

Curley's wife is a lonely character with broken dreams. We should feel sorry for her, what do you think & why?

Descriptive Text - First Impressions

'Both men glanced up, for the rectangle of sunshine in the doorway was cut off' (53) - She is making an entrance, like a spotlight on stage (simile). Appearing high almighty, above everyone else she is the main focus of attention. The full description - clothes/voice match her artificial personality.

'A girl was standing there looking in' (53) - Treated like a child with Curley being over protective. If she was described as a 'woman' it would point to her being independent, in control, something impossible in those times. She walks into the Bunkhouse - into a man's world, like how it was in that time. The term 'girl' reinforces her position in society.

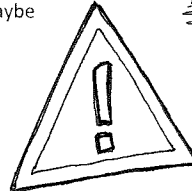
'she had full roqued lips & wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up. Her fingernails were red. Her hair hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages. She wore a cotton dress & red mules with little bouquets of red ostrich feathers!' (53) - Points to her not being important with the workers quickly glance her up & down with first impression being 'red' - danger, trouble, jailbait. It describes her as a young attractive, classy woman who dresses well. It also shows she is lonely & maybe sexually dressing to get attention.

"I think Curley's marries...a tart" (49) - Candy has a low opinion of Curley's wife's flirting

"Jesus what a tramp", "Don't even take a look at that bitch" (53) - George sees Curley's wife as a threat & a danger to Lennie.

"She was suddenly apprehensive "bye boys" she called into the Bunkhouse, and she hurried away"(54) - She is not really looking for Curley, she just wants to speak to people, but doesn't want to let anyone know so hurries off.

"She's gonna make a mess, they're gonna be a bad mess about her" (78) - Foreshadowing by George, opinion on women as a temptation & trouble.



Curley's Wife

Unhappy, pretty, lonely, dangerous, trouble, jailbait, young, newly married, bitter.

In a loveless marriage she has no one to talk to; she is isolated from all the other characters. She is the only female but is nameless only referred to as Curley's wife, a possession. She has a disruptive influence & all the men are wary of her apart from Slim. Sexuality is her only real weapon and she is aware of it. She met her Curley at the Riverside Dance Palace on the same night after having an argument with her mother regarding a letter her mother had stolen from her & her moving out of home, with her marrying on the rebound.

Things in common with

Lennie - Innocent, powerless, they are both different, both like soft things & both have broken unachievable dreams with them both eventually being killed.

George - Both hate Curley & what he has. They are both lonely. He is in an unhappy partnership, like an unequal marriage. Their dream although broken it keeps them both going.

Candy - A loner, powerless, left behind.

Crooks - Lonely, Crooks is isolated (due to his colour).



Further Interactions

"Think I'm gonna stay in that two-by-four house & listen how Curley's gonna lead from his left twice & then bring in the ol' right cross" (110) - She is very lonely as are so many people in the novel & is trapped in a loveless marriage.

"They left all the weak ones here" (110) - Curley's wife is cruel to the ranch hands that are left behind. Is she however including herself in this statement?

"you know what I can do to you if you open your trap" (113) - She can be vindictive & will use the power her status gives her even if it is unfair.

"Sure I gotta husband' you all seen him. Swell guy ain't he?" (110)

"I'm glad you bust up Curley a little bit he got it comin' to him sometimes I'd like to bust him myself" (114) - She is disillusioned with her marriage, she has no one to confide in, she is bitter & uses sarcasm.

"whatta ya think I am, a kid? I tell ya I could of went in shows, not just one neither" (111) - Her dream to be a film star.

"Standing here talking to a bunch of bundle stiffs - anigger an' a dum dum & lousy ol' sheep" (111) - Name calling, childish behaviour.

"Well, if that's all you want, I might get a couple of rabbits" (112) - She teases Lennie's dream, belittling it.

"Well you keep your place then nigger I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny" (113) - she threatens Crooks, again using her power of status.

'Curley's wife laughed "OK, machine I'll talk later. I like machines" (113) - Curley's wife flirting with Lennie.

After Crooks said "maybe you better go along to your own house now, we don't want any trouble". "Well I ain't giving you no trouble. Think I don't like to talk to somebody ever once in a while? Think I like to stick in that house all time" (110) - Again showing signs of her being lonely and in an unhappy loveless marriage and that even the ranch hands don't want to be with her.



Curley's wife's dream

"An a guy tol' me he could put me in pitchers" (111) "Maybe I will yet" (124)

"Soons he got back to Hollywood he was gonna write to me about it. I never got that letter". (124)

All her dreams & hopes when younger aged 15 shattered, she has since become bitter.

Lennie meets Curley's wife

"Why can't I talk to you? I never get to talk to nobody I get awful lonely" (122) - isolation

"Don't you worry none. He was jus' a mutt, you can get another one easy" - (123) - She consoles Lennie telling him to ignore George & what he said.

"I live right in Salinas, she said, Come there when I was a kid" (124) - Provokes empathy, flash back narration into previous life of Crooks (Chapter 4).

"I don't like Curley, he ain't a nice fella" & because she had confided in him, she moved closer to Lennie & sat beside him. "Coulda been in the movies, an' had nice clothes - all them nice clothes they wear" (125)

"Some people got kinda coarse hair" she said complacently. "Take Curley's hair is jus' like wire. But mine is soft & fine. Course I brush it a lot. That makes it fine. Here feel right here" She took Lennie's hand & put it on her head. "Feel right aroun' there an' see how soft it is" (127)

Killing of Curley's wife

Powerful graphic language

"She struggled violently under his hands. Her feet battered on the hay & she writhed to be free & from under Lennie's hand came a muffled screaming" (127)

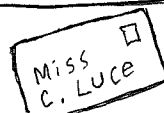
"He moved his hand a little & her hoarse cry came out" (127)

"Her eyes were wild with terror. He shook her then, & he was angry with her "don't you go yelling" he said & shook her, & her body flopped like a fish" (128) - She ends as a victim, powerless like on the Ranch/Life.

"Curley's wife lay with a half covering of yellow hay, & the meanness & the plannings & the discontent & the ache for attention were all gone from her face. She was very pretty & simple, & her face was sweet & young. Now her roqued cheeks & her reddened lips made her seem alive & sleeping very lightly. The curls, tiny little sausages, were spread on the hay behind her head, & her lips were parted (129) - Natural description sharp contrast. Look at the description when she is at the Bunkhouse page 53.

Miss Luce Letter

To Claire Luce
Los Gatos [1938]
Dear Miss Luce:



Annie Laurie says you are worried about your playing of the part of Curley's wife although from the reviews it appears that you are playing it marvelously. I am deeply grateful to you and to the others in the cast for your feeling about the play. You have surely made it much more than it was by such a feeling.
About the girl-I don't know of course what you think about her, but perhaps if I should tell you a little about her as I know her, it might clear your feeling about her.
She grew up in an atmosphere of fighting and suspicion. Quite early she learned that she must never trust anyone but she was never able to carry out what she learned. A natural trustfulness broke through constantly and every time it did, she got her. her moral training was most rigid. She was told over and over that she must remain a virgin because that was the only way she could get a husband. This was harped on so often that it became a fixation. It would have been impossible to seduce her. She had only that one thing to sell and she knew it.
Now, she was trained by threat not only at home but by other kids. And any show of fear or weakness brought an instant persecution. She learned to be hard to cover her fright. And automatically she became hardest when she was most frightened. She is a night, kind girl, not a floozy. No man has ever considered her as anything except a girl to try to make. She has never talked to a man except in the sexual fencing conversation. She is not highly sexed particularly but knows instinctively that if she is to be noticed at all, it will be because some one finds her sexually desirable.

As to her actual sexual life-she has had none except with Curley and there has probably been no consummation there since Curley would not consider her gratification and would probably be suspicious if she had any. Consequently she is a little starved. She knows utterly nothing about sex except the mass misinformation girls tell one another. If anyone-a man or woman-ever gave her a break-treated her like a person-she would be a slave to that person. Her craving for contact is immense but she, with her background, is incapable of conceiving any contact without some sexual context. With all this-if you knew her, if you could ever break down a thousand little defenses she has built up, you would find a nice person, an honest person, and you would end up by loving her. But such a thing could never happen.
I hope you won't think I'm preaching. I've known this girl and I'm just trying to tell you what she is like. She is afraid of everyone in the world. You've known girls like that, haven't you? You can see them in Central Park on a hot night. They travel in groups for protection. They pretend to be wise and hard and voluptuous.
I have a feeling that you know all this and that you are doing all this. Please forgive me if I seem to intrude on your job. I don't intend to and I am only writing this because Annie Laurie said you wondered about the girl. It's a devil of a hard part. I am very happy that you have it.
Sincerely,
John Steinbeck

Thinking

1. On your own...
What is your opinion of Curley's wife?
2. After sharing opinions with your group...
Record the opinion of one or more of your classmates here. How are their opinions different from yours?
3. After looking at the passages from the text on this sheet...
What do you think John Steinbeck's opinion of Curley's wife is based on what he wrote?
4. After reading Steinbeck's letter...
How do you think Steinbeck intended to portray her character? Was he successful in your opinion?
5. After looking at all the perspectives...
Has your opinion of Curley's wife changed? Explain why or why not. What perspectives influenced you?