

Curley's Wife

Points and quotes

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At first, Curley's wife is described to the reader through the comments of the men on the ranch. Candy tells Lennie and George when he first meets them that she 'got the eye' for the men on the ranch, even though she has only been married to Curley for two weeks. Candy thinks that she is 'a tart'.

We first meet Curley's wife when she comes into the bunkhouse, when Lennie and George are in there. She is apparently looking for Curley but she already knows that new men have arrived. Steinbeck gives a detailed description of her as she stands in the doorway of the bunkhouse and talks to Lennie and George. She is 'heavily made up', with 'full rouged lips' and red fingernails. Her body language is provocative as she positions herself in the doorway so that 'her body was thrown forward'. She smiles 'archly' and 'twitched her body'. The general impression the reader gains is of a young girl who is pretty and wants the attention of men.

George's reaction to Curley's wife, however, makes the reader realise that she is a potential threat to the two men. George sees her as 'poison' and 'jailbait'. He is angry with Lennie's admiration of her 'she's purty' and fiercely tells him that he must stay away from her. 'Don't you even take a look at that bitch.' Later, when we find out what happened at Weed, where Lennie frightens a woman by stroking her dress and they are forced to flee the town from a lynch mob, we understand why George is so alarmed that she will be the cause of more trouble for them.

As the story progresses we gain more knowledge of Curley's wife. When she comes to Crooks' door when all the men are in town on Saturday night we realise that she is lonely. She knows that Curley has gone to a brothel and we get some insight into what the reality of her life is on the ranch. When Crooks suggests that she should go away because 'we don't want no trouble' she says 'Think I don't like to talk to somebody ever' once in a while' and we realise that she is lonely with no one to talk to but Curley who spends all his time talking about 'what he's gonna do to guys he don't like'. We also find out that she has her own private dream that she could have been an actress or a showgirl.

However, any sympathy that we might have felt for Curley's wife is reduced because of the cruelty she shows when talking to the men and by the way she treats Crooks. She is contemptuous of Candy, Crooks and Lennie, referring to them as 'a nigger an' a dum-dum and a lousy ol' sheep' and she laughs at their dream of having a ranch of their own, dismissing it as 'Balony'. Far worse though is the way she removes all Crooks' pride and dignity when he dares stand up to her, asking her to leave his room. She reminds him scornfully that she could have him 'lynched' if she chose. She doesn't actually say so, but Candy and we know that it would be by claiming that he had tried to rape her.

When Lennie is in the barn and Curley's wife enters the reader is again aware of how lonely she is. Even though she realises that Lennie is not listening to her she is desperate to talk and we hear how isolated she feels. When Lennie tells her that he's

not allowed to talk to her she cries ‘What’s the matter with me?’ Then adds ‘Seems like they ain’t none of them cares how I gotta live’. We then find out more details of her life, that a man who ‘was in pitchers’ said that he was ‘gonna put her in the Movies’ and would write to her as ‘soon as he got back to Hoollywood’. The letter never came, and Curley’s wife believed her mother stole it but we realise that there was never likely to be any letter. The man was probably just taking advantage of her vanity, allowing her to think that she could be a famous film star.

We also find out that Curley’s wife only married Curley to get away from home. She met him at the Riverside Dance Palais, probably attracted to him because he was the son of a ranch owner. Now, however, the reality is that she doesn’t even like him. ‘He ain’t a nice fella’, she confides in Lennie. When they are talking together she shows some kindness to Lennie when she realises that he understands little of what she is saying. After she is dead we are shown by Steinbeck a different side of Curley’s wife. In death the ‘meanness and the plannings and the discontent and the ache for attention’ have gone from her face. We see she is just a young and pretty girl.

Does Steinbeck Condemn Or Condone Curley’s Wife?

Answer the question!

It is no good just writing about Curley’s wife as I have done above, if you are being asked a specific question. To answer this question correctly in the exam you must discuss at which point in the story you think Steinbeck is asking us to judge Curley’s wife as being a ‘bad ‘ person, or whether you think that at the end he is trying to make us feel some sympathy for her.

Remember that writers put characters across to us through describing:

- what they look like - physical appearance
- what they say - dialogue with others
- what they do – their actions
- what other characters say about them

If we **look through the men’s eyes** we see that they view her as just a ‘tart’ and are wary of her. **The physical description** Steinbeck uses reinforces this idea – heavily made up. And her **actions** are also provocative (leaning against the doorway). We also see she is cruel in what she says to Crooks.

However, there are occasions when we see a better side of Curley’s wife. We see her loneliness; she is kind to Lennie; she has a dream that she is not likely to achieve, like the other men on the ranch, and finally, Steinbeck’s description of her dead body seems designed to make us see her as a victim of life.

You answer should show that you have thought about the question and have set out a line of argument, showing both sides (condemn or condone) but finally reaching your own personal conclusion. If you do not answer the question, especially if you do not refer to it at the end of your answer, your grade will suffer!