

## How is the character of Curley's wife important to the novella as a whole? (20)

The Great Depression and its impact on American society in the 1930s is reflected in the character of Curley's wife. The economic devastation caused by the Wall Street Crash in 1929 resulted in widespread unemployment and financial ruin, which affected people from all walks of life. Curley's wife is no exception; she finds herself trapped in a life on the ranch, devoid of purpose or meaning, and struggling to make ends meet. The financial struggles faced by Americans during the Great Depression led to a breakdown of social structures and community support. This is reflected in the loneliness experienced by Curley's wife, who is unable to connect with the men on the ranch and is often shunned by the other women. Her isolation is compounded by the predatory behaviour of some men, who view her as a source of entertainment and objectify her. This reflects the prevalent sexism and misogyny that existed during the 1930s. This resulted in the worst parts of society becoming prevalent – with extreme examples of discrimination – including sexism and ageism an everyday part of society. Curley's wife is an important character to the novella as she represents the key themes of discrimination, loneliness, and dreams. The loneliness of Curley's wife is key to understand her importance as a character.

Often misunderstood as 'jailbait' or 'a tart' on the ranch, Curley's wife is actually a woman who simply craves human affection. Curley, her husband, treats her like a commodity, with his 'glove fulla vaseline' showing that he views her as nothing more than a sexual object. This leaves her having to seek tenderness elsewhere. As the only woman on the ranch, Curley's wife fulfills the gender stereotype at the time, living at the mercy of her husband. For this reason she uses flirtation as a means to communicate with the other men on the ranch, in the hope that they will give her the attention she needs. However, by being flirtatious, she only increases the hostility of the men on the ranch as they become suspicious. Steinbeck uses the frequent reference to the colour red when referring to Curley's wife to show that she symbolises danger. The only person that is unable to spot her dangerous potential is Lennie, who simply sees a 'purrdy' girl, much like the one he grabbed in Weed. Much like George, despite Lennie not having the mental capacity to participate in an engaging conversation, Curley's wife gravitates towards Lennie as she yearns for any form of attention. When she says to Lennie 'I get lonely...Ain't I got the right to talk to nobody?' Curley's wife shows an appreciation for her plight. She understands that she is lonely because of her gender and the control that Curley has over her, because she is a woman she loses her 'right' to have friends.

Steinbeck uses Curley's wife to comment on sexism during 1930s America. At the time, women did not have access to the same rights and opportunities as men. From amount of money received in wages to the expectation that women would perform all domestic duties in the house, women were constantly exploited. Steinbeck purposefully uses her name to demonstrate the unequal footing Curley's wife, and other women at the time found themselves in. By not disclosing Curley's wife's name Steinbeck dehumanises the character and reduces her to being the property of Curley. Both Slim and George make pertinent comments in the book which suggest that Curley should have a greater control over his wife. These examples of casual sexism are a small example of the type of discrimination women suffered from at the time. It is no surprise that Curley's wife has aspirations to leave the ranch and lead a better life

Whilst Curley's wife is subjected to deplorable sexism, she remains a product of 1930's America, with Steinbeck using her to show how people treated each other at the time. As a victim of discrimination, understanding the impact that prejudice has had on her life, you'd expect Curley's wife to treat others with a greater amount of respect. Instead, owing to her treatment and loneliness, Curley's wife is spiteful and vicious. When referring to Crooks, Lennie, and Candy as 'a nigger and a dum dum an' a lousy ol' sheep' we get an insight into the ease at which people in 1930s America slipped into discriminatory behaviour. Despite being aware of her status on the ranch and the limitations imposed on her because of her gender, Curley's wife still feels comfortable enough to abuse the more vulnerable members of the ranch. 1930s America did not encourage solidarity amongst the working classes, instead it facilitated those that sought to create even greater divides.

Curley's wife's is used by Steinbeck to show the futile nature of dreams in 1930s America. Curley's wife, as with many of the other characters, wants to live out the American dream. We learn that she believes she 'Coulda been in the movies', a dream that drives and compels her to carry on with her otherwise miserable life on the ranch. However, her sudden death shatters her only hope of being able to get away from ranch life and find the desire for autonomy/attention which clearly lay at the foundation of her dream. The shattering of her dream is mirrored by the death of Lennie, which ends George and Candy's dream.



Curley's Wife