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## Curley's Wife and Female Stereotype

One poignant example of the misperceptions that women face in a male-dominated society is presented in the novel *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck. The story takes place in the Dust Bowl era, when rough economic times made it hard to find work; two farmhands, George and Lennie, manage to take a job at a ranch. They meet many people at the farm, such as the boss's son Curley, who is disliked by many - including, notably, his wife. Although she is seen by the other men as flirtatious and provocative, Steinbeck generates sympathy for Curley's wife by presenting the men's opinions on her, then revealing her true self through dialogue at the end of the novel, ultimately suggesting that the way others see her may not be how she truly is.

Although the men at the ranch don't know her, they still have set preconceptions about Curley's wife. They immediately judge her by the way she dresses, acts, and the fact that she is a woman- the only woman on the ranch, in fact. Throughout the novel, they call her a "tart" and "tramp". When George and Lennie first arrive at the ranch, the old swamper Candy tells them about her: "She got the eye... I think Curley's married a tart," (28). Candy doesn't really know her, and just uses her as a way to describe Curley - as if she is just one of his qualities and not a person. Upon hearing what Candy has to say, George tells Lennie: "You keep away from her, 'cause she's a rat-trap if I ever seen one," George has only heard a few things about her, yet uses those few thoughts and his preconceptions against women to assume that she is what everyone says she is.

Another way Steinbeck generates sympathy for Curley's wife is by having her seen as an object, rather than a human with feelings. Throughout the book she's only referred to as "Curley's wife". Steinbeck doesn't even give her a name, choosing to allude to her as a mere possession of Curley's. This shows how she is trapped under Curley's power, as well as how insignificant women were to men in that time period. When Curley's wife has the opportunity to open up about her feelings, she tells Lennie: "'You can talk to people, but I can't talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad. How'd you like not to talk to anybody?'" (87) She's very lonely on the ranch because she is the only woman, and Curley doesn't want her talking to anyone else- yet she never receives attention from him. This is what makes her adopt a flirtatious manner, because she tries to gain that lost attention from the other men on the ranch. This causes the other men to view her as a "tart", and the cycle of oppression keeps repeating because women aren't seen as their own person like men are.

Towards the end of the novel, Curley's wife shows another side of her when talking one-on-one with Lennie. She finally opens up and reveals her pent-up emotions: "'Wha's the matter with me?' she cried. 'Ain't I got a right to talk to nobody? Whatta they think I am, anyways.... I ain't

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doin' no harm to you.... Seems like they ain't none of them cares how I gotta live'" (87). She knows that the other men dislike her, but doesn't understand why, and it makes her feel alone and upset. Curley's wife also opens up about her past, and how she almost made it to Hollywood. "I tell you I ain't used to livin' like this. I coulda made somethin' of myself" (88). She could've become a famous actress, but her mother didn't let her. In fact, she only married Curley to get away from her mother. Prior to this scene, readers only know what the other men say about her. Now, upon hearing Curley's wife's real story, they know the reasons for what she does and can sympathize with her.

Steinbeck's portrayal of Curley's wife allows the reader to sympathize with her. At first she is presented as a provocative woman whom the men dislike. However, by the end of the story, Steinbeck has her talk about her true feelings, and this allows the reader to have a better understanding of her character. The way in which Steinbeck has written reinforces the fact that stereotypes or preconceptions against women are not always true, and that despite facades of all sorts, everyone has his or her own story.

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