

THE FUNCTION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN STEINBECK'S FICTION: THE PORTRAIT OF CURLEY'S WIFE IN *OF MICE AND MEN*

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"Preferably a writer should die at about 28. Then he has a chance of being discovered. If he lives much longer he can only be revalued. I prefer discovery." So quipped the Nobel prize-winning American novelist John Steinbeck (1902-1968) to the British journalist Herbert Kretzmer in 1965.¹ Steinbeck died at the age of 66, however, as many critics have noted, there is still a lot about him to be discovered.

It must be borne in mind that Steinbeck's reputation as the impersonal, objective reporter of striking farm workers and dispossessed migrants, or as the escapist popularizer of primitive folk, has needlessly obscured his intellectual background, imaginative power and artistic methods. Of course, to think of Steinbeck simply as a naive realist in inspiration and a straightforward journalist while his achievement as a writer extends well beyond the modes and methods of traditional realism or documentary presentation is to disregard the complexities of his art.² For this reason, new readings and modern critical approaches constantly shed light on new sources of value in Steinbeck's work.

Many book reviewers and academic critics became antagonistic toward the writer when he grew tired of being the chronicler of the Depression and went further afield to find new roots, different sources and different forms for his fiction. As their expectations were based entirely on his greatest novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), winner of the 1940 Pulitzer Prize, cornerstone of his 1962 Nobel prize award, and one of the most enduring works of fiction by any American author, Steinbeck's subsequent work during and after World War II understandably came as a startling shock. One may be surprised to learn that in the six years following the publication of his best known novel Steinbeck wrote a collection of love poems, a screenplay, *Lifeboat* (1943), a nonfiction scientific book, *Sea of Cortez* (1941), written in cooperation with Ed Ricketts, a documentary film, *The*

¹ *John Steinbeck: Working Days: The Journal of "The Grapes of Wrath"*, edited by Robert DeMott, New York: Viking Press, 1989, xv.

² As early as 1933, Steinbeck claimed he "never had much ability for nor faith nor belief in realism". *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, edited by Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten, New York: The Viking Press 1975, 87.

Forgotten Village (1941), a documentary book, *Bombs Away* (1942), a series of articles which were later (in 1958) collected as *Once There Was a War*, and two novels, *The Moon Is Down* (1942) and *Cannery Row* (1945). As a result Steinbeck was accused of selling out, but it was the inordinate public success of *The Grapes* and especially its notoriety, putting aside the very act of researching and writing this novel, which drastically changed his writing. Seldom can we find a more restless experimenter with forms and subject matter, constantly surprising his readers with a different set of stylistic, thematic and philosophical bearings. Thus, whenever we believe we have safely arrived at a consensus about him, fresh evidence turns up that causes us to view his life and career anew. John Ditsky was right when he said that "we can begin the effort to see him whole - whatever that may prove to mean for his future reputation - only when we have piled up enough data about him and his writing".³

With this in mind, I am attempting here to expose particular problems relating to Steinbeck's creation of female characters. In doing so, I think we need to recall that more than forty years ago Peter Lisca, a distinguished American critic whose studies of Steinbeck's work established an indispensable background for a growing number of younger critics attracted to Steinbeck after the author's death, pointed out that Steinbeck's women were "overshadowed" by the more visible men.⁴ Perhaps it was for this reason that until very recently, critical attention to Steinbeck's female characters has been cursory in comparison to that devoted to his male characters. When critics have discussed women in his novels, they have tended to view them as types, categorizing them - like Lisca - either with Steinbeck's "noble women" (such as Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Juana in *The Pearl*, Rama and Elizabeth in *To a God Unknown*, Mordeen in *Burning Bright*, and most of the women in *The Pastures of Heaven*) or with his silly "girls", mostly preoccupied with their physical appearance. Furthermore, the tendency among readers and critics to focus on Steinbeck's male characters is understandable, considering that Steinbeck's critical reputation has traditionally rested on his achievements of the 1930s, especially *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and, of course, *The Grapes of Wrath*. It should be remembered that in the three novels, the world of action is the world of men, with the women surrendering their relative passivity only in the third volume of this "trilogy".

However, I am not about to deal here with Ma's assumption of the "male" function of action, which represents the potential for revolutionary change in a patriarchal family and for moving out of the mythical and archetypal role women have in Steinbeck's fiction, any more than I wish to deal with the symbolic implications of the closing tableau, in which Rose of Sharon participates in a curious kind of act of love. What I want to examine is the role of supposedly minor female characters who in fact deepen the reader's understanding of a work as a whole and thus enlarge the presumably narrowly confined roles of Steinbeck's female characters. This point seems to be particularly true of Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*, where the rather quiet and unobtrusive female character Lisa

³ John Ditsky, "John Steinbeck- Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow", *Steinbeck Quarterly* 23, 1990, 12.

⁴ Peter Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*, New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1958, 206.

attains a position of thematic significance in the work, as noted and discussed by Abby H. Werlock.⁵ Another powerful, although sometimes indistinct female character from Steinbeck's fiction of the same period is the figure of Curley's wife in *Of Mice and Men*. Her character, too, is much more complex than the casual reader might perceive. It would therefore be inappropriate not to argue with the essay by one of the most prominent of Steinbeck's feminist critics, Mimi Reisel Gladstein, in which she raises the issue of the curious anomaly by which Steinbeck, "who knew so many remarkable women in his life, fails to recreate them in his own fiction".⁶ In addition, it is Gladstein's challenging observation about Steinbeck's apparent "misogyny" in *The Wayward Bus* (1947) and her debatable thesis that the novel is misogynistic because of the author's personal troubles at the time he wrote it, during his difficult marriage to Gwyndolyn Conger, which causes us to turn our critical attention to fictional women in Steinbeck's work anew.

Regardless of Steinbeck's motivation in portraying female characters in *The Wayward Bus* and the fact that his work indeed mirrors the life he lived, the biographical facts simply do not support the notion that Steinbeck wrote the novel as a pointed attack on his wife and women in general. If further assurance is needed, and I think it is not, this book came out in the same year as *The Pearl* (1947), in which we find Steinbeck's creation of Juana, who is, as Gladstein herself writes in an article for the monograph *Steinbeck's Women*, "after Ma Joad the most positively depicted woman in Steinbeck's works".⁷ However, and without discussing the question of the portrayal of the women in *The Wayward Bus*, this study was not meant as a response to Gladstein's salient questioning about the absence of remarkable women in Steinbeck's work, as positive female characters have been extensively discussed by many other critics who rightly noticed their "overlooked or misunderstood" role. Rather, it is a quest for the so-called elusive women in Steinbeck's fictional world, to be precise, in his *Of Mice and Men*.

It has already been stated that Curley's wife, who has been until very recently generally regarded as entirely vicious and second only to Cathy in Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, (according to Peter Lisca the two of them present the third type of Steinbeck's female characters) should be viewed as a significantly more complex character than can be noticed at the first sight. It is true that both George and Lennie constantly refer to her as a "rat-trap, a bitch, a piece of jail-bait", which was most probably the reason why Mark Spilka in 1974 offered a very scathing interpretation of this female character, suggesting that "Steinbeck through George and Lennie projects his own hostility toward women in general", thus giving her "no other name but Curley's wife".⁸ According to Spilka, Steinbeck presented her

5 H. Werlock, "Looking at Lisa", *John Steinbeck: The Years of Greatness, 1936-1939*, ed. Tetsumaro Hayashi, The University of Alabama Press, 1993, 46-63.

6 Mimi Reisel Gladstein, *The Indestructible Woman in Faulkner, Hemingway and Steinbeck*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1986 and Bobbi Gonzales and Mimi Reisel Gladstein, "The Wayward Bus: Steinbeck's Misogynistic Manifesto" in *Rediscovering Steinbeck: Revisionist View of His Art, Politics and Intellect*, ed. Cliff Lewis and Carroll Britch, Lewiston, N.Y.: Edward Mellen Press, 1989, 157-73.

7 Mimi Reisel Gladstein, "Steinbeck's Juana: A Woman of Worth" in *Steinbeck's Women: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Hayashi Tetsumaro, Steinbeck Monograph Series, No.9, Muncie: Steinbeck Society, 1979.

as "vain, provocative, vicious...and only incidentally lonely".⁹ Similarly, Howard Levant observed that the woman is "characterless, nameless, and constantly discontent, so her death inspires none of the sympathy one might feel for a kind or serene woman".¹⁰ On the other hand, Louis Owens, in his *John Steinbeck's Re-Vision of America*, reasons that woman is not the evil in the mythical garden of *Of Mice and Men*, proposing that "the real serpent is loneliness and the barriers between men and women that create and reinforce this loneliness".¹¹ Though all of these critics analyse the same character, the differences in the conclusions drawn about her are obvious. These discrepancies in interpretation of Curley's wife may be attributed to the fact that the novel itself does not offer an authoritative or absolute statement on the woman's character. It goes without saying that Steinbeck, too, was aware of her "incomplete" portrait. If not, why would he have written to the actress Claire Luce, who was performing the role of Curley's wife during the New York run of the stage play *Of Mice and Men*, that to "know this character would be to love her"? And for what other reason would he have then countered this conviction with the forlorn declaration that "such a thing can never happen", giving us in this way perhaps the most authoritative statement that he can about Curley's wife?¹² (What can and does happen in *Of Mice and Men*, which was originally titled "Something that Happened", is that no one loves Curley's wife. She does not even love herself.) And it is more than that. Several revisions in the story for the play no doubt attest to the author's attempt to add an assertive dimension to her character in the play. These revisions were made under the guidance of a veteran playwright, George S. Kaufman, who also believed that "the girl should be drawn more fully, since she is the motivating force of the whole thing".¹³

Considering the impact she makes, it is surprising how brief a role Curley's wife has in the novel. Before the chapter when Lennie kills her and where she is actively present on more than six pages (86-91), she has only two short appearances, one for one page (31), another for five (77-81), for a total of twelve out of one hundred and seven pages of the entire book. The role probably seems larger because Curley and the others frequently talk about her, more or less in the following tones:

"Well – she got the eye."

"Yeah? Married two weeks and got the eye? Maybe that's why Curley's pants is full of ants."

⁸ Mark Spilka, "Of George and Lennie and Curley's Wife: Sweet Violence in Steinbeck's Eden", *Modern Fiction Studies* 20, 1974, 174.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁰ Howard Levant, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974, 138.

¹¹ Louis Owens, *John Steinbeck's Re-Vision of America*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985, 103.

¹² Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten, eds. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, New York: Viking Press 1975, 155.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 136.

"I seen her give Slim the eye. ... An' I seen her give Carlson the eye."
....."Well, I think Curley's married ...a tart." (28)

"Jesus, what a tramp,So that's what Curley picks for a wife." (32)
"Don't you ever take a look at that bitch. I don't care what she says and what she does. I seen 'em poison before, but I never seen no piece of jail bait worse than her. You leave her be. ..keep away from her, 'cause she's a rat-trap if I ever seen one." (32)

"She ain't concealin' nothing. I never seen nobody like her. She got the eyr goin' all the time on everybody. I bet she even gives the stable buck the eye. I don't know what the hell she wants".
"She's gonna make a mess. They's gonna be a bad mess about her. She's a jail bait all set on the trigger." (51)

As many critics have noted, *Of Mice and Men* has a recognizable mythical pattern, based on the Garden of Eden myth. Since the subject of the novel, on one level at least, is the destructive power of illusion pertaining to the American Dream, Steinbeck appropriates the Edenic elements, particularly the role of the woman, which is that of the temptress and despoiler of the Garden, to convey his personal interpretation of the dream of a place of one's own. It is obvious that Steinbeck manipulates his story in order to encompass the mythical interpretation. To fit the mythical framework, Steinbeck makes the woman the instrument of destruction of the characters' dream of having a plot of land, although, as he claimed in a *New York Times* interview, while discussing his sources for characters and incidents in this novel, he had witnessed Lennie's real-life counterpart's killing of a man, not a woman.¹⁴ This mythical discourse of the novel, which dictates that a woman precipitate the exile from paradise, as well as its numerous dialogues referring to Curley's wife in a similar way as quoted above, prevent the reader from seeing the only female character in the novel as anything but a wicked provocateur. Yet she is not. Charlotte Cook Hadella is right when she claims that what Steinbeck reveals in his emotional outburst when describing the woman's character is that "neither the context of the novel nor the context of her life allows her full humanity".¹⁵ In a 1979 article that analyses Steinbeck's treatment of women in his plays, Sandra Beatty, too, suggested a different interpretation of the role of Curley's wife. Ms Beatty believes that the woman "serves to reinforce the theme of loneliness, isolation, and the idea of a personal dream which is central to the play. She commands both our sympathy and respect because of her naive yet genuine pursuit of a life-long dream".¹⁶ It is true that additional speeches in the play make Curley's wife a bit more sympathetic, but isn't she worth our sympathy also in the

¹⁴ "Men, Mice and Mr Steinbeck", in a *New York Times* interview, December 5, 1937, reprinted in Thomas Fensch, ed., *Conversations With John Steinbeck*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988, 9.

¹⁵ Charlotte Cook Hadella, "Dialogic Tension", *John Steinbeck: The Years of Greatness, 1936-1939*, ed. Tetsumaro Hayashi, The University of Alabama Press, 1993

¹⁶ Sandra Beatty, "Steinbeck's Play-Woman: A Study of the Female Presence in *Of Mice and Men*, *Burning Bright*, *The Moon Is Down*, and *Viva Zapata!*" in *Steinbeck's Women: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Tetsumaro Hayashi, Steinbeck Monograph Series, No.9, 1979, 7.

novel? Do not the following excerpts which lead to her encounter with Lennie and later to her death, undoubtedly suggest that her looking for people to talk to is not erotic, but simply an attempt to find company to ease the loneliness caused by a sadistic husband who pays attention to her only when he is jealous?

"Think I don't like to talk to somebody ever' once in a while? Think I like to stick in that house alla time?" ... "Sure I got a husban'. You all seen him. Swell guy, ain't he? Spends all his time sayin' what he's gonna do to guys he don't like, and he don't like nobody. Think I'm gonna stay in that two-by-four house and listen how Curley's gonna lead with his left twict, and then bring in the ol' right cross?" ... "Sat'iday night. Ever'body out doin' som'pin. Ever'body! An' what am I doin'? Standin' here talkin' to a bunch of bindle stiff's – a nigger an' a dum-dum and a lousy ol' sheep – an' likin' it because they ain' nobody else?" (77-78)

"Why can't I talk to you? I never get to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely.I get lonely. 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?" (86-87)

"Wha's the matter with me?...Ain't I got a right to talk to nobody? Whatta they think I am, anyway?...Seems like they ain't none of them cares how I gotta live. I tell you I ain't used to livin' like this. I coulda made somethin' of myself." (87-88)

To further demonstrate that the woman does not merely bring "the harsh realities of the outside world to bear upon the events of the story", as reasoned by Peter Lisca, but is herself telling her story about fractured dreams and thwarted illusions, I also quote from Curley's wife nostalgic reflections, which illuminate an otherwise shadowy period of her life:¹⁷

"Well, I ain't told this to nobody before. Maybe I ought'n to. I don't like Curley. He ain't a nice fella...." "Coulda been in the movies, an' had nice clothes-all them nice clothes like they wear. An' I coulda sat in them big hotels, an' had pitchers took of me. When they had them previoss I coulda went to them, an' spoke in the radio, an' it wouldn'ta cost me a cent because I was in the pitcher. An' all them nice clothes like they wear. Because this guy says I was a natural." (89)

If additional proof is needed, and I think it is not, that Steinbeck counters George's as well as other characters' stereotypical condemnation of the woman, it should be remembered that after being killed, Curley's wife is described as follows:

"And the meanness and the plannings and the discontent and the ache for attention were all gone from her face. She was very pretty and simple, and her face was sweet and young." (92-93)

The conclusion that still has to be reached after examining the role of the feminine in this novel is that Steinbeck allows Curley's wife to take part in the "yearning of all men" for warm, living contact.¹⁸ For this reason Steinbeck's story about "something that happened" has something to tell its audience even six decades after its conception, not just of mice and men, but also of women living in the world in which they are not understood, are lonely and unloved. Thus, I

¹⁷ Peter Lisca, *loc. cit.*, 138.

¹⁸ In his letter to his agents Steinbeck described the book's theme as "powerful yearning of all men". (John Steinbeck to Lizabeth Otis and Mavis McIntosh, September 1, 1936.)

believe, we can safely add *Of Mice and Men* to the list of books in which female characters despite their quieter power as compared to the dominant power of men, are much more complex than a quick and casual reading might reveal.

More can be said, however, about "discovering" Steinbeck, if I return to the introductory idea of this study, but the final words here should go to "revaluing" him. It goes without saying that Steinbeck's pre-war work has generally been accepted as of permanent value, while the stature of his subsequent work remains controversial. Most critics have argued that there was a decline in the quality of his writings and have sought to give reasons for it, while others have challenged this judgement. Steinbeck's career did indeed have its share of artistic triumphs and failures, but it is also true that he made a significant contribution to the perception of the problems of his culture and created visions of universal significance, and for this reason, if not for many others, he has to be assessed and valued in terms of what he accomplished, rather than what he failed to do.

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