

Article #3

Title: Steinbeck's Play-Women: A Study of the Female Presence in *Of Mice and Men*, *Burning Bright*, *The Moon Is Down*, and *Viva Zapata!*

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In the following essay, Beatty maintains that the female characters in Steinbeck's plays merit increased critical attention because of their strong presence as individual actors rather than reactors to their male counterparts.

Steinbeck's female characters in his plays warrant critical attention first because they are significant in their own right and also because they perform a number of important functions in relation to the drama as a whole. For example, influential in determining the fate of the major characters, George and Lennie, Curley's wife in *Of Mice and Men* is the deciding factor in the outcome of the play. In addition, she 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.

Mordeen in *Burning Bright* is similar to many of the female characters found in Steinbeck's fiction. Her role in the drama is somewhat more significant than that of the other women since the action of the play revolves around her decision to give Joe Saul the heir he so desperately wants. Steinbeck has endowed Mordeen with the kind of sensitivity and insight that many of his other female characters possess, making her, at times, a philosophical presence in the play. Madame Orden, Molly, and Annie in *The Moon Is Down*, minor characters in relation to the men, each performs functions which are as significant to the cause of resistance as those of the men. As organizer at "headquarters", murderer and go-between, their actions are indispensable in the overall design of the play.

Josefa's most important function in *Viva Zapata!* is to elucidate the character of Emiliano Zapata. Although she is emotionally involved with him, Josefa retains an objectivity which allows her to analyze and evaluate both the man and his role as leader of the Mexican Revolution in a truer light than any other of the characters. In addition, her love, understanding, and support of her husband throughout their traumatic marriage are a constant source of strength and stability to Emiliano.

Because of the individuality and complexity of these principal female characters, attention should be paid to each one in turn and to the role that each plays in the dramatic work in which she appears.

Of Mice and Men has received wide critical acclaim both as a stage drama and as a film, primarily because of its simple yet poignant treatment of one of Steinbeck's recurring themes: the inherent loneliness of the itinerant farm laborer and his desperate desire for land of his own. Loneliness and the land dream are both personified in the characters of George and Lennie in

Of Mice and Men and so critics' attention has traditionally focused on them. However, there is another character in the play who is portrayed as equally lonely and commands an equal measure of our understanding and sympathy because she, too, had a dream that was never realized. Curley's wife may, at first, appear to play a relatively minor role in relation to the male characters in *Of Mice and Men* and also to the development of Steinbeck's overall theme. However, closer study of her character reveals that she is not only a major influence in the play but a well-developed character in her own right. Curley's wife has not been given a name, consequently, she is seen merely as an extension of her husband. This is not to say that Steinbeck considered her an unimportant character; rather, he is deliberately delineating her role insofar as it is seen by the male characters in the play.

We are introduced to Curley's wife by the farm hands, men who have been on the place for a while and who "know" her. We are tempted to pre-judge her in light of the comments made by these men. Candy remarks to George that "she got the eye"¹ and "I think Curley's married himself a tart. ... You look her over, mister. You see if she ain't a tart" (322-23). Steinbeck's initial description of Curley's wife seems to reinforce the opinion of the farm hands. She has "full, heavily rouged lips. Widespaced, made-up eyes. Her fingernails are bright red, her hair hangs in little rolled clusters like sausages. She wears a cotton house dress and red mules, on the insteps of which are little bouquets of red ostrich feathers" (324). Unfortunately, many characterizations of Curley's wife, particularly stage productions, begin and end with this superficial impression of her as a "cheap hustler". Curley's wife may come on to the men as playful and seductive, but she is acutely aware of the hostile reception she is receiving from them. She realizes that they will tolerate her presence around the bunkhouse only if she uses her usual excuse, "I'm lookin' for Curley" (325). Her more honest explanation and appeal, "I'm jus' lookin' for somebody to talk to. Don't you never jus' want to talk to somebody?" (325) meets with coldness and resentment from the men. As we get our first glimpse of the loneliness of this woman, we begin to sympathize with her repeated attempts to befriend the men.

It is interesting to compare the initial reactions of George and Lennie to Curley's wife. George's evaluation of her reinforces the opinion already voiced by the other farm hands—"Jesus, what a tramp!" (325). Lennie provides a characteristically simple and honest response, "Gosh, she's purty!" (325). Lennie's straightforward statement triggers an alarmed reaction from George. For the first time, he sees Curley's wife as a potential threat to their job security, their plans to "get a stake" and, ultimately, to their land dream. George threatens Lennie harshly. "Don't you even look at that bitch. I don't care what she says or what she does. I seen 'em poison before, but I ain't never seen no piece of jail bait worse than her" (326).

We begin to appreciate the intense loneliness and the desperate need for companionship in Curley's wife from a comment made by Whit later in the play. He says, "She's just workin' on everybody all the time. Seems like she's even workin' on the stable buck. I don't know what the hell she wants" (341). It is difficult to understand why a group of men who, by their own admission, are lonely most of the time and who crave companionship, cannot recognize the same need in a woman. The fact that Curley's wife would attempt to befriend the Negro stable buck, indicates the degree of her loneliness.