

For the men, at least, there is an emotional outlet. The male need for warmth and female companionship is satisfied, in part, by the whore. Susy in *Of Mice and Men* is typical of the whores found in Steinbeck's fiction. The matronly owner of the whorehouse knows and understands the men she serves. "I know what you boys want ... My girls is clean ... and there ain't no water in my whisky" (343). The men enjoy Susy's company. "Old Susy is a laugh. Always cracking jokes. ... She never talks dirty neither" (342). A good whorehouse is like a home to these men. "Susy's got nice chairs to set in. If a guy don't want to flop, why he can just set in them chairs and have a couple or three shots and just pass the time of day. ... A guy can set in there like he lived there" (342-43).

Unfortunately, there is no such outlet for the loneliness which Curley's wife feels. She tries to make the men understand her situation: "Sure I got a man. He ain't never home. I got nobody to talk to. I got nobody to be with. Think I can just sit home and do nothin' but cook for Curley? I want to see somebody. Just see 'em an' talk to 'em. There ain't no women. I can't walk to town. And Curley don't take me to no dances now. I tell you I jus' want to talk to somebody" (350). Curley's wife is totally isolated on the farm. She admits that her husband provides little company, and because she has no female companionship, she turns to the men. They misinterpret her friendly advances and her attempts to be nice and try to get rid of her. George demands, "If you're just friendly, what you givin' out the eye for an' floppin' your can around?" (350). She counters his abuse with, "I try to be nice an' polite to you lousy bindle bums—but you're too good" (363).

As a result of the hostility of the other men towards her, a kind of affinity develops between Curley's wife and Lennie. In the conversation in the barn, Steinbeck creates one of the most moving scenes in the play. For the first time, we are allowed to get close to two characters who have always been overshadowed by others and who have been afraid to speak openly because of the threat of the consequences. Even though the two are not speaking directly to one another, we sense that they are growing closer together as the scene progresses because they are sharing their feelings and their own personal dreams. Curley's wife confides in Lennie about her true feelings for her husband and about her plans to leave him. "I ain't tol' this to nobody before. ... I don't like Curley, he ain't a nice fella. ... I don't have to stay here. ... I'll go in the night an' thumb a ride to Hollywood" (370). Our sympathy is aroused for this woman who married a man she met at the Riverside Dance Palace in order to get away from her home and a mother who she felt did not understand her. We are also sympathetic towards her naivety in being taken in by the smooth talk of the big city boys who deceived her into believing that she could become a part of the glamorous life. But Curley's wife's dream of becoming a famous movie star in Hollywood is as real to her as Lennie's dream of being allowed to tend the rabbits on their own farm is to him: "Gonna get in the movies an' have nice clothes. ... An' I'll set in them big hotels and they'll take picers of me. ... All them nice clothes like they wear ... because this guy says I'm a natural" (370). We instinctively sense that Curley's wife's dream will never be realized, but we must credit her for her determination and courage in pursuing that dream, just as we credit the men for their single-minded perseverance in working to buy their own farm.

It is sadly ironic that Curley's wife's understanding of Lennie's passion for touching soft things and her final gesture of allowing him the pleasure of stroking her hair, leads to the simultaneous destruction of both their dreams. Curley's wife becomes a pivotal force in the play at this point

because her unselfish gesture triggers all the succeeding action and the ultimate outcome for the major characters. We are brought to this grim realization near the end of the play when Candy bitterly addresses Curley's wife's dead body: "You goddamn tramp. You done it, didn't you? Everybody knowed you'd mess things up. You just wasn't no good" (375). Candy's harsh words serve to generate additional sympathy for Curley's wife—a woman whose intense loneliness and dream for the future was as real and human as the men's.

[Analysis of Steinbeck's female characters from *Viva Zapata!*, *Burning Bright*, and *The Moon is Down* have been omitted.]

It is evident from this discussion of the female characters in Steinbeck's drama, *Of Mice and Men*, *Burning Bright*, *The Moon Is Down*, and *Viva Zapata!* that the overall impact of each work is greatly enhanced by the female characters in it. Curley's wife is a character who deserves both our sympathy--because of her isolation, her loneliness and her sincere attempts to befriend and be accepted by the men--and our respect because of her determined, if naive, pursuit of a better life. In addition to her worth as an individual, Curley's wife contributes to our understanding of the characters of George and Lennie and is a determining factor in the action and outcome of the play. Mordeen possesses an almost frightening determination and strength of character that is reminiscent of Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* and Liza Hamilton in *East of Eden*. These traits enable her to commit an alien act and to undergo incredible mental and emotional anguish in order to bring joy and satisfaction to her husband. Steinbeck has created a very powerful drama around the character of Mordeen and her unselfish act of love. Josefa will be remembered as the patient and understanding wife of Emiliano Zapata. Her unquestioning devotion to both her husband and the cause of the Mexican peasants is highly commendable and makes her a truly memorable character in our eyes.

In these three major female characters in particular and in all of his play-women, Steinbeck has created a series of powerful and dynamic characters, both in themselves and as evidenced by their actions in the plays. Mordeen and Josefa are, above all, individuals who refuse to be overshadowed by their more dominant male counterparts. In their role as wives, their understanding and support provided invaluable strength to their husbands. Curley's wife stands as a fully-developed and sympathetic woman, and she and the other women not only warrant critical attention but can only be fully appreciated after such a study.