

I'm Not a Tart: The Feminist Subtext of Steinbeck's *'Of Mice and Men'*.

If Steinbeck's woman character is purely a victim, why is she so hated? And if she is truly harmless, why is she so threatening? Without question, it was a commentary on the social climate at the time, which still surprisingly applies today.

By Leighton Meester (an American actress who played the character of Curley's Wife on Broadway in New York).

"Jesus, what a tramp!" George of the famous duo leading John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* exclaims with disdain after first meeting Curley's wife, the newly married young woman living on the ranch. The audience, notably younger than usual Broadway theatergoers, dependably erupts with laughter, and as that subsides, George threatens Lennie, his lovable, mentally disabled friend, "Don't even look at that bitch" when Lennie innocently remarks how "purdy" she is.

The insults are thrown at Curley's wife: "tramp" and "tart". The further along in the production we go, the more I realize that the audience agrees. In rooting for our heroes -- the everyman protagonists who scorn and demean the only woman -- the audience finds themselves unquestioningly hating her, too. But why? Of course, in playing this character, as with any other project, I care for her and have found common ground with even her specific flaws; I would expect my affection for her to be above those watching from the audience. But in dissecting this piece for five months now, I've found that within the writing, there is both a lack of reason to truly hate this woman, and the inevitable and undeniable urge to do so.

A few months ago, I read a piece by Daisy Eagan, a Tony Award-winning actress who was aiming to condemn a misogynistic comment on my character in a *New York Times* review. The review stated that my version of the character was intentionally lacking in the vamp department so as to dissuade the viewer from thinking that "she was asking for it," -- "it" being her death. Of course, I agreed with Ms. Eagan's opinion in that no woman ever asks for violence or assault, and that ignorance was most likely what brought the *Times* writer to his conclusion.

However, during our four-month run, I've had ups and downs with this notion, in my own feelings of insecurity, and in studying the words of Steinbeck; not just the play itself, but in a letter that was passed on to me by our director at the beginning of our run, written by Steinbeck to Claire Luce, the actress who originated the role on stage. In the letter, Steinbeck sheds light on what is behind this character without a name, writing that, "She was told over and over that she must remain a virgin because that was the only way she could get a husband ... She only had that one thing to sell and she knew it." He goes on, "She is a nice, kind girl and not a floozy. No man has ever considered her as anything except a girl to try to make ... As to her actual sex life -- she has had none except with Curley and there has probably been no consummation there since Curley would not consider her gratification and would probably be suspicious if she had any." I can barely read the letter now without tearing up at the thought of this imaginary woman, what she stands for, and what she loses. It's only become clear to me during my time with Curley's wife exactly how subversive Steinbeck's work is, and how he must have intended it.

If this woman is purely a victim, why is she so hated? And if she is truly harmless, why is she so threatening? Without question, it was a commentary on the social climate at the time, which still surprisingly applies today. But if sexism is one of the featured themes, why not say it? Crooks, a character who is forced to live in the barn and away from the other men, says that it's "because I'm black. They play cards in there but I can't play cus I'm black." As clear as day, the colour of his skin is

the reason for segregation. A modern audience cringes and immediately identifies. Such an explanation is never given as to why Curley's wife is shunned.

From an outside perspective, one might see her desperate attempts to make a connection to these men as innocent: "There ain't no women. I can't walk to town ... I tell you I just want to talk to somebody." Yet somehow, invariably, a large portion of the audience seems to agree with George. They want her to leave so she doesn't cause any trouble. I understand, because watching the actors, Chris O'Dowd, Jim Norton and James Franco, make their plans for a utopian ranch, I want them to have that dream, too. But why is Curley's wife's presence so disturbing? And why does the audience agree? It's the subconscious and inflammatory nature of Steinbeck's writing that makes the viewer join in on the bashing of this woman, punish her existence, snicker at her mishaps. The genius and relevancy behind Steinbeck's mission in writing this piece is that, to this day, it forces you to see yourself, to expose the depth of your own intolerance, prejudice, cruelty, and naiveté.

Literarily, Curley's wife is compared to an animal in an effort to reduce and humiliate her. She is mockingly referred to as a "Lulu," the same name for Slim's dog, described as a bitch who just "slang nine pups." "She'd be better off dead," is the opinion of Candy's old dog, and that attitude is undoubtedly mirrored toward the lone woman. But when the dog gets led off to be shot, protests can be heard from the audience, and as a dog lover, I have the same feeling. Complaints can rarely be heard during Curley's wife's death.

The final, eerie moment of her life is often accompanied by the uproar of laughter. She is violently shaken, rendered lifeless. It doesn't seem to get less painful for me, less terrifying, less tragic with time, yet our unusually young audience seems unfazed, if not amused by the savage act. Perhaps it's the only response that comforts them in an awkward or tense moment. Curley's wife's dead body lies still on the floor as Candy spits at her, "You goddamned tramp, you done it didn't you? Everybody said you'd mess things up, you just wasn't no good." And again, the audience cracks up. That isn't to say there aren't viewers undisturbed by the sight of this broken woman, and the lengthy scene that follows her death wherein she lies lifeless and untouched, center stage.

Throughout this run I've come to recognize these common reactions, and eventually understand them without resentment. Yet somehow, each time I enter the stage, as I'm faced with the audience who laughs or sneers, I'm struck with the loneliness that I can only imagine a woman like Curley's wife must feel -- the desperation for conversation, respect, and above all, dignity. Each time, I'm caught off-guard when I lose it.