

## The Classic Book I'd like to Rewrite

In *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, there is a character who has haunted me for forty years: the wife of Curly. She is pivotal but has too brief an appearance. She doesn't have a name, which might seem appropriate as she's not recognized as a person by other characters. Even the author, in an interview, admitted: 'She's not a person, she's a symbol.' But this, it seems to me, cannot be true because Curly's wife has as much reality as the other characters.

She's 'white trash', wears red lipstick, high heels and tight clothes. The men refer to her as tart or bitch. She has a dream. Hollywood! Stardom! But Curly grabs her instead. He wants a pretty wife and he gets one, but has no intention of getting to know her. His main response to her is ownership and distrust. He imagines she's unfaithful because she's flirty. The truth is, she's lonely and bored.

Curly's wife touches me in the same way Marilyn Monroe does. The same exploitation of beauty and sensuality, the same indifference to the person inside. They were both lonely and took the escape routes offered because they were desperate to belong somewhere, to someone. But they both jumped from one frying pan into another, over and over. Similar to the character Monroe plays in *The Misfits*, Curly's Wife lives in a male world of livestock and hard work. Taking pleasure in her appearance is the only avenue open to her, and demonstrates not just vanity, but pluckiness and ingenuity. A will to survive.

I respect Steinbeck, but think he missed a trick here. Lenny is brain damaged, but Lenny is not the only vulnerable character. Curly's Wife deserves more detail, more compassionate insight. I would develop her character more fully, include some flashbacks to her childhood and adolescence. I would describe the scene in which she succumbs to Curly's proposal – certainly not inspired by love. Far from being a symbol, she breaks my heart because she feels so real, so likely. Of course a farmer's son would want a pretty wife to prove he was a man and to run his household. And of course she would want a husband of any kind, as an escape from a life where she was unloved and lost. I would give her some siblings who feel equally neglected, and briefly follow their fates in order to put her own fate in perspective. A line or two about her parents perhaps, to flesh out the genetic mixture she is composed of. In short, I would let her step into the spotlight. And I would give her a name. Bobbie Jean, perhaps. Sorry Steinbeck – you're still my hero, but it's affectation to claim omitting her name is way of making her a symbol. All characters are symbols to some extent, and Curly's Wife is very alive in my imagination. The greater tragedy is not the death of Lenny.

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