

Steinbeck and Women's Liberation

How Steinbeck explores Women's Liberation in Of Mice and Men

“Woman is the slave to the slaves”

John Lennon sang this in the opening song of his 1972 album. But the quote actually comes from socialist James Connolly, who said it almost one hundred years earlier, and the sentiment has rung true throughout time. Ever since the agricultural revolution twelve thousand years ago, women have been oppressed by society. In *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck allegorically explores that oppression, and how patriarchal societies deprive women of agency, and by extension alienate them from their own individuality, and he explores how women may defiantly rebel against this oppression.

When we view *Of Mice and Men* through the lens of gender, we find that patriarchal society aims to deprive women of their innate human agency. This is exemplified through the character of Curley's Wife. Curley's Wife is deprived of her own agency by the patriarchy, and any power she has must be derived from men. When Curley's Wife seeks to leave her abusive household, the only way she possibly can is by marrying a man. “So I married Curley. Met him out to the Riverside Dance Palace that same night... I don't like Curley.” (88) Curley's Wife is only able to escape the control of her family by subjugating herself to the control of another man. There is no option for an independent woman with her own agency in patriarchal America. Curley's Wife doesn't even like Curley, the marriage is not by choice, it is just the only way she can gain any power or potential for herself. As she cannot exercise her own agency, and the potential that comes from it, she must by necessity marry Curley, in order to use his potential for herself. But this marriage is itself a facet of patriarchal relations, and it only continues the robbing of Curley's Wife's agency. When Lennie asks Curley's Wife not to talk to him, she complains that “I can't talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad.” (86) Curley deprives his wife of any expressions of her agency, she can talk to nobody but him. Steinbeck aims with this passage to show just one example of the theft of agency from women in America, in this case it is exemplified through talking. Speech is an innate expression of human agency, both in what we choose to speak about, and who we speak to, so the curtailing of that is also the curtailing of a person's own power, their own potential, their own agency. When Curley tells his wife not to talk to anybody, he is symbolically putting an end to her agency. This need to deprive women of

agency is necessary in patriarchal systems, as it solidifies the idea of women as property. Curley treats his wife as his property because he is the personification of patriarchy. “Any you guys seen my wife?” (55) he demands, because Curley’s wife is just that, *his* wife. Property does not have agency, it is a distinctly human trait, and so by attempting to deprive Curley’s Wife and other women of agency, Curley and the patriarchy also deprive women of their status as people, a lack of agency results in a lack of humanity.

The character of Curley’s Wife also demonstrates just *how* the alienation of people from their agency necessarily results in their alienation from their essence of the self, of their humanity. Curley’s Wife is obviously deprived of her agency, but she is deprived of it by Curley, an allegorical representation of women being deprived of their agency by the patriarchy. When Curley deprives his wife of agency, he robs it from her, he steals it from her, and in the process, Curley’s Wife becomes an extension of Curley. Once again we may go back to when Lennie asks Curley’s Wife not to talk to him, and she complains that “I can’t talk to nobody but Curley. Else he gets mad.” (86) Curley not only wishes to deprive his wife of agency here, he wishes to rob her of her agency, to take her agency for himself, and to make his wife an extension of himself. By asking her to not talk to anybody, he would be depriving her of agency, which he does. But what he really tells her, is to not talk to anybody *but him*, because that is a means to direct her agency towards him, to make her an extension of him, and to rob her of her self-essence, of her individuality. Curley’s Wife loses her independent self to Curley, and we can see this when we look at how other characters view her. “Wait’ll you see Curley’s wife.” (29) they say, because Curley’s Wife *has no name*. She is always *Curley’s* wife, she has no essence of her own, no self of her own, because she has no agency of her own. Everyone else on the farm recognizes this, they know that Curley’s Wife is really Curley’s property, a part of him. “Curley maybe ain’t gonna like his wife out in the barn,” (80) Candy says when she starts talking to them, (thereby expressing agency). Curley’s Wife is seen as Curley’s, belonging to Curley, and her agency is seen as belonging to Curley. Candy and the others believe it is perfectly fine that Curley tells his wife who and who not to talk to, because they too believe that her agency belongs to him. The patriarchy is enforced by everyone on the ranch, and everyone enforces the robbing of women’s agency and the control of that agency being given to men. Agency is a fundamental essence of humanity, and it is the fundamental essence of the self, of individuality. Without agency, we have no way to express ourselves as individuals, so controlling our own agency, results in controlling our own destinies, and thus our own selves. If others control our

agency, they control our destinies, and they control our selves. Alienation of agency results in the alienation of the self, which the patriarchal society must accomplish in order to deprive women of their humanity.

Of course, Curley's Wife is also a representation of how people may regain their agency, and may fight back, to rebel against the theft of their agency by the oppressors that seek to destroy their individuality. Steinbeck is careful to show that while patriarchal systems aim to steal women's agency and thus their individuality, agency is innate in people, and women may steal it back. Curley's Wife shows this through her many actions that demonstrate how she intends to hold on to her agency, and fight back against Curley, and the patriarchy as a whole. After Curley's Wife shows up in the bunkhouse and talks with George and Lennie, Whit remarks that, "She got the eye goin' all the time on everybody... Seems like she can't keep away from guys." (52) While Curley's Wife's actions may seem rather unconventional for a married woman, they make perfect sense in a revolutionary understanding. Steinbeck has shown throughout the whole of the book that Curley's marriage to his wife is sexist, and a facet and product of patriarchy. When we view Curley's Wife's actions through a gender lens, we find that she is actually rebelling against her lost individuality. By flirting with other men, she challenges the concept that a woman *belongs* to her husband, she breaks Curley's hold on her agency when she chooses to use her agency against him. Whit goes on to say that Curley's, "got yella-jackets in his drawers... [his] pants is just crawlin' with ants." (53) Curley's Wife knows that her flirtatious activities anger Curley, because they deprive him of his control on her agency. Curley has "yella-jackets in his drawers" because his attempts to rob her of her agency, and thus to stifle her individual self are failing. Curley's Wife is a revolutionary, fighting the system that oppresses her through any means she can think of. Curley's Wife is clear that she doesn't intend to actually carry out an affair with anyone, her flirting is purely a tool that she uses to regain her agency. When Curley hasn't seen her in a while, he immediately assumes that she's with someone. "Any you guys seen my wife?... Where the hell's Slim?" (55) Curley assumes that his wife must be with Slim, when as we learn later, she never was, "Uh-uh. She ain't been in the barn." Lennie says when asked if Curley's Wife ever entered while he was there. Curley's Wife doesn't actually carry out any affairs, she just pretends to, as a way to attack Curley. Steinbeck doesn't show Curley's Wife flirting to insinuate that she's a slut, he does so to show that she is a rebel. Rebelling against Curley. Rebelling against the Patriarchy. Rebelling for herself.

Curley's Wife in *Of Mice and Men* demonstrates the idea of alienation from a feminist perspective. Karl Marx famously argued in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, his idea of the worker's alienation from their humanity, in his theory, labor which he regarded as a fundamental aspect of self-expression, is estranged from the worker by capitalism, which divides up the labor system, and deprives workers of their own agency, that agency being ceded to the bourgeoisie. Max Stirner also argued that numerous ideas and systems contributed to the alienation from individuality in *The Ego and its Own*. But in the core of both of these arguments, we find the simple truth that agency, and a lack of agency, result in the alienation from the self. In Marx, this is expressed through the realm of proletarian-bourgeois relations, the proletarian is robbed of their agency, and the bourgeois redirects it for their own profit. In Stirner, we find this in a range of ideas, people are estranged from their own selves when they give away their agency to some greater idea such as a god, or the idea of humanity as a whole. In Steinbeck, women are robbed of agency by men, which results in the dehumanization and objectification in the literal sense, of women. Theft of agency results in theft of individuality, regardless of who is doing the thievery.

Of Mice and Men is a powerful allegory on how patriarchies seek to steal the agency of women, how that affects the individuality and self-essence of women, and how women may fight back against it. Steinbeck shows us that agency is the core of our humanity, it is what we have to control our destinies, and without it, we are objectified and dehumanized. While Steinbeck relates this to women and the patriarchy through Curley and Curley's Wife's relationship, we can relate to all structures of power, and the importance of it is not changed. All hierarchies seek to alienate their lowest levels from their agency, because all those in power need that agency directed for their own interests. Today in America, we often might feel that this is not the case, but it still very much is, just disguised and hidden away. Curley's Wife shows us how we might resist that, by resisting facets of hierarchies, just as she resisted her marriage, we might regain some of our own agency, and take our destinies back for ourselves.

"The first thing we want is to be masters of our own destiny"

- Che Guevara