

Trabajo Fin de Grado

First Glacial, Then Crucial:
A Contrastive Analysis of Female Characters in
John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pearl*

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ABSTRACT: For a long time, John Steinbeck has been labelled by some scholars as a sexist, *macho* and Anglo-chauvinistic author. This was likely due to his early works, in which he did not appear to consider women important while advocating for social equity through political change. Nevertheless, in his later works women's roles and their representation experienced an evolution and became a crucial element of social critique. Steinbeck seemed to realise women were suffering during the Great Depression and, as a result, he completely changed the roles of female characters in his fiction. The purpose of this thesis is to compare the representation of female characters in Steinbeck's early works with those in his later works to explore and understand the evolution of his views on gender and the role of women in society. In order to do so, Curley's Wife from *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and Juana from *The Pearl* (1947) are taken as examples, respectively, of the negative and positive characteristics Steinbeck attributed to female characters in his works.

Key words: Steinbeck – Feminism – Gender – Representation – Women's roles

RESUMEN: Durante mucho tiempo, John Steinbeck ha sido etiquetado por algunos académicos como un autor sexista, machista y anglochovinista. Esto se debe principalmente a sus primeras obras, en las cuales no parecía considerar importantes a las mujeres cuando abogaba por la igualdad social a través del cambio político. Sin embargo, en su obra posterior, el papel de la mujer y su representación experimentaron una evolución y se convirtieron en un elemento crucial de crítica social. Steinbeck pareció darse cuenta de que las mujeres también sufrieron durante la Gran Depresión, y consecuentemente cambió por completo el papel de los personajes femeninos en su ficción. Por lo tanto, el objetivo del presente trabajo de fin de grado es comparar la representación de los personajes femeninos en las primeras obras de Steinbeck con las de sus obras posteriores para explorar y comprender la evolución de sus puntos de vista sobre el género y el rol de la mujer en la sociedad. Para ello, se toma la esposa de Curley de *De ratones y hombres* (1937) y a Juana de *La perla* (1947) como personificaciones de todas las características negativas y positivas que Steinbeck atribuye a los personajes femeninos a lo largo de toda su obra.

Palabras clave: Steinbeck – Feminismo – Género – Representación – Roles de la mujer

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I. Introduction: *Quid de feminis?*

C'est notre problème, ainsi le problème de la femme a toujours été un problème d'hommes.
—Simone de Beauvoir, “La Femme Libre”

As Patricia Leavy and Anne Harris argue, from a gender perspective, the concept of woman is a socially constructed category (9), which is deeply connected to the cultural consideration of femininity. This construction of womanhood has generally been defined from a male perspective that has dominated literature from its early origins to its contemporary manifestations. Some examples of both are Homer’s *Odyssey*, with characters such as Circe and Calypso, who are menacing, manipulative and complying with traditional negative stereotypes associated with the female gender, and *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, where the title character is hypersexualised. Nevertheless, the dominant depiction of women might not always have been a negative one. It may be said that there have been authors who, albeit not part of an extensive movement, have constructed a counter narrative, and the Second Wave of feminism an outstanding example of this. As Leavy and Harris assert, challenging the established representations of women and their roles in society was a more widespread practice in literature during that period (21), as happens in *Down Among the Women* by Fay Weldon, a novel originally published in 1972 about a group of women who decide by themselves how each one of them wants to live, ignoring societal expectations.

An example of a male author who, according to critics, has contributed to the inimical construction of women in literary terms is John Steinbeck. He is considered to be a chauvinistic author by some scholars (e.g. Giles 2008, Montefiore 1996, and Spilka 1974). For instance, Sally Giles claims that the derogatory language used to refer to feminine characters in his works could be “a product of *machista* traditions, Anglo female suppression, or a product of the embittered author’s projected emotions” (96).

Some of Steinbeck's works, such as *Tortilla Flat*, *In Dubious Battle* and *Of Mice and Men* do indeed comply with these critics' opinions. However, when reading his whole oeuvre, it seems that not all of it depicts women so stereotypically. Other publications by him, such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Cannery Row* and *The Pearl*, show them in a very different way, leaving on a side all the negative characteristics Steinbeck has been said to associate them with. It appears that all the works that corroborate what these aforementioned critics say of Steinbeck coincide with the books of his earlier more *macho* phase, whereas in his more mature period, the works seem to challenge this perception of him.

If some of Steinbeck writings are projected on a timeline, it can be seen that the novellas representing female characters negatively are on the left side, and the works with a positive portrayal on the right side (fig.1). This suggests that perhaps there is an evolution in the author's approach to female characters. Therefore, this thesis attempts to ascertain whether this development can really be demonstrated in his feminine characters.

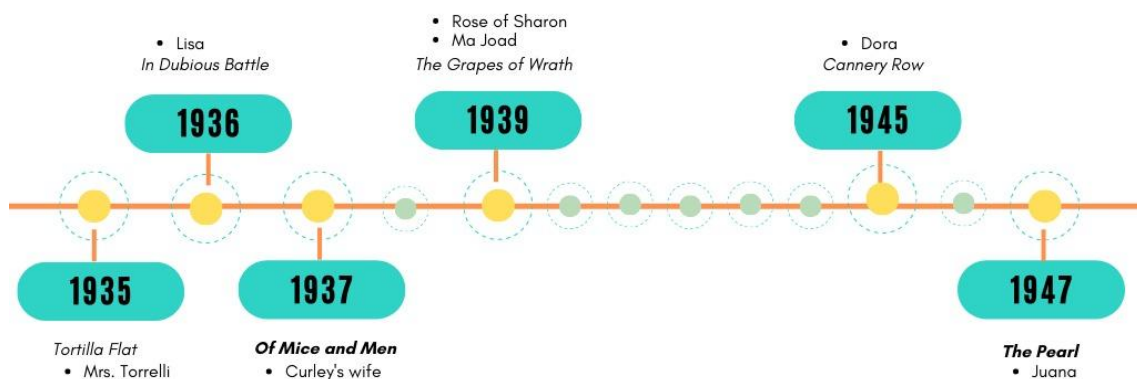


Fig. 1. Timeline with the novellas and the novel that are subject of analysis in this thesis (self-elaborated).

Because of their importance within the chosen works, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pearl* will be taken as representative exemplars for the study. To understand the reason behind this decision, it is worth mentioning that in *Of Mice and Men*, women's

functions are very stereotypical, whereas in *The Pearl*, they seem to differ from traditional gender roles. Therefore, female characters in these two novellas are going to be studied, in order to demonstrate that the later works, such as *The Pearl*, portray women more positively, which proves that there has indeed been a transformation in their depiction and Steinbeck's attitude towards them.

To explain this, first, a close analysis of Curley's wife and Juana will be carried out, followed by a comparison between both characters, which shows how much they contrast with one another and how they are differently portrayed. In this contrastive analysis, other characters from the aforementioned books are also introduced, showing that this evolution in the representation also affects female characters of other works that were published in the respective periods, and that Curley's wife and Juana are not an exception. Finally, a conclusion will be reached, proving that there is a process of maturation and change in the depiction of Steinbeck's feminine characters, and that his later works do not comply with the male chauvinistic canon he has been said to be part of.

II. Theoretical Framework: *Feminae? Feminae.*

Feminism: the radical notion that women are people.
—Marie Shear, "Celebrating Women's Words"

Feminism is defined by Owen Fiss as "the set of beliefs and ideas that belong to the broad social and political movement to achieve greater equality for women" (413). Nevertheless, this is just a common ground for all feminisms, since there are many different ones. Actually, as Sandra Acker enumerates, there are three main schools of feminism whose emergence coincides with the Second Wave of feminism: liberal, radical and socialist¹ (432-428), but as Leavy and Harries explain, since the late 20th

¹ Although they are not exactly the same, some feminists prefer the adjective 'materialist' (or 'cultural-materialist').

century, new forms of feminism are emerging (21), such as separatist, lipstick and anarcha-feminism. According to Acker, liberal feminists intend to remove barriers—either in school, individual psyche, or discriminatory labour practices—that prevent women from fully reaching their potential (423). She also elucidates the concept of radical feminism as a movement whose main purpose is to change the established social structure, thus eliminating patriarchy. Lastly, she argues that socialist feminists’ “aim is to remove oppression (in part by abolishing capitalism)” (426). Authors such as Rosalind Delmar argue that, although these divisions of feminism have their different points of focus, all seem to challenge the society in which men have most of the power and influence (11). Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis, a broader common frame of feminism, generally coinciding with Second Wave feminists, as explained below, is used, although the existence of others is acknowledged.

The birth of feminism has been associated with the First Wave; however, this is simply the moment when the concept as such emerged, not when the idea of equality against the patriarchal established system surfaced. The ideas that are associated with feminism have existed since the appearance of patriarchy and, in fact, any historical moment that challenges patriarchy is an instance of feminism before the concept itself existed.

As Leavy and Harris explain, during the First Wave (late 19th-early 20th century), a sense of community and sisterhood was achieved with the appearance of the *suffragettes* (21), overcoming the previous feminism *avant la lettre*. Still, the changes that were accomplished were not enough to fully acquire lasting equity for women and, consequently, the Women’s Liberation Movement appeared, introducing the Second Wave (1960s-1980s). It is not uncommon to hear that the movement constructs feminism, but actually, as Fiss suggests, it is “feminism [that] gives shape and direction

to the women's movement" (413). Consequently, the Women's Liberation Movement provided feminism the sense of group needed for it to be powerful. As Leavy and Harris state, this time the source of suppression was not considered unequal access to opportunities, but patriarchy as a system and, therefore, there was an attempt to enact alternatives to the male-centred society, which consisted in challenging both traditional representations and roles of women (21). This was followed by the Third Wave of feminism (1990s-present) and by what has been called the Fourth Wave, as well as Postfeminism (2000s-present), which is against a restrictive interpretation of feminism and opens it in a less dogmatic way to other postures that might have been rejected by traditional feminism.

To understand feminism thoroughly, the notion of who can be considered feminist is crucial. Delmar defines feminists as "the leaders, organisers, publicists, lobbyists, of the women's movement; . . . feminists are [feminism's] animating spirits" (16). This explanation does not seem to include men since, following Delmar's definition, being a feminist man could be considered to be counterproductive in the sense that feminism, a movement for women's rights, would run the danger of not being fully directed and organised by women, which could potentially silence their voice, as has in fact happened in the past. Consequently, men who show feminist attitudes and ideas have been identified as "allies" by several scholars (e.g. Drury and Kaiser 2014, Wiley and Dune 2019).

Even though it has been debated whether the term "feminist" can be applied to men, there are some male authors who, without explicitly expressing feminist attitudes, challenge social norms imposed by the patriarchal structure through the characterisation and representation of female characters. In that respect, they could be viewed as allies. Understanding this perspective requires an explanation of the notion of representation.

Leavy and Harris define representation as what is being said, how, in what form, and to whom (124). This suggests that representation is never objective because, although a narrative may be the same, it may have different effects and results, as well as project different images depending on who recounts it, who the addressee is, and how it is framed. This is indeed an issue with which feminism has been struggling for a very long time. According to Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément in “Sorties”, phallogocentrism has dominated history in terms of language, and as a result, “masculinity/femininity are opposed in such a way that it is male privilege that is affirmed in a movement of conflict” (80). In that regard, Elizabeth Wingrove argues that gender roles have been imposed by a male heterosexual and cisgender standard and, therefore, masculinity could be said to have been associated by them with power and aggressiveness, whilst femininity with passivity and subjugation, thus projecting the identity of both men and women (885). Consequently, many schools of feminism (e.g the socialist and radical ones) seek to challenge this image that has been perpetuated by patriarchy, the system that subordinates women to male dominance and that has not allowed them to have equal rights because they were not in charge of their own definition. In literary representation, authors (mostly male) have often reserved certain subject positions for female characters as well as for male characters, creating an impression that women’s unequal position is fixed and, therefore, unalterable.

This idea of representation might be closely linked with the notion of sexism, which entails discrimination and stereotyping, typically targeting women on the basis of their sex, thereby reinforcing prejudices and upholding a male dominant society. Ergo, female representation through different means² has mainly been produced from a male-dominated perspective based on sexist ideas that reduce men and women to these

² These means refer to all the mediums that have the capacity of representing and, therefore, constructing an identity of women such as cinema, paintings, publicity, etc.

subject positions that have been stereotypically associated with them, as explained above, and both genders have been affected by such representations, which is what feminism in general has been trying to challenge.

In brief, feminism might be considered to have existed since the origins of patriarchy and, with the First Wave, a sense of unity was achieved for the first time, which led to a flourishing of critical expressions against patriarchal society that had never happened before. Since then, it has been categorised into different subdivisions (some of which are still emerging) that have different points of focus, but still share the main idea: challenging the established male-dominant society perpetuated by androcentrism and sexist ideas that have been oppressing women for many centuries. As a result, feminists and allies have been trying to challenge these inequalities of which women have been victims just for the fact of being one to achieve a greater sense of equality for both genders and fully deconstruct the roles male authority benefits from.

III. Of Mice and (Wo)men

The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men /
Gang aft agley,
—Robert Burns, “To a Mouse”

Of Mice and Men published in 1937, is a novella that narrates the journey of George and Lennie, two drifters who strive to achieve their version of the American Dream: owning a farm. To make this dream come true, they must save up money and therefore, they begin seeking work in the fields and valleys of California during the Great Depression. Lennie is a surpassingly strong man who is not aware of his strength and has an intellectual disability that is evident throughout the narrative. George is his lifelong friend, who protects him because he cannot cope with daily life on his own. After being hired by Curley, the owner of a ranch near Soledad, a city in Monterey County,

California, George and Lennie encounter Curley's wife. She first appears in the bunkhouse where all the ranch workers live. These describe her as a 'looloo'³ (Steinbeck 57), and she does not appear to mind that Lennie is mentally challenged when trying to flirt with him. She does so by letting him stroke her "soft and fine" (102) hair, but he does this so forcefully that he accidentally kills her by holding onto it too tightly while trying to stop her from yelling for help. He does not intend to hurt her, but due to his situation, he cannot fully understand the consequences of his actions or the extent of his own physical strength.

Curley's wife's character has already been researched, but, since the novella does not make a clear statement on women, there have been discrepant analyses. For instance, Louis Owens argues that she is not the evil force in the novella, but capitalism and power and the corrupting influence they have on people (103), while Richard Hart suggests that she serves as a starkly ironic example of "the immorality of narrow minds" (39) and the social environments that breed them, since isolation is what made her behave in a despicable way. In this thesis, she will be analysed as an embodiment of all the characteristics the author associated the women of his early works with.

The first aspect of Curley's wife that captures the reader's attention is the fact that she lacks a proper name. Throughout the novella, she is only referred to as "Curley's wife" (31), indicating that she is not valued as an individual in her own right. As Kenna Wendt notes, her name is not significant, but rather her relationship with her husband is (32). This establishes a hierarchical relationship between her and the male characters, who are all named. In onomastics, which examines naming practices, names are considered to provide identity. Following this line of reasoning, Curley's wife is

³ This word is mostly found under the spelling "lulu". According to the *Macmillan Dictionary*, it is a word used in very informal American speech, and it means "someone or something that is very unusual or extreme, often in a silly or unpleasant way" ("Lulu").

deprived of a proper name and thus lacks a significant aspect of her identity. There are two possible interpretations of this: One could argue that it represents the erasure of the identity of women within marriage. The second interpretation, which the one this analysis will take, is that within the patriarchal society depicted in Steinbeck's novella, women only acquire an identity when married. If they remain unmarried, they are considered insignificant, since they would not be defined in relation to men. Thus, as Wendt states regarding the situation of Curley's wife, "the very thing that brings her control over others is also the thing that brings her no dominance over her own life" (31). Hence, if Curley's wife were not married to Curley, she would be entirely absent from the story.⁴ What distinguishes her as a person is not her identity, but rather her function as being wed to Curley. In this sense, Steinbeck appears to care about the function of women in the novella, not their identity.

The way in which Curley's wife dresses is another relevant factor when analysing her character. She is associated with red, and the visual representation of this colour has often been used to express passion and sexuality, and as such, a contrast is established with the softness of her cotton dress. This may be suggesting certain complexity in her character. She is presented as an alluring and sexually provocative woman, but at the same time, her clothing appears to symbolise her most innocent and vulnerable side. A plausible interpretation for this could be that this is a way of highlighting the limitations and expectations placed on women by the patriarchal society depicted in the novella, where women are seen as objects of desire and constrained by the established gender roles:

She had full, rouged lips and wide-spaced eyes, heavily made up. Her fingernails were red. Her hair hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages.

⁴ What is meant here is that the character of Curley's wife could be replaced by another woman in the function of being married to Curley.

She wore a cotton house dress and red mules, on the insteps of which were little bouquets of red ostrich feathers. (Steinbeck, *Mice* 34)

In Curley's wife's physical description, reddish colours are mentioned four times, which, according to Adam Pazda et al., convey the idea of sexual receptivity (787). Therefore, from the perspective of a straight male character, this can be interpreted as a symbol for eroticism, with which Curley's wife is being highly sexualised. Her hair is said to be "like sausages" (Steinbeck, *Mice* 34), which may also have a sexual connotation. This could be an attempt to imitate the phallic shape of an erected penis, which might be linked with Lacan's theory of sexual difference,⁵ which might be suggesting that Curley's wife is in a position of power towards the ranch workers. All of this establishes a contrast with the idea of softness and purity associated with the cotton of her dress.

This material is usually related to innocence and perceived as white, which is not generally considered an erotic colour by men, since it does not seem to convey sexual receptivity, which, as can be seen in figure 2, is perceived to a low degree compared to the one transmitted with red. The implication derived from this sharp contrast is that Curley's wife is represented as sexy and powerful, but there is nothing that should—apparently—scare the ranch workers. Nonetheless, throughout the novella, the reader notices how Curley's wife is conscious of her superior

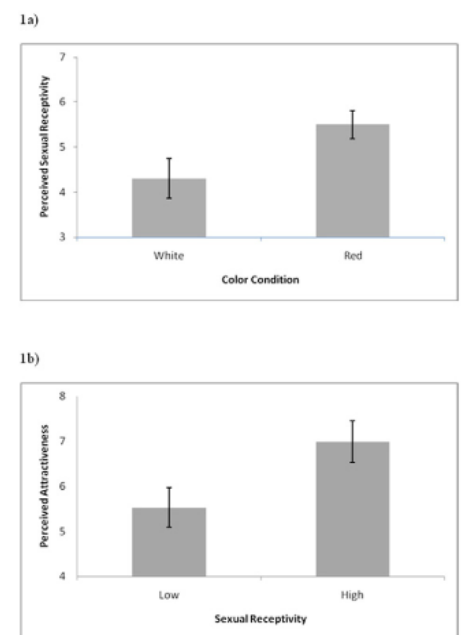


Fig. 2. a: The influence of shirt colour on perceived sexual receptivity in Experiment 1a. b: The influence of sexual receptivity on perceived attractiveness in Experiment 1b. (Pazda et al. 188)

⁵ According to Lacan, gender is not something biological, but rather a symbolic position, which is fundamental to construct subjectivity and the sexed object. In brief, possessing a penis is what provides the subject with power (being both usually linked to men). For further explanation on this, see Lacan and Miller, 1975.

power, both in terms of her position regarding the workers and of the erotic effect she has on them, and how she uses it unethically.⁶

Furthermore, Curley's wife's negative representation is reinforced by her racist attitude. Wendt points out how she treats blacks, which she exemplifies with the following quote: "'Listen, Nigger,' she said . . . 'Yes, ma'am.' 'Well, you keep your place then, Nigger, I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny'" (Steinbeck, *Mice* 91), which illustrates how Curley's wife behaves towards Crooks, a black ranch hand who is despised at the time by society and who holds an inferior social status to her (Wendt 28-30). Before this happens, the reader might think that Curley's wife is just resentful of her situation, because she is oppressed by a dominant group, and that, therefore, there would be a reason for her behaviour, as happens with Margaret in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by Tennessee Williams, where the reader gets an explanation for her demeanour, but this is not the case in *Of Mice and Men*. For the reader to think that Curley's wife is not corrupted, she would probably have to empathise with black people, since they are also a minority group who, like her, are victims of discrimination. As a consequence, the reader gets to think that Curley's wife has a malicious and arrogant behaviour, which reinforces the evil representation of her character.

In addition, although Curley's wife is the only woman who physically appears in the story, it is worth noting that Lennie's aunt Clara is mentioned several times in the text to provide insight into his childhood. She also appears at the end of the novella when Lennie experiences hallucinations due to his extreme fear after unintentionally killing Curley's wife. Acting as Lennie's conscience, Aunt Clara chastises him for his actions and reminds him of George's care and kindness towards him:

⁶ This generalisation of 'workers' does not include Lennie, since the reader never gets to know whether or not he has sexual desire for Curley's wife—or sexual desire in general—due to his personal circumstances. She is not aware of this, and trying to use the power she has on the wrong person is what makes the novella have a tragic ending.

And then from out of Lennie's head there came a little fat old woman. . .
. She stood in front of Lennie and put her hands on her hips, and she
frowned disapprovingly at him. . . .

'I tol' you an' tol' you" she said. . . . you don't never take no care. You
do bad things." (Steinbeck, *Mice* 113-114)

The representation of Aunt Clara is that of a caring mother figure, but her tone when addressing Lennie is stern rather than sweet. Furthermore, the physical description of Aunt Clara is not explicitly negative, but the narrator describes her as a "little fat old woman" (113), which could be interpreted as sizeist to a certain extent, since being fat in the novella's society has a negative connotation. She is also said to have "her hands on her hips" (114), which might be interpreted as an imposing and emotionless reprimand rather than one of understanding Lennie's extreme fear. However, this chapter focuses mainly on Curley's wife, since she is the only female character who receives significant attention from the narrator.

In brief, the representation of Curley's wife in *Of Mice and Men* is largely negative, and this is implied through the fact that she lacks a name, the narrator's description, her physical appearance, and her behaviour. Therefore, it can be said that Curley's wife is presented as a *femme fatale*, a character for whom no one may feel sorrow, emphasising the male chauvinistic perspective under which she is characterised.

IV. The Pearls of La Paz

Women should be respected as well! . . . men are held in great
esteem . . . so why wouldn't women have their share?
—Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*

The Pearl, published in 1947, recounts the story of a family whose infant son, Coyotito, is stung by a scorpion, which leads his parents, Kino and Juana, to seek medical help.

Nonetheless, the doctor refuses to treat the baby because they have no money. The family's fortune changes when Kino finds an enormous shiny pearl in the sea, which, as is later explained, is highly symbolic, but so does his behaviour as he becomes more and more driven by greed and violence, up to the point of killing a stranger. Despite Juana's attempts to help Kino and her best efforts to return to ordinary life, she is ignored and tragedy strikes when the family have to escape some hunters who mistake Coyotito for a coyote and shoot him, thus killing him. After recognising the threat the pearl has posed to his family, Kino tosses it into the ocean as he and Juana come back to the town with the dead body of Coyotito.

Imdad Ullah Khan et al. argue that Juana's rational mindset and resourcefulness serve as a contrast to Kino's behaviour, since he lacks these qualities (150). He is extremely bold and does not think before acting, whereas she is more calm and logical, thus acting wiser. An instance where this can be seen is when the scorpion stings Coyotito. Kino reacts violently and does not pay any special attention to the child, focusing on releasing all his anger on the animal, whereas Juana remains sensible and immediately tends to their son, as can be seen in the following passage:

Kino had it, had it in his fingers, rubbing it to a paste in his hands. He threw it down and beat it into the earth floor with his fist . . . Kino beat and stamped the enemy until it was only a fragment and a moist place in the dirt. . . . the Song of the Enemy roared in his ears.

But Juana had the baby in her arms now. She found the puncture with redness . . . She put her lips down over the puncture and sucked hard and spat and sucked again. (Steinbeck, *Pearl* 9)

Juana is portrayed as one of the most rational characters in the novella. Khan et al. state that, throughout the narrative, she serves as a voice of reason and caution (150).

She warns Kino about the dangers of his newfound wealth and the greed it brings out in others: “Kino, this pearl is evil. Let us destroy it before it destroys us” (Steinbeck, *Pearl* 58). She remains levelheaded and grounded. She is the first one to notice that the pearl is having a negative effect on them. Even though at first she was hopeful about the pearl, she reasons and becomes sceptical about it. This proves that she prefers her family to do concrete and pragmatic things to address their poverty situation they were before finding the pearl than to think about a utopian future full of money and benefits they will supposedly have, thus showing a strong sense of self-preservation and practicality when faced with difficult situations.

Nevertheless, the society shown in *The Pearl* is one that adheres to the patriarchal ideas of colonial Mexico,⁷ where women’s voices were ignored, and Juana is a victim of this societal trend. Kino does not consider taking her with him to sell the valuable pearl, despite her best efforts to provide him with wise advice throughout the course of the novella. Instead, he chooses to take his older brother⁸: “Kino stepped with dignity out of the house, and Juana followed him, carrying Coyotito. . . . But because of the seriousness of the occasion, only one man walked with Kino, and that was his brother, Juan Tomás” (46-47). Still, the trip to the city to sell the pearl is not a successful one. The dealers want to scam Kino, and in the city Juan Tomás is not helpful, since he provides no help and functions merely as an observer.

It is also relevant analysing how, even though Juana has a desire to rebel, she is still submissive to Kino, which makes her have, as Imdad Ullah Khan et al. call it, an

⁷ The story is located at a very unspecific time, which provides the text with a mythical dimension. Still, there are some specific clues that allow the reader to link the story with the colonial enterprise (e.g. references to supremacism in race).

⁸ The fact that he is not only a man, but also older, reinforces the literary motif of the wise old man who gives advice to a younger generation. For further explanation on this, see De Rose, 2017. It is true that there can also be wise old women, and even the otherwise rather misogynist philosopher Schopenhauer acknowledged how women can be good advisors (Schopenhauer 47-48). Still, Kino does not see Juana as a potential advisor.

“almost dog-like royalty to her husband” (154). However, this outward submissiveness is actually a result of Juana’s inner sense of rationality because she knows that confronting Kino at certain moments would neither be feasible nor advisable. She is aware of the patriarchal society in which she lives. Still, Juana does exert influence on Kino’s thoughts to a certain extent. She does not always allow herself to be silenced or to be obedient to Kino’s orders, which shows, as Khan et al. develop, Juana’s strength and will to protect the family, since she is not always diminished and disregarded by her husband (150). This can be seen when they escape to the mountains, where Kino listens to Juana for the first time:

“Juana,” he said, “I will go on and you will hide. . . .”

She looked full into his eyes for a moment. “No,” she said. “We go with you.”

“I can go faster alone,” he said harshly. . . .

“No,” said Juana.

“You must. It is the wise thing and it is my wish,” he said.

“No,” said Juana.

He looked then for weakness in her . . . there was none. (Steinbeck, *Pearl* 78)

By making her voice heard and asserting her opinion, she achieves a degree of egalitarianism within the family, since from now, she will be equal to Kino.

Furthermore, Juana is an active woman who stands up against the corrupting influence of wealth and power, which is seen in her attempt to throw the pearl back into the sea, even though Kino stops her and later even hits her: “Her arm was up to throw when he leaped at her and caught her arm and wrenched the pearl from her. He struck her in the face with his clenched fist and she fell among the boulders, and he kicked her

in the left side” (59). Still, the effort Juana makes is interesting for the analysis of her character. Richard Astro claims that throwing the pearl to the ocean may be a symbolic act of rejecting capitalism, since the pearl makes them materialistic (119). Kino halts Juana’s endeavour to throw it, but her striving for disposing of it shows her wisdom and her willingness to prioritise her family’s happiness and safety over money, since she recognises that economic prosperity is not valuable when lacking morality and ethics. Hence, the novella critiques through Juana the destructive effects of capitalism and highlights the need to put human values first over material affluence.

Physically speaking, the narrator does not apparently place much emphasis on Juana’s bodily depiction. The lack of description might be intentional in order to avoid portraying the character’s physical appearance as something that is central to the story. What appears to matter the most is not her looks, but her actions and thoughts. The only characteristic explicitly mentioned is her black braided hair: “then she combed her black hair and braided it in two braids and tied the ends with the green ribbon” (Steinbeck, *Pearl* 8). Although her image is not generally given importance, it is indeed relevant. As Barry Pritzker explain, braids are conceived as positive in some Native American cultures,⁹ being worn by married, fertile, smart and old women (11, 34, 94). Additionally, the colour green is also relevant in the description of the ribbon, since it has often been associated with expectancy, as happens in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, where a green gleam serves as a guiding light to all Gatsby’s ambitions. This might lead to the interpretation that Juana represents hope for her family.

Although Juana is the object of analysis in this thesis, there is another female character in *The Pearl*: Apolonia, Juan Tomás’ “fat wife” (Steinbeck, *Pearl* 9). She is described as fat and fertile, which reinforces the rather positive representation of female

⁹ Through the novella, the reader gets to know that La Paz is divided into Spanish colonists and indigenous people, being Juana and her family part of the second.

characters in the story, of course always within the ideas of a patriarchal system, since, according to Gabriel Saucedo Arteaga, in ancient cultures, such as Mesoamerican civilisations, being fat has a positive connotation (22). Although it is a trait that has its place in the male-centred system because fertility and the role of reproduction fits within it, to a degree it still gives an optimistic representation of Apolonia. Be that as it may, she is barely mentioned in the story and has a subordinate role to her husband.

As previously explained in this chapter, Juana confronts her husband without much accomplishment, since he does not allow her to do away with the pearl, which gives the reader the feeling that no matter how hard Juana tries and wise as she may seem, she is doomed to obey and to be submissive, therefore being silenced. Still, a partial success comes at the end, when Juana achieves some level of egalitarianism, her son having already died mostly because of her husband's stubbornness. A degree of equality between the two is achieved by the end of the story, and now, in a way that is relevant for this analysis, "they were not walking in single file, Kino ahead and Juana behind, as usual, but side by side" (Steinbeck, *Pearl* 87-88), breaking away from the conventional single-file arrangement in which Juana used to follow Kino.

In brief, the portrayal of Juana is a favourable one, and this is achieved by giving importance to her actions and thoughts, representing her as a brave woman who is not afraid to object to her husband's impositions, and foregrounding some aspects of her physical appearance, as well as downplaying others. Thus, Juana challenges the literary motif of female submission, since from the perspective of the reader, she is the novella's source of rationality and everything she does is for the benefit of her family.

V. Comparing Curley's Wife and Juana: *Absconditae animae*

It would be absurd if we did not understand both
angels and devils, since we invented them.

—John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

Throughout his oeuvre, Steinbeck has used different female characters, as could be seen in figure 1, which have similarities as well as differences. As chapter III of this thesis has shown for the case of *Of Mice and Men*, in his early works, which also include *In Dubious Battle* and *Tortilla Flat*, women were mostly portrayed negatively or as passive. Nevertheless, as chapter IV has demonstrated for the case of *The Pearl*, Steinbeck's later books, which also include *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cannery Row*, present another image of female characters, which appears to be a more positive and active one.

Most of the women in his works share some similarities, which can be seen in Curley's wife and Juana. Nonetheless, there are more differences than resemblances, which suggests an interesting dividing line in his works. The evolution of women's projections in his books can be observed on the timeline (see fig. 1), which could be seen to develop as a continuum. Within this line of evolution, *Of Mice and Men* would represent a peak in the negative representation of women within Steinbeck's work, while, at the other end of the continuum, the pinnacle in positive representation is reached in *The Pearl*.

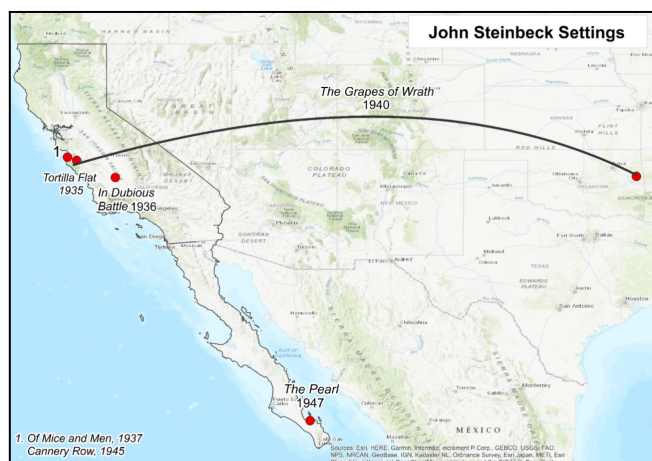


Fig. 3. Setting for John Steinbeck works mentioned in this thesis (self-elaborated).

One of the most obvious similarities that can be found in all Steinbeck works is their setting. *Of Mice and Men* takes place “a few miles South of Soledad” (Steinbeck 1) and *The Pearl* is located in La Paz. Thus, both novellas take place, broadly speaking, in the same area, where most of Steinbeck works are located, namely California

(the US state of California and in the Mexican State of Baja California Sur respectively), as seen in Figure 3.

The setting leads to another element that is common in Steinbeck's oeuvre, the characters and, especially, the protagonists of the plots. According to Susan Shillinglaw, in Steinbeck's stories they are usually members of the marginal groups of society (31), and so is the case of women in *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pearl*. Nevertheless, the female characters are not the only excluded class that play an important role in Steinbeck's oeuvre. An example of this would be *Tortilla Flat*, where minorities are represented by working class men with low income from a conflictive neighbourhood.

In *Of Mice and Men*, Curley's wife is isolated in the ranch because she is the only woman there and she is treated as Curley's possession, while in *The Pearl*, Juana is marginalised in her society because she is an indigenous woman living in a city with the presence of Spanish colonists. From an intersectional feminist perspective, Juana suffers from both gender and race oppression, making equality harder for her to achieve. Moreover, both of them are oppressed by men, which makes them victims of the patriarchal society to which they belong and, furthermore, the two are victims of violence. Curley's wife is killed by Lennie. In the second novella's case, Juana is beaten by her husband when he discovers she is trying to throw the pearl back into the ocean, as explained in chapter IV above.

In spite of these resemblances discussed so far, there are also differences, which are mostly related to the roles of female characters and their representation in *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pearl*, as well as in other novels and novellas. Those works that were published before *Of Mice and Men*, such as *Tortilla Flat* and *In Dubious Battle*, seem to contain little to no representation of female characters, and when these appear, they are usually portrayed negatively. On the other hand, the books in the second half of the

timeline (i.e. *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Cannery Row* and *The Pearl*) contrast with the earlier group with respect to female characters because the later ones depict women as caring, brave and warm-hearted.

Regarding their roles in the story, in *Of Mice and Men* it is noticeable how Curley's wife is not represented as an independent character, but as depending on her husband, which is seen even in her name. What appears to be important about Curley's wife as a character is not herself, but her dependence on her husband, as explained above. This is also evident in Mrs. Torrelli from *Tortilla Flat*, who, like Curley's wife, depends on her husband, Mr. Torrelli, and whose first name is never known either. In contrast, Juana in *The Pearl* is not presented as fully dependent on Kino. Of course, they form a family with Coyotito, which, under a patriarchal society, forces Juana into a subordinate position with respect to Kino. Nevertheless, as explained in chapter IV above, the narrative focus and the role of Juana are very different from the one of Curley's wife, and the same happens with Ma Joad from *The Grapes of Wrath*, who is the head and highest authority of the family. Still, the clearest contrastive element between the characters is that Juana does have a first name for herself, whereas, as previously mentioned, Curley's wife does not.

The way in which the stories end is also relevant for this analysis. On the one hand, Curley's wife suffers a tragic ending: she dies. There appears to be no success or achievement in her life, since it ends abruptly and tragically. On the other hand, although *The Pearl* also has a tragic ending because Coyotito dies, in Juana's case there is still an element of achievement: she attains a certain degree of equality. Besides, their roles in the stories differ. Both characters are authoritative, but Curley's wife is so because she acquires this status for being the wife of the boss. On the other hand, Juana is assertive and firm because she wants the best for her family: "We go with you' . . .

He looked for weakness in her face, for fear or irresolution, and there was none” (Steinbeck, *Pearl* 78). Actually, Juana’s personality is similar to the one of Ma Joad from *The Grapes of Wrath* and Dora from *Cannery Row*, since they all share a serious, but still motherly tone.

The personalities of Curley’s wife and Juana are also different from one another. Curley’s wife is domineering and exhibits racist behaviour, as previously discussed. She channels the oppression she experiences towards others. In contrast, even though Juana lives in a patriarchal and colonial system, this does not reverberate in her conduct since she does not exhibit negative behaviour towards others. While the reader infers that she dislikes the system, she does not react violently towards her husband or the colonists. Juana is presented as caring, non-violent and rational from the beginning, as shown when the scorpion stings Coyotito, focusing on taking care of the baby, thus contrasting with Kino’s reaction. Juana’s attitude is that of a person who cares for others, as happens with Dora from *Cannery Row*, e.g. when she helps the community by organising support for a flu epidemic, as well as when she gives Mack and his friends advice on solving the problems the party for the doctor had caused. This caring behaviour can also be seen in Rose of Sharon from *The Grapes of Wrath*, when she gives breast to a poor man at the end of the novel:

Suddenly the boy cried, “He’s dyin’, I tell you! He’s starvin’ to death, I tell you.”

“Hush,” said Ma. . . . She looked at Rose of Sharon huddled in the comfort. . . . And the two women looked deep into each other. . . .

She said “Yes.”

Ma smiled. “I knowed you would. I knowed!” . . .

Her hands moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 501-502)

In contrast, the attitude of Curley's wife seems to be the one of a woman aware of the reactions to her physical attractiveness and willing to take advantage of this, which makes her be represented negatively by the narrator: "She put her hands behind her back and leaned against the door frame . . . She looked at her fingernails. . . . She smiled archly and twitched her body" (Steinbeck, *Mice* 34-35). Apparently, her only role in the novella is to be desired by men, which could be compared to the roles of Lisa in *In Dubious Battle*, which seems to be no other than having children and taking care of them, and of women in *Tortilla Flat*, whose only occupation appears to be gossiping. The female characters from Steinbeck early works perform a very subordinate role and they do not appear to be crucial for the development of the main themes of the plot as such. In this sense, these early narrators seem to have a derogatory attitude, whereas the later ones could be said to have a more positive one

The themes both characters are associated with also differ. Curley's wife is, as Orzigul Ganiyeva and Zebiniso Rajabova explain, related to loneliness because she humiliates and tries to take advantage of whoever interacts with her (157). On the other hand, as Ganiyeva suggests in a prior article, Juana is bound to the family and wants the best for them, as well as for the community (749). Therefore, Juana is somehow related to being accompanied, which establishes a contrast to Curley's wife, whom the reader does not feel empathy for, since this reinforces her portrayal as evil and sinful by the narrator.

Furthermore, the physical description of both characters is very different. Curley's wife is described as an attractive woman who is desired by men, whereas Juana's appearance is hardly described at all, as already explained in the respective

chapter. In fact, physical sketches of characters are uncommon in Steinbeck's oeuvre. This lack of description does not seem to sound odd in books such as *Tortilla Flat* and *In Dubious Battle*, where women do not have an important role.

However, in publications such as *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Pearl*, where women have essential functions, the absence of physical depiction is interesting. The emphasis is on the inner capacities and personalities of the female characters, making their appearance less significant. In brief, the lack of physical description of women in Steinbeck's later works plays a relevant role. When there is such a representation, it is to emphasise the familiar, hopeful, and in the case of Juana, indigenous, image of the characters, whereas when there is no representation, it is because the focus is on the inner characteristics of the character. The general absence of feminine descriptions is important because when it happens, it is to emphasise the strength and positive aptitudes of the characters who are crucial for the development of the story's motifs.

Another similarity (which at the same time implies a difference) in the two main books that have been analysed is the presence of a secondary female character: Aunt Clara in *Of Mice and Men* and Apolonia in *The Pearl*. Both are characterised similarly to the primary characters. Aunt Clara is depicted negatively, whereas Apolonia is represented rather positively, as explained in the previous chapters, which reinforces the idea that female characters belonging to the first temporal division are represented adversely, whereas those in the later works are portrayed more favourably.

In conclusion, it seems to be clear that the representation of women in Steinbeck's oeuvre has experienced a change, which can be explained by a continuum that has *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pearl* as two cornerstones. The female characters in these novellas present similarities, such as being marginalised, oppressed and victims of violence, which establishes a point of connection, as well as relevant differences, such

as their role in the story, their personality, the themes they are associated with and the presence or absence of their physical description. Thus, Steinbeck's female characters have, indeed, experienced an evolution.

VI. Conclusion: *Evolutio est vera*

Are you ready to change? /
Says the thought to the heart
–Kathleen Raine, "Change"

Throughout his literary career, John Steinbeck's treatment of female characters evolved from traditional roles to more sophisticated and multifaceted ones. In Steinbeck's early works, women are portrayed as domestic and passive characters who largely serve as the male character's love interests and caregivers. Steinbeck's female characters did, however, develop into more dynamic and lively ones as time passed by. The complexity of women is explored in his later works, which show them to be both flawed and fragile as well as determined and resilient. Generally, the writer's image of women changed over time, progressing from simple and stereotyped roles to more nuanced and deeper ones. Thus, his later works question conventional gender roles and expectations by presenting women as powerful and complex characters who can overcome certain challenges of a patriarchal society. As John Steinbeck writes in *East of Eden*: "I believe a strong woman may be stronger than a man" (84). This quote highlights the mature author's thoughts on the gender roles established by society which differ from the tags that he was associated with.

As this thesis has shown, this evolution can be seen in the characters of Curley's wife from *Of Mice and Men* and Juana in *The Pearl*. It is through a comparison between these two, as well as referencing similar features present in other works by Steinbeck, that the development of the representation of female characters in the author's oeuvre

can be proven to be true. It is due to the unfavourable portrayal of Curley's wife, as well as the similarities present in Mrs. Torrelli from *Tortilla Flat*, and Lily from *In Dubious Battle*, that the early works are full of negative instances of women, which has led scholars to catalogue him as an advocate of patriarchy. On the other hand, it is with the different presentation—and representation—of Juana, Dora from *Cannery Row*, and Rose of Sharon from *The Grapes of Wrath*, that the later works evince an evolution in Steinbeck's way of thinking about women and gender roles, suggesting him to be less chauvinistic than many critics have hitherto dismissed him as.

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