

The american dream of mice and men

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The Great Depression began with the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929. In the aftermath of this economic downfall many citizens of the United States were left unemployed. In the following years roughly 12 million American men and women would be forced to leave their homes as they had no means to earn a living.

Incapable of generating an income many people were unable to buy food, or afford the resources to live. However, various farmers did not feel the full effect of the crash on Wall Street because a lot of them did not invest in stocks as so many others in urban areas did. Also, because many farmers could provide their own food supply, they did not have to worry about food shortages like countless other people in the United States (Worster 10).

Unbeknownst to the farmers however, there was another crisis looming. The Dust Bowl. In 1931 intense sandstorms would start to blow from the Southern Plains to the East Coast. This would cause what could be described as a large, thick blanket of sand and dirt that would cover most, if not all of the farmlands in the Great Plains region. This layer of grit would make the area virtually uninhabitable (Worster 10). The following years would prove to be challenging for many Americans since the Great Depression was coupled with the Dust Bowl.

It has been accepted that many of John Steinbeck's writings are a reflection of the common man during the Great Depression. An era when people were ill-treated due to their class, gender or race. Of Steinbeck's many works, his novel *Of Mice and Men* is cited as being one of the best to capture this difficult time and its numerous harsh realities.

One such painful reality was that the American Dream had become more of a nightmare. A nightmare that would taunt the nation's populace. Success, freedom and the promise of prosperity were not only the ideal dream of many but seemed so far out of reach. This ideal dream was once defined by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 writing of *The Epic of America*, in which he wrote;

The American dream is that dream of land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to achieve the fullest stature of which they are capable of, and be recognized by others for what they are regardless of the circumstances of birth and position (Adams 10).

In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, the central characters George Milton, a rough jaded man and his simple minded companion Lennie Small roam from town to town in search of work. Aside from just working together. They are friends. Both having a shared dream to own a piece of land that they can work.

The problem with the American dream is the concept that The United States is a classless society. A place that is equal on all fronts. However, America as it turns out is not these things. Not to the extent people think anyways. America has its flaws. The idea that America is a place that an individual wont be judged because of their gender, race, class or religion is not true.

Aside from these unfortunate facts there is another problem many people fail to see in their pursuit of their version of the American dream. The problem is that many people associate the achievement of happiness with prosperity of material goods. This is exactly what James Truslow Adams was against. He stated in his writing of *The Epic of America* that men and women would achieve their fullest stature. The stature was supposed to be a person's reputation. The individual's achievement through their ability to turn nothing into something. For some people it meant turning a piece of land into a bountiful farm. For others it could be starting a small one shop business and expanding it.

When people did well with these ventures they would invest back into themselves, back into their business. There came a time however when the individuals that were working the dream had used their means to purchase things. Others would see how well they were doing because of the things they had, not the work they were doing. These material goods became status symbols. This disconnect often lead people to lose sight of what Adams had in mind.

Though it could be argued the idea of owning their own land was more of a way for George to reassure Lennie that he wouldn't leave him. George would be unable to achieve their version of the American dream without Lennie because the dream was a place where they could both be free. It was also a place where George could let Lennie be himself without fear. Throughout the novel it is illustrated that their relationship is emotionally one-sided and

dysfunctional at times, however, George still cared deeply for Lennie and the dream wasn't a dream at all without his friend.

From the first few pages it is demonstrated that George is Lennie's benefactor. He tries to take care of Lennie, a grown man with the mind similar to that of a small child. George is regularly cited as keeping Lennie out of trouble.

The origins of their friendship began when they were children. They grew up together in the same town. Lennie had an Aunt by the name of Clara. It is presumed that Aunt Clara cared for Lennie, before instructing George to care for him when she passes away. George has noted that he used to make fun of Lennie because he was mentally slow. With that said, George reminisced that Lennie started following him to work. Lennie has been with George ever since, with their relationship changing from acquaintances to friends.

During the course of the novel Georger's good intentions of being Lennie's caretaker are shown to be compulsive and defeating. Often times leading to George and Lennie having to find work elsewhere. This behavior demonstrated by George could be characterized as co-dependency. George is in a dysfunctional one-sided relationship, where Lennie relies on him for nearly all of his emotional and self-esteem needs. This relationship enables George to develop a sense of reward and satisfaction from being needed by Lennie.

Georger's caretaking is another effect of co-dependency, Lennie's problem is that he is unable to care for himself because of his disability. In the

1930r's there wasnt much information in regards to mental handicaps like Lennie. This lack of understanding by people at this time in history is what scares George.

George wants to help Lennie so much that he does so to the point of giving up who he is. According to Darlene Lancer, a Mental Health Therapist, it is natural for people to feel empathy for someone, but individuals who are co-dependent put others needs well before their own. The individuals who dominated the relationship, in this instance George, would suffer from resentment toward his companion and guilt for feeling angered toward him.

Which is exactly what George does with Lennie. In Michael J. Meyerr's *One is the Loneliest Number: Steinbeckr's Paradoxical Attraction and Repulsion to Isolation/Solitude* he states that, George often finds his companion to be more of a trial than a blessing since his mentally challenged friend impedes [George] from the pleasures in life he most desires: eating good food, drinking whiskey, playing cards, shooting pool, and enjoying the sexual company of women. Such impositions anger George, and he is constantly contemplating how comfortable he would be if he did not have to worry about Lennie. (Meyer 298)

This evidence supports the theory that George and Lennie are co-dependent. However, it is evident that George and Lennie do care deeply for each other. Their relationship being described as complicated at best. Georger's resentment paired with his guilt could be one of the main factors keeping them together.

This dysfunctional relationship paired with the devastation of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression would prove difficult for the friends as they pursue their dream. As stated previously, George and Lennie had a shared dream. A dream that had developed over their time together. At times Lennie would pressure George to tell him the story of their ranch. The ranch they were working toward purchasing. George would describe the land has lush, with crops they can tend to. As well as having rabbits for Lennie to tend to because Lennie has a penchant for soft things.

Their shared dream epitomizes Adams's *The Epic of America*. The importance of this dream is the driving force that keeps them going in a time in history when all anyone wanted to do was give up. It's also an enabling tool George uses to sooth Lennie, further cementing his role as Lennie's caretaker. Most importantly, the story and its details have important meaning for the pair. The land represents freedom.

Freedom from having a boss, freedom from the brutalities of the world and its people. It offers a sustainable resource for food and shelter, if Lennie were to cause trouble there, they wouldnt have to leave. They could handle it internally, since they would become their own boss. The ranch offer's the men the opportunity to make their lives richer and better as Adams had suggested in *The Epic of America*.

However, purchasing land during this point in America history was almost impossible with the lack of employment opportunity as previously mentioned. With the Great Depression the deck was stacked against George and Lennie. Everyone was looking for work. Everyone wanted the same

comforts as George and Lennie. The few people that could afford to hire workers paid meager wages. The situation left George and Lennie making attempts to save their earnings. However, there were times that George would spend their savings on creature comforts. He would go out and drink or spend their savings on other frivolous things. He spent it because in the back of his mind he knew that it was only a dream. It wasn't going to come true. The idea of actually saving enough money to purchase the land led him to the fear that they could fail.

For George it was better to keep it a dream. It was easier to say that they weren't making enough, or to blame Lennie for his incompetence when they had to move on. It was easier because it kept them from failing. Keeping it as a dream offered George a respite from all the ugliness the world had to offer at that time. As much as the story was used to soothe Lennie, it also soothed George. This is where the hopes of both men become entwined. It would further solidify their bond as friends and deepen George's co-dependency with Lennie.

When the two get to their next work site they find comradery with the existing ranch hands. Most of them face the same issues as George and Lennie. All wanting a safe place. All wanting freedom and an opportunity to prosper. When they hear George and Lennie's plan to buy land and start their own ranch many of the men are seduced by it. At one point Candy, a fellow ranch worker, offers to join the men's venture. This offer suddenly makes their dream a reality. George can no longer dismiss the idea as impossible. When this offer is made George is finally able to realize his

dream and make real efforts to reach their goal.

Plain and simple. It was their dream together, they both came up with it. They both helped shaped the idea of their utopia. Lennie wanted rabbits, George just wanted to own and work their own land. For George it can be said that just having the land and working it wasnt just about possession. The land represented the freedom America boasts so much about.

With the land comes stability, a place to call your own no matter what. Granted there are certain assurances they would have to go through to keep their land but otherwise it was theirs to do with as they saw fit. Thatr's what George wanted, a place of his and Lennier's.

The emphasis is ? AND Lennie, without Lennie, there wouldnt really be a point for George to own the land, George would have no one to care for. No one to shelter and no one to love. Despite the comfort and stability the land would offer George, he is still able bodied with an able mind. He can thrive in the world that was shaped by the tragedies of the Dust Bowl and The Great Depression. He would be okay without a home, traveling from place to place. Whereas his companion Lennie would otherwise suffer.

Without George there was a very good chance that Lennie would have done something that would cause authorities or un-understanding people to put Lennie in a sanatorium or jail. Today it is understood that both of these places in this time of history were riddled with mismanagement and mistreatment of their patients or inmates. Often times treated inhumanly. Or the other option would be that Lennie would be tried for his crimes and killed as a result.

George understood that some people would act with prejudice towards Lennie. It is a fear that keeps him from abandoning Lennie. He would rather flee with Lennie than risk a chance of him being treated unfairly. This is another factor that keeps the two from separating.

It has been established that Lennie suffers from mental health issues that hold him back. Lennie is unable to remember anything. He is also unable to comprehend serious situations. There is an instances in Steinbeckr's Of Mice and Men when Lennie has a mouse. Lennie would pet the mouse because it was soft and this feeling offered him comfort. However, it isnt until later that itr's discovered, Lennie had killed the mouse. There came a time when the mouse bit Lennie and as a reaction Lennie had pinched its head. Lennie fails to realize his own strength. This moment in particular is important.

Itr's important because it demonstrates Lennier's inability to comprehend death and the consequences of his actions. The death of this mouse isnt the first instance of Lennier's negligent actions. It has been cited throughout the novel that there have been several instances similar to the mouse. Lennie has killed a puppy in his excitement. Another situation involved Lennie hurting a woman in a previous town George and he worked in.

With Lennie being an exceptionally special case because of his mental illness it could be argued that he could learn from his mistake despite his set back. Lennie is capable of physical labor. Lennie understands the importance of owning their own land and the benefits it brings. Lennie is compassionate as demonstrated when he tells George that he could have all the ketchup for

his beans if he wanted. These examples show that Lennie can learn if given the chance.

Rather than have Lennie face the consequences of his actions and learn from them, George rescues him. George enables Lennie under the guise of helping him. The reality is, although with good intentions, George is further stunting Lennie's growth out of fear of society treating him unfairly. Darlene Lancer has stated that it is easier for the dominating person in the co-dependent relationship to fix themselves rather than let the other figure it out and work through the problem themselves. George then justifies his action because of Lennie's mental health issue.