
American Dream Lost

It is the natural inclination of all men to dream. Some may have short-term goals, and others may have life-long ambitions. Despite what cynics say, the American people are hopeful and waiting for something great. In Of Mice and Men, John Steinbeck paints a portrait of characters who, longing for something outside of their monotonous lives, each have a lost dream that supports Steinbeck's view that the American dream is a lost cause.

Lennie's dream to tend to rabbits does not come true because of his own deficiencies and the obstacles of society. As Lennie and George, Lennie's companion and protector, travel through the woods to their next ranch-hand job, George confronts Lennie about keeping a dead mouse in his pocket and demands Lennie hand it over, "Lennie hesitate[s], back[s] away, look[s] wildly at the brush line as though he contemplated running for his freedom." George insists, "The mouse ain't fresh, Lennie; and besides, you've broke it pettin' it," and reminds Lennie of his past history of killing mice, so, then "Lennie look[s] sadly up at him... 'I'd pet em,' and pretty soon they bit my fingers and I pinched their heads a little and then they was dead'" (9-10). Lennie, who has a fetish for soft things, has the severe deficiency that he does not realize his own strength. His dream to own rabbits is important to him because he wants something to be responsible for, but it is obvious by his past history of roughness, and even his reluctance to hand the mouse over to George, that he is too reckless for his dream to ever to come true. In a conversation between Lennie and Curley's wife, Curley's wife tells Lennie that she has soft hair and that he may pet it, so, "Lennie's big fingers fell to stroking her hair... Lennie said, 'Oh! That's nice,' and he stroked harder... And then [Curley's wife] cried out angrily, 'You stop it now, you'll mess it all up.' She jerked her head sideways and Lennie's fingers closed on her hair and hung on. 'Let go,' she cried. 'You let go!'" (99). Lennie panics, and, in an effort to silence her, shakes her so hard that he breaks her neck, showing that he has absolutely no self-control. He does not stop petting Curley's wife's hair when she asks him to, even demands him to, partly because he is too dumb, but also because he lacks the physical capacity to control himself. Although Lennie is inherently innocent, his dumbness and lack of self-control combined with his obsession with soft things and his unknown strength, produce a deadly formula. Unfortunately for Lennie, society does not understand his mental handicap (earlier in the book George makes reference to the fact that Lennie was kicked in the head as a boy), and because he murdered Curley's wife, George must shoot him. Before George shoots him, Lennie asks him to recite their shared dream aloud, "'We gonna get a little place,' George began... He reached in his side pocket and brought out [the gun]... 'Look down there acrost the river, like you can almost see the place.' ...And George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie's head... He pulled the trigger" (117). Lennie's dream is his security blanket. His only measure of the seriousness of his actions is how it will affect his dream, and in his last

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moments of life, he asks to hear about it, still is too naive to realize that surely now it can never come true. After George pulls the trigger, Lennie dies along with the lost dream. For Lennie, the American dream is dead.

Crooks' dream does not come true for different reasons. A lonely man desperate for companionship, he has the ambition to work on George and Lennie's future farm that will never become reality. When Lennie first tells Crooks about his and George's plan to buy a piece of land, Crooks reacts, "You're nuts... I seen hundreds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an' that same [darn] thing in their heads... An' never a [darn] one of them ever gets it". Crooks's pattern of pessimism and negativity brings him down, and he even attempts to dampen the hopes of those around him, relating to Lennie that "hundreds" of men have passed through the ranch, all of them with dreams similar to Lennie's, but not one of them, he emphasizes resentfully, ever manages to make that dream come true. However, when he hears more of the plan, he offers, "If you... guys would want a hand to work for nothing-just his keep, why I'd come an' lend a hand" (80, 84). A plan so daring and uncertain requires its followers to have absolute faith. Crooks, who never believes in the plan from the very start, has a great chance of suddenly giving up again. Crooks' physical disability along with his race will prevent him from reaching his dream. Steinbeck narrates, "Crooks, the Negro stable buck, had his bunk in the harness room; a little shed that leaned off the wall of the barn... His body was bent over to the left by his crooked spine" (73). Crooks is not allowed in the bunkhouse with the white ranch hands and remains in a forced isolated state. He wants a place where he can be independent and have some security, but there is no security for a black man in a prejudiced world, least of all one with a crooked back. Farm work requires strength and physical endurance, and though Crooks offers to do odd jobs for George and Lennie, he would only end up hindering them with his disability. While Lennie, Candy, and Crooks fantasize about the land they hope to have one day, Curley's wife enters and makes attempts to draw all attention to herself. When Crooks tells her to leave, "She turned on him in scorn. 'Listen, Nigger... You know what I can do to you if you open your trap?' Crooks stared hopelessly at her... 'Yes ma'am.'" Curley's wife retorts, "'Well, you keep your place then,' ... Crooks had reduced himself to nothing. There was no personality, no ego-nothing to arouse either like or dislike. He said, 'Yes, ma'am,' and his voice was toneless" (88-89). The fact that Crooks is black cements his fate, and he realizes this. The moment Curley's wife, who on a larger scale actually represents all society, brings Crooks back to reality and keeps him down in his place, he loses the little bit of hope he had gained and again becomes nothing. The American dream that everyone has equal opportunity to achieve his goal through hard work and determination is dead to Crooks. Crooks' pessimism, physical disability, and race prevent him from reaching his dream.

Though Curley's wife, who walks the ranch as a temptress, seems to be cold and cruel, she too has a lost dream. Continuously throughout the novel, Curley's wife reminds those around her

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about the time a man came through town and told her that she could be a star. Another man told her that she was a natural and promised to write, but the letter never came. She tells Lennie, "I always thought my ol' lady stole it. Well, I wasn't going to stay no place where I couldn't get nowhere or make something of myself... So I married Curley. Met him out to the Riverside Dance Palace that same night," (97). Curley's wife is a poor decision-maker because she does not think out her actions. Instead of pursuing her dream by taking acting lessons or moving to Hollywood, she marries Curley the same night she met him. Entering the marriage, she believes it is a means of escape, but she only ends up stuck in Salinas, even more tied down. In not giving Curley's wife a name, Steinbeck makes Curley's wife a universal character; she represents every woman. Curley's wife has no personal identity; she is only identified with her husband. A woman who does not have even an identity can never make it big or even on her own. Later, in the same barn scene, Curley's wife flirts with Lennie and encourages him to pet her hair. When she tells him to stop, Lennie becomes frightened and breaks her neck. Steinbeck describes, "Curley's wife lay with a half-covering of yellow hay. And the meanness and the plannings and the discontent and the ache for attention were all gone from her face. She was very pretty and simple, and her face was sweet and young," (101). Even before Curley's wife dies, she is bound to remain in the same circumstance her entire life, never able to make anything of herself. Only in Curley's wife's death does Steinbeck grant her virtue, because only then does she die does she regain her innocence. Her dream is lost forever, and now without all her plans for the future she becomes fully human. Steinbeck seems to show through her that even the worst of us have our humanity. For Curley's wife, the American dream to rise out of one's humble roots will never be a reality.

Lennie, Crooks, and Curley's wife all have lost dreams because of their own personal deficiencies and those society forces on them. To them, the American dream is dead. Although the loss of dreams is depressing, all men must eventually face this harsh reality of life.

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