Of Mice and Men - John Steinbeck on the American Dream

America is often described solely by defining the “American Dream”, a notion influenced by the unprecedented success achieved by immigrants of the United States from the 18th century onward. Often left disregarded is the personal strife put forward by the individuals engaged in the dream, a sentiment which leaves those involved unaccredited for their steep journey. *Of Mice and Men*, a well-regarded novella authored by John Steinbeck, differs. Panning through the final journey of George Milton and Lennie Small, two farmhands working in California, Steinbeck offers a new perspective on the dream. He describes the personal dedication, goal setting, and dreaming involved with members of society, and the struggles they face along the path. Through this tireless journey, readers are informed of John’s personal take on the dream and the struggles two men living in the Great Depression are forced through. In the tale, *Of Mice and Men*, author John Steinbeck uses his finely crafted tale to characterize the American dream as a personal lifestyle and dedication, emphasizing the crucialityof relationships, commitment, and personal sacrifice.

“Participating” in the American Dream, individuals encounter the strain and concurrent necessity placed on their relationships, forming an integral component of the life of an American dreamer. During their numerous exchanges, both inwards and towards others, acting as one, Lennie and (especially) George realize the importance of their relation. In the brush, stopped along a creek, George and Lennie exchange, “‘If them other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn. But not us.’ Lennie broke in. ‘*But not us! An’ why? Because…because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that’s why*’” (Steinbeck 14.) The significance of this quote is twofold; for it demonstrates the importance of the relation in itself, but also proves the self-awareness the duo have for this need. In their prior experiences, they are aware first hand the typical man’s life is relation-less, and results in his ultimate demise. Resulting from their knowledge, George and Lennie know the necessity of their sticking together. It provides them a sense of motivation, and fills a “something to live for” role in their mindset. Stemming from this, both are also conscious of their differentiation from the rest of society. Both know how to play the game: they must stick together through the challenges they face to set collective goals and succeed in the struggles they face. The ultimate net of their relationship ends in tragedy, for George is forced to kill Lennie, for his own protection. In spite of this, George still lives on a stronger man, better suited to the dream, because his goals are set. Additionally, he has Lennie to pursue his dreams in memoriam of. Consequentially, the notion that the American dream is a commitment of lifestyle and a personal dedication is furthered, resulting from the obvious evidence of the aid strong bonds and relationships provide.

Secondarily — though equally important — the commitment necessary in Steinbeck’s characterization of the American dream is also clearly clarified in his novella, especially through the words, thoughts, and actions of George Milton. In the sleeping quarters of the ranch, during the quiet following the death of Candy’s dog in the cover of darkness, George resolves, “…if me an’ Lennie work a month an’ don’t spen’ nothing, we’ll have a hundred bucks. That’d be four fifty. I bet we could swing her for that… We’ll do her. We’ll fix up that little old place an’ we’ll go live there” (Steinbeck 60.) Unlike most of the other farmhands, George and Lennie maintain a long-time goal. In spite of all setbacks, trials, and failures, the duo press on and continue their struggle. In itself, this contributes to the point of the necessity of commitment in regards to the American dream; without, they would’ve given up already. Worse yet, they would have been relegated to prison, shrunk back from their dreams and without cause. The level of commitment and dedication shown by the pair makes clear to Candy that they have the drive necessary to exact their goals at last. Thus, he requests to join them – a move stemming from their drive itself. Consequently, they may finally move a step closer to accomplish the dream; a move that further motivates the (now) trio. Without their total dedication and resolve, they would never have received the final piece to their American dream-puzzle: Candy. Ultimately, it is demonstrated that a resolution of total focus, drive, and commitment is required in the Steinbeck characterization of the lifestyle demanded by the American dream.

Finally, the personal sacrifice required to stay afloat in the strife to succeed in the pursuit of the American dream is demonstrated in the course of the story. In response to the impending danger looming over the ignorant Lennie, George accompanies him. Realizing the threat he faces — death to an evil man’s hand or suffering in an infirmary — George consoles Lennie. Knowing the pain he’ll unleash on himself, he still sacrifices his own potential criminal status and emotions, “he brought the muzzle of it close the back of Lennie’s head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger…and he lay without quivering” (Steinbeck 106.) Depressingly, both for readers and George, Lennie is killed, though for his own good. Steinbeck’s build-up to this moment — one of monumental sacrifice and pain — represents the largest segment in the Steinbeck-American dream. Through the building of core relationships, hard work and dedication, it all falls back to the self-sacrifice required to succeed. Lennie was sacrificed, but ultimately his own well-being. The true victim, as he is forced to live with the burden of guilt, is George, Lennie’s companion. He embodies the personal sacrifice needed – now, he’s set back a friend, potential income, and to no one’s benefit other than that of the deceased. However, George’s overall progress would’ve been hindered had he allowed Lennie live, as he’d have the “blood” on his hands of his murder or the strife to save him from the hell of an infirmary. From a humanitarian perspective, rather than objective, George also truly prevents the misery of Lennie, “putting him out of his misery,” so to speak. This epitomizes the deep cuts and spontaneous decision making required in order to thrive in the tough competition that is the American dream, conceptualized in Steinbeck’s eyes.

Evidently, the novella *Of Mice and Men*, authored by the late John Steinbeck, presents clear evidence demonstrating the absolute requirement of a total reform in lifestyle and drive whilst pursuing the American dream, drawing base on the bonds formed by individuals, the perseverance and commitment called for, and the personal exertion and self-sacrifice. Driven home by the demonstration throughout the novel that friendship bonds, such as that of Lennie Small and George Milton, commitment to weather the worst of storms, and the will to sacrifice ones own feelings, emotions, and personal needs for another or the greater good’s need, shows the true demands in the Steinbeck vision of the American dream. In a broader sense, Steinbeck’s work inks the incredible demands of the American dream in a way that had not been done and still is not yet colloquially done. It represents an incredible landmark in literature, demonstrating that the American dream is not a unique attribute of America, but of Americans — an effort of personal valor, not based on heritage or ancestry. It tells of the personal strife and endeavor “American dreamers” face, and its incredible requirements. There is no blind notion of “American exceptionalism” mentioned or referenced, but instead the defining of true heroes in average citizens rising up, building bonds, making and keeping commitments, and taking the personal damage of self-sacrifice to attain their goals.