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# "The colossal vitality of his illusion": the myth of the American dream in the modern American novel

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"THE COLOSSAL VITALITY OF HIS ILLUSION":  
THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN THE MODERN AMERICAN NOVEL

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by  
James Ayers  
B.A., Thomas More College of Liberal Arts, 2004  
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*For Edward*

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## Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	vi
INTRODUCTION	
WHAT IS THE AMERICAN DREAM?.....	1
CHAPTER ONE	
THE AMERICAN DREAM AS MYTH: DEFINING AN APPROACH TO NARRATIVE STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS.....	18
CHAPTER TWO	
MYTHIC HERO: <i>AUGIE MARCH</i> AND THE SELF-MADE MAN IN AMERICA.....	62
CHAPTER THREE	
MYTHIC WORLD: THE AMERICAN FRONTIER AS SPATIAL METAPHOR FOR ABUNDANCE.....	103
CHAPTER FOUR	
MYTHIC ACTION: THE PRIVATE/SOCIAL PARADOX OF UPWARD MOBILITY.....	150
CHAPTER FIVE	
THE AMERICAN DREAM IN THE 21 <sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: A LITERARY CONSIDERATION.....	203
CONCLUSION	
AMERICAN DREAM / AMERICAN REALITY.....	236
BIBLIOGRPAHY.....	242
VITA.....	249

## Abstract

This dissertation argues that the American dream is a large-scale cultural myth, and that through an analysis of the dream's mythic *structure* we can locate a paradigm according to which both American literature and American culture are organized. The American dream has maintained unique relevance across the historical, regional, and cultural diversity of the American nation, in part because it always remains abstract and resists firm definition. Nevertheless, by breaking the broad myth into its most basic elemental parts we can begin to see patterns across the many distinctive versions of the American dream, such that we can identify the American dream as a generic category. This project therefore proceeds by analyzing the most basic narrative features of the American dream: its actor or hero, its setting or universe, and its primary action. Through an analysis of the figure of the self-made man, the "frontier" as American spatial metaphor, and the action of upward mobility, this dissertation locates common features across myriad versions of this American dream myth in order to establish the American dream as a pervasive organizing ideal within American culture. This dissertation focuses its study on American fiction of the twentieth century, where the American dream finds its clearest articulations, and it has special recourse to nineteenth-century and early American history and culture as the ground for this modern sense of the American dream. Finally, I end with a discussion of American literature of the last decade, in which I discuss prevalent contemporary attitudes about the American dream in order to assess its current condition. Ultimately, this dissertation suggests that the American dream, because it is a genuine cultural myth,

both organizes American cultural experience and structures American literature about that experience.



## Introduction What Is the American Dream?

An inquiry into the vast subject of the American dream must first establish some definitional parameters for discussing that subject. I will therefore open with a *working* definition—open to revision as necessary—at the outset. In brief, the American dream is the *myth* that, in America, opportunity exists for reward that is directly commensurate with one’s effort. This definition has been pieced together over the course of this project’s development, and functions as a working articulation of a pervasive and ambiguous cultural reality. This American myth has functioned integrally since the beginning of the nation, and it has persisted as a relevant description of American values despite the great historical, regional, and cultural diversity that makes up the nation. Indeed, it is the single-most definitive statement we can make towards the outlining of an “American consciousness.” Because the American dream has consistently remained vague—it neither denotes a clear set of goals nor offers a paradigm for their accomplishment—it has remained open to interpretation for all Americans, regardless of their historical moment, socio-economic position, or regional and cultural identity. It has also resisted definition for this same reason. Because it stands as a unifying national statement, though, its study is essential for an understanding of American culture generally; indeed, its study is the clearest means of understanding American culture—as a coherent unit—at all.

The American dream functions vitally within American culture, despite its literal ambiguity, because it operates mythically. Americans therefore have a kind of innate

understanding of the myth as it has been passed on through American culture. Though many different versions of the myth have existed and continue to exist, we can recognize an overarching *idea* out of which these myriad versions are sprung. This project is explicitly concerned with outlining the structure of this governing idea. The many versions of this American myth, which we shall call “myths,” thus serve to articulate the general national idea for specific American sub-cultures throughout history. We cannot possibly pool *all* of the various myths together in order to abstract the organizing idea from their commonalities. We can, however, analyze the overarching structure of the myth through its dominant mythic articulations, and arrive at a working (and useful) description of the myth. This will offer us a unique tool for the study and critique of American culture and of the American novel.

It must be remarked at the outset that the subject of “American culture” poses a difficult definitional problem, for America is vastly multicultural, and so is naturally resistant to the unified acculturation implied in the term “American culture.” This is a problem that we must confront, however, if we are to discuss America generally as a unified national culture. R. W. B. Lewis writes, in his prologue to *The American Adam*, that “There may be no such thing as ‘American experience’; it is probably better not to insist that there is. But there has been experience in America, and the account of it has had its own specific form.”<sup>1</sup> This is a fine place to begin our discussion, for it offers us a concrete reality (the American continent) out of which we might abstract the dominant

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, *The American Adam*, 8.

ideas about it. Myra Jehlen helps us to outline the real subject at stake when we discuss American culture, in the introduction to her book, *American Incarnation*. She writes that

when Americans said “America” they meant something they took to be fact: that their country, whose foundations defined and identified a previously vacant continent, represented a new and culminating development in world history and thus the fulfillment of progress. They could also, perhaps in smaller numbers, mean an idea as such, an idea not necessarily enacted in the real country: a vision, even self-consciously a myth, of individual transcendence and democratic equality, of spiritual redemption and ultimate technological competence; or, for that matter, a travesty in both fact and idea, the doom of real and ideal hopes.<sup>2</sup>

American culture, as a comprehensive term, encompasses all of these views about the American nation and its corresponding idealism. It is derived from real, concrete experience in America, which experience has been recorded and critiqued throughout American history. The American dream, as a large-scale cultural myth, represents an “American” way of encountering the world; it describes experience unique to the American continent, out of which is derived a fundamental conception of personal identity, spatial milieu, and progressive purpose. That the American dream is uniquely American will be demonstrated in due course; such a classification depends on the existence of “Americanness” (or American identity, American culture, American consciousness, etc.) as a subject, and so I use the term in the course of this project with the meaning discussed here.

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<sup>2</sup> Jehlen, *American Incarnation*, 20.

Another word of clarification might be said on this subject, and Sacvan Bercovitch has offered such a clarification in his book *The Rites of Assent*. Bercovitch discusses the stark connotative differences between an American continent and an American culture, and finds that American literature bridges the gap between the two. His reflection, then, is vital to the organization of this study. Bercovitch writes,

It seemed to me that the process by which the United States had become America was nowhere more clearly displayed than in the bipolarities of American Studies: on the one hand, a multiculturalism (or experiential pluralism) that rendered invisible the structures of national cohesion; on the other hand, a consensual identity, "American," that by definition transcended the "ideological limits" of class, region, generation, and race (i.e., redefined American identity, ideologically, as a process of transcending the boundaries of class, region, etc.). As this principle applied to American literary studies in particular, the relation between text and context opened into a cultural symbology: configuration or tangle of patterns of expression common to all areas of society, including the aesthetic. So understood, "high literature" was neither an imitation of reality nor a Platonic (or Hegelian) ladder to a higher reality. It was a mediation between both, which I thought of in terms of ideological mimesis: a representation of the volatile relations between conceptual, imaginative, and social realities that was different from, often opposed to, and yet fundamentally reciprocal with the ways of the world in which it emerged.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent*, 14-15.

Bercovitch's insight here is quite helpful, for he effectively resolves the problem of American cultural identity, at least within this study. American culture is derived from real experience of the American continent (the United States), but there is always a great difference between the practical reality of America and the theoretical figuration of a national consciousness, founded on a social idealism. This is nothing more, really, than the great divorce between ideal and reality that is always at the center of the American dream. But in negotiating both the *idea* of America and its literal reality, American literature offers a unique reflection that largely bridges this gap. The modern American novel is crucial to our study of the American dream here, because it represents American culture or identity, as an ideal figuration, in the real context of concrete experience (which more often than not directly challenges the idealistic paradigm).

It will be useful in contextualizing this discussion to offer a brief survey of popular definitions of the American dream, for our working definition is pieced together from the various versions of the dream that have at different times held sway. While a more detailed history of the theoretical term, "American dream," will be conducted in Chapter One, we can here discuss some of the more recent and general understandings that have emerged over the course of the dream's history. Cal Jillson's 2004 study of the American dream, *Spreading the American Dream*, offers a nice comprehensive overview of the ideal, emphasizing its basis on equality. Jillson writes,

The American Dream has always been, and continues to be, the gyroscope of American life. It is the Rosetta stone or interpretive key that has helped throughout American history to solve the puzzles of how to balance liberty

against equality, individualism against the rule of law, and populism against constitutionalism. The American Dream demands that we constantly balance and rebalance our creedal values to create and preserve an open, competitive entrepreneurial society in which the opportunity to succeed is widely available. Despite the many conflicting strands of the American Creed, the American Dream insists that this must, and must increasingly, be a country in which opportunity is available to all and honest hard work yields the chance to succeed and thrive.<sup>4</sup>

Jillson's description of the American dream (it is less a definition) emphasizes two of its important features: it demands national equality of opportunity, and it functions as a "Rosetta stone" for American culture. The demand for equality (of opportunity, not condition) is the central idealistic premise on which the national progressive project is enacted. Ernest Bormann's book, *The Force of Fantasy*, also proposes this definition of equality. Bormann takes his definition of the American dream from Martin Luther King, Jr., quoting him accordingly: "[. . .] the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal."<sup>5</sup> For these critics, equality is the key motivation and end of the American pursuit. The American dream makes no assurances of success, nor offers a clearly structured paradigm for pursuit in America; instead, it promises *opportunity* for success. The promise of opportunity is contained in the apparently endless physical abundance of the American continent, and also in the

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<sup>4</sup> Jillson, *Pursuing the American Dream*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Qtd. in Bormann, *The Force of Fantasy*, 236.

governmental idealism that assures social equality – that all individuals have an equal chance to pursue success.

But it is important to emphasize Jillson’s description of the American dream as a gyroscope of American life – this is the precise understanding adopted by this project. Because I contend that the American dream is a cultural myth, it describes the basic structure of American experience. The American dream makes a clear statement of American individuality, defining the ideal character of the American hero; it stems out of and in turn contributes to Americans’ spatial understanding of the nation; and it describes the progressive material and social goals that are the ideals of the American nation. In short, it offers a summary portrait of goal-oriented American culture. Our understanding of the myth, then, is an exploration of American culture in the sense that *any* myth analysis tells us about the culture out of which that myth sprung. The American dream describes the predominant models according to which Americans have historically structured their lives, and in doing so constantly reveals a unique practice of Americanness.

In her book, *American Dream, American Nightmare*, Kathryn Hume outlines a broad idea of the American dream that focuses on the immigrant and encompasses some the general attitudes adopted by Americans. She writes,

Many longings and desires are expressed through that rubric [the rubric of the American dream]. Prosperity for anyone willing to work hard is a crucial component of the Dream, a house of one’s own being the icon. In the past, immigrants knew that they might have a hard life, but they trusted that their

children would be better off. For a long time, indeed, successive generations did acquire more personal property than their parents did. Reinforcing this perception is the technology that makes each generation seem better off. Indisputably, cars got faster, houses became larger and acquired more appliances, and more miraculous medical interventions proved possible.<sup>6</sup>

That each generation should be better off than the previous has long served as a practical description of the American dream, especially for immigrant families. Because the dream depends on physical attestations to its viability, the steady increase of material luxuries has been the real source of its persistence. Whatever idealism is no doubt contained in the dream myth, it must always have a concrete material referent.

Other critics have adopted far more general descriptions of the American dream, taking it as broadly indicative of societal goals. Richard Cornuelle writes that “For a long time it seemed that the free society and the good society could be realized together in America. This, I think, was the American dream.” Far from defining the American dream as a coherent analytical unit, Cornuelle uses the term as descriptive of American notions about society. He goes on to define what he means by a free and a good society:

We wanted, from the beginning, a free society, free in the sense that every man was his own supervisor and the architect of his own ambitions. [. . .] We wanted as well, with equal fervor, a good society – a human, responsible society in which

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<sup>6</sup> Hume, *American Dream, American Nightmare*, 3.



helping hands reached out to people in honest distress, in which common needs were met freely and fully.<sup>7</sup>

Cornuelle is here offering an adequate description of the impulses that gave rise to American society, and his discussion is relevant to the American dream even if he is mistaken in identifying these impulses *as* the American dream. What we take from this selection is that the American dream is always rooted in conceptions of political liberty and a general social ethic.

But still, many critics have insisted on limited economic definitions of the American dream. For Emily Rosenberg, the American dream is no more than “high technology and mass consumption,”<sup>8</sup> and hence the dream is most attested to by events such as the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, which showcase these material achievements. In limiting the dream’s purview to technology and consumption, Rosenberg delineates an economically determined material paradigm that has no hint of the social idealism that also rests at the American dream’s core. For Wallace Peterson, “The post-World War II experience of steady growth, abundant jobs, and low inflation shaped what we know as the ‘American dream.’”<sup>9</sup> Here, again, we see a view of the American dream that is limited in scope by tracing only the economic parameters of the dream. Indeed, one wonders why Peterson locates the dream only in a post-World War II context, since the generation of the term predates World War II, and the idealism that shapes the dream begins to form when the first settlers arrive in the New World. That Peterson really

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<sup>7</sup> Cornuelle, *Reclaiming the American Dream*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Peterson, *Silent Depression*, 20.

does mean to emphasize economics and materiality becomes clear right away, though.

He goes on:

There is a further set of expectation in the American Dream. First, a secure and steady job at good wages that steadily improve, not just in terms of money but in their purchasing power. Second, home ownership. Third, the affordability of an increasing number of things that may make life easier and more enjoyable—automobiles, washers, driers, microwaves, air conditioners, radios, TV, VCRs, power mowers, snow blowers. Fourth, an array of fringe benefits—paid vacations, generous pensions, and adequate health care, to name the most important. Fifth, travel and leisure, both of which require a growing amount of “discretionary income” —income one is free to spend without constraint. Sixth, college for the kids, and the hope and belief that the children’s economic life will be better than their parents’. Finally, upward mobility.<sup>10</sup>

Peterson here lists *seven* expectations contained in the phrase, “American dream,” and not a single one of them pertains to social idealism or the national project generally. They are all about material, financial, and prestigious gains—they are all overtly socio-economic. Again, Robert Ringer stresses that “high taxes, the frustration of trying to keep pace with inflation, the fear of unemployment, and the feeling of being stifled at every turn by ever-increasing [governmental] regulations”<sup>11</sup> describe the real death of the American dream. These critics are acutely aware of the socio-economic character of the American dream. And to be sure, they are right to stress the materialism inherent in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>11</sup> Ringer, *Restoring the American Dream*, 11.

it. But a thorough treatment of the American dream, which has vitally impacted nearly all aspects of American culture and identity, must consider its materialism along with its idealism, for the two shape each other.

If we take these definitions altogether, we can begin to arrive at a more comprehensive definition of the American dream (while still realizing that no definition can be finally perfect). I propose, as stated earlier, that the American dream is the *myth* that, in America, opportunity exists for reward that is directly commensurate with one's effort. This definition is appropriately "loose," so that it is generally applicable in myriad contexts. First, it clearly outlines the material paradigm of the American dream as one of effort-based reward (those rewards being socio-economic). In guaranteeing *opportunity*, this definition at once describes America as a space of abundance (where opportunity literally does exist) and it describes the American ideal of equality that must exist in order for universal pursuit to be possible. This definition further contains the seeds for a fuller development that will be this project's aim.

Over the course of this project I will analyze the *mythic structure* of the American dream, locating representative models of the myth in the modern American novel. In Chapter One, I develop a methodology for the literary study of mythic structure using Lévi-Strauss' theory of structural anthropology. While this project is not explicitly Lévi-Straussian (nor is it anthropological), a literary critical apparatus can be derived from Lévi-Strauss' mythic structuralism. In brief, Lévi-Strauss finds that any myth exists in many different versions, and there are always differences of content amongst these various myths. However, he also finds that the different versions of a myth all contain

an identical structure—they describe the same action or sequence and appeal to the same motifs, though the particulars of the story (characters, names, places, symbols) will vary. Thus, in collecting many different versions of a myth, one can begin to derive an understanding of that myth's essential structure. The more myths (versions of the myth) that one acquires, the better their understanding of the governing structure of those myths.

Lévi-Strauss finds that the structure of a myth consists (in part) of linguistic mythemes—component structural elements that consists of tense relations. Each mytheme, he says, functions elementally, like a sentence. Also like a sentence (which contains a subject and a verb), each mytheme carries two terms, derived from a culture's experience, that are in contradiction with one another. The myth, in positioning these relational paradoxes together, presumes their reconciliation though there is no resolution in fact. The myth, then, is the *apparent* resolution of a culture's paradoxes of experience. For the purposes of this project, I adopt an analogical approach to these mythemes, finding that structural, relational paradoxes persist in the American dream because it has a mythic structure.

Thus I delineate a basic narrative structural paradigm for the analysis of the American dream. Using F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as a case study of the American dream in fiction, I find that the mythic narrative is composed, most fundamentally, of a mythic actor, a mythic context or universe, and a mythic action. These structural elements make up the subjects of Chapters Two, Three, and Four,

respectively. Within each structural element of the American dream myth, I find a persistent relational tension, the resolution of which is the function of the myth.

Chapter Two, then, discusses the paradigm of the self-made man as the mythic hero of the American dream. Tracing his roots back to the agrarian and frontier conception of the American Adam, I outline the religious moral paradigm that defines the self-made man in the nineteenth century, and then discuss alterations to this model as they are introduced in the twentieth century. I find that the self-made man contains an inherent paradox of experience, or mythemic relation, found in the relationship between effort and reward. The myth of the self-made man proposes that there is a direct and *causal* relationship between one's effort and one's reward, such that if one is industrious and dedicated, one *will* be successful. This ideal is an apparent resolution of an experiential contradiction in reality: namely, that work and reward bear no *necessary* relationship to each other. Because such a figuration is devastating to America's self-conception, the myth suggests an apparent resolution in supposing an overtly causal relationship. For my literary analysis in this chapter, I discuss Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, which consists of two competing narratives about the self-made man and the act of self-making (in the characters of Augie himself and his brother, Simon). I compare these characters to each other, as one enacts a traditional self-made man pursuit and the other challenges this model in preference for a more generally American process of self-making. Ultimately, I find that the self-made man is the clearest articulation of the actor implied in the American dream myth.

Chapter Three discusses the spatial metaphor according to which the context (or universe) of the American dream is organized. I find the spatial metaphor of the frontier to be vitally important to American conceptions of the physical landscape, and I develop this metaphor to be symbolic of territorial expansion, a nineteenth-century nature/civilization tension, and the general belief that America is a land of endless abundance and opportunity. The central tension contained in the frontier myth is, again, one between the cultural ideal and the literal reality. By the close of the nineteenth century, there is no longer any available frontier space—Americans have reached the westernmost coast and cannot continue in endless physical expansion. The ideals promised by endless expansion, then, are challenged in this turn-of-the-century moment. As a spatial metaphor, though, I contend that the frontier continues to govern our conception of abundant physical space throughout the twentieth century, even in the face of the literal exhaustion of available space. Insofar as the frontier continues to function metaphorically as a spatial description, the myth of the American dream apparently resolves the discrepancy between real and theoretically endless physical space. In this chapter, I discuss John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* as a representation of frontier idealism in a literally post-frontier space, and I discuss the dangers of enacting a nineteenth-century conception of the frontier within a twentieth-century context in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*. Ultimately, I delineate a mythic universe in which the American dream plays out, and this universe is defined by a sense of endless expansion towards increasingly abundant opportunity.

In Chapter Four I address the tensions inherent in the basic action of the American dream. The action of the American dream, simply stated, is upward mobility. This term has a very private sense, in that it pertains to the socio-economic ascension of an individual. And yet, the action of the American dream also describes increasing social justice—the guarantee of equality and liberty for every American. I find that individual pursuits are often directly opposed to social ones, and that even personal socio-economic progress is often dependent on the socio-economic decline of others. The American dream makes the mythic assertion that there is no tension here, and that, instead, personal progress spurs social betterment, and social betterment allows for personal progress—such that the two are in a mutually beneficial and quite fluid relationship. In my literary analysis, I first discuss Frank Norris' *The Pit*, which demonstrates the material consequences of one's man's corner of the wheat market on the entire economic system. I then move to treat Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, which examines the limited female position in terms of Lily Bart's inability to resolve her material goals with her societal position. Finally, I discuss Toni Morrison's most recent novel, *A Mercy*, in which the author develops the pre-institutional roots of slavery, establishing a direct correlation between one man's material rise and the establishment of slavery as a formal institution.

Chapter Five functions as a kind of addendum to this argument and does not add to the theoretical paradigm developed over the course of Chapters One through Four. Chapters One through Four offer a structural analysis of the American dream as it has existed historically, with special emphasis on its twentieth-century incarnations.

Chapter Five attempts to position this analysis of the American dream within a contemporary context. I therefore examine novels published in the last decade, with attention given to these novels' representation of a widespread disillusionment with the American dream. I first treat Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*, which is set just after the 2008 economic crisis and uses the symbol of the foreclosed home to create a post-American dream space in which the dream has lost all economic viability. I then discuss Chris Bachelder's *Bear v. Shark* as an appropriate correlative to Auster's text. Bachelder's novel does not emphasize economic collapse, but rather idealistic collapse. In *Bear v. Shark*, mass consumerism and materialism characterize the space of American experience, and there is no trace of social idealism. These two novels, then, alternately present disillusionment with an American dream that has been stripped of one or the other of its essential features. Finally, I discuss Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as a post-apocalyptic and post-American novel, which positions its characters after the total annihilation of American culture. In the world of McCarthy's novel, the American idea is lost when a progressive worldview is obliterated. These novels together help to contextualize the American dream in the present moment, and by implication they appear to call for reassessments of the American dream.

Ultimately, then, this project details the formal, constitutive features of the American dream and explores the representation of those features in the modern American novel. This study is not meant to be exhaustive; the American dream is so pervasive and diverse, that a totally comprehensive understanding of it is impossible. That does not mean, however, that we cannot approach an increasingly enhanced



understanding of our subject. In conducting a structural analysis of the dream myth, we have, at least, a definitive and useful place to begin. Structural analysis allows us to see beyond the endless diversity of American dreams and to locate their common features, such that we can recognize the American dream insofar as it meets the formal standards that we are establishing. In this sense, we are locating a kind of generic paradigm to which the various American dream myths adhere. This study, then, offers a tool for the analysis of literature and culture, and in turn exposes the history of an active and still relevant myth that has consistently organized American experience.

**Chapter One**  
**The American Dream as Myth:**  
**Defining an Approach to Narrative Structural Analysis**

No concept is more fully emblematic of American cultural idealism than the American dream, which has consistently articulated the paradigmatic structure for national and individual success in America.<sup>1</sup> While the specific tenets of the American dream have undergone developmental alterations since the nation's beginning, the ideal has persisted (under a variety of names and regional-historical interpretations) as a natural byproduct, as it were, of the spirit of democracy. And yet, given the fervor with which this ideal has been pursued almost universally and repeatedly across a variety of American contexts, it must come as a surprise that its precise parameters and the specificity of its meaning have consistently remained elusive. While the American dream has been theorized and critiqued abundantly (though, perhaps, not quite as abundantly as we might expect), it is nevertheless the substance of a massive cultural idealism and so naturally resists the confines of strict definitional boundary. Indeed, the American dream's sustained cultural relevance is directly owing to its

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<sup>1</sup> The term "American cultural idealism" is notably ambiguous because America consists in a great variety of diverse cultures, and no term exists which can adequately encompass them all. However, a definable American nation does exist, and I use the phrase "American cultural idealism" to refer to those values and ideals promoted by that nation as it understands itself through national documents, dominant political discourse, governmental structure, and social rhetoric.

Whether or not a unified "American identity" exists, it is nevertheless useful—indeed, it is necessary—to talk about American identity generally. When I use generally inclusive terms such as these, it should be noted that I do not mean to reduce the diversity of Americanism to a single unified (and therefore limited) identity. Rather, these inclusive phrases serve an analytical purpose by furnishing us with practical definitional tools, so that we can even talk about a subject as broadly amorphous as "America" in the first place.

adaptability – that it can be uniquely appropriated by any given social set within the nation. Such interpretive variance does not distort the ideal, but rather serves as the source of its persistent strength and durability, for the ideal exists *as* the sum of its collective interpretations. Consequently, I will argue that the American dream functions *mythically* in a Lévi-Straussian sense – as the apparent reconciliation of its abundant versions.

The identification of the American dream as a large-scale cultural myth is no great discovery, but such a classification is nevertheless an essential move for the establishment of a theoretical history of the concept. Such a theoretical history should serve as a resource for American studies, and will position a precise image of American national ideology within the context of a trans-national, or global, space of experience. I will argue that the mythological character of the American dream opens up an avenue for its theorization by succinctly examining its constituent narrative elements, and that by considering the tensions among these elements we can illuminate the structural composition of the American dream. Figuring the American dream in this way – through an analysis of its mythic structure – will not present us with a rigid definition, but will undoubtedly enhance our understanding of “Americanism” as a unit of study. In the course of this project, I will analyze literary texts of the twentieth century that have as their goal the overt representation of the American dream in practice, creating out of these multiple narrative instances a sense of the mythology generated by their specific diversities. If the American dream has a mythic structure, it will be expressed narratively, and so it will make obvious sense to concentrate our focus on the literary

illustrations through which such mythology is represented. Ultimately, these American dream narratives will echo the very structure of the myth in their representations, insofar as these novels act as incarnations or “versions” of the myth itself.

### **Walter Lippmann and James Truslow Adams: Innovators of American Dream Theory**

Before we move to treat the American dream as a national mythic reality, however, we would do well to first consider the raw idea with which we will be working. While the history of American dream theory strongly suggests that we cannot arrive at a unified and wholly objective definition of the term, we can certainly trace an adaptable outline around the term, so to speak, so as to familiarize ourselves with the object of study and in order to set some loose parameters around that study. We might naturally begin, then, with the historical generation of the term itself—a starting point that will firmly ground this study within a twentieth century context. While the American dream undoubtedly has its roots in the earliest beginnings of American democracy, the term itself does not emerge until rather recently in American history, and even then it does not carry the specific connotations that now dominate our understanding of it. The American dream makes its debut in print discourse in 1914 in journalist and political commentator Walter Lippmann’s book, *Drift and Mastery*. While Lippmann’s discussion of the American dream differs greatly from the sense that it comes later to adopt, his insights are nevertheless integral to a fully rounded and complete comprehension of the term, and they shed extensive light on the problematics implicitly contained in the concept’s idealistic nature. Unlike our current standard

sense of the American dream, the ideal is for Lippmann no dream of future fulfillment at all; it is, rather, a dream of an idyllic past, of a kind of uneducated common man living in a rural golden age. Lippmann's exercise of the term replaces its standard push for ambition with a call to reversion. He writes, simply enough, that "the American dream . . . may be summed up, I think, in the statement that the undisciplined man is the salt of the earth."<sup>2</sup> This definition (if we may indeed call it one; this is, historically, the first printed use of the term at all) follows on the heels of a discussion about men's natural tendency to past idealism. "Whenever the future is menacing and unfamiliar," Lippmann says, "whenever the day's work seems insurmountable, men seek some comfort in the warmth of memory." He goes on: "The past which men create for themselves is a place where thought is unnecessary and happiness inevitable," finally concluding that "the American temperament leans generally to a kind of mystical anarchism, in which the 'natural' humanity in each man is adored as the savior of society."<sup>3</sup>

It is precisely Lippmann's emphasis on this impulse towards past idealism that marks his treatment of the American dream as distinct from a contemporary version of it, and according to which his priority in the theoretical history of the American dream might be denied. Indeed, there is certainly a sharp and evident distinction to be made between looking backward and looking forward, as it were. Nevertheless, Lippmann's treatment of the topic recognizes something exact about American dreaming generally. Lippmann observes a tendency in the American public (circa the turn of the nineteenth

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<sup>2</sup> Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, 103.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 102–3.

century) towards a fantasy resolution of immediate unhappiness, and he is sharply critical of this impulse. The American nation, still so early in its national development, touts itself as a young and fresh land of opportunity. Dedicated to the now familiar tenets of a new democracy, according to which all men are free, equal, and guaranteed the rights to accumulate property and pursue happiness as they see fit (within, of course, certain confines regarding a public good), America carries with it a definitive notion that its citizens are already on the path towards success. Economic and social failure, therefore, are notably debilitating to those citizens who, perhaps a bit naively, had trusted in a better life.<sup>4</sup> Because the promises the nation makes are idealistic (which does not immediately mean they are also unrealizable<sup>5</sup>), such a cultural consciousness is engendered that tends naturally to look outside the present moment for fulfillment and happiness—national idealism, that is, creates idealistic citizens. When Lippmann observes his contemporaries placing their hope and faith in a lost time, in a previous uncomplicated and rural age, he is observing a culturally created impulse away from the reality of the present moment. But at the turn of the century, this impulse finds its object in some golden age of the past—a dream-object which comes very soon after to

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<sup>4</sup> The *struggle* to ascend has always been an essential aspect of the American dream, which has never shied away from emphasizing the importance of hard work and endurance. However, if struggle is not rewarded with measurable progress, this spirit of disillusion sets in rapidly.

<sup>5</sup> Whether or not the goals and values of the American nation can be attained is, more or less, irrelevant. The nation continues to function under this paradigm because, so long as progress towards these goals and values is consistently made, these aims are in the *process* of accomplishment, and this is enough to sustain the national enterprise. Indeed, America has always endorsed an anti-utopian vision, preferring instead to encourage concrete, visible, sustained socio-economic ascension.

be replaced by a more appropriate end (at least in terms of standard American ideology): hope in the future and the American virtue of ambition.

Walter Lippmann, though, is writing on the cusp of this great shift in American thought from past idealism to future progress, and he does go on to briefly discuss this newly burgeoning impulse. He writes (and here we might recognize a discussion of a reality much more akin to our own sense of the American dream):

But there has arisen in our time a large group of people who look to the future. They talk a great deal about their ultimate goal. Many of them do not differ in any essential way from those who dream of a glorious past. They put Paradise before them instead of behind them. They are going to be so rich, so great, and so happy some day, that any concern about to-morrow seems a bit sordid.<sup>6</sup>

It is noteworthy that Lippmann recognizes the similarity between these dreamers of the future and his already discussed past idealists, and he is critical of both. Lippmann takes a middle course, claiming that American virtue lies in living in the present moment, with an awareness of the past and a concern for the future, but not as more relevant than the moment at hand. For this reason he launches a critique of these future-lookers—a critique which we would do well to remember as we trace the current sense of the American dream. He writes, “Now this habit of reposing in the sun of a brilliant future is very enervating. It opens a chasm between fact and fancy, and the whole fine dream is detached from the living zone of the present.” There are a couple of points to be made here, the first of which is that Lippmann refers to the above future-

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<sup>6</sup> Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, 104.

looking impulse as a dream (albeit not *the* American one). Clearly (and as implicitly evidenced by our discussion) there is a correlation between a kind of American dream of the past and the inverse American dream of the future. Secondly, in his critique of the latter, he talks about a “chasm between fact and fancy.” Lippmann is here recognizing precisely what so many later critics are quick to note: such idealizational thinking about the progress of one’s own life leads, ultimately, to the very real problem of finding some material referent for an immaterial object. In other words, while dreaming the future may offer a semblance of escape from present misfortune, there always remains the difficulty—at times even the blatant impossibility—of ever truly realizing that ideal.

The American dream, we can see, is for Lippmann a kind of cultural pitfall—a dangerous tendency of American citizens towards unrealism and nonproductive fancy that appears to be *naturally* derived from the most basic conditions of American cultural ideology. In his later work, Lippmann characterizes the decade of the 1920’s (which immediately follows the historical moment we are here discussing), where we can see the fruition of such American dreaming, and he is sharply dismissive of this era. Charles Wellborn writes,

He [Lippmann] sees the history of Western society since World War I as drastic evidence of political decay. Possessing the greatest accumulation of technological power and potential the world has ever known, victorious in battle over all enemies, committed to high ideals and noble purposes, the democratic nations have still failed to achieve the kind of society expected by their people



and demanded by the times. Lippmann wrote, “The more I have brooded upon the events which I have lived through myself, the more astounding and significant does it seem that the decline of the power and influence and self-confidence of the Western democracies has been so steep and so sudden. We have fallen far in a short span of time.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite all the progressive greatness of America that results from its citizens’ endorsement of the dream paradigm, Lippmann finds that this American dream has deprived Americans of concrete substantial value. Despite widespread apparent “success,” Lippmann perceives an utter failure of democracy: in setting up such lofty, idealistic social goals and expectations, America guarantees that it must fail to accomplish them. For Lippmann, it seems, the infinite progressivism of the American dream (which never finally *attains* its object) spoils it as a viable national paradigm. Consequently, Lippmann ultimately dismisses the American dream as a useless and dangerous flight of fancy.

Roughly twenty years after the appearance of Lippmann’s assessment, however, James Truslow Adams published his attempt at an American history to date, *The Epic of America*<sup>8</sup>, which paints the American dream in a more general, and far more positive, light—one which bears a more striking resemblance to our currently predominant version of the dream. Adams calls the American dream a “distinctive and unique gift to mankind,” and he goes on to detail a large-scale cultural impulse that moves beyond

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<sup>7</sup> Wellborn, *Twentieth Century Pilgrimage*, 151.

<sup>8</sup> An often told story relates that Adams originally intended to title his book, *The American Dream*, but the title was rejected by his publisher, who claimed that no self-respecting American would ever pay \$3 for a “dream.” The irony here is brilliant.

the pursuits of individual fulfillment (while still emphasizing their importance) in order to draft a portrait of an ideological national enterprise. Adams writes:

But there has been also the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.<sup>9</sup>

This description certainly seems much more in line with our common understanding of the American dream. Indeed, much of Adams' rhetoric here is still actively employed by contemporary politicians and taken for granted by average Americans—Adams is describing a brand of American idealism that should strike us, today, as familiar and relevant.<sup>10</sup> And yet, this is simultaneously a national ideal that has existed, by Adams'

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<sup>9</sup> Adams, *The Epic of America*, 415.

<sup>10</sup> Consider, for instance, the overt American dream rhetoric in President Barack Obama's recent 2011 State of the Union Address. Despite growing concerns of America's economic instability and the perceived decay of America's authority and privilege as a world power, Obama's address nevertheless appeals directly to this traditional dream idealism, updating the same rhetoric used by Adams for a contemporary American audience. He says,

So, yes, the world has changed. The competition for jobs is real. But this shouldn't discourage us. It should challenge us. Remember — for all the hits we've taken these last few years, for all the naysayers predicting our decline, America still has the largest, most prosperous economy in the world. (Applause.)

measure, since the earliest beginnings of America. As Allan Nevins relates in his intellectual biography of Adams,

The central idea of the book [*The Epic of America*] was that American development had been dominated by a dream, the dream of a better, richer, happier existence for every citizen of whatever rank or condition. That dream or hope had been a vital force from the moment the first colonists came to Jamestown and Plymouth. It had contributed to the struggle for independence, and from the hour when independence was won, every generation had witnessed some kind of uprising of the common folk to protect the dream from forces that seemed likely to overwhelm and dissipate it.<sup>11</sup>

Adams locates the American dream, before it is defined and set into public discourse as such, in the early spirit of America, and this is an observation that sets Adams up as quite distinct from Lippmann (who recognizes, rather, a markedly different incarnation of the dream in his assessment of early America). Adams' observation, though, is an

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No workers – no workers are more productive than ours. No country has more successful companies, or grants more patents to inventors and entrepreneurs. We're the home to the world's best colleges and universities, where more students come to study than any place on Earth.

What's more, we are the first nation to be founded for the sake of an idea – the idea that each of us deserves the chance to shape our own destiny. That's why centuries of pioneers and immigrants have risked everything to come here. It's why our students don't just memorize equations, but answer questions like "What do you think of that idea? What would you change about the world? What do you want to be when you grow up?" (Obama, State of the Union, 2011)

Obama's rhetoric here attests to the versatility of the American dream as a national ideal. Just like Adams, Obama stresses a dream for *all* Americans that consists not only in material excellence, but in intellectual and human idealism as well.

<sup>11</sup> Nevins, *James Truslow Adams*, 68.

important one, for it establishes the American dream as among the *causes* of American development, and therefore as integral to the ongoing construction of American identity, rather than as a mere effect (and so not necessarily a permanent one) of the growth of American culture into the twentieth century. If the American dream does indeed function as a *myth*, then the generation of that myth must be a complex cultural process that begins right alongside the initial formation of its culture.

In *The Epic of America*, Adams paints a picture of a social order founded on the principle of the American dream—a social order that seems characteristically defined by a sense of social equality and liberty. But he is careful not to categorically eschew the more mundane aspects of this ideal. “It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages *merely*,” he says, but it is certainly those things at least. He goes on to emphasize this point: “No, the American dream that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtless counted heavily.”<sup>12</sup> Our understanding of the American dream seems to rest tenuously between the two poles of lofty social idealism and immediate material fortune.<sup>13</sup> The American dream, according to Adams, seems to consist in the guarantee of social equality and freedom to pursue a better life. The specifics of that “better life,”

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<sup>12</sup> Adams, *The Epic of America*, 416.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the sustained tension between materialism and idealism is perhaps the single greatest cause of the dream’s historical persistence, and will be analyzed in this project accordingly.

however, are vague at best, but measured by American standards, such a life seems most often to be associated with economic and social rise.<sup>14</sup>

The national standard that Adams details, however, is not a promise of merely economic success. There is a loftier principle at work in the guarantee of universal opportunity, though such a guarantee must be evidenced by more mundane concrete instances of individual fulfillment if it is to hold any real cultural currency. The initial authors of this idea – Lippmann and Adams – are decidedly at odds with one another in their conceptions of the national spirit engendered by the American dream. Whereas Lippmann sees only danger in the urge towards this kind of self-betterment (one which disengages itself from the starker realities of the present moment), Adams sees a larger arena of social advancement implicit in the precepts that stem from equal and free opportunity for all citizens. Undoubtedly, these critics present two different sides of the same ideal, and an adequate understanding of that ideal must maintain the duality of these positions. Indeed, this is the precise point at which a mythological understanding of the American dream becomes not only relevant, but necessary.

### **Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Structuralist Model of Myth Analysis**

To argue that the American dream functions mythologically demands, first of all, a discussion of myth; and yet the field of mythology is so extensive and diverse, it can be difficult to arrive at a coherent, generally accepted theory for the study of myth. For

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<sup>14</sup> Material gain serves as a concrete manifestation of the dream's more idealistic principles. If one has a great fortune, social affluence, etc., then this serves as "proof" that America has made good on its promise. Consequently, ideals such as liberty and equality have a tendency to take on materialistic definitions.

this project, we are interested in demonstrating how the American dream has consistently functioned in a mythic capacity; that is to say, we will be fundamentally concerned with the structural principles that define the “shape” of the myth, or, one could say, the mythic genre. If we can accurately identify the formal category of myth, then we can move to address the extent to which the American dream fits into that category—we can compare the underlying structure of the American dream to the underlying structure of myth generally. Our project, at least at this stage, is one of classification. And so, it will make sense that we now turn to an authority on the organization of structural (i.e. *formal*) principles within mythic expression.

Our most comprehensive understanding of formal mythic structure comes from one of the twentieth century’s preeminent structural anthropologists, the late Claude Lévi-Strauss. Some readers may find that a theoretical reliance on Lévi-Strauss is too ‘dated’ for the contemporary “post-theoretical” era of literary studies. The twentieth century was undoubtedly a period of great philosophical, psychological, linguistic, and cultural evaluation in the field of literary studies, and while to some extent we may have advanced past literary theory of the last century, we must nevertheless recognize that the century’s theoretical contributions were enormous. Structuralism, while certainly limited in its approach by its own methodology (as are, arguably, all theoretical schools of thought, to some degree), still continues to provide us with a most basic set of critical tools for establishing a categorical distinction between the countless texts available for analysis. In short, structuralism furnishes us with the means for defining *genres*, based not in theme and content, but based in structural principles that

demonstrate an overarching *logical similarity* between the organization and development of distinct texts. Of course, once we categorize, once we put materials in relation to each other, we can begin to understand them outside of a vacuum. The tools with which Lévi-Strauss has provided us over the long course of his impressive career offer an invaluable resource: structuralism (suffering my own alterations to the theory) will demonstrate for us that the American dream is structured like a myth and, moreover, will provide us with the structural substance for our analysis of this myth.

At the onset, a precise definition of myth would be very useful. Unfortunately, Lévi-Strauss does not supply us with one—or rather, he does not supply us with a definition that is absolute and objective. Simon Clarke discusses Lévi-Strauss’ “definition” of myth, finding that Lévi-Strauss contrasts myth with other similar expressions of cultural thought (such as ritual, magic, folk-tales, etc.) on the basis of their structures. “Hence,” Clarke writes, “Lévi-Strauss appears implicitly to define myth as that which is structured like a myth. So long as the object in question can be found to have a structure of reduplicated opposition, mediation and transformation, then it is a myth.”<sup>15</sup> We will address this matter of oppositions, mediations, and transformations a little later, but suffice it to say here that, according to Clarke, Lévi-Strauss’ definition of myth is largely relative to the way one is looking at a mythic text. Indeed, Clarke goes so far as to say, “Lévi-Strauss believes that the myth presents itself as such to the analysis, and so reliance is placed on the intuition of the analyst.”<sup>16</sup> This

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<sup>15</sup> Clarke, *The Foundations of Structuralism*, 197.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

is far from satisfactory as a definition with any finality; intuition is never the safest place to begin a serious analytical inquiry.

Of course, Lévi-Strauss does offer other definitions of myth, but none are exactly satisfying. C. R. Badcock relates that “Lévi-Strauss starts his analysis of myth with a simple definition; a myth is something which tells a story. It is an anecdote. Unlike poetry, where the individual word is all-important, in myth what matters is the story, not the word.”<sup>17</sup> This distinction between poetry and myth will be important to our discussion, and we will touch on it later. But we must recognize that, among the countless materials that “tell a story,” Lévi-Strauss does nothing here to mark the myth as distinctive. Once again, he implies a *structural* distinction, this time insisting that the myth is recognizable not only because of its structure, but because that structure really lacks relevant content, and so the myth essentially *is* its structure. This is certainly a significant point for Robert Deliège, who notes that “Everywhere in the world people relate myths, that is to say allegorical accounts meant to explain the origin of their institutions. Such a universal phenomenon poses a question; [ . . . ] If myths are found the world over, it is because they express a way of thinking characteristic of all humans: they partake of the laws of the mind’s structure.”<sup>18</sup> If we skip over Deliège’s definition—a fine enough statement relating myth to allegory which, ultimately, does not prove particularly useful for analytical definition—we find a more interesting thought. Namely, Deliège recognizes that the universality of mythic thought implies that the structure of myth must be universal (since we recognize “myth” as a structural

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<sup>17</sup> Badcock, *Lévi-Strauss*, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Deliège, *Lévi-Strauss Today*, 96.



category). Delière accounts for this, as does Lévi-Strauss, by finding that mythic structure imitates human cognitive structure, and so myth is essentially an articulation of the structure of logical, conflict-resolving, thought. It should be sufficient if we recognize here that the structure of myth, then, ought to be fundamentally logical; indeed, Lévi-Strauss organizes mythic material into a Hegelian dialectical process, such that logical processes determine (wholly) the structure of the myth. Beyond this observation (which emphasizes the logical order behind the myth), Delière's statement about the universality of myth delves into the realm of cognitive psychology, and so will not be relevant to our discussion here.

Edmund Leach proposes a useful anthropological definition of myth in his book on Lévi-Strauss, finding that Lévi-Strauss himself fails to offer one. "Myth is an ill-defined category," he writes:

Some people use the word as if it meant fallacious history – a story about the past which we know to be false; to say that an event is "mythical" is equivalent to saying that it didn't happen. The theological usage is rather different: myth is a formulation of religious mystery – "the expression of unobservable realities in terms of observable phenomena." This comes close to the anthropologist's usual view that "myth is a sacred tale."<sup>19</sup>

We are approaching an understanding of myth out of these various definitions, even if we cannot arrive at an absolute sense of myth that everyone will agree upon. Essentially, the myth is a culture's articulation of itself, structured in a certain way and

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<sup>19</sup> Leach, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, 54.

with a distinctive purpose intended. In a nice statement by K. O. L. Burridge, “Myths are reservoirs of articulate thought on the level of the collective. But they are not simply ‘articulate thought’ in a vacuum. They represent the thought of people about themselves and their condition.”<sup>20</sup> We can accept Burridge’s definition at least in a working form if we augment it somewhat to emphasize the structural elements of the myth that, for Lévi-Strauss, ultimately define the myth as such. Cultures, of course, express themselves in a multiplicity of ways, and myth is only one particular form of cultural expression. Nevertheless, myth is unique in purpose, and it is here we will look now.

Lévi-Strauss does give us a definitive statement about the purpose of myth in his *Structural Anthropology*. He writes that “the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real).”<sup>21</sup> For Lévi-Strauss, myth exists for the sole purpose of conflict resolution—culturally perceived contradictions, contraries, and tensions in reality are resolved through the structural expression of the myth (which, by positioning contradictory elements into a logical relation, has the appearance of then resolving the perceived absurdity in experience). In this sense, myth speaks to a cultural understanding of the structure of reality itself. As Badcock writes,

Myth does not convey commonsensical information, it is not for practical purposes. It serves no utilitarian end whatsoever, and conveys no information about the everyday world. Nor is it necessarily morally or politically pedagogic.

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<sup>20</sup> Burridge, “Lévi-Strauss and Myth,” 92.

<sup>21</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (v. 1), 229.

[. . .] [M]yth in reality is extremely purposeful. [. . .] [M]yth is a means of structuring and ordering reality, a means of understanding it in the sense that totemism, for instance, is a means of understanding the people who practice it. Whereas totemism, ritual, or modes of cooking may be seen as ways of ordering and classifying natural phenomena and men, myth may be seen as exactly the same undertaking with the difference that myth is above all an ordering of concepts and an expression in anecdotes, since unlike these other examples it is limited to realization in words alone.<sup>22</sup>

Simply stated, the purpose of myth is to resolve apparent contradictions in the way a culture conceives its reality. And so, while the content of myths will vary from culture to culture (and Lévi-Strauss ultimately claims that the content of the myth is irrelevant), the inherent structure of myth will be identical from culture to culture. A myth is a myth by nature of its structural ability to reorganize experience for a specific culture, resolving the tensions that culture finds in its unique perception of reality. Burridge gives us a clean statement about this purpose, writing that “myths provide concrete situations capable of overcoming logical contradictions.”<sup>23</sup> With this purpose and rough definition in mind, we can begin to outline a model for structural myth analysis.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Badcock, *Lévi-Strauss*, 55-6.

<sup>23</sup> Burridge, “Lévi-Strauss and Myth,” 112.

<sup>24</sup> I will include one more statement about the myth’s purpose in resolving culturally perceived contradictions in reality, for the purposes of clarification. Mary Douglas writes,

On the assumption that it is the nature of myth to mediate contradictions, the method of analysis must proceed by distinguishing the oppositions and the

Because Lévi-Strauss is a linguistic structuralist, his extensive analyses of mythology have their roots in the precise linguistic construction of myths. While linguistic deconstruction will not be our primary aim here, we can nevertheless adopt an analogical derivative of his understanding in order to develop a methodology for the study of cultural mythology. For Lévi-Strauss, in order to understand a myth we must first break it down into its most basic constituent parts, and through the rearrangement and analysis of those parts we find repetitions and tensions, out of which the myth itself is sprung. The myth, then, exists as the apparent reconciliation of its diverse and contradictory elemental experiences, and it accomplishes such a reconciliation by virtue of the specific manner in which those elements are brought into relation with one another.

But we cannot understand the meaning contained within a myth, Lévi-Strauss emphasizes, merely by breaking that myth into its constituent elements and analyzing those elements each in turn. On the contrary, Lévi-Strauss writes, "If there is a meaning to be found in mythology, it cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined."<sup>25</sup> For Lévi-

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mediating elements. And it follows, too, that the function of myth is to portray the contradictions in the basic premises of the culture. The same goes for the relation of myth to social reality. The myth is a contemplation of the unsatisfactory compromises which, after all, compose social life. In the devious statement of the myth, people can recognize indirectly what it would be difficult to admit openly and what is patently clear to all and sundry, that the ideal is not attainable. (Douglas, "The Meaning of Myth," 52)

While largely restating the above discussion of mythic purpose, Douglas adds a dimension to her treatment here that seems to resonate uniquely with the American dream: namely, the unattainability of cultural idealism.

<sup>25</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (v. 1), 210.

Strauss, the structuralist, the most constituent parts of myth are identical with the most constituent parts of language itself (for the myth exists as a linguistic construction before anything else). Hence a myth, most basically, consists of a collection of phonemes, morphemes, and semes (here Lévi-Strauss' theoretical debt to Roman Jakobson is obvious). These most basic linguistic components, however, do not supply us with the appropriate elemental substances that we require to understand mythic meaning. For this reason Lévi-Strauss introduces a second and superior (in terms of complexity) classification of mythic parts, locating what he terms "gross constituent units" (or "mythemes") as the basic *relations* that constitute a mythic structure.<sup>26</sup>

Here Lévi-Strauss' analysis of myth delves more deeply into a linguistic structuralism, and he moves to analyze sentences as the elemental constitutive relations of myth (each sentence naturally containing a relation in the simultaneous presence of a subject and a function). It is here that we can begin to steer our discussion away from a strictly linguistic study and pursue an analogical line of inquiry, isolating these constituent relations as the fundamental basis of a myth. Lévi-Strauss remarks that "mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution,"<sup>27</sup> such that we can define myth as the apparent resolution of naturally irresolvable realities. These mythemes will be culturally grounded—based on the

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<sup>26</sup> For clarification, I quote Badcock's assessment of this feature:

[T]he significant units of myths are phrases and sentences which are the fundamental particles of the anecdote which the myth essentially is. Clearly, the study of myth is the study of the structural inter-relations of these fundamental particles of 'mythemes' as Lévi-Strauss calls them, using this term to underline the parallel with the phoneme of structural linguistics. (Badcock, *Lévi-Strauss*, 53)

<sup>27</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (v. 1), 224.

specificity of experience belonging to a given social set—and so they will generate uniquely cultural myths. Hence a myth is a given culture’s attempt at reconciling those contradictions in human experience that that culture observes. If we now return our attention to the American dream, a clear methodology for its study begins to emerge. By breaking the myth down into its constituent mythemes, which will each hold a primary and fundamental opposition or tension within itself, we can outline the structure according to which the American dream attempts to resolve the problems of American ideological experience.

The difficulty in this project arises because of the great difference between a large-scale and vaguely represented cultural myth such as the American dream, and the more concrete (though various) primitive mythological narratives that Lévi-Strauss adopts for his study. Lévi-Strauss works with mythological narratives—stories that relate cultural experiences and can individually be broken down into distinct narrative parts and remapped based on the similarities and differences of those parts. While a great variety of versions of any particular myth may abound, nevertheless “every version belongs to the myth,”<sup>28</sup> and the separate versions can be broken down and mapped together.<sup>29</sup> The American dream may function mythologically, but we do not

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>29</sup> In fact, the abundance of different versions of a myth is quite important to Lévi-Strauss’ understanding of myth. Because myths articulate cognitive structure, their content is irrelevant. Multiple versions of a myth are seen as equally authentic with no regard for significant differences in content, because they reproduce identical mythological structures. Thus, whereas different versions of a literary text pose problems of authenticity and authority, different versions of a myth are encouraged, for the more versions that exist, the more clearly the structural similarities of distinct versions can emerge.

find it contained in a variety of narratively based myths. What we do find, however, is an extensive collection of American literary texts that attempt to represent the substance of the American dream in action. An important clarification must be made here, namely that these American literary texts that adopt the American dream as their subject are not identical with Lévi-Strauss' myths. The American dream, as I am contending, is an American cultural myth. The American novel about the dream, rather, is a literary representation of the myth—not the myth itself in raw form.

But the American nation, as such, never existed in a genuine primitive state, in the sense that Lévi-Strauss locates primitive cultures (for Lévi-Strauss the primitive culture is that which lacks written language), and so original, authentic, primitive myths do not occur. Instead, we have highly developed, artistically advanced literary representations of this mythic reality, and I adopt these texts for analysis in the absence of more “genuine” incarnations of the myth.

Richard Slotkin notes this precise problem with constructing an American mythology:

[T]his artificially created American nation—the self-baptized “American people”—first saw light in the age of the printing press. Mythologies arise spontaneously in the preliterate epochs of a people's history and consequently are “artless” in their portrayal of the world and the gods, appealing to the emotions rather than the intelligence. American myths—tales of heroes in particular—frequently turn out to be the work of literary hacks or of promoters seeking to sell American real estate by mythologizing the landscape. One of the

problems with which this study has to deal is the question of the relationship between myth and literature.<sup>30</sup>

Setting aside those “literary hacks” that Slotkin notes, I contend that one of the roles of the literature selected for analysis in this project is to represent a mythic reality. This implies a firm distinction between myth and literature, while still maintaining the importance of literature for the study of myth. Now, while a Lévi-Straussian linguistic analysis of each American dream narrative is a far too massive and tedious critical pursuit, we can appoint for our study certain preeminent literary texts that are most clearly representative of the tensions and oppositions that are apparently resolved in the structure of the American dream.<sup>31</sup>

There is some precedent for this analogical adaption of Lévi-Strauss’ explicitly linguistic structuralism. It might seem that this methodological course departs radically from Lévi-Strauss’ original structural methodology. This methodology does depart from Lévi-Strauss’ insofar as it repurposes his statements and conclusions about mythic thought, yet the departure is not quite so radical as it might appear. Lévi-Strauss emphasizes that his method of study is a kind of pure structuralism: he ignores content outright and relates his elemental units of analysis to the elemental structures of language. Yet, when we watch Lévi-Strauss’ actual myth analyses, we find that his structuralism is perhaps not so pure as he implies. Lévi-Strauss’ mythemic units are not

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<sup>30</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> It is worth nothing here that the contradictory views about the American dream presented by Lippmann and Adams might now both be held as definitive assessments of the American dream. As interpretive devices, at least, we would do well not to categorically privilege one over the other, for they appear to represent something akin to Lévi-Strauss’ distinct “versions” of a myth.



really analogous to the constituent elements of language on a sentence level; his mythemes are not concerned with themes in the myth, but they are concerned with action in the myth. It is ultimately the events of the myth that Lévi-Strauss maps together—the myth’s “plot” (however undeveloped) is the myth’s structure, and when we realize this it is not so strange to adopt a broader approach to this structural methodology in order to apply it to literary texts.

Clarke points out this fact, even if he fails to really develop his point. He writes, “Although Lévi-Strauss makes use of many terms borrowed from linguistics and makes frequent allusions to linguistics, specific borrowings are rare. Thus many commentators have noted that Lévi-Strauss’ allusions to linguistics are largely metaphorical.”<sup>32</sup> Further, Douglas insists that we cannot “take him [Lévi-Strauss] literally” on this matter. She writes,

[Lévi-Strauss’ methodology] assumes that the analysis of myth should proceed like the analysis of language. In both language and myth the separate units have no meaning by themselves, they acquire it only because of the way in which they are combined. [. . .] Lévi-Strauss unguardedly says that the units of mythological structure are sentences. If he took this statement seriously it would be an absurd limitation on his analysis. But in fact, quite rightly, he abandons it at once [. . .] Linguists would be at a loss to identify these units of language structure which

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<sup>32</sup> Clarke, *The Foundations of Structuralism*, 184.

Lévi-Strauss claims to be able to put on punched cards and into a computing machine as surely and simply as if they were phonemes and morphemes.<sup>33</sup>

What Douglas is pointing out is that, despite what Lévi-Strauss claims about his methodology, his analysis nevertheless proceeds in much the same manner as this project proposes to do. The underlying elements of myth that determine its structure and meaning do not, in fact, resemble the constituent elements within a sentence. In fact, they resemble the sentences themselves, arranged with direct reference to the actions those sentences describe (and these actions in turn determine the shape and direction of the myth narrative).

Douglas, for one, cannot understand Lévi-Strauss' reluctance to relate myth to literature in light of this fact. "Why does he want so vigorously to detach myth criticism from literary criticism?" she writes; "It is on the literary plane that we have his best contribution to the subject of mythology."<sup>34</sup> She goes on:

Lévi-Strauss claims to be revealing the formal structures of myths. But he can never put aside his interest in what the myth discourse is about. He seems to think that if he had the formal structure it would look not so much like a grammar book as like a summary of the themes which analyzing the particular structure of a myth cycle has produced. [. . . ] He falls into the trap of claiming to discover the real underlying meanings of myths because he never separates the particular artistic structure of a particular set of myths from their general or purely formal structure. Just as knowing that the rhyme structure is a, b, b, a,

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<sup>33</sup> Douglas, "The Meaning of Myth," 50.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

does not tell us anything about the content of a sonnet, so the formal structure of a myth would not help very much in interpreting it.<sup>35</sup>

Douglas makes a great point here—Lévi-Strauss evidently tends to equate formal structure with artistic structure, such that, in fact, the analysis of myth—insofar as it sustains a Lévi-Straussian analysis of *structure*—should be only minimally different from the structural analysis of literature. With this in mind, we will proceed with our discussion of the American dream (now figuring it as myth), and set our sights on American narratives about the American dream—for while these narratives are not myths, *per se*, our structural analysis of them can nevertheless proceed as Lévi-Straussian myth analysis.

### ***The Great Gatsby* As American Mythic Paradigm: A Case Study**

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* serves wonderfully for a preliminary discussion of the American dream as represented in concrete narrative form, for many critics easily recognize this novel as the paradigmatic American dream narrative. We can turn to *The Great Gatsby*, then, as a definitive *version* of the American dream myth, out of which we might derive the mythemes that will be the ultimate subjects of this study. The dominating tension of Fitzgerald's novel rests in the discrepancy between conflicting versions of success, and is summed up quite nicely in the narrator's ongoing assessment of Gatsby. Nick Carraway witnesses Gatsby's monumental failure firsthand and, to be sure, he recognizes it as such. Nevertheless, he opens the novel with the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 64.

striking claim that, “No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end.”<sup>36</sup> Fitzgerald’s novel has survived extensive critical scrutiny precisely because its tensions are not easily resolved: Gatsby is at once a success and a failure, whether we measure his success by the material trappings he acquires, the social prestige to which he rises, or the implicitly nobler end of the attainment of Daisy’s affections. In fact, the great complexity of Gatsby’s American dream objective is what sets the novel up as a grand reflection on an all too obscure cultural myth.

Nick lauds Gatsby for his terrific ability to dream—to locate and articulate a solid material referent for his desire that moves beyond the merely mundane. Gatsby has what Nick calls “an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again.”<sup>37</sup> Gatsby’s dream is not abstract and therefore innately unattainable, but neither is it wholly concrete and therefore transient. In fact, it is in breaching these boundaries that his dream-object merits the distinction that Nick assigns it. We must recall that Gatsby’s dream had been, first and foremost, a more standard dream of upward mobility in terms of economic and social increase. Before ever laying eyes on Daisy he is already several years into his advancing career—he has changed his name, spent educative time under the tutelage of Dan Cody the millionaire, and begun to map out the shape that his success will take. He does not spend his life amassing a fortune for the sole end of impressing and thereby attaining Daisy, as many reader have wrongly asumed. Rather, he spends his life in pursuit of Daisy because he has made her the

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<sup>36</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

romantically appropriate conclusion to his desire for an amassed fortune. Daisy is the object of Gatsby's American dream because she seems already to contain in herself the standard trappings of material success and luxury. Right after Gatsby and Daisy begin their original love affair, we are given the following description of Daisy, no doubt narratively influenced by Gatsby's own imaginative perception of her: "She had caught a cold and it made her voice huskier and more charming than ever and Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor."<sup>38</sup> Daisy is, for Gatsby, the complete incarnation of the total *idea* of her life. She is a physical embodiment of the material ideals that hitherto had made up the content of Gatsby's pursuit, and as the natural extension of this ideal, she becomes – quite naturally – the object of Gatsby's American dream.<sup>39</sup>

It is Daisy's voice, above all, that characterizes her according to Gatsby's ideal – the very voice with its distinctive quality that Nick finds himself unable to identify throughout the novel and which Gatsby suddenly and strikingly describes near the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>39</sup> Roger Lewis expands on this argument, demonstrating the direct correlation between Daisy and money in Gatsby's mind. He writes,

[. . .] the means by which Gatsby expresses his feelings for Daisy – even though those feelings are sincere – is by showing off his possessions. Urging Daisy and Nick to explore his house, he tells them: "It took me just three years to earn the money that bought it" (p. 109). The very language in which Nick describes Gatsby's love for Daisy is commercial: "I think he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes" (p. 11). (Lewis, "Money, Love, and Aspiration in *The Great Gatsby*," 45-6)

This passage does not demand much commentary; it is sufficient to state that, not only does Daisy embody a monetary ideal for Gatsby, the economic nature of Gatsby and Daisy's love affair is reflected, among other ways, in the very substance of their courtship.

novel's end: "Her voice is full of money." Nick immediately reflects on Gatsby's observation, saying, "That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money – that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it. . . High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl. . ."40 The tone of Daisy's voice has a symbolic effect more durable than the other ways in which the narrative presentation suggests that Daisy stands for Gatsby's ideal – and this is even a fact that Nick recognizes when he reflects on Gatsby's catalogue of imaginative symbols associated with Daisy. The casual way in which Daisy fits into her expensive, extravagant, "better" surroundings crafts for us an image of a girl who belongs in the midst of riches and fine things; the direct way in which her voice is characterized by physical wealth, though, makes Daisy properly symbolic, for she suddenly embodies (and not only incidentally) the very ideal for which she has come to stand. It is all the more striking that Daisy's monetary tones are not merely the product of Gatsby's fancy, but rather her money-fluid voice is heard as such by our more grounded and sensible-minded narrator. If Nick, our point of critical reference from Gatsby, shares such a perception of Daisy, then the novel seems to be implying that there is a definite quality according to which Daisy's character naturally lends herself to Gatsby's fantastical creations. She becomes, most exactly, the objective, physical reality behind Gatsby's immaterial idealism.

The novel makes this move clear, pinpointing the exact moment at which Daisy becomes the material referent of Gatsby's idealism, and suggesting the peril of Gatsby's

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<sup>40</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 127.

dream in adopting her as such. The transformation of Daisy into an enduring image of success and fulfillment occurs as she and Gatsby share their first kiss:

His heart beat faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete.<sup>41</sup>

The narrative suggests that there is some necessary danger in the adoption of a physical image for Gatsby's idealism. Daisy is perishable, and so her adoption into his imagination guarantees its ultimate dissipation. Yet, without her, his dream lacks any concrete purpose and loses all its merit. Hence Nick assigns greatness to Gatsby's pursuit only when he learns that it includes Daisy and is not limited to the mundane trappings of wealth that surround Gatsby. Jordan Baker tells Nick, "Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay," and in doing so she triggers a profound alteration in Nick's judgment of Gatsby. "Then it had not been merely the stars to which he had aspired on that June night," Nick reflects. "He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor."<sup>42</sup>

And yet, as much as Gatsby's pursuit is an avid progression forwards towards success, it is simultaneously tethered to the past. His dream-object seems to occupy a space between the idealistic tendencies that Lippmann details, for it is something like a

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 83.

longing for a better time that has passed, which can only be practically located in the future. This temporal paradox is not one that Gatsby rightly comprehends, for his idealism results in a skewed understanding of temporal reality. In an attempt to call Gatsby's attention to this discrepancy, Nick plainly points out that one cannot repeat the past. "Can't repeat the past?" Gatsby famously remarks, "Why of course you can!"<sup>43</sup> In commenting on this passage, Marius Bewley does a fine job of characterizing the complexity of Gatsby's ties to the past in relation to the future. He writes,

The American dream, stretched between a golden past and a golden future, is always betrayed by a desolate present—a moment of fruit rinds and discarded favors and crushed flowers. Imprisoned in his present, Gatsby belongs even more to the past than to the future. His aspirations have been rehearsed, and his tragedy suffered, by all the generations of Americans who have gone before. His sense of the future, of the possibilities of life, he has learned from the dead.<sup>44</sup>

Gatsby, as a mythic embodiment of the hero of the American dream, repeats this discrepancy between past and future idealism in the whole design of his life. As a figurative model, he speaks directly to the contradictory tension inherent in the American dream vision.

Fitzgerald's novel, then, presents a very convoluted portrait of the American dream, suggesting thereby that the myth persists *because* of (rather than in spite of) the assorted contradictions that inhere in it. Gatsby's dream is, in fact, a *dream*: it is a constructed illusion that forges a great gulf between reality and fancy. So long as he

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>44</sup> Bewley, "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America," 48-49.



*pursues* the concretized ideal in Daisy, Gatsby's action retains the character of magnificence. As he comes closer to actually attaining that ideal, however, it steadily recedes before him, for it cannot persist in the face of reality. Hence when Daisy is no longer just across the bay, when she is physically with Gatsby, that dream begins already to fade. Nick observes:

As I went over to say goodbye I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby's face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way.<sup>45</sup>

Gatsby's project is remarkable so long as it remains a hopeful pursuit. But the American dream never guarantees fulfillment, and seems to call for the regular revision of ideals, such that the end of pursuit is never finally accomplished. And so, Nick reflects that Gatsby's demise is the high price he paid "for living too long with a single dream." With the loss of Daisy, which amounts to the collapse of Gatsby's entire idealistic system, the world profoundly changes its character for him: "He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely

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<sup>45</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 101.

created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about..."<sup>46</sup> Without Daisy, Gatsby is left with the empty shell of his many accomplishments, accomplishments that lack real value when divorced from the purpose that had hitherto informed them. It is narratively appropriate that Gatsby is killed after this revelation, for he has been suddenly thrown into a world that he cannot abide.<sup>47</sup>

What, then, does the progress of Gatsby's action tell us about the internal structure of the American dream myth? Most centrally, *The Great Gatsby* makes clear the illusory quality of the American dream. The American dream functions mythologically, to be sure, but it is also a practical guide to self-fulfillment. As such, it occupies a dangerous space—dangerous because reality always threatens the whole idealistic project. The underlying tension of the American dream, as evidenced by *The Great Gatsby*, is that progressive forward movement towards a concretized goal or set of goals actually causes the dissolution of those goals. As the American dream pursuer approaches nearer his objective, the objective more and more evades him, or else

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>47</sup> Bewley makes this point very clearly:

Paradoxically, it was Gatsby's dream that conferred reality upon the world. The reality was in his faith in the goodness of creation, and in the possibilities of life. That these possibilities were intrinsically related to such romantic components limited and distorted his dream, and finally left it helpless in the face of the Buchanans, but it did not corrupt it. When the dream melted, it knocked the prop of reality from under the universe, and face to face with the physical substance at last, Gatsby realized that the illusion was *there*—there where Tom and Daisy, and generations of small-minded, ruthless Americans had found it—in the dreamless, visionless complacency of mere matter, substance without form. After this recognition, Gatsby's death is only a symbolic formality [ . . . ] (Bewley, "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America," 52-53)

becomes increasingly devalued relative to his proximity to it. The well-known conclusion of Fitzgerald's novel speaks directly to this phenomenon:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.<sup>48</sup>

The fundamental paradox that underlies the American dream—that which the American dream attempts or appears to resolve—is a kind of absurdity of progress. This endlessly progressive movement (that which is in constant motion towards a constantly receding object) is imbued with *meaning* by the mythology of the American dream. This is, after all, the purpose of myth if we continue to follow a Lévi-Straussian understanding that myth acts as the apparent resolution of inherent contradictions in human or cultural experience in order to justify, or assign value to, human action. The American dream quite simply posits that all American citizens have the right and opportunity to rise, economically and socially, regardless of the conditions into which they are born. It notably offers no guarantee of success, but rather implies the opportunity for perpetual motion towards a goal. And yet, in focusing on the capacity for increase, the American dream seems to resolve the inanity of unattainable pursuit (for there is doubtless some absurdity in what ultimately amounts to progress for its own sake). The mythic resolution of this absurdity rests in the manner in which the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 189.

American dream demands a concretization of one's goals. Gatsby is a great dreamer because of the manner in which he finds a concrete value to attribute to his otherwise purposeless rise. And indeed, as an adherent to the myth, Gatsby is blithely unaware of the flaw in his design, for as far as he is concerned the myth has successfully resolved the conflict of his experience.

Now, this mythic interpretation of self-sufficient progress is remarkably American in kind. We can recall here Adams' commentary that the American dream constitutes a national imperative. As much as it encourages individual fulfillment, the American dream has the larger scope of establishing a national social order. Stemming from the basic tenets of democracy, the American project has always been one of national progress. This national scale of upward or forward mobility informs the individual pursuits of American citizens, which essentially constitute the larger arena that is at stake. If the nation is to be always advancing, then such motion can only be accomplished through the perpetual advancement of its citizens. Grounded in democracy, however, American national idealism is not merely ordered to the increased attainment of power (though this is certainly a primary aim). Rather, the ideals of freedom and equality, on which the dream is premised, serve as the nation's idealistic goals. But the American project is decidedly not a Marxist one: the nation is not ordered to the final realization of its ideals in some future national utopia. There is no point in time, at least as far as the American imagination is concerned, at which these national ideals are attained. Instead, the nation constantly strives for increased freedom and equality (and, we can say, global power) for its citizens, creating an ideological goal

of perpetual progress. The culturally inherent nobility of these goals accounts for their sustained durability and therefore maintains the whole structure of the American dream, figured personally. In short, the American dream acts as a national mythic resolution of the meaninglessness of progress in order to guarantee the ongoing accomplishment of such progress.

### **Extracting Mythemes: The Identification of Structural Tensions in *The Great Gatsby***

Such is the mythic substance of the American dream generally, out of which we might now derive the specific relational tenets whose analysis will result in a detailed understanding of the structure of the American dream. Again, we can look to *The Great Gatsby* in its particularity for an overview of these mythemes, but we must proceed with caution. Because the American nation is so large and diverse, the American dream defines a very broad set of goals and expectations, so as to maintain inclusivity. Consequently, many mythemic tensions are contained in the abstract ideal of the American dream, and we cannot possibly pursue them all in detail here. We must, then, carefully select those mythemes that are most clearly pertinent to our discussion here—those which really establish the basic structural components of the American dream as myth. For this task, we can turn to yet another literary critic who has offered up a basic model for the core narrative elements of a myth.

In his book *Regeneration Through Violence*, Richard Slotkin asserts that mythical narratives—like any kind of narrative, really—have a most basic structural composition. He writes,

As artifacts, myths appear to be built of three basic structural elements: a protagonist or hero, with whom the audience is presumed to identify in some way; a universe in which the hero may act, which is presumably a reflection of the audience's conception of the world and the gods; and a narrative, in which the interaction of hero and universe is described. Hero and universe may be readily abstracted as "images," which may in turn be evocative enough to become equated in our minds with the whole of the myth itself. The narrative as a whole is more difficult to abstract, since its action defines (explicitly and implicitly) the relationship of hero to universe and of man to God—and so establishes the laws of cause and effect, of natural process, and of morality. It is the narrative which gives the images life by giving them a mode of interaction.<sup>49</sup>

Slotkin sets up for us a very clean, neat breakdown of mythic narrative structure. Essentially, a myth consists of an actor, a setting, and an action; the interplay between these structural aspects defines a culture's mythic understanding of the basic structure of reality. Now, each of these narrative elements will certainly be present in representations of the American dream. In fact, because the American dream functions mythically, these structural elements will, in fact, act as Lévi-Straussian mythemes. When we apply each of these elements—character, setting, and action—to the American dream myth, each will consist in a mythemetic tension that defines the basic structure of that myth. In short, the most basic structural elements of the American dream myth will each contain a relational tension, such that the American dream is structured by the

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<sup>49</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 8.

very tensions that it seeks to resolve. This structure is ultimately what makes the American dream a national myth.

Perhaps *The Great Gatsby* is so highly esteemed as a paradigmatic American text because of its fluid incorporation of these mythemes into its narrative structure.<sup>50</sup> To be sure, *Gatsby*—like any other narrative—contains a basic actor, action, and setting. In exploring the novel’s precise representation of these elements as mythemes, we will arrive at the mythic structure of *Gatsby*, which will in turn serve as an example of that structure which we will locate in the American dream myth itself, and also in other novelistic representations of the dream.

Let us begin, then, by identifying Jay Gatsby as the novel’s unequivocal protagonist, and then defining that which makes him a *uniquely American* protagonist.<sup>51</sup> Gatsby is fabulously wealthy, but his possession of great wealth does not alone make him a prototype of the ideal American hero. What does mark his Americanness, though, is the fact that Gatsby was not always wealthy, and that he made his great fortune more or less independently. In short, Gatsby is a self-made man. This designation— “self-

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<sup>50</sup> This would imply that critics and theorists of Fitzgerald’s novel are aware of the mythemic structure of *Gatsby*; I do not mean to put forward this argument. Rather, I contend that this structure is *implicit*, such that critics and theorists of the novel recognize its paradigmatic American dream structure without necessarily identifying it as such.

<sup>51</sup> Most readers will not object to this identification, but some may contend that Nick Carraway is more properly the novel’s protagonist. I reject this reading, for while there is much to be said about Nick as a character and narrator, and while he decidedly executes his own unique action in the novel, Nick’s story consistently develops Gatsby as its protagonist, and it is Gatsby’s action which ultimately directs Nick’s (such that Nick’s narrative development is always subject to the development of Gatsby’s own action). Consequently, while other plots may take place within the novel, it is Gatsby who most completely fills the role of the protagonist. This is, most likely, why the novel bears his name for its title.

made man” – is the paradigm for the protagonist of the American dream narrative, and, by implication, the mythic hero of the American dream. While a more precise definition and understanding of the self-made man will be the subject of the next chapter, we can here at least outline the basic tension that sits at the center of the self-made man as American mythic protagonist.

Dedicated, hard work is the hallmark of the self-made man, and operates as the real catalyst for success. While equal and universal opportunity for advancement is the promise of the American dream (a promise never wholly made good on), such opportunity is never a guarantee of success. It is through personal initiative and sustained dedication that the American dream implies such success might be really attained—indeed, the myth of the self-made man is such that honest, genuine hard work *must* pay off. In the case of Gatsby—who is figurative of this mythic understanding<sup>52</sup>—his great designs are accomplished because they are so pragmatically constructed. Gatsby’s illusions about Daisy may be no more than dreamy abstractions, but his path to wealth and prestige is concretely determined. We need only recall the

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<sup>52</sup> Bewley sets Gatsby up as a mythic hero by drawing the following conclusion:

In an essay called “Myths for Materialists” Mr. Jacques Barzun once wrote that figures, whether of fact or fiction, insofar as they express destinies, aspirations, attitudes, typical of man or particular groups, are invested with a mythical character. In this sense Gatsby is a “mythic” character, and no other word will define him. Not only is he an embodiment (as Fitzgerald makes clear at the outset) of that conflict between illusion and reality at the heart of American life; he is an heroic personification of the American romantic hero, the true heir of the American dream. (Bewley, “Scott Fitzgerald’s Criticism of America,” 40)

While Bewley is drawing his conclusion from an argument different than my own, his reflection that Gatsby is mythic because he embodies this American tension certainly speaks to the current discussion and provides a bit more support for the claim that Gatsby, as self-made man, is a *mythic* hero.



significance of his childhood schedule, whose exacting nature is indicative of severe purpose, and which already contains the germ of his future aspirations.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, for Gatsby material rise seems inevitable given his character alone. His ultimate failure is in no way owing to lethargy or lack of purpose, but results from the idealism behind his practical progression, as we have seen.

Yet Gatsby has some inherent advantages, to be sure. While he may not be imbued with a lofty social status from birth, he is nevertheless a fully-abled white male—categories that, practically, become all too relevant to a discussion of realistic ascension in American history. Moreover, Gatsby is lucky to a large extent. There are an array of internal factors that contribute to Gatsby's success, to be sure, but we cannot overlook the extensive external factors that also assist him. In short, the narrative suggests a quite fluid connection between Gatsby's financial success and his personal ambition, and it is through this direct connection that the myth of the self-made man is realized and can be propagated. The simple facts that hard work does not always result in success, that conditions outside oneself can impact one's life severely and irrevocably, and that opportunity for increase is not, in fact, universally and equally assigned, present crude and harsh realities that belie the simple directive that honest ambition must of necessity lead one to one's goals. The myriad contradictions that persist in real experience do not allow for a national endorsement of personal ambition, without which the larger social ideals of the American dream cannot be accomplished (for lofty national ideals are only achieved by real, concrete instances of success). The self-made

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<sup>53</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 181–82.

man, then, constitutes one of these gross constituent units, or mythemes, out of which the larger myth of the American dream is composed. The imagined resolution of the tensions surrounding the self-made man ultimately make the American dream viable, and a mythological analysis of the American dream demands a closer study of him.

*The Great Gatsby* also offers a mythemic tension in its setting, which contains enough diverse trappings that we can take it as a general representation of idealistic American terrain. Most notably, the tension regarding the novel's setting exists in the dichotomous representation of Long Island: The separation between a "West Egg" of new money and an "East Egg" of old money speaks directly to the frontier idealism of American optimism. The novel is set in the 1920's—well after the supposedly endless western frontier has been closed.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, *Gatsby* repeats this theme of the Western frontier in its representation of Long Island; hence Gatsby and his "new money" occupy the West Egg—Gatsby's wealth is literally associated with the promise of the frontier enterprise (indeed, Gatsby's economic success is a testament to the reality of the "go west!" paradigm). For Gatsby America really is the "Golden Land of Opportunity"—a phrase that comes to embody the representative American setting that constitutes the geographical paradigm of the myth's structure. And yet, there is a mysterious tension here nonetheless, for Gatsby's "western" action is actually accomplished by moving east. This is similarly echoed by Nick, who goes west at the end of the novel, as though he will find new opportunity in the now exhausted

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<sup>54</sup> See here Frederick Jackson Turner's famous frontier thesis, which is discussed at length in a later chapter.

frontier.<sup>55</sup> Essentially, the novel represents a clear understanding of the western frontier paradigm, with all its promise of opportunity and material rise, from within a physical space in which the frontier no longer exists. Consequently, the novel at once attests to the viability of America as a land of opportunity (Gatsby, after all, makes his great fortune within an opportunistic terrain), while simultaneously emphasizing the closure of that opportunistic space. Ultimately, the structural mythemic tension contained here is that between the reality and the illusion behind an opportunistic conception of American physical space.

*The Great Gatsby's* most remarkable accomplishment is its representation of our third and final structural mytheme: the action of the American dream. While typically the most difficult narrative element to define, in the case of the American dream we can easily enough identify "upward mobility" as its predominant action. Within an American mythic context, upward mobility refers specifically to the movement from one socio-economic sphere to a "higher" or "better" one. Critics of the American dream may emphasize the loftier national idealism behind the dream, but they consistently

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<sup>55</sup> Robert Emmet Long discusses the implied contradiction inherent in Nick Carraway's westward move at the novel's end. He writes,

At the end, Carraway returns to the West, where he can keep his moral distinctions straight. Or so he says. But there is a contradiction in terms in his return, since he has already envisioned a darkness spreading across the entire continent, including the West he returns to as sanctuary. Moreover, it is in the West, in the environs of Chicago, that the Buchanan money was made, that Gatsby was closed out of Daisy's life originally, that Daisy chose Tom. Further still, the frontier vision served first by Cody and then by Gatsby, and exploded as a cruel illusion, was a dream of the West. Carraway returns to the West not, it seems, as fact so much as admitted illusion of adolescence, which means that he, like Gatsby, has no place to go, can envision no alternatives to the nightmare he has lived through. (Long, *The Achieving of the Great Gatsby*, 181-82)

insist (as they must) on the material parameters of the dream as well. *Gatsby* is a direct attestation to this fact—even the grand ideal he locates in Daisy is, ultimately, an extension of the drive towards wealth. A conflict arises here, though, when we attempt to balance individual material rise with national idealistic accomplishment; these two movements tend to be exclusive of one another.

The mythemic tension that we locate here exists in the frequent discrepancy between the American dream's supposed guarantee of personal material success and its simultaneous promise of social betterment, and this tension, like the others just mentioned, will be explored in detail in a later chapter. This conflicted notion of success is perhaps the most complex tension that the American dream offers; this should not come as a surprise if we recall that Slotkin emphasized that mythic action is always the most difficult structural element to define. Essentially, in the recognition of American mythic action, we find that private and social progress, while informing and assisting one another in theory, too often espouse conflicting courses of action. The problem that emerges is that, in advancing oneself, one inevitably restricts another individual and, regardless of one's degree of success, any individual can effect the social structure according to which others are capable of material ascension. Coupled with the relative nature of the American dream—that one's measure of success is always calculated against another's level of success—the reality of upward mobility is competition. Far from working for general social advancement and increased opportunities for everyone, then, the action of the American dream (which is at once public and private) contains in itself an overt contradiction. In short, the action of the American dream, insofar as it

simultaneously defines contradictory personal and public goals, attempts to resolve the illogicality of its own design.

While the mythemes briefly discussed here certainly do not encompass the totality of elemental relations that compose the American dream, they are nevertheless the most central and directly relevant to this analysis, insofar as they describe *structural* tensions. Through the historical development of each conflicting constitutive relationship, as well as through the analysis of their various American literary representations, we can arrive at a detailed understanding of the most integral components of the American dream, through which the structure of the myth will become evident. The American dream is absolutely a massive and complex attempt to resolve the many discrepancies evident in the American social project. Its sustained cultural relevance seems to attest to its success as a myth—that it does effectively resolve the problems for which it exists. At any rate, the success or failure of the American dream as a mythic system is assuredly an important matter for our discussion, and will be taken up in turn. For now, we will do well to begin our more specifically detailed analysis of these most fundamental mythemes.

**Chapter Two**  
**Mythic Hero:**  
***Augie March* and the Self-Made Man in America**

The American dream is most commonly associated with the idea that, regardless of one's origins, one may advance one's economic and social standing given the basic economic and political structure of America. It is not surprising, then, that the myth of the self-made man thrives as a necessary constituent element of the larger social ideal, for he is the evidentiary embodiment of the whole dream ideal. The self-made man, as we understand him, is markedly American in kind—no other national society has historically allowed for the *fluidity* with which the self-made man is able to drastically alter his social and economic standing. The very existence of the self-made man says a great deal about the historical social structure of America, and in turn about the whole national consciousness underlying the American dream. The self-made man is, in short, the most clearly constitutive unit of the American dream myth. As such, his theoretical and historical figuration is fraught with tensions, contradictions, and other relational paradoxes that his *mythic* existence actively attempts to resolve. If we are to understand the complex structure of the American dream as it functions mythically, a historical-theoretical study of the self-made man is the most obvious place to begin.

While the majority of Americans have a “household” understanding of the self-made man (he is, after all, a part of Americans' mythic reality), we would do well to define him, simple as that definition may be. Michael Kimmel offers a brief historical summary of the self-made man's appearance in national discourse, and this summary will help our characterization of him here. Kimmel writes,

Even the term *self-made man* was an American neologism, first coined by Henry Clay in a speech in the U. S. Senate in 1832. Defending a protective tariff that he believed would widen opportunities for humble men to rise in business, he declared that in Kentucky “almost every manufactory known to me is in the hands of enterprising, self-made men, who have whatever wealth they possess by patient and diligent labor.”<sup>1</sup>

Kimmel goes on to discuss the flourishing of this term by the 1840s and 1850s, indicating the sudden preponderance of “popular biographies and inspirational homilies” that have direct recourse to this new popular term.<sup>2</sup> It is circa the mid-nineteenth century, then, that this term enters the public discourse and is quickly adopted as a mainstream version of American myth. Simply put, the self-made man is one whose rewards are directly commensurate with his work; the American dream posits that the relationship between *effort* and *reward* is causal, such that hard work naturally, logically results in success. This, of course, is simply the myth’s attempt at resolving an apparent discrepancy in reality: namely, that success and effort do not, of necessity, bear a causal relationship.

The idea that one’s social and economic status can be altered by a consistent exercise of one’s natural abilities emerges simultaneously with the inception of the American nation itself: it is inextricably rooted in the early modern notion of America as the golden land of opportunity. As such, it is deeply embedded in the American

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<sup>1</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 26.

<sup>2</sup> In his discussion, Kimmel cites John Frost’s *Self Made Men in America* (1848), Charles Seymore’s *Self-Made Men* (1858), and Freeman Hunt’s *Worth and Wealth* (1856) and *Lives of American Merchants* (1858) as instances of such texts. *Ibid.*, 26.

consciousness (if we can name such a thing), and stands as a *uniquely* American ideal. This fact is well worth noting. One pivotal assessment of the self-made man in America, John G. Cawelti's 1965 book, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, calls attention to this fact right from its introduction. Cawelti writes,

When he becomes successful, the American self-made man likes to boast of his achievement, to exaggerate the obscurity of his origin, and to point out the "Horatio Alger" quality of his career. In Europe, where class traditions are stronger, the successful man often prefers to forget his origins if they are in a lower class. Even the words which different countries have created to describe the "mobile man" indicate significant differences in attitude. Americans coined the term "self-made man." The French expressions *parvenu* and *nouveau riche* point to the newness of the individual's rise and not to the fact that he has succeeded by his own exertions; in addition they carry a tone of condescension which is absent from the American term.<sup>3</sup>

If the above statement is less true today than at the time it was written, we can nevertheless stress the historically distinctive character of social mobility in America. Indeed, if class structures are now less strict in other countries than they were in years past, this is likely owing to the spread of American models of ascent and prosperity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Celeste MacLeod discusses the globalization of the self-made man at the beginning of her book, *Horatio Alger, Farewell*. She writes,

The dream of riches for everybody originated in the United States, but it has become one of our most popular exports. The idea that everyone who works hard enough can become wealthy, regardless of social class or advantages (and irrespective of the economic and political situation in one's country), has



Regardless, this self-made man is at least an American invention (however else he has subsequently been adopted), and his existence thereby speaks directly and significantly to the development of the myth of the American dream.

Let us consider, then, the features of this ideal American character. Irvin G. Wylie offers a summary picture of this “legendary hero” as we commonly know him:

He has been active in every field from politics to the arts, but nowhere has he been more active, or more acclaimed, than in business. To most Americans he is the office boy who has become the head of a great concern, making millions in the process. He represents our most cherished conceptions of success, and particularly our belief that any man can achieve fortune through the practice of industry, frugality, and sobriety.<sup>5</sup>

The self-made man is strong, durable, and hard-working, such that he can “pull himself up from his bootstraps” (as has been the tradition) and rise to great social and economic heights from all too obscure and mediocre origins. Indeed, the more dramatic the discrepancy between whence he comes and where he arrives, the more valuable he is as a representative figure. However, the path he takes to his success is just as important as the measure of that success. The self-made man must not only rise a great distance, but he must do so according to basic models of human virtue: he is honest, just, and wholly upright in every aspect of his life. No writer stresses a virtuous model of the self-made

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universal appeal. [. . .] The American dream has helped raise expectations across the globe. (MacLeod, *Horatio Alger, Farewell*, 3)

Certainly, then, this American model becomes a popular “export,” but this aspect of the self-made man is less relevant to our current study, which is more concerned with his American origins than his later European incarnations.

<sup>5</sup> Wylie, *The Self-Made Man in America*, 6.

man more prominently than Benjamin Franklin, who is perhaps the nation's most avid promoter of this uniquely American "man of virtue." In such aphoristic texts as *Poor Richard's Almanack* (which contains the later renamed preface, "The Way to Wealth"), Franklin enumerates the many simple maxims that advise industry and honesty as the hallmarks of the man of virtue.<sup>6</sup> In his own autobiography, Franklin openly makes a shining example of himself—his own grueling path from mediocre beginnings to grand accomplishments being a direct and unfailing attestation to the realistic and very natural conclusion of such virtuous behavior.

Franklin's account of his own life can be generally taken as exemplary action for the self-made man: Franklin means for us to emulate his practice of thrift and dedication in the face of Providence, so as to earn the benefits of monetary and social success. Franklin's own literal success is a direct attestation to the viability of his project, and accounts for the tremendous popularity of his work. In an uncredited introduction to the 1895 Henry Altemus edition of the text, we are told that "In all his writings is evidenced his wonderful gift of shrewd common-sense and practical wisdom" and that

His revelation of himself is a very frank one—almost the frankest that has ever been written; and it is full of wise hints for those who know how to take them.

[ . . . ] that active and ever-striving life, that began as a printer's boy and ended as

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<sup>6</sup> Included here is a small sampling of some of the more relevant aphorisms we find in Franklin's *Almanac*: "Diligence is the mother of good luck"; "Diligence overcomes difficulties, sloth makes them"; "Have you somewhat to do to-morrow; do it to-day"; "If you know how to spend less than you get, you have the philosopher's stone"; "No gains without pains"; "Speak little, do much." These brief aphorisms became a quick bestseller, attesting to the popularity of (and therefore the widespread belief in) such quick and easy statements about American opportunity through industry. Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanac*, 14, 16, 19, 22, 24.

one of the foremost makers of a nation, who, despite his political occupations, ranked also among the leading philosophical and scientific men of his time.<sup>7</sup>

This is a characterization that we are accustomed to hearing, and the emphasis on Franklin's progress is always placed on his advocacy of common sense and practical wisdom. Indeed, Franklin himself insists on the relevance of his autobiography:

From the poverty and obscurity in which I was born, and in which I passed my earlier years, I have raised myself to some degree of affluence and celebrity in the world. As constant good fortune has accompanied me even to an advanced period of life, my posterity will perhaps be desirous of learning the means I employed, and which, thanks to Providence, so well succeeded with me. They may also deem them fit to be imitated, should any of them find themselves in similar circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

There is no ambiguity here—Franklin means his text to be a straightforward self-made man narrative.

There is a clear overarching ordering principle to Franklin's text, and it is not just the precise sequence of his life's events. Rather, Franklin's autobiography is organized according to his life's own personal attestation to a unique set of "American" virtues (so laid out by Franklin himself). Rather than call for a direct imitation of Franklin's own life, Franklin establishes a clear moral standard according to which his life's action was conducted, and encourages others to adopt this same moral paradigm. Franklin's *Autobiography*, then, does not insist that the successful American copy Franklin's life;

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<sup>7</sup> Introduction to *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1895), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Franklin, *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1879), 1.

rather, he means that the successful American will apply the same moral standard to his own life. That moral standard could not be made clearer by Franklin, who outlines thirteen “American” moral virtues and their corollary precepts. He lists them:

1. Temperance.— Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation
2. Silence.— Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
3. Order.— Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
4. Resolution.— Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.
5. Frugality.— Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; that is, waste nothing.
6. Industry.— Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.
7. Sincerity.— Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
8. Justice.— Wrong none by doing injustice, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.
9. Moderation.— Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.
10. Cleanliness.— Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes, or habitation.

11. Tranquility.—Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. Chastity.—Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.
13. Humility.—Imitate Jesus and Socrates.<sup>9</sup>

There is surely something striking about this enumeration of virtues: they differ from those proposed by classical philosophy. In his *Ethics*, Aristotle, too, lists a set of virtues—a set of virtues that have been a kind of moral cornerstone within the Western tradition. Aristotle lists the following ideal virtues (both intellectual and moral), which always rest between vicious extremes and deficiencies: Courage, Temperance, Liberality, Magnificence, Magnanimity, Pride, Good Temper, Truthfulness, Ready Wittiness, Friendliness, Modesty, and Righteous Indignation.<sup>10</sup> While there are certainly some virtues that fall under both Franklin and Aristotle's lists, it is interesting to our discussion here to note those that are anomalous. Franklin calls for the virtues of cleanliness and order, for instance, which are notably absent from Aristotle's list. Indeed, Franklinian virtues such as silence and sincerity in conjunction with precisely defined motivations towards industry and frugality approach a quite distinctive ethic. Because so much meaning can be attached to Aristotelian classical virtues (they have been re-appropriated and redefined countless times in the course of their history),

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<sup>9</sup> Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, (1895), 90-91.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.7 (959-62).

Franklin insists on attaching specific, precise meanings to each virtue he enumerates,<sup>11</sup> and this is a great help in defining the general “tone” of Franklin’s virtues. Franklin’s virtues—*all of them*—are directly ordered to the creation of hard-working, successful Americans. They say little about attaining an Aristotelian mean that results in a classical definition of happiness; rather, they espouse behaviors that result in an American definition of success. Franklin’s virtues are economically and socially oriented, and they are a moral standard for productivity, innovation, and socio-economic ascension in America. It is here that we begin to notice the emergence of a materially-figured American morality.

And yet, while it is important to emphasize that a socio-economic model of the self-made man does exist in Franklin’s *Autobiography*, and that the subsequent adoption of an explicitly socio-economic model is derived from here, the text does not only promote the socio-economic consequence of Franklin’s life. In a seminal essay on Franklin’s text, titled “Franklin’s *Autobiography*, and the American Dream,” J. A. Leo Lemay traces iterations of the American dream in Franklin’s autobiography that stress its non-socio-economic parameters. And so, while he locates the “rags to riches” paradigm in Franklin’s account, he does not find that this economically figured genre is the text’s primary figuration of the American dream. A “more important aspect of the American dream theme in the *Autobiography* is the rise from impotence to importance,

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<sup>11</sup> Franklin writes, “In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalogue more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name. [. . .] I proposed to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas attached to each, than a few names with more ideas” (Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, (1895), 90).

from dependence to independence, from helplessness to power,"<sup>12</sup> he writes. Also, Lemay contends that Franklin propounds a philosophy of individualism, which has a general "hope for a better world, a new world, free of the ills of the old, existing world,"<sup>13</sup> and sees the individual as the agency of this hopeful new world. All of these aspects of the narrative work to support a model of the self-made man—they emphasize his many virtuous features, his many possibilities for experience, and his fundamental sense of accomplishment (even outside the realm of materially figured success). It is important to insist that the self-made man is a socio-economic hero, but that he is not only this; there is a much larger, and morally-figured, context within which the self-made man acts, and which informs his action.

The model of the self-made man embodied by Franklin and suggested by the other critics discussed here has been represented extensively in American literary history, and most notably in the work of Horatio Alger, Jr. While Alger's novels may not stand as paragons of aesthetic excellence, they clearly outline, however crudely or simplistically, the basic plot and character structure for the paradigmatic American self-made man narrative. We might consider Alger's most famous novel, *Ragged Dick*, in which a young and homeless New York city boot shiner decides one day to improve his life, and then promptly sets about doing so. The message of the novel is straightforward—better living conditions await the industrious man, whatever his origins or current state of affairs. Dick is not lucky, but rather reaps the benefits of fortuitous circumstances that seem to emerge as a direct result of his openly virtuous

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<sup>12</sup> Lemay, "Franklin's *Autobiography* and the American Dream," 351-52.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

behavior. His return of small change to a businessman, for instance, is a clear mark of his honest disposition and as such serves as the impetus for that businessman's personal interest in Dick's wellbeing. The novel insists on a causal relationship between personal action and success, such that good fortune is never the result of luck or base moral behavior. To be sure, circumstances frequently present themselves by chance, but a chance occurrence never promises personal advancement. Rather, Dick must consistently exercise his many virtues in the face of these occurrences, and it is his just and upright response to chance encounters and events that makes them fruitful for his career.

*Ragged Dick* insists that one's social and economic circumstances are the direct result of personal action, such that each individual creates their own circumstances. Even when misfortune befalls Dick, it is always of a kind that can be resolved through quick industry.<sup>14</sup> Having had his savings book stolen, for instance, Dick needs only to rush to his bank and hide out in order to catch the perpetrator and have his savings restored. Misfortunes occur, the novel demonstrates, but the truly dedicated hard-worker is never really impeded by them. Critics have long attacked Alger's work for its relatively naïve attitude in this respect, but, while such an attitude may be rather

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, Dick's white male privileged status has much to do with his success. Challenges to this paradigm have come in many different forms, but racial ones are abundant. Consider Richard Wright's *Native Son*, which opens with a character seemingly destined to make something of himself, and then quickly establishes a set of circumstances *outside of his control* that lead to his utter tragic destruction. Dick's circumstances are advantageous, so the implication goes, because of his privileged racial status. Consider also Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which is explicitly about self-making *outside* of this exclusive paradigm, and so attempts to rewrite the narrative in some sense.



simplistic, it is nevertheless the most basic representation of the national mythic ideal of the self-made man. Alger stresses personal responsibility for his characters because the myth of the self-made man does so, at least in its early incarnations. In fact, this myth goes so far as to insist that *all* citizens, regardless of their inherited advantages or disadvantages, can make the most of the opportunities that will undoubtedly present themselves in the course of one's life. Wyllie writes,

Economic salvation, like spiritual salvation, was not reserved for men of superior physique and intellect, but could be attained by all men of good character. In respect to character, presumably, all started as equals. It was not the boast of the self-made man that nature had made him stronger and more intelligent than his fellows, it was that through the cultivation of good character he had managed his own elevation.<sup>15</sup>

According to such a paradigm, all men really are "equals," and external circumstances can ultimately have no final say on the outcome of one's life. The direction one's life takes is a direct effect of the character one breeds in oneself.<sup>16</sup> In short, America is the golden land of endless opportunities and inexhaustible resources, and so, naturally, all

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<sup>15</sup> Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> We do see fictional instances of self-made men who adopt amoral or immoral means to pursue their ends, and usually these texts have the force of challenging the underlying idea of the American dream. Thomas Sutpen, of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, perfectly embodies the self-made man and represents an American dream, but his action is one of overt subjugation of others. Sutpen comes from humble origins and rises to greatness (socio-economic viability is expressed through his monumental home) through dedication and industry, as well as the enslavement of many African-Americans and one French architect. This does not support the inherited paradigm of the self-made man; rather, it is a representation of an ideal, realistically figured, and in so considering the *reality* of the self-made man paradigm, it challenges it.

wealth and social prestige do in fact await the industrious man of virtue. Or so the myth goes.<sup>17</sup>

While doubtless some disillusionment has entered into our conception of the self-made man,<sup>18</sup> it is easy enough to see why this mythic figure was constructed as he was, and why his figuration may have been more durable in the earlier years of the nation's development. After all, early Americans saw the open and seemingly unending landscape of America as a sort of blank slate (barring the inconvenience of the country's previous inhabitants, of course). As such, these early Americans set about constructing social systems, political governmental bodies, and personal ideals that would foster some new sense of identity. Because of the great enormity and difficulty of this project, it is natural that a system of virtue which privileges endurance and justice would develop along simple, clear moral lines. America cannot be built without a mass and continued dedication to hard work and to the simple precepts that endorse fair behavior, and so these values become essential characterizations of the properly

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<sup>17</sup> American fiction has, of course, offered many characters and actions that directly resist or challenge this paradigm. Consider, for instance, Nathanael West's parody of Alger's genre, *A Cool Million*. This novel traces a character who very much resembles Dick (especially in his naiveté), except that his hard work and honesty only bring him horrible misfortune. The novel reads like a slow descent into socio-economic depravity, and thus self-consciously offers a counter-model to Alger's text. Fiction often challenges mythic paradigms in this way in order to expose the myth for critical reflection.

<sup>18</sup> This is often owing to adverse social conditions under which one's effort and industry are exploited, rather than rewarded. Examples are abundant and include Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (indeed, all of Sinclair's fiction is about the besieged laborer and unfit working conditions), Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*, or even Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete*. We see that many of these novels insist that opportunities are different, if not nearly non-existent, for immigrant workers or the lower classes in big cities.

moral American life. At a time when America is still in the early stages of construction, the myth of the self-made man is integral to national development: it establishes a very straightforward and easily understandable moral paradigm that, in effect, functions to create “American” citizens (that is, citizens who are properly fitted to the generation and ongoing development of this uniquely “American” nation).

Historically, we can argue that the morally figured self-made man develops out of an earlier notion of the American hero. In his book, *The American Adam*, R. W. B. Lewis suggests that, “a century ago [circa mid nineteenth century], the image contrived to embody the most fruitful contemporary ideas was that of the authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history.”<sup>19</sup> Lewis terms this hero “the American Adam,” for he resembles the prelapsarian hero of Genesis, being at once innocent and ahistorical. Lewis offers a more comprehensive discussion of this Adamic hero. He is

[ . . . ] an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero (in praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. Adam was the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis, *The American Adam*, 1.

before him. And he was the type of creator, the poet par excellence, creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene about him.<sup>20</sup>

This depiction of the standard American hero does not contradict the alternate model of the self-made man; indeed, the two appear very similar in description. The self-made man is not ahistorical, exactly, but he certainly enjoys many of the benefits of an ahistorical existence: he, too, is “happily bereft of ancestry” (if not literally, then figuratively) and “undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race.” The self-made man, like the Adamic hero, is self-motivated and self-reliant, and relies on the cultivation of inherent talents to confront “whatever awaited him.” The difference between these figures is largely contextual; the American Adam exists in a raw state of nature, but emerges as the more clearly recognizable self-made man when he becomes a figure of civilization.<sup>21</sup> Essentially, the American Adam defines his cultural context, in effect creating it, and is redefined in the process of doing so. Ultimately, the sharpest distinction between the Adamic hero and the self-made man (and it *is* a significant distinction) is the existence, for the self-made man, of a goal-oriented moral paradigm. Prelapsarian and ahistorical, the Adamic hero lacks any need for a moral paradigm (and, consequently, for the goals towards which such a paradigm is ordered). With the expansion of American territory, the American Adam is naturally refigured as a more practical standard for an emerging goal-oriented society.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>21</sup> This image of American heroism coincides nicely with early American conceptions of America as “Nature’s Nation” or with the myth (and the reality) of the American frontier. Indeed, the shift from the standard of the Adamic hero to that of the self-made man nicely parallels the movement from a frontier-based “natural” American terrain, to a city-based “civilizational” American space.

While the ideal of the self-made man certainly carries a strong moral component (as indicated by Franklin and Alger's treatments of it), it is ordered towards a relatively base-looking end: that of wealth and status. Why ought the American citizen exercise industry and fair dealings with others? The answer is simple—so that he might attain the benefits of economic and social increase, and thereby contribute to the greater extension of his nation.<sup>22</sup> The nation's endorsement of the self-made man is mutually beneficial in this respect to both the nation and its individual citizens.<sup>23</sup> By encouraging honest labor that reaps wealth, which in turn reaps status, America is itself built up as a stronger and more powerful nation. This economically oriented model, under the guise

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<sup>22</sup> Kimmel supports this definition of the purpose of the self-made man:

Yet that is precisely what defined the Self-Made Man: success in the market, individual achievement, mobility, wealth. America expressed political autonomy; the Self-Made Man embodied economic autonomy. This was the manhood of the rising middle class. The flip side of this economic autonomy is anxiety, restlessness, loneliness. Manhood is no longer fixed in land or small-scale property ownership or dutiful service. Success must be earned, manhood must be proved—and proved constantly. (Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 23)

For a discussion of this passage's insistence on masculinity, see note 23 in this chapter.

<sup>23</sup> It is perhaps necessary here to stress the *masculinity* inherent in this version of the self-made man. While not the primary topic of this discussion, the ideal of the self-made *man* is notably exclusive of women (who are, by and large, expected to marry into success rather than to build it). Kimmel comments that "Between 1810 and 1820, the term *breadwinner* was coined to denote this responsible family man. The breadwinner ideal would remain one of the central characteristics of American manhood until the present day. At its moment of origin, it meant that a man's 'great aim' was 'to fill his station with dignity, and to be useful to his fellow beings'" (Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 20). Moreover, the emerging capitalist market opened up opportunities for *men* to rise to new heights. In his discussion of the myth of the self-made man, James Catano focuses the attentions of his book on masculinity, explicitly. This is an important note to make, insofar as the gendered nature of this ideal has extensive social implications. The pursuit of those social implications, however, lies outside the purview of this discussion, which is strictly concerned with analyzing the structure of the American dream *as it exists*, and it exists, of course, as an overtly masculine ideal. See Catano, *Ragged Dicks*.

of moral self-betterment, serves quite well for the attainment and consolidation of increasingly extensive national power. In short, the success of the self-made man at once generates American citizens (ideologically) and sustains and increases the American national power structure. Consider the following passage, taken from one of the many self-help books that sprung up in the nineteenth century, which explicitly encourage precise paths for such a self-made man:

...every young man can see how great is the responsibility resting upon him as an individual. If he commence with right principles as his guide,—that is, if in every action he have regard to the good of the whole, as well as to his own good,—he will not only secure his own well-being, but aid in the general advancement toward a state of order. But if he [...] follow only the impulses of his appetites and passions, he will retard the general return to true order, and secure for himself that unhappiness in the future which is the invariable consequence of all violations of natural or divine laws.<sup>24</sup>

Following this line of thought, it is most interesting to consider the relationship between wealth, moral virtue, and national success that permeates the nineteenth century American imagination (and that defines the ideological substance of the self-made man).

To be sure, the nineteenth century is a period in which the complex relationship between a man's moral/religious character and his economic success undergoes a rapid change. For nearly the first half of the century, traditional *religious* moral standards, such as we find in the work of Cotton Mather, tend to hold sway. Mather himself does

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<sup>24</sup> Qtd. in Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, 48.

not attempt to establish a direct causal relationship between moral excellence and material reward, but neither does he condemn the attainment of wealth outright. Rather, he insists that with material prosperity comes certain religious obligations—namely, the traditionally conceived service to the poor, most straightforwardly accomplished through tithing. Indeed, the rich man who gives liberally and without ostentation not only lives up to his moral responsibilities, but even, Mather hints, finds greater material rewards: “Such liberal men, it is observed, are generally long-lived men; and at last they pass from this into everlasting life.”<sup>25</sup> Mather by no means indicates wealth as a natural reward for moral excellence, but neither does he claim that wealth precludes religious salvation. Mather’s teachings, still important guides for the early nineteenth century American, at least allow for a space where a new conception of morality and enterprise might open up.

In his book, *The Rites of Assent*, Sacvan Bercovitch brilliantly captures the tension between material and spiritual rewards in Mather’s doctrines, ultimately demonstrating the gradual emergence of a spiritually figured material paradigm. In a discussion of Mather’s “harvest” metaphor (which represents both the spiritual and material benefits of moral righteousness), Bercovitch writes:

The harvest, Mather promises, will yield blessings both in this world and in the next. In light of current criticism, it needs to be reemphasized that the promise does not mark a departure from orthodoxy. It was standard fare in the early colonial churches, intrinsic to the rationale for corporate calling and for

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<sup>25</sup> Mather, “Essays to Do Good,” 167.

preparation for salvation. [. . . ] Because he knew that prosperity might follow the labor of the covenanted (in the New Israel above all other lands), he set his sights upon [wealth's] positive implications; and because he could not resolve the tension between dogma and practice, between a flourishing New England as it should be and as it was, he turned as usual to rhetoric in order to dissolve it. With an easy fluency which has shocked later theologians, he elaborated on the metaphor that the righteous are the trustees of God's world, on the parable of the bread thrown upon the waters, and on the prophecies concerning the blessed remnant. In these terms he measured the distance between the saintly rich and those who rise by fraud, and, affirming the correspondence between God's temporal and spiritual aid, he urged parents never to "*Concern themselves more to get the World than Grace for their Children,*" since "if God giveth Grace, Earthly blessings shall never fail."<sup>26</sup>

This is a striking analysis of Mather's doctrine on the subject. While Bercovitch never establishes a causal connection between wealth and salvation in Mather's teaching, he appears to come very close. What is of greatest note here is that, far from suggesting that material wealth and spiritual salvation are mutually exclusive, Mather so arranges his rhetoric as to insist that, ideally, the two exist in a kind of natural relation ordained by God.

As the century progresses, the connection between moral righteousness and physical wealth, and that between material and spiritual prosperity, becomes more

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<sup>26</sup> Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent*, 119-20.



explicit. Cawelti traces this development at some length, noting that, “the self-help popularizers of the mid-nineteenth century resolved the pursuit of final ends and rising in society into one and the same thing.” He goes on to illustrate this point:

Freeman Hunt was critical of those who went to church to advertise their businesses, but he insists that “a truly religious man will give proper attention to business; and a man who conducts a business as he ought, will do it on religious principles.” “The destiny of mankind,” says T. S. Arthur, “is a return to heavenly order and true happiness.” But he goes on to insist that this is to be achieved by rising to respectability and wealth through the discipline of industry, temperance, and frugality. According to Henry Ward Beecher, “the truest happiness implies the development, the education, of the social and the spiritual, as well as the physical elements of our being... it includes benevolence, and takes on the here and the hereafter as well.” Yet two pages later he asserts, “I had almost said that it is the *beau ideal* of happiness for a man to be so busy that he does not know whether he is or is not happy.”<sup>27</sup>

In these selections, which preserve a certain inherited religious/moral imperative, we can already see emerging a new material paradigm. Because this more basely figured materialism cannot outright supplant the moral organization of the nation, the two begin to seamlessly elide together. In these mid and late nineteenth century texts, the American’s religious/moral life is not at odds with his material life; on the contrary, we move into a space where the two are essentially one and the same.

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<sup>27</sup> Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, 53.

Esmond Wright further emphasizes this fact, arguing that Mather's religious doctrines have even been adopted as tenets for the action of the self-made man (although he does not use this exact language). He writes,

As Max Weber and R. H. Tawney have shown, Calvinism and the business ethic are closely linked. Benjamin Franklin derived a career of conspicuous secular success largely from the adages of Cotton Mather. The Yankee emphasis on sobriety and earnestness—even if in twentieth-century New England both gaiety and Catholicism have indeed broken in; the search for wealth as a symbol of success and the promptness to see God and Mammon as twin deities; the mysticism indeed of success itself as at once reward and justification; these also became American characteristics.<sup>28</sup>

By the close of the nineteenth century, then, the self-made man emerges as a figure of spiritually (i.e. morally) informed material pursuit. This figuration is largely responsible for the fluidity with which the American ideal maintains a moral dimension within the (seemingly amoral) pursuit of success.

It is tempting to imagine that as this ideal continues to develop throughout the twentieth century, the materialism with which we are so accustomed to associate the self-made man gradually comes to extinguish his religious/moral character. This is not, however, the case—at least not exactly. While the religious character of the self-made man is more or less supplanted with a more humanistic moral one, the *ideal* of the self-made man is never couched in terms of immoral or amoral materialism. Indeed, the

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<sup>28</sup> Wright, *The American Dream*, 31.

self-made man is “great” precisely because of his lofty moral character (here we must stress again the American quality of this moral character—that it is defined by Franklinian virtues such as Industry, Order, Frugality, and Moderation rather than the more classical virtues of Courage, Pride, or Liberality). If we look to the twentieth century, we have copious representations of this “modern” self-made man—one who takes his moral cues not necessarily from religion, and not with an aim to his eternal salvation, but rather one who takes them from a kind of civic moral ideal, which is in turn ordered towards economic gratification and large-scale political well-being. It is certainly culturally intriguing to consider the manner in which the model of the self-made man comes to promote moral excellence, such as in turn contributes to national development, within an increasingly secularized context.

And yet, while this economically oriented self-made man is the version which tends most often to receive overt national endorsement (owing to its relevant impact on national progression), the ideal of the self-made man is American precisely because it is derived from the twin values of freedom and equality. Grounded in this way, the ideal naturally opens itself up for interpretation. We must recall here that, far from outlining a clearly defined set of motives and goals, the American dream functions as a loose conglomeration of its various interpretations. Ideologically, Americans are conceived as fundamentally free to pursue success, and while the nation naturally favors a success-as-wealth model, the American dream affords a great deal of interpretive liberty. It is for this reason that the self-made man does, in fact, come to be figured outside the parameters of mere economic fulfillment. As a constituent mytheme of the

American dream, the self-made man occupies no definitive position in the American imagination (though, to be sure, certain versions of him predominate). Rather, this ideal tends towards an American sense of the openness and possibility of experience. The Algeran model of the self-made man is one with which we are intimately familiar, but we also recognize other paradigms of American selfhood that operate differently, yet still adhere to the ideal of the American dream. Consider, for instance, the pioneers of the American beat movement—Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, etc. Kerouac's *On The Road* is an explicit literary representation of self-making, though it bears little resemblance to the ideal as outlined above. It is important to note that, while the self-made man persists as a model for the attainment of success (i.e. the American dream), the myth of success in America is diverse enough to sustain a multitude of pursuant selves.

We should emphasize here that the typically figured self-made man is one who adopts a strictly American moral code of conduct in order to gradually ascend the ranks of financial and social security. It is inappropriate, if we are to be exact, to argue that Kerouac or his fellow beats constitute an alternate version of “the self-made man.” The term, after all, has a very strict historical meaning. This is not to say, however, that the beat generation does not endorse an alternate mode of self-making—one derived from the very same national precepts that allow for the traditional self-made man. But so as not to be caught in a cloud of definitional contradictions, it will be important here to maintain the self-made man, as a *term*, according to the conventional understanding that has been discussed.

Nevertheless, if we are to offer up a fully-rounded understanding of the mythemic principles underlying the American dream, it is necessary to entertain alternative models of self-making. After all, the self-made man exists as a paradigmatic pursuer of an *interpretation* (albeit a predominant one) of the American dream. Naturally, differing interpretations of the dream will entail contrary paradigms of pursuit. Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* provides us with a wonderful narrative instance of self-making in America, supplying us with contrary models of self-creative American pursuit. A rather extended narrative, Bellow's novel traces the diverse development of its titular character as he works towards self-creation. But Augie's story is regularly punctuated with that of his brother, who represents the clearer, more traditional mythic rise of the self-made man. By weaving these separate versions together, Bellow sustains a complex consideration of pursuit and success in America, spanning physical, social, and economic milieus that together comprise a national landscape portrait.

Bellow's *Augie March* has been described as a vivid representation of the spirit of 1950s America (though the novel is set in the 1930s), and as such it describes the American dream within a complex cultural context. Keith Michael Opdahl writes that Bellow's "portrayal of Chicago in the thirties caught the spirit of America in the fifties. To J. B. Priestley, 'this is the place, these the people.' To Norman Podhoretz, Augie's adventures reflect 'the intellectual's joyous [new] sense of connection with the common grain of American life.'"<sup>29</sup> The novel becomes relevant to our discussion, beyond its

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<sup>29</sup> Opdahl, *The Novels of Saul Bellow*, 70-71.

overt self-making themes, because of the contrary nature of its 1950s context. Opdahl goes on to describe this contrary context:

Augie's happy acceptance of his time and place expresses the acquiescence of the Eisenhower decade at the same time that it breaks through the narrow world of the alienated hero. The "huge energy" which Bellow matches is at once the force of the physical world and the force of society, particularly one that is exploding in population and technology. It is also—in spite of Bellow's use of an earlier setting—the negative force of what many considered the inertia of the fifties, what Bellow himself calls elsewhere "the reign of the fat gods" which "subverts everything good and exalts lies, and . . . wears a crown of normalcy." By portraying a vitality and color that is antithetical to "normalcy" and yet is the very fabric of our nation, Bellow celebrates America at the same time that he rejects false values.<sup>30</sup>

The historical context of the novel establishes it as an important critical reflection on its dominant themes. For our discussion here, it becomes essential that we analyze a novel that represents contrary modes of self-making within the precise context of this tension between rapid development (which attests to the successful paradigm of the self-made man) and widespread social inertia (which directly counters the notion of the self-made man). The spirit of the fifties, which informs *Augie March*, positions this context nicely.

Moreover, there is something to be said for the novel's Jewish perspective within this context. Augie strikes the reader as more American than Jewish, perhaps, but it is

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 71.

important to note that Bellow means Augie's Jewish identity to inform the novel. John Jacob Clayton outlines for us the relevance of Jewish identity within Bellow's twentieth century American context. He writes,

Bellow's despair is typically Jewish. For while it is true that the Jew has transformed suffering by means of irony and a celebration of endurance, it is also true that Jews are expert sufferers. [...] Indeed, when critics say that the Jewish writer now speaks for all men and that this is the root of his current popularity, they refer primarily to the "voices of powerlessness speaking in situations of humiliation, nakedness, and weakness. . ." This is the Jewish voice "that speaks most directly about the nature of present experience." [Leslie] Fiedler agrees: "It is the Jew who has been best able to recast this old American wisdom (that home is exile, that it is the nature of man to feel himself everywhere alienated) in terms valid for twentieth century Americans, which is to say, for dwellers in cities."<sup>31</sup>

The Jewish experience of isolation and suffering, of "outsider-ness," is interestingly the very thing that characterizes Augie as American, for his resistance to "normal" paths of self-creation sets him up for his optimistic journey of unique and diverse self-creation. Ultimately, *The Adventures of Augie March* occupies an important socio-historical context, within which it develops themes directly pertinent to our current discussion insofar as they are informed by Augie's own Jewish-American identity.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Clayton, *Saul Bellow*, 50-51.

<sup>32</sup> Everett Carter notes the importance of *Augie March*, also: "*The Adventures of Augie March* is Bellow's largest and most impressive defense of the idea of America; it is a contemporary epic, and its hero, a young second-generation Jew in whom lives the indestructible spirit of Franklin, Emerson, Mark Twain, and William James" (Carter, *The*

Bellow sets the tone of his novel right from the start, and it is one that speaks at once to Augie's Americanness as well as to his manner of pursuit and self-creation:

I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, freestyle, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man's character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn't any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles.<sup>33</sup>

As is immediately clear from the opening, the novel's hero will not be molded after the American self-made man model. The self-made man does not "go at things as I have taught myself, freestyle," but rather acts in accordance with inherited standards of behavior, ordered towards pre-established ends. In this sense, the course of the self-made man is more or less fully determined. Augie exists in a different American tradition—that of uninformed but extensive freedom and opportunity. He moves from one experience to the next as his ultimate goals undergo constant revision in light of those experiences, such that he essentially discovers himself along the way. Opdahl notes that

If *Augie March* caught the spirit of the fifties, however, it did so by embodying some of that era's difficulties. Norman Podhoretz goes on to say that in "the willed spontaneity of the writing, the abstractness of the hero . . . we can also

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*Idea of America*, 253). Carter nicely places Augie in a distinctly American heroic tradition, while simultaneously insisting that his action is an important representation of the American spirit.

<sup>33</sup> Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March*, 1.



detect the uncertainty and emotional strain that lurked on the underside of the new optimism.” The conflict between Augie’s announcement that he will write catch as catch can—promising an episodic novel—and his assumption of moral growth—claiming a *Bildungsroman*—suggests that this “uncertainty” exists in the novel’s form.<sup>34</sup>

There is something dark lurking in the background of Augie’s character, and this darkness stems from the anti-Americanness of his pursuit. Opdahl notes that the tension that exists in Augie’s tenuous optimism is reflected in the novel’s structure.<sup>35</sup> Whereas the traditional American self-made man narrative adopts a *bildungsroman* style of self-creation<sup>36</sup>—wherein the protagonist develops according to a specific model of betterment already discussed—Bellow’s novel blends this style with the picaresque, which, leaving itself open to myriad and episodic experience, never implies *growth* on the part of its protagonist. The result is a formal representation of Augie’s character: Bellow attempts to create a character who can develop through his episodic and accidental experiences, because that character actively sees his picaresque experience as his means of self-formation. Whether or not Augie is successful in his act of self-making will be discussed further on.

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<sup>34</sup> Opdahl, *The Novels of Saul Bellow*, 71.

<sup>35</sup> This is not an original insight, but rather one that has been noted and commented on at some length. See Fuchs, *Saul Bellow*, 59-77 and Clayton, *Saul Bellow*, 122-28.

<sup>36</sup> The *bildungsroman* traces the education and development of its hero, usually through a detailed life account. Traditionally, the *bildungsroman* allows its hero more freedom than is available to the self-made man, whose process of development occurs accordingly to a quite rigidly pre-established form. Nevertheless, the process and development of the self-made man still tends to follow a pattern of experiential education, and in this sense participates in the *bildungsroman*.

But while Augie adopts this open, vague, indirect, and non-committal pursuit of experience, his brother Simon takes a different route—one not propelled by self-discovery, but by self-formation. Simon decides what he wants out of life and then goes about acquiring it in an intensely calculated way. In him, we see the strength of dedication that results in grand success, and then we see the all-too-overlooked consequence of such success. I will examine the character of Simon first, as his action is far simpler and makes up the novel's most substantial counterpoint for its primary action.

Simon March bears the signs of his potential greatness in nearly every aspect of his comportment—he has an air of authority that those around him recognize instinctively. We are told that he has a “governor’s clear-eyed gaze,” and “a lifted look of unforgiving, cosmological captaincy... where honesty had the strength of a prejudice, and foresight appeared as the noble cramp of impersonal worry in the forehead.”<sup>37</sup> Even his passivity causes him to stand out in a crowd, such that every aspect of his character is infused with a kind of over-active, compelling American authority. He is exactly the kind of character that one imagines running a major business or holding a high political position, because he demands respectability. This shaping of his character prepares the reader for the man that Simon becomes—we expect lavish wealth to come to Simon (though his origins are as poorly obscure as Augie’s) because he perfectly personifies that spirit of American honor which cannot but be accompanied with the material trappings of success. And so, even in his youth Augie witnesses his brother

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<sup>37</sup> Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March*, 118.

cultivating himself according to these lofty American ideals, though Augie himself does not yet understand Simon's efforts. Augie describes this process of cultivation, which is wholly foreign to the dingy poverty with which he (and Simon, at this point) is familiar:

And now he [Simon] was on soggy ground and forced to cut down the speed he had been making toward the mark he secretly aimed at. I didn't know at the time which mark or exactly understand why there needed to be a mark; it was over my head. But he was getting in, all the time, a big variety of information and arts, like dancing, conversation with women, courtship, gift-giving, romantic letter-writing, the ins and outs of restaurants and night clubs, dance halls, the knotting of four-in-hands and bow ties, what was correct and incorrect in tucking a handkerchief in the breast pocket, how to choose clothes, how to take care of himself in a tough crowd. Or in a respectable household... I name these things, negligible to many people, because we were totally unfamiliar with them. I watched him study the skill of how to put on a hat, smoke a cigarette, fold a pair of gloves and put them in an inner pocket, and I admired and wondered where it came from, and learned some of it myself. But I never got the sense of luxury he had in doing it.<sup>38</sup>

Not yet having wealth at his disposal, Simon sets about learning the trappings, the basic behavioral strategies and customs, that will be invaluable to him when he does come into money (Simon's eventual financial success is always anticipated in the novel because of the sheer intensity of his character). This is important, for the self-made man

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 119.

is no bumbling millionaire. Mythically, or idealistically, the self-made man is the paragon of American excellence. He is wealthy and powerful, virtuous (“where honor had the strength of a prejudice”), and yet completely respectable—every detail of his life pays ornate tribute to the whole symbol of his existence. Simon does not mean to attain wealth merely; he means, ultimately, to succeed in the American way.

We are given accounts of several menial jobs that Simon holds in his youth, at which he performs exceedingly well. These positions are not, however, enough to secure him a firm financial position. Here he somewhat undercuts the traditional model of the self-made man, who builds his empire wholly from the ground up. Simon cultivates respectability so that he can marry Charlotte Magnus, a wealthy, even if not particularly attractive, girl. Using her money, Simon is then able to establish himself in ever-increasing financial stability. While marrying up certainly goes against the understood ethic of the self-made man, it does not appear to do so for Simon, for he is no mere scrounger. Rather, he views his marriage as just one of many financial steps—a way to get a solid start. Indeed, Simon himself reflects on his status as “self-made,” well after he is established in his married life: “Oh, but you’re not a Henry Ford,” Augie tells him; “After all, you married a rich girl.” Simon replies, “The question is... what you have to suffer to get money, how much effort there is in it. Not that you start with a nickel, like the Alger story... and run it into a fortune. But if you get a stake, what you do with it, whether you plunge or not.”<sup>39</sup> Simon views himself as self-made, even though his arc is not identical to that of a Ragged Dick, for he has exerted genuine

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 271.

effort to get to where he is, and he maintains his industrious disposition such that his wealth steadily increases instead of simply being used up. Going on to work in the Magnus family's coal business, Simon finally presents a figure whose wealth, power, and grandiose presentation, given where he began and what all it took for his rise, speak directly to the ideal of the self-made man.

Augie's own career is dramatically different from his brother's, though Simon does attempt to set Augie on the same path (presenting an opportunity for marriage to his sister-in-law, through which Augie might carve out a life identical to Simon's). Augie's progress in the novel follows no strict guide—he is in pursuit of no definitive 'mark' as Simon was. Instead, Augie is characterized by a certain romantic openness to experience, such that he never crafts a firm plan for his life, but instead steadily revises his aspirations from one moment to the next.<sup>40</sup> This is certainly not for lack of opportunity. Indeed, Augie frequently finds himself in a position from which he might benefit, and through which he might enter on a more traditional track of socio-economic ascension. There is something in Augie, though, that resists such a lifestyle. Augie's narrative progression lends him a certain insight, for while he never formally

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<sup>40</sup> Robert R. Dutton provides a nice abbreviated catalogue of Augie's myriad pursuits, which helps to characterize the extremity of Augie's diverse experiences and, by implication, his lack of commitments:

[Augie] works as a stock boy in a department store, sells trivia in a railway station, steals and sells textbooks, begins a university education, becomes a coal salesman, enters the fringes of the underworld, helps to manage a professional fighter, takes care of dogs for the socially elite, falls in love twice, becomes a union organizer, trains an eagle to catch giant lizards in Mexico, skirts the edges of joining Trotsky's cause, joins the Merchant Marine; and he finally marries and settles in Paris, where he is last seen participating in some form of shady business. (Dutton, *Saul Bellow*, 42)

belongs within an upper social echelon, there are periods in his life where he has access to these circles—and not only through his brother’s influence. When he spends time with the wealthy Renlings (who own and operate a successful sporting goods store), they offer to legally adopt Augie and pay for his college education. We expect such an offer to hold Augie’s interest, for his tendencies at that time (indeed, throughout the novel) are towards formal education. But Augie resists this offer, causing him to break with the Renlings, because he is unwilling to enter into such a world where his free individuality might be subsumed into a larger and normative cultural context. Essentially, his rejection of the Renlings amounts to a rejection of the American ideal. About Mrs. Renling and her offer of adoption, Augie muses:

However, I was in a state of removal from all her intentions for me. Why should I turn into one of these people who didn’t know who they themselves were? And the unvarnished truth is that it wasn’t a fate good enough for me [...] But all the same I was not going to be built into Mrs. Renling’s world, to consolidate what she affirmed she was. And it isn’t only she but a class of people who trust they will be justified, that their thoughts will be as substantial as the seven hills to build on, and by spreading their power they will have an eternal city for vindication on the day when their founders have gone down, bricks and planks, whose thoughts were not real and who built on soft swamp. What this means is not a single Tower of Babel plotted in common, but hundreds of thousands of separate beginnings, the length and breadth of America. Energetic people who

build against pains and uncertainties, as weaker ones merely hope against them.<sup>41</sup>

Augie's reflections here amount to a rejection of a certain reading of the American dream, and it is precisely in this that he is set apart from figures such as his brother, who wholly endorse such a reading.

The American dream, as understood by such as Simon or the Renlings, is about the attainment of security (socially, economically, politically). It is about carefully selecting what one wants to become, and then gruelingly building up a kind of fortress around that personal ideal, so as to be safe from dissolution. By holding oneself intact in this way, one can assign positive value to their life as an ongoing project. Clayton discusses the manner in which every character in the novel, to some degree or another, attempts to stamp their individuality on the world, in effect recreating the world in their own image.<sup>42</sup> This is the exact action described by the novel's wealth-driven characters—they are attempting to live the American dream, so as to preserve the idea that it exists. Ultimately, this is the very purpose that the self-made man serves: through enacting the drama of the American dream, he secures for himself its promises; the dream becomes reality through individual, purposeful action (so long as that action is successful).

Augie's objection to this ideal rests in his unwillingness to be fully pinned down, and this is likely the reason behind his inability to really commit to any durable career or lifestyle. It is a typical romantic quandary—having all opportunities before him,

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<sup>41</sup> Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March*, 164.

<sup>42</sup> See Clayton, *Saul Bellow*, 85-86.

Augie cannot choose any path that might close off the others. And while the structure of America is built on these ideals that do so easily lend themselves to romantic impulse, the national imagination tends not to endorse Augie's kind of indecision. Augie is an American dreamer—no doubt—but he never finds that space where he might begin realizing his dream. Indeed, he never settles on any given dream long enough to genuinely pursue it.

Augie's overt resistance to the American ideal persists throughout the novel, such that he regularly challenges the precepts that define American virtue and success. When a fellow of his comments, regarding an upcoming university test, that "Either this stuff comes easy or it doesn't come at all," Augie is set off on a reflective path that concludes with a complete subversion of the whole ethic of the self-made man. Whereas Simon had stressed the importance of effort, above all, Augie contemplates a contrary model:

Of course! Easily or not at all. People were mad to be knocking themselves out over difficulties because they thought difficulty was a sign of the right thing. So I decided to try this out and, to begin with, to experiment with book stealing. [...] I didn't mean to settle down to a career of stealing even if it were to come easy, but only to give myself a start at something better.<sup>43</sup>

This is quite an interesting passage, for while it sets Augie up as, really, an anti-self-made man, it echoes a sentiment that we find in Simon (our preeminent self-made man). Two things are strikingly anti-self-made in Augie's plan: his decision to steal (which

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 209.



directly transgresses the moral ideal on which the self-made man is built) and his conclusion that ease, and not difficulty, is the real key to success. And yet, Augie says he does not intend to settle down to a life of thievery (remember here that Augie is incapable of settling down to *any* lifestyle), but only to “give myself a start at something better” (he says he wants to raise just enough money to pay his university tuition fee). There is a note of ease in Simon’s beginning, though it involves nothing so base as theft, but Simon does not see it as such. Hence he insists that effort constitutes the value of one’s life, and he works hard to increase the benefits he received from an easy marriage (though one, to be sure, that required tremendous effort in social cultivation). What Simon and Augie have in common is their desire to find some means of getting an easy start; but they differ greatly both in the easy start they select (Simon’s being an entrance into respectability and Augie’s being the exact opposite) and in the theoretical ground underlying their pursuits.

Augie’s action takes him across the American border to Mexico, and later overseas to France—a natural progression given his inability to become American. But towards the finish of the novel Augie vocalizes a kind of regressive American dream—one which fits as the culmination of his rising romantic tendencies. He tells a friend,

I aim to get myself a piece of property and settle down on it. Right here in Illinois would suit me fine, though I wouldn’t object to Indiana or Wisconsin. Don’t worry, I’m not thinking about becoming a farmer, though I might do a little farming, but what I’d like most is to get married and set up a kind of home and teach school. I’ll marry—of course my wife would have to agree with me

about this—and then I'd get my mother out of the blind-home and my brother George up from the South. I think Simon might give me some dough to get a start. Oh, I don't expect to set up the Happy Isles. I don't consider myself any Prospero. I haven't got the build. I have no daughter. I never was a king, for instance. No, no, I'm not looking for any Pindar Hyperborean dwelling with the gods in ease a tearless life, never aging—<sup>44</sup>

Despite what Augie says, his idyllic dream does reek of Prosperan romanticism. It is not a goal he ever reaches (nor one that he takes any real steps towards). But it is a version of the American dream, in that Lippmann-esque sense of hope in a better past. Clayton argues that Augie's ongoing pursuit throughout the novel "is an orphan's quest for a personal Eden,"<sup>45</sup> and we can certainly read this statement from Augie as an Edenic longing. What it notably lacks is the spirit of American materialism, as this dream opposes the ideal that locates value in a person's material trappings. Indeed, Augie's assessment of the vileness of materialism is one of his most pointed commentaries in the novel, and goes a long way in establishing an ideal that rejects the standard definition of success in America. He reflects,

But in this modern power of luxury, with its battalions of service workers and engineers, it's the things themselves, the products that are distinguished, and the individual man isn't nearly equal to their great sum. Finally they are what becomes great—the multitude of baths with never-failing hot water, the enormous air-conditioning units and the elaborate machinery. No opposing

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 496.

<sup>45</sup> Clayton, *Saul Bellow*, 87.

greatness is allowed, and the disturbing person is the one who won't serve by using or denies by not wishing to enjoy.<sup>46</sup>

Augie's assessment is a keen one in that it draws attention to the material paradigm that prevalent understandings of the American dream have generated. If success is measured in terms of prosperity, then it is the things one owns that become of value. This is quite natural, for material possessions act as a concrete attestation of what a person has attained—a physical manifestation of the more abstract goal of reaching one's dream. Established in this way, mainstream versions of the American dream quickly follow suit, endorsing less the pursuit of one's abstract dreams in favor of the far more concrete pursuit of material possessions, which hold imagined value as status symbols and become the real ground of one's personal worth.

And so the novel presents two different sides of self-making, one ordered to the traditional ideal of success as wealth through industry, and the other a sort of unrealized, dreamy hope in personal value wholly independent of material fortune. Because Augie does not reach his bucolic retreat, the novel implicitly comments on the unfeasibility of his ideal—at least within a twentieth century American context.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, many critics have simply called Augie an outright failure, finding no hint of reality in his dreamy ideal (nor any genuine purpose to fulfill it), and finding that, ultimately, Augie fails to attain self-knowledge. If we recall the formal discrepancy

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<sup>46</sup> Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March*, 259.

<sup>47</sup> Dutton insists that Augie is a failure, despite his many redeeming qualities, because he is ultimately too passive; he lacks the "directness" that belongs to the American pursuit and that is the very means of attaining goals (i.e. success). Dutton, *Saul Bellow*, 48-52.

between the picaresque and the *bildungsroman* that organizes the novel, we can think of Augie's development in these terms. Daniel Fuchs writes that "For better or worse, Bellow's narrative strategy is to have Augie necessarily fall short of the self-knowledge that the *Bildungsroman* hero has—he is left with the limited perception of the picaro."<sup>48</sup> Augie, then, represents a version of American self-making, but he is ultimately something of a failure (he is, though, an *American* failure). And yet the novel does not exactly endorse Simon's progressive rise, either. Indeed, Augie becomes disillusioned with Simon's lifestyle when he witnesses the elaborate operations of his brother's love affair, as well as the isolating effect of Simon's robust authority. Having overreached his peers, Simon attains something of an ivory tower (as represented by his lavish penthouse, for instance), in which he is essentially alone in the lap of luxury, totally cut off from real, personal relations. But in this position Simon becomes a point of reference for those around him—he is the ideal after which they all strive.

*The Adventures of Augie March*, then, offers no ideal path to happy success, but we do not expect this from works of literature. Rather, what the novel does is outline the potential conclusions of its characters' pursuits without casting any definitive judgment on those conclusions. Simon is successful—according to this American paradigm—whatever else he may be. And Augie, having never really set out to attain anything concrete, ends with nothing concrete. Both men are self-made, after different fashions and according to distinct standards of success, and both find that their respective realities do not measure up to the idealistic dreams to which they had aspired. But this

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<sup>48</sup> Fuchs, *Saul Bellow*, 61.

disassociation is built into nearly every version of the American dream, and indeed constitutes the primary tension that the myth exists to resolve. The self-made man, and the act of self-making, are the underlying means by which that mythic dream can be realistically pursued—a means of attempting to bridge the gap between fantasy and realistic possibility. However we read the careers of Simon and Augie, one thing is certain: that they embody paradigms of pursuit in America. As such, they demonstrate the realistic viability of the American dream insofar as it can be concretely imagined, and insofar as it can (or cannot) be abstractly pursued. There is, here, no value-based assessment of the self-made man ideal or of the American dream; instead, we have a representative fictionalization of models of self-creation, which work to enhance our understanding of the American dream in practical action—which essentially amounts to a demonstration of a standard (the self-made man and the act of self-creation) that is crucial to the mythic existence of the American dream.

The ideal of the self-made man is thus a central underlying principle according to which the myth of the American dream functions. Without him, the whole dream ideal remains abstract, for it is the self-made man—grounded in utmost practicality—who represents for the general public a very concrete regimen according to which material rise is a realistic possibility and no mere dream. This is why literary works in America may strive to present self-made characters in order to understand the process and consequences of their rising, but why those literary characters do not become the ground on which hinges the viability of the myth. We talk about Algeran models of self-creation, certainly, but always with heavy recourse to “real” historical instances of

the self-made man. We cherish Benjamin Franklin, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, all the way up to Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg, because these *actual* Americans are the most substantial evidence of the literal reality of the American dream myth. Now, in fact, these figures hold no more place in the American imagination than the fictional characters that a culture adopts (because, for the average American, these figures have an almost fictional, if not mythical, kind of existence). But the fact that we conceive of them as historically successful implicitly lends credence to the physical reality of the American dream. At any rate, Americans would be loath to accept fictionalized stories of success that have no realistic referent. The fact that we can point to historical examples of ascent in America— ascent according to the paradigm of the self-made man—is what finally justifies the fictionalization of the self-made man and the mythic ideal of the American dream towards which he labors.

**Chapter Three**  
**Mythic World:**  
**The American Frontier as Spatial Metaphor for Abundance**

*Always it has been the frontier which has allured many of our boldest souls. And always just back of the frontier, advancing, receding, crossing it this way and that, succeeding and failing, hoping and despairing – but steadily advancing in the net result – has come that portion of the population which builds homes and lives in them, and which is not content with a blanket for a bed and the sky for a roof above. . . . The frontier has been the lasting and ineradicable influence for the good of the United States. It was there we showed our fighting edge, our unconquerable resolution, our undying faith. There, for a time at least, we were Americans. We had our frontier. We shall do ill indeed if we forget and abandon its strong lessons, its great hopes, its splendid human dreams.*

– Emerson Hugh<sup>1</sup>

Among the myriad ways we might define “America” stands what is perhaps the most obvious – that it consists in the physical, geographical space that it has claimed for itself to date. Anyone wishing to know “where” America lies can simply turn to a Rand McNally map or run a quick search on Google Earth. Granted, a purely geographic understanding of the American nation is not a comprehensive one, but the spatiality of a nation is nevertheless an integral component of that nation’s existence. Whatever ideological and mythological tenets of the nation are not contained in the physical landscape it occupies, those tenets *are* in some part derived from the culture’s interactive experience with the terrain, which is to say that the physicality of the nation is ultimately integral to the abstract idealization of it. Indeed, the very terms used to describe early America directly imply a larger national idealization, as with “the New

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in Gus Emerson, *The New Frontier*, 5.

World," "the Golden Land," "Nature's Nation," or "the Virgin Land," all which point to an optimism and inherent faith in the past, present, and future greatness of America.

Conceptions of physical landscape are often metaphorical devices through which a national mission is articulated. The American dream, for all its abstraction, carries also a very practical referent—it is evidenced by real people executing real actions upon a real terrain. The subjective cultural conceptions of this physical terrain act at once towards the formation of American cultural ideology, and in particular function directly in the construction of the American dream mythology. As we have seen, the American dream requires the demonstration of realistic attainability in order to function viably within the national consciousness. What better way to accomplish this, we might reflect, than to imbue the physical landscape of America with meaning that is directly applicable to the greater national design outlined by the American dream, such that the operation of the dream-myth can be figured as naturally derived from the very space it occupies?

The American dream is not the result of a global understanding of success and opportunity. It is a unique national mythology, created in part as a natural derivative of early Americans' understanding of the land they inhabit. Territorial characterizations do not merely reflect a national spirit that informs them; they work to engender the larger national spirit itself. Before the forms and institutions of American national government are conceived and executed, the physical landscape has already taken on an imaginative existence, imparted by the unique perceptions of its early observers. Consider, for instance, Columbus' description of Hispaniola in his 1493



letter of Barcelona, after his first voyage. As a depiction of the New World, this is an important characterization of “American” space:

Hispaniola is a wonder. The mountains and hills, the plains and meadow lands are both fertile and beautiful. They are most suitable for planting crops and for raising cattle of all kinds, and there are good sites for building towns and villages. The harbours are incredibly fine and there are many great rivers with broad channels and the majority contain gold. The trees, fruits and plants are very different from those of Cuba. In Hispaniola there are many spices and large mines of gold and other metals...<sup>2</sup>

What is striking about this passage is its insistence on colonizable space in America. Columbus here emphasizes the fertility of the land and the vast availability of gold and precious resources. Conceived as a new, plentiful, and virgin world, America – the real, geographical space – seems already to physically embody the idea of limitless opportunity.

J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur develops this sense of American opportunity embedded in the landscape in his well-known *Letters from an American Farmer*. His discussion focuses on the discrepancy between American and European experience, and he paints a picture of the European’s sensations upon first occupying this new American space. He writes,

He [the European] is arrived on a new continent; a modern society offers itself to his contemplation, different from what he had hitherto seen. It is not composed,

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<sup>2</sup> Columbus, *The Four Voyages* (ed. Cohen), 117.

as in Europe, of great lords who possess everything, and of a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great refinements of luxury. The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Here Crèvecoeur demonstrates the social differences between America and Europe, which exist because of the unique fact of American rural life. The landscape is the immediate cause of this American character and society, according to Crèvecoeur, because the landscape enables the American agrarian lifestyle.<sup>4</sup> Hence, as Crèvecoeur recounts later, the European on American shores will be immediately swept up in the sense of teeming possibility apparent everywhere in the landscape:

An European, when he first arrives, seems limited in his intentions, as well as in his views; but he very suddenly alters his scale; two hundred miles formerly appeared a very great distance, it is now but a trifle; he no sooner breathes our air than he forms schemes, and embarks in designs he never would have thought of in his own country. There the plenitude of society confines many useful ideas, and often extinguishes the most laudable schemes which here ripen into maturity. Thus Europeans become Americans.<sup>5</sup>

Here the American continent has certain inherent American features, such that occupying American space already engenders an American spirit. In this sense, it

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<sup>3</sup> Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* offers a nice fictional representation of this idealized agrarian American life (for the immigrant), often highlighting that life's hardships.

<sup>5</sup> Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 55-56.

appears that the American spirit really is derived from landscape impressions, rather than vice versa.

The American dream is not the sort of ideal that can be easily adopted by any cultural consciousness; it somehow *belongs* to America, as if naturally, and this is due in part to the associations Americans have had with the landscape surrounding them. America—the idealistic national enterprise—is largely shaped out of its early inhabitants’ relationship to and ongoing interaction with the physical space onto which that enterprise comes to be inscribed. As Anne Mackin nicely summarizes,

If we borrow the cultural anthropologist’s lens to examine the historic relationship of European Americans with their land, we find many complexities. Ours is a transplanted culture—an Old World culture planted in a new, uncrowded world of seemingly limitless fertile land. But the beaching of the first European shallop on American shores initiated an alchemy of nature and culture that produced a uniquely American society. With the motherland a two- or three-month sea voyage away, and with enough land and other resources to spread out and start anew almost continually, attitudes toward all traditions—including social conformity, civic responsibilities, individual freedoms, class and wealth, and the role of community—began an organic transformation.<sup>6</sup>

Insofar as this landscape (or rather, early Americans’ experience of it) is undergoing constant revision and expansion in the nation’s early years, the execution of the

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<sup>6</sup> Mackin, *Americans and Their Land*, 1.

American project (and, consequently, the genesis of the myth of the American dream) is accordingly organic.

What this means is that the spatial metaphor through which we read the American landscape (and which is the pivotal incarnation of the dominant landscape myth) grows out of a developing sense of the greater American myth even insofar as it contributes to the underlying structure of that myth. In this organic relationship, the land becomes a source of mythology because it is in the process of being mythologized. Consider Myra Jehlen's characterization of the American land as *immanent transcendence* – a description that insists on this kind of organic evolution:

I want to stress the land, the continent's physical reality, or more basically, its physicality. For it is precisely because the concept of America is rooted in the physical finite that it can be infinitely metaphysical. The concept of the New World could not come to everyday life as a pure abstraction; it had to interpret some actual territory, a real place. Lately, in order to refute the identification of the United States with the whole continent, historical revisionists have worked to separate the idea and myth of America from its material reality. The dichotomy that is thus established very usefully counters a prior tendency among even historians and critics to assume that "America" is a reality as such, so that we have only to examine its historical implementation. But through such demystifications, the connection of mystique to reality can be lost to analysis, and it is particularly this connection that interests me. For the myth of America

has been *both* ideal and material (idealist and materialist): if it is transcendent, it is *immanently* transcendent.<sup>7</sup>

Jehlen makes an important comment here: however important it is to the study of history to separate the American idea from the American material reality, it is likewise important to the cultural theorist to avoid such a separation. We cannot understand the American landscape *mythically* if we fail to see the significance of its metaphorical characterization as mythic expression—that is, if we fail to see the landscape as both material and ideal: as immanent transcendence.<sup>8</sup> What concerns us in this study is the manner in which America’s spatial existence has been figured mythically; we are seeking the dominant spatial metaphor according to which American mythic idealism has been articulated.

The founding and development of America has often been historically figured through the landscape metaphor of the “frontier,” and hence the complex fact of westward expansion has traditionally taken on great significance as an embodiment of national progression. We need only recall here the thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 paper, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” which quite simply states its revolutionary thesis right up front: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain

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<sup>7</sup> Jehlen, *American Incarnation*, 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere in her book Jehlen writes that “the American teleology cites the will of heaven and the human spirit, but it rests its case on the integrity of the continent.” This simple statement nicely summarizes the importance of the American landscape as immanent transcendence. *Ibid.*, 5.

American development.”<sup>9</sup> To be sure, Turner has been thoroughly criticized for the extremity of this claim—which essentially asserts that “the American experience” can be reduced entirely to the fact of westward expansion—as well as for the larger implications of his paper. Nevertheless, Turner’s thesis was a novel theoretical innovation for its time, and effectively identified a spatially figured history by which the ever-elusive “American character” could be re-imagined in terms of some concrete physical referent. Turner’s thesis essentially suggested the theoretical parameters for delineating a properly mythic universe—a truly essential move if the American dream myth were ever to become an enduring national paradigm.

Let us first, then, place Turner’s thesis in a more current critical context so that we can assess its viability within our study. Shortly after Turner introduced his revolutionary thesis—one which essentially delineated new terms for the historical study of America as “unique”—his idea was adopted by historians for the establishment of “frontier studies.” As Gregory Nobles details this historical moment, “the freshness of the frontier provided an upbeat, positive perspective on the past that soon attracted a loyal following among historians,” and “By the time of his death in 1932, the ‘Turner School’ of historians had secured a prominent place in the profession, and an able body of followers helped maintain the Turnerian legacy throughout the first half of the twentieth century.”<sup>10</sup> Despite the early impact of Turner’s frontier thesis, however, his claims come under sharp criticism by mid-century with the result that the Turner thesis now appears greatly deflated to contemporary critics.

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<sup>9</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 1.

<sup>10</sup> Nobles, *American Frontiers*, 8.

The major critique of Turner's frontier thesis is one of its limited vision: that Turner avows the existence of a frontier space as the single most important factor in the formation of American identity. Nobles writes that "Other factors—urbanization, immigration, and industrialization, to name the most significant—were equally important, if not more so."<sup>11</sup> This is certainly true, and we must be careful to remember it. We cannot, as Turner does, reduce American experience to frontier mythology. Rather, we would benefit from considering the frontier space as a relevant and important *version* of the mythic spatial metaphor of American terrain. Nobles continues his overview of Turner criticism by highlighting some of the other important facts of American experience that lie outside the purview of Turner's frontier. He writes,

Other historians of Turner's generation pointed out that westward migration was not the only significant form of human movement in the United States in the nineteenth century: continued waves of immigrants from Europe and other parts of the world made a major contribution not just to the nation's population but to its very character. Turner's emphasis on American exceptionalism overlooked or obscured the continuing significance of international influence on American culture. Moreover, scholars also noted that migration within the United States did not always move in one direction, toward open land in the West: people moved from farm to city and, in many cases, from west to east. Thus, the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 9.

factories of Eastern cities were as much a part of the American experience as the farms of the Western frontier.<sup>12</sup>

Today, historians recognize the revolutionary importance of Turner's thesis while simultaneously recognizing its severe limitations. Despite those limitations, though, Turner's thesis has directly contributed to the existence of frontier studies in the early to mid twentieth century (even if the frontier is not regularly studied today). As we pursue our own line of inquiry, we would do well to preserve the fact of the frontier as a representative spatial metaphor of the American dream. This does not imply that there are no other spatial metaphors according to which the landscape of the American dream has been written; it does recognize that, as a version of mythic landscape articulation, the frontier is a thorough representation of the ideal of American terrain. As such, we will discuss it as a relevant instance of America's mythic articulation of itself through the landscape.

Turner's American frontier is significant for its consistent recession, which is to say that, however far westward one travelled, there was always a new frontier on the western horizon.<sup>13</sup> This seemingly unending potential for territorial extension, he

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory Nobles identifies this feature of the frontier – its continued recession – as the fundamental difference between American and European conceptions of a "frontier." He writes,

In Europe, the term "frontier" referred to the border zone between two nations. In North America, Turner explained, the frontier was not a fixed boundary but a moving line, "the outer edge of the wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization." More to the point, there was no single line, but a succession of frontiers that followed upon each other [. . .] The frontier was not simply a place; it was a recurring process that moved (or, to use Turner's more energetic terms,



argues, figured immensely in the formation of American identity. The unique dynamic of constant resettlement worked to supply the nation with the ground for its ideological tenets.<sup>14</sup> Turner writes, “American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.”<sup>15</sup> We can clearly hear in Turner’s statement the rhetoric of the American dream: “rebirth,” “fluidity,” “expansion,” “opportunity,” and “simplicity” – these are the familiar buzzwords of American dream theory. And while Turner’s discussion has no direct recourse to the American dream, insofar as he is attempting to locate a ground for national character his historical assessment has more than a cursory relevance to our discussion here. Indeed, according to Turner’s thesis, America actually becomes more American with each successive move westward – it is in relation to the vast frontier that

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“leaped” or “skipped”) across the continent in stages, leaving newly born societies to develop in its wake. (Nobles, *American Frontiers*, 6-7)

<sup>14</sup> Esmond Wright attempts a characterization of the American values engendered on the American frontier. He writes that Turner

first gave expression to the view that it was the moving belt of human population pushing ever-westwards that was the unique feature in the story; and that to this were due many of the characteristics of American society. As safety valve for urban tensions and discontents, it created a resourceful, independent and egalitarian society, with freedom of opportunity and free land available to every man who had the energy, courage and will to work it; it called for initiative, ingenuity and self-reliance; it was hostile to remote authority because it was remote and because it was authority; it was activist, un-intellectual, and strongly optimistic. (Wright, *The American Dream*, 8)

Again, we see stressed here the importance of available land and opportunity for industrious workers. Wright makes a nice characterization of the spirit of the Adamic hero/self-made man in the context of physical opportunity, such that the American mythic hero does seem to emerge from this unique mythic context.

<sup>15</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 2-3.

an entire political, social, and, yes, *mythological*, identity is formed. This is largely owing to the direct influence of western mobilization on a national sense of independence. As Turner describes, “At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American. [. . .] Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines.”<sup>16</sup> Turner spends the bulk of his paper detailing some of the predominant, specific effects of westward migration in America in order to demonstrate this claim. He argues that westward migration “promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people,” that it “decreased our dependence on England,” that it conditioned the “legislation which most developed the powers of the national government,” and that, most importantly, its production of individualism worked to promote the national standard of democracy.<sup>17</sup> Certainly Turner is right to stress a connection between these historical conditions. If we are to critique him, we ought not disregard his thesis outright. Clearly the frontier is not the sole factor in the formation of American national identity – but neither is it a negligible one. As we trace the spatial metaphor according to which the myth of the American dream is enacted, we would do well to recognize the importance of Turner’s contribution.

We ought, however, to introduce a slight caveat to the above discussion, which may emphasize too much a unique position for America. America’s history largely revolves around a receding frontier, and the existence and population of this frontier

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 22, 23, 24, 30.

space contributes in no small part to the formation of American identity. But we must be reluctant to call America *unique* in this respect. Gus Emerson, in his book *The New Frontier*, adopts Turner's thesis in an effort to demonstrate the specific American traits that are born out of frontier life. While he argues that the frontier terrain is indeed formative of American identity, he also stresses that America is in no way different from other countries in having a frontier to conquer. This is an important point to make if we seek some singular quality in the American frontier. Emerson writes,

[T]he American spirit is not to be distinguished from any other national spirit to any great extent by reason of the *exclusive* possession of any particular qualities. Other nations have had frontiers. National character has in other instances been influenced by restless and vigorous pioneers. But no state or nation, no people, has been, to the same extent, influenced by the elements in human character growing out of the continuous opening up of new country, the repeated seeking out of new homes by the people, the constantly refreshed and perpetuated spirit of reliance upon self as the only stable and permanent element in a constantly shifting environment.<sup>18</sup>

Emerson's point here is that the frontier is not unique to America, but the individual who is born from American frontier life *is* unique to America. This argument essentially allows Emerson to straddle the fence on the question of American singularity. All nations develop along similar lines, but the geographical, political, and social peculiarities of those nations lead to the generation of diverse national spirits.

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<sup>18</sup> Gus Emerson, *The New Frontier*, 15.

The quality of *American* pioneer life, therefore, defines the unique status of American culture.

The pivotal signification of the American frontier—at least for our discussion of the American dream—is that of opportunity. The frontier as a physical embodiment of the ideal of opportunity, in fact, is the most vital and significant meaning that Turner himself attaches to it. Reaching the conclusion of his paper, he writes, “Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them.”<sup>19</sup> The central structuring ideal of the American dream is that of opportunity—that the possibility for social and economic advancement not only exists in inexhaustible abundance, but that it is an avenue open to all who choose to pursue it. This is why, despite its limitations, the frontier metaphor serves our purposes so well: it is one of many articulations of the endless *opportunity* inherent in the American landscape. Because the frontier metaphor emphasizes a constantly receding physical boundary, it insists on *limitless* abundance (materially figured), which amounts to real, inexhaustible opportunity. It should now be clear that the frontier—this imaginative perception of American space—functions as an important version of this central mythological tenet.

And indeed, we find in the frontier an underlying structural tension, according to which we can locate its mythemic relevance to our American dream discussion. This

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<sup>19</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 37.

tension is derived from the reality of America's physical expansion—that it eventually reaches a point, as Turner concludes, where the seemingly endless frontier is exhausted. As Perry Miller describes in his book *Nature's Nation*, "in America Nature is going down in swift and inexorable defeat. She is being defaced, conquered—actually ravished."<sup>20</sup> The limitless frontier that characterized American experience through the nineteenth century is, by the onset of the twentieth century, being quickly "used up."<sup>21</sup> We see this sentiment expressed in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers*, in a debate over the expendability of resources. Judge Marmaduke Temple (the novel's protagonist) remarks upon the wasting of wood for hearth fires: "Really, it behoves the owner of woods so extensive as mine, to be cautious what example he sets to his people, who are already felling the forests, as it no end could be found to their reassures, nor any limits to their extent. If we go on in this way, twenty years hence we shall want fuel." Richard answers the Judge's comment, saying, "why, you might as well predict, that the fish will die, for want of water in the lake, because I intend, when the frost gets out of the ground, to lead one or two of the springs, through logs, into the village."<sup>22</sup> While this discussion, subsequently interrupted in the novel, offers no resolution to the question of resource exhaustion, it presents the question in a summary way,

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<sup>20</sup> Miller, *Nature's Nation*, 198.

<sup>21</sup> This is the important theme of Louise Erdrich's fiction. Erdrich's fiction represents the disenfranchisement of the Native American throughout the twentieth century, and so we see the question of exhausted expansion refocused as a problem for those being conquered, rather than for those who have nothing left to conquer. See *Love Medicine* for a more comprehensive representation of this idea, or *Bingo Palace* for a more specific reflection on contemporary Native American life in the context of the increasing devastation of nature.

<sup>22</sup> Cooper, *The Pioneers*, 94-95.

highlighting the tension between apparently endless resources and the realistic possibility of their exhaustion over the course of multiple generations. It makes clear that the ideal/real tension that inheres in nineteenth-century conceptions of frontier space is a cause for immediate concern.

The impending exhaustion of frontier space represents a kind of limit to American abundance, and this is clearly a threat to the American dream, which demands a space of endless resources to populate its opportunistic world. Within the nineteenth century, this tension between the reality and the ideal of American abundance becomes figured through an understanding of the interactive relationship between 'nature' and 'civilization.' Without a western frontier to move towards, nature is not perennially reborn in American experience; instead, America becomes increasingly civilized. The tension arises, within this historical moment, of mediating the contrary supposed virtues that belong separately to nature and civilization, for the nineteenth-century imagination sees a dynamic tension between nature and civilization that arises in the liminal space of the frontier and that sustains a complex American identity—such that the frontier space ultimately describes *both* the literal field of opportunity in America *as well as* the sustenance of American identity through this ongoing development.<sup>23</sup> Miller succinctly outlines this paradox, claiming that Thoreau,

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<sup>23</sup> Nobles' book, *American Frontiers*, sets out to reimagine Turner's frontier in a more generally applicable context. Because late twentieth-century cultural historians have largely debunked the Turnerian hypothesis of the frontier as the space where civilization meets nature or savagery (because these terms are always subjective or relative to one another), it is more adequate to recognize the frontier as a generally liminal space. "In recent years," Nobles writes, "post-Turnerian scholars have begun to use terms like 'contact zone,' 'zone of interpenetration,' or 'middle ground,' thus

Melville, and Whitman “present us with the problem of American self-recognition as being essentially an irreconcilable opposition between Nature and civilization—which is to say, between forest and town, spontaneity and calculation, heart and head, the unconscious and the self-conscious, the innocent and the debauched.”<sup>24</sup> Whereas landscape artists, poets, and preachers may have avowed the preeminence of Nature for its authentic, untarnished purity, Miller gives us a fine description of the alternate mood, which in pushing towards increasing civilization does not recognize any inherent vice or evil in the move. He writes,

This was the expanding, prospering, booming America of the 1840’s; here, if ever in the annals of man, was an era of optimism, with a vision of limitless possibilities, with faith in a boundless future. There was indeed some fear that the strife of North and South might wreck the chariot of progress, but the more that threat loomed the more enthusiastically the nation shouted the prospects of wealth and prosperity, if only in order to show the folly of allowing politics to spoil the golden opportunity. Dickens and other foreign visitors report a republic constantly flinging into their faces preposterous vaunts about what it would shortly become, and then steadily making good its wildest boasts. Surely

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suggesting an area of interaction between two or more cultures in which neither culture is assumed to have an altogether superior position.” In this sense, the frontier can be reimagined “not just as a place, or even as a frequently repeated, one-dimensional process of contact, settlement, and development,” but as a “much more complex process of mutual exchange in which neither culture, Native American or Euro-American, could remain unchanged.” In this sense, the frontier stands as a broad metaphorical characterization of spaces of multi-cultural exchange, and Turner’s thesis can be used without privileging one cultural perception over another. Nobles, *American Frontiers*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Miller, *Nature’s Nation*, 199.

this society was not wracked by a secret, hidden horror that its gigantic exertion would end only in some nightmare of debauchery called “civilization”?<sup>25</sup>

Again we clearly see the overt rhetoric of optimism—that mythic feature which consistently attempts to resolve an irresolvable paradox of experience. The American dream is built on the supposition that America is unique, and so not subject to the pitfalls of other nations. Without really resolving the nature-civilization dichotomy, the American dream casually asserts their perfect coexistence (for this is how myths appear to resolve the irresolvable). As Miller describes this supposed resolution, “America can progress indefinitely into an expanding future without acquiring sinful delusions of grandeur simply because it is nestled in Nature, is instructed and guided by mountains, is chastened by cataracts.”<sup>26</sup> It is from this unique relationship that the term “Nature’s Nation” is derived: in the face of choosing between a natural or a civilized state, America boldly proclaims that it is both, simultaneously and without contradiction.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>27</sup> Regarding the symbiotic relationship between nature and culture in America, Myra Jehlen comments that,

But when the democratic Enlightenment became associated with the North American continent, something new did emerge, for with this added dimension the theory of liberal individualism entered a culminating stage that was substantially different from its intermediate European form. Grounded, literally, in American soil, liberalism’s hitherto arguable theses metamorphosed into nature’s material necessities. Thus European reformers had argued in accord with Natural Law philosophy that their societies should parallel and complement nature. But the forming of American society was a still more ambitious enterprise. Americans saw themselves as building their civilization out of nature itself, as neither the analogue nor the translation of Natural Law but its direct expression. (Jehlen, *American Incarnation*, 3)

Taking this sense of balance a step further, Leo Marx finds that the relationship between nature and civilization in America essentially represents the attainment of a pastoral



The resolution of this nature/civilization tension is an important one for the nineteenth-century frontier imagination, but it is less relevant to the larger opportunity-based figuration of the spatial metaphor. For our purposes, the existence of a perpetual frontier space has the quality of assuring sustainable abundance. The Turnerian frontier as a liminal space between savagery and civility is undoubtedly an essential characterization for the representation of a historical moment in the American dream mythology, but with increased urbanization, industrialization, and technologization, the location of such a liminal space becomes less relevant to the larger idealistic paradigm in the twentieth century.<sup>28</sup>

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ideal—and this is precisely why the frontier metaphor is ultimately not sustainable as such through the twentieth century. He writes,

In the New World [. . .] it actually seemed possible, as never before, for migrating Europeans to establish a society that might realize the ancient pastoral dream of harmony: a *via media* between decadence and wildness, too much and too little civilization. For the revolutionary generation of Americans, notably Thomas Jefferson, this Rousseauistic possibility was represented by the captivating topographical image, or mental map, of the new nation as an ideal society of the “middle landscape” midway between *l’ancien régime* and the wild frontier. [. . .] [*The Machine in the Garden*] ended in the present tense with a suggestion that today, in the era of high technology, pastoralism almost certainly had become anachronistic, even less feasible as the basis for a political ideology than it had been in Jefferson’s time, and therefore it soon might be expected to lose its hold on the minds of disaffected Americans. (Marx, “Pastoralism in America,” 38)

We will do well to keep in mind this figuration of the frontier as pastoral harmony, for it speaks directly to the nineteenth-century American imagination and, in doing so, represents the danger of adopting a frontier-based idealism in the twentieth century.

<sup>28</sup> Some authors, though, have attempted to reposition the significance of this nature/civilization tension within the twentieth century. I am thinking here of Toni Morrison. In both *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*, Morrison’s narratives make substantial detours into rural settings. This is perhaps surprising, since both novels depend in large part on the bustling city for their actions. But Milkman’s self-creative journey requires that he make contact with his “natural” roots, and the city of Harlem in *Jazz*, it seems, cannot be fully represented *as a city* without a narrative detour (about seemingly

For the fact remains that there is no more western frontier left to conquer by the close of the nineteenth century. This is problematic, for the frontier functions as a spatial metaphor for the guarantee of sustained abundance and opportunity, and without this (or another) spatial metaphor, the American dream lacks a grounded, physical context (which it requires in order to function mythically). It is for this reason that Turner's paper reaches an abrupt conclusion. Describing the character of American life, Turner remarks that "movement has been its dominant fact" and, consequently, "the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves."<sup>29</sup> With the exhaustion of available frontier space, so ends "the first period of American history"<sup>30</sup> in Turner's estimation. This is certainly a pivotal moment in American history if we at all accept Turner's insistence on the nationally formative aspect of the frontier. Indeed, if we are to locate a mythemic unit in the frontier symbol,<sup>31</sup> then we must consider how the myth of the American dream persists in the post-frontier space of the twentieth century.

Emerson's book is specifically concerned with this question. His "new frontier" picks up where Turner's paper leaves off—at the point of the exhaustion of American frontier space. "What are we to do today," he asks, "who live in crowded cities? What

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irrelevant characters and actions) into rural Virginia. These narratives attest to the importance of contact with nature in light of civilization.

<sup>29</sup> Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 37.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>31</sup> This is not to claim that the frontier is the dominant articulation of American mythic space. Rather, I am arguing that the frontier is one version of such an articulation. I concentrate on the frontier in this discussion because, as a version of this mythic spatial metaphor, it is a good one: it nicely captures the spirit of limitless abundance in the context of consistent progress, all as a characterization of material space.

are we to do today who grow up and die without ever setting foot on a forest path? What are we to do today when one set of problems confronts the people of the Atlantic Coast, the people in the conquered wilderness of the Mississippi Valley and the people of the Far West?"<sup>32</sup> Emerson is posing the question that now presents itself before us, and his solution depends wholly on a symbolic understanding of the frontier. He writes, "*Our last material frontier having been conquered, we now face the great problems of social, political and industrial organization and of artistic creation. A frontier still confronts us, and only in the frontier spirit can we meet it.*"<sup>33</sup> This answer indicates the direction our discussion must now take.<sup>34</sup> The physical frontier of America is significant for the symbolic role it plays in the generation of American character. If the dawn of the twentieth century demands an alternate conception of the frontier – one still rooted in the spatial metaphor of opportunity – then we must re-conceive it accordingly.

It is important to clarify that the western space of the frontier does not simply vanish overnight, even when the very concrete boundary of the Pacific Ocean is reached and the whole western coastline is mapped. This is because, well after the exhaustion of realistically viable frontier space, the frontier nevertheless continues to function symbolically within the American imagination as a spatial articulation of abundant

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<sup>32</sup> Gus Emerson, *The New Frontier*, 207.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Henry Nash Smith supports this kind of reading of the frontier in the twentieth century, noting in a short paper that "If we look upon the frontier as a place where the spirit of capitalistic accumulation could flower without restraint, we can perhaps begin to recapture its significance for American history in general." Indeed, Turner's frontier supports such a reading, but this reading also allows us to carry the function of the frontier space into the twentieth century, where capitalism flourishes to an even greater extent than it ever could in the nineteenth century. Smith, "Symbol and Idea in *Virgin Land*," 32.

opportunity. Hence, well into the twentieth century, the idea of westward migration is no less powerful than it had been for the past few hundred years, despite the absence of “new” terrain or even literal westward motion. This is because the heightened industrialist capitalism of the twentieth century does not enter into the American consciousness as a sudden and foreign new element, but rather develops organically out of the developing American consciousness. Leo Marx describes this organic development between a pastoral and an industrial frontier, heavily implying a resolution to the problem of Turner’s closed frontier in the twentieth century. He writes,

The machine-in-the-landscape episode marks the emergence of a distinctive industrial age variant of pastoralism. In the symbolic topography that had previously lent expression to that ancient world view, the locus of power, wealth, hierarchy, sophistication—of the complex world—had been fixed in space. It characteristically had been a city or royal court or aristocratic household, or at any rate a *place* unambiguously separated from the green world: the realm of urbane social life here, the countryside (and wilderness) there. But the new machine power figured forth a fundamental transformation in relations between society and nature—it introduced a vivid awareness of the unprecedented dynamism of industrial society into nineteenth-century conceptions of landscape. Power machinery, factories, steamboats, canals, railroads, telegraph lines, wherever they appeared, were perceived as extensions of urban power and complexity. Potential invaders of all sectors of the environment, the forces represented by the new technology necessarily blur (if they do not erase) the

immemorial boundary lines between city, countryside, and wilderness. By threatening to take dominion everywhere, they intensify – at times to the point of apocalyptic stridency – the dissonance that pastoralism always had generated at the junction of civilization and nature.<sup>35</sup>

Marx's argument here does not directly resolve our immediate problem—that of finding this frontier vision of the landscape as a sustained cultural metaphor through the twentieth century—but it hints at how a resolution can be made. When we recognize that the features of the frontier are developing right alongside the intrusion of technology (which is having a widespread impact on the American environment everywhere), it is not so difficult to see how the new cultural terrain of the twentieth century maintains strong ties to early American conceptions of the frontier.

Indeed, Turner's thesis is notably introduced into academic discourse at the *close* of the frontier. As such, it describes a past moment with heavy recourse to the present and future of America. The *theory* of the early American frontier is a turn-of-the-century theory, and so it describes a landscape metaphor in perfectly relevant language. This is why Turner insists on uncovering the *spirit* of frontier Americans, for it is presumably a spirit that is still with us, and that establishes a cultural connection between early and twentieth-century America.<sup>36</sup> Richard Slotkin offers a fluid

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<sup>35</sup> Marx, "Pastoralism in America," 58.

<sup>36</sup> On this subject, Allen Trachtenberg poses the question, "Would the America fashioned on the frontier survive the caldrons of the city?" His answer appeals to Turner's "frontier spirit":

To be sure, [Turner] argued, the story of the frontier had reached its end, but the product of that experience remains. It remains in the predominant *character*, the traits of selfhood, with which the frontier experience had endowed Americans,

description of the transformation of the frontier myth at the turn of the century and, because it is important to this discussion, I quote it at length:

Theodore Roosevelt's enthusiasm for the West and pioneer history, and his linkage of Progressivism with the "strenuous life" of the Frontier, was the central formulation of this revised version of the myth; and Roosevelt himself was the center of a web of associations (community) of more or less like-minded men. The group included such political titans as Henry Cabot Lodge, the conservationist Gifford Pinchot, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, novelists Owen Wister and S. E. White, racist-anthropologists Madison Grant and Henry Fairfield Osborn, and other business, political, and cultural magnates. These men identified their particular concerns—economic progress, political reform, literary "realism"—with the "frontier" virtues of "red-bloodedness," macho individualism, and heroic dominance that Roosevelt located in the personalities of frontier heroes. It was this group, working at the "end of the frontier," that formulated the myth-ideological system associated with that phase of American history into its most significant form, and used it as the basis of a general theory of American history and politics. In doing so, they transformed the ambivalently democratic and agrarian materials of the original myth into a set of doctrines and fables suited to the ideological needs of an industrial economy and a managerial policy. Thus discontent breaks down the "harmonious display of essences,"

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that "dominant individualism" which now must learn to cope with novel demands. The thesis projects a national character, a type of person fit for the struggles and strategies of an urban future. (Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 15-16.

degrading sacred myth into secular ideology; and ideology, in the hands of a class-seeking hegemony, reaches out to co-opt myth.<sup>37</sup>

Here we see how the frontier continues to function as an organizing spatial metaphor within the twentieth century, even after the exhaustion of literal frontier space. Because the *myth* of the frontier denotes a complex system of American idealism, virtue, progress, and opportunity, it sustains its relevance as a spatial metaphor despite the exhaustion of its literal context. As a *metaphorical characterization* of the American landscape (and, by implication, of American pursuit generally), it is no less relevant today than at the time when a very real frontier space existed: it continues to describe America as the land of opportunity.<sup>38</sup> For our purposes here, then, we would do well to consider this “new” frontier space—this modification of the early American myth—and for this we turn our attention to twentieth century representations of the frontier in America.

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<sup>37</sup> Slotkin, “Myth and the Production of History,” 86-87.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel Elazar finds that the presence of metaphorical frontiers have *always* characterized American experience, and this helps us to position the frontier—as a metaphor for America’s spatial existence—into a more general American context. He writes,

American society is a frontier society. It has chosen—or had thrust upon it—a path which involves continuing economic, social and political change of the first magnitude based on a constant effort at continued growth and development designed to periodically alter the very environment in which Americans live. [ . . . ] The governments of the United States have always been called upon to encourage the scientific and technological development needed to discover and open new frontiers, to create a political framework without which non-governmental and individual enterprise could move out onto those frontiers, and to provide the necessary public infrastructure for their conquest. (Elazar, *Building Cities in America*, 49)

In this sense, again, we can see how the frontier continues to function as an organizing spatial metaphor long after its literal closure.

Let us consider John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, which is set in the 1930s and is explicitly concerned with westward migration. Because Steinbeck's novel is set in the midst of the Great Depression,<sup>39</sup> the hope that his characters have in their westward progress is in extremely sharp contrast to their present circumstances. Indeed, the failure of the Joads' Oklahoma "dustbowl" farm life, within which the entire American governmental system is demonized for its mechanism and life-crushing expansion, acts to directly undercut the substance of the American dream, *while at the same time* the American dream is championed and endorsed by the characters' active pursuit of it westward. The novel, to put it simply, cleverly manages a representation of persistent hope in a dream that appears to have no genuine potential for actualization. This dichotomous representation of the American dream is accomplished through the novel's shifting narrative structure, in which the narrator alters his storytelling focus from one chapter to the next. And so, while the majority of the novel's chapters detail the actions of the Joad family, who consistently struggle onwards and periodically renew their hopeful aspirations, the alternate chapters (which are notably far shorter, and which dominant critical consensus has termed "interchapters") adopt a pseudo-objective account of the starkness of American experience. These interchapters, which give no intimate attention to specific characters so as to maintain an impersonal tone, often detail the rugged conditions of the landscape and demonstrate the unstoppable mechanical (and overtly evil) progression

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<sup>39</sup> We must keep the context of the Great Depression in mind, for it substantially colors the features of Steinbeck's world in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and we must consider whether the novel challenges the American ideal generally, or if it does so within the specific context of the Great Depression's unique historical threat to economic gain.



of American capitalism.<sup>40</sup> The novel allows these two narratives to run side by side, thereby allowing a fictional development of the American dream that more closely approximates its realistic context. As John J. Conder argues, the interchapters work together with the novel's primary story to create a universe that is economically determined, and yet one in which free will persists. He writes,

The interchapters display the growth of a group consciousness controlled by instinct's response to the dynamic of economic forces. [. . .] But in the story proper, instinct does not rule each person with equal power. The instinctual power that drives the group in the interchapters is unequally distributed among its individual members. [. . .] In the plot, then, free will plays a major role.<sup>41</sup>

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, then, Steinbeck manages a narrative organization that maintains his character's freedom of identity (such that they are "Americans" in the frontier spirit<sup>42</sup>), while simultaneously insisting on a deterministic economic model that governs American experience. In other words, the characters in the novel are openly pitted against the world (i.e. the landscape) in which they function.

Representations of the American landscape abound in Steinbeck's novel—rich, elaborate representations that detail the diversity of conditions in the land (from extreme drought to torrential flooding, for instance). These descriptions are essential to

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<sup>40</sup> Conder writes that, "The interchapters of Steinbeck's novel create a network of interlocking determinism through their emphasis on the operations of abstract, impersonal forces in the lives of the Oklahomans." He locates "economic determinism" as the governing motif of the interchapters. Conder, "Steinbeck and Nature's Self," 99-100.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>42</sup> "For these are a people with pioneer blood in their veins," writes Peter Lisca about the Joads. Lisca, "The Dynamics of Community in *The Grapes of Wrath*," 87.

the development of the narrative, as well as to our discussion here, for they emphasize the physical geography of the Joads' pursuit. Steinbeck's novel sets up a clear antagonism between the dual forces of nature and civilization, implying a clear breakdown of their supposed harmonious relationship in America. The Joads' westward movement to California is a heavily symbolic action that takes its significance from the frontier ideal. Their journey, though difficult, is suffused with an optimism derived from the rich promises of an abundant landscape. Indeed, this tension in the novel between the lavishness of its setting and the destitution of its characters constitutes the central tension with which we are concerned here.

Depictions of California in the novel differ powerfully from those of the dustbowl, out of which the Joads are migrating. California is the new frontier, teeming with opportunity, while the dustbowl is a dried up, hollow desert—an exhausted dream. Our narrator describes the migration generally (i.e. not specific to the Joads), adopting the highway as the preeminent symbol for the migratory boom that is sweeping the nation:

Highway 66 is the main migrant road. 66—the long concrete path across the country, waving gently up and down on the map, from Mississippi to Bakersfield—over the red lands and the gray lands, twisting up into the mountains, crossing the Divide and down into the bright and terrible desert, and across the desert to the mountains again, and into the rich California valleys.

66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership, from the desert's slow

northward invasion, from the twisting winds that howl up out of Texas, from the floods that bring no richness to the land and steal what little richness is there. From all these the people are in flight, and they come into 66 from the tributary side roads, from the wagon tracks and the rutted country roads. 66 is the mother road, the road of flight.<sup>43</sup>

It is worth noting that, as represented in the novel, the Midwest is essentially a dried up wasteland with no promise of success or even basic sustenance. This is *not* the notion of a successfully accomplished “Nature’s Nation,” which continually expands westward as a means of recreating and reinforcing the cultural values that allow civilization to prosper. Rather, this is the image of a ravenous governmental machine, which must continually expand westward as it continually consumes its present resources. As one ambiguous property owner in the novel describes, “The bank – the monster has to have profits all the time. It can’t wait. It’ll die. No, taxes go on. When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can’t stay one size.”<sup>44</sup> The evils of capitalism are here laid bare in the symbol of the bank-monster, which exploits individuals and ravages the landscape. The effect of this ravage is the Midwestern wasteland of the novel, wherein the American terrain ceases to function as a figurative articulation of American abundance.

Clearly, then, as is the case with most novelistic representations of the American dream, *The Grapes of Wrath* does not paint an idealized dreamscape of American cultural success, but rather points to the realistic pitfalls of such idealization. But in demonstrating the discrepancy between the frontier as reality and the frontier as ideal,

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<sup>43</sup> Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 118.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

the novel does powerfully expose the enduring dynamic of American dreaming, for hope (however ill-grounded) appears to persist to the novel's end. We see this at regular points in the novel, whenever the Joads are in motion from one place to the next. This is an interesting fact in and of itself, for it emphasizes the dream as a *pursuit* towards an ideal, rather than as any substantial possession of that ideal. Time after time, the Joads vocally express their lofty expectations while en route to some destination, only to find those expectations far from met upon arrival. Rose of Sharon, the eldest (and pregnant) daughter of the family, most overtly embodies this dreamy spirit of expectation. Before they arrive in California, she describes the life she hopes to have with Connie, her husband:

Connie gonna get a job in a store or maybe a fact'ry. An' he's gonna study at home, maybe radio, so he can git to be a expert an' maybe later have his own store. An' we'll go to pitchers whenever. An' Connie says I'm gonna have a *doctor* when the baby's born; an' he says we'll see how times is, an' maybe I'll go to a hospiddle. An' we'll have a car, little car. An' after he studies at night, why—it'll be nice, an' he tore a page outa *Western Love Stories*, an' he's gonna send off for a course, 'cause it don't cost nothin' to send off. Says right on that clipping. I seen it. An', why—they even get you a job when you take that course—radios, it is—nice clean work, and a future. An' we'll live in town an' go to pitchers whenever, an'—well, I'm gonna have a 'lectric iron, an' the baby'll have all new stuff. Connie says all new stuff—white an'—Well, you seen in the catalogue all the stuff they got for a baby. Maybe right at first while Connie's

studyin' at home it won't be so easy, but—well, when the baby comes, maybe he'll be all done studyin' an' we'll have a place little bit of a place.<sup>45</sup>

Rose of Sharon's description rambles on in this dreamy way, and it is not long after she makes this speech that her hopes are, quite definitively, made impossible: upon the family's arrival in California, Connie promptly deserts his wife, failing to reappear before the novel's end. Rose of Sharon is, perhaps, the most clearly hopeful character in the novel (even persisting in her belief that Connie will return to her once he finds work), but all of the characters cling to some ideal of success in one form or another, despite the failures and blighted prospects with which they are continually met. The family is driven into nearly constant motion, searching the entire state of California for work, and never finding any lasting positions, let only those that pay decently. But it is the fact of this regular motion that sustains their dreamy hopes, for they are consistently moving to an imagined better place—one which, wherever they stop, is always just a little further on.

By the novel's end (when the Joads have clearly lost the rampant optimism that characterized them when they first set out westward), lofty promises are still being made amongst the Joads, such as Tom's promise to his mother that, come winter, she will definitely have a house.<sup>46</sup> It is unclear, exactly, how much confidence the family members have in these promises by this point in the novel. It is the hope of fulfillment that sustains them, though, even while the novel darkly suggests that such hope is ultimately empty, for the real circumstances of their position guarantee failure. This is

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 164-65.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 363.

an interesting take on the American dream insofar as it is set up as a kind of necessary empty promise.

The defining tension between frontier reality and idealism is embodied in the novel's characterization of governmental impact on an abundant landscape. This tension is recounted, in brilliant narrative detail, in chapter twenty-five, where abundance turns to putrid waste in the course of a few pages. We move from fragrant pink fruit blossoms and the fresh white waters of a shallow sea to rotted grapes and shriveled, soured pears and prunes. All across the state of California, laborers diligently toil for far less than livable wages in horrible conditions, while the luscious produce of the land spoils (if it is not intentionally ruined), in a mad effort to adjust profit margins for the banks and landowners, who are abstract and distant from the concrete process of labor. This, to our narrator, amounts to a great national failure, one which "hangs over the State like a great sorrow." We are told,

There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroner must fill in the certificates—died of malnutrition—because the food must rot, must be forced to rot.<sup>47</sup>

This passage is deliberate and direct: the circumstances portrayed in the novel describe the absolute failure of the American dream project. Rather than deriving its national

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 348-49.

strength from its great natural heritage, the American nation has become a profit-hungry, cold business, ruining its own plentiful bounty in order to financially enslave its striving citizens. This is the very definition of the “evil” of civilization that America is supposed to avoid by virtue of its natural foundations. The fact that Steinbeck explores natural, land-rooted labor (peach picking, ditch digging, cotton picking), as opposed to, say, debased factory working conditions, further attests to the emphasis his novel means to place on the *natural* consequences of American capitalist expansion.

Are we to conclude from the novel, then, that the American dream circa the 1930s is dead, or at best a personal illusion with no real ground in possibility? If the American dream is still with us today (as I strongly propose), then we cannot come to such a conclusion. Rather, we must explore the subtlety of a national “dream.” The American dream, after all, is a national ideal towards which we collectively and individually strive. If there are periods in American history where advancement is notably improbable, this does not necessarily mean that the dream has lost all viability. The dream, indeed, persists *despite* the great historical threats to its real fulfillment. But *The Grapes of Wrath* calls attention to the very real expiration of expandable space, and so seems to indicate a significant change in the open landscape that previously allowed for fresh beginnings. The novel does not argue that the American dream simply exhausted itself; rather, it describes a significant moment in American history when there is a unique threat to the dream. Steinbeck’s novel is set in Turner’s post-expansion America, and amidst the Great Depression, no less. It describes a historical moment in which the frontier as an organizing spatial metaphor must be refigured—

that is, the myth of America as a constantly expanding land of opportunity must here be rewritten. *The Grapes of Wrath* represents the defeat of the old world frontier myth, and we will have to consider to what extent it replaces the old myth with a new one.

Louis Owens describes the basic narrative pattern that underlies the Joad's quest in the novel as one of perpetual search for a New Eden, in his book *The Grapes of Wrath: Trouble in the Promised Land*. He writes,

The settlement of America may be seen as a process of ever westward expansion in search of that Eden which seemed to recede always before the eyes of the first colonists. The process became one of despoiling the Garden in search for the Garden until, finally, Americans stood at the edge of the Pacific, having slaughtered and driven from their lands the original inhabitants, having deforested enormous portions of the continent, and having fought and gouged with all other claimants to the continent in order to reach the western shore. Surely, if there were ever to be a Garden it must be at the western edge. And the beauty and fecundity of California seemed to fulfill that promise. Still, Americans were left with a feeling of loss, emptiness, summed up in Walt Whitman's great poem, "Facing West from California's Shores," in which he concludes with a parenthetical question that resounds throughout American history and American literature: "But where is what I started for so long ago? / And why is it yet unfound?"<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Owens, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 47-48.



Owens' reading is ultimately bleak, for he details how the Joads enact this traditionally repeated drama in its last iteration—at the moment of a closed frontier—and, like Whitman, discover that there is no realistic substance to their dreams, no possibility for attainment. Owens does find that, at the novel's end, Tom Joad becomes a kind of leader in a new tradition that no longer repeats the "New Eden quest" narrative, but rather seeks to recreate the current world instead of moving ever westward. He writes that Tom "will not lead the people 'someplace' but will lead them toward a new understanding of the place they inhabit here and now."<sup>49</sup> Owens is notably unclear about the precise features of this "new understanding," perhaps because the novel is so. The novel does indeed set Tom up as a new paradigm for heroic action, but it does little more than merely set him up in such a position. The novel concludes—with a note of hope in Tom Joad's future—before we see this "new Tom" in action.

The defeat of the old frontier myth and its subsequent replacement by a new frontier myth is discussed in a short paper by Peter Lisca (though not in these terms, exactly). Lisca details competing versions of community in the novel, insofar as they are expressive of these different traditions. He writes,

*The Grapes of Wrath* moves not only along Route 66, east to west, like some delayed Wagon Wheels adventure, but along the unmapped roads of social change, from an old concept of community based on sociological conditions

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 55.

breaking up under an economic upheaval, to a new and very different sense of community formulating itself gradually on the new social realities.<sup>50</sup>

The old order of community in the novel is represented in the Joads' dustbowl life. This communal identity is "invested in the land, the houses, and personal possessions," but also "in terms of social customs and mores."<sup>51</sup> It is patriarchal and family-based, and rooted in a specific location, such that migration represents a very literal uprooting of the old communal order. Lisca therefore details the many scenes of transition during the liminal migratory journey to California, in which the old sense of community is put to rest in preparation for a new one.<sup>52</sup> And yet, a new ideal of communal structure is not fully fleshed out in the novel. As Lisca writes, "But in *The Grapes of Wrath* we do not see the realization of utopian community, for there are anticomunity forces as well; and these, too, manifest themselves in a wide range."<sup>53</sup> These anticomunity forces include a biological imperative for survival, selfishness and greed, and the creation and subsequent existence of the deterministic economic (bank) system. In Lisca's reading, the persistence of these social evils is what ultimately prevents the actualization of a new communal ideal, but we do see some hints at the structure of that ideal nonetheless. Lisca writes that "It is this growing knowledge of the necessity of sharing with strangers far beyond the usual circle of family and friends that becomes the most

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<sup>50</sup> Lisca, "The Dynamics of Community in *The Grapes of Wrath*," 87.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>52</sup> Examples of these transitional moments include: Casy's inclusion in the Joad family, despite his not being a Joad; the Joad family's inability to properly bury Grandpa Joad while en route; and Connie's abandonment of his wife and unborn child upon first reaching California. All of these instances, which take place in the liminal space of Route 66, attest to the breakdown of an older communal order.

<sup>53</sup> Lisca, "The Dynamics of Community in *The Grapes of Wrath*," 93.

powerful force for establishing the new community.”<sup>54</sup> Acts of extra-familial sharing are abundant in the novel, but Lisca’s case is made most definitively in the novel’s concluding scene, in which Rose of Sharon, having delivered a stillborn child, shares her breast milk with a starving old man (who is also a complete stranger). These scenes of sharing attest to the formation of a new American community – solidly allied – which might “repossess” this defiled and wasted America. And so *The Grapes of Wrath* ends with a metaphorical frontier (as yet unconquered), even as it crushes the notion of a literal one.<sup>55</sup>

Here we ought to recall Gus Emerson and Henry Nash Smith’s metaphorical characterizations of frontier space, for these critics outline the persistent relevance of the frontier as a governing, organizing spatial metaphor. The American myth is not static, which is why it has been continually relevant to each subsequent generation. Just as the paradigm of the self-made man gradually moved from a dictum of religious responsibility to a humanistic model of (American) virtue, so also does the world in

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>55</sup> David Wyatt further emphasizes this point, arguing that Steinbeck uses his homestate of California to mythologize the western migration, creating a non-spatial terrain of the imagination in which the frontier continues to function. He writes,

Steinbeck’s best work naturalizes in his home state the central Western legend of loss. During the 1930s he wrote a series of books that deal, in sequence, with the acts of settlement, corruption, fall, and eviction. *The Grapes of Wrath* is the last of these, and California is the garden lost. Steinbeck treats his birthplace as a natural and imaginative fact. Although its specific locales and landscapes shape the course of a story’s action, its location on a map of the mind converts it into a kind of national or even global destiny, the end point of humanity’s incessant “westering.” Steinbeck’s contribution to the literature of his nation and his region is to discover ways in which the unique features and history of a place can be discreetly raised up toward the status of myth. (Wyatt, “Introduction” to *New Essays on the Grapes of Wrath*, 17.)

which his mythic action exists become something other than the natural frontier out of which it began. Americans still live in a “frontier world” and, as Emerson writes, “*only in the frontier spirit can we meet it.*” As a structural spatial metaphor, the frontier excellently describes the American ideology that underlies perceptions of physical space—it continues to define the context of the American dream myth as one of expansion, abundance, opportunity, progress, and mobility.

And yet, *The Grapes of Wrath* insists that the literal frontier is exhausted. Indeed, American authors have warned against a too literal reading of the frontier. In Philip Roth’s 1997 novel, *American Pastoral*, we are given an explicit outline of the dangers inherent in pastoral frontier idealism, and the novel emphasizes the importance of “updating” one’s perception of American context within the twentieth century. Rather than deal with the question of a literal versus a symbolic frontier space, Roth’s novel instead pursues a representation of the *ideal* that underlies the old frontier myth, and then proceeds to dispel the relevance of that ideal. *American Pastoral* describes the danger of pastoral idealism—a landscape-based, “pre-cultural” ideal based on the raw, fresh beginnings of the old world frontier imagination—and in doing so insists on the importance of building one’s American dreams within the appropriate national context.

*American Pastoral* sets up an image of the American dream pursuit that rather resembles the model (discussed earlier in chapter one) outlined by Walter Lippmann that privileges past over future idealism: the novel’s hero attempts to retreat into a simpler and more rural American life that is no longer a viable option in 1960s America. Before considering the text at any length, it is necessary to first emphasize the inherent

instability written into it: the narrator, Nathan “Skip” Zuckerman, imaginatively creates the story of the novel from a handful of facts he comes to learn about the former athletic hero of his Newark high school, Seymour “Swede” Levov. Within the context of the novel, the story Zuckerman recounts is not true—it is an invented possibility that Zuckerman uses to reflect on “[t]he tragedy of the man not set up for tragedy.”<sup>56</sup> It is, essentially, Zuckerman’s own attempt at working out the ambiguity of the American dream. Zuckerman remembers the Swede as the all-American hero, “the household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews”<sup>57</sup> for whom the cheerleaders have their own cheer, and in whom rests all the hopes of the previous generation. After his graduation, the Swede marries Dawn Dwyer, the former Miss New Jersey and one time competitor in the Miss America pageant, and joins his father’s glove factory, solidifying for himself an idealistic, pastoral life. But through a much later conversation with the Swede’s younger brother at their forty-fifth high school reunion, Zuckerman learns that the Swede’s teenage daughter was the infamous “Rimrock Bomber” who blew up the local post office as a Vietnam War protest, killing a doctor, and causing her father irreconcilable grief. It is this piece of information—that the one time god of Weequahic High could be made to suffer tragedy—that spurs the rest of the novel, which becomes Zuckerman’s attempt to suggest a plausible account of the Swede’s life. Zuckerman relates, “To the honeysweet strains of ‘Dream,’ I pulled away from myself, pulled away from the reunion, and I dreamed . . . I dreamed a realistic chronicle. I began gazing into his life—not his life as a god or a demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy

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<sup>56</sup> Roth, *American Pastoral*, 68.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

but his life as another assailable man.”<sup>58</sup> The Swede’s failure to maintain his ideal American dream-like lifestyle is a fact to which Zuckerman has great difficulty reconciling himself. The narrative thus stands as an extended attempt to make sense of the senseless: the failure of the American dream in one for whom its success seemed destined.

The Swede’s dream is not completely unattainable, but is rather something he does achieve and enjoy in peace for half his life. By the very nature of its construction, however, it is ultimately not sustainable (in his contemporary milieu) and so must finally collapse. Swede Levov pursues a dream of pastoral idealism, a quiet, perfect, and typically “American” existence that is altogether free of any cultural, social, even economic complications. It is for this reason that Zuckerman makes a point of considering Swede apart from his Jewish identity, for he seems to manage a very smooth and easy assimilation into mainstream (non-Jewish) Americanism. For one thing, he presents a very atypical figure of a Jew: “Of the fair-complexioned Jewish students in our preponderantly Jewish public high school, none possessed anything remotely like the steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond born into our tribe as Seymour Irving Levov.”<sup>59</sup> Zuckerman constructs a story of the Swede’s failure owing to an idealizational cause, not a straightforwardly ethnic one, because it is one of the accomplishments of which the Swede can boast that he has overcome the pre-established limitations against him owing to his ethnic identity. Indeed, Zuckerman can consider the collapse of the Swede’s dream precisely because the Swede had

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 3.

seemingly managed to overcome the cultural restrictions that might have worked against him. The narrator means to indicate an *essential* flaw in American dream ideology, not merely an incidental one (as racial or ethnic restrictions undoubtedly are). Hence Zuckerman writes, just before he begins constructing the Swede's story,

I lifted onto my stage the boy we were all going to follow into America, our point man into the next immersion, at home here the way the Wasps were at home here, an American not by sheer striving, not by being a Jew who invents a famous vaccine or a Jew on the Supreme Court, not by being the most brilliant or the most eminent or the best. Instead – by virtue of his isomorphism to the Wasp world – he does it the ordinary way, the natural way, the regular American-guy way.<sup>60</sup>

Zuckerman means to construct an explanation for unprecedented failure. The Swede's Jewish identity, while always a fact in the novel, cannot be the explicit cause of his failure; if it were, it simply would not be unprecedented.

The Swede's pastoral idealism – Zuckerman's invented cause for the Swede's failure – begins at an early age, and is evident when he first sees the house in which he will later settle his family:

The stone house was not only engagingly ingenious-looking to his eyes – all that irregularity regularized, a jigsaw puzzle fitted patiently together into this square, solid thing to make a beautiful shelter – but it looked indestructible, an impregnable house that could never burn to the ground and that had probably

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 89.

been standing there since the country began. Primitive stones, rudimentary stones of the sort that you would see scattered about among the trees if you took a walk along the paths in Weequahic Park, and out there they were a house. He couldn't get over it.<sup>61</sup>

This description functions as a fine summary of the Swede's sentiments and expectations: he means to construct a primitive stronghold, built out of the very substance of the American frontier, both ancient and enduring, and markedly anti-modern. The house itself takes on a symbolic role as the image of success for the Swede (in a manner very akin to Gatsby's adoption of Daisy as the image of his success). We are told that "The random design of the stones *said* 'House' to him"<sup>62</sup> as no other house (even his childhood home) ever could. Not so much an instance of an idea, Old Rimrock (the estate's name) is the symbolic embodiment of what, for the Swede, a house *ought to be*. It is not merely an empty structure, but is the product of the Swede's imaginative enhancements—it is garnished with the trappings of his idea of familial serenity, right down to the image of the little girl "on a swing suspended from a low branch of one of those big trees, swinging herself high into the air, just as happy, he imagined, as a kid can be."<sup>63</sup> Old Rimrock is *the* place where the Swede can live out his American dream of pastoral bliss. And indeed, the life Swede Levov constructs in this house is exactly appropriate to the structure itself. It is a life founded on the dream of a quiet, natural, and perfectly free and harmonious existence (this is the "New Eden"

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



which the traditional frontier imagination pursues) cut off all but entirely from (indeed, rigidly protected against) the then current social and political upheaval of the nation.

The primary action of Swede Levov's life is set in the 1960s and early 1970s—a time clearly marked by tremendous social and political activity. The Swede's ideal life is destroyed because he makes the attempt to live a life cut off from the larger context outside of it, such that his daughter's Vietnam War protest (a political fact the Swede refuses to acknowledge), intrudes directly into his happy existence. As his brother Jerry puts it, "His life was blown up by that bomb." He goes on: "Seymour was into quaint Americana. But the kid wasn't. He took the kid out of real time and she put him right back in. My brother thought he could take his family out of human confusion and into Old Rimrock, and she put them right back in."<sup>64</sup> In a manner analogous to Gatsby's failure, ignored reality (here literally) explodes the ideal. Derek Parker Royal observes that the Swede is unable to admit "the ambiguity underlying the American project." He goes on, saying of Swede Levov and Ira Ringold (of Roth's *I Married a Communist*): "Their attempts to discover their own American pastoral—a paradise free of ethnic, economic, and political complications—prevents any awareness of the unflattering or even malignant characteristics of their surroundings."<sup>65</sup> The Swede's pastoral ideal fails

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>65</sup> This passage of Royal's goes on to make comparisons to other American literary figures, indicating thereby this American trend towards idealism: "Much like Hawthorne's Goodman Brown, who will not admit the darker side of the human heart; much like Melville's Ahab, who must know without any doubt the reality behind the pasteboard masks; and much like Fitzgerald's Gatsby, who refuses to see the more sordid reality behind the green lights of Daisy's dock, Swede Levov and Ira Ringold attempt to live an idealized American life." Royal, "Pastoral Dreams and National Identity," 202.

because the very nature of that ideal to ignore all reality outside itself leaves it more than a little vulnerable to the influences of those unacknowledged factors.

This flaw in the Swede's American dream course is precisely that against which Lippmann has expressly warned. Lippmann stresses that this tendency towards past idealism, where men can theoretically be left alone to their own harmonic devices (trusting that, as he originally defines the American dream, "the undisciplined man is the salt of the earth"), is rooted in escapist desire. Human beings, Lippmann writes, want fundamentally to be taken charge of by a "benevolent guardian, be it a 'good man in office' or a perfect constitution, or the evolution of nature." "If they have to think for themselves," he goes on, "they turn either to the past or to a distant future: but they manage to escape the real effort of the imagination which is to weave a dream into the turning present."<sup>66</sup> Swede Levov is rather a paradigm of Lippmann's description of the misinterpreted American impulse towards betterment. As could be expected, the construction of a pastoral world cut off from its contemporary reality results in the very natural self-destruction of that world. To imaginatively weave a dream into the turning present, as Lippmann describes it, is the difficult task in which the "true" American dreamer must engage if he is to be really successful.

Yet Zuckerman finds some cause for mourning Swede's destruction. His final assessment adopts a more somber, even nostalgic tone in an attempt, it seems, to lift the Swede from blame. Zuckerman says,

Yes, the breach had been pounded in their fortification, even out here in secure

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<sup>66</sup> Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, 108.

Old Rimrock, and now that it was opened it would not be closed again. They'll never recover. Everything is against them, everyone and everything that does not like their life. All the voices from without, condemning and rejecting their life!

And what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?<sup>67</sup>

The question Zuckerman poses here that finishes the novel is one that the novel has already implicitly answered: there is nothing "reprehensible" about the Levovs in a moral sense; they are merely anachronistic. The illusion (or dream) that they pursue is, by nature of its historical context, resistant to reality, and so inevitably shatters in the attempt to be realized. This is absolutely vital to our understanding of the American dream, for the Swede's idealistic misstep is an overt failure to recognize a significant historical revision to the dominant national mythology of American dreaming. Set some forty years after *The Grapes of Wrath*, the novel entails a different failure of pursuit. Whereas the Joads are on the cusp of a changing national structure, and so are ill-equipped to "update" their dreams, the Levovs blithely ignore the more solidly established world of their contemporary America. By the mid twentieth century, the frontier imagination no longer delineates an ideal of endless new beginnings on a virgin landscape. Rather, it delineates an American world teeming with opportunity and spaces for advancement within the current national system. The physical land of America is still vital in the twentieth century, but not as a space of untouched and

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<sup>67</sup> Roth, *American Pastoral*, 423.

savage purity where a new Adam can thrive. Rather, it is conceived as an abundant resource, taken advantage of now by industrial and technological forces that increase the productivity of the land and create business and professional opportunities away from the land, in cities. It is still the physical presence of America that allows the American dream to persist, for the myth of the continent still describes a physical place where opportunity for advancement exists (and this is why America continues to experience high rates of immigration).

As a structuring metaphor, then, the frontier myth offers us a succinct description of the national context within which the American dream operates. While this imaginative conception of the landscape is only one particular version of mythic space in America, it is the most comprehensive. In describing a literal experience, the frontier depicts the nation as an abundant space of opportunity for the attainment of American ideals, for it describes a literal space teeming with vegetation, fertile soil, and resources, and free of the social and cultural constructions of the civilized world. Such a place is an ideal backdrop for the action of the American Adam, whose Edenic ideal closely resembles the real fact of the virgin American landscape. As such, the frontier describes an *idea*, embodied in the landscape. But when the frontier closes and there is no more open space to the west, the *idea* embodied in the frontier continues to function, for that idea has become an integral part of the American consciousness. The populated, industrialized, civilized American continent maintains the sense of identity derived from early American articulations of the land, even as the appearances (indeed, the *facts*) of that land undergo constant revision. And so the notion of America as the

Golden Land of Opportunity is still very much alive, though mutated. The American Adam is no longer the paradigm for heroism when we reach the twentieth century; his action, set on the wilderness frontiers of early America, has been supplanted by that of the self-made man (who is often a business model) who seeks his fortune amidst the prolific opportunities of the city. But the American dream, subtly shifted, remains essentially the same, and insofar as it is structured by an understanding of its action's context, this study of the frontier myth establishes the dominant metaphor according to which the American dream finds contextual articulation. In short, the American dream is always and only achievable *in America*, because the American continent, as described by the myth, is the very physical place in which opportunity thrives.

**Chapter Four**  
**Mythic Action:**  
**The Private/Social Paradox of Upward Mobility**

In the preceding discussions, we have been considering the American dream in terms of its most straightforward narrative parts, and identifying underlying mythemic tensions as central to these parts. Every mythical narrative has three most basic structuring principles: an actor (or hero), a setting (which delineates an entire mythic universe), and an action (which denotes the primary accomplishment of the myth). In the previous two chapters we have described the American mythic hero as the self-made man, and the American mythic universe as the idyllic Golden Land of Opportunity. Our concern here will be the characterization of the overarching *action* of the American dream myth. We are accustomed to hearing the very common phrase, “upward mobility,” in the context of American dream discussions, and this phrase clearly describes the prevalent action of the American dream, for it emphasizes movement from one socio-economic sphere to another, “better” one. Nevertheless, the phrase “upward mobility” is especially noncommittal, for while it seems to imply whatever sense we attach to it, it concretely describes nothing. In fact, the progressive action of the American dream occurs according to a very definite set of rules and expectations, though the language with which we describe it leaves it open to a great deal of personal interpretation. This seems to be always the case with the American dream, and in fact we might claim that the dream’s historical persistence is owing to the very looseness with which this established ideal is commonly described—it creates the illusion that the American dream is always personally constructed, and therefore

always a unique personal ideal. The action described by the American dream myth is a continuing attainment of increasing success. As such, this action is never completed, though it is constantly becoming more and more complete—much like an infinite approach to a consistently receding goal (we can call to mind here the concluding lines of Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*). Because success is never fully accomplished, the American dream continues to hold relevance for every American, whatever their socio-economic station. Our understanding of this mythic action depends wholly on our understanding of the American idea of success, and the perpetual motion that this idea implies.

The idea of success in America is complicated, because it describes two separate and often competing spheres of action: the public and the private. The American dream guarantees the opportunity for any given individual's material rise (often at the expense of another individual), while at the same time it encourages progress on a national level according to a set of communal ideals. Public and private progress need not necessarily be at odds with one another according to the model of the American dream, yet they often are, owing to the looseness of interpretation for which the dream allows. Progress in America, conceived on a private scale, is most commonly associated with increasing wealth—it has a definite material referent. Celeste McLeod writes that “Money is the key word to the history of the United States.” Our understanding of the American dream—as both an abstract and a material ideal—has been and is still deeply tied to the attainment of wealth. McLeod continues, citing some early sources to emphasize the long-term persistence of this ideal:

Long before the colonies became an independent nation, the desire for wealth was already a national obsession. “The only principle of life propagated among the young people is to get money, and men are only esteemed according to what they are worth—that is, the money they are possessed of,” an observer in New York City reported in 1784. A century later the French traveler Alexis de Tocqueville noted this same quality: “In America then everyone finds facilities, unknown elsewhere, for making or increasing his fortune. The spirit of gain is always on the stretch, and the human mind, constantly diverted from pleasures of imagination and the labours of the intellect, is there swayed by no impulse but the pursuit of wealth.”<sup>1</sup>

What we see here is that historical observers have always perceived the importance of wealth to American society. Indeed, wealth has been the dominant understanding of success in America.<sup>2</sup> It is not just the attainment of wealth that is emphasized in this passage, though; it is the *increasing* attainment of wealth. The American dream is about sustained gain, such that its action is never accomplished for an individual. “Success,”

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<sup>1</sup> MacLeod, *Horatio Alger, Farewell*, 8.

<sup>2</sup> To emphasize this point, MacLeod lists many of the success manuals that sprung up in the nineteenth century, for their titles attest to the prevalence of the American cult of success as wealth:

Some manuals had the word “success” in their titles; others used “rich” or “money.” Thus were *The Foundations of Success* (1843), *Elements of Success* (1848), *Success in Business* (1867), *The Secret of Success in Life* (1873), *The Elements of Success* (1873), another *Success in Business* (1875), *Successful Folk* (1878), *How to Succeed* (1882), *Successful Men of Today and What They Say of Success* (1883), *The Law of Success* (1885), *Success in Life* (1885), *Keys to Success* (1898), *Successward* (1899), *The Attainment of Success* (1907), *How to Get Rich* (1866), *Money and How to Make It* (1872), *The Art of Making Money* (1872), *Money for the Million* (1872), *On the Road to Riches* (1876), *How to Become Rich* (1878), and *The Art of Money Getting* (1882). (MacLeod, *Horatio Alger, Farewell*, 9)



then, is not a fixed goal towards which Americans strive, but is rather a receding goal always defined relative to one's current socio-economic standing.

And yet, success in America is also defined as relative to *another's* socio-economic standing, such that a wealthier and more prominent citizen sets a standard for those who have attained lesser degrees of success (conceived socio-economically).<sup>3</sup> This dynamic of large-scale relativism becomes more complex when we consider the extent to which one individual's rise always affects another's, or may even be dependent on another's decline. MacLeod notes the tension in this dynamic, describing an atmosphere in which opportunity exists for all, but also a labor structure that forces the subjugation of the poor for the service of the rich. She writes,

But the super-rich were not the only people who prospered, one can argue; the average immigrant fared better in America than he or she would have back home. There is no doubt that immigration to the United States brought opportunity and money to millions at all points along the economic spectrum. But there is also no doubt that the wealth of the super-rich depended in large part on cheap labor. Millions of workers remained in poverty in order that a few people might

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<sup>3</sup> This idea is succinctly presented in Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*, which serves as a quaint depiction of upper middle-class mobility and its accompanying dissatisfactions. In one passage, we are given a detailed account of some guests whom Babbitt has over for dinner. The evening is one of great frustration for Babbitt, because his guests are well below Babbitt's own social station. He tolerates their presence, therefore, but vows never to invite them over again because they are so below them. Not much later in the novel, Babbitt and his wife attend an acquaintance's home as guests, and they are treated in the same way that Babbitt treated his previous guests: the Babbitts are below the station of their hosts, and so will never be invited to return. The juxtaposition of these scenes is ironic, of course, and demonstrates the importance of *relative* social standing to people's own sense of success.

prosper. The men and women who worked in the factories, mines, and railroads of the titans had scant opportunity to exchange rags for riches; they were lucky if they could feed and clothe their children on what they earned for ten to fourteen hours of labor each day. Frugality was a necessity, not a virtue, for these workers who were exempt from the American dream.<sup>4</sup>

This dynamic is hard to reconcile, for it insists on universal opportunity for Americans within a context of forced cheap labor. Thus, while some citizens do indeed rise, their rise appears to necessitate the socio-economic decline of others.<sup>5</sup> In the end, we see that the relativist nature of success in America (that one's attainment of success is relative to oneself and others, and so endless) breeds a competitive spirit that resists the larger public ideal of universal liberty and equality.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>5</sup> J. B. Bury comments on this fact that seems to undercut the doctrine of progress in his seminal book on the subject, *The Idea of Progress*. He writes,

But against all this technical progress, with the enormous expansion of industry and commerce, dazzling to the man in the market-place when he pauses to reflect, have to be set the exploitation and sufferings of industrial workers, the distress of intense economic competition, the heavier burdens of preparation for modern war. The very increase of "material ease" seemed unavoidably to involve conditions inconsistent with universal happiness; and the communications which linked the peoples of the world together modified the methods of warfare instead of bringing peace. (Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 332)

<sup>6</sup> This is the large-scale dynamic of John Dos Passos' comprehensive *USA Trilogy*. Over the course of three novels, the narrative develops many, many protagonists who demonstrate a great deal of diversity in their *separate* American pursuits, and yet these distinct American actions are all unified under the same general American ideas of progress, success, effort, and money. In short, the trilogy demonstrates an abundance of American action, constantly reaching for the commonality amongst all the American diversity. Its context, though, is a sharply capitalist, industrially and technologically innovative, and turmoil-driven America. In describing such a world of extreme mobility, communication, and economic determination, Dos Passos creates characters

For while socio-economic definitions of individual success prevail in America, for *all* individuals, the humanitarian ideals promoted by the nation outline a very different version of political success. The American project is fundamentally a governmental experiment whose end is the promotion of a more just civil society. For this reason, the American nation outlines its larger ideals in terms of humanitarian justice: all men are *entitled* to certain rights, which they possess *by nature*, and it is the sole purpose of government to ensure that these rights are upheld. But the rights guaranteed by the American government—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, most notably—are often in direct tension with the social milieu in which the action of the American dream is accomplished. In short, the accomplishment of the American dream, for a few individuals, at times necessitates the suspension of nationally inherent rights (as when the vast majority of African Americans are literally enslaved in order to promote the success of Southern agrarianism and to generate wealthy plantation holders, for instance). We are confronted, now, with the mythemic tension that structures the American dream action: public and private models of success in America do not function together harmoniously; and yet, strangely, *both* continue to function integrally in the American consciousness.

Everett Carter describes two seminal documents that separately detail these private and public lines of pursuit, locating a model for the individual's advancement in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, and a model for social development outlined in the

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who, collectively, demonstrate this dynamic of relative and competitive American society.

Declaration of Independence. These two documents together, he writes, embody the practice of the myth:

The Declaration summarized the colonists' belief in the essential goodness of man and nature, in the value of common sense, in the ability of men everywhere—after having been put in possession of a correct knowledge of the facts—to know the truth; Franklin's *Autobiography* proclaimed the possibilities of the individual as he is organized into societies of his own making and his own choice. Together, Jefferson's Declaration and Franklin's *Autobiography* constitute the classic statements of the way in which American culture has generally made sense of the universe and of man's place in it: the *style*, the *myth*, the *dream*, the *official faith*, or whatever other terms we choose to depict the "imaginative idea which—whatever its truth—induces men to feel and act."<sup>7</sup>

Carter goes on to emphasize the very concrete meaning of these texts, first by dissecting the language of the Declaration of Independence to demonstrate that the document reads as an analytical statement of American values. The document famously identifies three very secular human rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. "Here," writes Carter, "frankly and openly, human well-being—by implication the basic fleshly, as well as spiritual delights—was idolized as the end and object of all human organization."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Benjamin Franklin made a slight alteration to the text, dropping the phrase, "We hold these truths to be sacred" in favor of the more scientifically axiomatic, "We hold these truths to be self-evident." This simple edit

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<sup>7</sup> Carter, *The American Idea*, 30-1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

loads the phrase with secular rather than spiritual idealism and firmly roots the American consciousness in the scientific (experimental and experiential) tradition. In promoting a view of humanity as innately possessed of certain inalienable rights (liberty and equality), the American government establishes a new ideal for social organization—one which sets everyone on an equal plane where they can freely pursue happiness. But general human betterment (in a social context) is always the overt goal here. In assuring the universal distribution of inherent rights, America accomplishes the existence of those very ideals, which is to say that the belief in and practice of equality breeds real equality. A belief in the inevitability and value of human *progress* erupts naturally out of this discussion, for the nation is committed to the sustained and increasing guarantee of these rights, and has been historically invested in expanding the nation's parameters for an increasingly more widespread distribution of these inherent human rights.<sup>9</sup>

Sacvan Bercovitch describes the importance of a progressive view to the formation of early American culture, in his seminal work, *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. I quote it here at length:

But we cannot begin to account for the powerful grip that the progressive viewpoint has had on the minds of Americans if we think of it only as an expression of narrow class interests. Quite apart from its manifest usefulness to enterprising capitalists, the idea of history as a record of progress was attractive

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<sup>9</sup> Because these rights are conceived as inherently *human*, rather than inherently *American*, the American nation has felt a certain entitlement—indeed, a responsibility to humanity—to guarantee, as much as possible, the universal (global) possession of these rights.

to many other Americans for many other reasons. To begin with, it was—is—intrinsically appealing. Its implicit confidence in human rationality is flattering enough but its cosmic hopefulness, when joined, as it had been by the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, with the idea of liberation from the oppressive rule of monarchs, aristocrats, and priests—which is to say, with a vision of a more just and egalitarian society—lends the idea of progress the enormously gratifying quality of unconstrained moral generosity. To believe that things are, or soon will be, getting better for most people was particularly desirable in a culture freeing itself from the strong hold of Calvinism and its tortuous, finally hypocritical way of justifying self-centered behavior. The belief in progress not only helped to assuage the guilt arising from self-concern, it gave self-advancement a warrant of innocence. In nineteenth-century America, indeed, the progressive world view provided a kind of conceptual umbrella for a large cluster of prevalent attitudes: the imperatives of the quasi-religious work ethic; the idea that equality of opportunity, or upward social mobility, was available to any industrious (white male) adult; and the distinctive millennial fantasies nurtured by evangelical Protestantism.<sup>10</sup>

Owing to a variety of historical circumstances, America was ripe for the adoption of a progressive worldview, and belief in progress consequently organizes our understanding of experience in America. The American dream, in fact, is overtly a

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<sup>10</sup> Bercovitch, *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, 40-41.

progressive ideal, for it encourages steadily increasing progress for the individual and for society.

Of course, the sense of the term “progress” here is quite specific, referring to the steadily increasing attainment of *social* human rights. The nation does not exist for the purpose of perpetual advancement of itself, but rather for the sustained guarantee that its citizens might ever approach a more naturally complete version of themselves. This is accomplished in America by an insistence on social equality, and in fact the doctrine of equality propounded in America is supposed to be the very definition of progress, according to the theorist J. B. Bury in his important book, *The Idea of Progress*. Bury describes de Tocqueville’s endorsement of equality as the new end of human progress, writing that

Among the competing theories of the time, and sharply opposed to the views of Comte, was the idea, derived from the Revolution, that the world is moving towards universal equality and the obliteration of class distinctions, that this is the true direction of Progress. This view, represented by leaders of the popular movement against the bourgeois ascendancy, derived powerful reinforcement from one of the most enlightened political thinkers of the day. The appearance of de Tocqueville’s renowned study of American democracy was the event of 1834. He was convinced that he had discovered on the other side of the Atlantic the answer to the question whether the world is tending. In American society he found that equality of conditions is the generating fact on which every other fact

depends. He concluded that equality is the goal of humanity, providentially designed.<sup>11</sup>

If we adopt de Tocqueville's perceptions of American culture, we see clearly that in executing a design of social equality (ordered towards universal liberty), America is identifying itself as a progressive nation. In the global context of Bury's study, this identification amounts to America's revision of the historical paradigm of progress. In the context of our own study here, we see that the humanitarian progressive ideal of equality is the end implied in the American dream pursuit—or at least one of them. The notion of equality is obviously in direct tension with the notion of a competitive economy and a relative sense of one's own wealth: these features depend on the disparity between individuals, not their equality. We will have to consider the dynamic engendered by the coexistence of these competing American goals.

First off, we must clarify the meaning of *equality* within this context. As a political ideal in America, equality refers to a level playing field of opportunity for all individuals, rather than a general sameness of station. Traditionally, these senses of equality have been termed "equality of opportunity" and "equality of condition."<sup>12</sup> When we make this distinction, it is intended to emphasize that all Americans are only equal in the sense that they all have an equal opportunity to pursue their innate and inalienable rights.<sup>13</sup> This does *not* mean that they will all attain the same rewards and favors for their effort; it only means that all Americans—regardless of any inherited

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<sup>11</sup> Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 315.

<sup>12</sup> As referenced in Parks, *Capitalism in Early American Literature*, 93.

<sup>13</sup> Or, in other words, all Americans have an equal opportunity to pursue the American dream.



conditions—are given an equal chance to seek success (because all are equally entitled to do so, and because the opportunities for advancement are presumably so abundant). It has long been clear that America is a land of equality of opportunity and not of condition. Andrew Jackson himself makes this distinction clear in a veto of the charter of the Bank of the United States, writing:

It is to be regretted that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes. Distinctions in society will always exist under every just government. Equality of talents, of education, or of wealth cannot be produced by human institutions. In the full enjoyment of the gifts of Heaven and the fruits of superior industry, economy, and virtue, every man is equally entitled to protection by law; but when the laws undertake to add to these natural and just advantages artificial distinctions, to grant titles, gratuities, and exclusive privileges, to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers—who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors themselves, have a right to complain of the injustice of their Government... If [government] would confine itself to equal protection, and, as Heaven does its rains, shower its favors alike on the high and the low, the rich and the poor, it would be an unqualified blessing.<sup>14</sup>

Jackson is here disparaging the practice of conferring titles, and all such similar acts of nepotism and the granting of other unfair advantages. But he is very clear, in

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<sup>14</sup> Qtd. in Parks, *Capitalism in Early American Literature*, 93.

denouncing these unjust practices, that establishing such an equality of opportunity is very different from establishing a real equality of condition.

That an equality of condition has never existed in America should be clear; the establishment of a real equality of opportunity has itself been a constant and ongoing struggle. Esmond Wright nicely characterizes the complex duality of supposed and real equality in America, highlighting some of the key discrepancies that stand out in American history. He writes,

In the New World as in the Old, equality meant equality of chance, not equality of reward; diversity of racial and economic origins could produce unrest and violence, as in the lynching of Negroes or in the War Between the States; nor has equality of opportunity been matched by easy acceptance of differences of color or of religion or of taste; the price of diversity of origins has been to stress conformity rather than individualism, the normal rather than the eccentric.<sup>15</sup>

This is an interesting conclusion that Wright draws out of the American emphasis on equality: it breeds conformity. And yet, he insists, it breeds a unique brand of multicultural conformity, for “where differences [between cultures] could be reconciled, the life of the nation has been deepened and enriched and made distinct from any other by the infinite variety of its component stocks.”<sup>16</sup> It seems that Wright is refraining from adopting a definite position here, for he emphasizes a kind of “diverse conformity,” if we can understand such a thing. Suffice it to say, for this discussion, that the sense of equality in America is one of *opportunity*, and that the promotion of

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<sup>15</sup> Wright, *The American Dream*, 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

equality of opportunity has the effect of consolidating citizens towards a unified purpose.<sup>17</sup>

Because socially progressive movement in America is always towards a supposed “better” (human) position, progress in America is a *virtue* by which humans fulfill their natural ends. Economic prosperity and material luxury are not the progressive ends implied here – at least not directly. This enterprise is more idealistic, privileging increased equality and liberty as the hallmarks of “natural” progress. And yet, in assuring a right to the pursuit of happiness as well, the Declaration of Independence makes a strikingly vague statement. Perhaps we can assume, given that the Declaration is steeped in the classical tradition, that happiness carries a definite Aristotelian reference to a composed and dutiful life of virtue—happiness is the tenuous balance between vicious extremes. In failing to really set a definitional boundary for the term, however, “happiness” becomes no more than “one’s personal

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<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Chenoweth argues, in *The American Dream of Success*, that the American success ethic clearly privileges individuals who are successful, and so encourages supremacy over equality. He writes,

Why do so many citizens fail to see the elitist orientation of success ideologists? At its root, the success ethic encourages supremacy, not equality. Articles in *Reader’s Digest* and *The Saturday Evening Post* regularly praised successful figures who rose “to the top” or were “the best in the world.” To be sure, Americans point with pride to their tendency to root for the underdog. In doing so, however, they reveal an interest in the struggling achiever rather than the downtrodden. If the underdog succeeds, he is praised; if he fails, he is soon forgotten. (Chenoweth, *The American Dream of Success*, 10)

It is not really surprising that a success ethic would privilege the successful; this only seems natural. But, in privileging those who do accomplish their socio-economic goals, the success ethic does not promote supremacy over equality. Rather, it has consistently used success stories in order to stress the importance of general equality of opportunity. At any rate, failure to succeed does not strip one of their equal opportunity to pursue success.

idea of happiness,” and this is the point at which material fortune can easily become emblematic of real, American progress.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, absolute luxury, social position, and financial freedom can easily be taken for the virtuous conclusion of human progress—hence these trappings hold such importance for contemporary American culture.<sup>19</sup>

Let us be careful, however, not to completely demonize the socio-economic paradigm of the American dream, whatever social evils have no doubt sprung from it. As we saw in our discussion of the self-made man, concrete wealth is not necessarily at odds with the nineteenth-century moral American hero. Rather, wealth almost functions as a testament to his heroism and as an indication of his eternal salvation. This is because, in the nineteenth century, wealth is rooted in the ethic of the industrious worker. George Cotkin discusses a turn-of-the-century paradigm shift that impacts our discussion here, for it involves a cultural re-conception of the success-as-wealth paradigm. Cotkin writes,

The success ideal, whether in the hands of Carnegie, Alger, Conwell, or Whitaker, was predicated on an image of American society as open to change yet

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<sup>18</sup> As we have seen over and over again, the basic ambiguity inherent in the American dream is what allows myriad versions of the myth to persist. Socio-economic progress is one dominant version of the myth.

<sup>19</sup> We see a hint of this transition—from ideal to material paradigms of progress—in the alteration of “property” for “the pursuit of happiness” in early drafts of the Declaration of Independence. The 1774 Declaration of Colonial Rights enumerates “life, liberty, and property” as the inalienable human rights guaranteed by the government. Of course, when the Declaration of Independence appears, these rights have been revised to read, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Replacing a natural right to property with a natural right to happiness implies some similarity between the two terms: in some sense, property ownership was identifiable with the pursuit of happiness. The pursuit of happiness is ultimately used, presumably, because it is a more inclusive term. We must be aware, though, that the pursuit of happiness in this context does not merely connote a humanitarian ideal; it *also* must connote a material one.

dependent on fixed moral values. These merchants of success literature might be seen as having pandered to a crass materialism that some cultural custodians found at the root of American cultural decay. But actually, these authors stressed the social utility of wealth. Their beliefs were firmly rooted in the ethos of the producer. It was the responsibility of both the capitalist and the worker, they maintained, to give fair value for the money invested in either products or labor. Pride came from production; production was the source of pleasure and wealth. Success did not come overnight; it was a result of carefully cultivated habits, along with a dose of luck. But these ideals, rooted in the producer ethic, were already under siege by the late 1880s as a new ethic, based on consumerism, gained popularity and became a cultural force of immense proportions.<sup>20</sup>

We will discuss this new ethic of consumer culture in the next chapter, but for now let us concern ourselves with the sense of wealth that inheres in the nineteenth century. We see in Cotkin's discussion that, for the early proponents of this success-as-wealth ethic, wealth appears as the very natural result of moral effort. It is not the sole end of the American's pursuit, but neither is it a negligible one. Rather, wealth is the natural reward for industrious labor, and the wealthy individual (who acquires his fortune according to the moral paradigm of the self-made man) will use his wealth for the general benefit of society (ideally). Whether or not this paradigm is met in fact, the persistence of it as an ideal attests to a dominant understanding of wealth in nineteenth-century America. When wealth becomes the direct and primary object of the American

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<sup>20</sup> Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism*, 115-16.

dream pursuit in the twentieth century, this is due in large part to this nineteenth-century understanding of it that sustains a sense of wealth's inherent respectability.

We see these material goals taking precedence more clearly when we survey the individualistic statement of American idealism found in Franklin's *Autobiography*, which establishes the paradigm for the self-made man narrative in America. Franklin repeatedly emphasizes human industry as the hallmark virtue of the American success story; notably, such success is marked by social affluence and material prosperity. We will not give great attention to Franklin's text here, as it has been discussed in a previous chapter, but it is necessary to emphasize the importance of Franklin's autobiography to the national paradigm for the attainment of success. If the Declaration of Independence is idealistic, then Franklin's *Autobiography* is no less so. Clearly, though, these texts belong to wholly different genres (the one being a public national statement, the other a personal narrative). As such, they accomplish very different ends, but they nevertheless work in harmony towards the production of a unified national project—as Carter says, the one document outlining a social mission, and the other an individual's concrete pursuit of what that mission delineates. The Declaration, then, asserts a set of standards ordered to the accomplishment of social betterment via an emphasis on individual betterment (often figured in terms of socio-economic prosperity), while Franklin's *Autobiography* details a historical individual's material rise, which rise is accompanied with appropriate acts of social benevolence.

Franklin was himself acutely aware that private material reward is an essential spur to industry, and so is ultimately necessary for general social well-being. Lynn A.

Parks quotes Franklin, from a 1784 letter to Benjamin Vaughan, in her discussion of the topic:

Suppose we include in the Definition of Luxury all unnecessary Expence, and then let us consider whether Laws to prevent such Expence are possible to be executed in a great Country, and whether, if they could be executed, our People generally would be happier, or even richer. Is not the hope of being one day able to purchase and enjoy Luxuries a great Spur to Labour and Industry? May not Luxury, therefore, produce more than it consumes, if without such a Spur People would be, as they are naturally enough included to be, lazy and indolent?<sup>21</sup>

Parks comments: “This sentiment echoes the hard lesson learned by the leaders of the Jamestown and Plymouth colonies, the lesson that self-interest is a strong driving force which needs to be properly harnessed for the good of both the individual and the community.”<sup>22</sup> According to the ideal standard, personal material reward drives the individual to increase production, and that increased production contributes to the general good of society. Hence, in theory, the national paradigm guarantees an individual’s *right* to self-betterment, while the exemplary self-made man text emphasizes the individual’s responsibility to social betterment—the end result being a simultaneous private and public progressive movement. This harmonious socio-political ideal, however, is seldom actually accomplished. Rather, mis-interpretations of these ideals encourage an individual to adopt completely self-interested modes of socio-economic increase, while the larger political ideal of social betterment tends to

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Parks, *Capitalism in Early American Literature*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

denounce individual success, which so often is only reached at the socio-economic cost of others. We are confronted with a problem, quite simply put, of whether to privilege progress on an individual or a social scale, since these ends are so frequently contrary. The American dream, of course, casually asserts that they are not contrary, but rather that they harmoniously work together towards an increasingly better society, which society is composed of increasingly better citizens. This public/private tension, which the myth of the American dream calls no tension at all, is the primary mythemic relation relevant to our discussion of progress as the prevalent action of the American dream.

The tension that may exist between a public good and a personal success is the single most disruptive quality of the American dream, for it is at this juncture that even as one American dreamer advances towards fulfillment, an entire group of collective strivers must then fail as a direct consequence of the individual's success. Indeed, each citizen's progress has a definite impact on the whole socio-economic order of things, either locally or, in the case of extreme increase, nationally or even globally. Frank Norris explores this peculiar nature of consequential success with the coherent and impressive symbol of the Chicago wheat-trading pit in his aptly titled novel, *The Pit*. Norris' novel consists of two narrative actions and both revolve around respective metaphorical "pits." While Curtis Jadwin negotiates the economic terrain of the wheat trade (figured prominently as a sucking whirlpool), his wife, Laura, circles the emotional abyss of her increasingly solitary married life. We will concern ourselves, for the purposes of this discussion, with the narrative action of Curtis Jadwin.



Jadwin is consistently and clearly depicted as the novel's hero—as an *American* hero—for his brilliant ability to single-handedly gain and manage control of the entire American wheat industry. His virtue (if we call it such) is, quite simply, economic savvy. As Ernest Marchand writes, “Jadwin is unquestionably the hero of *The Pit*. However Norris deplored the economic consequences of speculation, he could not withhold his admiration from Jadwin for his boldness, his energy, his resource, and the magnificent scope of his designs.”<sup>23</sup> Jadwin's action throughout the novel, while it is always tending more and more to his ultimate downfall, is marked by terrific, extraordinary rise. This material ascension is concretely embodied in the rising value of wheat, such that the cost of wheat comes to signify Jadwin's real value as an individual. Put another way, the novel sets up a one-to-one correspondence between the value of wheat and the measure of Jadwin's life, such that he is *entirely* defined by his material standing. (Incidentally, the fact that Jadwin's career functions in this way is the direct and immediate cause of his wife's own ongoing flirtation with tragedy.) The first half of the novel sets the stage for Jadwin's great feat—cornering the wheat market—by demonstrating his more minor, always successful, trades, through which he amasses his great fortune. Indeed, the first half of the novel paints a lovely portrait of American success, securing for Jadwin a fortune comparable to any of the wealthiest of Americans. Having amassed this great fortune, and having all of the appropriate trappings to signify it (Gretry, Jadwin's right-hand broker, aptly remarks on Jadwin's great Central

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<sup>23</sup> Marchand, *Frank Norris*, 169.

Park house, “I suppose, now, it all represents a pretty big pot of money”<sup>24</sup>), he sets out for even greater success. Progress, in the American spirit, must be unending, and so while Jadwin already has every material luxury he could possibly attain, his “work” is never finished. Jadwin is not defined by the materiality of his great fortune, which is why his character is so interesting. Rather, he is defined by the far less material, far more constructed and slippery, value of wheat. What this essentially means is that the value of wheat is not representative for Jadwin— in the sense that it does not represent things he can purchase or otherwise do with money. He already has everything he could buy. Rather, the value of wheat is directly indicative of the total worth of Jadwin’s whole life. Hence cornering the wheat market, which is financially unnecessary for Jadwin, is his single greatest accomplishment. William B. Dillingham argues that Jadwin “speculates not because he wants money but because of his instinctive urge to gamble and, through chance, control and master.”<sup>25</sup> Dillingham is right to emphasize *control* as the primary object of Jadwin’s enterprise (and Jadwin is not obsessed with gambling (speculation) for its own sake, but rather because it brings him this control and power). The rising value of wheat—which is the rising value of Jadwin himself—comes from the exercise of this power, and so Jadwin’s corner of the wheat market essentially allows him socio-economic self-determination.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Norris, *The Pit*, 115.

<sup>25</sup> Dillingham, *Frank Norris*, 81.

<sup>26</sup> Socio-economic self-determination is arguably the greatest accomplishment that an American dreamer can boast, for it represents the pinnacle of success detached from external influence. In other words, it amounts to socio-economic *freedom*, because it assigns a status that is not relatively determined.

Jadwin's successful wheat enterprise is a direct result of his ability to identify a clear opportunity and to act on it. An abundant wheat crop drives the price of wheat down (from roughly ninety cents per bushel to sixty cents). Jadwin is able to anticipate that this abundant wheat crop will be followed by a terribly sparse one, and so he acts quickly and diligently to purchase—all on his own—the entire May wheat crop in America. When wheat fails in nearly every other country around the world, Jadwin then holds a grossly controlling interest in the entire global supply of wheat, literally keeping huge warehouses full of the wheat that he now owns. Consequently, the price of wheat steadily climbs from sixty cents per bushel to a dollar and fifty cents, for Jadwin now controls the wheat crop and may set the price wherever he sees fit:

Then at last the news of the great corner, authoritative, definite, went out over all the country, and promptly the figure and name of Curtis Jadwin loomed suddenly huge and formidable in the eye of the public. There was no wheat on the Chicago market. He, the great man, the "Napolean of La Salle Street," had it all. He sold it or hoarded it, as suited his pleasure. He dictated the price to those men who must buy it of him to fill their contracts. His hand was upon the indicator of the wheat dial of the Board of Trade, and he moved it though as many or as few of the degrees of the circle as he chose.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Norris, *The Pit*, 359.

This moment in the novel—the point at which Jadwin has a genuine and indisputable control of the nation’s wheat—marks the point of Jadwin’s ultimate greatness.<sup>28</sup> As wheat reaches its inevitable ceiling of value, though, so also does Jadwin. There is no place to go except for downward, for Jadwin cannot continue to increase the cost of wheat (new crops begin to come in, and he cannot possibly purchase all of this new wheat<sup>29</sup>), and nor can he sell off the entire stock he has at a profit. At the height of his success, Jadwin cannot see the ceiling. He remarks to Gretry:

...I’m going to swing this deal right over into July. Think I’m going to let go now, when I’ve just begun to get a real grip on things? A pretty fool I’d look like to get out now—even if I could. Get out? How are we going to unload our big line

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<sup>28</sup> Jadwin’s great accomplishment here is rooted in the symbol of the wheat-trading pit, a symbol that Barbara Hochman finds is “among the most vital symbols in Norris’s work.” She writes,

The Wheat Pit may be taken, first of all, as the ground upon which both Jadwin and Laura struggle for a form through which to affirm and stabilize themselves. For Jadwin, obviously, the Pit—the actual, literal Wheat Pit at the Board of Trade—becomes the arena within which he tests his capacity to predict and impose his will upon the future price of wheat. He would second-guess and dominate “the very Earth itself” (374) and by so doing would assert the incomparable superiority of his knowledge, his clarity of vision, and his capacity to exercise control over men and events. (Hochman, *The Art of Frank Norris*, 99, 101)

In this sense the pit, which is an overtly tragic symbol, is the ground on which Jadwin attempts to exercise absolute socio-economic power. Jadwin’s action represents a kind of culminating American dream action; it fails because in the end, as always, this kind of *final* success recedes away from Jadwin.

<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the new crops coming in are abundant. Because Jadwin has driven up the price of wheat, he has created a huge economic boon across the nation. Consequently, wheat farmers are getting wealthier every day, and so they continue to plant *more* wheat. As a result, there is simply too much wheat for Jadwin to purchase on his own.

of wheat without breaking the price on us? No, sir, not much. This market is going up to two dollars.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, the market cannot sustain a wheat value of two dollars per bushel, and with the onset of new crops Jadwin's competitors are able to work together to drive the price of wheat down to a more standard cost, which amounts to the total devastation of Jadwin's financial standing, leaving him with absolutely nothing. In the true American spirit, Jadwin and his wife desert their extravagant home and their many possessions and luxuries, heading out West for a fresh start, and so the novel concludes.

The time during which Jadwin holds a corner on the wheat market, though, has abundant and vast consequences on the national and global economies in which he is operating. While Jadwin's economic corner amounts to certain devastation for the wealthy traders in the pit, it amounts to something quite different for the average American citizen. Jadwin's corner is accompanied with a huge economic boon throughout the nation, for the value of wheat is now so high that those who grow and sell it are doing wonderfully. One representative of the wheat growers enters the pit to give an address:

He explained that all through the Middle West, all through the wheat belts, a great wave of prosperity was rolling because of Jadwin's corner. Mortgages were being paid off, new and improved farming implements were being sought, new areas seeded, new live stock acquired. The men were buying buggies again, the women parlour melodeons, houses and homes were going up—in short, the

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<sup>30</sup> Norris, *The Pit*, 371.

entire farming population of the Middle West was being daily enriched. In a letter that Jadwin received about this time from an old fellow living in “Bates Corners,” Kansas, occurred the words,—

“—and, sir, you must know that not a night passes that my little girl, now going on seven, sir, and the brightest in her class in the county seat grammar school, does not pray to have God bless Mister Jadwin, who helped papa save the farm.”<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly, here, Jadwin’s appropriation of such extraordinary wealth really does mark him as an American hero—both in terms of his displaying typically American qualities of business and economic heroism, and by virtue of his having “saved” the majority of the American farming population.

This dynamic of large-scale economic consequence is precisely that with which we are concerned here. Jadwin is an individual success-seeker in the midst of a collective society of similar success-seekers, and a rampantly capitalist economic structure dominates these characters’ actions. Consequently, Jadwin is at once a great American hero of the people and a monstrous threat to the consolidated wealth of the nation. His power over the wheat market is, in effect, a power to make poor men wealthy and wealthy men poor, and in a few instances he exercises this power directly on specific individuals. This large-scale economic fluidity is markedly American, so that our American hero (Jadwin himself) is one who can single-handedly alter the value of a resource at his personal discretion. Jadwin is not merely powerful because he is

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 360-1.

incredibly wealthy; rather, his very power rests in his control of the wealth all around him. And, true to the stock history of the American hero, Jadwin's own personal rise to extravagant wealth has its humblest roots in mid-Western farm life. As Joseph McElrath writes, "Curtis is a country boy who came to Chicago for the resolute pursuit of the American Dream. He has made a killing in real-estate ventures and, still a young man, is the verification of the Franklinesque success myth."<sup>32</sup> It is, then, in a typically (i.e. paradigmatic) "American" way that Jadwin rises from impoverished obscurity to renowned wealth, and onward to absolute control of his trading industry. It is the capitalist economic system that allows for this rise, and it is in the capitalist economic system that we find the overarching tension between public and private interests.

The character of Jadwin remains consistently sympathetic throughout the novel—we hope for his success and mourn his inevitable failure. Written with direct reference to classical models of the tragic hero, Jadwin's character comes to embody an economic vision of America that ultimately cannot be sustained. Jadwin is instantly recognizable as a great man, "though not preeminently good;" he has a distinct and defining tragic flaw, which amounts to economic hubris (or pride); and his great fall is not due to vice or depravity, but to a great error in judgment. Like the classical tragic hero, he is relatable because he is at once great and flawed. As Marchand describes him, "Unlike Shelgrim [of Norris' *The Octopus*] he is no austere and inscrutable figure, no shadowy presence everywhere felt as the moving power behind events but seldom seen. He is exhibited in a human and sympathetic light with all his foibles and weaknesses;

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<sup>32</sup> McElrath, *Frank Norris Revisited*, 110.

we hear his familiar speech, we see him in his shirtsleeves.”<sup>33</sup> Because his character functions according to a classical model of tragedy, Jadwin’s actions similarly carry appropriate social ramifications (in the sense that social tragedy is classically embodied and explored through the dramatic action of a tragic hero). Traditionally, the tragic hero is one who heroically challenges the forces of fate (however “fate” comes to be socially embodied), and ultimately loses. Norris’ novel appropriately assigns the role of fate to the American economy (to which all citizens are subject), and locates a coherent tragic abyss in the symbol of the wheat-trading pit. The classical mechanism according to which the novel functions imbues Jadwin’s action with significant social relevance, such that his corner of the wheat market and subsequent collapse attests to the fatalistic reality of the American capitalist economy. In the end, Jadwin cannot gain absolute control and completely restructure the distribution of wealth at his own personal discretion. While his powerful effort to do so may mark him for greatness, his inevitable failure is a concrete attestation to the monolithic economy according to which success and failure are simultaneously made possible.

Jadwin’s enterprise fails because it directly challenges the force that governs American socio-cultural experience. According to the extensive symbolism of the novel, a challenge to the American economy really amounts to a direct challenge of classical fate. The capitalist economy in America is thereby implicated as deterministic and unsympathetic, and entirely unmovable. But Jadwin’s tragic brilliance flashes for a moment on the stage of the wheat-trading pit, and he does attain the status of greatness

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<sup>33</sup> Marchand, *Frank Norris*, 162.



even as he fails monumentally. What his action demonstrates is the structure governing successful progress in America—upward mobility occurs according to the stringent economic rules of the American capitalist system, according to which one individual's progress will always, at least in part, determine another's. Jadwin exercises a position of power, for a little while, and so stands as a representation of the failed attempt to defeat this system. Other literary representations have centered their focus on victims of the socio-economic system, and in doing so have sought to explore the socio-economic realities that structure personal progress towards success.

This persistent tension between personal (i.e.: material) success and social betterment is explored in detail in Edith Wharton's 1905 novel, *The House of Mirth*. Lily Bart craves a high degree of financial independence that is blatantly unavailable to her as a single woman. Quite simply, her socially gendered position excludes her from her very American aspirations. The ostensible tragedy of the novel lies in Lily's failure to secure a respectable and wealthy husband, but the real tragedy of the novel lies much deeper. Lily Bart is tragic, not because she declines the attentions of multiple gentlemen, but because she actively resists the social structures that deny her self-sufficiency and ultimately fails in that resistance. She openly seeks wealth and status—there is no question about that—but she challenges the social standards that will allow her these things only by marriage.<sup>34</sup> As Katherine Joslin so neatly summarizes: "If a woman chooses to discard the usual plot of marriage and her subsequent economic dependence

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<sup>34</sup> Diana Trilling writes that *The House of Mirth* "is nothing if not a novel about social stratification and the consequences of breaking the taboos of class." Trilling, "The House of Mirth Revisited," 105.

on a man, then what? Exactly who is she? In more practical terms, how is she to earn her own way? [. . .] The further question for her [Lily], for women in general, is: If not marriage, then what?"<sup>35</sup> The answer to this question is unsatisfactory, for Lily's character is written on the cusp of a shift in the social hierarchy of her day (evidenced through such characters as Rosedale, whose sudden ascendancy into elite society challenges the whole notion of "old" money and respectability), and Wharton really sees no current options for a Lily Bart, outside of marriage. Hence her challenge of society ends in confrontation with a tragic abyss—the dark mass of unknown experience that lies outside of high New York society opens up to swallow Lily whole and crush her. Lily's most prevalent desires, for economic prosperity and social independence, are mutually exclusive given her position, and yet they are so bound up together that she is simply not interested in one without the other. The object of her pursuit resembles the reconciled versions of private and public success in America. The problem is that no such reconciled version prevails in America, and Lily is wholly unable to choose.

Now, it is necessary to mention that Lily Bart is often not the most sympathetic character. She flashes from one mood or sensibility to the next in a matter of several paragraphs, she alters the course of her actions almost constantly, and she really has done nothing to deserve the financial independence to which she feels so entitled. In a rather harsh (but realistic) characterization of Lily, Maureen Howard argues that she "lives at the edge of permissible behavior" and is "hardly an innocent." Indeed, we

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<sup>35</sup> Joslin, *Edith Wharton*, 50, 53.

must not be reluctant to assign some responsibility for Lily's tragedy to Lily herself. Howard continues,

Her fate would not concern us if she were [innocent]. *The House of Mirth* becomes a forceful moral tale because Wharton reveals Lily as conventionally corrupt, jaded, snobbish, aging, yet an exceptionally beautiful and quirky product of her society. A sport of nature, she is just unconventional enough in her self-awareness, and her contempt for the pleasurable life she is addicted to, not to consolidate her gains, consistently revealing her flaw of irresolution. Lily Bart is unwise and uncertain in estimating her worth, investing heavily in the ornamental woman she was fated to be, given the accident of her birth, placing little value on the useful woman she might have chosen to be against the odds.<sup>36</sup>

Howard is correct in her characterization of Lily, and these qualities of her character do make her interesting if not sympathetic. Even still, the novel attempts to position Lily's plight in a sympathetic light, for she is, after all, a clear product of her social circumstances, and if she is less than ideal, it is the very social structures which she seeks to challenge that have made her so. Lily's tragedy is that she has been created by social institutions to play a purely ornamental role in a world of elaborate finery. She has been conditioned to desire a set of material luxuries that she cannot attain without surrendering her independence, and yet the driving force behind her desire for material luxury is the social independence that it could afford her. Caught in this societal

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<sup>36</sup> Howard, "The Bachelor and the Baby," 141.

paradox, Lily Bart experiences firsthand the cruel unreality of the American dream paradigm—at least insofar as it is exclusive of female pursuit.

It is the character of Selden who most clearly embodies the unmarried and financially independent lifestyle that Lily so desires, but even his life is ultimately unsatisfying to her. At the very opening of the novel, Lily meets Selden at the train station and visits his apartment—a complex scene that sets the tone of the novel's ensuing action. Her first words upon entering Selden's apartment—spoken just after she sinks into a “shabby” leather chair (this word, “shabby,” comes to stand for Lily's great financial fears)—are as follows: “How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman.”<sup>37</sup> Lily's statement here summarizes the whole tension she feels; Selden's apartment attests to his financial and social independence, yet it is only available to him because he is a man. This gendered distinction is important to the novel, for it is the basis of Lily's plight. In the context of the American dream, Lily occupies an excluded position as a woman. Joslin makes this point clear:

As perhaps the best social historian of her day, Wharton studies the phenomenon of marriage in turn-of-the-century capitalist America, where the male barter to own a female and the female negotiates to secure a male. The novel presents the dilemma of the single woman, a capitalist commodity, who must earn her social place by enticing a wealthy male into marriage.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Joslin, *Edith Wharton*, 52-53.

According to Joslin's classification, the female figure is no more than an *object* within the American dream paradigm in this historical moment, and so she is not free to pursue the American dream from within the traditional subject position. Lily's attempt to accomplish her ideal, despite her societal lack of a subject position, does mark her character for greatness. Her failure, in accordance with established tragic models, is not unexpected.<sup>39</sup>

As Lily and Selden's conversation continues, Selden suggests the character of Gerty Farish, a single woman who has her very own New York flat. Meant to model a life that is open to Lily, Gerty's style of independence is wholly unacceptable to Lily, because her life is inundated with that "shabbiness" that Lily so detests. Lily remarks that "she has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap. I should hate that, you know."<sup>40</sup> No, the life of Gerty Farish is far too poor and shabby for Lily's socially refined tastes. And yet, while she can admire Selden and even envy his social (male) position, even his lifestyle

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<sup>39</sup> Trilling describes Lily's conflict as one between her practical good sense (material) and the pull of her spirit (ideal):

It is clear that what Mrs. Wharton is captured by in Lily Bart is her ambiguity of purpose, the conflict between her practical good sense and the pull of spirit. And what makes Lily a heroine for the reader—one of the greatly appealing heroines of fiction, worthy of association with Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina—is the ultimate triumph of spirit over good sense, even though the transcendence guarantees her destruction. (Trilling, "*The House of Mirth Revisited*," 109)

We can read Trilling's analysis, if we reframe it slightly, in terms of the American dream. This material/ideal tension that Trilling locates in Lily is an echo of the same tension contained in this aspect of the American dream's action. In attempting to resolve this tension, and in finally not succumbing to the societal pressures of respectable marriage, Lily becomes a great tragic heroine in the tradition of the American dream.

<sup>40</sup> Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 5.

is inappropriate for a woman of Lily's tastes and sophistication. Uninterested in marrying for wealth, Selden can nevertheless travel in lofty social circles because his masculinity affords him a certain freedom to do so. Lily remarks,

"Ah, there's the difference—a girl must [marry], a man may if he chooses." She surveyed him critically. "Your coat's a little shabby—but who cares? It doesn't keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like; they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop—and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership."<sup>41</sup>

The expectations to which Lily here refers are the loftiest of feminine social standards of the time, and they simply cannot be met without an incredibly substantial disposable income. As Lily herself puts it, "you know I am horribly poor—and very expensive."<sup>42</sup>

Notably, Selden is not very sympathetic to Lily's plight. She requires a great deal of money, yes, but she is and has been one of the finest, most elegant and desirable candidates for marriage among her social set. But that is precisely her problem—she quite literally embodies the whole feminine paradigm to which she is so resistant, which makes that paradigm very difficult to resist. The novel consistently insists that Lily has been raised to serve no practical purpose whatsoever; she is meant to be purely ornamental, and she is meant only for respectable marriage. Hence Selden refers to

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 8.

marriage as her *vocation*.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the attitude her mother had adopted after the loss of the Bart family fortune speaks directly to this upbringing. We are told,

Only one thought consoled her [Lily's mother], and that was the contemplation of Lily's beauty. She studied it with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance. It was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt. She watched it jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian; and she tried to instill into the latter a sense of the responsibility that such a charge involved.<sup>44</sup>

In this attitude—an attitude implicitly adopted by the majority of Lily's social set—Lily is the crowning asset of some as yet unrealized (but grand) fortune. She cannot resist expensive luxury and social prominence because the very nature of her character demands these things.

Unfortunately for Lily, marriage is the only means she has of attaining extravagant wealth, and "marriageability" is the only skill she possesses. Towards the end of the novel—after Lily has been disinherited by her aunt and expelled from her social circle—she takes up in a dingy apartment and tries her hand at manual labor. She is shortly dismissed from her position as seamstress, however, owing to her inefficiency—she simply lacks any professional ability. Our narrator reflects,

She had learned by experience that she had neither the aptitude nor the moral constancy to remake her life on new lines, to become a worker among workers

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 34.

and let the world of luxury and pleasure sweep by her unregarded. [. . . ] Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight [. . . ]<sup>45</sup>

If we now return our attention to the American dream, we can see how Lily's aspirations and ideals of success contribute to our discussion. The duality inherent in the mainstream definition of success in America is the very duality that Lily cannot reconcile.

In one passage of the novel, Selden straightforwardly asks Lily to define her understanding of success, to which she replies: "Why, to get as much as one can out of life, I suppose. It's a relative quality, after all."<sup>46</sup> Lily's answer is vague at best, but this is unsurprising. She knows full well what she can achieve by grace of her beauty and social sophistication, but she cannot equate the attainment of wealth and status with success because the means of attaining these things—through marriage—is prohibitive to her in its own way. Selden counters her statement with his own, far more liberal, definition of success: "'My idea of success,' he said, 'is personal freedom.'" When asked to elaborate—freedom from what?, wonders Lily—Selden continues: "From everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit—that's what I call success."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



Abstract in its own way, Selden's definition is exactly the kind of statement we are accustomed to hearing in regards to the American dream. Rooted in an ideal of personal freedom, the American dream purports that success is measured according to one's increasing independence from these material accidents that Selden references. In Lily's case, these material accidents are none other than wealth and status, and we see as Lily and Selden's conversation continues that the greatest difference in these two characters is how they perceive wealth and status. For Selden, this sense of freedom directly implies that one need not be wealthy or socially affluent in order to be successful, so long as they are free from an immobilizing concern over these things. Selden's own life—as represented consistently through the novel—attests to the viability of his position. Lily, however, sees the matter quite differently. She summarily states that “the only way not to think about money is to have a great deal of it.”<sup>48</sup> Here is the striking difference in Selden and Lily's positions, and Lily's view essentially determines the tragic path that she will follow.

Much of the tension generated by the American dream lies in the frequent discrepancy between the humanitarian ideal and the practical application of that ideal. Selden is able to inhabit his “republic of the spirit” because his understanding of the ideal has not been sullied by experience of the real world. Lily, on the other hand, has been raised to be dependent on wealth and status, and she cannot conceive of an ideal of success that is not innately tied to the possession of these things. But it is Lily's ongoing contact with Selden that ultimately ruins her, for he spurs in her the desire for

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 71.

self-sufficient happiness that is not dependent on outward trappings, even while she refuses to relinquish her dependency on these outward trappings. According to Irving Howe, Lily's dilemma can be boiled down to a problem of taste. He writes that "Lily Bart is a victim of taste, both good and bad: she has a natural taste for moral and esthetic refinements which causes her to be repelled by the world of the rich, and she has an acquired taste for luxury that can be satisfied only in that world."<sup>49</sup> As a result, Lily is unable to sacrifice herself to a gentleman in marriage, and yet she cannot be happy without the financial and social prestige of such a marriage. Lost in the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality of the American dream, Lily's career naturally ends in tragedy.<sup>50</sup>

We ought to say a few more words about Selden's conception of success, for he presents a very American idea in the "republic of the spirit," and if we are to understand Lily's failure, we must first understand the ideal that she fails to realize. Monetary wealth and social well-being are certainly implied in the American dream, but they are never stated as ends in themselves. These material accidents are just that—too concrete and "real" for the very abstract American dream ideal. The American dream merely promises an equal *opportunity* for personal and social betterment; it does not define a set a concrete goals, nor does it suggest any practical paths for the

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<sup>49</sup> Howe, "A Reading of *The House of Mirth*," 124.

<sup>50</sup> Some might argue that Lily Bart finds redemption at the conclusion of the novel. Others, no doubt, might find quite the opposite if they read her death as suicide. For the purposes of this discussion, I am avoiding the question as it is irrelevant. Lily's predominant mood and understanding in the novel characterize an American attitude, regardless of what she does later, and we are concerned here with that dominant characterization of her.

attainment of such goals. If it did so, then it would be easy enough to point to countless instances in which the American dream has failed, time and again. Lily believes, throughout the novel, that she is entitled to physical luxury of the highest order. We cannot blame her too much for this, for her life's education has taught her this lesson and she has been bred to occupy no other surroundings. Nevertheless, the American dream has made her no such promise, and her tragedy does not attest to any flaw in the American paradigm. Indeed, Lily passes up many, many opportunities for "successful" marriage; she is simply not interested in the compromise. To be sure, Lily's failure is no one else's fault, and if she is a victim she is victimized by her own refusal to compromise mutually exclusive values. Lily's America prohibits her from having Selden's lifestyle, because of her sex, but we know full well that Selden's limited means and social standing would always be inadequate for her. Lily's tragedy is finally a result of her upbringing and conditioning; it is not a result of an unfulfilled American promise.

Whereas Lily's action highlights the limitations of her sex in light in of her need for extravagant wealth and luxury, and thereby draws out the discrepancy between Lily's social situation and her personal one, Toni Morrison's most recent novel, *A Mercy* (2008), attempts to situate the large scale social institution of slavery in the context of one man's very early American dream. Morrison demonstrates that one man's material rise directly affects the racial and classist paradigms that are just beginning to develop around him, such that his American dream action, which is his upward mobilization, greatly contributes to the institutionalization of racism and slavery. In this sense,

Morrison means her protagonist to be representative, and her novel develops the social ramifications of an individual's material rise.

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* is unique to her canon of novels, though it certainly continues the development of an earlier idea in her work. I mean here the figure of *memory*, most elaborately explored in her novel *Beloved*, but at least indirectly present in all her novels.<sup>51</sup> Morrison's work has been concerned with the memory of an intensely racialized (and all too frequently racist) memory of America's history. In *Beloved*, she traces with intense narrative detail the personal ramifications of slavery itself, gesturing all the while towards the more public implications of that private experience. In *A Mercy*, Morrison's project follows this governing idea down a different course, reaching back before the institutionalization of slavery and the regional social structure that is founded on it, to a generative moment of racism in the raw American wilderness. Her novel is a struggle to remember those things that have been lost to memory, those experiences that generated a long-standing system whose realities must consistently be recalled, but which are themselves beyond the scope of recorded history. As such, *A Mercy* is an imaginative response to the demands of a cultural memory and seeks to re-

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<sup>51</sup> Marilyn Mobley finds that Morrison's *Beloved* adapts the inherited form of the slave narrative in order to more fully represent slave experience for a contemporary audience, and in order to reposition that experience within the context of memory. She writes,

I would like to suggest that the intertextual relationship between *Beloved* and the slave narratives—the genre that began African-American literary tradition in prose—offers significant interpretative possibilities for entering the hermeneutic circle of this novel. More specifically, I would like to argue that Morrison uses the trope of memory to revise the genre of the slave narrative and thereby to make the slave experience it inscribes more accessible to contemporary readers. (Mobley, "A Different Remembering," 69)

*A Mercy* continues this same tradition that Mobley is addressing in *Beloved*; it is a tradition that runs through much of Morrison's work.

create American history in light of the vision explored consistently in each of Morrison's preceding novels.

*A Mercy* tells a story of early American identity formation (at once personal and national), through which social structures emerge and relations between individuals are established (these relations being largely based on invented classist distinctions). At the center of the novel are the personal narratives of four women living on Jacob Vaark's early farm settlement: Jacob's wife, Rebekka; and his three "slaves": Lina (a native-American adoptee), Sorrow (a mongrel girl who is given to Jacob), and Florens (a young slave whom Jacob accepts in partial payment of a debt owed him). Jacob Vaark's narrative contextualizes all the others in the story, for the women are subject to his action, and it is Jacob's narrative (and his alone) that is directly concerned with the American dream. Having tried his hand at farming and learned that he could break even but never turn a profit, he takes up the business of trade—a career that, by the beginning of the novel, has brought him to the home of Mr. Ortega, a wealthy Virginian slave owner, to collect on a debt. Jacob's visit to Ortega's home proves to be the formative experience that propels Jacob into a headlong pursuit of wealth and status (Jacob himself being an orphan of no special standing).

Approaching Ortega's house, Jacob stops a moment to appraise it:

Two wide windows, at least two dozen panes in each, flanked the door. Five more windows on a broad second story held sunlight glittering above the mist. He had never seen a house like it. The wealthiest men he knew built in wood,

not brick, riven clapboards with no need for grand pillars suitable for a House of Parliament. Grandiose, he thought...<sup>52</sup>

Soon after entering, he joins Ortega and his family for dinner—an event that only further propels him on his future path. We are told that,

Dinner was a tedious affair made intolerable by the awkwardness Jacob felt. His rough clothes were in stark contrast to embroidered silk and lace collar. His normally deft fingers turned clumsy with the tableware. There was even a trace of raccoon blood on his hands. Seeded resentment now bloomed. Why such a show on a sleepy afternoon for a single guest well below their station? Intentional, he decided; a stage performance to humiliate him into a groveling acceptance of D'Ortega's wishes.<sup>53</sup>

The sense of humiliation that Jacob feels over dinner is deeply significant (as it frequently tends to be in American dream narratives). Following on the heels of his abuse, Jacob's disdain swiftly evolves to intense desire. The subject of his apparent humiliation, that is to say, becomes (quite naturally) the object of his envy. After dinner, Ortega makes clear specifically what he can offer Jacob: slaves—an offer Jacob sharply turns down because his farm is too small to require the additional help, and he is wholly unwilling to trade in human flesh. But Jacob does end up accepting Florens, the little slave girl in too big shoes whose mother begs Jacob to take her, having witnessed Jacob seeing the little girl “as a human child, not pieces of eight.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Morrison, *A Mercy*, 15.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

The scene of Jacob's acceptance of Florens is a complicated one, for it marks Jacob as a slaveholder while simultaneously emphasizing his internal resistance to the practice of trading humans. "God help me if this is not the most wretched business,"<sup>55</sup> he thinks to himself, but he then immediately accepts Florens as partial payment of Ortega's debt, believing that perhaps Rebbeka will welcome a child on the farm, having just lost another infant. Without intending to do so, Jacob overtly participates in the practice of slavery, before it has been firmly institutionalized in America. While he may mean no real harm, he effectively marks himself as a slaveholder—a status he will later require for the designs he crafts for his future.

On his return journey, he stops a night at a nearby inn and saloon, where he hears embellished stories of the rising rum trade. These thoughts couple nicely with his recollection of Ortega's home—once the site of ostentatious humiliation, Ortega's great house quickly becomes for Jacob the object of his dreamy envy. As he prepares for bed, we are told,

Now he fondled the idea of an even more satisfying enterprise. And the plan was as sweet as the sugar on which it was based. And there was a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio and a remote labor force in Barbados. Right? Right, he thought, looking at a sky vulgar with stars. Clear and right. The silver that glittered there was not at all unreachable. And that wide swath of cream pouring through the stars was his for the tasting.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 26.

The heat was still pressing, his bed partner overactive, yet he slept well enough. Probably because his dreams were of a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog.<sup>56</sup>

The diction in the above passage speaks clearly to the substance of the American dream—a dream impulse that lacks the formal shape with which we now understand it. Jacob’s American dream is as wild and raw as the landscape in which he will enact it. The rum enterprise is a new and exciting opportunity that ought to bring all the trappings of success—a success that Jacob can now measure against the tangible image of Ortega’s wealth.<sup>57</sup> Despite these bright dreamy illusions, though, the passage contains a note of darkness in Jacob’s reflection about slave ownership. In this scene, Jacob realizes unquestionably that the dream he is designing will require slave labor for its realization. Despite his reluctance to do so, Jacob will participate in the slave trade because the accomplishment of his goals depends on it.

It is Jacob’s wife who first begins to recognize the change that has come over her husband as she struggles to reconcile the urgency of their immediate needs with her husband’s increasing desire for useless fancy. “If on occasion he brought her young, untrained help, he also brought home gifts [. . .] gifts that were becoming less practical, even whimsical,” we are told. The passage continues,

A silver tea service which was put away immediately; a porcelain chamber pot quickly chipped by indiscriminate use; a heavily worked hairbrush for hair he

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>57</sup> As we have seen, the goals of the American dream are relative. Jacob does not desire his great house until he witnesses Ortega’s; in this sense, Ortega’s accomplishments create a standard that Jacob feels compelled to meet.



only saw in bed. A hat here, a lace collar there. Four yards of silk. [...] a mirror framed in silver. Having seen come and go a glint in his eye as he unpacked these treasures so useless on a farm, she should have anticipated the day he hired men to help clear trees from a wide swath of land at the foot of a rise. A new house he was building. Something befitting not a farmer, not even a trader, but a squire.<sup>58</sup>

Rebekka's apprehension over Jacob's sudden and inexplicable desire for fineries stems from her literal station in life. "We are good, common people, she thought, in a place where that claim was not merely enough, but prized, even a boast."<sup>59</sup> Rebekka is not here assigning herself to some lower and arbitrary class, for whom Jacob's signs of wealth are well out of "proper" reach. Rather, she is emphasizing the discrepancy between her and Jacob's very real, often dire, needs and such useless trappings. The fact of Rebekka's life is hardship and toil, not leisure and luxury. But when she raises these concerns to her husband, Jacob tells her, simply, "Need is not the reason, wife," and that "What a man leaves behind is what a man is." When Rebekka tells him that "a man is only his reputation," Jacob responds, "Understand me. [. . .] I will have it."<sup>60</sup> This proves to be the final word on the subject, and the massive enterprise of Jacob's grand home (complete with intricately detailed ironwork) is begun.

Jacob's great house—in its various stages of completion—looms over the narrative as a backdrop for its developing senses of early race relations. For, in

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<sup>58</sup> Morrison, *A Mercy*, 88.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89.

pursuing his own early American dream on fresh, nowhere near socially institutionalized terrain, we watch develop the racist and classist structures that grow in response to unrealized early American social idealism. Near the beginning of the novel we are offered a brief portrait of race relations prior to slavery's direct role in them.<sup>61</sup> We are told,

Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes – freedmen, slaves and indentured – had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class. When that 'people's war' lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done – which included the slaughter of opposing tribes and running the Carolinas off their land – spawned a thicket of new laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owner's for a slave's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever.<sup>62</sup>

In exploring this sense of white and black race relations, the novel presents two clear and distinct figures, both of immediate African descent. One is the slave girl Florens, whom Jacob takes out of pity; the other is a free black ironworker, who is responsible for the very impressive construction of the massive iron gate guarding Jacob's new stronghold.

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<sup>61</sup> Morrison's novel is, after all, attempting to discover and explore a pre-slavery space of American racism.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

The juxtaposition of a free and an enslaved African, who become entangled together in a passionate sexual affair, serves as an overt exploration of the quality of enslavement. It is the ironworker, perhaps more than any other character in the novel, who is most assured of his own self-worth and is in fullest control of his own physical and mental faculties. His affair with Florens—intensely physical—is marked by a uniquely non-animalistic distinction. It is Sorrow who relates their lovemaking, having witnessed them in secret. She is struck and confused by their very manner of their lovemaking, for it resembles nothing of the violent and hurried rape with which she is herself familiar:

The blacksmith and Florens were rocking and, unlike female farm animals in heat, she was not standing quietly under the weight and thrust of the male. What Sorrow saw yonder in the grass under a hickory tree was not the silent submission to the slow goings behind a pile of wood or a hurried one in a church pew that Sorrow knew. This here female stretched, kicked her heels and whipped her head left, right, to, fro. It was a dancing. Florens rolled and twisted from her back to his. He hoisted her up against the hickory; she bent her head into his shoulder. A dancing. Horizontal one minute, another minute vertical.<sup>63</sup>

Such a representation of their union directly opposes the inherited stereotype of early black sexuality. Their lovemaking is human, but even more than that it is artistic, a dancing. Pivotaly, the narration continues: “It all ended when the blacksmith grabbed Florens’ hair, yanked her head back to put his mouth to hers. [. . .] It amazed her to see

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 128.

that. In all of the goings she knew, no one had ever kissed her mouth. Ever.”<sup>64</sup> This kiss is the defining moment of their lovemaking—a violently passionate sexual act that, by its very nature, stresses the humanity of the lovemakers. These are not rugged savages or “natural slaves,” the narrative insists.

Florens’ first person narrative sections all take place around the event of her journey to the blacksmith, who returns home after the completion of his work. She must travel alone to find him on the hope that he will be able to cure Rebekka, who has taken ill after Jacob’s death. Florens is wholly and completely consumed with her desire for the ironworker, a point she stresses regularly throughout her narrative. But her journey to him brings about a kind of racial awakening through experience—it is on her dangerous quest that she really comes to learn that she is black, and what the immediately consequent dangers are for her. Stopping to rest a night at the home of a widow, she finds herself subject to the harsh and heathen religious understandings of her race. When the villagers arrive at the widow’s house in the morning to investigate whether her daughter is demonic (she has a lazy eye which is taken as a sign of the devil), they see Florens with her coal black skin and immediately see the devil in her. Fearful and horrified, they lead Florens out back where they force her to strip and begin to examine her in a way almost identical to the examination of a slave for labor potential. “Without touching they tell me what to do,” she relates. “To show them my teeth, my tongue. [. . .] They look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their examination I watch for what is in

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition.”<sup>65</sup> Narrowly making her escape, Florens feels the implications of their inspection and reaches some new understanding of her racial status—it is as though, by the villagers’ treatment of her, she becomes self-consciously black, a clear indication from the novel of the constructed quality of racial assignation. “You have the outside dark as well,” Florens says (“you” being always the blacksmith). “And when I see you and fall into you I know I am live. Sudden it is not like before when I am always in fright. I am not afraid of anything now. The sun’s going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home.”<sup>66</sup>

Florens suddenly finds comfort in the racial status of the blacksmith, his race hitherto being an attractive quality, but bearing little importance beyond that. She stands on tenuous ground at this point: she has been made aware of racial difference, which marks her as a slave, and yet her desire for the blacksmith, which comes to be largely predicated on their shared blackness, is her only understanding of freedom. Hence she comes to understand that the classification of “slave” or “free” is determined by the context of her surroundings. She reflects, upon finally arriving at the blacksmith’s home, that she will never leave him:

We talk of many things and I don’t say what I am thinking. That I will stay. That when you return from healing Mistress whether she is live or no I am here with you always. Never without you. Here I am not the one to throw out. No one steals my warmth and shoes because I am small. No one handles my

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 115.

backside. No one whinnies like sheep or goat because I drop in fear and weakness. No one screams at the sight of me. No one watches my body for how it is unseemly. With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me.<sup>67</sup>

Floren's attitude here is one of complete and total dependence. When she learns that the blacksmith has taken in a small foundling child, and that she must watch the boy while the blacksmith is away tending to Rebekka, she is overwhelmed with jealousy over their relationship. She relates, "I worry as the boy steps closer to you. How you offer and he owns your forefinger. As if he is your future. Not me."<sup>68</sup> The blacksmith returns from his journey just at the moment when Florens is violently attempting to hush the child's fearful screams and tears; she dislocates his arm in doing so, throwing the blacksmith into a rage. Florens and the blacksmith have a hurried exchange, which speaks directly to Florens' own developing sense of enslavement:

I want you to go.

Let me explain.

No. Now.

Why? Why?

Because you are a slave. [. . . ]

I am a slave because Sir trades for me.

No. You have become one.

How?

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 136-37.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 136.

Your head is empty and your body is wild.

I am adoring you.

And a slave to that too.

You alone own me.

Own yourself, woman, and leave us be. [ . . . ] You are nothing but wilderness.

No constraint. No mind.<sup>69</sup>

The blacksmith's words are harsh, and at their sound Florens breaks, unable to make sense of her status as free or slave.

The blacksmith's sentiments are echoed at the end of the novel by Florens' own mother, in a final chapter that takes place closer to the novel's opening action, when Jacob is accepting Florens from Ortega. Reflecting on the scene, Florens' mother says,

It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing.<sup>70</sup>

Florens is finally unable to craft a definition of herself apart from her relation to others; she is slave or free according to what she is told and how she is treated, not according to any personal self-knowledge. This lack of real self-awareness, the novel implies, is the result of Florens' limited scope of experience. She lacks a positive sense of her identity because that identity has been constructed for her, by racially prejudiced communities

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 166-67.

and slaveholders. When Jacob accepts Florens, he sees her as a human child—a vision far superior to that of Mr. Ortega, who is beginning to see Florens as a sexual object (hence Florens’ mother’s urgency to re-place her daughter with Jacob). And yet, it is not enough that Jacob does perceive Florens as human, for he still accepts her as a slave, and her status at his house does not change. Florens is unable to construct her own sense of identity in this world where she is forced into an enslaved status. Although Jacob can see the artificiality of Florens’ slave status, and therefore has the power to help set her free, he requires her slave status for his great venture. When Florens’ mother offers her daughter up to Jacob—indeed, begs him to take her—it is because she sees in Jacob something *different* from what she sees in Ortega. She says,

When the tall man with yellow hair [Jacob] came to dine, I saw he hated the food and I saw things in his eyes that said he did not trust Senhor [Ortega], Senhora or their sons. His way, I thought, is another way. His country far from here. There was no animal in his heart. He never looked at me the way Senhor does. He did not want.<sup>71</sup>

This assessment of Jacob is true enough in the moment she thinks it—we recall Jacob’s initial great distaste for Ortega’s elaborate show. And yet, we know that Jacob’s distaste quickly changes to compulsive desire. With the prospect of Jacob’s great monument to himself on the horizon, he cannot afford to be so humanitarian. Jacob requires slaves to attain his American dream. Florens’ mother observes that Jacob

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 163.



“does not want,” and yet we watch the slow and steady development of Jacob’s desire. By the time he is building his house, Jacob “wants” very much.

Jacob’s American dream pursuit, then, is directly responsible for the enslavement of Florens. The novel means this relationship to be representative, so that we can see the necessary ties between individual material rise and the diminishment of others’ freedoms. Far from an idealized portrait of great men rising to further greatness (our traditionally inherited model of the American dream), Morrison’s novel insists that this degree of wealth and success is always dependent on the enslavement of another—whether though literal, institutional slavery, or through the arbitrary assignment of perpetually limited social status. What the novel demonstrates is the complexity of Florens’ understanding of herself as slave, against the backdrop of Jacob’s enterprise. We can conclude from this novel that, even in its earliest, rawest incarnation, the defining motivation of the American dream necessitates the literal and/or figurative enslavement of others: that is, the social idealism inherent in the idea of personal rise is always predicated on the real fact of social subjugation.

We begin to see that the action of the American dream consists in a complex social dynamic of rising and falling individuals, such that no one progresses in America without directly affecting another’s progress. Moreover, these competitive individual pursuits are coupled with idealist social aims as well, and we have seen the effect that one individual’s private rise can have on the entire society. Despite these often contradictory pursuits, though, the action of the American dream remains intact as a result of its mythic articulation. That action is fundamentally *progressive* (for humanity

generally as well as for the individual) insofar as it seeks a sustained increase of social and personal position. The underlying action of the American dream, then, is at once socio-economic upward mobility and ever-expanding social idealism. Both pursuits are sustained in America, even though they may at times interfere with one another, because the mythic understanding of these diverse interests appears to resolve them in a dynamic that privileges personal, material gain as a spur towards social benevolence. Conversely, the social idealism of the American dream, in guaranteeing equality of opportunity and freedom for the pursuit of happiness, creates the social milieu necessary for private upward mobility in the first place. Indeed, the American dream *depends* on the sustained pursuit of *both* individual and public (social) progress, for neither can be accomplished without the other. We can see, then, why it is so mythically important to resolve the discrepancies between these success-objects (even if that resolution is only apparent and not real). The primary action described by the American dream—and that constitutes one of the dream's central structural tenets—is finally one of progressive action (on both an individual and a social scale) towards a constantly receding (because relative) goal of success.

**Chapter Five**  
**The American Dream in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:**  
**A Literary Consideration**

Our previous discussion makes clear that the American Dream functions in a predominantly mythic capacity, such that it maintains cultural relevance throughout the course of its ongoing development. The basic structure of the American Dream myth establishes a set of basic narrative paradigms that, collectively, determine an appropriately revisable model for individual and national rise (which, as we have seen, ultimately amounts to an economic measure of increasing success). This broadly figured national myth has been generally accepted in one form or another throughout American history, despite consistent challenges to its validity as a practical model for betterment. This to say, essentially, that there has always been a great divorce between the idealism of the Dream and the probability of its realistic accomplishment (in fact, this observable division is precisely the overarching tension that maintains the Dream's status as cultural *myth*). Some periods in American history have undoubtedly challenged the Dream's authenticity more than others; the Great Depression or the Civil Rights Movement, for instance, take a far more anti-Dream stance than the immediately post World War II America. Our contemporary America, however, poses perhaps the greatest challenges to the Dream myth that have ever been raised, in what ultimately amounts to a rising public desire to completely dispel the whole notion of the American Dream and reveal it as mere empty fantasy. This harshly anti-Dream attitude is the result of a longer historical perspective and an acute sense of the very real socio-

economic problems that plague the vast majority of American citizens today. Moreover, with the onset of advanced communication technologies, the realistic circumstances of millions of Americans are far more difficult to ignore. The very reality of impoverished and socially outcast members of American society directly challenges the American dream, which appears to ignore realistic circumstances out of preference for apparently unattainable ideals. Works of literary fiction have always adopted an ambiguous stance towards the American dream, if not frequently raved against it outright. American fiction of the last decade, however, has adopted a slightly less obvious anti-dream attitude, either by dramatizing an imagined reality where the dream is quite dead and then considering this new American terrain, or by anticipating a world so overrun by dream ideology that it ceases to have any connection to actual lived experience.

Contemporary impressions of the American dream are bleak, although American dream rhetoric continues to persist in social and political dialogue. In the genres of popular self-help guides and financial planning books, an overwhelming rhetoric of *restoration* pervades American dream discussion, openly implying (and in some cases directly stating) that the dream is now defunct and in need of complete overhaul. The national economic crisis of the past decade is undoubtedly responsible for these sentiments; any threat to the financial integrity of the American nation and American people results in widespread panic over the perceived loss of that idealism in which the whole national project is rooted. The American dream holds cultural relevance, as we have seen, so long as the American people can perceive its practical efficacy. Of course, as we have also seen, this practical efficacy is synonymous with concrete financial value.

So long as a majority of Americans continue to expand their net worth, Americans are inclined to trust in the reality of the American dream. When Americans' assets begin to lose value, when there is a large-scale loss of jobs, houses, cars, etc., and when opportunities to correct these misfortunes are virtually non-existent, faith in the American dream crumbles quickly. Historically, belief in the viability of the American dream has been restored whenever the economy once again becomes favorable for Americans. Currently, Americans fears are rooted not merely in the collapse of their economy, but in the possibility that their economy had reached an inevitable ceiling that can never be broken, and so will be impossible to restore. The traditional belief in endless financial, social, and political increase now runs head into the fear of an unbreakable ceiling of value.

Paul Auster's most recent novel, *Sunset Park*, is set in the desolate landscape of the 2008 financial crisis, and it characterizes this new American terrain in terms of a dead American dream. The novel adopts the abandoned American home as its predominant symbol for this economic collapse, and through this repeated symbol we see a sharp portrait of a financially unstable nation. The opening of the novel describes the current occupation of Miles Heller (the protagonist), who cleans out foreclosed homes that have been abandoned by their owners and are still full with personal possessions. We are told,

For almost a year now, he has been taking photographs of abandoned things. There are at least two jobs every day, sometimes as many as six or seven, and each time he and his cohorts enter another house, they are confronted by the

things, the innumerable cast-off things left behind by the departed families. The absent people have all fled in haste, in shame, in confusion, and it is certain that wherever they are living now (if they have found a place to live and are not camped out in the streets) their new dwellings are smaller than the houses they have lost. Each house is a story of failure—of bankruptcy and default, of debt and foreclosure—and he has taken it upon himself to document the last, lingering traces of those scattered lives in order to prove that the vanished families were once here, that the ghosts of people he will never see and never know are still present in the discarded things strewn about their empty houses.<sup>1</sup>

If Auster's novel adopts a bleak and crushing view of the current state of the American people, it does so because the story is filtered through Miles' own perception, which must be decidedly stark given his daily labor. Moreover, the initial description of Miles Heller that is given to us paints him as anything but the traditional American hero—his whole sensibility seems to oppose the basic structure of the American dream:

He is twenty-eight years old, and to the best of his knowledge he has no ambitions. No burning ambitions, in any case, no clear idea of what building a plausible future might entail for him. He knows that he will not stay in Florida much longer, that the moment is coming when he will feel the need to move on again, but until that need ripens into a necessity to act, he is content to remain in the present and not look ahead. If he has accomplished anything in the seven and a half years since he quit college and struck out on his own, it is this ability

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<sup>1</sup> Auster, *Sunset Park*, 5.

to live in the present, to confine himself to the here and now, and although it might not be the most laudable accomplishment one can think of, it has required considerable discipline and self-control for him to achieve it. To have no plans, which is to say, to have no longings or hopes, to be satisfied with your lot, to accept what the world doles out to you from one sunrise to the next—in order to live like that you must want very little, as little as humanly possible.<sup>2</sup>

Miles' lack of ambitions and resistance to planning a future strikingly position him in a very un-American vein. Perhaps because he chronicles the apparent failure of the American dream in his own context, though, we accept him as a spokesman for a post-dream America.

While no major critical work has been done on Auster's novel (it is too recent), treatments of Auster's work in general offer us a bit of context for considering *Sunset Park*. In his book, *Paul Auster's Postmodernity*, Brendan Martin contends that "New York City serves as a backdrop to many of Auster's writings, and Auster evokes the postmodern notion of urban dislocation in order to compliment his fictional narratives."<sup>3</sup> New York City is, indeed, the backdrop for *Sunset Park*, and its representation in the novel continues Martin's thesis that Auster makes use of the city as a context for American urban dislocation. Auster is a postmodernist in Martin's reading, and Martin does devote some attention to defining postmodernism through a historical analysis. He concludes that literary postmodernism most notably consists in "ontological skepticism, foundational indeterminacy, and an overwhelming lack of

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Martin, *Paul Auster's Postmodernity*, ix.

cognitive identity.”<sup>4</sup> Essentially, these are all more precise terms for subjective dislocation or fragmentation. Postmodernism thus describes rootlessness, lack of cohesive self, and innate distrust. In short, this postmodern “mood” makes for an apt characterization of the world of *Sunset Park*. This should not be surprising, since Auster’s newest novel is merely continuing a pre-established trend in Auster’s work. But the effect of this postmodern world in Auster’s novel, according to Carsten Springer, is the establishment of *crisis*.<sup>5</sup> Springer finds the repeated motif of postmodern crisis across Auster’s novels (again, up to but not including *Sunset Park*), and it is an apt characterization of *Sunset Park*. The characters in Auster’s newest novel are undoubtedly in the midst of a literal economic crisis, the effect of which is to throw the entire paradigm of the American dream into full crisis. In *Sunset Park*, postmodern crisis is the result of economic collapse, and economic collapse is a sign of American dream disillusionment.

If Auster’s novel attempts to characterize an America in the midst of the collapse of its dream idealism, it nevertheless represents the persistence of the shell of such idealism. Indeed, the endurance of abandoned houses is a testament to this representation, for the houses have not been destroyed outright, but merely vacated. Auster’s novel creates a space where we can reflect on the meaning of an America that has been stripped of its citizens’ implicit trust in the inviolability of its core values, but this American space is nevertheless populated with countless monuments and testaments to the old dream. In fact, the dominant symbol in the novel – the abandoned

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>5</sup> Springer, *Crises: The Works of Paul Auster*.



American home—takes absolute center stage in the novel, whose action is centered around a group of mismatched people who move into an abandoned home in New York city. This action, in which four very different American adults take advantage of a collapsing economy in order to live rent free and off the public radar, is a decidedly non-traditional American action. Rather than working persistently towards some great socio-economic goal, these characters openly live off a failed American dream.

It is an old friend of Miles', Bing Nathan, who first conceives of the idea of moving into an abandoned home in the neighborhood of Sunset Park, and who recruits the house's tenants. Bing Nathan's character is marked by a striking disillusionment with America, which essentially serves as his own personal justification for moving into the house. Of Bing's attitude, we are told:

Since the war in Vietnam, which began nearly twenty years before he was born, he would argue that the concept known as *America* has played itself out, that the country is no longer a workable proposition, but if anything continues to unite the fractured masses of this defunct nation, if American opinion is still unanimous about any one idea, it is a belief in the notion of progress. He contends that they are wrong, that the technological developments of the past have in fact only diminished the possibilities of life. In a throwaway culture spawned by the greed of profit-driven corporations, the landscape has grown ever more shabby, every more alienating, ever more empty of meaning and consolidating purpose.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 53.

This passage does a great job of characterizing Auster's world in the novel, for while America is ostensibly falling apart, even a wholly disillusioned character like Bing recognizes that the belief in American progress, even if misguided, is still powerfully alive and well. It is this tension that sustains the novel, for the persistence of belief in an ideal that no longer appears to exist is precisely what allows us to see this post-dream America *as* a genuine American space. This theme, while represented symbolically by the vacant house, is repeated personally for Bing in his occupation.

Bing Nathan operates his own small business, a repair shop for old objects, called The Hospital for Broken Things. This shop is "devoted to repairing objects from an era that has all but vanished from the face of the earth: manual typewriters, fountain pens, mechanical watches, vacuum-tube radios, record players, wind-up toys, gumball machines, and rotary telephones."<sup>7</sup> Bing's shop is a testament to his faith in the past and his distaste for all the technological advancements of his contemporary era. It is fundamentally anti-American, in a way, for the little shop focuses its unwavering gaze on artifacts from the past, great technological gadgets that once attested to the glorious advancement of America but are now defunct in a hyper-digital age. Bing himself shuns all new technologies, as they embody and promote a future America that, for Bing, lacks all traditional substance. Indeed, Bing "takes it for granted that the future is a lost cause, and if the present is all that matters now, it must be a present imbued with the spirit of the past. That is why he shuns cell phones, computers, and all things digital—because he refuses to participate in new technologies" (53). Because Bing

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 54.

believes that the American experiment has run its course—that America really has no future at all—his practice of Americanism must be relegated to his faith in the past, and in this way he seeks to preserve an old idea of American exceptionalism through the literal preservation of these artifacts of American greatness. It is important to mention, though, that Bing's business is not a great success, and the majority of his income at the shop comes from framing pictures. Indeed, this commercial testament to the past-preserving-present ultimately falls flat, for America (regardless of Bing's own opinions) remains steadfastly focused on the future with no genuine regard for these blatantly irrelevant relics of another (even if recent) age.

The tension that sustains Auster's novel lies in this perceivable distinction: that the contemporary appearance of America is fundamentally at odds with the prevalent sustained belief in America's greatness. This tension is, as it were, a natural property of the American dream, which always imagines a future that is better than its present condition. Bing's vision of America (which is one at least implicitly shared by his other housemates), supposes the death of the American dream while leaving no room for its potential resurrection. And yet, as the novel continues, the characters act out quite traditional personal dramas in the context of this supposed American wasteland. By nature of their actions—Miles' reparation of his broken family ties, Alice's completion of her dissertation, Ellen's pursuit of her passion for painting—the "tenants" of the Sunset Park house each engage their own articulation of an American dream (even if that pursuit is not directly figured as such). Indeed, their house becomes not a retreat from a failed American project, but a space for the rebuilding of American values and

accomplishments. And yet, the house is nevertheless a constant reminder of the current failure of the American economy (and, therefore, of the American dream). Herein lies the complex symbolic meaning of the Sunset Park house: it at once attests to the death of America even as it acts as a space for American re-creation.

The condition of the Sunset Park house upon Bing's first discovering it begins its characterization as a symbol. We are told,

They broke in one night and discovered that there were four bedrooms, three small ones on the top floor and a larger one below, which was part of an extension built onto the back of the house. The place was in lamentable condition, every surface coated with dust and soot, water stains streaking the wall behind the kitchen sink, cracked linoleum, splintered floorboards, a team of mice or squirrels running relay races under the roof, a collapsed table, legless chairs, spiderwebs dangling from ceiling corners, but remarkably enough not one broken window, and even if the water from the taps spurted out brown, looking more like English Breakfast tea than water, the plumbing was intact. Elbow grease, Ellen said. That's all it was going to take. A week or two of scrubbing and painting, and they would be in business.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly this abandoned home is in bad shape. But even as the narrator's description of the house enumerates a long list of problems, damages, and general filth, the description ends with a familiar American sentiment: a bit of sustained hard work, and the house will be livable once again. And yet, there is a persistent un-American

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 60.

substance underlying this apparent success-through-hard-work principle, for the house's occupants will be illegally inhabiting a foreclosed home and intentionally dodging the most basic tenet of American capitalism: the simple exchange of money for goods and services. The Sunset Park project is always doomed to failure, for it is an attempt to live off the death of the American dream according to the very principles that have died. It is an attempt to assume the traditional American lifestyle without paying any of the debts incurred by that lifestyle—indeed, by sidestepping the very system that has made the American dream lifestyle possible at all.

And so, the characters who occupy the Sunset Park home do engage in dramatic actions of self re-creation, but they do so in the context of an American dream vacuum, as it were. The house they inhabit, during the period of their occupancy, is represented as totally isolated. It exists in a lived-in neighborhood, certainly, but its foreclosed and abandoned status leaves it vacant and completely unattended to, such that no one is aware of the faux-tenants' presence. While living in this house, the occupants accomplish goals of self-discovery and self-fulfillment, such that their communal living project offers them each a chance to assess the current state of their lives and shape the directions of their futures. The novel covers a period shortly before the tenants move in, through to their inevitable eviction, but it stops abruptly with the event of that eviction. Because the novel centers around the symbolic representation of the apparently dead American dream through the image of the vacant house, it is only appropriate that the novel end with the characters' departure from that house. Given the thematic center of the novel, this ending point is a structural necessity. We are not concerned here with

the real death of the American dream or its real resurrection in the characters' post-Sunset Park lives. Rather, the novel is unwaveringly focused on developing its action solely within the context of this *apparently* dead American dream. As a symbol of the failed American project, the occupancy of the vacant home provides Auster with a context for exploring the supposed death of the American dream (which supposition stems from the 2008 economic crisis), without actually having to admit or deal with the real death of the American dream.

We might be interested to consider, then, just what exactly is gained through Auster's reflection in this invented explorative context. For this question, we do best to turn our attention to the novel's protagonist, Miles Heller. Miles is an interesting character to consider, because the shape of his life is always figured in terms of his ongoing struggle with the questions of progress and accomplishment. In short, Miles is consistently concerned with the "Americanness" of his own life in an increasingly less American context. When we are first introduced to Miles, we are given an insight into his present-centered, anti-goal-oriented nature (quoted earlier), and we learn of his seven-year estrangement from his parents. Miles' redemptive action, if we are to locate one, centers around his slow reconciliation with his parents—an action that requires Miles to develop a fuller contextual understanding of his relation to others and the total shape and direction of his life. When he explains the reason for his estrangement to his mother, he describes a fundamental disillusionment with the most basic American dream values. He says,

I did want to become a better person. That was the whole point. Become better, become stronger—all very worthy, I suppose, but also a little vague. How do you know when you've become better? It's not like going to college for four years and being handed a diploma to prove you've passed all your courses. There's no way to measure your progress. So I kept at it, not knowing if I was better or not, not knowing if I was stronger or not, and after a while I stopped thinking about the goal and concentrated on the effort [ . . . ] I became addicted to the struggle. I lost track of myself. I kept on doing it, but I didn't know why I was doing it anymore.<sup>9</sup>

This problem that Miles details is a common one, especially within a contemporary American context. Pursuit of the American dream has always run the risk of privileging the pursuit itself over the goal of the pursuit. In a world of economic collapse, where the possibility for actually attaining goals is all but removed and citizens are left with the pursuit alone—a pursuit that will yield no return at all—this is a bleak attitude to have. It is easy enough to understand the Miles that opens Auster's novel in this context of his previous failed suppositions. Miles is, in short, a disillusioned American hero—disillusioned by his failure to distinguish between his goals and the pursuit of those goals. And so, it is unsurprising that, as the novel opens, Miles is a man without ambition who lives only in the present moment and makes his living off the failed ambitions of others. Indeed, in light of this understanding of his

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 185.

character, it is quite natural that Miles would accept Bing's offer to move into the Sunset Park home.

Miles' progress at Sunset Park, then, is marked by his re-conception of pursuit and reward in America, and by the re-establishment of appropriate goals for pursuit. When we see Miles at the novel's end, though, fleeing New York City after he and his fellow occupants' eviction, his departing sentiment is, perhaps, not what we would expect. By the novel's end, Miles is still no proponent of traditional American dream ideology. He has repurposed his life, but he is no living attestation to a pre-Sunset Park spirit of America. Rather, he has traded the value of hope in the future for one of contentment in the present. Miles does not depart Sunset Park to discover a revitalized American dream spirit, but rather re-enters the American wasteland that opened the novel. His sentiments, as he crosses over the Brooklyn Bridge, conclude the novel:

[ . . . ] and as the car travels across the Brooklyn Bridge and he looks at the immense buildings on the other side of the East River, he thinks about the missing buildings, the collapsed and burning buildings that no longer exist, the missing buildings and the missing hands, and he wonders if it is worth hoping for a future when there is no future, and from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever.<sup>10</sup>

There is no question that the conclusion of Auster's novel offers a bleak vision of America, and there is really no way to sugar-coat this final sentiment. Miles looks out

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 215.



at the greatest of American cities, and he sees what is *gone* rather than what still stands. He does not see potential or sustained greatness, but only failure and hopelessness. His closing thoughts offer a way of occupying this American wasteland, of “getting through” the hardship that is now America, but they offer no possibility for the positive reinvention of America. Because there is finally no hope for America in Miles’ vision, and he is left only with the constantly fleeting moment of “the now,” there is essentially no substance, no purpose to America. The novel closes with the same presentation of American space that characterizes its opening, such that, finally, the novel stands as an imaginative characterization of a “post-American dream” America in stark relief. The novel offers no defense of the American dream and no vision of its restoration; it merely considers a select group of American characters as they try to make sense of their lives in a dreamless world, and demonstrates the bleak convictions that they gradually come to adopt.

The indication of Auster’s bleak vision of America is no critique of his novel, however; it merely attests to the phenomenon of recent literary representations of the death of the American dream. Whereas Auster creates an American wasteland, however, other novelists have adopted different means of exploring the current state of the American dream, drawing very similar conclusions out of diverse original contexts. Standing in stark opposition to the land of foreclosed homes and empty bank accounts of Auster’s novel, Chris Bachelder creates a hyper-technological America that is chronically obsessed with consumerism in his 2001 novel, *Bear v. Shark*. Far from a wasteland, Bachelder’s America is over-filled with luxuries, entertainments, and

absolute national self-satisfaction. If Auster's novel contemplates the persistence of residual American substance after total economic collapse, Bachelder's novel contemplates the natural conclusion of America's current trend of hyper-consumerism and unending increase, separate from the governing ideals that established the American dream. Indeed, Bachelder's novel describes an almost perfectly successful America in order to consider the American dream in terms of absolute commercialization.

Whereas Auster's bleak America is represented in his slow, meticulous prose style, Bachelder's novel adopts a suspiciously light tone and whimsical prose, switching genres from chapter to chapter and favoring short, overly-general statements that participate in a variety of popular cultural motifs in an attempt to characterize the dangerous levity of American consumerism. At the center of Bachelder's novel is a super-large-scale entertainment event—an epic battle between a technologically advanced mechanical bear and shark—and this battle becomes emblematic of the existing substance of American culture. As a metaphor for exaggerated consumerist entertainment, the Bear v. Shark event consumes the entire American population, becoming the biggest craze to ever hit America, and affecting virtually every aspect of American popular culture. The novel is consistently humorous, and the underlying comedy helps maintain the novel's detached and light tone (which, in turn, sustains the novel's understanding of American culture's lack of substantial value). The Bear v. Shark event (“versus” is always presented in its abbreviated form: “In today's hectic

world, Mr. Norman thinks, who has time to say ‘versus’? It’s always *vee*”<sup>11</sup>), is outlined for us early on in the novel, in a chapter titled “Bear v. Shark: The Question.” The very short chapter, in its entirety, reads:

The question is simple, as are most profound questions.

Given a relatively level playing field—i.e., water deep enough so that a Shark could maneuver proficiently, but shallow enough so that a Bear could stand and operate with its characteristic dexterity—who would win in a fight between a Bear and a Shark?<sup>12</sup>

The irony of designating this query as a profound question is immediately apparent, and such humor is persistent in Bachelder’s novel. As we soon find out, all of America is intently focused on this upcoming battle of the beasts, and our protagonists—the Norman family (perhaps there is intended a play on “normal” in the family’s last name, as they are generally representative of middle America)—are set to attend the event in Las Vegas. The event itself is extremely exclusive; with only around 20,000 tickets available (the exact number is never specified), the best tickets immediately go to the most elite members of American society, while some 15,000 are available through a lottery: “Over 21 million (21,000,000) people entered the lottery, and the lucky winners were given the opportunity to buy two tickets for \$2,500 each.”<sup>13</sup> The sheer expense and exclusivity of the event directly attests to its symbolic status as an image of the height of American consumerism. The Norman family is attending the event because

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<sup>11</sup> Bachelder, *Bear v. Shark*, 102.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

child Curtis Norman was the lucky winner of a ticket-giveaway essay-writing contest, for which contestants “were to write a 250-word response to the question, ‘What does Bear v. Shark mean to America?’”<sup>14</sup> Printed later in the novel, Curtis’ essay is written with the simplicity of a grade school student and demonstrates a rudimentary understanding that Bear v. Shark *is* the basic substance of American culture. The essay’s short conclusion reads, “In closing, my gardener is Dutch and he doesn’t have a culture. But America is great because it has a culture and Bear v. Shark helps us have a culture.”<sup>15</sup> While Curtis’ conclusion may be based on misinformation about the Dutch (the abundance of discrepant information is a central theme in the novel), it nevertheless attests to the many blind assumptions made about America based on the Bear v. Shark event. The question to which Curtis’ essay responds is, really, the question that the novel itself is most concerned with, and as the novel progresses we do get a more and more concrete sense of just what, exactly, Bear v. Shark means to America.

If Bear v. Shark is the central event of the novel, it is not the only spectacle or consumable object that characterizes American culture in the novel. Bachelder’s book reaches after every good or service that can be advertised, and presents it in the context of advertisement (and frequently in the immediate context of Bear v. Shark), such that the American terrain becomes nothing more than an endless series of essential luxuries that are necessary for happiness. The novel opens with Mr. Norman waking up one morning, and focuses on Mr. Norman’s pillow, the “Vibra-Dream Plus.” The

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 74.

scintillating, womanly characterization of the pillow, together with the vague reference to an American dream in its name, make this an appropriate figure for the opening of the novel. We are told, "This blindingly white pillow, for which operators are standing by, cradles Mr. Norman's face and curves seductively, ergonomically, up to his ears, into which it purrs and coos like a lover."<sup>16</sup> Here, the American product becomes the fulfillment of sexual fantasy and the only available means for complete relaxation; it becomes a necessity, a prerequisite for happiness. In fact, "She (the pillow) just wants Mr. Norman to rest easy after a long day at the office. She understands. She cares. She grazes his earlobes when she speaks."<sup>17</sup> The personification of the pillow works in reaction to a perceived lack: Mr. Norman no longer sleeps in his bed with his wife, but sleeps on the den sofa, and so, naturally, the pillow fills the void left by his absent wife. Further, the Vibra-Dream plus "is the official cordless pillow of *Bear v. Shark II*."<sup>18</sup> Bachelier's opening symbol, then, embodies the consumerist spirit of the novel as it relates to the basic need for happiness and satisfaction, and does so all in the context of *Bear v. Shark*.

This model is repeated with a great variety of consumable symbols, reaching its concise climax in a brief discussion of passing billboards:

These billboards perform countless miracles of conjunction: cologne and power are joined in natural and sensible union, the corner office shown to be the telos of the fresh, manly scent; *bottled water* leads inexorably, syllogistically, to quirky

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

individualism; baked cheese snacks and Happiness become indistinguishable; Seasoning Pouches and harmonious families reprise the chicken-or-the-egg conundrum.<sup>19</sup>

The core perversion of Bachelder's America is contained in the simple line, "baked cheese snacks and Happiness become indistinguishable." This is a direct appeal to the problematic vagueness of the American dream, which lacks a clear statement of ideal goals for pursuit. When "happiness" is left undefined as the object of the American dream, it becomes synonymous with baked cheese snacks insofar as that American dream becomes commercial. When material goals fully supplant traditional American idealism, the result is the marketing excess of *Bear v. Shark's* America, and happiness becomes a terrifically fragmented idea with only relative meaning.

These symbols of consumerist excess permeate Bachelder's text, and the novel is all the more effective because of the context of misinformation that surrounds these abundant symbols. Questions in *Bear v. Shark* are frequently resolved with speedy Internet searches; never-mind the abundant discrepancies in search results. Matthew Curtis comments that, "What you have to remember is that a person who reads the Sunday *New York Times* gets more information than a French villager in the eighteenth century got in his whole lifetime."<sup>20</sup> There is much to comment about this simple statement. For one thing, the credibility of the claim itself is never verified. Like so many other "facts" in the novel, the credibility of this claim lies in its verbalization: if spoken, it becomes just as true as anything else that is spoken. Indeed, when the other

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 72.

members of the family challenge the veracity of the claim, the challenge does not really serve to disrupt the veracity of the original claim, but only to establish alternate veracities. Information becomes so fragmented that a multiplicity of meaning erupts, and anything is true so long as it can be traced to a source, however dubious. The family's conversation continues:

Mrs. Norman says, "The way I heard it was that a person who habitually reads newspapers knows more, in essence, than an eighteenth-century French person."

Curtis says, "The point is that it's hard to know what to believe."

Mathew says, "No, the point is that there is a lot of stuff to believe."

Mr. Norman says, "Isn't the point that you shouldn't believe anything?"

The waitress says, "Aren't those all the same point?"<sup>21</sup>

Here meaning becomes completely lost in the idea that everything means everything else. The waitress' statement is somehow conclusive (it does effectively conclude the discussion), but all it really states is that there is such a diversity of contrary meanings that speech is, ultimately, meaningless. When information is adopted wholeheartedly with no regard for its veracity, "truth" becomes inconsequential, or at least entirely relative. In one brief chapter of the novel, we are given the following striking characterization of information in America, which helps us to bolster this discussion (the passage is structured like a *Jeopardy* "answer," the "question" for which is, Who is Neil Postman):

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

In his long-out-of-print book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, this shrill cultural critic wrote, “A **pseudo-context** is a structure invented to give fragmented and irrelevant information a seeming use. But the use the pseudo-context provides is not action, or problem-solving, or change. It is the only use left for information with no genuine connection to our lives. And that, of course, is to amuse.”<sup>22</sup>

This description describes perfectly the nature of information in Bachelder’s novel. With the production of multiple contexts, information becomes a relative affair, and any claim can be made just as accurate as any other so long as it is rooted in some context, however fabricated. The purpose of this pseudo-context, of course, is purely amusement. As it pertains to the overwhelming practice of advertisement in the novel, such pseudo-contexts allow the culture of American consumerism to persist in this wild excess. Every billboard is just as true as every other, and consequently there erupts an endless variety of things utterly necessary for happiness.

And so, Bachelder’s novel thrusts the reader into an America overwhelmed with the need to satisfy every desire that can be fabricated by advertisers, with the Bear v. Shark event representing the pinnacle of the manufacture of desire. In the novel, Americans across the board (with the exception of anti- Bear v. Shark terrorists<sup>23</sup>), feel the desire to attend the event as a *necessity*, and several chapters of the novel enumerate the things people are willing to do for tickets. Ranging from degrading activities to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>23</sup> Even those who overtly oppose the event, however, are just as fully consumed by their obsession with destroying it.



shockingly immoral ones, the list includes the following: “I’d off my grannie for a ticket. I’d rattle a bear for a ticket. I’d give up my television for a ticket,” “I’d kill the family pet for a ticket,” “I’d drink real piss for a ticket,” “I’d eat broken glass for a ticket,” and a patrol guard at the Las Vegas border who lies about having a crippled son whose dying wish is to attend the event.<sup>24</sup> *Bear v. Shark*, of course, is an *entertainment* event, whose sole purpose is to amuse; Americans’ fascination with only the best possible amusement, therefore, dominates—defines, even—American culture in the novel. According to the simple logic of the novel, the natural conclusion of Americans’ obsession with increasing material luxury and amusement is something like *Bear v. Shark*. The American dream, bastardized into the mere pursuit of luxury and pleasure, contextualized by abundant misinformation and endlessly manufactured desire, finally culminates in a battle extravaganza that openly endorses the shallowness of contemporary American culture.

Auster and Bachelder, then, provide us with distinct visions of the contemporary American dream; and yet, despite the great differences in their contextual American worlds, the similarity between their visions is striking. Both novelists deal with a disillusioned America, one through the representation of decay and the other through that of abundance. Both Americas ultimately lack real cultural substance: the value of traditional American idealism has been either lost through personal financial crisis, or forgotten through the constant gratification of every fickle desire. In both novels, the disillusioned state of America is the result of the dissipation of traditional American

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<sup>24</sup> Bachelder, *Bear v. Shark*, 150, 144, 128, 213.

dream values. Cormac McCarthy, in his 2006 novel *The Road*, develops this paradigm of disillusionment several degrees further, exchanging Bachelder's vibrant America or Auster's foreclosed wasteland for an American space that is scarcely recognizable as such. *The Road* is set in a harshly post-apocalyptic America (the cause of apocalypse never being stated), in which nearly every sign and practice of civilization is completely and utterly gone. McCarthy's terrain in the novel is post-American, such that even remnants of a previously thriving culture are scarce and unrecognizable. If other contemporary authors have dramatized the slow death of the American dream, McCarthy dramatizes the sudden and absolute death of American civilization in its entirety.

Indeed, McCarthy's physical terrain is barely recognizable as American, and we really must consider whether his novel can be treated in light of American civilization and culture, or whether it merely represents a totally a-national, post-civilizational space that has no ties whatsoever to its previous civilization. Although the world of *The Road* is most definitely stripped of any preexisting culture, the particular manner in which McCarthy represents that world is key to understanding its larger context. Some of McCarthy's earlier novels provide us with a model for understanding *The Road*, even as *The Road* diverges significantly from these works. I mean here the depiction of an untamed Western frontier that pervades such works as *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *The Plain*. McCarthy's depictions of the terrain and physical space in *The Road* directly reference the early Western frontier that he has developed elsewhere, such that McCarthy's post-civilizational America very closely resembles the

pre-civilizational America that he writes about in other novels. This offers us a frame of reference for looking at *The Road*, for an appeal to the terrain of the American Western frontier sets this novel in an American context, and allows us to look at it in terms of post-Americanness.

Consider two passages, the first from *Blood Meridian*, and the other from *The Road*:

For the next two weeks they would ride by night, they would make no fire. They had struck the shoes from their horses and filled the nailholes in with clay and those who still had tobacco used their pouches to spit in and they slept in caves and on bare stone. They rode through the tracks of their dismounting and they buried their stool like cats and they barely spoke at all.<sup>25</sup>

He pushed the cart and both he and the boy carried knapsacks. In the knapsacks were essential things. In case they had to abandon the cart and make a run for it. Clamped to the handle of the cart was a chrome motorcycle mirror that he used to watch the road behind them.<sup>26</sup>

The similarity in tone here is striking, but may be no more than stylistic. The similarity in description, however, demands our attention. The sense of pervasive danger characterizes both passages, as does the need for almost constant, secretive travel. The raw and wild Western frontier is a world where everyone is both hunter and hunted, and the same is true in the post-American wilderness of *The Road*. It is the

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<sup>25</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 151.

<sup>26</sup> McCarthy, *The Road*, 6.

overwhelming lack of organized civilization that marks the similarities in these two worlds. Indeed, the very landscape itself is nearly identical when we compare the pre-American frontier to the post-American wilderness. Although there are, of course, significant differences in landscape depiction, the landscape ultimately carries the same connotations of fear and sterility in both novels. Again, to sample two passages:

All night the sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunderheads, making a bluish day of the distant desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear. The thunder moved up from the southwest and lightning lit the desert all about them, blue and barren, great clanging reaches ordered out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land that come the day would leave them neither trace nor smoke nor ruin more than any troubling dream.<sup>27</sup>

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadow-lands stark and gray and raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 47.

<sup>28</sup> McCarthy, *The Road*, 7.

These descriptions speak for themselves: barren desolation and endlessly expanding fear and sterility characterize these landscapes. As Lydia Cooper writes in her comparison of the worlds of *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*, “*The Road* depicts a world even bleaker (if possible) than the world of *Blood Meridian*, but the novel nevertheless privileges the haunting obligation of ethical behavior, indicating that the darkest possible world may not be entirely bereft of people able to believe in human goodness.”<sup>29</sup> We will address this “haunting obligation of ethical behavior” shortly, for it adds the crucial significance that makes this novel more than just a bleak characterization of a post-apocalyptic world. In this context, though—and especially coupled with McCarthy’s other Western novel landscape depictions—we can see that the universe of *The Road* is undoubtedly American, even if that America is scarcely recognizable to us as such.

But that unrecognizability of the American terrain is precisely what makes *The Road* so compelling, for in thrusting its protagonists into such a world, the novel demands that we shift our perception of America. No longer do we see America as the land of hope and opportunity, and gone is the dreamy idealism that once defined a nation. What strikes us about this landscape is the utter absence of the American dream. Our heroes progress in constant motion, following the unending paths of the leftover interstates, but they are not headed towards any distinct *goal*. Rather, constant motion forward is the only alternative to death, or worse. Still, the protagonists are marked as heroes by the way they maintain a sense of purpose, however abstract.

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<sup>29</sup> Cooper, *No More Heroes*, 133.

Repeated several times in the novel, the father and the boy are “carrying the fire” with them on their journey.<sup>30</sup> Of course there is no literal fire here, and this figurative flame takes on a vague significance of culture as the novel develops. In the absence of structuring social paradigms, our heroes are heroes precisely because they sustain the *idea* of culture in a world where it cannot be enacted. In a world of theft, rape, murder, mutilation, torture, and rampant cannibalism—a world of total lawlessness, in other words—the man and the boy (by nature of their existence and persistence) carry forward a standard of human decency and moral perseverance.

We cannot discuss the state of the American dream in McCarthy’s world, for it occupies no place in the novel. Social ascension is impossible in the absence of society, and material betterment cannot happen in a brutal wasteland. What we are presented with, though, is a world starkly defined by the lack of this ideal—indeed, by the lack of any idealism whatsoever. Within our discussion of contemporary treatments of the American dream, McCarthy’s novel contributes a sense of utter post-Americanness, replacing constant increase and security with the incessant need for basic survival. McCarthy does not show us the slow degradation of American values, but rather the sudden moment of their complete extinction. It is quite fitting, then, to consider this novel alongside those that dramatize various “states” of the American dream in context, for it at once stresses precisely what is at stake, and also offers a backdrop of absence against which to consider the dream.

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<sup>30</sup> McCarthy, *The Road*, 37, 56, 89, 114.

And yet, a few husks of American cultural symbolism do linger in the novel, as, for example, when the man offers a coca-cola to his son. The scene is brief: “He [the man] slipped the boy’s knapsack straps loose and set the pack on the floor behind him and he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can and then handed it to the boy.”<sup>31</sup> The coca-cola is introduced into the narrative suddenly—it is leftover from a toppled over soda machine that the man discovers at a looted convenience store. The boy has never had a soda before, and he lacks any context for understanding the experience. A coca-cola might have functioned as a powerfully complex symbol of American cultural identity in a novel such as Bachelder’s, one rich with cultural context, but in McCarthy’s novel the coca-cola is almost entirely divested of significance as a symbol. Apart from the cultural context of American consumerism, the symbol is utterly flat. The man insists that the boy drink the soda himself (when the boy offers some to his father), and the boy realizes: “It’s because I wont ever get to drink another one, isn’t it?” His father responds, “Ever’s a long time.”<sup>32</sup> This is an interesting response, for it contains a note of hope in the future—a *possibility* that the boy will one day drink another coca-cola.

For, despite the total destruction of American culture, a loose sense of hope does persist, and some clear Edenic goal is reached (at least for the boy, who represents the post-American hero far more fully than his father, who is more transitional). In the context of post-American identity, we can read the Eden of the novel’s conclusion in

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

American terms, for it actively engages the traditional American symbolism of the new Eden. The boy-hero of the novel passes from one world to another in the novel's final pages. In the moment that his father passes away, another man emerges to "rescue" the boy, taking him away to a hidden away paradise in the mountains. This new terrain, though we see very little of it, is a paradise to the boy because there are other children there, these people are not cannibalistic, and the man says that they, too, are "carrying the fire." The following depiction of this new space—in stark contrast to the novel's dominant spatial metaphor of the endless road—concludes the novel:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.<sup>33</sup>

The imagery in this passage is clearly in line with that of Edenic paradise; yet the imagery here does not actually describe the new spatial terrain. It describes a past reality and insists that the past cannot be restored. Kenneth Lincoln, in *Cormac McCarthy*, describes the ambiguity of this passage, unable finally to decide whether the passage details "an old an renewed dream, or an illusion without rainbows."<sup>34</sup> He finds that the imagery must be significant to the novel's action, but that the novel offers no

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>34</sup> Lincoln, *Cormac McCarthy*, 173.



definitive answer as to whether this is a real and future paradise or merely a space informed by a long-ago paradise. Ultimately, we must conclude that the ambiguity here is the point. McCarthy does not offer an ultimately redemptive vision at the end of his post-apocalyptic tale, but neither does he offer a condemned one. In the space of apocalypse, the novel appears to contend, there is no certainty; only the drained husks of forgotten cultural symbols persist, and an immaterial ethic that is passed on amongst a small few.

In representing a post-American world, McCarthy's novel makes an overt contemporary comment on the American dream as indicative of American culture. McCarthy's representation in the novel strips the American dream (or American culture) of its progressive emphasis. The world of *The Road* is fundamentally anti-progressive; in fact it represents a total civilizational regression. In the absence of opportunity for progress (and we must here distinguish between progressive action that leads to enhanced circumstances and the monotonous forward motion of the father and son's journey down the road which is *not* progressive), American culture simply ceases to exist. Now, McCarthy's novel does not represent cultural hardship; it represents cultural annihilation. In the stark contrast between American idealism and the world of *The Road*, we see the absent features of American culture that had bred the myth of the American dream. We see, ultimately, that the devastation of Americans' belief in progress—that the very literal loss of opportunity for advancement—results in the total defeat of the American dream.

The novels discussed here have all been published in the last decade, and as such they represent a sampling of contemporary artistic treatments of the American dream. Our study has been concerned with dominant representations of the American dream in the twentieth century (where the myth finds its most complete articulations) and the historical basis of the myth in early American culture. But the historical study of the myth only takes us so far. Because the history of the American dream has been one of revision and adaptability—the American dream has always taken on meaning specific to those historical and regional American sub-cultures that have adopted it—our understanding of the dream is dependent on how that dream functions in contemporary society. For this reason, the novels of Paul Auster, Chris Bachelder, and Cormac McCarthy have been selected to represent current attitudes about the American dream, within which context we can assess the relevance or the viability of the American dream today.

And what we see in these novels is a strong spirit of disillusionment, albeit figured in different ways. These contemporary treatments of the American dream seek to overtly challenge the myth by indicating prevalent social attitudes that distort the ideal. In *Sunset Park*, Auster paints the American dream apart from its economic guarantees. In the face of failed economic expectations, we see that the idealism inherent in the dream attempts to persist but ultimately cannot without the literal signifier of socio-economic mobility. In Bachelder's *Bear v. Shark*, we have an alternate representation. Bachelder's novel represents the height of economic consumerism and constructs a version of the American dream that is wholly independent of social

idealism. This intensely materialistic dream stands as a very realistic possibility for the future of American culture if it continues in its obsession with a strictly socio-economic understanding of the American dream. Finally, McCarthy's *The Road* looks beyond the space of American experience and into a post-American terrain where the American dream cannot exist, and in doing so indicates the real death of America in the face of anti-progressive forces. These novels, taken together, offer bleak attitudes about the American dream. But it seems that their intent is not to discourage American dreaming, but rather to redirect it. These novels emphasize pitfalls or dangers that arise from misconceptions of the American dream, and ultimately they call for a re-appropriation (through a reconsideration) of the myth. This is an important cultural task that must be performed. While the year of 2008 brought countless protestations against the viability of the dream, the years since have once more attested to Americans' persistent belief in this ideal. But, as the novelists discussed here stress, the understanding of that dream must be reassessed in times of crisis. Auster, Bachelder, and McCarthy stress that, in re-conceptualizing this American ideal, we must emphasize its socio-economic parameters, its social idealism, and the progressive worldview that underlies the whole ideal. In the face of disillusion, Americans must re-enact a tradition that has been their longstanding heritage: they must continue to shape their American dreams.

## Conclusion American Dream / American Reality

The foregoing discussion has considered the American dream as a large-scale and historically persistent cultural myth, and has attempted to analyze the underlying structure of that myth in order to reveal consistent trends in American experience. What we have found, given the American dream's mythic structure, is that the dream is composed of certain narrative elemental paradoxes, and these paradoxes are apparently resolved through their mythic articulation. While we have located several distinct paradoxes—in the self-made man, the frontier metaphor, and the action of upward material and social mobility—we find that there is a larger, more general paradox at work that informs each of these elemental relations and ultimately describes the fundamental tension of experience that the American dream exists to resolve. I mean here the general discrepancy between *ideal* and *reality* in America. The most significant tension inherent in the American dream is contained in the very term we use to describe it: it is a *dream*, and so naturally pitted against reality.

Because this American myth is a dream, it connotes hope: hope in the future, that one will progress to increasing socio-economic prosperity; hope that opportunities do exist in abundance (this hope has the force of faith in America); hope that the national social ideals of liberty and equality will be ever-expanding and increasingly guaranteed for all individuals. How interesting, we might reflect, that the novelty of the American project rests largely on its persistent reliance on *hope*. As such, the American dream really describes a set of expectations derived from the precedent of real experience. This once more attests to the overarching tension that governs the American dream, for

the spirit of dreamy hope in the future is not derived from realistic circumstances that overtly challenge the dream; it is, rather, rooted in real, concrete experience that *attests* to it. And yet, realistic circumstances often *do* challenge the dream's idealism—such circumstances are just never the ground on which the dream is based. Indeed, the fact that reality confirms the viability of the ideal *at the same time* that it denounces it is precisely what interests us here.

Americans believe in the American dream, despite realistic challenges to its accomplishment, because there are also very real experiences in America (indeed, an abundance of them) that demonstrate the dream as a seemingly practical ideal. Thus the myth is caught up in an essential paradox of experience (as myths always are), and exists to resolve the discrepancy between American idealism and American reality. It does so by positing that the dream is rooted in experiential precedent, and so assumes a concrete reality wherein the dream can be enacted. Without a concrete iteration of one's dream, that dream cannot exist. And yet, as we have seen, "successful" American dreams are those that attempt to bridge this real/ideal chasm, usually by assigning some material (i.e. real) value to an ideal pursuit, such that the American hope can be *realized* (made real) in some empirical reality. We can recall Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* here, for this is the primary accomplishment of the novel's protagonist and is the very reason we esteem the novel so highly as a paradigmatic American dream narrative. We will bring to mind, once more, the stunningly effective symbol of Daisy Buchanan's voice.

In remarking that Daisy's voice is "full of money,"<sup>1</sup> Gatsby locates a concrete and material referent for his ideal hope. Through his "incarnation" of Daisy, he accomplishes a colossal American dream (which secures him the narrator's respect, despite Gatsby's failure). Daisy herself represents all of Gatsby's very immaterial ideals: his hope for love, happiness, and security. And yet, as a literal figure, she embodies the socio-economic goals that Gatsby already has in mind when he meets her. Gatsby's imaginative appropriation of Daisy results in her figurative incarnation—Gatsby's immaterial hopes and dreams are made real, are embodied, in the physical person of Daisy Buchanan, who is not just wealthy and socially elite but rather *embodies* socio-economic abundance. Her voice, then, is a perfect symbol for the material idealism that Daisy engenders, for a voice appears to lie midway between the physical and the immaterial. Daisy's voice is empirical, and so "physical" in the sense that it can be perceived or sensed. And yet, there is nothing genuinely "material" about a voice, because it lacks tangibility. As a symbol for the embodiment of an ideal paradigm within a material reality, then (her *voice* is full of *money*), Daisy's voice functions as the preeminent symbol of Gatsby's design, and is a potent narrative representation of how the myth resolves itself as both ideal and reality.

Despite the vitality and complexity of Gatsby's dream, the use of symbolic characterization may offer little practical relevance to an American dreamer (though it certainly offers critical clarity for analytical purposes). We might recall, then, the more practical advice of Walter Lippmann, when he suggests that future or past idealism is

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<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 127.

rooted in escapist desire and that “the real effort of the imagination [ . . . ] is to weave a dream into the turning present.”<sup>2</sup> Though Lippmann does not elaborate on the meaning of this cryptic turn of phrase, our present discussion sheds light on it. Lippmann’s discussion discredits the American vision that disregards present circumstances in favor of dreamy hopes about the future or about the past. And yet this statement does attest to the importance of dreaming, but only insofar as one’s dreams (or hopes) are firmly, concretely rooted in the reality of the present moment—which is, of course, always receding away. Thus the future bears an important relation to the present, and one’s hope in the future must always find a precedent in the practical present moment. A few conclusions can be drawn here. First, hope in the future (the American dream) is unrealizable without action in the present moment (hence success or reward—a future aspiration and an *ideal*—is always predicated on personal industry—a present activity and a *reality*). Second, because the present moment is always slipping into the past and the future into the present, one’s dreams must then be perpetually revised—hence Lippmann refers to “the turning present” in order to emphasize dynamism over stasis. Finally, despite his condemnation of “false” American dream attitudes, Lippmann is here encouraging participation in the properly conceived, realistic American dream (and yes, there is a clear paradox in a “realistic dream,” but we will let that paradox stand, as it is descriptive of the mythic resolution).

This discussion has a great deal of contemporary relevance, for in light of economic crises Americans have always challenged the potential for the dream’s

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<sup>2</sup> Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, 108.

realistic accomplishment. And yet, what we find (in this discussion, which has its roots in early twentieth-century American dream theory, as well as in our preceding discussion of the repeated disillusionment with the dream in the contemporary American novel) is that Americans need to *revise* their sense of the American dream rather than dispel the whole myth. Such a revision will not amount to a “new” conception of the American dream, but rather will restore this older sense of it that we are discussing here. In light of severe economic hardship, Americans tend to lose their implicit faith in the American dream, which always depends on real instances of accomplishment. Because loss of belief in the dream stems from economic circumstances, Americans have a tendency to read the dream as a purely socio-economic ideal (especially in the moment of its disillusionment), for that is the aspect of the dream under direct siege by economic downturn. In light of severe economic adversity, then, the revitalization of the dream depends on a resurrection of its social and humanitarian ideals—for these have traditionally provided the ground on which the whole socio-economic pursuit is based.

This is all to say that, despite the challenges made to it, the American dream is no less relevant today than ever in American history. It would be easy enough to adopt the rhetoric of the American dream here, as much recent political discourse has done, and propound a spirit of faith in America and hope in the nation’s sustained progress as a world power and the inevitability of the economy’s eventual rise. Yet these idealistic national hopes remain empty if they are not grounded in the real possibility of America’s ability to progress onward. Belief or hope alone is insufficient for the



accomplishment of the national paradigm, as we have seen. And yet, how can we be prepared, in this moment of crisis, to address the question of whether America is capable of progressive rise? We can no longer adopt the nineteenth-century American worldview, which witnesses endless territorial expansion as a direct testament to the realistic accomplishment of American ideals. On the global field of national experience, America's presence as a world power is now being seriously questioned, or at least challenged, and no idle fantasies will save us. Fiction does not supply us with an answer, but only diagnoses the problem.

I am not in a position to answer this question, as it is a speculative one. We can observe, though, that *innovation* has been the tradition of the American nation: its democratic governmental structure is a political innovation; its emphasis on human progress is a social innovation; its constant westward expansion through to the end of the nineteenth century is a sustained testament to innovative civilizational processes; and business, economic, and technological innovation have characterized the spirit of twentieth-century America (in the absence of literal frontier space). We have discussed the persistence of the frontier as a spatial metaphor in Chapter Three, and it is relevant to our contemporary moment, which must locate a new frontier space of experience on which to exercise the American dream. This is the challenge that awaits the American people now, and it is the same challenge that Americans have historically met again and again: to innovate new fields of experience wherein the American cultural spirit—that tradition of the American dream that has been our ancestry and heritage—can assert itself once more.

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## Vita

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