

Spring 2016

The American Dream: Fantasy or Reality?

Ellie Quick
Ouachita Baptist University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/english_class_publications



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Quick, Ellie, "The American Dream: Fantasy or Reality?" (2016). *English Class Publications*. Paper 21.
http://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/english_class_publications/21

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Class Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact mortensona@obu.edu.

Ellie Quick

Prof. Jennifer Pittman

American Lit. II

April 22, 2016

The American Dream: Fantasy or Reality?

“Rags to Riches”; “Home of the Free”; “Land of Opportunity.” For centuries, the idea of the American Dream has been engrained into the ideology of many Americans in the United States and a faraway dream for those wishing to be a part of it. The idea of anyone, rich or poor, being able to freely achieve his or her dreams and pursue happiness became enticing to not only colonists coming to the New World and immigrants wishing to leave their home countries, but as the country developed, also to individuals living in the United States. The concept of the American Dream is not a new one; it was in fact introduced at the beginning of the country as Puritans were coming to the New World in 1630. On one of the Puritan ships coming to America, the *Arabella*, John Winthrop delivered his famous sermon “Modell of Christian Charity” where he preached on the authority of God involving The Puritans’ success in the New World. Winthrop believed that it was God’s will for some to be poor and some rich, and that they would succeed if they trusted in their authorities to lead them (Morgan 145-46). This idea of success would continue to exist centuries later but on a more individual level as seen in Benjamin Franklin’s “A Way to Wealth.” Franklin was one of the United States’ Founding Fathers as well as an author who often used literature to convey ideals. Written in 1758, he talks about individual success and describes his model of a “self-made man” (546 Hornung). This literature is evidence that even from the beginning of the United States, this idea of success and individualism was formed in American culture. The American Dream was a reality all

Americans strived for and believed in and it continued to be case for years to come. So embedded in American culture, the American Dream has been an underlying theme in many works in American literature. By analyzing Fitzgerald's "Winter Dreams" Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, I will demonstrate how these authors portrayed the American Dream presenting two realities: an unattainable American Dream and a realistic one.

Though the American Dream holds the same principal for all, its outlook is different to each beholder. The American Dream can become an unattainable reality men and women will never achieve, making them live in a fantasy world. For those with a clearer idea of what reality is like, they seek to work hard to achieve change around them whether it is equality, happiness, or riches. The American Dream allows for people to defy the odds of reality. Though aspects of the American Dream have changed throughout the years; it is always destroyed or fueled by one common factor: reality. These authors provide works of literature that prove how the American Dream is only beneficial to those who are rooted in reality. A notorious writer of the pursuit of lavish lifestyles full of glamour, romance, and parties is Scott F. Fitzgerald whose characters face the reality of what the American Dream really is.

In Fitzgerald's short story "Winter Dreams" he provides a story with a character that is driven by a false reality of what success and wealth look like. Dexter Green has been chasing his dreams of glamour and wealth since he was a child, only to realize he will never achieve what he always dreamed of. To Fitzgerald, the American Dream is virtually unattainable. It is a myth that allows people to keep reaching towards a lifestyle they are never satisfied with. I agree with Kimberly Hearne when she says that Fitzgerald's view of the American Dream was that it is "beautiful yet grotesquely flawed and distorted" (Hearne 191). Dexter strives for a lavish

lifestyle which he ends up enjoying for a while, but in reality it becomes hollow and disappointing. Parvin Ghasemi and Mitra Tiur say it best: “Thus, the man of imagination in America, searching for the source of satisfaction of his deepest aesthetic needs, is seduced by the delusion that these qualities are actually to be found in people who, in sober fact, are vacuous and irresponsible” (124). In other words, dreamers live in delusion seeking their dreams when in reality what they sought is found in people who end up disappointing the dreamer and destroying them.

Dexter had been reaching towards the American Dream ever since he was young, he knew what the life he wanted when he saw Judy, and he did something about it that day he quit his caddying job. This event changed Dexter’s life, a dream formed in him that he would end up pursuing his whole life. Dexter is a classic example of the American middle class: his family is not rich but they are comfortable. He has a certain idea of what his life should look like and what kind of person he strives to be. At fourteen years old Dexter is working as a caddy at a Golf Club. Surrounded by wealthy people, Dexter feels the difference between himself and people with money and status. While caddying, Dexter meets Judy Jones, an eleven year old girl from a wealthy family with a fiery attitude. Dexter decides from that moment that he is going to quit his job and pursue what he calls his “winter dreams”: “As so frequently would be the case in the future, Dexter was unconsciously dictated to by his winter dreams” (Fitzgerald 662). Though a different name, Dexter’s winter dreams line up with the ideology of the American Dream. Dexter, a middle class teenager, dreams of being successful and rich. He believes that he has a chance to make something of himself, and his first step is quitting his day job.

Dexter does pursue his dreams: he gets an education, and early in the narrative we learn that before he is twenty seven he will own the longest string of laundries in the Midwest.

Because Dexter lives in world of false reality and expectations, he begins to be hit with reality early on. At twenty-three, Dexter meets Judy Jones again while back at the Golf Club. At Judy's house, Dexter first begins to be disillusioned with his expectations of the rich and glamorous when he enters her home and spends more time with her, he finds the conversation unsatisfactory and Judy to be "faintly irritable" (Fitzgerald 666).

In this story Judy symbolizes the American Dream for Dexter: wealthy, eternally youthful, attractive, and unattainable. Though Dexter is sometimes disillusioned with his dreams, it is not enough to make him stop pursuing it in hopes that it still exists. Dexter begins to fall in love with Judy as he spends time with her, and is convinced he wants to be with her though he knows she tends to play with men's hearts and has no desire for any real commitment. Though Dexter knows Judy doesn't really love him, he realizes that he will always love her and think highly of her. Dexter has Judy on a pedestal; he loves what she symbolizes more than he does her as a person, much like man and the American Dream. Men love striving for the American Dream and are in constant pursuit of it, yet as Fitzgerald so often emphasizes in his novels, they end up disillusioned. For Dexter, his moment of major disillusionment comes when he finds out seven years that Judy has married a drunkard and is no longer beautiful. Dexter weeps not only because Judy is not who she used to be, but because his "winter dreams" are gone, Dexter will never be that boy with a dream as he once was. His dreams were destroyed by reality, and since Dexter was never truly rooted in it to begin with, his American Dream was destroyed by it when it hit him.

Through his oeuvre, Fitzgerald reflects the American Dream of society at that particular time: wealth and success. However, Fitzgerald provides a realist's perspective on what society thought of the American Dream as well as himself. Writers of the Modern Era were for the most

part not writing feel-good stories about success and riches; instead, they were writing about the reality of the American Dream and its disillusionment, they were cautionary stories (Hearn 190). The 1920's was, as Cleanth Brooks put it, an "age of disillusionment and frenetic excitement" (Ghasemi, Tiur 118). Fitzgerald was able to accurately reflect the American Dream and society's view of it at this time: distant dreams that do nothing but leave the dreamer disillusioned and disappointed. Through this story Fitzgerald was exemplifying the idea that those who pursue the American Dream with no concept of reality will end up worse off than anyone else.

As the United States kept on developing and changing, so did the lifestyles of the American people. World War II began in 1939 and ended in 1945 which deeply affected the country's economy. Social classes were now divided and struggling for power, the lower classes now seen as American heroes who worked hard and had traditional American values. The war changed American culture including men who after a post war victory which resulted in "a masculine bravado that is seen in the men's abrupt and aggressive actions" (Karagiorgis, Mavromatis, Wong, Zhang). These new social changes brought on new aspirations and expectations, a new American Dream for all social classes as well as the men who strived to be the hardworking men society adored.

In Tennessee Williams' drama *A Streetcar Named Desire* the American Dream is perceived differently by different characters. Williams, like Fitzgerald, portrays the American Dream as being nothing more than a myth for one character, but a reality to strive for in another character. He uses two characters to contrast these realities.

One of the main characters in *Streetcar* is Blanche DuBois. Blanche comes from a wealthy family in the South. Blanche goes to visit her sister Stella and her brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski in New Orleans and is shocked to see the way they live. Though Blanche aspires to

live an elegant, high class lifestyle what she is truly seeking is personal happiness. Blanche lives in a fantasy world; her desire is to escape reality to find happiness. Blanche not only lives in a fantasy world herself, she constantly drags others into her illusions as well. From her looks to the way she acts, Blanche is always living in a fantasy world and she admits this to Mitch: "I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell truth, I tell what *ought* to be the truth." (Williams 143). Blanche is still yearning for the life she had, she belongs to what is called in literature the 'Old South': aristocracy, manners, refinement and beauty (Drobot 154). However, Blanche now lives in a world where these traits are no longer valued. Blanche strives to make herself and others believe she is still a sophisticated woman from the South. Blanche lives in denial about her problems and is constantly covering them up with lies she eventually believes herself. The fact that Blanche is unhappy with reality is seen in her lies and her illusions. As much as Blanche tries to escape reality and disappointment, she can't. Blanche is hit hard with reality when Stanley rapes her. Blanche's dreams are then completely destroyed when her sister Stella denies it ever happens and allows for Blanche to be taken away by a doctor to a mental institution. She will never have the life she longs for of wealth and class.

Living in what seems like a different world than Blanche is her brother-in-law Stanley. Stanley is rooted in reality and sees things the way they are, perhaps too grimly. He is aggressive, rough, and possessive. He believes in hard work and traditional gender roles. His perception of the American Dream comes from what he can do within society and how he reacts to the world and other people. Stanley desires wealth, a passionate relationship with his wife, and to be the head of his household. Stanley does not do well with sharing power or having his household disrupted as it does when Blanche comes to visit, which shows what kind of

household he desires to live in. Stanley does not hope for anything fantastical and doesn't strive for anything he feels is out of his reach. He knows he has to work hard and what he must do to get what he wants. One example of this is how he managed to rape Blanche and then throw her out of the house with no one opposing to it or standing up to her, including her own sister.

Though Blanche is the one living in a dream at the beginning, setting her hopes on better times and trying to forget the pain in the world, she ends up with more pain and disillusion than Stanley ever had. At first glance Blanche may seem like she has better qualities and dreams than Stanley, but in the end she is the one with destroyed dreams and her own lies she begins to believe. I believe Williams is demonstrating that though everyone may be driven by different desires and dreams, it is the ones who are rooted in reality that end up not being disillusioned. Each American Dream is driven by desires and achieved depending on how rooted in reality the desires are.

To Kill a Mockingbird provides different insight concerning the American Dream, using the innocence of a child and wisdom of a father figure to exemplify the contrast of reality and dreams. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published in 1960, although the novel is supposedly set in the 1930's. However, many scholars believe it is more closely correlated with the 1950's because of the similarities between the civil rights era, such as the death of Emmett Till in 1954 and *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1955 (Chura 1). Lee incorporates many aspects of the American dream in her novel: perseverance, opportunity, equality, and social mobility which are portrayed in her characters. Along with the dream of striving to make social change is the contrast of living within a dream and not being rooted to reality to see this issues taking place.

One of the main characters and the narrator of the novel is Scout Finch. Although Scout is only six years old when the novel begins, it is obvious that she is driven by the American dream in her own way: she doesn't separate people into social classes, her judgment of others isn't determined by race, and she seeks righteousness like her father. Scout doesn't understand how people can be mean to one another and approaches dangerous situations with child innocence, an example being when she approaches Mr. Cunningham in the midst a mob of people confronting Atticus. Scout makes out everything to be an adventure or mystery, an example being her neighbor Arthur Radley whom she constantly is curious about. As Scout gets older and experiences the world, she is faced with the reality that people are racist, judgmental, can have intentions to harm others. Because Scout lives in her own world which is slowly being tinted by reality, she is disillusioned when she realizes the ways of the world. Scout no longer approaches situations with the innocence she had before, but is now faced with the reality of how cruel and unjust the world can be. Her eyes have been open to social classes, prejudice, and ignorance. Scout was living in an American Dream rooted in her fantasy world which was innocence and naivety.

Atticus Finch, a father who is trying to do what is right, is a dreamer who is rooted in reality. Atticus teaches his children about equality and justice even when society goes against him: respect for people of all colors and to 'climb their skin and walk around in it' (Lee 33). Because Atticus knows the way the world works, its social classes, prejudice, and ignorance, Atticus tries to teach his children to overcome it best he can in hopes for a better world around him.

Atticus embodies the American dream and what it stands for as he pursues to give all people what the United States has claimed to provide, which is equal opportunity for all. Because

he knows how the world works, he can pursue his American Dream and not be disillusioned enough to give up. One example of Atticus being rooted in reality yet still pursuing his American Dream is taking the Tom Robinson case. Atticus wanted to defend Tom because he believes in equal opportunity and justice for all. However, Atticus also knows that white Americans are not so kind with African Americans in treating them justly. Though the case seems impossible to win, Atticus still does everything in his power to help Tom. In the end, Tom is found guilty and is eventually killed trying to escape. Atticus doesn't lose hope; he continues to strive for righteousness in making the world a better place. Just like Atticus facing harsh realities with Tom Robinson, Scout learns that reality is much harsher than what she imagines, stronger than her dreams of innocence and childhood.

Through this novel Lee was able to show two perceptions of the American Dream: one who is rooted in reality and works for a dream of equality and justice, and one who lives in a fantasy world with an unattainable version of the American Dream. Both are disillusioned at times with the circumstances of life, but Atticus, being rooted in reality, can truly achieve his American Dream whereas Scout's dream was shattered in reality.

American Literature is no stranger to the concept of the American Dream, its roots being in the very conception of the country itself. As society changed so did the dreams of the people, captured by Fitzgerald, Williams and Lee in their literature. The American Dream began as an achievable lifestyle, but it would later transform into an unattainable reality to those rooted in fantasy which left dreamers disillusioned and broken by reality.

Works Cited

- Chura, Patrick. "Prolepsis and Anachronism: Emmet Till and the Historicity of *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *The Southern Literary Journal* 32.2 (2000): 1-26. Web. 18 Apr. 2016.
- Drobot, Irina-Ana. "Perception of Reality in *A Streetcar Named Desire*." *Scientific Journal of Humanistic Studies* 4.7 (2012): 153-156. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 16 Apr. 2016.
- Fitzgerald, Scott. F. "Winter Dreams" *The Norton Anthology of American Literature Volume D*. Eds. Nina Baym and Robert S. Levine. New York: Norton, 2012. 659-675. Print.
- Ghasemi, Parvin, and Mitra Tiur. "The Promise and Failure of the American Dream in Scott Fitzgerald's Fiction." *K@ta* 11.2 (2009): 117-27. Web. 20 Apr. 2016.
- Hearne, Kimberly. "Fitzgerald's Rendering of a Dream." *Explicator* 68.3 (2010): 189-94.
- Hornung, Alfred. "The Un-American Dream." *Amerikastudien / American Studies*. 44.4 (1999): 545-553. Web. 15 Apr. 2016
- Karagiorgis, Theologia, Joanna Mavromatis, Sara Wong, and Jun Jake Zhang. *The Arts in New York City: Form, Content, Context*. Honors Seminar One/Professor J. Saslow. 21 Apr. 2016.
- Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: HarperCollins, 1988. Print.
- Morgan, Morgan S. "John Winthrop's 'Modell of Christian Charity' in a Wider Context." *Huntington Library Quarterly* 50.2 (1987) 145-151. Web. 18 Apr. 2016.
- Williams, Tennessee. "A Streetcar Named Desire." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature Volume E*. Eds. Nina Baym and Robert S. Levine. New York: Norton, 2012. 93-155. Print.