

The Rise and Fall of the American Dream: From *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin to Death of a Salesman*

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In his 1931 *The Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams became the first to name and define the one desire that has united and characterized the American people since our beginnings. He called it the “American Dream” and identified it as the “hope of a better and richer life for all the masses of humble and ordinary folk” (363). This optimism about one’s ability to have a better life and the “belief in the common man and the insistence upon his having, as far as possible, equal opportunity in every way with the rich one,” according to Adams, is the “greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought and welfare of the world” (viii). Although notions of success vary widely and interpretations of the dream have shifted over time, the notion of the American Dream can be traced back to the nation’s beginnings, and it has remained a crucial aspect of the national ethos even into the twenty-first century.

In the seventeenth century, Americans dreamed about obtaining a better life through faith, hard work, and perseverance. For eighteenth-century Americans, success was inextricably tied to religion and morality; thus, success was measured, not only by the accumulation of material wealth, but also by one’s moral code, one’s standing in the community, and the contributions that an individual made to the community. By the nineteenth century, though religion and morality were still important, material success and work itself became the two most important aspects of the American Dream. Americans continued their practice of working hard, but they wanted money in the bank, large houses, and other symbols of wealth. It was important to be a respectable member of the community, but one’s worth was measured, in large part, by one’s profession and income. This emphasis on augmenting one’s material wealth continued and, by the early twentieth century,

many Americans dreamed about large bank accounts, even larger houses, and cars. By the mid-twentieth century, some began to question whether or not it was even possible to attain the American Dream, while others challenged notions of the dream itself. Yet, even in these moments, Americans in general remained optimistic and continued to believe that the United States was a place where if one worked hard, success would surely follow.

Since its beginnings, American literature has served as a chronicle of the American Dream, and some of the nation's most revered texts provide strikingly forthright portraits of individuals pursuing and living the dream. Perhaps no other text demonstrates the American Dream of the eighteenth century quite as accurately as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, as Franklin himself seems to embody the American Dream. Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* thoroughly exemplifies the hopes and aspirations of those living in the nineteenth century, and Alger's protagonist, Richard Hunter, or "Ragged Dick," demonstrates what can happen if one will only work hard and live honestly. In the twentieth century, F. Scott Fitzgerald highlighted the American Dream in his fiction, and he constructed a forceful image of the post-World War I dream in *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald's characters, with their fine houses, clothes, and cars, seem to have reached the pinnacle of the "good life." Finally, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* demonstrates not only the enduring belief in the dream but also the dangers associated with having "the wrong" dream in mid-twentieth century America (Miller 138). Through Willy and Biff, Miller explores what the dream means at that particular moment and the reasons why it seems, for some, unobtainable and elusive. These four narratives provide an opportunity for us to survey the American Dream from the nation's beginnings through the twentieth century. Such a study exposes the relation between the dream and American literature, provides a better understanding of what the dream represented in different periods, and reveals the evolution of the dream from one era to another. Perhaps most importantly, it suggests the omnipresence of the American Dream

in our national consciousness and demonstrates how tremendously significant it is to Americans, both individually and collectively.

Franklin's Autobiography

When the Pilgrims established Plymouth Plantation in 1620, they had a dream of practicing religion without the oppressive constraints placed upon them by the Church of England. Ten years later, in 1630, the Puritans arrived in Massachusetts Bay, bringing with them a similar desire to follow their own faith without the intervention of popes and bishops from other religions. Throughout seventeenth century, religious ideology guided American thought, and texts such as John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity," the poetry of Anne Bradstreet, and *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* reflect the pervasiveness of religion in the American consciousness during this period. However, by the eighteenth century, dramatic changes in the social and philosophical environment, in the government, and in the sciences transformed how Americans perceived the world and their place in it. Although religion still played a central role in American life, many turned to science and philosophy to provide answers to their philosophical and moral queries. The American Dream, though it had not yet been named, was affected by these transformations.

In his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin fashions a self-portrait that demonstrates this coalescing of religious and philosophical ideologies in the eighteenth century. Franklin's notions about religion and morality guide his life and actions, and they provide the foundation of his understanding of the American Dream. Even though he never used the phrase "American Dream," Franklin had a clear vision about how to be successful, and his ideas serve as the basis of the American Dream in the eighteenth century and beyond. For Franklin, the dream consisted of attaining moral perfection, earning the respect of one's fellow citizens, and becoming financially independent. In order to achieve such a position, one must live morally, work diligently, and practice frugality, and Franklin insists on the relation between success

and moral fortitude. Thus, he confesses his faith and avows that he “never doubted, for instance, the Existence of the Deity” (89). Additionally, Franklin believes that “the most acceptable Service of God was the doing Good to Man,” and he emphasizes work, rather than faith, as the key to realizing the dream (89).

By confessing his faith and linking one’s work to God, Franklin attempts to establish morality and work as the path to success, and his narrative continually reaffirms that assertion. For example, he “conceiv’d the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection” and confesses that he dreamed of living “without committing any Fault at any time” (90). In his effort to achieve moral excellence, Franklin banishes drunkenness, extravagance, indolence, dishonesty, and such vices, and thus positions himself as an honest, temperate, frugal, and industrious man. Such a man, it follows, should necessarily find success. Thus, Franklin concocts a plan wherein he attempts to gain control over thirteen different areas of his life, including “Temperance,” “Silence,” “Order,” “Resolution,” “Frugality,” “Industry,” “Sincerity,” “Justice,” “Moderation,” “Cleanliness,” “Tranquility,” “Chastity,” and “Humility” (91–92). By mastering each of these areas, or virtues, as he called them, Franklin believed that he would live a life of productivity, faultlessness, and rectitude. Although he confesses that he “fell short” of reaching the “Perfection” that he “had been so anxious of obtaining,” he claims that he was “a better and a happier Man than I otherwise would have been” (99). What is more, he insists that his financial success and his outstanding position in the community stem from his dedication to living a life grounded in morality, industry, and frugality. In Franklin’s view, these virtues lead directly to the attainment of his dream.

By the nineteenth century, perceptions of the dream shifted as Americans began to measure success by the amount of material wealth that they accumulated. The desire to obtain such wealth became so intense for some that Merle Curti, author of *The Growth of American Thought*, calls it a “quest” that Americans embark upon as they seek

out “material fortunes as ends in themselves” (508). Whereas Franklin and his eighteenth-century contemporaries perceived work itself as a virtue, nineteenth-century Americans had a new interpretation of work, wealth, and success. Rather than a means of doing God’s work and an opportunity to enhance the lives of one’s fellow citizens, work now primarily served as a pathway to building individual fortunes. The goal, or dream, was to make more money than the competition, to see who could increase their capital the most. As Alan Trachtenberg explains in *The Incorporation of America*, work in the nineteenth century was perceived as “a field of personal competition, of heroic endeavor” (5). It is not surprising, then, that when Alexis de Tocqueville traveled to the United States during the 1830s and wrote about his journey in *Democracy in America*, he was struck by the American preoccupation with wealth. In Tocqueville’s opinion, American men struggled with two fears: that they would not be as affluent as their fathers and that they would not amass a fortune large enough to ensure their sons’ futures. Thus, despite their success, prosperous American men are “almost always disconnected with” their “fortune,” and they are “constantly haunted by the desire of obtaining wealth, and they naturally turn their attention to trade and manufactures, which appear the readiest and most powerful means of success” (164).

Alger’s Ragged Dick

In *Ragged Dick*, Horatio Alger makes this preoccupation with work and wealth a central part of his narrative about a young boot-black who manages to redirect his life and find the path to middle-class success through perseverance, frugality, and hard work. Written just before the rise of business titans John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan, Alger idealizes the nineteenth-century dream of entering the business community, increasing one’s wealth, and steadily improving one’s position in society. Alger’s protagonist, Richard “Ragged Dick” Hunter, dreams of moving beyond his lowly position as a bootblack. As he confesses to his new friend Frank Whitney, “I really wish I could get somethin’

else to do. . . . I'd like to be a office boy, and learn business, and grow up 'spectable" (26). Yet Dick worries that his dream will remain unfulfilled. Anticipating a lifetime of deprivation and bootblackening, Dick expects nothing more than what he has been told, that he will likely "grow up to be a vagabone . . . and come to the gallows" (27). More, he acknowledges that his frivolous habits—"goin' to the theatre, and treatin' boys to oyster-stews, and bettin' money on cards"—hinder his ability to obtain a better situation (28).

However, nineteenth-century America was hopeful. It was a time, seemingly, when determination, a good work ethic, and strong morals were rewarded with success and upward mobility. It was a time when many believed, along with Henry David Thoreau, that "if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours" (Thoreau 267). Such remarks all but promise the realization of the dream, if one will only try. In *Ragged Dick*, Frank Whitney, who serves as just one voice of morality and hope in the narrative, echoes Thoreau's sentiments. According to Frank, "If you'll try to be somebody, and grow up into a respectable member of society, you will. You may not become rich,—it isn't everybody that becomes rich, you know,—but you can obtain a good position, and be respected" (27–28). Frank's uncle, Mr. Whitney, also possesses this same hopefulness, and he instructs Dick to "save your money, my lad, buy books, and determine to be somebody" (49). By following these guidelines, Whitney claims, "you may yet fill an honorable position" (49). In each instance, the nineteenth-century dream of respectability, work, and increased wealth comes as a result of maintaining a good work ethic, practicing honesty and frugality, educating oneself, and having a strong moral compass.

Each man who assists Dick, from Whitney to Rockwell, is an honorable, Christian businessman. They have been successful in life, amassed significant wealth, and seemingly preserved their moral fortitude. And because Dick, our hero and a hopeful young lad, longs to

emulate these men, it is unsurprising that he, too, possesses a similar work ethic. Like Benjamin Franklin before him, Dick works hard, lives within his means, and manages to save a bit of money. But perhaps most importantly, he “was above doing anything mean or dishonorable. He would not steal, or cheat, or impose upon younger boys, but was frank and straight-forward, manly and self-reliant. His nature was a noble one, and had saved him from all mean faults” (6). Such an emphasis on Dick’s capacity for conforming to the morals and guidelines of nineteenth-century society reinforces the relation between the dream and virtue. That Alger stresses such character traits and links them to success is no accident. Intending his stories to teach boys that success and morality go hand in hand, Alger takes it as his duty as a writer to “exert a wholesome influence on his young readers” (“Writing” 126). Thus, he quite consciously emphasizes “honesty, industry, frugality, and a worthy ambition” in his narratives and attempts to create “heroes” who are “manly boys, bright, cheerful, hopeful, and plucky” (126).

Although attaining the American Dream seems a rightful reward for one’s upstanding behavior during these early years in America, by the late nineteenth century, men like John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan transformed the rules of business, and their questionable tactics created a chasm between morality and success. Not only did these giants of the railroad and oil industries redefine how businesses operated, but they also intimated the separation between ethics and business practices and the desire to accumulate wealth. As Adams explains, during these years and into the twentieth century, business “ceased to be a mere occupation which must be carried on in accordance with the moral code. It had itself become part of that code. Money-making having become a virtue, it was no longer controlled by the virtues, but ranked *with* them” (191). Because of this shift in the relation between business and ethics, the dreams of Franklin and Alger consequently drifted further from the nation’s consciousness. Furthermore, because the acquisition of money was now perceived as a “virtue,” to borrow Adams’s

word, Americans longed to display their wealth, and they exuberantly collected objects—homes, cars, art, and boats—that showed the world just how successful they had become.

The Great Gatsby

For Henry James, this obsession with wealth was one of the most important and anxiety-inducing aspects of American society in the early twentieth century. Returning to America after a twenty-two year absence, James was shocked by the transformation of his native country. In *The American Scene*, he gazes anxiously on skyscrapers built seemingly for no other purpose than “to bring in money” and wonders, “was not money the only thing a self-respecting structure could be thought of as bringing in?” (73). In this new America, there seems to be no room for architecture that represents aesthetic beauty, history, and culture. For James, the new commercial landscape suggests a troubling fixation on profitability and work, and a sublimation of leisure, art, and beauty. In addition, James believes that this obsession with affluence has even penetrated the nation’s home life. Traveling through the nation’s residential areas, he discovers “huge new houses, up and down” that “confessed to their extreme expensiveness” (10). From James’s perspective, such homes serve as little more than testimonies of wealth and affirm that the “expensive” had become “a power by itself” in America (11).

The American Scene illustrates the extent to which wealth had become a force in American culture in the early twentieth century. This fixation deepened in the years leading up to World War I, and after the war the national enchantment with affluence intensified even more. By the end of the war, the nation had entered a period of tremendous prosperity: Industry was booming, new roads and technologies had emerged, there was greater wealth all around, and Americans had a fresh outlook on life. World War I had redefined America’s sense of itself and its role in the world, and called into question notions of morality, convention, religion, and tradition. This is the backdrop that F.

Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is set against, and the book provides one of our most vibrant and forthright portrayals of American life during this period. The book is also regarded as one of the most thorough assertions of the American Dream in the 1920s, and Fitzgerald depicts the effects of what happens when individuals pass their days in an attempt to live this new dream.

The Great Gatsby is populated by characters hoping to attain, or to at least touch, a life of great wealth. But unlike their predecessors, who dreamed of affluence as a consequence of hard work and dedication to a particular ethical standard, many in *The Great Gatsby* seek to circumvent the responsibilities and duties formerly associated with achieving material wealth and success. They seek a world where no one actually engages in meaningful work, but where money is inherited, is made through questionable or illicit dealings, or is discussed in books about "banking and credit and investment securities" and which promise to deliver the "shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Mæcenas knew" (5). In this world, work alone hardly earns respect, as Fitzgerald demonstrates with George Wilson, who owns his own garage and struggles to make it a success. Meanwhile, Wilson's wife, Myrtle, has an affair with Tom Buchanan, who, with his apartment in the city, new car, and no shortage of money, provides Myrtle with an opportunity, if only momentarily, to escape her lowly, ordinary life and assume the role of a more affluent woman.

As a man of tremendous wealth and leisure, Tom, who owns a "white Georgian Colonial mansion," a boat, horses, and a stable, appears to personify the American Dream (6). But it is Gatsby, more than anyone, who appears to have most fully recognized the dream. Born in a family of modest means and now the owner of a "mansion" described as a "colossal affair by any standard," Jay Gatsby appears to be a rags-to-riches type of man (5). As a boy, "Jimmy Gatz" wrote down a list of "resolves" in a notebook. The notes served the same purpose as Franklin's virtues, and to similar effect. According to the notebook, young Jimmy rose at six o'clock, exercised, read, studied "elocution,

poise and how to attain it,” and “electricity,” among other subjects (110). He also resolved to avoid activities that wasted time, such as “smoking or chewing,” and to save money and “Be better to parents” (110). Before he was twenty years old, he spent a year “beating his way along the south shore of Lake Superior as a clam-digger and a salmon-fisher or in any other capacity that brought him food and bed” (63). That Jimmy had presumably followed such a schedule and worked in such a capacity” suggests that, before he became “Jay Gatsby,” Jimmy subscribed to a more conventional notion of the American Dream.

It is a dream that Gatsby’s father, Henry C. Gatz, continues to believe in, and he is sure that his son has attained his riches through honest and meaningful work. Gatz claims that Jimmy “had a big future before him” and that he would have “helped build up the country” (107). But, as the narrative reveals, neither that dream nor that boy would survive. Gatsby associates with those who make their money by “fixing” sporting events and engaging in questionable, if not illegal, business practices. As a result of his “work,” Gatsby now owns a home that is “a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden”; he has a closet full of fine clothing; he employs numerous servants, and he owns a Rolls Royce, a hydroplane, and a number of boats (5). His outlandish parties provide others with a space where they can leave behind their inhibitions, dance to a live orchestra, and revel in a world where champagne flows freely. In such a life, as Fitzgerald suggests, the connection between work and a strong moral standard is shattered. Though there may be material wealth and financial independence, the price is too high.

But these dreams are not the only ones represented in *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald also suggests that early twentieth-century Americans were nostalgic, that they longed for something that they had lost. Henry Gatz dreams that his son will use his work to make a contribution to the world and make it a better place. Such a dream reflects

Franklin's aspirations and reasserts the relation between work and morality. Yet Gatz is a part of the last generation, and that dream appears to have passed. For Gatsby and narrator Nick Carraway, too, the dream is steeped in nostalgia; it stems from something that happened long ago. Gatsby aspires to be rich—not necessarily because he longs for material wealth in and of itself, but because he wants to make an impression on Daisy, to win back her affections and to recapture their romance. For Nick, the dream is associated with something other than riches. He confesses that he “wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention for ever,” a remark that suggests a desire to return to the type of order that existed before this moment of chaos and irresponsibility (3).

Death of a Salesman

After nearly a decade of such dreams, the year 1929 approached and brought with it the stock market crash and, after that, the Great Depression. In 1941, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, America entered World War II. Once again, our participation in a war caused a shift in the nation's manufacturing and financial sectors and transformed the workplace, and it altered the nation's cultural and social environment. In the aftermath of the war, while other nations struggled to regain their stability, America emerged as the supreme world power, both militarily and economically. Moreover, action by the federal government such as the passage of the G.I. Bill (the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944), an increase in the minimum wage, and the National Housing Act 1949 helped to give birth to a large middle-class that dreamed of upward mobility, home ownership, and cars and appliances that would make Americans' lives more comfortable.

In literature, writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Tennessee Williams, and John Steinbeck made these Americans and their dreams the focus of their narratives, and the wealthy elite faded into the background as more writers began to emphasize the middle and lower classes. In 1949, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* appeared, placing at

the center of action Willy Loman, a man who can hardly be called a hero but who seems instead to be an everyman, an individual possessing a set of universal traits that nearly everyone can relate to (Fuller 243). The play opened to tremendous success. One reviewer, John Mason Brown, claimed that it “provides one of the modern theatre’s most overpowering evenings” (207), while another correctly predicted that the play would be “performed over and over for many years” (Schneider 258). In addition to providing theatergoers with a memorable night out, the play speaks volumes about the American Dream in the twentieth century; it provides insight into our motivations and explores the reasons why Americans sometimes fail to achieve the dream. As critic William Hawkins put it, *Death of a Salesman* “is a fervent query into the great American competitive dream of success, as it strips to the core a castaway from the race for recognition and money” (202). By examining Willy’s notion of the dream and then juxtaposing that with other assertions of the dream in the play, we begin to understand not only the dangers associated with having the wrong dream but also the timelessness of the relation between honest work and the attainment of the dream.

If having a home, a car, and a few modern comforts signify the realization of the dream, Willy, for all intents and purposes, has achieved it. Yet, even though he is one payment away from home ownership, Willy continues to pursue his version of the dream. Unlike those who overvalued material wealth, Willy’s dream is not at all associated with possessions or the accumulation of capital. Rather, he yearns desperately to be someone important, to be seen as a mover and shaker, to be perceived as a man of consequence. According to Willy, “The man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead” (33). He “always felt that if a man was impressive, and well liked, that nothing” could prevent his rise to the top (97). For Willy, then, success and likeability are inextricably linked. His dream is steeped in a desire to be liked, to

be impressive and to have a presence. But this dream is problematic, for Miller clearly demonstrates that in Willy's line of work, or in any money-making business, success is measured by one's ability to produce sales and increase profitability. As a lackluster salesman with a delusional sense of self, Willy is destined to fail.

Following Willy's funeral, his son Biff asserts that Willy "had the wrong dreams" (138). In Biff's opinion, Willy's belief in the relation between success and one's reputation was misguided and perhaps even foolish. For Biff, the dream is associated with working with one's hands and being "outdoors, with your shirt off" (22). As one who values manual labor and who sees work as an opportunity to create something, Biff maintains that Willy was most successful, and happiest, when he worked with his hands: "making the stoop; finishing the cellar; putting on the new porch; when he built the extra bathroom; and put up the garage" (138). In Biff's opinion, there was "more of [Willy] in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made" (138). Though Biff's dream hearkens back to those who looked westward and dreamed of building a nation, it seems out of sync with the rest of society, and by the end of the play, Biff seems no closer to realizing his dream than he was in the beginning. But, in his assertion that Willy's dream is misguided, Biff is not alone. Every truly successful male character in the play demonstrates the unsoundness of Willy's dream. Bernard, a neighbor, made the "best marks in school" (33), follows the rules, and eventually becomes a successful lawyer who is on his way to "argue a case in front of the Supreme Court" (95). Charley, Bernard's father, appears to be an honest, profitable businessman who understands how business really works. In Willy's opinion, neither man is "well liked," yet Miller portrays both Bernard and Charley in a way that suggests that they have found success and respectability. They have achieved the dream, while Willy and Biff spend their days chasing after dreams that seem entirely unattainable.

Conclusion

Although the American Dream has evolved and has, at times, seemed elusive, it nonetheless remains an important aspect of our national culture and ethos. In *Back to Work* (2011), former President Bill Clinton evokes the American Dream as he considers the relation between government and the economy. It is not necessary to recapitulate his arguments here; instead, what is relevant in the context of this study is Clinton's assertion of the dream. For Clinton and, indeed, for many Americans in the twenty-first century, the dream is understood in these terms: that "no matter who you are or where you're from, if you work hard and play by the rules, you'll have the freedom and opportunity to pursue your own dreams and leave your kids a country where they can chase theirs" (ix). Clinton's dream also reflects the most pressing concerns in our twenty-first-century world. He imagines an America that is once again prosperous, and he imagines a day when the nation experiences what he calls "American Dream growth," an economic and industrial boom characterized by "lots of new businesses, well-paying jobs, and American leadership in new industries, like clean energy and biotechnology" (x). Although Franklin, Alger, Fitzgerald, and Miller could not foresee a time when green energy would become a part of the American Dream, there is a clear connection between their assertions of the dream and Clinton's understanding of it as the promise of opportunity, not only for the individual in the present moment, but for the future as well. Although the dream has been transformed by changing business ethics, wars, and other events, its essence remains with us even in the twenty-first century, and it is to be hoped that it will live on, not only in our literature, but in our lives, for another two hundred years.

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