

# THE AMERICAN DREAM



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PROJECT DESCRIPTION</b> .....	3
<b>MAPPING OUT THE DREAM OF AMERICA</b> .....	5
The Dream of a Better World.....	6
The Dream of Equality.....	11
The Dream of Moving Up.....	14
The Dream of Instant Wealth.....	18
<b>ANALYSIS: <i>THE GREAT GATSBY</i></b> .....	21
Historical background.....	21
The Cultural Clash.....	23
Modernism.....	24
The Dream of a Symbol.....	26
The Dream of Moving Up.....	28
The Death of the Dream.....	32
<b>ANALYSIS: <i>THE GRAPES OF WRATH</i></b> .....	34
The Dream of a Better World.....	34
The Dream of Moving Up .....	37
Escapism.....	38
The loss of the pluralism of the American Dream.....	39
The Dream of Equality.....	41
<b>ANALYSIS: <i>FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS</i></b> .....	46
Historical background.....	47
Las Vegas.....	47
The Baby Boomers.....	48
Hunter's American Dream.....	51
Where are we going?.....	52
The Dream of Moving Up.....	54
The Dream of Instant Wealth.....	55
Escapism.....	58
<b>DISCUSSION</b>	
The American Nightmare.....	60
The outlaw moving up.....	62
The American Nightmare.....	63
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	67
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	71
<b>RÉSUMÉ</b> .....	73

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This paper attempts to investigate the development of the American Dream in American literature from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 1960's. Analyzing three novels each representing an era I will attempt to point out in which ways the American Dream has changed as a concept.

I will analyze F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, representing the 1920's, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, representing the 1930's and Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, representing the 1960's, in order to point out the changes.

I will not claim that a comprehensive analysis of the period is possible using just three novels, but their place in the cultural canon as well as their thematic qualities allows for them to be considered representative of the era they depict.

I have chosen these three books because they are emblematic to the changes America went through after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the First World War. *The Great Gatsby* and *The Grapes of Wrath* both portray the transformative time known as the interwar period, but represent very disparate models of society, the greatest distinction of course being the Wall Street Crack where the economic optimism of the roaring 1920's is replaced with the devastating depression of the 1930's. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is a product of the changes America underwent after the Second World War and the ensuing economic boom, and especially how this development affected the culture of the 1960's.

The literature of a society has a great impact on the ideology and sentiments of the people while simultaneously the *Zeitgeist* of a society will influence the cultural manifestations it produces. The cultural products and the culture they arise from are connected, and due to this co-dependency it is possible for me to say that through analysis of three iconic works of literature (with the American Dream as a theme) I will be able to get an idea of how the Dream has shaped contemporary society and how society has changed the Dream. I will investigate the history of the United States to better understand the dream, but the relations of this history to fictional literature is my main focus, since I believe any work of fiction contains a naked honesty, which says something far more true about the world than any scholarly literature ever could, and ultimately “the American Dream is most fully realized in works of art”<sup>1</sup>.

To fully understand the cultural and historical climate that the novels are part of, and in which ways the American Dream has changed over the years I will consult Lawrence Samuel's *The American*

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1 Cullen (2004, p. 179)

*Dream – A Cultural History* and Jim Cullen's *The American Dream – A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* along the way, helping me to answer the following question:

*In what ways has the American Dream changed since the birth of the Republic and affected American culture, and how can this development be traced in three quintessential works of literature?*

# MAPPING OUT THE DREAM OF AMERICA

## *A look at the history that shaped the American Dream(s)*

*“The problem with pursuing dreams, even shared ones, is that not everyone sees them in quite the same ways”<sup>2</sup>*

Much like overtly positive terms such as “democracy” and “liberty” lose their meaning as more and more disparate positions use them to their gain, “the American Dream” has come to mean so many things over the years. The only thing that seems to create a common ground for all these variations of the dream is the quest for progress – a general improvement of life – and a great sense of freedom for the individual along the way.

Although this ideal seems perfectly straightforward it possesses a number of possible interpretations. The exact nature of the progress in question for instance – is it material gain, spiritual enlightenment, technical achievements or academic wisdom that is the source of the striving? Even with that difficult definition out of the way, what exactly is freedom? And more importantly: To whom is this freedom bestowed – who will benefit from the improved life conditions?

Throughout this chapter I will try to map out four different American Dreams. These four dreams are inspired by the distinctions made by Jim Cullen in *The American Dream – A short history of an idea that shaped a nation* (2004 Oxford University Press) but have been modified to suit my own perception of the dream. Perhaps because I am younger or perhaps because I am not an American I found his definitions to be precise in certain aspects but rather far-fetched in others.

Consequently Cullen's six variations on the American Dream has become four (in some ways almost three and a half) in this text. It is worth noting that I have not discarded two of Cullen's dreams, but rather created my own concept of definition very loosely based on the thoughts in his book, and shaped around the definitions I had mapped out before reading his work.

Although the four are in no way exhaustive in representing the numerous and sometimes arbitrary ways the American Dream is perceived by the individual, I have discovered in my research that fairly distinct versions of the American Dream seem to exist. Depending on the point in time you investigate the dream has meant different things. Although America is a very young nation (or

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2 Cullen (2004, p. 25)

perhaps because of this) the development of society, of the citizens and the visions they carry with them has changed substantially from the pilgrims set ashore in the early 1600's to an Austrian immigrant and bodybuilder took to the governor's office in California almost exactly 400 years later.

Yet on the surface the dream seems to be intact, seems to be the same vision as it ever was. Even when mapping out these different interpretations of the dream they are not distinct. They intersect and overlap and are all connected around this most fleeting and haunting of concepts: A better life.

With this connection in mind, and consciously aware that this is a simplification, I will now try to describe the four dreams in order to better understand the American state of mind, as well as in order to have a framework for analysis later in this thesis.

The four encompass of (1) the Dream of a Better World (as in better than the old one left behind), which is closely connected to the idea of the frontier, (2) the Dream of Equality expressed in the visions of the Declaration of Independence, (3) the Dream of Moving Up on the social ladder through hard work – and lastly the dream derived from this notion: (4) The Dream of Instant Wealth, where the end is the same, but the way to the top is practically devoid of obstacles. These last two dreams are interconnected in many ways, and in some cases I will have to look at them as one and the same. However in most aspects they are quite different, especially in regard to perseverance and morals.

Through these distinctions I will be better equipped to understand how the dreams, fulfilled or not, have affected the literature of 20<sup>th</sup> century America and vice versa.

First I will look at a dream that has shaped quite a substantial portion of early American literature and has been an essential concept in the myth of America.

### ***The Dream of a Better World***

The chronologically first occurring dream is what I choose to call "The Dream of a Better World". America as a nation was born out of immigrants sailing into the unknown looking for a better life in a new world, and throughout decades and centuries of expanding western civilization on the American continent the notion of the frontier has always been a luring concept.

When the pilgrims arrived in nowadays Virginia in Jamestown in 1607 and in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620 they brought with them a dream of a better world for their children and a society where religious matters would be the center of existence. They left the increasingly liberal English church behind in search of a place where more strict religious doctrines would rule and where the world that had become "a corrupt place" could be changed<sup>3</sup>. Indeed this idea that the world might have gone askew but that things could and would be better across the ocean, or over the hill or on the other side of the fence is essential to the understanding of the dream and indeed the American state of mind. In the words of historian Jim Cullen their "faith in reform became the central legacy of American Protestantism and the cornerstone of what became the American Dream. Things – religious and otherwise – could be different"<sup>4</sup>.

The word Pilgrim derives from the Latin *peregrinus* (a person from abroad), and has come to mean a person performing a pilgrimage - in the religious sense a person traveling to a holy place.

The pilgrims that came to America were in fact people from abroad, from England and the Netherlands and they were really going to a holy place. They considered themselves to be better than the religious authorities they left behind, and their self-righteousness led them across the Atlantic Ocean to what they considered the promised land. The analogy to the chosen people of the Bible was not only a powerful symbol but rather a perceived reality. The puritans especially, but in reality most of the pilgrims, saw themselves as the descendants of the Israelites – the treasured people of God in the Old Testament.<sup>5</sup> Throughout history America has been perceived as The Promised Land, whether in a strictly religious sense or a more secular way, and the notion of America as a continent of endless possibilities where humans could pursue their true potential has been essential to the myth of America - luring immigrants from all over the world to its shores. The word 'myth' is not irrelevant here. America as the promised land became an attractive myth, especially after the revolution, that mesmerized people all over the world dreaming of a better life. It was no longer a particularly religious concept, but rather a symbolic idea of a place where everybody had a chance to go where no one had gone before and start afresh. No matter where you came from, and no matter how corrupt, poor or dangerous a place you lived in you could leave the Old World behind, go to the frontier and start a truly new life without constraints.

After the Revolutionary War against Britain America achieved its independence. The following annexation of states towards the Mississippi River and the purchase of the Louisiana territory from France in 1803 saw the landmass of America increase substantially. This gave way to a wave of

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3 Cullen (2004, p. 15)

4 Cullen (2004, p. 15)

5 Cullen (2004)

pioneers moving further west from the coast into new land. In some cases this migration was instigated by disagreements in the former colonies, much like the first colonies were founded on disputes with the homelands of Europe. Disagreements with authorities were by no means always the reason for western expansion, but the attraction of the freedom of the frontier may have turned tiny disagreements into substantial reason to go seek the unknown. This is the essence of the Dream of a Better World: That you can go to the edge of civilization, expand it and shape it in your own image. As Cullen puts it: “The dream had once been the creation of a new world. Now the task was to sustain and extend it”.<sup>6</sup> George Washington described the importance of an expanding nation, a place he called “Land of promise, with milk and honey” in a letter to general Lafayette:

*I wish to see the sons and daughters of the world in peace and busily employed in the (...) agreeable amusement of fulfilling the first and great commandment – increase and multiply: as an encouragement to which we have opened the fertile plains of the Ohio to the poor, the needy, and the oppressed of the Earth. Washington cited in Cullen (2004, p. 139)*

Following the Civil War westward settlement was encouraged further by the administration who gave away (almost) free land, and thus the movement west took on the shape of an exodus. What is worth noting in relation to this ever-expanding movement westward was that while some people did it out of need, as Washington had stated as one of the reasons for expansion, many people moved west because they had a *dream* of an even better life and the highest possible degree of freedom at the frontier. America was a “frontier state” as Dorothee Kocks puts it and this foundation shaped the future of the country.<sup>7</sup> The frontier allowed for the needy to find fertile soil, but it also allowed the independent to move away from civilization when an area became too crowded and the pioneer “lacks elbow room” as it is humorously declared in *A New Guide to Emigrants to the West* from 1837<sup>8</sup>.

It is quite possible that Kocks has found her inspiration for her depiction of “the frontier state” in the influential 1893 essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* by Frederick Jackson Turner who described the ongoing process of new settlements further west as a chance for a portion of society to go back-to-basics and start anew. He called the process a “perennial rebirth” and acknowledged its influence on American character and as such the American Dream: “this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch

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6 Cullen (2004, p. 29)

7 Kocks 2000

8 Peck cited in Turner (1921, p. 20)



with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.”<sup>9</sup>

Once the western coast and the Pacific Ocean was reached the movement west was over, but the territories still allowed for dreamers to go to the frontier (south towards Mexico and especially north to the territories south of present day Canada) and search for the good life in an empty land. In reality of course the land was not empty and never had been, but the Native Americans were either considered irrelevant animals to be controlled - “their land is empty”<sup>10</sup> - or subordinate human beings who were physically removed to suit the ruling class of white men. This movement north and south had to cease at some point as well. In time the frontier - “the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization”<sup>11</sup> - would be gone, and there would be no empty land to go to. The problems that could arise from this development and the ways in which the Dream of a Better World had shaped America was beautifully described by Turner, who noted that after 1880 the concept of the frontier was no longer to be part of the American vocabulary, since the Great West had been colonized such as to leave only fragments of empty land - essentially destroying the dream of the frontier. But that dream had shaped America; according to Turner it was the concept of the frontier itself that had made the continent essentially American. The lessons learned and the attributes gained from the frontier would not cease to be part of the American Dream, but it would have to take on a different form, because the time of settlement, the time of the pioneers and the time of the frontier was gone:

*The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (...) He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves. And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone,*

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9 Turner (1921, pp. 2-3)

10 Cushman cited in Cullen (2004, p. 17)

11 Turner (1921, p. 3)

*and with its going has closed the first period of American history.* Turner (1921, pp. 37-38)

Once the physical frontier was gone, so was the Dream of a Better World, although many of Turner's critics claimed that the dream of a better place would never die, as it was a dream of novelty and exploration of unknown areas. Consequently both the internet and space travel (“The Final Frontier”<sup>12</sup>) has been considered heirs to Turner's frontier.<sup>13</sup> But Turner was not the only one to feel that something was lost with the end of the frontier. Walt Whitman stood on the coast of California and sensed this “restless, nervous energy”, this American need to move on.

*Facing west from California's shores,  
Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,  
I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of maternity,  
the land of migrations, look afar;  
Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled;  
For starting westward from Hindustan, from the vales of Kashmere,  
From Asia, from the north, from the God, the sage, and the hero,  
From the south, from the flowery peninsulas and the spice islands,  
Long having wander'd since, round the earth having wander'd,  
Now I face home again, very pleas'd and joyous,  
(But where is what I started for so long ago?  
And why is it yet unfound?)*

- Walt Whitman (1980, p. 361)

The Dream of a Better World was not only about new land in a very physical and tangible way, but about the dream of a better life further down the road. The restless journey for improvement, which left Whitman at the edge of the pacific ocean still dreaming onwards, and which has made Americans throughout history travel further west, was the true essence of the Dream of a Better World.

Despite all this the exhaustion of land had affected the dream of the frontier, and while the dream itself remained relevant, the notion of the physical frontier was gone, and consequently a new

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12 Space is described as “The Final Frontier” in the introduction to the sci-fi television show *Star Trek*. The last line of the same introduction encapsulates the essence of the Dream of the Frontier: “To boldly go where no man has gone before”. Martin, G: *Phrase Finder* viewed 16 april 2014. <<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/328700.html>>

13 Cullen (2004, pp. 142-143)

American Dream was arising. A dream that had been growing in appeal since the Declaration of Independence, and a dream that now seemed to be necessary to the future of a continent. At the time Turner was writing it had almost reached its final size, but the citizens were still rapidly growing in numbers.

### ***The Dream of Equality***

The pilgrims, like almost all Americans since then, were searching for freedom, but like the ever-changing vision of the Dream, the concept of freedom is ambiguous.

When asked to define freedom most people in our neck of the woods (and in our time) would probably talk about the possibility of following one's dreams and convictions without constraints, perhaps adding that the individual's pursuit of happiness never allows him/her to deprive others of the same privileges. However, today as well as then, the notion of solidarity might be left out of the equation.

In the case of the pilgrims, or more accurately the puritans, the idea of freedom was very important, but what they considered freedom or liberty would probably not be recognized as such in the mindset of most Americans today. In fact the kind of freedom I have described above was considered to return men to a prehistoric state and render them brutal animals controlled by instinct and desire. Instead the edifying freedom desired by the puritans was centered around the disciplined following of scripture and rules and was "maintained and exercised in a way of subjection to authority" to quote one of the founders of Massachusetts Bay, John Winthrop writing in 1645.<sup>14</sup>

Plainly, language can be powerful and deceptive and it is vital to understand the cultural background of particular rhetoric before we are able to understand fully what "freedom", "equality" and "liberty" mean in a specific context. The key here is to acknowledge the fact that the semantic properties of any word change from era to era, and even from one geographical point to another. It is worth noting that while the language of the founding fathers was English, the specific meaning of words change, and the meaning can be subject to dispute even among people from the same time.<sup>15</sup>

This paper is not intending to exhaust the history of any words in relation to American culture. Instead I will look briefly at a specific phrase that perhaps more than any other combination of words has shaped the United States as a nation and with it the foundation of its appeal, The

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<sup>14</sup> Winthrop cited in Cullen (2004, p. 21)

<sup>15</sup> Cullen (2004, pp. 52-53)

American Dream:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*<sup>16</sup>

The most striking and surely most cited part of this segment is “all men are created equal” and rhetorically this is an interesting sentence. First of all it says “men”, which we would believe to be all human beings but in fact the authors were only referring to males, and only white males at that. Women, blacks, Chinese and any other deviants were not part of the equation.<sup>17</sup>

Next the word “created” is important, because it clearly states that all men are born with the same rights and the same ability to success, but that does not mean that all men always will remain equal. The sentence is implicitly conveying that everybody can reach the top, *but not everyone will*.

Other interesting aspects of this most famous of charters is the recognition of a God (“Creator”), and the utterly vague message that “Life and Liberty” are among the rights of men.

The last right I find particularly characteristic of the American mindset: “The pursuit of happiness”. It implies that happiness is a tangible thing that can be acquired, and this seems to be at the core of the American Dream in all its incarnations. Especially in the Dream of Moving Up which I will come back to later. Although women were not part of the discourse that surrounded the Declaration of Independence, the Dream of Moving Up began to have an appeal to women as well, who could imagine themselves as agents of their own destiny. The great depression saw women working alongside men and this made the man's monopoly as the sole provider disintegrate. During the Second World War it was the women who logistically won the war, since they were the ones working the factories while the men were getting shot in Europe.<sup>18</sup> This position was reinforced after the war and the woman's place was no longer only “in her home”.<sup>19</sup>

The Dream of Equality was not only a dream for men.

If you look up “Equality” in *Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English* it states that equality is a “situation in which people have the same rights, advantages etc.”.<sup>20</sup>

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16 Armitage (2007, p. 27)

17 Cullen (2004, p. 51)

18 Cullen (2004, p. 154)

19 Although the women were no longer confined to the house many believed they should be. This includes singer Ray Charles who in his 1954 hit *I got a Woman* sang: “Never runnin' in the streets, and leavin' me alone / She knows a woman's place is right there now in her home”

20 Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, fourth edition (2005, p. 527)

Looking at the history of the United States we learn that actual equality of status is not prevalent since people rarely have the same possibilities, their social background being just one factor that renders people in disparate positions. The Dream of Equality revolves around the notion that all men have equal *opportunity*, which is not in any way the same as actual equity. This dream seems to relate to a more theoretical sort of equality where everyone potentially has the same opportunity to become the President or a business tycoon (but the ones born with money or influence tend to have an easier passage to the top). Jim Cullen points out that without this universal eligibility the Dream is lost: “At some visceral level, virtually all of us need to believe that equality is one of the core values of everyday American life, that its promises extend to everyone”<sup>21</sup>.

From the very beginning of America's young life the notion of a better life for everyone has been central. The dream of a New World where improved life conditions would benefit every American had a spiritual aspect and the Dream of Equality was central to the man who is credited for coining the term “the American Dream”, James Truslow Adams. He stated that the “greatest contribution we have made to the welfare of the world” was “that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank”.<sup>22</sup> In relation to this discussion about equality his remarks about improved life conditions for all classes is most striking. Up until the industrial revolution it seemed that improving society and the life for all in a community was an honorable goal, that it was man's duty to “improve not only his own condition, but to assist in ameliorating mankind”<sup>23</sup>.

However when the money started flowing things changed:

*The acceleration of industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth century, combined with the growing application of the Darwinian theory of “the survival of the fittest” to human affairs popularized a notion of freedom as the right of the individual entrepreneur, like John D. Rockefeller, to make as much money as he could without interference that would drag down the progress of the human race as a whole. In this view, freedom meant freedom to dominate and freedom from regulation. Cullen (2004, p. 107)*

The spiritual aspect that had been the frame work of both the Dream of a Better World and the Dream of Equality were losing its moral fibers, becoming ever more materialistic.

The Dream of Equality meant that everybody were able to dream the same ensuing dream – the Dream of Moving Up. The possibility of working your way from the gutter to the office at the top

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21 Cullen (2004, p. 108)

22 Adams cited in Cullen (2004, p. 4)

23 Lincoln cited in Cullen (2004, p. 94)

of the sky scraper (even if it is only a hypothetical one) is perhaps the most fascinating and universally captivating aspect of the American Dream. We will take a closer look at that dream now.

### ***The Dream of Moving Up***

The myth of a poor boy living in the slum who gets a job running errands for the boss of a big company, and slowly but steadily works his way to the top of the corporate ladder is perhaps the most seductive and most famous of American Dreams. The fact that this is not only a myth, but rather a true (albeit very rare) story about some of the most powerful men of the industrialization in America makes the Dream feel all the more real.<sup>24</sup> It is essential to the Dream of Moving Up that you believe hard work pays off – that “virtue and reward are locked in symbiotic embrace”<sup>25</sup>.

In the first years of American life, when the pilgrims' existence revolved around God, the desire to move up socially or economically was much less prevalent than today. Even if you worked to improve your condition in life there was a sense of community involved where your own development could benefit society as a whole. The spiritual quality of “doing good” was to help everybody on their journey to heaven, not just yourself. But as the colonies were established and stable and life quality increased, financial and social advancement became desirable: “Once a form of distraction or comfort while awaiting the implacable hand of fate, becoming healthy, wealthy and wise had gone beyond an instrument of salvation into being a practical end in its own right”.<sup>26</sup>

The economic safety and the material achievements were perhaps obtained too effortlessly, and the spiritual aspect faded and was eventually obliterated.

Remembering the words from the Declaration of Independence discussed above one cannot help to think that the freedoms ensured by the charter involves (perhaps even revolves around) the freedom of enterprise, which has been vital to the American Dream since the early years of the republic.<sup>27</sup>

In John Lockes draft for the Declaration from 1689 “the pursuit of happiness” was actually “the pursuit of property” and in George Mason's *Declaration of Rights for Virginia* (1776), which was a great inspiration to Jefferson's final wording in the *Declaration of Independence*, he wrote about “the enjoyment of life and liberty with the means of acquiring and possessing property”.<sup>28</sup> It was clear that the liberty ensured in the Declaration could also be used for economic gain.

This passion for working hard and enjoying the fruits of your labor had been a part of American

24 Andrew Carnegie's success in the steel industry is just one example

25 Cullen (2004, p. 85)

26 Cullen (2004, p. 30)

27 Cullen (2004, p. 58)

28 Cullen (2004, p. 46)

culture even before you could talk about such a culture. The pilgrims and later the pioneers took chances and built a society from scratch, and it was (and is) a common belief that through hard work life would get better, for you and for your children. In the words of Jim Cullen:

*The American Dream was never meant to be a zero-sum solution: the goal has always been to end up with more than you started with. (...) The foundation of this dream, upward mobility, was a belief that one could realize the fruits of one's aspirations through applied intelligence and effort.* Cullen (2004, pp. 159-160)

It is not hard to find examples of these self-made men making their life better because they wanted to, and because they had the vitality and self-reliance necessary to do so. Many of the iconic historical figures of America were embodiments of the American Dream of Moving Up. Abraham Lincoln's rise from a worker's son to President of the United States is one example, and he was well aware of his position as representative of that dream: "I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has"<sup>29</sup>.

The Dream of a Better World and The Dream of Moving Up was not an American Dream per se. The idea that somewhere a land was waiting to host the high point of civilization along with a hope that the riches of the land could benefit the individual was the fuel of many of the expeditions in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. When America was founded the vision of this new world had found a geographical focal point, and the homeless dream had become American.

The fantasy about the New World where everyone, regardless of their social background could advance and live the good life spread across the globe and drew immigrants to the shores, especially Chinese reaching California and Europeans sailing into New York under the stern gaze of the Statue of Liberty. The sonnet by Emma Lazarus depicted on the pedestal of the statue embodies this notion of America as a welcoming "Mother of Exiles"<sup>30</sup>:

*From her beacon-hand*

*Glows world-wide welcome;*

*"Give me your tired, your poor,*

*Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,"* Lazarus cited in Lehman (2006, p. 184)

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29 Lincoln cited in Cullen (2004, p. 74)

30 Lehman (2006, p. 184)

Although the Statue of Liberty was intended as a symbol of republicanism it became a symbol of immigration and America's subsequent kaleidoscopic population<sup>31</sup>. It became a symbol of the shared dream based on collective ownership, the idea that America is for whoever chooses to come there. No matter what language you spoke when arriving at Ellis Island the American Dream of Moving Up was universally understood. And to make absolutely sure that all new Americans understood the name of the game, a guidebook given to immigrants encapsulated the idea of hard work leading to prosperity: “Forget your customs and ideals. Select a goal and pursue it with all your might. You will experience a bad time but sooner or later you will achieve your goal. Don’t take a moment’s rest. Run.”<sup>32</sup>

As it is carefully suggested in this extract the path to the top might not be without obstacles, and if you slow down you might never reach it. The competitiveness of capitalism and the inevitable downside to this antagonism was beginning to show its face.

What I find important in understanding the Dream of Moving Up is that it wasn't until the industrial revolution in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that the dream started losing its moral frame work. Benjamin Franklin is called “the prophet of American capitalism”<sup>33</sup> and yet the individualism without empathy that characterizes certain aspects of modern capitalism did not seem to be present in his scheme of things. If we see Franklin as a symbol of contemporary discourse he was remarkably concerned with the well-being of the community and the equilibrium that ought to exist between spiritual and secular matters. Although he believed it to be an honorable quest to seek wealth he refused to take out a patent for the wood stove he invented, as he believed (like Nikola Tesla 150 years later) that “scientific knowledge should be freely shared and diffused”<sup>34</sup>. By the time of Franklin such generous behavior was not considered as unorthodox as it was when Tesla did the same, and through their rivalry Thomas Edison came to embody modern capitalism. He took out patents for his inventions, discredited Tesla's innovative discoveries to strengthen his own position, and as a result became rich and famous while Tesla became, if not a historical footnote, than devoid of the commercial and social success that Edison enjoyed.<sup>35</sup>

The individualism (a term coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in his influential *Democracy in*

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31 Auster 2002, New York Times, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/09/opinion/09AUST.html>>

32 History Channel: *The Statue of Liberty* <<http://www.history.co.uk/study-topics/history-of-america/statue-of-liberty>>

33 Cullen (2004, p. 64)

34 Ibid.

35 Jonnes 2003



*America*<sup>36</sup>) that had been a part of the Dream of Moving Up from the beginning did not necessarily mean that the solidarity with the weakest members of society would be sacrificed in the name of profit, but somewhere along the way that seemed to happen.

William Whyte in his 1956 *The Organization Man* notes that the individualism that had characterized American Culture (emerging from life at the frontier, according to Turner) had lost its touch with its protestant heritage, and the moral aspect of the dream, where upward mobility is for the benefit of the community and not just the individual, had vanished. Instead it was (only) an individual quest for improvement, and with the aspect of society lost, so was the solidarity with the less fortunate.<sup>37</sup> As Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal noted in his 1944 study *An American Dilemma*: “In society liberty for one may mean the suppression of liberty for others”.<sup>38</sup>

The lack of solidarity is one thing, the eternal competition to reach the top, however friendly it may be, is another, and no matter how you look at it, the Dream of Moving Up will not come true for every single American. Tocqueville had some important insight on this as well:

*When all the privileges of birth and fortune are abolished, when all professions are accessible to all, and a man's own energies may place him at the top of any one of them, an easy and unbounded career seems open to his ambition and he will readily persuade himself that he is born to no common destinies. But this is an erroneous notion, which is corrected by daily experience. The same equality that allows every citizen to conceive these lofty hopes render all the citizens less able to realize them; it circumscribes their powers on every side, while it gives freer scope to their desires. Not only are they themselves powerless, but they are met at every step by immense obstacles, which they did not at first perceive.*

Tocqueville (1863, p. 165)

Although the Dream of Equality allowed all Americans to have the same desire, according to Tocqueville the very equality that gave them equal opportunity ensured that only a minority would reach their goals. Since Tocqueville's visit to America a lot has happened to American society, and the way to the top seems even more rugged than in the 1800's. It is difficult to come out the winner, some would say impossible, and it is this deceptive nature of the American Dream that Pulitzer Price winning journalist Chris Hedges attacks:

*The vaunted American dream, the idea that life will get better, that progress is inevitable if*

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36 Cullen (2004, p. 69)

37 Whyte cited in Cullen (2004, p. 153)

38 Myrdal cited in Cullen (2004, p. 118)

*we obey the rules and work hard, that material prosperity is assured, has been replaced by a hard and bitter truth. The American dream, we now know, is a lie. We will all be sacrificed. The virus of corporate abuse - the perverted belief that only corporate profit matters - has spread to outsource our jobs, cut the budgets of our schools, close our libraries, and plague our communities with foreclosures and unemployment. Hedges & Sacco (2012, pp. 226-227)*

This depressing image of contemporary America is no doubt unnerving, perhaps even exaggerated, but it is hard not to find even an iota of truth in Hedges' disgust with the society he lives in, when you look at the ghost town of Detroit, the unemployment rate sky rocketing, the prisons filling and the bailouts to the banks following the financial crisis. Still the American Dream of Moving Up lives on. Every day immigrants arrive in America hoping to work their way up, and improve the life for themselves and their children – and a few of them still succeed.

The Statue of Liberty used to welcome immigrants to their new home, now electrified fences and armed officers on the Mexican border greet “the poor, the needy, the oppressed of the earth” trying to seek refuge in America. If they get in, now as well as 100 years ago, it will require quite a lot of skill and tough grinding to come out on top. It is therefore not such a strange occurrence that many hope to “hit the jackpot” - figuratively as well as literally. The problem is that so many are battling for the same spot on top of the podium. Therefore: “Great and rapid elevation is (...) rare. It forms an exception to the common rule; and it is the singularity of such occurrences that makes men forget how rarely they happen”.<sup>39</sup>

### ***The Dream of Instant Wealth***

The settlers of the great plains might have found the American Dream to be a self-sufficient household and the autonomy of living at the frontier, but after the industrialization and up through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which the literature of this project revolves around, “getting by” was not enough. Owning a house was the first step, then a car, then a fridge, then TV, new clothes and a leather couch. Consumerism became an essential part of the American Dream, especially following the economic boom of the post-WW2 years, and with it came the dream of owning all these possessions and spending money without working for them.

The gratification of hard work no longer had the same strong appeal, and the dream of reaching the top of the social pyramid changed. The end goal was still the same, but the way to get there was quite different. Instead of climbing a frail, dangerous ladder overcoming obstacles along the way,

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<sup>39</sup> Tocqueville (1863, p. 301)

the new American Dream was to simply step into a shiny elevator and cruise all the way to the top. The Dream of Instant Wealth is “more quantitative than qualitative” compared to the Dream of Moving Up - the acquisitions hoarded along the way are more important than the journey to the top.<sup>40</sup> Jim Cullen believes that a cynicism has replaced the spiritual aspect of the American Dream and to most modern Americans “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are a matter of individual fulfillment and ease, not striving and hard work”.<sup>41</sup>

I want to make it clear at this point that the Dream of Instant Wealth is not a new dream born out of the consumerism of post-modern America. The pioneers hustled and battled each other to get a share of free land, and the gold rush of California in the 1850's with its despair, backstabbing and rare spurts of extreme wealth, became symbolic to the Dream of Instant Wealth. It festered itself in the American imagination, the idea that “transformative riches were literally at your feet, there for the taking”.<sup>42</sup>

With that in mind it is still in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially after World War II that this dream has seemed to overshadow, perhaps even obliterate, the previously mentioned varieties of the dream. To reach the top through relentless labor and innovative thinking was surely difficult, so to reach the top with as little effort as possible, preferably none at all, required luck and a gambling mind set. That was not such a far-fetched idea though, as “America itself – in the broadest sense of that term – was a world built on gambling.”<sup>43</sup> It is worth noting that one of the main mechanisms used to gather the capital needed to build colonial America were lotteries, and it was a popular alternative to taxation. Even the first pilgrims, and the colonizers from Spain and France before them, were gambling with their life when they set out on the perilous journeys across the Atlantic Ocean, not to mention the pioneers who traveled across the great plains, risking everything.

The dream of instant wealth is of course related to the fantasy of Scrooge McDuck-esque riches, but it is rather the easy living that is the captivating approach of this dream. Thomas Edison and many others' protective desire to copyright everything they created and live off the profits became a variation of the Dream of Instant Wealth – that you only had to make it big once and were able to live the Good Life due to proceeds for the rest of your existence.<sup>44</sup>

You had to be made of something special to believe that you could survive in a New World and build a society from nothing but ideals and enterprise. You had to be made of something special to believe that as a former slave you would ever have any rights. And you had to be made of

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40 Cullen (2004, p. 160)

41 Cullen (2004, p. 39)

42 Cullen (2004, p. 170)

43 Cullen (2004, p. 161)

44 Cullen (2004, pp. 172-173)

something special to believe that you could work your way from an errand boy to one of the richest men in the world within 40 years (as Andrew Carnegie did).

To realize the American Dream you had to be made of something special. You had to possess resourcefulness, recklessness and hope in even proportion. If you are able to believe in the tales of the past, and if you are able to dream, there is always a strand of hope. Even if it is a fool's hope.

*Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it. It rests on confidence not so much in the future as in the past. It derives from early memories – no doubt distorted, overlaid with later memories, and thus not wholly reliable as a guide to any factual reconstruction of past events – in which the experience of order and contentment was so intense that subsequent disillusionment cannot dislodge it. Such experience leaves as its residue the unshakable conviction, not that the past was better than the present, but that trust is never completely displaced, even though it is never completely justified either and therefore destined inevitably to disappointments. Lasch cited in Cullen (2004, p. 184)*

# THE GREAT GATSBY

*The Great Gatsby* was written by Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald and published in 1925.

*The Great Gatsby* has for a long time and by many been considered not only the quintessential American Novel, but (of more importance to this project) the quintessential expression of the American Dream, particularly the Dream of Moving Up.<sup>45</sup>

Although the book is now one of the biggest American classics, the book received tepid reviews upon its publication.

The book deals with the American Dream of Moving Up with its main character Jay Gatsby mimicking the Horatio Alger story of rags to riches, but the story is also symbolic to the development of the 1920's and the demise of morals, and deals with the illusion of the American Dream. *The Great Gatsby* has a “fable-like plot about a man who pursues unseemly ends through unseemly means and pays for his dream with his life”<sup>46</sup> and due to its mythical narrative it can be seen as both a critique of the development of society in the interwar period and as commentary on the deceptive nature of dreaming.

Fitzgerald investigates the polarities of the American Dream and the dichotomy that seems to exist in everything. Huge success is presented on one side, while tragedy is right around the corner. The world is a wonderful place where love will endure, but is also a gray dump, dislocated and empty of meaning. The parties and the life of the rich on Long Island is in stark contrast to the ash city they have to pass through to go to New York City. Their colorful lives seem to turn black and white when they pass through, and while their parties are completely devoid of morals, the eyes of T.J. Eckleburg loom in the air above the valley of ashes, ultimately overseeing the destruction of Gatsby's dream.

## ***Historical background***

The Great Gatsby takes place in a time Fitzgerald dubbed “The Jazz Age” and this time, the 1920's, had an inherent paradox: There was extreme optimism due to the financial and technological situation, coupled with an apathetic approach to politics and morals ensuing the Great War.

Nietzsche had proclaimed that God was dead, and many saw the innovative spirit of the age as

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45 Cullen (2004, p. 180)

46 Cullen 2004, p. 181

proof that humans were his successors - the true masters of the earth. Airplanes had conquered the sky, great machines were moving without horses and messages were sent across the world in the flash of an eye. Compared to the reality of just 50 years before the human race was skyrocketing, and dreaming of continually moving up; but within their desire for progress arrogance ensued.

Nothing seemed to be able to stop the inevitable technological progress, which would improve our living conditions, and in America the dream of the perfect world elevated as fast as the skyscrapers on Manhattan. While confidence soared higher, seemingly unable to be shaken, a number of events took place that destabilized the foundation of human audacity.

“The War to End All Wars” turned out to be a devastating, meaningless tragedy. Millions of young men lost their lives on all fronts, without substantial change to the geopolitical landscape or the world being a safer place. What was most devastating was the way technological achievements such as machine guns and aerial bombers allowed the slaughter at the battlefields. Innovations were supposed to improve life and instead it had ended it for a large portion of the young generation.

A few years prior the human faith in its own innovative abilities had suffered another hard blow as the luxurious Titanic, the “unsinkable ship” that was the pinnacle of technological achievement, failed to overcome its maiden voyage, killing around 1500 people on their way to live out their own American Dream in New York City. Almighty man suddenly saw his power burst by nature as haughtiness had turned to tragedy. It was as though an admonishing finger was being raised from the antic past. The hubris of humanity had been punished by the cold hand of Nemesis in the shape of an iceberg. The Titanic had sunk, and with it the blind faith in the future.

The human race had lost its way from its path of moral righteousness and technological improvement. Millions had died in a seemingly unnecessary conflict and the technological achievements that were supposed to elevate humanity had been the main reason behind the slaughter on the battlefields of Europe.

The turbulent times after the War meant that Americans needed something to hold on to. In America where the War had affected people less directly, the radical political and cultural development of Europe was unnerving and instead the nation devoted itself to its core values and more conservative politics. Economic expansion and further technological innovation coupled with a fear of progressive ideologies and an extension of prohibition made the 1920's in America a decade of “political ignorance, flaunted capitalism and material wealth”<sup>47</sup>. Although many Americans found solace in conservative values the decade was essentially transformative, and while the political life was somewhat moderate and traditional, the rest of society was going through changes that were occurring at an increasing speed. Consumption became more important than production, the country

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47 Ruland & Bradbury (1992, p. 296)

was abandoned in favor of the city, the mind was perceived differently through psychoanalysis, music suddenly had a beat, and new technology changed the course of human life forever.

It was a high-wire balancing act to exist between novelty and nostalgia which made everything seem evanescent, and the anomaly of the time left people begging for purpose.<sup>48</sup>

While faith in the sanctity of human morality had been shaken, the innovative spirit lived on and the economic upswing kept accelerating. It is this paradoxical time that came to shape modernism and *The Great Gatsby*. In the apathetic limbo between technological progress and moral decline that shaped the interwar period it was a shining path through the chaos to negate history, distort morals and dance on the antique tables of the past.

### ***The Cultural Clash***

The clash of the conservative values that swept America and the hedonistic life style that came to represent the new world is described throughout *The Great Gatsby*. In a sense it is the meeting between the Old World and its inherited privilege and the new world where people can rise to the top if they want it badly enough that is the framework of the book. What the two worlds can agree upon is the dubious state of the world after World War 1. “Civilization's going to pieces”<sup>49</sup> as Tom declares in the beginning of the book, and shortly after Daisy admits to Nick that she agrees and hopes her daughter will be “a beautiful little fool”<sup>50</sup> to spare her from the corrupted world she was born into. While Tom devotes himself to protecting the conservative values of America, the more progressive people, like Gatsby and his guests, submerge themselves in a hedonistic lifestyle to infuse some sort of meaning into the world that seems to be without purpose.

This is a way to cope with reality, but for Tom it is one of the objects of his scorn. He belongs to an old world, and he does not understand the new one. As he says with contempt:

“I suppose you've got to turn your house into a pigsty in order to have any friends – in the modern world.”<sup>51</sup>

*Solace in excess* can be said to be the key phrase for the people who attend Gatsby's extravagant parties. The champagne is flowing, the music is loud, and everything is extreme. To use a hackneyed phrase - they were partying like there was no tomorrow. The moral situation of the day meant that some people coped with reality by letting pleasure dictate their actions, as they

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48 Ruland & Bradbury (1992, pp. 295-297)

49 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 19)

50 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 24)

51 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 136)

“conducted themselves according to the rules of behavior associated with an amusement park”<sup>52</sup> and lifted hedonism to some sort of moral value in its own right. As Nick notes at one of the parties when he has surrendered himself completely to the celebration of the moment:

“I had taken two finger-bowls of champagne, and the scene had changed before my eyes into something significant, elemental and profound.”<sup>53</sup>

Aside from the decadence of the parties the modern world involves the breakdown of traditional inherited class, which meant that people like Jay Gatsby, and especially people like his guests (movie stars, musicians and entrepreneurs) are able to climb the social ladder. These *nouveau riche* awake contempt in the eyes of people like Tom and Daisy Buchanan who are from a long line of wealthy families. The historical grandeur that West Egg lacks makes the place and its inhabitants despised by the aristocracy of East Egg, who are “appalled by its raw vigour that chafed under the old euphemisms and by the too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants along a short-cut from nothing to nothing.”<sup>54</sup>. The Buchanan's belong to the old, vanishing world, and they have never known anything but riches. This has a profound influence on Daisy's personality, and her position is almost a proverbial princess waiting for her prince. She was born with a silver spoon in her mouth and silk linen draping her body. She is at the very top of the social ladder and everything in her demeanor is related to wealth. Even her voice is “full of money” as Gatsby puts it, and Nick elaborates: “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”<sup>55</sup>.

The disagreements between old and new does not only take place in the plot of *The Great Gatsby*. The book itself, both its literary virtues and narrative themes, places it in the middle of a literary clash. Now I will look into this briefly.

## **Modernism**

In literature the cultural confrontation of the time was evident. The naturalism that had dominated American literature was being challenged and *The Great Gatsby* was one of the books that boded the coming of modernism.<sup>56</sup>

Gatsby's parties are the roar of modernism, with decadence, new music, ever-changing fashion, promiscuity and heavy drinking. The fragmented experience of the parties and the pandemonium

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52 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 47)

53 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 53)

54 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 114)

55 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 126)

56 Ruland & Bradbury (1992, p. 248)



Nick Carraway experiences as he tries to go with the flow is the signs of modernism, while a more symbolic literary heritage also persists in the writings of Fitzgerald; the eyes of the giant bill board surveying the actions of the characters as a passive God and the area he hangs over being one example. If God isn't dead like Nietzsche said he has at least been reduced to mute divine judgment in Fitzgerald's world, monitoring the valley of ashes. The valley can be seen as Fitzgerald's way of demonstrating the downside of the economic upswing to the reader, but it can also be seen to have a more symbolic meaning. While most of the action of the book takes place in fantastic mansion and luxurious hotel rooms, the valley of ashes lies in between the two places, revealing that the glittering and sparkling world of Gatsby is superficial, hiding the reality of “the wasteland of humanity in a Godless age” that is the *real* world.<sup>57</sup>

I will return to the symbolic importance of this place momentarily.

For a brief period Fitzgerald was part of the expatriate community of American authors in Paris that Gertrude Stein dubbed “The Lost Generation”<sup>58</sup> and inspired by his peers, like Ernest Hemingway and James Joyce to mention a few, he experimented with the new thinking of the modern age. Stylistically however *The Great Gatsby* is not revolutionary to modernism (especially not in comparison with Joyce) – it is instead its depiction of the flashy fragments of parties, the noise, the speed, the crowded motion of the city, the callousness of the rich that conveys the sensation of the era to the reader. Instead of writing in a radically modern *way* he wrote *about* the modern time, perhaps better than any other American author. He was a “novelist of immersion, deeply invested in the dreams, illusions and romantic vulgarities of his generation”<sup>59</sup>.

This is not to say that there are no modernist stylistic choices in Fitzgerald's writing. His indirect use of first person was inspired by Joseph Conrad, and T.S. Eliot hailed *The Great Gatsby* for being a modern piece of work that would endure for decades to come.<sup>60</sup> He used fragmentary descriptions to mimic the confusion of inebriation when Nick goes to New York with Tom and his lover<sup>61</sup> and in his writing it is clear that he was part of a wave of writers rebelling against the realism of their literary past, as his metaphorical description of a drunk Myrtle Wilson shows:

*Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment, and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her, until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air.* Fitzgerald (1994, p. 37)

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57 Cullen (2004, p. 181)

58 Ruland & Bradbury (1992, p. 304)

59 Ruland & Bradbury (1992, p. 298)

60 Ruland & Bradbury (1992, p. 299)

61 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 44)

However it is to a larger degree Fitzgerald's choice of themes and his vivid depictions of the flamboyant life style of the modern age that secures *The Great Gatsby's* place in the modern canon. Fitzgerald was an essential part of the movement and although it might be coincidental the action of the book takes place in 1922, the high point of literary modernism that saw the publication of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and many other revolutionary pieces of work. In one of the ways *The Great Gatsby* can be considered a modernist piece of writing is in its disintegrated description of its main character, Jay Gatsby. Everything we learn about him seems to be elusive and it requires the involvement of the reader to understand who he is. Gatsby is an iceberg, the majority of his story submerged under water, hidden between the lines of the book, slowly revealed to us. Through Nick Carraway we get to see small bursts of genuine personality in Gatsby, fragments in their own right, but put together creating an image of Gatsby as something more than just a personification of the decadent, materialist world – rather a victim of the excessive version of the Dream of Moving Up and its endless race for property and privilege. This way of seeing things “through the mist” in order to reach a realization or even epiphany is definitely modern, and combined with the heritage of symbolism that is so clear in *The Great Gatsby* it is not difficult to see the signs of the time in Fitzgerald's work.

*The novel suffuses the material with the ideal and turns raw stuff into enchanted objects. That partly reflects Gatsby's own romantic and obsessive qualities, but it is also the product of a symbolist mode of writing that informs everything – Gatsby's dreams, parties, even his shirts – with an enchanting glow.* Ruland & Bradbury (1992, p. 299)

### ***The Dream of a Symbol***

It is symbols that lead Gatsby on. Symbols that has long since lost their touch with the real world. The green light at Daisy's house becomes a symbol of everything he wants his life to become, but in the end both the green light and what it represents remain out of reach. The symbol is transcendental, yet deceptive and from being a symbol of love and hope for Gatsby it comes to be a symbol of the elusiveness of dreaming.<sup>62</sup>

At the same time it seems Gatsby's dream, which the green light and Daisy herself represent, has become a promise within himself that reality can never satisfy. Even with Daisy finally standing next to him he is drawn to the green light that has been the symbol of all his desires for so long. It

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62 Ibid.

has consumed his attention for so long it is difficult to relate to the fact that his grand dream is no longer a figment of his imagination. That the dream will have to be lived now, and that reality has taken the place of fantasy:

*Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one.*  
Fitzgerald (1994, p. 100)

Although Daisy is the girl of his dreams, and he is mad with joy that she's finally there, tangible and physically in front of him, it is impossible for the reality to be exactly like his dream. The love in his heart that Daisy represents has almost taken on the form of myth, a symbol of not just his yearning for her, but his yearning for everything good in life - and even the most elaborate earthly mansions cannot measure up to castles in the sky:

*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. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man can store up in his ghostly heart”*  
Fitzgerald (1994, p. 103)

Nick is aware of the deceptive nature of Gatsby's dream, and tries to warn him that his fantasy of an ideal time long ago cannot be reproduced or repeated. But Gatsby's notion of his dream is so complete that this flash of reasoning about the past fails to convince him of his unrealistic model for the future. He is obsessed with the image of the past and his own power:

*“Can't repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. “Why, of course you can!”*  
*He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand.*  
*“I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before” he said, nodding determinedly.*  
*“She'll see.”*  
*He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some*

*idea about himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was.”* Fitzgerald (1994, p. 117)

Gatsby's dream of Daisy is the catalyst that sets in motion his great Dream of Moving Up because he knows that if he is not at the very top of the social and economic pyramid she will never have him. She is part of a conservative Old World where privilege and money is inherited, and his only chance is to attempt to reach her position. The problem is that he can never obliterate his past, and in the end her choice to stay with Tom is proof of her superficiality and her conservative standards. Although he fails Gatsby attempts to reproduce the past and change time itself on his way to the top. I will look further into this and his Dream of Moving Up in the following segment.

### ***The Dream of Moving Up***

Gatsby lives a perverted version of the American Dream where literally *anything* is possible. Through his success he has elevated himself to a state of megalomania where he believes that even the time lost can be made up, if only he has enough money and enough persistence. He is desperately searching for meaning in the meaninglessness of the interwar period, chasing a vision of a “world beyond the clock of historical time”<sup>63</sup>.

Gatsby's approach to time seems to betray his otherwise modern character, because in his mind the memory of perfect love has become myth, and he has a transcendental approach to his own existence.<sup>64</sup> He simply believes that if he really works for it, he can change the face of time, change his position in society and pursue happiness in his own way. That is his illusion of the American Dream. It is perhaps one of the most pure versions of the Dream that through relentless effort and steadfast faith you can reach your goals.

His persistence began when he was a child, even before he took on the artificial identity of Gatsby, which is illustrated in the notebook his father brings to the funeral, where an ambitious schedule for each day has been drawn up on one of the pages.<sup>65</sup> But it was when he decided to be Jay Gatsby and leave his early past behind that his dream was able to gain momentum. In order to fully devote himself to Moving Up he had to break off from his unsuccessful parents and become the ideal

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63 Ruland & Bradbury (1992, p. 300)

64 Ruland & Bradbury (1992, p. 249)

65 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 180)

identity, which was his conception of himself. “He was a son of God”<sup>66</sup> and his high ambitions and ideals stuck with him, for “he had committed himself to the following of a grail.”<sup>67</sup>

His dreams of the future before he met Daisy revolved around great riches, and his conviction that he would achieve everything takes on a magical glow in his imagination:

*The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the washstand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace. For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing. Fitzgerald (1994, pp. 105-106)*

His child-like faith in his own abilities and the generosity of the future awaiting him did not leave him after meeting Daisy, but after meeting her his desire for wealth became instrumental, it was a vehicle for getting that ultimate price – the perfect girl.

His uncompromising strive for greatness allowed him to acquire the unfathomable economic foundation he desired in “just three years”<sup>68</sup>, which is undoubtedly both because of his scrupulous approach to everything, and the margin of profit which is possible in a criminal business.

Once Jay Gatsby has established himself as a social and economic force on the East Coast he starts throwing his elaborate parties, and both these social gatherings with their extravagant self-indulgence, and the secretive, but generous, host is a source of enchantment. The fascination is not lost on Nick Carraway who finds himself admiring and doubting his new neighbor all at the same time. He is drawn to Gatsby's “resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American” and in the eyes of Nick, Gatsby embodies another essentially American characteristic, as he is not able to hide his background and his anxious nature in his otherwise poised demeanor:

“This quality was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness. He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand.”<sup>69</sup> While Nick gets to know Gatsby better his admiration grows, as he declares his “incredulity was submerged in fascination now; it was like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines.”<sup>70</sup>

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66 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 105)

67 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 155)

68 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 97)

69 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 70)

70 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 72)

Although his hundreds of guests admire him for his flamboyant life style his secrecy combined with common jealousy invokes a number of accusations regarding Gatsby's person, and he is suspected to be both a killer, a German spy<sup>71</sup> and a relative of Kaiser Wilhelm.<sup>72</sup> While his guests speculate about the source of his money they still find him deeply fascinating, perhaps especially because he emits an attractive vibe - "he literally glowed"<sup>73</sup> - and his elegant presence leaves most people awestruck. Gatsby's glow hinders others from seeing that he is corrupt, or at least leaves them indifferent, and his position in life he has created for himself helps him convince others, and himself, about the illusion that is his existence.

Although he is outside the law, and makes his money in some sort of illegal business related to the distribution of alcohol, it is the ambition and hard work of Gatsby that makes his dream holy and his person admirable. Even though he has reached the top through corruption, fraud and crime it is the object of his striving, his pure love for Daisy, that essentially vindicates him and leaves the reader on his side. His Dream is pure but out of reach.<sup>74</sup> To Nick the superficiality and ruthlessness of the upper class makes Gatsby's crimes less odious, and while he does not believe Gatsby to be a saint he still exclaims praise for him in the end, which incidentally turns out to be the last thing he says to Gatsby: "'They're a rotten crowd,'" I shouted across the lawn. "You're worth the whole damn bunch of them put together."<sup>75</sup>

So while Gatsby has won the attention of Daisy through illegitimate means we cannot help to exonerate him when we learn that the material wealth no longer means anything to him in the light of her proximity:

*He hadn't once ceased looking at Daisy, and I think revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes. Sometimes, too, he stared around at his possessions in a dazed way, as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real. Once he nearly toppled down a flight of stairs.*

Fitzgerald (1994, p. 98)

Although Gatsby's quest seems noble the values of the American Dream that makes up Gatsby's Dream of Moving Up (hard work, perseverance and hope leading to happiness) are challenged by the reality. Gatsby is trying to turn money and extravagance into happiness and love - he refuses to accept the passing of time and the fact that the dream of his youth is lost, and the illusion that

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71 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 50)

72 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 38)

73 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 96)

74 Cullen (2004, p. 182)

75 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 160)

money can buy everything is what betrays him in the end.

Despite all his efforts he is not fully accepted by the upper class Daisy is part of. It seems the real world is more superficial, and these values transcend his ideals. In the words of Nick Nuttall:

“We see how modern values have transformed such pure ideals into a scheme for materialistic power; how the world of high society lacks any sense of morals or consequence.”<sup>76</sup>

It is not only in Gatsby's personal life that the desire for material wealth has a more sinister side to it. The ruthless desire for money and profit shaping contemporary society also had a downside, and Fitzgerald demonstrated this through the valley of ashes.

The valley of ashes and its position in between, neither one nor the other, is a symbol of how the majority will fail to benefit from the fruits of the economic upswing. They are not only less fortunate but devoid of privilege. They live in a world of dust and dirt, and even the color seems to have been extracted from the place (and sold to the highest bidder):

*This is a valley of ashes – a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.* Fitzgerald (1994, p. 29)

The inhabitants of the valley dream of a better life, much like Gatsby did before he reached the top. Myrtle Wilson dreams of marrying Tom, so she can move up on the social ladder. She hates her husband for being poor, and was devastated to find out that he borrowed the suit he wore to their wedding.<sup>77</sup> Her husband George, while being more modest, dream of going West as so many other Americans has dreamed before him.

In the houses of the rich the morals have apparently been lost somewhere along the way, but in the valley they persist. Every time our main characters visit the valley of ashes they do so “under Doctor Eckleburg's persistent stare”<sup>78</sup> - a long forgotten billboard with paint peeling off, and a pair of eyes suspended in mid air. This billboard is a symbol of God, who has also been forgotten (presumably dead, as discussed earlier) surveying their actions. None of the characters pay attention to him, except Mr. Wilson who considers the billboard the actual face of God, not just a symbol. “God sees everything” as he muses, while the face emerges “pale and enormous, from the

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76 Nuttall 2012 <[http://www.ialjs.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/103-116\\_ApocalypseNuttall.pdf](http://www.ialjs.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/103-116_ApocalypseNuttall.pdf)>

77 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 41)

78 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 30)

dissolving light”<sup>79</sup>.

It is an indication of Fitzgerald's attempt to comment on the rat race of capitalism and the burst dreams it produces that the very last sentence of the book relates to it. He proclaims that “tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further”<sup>80</sup> but our goal seems to be continually out of reach. The metaphor of the boats struggling against the strong current, and their failed attempts to progress is symbolic to the deceptive nature of the Dream of Moving Up. It lures us into a race to get ahead, dreaming that “one fine morning”<sup>81</sup> things will be better, but eventually the race itself prevents us from progressing “borne back ceaselessly into the past”<sup>82</sup> – one step forward, two steps back. While the depressive appearance of the valley is a symbol of how the losers of the capitalist game is abandoned in a wasteland robbed of color, it takes on a deeper meaning as it is the location of the book's climax, and thus is the place where Gatsby's dream is definitively dead.

### ***The Death of the Dream***

Upon finally meeting Daisy again after years of planning and waiting Gatsby is close to bursting.

*After his embarrassment and his unreasoning joy he was consumed with wonder at her presence. He had been full of the idea so long, dreamed it right through to the end, waited with his teeth set, so to speak, at an inconceivable pitch of intensity. Now, in the reaction, he was running down like an over-wound clock.* Fitzgerald (1994, p. 99)

It is almost too much for him to fathom, and in the end the short period of frantic happiness is as deceptive as his dream. As mentioned earlier the dream and the ideal has taken on a life of its own which reality will never be able to live up to. Even if it was, his dream is essentially flawed because he believes the past can be re-modeled to suit his desires. Nick contemplates on this after Gatsby's death, and the sad fact that Gatsby was never able to understand that some things could not be changed - the course of time was an irreversible line:

*I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close*

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79 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 166)

80 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 188)

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.



*that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night. Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us.* Fitzgerald (1994, p. 188)

Throughout the numerous parties his mind had been somewhere else, the elaborate social events nothing more than a tool, a means to reach the ends he so desperately desired, and nobody knew. They conspired and speculated at his crimes, while praising him for supplying them with the place they needed to engulf themselves in passion and decadence, and they thought they shared this desire for hedonism with him. But while they saw him as a man without morals, he kept the purity of the truth to himself: “The lawn and the drive had been crowded with the faces who guessed at his corruption – and he stood on those steps, concealing his incorruptible dream, as he waved them goodbye”<sup>83</sup>. When Daisy finally attends his party and he realizes that this is not the life for her, he abandons the whole project, proving that it was nothing more than a way to get her attention: “The whole caravansary had fallen in like a card house at the disapproval in her eyes”<sup>84</sup>.

The dream had taken on such a strong life of its own, especially after becoming real for a short while, that it was impossible for Gatsby to understand it was slipping away, and that he would never be able to succeed. Even when his masquerade was disclosed by Tom “the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away, trying to touch what was no longer tangible”<sup>85</sup> and a few hours before his death he is still hoping that Daisy will call, making everything alright. As Nick notes however, even Gatsby seems to have accepted that she would not call and that the dream was an illusion:

*he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. 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 created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about ... like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding towards him through the amorphous trees.* Fitzgerald (1994, p. 168)

As a lonely guest, reaching Gatsby's mansion long after the lights had gone out and the celebrations had ceased, had to conclude in disappointment: “The party was over”<sup>86</sup>.

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83 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 160)

84 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 120)

85 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 141)

86 Fitzgerald (1994, p. 187)

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

*The Grapes of Wrath* was published in 1939 and won the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and was a significant basis for John Steinbeck's Nobel Prize in literature, which he received in 1962.

Steinbeck's realist depiction of the struggles of the working man during the depression, aggravated by the Dust Bowl, as well as corporate America's influence on the hardship of the people, made it one of the most discussed works of fiction in America – not just in the time of its publication, but ever since.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is considered one of the great American novels, both due to the political issues it presents and its stylistic virtues. The book itself embodies the American characteristics in all its multifaceted literary qualities. Robert Demott describes the book as “part naturalistic epic, part labor testament, part family chronicle, part partisan journalism, part environmental jeremiad, part captivity narrative, part road novel, part transcendental gospel”<sup>87</sup>.

### ***The Dream of a Better World***

When the Joad family is forced off their land by the bank they are drawn towards California for several reasons. They have seen bills requesting fruit pickers for a good wage, the climate is nice and the images they have of the state are reminiscent of the mythical land of milk and honey. It is symbolic to the spirit of America and the Dream of a Better World that you can always go West and shape the future according to your abilities and good intentions. California more than anywhere represents this dream, as Jim Cullen puts it “California itself was at least as much a dream as it was a place”<sup>88</sup>. To the Joads like many of their fellow “Okies” this is very true.

California is the place of oranges and grapes in abundance, there for the taking, the place of high wages where they can make enough to start their own business, the place of eternal sunshine and white houses in fertile orchards. And when they first set eyes on California, this is really what they see; a beautiful land covered in a holy mist, green and fruitful (both literally and metaphorically) which leaves them “awestruck, embarrassed before the great valley”<sup>89</sup>.

But reality turns out to be quite different and before arriving in California they face hardship in abundance.

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87 Demott cited in Steinbeck (2006, p. XIII)

88 Cullen (2004, p. 168)

89 Steinbeck (2006, p. 226)

The depression was a hard blow to most Americans. The banks and corporations lost enormous amounts of money due to the financial atmosphere of the optimistic 1920's and the ensuing burst of the bubble, and wages plummeted as a result. The party of the roaring 20's came to a sudden stop:

*What had come to seem an irreversible ride on the celestial railroad became perhaps the most serious challenge the American Dream had faced since the Civil War. (...) the entire edifice seemed to many on the brink of collapse. Ruland & Bradbury (1992, pp. 317-318)*

To make matters worse a huge dust storm swept Oklahoma, Texas and adjoining states caused by severe drought and a somewhat rapacious approach to farming the soil. The state of the land made it impossible to make enough money in the already struggling economy leaving thousands of families in debt with the banks unwilling to make loans, consequently rendering the working class broke. Farmers were forced off the land they used to own, which now belonged to the banks, to streamline production and raise profit for the land owners. Hundreds of thousands moved away, especially in Oklahoma but also in other states, like Arkansas and Texas. There was nothing to live off in their home state, so the majority got on the road, heading West, heading for California - "a gold rush for work"<sup>90</sup> - and Steinbeck illustrates this to us in a number of ways.

The turtle Tom Joad meets in the beginning of the book is heading west<sup>91</sup>, the wind that rushes through the grass and the stars go out towards the west<sup>92</sup>, even their old house is facing west<sup>93</sup>. It is of course symbolic of American history and the dream of the frontier – it is the pilgrims going West across the Atlantic Ocean, the pioneers going West to new territory, the gold diggers going to California. It's even Walt Whitman: "...For These States tend inland, and toward the Western Sea – and I will also."<sup>94</sup>

Although the road trip has been part of American culture due to Western movement, and the road trip was often associated with adventure and excitement, the Joads experience much hardship along the way, like most of the "Okies" did. The migration west is a symbol of American perseverance, but also of the tragedy that can befall those trying to make a living, attempting to reach a better place. Like the Joads in the 1930's or like the Donner family in 1847:

*The almost mythic tale of the Donner Party, trapped in the mountains during an overland journey into California and forced to eat human flesh, became a potent symbol of the*

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90 Steinbeck (2006, p. 235)

91 Steinbeck (2006, p. 44)

92 Steinbeck (2006, p. 112)

93 Steinbeck (2006, p. 99)

94 Whitman (1980, p. 95)

*nightmares that could result from the pursuit of this dream.* Cullen (2004, p. 169)

Despite the tragic fates they encounter along the way and the problems they run into, the road is still a symbol of hope. The mythology of the road is closely connected to the dream of the frontier, and has always been part of American culture. Hope is cast into the asphalt of the road (or dirt, which was mostly the case at the time of *Grapes of Wrath*), and once there the opportunity for a better life is real, the pursuit of happiness can continue. The Joads experience this, just like Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty in *On The Road* or Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The road is part of the American culture, and highway 66 has come to be symbolic to the promises of the open road, due to a number of popular culture works (from Bob Dylan and Jack Kerouac, just to mention a few) but especially due to the emigration of the “Okies” - both the real immigrants of the 1930's and the fictional ones in Steinbeck's world. As true Americans they are “Always on the way. Always goin' and goin'.” and are living the Dream of a Better World, hoping that the grass will be greener on the other side: “Movin' 'cause they want somepin better'n what they got. An' that's the on'y way they'll ever git it.”<sup>95</sup>.

When the Joads realize they are forced to leave their home behind, sadness is soon exchanged for hope and dreams of the new land. It is the dream of the frontier, although California has already been colonized. The idea that you can put everything you own in one car load and head into the unknown searching for a better life is the cornerstone of the Dream of a Better World.

They dream of starting over “in the new rich land – in California, where the fruit grows”<sup>96</sup>, but they are not nomads – they find it difficult to leave everything behind, since it is their land, and they are part of it. The past is part of them, and part of America.

*The anger of a moment, the thousand pictures, that's us. This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us. We can't start again. The bitterness we sold to the junk man – he got it all right, but we have it still. And when the owner men told us to go, that's us; and when the tractor hit the house, that's us until we're dead. To California or any place – every one a drum major leading a parade of hurts, marching with our bitterness. And some day – the armies of bitterness will all be going the same way. And they'll all walk together, and there'll be dead terror from it.*

Steinbeck (2006, pp. 87-88)

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95 Steinbeck (2006, pp. 127-128)

96 Steinbeck (2006, p. 87)

No matter how much you chase the Better World, your old life will follow you, and you cannot escape who you are. Although they try by burning everything they leave behind, even the mother's box of memories, letters and other paraphernalia, their identity and their memories travel with them to California.

### ***The Dream of Moving Up***

Once the land is left behind they start dreaming. They dream of Moving Up, and they dream of the benefits of a stable life. Ma dreams of a little white house in the middle of an orange plantation<sup>97</sup>, Wilson dreams of a piece of land of his own<sup>98</sup>, Rose of Sharon and Connie dream of living in the city and having an ice box<sup>99</sup>, and Pa just dreams that things will be better<sup>100</sup>.

The only one who does not seem to dream is Tom, perhaps burdened by the responsibility he feels towards his family. Although she dreams her own dreams, especially when talking to the others, Ma seems to share Tom's anxiety about the future, and whether the promise is all too good to be true: "I'm scared of stuff so nice. I ain't got faith. I'm scared somepin ain't so nice about it"<sup>101</sup>.

But she keeps her hopes up, and soon returns to the optimistic state of mind she is compelled to express to keep morale in the family high:

*"I like to think how nice it's gonna be, maybe, in California. Never cold. An' fruit ever'place, an' people just bein' in the nicest places, little white houses in among the orange trees. I wonder (...) maybe we can get one of them little white houses. An' the little fellas go out an' pick oranges right off the tree."* Steinbeck (2006, p. 91)

Tom is more pessimistic. When they reach the Rocky Mountains he exclaims "This here's a murder country. This here's the bones of a country. Wonder if we'll ever get in a place where folks can live 'thout fightin' (...) Get to thinkin' they ain't no such country"<sup>102</sup>.

The hardship they have to endure along the way includes the death of the grand parents, a child (Noah) who abandons the family and scrupulous merchants who rob them of most of their money. After struggling across Texas, New Mexico and especially the devastating desert of Arizona and eastern California they finally reach the promised land, and upon laying eyes on the fertile soil, and

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97 Steinbeck (2006, p. 91)

98 Steinbeck (2006, p. 147)

99 Steinbeck (2006, p. 164)

100 Steinbeck (2006, p. 109)

101 Steinbeck (2006, pp. 90-91)

102 Steinbeck (2006, p. 204)

the colors of the fruit trees things start looking up. When they arrive at the government camp they are treated with respect as human beings, and this is when they feel their morale rising – they are allowed to dream again.

Al dreams about using his abilities with cars (“I wisht I could get work in a garage. I'd learn that stuff quick, an' I'd like it.”<sup>103</sup>), and Ma dreams about the commodities they can acquire (“a little stove (...) An' then we'd get a tent, big enough, an' maybe secon'-han' springs for the beds”<sup>104</sup>), and the Good Life they can lead, when they are all working and the money starts flowing: “Sat'dy night we'll go to the dancin'.”<sup>105</sup>

Once they have the safety of the camp and the community the dreams start revolving around spending, around the bourgeois life. Even simple Uncle John says he dreams of “Stuff I don't need. Awful cheap. (...) Stuff settin' out there, you jus' feel like buyin' it whether you need it or not.”<sup>106</sup>

## **Escapism**

During the depression many people on the edge, like the Joad's, needed a bit of hope, something positive to get them through the struggle of everyday life. Uncle John would buy himself a bottle of whiskey once in a while and drink the whole thing in one go. Al would go looking for girls. And the others found solace, if not in excess like in *The Great Gatsby*, then in the magic of story telling. Steinbeck knows this, and is perhaps performing a meta-salute to people like himself as the “story teller”, not coincidentally describing him as a sort of prophet, gathering people:

*The migrant people, scuttling for work, scrabbling to live, looked always for pleasure, dug for pleasure, manufactured pleasure, and they were hungry for amusement. Sometimes amusement lay in speech, and they climbed up their lives with jokes. And it came about in the camps along the roads, on the ditch banks beside the streams, under the sycamores, that the story teller grew into being, so that the people gathered in the low firelight to hear the gifted ones. And they listened while the tales were told, and their participation made the stories great.* Steinbeck (2006, p. 325)

If the wonderful world of the imagination refrained from doing the trick the possibility of getting drunk like Uncle John was always present, which in Steinbeck's world seems to be a legitimate, almost noble way to escape a brutal reality:

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103Steinbeck (2006, p. 319)

104Ibid.

105Ibid.

106Steinbeck (2006, p. 411)

*The hard edge gone, and the warmth. Then there was no loneliness, for a man could people his brain with friends, and he could find his enemies and destroy them. Sitting in a ditch, the earth grew soft under him. Failures dulled and the future was no threat. And hunger did not skulk about, but the world was soft and easy, and a man could reach the place he started for. The stars came down wonderfully close and the sky was soft. Death was a friend, and sleep was death's brother. (...) And the stars down so close, and sadness and pleasure so close together, really the same thing. Like to stay drunk all the time. Who says it's bad? Who dares to say it's bad? Preachers – but they have their own kinda drunkenness. Thin, barred women, but they're too miserable to know. Reformers – but they don't bite deep into living to know. No – the stars are close and dear and I have joined the brotherhood of the worlds. And everything's holy – everything, even me.* Steinbeck (2006, pp. 327-328)

Reminiscent of his brilliant novel *Tortilla Flat* (as well as segments of *Cannery Row*) Steinbeck praises the drunk bums as honest and true human beings, and lifts inebriation to a spiritual state. Like Charles Baudelaire, Steinbeck seems to believe that we need something to sedate reality, whether it's religion, poetry or drugs to live with the pain of being human:

”So as not to feel the horrible burden of time that breaks your back and bends you to the earth, you have to be continually drunk. But on what? Wine, poetry or virtue, as you wish. But be drunk.”<sup>107</sup>

To Steinbeck intoxication seems to be both a tool to sedate reality and to achieve clarity.

Perhaps when the American Dream is lost it is okay to enter a fantasy world through alcohol or fiction or whatever works, allowing the individual to dream on just to maintain a sense of magic and hope.

Although the government camp renders the Joads with hope in humanity and the power of community they still realize that the plantation owners will exploit their labor and that the corporations will do anything to ensure that the workers stay hungry and the unions obsolete. Quickly they realize that California is not the promised land.

The modern version of the Dream of a Better World seems to be an illusion.

### ***The loss of the pluralism of the American Dream***

From the Dream of a Better World and its promises of utopia, from the dreams of the founding fathers, and the belief in a better world for all Americans, the focus of the dream shifted from ”we”

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<sup>107</sup>Baudelaire (2010, p. 73)

to "me" during the depression.<sup>108</sup>

Throughout *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck demonstrates this shift, where people who cared for the community suddenly turn against their neighbors for a paycheck. The desperate desire to feed the children turns the focus from society at large, and reduces the sense of community to be only the family. The solidarity with your people is lost as food grows scarcer, and from the very beginning of his tale Steinbeck lays this truth on us. From the amiable neighbor, who suddenly drives the tractor for the faceless banks through the Joad residence because "a man has got to eat"<sup>109</sup> to the merchants they meet along the way who will only give them a fraction of what their goods are worth. As recession sets in - so does division.

The car sales man rips them off<sup>110</sup> and so does the guy selling tires<sup>111</sup>. Steinbeck conveys how some were ashamed of what they had to do, while others had grown cold and heartless, but no matter their disposition "all of them were caught in something larger than themselves".<sup>112</sup>

Meeting the locals in California the Joads are confronted with the new reality of America where money talks, and the Dream of Moving Up apparently only applies to those willing to exploit others to get to the top:

*"[California] ain't that big. The whole United States ain't that big. It ain't that big. It ain't big enough. There ain't room for you an' me, for your kind an' my kind, for rich and poor together all in one country, for thieves and honest men. For hunger and fat. Whyn't you go back to where you came from?"*

*"This is a free country. Fella can go where he wants."*

*"That's what you think! (...) Well, try to get some freedom to do. Fella says you're just as free as you got jack to pay for it."* Steinbeck (2006, p. 120)

The land of the free is no longer for everyone. The land is taken over by faceless banks, and the cold, metallic machines flattens the land and leaves it. The humanity of the country is lost as the families are driven from their land while the land owners assume control. The whole process is dehumanizing and leaves the farmers frustrated without a human face to interact with. The owners answer to the corporations, who answer to the banks, and in Steinbeck's world there is nothing human about the banks, the companies, the men they employ or the equipment they use.

The system was a faceless dead entity that Steinbeck reanimated to allegorically describe the way it

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108Samuel (2012, p. 10)

109Steinbeck (2006, p. 37)

110Steinbeck (2006, pp. 61-66)

111Steinbeck (2006, p. 120)

112Steinbeck (2006, p. 31)



devoured the country. The “banks were machines and masters all at the same time (...) They breathe profits, they eat the interest on money”<sup>113</sup> and they occupy the antithetical place between organism and machine. A powerful system created by humans that had grown larger than us: “The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it but they can't control it”.<sup>114</sup> The “monster” uses both mechanical and human slaves to do its bidding, and Steinbeck creates a paradoxical entity that is neither dead nor alive to describe the tractors and their drivers. His impressionist depiction of the machine as a living thing is reminiscent of the passionate depictions of the futurists, especially Italian F.T. Marinetti and his modernist salute to the age of machines in the Futurist Manifesto of 1909:

*the gluttonous railway stations swallowing smoky serpents; the factories hung from the clouds by the ribbons of their smoke; (...) the broad-chested locomotives, prancing on the rails like great steel horses curbed by long pipes, and the gliding flight of airplanes whose propellers snap like a flag in the wind, like the applause of an enthusiastic crowd.*

Marinetti cited in Apollonio (1973, p. 21)

Steinbeck also experiments with the paradoxical use of organic life to describe the movement of the machines, but it is decisively negative when “the tractors came over the roads and into the fields, great crawlers moving like insects”<sup>115</sup> with the sowing machine behind and its metal pipes penetrating the ground “twelve curved iron penes erected in the foundry, orgasms set by gears, raping methodically, raping without passion.”<sup>116</sup>

While the analogy is similar to Marinetti, the affiliation is certainly not. Unlike the futurists Steinbeck does not see the machines as humanity's supreme achievements, but rather as faceless evil, a symbol of the dehumanizing nature of capitalism, a symbol of death:

“When the motor of a tractor stops, it is as dead as the ore it came from. The heat goes out of it like the living heat that leaves a corpse.”<sup>117</sup>.

The “monster” was taking over the land with its goggled slaves at the wheel.

## ***The Dream of Equality***

The monster is robbing people of their share in the land and the resources, and to most of the

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113Steinbeck (2006, p. 32)

114Steinbeck (2006, p. 33)

115Steinbeck (2006, p. 35)

116Steinbeck (2006, p. 36)

117Steinbeck (2006, p. 115)

characters in *Grapes of Wrath* the injustice of the depression is incomprehensible. The faith they had in the country and in the community is shattered, because “were not debt and depression a denial of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?”<sup>118</sup>. It seemed that the new financial reality was a betrayal of the American Dream and its promise of equal opportunity and improvement of life conditions. Steinbeck eludes to this throughout the book, and the owners, these “little pot-bellied men in light suits and panama hats”<sup>119</sup> know it, although they try to convince themselves otherwise, and tell themselves

*business is noble and not the curious ritualized thievery they know it is; that business men are intelligent in spite of the records of their stupidity; that they are kind and charitable in spite of the principles of sound business; that their lives are rich instead of the thin tiresome routines they know; and that a time is coming when they will not be afraid any more. Ibid.*

As it is suggested above capitalism plays people out against each other and spreads a universal fear – the poor are afraid they won't survive and the rich are afraid someone will take away their wealth. The “corporate abuse” that Chris Hedges talks about in *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (see chapter *Mapping out the American Dream* above) is contemporary, but it is clear that the issue began long before current time. We learn from Steinbeck that the development gained momentum during the tumultuous time of the depression, and we learn that it is the economic hardship that makes people turn on each other, making people more cynical and selfish.

The land owners owning thousands upon thousands of acres of land lose the spiritual connection with the land. As the land becomes nothing more than a means for profit the spiritual connection to other people slowly disappears as well. The importance of good business becomes vital for the survival of the farmers and with good business comes cynicism - “their love was thinned with money”<sup>120</sup>. While the hunger for profit grew, so did the size of the farms, while the total number fell. The owners no longer knew the land they farmed. It was a source of income, not of passion or spiritual relationship. The American Dream, which had once been such a spiritual endeavor, had transformed into a dream of material gain – more land, more crops, more profit. The responsibility towards the community no longer existed, and profit was more important than concern for the losers of the capitalist game.

The American Dream had been about improving the living conditions of all Americans but it was becoming a race where everyone was the architect of his own future. It encompassed the vitality

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118Cullen (2004, p. 50)

119Steinbeck 2006, p. 155

120Steinbeck (2006, p. 232)

and self-reliance that was so American, but the spiritual aspect of the Dream had clearly been lost in favor of a fight for material possessions. The desire for profit came before the concern for others, and every time kerosene was sprayed on discarded vegetables to avoid people eating free food while they starved it was the failure of humanity and anger arose: “In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.”<sup>121</sup>.

The oppression of the system is one message that *Grapes of Wrath* conveys while simultaneously suggesting that things could be better, and that when times are tough people in need move closer together. Steinbeck continually refers to the potential power of a united people<sup>122</sup>, whether it is in terms of the government camp<sup>123</sup>, the unions<sup>124</sup>, or even the solidarity between a couple of families (like the Joads and the Wilsons). Although there tended to be a shift from “we” to “me” as discussed above Steinbeck attempts to reverse the order throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*. In chapter 14 he talks about growing solidarity, perhaps not so much as a real thing, but more as his personal dream for the development of America. From “I lost my land” comes a sense of community, and the loss becomes “our” loss. It is the Dream of Equality that comes to life when people have nothing to lose except each other. One of the strongest advocates for this Dream is Reverent Casy.

Casy is a sort of prophet for the Dream of Equality and the maintaining of morals, and although he insists that he is no longer a preacher, his speeches take on the shape of secular sermons. He has left the community behind and reached an understanding of his and all others humans' holy connection with the earth<sup>125</sup>, and it is through this understanding he reaches the conclusion that no one has more right to land than others. He returns to talk to people that will need help “to live before they can afford to die.”<sup>126</sup> He dreams of what could happen if people stuck together - “if we was all mad the same way”<sup>127</sup> - and put a stop to the endless collection of goods. He is appalled by the people who “need a million acres to feel rich”<sup>128</sup> and the way they prevent the average man and woman from realizing their simple American Dream of the good life.

*These here folks want to live decent and bring up their kids decent, An' when they're old they wanta set in the door an' watch the downing sun. An' when they're young they wanta dance an' sing an' lay together. They wanta eat an' get drunk and work. An' that's it – they wanta jus' fling their goddamn muscles aroun' an' get tired.* Steinbeck (2006, p. 250)

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121Steinbeck (2006, p. 349)

122Steinbeck (2006, p. 198)

123Steinbeck (2006, p. 307)

124Steinbeck (2006, p. 358)

125Steinbeck (2006, p. 81)

126Steinbeck (2006, p. 52)

127Steinbeck (2006, p. 77)

128Steinbeck (2006, p. 207)

The former preacher really is a preacher as a lot of the existential questions raised throughout the book are raised through his voice, and in the end he is a political revolutionary, a martyr even. Instead of preaching about God the power of community has taken up His place. In a typical Steinbeck fashion religion seems to be both mocked and praised. While organized religion is abandoned by Casy the vital aspects of spirituality and the concern for the community is not, and these important messages make an impression on Tom Joad turning him from pessimistic survivor to a revolutionary willing to fight for the cause of the people:

*“Ma, I been thinkin' a hell of a lot, thinkin' about our people livin' like pigs, an' the good rich lan' laying fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hunderd thousan' good farmers is starvin'. An' I been wonderin' if all our folks got together an' yelled (...) They sat silent in the coal-black cave of vines. Ma said, “How'm I gonna know 'bout you? They might kill ya an' I wouldn' know. They might hurt ya. How'm I gonna know?” Tom laughed uneasily, “Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one (...) Then it don't matter. Then I'll be aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where – wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' – I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build – why, I'll be there.” Steinbeck (2006, p. 419)*

Tom still has hope in the future of humanity. Perhaps not in his own personal life, but he knows that if people stand together things can be different. He believes the American Dream can be revived and people can once again enjoy the crops they raise, living in the houses they build.

Despite this cautious faith the system has killed off most hope, and the American Dream seems to be an illusion to many. The Dream of Moving Up does not apply to everyone, and America has been divided with everybody looking out for number one. The hope the Joads possessed in the beginning of their journey and their faith in the future has been substituted for a nostalgic yearning for the past. As Pa complains: “Spen' all my time a-thinkin' how it use' ta be. Spen' all my time thinkin' of home, an I ain't never gonna see it no more”<sup>129</sup>. The past is no longer something to leave behind, to burn. It is desirable, a memory of a better time. The Dream of a Better World seem to be a lie, and only their immortal Dream of Moving Up and their memory of a past out of reach lives on. Their

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<sup>129</sup>Steinbeck (2006, p. 423)

vitality and hope is remarkable considering almost everything in their tale has demonstrated that the Dream of Moving Up is an illusion for all those who possess a string of morals and a sense of community.

Even towards the end of the book, where all hope seems to be lost, they still believe that since change is coming, it might be for the better<sup>130</sup>. They believe that if they keep at it, work harder and harder, in the end they will come out on top. They still believe in the Dream of Moving Up, but no matter how much perseverance they can muster they are still kept down by the system, by the people who own the corporations and the people they employ. Still they never give up, ready to move on if they have to<sup>131</sup>, and the mighty courage and generosity demonstrated by Rose of Sharon in the closing scene in the barn illustrates what should be perceived as proof that humanity is essentially good, and that people will help each other out whenever the dream becomes a nightmare.

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130Steinbeck (2006, p. 345)

131Steinbeck (2006, p. 444)

## FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* by Hunter S. Thompson was published in 1971 as a two-part segment in *Rolling Stone Magazine* and was published by Random House as a novel in 1972.

The book recounts two trips to Las Vegas taken by Hunter S. Thompson and Mexican lawyer and civil rights activist Oscar Zeta Acosta in March and April 1971.

The first trip is a job to cover the “Mint 400” off road motorcycle race for *Sports Illustrated*, and the second trip is an attempt to cover the National District Attorneys Association's Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs.

This is just the official story though, a frame work so to speak, to investigate the current state of the American Dream, as well as the boundaries of freedom in America.<sup>132</sup> However for the most part the narrative is a reckless roaming under neon lights through bright casinos and vandalized hotel rooms, fueled by an excessive experimental odyssey through “almost every type of drug known to civilized man since 1544 A.D. (...) an exaggerated medical exhibit”.<sup>133</sup>

What is important to note before discussing the complications and symbolism of this book is the aspect of authenticity. Thompson was not a novelist but a journalist, and a rather radical one at that. He believed more than anything in the maxim of William Faulkner that “the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism”.<sup>134</sup> This is closely connected to his distaste for objective journalism, which he called “a pompous contradiction in terms”.<sup>135</sup> He rejected the traditional journalistic devotion to be the fly on the wall. Instead he wanted to be the fly in the soup, actively changing and affecting the cause of the story he was covering. In conclusion Hunter aimed for an idiosyncratically subjective prose, comparing his writing to an old photograph that neither could nor should be altered once the moment had been captured.<sup>136</sup>

In the case of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* he stated that “only a goddamn lunatic would write anything like this and claim it was true”<sup>137</sup>, but considering the nature of Thompson's work and his general approach to fact/fiction it is difficult to separate the narrative from what actually happened. Raoul Duke is Hunter's alter-ego but even in the narrative “Duke” is his fake identity and “Thompson” his real one, blurring the line between reality and fiction further.

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132Elborough in Thompson (2005, appendix pp. 8-12)

133Thompson (2005, p. 188)

134Thompson (2009, p. 108)

135Thompson (2005, p. 44)

136Thompson (2009, p. 109)

137Thompson (2009, p. 110)

With this in mind I will attempt to use the name “Raoul Duke” whenever I refer to the protagonist of the book and “Hunter Thompson” when referring to the author himself. In the same way “Dr. Gonzo” is the fictional persona of Oscar Zeta Acosta.

Since *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (hereafter referred to mainly as *Fear and Loathing*) is a work of progressive journalism, which relates to contemporary society, it is important to understand the historical and cultural climate it was written in. I will do this in the following segment.

## ***Historical background***

The human devastation of the depression and the ensuing hardship of the war had rendered the Americans eager to settle down. Many felt they had survived great trials through unemployment, hunger, insecurity and death, and consequently felt that their Great Generation deserved to enjoy the security they had ensured for themselves and their children.

They wanted to lead a peaceful traditional life in the safety of the family, and enjoy the fruits of the financial security that came with the economic upswing they had helped create.

To them America was a different place than it was before the war, but perhaps they were not able to see just how different. The new financial reality of post-war America would alter American life and the old generation were unable to see that their children were experiencing this change in quite a different way.

## **Las Vegas**

The economic upswing following the war resulted in growing consumerism and a heightened interest in leisurely entertainment. No other place was this change more tangible than in the desert of Nevada. Built in one of the most hostile environments of America Las Vegas was a symbol of what could be done with perseverance and a whole lot of money, and secular fulfillment became the foundation of its existence<sup>138</sup>: “By the early 1950's Las Vegas had become the Great American Playground, a frontier town for the age of jet airplanes.”<sup>139</sup>

The city became synonymous with the Dream of Instant Wealth, both in terms of the gambling and the obvious chance for Moving Up related to this, but also in connection with the mobsters who built the first hotels, and the ultra capitalist notion embodied in Vegas that reaching the top is more

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<sup>138</sup>Cullen (2004, pp. 165-166)

<sup>139</sup>Ibid.

important than who you trample to get there.

“The American Dream embraced most fully by earlier incarnations of Las Vegas, which remains present even now, focuses on getting something for nothing”<sup>140</sup>.

## **The Baby Boomers**

During and after the war the biggest generation of babies in the history of the United States of America were born. This was to be known as the baby boom, and this huge generation was inevitably to shape society in new ways when they grew up.

The baby boomers were living in an economic upswing with consumer culture and mass media growing up alongside them, and many of them found it difficult to live in a world shaped by the traditions of pre-war America. In a sense the clash between the old generation, the ones who fought in WW2 - the ones born during the depression, and their children, were inevitable.<sup>141</sup>

America had been through a violent change and the economic stability (abundance, even) following WW2, as well as the freedom that came with it, gave the young generation a sense of ownership over their lives. The “teenager” was born and although many young men and women followed the example of their parents, a growing number was becoming dissatisfied with the traditional society of the 1950's and 1960's. Although suburban life was a new invention the values it cherished were very traditional: The nuclear family and the acquisition of goods to improve life and the community. The traditional family with the patriarch going to work to support and provide for his wife and their two children (a boy and a girl) was a family life of the past, and in combination with the conformity of suburban life the young generation was becoming restless.

The mass produced houses with the same car parked outside each garage became a symbol of the old world, and the baby boomers wanted to lead a life that revolved around individualism with concern for society at large. In a sense it was the original American Dream that resurfaced with the counterculture movement of the 1960's:

*The most persistent American dream, originating with the Founding Fathers and periodically recurring for 200 years, has been that of creating on this continent a Great Society resting upon a people made politically free, economically secure, universally literate, culturally sophisticated, politically wise, morally right and naturally good*

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140Cullen (2004, pp. 166-167)

141Cullen (2004, pp. 154-155)



Wiggins cited in Samuel (2012, p. 73)

The major problem for these young people was that the ideals had been sacrificed by their parents generation in turn for a superficial consumer race, where the overall goal was not a better society (perhaps because society was already so good), but rather to retire to ones home with all the commodities that made life even more comfortable than anyone could have dreamed of, growing up during the depression or the war.

In the mid-fifties America's economic growth was at its height, and with it the laissez-faire capitalism of the free market and free enterprise mentality. Adam Smith's 1776 remarks about how the individual's free pursuit of one's interests would automatically benefit society were becoming sacred ideology, and the way to understand the nature of the market:

*Smith's seemingly paradoxical notion that the clashing of self-interests ultimately benefits all was the perfect theoretical framework for the post-war era, the welfare of the nation dependent on individuals vigorously pursuing their particular dream.* Samuel (2012, p. 52)

This could be mistaken to mean any dream, and thus also the more spiritual dream that the progressive young generation was dreaming, but this was not the case. It was the Dream of Moving Up, and a very materialistic version at that. George Gallup proclaimed that the American Dream was that “every man could become a millionaire”, so to him and many others in post-war America the dream was about seizing an opportunity and using it for financial success. Corporate America certainly had a stake in this development, but so did the Cold War – consumerism was a way to show that America was inherently different from the Soviet Union.<sup>142</sup>

Consumerism was not necessarily the same as the Dream of Moving Up though. Many Americans were satisfied with their place in society, and did not have grand ideas about the moral status of America. Instead they “contented themselves with more earthly delights”<sup>143</sup> and “Keeping up with the Joneses” became the Dream of the fifties.<sup>144</sup> The bourgeois adaptation of the formerly so spiritual dream seemed to spread and in the words of Lawrence Samuel: “Many Americans did not understand or want to believe that freedom and democracy were more valuable than automobiles or television sets.”<sup>145</sup>

The problem was that the consumerism took over, not just from the allegoric Dream of the Frontier

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142Samuel (2012, p. 43)

143Samuel (2012, p. 56)

144Samuel (2012, p. 57)

145Samuel (2012, p. 59)

and a better society, but also from the Dream of Moving Up. This is closely connected with the Dream of Instant Wealth, where the position in society is far more important than how you got there. Whether this shift away from the Dream of Moving Up was due to the influence of modern capitalism, a general decline in spirituality or the work of Roosevelt's New Deal policies and the growing state system largely depended on who you asked.<sup>146</sup>

The quest for material gain and the belief that financial security and electrical appliances would provide happiness left many Americans quiet and content in their suburban homes. However, some felt they had been deceived and in stead a new movement arose, which had individual, spiritual fulfillment at its center. The decidedly young movement abandoned the idea that material wealth led to contentment and instead pursued happiness (as was their constitutional right) through spiritual desire and a certain degree of decadence.<sup>147</sup> Up through the sixties this generation became stronger and the opposition towards the more conformist current grew. As Chamberlain thundered: “The equality which is part of the American Dream is equality of opportunity, not equality of possession”<sup>148</sup>.

The belief in the original (spiritual) aspects of the American Dream was definitely not shared by the entire society, but the idea was spreading, and the Dream of Moving Up their parents had dreamed had been substituted for “a more hedonistic and spiritual version”<sup>149</sup>. The materialistic life style was going out of fashion, and instead an alternative path where the emphasis was not as financially centered had taken its place among the alternative youth.<sup>150</sup>

To some it was not just about less of a materialistic life style, but about rethinking the whole way society worked. It was that great American Dream of creating a new and better life for oneself and one's children, leaving the confines of traditional society behind and beginning from scratch, which was still alive. The Dream of the Frontier in the physical sense was lost as civilization had swept the continent, but the symbolism of the dream and the notion that life could and should be better was present in the minds of this young generation of the post-war years. If you could not go to the actual frontier you could create your own in an abandoned house or in a rural community. Social experiments, big and small, were taking place throughout the 1960's and the traditional concepts of sexuality, family, housing, politics and inebriation (among others) were being challenged.<sup>151</sup>

It was an explosive age where change seemed to come from everywhere. But at the same time

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146Samuel (2012, pp. 56-60)

147Samuel (2012, pp. 78-80)

148Chamberlain cited in Samuel, p. 57

149Samuel (2012, p. 79)

150Samuel (2012, p. 85)

151Samuel (2012, pp. 75-84)

powerful conformists coming from both the older generation and the conservative young one wanted to preserve the America of yore, and a cultural clash seemed to be inevitable.

It was a decade that saw the rising of communes, consciousness expansion, festivals and free love, but also the slaughter at Kent State University, the tragedy of Vietnam, and the assassination of a number of the prime fighters for change. The generational clash of the 1960's might have been inevitable but the consequences were harsh to cope with none the less.

Hunter S. Thompson was right in the middle of the action and to him the visions of the counterculture and the ensuing failure of the movement to implement its ideals was as much proof of the inadequacy of the hippies as the cultural bigotry from the American establishment.

### ***Hunter's American Dream***

*"The Sixties were an era of extreme reality. I miss the smell of tear gas. I miss the fear of getting beaten."<sup>152</sup>*

Hunter S. Thompson was part of the hippie movement, the San Francisco acid wave and many other of the counterculture experiments taking place in the middle 1960's. From the beginning their belief in their visions and in themselves was overwhelming, as it is brought to light by Raoul Duke on a nostalgic night in a Las Vegas hotel room, coming down from a monumental acid trip:

*San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. Maybe it meant something. Maybe not, in the long run ... but no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense of knowing that you were there and alive in that corner of time and the world, whatever it meant.*

*History is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit, but even without being sure of "history" it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that nobody really understands at the time – and which never explain, in retrospect, what really happened. There was madness in any direction, at any hour. (...) You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning...*

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<sup>152</sup>Thompson, *Independent on Sunday*, 1997 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/dayinapage/?year=1997&month=10&day=12>>

*And that, I think, was the handle – that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply prevail. There was no point in fighting - on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave...*

*So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark - that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.* Thompson (2005, pp. 66-68)

Following the failed attempts to create a better life the visions died, and the paranoia and disappointment took over. The fear and loathing with contemporary society was all that was left.

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is part of a greater mission of Hunter's, commissioned by Random House in 1968, to write a book on the Death of the American Dream. The book was never finished, but instead the notion of the battered American Dream came to be a recurring theme in all of Thompson's writing, with *Fear and Loathing* being the first major work of his relating to the theme. To state that *Fear and Loathing's* great motif is the American Dream would however be an exaggeration. In reality the Death of the Dream resurfaces from time to time throughout the book, but for the most part the two unlikely protagonists plummet into a savage drug abuse and a more or less conscious scrutiny of how far you can go in America in the name of freedom. They forget their duties and it becomes a quest to see how far out on drugs it is possible to get before the hammer comes down in the shape of psychosis or jail time - how far you can go with fraud and felonies as long as you are completely confident and believe in your goals. In a sense this could be viewed as a perverted version of the American Dream, freedom taken to the extreme, and I believe it should be viewed as such.

To state that the book conclusively is nothing but a psychedelic farce would not be true either. The fact is that *Fear and Loathing* possess both investigation of the American Dream, political commentary on the development of the 1960's and in all its madness it is symbolic to the state of both the American Dream and American society at the beginning of the 1970's.

### ***Where are we going?***

The mental journey of the two protagonists of *Fear and Loathing* is symbolic to the journey of the counterculture movement. When they leave Los Angeles Raoul Duke claims that the trip is to be a “a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character (...) a gross,

physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country”<sup>153</sup>, but in the end their search leaves them separated and in a mess.

Duke and Gonzo are thoroughly confused about the meaning of the journey to Las Vegas, while at the same time taking all decisions at full speed with complete confidence:

“What *was* the story? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream.”<sup>154</sup>

They are personifications of the alternative movement of the 1960's and their actions are symbolic to the state America was in during the time. Ever since the founding of the nation centuries prior the mantra of America had been to always move forwards, but following the cultural clash of the 1960's, and perhaps due to the materialistic version of the Dream that seemed to have taken over, many people were uncertain as to where the country was going. “The public mood of the country is defensive, to hold on and to conserve, not to push forward and to create”<sup>155</sup> as Walter Lippmann complained. Something had to happen, because the status quo was unacceptable, even to the conservatives who “held on”, and to Hunter S. Thompson the best parts of the Old America combined with the avant-garde actions of the new movement was the way to go. Duke was therefore “a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger”<sup>156</sup>, and although there was great confusion in society and thus also in the minds of Duke and Gonzo, there is rare glimpse of clarity from Duke in the car on the way to Las Vegas. Despite the drugs and the job they have been hired to do he is aware what the trip is *really* all about: “We're on our way to Las Vegas to cover the Main Story of our generation”<sup>157</sup>.

The demise of the American Dream is of course the Main Story and Duke believes that Las Vegas is the essence of the Dream (or what is left of it) with all its fake palm trees and laissez-faire capitalism. The truth scares Dr. Gonzo and he has to be calmed down by Duke:

*“We came out here to find the American Dream, and now that we're right in the vortex you want to quit.” I grabbed his bicep and squeezed. “You must realize,” I said, “that we've found the main nerve.”*

*“I know,” [Gonzo] said, “that's what gives me the Fear.”* Thompson (2005, pp.47-48)

Since the American Dream to Hunter Thompson, and to most people around the time, was spoken of in the past tense, as a concept belonging to a better time, Las Vegas can be seen to embody the

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153Thompson (2005, p. 18)

154Thompson (2005, pp. 11-12)

155Lippmann cited in Samuel (2012, p. 60)

156Thompson (2005, p. 204)

157Thompson (2005, p. 19)

Dream due to its “atavistic” nature, which Duke calls “a Time Warp, a regression to the late fifties.”<sup>158</sup> Las Vegas is thus a symbol of conservative America's idea of fun as well as a strong symbol of “survival of the fittest” capitalism:

*This place is like the army: The shark ethic prevails - eat the wounded. In a closed society where everybody's guilty the only crime is getting caught. In a world of thieves, the only final sin is stupidity.* Thompson (2005, p. 72)

### **The Dream of Moving Up**

During their time in Las Vegas Duke and Gonzo realize that the place is the physical representation of everything wrong with the Dream and with America. There is no sympathy for anyone, and even the flora of the city seem to emulate the deceptive nature: “no flowers in this town, only carnivorous plants”<sup>159</sup>. They realize that under the shiny surface of America, which Las Vegas represents more than any other place, lies a brutal and violent reality.

The owners of the casinos, metaphors for any capitalist entrepreneur, sell their customers an idea of wealth and happiness, a dream, but only a negligible number receives the price, and in the end the owner is the only one who reaches the top (and stays there).

In the following dialogue between Raoul Duke and singer Bruce Innes, sitting in the revolting Merry-go-around bar of the Circus-circus casino, this hard, bitter American Dream is revealed:

*He seemed surprised. “You found the American Dream?” he said. “In this town?”*

*I nodded. “We're sitting on the main nerve right now,” I said. “You remember that story the manager told us about the owner of this place? How he always wanted to run away and join the circus when he was a kid?”*

*Bruce ordered two more beers. He looked over the casino for a moment, then shrugged.*

*“Yeah, I see what you mean,” he said. “Now the bastard has his own circus, and a license to steal, too.” He nodded. “You're right – he's the model.”*

*“Absolutely.” I said. “It's pure Horatio Alger”.* Thompson (2005, p. 191)

This is clearly the Dream of Moving Up. The Dream of the little boy, who ends up with even more than he figured in his wildest imagination. The real life “rags-to-riches”.

Duke's reference to Horatio Alger is no solitary occasion, as it happens several times throughout the

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<sup>158</sup>Thompson (2005, p. 156)

<sup>159</sup>Thompson (2005, p. 56)

book. It seems the mythic tales of Horatio Alger's has a prominent place in Duke's understanding of the American Dream. What is worth noting about these mentions to Horatio Alger is that all his tales were about impoverished boys who managed to make a life for themselves through hard work, perseverance and honesty. However when Duke compares a situation to Horatio Alger it is in relation to instants of drug-induced fear<sup>160</sup> or scrupulous fraud<sup>161</sup>. Honesty is usually not part of the equation, except perhaps in the beginning of the book where Duke is excited about the investigation in Vegas: "We'd be fools not to ride this crazy torpedo all the way out to the end. (...) Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas."<sup>162</sup>

Critics of Horatio Alger have claimed that most of the boys in his stories only escape poverty due to some extraordinary luck or act of courage, which allows them to be taken under the wing of a rich man. In that sense the destiny of Jay Gatsby is much closer linked to Horatio Alger, as we learn towards the end of Fitzgerald's work that Gatsby was in fact a poor boy taken in as a ward.

Hunter Thompson's mentions of Horatio Alger seem to be more satirical. The last scene of the book where Duke is in the brink of a breakdown in the airport, desperate to go home, but aware that he has survived excessive drug abuse, no sleep for days, and a very elaborate scam on two Vegas hotels, he finds himself again thinking about his own position as "a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger. A Man on the Move, and just sick enough to be totally confident."<sup>163</sup>

The owner of the Circus-circus is the boy who lives his Dream of Moving Up, and in doing so, allows others to live their Dream of Instant Wealth at his casino. But as the comment made by Bruce Innes suggests – "a license to steal" – he has not reached the top without benefiting off the loss of others.

### ***The Dream of Instant Wealth***

Las Vegas represents The Dream of Instant Wealth more than any other place on earth (perhaps alongside Silicon Valley). Duke is familiar with the deceptive nature of the gambling environment, and especially the Dream of Instant Wealth that he does not seem to take a share in. He describes the desperate Americans in the casinos as "caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas"<sup>164</sup>, clearly despising their blind faith in unlikely luck:

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160Thompson (2005, p. 70)

161Thompson (2005, p. 95)

162Thompson (2005, pp. 11-12)

163Thompson (2005, p. 204)

164Thompson (2005, p. 57)

*Still screaming around these desert-city crap tables at four-thirty on a Sunday morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino. Ibid.*

Duke also recounts the tale of a friend who went to Reno on three consecutive weekends “winning heavily each time”<sup>165</sup>, and who decided to quit a winner. He was then persuaded by the casino to return, by flying him in on a private jet, and within a weekend the casino had made sure he had lost three times more than he had made on his previous trips. In the mind of Duke this is no isolated episode, and while the mentality of Reno is foul and evil Vegas is worse: “For a loser, Vegas is the meanest town on earth”<sup>166</sup>.

According to Hunter Thompson, while the Dream of Instant Wealth can be dreamed by anyone, he seems to look down on the ones dreaming it. The Dream of Moving Up on the other hand only applies to people with no morals, and the lethargy that sweeps the remainder of the population keeps them in place:

*In a nation ruled by swine, all pigs are upward-mobile – and the rest of us are fucked until we can put our acts together: Not necessarily to win, but mainly to keep from losing completely. We owe that to ourselves and our crippled self-image as something better than a nation of panicked sheep ... but we owe it especially to our children, who will have to live with our loss and all its long-term consequences. Thompson (2009, p. 112)*

It is clear from this quote that Hunter Thompson has a vision for America, and that he is disappointed in his country's inability to be the beacon of morality that so many have considered it to be. To him the morality, and with it the American Dream, was gone and he worried for the future of America - he “feared for the United States, a fear embodied in what he termed the death of the American Dream”<sup>167</sup>.

The Dream of the guy who went all the way to the top and now owns the Circus-Circus is described by Raoul Duke as the proper American Dream. Hunter's alter-ego acknowledges the associations between this guy and the Dream of Moving Up, but also acknowledges the complete lack of morals. What is left is an ego-centered Dream, focused on Moving Up as fast as possible, and not worrying about who are stomped on the way. Just absolute freedom with no sign of sympathy for anyone.

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165Thompson (2005, p. 41)

166Thompson (2005, p. 42)

167Nuttall (2012, p. 103)



This is not The American Dream in the eyes of Thompson, but rather the death of it.

In the end of their trip to Vegas, before Duke and Gonzo leave each other and succumb to their own desperation, they go searching for the American Dream in a very tangible way. Apparently an old night club in Vegas was called The American Dream, and they try to find it - without succeeding of course. Although they had all the tools: "They gave us this white Cadillac. They figured we could catch up with it in that".<sup>168</sup>

Instead of catching up to the dream they discover the place has been renamed "The Old Psychiatrist's Club" and has burned down to the ground. Not only is the dream "closed down" - it has been converted into a place of paranoid psychological evocations, now burned to the ground "about three years ago"<sup>169</sup>. That makes the death year of the American Dream 1968 – a year that Thompson on a completely different occasion described as "the year that somehow managed to confirm almost everybody's worst fears about the future of the republic"<sup>170</sup>. Notably this quote was written after *Fear and Loathing*.

Thompson claimed to have been searching for the death of the dream for years, but he "didn't find it until 1971 at the Circus-Circus Casino in Las Vegas", so in the words of Duke the owner of the Circus-circus is the model of the American Dream, but to Thompson he is proof that the Dream is dead. Nick Nuttall agrees that this American Dream is recognized but not approved by Thompson:

*The outstanding feature of most of Thompson's output is that it has a "moral aspect", and it shares this defining characteristic with, I would argue, what has become tagged the American Dream. For the "Dream" can only exist within a moral landscape and for Thompson it is this morality that has gone AWOL.* Nuttall (2012, p. 105)

Lamenting the loss of the morals that was supposed to be the frame work of the American Dream is a theme in all three literary works chosen for analysis in this thesis, but there is a clear connection between *The Great Gatsby* and *Fear and Loathing*. Or perhaps more clearly between Fitzgerald and Thompson. First of all the themes of the books are connected as "Gatsby's ultimate failure is the failure of the American Dream and the theme of Fitzgerald's novel became the theme of *all* of Thompson's writing"<sup>171</sup> but there is also a more personal connection. Hunter S. Thompson has

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168Thompson (2005, p. 164)

169Thompson (2005, p. 168)

170Thompson (2005, p. 81)

171Nuttall (2012, p. 106)

frequently stated that Fitzgerald's work was a great inspiration to him, and he re-typed the entire *The Great Gatsby* to get the music and the rhythm of the language into his fingers.<sup>172</sup>

As mentioned it was not only the style of Fitzgerald that was an inspiration, but rather the entire thematic structure of *The Great Gatsby*. I will look into another of these thematic similarities now.

## **Escapism**

Much like *The Great Gatsby*, *Fear and Loathing* investigates the notion of 'solace in excess', and in which ways it is possible to escape a devastating reality through inebriation and decadence.

It is the mantra from the Declaration of Independence taken to the extreme: It is "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" in abundance. But what was in fact a pursuit of happiness in the middle 1960's has become the sedation of the fear and loathing the protagonists feel towards contemporary society in 1971. It is "escape from despair" disguised as "pursuit of happiness".

This escapism is hinted at from the very beginning of *Fear and Loathing*. The book opens with the following quote from Dr. Samuel Johnson: "He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man".<sup>173</sup> That opening quote might as well have been found in Fitzgerald's or even Steinbeck's work, since the escapism it mentions is quite similar to some of Fitzgerald and Steinbeck's characters' relationship with alcohol.<sup>174</sup>

Escapism is an ongoing motif of *Fear and Loathing*, and it is the excess that has taken the place of political activism. In the middle sixties many iconic figures such as Jim Morrison and Thompson himself subscribed to the words of the great poet William Blake, who said "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom"<sup>175</sup>. But when the promises of the counterculture of the 60's were revealed as castles in the sky, consciousness *reduction* seemed to take over from expansion.

An important aspect of this change is found in the actual drugs used (or abused) to alter the mind. The drug use described in *Fear and Loathing* is very different from the consciousness expansion of the middle sixties. Timothy Leary's Orientally inspired guided trips to an expanded consciousness through LSD was a wholly different trip from Duke and Gonzo's decadent abuse in Vegas hotel rooms. Perhaps especially because Thompson had been part of the hippie movement's experiments with consciousness expansion and a new world, his disappointment was that much greater when the ideals failed to implement themselves. The use of drugs changed accordingly. As journalist Crawford Woods notes in his 1972 revue of *Fear and Loathing* in *The New York Times*: "The

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<sup>172</sup>Elborough in Thompson (2005, appendix p. 8)

<sup>173</sup>Thompson (2005, p. 0)

<sup>174</sup>cf. Steinbeck 2006, pp. 327-328

<sup>175</sup>Blake (1925, p. 13)

suggestion [of the book] is that to drop acid in 1966 was to seek the flower at the heart of the cosmos, but to shoot heroin in 1972 is to hide from the pain of the President's face"<sup>176</sup>

As Duke himself formulates it: "Uppers are no longer stylish (...) "Consciousness Expansion" went out with LBJ ... and it is worth noting, historically, that downers came in with Nixon".<sup>177</sup>

Hunter lived the hippie dream of communal caring and limitless love but he experienced the downfall. The Dream of the hippies was in essence the Dream of a Better World: Leaving the old world behind and starting a better one, but the violence that surfaced when the old world order refused to let go of its privileges scared Hunter, and after being beaten by riot police at a demonstration in Chicago in 1968 he no longer had faith in the American society.<sup>178</sup> *Fear and Loathing* is an analogy of the dissipating Dream, and the evaporating confidence in the US. To return to the trip down memory lane that Duke takes in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter I discussed above:

When the wave "finally broke and rolled back" you could either face the reality that society was not gonna be revolutionized for the better and deal with it best you could, or keep searching for an American Dream that, in the eyes of Duke, was dead, or at least fatally wounded.

He realized the failed project and used drugs and alcohol to cope with it, and he felt sorry for the "generation of permanent cripples (...) who never understood the essential fallacy of the Acid Culture: the desperate assumption that somebody – or at least some *force* - is tending the Light at the end of the tunnel."<sup>179</sup>

The hippies that had been lured by the temptation of consciousness expansion, still thinking that you could buy "peace and understanding for three bucks a hit" and change the world that way were naïve, "failed seekers" in the eyes of Duke. They were still dreaming of the Frontier, but had retracted into their own minds and only ventured towards the frontiers of sanity.

It is the "mythology mistaken for promise" that haunts the whole concept of the American Dream. Duke's moral ideal for America was squashed by reactionary forces, and he was left alone in "this doomstruck era of Nixon"<sup>180</sup> unable to dream any more. "Just another freak in the freak kingdom"<sup>181</sup>

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176Woods, New York Times, 1972 <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/29/specials/thompson-vegas.html>>

177Thompson (2005, p. 202)

178Thompson (1973, p. 81)

179Thompson (2005, p. 178)

180Ibid.

181Thompson (2005, p. 83)

## DISCUSSION

### *The American Nightmare*

In *The American Dream – A Cultural History* Lawrence Samuel argues that the American Dream is a very deceptive tale, a myth that has shaped the characteristics of the American spirit with the concept(s) of the Dream embodying what is essentially American. Samuel argues that virtues such as opportunism, self-reliance, resourcefulness, optimism, entrepreneurship and innovation are all considered American traits and has been part of the myth that is the American Dream since before it was coined.

Notably none of these traits are related directly to pluralist improvement. Although James Truslow Adams when coining the term in his 1931 *The Epic of America* repeatedly referred to the general improvement of life for the community and how the dream applied to everyone, he was also aware the dream had taken on an individual aspect. Written in the time of *The Great Gatsby*, the roaring 1920's, Adams was painstakingly aware that the dream was losing its spiritual aspect "its guiding philosophy forgotten in the wild pursuit of money and the things it could buy"<sup>182</sup>.

The sheer number of variations on the American Dream, from spiritual enlightenment to a new car, from eternal youth to 15 minutes of fame, suggests that the Dream is so engrained in the American DNA that it can mean just about anything the American wants it to mean<sup>183</sup>.

The variations of the dream surfacing over the years, among those the variations described in this paper, have been many and even conflicting, but if one notion reigns above all others it is the concept of freedom, what Adams dubbed the "inherent right to be restricted by no barriers"<sup>184</sup>. This concept of unrestricted freedom is connected to the general distrust in a strong state, the desire by some Americans to bear arms at all times and can be seen as part of the "survival of the fittest" mentality of capitalism. Obviously the freedom that the Dream embodies is to be used successfully. Prosperity is the ends where freedom is the means. What has changed over the years is whether this prosperity is considered individual or not.

Turner argued that it was frontier life that created the "rugged individualism" that Adams also mentions, but Adams knew that to many the individualism had come to be an almost religious concept where personal gain was above anything else: "We have talked of rugged individualism, but what we have too often meant was cash"<sup>185</sup>.

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182Samuel (2012, p. 13)

183Samuel (2012, p. 42)

184Adams cited in Samuel (2012, p. 14)

185Samuel (2012, p. 19)

As I have discussed earlier in this thesis the American Dream did indeed have a spiritual and communal aspect in the first centuries of American life. Especially among intellectuals. Within this segment the improvement of America as a society has remained the cornerstone of the Dream, but to the average American a change seemed to occur from around the industrial revolution, and the dream has been going through a steady process of galvanizing with individualism. Historian Marjorie Greenbie argued that

*a fundamental change occurred around the turn of the twentieth century when divisiveness and self-doubt crept into the national zeitgeist, the dream of a better life for all fading into a wisp of what it once had been.* Greenbie cited in Samuel (2012, p. 27)

The prosperity of the whole country has been the myth that has kept morale high, but more often than not the reality has been the success of a negligible few at the expense of the majority. Many intellectuals still saw what America could be - it was easier to envisage an ideal society when you were already at the top. As Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in 1941: "America is not a pile of goods, more luxury, more comforts, a better telephone system, a greater number of cars". Instead it was (or ought to be) "a dream of greater justice and opportunity for the average man".<sup>186</sup>

But to the "average man" the commodities she mentioned was an ever greater part of the dream, and the equality she called for quickly turned to ruthless competition when the economy was rough, as it was during the time of her utterances. The individual competition among the Americans had been part of the culture since the birth of the nation, and no matter how much you talked about constitutions and equality the competition was gonna endure and the strongest would come out the winner. As Rose Lee Martin of the New York Times bluntly put it five years before: "A Colt's .45 makes all white men equal".<sup>187</sup>

One piece of cultural entertainment embodied the deceptive dream more than anything: The 1933 board game *Monopoly*. The very goal of the game is to bankrupt your opponents, to win through the loss of others. As a symbol of capitalism it was crude and honest in its depiction of the competitors going round and round in endless circles, chasing profit, and in the end only one participant emerging as the winner. Yet it was still a huge success despite it being launched in the midst of the depression where the bankruptcy of the game was a devastating reality for many Americans.<sup>188</sup>

Just like in *Monopoly* the Dream of Moving Up has come to be an individual quest where the concern for others is not necessarily obsolete, but always less important than personal profit and

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<sup>186</sup>Roosevelt cited in Samuel (2012, p. 31)

<sup>187</sup>Samuel (2012, p. 28)

<sup>188</sup>Samuel (2012, p. 18)

prosperity.

### ***The outlaw moving up***

The Dream of Moving Up is still part of the American vocabulary, perhaps even more so for immigrants seeking a better life in the States, although studies have shown it to be an illusion with inequality being a far bigger issue in America than in most other western countries.<sup>189</sup> Despite the realities the Dream lives on, spurred on by popular culture, which more than anything else has kept the dream alive. From Horatio Alger to Jay Gatsby to Donald Trump, the dream of making it big lives on.

There is still a strong belief woven into the fabric of American life that if you "play by the rules" and work hard you will reach the top, and cultural products (not to mention advertisement) replicate this notion.<sup>190</sup> However, that is rarely the case, as we have learned in the preceding analysis.

Jay Gatsby wins his fortune through crime and fraud, and yet the reader is left with a sympathy for him, perhaps because his Dream, and his desire to fulfill it, was pure and founded in love, or perhaps because the Americans has always rooted for the outlaw.

In a sense the whole continent was created by outlaws, although most of the puritans left out of disgust with the Old World and not because of lust for adventure or fear for the actions of the elite. Just like in *The Great Gatsby* the American popular culture is full of rebels, and they seem to glorify vitality, self-reliance and innovation above all other traits. Morals seem less important, as the wave of gangster movies in the 1930's revealed. These movies "glorified the rebellious (and entrepreneurial) criminal for his no-holds-barred pursuit of the Dream, as dark as it was, mirroring the admiration many felt toward real-life outlaws as they risked it all to beat the system."<sup>191</sup>

It was not a phenomenon found solely during the depression, but rather a repeating trait in the national character. The movies of the 1960's (like *Bonny & Clyde* and *Easy Rider*) convey the same sympathy for those outside the law<sup>192</sup>, and the protagonists of the three literary works under scrutiny in this thesis can be considered antiheroes in one way or another.

Jay Gatsby cheated his way to the top, but it is his position that makes him admirable, along with his pure and true Dream that has led him there. He is an outlaw and we are drawn to him.

On a different background Tom Joad is also an outlaw and just like Gatsby we are drawn to him despite his crimes, because his ideals and his dreams are pure. The protagonist of the last literary

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189Samuel (2012, p. 7)

190Disney's animated movie "The Princess and the Frog" from 2009 is just one recent example of how believing in your dreams, and working hard will eventually allow you to move up the ladder and realize your dreams.

191Samuel (2012, p. 26)

192Samuel 2012, p. 90

work of this paper, Raoul Duke, is no doubt also an outlaw, breaking the law on almost every single page, but in the same way as the others we root for him, and feel that his elaborate scam to rip off the Las Vegas hotels is if not admirable then justified.

In the scheme of war and political assassinations Duke considers his actions legitimate in a way when compared to the acts of politicians and thugs. “Against that heinous background, my crimes were pale and meaningless. I was a relatively respectable citizen – a multiple felon perhaps, but certainly not dangerous.”<sup>193</sup>.

As long as our American antiheroes are fighting the faceless system they can be glorified, because their rebellious attitude is engrained in the American spirit that is the Dream.

### ***The American Nightmare***

Due to its deceptive nature the dream becomes nightmare for most, all those failed seekers who has “mythology mistaken for a promise”<sup>194</sup> will hit the bottom hard when utopia is believed to be an actual place. The Joad family's perception of California is based on tall tales and a drawing on a box, but in their minds the land of milk and honey (or land of grapes and oranges) is very real, it is an actual destination. Their dream is related to the America of the past, and so is the dream described by James Truslow Adams. Their dream is about self-reliance and freedom (as any American Dream) but it is especially centered around the dream of home ownership and independent enterprise. The Dream of each American having his own farm or business and making a good life for himself and his family through perseverance and innovation.

Adams coined the term in the midst of the depression and during this time the Dream of yore seemed to be not only threatened but already destroyed by corporate capitalism. The dream turned out to be a nightmare for far more people than the very few exceptions who came to be the rule, because the few winners reached the top by appropriating the land and the resources that had been the foundation of the Dream of the Frontier – the dream of a little piece of land for everyone.

The faceless banks of *The Grapes of Wrath* and the agricultural company that takes over the land is the new reality, and the disbelief of the Okies is proof that the old American Dream is very real to them. They don't understand how its possible for a man to own a million acres, or even why he would need it. It is the curse of capitalism that you have never gathered enough, and the chronic desire for prosperity, the status quo never sufficient, has come to be part of the American way of life<sup>195</sup>. The economic system (“the monster” as Steinbeck calls it) is out of control, especially during

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193Thompson (2005, p. 74)

194Samuel (2012, p. 7)

195Samuel (2012, pp. 24-25)

the depression, and the workings of the market command the actions of the Americans, while “capitalism and its trusted industrial and technological handmaidens seemed powerless to halt the slide and sustain an egalitarian society that could guarantee the welfare of all”<sup>196</sup>.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck conveys a sort of homesickness, a sentimental concept of America related to the past of the country, which has been lost. Steinbeck's vision of the good America is that of the past. Both *The Great Gatsby* and *Fear and Loathing* can be seen as conveying a similar nostalgic attitude towards historical America. Gatsby is trying to reconstruct the past that World War 1 has taken from him and Raoul Duke is lamenting the loss of the innocence and faith in the future that characterized the 1960's, and all that America could have been, but never became.

The foundation of the America that came to host the dream is the vision of the fertile land that presented itself to the first people to arrive from Europe. To Fitzgerald the Dream of a Better World is pure, and he seems regretful that the opportunity to go where no man has gone before no longer presents itself. It seems that with the loss of the frontier, so the true American Dream is lost:

*as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way to Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.*

Fitzgerald (1994, pp. 187-188)

The spiritual aspect of the American Dream was already hurting before the 1920's, and when Gatsby dies in the swimming pool of his preposterous mansion, so the spiritual dream is fatally wounded with him. During the depression the Americans were instead living a nightmare. The dream might have been real to some, as Steinbeck conveys to us, but their dream was an illusion. As long as the system kept people divided as individualist seekers of property the Dream of a Better World and the Dream of Equality would remain unrealizable.

It seems the condition of the American Dream is closely related to the financial situation of

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<sup>196</sup>Ruland & Bradbury (1992, p. 318)



America. During the 1920's of *The Great Gatsby* economic optimism meant that it was easy to Dream of Moving Up, while the depression years of *The Grapes of Wrath* diminished the Dream of Moving Up to relate mostly to survival - the dream of Moving Up became “a sneer and a tragedy”<sup>197</sup>. “Hitting it big” was out of the question when you could not even supply your kids with food enough to live. In the 1950's the Dream of Moving Up and especially the Dream of Instant Wealth was revived, the Americans got back the “Horatio Alger feeling about the American Dream”<sup>198</sup> and faith in the future was restored, as the economic upswing commenced<sup>199</sup>. However in the end of the 1960's the cultural chaos the decade brought along with political assassinations, the attack on the democratic convention protest of '68, the National Guard's slaughter at Kent State University (as well as all other events related to the Vietnam War) and the growing consumerism had a profound effect on the American Dream<sup>200</sup> and to many the dream seemed to have permanently lost its spiritual qualities:

*Whatever else all the dreary and demeaning events of the past decade ... mean and may come to mean, they surely mean an end to the American dream as it was given to us, (...) that which we inherited we shall not be able to bequeath. (...) We are ill-served by those who yearn for the good old days and, presumably, the good old dream, for the good old days led irrevocably to the bad times we have seen, and the good old dream bore bitter fruit.*

Professor Leonard J. Fein cited in Samuel (2012, p. 88)

The Dream was now nothing but a materialistic mirage of what it once was but the painted corpse was still presented in ads, convincing the Americans that the dream was alive and well.

The promises of the mythology of the acid culture turned out to be a hallucination but as Raoul Duke rightly notes “their loss and failure is ours, too”<sup>201</sup> because the spiritualism they possessed and their belief that the original values of the American Dream were more important than consumer culture and “keeping up with the Joneses” was lost with the turn of the decade.

The main problem with the solely material version of the American Dream, apart from the lack of solidarity with your fellow countrymen, is the illusion of the race for ever-greater profit:

*This perversion of the Dream had major consequences for the fate of the Nation, I believe, the switch from existential goals, that is, the realization and expression of one's identity, to*

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197Editor of the *New York Times* (1943) cited in Samuel (2012, p. 37)

198Ibid.

199Samuel (2012, p. 51)

200Samuel (2012, p. 78)

201Thompson (2005, p. 178)

*financial ones bad for individuals and the country. Because wealth is perceived as relative rather than absolute, many researchers have found, chasing dollars is ultimately a no-win game, the fact that someone somewhere has more than you do spoiling the whole thing.*

Samuel (2012, p. 198)

The red thread of the American Dream in all its incarnations is that it remains elusive, only a malevolent minority realize it. Living the dream, emerging as a winner, is like grasping the gold at the end of the rainbow. It seems so close you can touch it but no matter how you approach it, it will evaporate and leave you craving for *that thing*, just out of reach. The intangibility of the Dream can also be found in its place in time. The present is never the dwelling point of the American Dream as it “seemed to almost always reside in the past or loom in the future”<sup>202</sup>.

The myth of the American Dream will continue to lure in the shadows of the American conscience, but as we have learned the land of opportunity is a deceptive mistress. The dreamers will keep running, forever chasing the proverbial oasis almost within their reach. But the reality of the Dream is not well; “the realities were already fixed; the illness was understood to be terminal”<sup>203</sup> and the Americans would remain divided in their individual pursuit of happiness.

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<sup>202</sup>Samuel (2012, p. 197)

<sup>203</sup>Thompson (2005, p. 180)

## CONCLUSION

Despite all its incarnations the unifying force behind all American Dreams is the freedom to act on your desires and enjoy the fruits of unlimited levels of achievement - but whether the dream is pluralist or individual, whether it has a moral aspect and whether it is for everyone, is a matter of interpretation and historical context.

We have learned that the American Dream can be sub-categorized into four versions.

**The Dream of a Better World** is connected to the frontier, and the idea of going “where no man has gone before”. Throughout American history the Dream of a Better World has been a catalyst for the pilgrims, the pioneers, the Mormons and all other Americans seeking the frontier and the possibilities it encompasses. As the American landmass was colonized and it was no longer possible to go to the frontier, the need for genuine pluralism arose, which gave way to the Dream of Equality. It is worth noting however that while the physical frontier was gone the Dream of a Better World lived on as a symbolic notion of an improved society.

**The Dream of Equality** was born with the Declaration of Independence, and throughout American history the culture has been overflowing with the ideal of equal opportunity. The limitations of this vision has been challenged over the years, to reveal the deceptive nature of this particular dream. Slowly all races and both genders gained the ability to dream, but we also learn that equal opportunity does not give rise to an egalitarian society.

**The Dream of Moving Up** is perhaps the most widely recognized version of the American Dream. The dream has a moral frame work, which conveys the message that virtues such as hard work, perseverance and honesty will pay off in the end. It became the universal message that everyone could understand, no matter what language you spoke when you arrived in the United States. We learn that following the industrial revolution the competitiveness of capitalism meant that while perseverance and hard work might still be essential components in Moving Up, honesty and a concern for pluralist improvement was slowly lost.

**The Dream of Instant Wealth** has the same ultimate result as the Dream of Moving Up – reaching the top of the social ladder – but as a result of the ruthless competition coupled with foolhardy faith in individual luck, the desire to work your way up was lost. In the Dream of Instant Wealth the hard work and struggling does not carry value or developmental quality in its own right. It is the ease of the accomplishments which are the key here, so while incredible riches was desirable it is the easy living that is the cornerstone of the Dream of Instant Wealth.

In the analysis of the three literary works we see that the evolution of American society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has taken part in changing and shaping the American Dream.

*The Great Gatsby* takes place in a time of great paradox. The economic upswing is at its highest while the destruction of WW1 has shaken the moral fabric of modern humanity.

The infallible faith in the powers of humanity, taking over where Nietzsche's dead God had failed, suffered a terrible blow when the technological beacon Titanic sunk on its maiden voyage and the innovative machinery of humanity was used for unfathomable destruction in the Great War.

Political, moral and cultural apathy ensued and left people either nursing conservative ideals, or escaping from a meaningless existence through endless celebration of the moment and a decadent life style. The followers of tradition in *The Great Gatsby* are the aristocracy who inherit titles or money and lead a conservative life style, while the *nouveau riche*, like Gatsby, have worked their way up the social ladder and lead a decadent life. Gatsby wants to transcend his place at the bottom of the social pyramid and rise to the top through his own effort, much like Great Americans like Abraham Lincoln had done before him, but he learns that superficiality and prejudice persists.

Gatsby's faith in his own vitality and the opportunities of America becomes a deceitful veil that prevents him from seeing that his love for Daisy, while pure and beautiful, can never be realized.

In the limbo between technological progress and moral decline that was the interwar period we are reminded that the American Dream is deceptive, and while love can be eternal, the past can not be changed.

When the party of the 1920's was over, the depression swept the country. In Oklahoma it forced people off their land, resulting in a mass migration for California, and in *The Grapes of Wrath* we see the consequences of the brutal economic reality through the experiences of the Joad family.

Through their hardship they remain loyal to vision of a better America, and while they are kept down they still Dream of Moving Up. Their dream is founded in the past, in ideals of self-reliance and independent home ownership, and the new economic and social reality leaves them crestfallen as they realize that their vision of America is forever lost.

The cynicism that is sweeping the country, caused by the people's desperation, exchanges solidarity with the community for individual economic gain, and the people who value morals above their own needs, like the Joad family are left on the losing end.

Some remain hopeful, still believing in a dream eternally out of reach, while others sedate themselves with stories of a better world, alcohol or anything else at hand.

*The Grapes of Wrath* demonstrates that in the new reality of free market capitalism the people are

left powerless, struggling to feed the monster they have created themselves.

Only a precious few will come out on top as long as the struggle for survival is individualized, and Steinbeck seems to tell us that the only chance to save America is to unite in a quest for pluralist improvement. Rose of Sharon's act in the end of the book is proof that despite losing everything, we still have something to give to others, and her solidarity with the old man is Steinbeck's vision for humanity.

Following WW2 the economic reality changed and the greatest generation of Americans ever grew up alongside an upswing, which allowed for fundamental social changes, ultimately resulting in a growing consumerism and a cultural clash between conservative and progressive values.

The youth movement of the 1960's praised spiritual values and the concern for the community, while the rest of society seemed devoted to an increasingly individualized version of the American Dream where material gain and upwards social mobility mattered more. However the faith in the transformative powers of the movement evaporated as political assassinations, police brutality and internal struggles put a stop to the wave towards the end of the decade. The ideals of the counterculture had been squashed and the political apathy and ensuing escapism is the catalyst for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Duke and Gonzo's faith in the cultural revolution was lost, and their Dream of a Better World with it, so they investigate the complications of the Dream of Moving Up and the Dream of Instant Wealth in Las Vegas. While continually referring to Horatio Alger it becomes clear that his version of the dream, founded in honesty and hard work, has been obliterated by the competitiveness of the system, and only lives on as a material atavistic parody of what it once was. Duke and Gonzo's trip reveals that the way to cope with this is to conform or to hide in a make-belief world of drugs. The protagonists of *Fear and Loathing* learn that the moral values of America has been sacrificed in the name of profit and their capacity to Dream of a Better World is lost.

In the discussion we find that ever since the term "American Dream" was coined in 1931 the guiding philosophy has been substituted for a race for property and cash.

The battle to reach the top has become so ruthless that the American seems aware there are no holds barred in order to get there. It is not *how* you reach the top, but the fact that you *do* that evokes admiration, and this can be seen in the American fascination with the criminal.

We learn that all three protagonists of the literary works chosen are outlaws in one way or another, and as long as they believe in their ideals and have a pure dream we sympathize with them.

Furthermore we learn from all three novels that the capitalism that is the foundation of the

entrepreneurial spirit of the American Dream has a downside: While a few ferocious individuals are able to succeed in the rat race, the vast majority are left behind empty-handed. The materialistic version of the dream keeps the Americans divided, and while the Dream of Moving Up and the Dream of Instant Wealth persists (albeit as an illusion to most) the division keeps the Dream of a Better World and the Dream of Equality unrealizable.

However even if the Dream is out of reach, it still persists in the minds of the dreamers, and while it may never be realized it works as an inspirational force urging people onwards. It is thus the perfect impetus in a capitalist society encouraging people to keep running on their treadmills to keep the wheels going. Conclusively we learn that the development of the American Dream has sacrificed the spiritual and moral virtues it originally contained, and instead success is measured in cash. The American Dream has become a materialistic mirage of the past.

Through great works of literature we learn that any dream can be deceptive if we dream so vigorously that we forget about the boundaries of reality.

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## RÉSUMÉ

This project deals with the deceptive nature of The American Dream and its place in American culture in the first six decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely in the three quintessential novels *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

With the aid of Jim Cullen's *The American Dream – A short history of an idea that shaped a nation* and Lawrence Samuel's *The American Dream – A cultural history* the different types of American Dreams are investigated, as well as how the Dream has changed along with American society. This project shows it has taken on a variety of forms, which can be classified into four main categories:

**The Dream of a Better World** and the frontier as a concept has been part of the American conscience since the birth of the nation and has always related to utopian ideas about improving the living conditions of the Americans.

An important aspect in The Dream of a Better World is whether the improved society embraces everyone, and not just a particular political affiliation, race or religion, and we learn that throughout American history genuine pluralism has never existed.

**The Dream of Equality** is closely connected to the Declaration of Independence with its mantra that "all men are created equal". This phrase is subject to scrutiny and we find out it means no American should be held back by external barriers in his pursuit for individual progress - it should not be misunderstood as the foundation of an egalitarian society. The spiritual aspect of the dream, and the concern for the community was slowly lost, and instead "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" was an increasingly individual matter.

**The Dream of Moving Up** is founded in the myth that through hard work, perseverance and self-reliance everybody is able to climb the social ladder and make a lot of money.

Along with the industrial revolution the dream became part of a ruthless race to reach the top before others, and as capitalism turned into "survival of the fittest" it became evident that while everybody were able to Dream of Moving Up very few would.

**The Dream of Instant Wealth** could be seen as a consequence where the last moral aspects of the dream was lost. It is the dream of reaching the social or economic peak with as little effort as possible, and the foundation of this dream was growing consumerism and the equation between material goods and happiness.

In the analysis the distinctions are used to better understand the three works of literature in a cultural frame, and how the books convey a specific American Dream.

*The Great Gatsby* is essentially representative of the Dream of Moving Up.

We learn that both in terms of its plot and its stylistic virtues *The Great Gatsby* is symbolic to the modern time it was part of. Fitzgerald experiments with a number of modern stylistic choices in his book, while portraying the modern age through fragments, colors and movement.

*The Great Gatsby* is essentially symbolic and especially the green light at Daisy Buchanan's dock plays an important role as the symbol of Gatsby's own dream. Gatsby's attempt to recreate the past and live out a lost love is a deceptive dream, continually out of reach, and even when it seems realizable the conservative powers of the time, as well as the nature of the Dream betrays him.

While riding the great wave of prosperity it was easy to Dream of Moving Up, but pluralism was slowly replaced with individualism, so the prosperity was no longer about the benefit of America, but the interest of the individual. This meant that many people ended up on the losing end of the capitalist game, which is shown through the valley of ashes, where people dream, but stay at the bottom. Gatsby's Dream of Moving Up was representative of the emerging individuality of the time and he worked his way up in a true rags-to-riches story, but took a criminal route in order to get to the top faster. His position and his demeanor is admired by all his guests, but his secrecy also evokes a lot of negative rumors about his rise to the top. The reader is left sympathizing with Gatsby because the object of his striving is his pure love for Daisy, proving that his materialistic life style was mostly a way to lure her into his arms.

In the limbo between technological progress and moral decline that was the 1920's Fitzgerald seems to want to remind us that the American Dream is deceptive, and while love can be pure and eternal, the past can not be changed.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* we follow the Joad family as they battle the consequences of the brutal economic reality of the depression. While forced to migrate to California, The Dream of a Better World and the promises of the west lives in the hearts of the Joads, and their hopes are high as they journey towards the promised land. But the cynicism of the new economic reality means that the spiritual aspect of the American Dream is lost, and instead people dream of material gain, they Dream of Moving Up, and that dream is an individual one. Very few people are able to climb the social and economic ladder and the rest are left behind in the gutter, while the winners of the ruthless game for property are no longer human, but faceless corporations - "the monster" - which robs people of their land, their money, their rights. Steinbeck attempts to convey to us that while hope may seem lost, the community and the Dream of a Better World for all can still be realized as soon as people stand together, and worry about the group before the individual.

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is a hybrid of fiction and subjective journalism and despite its frame work narrative of a journalist covering a motorcycle race and a district attorney's conference, the goal of the book is to investigate the state of the American Dream and lament the loss of the spirituality and morality of the youth movement of the 1960's.

Las Vegas is the embodiment of the perverted version of The Dream of Moving Up where every man is the architect of his own future and sympathy for others is a thing of the past. What's more there are aspects of the Dream of Instant Wealth, which is founded on belief that cutting corners and taking advantage of others is a legitimate shortcut, and the self-reliance and perseverance of the "Horatio Alger"-dream is lost. We learn that towards the end of the 1960's the American Dream only lives on as a material atavistic parody of what it once was, and the only way to cope with this is to conform or to hide in a make-belief world of drugs. The protagonist of *Fear and Loathing* no longer believes in the moral values of America, and his capacity to Dream of a Better World is lost.

In the discussion we learn that ever since the term "American Dream" was coined in 1931 the guiding philosophy has been substituted for a race for property and cash, and the idea that the Dream is about the benefit of all Americans was replaced with a competitive system, which leaves the majority on the losing end.

The battle is not about *how* you reach the top, but it's the fact that you *do* that evokes admiration, and this can be seen in the American obsession with the criminal. We learn that all three protagonists of the literary works chosen are outlaws in their own right, and that as long as they believe in their ideals and have a pure dream we sympathize with them.

Furthermore we learn from all three novels that the capitalism that has been the foundation of the entrepreneurial aspect of the American Dream has a downside. The materialistic version of the dream keeps the Americans divided, and while the Dream of Moving Up and the Dream of Instant Wealth persists (albeit as an illusion to most) the division keeps the Dream of a Better World and the Dream of Equality unrealizable.

The American Dream, which once was about improving the life of all Americans, is now a materialistic mirage of the past.