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Why Speak of American Stories as Dreams?_____

Cara Erdheim

The term “American Dream” conjures literary images of perseverance and promise on the one hand but disillusionment and defeat on the other: Ben Franklin pulling himself up by the bootstraps, Huck Finn “lighting out” for the territories, Gatsby insisting that he can “repeat the past,” Willy Loman burying his face in his hands. Whether one accepts it as a reality, punctures it as a myth, or presents it as a nightmare, the American Dream has maintained its powerful presence in scholarly conversations throughout the decades. Traditionally, scholars have referred to classic American Dream texts such as Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* (1791–1790), Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick* (1868), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949). In their readings of these works, early critics tended to associate the dream with a pervasive American spirit, a belief in national innocence, and a vision of human perfectibility; while later scholars challenge these traditional mobility narratives, some contemporary critics deny that the dream ever existed in the first place.

The shifting trends in American Dream scholarship reflect an effort in American literary criticism to enlarge the borders of US literature to include formerly silenced voices. As attitudes toward the dream itself change, the literary canon expands to include formerly marginalized narratives related to race, gender, ethnicity, disability, and class. Since the growth of multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars have expanded what counts as American Dream narratives, others have rewritten the criteria, and some have even abandoned the canon established in 1941 by F. O. Matthiessen that centered on elite white men such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville. Scholars such as Jane P. Tompkins, Henry Louis Gates, and William L. Andrews have revised Matthiessen’s master narrative to include long-neglected texts by African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and

women; however, other critics claim that these works deserve their own place outside of the grand master narrative. As such, a similar dynamic occurs in scholarship devoted to the American Dream.

Defining the Dream

The birth, death, and rebirth of the American Dream show that the narrative has a life cycle of its own. One cannot really talk or write about American literature, which contains various voices and a multitude of perspectives, without referring to some element of the American Dream. The reverse is also true: Almost any discussion of upward mobility requires a reflection on the nation's literary traditions, which are dynamic and multifaceted. From its role as a British colony to its twentieth-century position as a "global superpower" (Newman 1), the United States has produced writings that both shape and are shaped by the dream.

Despite its omnipresence in American literature, the "American Dream" did not receive a formal definition until 1931; in the wake of the Great Depression, James Truslow Adams, in *The Epic of America*, defined the dream as one that would allow all men and women, regardless of their origin or social status, to prosper in a place of free and equal opportunity (416). While he did not deny the potential for financial mobility, Adams noted that his vision of the dream extended beyond dollars and cents. Specifically, he claimed that the American Dream, or the "great epic," transcended "mer[e] material plenty" (416) and did not, therefore, limit itself to "motor cars and high wages" (415).

However, nearly a decade before Adams, D. H. Lawrence's now-classic critique of American hero worship, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), in many ways anticipated the major shifts in critical studies of the American Dream. In one of the first extended commentaries on Franklin, Lawrence takes pleasure in satirizing *The Autobiography's* idealization of self-made success; rather than exalt Franklin as a sort of American hero, Lawrence identifies human "perfectibility" as a truly "dreary theme" (15). By mocking Franklin's concept of "the

ideal man” (15), Lawrence demonstrates the flawed logic of American hero worship, which praises the ideal while celebrating the common.

Lawrence’s *Studies in American Literature* exposes the national myths at play throughout the early narrative history of the United States. Though he does not have access to “American Dream” as a term, Lawrence takes aim at what he calls “the true myth of America” (60). Through his discussions of James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking novels, Lawrence knocks off his pedestal Cooper’s protagonist, Natty Bumppo, by identifying this white savage as “the stoic American killer of the old great life” (65). Rather than romanticize the hero and praise Bumppo as the personification of a nation’s spirit, Lawrence claims that Cooper’s characters capture “the essential American soul [as] hard, isolate, [and] stoic” (68). Just as he satirizes self-made success and mocks hero worship, Lawrence calls into question American claims to innocence.

Since these foundational studies, subsequent critics have incorporated their insights and revised them to accord with contemporary critical preoccupations. To map out the thematic shifts in thinking about the American Dream, it is helpful to cluster scholarship devoted to the dream as occurring in three “waves” that correspond to the eras 1950s–1960s, 1970s–1980s, and 1990s–present.

American Innocence and the Spirit of a New Nation, 1950s–1960s

Early commentators on the American Dream often looked back to the nation’s earliest writings, ranging from Puritan narratives to Franklin’s *Autobiography*, to understand the spiritual foundations for the concept. During the 1950s and into the 1960s, American scholars associated the dream with a new Eden, which early authors believed could fulfill biblical prophecies in ways that Europe and the Old World had not. Two decades after Adams popularized the term, the American Dream became central to critical conversations about the nation’s literary traditions. *The Epic of America* generated a great deal of energy

and enthusiasm among first-wave dream critics who used the phrase to develop a framework to discuss democracy, freedom, independence, Manifest Destiny, and upward mobility.

If James Truslow Adams inserted the term into popular discussions, then Frederick Carpenter gave literary life to the American Dream in *American Literature and the Dream* (1955), which provides a foundation for modern understanding of the dream, even if the study seems rather outdated. Carpenter begins by insisting upon defining the dream; like American literature itself, he says, the dream defies definition because of its vastness (3). Carpenter argues that American literature distinguishes itself from British writing because of the “constant and omnipresent influence of the American dream upon it” (3). Though he does not settle on one definition, Carpenter claims that the dream captures a distinct national spirit, which he calls a “new realization of the old religious ideals” (198). Readers can learn a great deal about early American beliefs by looking at how the dream has been shaped and reshaped by the literary imagination.

Carpenter’s book opens with a comparative study of Puritan narratives and transcendentalist texts, which share the “dream of a new world” (14). Authors ranging from William Bradford and Jonathan Edwards to Emerson and Whitman look toward a new American Eden by rejecting the past, whether that history contains the Church of England, European culture, or British literary traditions. Indeed, much like the nation itself, the dreams expressed by these writings are future-oriented (28). Carpenter suggests that Edward Johnson’s “A New Heaven and a New Earth” (1653) reflects the dream’s connection to the earliest American settlers, by and large Puritans who believed a new biblical Eden would grow from American soil. Through his interpretation of the poem, Carpenter suggests that colonial Americans saw the new land as uncharted territory that granted its inhabitants spiritual and material rewards. “A New Heaven and a New Earth” thus establishes a narrative of American promise and hope that future writers such as Franklin and Thomas Jefferson would later explore in their own writings (5).

Considering his classic connection to self-made success, Franklin and his *Autobiography* receive surprisingly little attention in *American Literature and the Dream*. While he acknowledges Franklin's influence on the transcendentalists, Carpenter credits Emerson in particular with achieving a "realization" of the "ideal, democratic 'American' self" (17). Starting his study with the Puritans and Emerson, Carpenter then divides American literature into four categories, each of which distinctly present the nation and its dream: Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman function as the dream's "philosophers," "Gentile Traditionalists" such as Amos Bronson Alcott oppose the dream, writers such as Hawthorne and Melville express romantic faith in the dream, and realists such as Sinclair Lewis critique the dream (5). Carpenter concludes with a question, which he seems to direct to future scholars: What, he asks, can the American Dream reveal about the nation's literary tradition, and vice versa?

In his 1968 essay "The Enlightenment and the American Dream," Theodore Hornberger probes the question posed by Carpenter; he takes on Carpenter's challenge of trying to define the dream by looking at shifts in American literature, history, and culture. Rather than start with the Calvinists, as Carpenter does, Hornberger begins in the American republic and focuses on Franklin, whose autobiographical writings he connects to the Age of Reason. Specifically, Hornberger identifies the original American Dream, as expressed by Franklin, with ideals such as "perfectibility, social progress, democratic government, and self-reliance" (17). The dream forms "an integral part of the Enlightenment" because it reflects the optimistic tone of the period; he defines it as the North American ability to reinvent the self, reconstruct one's identity, join new communities, and simply start over (17). Less focused on the spiritual aspect of the dream's national narrative, Hornberger stresses secular virtues, such as industry.

Like Hornberger, Lewis B. Wright, in "The Renaissance Tradition in America," argues that Enlightenment ideals, which celebrate the nation's newness on the one hand but its rich roots on the other (5), have

shaped the dream since its inception. Furthermore, Wright associates the American Dream with unbridled mobility through the acquisition of land: “The New World offered undreamed-of possibilities for social advancement because land—the magical basis for gentility—could be had with relative ease” (7). What makes Wright’s reading distinct from those of Carpenter and Hornberger is his study of the Greek influence on early America. Specifically, Wright traces the word “Renaissance” to the ancient world and argues that early narratives such as Franklin’s *Autobiography* constitute a classical revival (8).

While Carpenter studies the Puritans, Hornberger focuses on Franklin, and Wright goes back to the Greeks, Walter Allen idealizes the democratic principles upon which the United States was founded. In *The Urgent West* (1969), Allen designates Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence as the original dream document, and he claims that the American republic gave birth to a reality that did not exist for early North American settlers. Indeed, Allen’s scholarship appears the most dated, especially when he insists that Americans, regardless of race and origin, share one universal experience and identity (5). To his credit, Allen does move on to modern illustrations of the failed dream, which he explores in relation to *The Great Gatsby* and Theodore Dreiser’s naturalist novel *An American Tragedy*, both published in the same year, 1925.

Although published earlier than Allen’s work, Malcolm Cowley’s *The Dream of the Golden Mountains* (1964) further highlights the myth of unlimited American success. As a longtime journalist for *The New Republic*, Cowley takes a special interest in Upton Sinclair’s muckraking novel *The Jungle* (1906), a naturalist narrative that exposed Chicago’s unsanitary meatpacking industry, resulting in the 1906 legislation of the Pure Food and Drug Act under President Theodore Roosevelt. Moreover, *The Jungle*, Cowley argues, captures failed American aspirations through the urban experience of early twentieth-century immigrants such as Jurgis Rudkus, the novel’s protagonist. Through his emphasis on “the working class [as] part of the dream” (118), Cowley anticipates second-generation criticism.

Manifest Destiny and the Myth of Upward Mobility, 1970s–1980s

While many first-generation dream scholars celebrated spiritual success and material wealth in narratives by Franklin and Alger, the next wave of criticism focused on twentieth-century texts in which prosperity fails in all forms. Plymouth, that Puritan “City on a Hill,” had signaled rewards and pleasures for early American authors, but the biblically based Promised Land soon moved west with the ever-expanding frontier. In fact, some would argue that the 1849 California gold rush played the greatest role in creating a national myth that wealth would naturally flow. Second-generation dream critics exposed this western myth by looking in particular at the writings of John Steinbeck, whose novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) “laid bare the bankruptcy of an ancient American dream about going westward to the Promised Land” (Athearn 90). Indeed, the frontier had failed those trekking west during the Depression years, and novelists such as Steinbeck poignantly capture this reality.

One year prior to the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, American poet Archibald MacLeish wondered whether the dream would continue to survive amid the nation’s economic collapse in *Land of the Free*, a 1938 book of poetic verses and photographs. In a short poem within the book, MacLeish mused, “We wonder if the liberty is done: The dreaming is finished.” MacLeish’s work inspired historian Robert G. Athearn to explain that the statement both reflected a reality and created a national nostalgia for the “heartland of the old, romantic West” (88). However, at the same time that family farmers longed for an era gone by, the gospel of Manifest Destiny kept “nonfarming westerners” (91) hopeful that fortunes would follow on the frontier. Throughout his book *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (1986), Athearn acknowledges the power of 1930s fiction and film to show that the “American dream had become an illusion” (104). Part of this illusion involved the worship of white male heroes, from which second-wave criticism started to move away.

With the advent of multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s, literary scholars adjusted their definition of the American Dream to account for race, gender, ethnicity, and class. Kathryn Hume observed:

With African Americans, the dream often refers to freedom in the North (an idealized Garden or Promised Land); for Native Americans, the “dream” often refers to desire for land ownership, freedom to practice native spirituality, the ability to achieve sovereignty, the want of protection against government or corporate practices that wreak environmental havoc on reservations and other lands. (iv)

Increasingly, scholars began to edit collections of writings by previously marginalized authors and called attention to the ways in which the writings engaged—or did not engage—with hallowed American traditions. William L. Andrews examined African American experience as revealed through autobiography and slave narratives, Duane Niatum turned attention to American Indian culture and traditions, James P. Gaffney shed light on the American Catholic dream, and Jane P. Tompkins located within women’s writing and nineteenth-century sentimentalism another “American Renaissance,” which had been overlooked by Matthiessen and others. While scholars reworked the canon, they also revised the original dream that had sustained the nation’s literary tradition.

Second-wave American Dream scholars developed an interest in how African American works about slavery, segregation, and racism both expose the national myths surrounding upward mobility and show that the United States had never been a land free from sin. In *To Tell a Free Story: The First Generation of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (1988), Andrews, one of the most influential scholars on African American autobiography, demonstrated the limitations of black upward mobility, both physical and financial. At the same time, Andrews highlighted the intellectual and spiritual triumphs of nineteenth-century slave autobiographers such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs.

African American authors, ranging from Douglass and Jacobs to Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Walker, move the Garden of Eden from Plymouth or Concord to the northern industrial city. In Douglass's *Autobiographies*, the North represents freedom, both physical and spiritual, through his escape from slavery and the realization of his humanity through literacy. In Hansberry's 1959 drama, *A Raisin in the Sun*, African American characters such as Mama plant gardens in the northern housing projects where they live and thus create their own miniature Edens. However, in many of Walker's works, such as her 1970 novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, African American dreams continue to fail in the new northern "Garden," which brings individuals, families, and communities new nightmares such as racism, segregation, poverty, and violence, a failed dream Walker addresses in her essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" (1974).

In his 1989 study *Race, Gender, and Desire*, Elliott Butler-Evans looks to the texts of twentieth-century African American female writers such as Toni Morrison to expose the crisis of subjectivity in literature written by and about black women (5). Calling attention to the "visibility of black culture" (7), Butler-Evans notes, Morrison uses nonlinear narrative structures, patterns, and forms to illustrate how whites have constructed African American identity through the American Dream, and vice versa.

Scholars in the 1970s and 1980s tended to reexamine the dream in three ways: by exposing the failures of the western frontier, exploring the multicultural dream and its realities, and examining the myth of upward mobility in classic narratives about failure rather than about success. In the 1970 essay "Gatsby: False Prophet of the American Dream," Roger L. Pearson insists that Fitzgerald's protagonist personifies "the Gospel of the corrupted American dream" (640). According to Pearson, the original dream contains a spiritual component, an aspect that has been polluted by Gatsby's delusions about his wealth. In order to demonstrate that the dream has changed over time, the article takes readers on a journey through American literary history. Beginning with

the Puritan writer Jonathan Edwards, Pearson shows how “spiritual fulfillment” signified success in early national narratives (638). Pearson’s essay works well to prepare readers for the third phase of literary dream criticism, which focuses on success and failure in an increasingly global literary marketplace.

The Post-Apocalyptic American Nightmare, 1990–Present

Little significant literary scholarship and cultural criticism on the American Dream emerged between 1990 and 1999. Perhaps because of the financial boom of the 1990s, there was less need for critical conversations about success and upward mobility. However, in an insightful commentary, Alex Pitofsky argues that Dreiser’s naturalist novel *The Financier* (1912) is a twentieth-century Horatio Alger story in its depiction of the rise and fall of Frank Cowperwood, but also that through his story Dreiser exposes the “Horatio Alger myth” that underlies many conceptions of the American Dream. For many readers, Alger’s heroes embody Americans’ dreams of success, for in tale after tale, Alger traced the rise of his boy heroes from penury to middle-class respectability. Pitofsky notes that Dreiser’s Cowperwood is the antithesis of Alger’s heroes, because Cowperwood starts out his life with more privilege and aspires to far more wealth than does the typical Alger protagonist (281). Unlike Alger’s heroes’ ethical principles and intellectual curiosity, Cowperwood has little of both (282), says Pitofsky, who also claims that *Ragged Dick* is less about selfish individualism and more about assimilation into an upwardly mobile community (277).

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, transformed literary criticism on the American Dream. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, scholarship became apocalyptic in tone; indeed, critics engage more with the nightmare than with the dream. In a postmodern world, scholars have perhaps the greatest challenge: to say something original about a dream that may never have existed, in literature or in

culture. Interestingly, some contemporary critics have returned to the classic American Dream texts and have sought to imbue these narratives with new meaning. If scholars of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s spent time rethinking Franklin and Alger, then post–September 11 critics have produced new readings of Fitzgerald and Miller. Moreover, the Great Recession has sparked renewed interest in *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman and James Gatz are among the most famous failed dreamers in American literature; critics never seem to grow tired of these tragic characters.

In “Success, Law, and the Law of Success” (2005), Galia Benziman focuses on the commercial context in which Miller created his drama. First produced in 1949, *Death of a Salesman* was composed by the playwright during the “consumer boom” that followed the Great Depression and the 1930s recession. Consumption had begun to supersede production in national importance (20). As much as the play critiques the nation’s obsession at the time with “competition, materialism, and selfishness” (20), Benziman argues that Miller’s drama seeks to reclaim the dream as originally intended; that is, a dream that exists beyond “self-centered ambition” and more in line with humble “upward social mobility” (21). *Death of a Salesman* shows readers and audiences that the American Dream does not have to be immoral or destructive so long as it does not involve “selfish greed.” The play may even teach that the American Dream involves and even requires social and moral responsibility (21).

Throughout her study of Miller’s drama, Benziman poses a number of complex questions, which she never fully answers, about the potential pitfalls of capitalism and consumerism: To what extent must the American Dream be associated exclusively with “commodity culture?” (22), and how much does Miller align “salesmanship” with “fraud?” (22). She argues that Miller’s play works to achieve a balance between two aspects of the dream, selfishness and personal success (22). Benziman comes closest to addressing her inquiries about consumer culture when she makes the somewhat counterintuitive claim

that *Death of a Salesman* tells a tragic tale about how “personal integrity” can still accompany capitalist success (25).

Benziman concludes her study of Miller’s modern tragedy with a statement about how the most successful American Dream involves self-awareness, which Willy Loman does not have. Not only does Miller’s tragic hero dream, but he also makes myths by denying reality, falsifying his success, and exaggerating his charisma; furthermore, he fails to read others, such as his sons Happy and Biff (28), and misreads himself. Like Gatsby, Loman has a certain degree of megalomania, and he often resorts to self-aggrandizement (30–31). Despite the belief that both men are well liked, almost nobody shows up for their funerals. The parallels between Gatsby and Loman are many, but modern scholars seem to engage less in comparative readings and more in individual studies of these two flawed characters.

In *The American Counterfeit: Authenticity and Identity in American Literature and Culture* (2006), Mary McAleer Balkun identifies Gatsby as the ultimate “American Counterfeit” who fabricates and falsifies his identity by collecting meaningless materials. Tracing the trajectory of American literary history from Whitman through Fitzgerald and beyond, Balkun claims that acquiring useless goods leads impulsive characters like Gatsby to falsify what they own and who they are; in essence, the acquisition of stuff brings about the formation of an imagined self, both personal and national. The Victorian or post-Victorian culture of commodities, then, reflects an evolving American fascination with commercialism and “consumerism” (129). Throughout *The Great Gatsby*, the act of collecting things also puts a new spin on the commonly juxtaposed ideas of old and new money (131).

Collecting in *The Great Gatsby* becomes a way to “restore the past to the present” and thus to expose the “interrelatedness” of both, according to Balkun (132). Collecting takes three forms, as one acquires “souvenirs” (Nick Carraway), “fetish objects” (Gatz/Gatsby), and “systematics” (Tom Buchanan through his acquisition of females) (132). Collecting functions throughout the novel, Balkun contends, as

a means of molding the self and his or her worth for further “public consumption” (132). Daisy Buchanan, of course, becomes Gatsby’s “object of desire,” as well as a “curiosity” of sorts (134). Daisy, much like the idealized past itself, becomes increasingly inaccessible as the novel moves forward (135), so the search for authenticity proves impossible in the end (152).

Benziman and Balkun express interest in the material side of the American Dream, but modern critics still debate the degree to which wealth figures into the original concept. While Betty Sue Flowers, in *The American Dream and the Economic Myth* (2007), claims that the grand “economic myth” remains embedded in the dream, Norton Garfinkle takes a slightly different approach by distinguishing the dream from its rivaling “Gospel of Wealth.” Modern scholars have perhaps the greatest challenge, as they seek something original to say about a concept that has for so long been recycled, re-created, and re-envisioned.

Hume offers one of the most innovative commentaries on the twenty-first century American Dream, as reflected in American literature and culture. Although published one year prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11, *American Dream, American Nightmare: Fiction since 1960* (2000) captures the apocalyptic tone of the era. Hume’s book is perhaps the only one to examine post-1960 fiction written by and about marginalized peoples that expressed a growing “disillusionment” with the American Dream (i). One of the few dream critics to focus on late twentieth-century ethnic American Dreams, Hume examines writings focused on Jewish Americans by Abraham Cahan, as well as Chinese and Native American narratives composed by women. While she does acknowledge some success stories, such as Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, a 1999 novel about the experience of an Indian immigrant in the United States, Hume argues that the culturally, ethnically, and racially marginalized women in post-1960s fiction share a feeling of estrangement from the dominant white male culture that promises success (viii).

Hume connects ideas about failure to environmental narratives, which she comes to understand as toxic national nightmares. Through her study of *Ecotopia* (1975) and *Ecotopia Emerging* (1981), both by Ernest Callenbach, Hume claims that green texts critique the American Dream by envisioning a sort of environmental or ecological revolution (160–61).

Ecological interdependence also replaces a “rugged individualism,” associated with the classic western narrative (163), which moves from innocence to experience. The more environmental critics discuss nature, the harder it becomes to define; similarly, conversations about the American Dream seem to exhaust the term of all meaning. At the same time, though, dream-driven discussions are significant because they reveal something about how national narratives have been constructed by writers and readers alike over time.

As the foregoing suggests, the critical literature devoted to the American Dream is vast and varied. The large scope of literary criticism on the dream itself is overwhelming enough, but there also exists a wealth of material on classic texts such as *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman*. It is just as difficult to speak about literary representations of the dream without mentioning Willy Loman as it is to reflect on Miller’s tragic hero without invoking the American Dream. As the American Dream continues to permeate American political and social discourse, it is significant that cultural critics and literary scholars continue to generate new perspectives on a formative American theme.

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