

A CASE STUDY OF NATIONAL IDENTITY:  
AN ANALYSIS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN POLITICS AND LITERATURE

by

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## ABSTRACT

The American Dream has been the inspiration of many political speeches, political writings, and works of literature throughout American history. Most recently, it has inspired political groups like the *Center for the New American Dream* and academic groups like the Xavier University *Center for the Study of the American Dream*. As of late, the notion of the American Dream has begun to crop up more often than not in main stream political discourse, especially surrounding the topic of immigration with the aptly named *Dream Act*. Why has the American Dream drawn this new attention and inquiry? Why and how is it important to American Political thought? What does it mean? Why does it endure?

As a complex issue of American culture, this thesis will use disparate methods of analysis to form answers to these questions. The American Dream is often referred to as our national myth. It is comprised of the many ideals and narratives which undergird American politics and culture. Through examination of literary works of fiction and of political texts, this research will examine the meaning and the history of the American Dream. Then, using secondary survey data, this research will examine the implications and state of the American Dream. Finally, to answer the question of why the American Dream endures, this research will employ elements of psychoanalytic and Marxist theory to argue that the Dream works as a cycle of American political thought.

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*“The Americas as a dream: a continent that Columbus stumbled across with a mythical map in his hands on his way to Cathay, the Spice Islands and the Orient. This unexpected landfall was initially transformed into the European script of El Dorado, a city on the hill, a virgin land, a new world: an imaginary construct that responded to the desires and fears (gold and cannibals) of Europe. . . . So, modernity is the product of an imaginary map. . . .”*

*–Ian Chambers*

## *INTRODUCTION*

Called “the idea that shaped a nation,” the American Dream has become an increasingly important concept in American politics as it is begins to break out of the “musty domain of print culture” (Cullen 5). Roughly, it is the idea that regardless of one’s origins, Americans have the freedom and the opportunity to achieve their goals, be they material, social, political, or spiritual. Brought to the attention of the mass media in part by social movements like the Occupy and Tea Party movements which, representing partisan extremes, espouse that each has discovered the true American Dream, the concept has slowly worked its way into the media’s sphere of interest “where it is enshrined as our national motto” (Cullen 5). The American Dream has been evoked by activists, artists, authors, scholars, leaders, politicians, and playwrights. Currently, the American Dream is being fought over by

political parties like a single piece of candy in a crowded schoolroom. This battle for meaning is essential, though, because the ambiguity gives the Dream its longevity. After all, it “would have no drama or mystique if it were a self-evident falsehood or a scientifically demonstrable principle” (Cullen 7). The Dream embodies our national myth, motto, ideals, and our spirit. The Dream is traceable through American history long before the term was ever used. In many instances, the American Dream is viewed as America’s unifying theme, as it was borne out of one of our darkest hours during the Great Depression. In the midst of fear, instability, and regret, Americans of the Great Depression were desperately in need of a hard look at what they would define as the nation’s values; these were destined to be abstractions since it was the chase for material wealth and the boom of the Jazz Age which had led to the unfathomable bust and fraud of the Depression in the first place.

Despite the challenging circumstances which gave birth to the Dream, it is important to note that the concept of an American Dream has survived various challenges to its validity—economic crises, racial tensions, income inequalities, and most recently, ideological polarization, as each party begins to struggle for rights to co-opt the narrative as its own. Specifically, Jennifer Hoschild argues “that the American dream is being threatened by Americans’ racial antagonism” (xviii) while Mark Davis argues that the capitalist notions at work behind the Dream hold the American working class “prisoner.” The concept has fueled many a political debate, but it gains primary significance as the cornerstone of American national identity. At the Xavier University Center

for the Study of the American Dream, scholars ardently defend the significance of the Dream to American politics:

To ask why it is important to study the American Dream is to ask why America, itself, is important. The American Dream defines our aspirations; . . .The Center's mission is to study the *history* of the American Dream, to examine and report on the *present* state of the American Dream, and to identify trends and analyze shifts in the future evolution of the American Dream. (n.p.)

Xavier's argument for the centrality of the Dream is far from unfounded. The Dream provides a stream of political and cultural discourse many fathoms deep. In his analysis of trends found in Presidential addresses, for example, Elvin Lim observes that the American Dream is an increasingly important concept to American politics as the occurrence of the term has increased drastically since 1964 (335).

The American Dream is also politically significant as it provides a convenient guide for debates over the state of American national identity. In his 2004 book *Who Are We?*, Samuel Huntington argues that America is suffering an identity crisis: "Debates over national identity are a pervasive characteristic of our time. Almost everywhere people have questioned, reconsidered, and redefined what they have in common and what distinguishes them from other people: Who are we? Where do we belong?" (12). While the American struggle for national identity is a significant political discourse, it is not unique to "our

time” (whatever that may be), nor is it a fatalistic indicator that America is in crisis as Huntington later argues. Many generations have had to grapple with establishing a sense of identity, as we have transitioned from British subjects to colonists to state citizens to finally see ourselves, in varying degrees of intensity, as Americans.

The Dream is a particularly important home for political discourse since it acts in many ways as America’s “unifying theme.” Imbued with a sense of community, the Dream represents a view of America’s national solidarity rather than as a fragmented body of confederated states, races, ethnicities, cultures, communities, and political partisans. While there has been a great deal of research which employs the American Dream, as Stanley Tracktenburg observes, “One of the characteristic difficulties in identifying the American Dream is that it hasn’t stood still long enough” (227). Many authors who seek to define or analyze the Dream either deconstruct it, using compartmentalized components to dismantle and understand the Dream, while others situate the Dream within an already established political discourse (such as class warfare in Davis’s text or racism in Hochschild’s) and use it as a guide rope out of the abyss. Similarly, I seek to work my way through the labyrinthine Dream in an effort less to trace or define the American Dream than to anatomize it.

### ***Hypothesis***

My goal is to show that while the American Dream is often associated with material objectives (i.e., the goal of homeownership), there is a

psychological element to the dream which cyclically validates the pursuit in spite of the materialistic disillusionment we experience in times of economic crisis. In his book *Prisoners of the American Dream*, self-described Marxist Mike Davis argues that the lure of capitalism repeatedly draws generations of Americans toward a fallacious promise of economic opportunity in order to subjugate the American working class. His analysis of “why the American working class is different” seeks to understand why America lacks the socialistic class consciousness of other nations. He finds that the answer lies at “the very structure of American culture—the lack of feudal class struggles, the hegemony of a Lockean world-view, the safety-valve of the frontier, and so on” (6). This thesis seeks in part to build on, and to refute, this Marxist argument. Where Davis argues in favor of class warfare, which he believes is being stymied by the American Dream, I argue that the belief in, and existence of, upward mobility does not imprison the American working class, but liberates it. The definition of the American dream founded on opportunity and upward mobility endures because it represents the Dream as a cycle of American consciousness to which there is no ultimate end.

I would like, however, to build on an argument which Davis makes about the economic based cultural environment in America. Davis writes that “[e]ach major cycle of class struggle, economic crisis, and social restructuring in American history has finally been resolved through epochal tests of strength between capital and labor” (7). I argue that the American Dream can be traced along this same “major cycle of class struggle,” which Davis discusses as being

fueled by the Marxist progression. Davis writes that the “democratic revolution had been left ‘unfinished’” as these cycles which, by the Marxist model, should result in a revolt of the underclass, are continually thwarted by “same malign ‘American Dream’” (7, 314). This fusion of economic motives and psychological impact makes the American Dream an important model for understanding political behavior. As the XavierCenter observes, the American Dream allows us “to understand the aspirations and values likely to directly current and future economic, political, and cultural decisions” (sic). While this thesis seeks to discover what characteristics comprise and motivate belief or disbelief in the American Dream, it will ultimately draw conclusions concerning the influence the American Dream has on social and political behavior.

To do this, I will use works of literature, as the Dream is often constructed as a theme of literary works such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and in historical texts like Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*. This thesis will contain three major sections. The first will explore the origins and fundamental principles of the Dream. The second will scaffold the economic and political motivators of the Dream. The third embarks on a psychological literary exploration of the Dream through analysis of modern American literature. To conclude, this research will offer arguments for the continued study and consideration Dream’s significance.

*And that is something else at the center of the American Dream which is one of the distinguishing points, one of the things that distinguishes it from other forms of government, particularly totalitarian systems. It says that each individual has certain basic rights that are neither derived from nor conferred by the state. They are gifts from the hands of the Almighty God. Very seldom if ever in the history of the world has a socio-political document expressed in such profound eloquent and unequivocal language the dignity and the worth of human personality.*

*—Martin Luther King Jr., giving a speech at Drew University in New Jersey.*

### *DEFINING THE AMERICAN DREAM*

In analyzing the American Dream, this study seeks to expand on a problem that Jim Cullen notes in the introduction to his book on the American dream: “When . . . I typed [American dream] into a library catalog, I got back over seven hundred titles. . . . None of the books I looked at makes anything like a systematic attempt to define the term or trace its origins; its definition is virtually taken for granted” (5). Definitions and polls on this concept, which Cullen argues has become our “national motto,” are few and far between. The lack of definite perspective on the American Dream is problematic. The ambiguity of its meaning is an important sustenance—avoiding restriction or structure allows the Dream to remain fluid and viable for each generation to amend and assume as its own. On the other hand, the fluidity of meaning can

undermine the concept as a space for unity when partisan or ideological groups begin to define or fracture the Dream based on proprietary values.

Partisan schism over the Dream that has occurred as of late can be seen through institutions like The Center for the New American Dream and the Heritage Foundation's *Saving the American Dream*. These examples demonstrate the thought chasm surrounding the American Dream as partisan organizations battle over the prized territory of our national myth. In the liberal corner, Center for the New American Dream argues that the Dream needs to be re-constructed, seeing it as based solely on conflated materialism which is eroding the sense of unity and community in America as we ardently pursue individual prosperity: "Since its founding in 1997, the New Dream has raised awareness of the negative impact of a hyper-consumer culture" (n.p.). In the conservative corner, the Heritage Foundation's publication argues that America needs a (nostalgic) look back to our founding values in order to sustain the forward looking perspective of prosperity for future generations: "At the end of the day our plan, while economic in nature, has a higher moral purpose. . . . Our initiative . . . aims to preserve America's promise bequeathed to us by past generations" (n.p.) However, the struggle for meaning has existed since the term originated:

[O]n the fiftieth anniversary of the publishing of *The Epic of America*, . . . the governor of Massachusetts was quick to use it in a speech made in front of the monument on Bunker Hill. The governor . . . tweaked the

meaning of the phrase to match the particular occasion, something that would to this day become more the rule than the exception. (Adams himself provided at least three slightly different definitions in his future writings.). . . (Samuel 15)

The existence of partisan divide over the American Dream is strong evidence that not only is the American Dream eroding in the eyes of Americans, but also that it is not a static concept.

The Dream is still undergoing reconstruction. The continual change and scrutiny of the values which structure the Dream present another important question surrounding it: does the Dream influence behavior or is it a vessel for post-hoc justification? To answer this, a constructivist approach, the view that “human identity is formed by the culture into which one is born,” to the American Dream is perhaps most useful (Dobie125). Barry Glassner, in his article “Where Meanings Get Constructed,” advocates constructivism as a means of studying social behavior by persuasively eroding the significance of overly formulaic perspectives on social behavior like rational choice: “Anticonstructionists might prefer that all meanings held by policy makers and their constituents correspond to the best information available from scientific inquiry, but they would hardly need to issue their critiques of subjective knowledge if they believed that such is already the case” (591). It is important to acknowledge that, unlike natural sciences, the social sciences are inherently subjective as they lack the benefit of controlled experimentation, but all of this

subjectivity should not be taken to mean that reality doesn't exist. As Glassner, somewhat comically, puts it, "social constructionists plainly *do* accept that reality—without scare quotes—exists" (591). The lack of objective properties does not remove the measurability of the Dream. Rather, the fluidity of the Dream makes the endeavor to analyze it more important to our understanding of the particularly subjective notion of what it means to be an American.

The Xavier Center for the Study of the American Dream has begun the effort to quantify the American Dream with its American Dream Composite Index (ADCI), has broad implications, as it

provides business, media[,] and non-profit organizations, universities[,] and institutions with valuable insight into the current economic, political, and societal conditions in the United States. Furthermore, the Index will reveal how people living in the U.S. feel about their personal well-being (n.p.)

The ADCI founders state that by quantifying attitudes on the American Dream it is actually indexing and measuring "true aspiration," which is no small task, nor an objective one. But The American Dream Composite Index is quite thorough, and uses various sub-indices based on concepts that make up the American Dream. The sub-indices are categorized into major concepts, so economics is a separate index from well-being, which is different from Diversity, and so on. These sub categories are then grouped into a measure which "quantifies the American Dream in its entirety." It is important to note

**Table 1. Goals in Life.** Zogby: Which of the following descriptions best represent your goals in life?

	Material success (%)	Spiritual fulfillment (%)	American Dream means material success. It exists, but it is more likely to be attained by my children and not by me (%)	I cannot achieve the American Dream (%)	Not sure (%)	<i>N</i>
6/6–7/27/2001	24	53	11	7	5	3,019
11/16–19/2004	29	48	8	7	8	1,204

**Table 1 “Goals in Life” Source:** Hanson, Sandra L. and John Zogby. “The Polls—Trends Attitudes About the American Dream.” *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 74:3. 2010. 570-84. JSTOR. 6 Sept. 2012.

- a. This table shows the importance of spiritual values to the American Dream. Notice that both in 2001 and 2004 the majority of respondents, though in decline, described their goals as spiritual fulfillment rather than material success.

that, by including more abstract sub-indices such as well-being, that the ADCI and others support the significance of spiritual or emotional characteristics which are important to understanding Americans’ attitudes beyond those based on Consumerism alone (such as Consumer Price Index or the Consumer Confidence Index).

One of the defining characteristics of the American Dream and positive arguments for its applicability is that it takes a more holistic view of American motives based not only on consumerism, but also on the importance of beliefs.

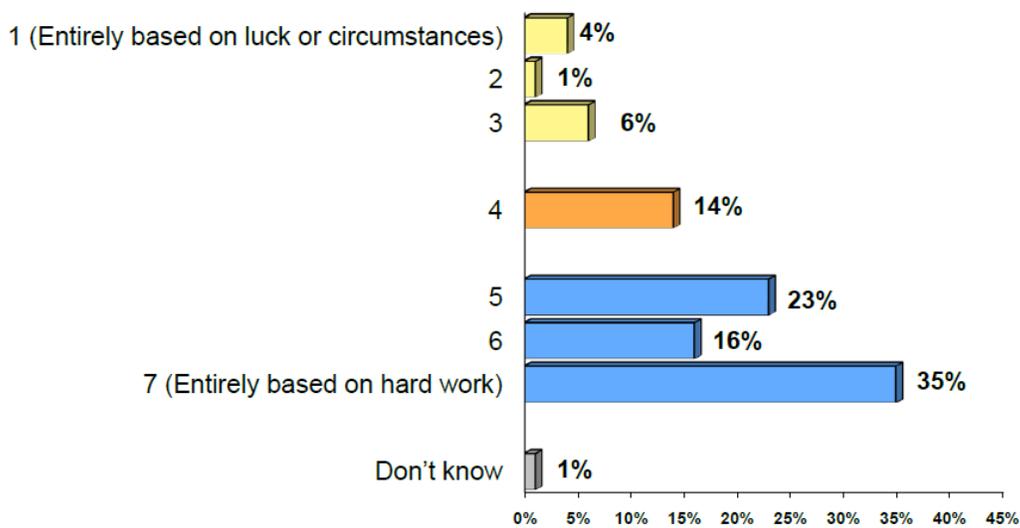
While it may be true that beliefs do not act on human behavior so directly as to “drive action as a rider directs a horse,” the American Dream provides a truer measure as it seeks to understand Americans’ aspirations (Fischer 364).

### ***Early American Literature as a Source for Dream Values***

In early American literature, we can find some of the initial and most fundamental political narratives which shaped American ideals. Through the early political essays of John Smith, John Winthrop, and Benjamin Franklin, we read some of the early principles which would come to construct the American Dream, but none more explicit than John Smith’s *A Description of New England*, “in which he portrayed life in Virginia in terms of virtually unlimited material and moral benefit, thus making one of the first literary installments on what many have called the American Dream” (Norton 14). This seminal text provides particularly interesting insight into the original notion of America as a fertile, Edenic land of prosperity and excess for all. Smith writes, for example, “Who can desire more content, that hath small meanes; or but only his merit to advance his fortune . . .” (qtd. in Heath 281). Noticing some key words, *merit*, *desire*, *advance*[ment], and the important element of beginning from *small means*, Smith espouses some of the original, and relatively incontrovertible, principles of the American Dream.

In these foundational ideas we find not only the material promise of the American Dream as motivator in Smith’s description of early America, but also as a source of the Dream’s moral bedrock as he espouses individualism and self reliance.

## AND THEY BELIEVE ACHIEVING THE AMERICAN DREAM IS DEPENDENT MOSTLY UPON HARD WORK.



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**Table 2 “American Dream is Dependent Mostly Upon Hard Work”** Source: Ford, Michael. “The American Dream Survey.” *Center for the Study of the American Dream*. Xavier University. March 2010. (Web). 23 February 2013.

b. An aspect of individualism, Americans associate hard work with achieving the American Dream.

A large part of the American Dream, and of American culture, is the desire for autonomy. In his article “Paradoxes of American Individualism,” Claude Fischer writes that our “culture expects the individual to be self-reliant materially and, in the Emersonian sense, morally” (364). These notions of higher morality

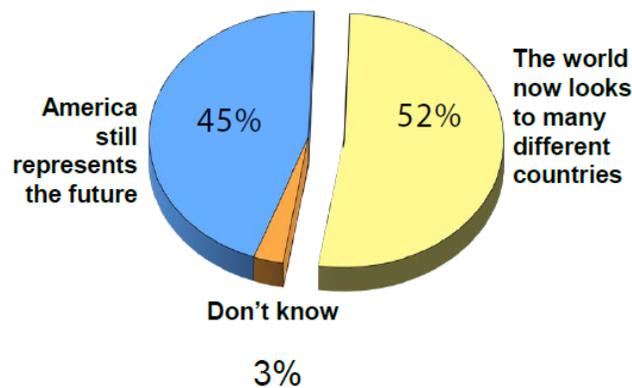
found in individual works would influence American culture far beyond colonial America as “Smith reincarnate[s] himself in his writing as a prototypical American hero, the antecedent of the self-mythologizing southern frontiersmen such as Davy Crockett and later fictional southern swashbucklers with a grand design such as Thomas Sutpen in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*” (Norton 15). At this point of evolution, where individualism morphs into frontiersmen of grand design, though, is where the concept of the American Dream becomes somewhat murky. To truly understand the American Dream, it must be isolated from other archetypes by establishing where the defining lines between concepts like manifest destiny and American exceptionalism lie in relation to the Dream. It is perhaps more useful, though, to understand these principles as ideals that contributed to the American Dream before taking on a life of their own as independent socially constructed phenomena.

Interestingly, American exceptionalism, according to Peter Onuf, has undergone a similar resurgence to the American Dream as it has moved from the obscurities of scholarship and has increasingly become a staple of “political vernacular”(78). The most interesting contribution of American exceptionalism to the Dream is most likely that defining what makes America exceptional is often fodder for political debate among partisans debating the Dream itself. The American Dream, as the zenith of American achievement both communal and individual, is closely linked to the notion of exceptionalism, and so each party is particularly inclined to argue that its model is the best representation of

American principles. Onuf writes about the contrast that “[w]e might conclude that self-defined conservatives and liberals—these ideological preferences now map onto party preferences—live in different countries altogether. But this is nonsense” rather, they are “[c]ombatants in this latest phase of the ‘culture wars’” as they battle over the Dream (79).

However, the more defining contribution to the Dream that the notion of American exceptionalism makes is the importance of “the belief in progress” and, vaguely, that America should be a leader in the world (80).

Do you believe that for the rest of the world America is still the standard of success and represents the future or do you think that America is no longer unique, and that the world now looks to many different countries to see where things are headed in the future?



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**Table 3 “America is Still the Standard of Success”** Source: Ford, Michael. “The American Dream Survey.” *Center for the Study of the American Dream*. Xavier University. March 2010. (Web). 23 February 2013.

The belief that America should be a world leader shows another aspect of the unifying nature of the American Dream. Further strengthening fierce belief in individual advancement, the two coincide when individual advancement is

tied to the benefit of the community, of which some key links can be found in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. Franklin begins his *Autobiography* by describing events of his childhood and wastes no time mentioning his own virtues: "I was generally a Leader among the Boys, and . . . as it shows[,] an early projecting public Spirit" (Heath 865). He tells of leading his classmates in building "a Wharf fit for us to stand on" using stolen stones. He recalls the lesson of his father that "tho' I pleaded him the Usefulness of the Work, mine convinc'd me that nothing was useful which was not honest" (863). Though Franklin himself admits to his own occasions of dishonesty, he spends many more pages discussing his "means of improvement . . . and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection" (911, 912). He extends his own endeavors to the community through his endeavors for a public library and even the organization of the city:

Our city, tho' laid out with a beautiful regularity, the streets large, straight, and crossing each other at right angles, had the disgrace of suffering those streets to remain long unpaved. . . . I was at length instrumental in getting the street paved with stone between the market and the bricked foot pavement was on each side next the houses .(921)

However, the limits of the relationship of exceptionalism to the Dream do not end at the notion of advancement. Patrick Deneen, in his article "American exceptionalism: Is it Real, is it Good?" writes that the notion of exceptionalism extends to the idea that America is "blessed" and "on a mission" and,

significantly, that it is “born generally of a theological view” (29-30). The import of Franklin’s account is its promotion of exceptionalism by *design*. The term “design” refers to David Minter’s concept of interpreted design. He uses Franklin’s autobiography as an example of his notion of a “man of design” who, by creating a framework or structure, can provide his own means for attaining the American Dream. Franklin’s autobiography provides support for the idea that the American Dream holds in it a concept of structure; Franklin articulates the notion that one can create a map or a framework for achieving success and that he is in such control of his destiny that he will eventually attain an ideal success if he is measured enough (Minter 10, 78). The notion of grand design, of course, calls attention to the idea of America as the “City on a Hill,” on a mission motivated by divine inspiration—enter Manifest Destiny.

Form of the Pages							
Temperance.							
<i>Eat not to Dulness</i> <i>Drink not to Elevation</i>							
	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
T							
S	••	•		•		•	
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H							

**Figure 1 "Temperance"** Source: *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Vol A. "Franklin *The Autobiography*." 2009. Wadsworth. 861-923. Print.

- i. Franklin charts out the performance of each of the virtues he defines as important to achieving moral perfection.

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny is inherently religious in that it suggests a calling toward exceptionalism for America as a whole. In *A Modell of Christian Charity*, John Winthrop writes some of the founding notions of American ethos. As Nicholas Rombes writes in his head-note to the text of Winthrop's sermon as it is published in the *Heath Anthology of Early American Literature*, "As governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for twelve of the nineteen years during which he lived there, Winthrop was integral in influencing—and recording—the social, political, and religious growth of the colony (332). Manifest Destiny becomes distinct from the American Dream when it "is approached only as an overt political doctrine limited to land expansion" (Coles 405). In this limited sense, the term and its close relative, American exceptionalism, are perhaps simply a "narrative useful for justifying war," but when taken as "themes of America's civil religious repertoire . . . the narratives, sacred symbols, and ideals . . . undergird a country's self-definition, explain why and how a society came to be, [and] justify why its members do what they do" (403). Not coined until 1845, the religious notion of America as worthy of "praise and glory," as Winthrop writes, is at work early in the construction of American self-definition. Manifest Destiny as a justification for war got its start early in our history with the Puritan ancestors who, believing they were on a mission ordained by God, "were no worse than their contemporaries," the British and Spaniards who "enslaved natives . . . and sold disease-ridden blankets to Indians" (Cullen 13). The task of self-definition was not a simple one. "On the one hand, the Puritans believed and acted as if a

person could make a difference in making the world a better place—indeed, had an obligation to do so. On the other, they believed they were powerless to do anything but follow the dictates of God’s inscrutable will” (19). Rombes also identifies the “struggle to reconcile God, commerce, and individualism” found in Winthrop’s writings (332). This struggle is quite revealing, since the American Dream, in its mixed motives of consumerism and idealism, embodies a paradox which Americans still wrestle with.

## *AMERICAN DREAM POLITICS AND MARXIST ECONOMICS*

For all of its ideals, the American Dream has a long history as an economic concept. While it originated during the Great Depression, even earlier, returning to Smith's promotional tracts, we notice that as Amy Winans discusses John Smith's writings in her article which serves as the head-note to his texts in the *Heath* anthology, she writes that Smith "proffered the hope that through hard work and enterprise his readers too could realize the American dream" (273). Although Smith obviously did not use the phrase himself, Winans ascribes the American Dream to the promises that Smith makes to potential settlers. Winans's application of the Dream characterizes Smith's writings as America's earliest capitalist myth, founded purely on economic pursuits: "Unlike the Puritan settlements that were later established in Massachusetts, the goals of the Jamestown colony were primarily commercial rather than religious from the outset" (274).

In his text, *Prisoners of the American Dream* Mike Davis expands on "the classical question of 'why is there no socialism in America?'" (viii). He, like many others, writes the Dream far less favorably when considering it from an economic standpoint. Even in works of literature like Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, the Dream is largely critiqued as an illusion which preys on Americans who chase an unattainable goal like running on a treadmill.

**American Dream Impossible for Most?** Do you agree or disagree: The American Dream has become impossible for most people to achieve?

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not sure (%)	<i>N</i>
Time/CNN/Yankelovich 1/11–12/1995	57	40	3	1,000
Time/CNN/Yankelovich 1/17–18/1996	63	34	3	800
Time/CNN/Yankelovich 1/8–9/1997	55	41	4	1,015
Time/CNN/Yankelovich 1/14–15/1998	51	45	4	1,020
Time/CNN/Harris 1/15–16/2003	50	47	3	1,010

**Table 4 “American Dream Impossible for Most?” Source:** Hanson, Sandra L. and John Zogby. “The Polls—Trends Attitudes About the American Dream.” *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 74:3. 2010. 570-84. JSTOR. 6 Sept. 2012.

c. Over the years, Americans have felt that the Dream cannot be attained.

Yet the monetary component of the Dream has certainly not always been viewed as a blemish to the ideal. Many Americans view the Dream almost primarily in terms of achieving wealth or financial security. “For hundreds of years, American readers and writers have had the tireless appetites for tales of poor boys (and later, girls) who, with nothing but pluck and ingenuity, created financial empires” (60). When polled, wealth is second only to family or spiritual happiness in terms of importance to achieving the American Dream. (Hanson and Zogby 572; Ford and Maslin 13). And while the primary motive of Puritanical industry was theocratic, “earthly improvement was not necessarily antithetical to their plans. Indeed, in many cases it was an important

component of them” (Cullen 60). It was Winthrop, after all, as Rombes writes, who “had referred to England as ‘this sinful land,’ plagued by poverty, unemployment, inequitable taxation, and a bureaucratic legal system” but also points out that “Winthrop did not hesitate to note that God designated that ‘some must be rich some poor”” (*Heath* 332).

The close contest between spiritual happiness and material wealth evidenced in the above polls, though, is central to understanding the cyclical nature of the American Dream. In her book *Psychological Politics of the American Dream*, Tyson writes about how amalgamated commodity and spiritual fulfillment become in the context of the American Dream:

Most writers who use the phrase recognize that one's "stature" in America is usually judged as a function of one's socioeconomic status. The American dream is thus a dream of the commodity, and the implied premise is that one's spiritual worth and well-being are directly proportional to the value of the commodities one owns. (5)

The desire for wealth and social mobility, an essential part of the Dream, has been a constant driving force in American political culture. Brian Luskey discusses the limited opportunities afforded for upward mobility in the mercantile economy of early America, writing about the yearnings of Alexander Hamilton and Benjamin Franklin to achieve a higher station through clerkships: “Benjamin Franklin briefly entertained the hope that a clerkship with a respected merchant offered him a ‘better prospect’ for social and

economic ascent in colonial Philadelphia” (667). Moving forward in American history, Jim Cullen, though, makes the important distinction between freedom and equality in the context of upward mobility. He discusses the impact that President Lincoln had as he was “seeking to defend an understanding of American identity that was now being actively challenged” (88). That identity was, in the classical sense, the right of “the pursuit of happiness.” Cullen writes that Lincoln distinguished freedom and equality, in terms of slavery, this way:

(“Negro equality! Fudge!!” he once wrote in exasperation over the rhetoric of his enemies.) *Freedom*, he repeatedly asserted, was not the same thing as *equality*. “Certainly the negro is not our equal in color—perhaps not in many other respects; still, in the right to put into his mouth the bread his own hands have earned, he is the equal of every other man, white or black” (88).

Equality, it seems had never been guaranteed in America. Instead, it was only the freedom of opportunity which had been promised, an important distinction in terms of the American Dream.

*Do you think the United States benefits from having a class of rich people, or not?*

	Yes, benefits	No, does not benefit	No opinion
	%	%	%
Republicans	80	17	3
Independents	59	37	4
Democrats	52	46	2

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**Table 5 “Do you think the United States Benefits from having a Class of Rich People, or Not?”** Source: Newport, Frank. “Americans Like Having a Rich Class, as They Did 22 Years Ago.” 11 May 2012 *Gallup Economy*. Web. 27 January 2013.

d. This poll finds that not only is economic equality not seen as a guarantee as part of the American Dream, but also that having a rich class “in society who have a lot more income and wealth than most of the rest” is actually beneficial. Additionally, in the same study, the survey found that “the American Dream is alive and well in the minds of young Americans, almost half of whom think it is at least somewhat likely that they will be rich some day.” Interestingly, the belief in the American Dream as obtaining wealth was also the aspiration of 8% of those over 65.

As significant as the opportunity for success has been throughout American history, an economy which fosters equal opportunity also encourages failure. The theme of success and failure has been a constant since “the writings of Franklin and others, [which] promised those who worked hard and lived virtuously that they could make their own success. Late-eighteenth and early-

nineteenth-century economic expansion created a competitive and uncertain urban landscape . . . . as they attempted to succeed in the boom-and-bust economy” (668).

### ***Understanding the Dream Through the Boom/Bust Cycle***

While the ideas that provide the bedrock of the American Dream are found in early American thought, the term American Dream did not occur until the 1930s, in the aftermath of the boom-and-bust of the Great Depression. In *The Epic of America*, James Turslow Adams embarks on an exploratory historical narrative to trace American identity throughout history. He writes an unabashed account of America's history from our founding up to what was his modernity. He took stock of what it meant to be an American and what the future held for the great nation. The realization that came out of the Depression was the importance of opportunity rather than abject wealth.

One of the striking shifts in thought to come out of the Depression occurred in economics with Keynes' *General Theory*, published in 1936. Michael Stewart writes that Keynes “felt particularly strongly about the misery of the 1930s, and was fiercely critical of governments for doing far too little about it; he was convinced that this problem—indeed most problems—could be solved by thinking clearly and acting firmly” (13). The significance of Keynes' writing during the Great Depression was, as Stewart writes, that Keynes was less concerned with the nature of the boom/bust cycle, but with the cause of the lasting severity of the Great Depression (72). For the context of the

American Dream, though, the most important determination that Keynes made was the significance of consumption to the economic ebb and flow of the capitalist economy. Keynes' findings that individual and entrepreneurial consumption and investment were the driving force behind a successful (or failing) economy, Stewart writes, meant that Keynes' assertion was that "it is the job of the government to raise the level of output and incomes further, by getting businessmen to invest more, or families to consume more. . ." (105).

Renewed faith in ideals is the side of the dream that disrupts the Marxist progression toward proletariat revolution in times of depression: "the Dream also served as a powerful vehicle for blaming those who did not succeed and for distracting those who might otherwise have sought structural changes by seducing them into thinking they weren't really necessary" (Cullen 101). Lured by those who had promised great rewards for minimal effort (investing in stock on borrowed money), there is a great deal of psychology to understanding the boom of the 1920s. In his book *The Great Crash 1929*, John Galbraith offers a psychological explanation: "the vested interest in euphoria [that] leads men and women, individuals and institutions to believe that all will be better, that they are meant to be richer and to dismiss as intellectually deficient what is in conflict with that conviction" (qtd. in White 68). It seems that the conflict should have been apparent, especially since the investments were made with easily obtained loans which were "a key element in generating the mania. . . . A buyer need only to provide a fraction of the required funds, borrow the rest and enjoy the full capital gain less the interest on the borrowed funds" (74). The

attraction to easy wealth, unfortunately, is embedded in American history if we recall again the tracts of John Smith, who was "selling" the idea of settling an American colony to potential settlers by painting America as an Edenic garden, available to all who came. They could reap unfathomable reward for little effort. Easily won prosperity, though, was not the environment of the early Jamestown colony, and Smith enforced the rule that "he who does not work shall not eat" in order to ensure the survival of the colony (Heath 275). Just as emotional investment was a significant contribution to the 1920s boom, it was equally significant contribution to the bust as "the demise of the bull market was an endogenous collapse of expectations . . . the downturn in the business cycle, made more severe by tight credit, prompted a revision of expectations" (White 79). This revision of expectations, though, is what Marxist critics of the Dream like Davis see as the dark side to the ideal.

In *Rules for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky repeatedly emphasizes the lack of "identification" among Americans with communistic or socialistic movements. Apathy, he argues, is the state in which "people resign themselves to a rationalization: it's that kind of world, it's a crumby world, we didn't ask to come into it but we are stuck with it and all we can do is hope that something happens somewhere, somehow, sometime" (119). But, as the Gallup poll above shows, Americans continue to believe that a rich class is good for America. This is perhaps because a major part of the American Dream is the aspiration to be a part of that class. If it is impossible to become a part of that class, then the goal to aspire for will be gone.

*All in all, if you had your choice, would you want to be rich, or not?*

Asked of those who do not consider themselves rich

	<b>Yes, would want to be rich</b>	<b>No, would not want to be rich</b>	<b>No opinion</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Republicans	64	35	2
Independents	63	35	1
Democrats	64	35	1
18 to 29	63	35	2
30 to 49	72	27	*
50 to 64	62	36	2
65+	50	48	2
East	73	24	3
Midwest	64	35	1
South	57	43	*
West	63	36	1

\* Less than 0.5%

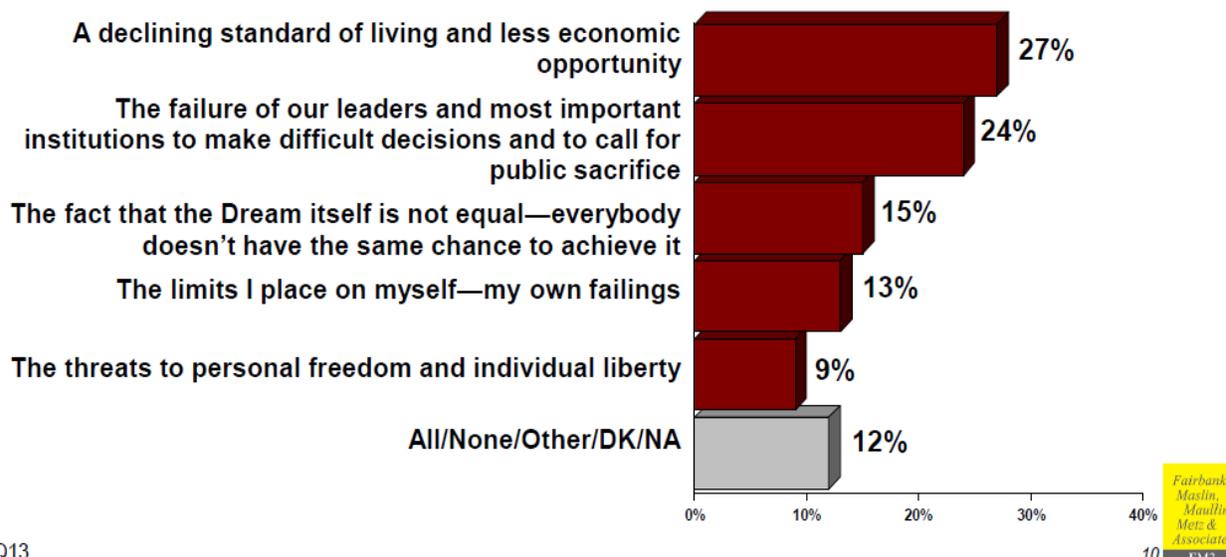
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**Table 6 “All in all, if you had your choice, would you want to be rich or not?”** Source: Newport, Frank. “Americans Like Having a Rich Class, as They Did 22 Years Ago.” 11 May 2012 *Gallup Economy*. Web. 27 January 2013.

Interestingly, perceived lack of opportunity can be seen as an obstacle to the American Dream, as can the lack of equality.

Which one of the following do you think most stands in the way of you achieving the American Dream?



This perception is interesting because it seems contrary to the construction we've developed so far. In the classical sense, "the fact that the Dream itself is not equal" should not be seen as an obstacle: "Locke made it clear that the equality he endorsed was not "equality of all sorts. . ." yet, in a particularly American fashion, "the single concept of "property," by which Locke meant "life, liberty, and estate. . . . Thomas Jefferson changed Locke's formula to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Dolbear 7). Even sub-textually, the material and incorporeal are conflated so that "economic opportunity" becomes synonymous with "the pursuit of happiness" such that it is not *economic* equality which motivates renewed faith in the American Dream, but equality of *opportunity*.

The relationship of economics to the psychology of the Dream is revealed at the intersection of "the pursuit of happiness" and the pursuit of economic

opportunity. The Marxist term for this intersection is *commodification*, which Dobie defines as “the attitude of valuing things not for their utility but for their power to impress others” (99). Tyson elaborates on the notion of commodification in the larger context of commodity psychology and argues that “[t]he American dream is thus a dream of commodity, and the implied premise is that one’s spiritual worth and well-being are directly proportional to the value of the commodities one owns” (5).

### *MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE DREAM*

In attempting to define or analyze the concept of the American dream, finding a clear discursive locus is particularly difficult because the concept does not fit neatly with any one discipline. One solution is to explore the areas of overlap between literature and politics. By exploring the meeting places of literary expression and political expression, traces of national identity or ideology can be found at the intersection of the two disciplines, as Jason Dittmer observes that,

[I]nstitutionalized regions, states are best understood as an ongoing process of creating and maintaining territorial practices and ideologies. . . . One way in which the symbolic meaning associated with these boundaries materializes is through the production and consumption of popular culture, which leads to the internationalization of the mythic and symbolic of national identities. (626)

Louis Tyson also makes a case for the significance of literature to understanding political phenomena, particularly from a Marxist perspective, as she applies Louis Althusser's theory that "in order for any social system to survive, its conditions of production must be reproduced in the individual psyche" (1). Althusser's theory was, "[i]n short, [that] literature and art can affect society, even lead it to revolution (Dobie 88). Tyson argues the case for literature as an important tool for the analysis of the psychology of the American Dream since "literature is a repository of both a society's ideologies and its psychological conflicts, it has the capacity to reveal aspects of a culture's collective psyche, an apprehension of how ideological investments reveal the nature of individuals' psychological relationship to their world" (1).

### ***The Dream in Literature: A Marxist Psychoanalytic Critique***

Perhaps more than any other novel, the *Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald is the work of fiction most closely associated with the American Dream. With the American Dream as a central theme of his work, Fitzgerald "has come to be associated with this concept of the American dream more so than any other writer of the twentieth century" (Pearson 638). In the novel, the story of Jay Gatz is told in retrospect by a removed narrator, Nick Carraway. Gatz, in the ultimate display of the self-made man, "invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was always faithful to the end" (99). He, too, is on a sacred mission, believing, according to Nick, himself to be "a son of God . . . he must be about

His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" which we come to identify as the American Dream, aka Daisy (99).

The story chronicles Gatsby's pursuit of his lost love, Daisy Buchannan. Gatsby believes that by re-inventing himself and becoming a man of wealth and status, he can win her back. We find that Daisy is the motive for Gatsby's success and his metaphor for the Dream: "he was consumed with wonder at her presence. He had been full of the idea so long, dreamed of it right through to the end, waited with his teeth set, so to speak, at an inconceivable pitch of intensity" and too, for his failure to capture her/it: "Now, in the reaction, he was running down like an over-wound clock" (93).

*Gatsby* is particularly pertinent to understanding the American Dream in that it places particular emphasis on class warfare and, especially, the nostalgic facet of the Dream: "F. Scott Fitzgerald's best-known novel has elicited a critical response that reveals Americans' desire to sustain their nostalgia for an idealized America—and an idealized American ideology—as an absolute positive value of pristine origin" (Tyson 40). *Gatsby* articulates this concept of nostalgia as a "continuous undercurrent of American life, as compelling perhaps for the masses of people as any visionary glimpses of progress" (Dudden 517).

While it is true that those last, oft quoted lines of *The Great Gatsby* suggest that there is hope for continued progress encapsulated in the Dream, “borne back ceaselessly into the past;” it is also true that the novel presents the dark side of the American Dream. After all, the fact that the book takes a nostalgic perspective suggests that then, as perhaps now, the Dream is fundamentally flawed as it has grown away from the more fundamental ideals which those first dreamers first imbued in it. Tyson writes that “*The Great Gatsby* does not portray the American dream as an absolute positive value of pristine origin that somehow gets corrupted. Rather, because it is a commodity—in this case, a sign invested with the desire for consumption as the principle mode of production—the American dream itself is a source of corruption” (41).

The bitter view of the American Dream as Fitzgerald writes it is not unfounded. As Stewart writes, in the 1930s “Capitalists shivered; the more cold-blooded Marxist rubbed their hands” (9). In the novel, Fitzgerald structures a society based upon the Marxist scheme of class warfare and commodification—holding that elusive symbol of status as its core. However, *The Great Gatsby* is not entirely critical of the Dream, in fact, it supports it in many ways. Tyson points out that

[o]perating the against *The Great Gatsby*’s powerful critique of commodity psychology is the novel’s subtle reinforcement of the commodity’s seductive appeal. This countermovement operates on two levels. First, because Nick is seduced by the dream Gatsby represents for him, his narrative seduces

many readers into collusion with Gatsby's desire. Second, the language used to describe the physical setting of this world of wealth makes it attractive despite people like the Buchanans who populate it. (66-7)

In keeping with the coming-to-terms soul searching of American values that occurred during the Depression, Fitzgerald set out, in *Gatsby*, "to explore America's past, to recover some idea of ourselves as a people, to look to the starting place and 'find out what the thing was' that was America" (Rohrkemper 153). Those infamous closing lines suggest that Fitzgerald had made his determination: he reframes the dream in terms of the early ideals brought over by those early "Dutch sailors" rather than as the Meyer Wolfesheim-esque version, commodified and corrupted. Tyson writes that "while *The Great Gatsby* offers a significant critique of the American dream's commodified ideology, it also repackages and markets the dream anew" (62).

Renato Rosaldo would refer to this repackaging of the American Dream as "Imperialist Nostalgia." This work, like the closing lines of Fitzgerald's novel, is a sociological study that links the colonial and early periods of American politics and literature to the modern. Rosaldo supports the notion that where Americans find fault or failure in the American Dream, psychological phenomena such as imperialist nostalgia, which Rosaldo defines as "nostalgia for the colonized culture as it was 'traditionally' . . . a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves transformed. Imperialist nostalgia thus revolves around a

paradox . . .” (107-08). That paradox is, in terms of the American Dream, the cyclical nature of the Dream in which we criticize it (as Fitzgerald and Miller do, for example) in times of economic crisis, while longing for the same “tradition,” in this case consumerism and capitalism, which created the situation in the first place. The repackaging of the American Dream is the key to its importance as it causes Americans to question, evaluate, and reshape our fundamental values.

A text, which operates as an evaluation of American values, in a more unforgiving critique of the American Dream, is Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Like Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby*, Miller’s play also focuses on the American Dream, as Miller writes in the opening lines that “[a]n air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality” (11). The play provides fodder for analysis of the psychological underpinnings of the Dream as expressed through Willy’s psychological deterioration. It is Willy’s pursuit of the commodified ideal as articulated by Ben, for example, in his rags to riches story that Willy frequently revisits:

Ben: “Why, boys when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. *He laughs.* And by God I was rich.

Willy, *to the boys*: “You see what I been talking about? The greatest things can happen!” (48).

One might complete Willy's interjection with ". . . if only you believe in the Dream." As Lois Tyson points out, "it is in the American dream--specifically, in its relation to commodity psychology--that the play's psychological and political strands are inextricably entwined" (64). Like Meyer Wolfesheim, and even Gatsby himself in *The Great Gatsby*, we get the feeling that Ben's untold exploits in the jungle are less than honest. Even so, inspired by Ben's success, Willy believes that through his ingenuity and entrepreneurship as a salesman, he will be able to achieve the American Dream. *Death of a Salesman*, though set in 1949, is reminiscent of the boom and crash of the Great Depression, as Willy remembers his own success in the late 1920s

Willy: "I was thinking of the Chevy. *Slight pause*. Nineteen twenty-eight . . . when I had that red Chevy— *Breaks off*. That funny? I coulda sworn I was driving that Chevy today." (19)

The criticism of values, though, occurs in Willy's tragic failure. He laments the failure of his sons, who, uneducated and unambitious, fail to find their own wealth and prosperity, and the loss of natural beauty

LINDA: "We should've bought the land next door.

WILLY: "The Street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the back yard. . . . Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them?" (17).

There is also the incident of the refrigerator, a telling sign that Willy is also caught up in an endless pursuit of commodity as he argues with his wife, Linda, that they would not be paying repairs, if only they had “bought a well-advertised machine” like a General Electric refrigerator, lamenting “Whoever heard of a Hastings refrigerator?” (73). Of course, Willy is caught up in the ultimate capitalist system of planned obsolescence.

However, the play is not entirely a criticism of the American Dream. Rather, it is a criticism of the *commodity* or material side of the Dream, while advocating the spiritual. Arthur Miller writes of his own play that while he is criticizing the consumerism of the Dream, the health of American society depends upon a renewal of the spiritual system which also structures it:

Equally, the fact that Willy’s law—the belief, in other words, which administers guilt to him—is not a civilizing statute whose destruction menaces us all; it is rather, a deeply believed and deeply suspect “good” which, when questioned as to its value, as it is in this play, serves more to raise our anxieties than to reassure us of the existence of an unseen but humane metaphysical system in the world. My attempt in the play was to counter this anxiety with an opposing system which, so to speak, is in a race for Willy’s faith, and it is the system of love which is opposite the law of success. (169)

Miller also notes that his construction is not entirely a Marxist one: “I do not believe that any work of art can help but be diminished by its adherence at any

cost to a political program . . . there is no political program . . . which can encompass the complexities of real life. The most decent man in *Death of a Salesman* is a capitalist (Charley), whose aims are not different from Willy Loman's (170).

To underscore the spiritual emphasis, Miller writes that what it was that he saw as opposite the law of success was "love" (170). Willy does not enjoy the love of his sons, as their mother constantly reminds them how repugnant she finds it that they have turned their backs on him (60). In his Marxist (though he denies Marxism as a motivator for the play) critique of the Dream Miller, too, is "repackaging" the American Dream to emphasize the values of family, love, nature, hard work, education—all the values which undergird the Dream, but sometimes become obscured by the fervent pursuit of commodity. Thus, again, where the Marxist progression fails, a restructuring of the Dream which looks back with nostalgia to those earlier, better days, as Willy constantly does, revives the "race for faith," as Miller calls it.

*I would like to use as a subject from which to speak tonight, the American Dream . . . because America is essentially a dream, a dream yet unfulfilled. The substance of the dream is expressed in some very familiar words found in the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This is a dream.*

*—Martin Luther King Jr., giving a speech at Drew University in New Jersey.*

## CONCLUSION

The American Dream has been exhaustively evoked, but seldom examined. Generally, as Jim Cullen observed, much of the literature to do with the American dream does not try to define it. The notion of the American dream endures because of its synthesis of constructs and its foundation on the “power of belief” in the face of conflicting material reality (Weinstein 25). Cullen also strikes at the heart of the importance that detailed study holds for the Dream, not only as it is expressed through literature, but also as it is seen in our social structure. He argues that to analyze what the American dream truly means and how it functions is to “transform the Dream from a passive token of national identity to a powerful instrument of national reform and revitalization” (189). To be clear, this research is not meant to be taken as a Marxist

argument. While it employs the scheme of Marxism, using critiques from many authors using that same perspective, it used to analyze the Dream based on how the Dream fits with the Marxist model and to show that the Dream's promise and survival is contingent upon continually revisiting the values of our founders. The goal of this research has been a humble attempt to contribute to the developing discourse in order that it may help to define the American Dream as a functioning tool of analysis in our understanding of American politics.

The American Dream, as we have seen, is a deep and complex notion that is hard to explain or codify, most obviously because there is little comparison. Other nations do not have an archetype to look to in the way that Americans do. The American Dream is important because it continually keeps us in check. Pursuit of the Dream keeps consumerism alive—the sun and water needed for capitalism to survive. At the same time, Marxists will argue that this fanatical consumption of the Dream itself is dangerous, and they are right. Whenever we find ourselves in the slump of recession/depression, though, and the “more cold-blooded Marxists,” as Michael Stewart called them, watch in baited anticipation for the system to fail, inevitably, that nostalgic longing for the ideals of those first “Dutch sailors” as Fitzgerald writes, or simply of love, as Miller writes, brings America to an examination of its conscience. This “repackaging” and examination of our national self is hugely important to progress. Martin Luther King used this aspect of the Dream to champion his cause for civil rights. King argued that America needed to rethink

the values that we held dear, and to consider that “human happiness” is truly the most important value America stands for.

Perhaps this is why, in the polls shown here, such as the Zogby poll, Americans tend to respond that while Material and Spiritual happiness are a part of the American Dream, the Spiritual fulfillment is most important. This is why Gatsby and Willy are tragic figures, fated to death at the close of each novel (Gatsby is shot while lounging in his pool, which he enjoys for the first time. Willy, disillusioned by his inability to attain his Dream, commits suicide, perhaps in an attempt to provide his family with some glimpse of material security in the form of his life insurance.): each was invested in the contradiction that the American Dream meant spiritual happiness could only be found through the corporeal. As long as the contradictions within the American Dream, aka American national identity, are addressed and scrutinized, as Martin Luther King Jr. did with segregation, in an effort not to undermine the Dream, but to improve upon it, then it will survive as a fundamental pillar of American identity.

### ***Future Implications for the Study of the American Dream***

Some indications of the increased political significance of the American Dream can perhaps be found in Elvin Lim’s study, “Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric: An Analysis of Rhetoric from George Washington to Bill Clinton.” Presidential addresses are important in helping the American psyche achieve a sense of unity and identity. The President speaks not to one interest group or

constituency, but to the nation as a whole. As Elvin Lim points out in his study of the “rhetorical presidency” model of presidential politics, “the challenges of modernity have motivated twentieth-(and twenty-first-) century presidents to reach even more energetically for the abstract” (335). As our politics have become more and more complex, as evidenced in the notion of the Dream, it is perhaps logical to expect modern presidents who are appealing to broad and complex audiences to gravitate toward all encompassing abstractions. Lim notices the increase in the use of the “word *dream* appears barely fourteen times in the 220 speeches before 1964; and it has appeared one hundred times in the 44 speeches since” (335). This trend is interesting, not least because it suggests the importance of the Dream in tapping at the essence of our complex set of beliefs.

A more tragic story, which has brought the American Dream to the forefront of political discourse, came in 2008 when the lucrative exploits of investment manager Bernard Madoff were found to be fraudulent (Robert n.p.). A modern day Gatsby story, the Occupy Wall Street movement was spawned in 2011 from the outrage which exploded over the 2008 financial collapse and stories like that of Mr. Madoff. In their own words, the movement sought “to fight back against the richest 1% of people that are writing the rules of an unfair global economy that is foreclosing on our future” (n.p.) The keyword here is, perhaps, future. Cast on one the one hand as a group fueled only by a sense of entitlement, and on the other as a group which was trailblazing its way to economic equality, the group eventually failed, arguably because it did not have

a message that truly resonated with people (to any lasting effect) because it was rooted in a sense of entitlement, contrary to the conviction that the Dream is won through hard work.

**Success Determined by Forces Outside of Our Control.** *Pew:* Please tell me whether you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or completely disagree with the following statements . . . Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside of our control.

	Completely agree (%)	Mostly agree (%)	Mostly disagree (%)	Completely disagree (%)	Don't know/Refused (%)	N
7/14–8/5/2003	11	19	35	32	3	2,528
12/12/2006–1/9/2007	10	24	39	23	4	2,007
4/23–5/6/2007	7	26	41	23	3	2,026
1/24–2/19/2008	7	29	44	17	3	2,413

**Table 7 “Success Determined by Forces Outside of Our Control.”** Source: Hanson, Sandra L. and John Zogby.

“The Polls—Trends Attitudes About the American Dream.” *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 74:3. 2010. 570-84. JSTOR. 6 Sept. 2012.

e. The majority of respondents, to some degree, disagreed that one’s success is determined by uncontrollable outside forces, reinforcing the idea that the Dream is achieved through an individual’s own effort.

The movement did work on some level, though, as it made its mark in some 1,500 cities throughout the world. Hanson and Zogby observed, too, that of those polled from 1985-2006, a majority, 63-70%, of those surveyed responded that hard work is the most important means of achieving success (573). While Hanson and Zogby, in their data from public opinion polls from 2001 and

2004, reported that a majority of those surveyed responded that spiritual fulfillment was the ultimate goal of the American dream, 53% in 2001 and 48% in 2004, still 35-37% responded that the American dream means material success (572). Eventually, the Occupy movement failed, perhaps due to the triumph of the American Dream—the notion that true success, born of hard work, is found in ideals and spiritual happiness rather than the frantic pursuit of commodity, which, as we see through characters like Willy Loman and Jay Gatz, are doomed to tragic failure.

The importance of the American Dream is that it acts as a guide against this type of tragic failure. The Dream provides a place of safe-keeping for Americans to store and revisit our core values. President Lincoln remarked that his aim was not for “Negro equality” but for freedom, a freedom to pursue happiness however we define it. Thus, the measure of the American Dream will be a measure of American happiness, or as the Xavier center remarks, a study of “true aspiration.” Luke S. H. Wright predicted the death of the American Dream in 2009. He felt this way because “it is now the fall of 2009 rather than the summer of 2008 and hope is rapidly turning to dust—or rather to anger and envy” (199). President Obama relied heavily on abstractions in his 2008 campaign, using “Hope and Change” to signify his mission. However, like our tragic literary figures, Americans’ hope has vanished and change has given way to stagnation. Like those returning to the Dream before us, Lim writes that “[w]e confused the American Dream with simple accumulation” (199). He writes of the shock that has come with the loss of “as much prestige and status as we

have in the past few years. You can't really register the fact that you're no longer a citizen of a thriving first-world democracy" (199). With the rise of the rhetorical presidency and the increasing complexities of American values, it will become increasingly important to know what Americans aspire for and, most importantly, what they find contrary to the achievement of those aspirations.

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