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Fall of the Idea of American Dream in the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald

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Abstract: The concept of the American Dream emerged in the 1600s, prior to the discovery of America, during a period characterized by new aspirations and ambitions for the uncharted territories. This ideology embodies fundamental principles such as independence, equal opportunities, uniqueness, and upward mobility, which are deeply ingrained. Within the American Dream, it is anticipated that every American citizen will achieve success through diligent effort. This vision encompasses a life of contentment and accomplishment for all individuals. Initially, the American Dream emphasized labor and spiritual autonomy; however, it has since evolved to emphasize achievement and acknowledgement. Presently, the American society reflects the ideals of this enduring dream.

Keywords: American Society, Religious Freedom, Spiritual Independence, Success & Recognition.

I. INTRODUCTION

The foundation of America was rooted in the principles of liberty, ensuring equal opportunities for every individual. It was hailed as the "Land of Opportunity," a place where limitless possibilities existed. It was from these principles that the concept of the "American Dream" took shape. Nevertheless, critics argue that realizing this dream is unattainable due to societal disparities based on caste, culture, and ethnic origins. The philosophy, ideas, and beliefs that define America find expression and embodiment in the notion of the American Dream. Despite its familiarity, a brief discussion and introduction are necessary for a comprehensive understanding of this term.

Renowned scholar P. Mueller extensively explored the American Dream in his book "Star Trek and the American Dream." He asserts that the dream comprises narratives of people's success and portraits of exemplary figures who embody the ideals of both the American Dream and humanity. Mueller further elucidates that the term "American Dream" was first coined by J. T. Adams in 1931. Adams identified three fundamental pillars that underpin the dream.

The first pillar revolves around the mythical aspect, envisioning society as a utopia that existed in ancient times prior to its discovery. The second pillar entails the religious aspect, imagining society as a Puritan haven established upon a metaphorical hill. The third and most significant aspect is the political foundation, conceptualizing a society born out of the announcement of independence and the drafting of the constitution. Among these three aspects, the political aspect holds greater prominence, and numerous critics have expounded upon the dream within this context. Martin Luther King also discussed this aspect in the following manner.

"It [the American Dream] is found in those majestic words of the Declaration of Independence, words lifted to cosmic proportions: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by God, Creator, with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. This is a dream. It's a great dream."

J. Bickford, in his book "The American Dream: Our Heritage of Hope," supports this viewpoint as well. He provides numerous examples of past instances where the American Dream was realized. Bickford argues that the essence of the American Dream permeates the fabric of the nation, and the proclamation of independence has further fortified this ideal. He emphasizes that it was the ancestors who risked their lives and fought for the freedom of their country, laying the foundation for the American Dream.

In the realm of film, the American dream finds explicit or implicit representation on the theater screens. Hollywood, known as the largest film production hub not just in America but globally, sets standards that are followed by other film industries worldwide. Hollywood often depicts the American Dream in its political context, albeit with inconsistencies in its portrayal. Nevertheless, themes of life, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness prevail in these movies. The representation of the American Dream in films takes various forms without a consistent connection between them. While the presentation of America appears magnificent and pleasing, the depictions of this dream in films tend to be satirical, critical of the USA and American society.

This situation raises the question of how the American Dream is presented in films. The universal theme of the American Dream, as described by Müller, resembles the "rags to riches" story. Müller's description and fundamental definition of the American Dream can be considered essential, given its straightforwardness, which appeals to filmmakers. He incorporates key elements such as the "explicit future," "the frontier," the "melting pot," and the crucial element of a "country of achievement," although Müller does not explicitly mention it, it is inherently linked to the American Dream. Müller represents this philosophy not only in films but also in long television serials like the Star Trek channel, which include elements such as "boldly going" and "the final frontier." However, there is a disparity between the representation in books and films, making the task of interpretation challenging.

Presenting the American Dream through films seems reasonable, as this type of representation is clear, original, and allows for multiple examples. Filmmakers are highly influenced by the straightforwardness and clarity of plots, particularly when they involve the timeless story of going from rags to riches, which strongly appeals to audiences. Viewers experience a sense of satisfaction and find the journey from adversity to success captivating.

Released in 1920, the film "Pretty Woman" emerged as a noteworthy Hollywood production, showcasing the classic tale of an individual rising from destitution to prosperity. This cinematic creation exemplifies the notion of pursuing dreams. The story revolves around a woman who works as a prostitute and unexpectedly finds love with a wealthy businessman. Through their marriage, she transcends into high society, assuming the role of a princess, akin to a knight's fair maiden. Julia Roberts impeccably portrayed this central character in the film. "Pretty Woman" can be perceived as a reimagined rendition of the age-old fairy tale theme of a pauper transformed into a prince, albeit with a gender switch. The underlying message conveyed by the movie underscores the idea that America resembles a magical realm, where dreams can be realized. It highlights the notion that one's background is inconsequential; instead, it is one's abilities and actions that determine their path to success.

As Archibald Macleish states the American Dream has been interpreted many different ways and is different for everyone: "There are those, I know, who will say that the liberation of humanity, the freedom of man and mind, is nothing but a dream. They are right. It is the American dream." Since the inception of America, the notion of the American Dream has been intricately intertwined with the country's society, economy, politics, and culture. Although the term "American Dream" suggests a focus on the aspirations within America, its societal principles also encompass those individuals who were previously outside its borders. The broader perception and manifestation of the American Dream have long captivated the imagination of Western societies. In his insightful analysis, Jim Cullen delves into the concept of the American Dream, examining its intricacies, and identifies five examples that illustrate its presence in the everyday lives of Americans. These five examples are "The Dream of good life and upward mobility, The values expressed in the Declaration of Independence (among which is the 'pursuit of

happiness'), The Dream of equality, The Dream of home ownership and the Dream of moving to the coast (starting with the Gold Rush) as a metaphor for a utopian western location far from the corrupted eastern cities."

Here the author says that: "The American Dream has long since moved beyond the relatively musty domain of print culture into the incandescent glow of the mass media, where it is enshrined as our national motto. Jubilant athletes declaim it following American Dreams." Aspiring politicians are increasingly leveraging the American Dream as a foundation for their candidacy, aiming to capitalize on its resonance with the public. Simultaneously, earnest businessmen are highlighting the pursuit of the American Dream as a central objective of their entrepreneurial endeavors. Consequently, the term "American Dream" is gaining popularity and becoming both an influential and immediate aspect of American society, sometimes overshadowing other important concepts such as democracy, the constitution, and even the idea of America itself.

The definition of the American Dream is complex as it is very hard to define American Dream in a line and the expression of the term has been also become more comprehensive throughout the past. The *Electronic Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* explains the concept as: "An American social ideal that stresses egalitarianism and especially material prosperity." Another dictionary, *Electronic Word Web Dictionary*, defines the term as, "the widespread aspiration of Americans to live better than their parents did." The American Heritage Dictionary, which is also considered one of the prominent dictionaries, defines it as, "an American ideal of a happy and successful life to which all may aspire, which in situations of national distress represents a reaffirmation of traditional American hopes." Compton encyclopedia also provides a very questioning definition of American Dream under the entry for 'United States':

The United States has long symbolized freedom, encompassing the rights to worship according to one's beliefs, pursue a suitable occupation based on skills and interests, and be treated equally under the law. It embodies the ideals of conquering frontiers, overcoming challenges, advancing scientific and medical breakthroughs, and even venturing into space exploration. The American Dream represents the belief in progress, where personal lives and political, social, and economic institutions can improve through hard work, fair competition, and honest endeavors. It embodies the spirit of democracy, granting individuals the right to be heard, to participate in free elections, and to aspire to a better life while actively working towards their goals.

The influence of the United States extends not only to its own society but also to the global stage, evoking both optimistic and ambivalent responses. American society exhibits a liberal disposition, allowing for the incorporation of foreign values and visions of the American Dream. Throughout its history, the United States has demonstrated a moral fervor that has shaped its actions, leading to two contrasting attitudes in its foreign policy. On one hand, America has served as a shining beacon of democracy, leading by example and inspiring the entire human race. On the other hand, American values have necessitated a commitment to fight for these ideals worldwide.

Caught between a longing for an untainted past and an aspiration for a promising future, America finds itself oscillating between feelings of alienation and reassurance. Throughout the 20th century, American presidents, such as Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan, consistently upheld the concept of the American Dream, understanding its enduring moral significance. The principles embodied by the American Dream have held paramount importance, and whenever challenges arose, the solution has always been to restore peace while preserving those principles.

The allure of the American Dream extends beyond the borders of the United States, prompting citizens of other countries to migrate in pursuit of that dream. While many authors have explored the concept of the American Dream in their works, F. Scott Fitzgerald's portrayal differs from others. Throughout his novels, Fitzgerald weaves together three prominent themes: the disillusionment surrounding the American Dream, societal observations, and the conflicts that arise within relationships. In contrast to the prevailing focus on realizing the American Dream, Fitzgerald sheds light on the darker aspects of American society.

One central idea that Fitzgerald consistently explores in his fiction is the decline or failure of the American Dream. In "The Great Gatsby," he vividly depicts this failure through the desolate landscape known as the valley of ashes. Within the novel, the character Tom engages in a relationship with Wilson, which symbolizes the erosion of societal and ethical values.

Fitzgerald's narratives shed a critical light on the notion of the American Dream, offering a perspective that challenges the prevailing optimism. He delves into the consequences and shortcomings associated with the pursuit of this ideal, inviting readers to confront the darker undercurrents beneath the surface of American society. He accepts that "once in a while he goes off on a spree and makes a fool of [himself], but [he] always comes back" (Fitzgerald 132). Tom considers it unproblematic having an affair but on the other hand he behaves abnormally and violently when he doubts on Daisy that she is engaged in a relationship with Jay Gatsby which exhibits that he don't have any societal and ethical values. Fitzgerald's characters in his novels often exhibit an insatiable longing for wealth, serving as a representation of the failure of the American Dream. For instance, Gatsby, a relatively unknown individual from North Dakota prior to his involvement in World War I, becomes consumed by his pursuit of impressing Daisy, a woman belonging to the old money social class. In his desperation to win her over, Gatsby immerses himself in illicit activities to amass great wealth. However, his initial desire for financial success spirals into an uncontrollable obsession, ultimately leading to his downfall.

In his second novel, "This Side of Paradise," Fitzgerald once again delves into the theme of the American Dream's failure through the character of Amory Blaine. Amory's early education at a boarding school and subsequent enrollment at Princeton College reflect his belief that "his nearest approach to success [is] through conformity" (Fitzgerald 110). He embraces activities and pursuits deemed popular by others, such as joining the football team. Additionally, Amory diligently works to secure a respectable job at an advertising agency, aiming to prove his worthiness to marry his girlfriend, Rosalind. Despite living a lifestyle typical of the average person, Amory finds it unsatisfying. He realizes that the path to success lies within himself and engages in numerous discussions on this matter with Burne Holiday.

Fitzgerald explores the theme of the American Dream's failure not only in these two novels but also in his third work, "The Love of the Last Tycoon," through the character of Monroe Stahr. Monroe is a dedicated individual who can "work all through the night on a single picture" (Fitzgerald 37). His life is marked by difficulties, including health issues, unfinished home construction, and the heartbreak of his beloved leaving him to marry someone else. As the novel concludes, Monroe realizes that he has squandered his life. Despite his relentless pursuit of financial success, he comes to the realization that money holds little value. The three protagonists in these novels toil tirelessly in their quest for the American Dream, yet not one of them achieves their objective.

II. CONCLUSION

It becomes evident that the American Dream, being a dream at its core, remains elusive and unattainable in its entirety. Yet, it continues to endure within the aspirations of both native-born Americans and immigrants who seek opportunities in America, hoping to find what was lacking in their home countries. Fitzgerald's exploration of the inner worlds of his characters stems from this very notion. Through his male protagonists, he conveys the unchanging nature of the American Dream. His perspective remains cynical, portraying it as a dream for which individuals are willing to live and die, even though it remains perpetually unfulfilled.

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