



## THE EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE: A JOURNEY OF HOPE, DESIRE, AND DISILLUSIONMENT

Sunila\*

Email: [sskamboh3@gmail.com](mailto:sskamboh3@gmail.com)

Hafsa Shafique

Email: [hafsahafsa0245@gmail.com](mailto:hafsahafsa0245@gmail.com)

University of Okara, Renala Khurd, Okara, Pakistan.

Undergraduate Students, BS English (Literature and Language)

\*Corresponding Author: Sunila ([sskamboh3@gmail.com](mailto:sskamboh3@gmail.com))

### Abstract.

*The American Dream is a powerful concept in English literature that focuses on equal rights for all the people. This research paper examines how the American Dream is depicted and characterized across various works of English literature, exploring critical perspectives. The purpose of this study is to understand how the American Dream has been depicted in literature and how these portrayals mirror and respond to changes in societal values and conditions. This study involves a close and deep reading of selected literary texts from various time periods and assembles a comparative analysis to highlight changes in its representations over time. The findings indicate that earlier literature represents the American Dream as a symbol of boundless opportunity, while more recent works offer a critical view analyzing moral dilemmas of American society. These literary portraits provide thought-provoking reflections and helpful perspectives into the changing nature of these ideals. This article will provide information about different writers' perspectives, their ideas, and how they have interpreted the idea. The concept was used before 1776 and first coined as a phrase in 1931 by James Truslow Adams in his book Epic of America. In this research paper, the American Dream encompasses ideals of liberty, equality, chances, and the chasing of joy. Overall, the American Dream in English literature assists as a reflection of society's dreams, struggles, and the excessive development of the quest of happiness and success in the American context.*

**Keywords:** American Dream, English literature, liberty, opportunity, equality, societal values, literary analysis, critical perspectives

### Introduction

The American Dream represents the enduring ideal that success is attainable for all individuals through determination and sustained effort, irrespective of their origins, and it continues to serve as a powerful and recurring motif in both American culture and literature (Khan et al., 2024).

The American Dream emerged in the early 20th century as a strong cultural and national ideal in the United States. The concept of the American Dream has been a keystone of American culture and identity since the country's founding. The American Dream is an ideal representing that the United States is a land of opportunity that allows upward mobility, freedom, and equality for people of all classes who work hard and have the strong determination to succeed. The American Dream symbolizes the idea for a superior life, liberty, and success, embodying the goals of the American people. The American Dream promises that any person can achieve success through hard work and drive. It inspires characters to struggle for a better life and promises of self-made success emerging prominently in the early 20th century.

The main research goal related to the American Dream involves scoping the gap between the ideal and the reality experienced by persons in society. In spite of its enduring presence, the American Dream has become increasingly elusive for many persons. Problems like income inequality, social injustice, and political polarization have lifted up questions about the current state and importance of the American Dream. This trouble deserves investigation to understand the difficulties and complications encompassing the American Dream.



The objective of examining the American Dream is to deeply analyze the concept of its development and its effect on modern American society. In the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and John Steinbeck, the American Dream is frequently portrayed as a promised land or a land of opportunity where anyone can achieve their goals, no matter where they are from and what their background is, and can seek opportunity and achieve success through hard work, determination, and perseverance (Cullen, 2003).

This research is important as it helps us understand how today's writers and authors tackle the idea of the American Dream, revealing much about our current strides and hopes. As there is plenty of research on the American Dream, most of it focuses on historical and traditional views, so there is a need to discuss how modern literature challenges this dream, especially given current economic and social problems. The basic aim of this study is to uncover how contemporary literature associates with the American Dream. The hypothesis is that modern works present a more critical perspective, keeping in mind today's complex social and economic landscapes.

Understanding modern benefits and engagement with the American Dream will benefit scholars, students, and policymakers related to education, social welfare, and job opportunities. Readers will gain a rich understanding of today's depicted American Dream, reflecting and shaping current societal values and problems. This research helps society by promoting critical thinking, motivating positive change, and fostering empathy.

The term "American Dream" was first coined by James Truslow Adams (1931) in his book *Epic of America*, in which he defined the American Dream as follows:

Not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (Adams, 1931, p. 214)

A Statue of Liberty is a gigantic neoclassical figurine positioned on Liberty Island in New York Harbor, crafted by French sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi and constructed by Gustave Eiffel, dedicated on October 28, 1886. It is a sign of liberty, democracy, and chance. A robed female figure representing Libertas, the Roman goddess of liberty, stands as a symbol of freedom and independence. In her right hand, she holds a torch representing the light of liberty. In her left hand, she carries a tablet inscribed with the date of the American Declaration of Independence. At her feet lie broken chains and shackles, symbolizing the abolition of oppression and the triumph over enslavement.

### **Literature Review**

The literature on the American Dream includes looking into different kinds of scholarly works, historical accounts, and literary texts that examine and critique the concept (Cullen, 2003; Castronovo, 2017). This review gives a thorough and detailed overview of how the American Dream has been understood, explained, challenged, and depicted throughout history.

In its historical perspectives, early literature of the American Dream frequently focuses on its origins and evolution, such as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches stories, which highlighted the conviction in upward social mobility through hard work and determination (Cullen, 2003).

In literary criticism, key literary works that address the American Dream are examined closely for their representation of the ideal and its implications. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is often examined for its critical perspective on the American Dream, highlighting the illusion of social mobility and the corrupting influence of wealth (Castronovo, 2017, p. 12).



Sociological and economic studies examine how factors like race, gender, and education affect persons' ability to achieve the American Dream (Hochschild, 1995, p. 12).

In the mid-20th century, the American Dream was reexamined in the context of post-war America, with works like Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, which analyzed the Dream's impossible ideals for many Americans (Pells, 1985, p. 23).

In the late 20th century, diverse perspectives on the American Dream arose, including feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theory critiques. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* explores the American Dream from the view of African American women, shedding light on the intersections of race and gender in accomplishing success (McGowan, 2014, p. 12). Notable works that explore the American Dream are F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970).

Themes and critiques connected with the American Dream include materialism and consumerism as key elements frequently linked with the American Dream (Adams, 1931). In the view of Adams (1931), the American Dream is not just about having good status and good job opportunities but is something related to our own perspective and our own desire to be loved and appreciated by people. So, it can be said that this dream was not only about acquiring wealth and materialistic things. It is something beyond this concept. The basic elements of that idea were determination, hard work, liberty, equality, and equal rights for rich and poor.

### **Marxist Theory**

Marxism is a social, political, and economic theory developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the 19th century. Marxists argue that the American Dream maintains the illusion of social mobility, distracting the laborer from investigation of the nature of capitalism. Marxists highlight the class struggle between the capitalist and the laborer, investigating the interests of the ruling class. This theory also proposes that the chase of the American Dream guides to false consciousness as persons comply with societal expectations. Researchers like Lawson (2012) argue that works such as *Death of a Salesman* reveal how the Dream is a tool to sustain a class-based society.

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory critiques the concept that the Dream is available to all, arguing that it is deeply patriarchal and discriminatory. The American Dream sustains traditional gender roles, limiting women's capability and authority, restricting them to domestic areas while men pursue public success. Women face financial discrepancies, limited social mobility, and are illustrated with restricted choices, maintaining the illusion of independence. Feminist critiques identify that women's journeys are shaped by intersecting factors such as race, class, and sexuality, as exemplified in works such as *The Awakening* and *The Bell Jar* (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p. 12).

### **Methodology**

This research paper engages a qualitative interpretivist methodology, concentrating on close reading and comparative analysis of literary texts that illustrate the American Dream over different time periods.

### **Research Questions and Hypothesis**

This research focuses on investigating how the American Dream is represented in different works of English literature and investigating its development over various literary periods and its critique of changing societal values. This research is directed by the following key questions: How do representations of the American Dream develop over various literary periods in response to societal changes? How do contemporary literary works critique the American



Dream in the context of modern social-economic realities? What essential viewpoints are provided by modern literature on the American Dream and how do they reflect current societal and financial conditions?

The hypotheses for this study are: earlier literary works mainly represent the American Dream as a symbol of endless possibilities, concentrating on social mobility, independence, and achieving goals through dedication, effort, and perseverance; contemporary literature provides a more crucial examination of the American Dream, emphasizing its limitations in the face of problems like disparities, social injustice, and income gaps; and modern portrayals of the American Dream are molded by societal factors like race, gender, and class, exposing the gap between the ideal and the reality experienced by peoples.

### **Data Collection and Handling**

The research includes collecting data from selected literary texts, critical essays, and scholarly works discussing the American Dream. Primary sources involve literary texts like novels, plays, and short stories composed between the early 20th century and the present day, selected for their thematic focus on the American Dream. Secondary sources involve critical essays and scholarly works on the American Dream, its history, and literary critiques.

The literary texts have been selected to show: the early 20th century, when the idea of the American Dream acquired importance, for example, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald; the mid-20th century, during which critiques of the American Dream increased, for example, *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller; and contemporary literature that addresses modern viewpoints, for example, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison.

### **Sampling Strategy**

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to confirm a representative selection of literary periods, concentrating on key texts that emphasize the American Dream. The sample was selected from different periods — early 20th century, mid-20th century, and contemporary literature — key authors and genres. The sample includes works by F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller, and Toni Morrison. Furthermore, contemporary authors and modern viewpoints were involved to offer a comprehensive view.

### **Measures to Avoid Bias**

To reduce bias, the following measures were taken: texts were chosen based on their thematic focus on the American Dream; authors from different backgrounds and viewpoints were involved; and a randomization process guaranteed equal representation of literary periods.

### **Research Instruments**

The main research instrument is a literary analysis structure that judges every text for themes related to the American Dream, like upward mobility, success through hard work, and reviews of capitalism and moving up in society. The structure also examines how these themes are impacted by factors such as race, gender, and class.

### **Administration of Data**

The data collection steps consist of choosing literary texts, doing close readings, and getting important details related to the research questions. The selected texts are organized by period — 20th century, mid-20th century, and contemporary — and the depictions of the American Dream are captured based on the themes, characters, and important viewpoints observed in every work.

### **Analysis Framework**

Data is gathered and organized using a qualitative coding system. Each literary text is examined for: representation of the American Dream (positive, negative, and neutral); themes (success, failure, upward mobility, and income disparity); character experiences (those who accomplish



the dream, those who do not succeed, and those pushed to the side by society); and critical viewpoints (Marxist and feminist theories). This coding assists in recognizing models in the depiction of the American Dream throughout time and facilitates comparative analysis.

### **Thematic Analysis**

A qualitative thematic analysis framework was employed to analyze the literary texts. The analysis integrated critical viewpoints from Marxist and feminist theories to deepen the understanding of the American Dream. Marxist theory informs the analysis of the American Dream as an instrument for maintaining capitalist ideology. Feminist theory critiques its patriarchal and discriminatory nature. *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald will be examined through a Marxist lens to investigate how the American Dream maintains class divisions. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison will be analyzed through a feminist viewpoint to emphasize the intersectionality of race, gender, and socioeconomic status in attaining the American Dream.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis includes comparative thematic analysis of the literary texts to analyze how the American Dream has been represented over various periods. The study contrasts: early representations of the American Dream as a route to success and independence through effort, as depicted in works such as *The Great Gatsby*; mid-20th century critiques, such as the disillusionment with the American Dream, as depicted in *Death of a Salesman*, which reveals the ethical and societal dilemmas faced by those pursuing achievement; and contemporary literature's analytical framework, as in *The Bluest Eye*, which emphasizes the junction of ethnicity, sexuality, and socioeconomic status in attaining the American Dream.

The data is examined using textual analysis to learn how themes change and develop as time passes. This method enables the study to map shifts in societal attitudes toward the American Dream, from one of hope and chance to a more nuanced critique that identifies its boundaries in the context of contemporary socioeconomic reality. Moreover, the study includes critical viewpoints like Marxist and feminist theories to deepen the analysis. These viewpoints help investigate how the American Dream is used to sustain or challenge power dynamics and gender roles in society. The findings are explained in the context of the wider socio-political changes that have molded American society and its ideals over time.

The methodology gives an organized method to discovering the representation of the American Dream in English literature. By using close reading, comparative analysis, and the application of critical theories (Marxist and feminist), the study aims to reveal how literary representations of the American Dream reflect the developing values of American society.

### **Results/Analysis**

#### **Introduction**

This portion shows the findings of the research on the representation of the American Dream in chosen literary texts over various periods. The analysis is structured based on the research questions and hypotheses founded in the methodology. The concentration is on how the American Dream has developed in literature, reflecting shifting societal values, and how contemporary works critique the Dream in view of modern social and economic conditions.

#### **Findings**

##### ***Representations of the American Dream over Time Periods***

*Early 20th Century Literature.* Key texts from this period include *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925) and *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway (1926). The American Dream is represented as a sign of endless opportunity and upward mobility. Main characters repeatedly



represent ideals of hard work, perseverance, and the quest of success. Themes of wealth, social status, and the quest of happiness are common.

The pursuit of the American Dream often uncovers societal problems like ethical decline linked with wealth and social status. Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan represent the ideal of success but also emphasize the emptiness and superficiality of such ambitions. Their difficulties reflect wider societal problems like class inequalities and the evasive nature of happiness (Fitzgerald, 1925).

Text	Key themes	Character Examples
The Great Gatsby.	Wealth, Social Mobility.	Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan.
The Sun Also Rises.	Disillusionment, Lost Generation.	Jake Barnes, Lady Brett Ashley.

### Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century literature:

- **Key Texts:**

Death of a Salesman by Arther Miller (1949) and Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck (1937).

- **Findings:**

- A change for disillusionment with the American Dream.
- Crucial evaluation of social frameworks that restrict personal achievement.
- Investigation of themes such as failure, moral conflicts and societal pressures.

A shift towards disillusionment with the American Dream is manifest. These works critique social frameworks like the post-war economy and rigid societal norms, that restrict personal achievement. Willy Loman's tragic quest for success demonstrates the overwhelming pressures of consumer culture and the inaccessible nature of the dream. Of Mice and Men reveals the fragility of aspirations for social mobility among systemic obstacles that hinder the dreams of characters such as George and Lennie.

Text	Key Themes	Character Examples
Death of a Salesman.	Disillusionment, Financial hardship.	Willy Loman, Biff Loman.
Of Mice and Men.	Companionship, The weakness of Dreams.	George Milton, Lennie Small.

### Contemporary Literature

#### Key Texts

*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970) and selected modern works by different writers.

#### Findings

- Contemporary literature focuses on how race, gender, and class shape people's understanding and access to the American Dream.
- It highlights structural barriers such as discrimination and economic inequality that complicate the pursuit of success and raise questions about capitalist ideals.
- It also draws attention to the psychological and social effects of goals that remain out of reach for many individuals.

In *The Bluest Eye*, characters such as Pecola Breedlove experience systemic oppression along with imposed standards of beauty that shape self-perception and identity. Her experience reflects broader social concerns related to race, marginalization, and the impact of dominant cultural ideals on vulnerable individuals.



Texts	Key Themes	Character Examples
The Bluest Eye.	Race, Gender, Identity.	Pecola Breedlove, Claudia MacTeer.
Contemporary works.	Varied Viewpoints, Social Justice.	Different Writers.

**1. Thematic Analysis of American Dream Representations**

**Success and Failure**

- Earlier literary texts present success as achievable through hard work and determination.
- Mid-twentieth-century works show increasing failure among individuals who pursue the American Dream, often due to social and economic pressures.
- Contemporary texts focus on more complex and less visible barriers that restrict access to success.

**Critical Viewpoints**

- The analysis draws on Marxist and Feminist theoretical perspectives.
- Marxist readings suggest that the American Dream can reinforce class inequality, as seen in Willy Loman’s inability to achieve success due to structural economic constraints.
- Feminist perspectives highlight the limitations faced by women and marginalized groups, as reflected in Toni Morrison’s works, where race and gender intersect and complicate the pursuit of the Dream.

Theory	Key insights
Marxist Theory.	The American Dream as an instrument for class management.
Feminist Theory.	Evaluation of gender roles and structural constraints.

**1. Visuals Representations of Findings:**

**Table of Literary Texts by Period:**

Time Period	Key Texts	Major Themes
Early 20 <sup>th</sup> Century.	The Great Gatsby, The Sun Also Rises.	Wealth, Chance, Disillusionment.
Mid-20 <sup>th</sup> Century.	Death of a Salesman, Of Mice and Men.	Failure, Societal Pressure.
Contemporary.	The Bluest Eye, Different Modern Works.	Systemic Barriers.

**Summary of Findings**

- Early twentieth-century literature presents the American Dream as an achievable ideal grounded in opportunity and effort.
- Mid-twentieth-century literature reflects growing disillusionment and increasing critique of the Dream’s accessibility in real social conditions.
- Contemporary literature adopts a more critical stance, highlighting structural inequalities and the difficulties involved in attaining the American Dream.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study provide meaningful insights into the development of the American Dream in English literature, reflecting changing social values and sustained critiques of the Dream in relation to contemporary economic and cultural conditions.



### **Interpretation of Results**

The results of this research demonstrate a gradual transformation in the representation of the American Dream across different literary periods, shaped by broader historical, social, and ideological shifts.

In early twentieth-century literature, the American Dream is largely presented as an attainable ideal, grounded in the belief that persistence and hard work lead to upward mobility and success. This optimistic vision is reflected in characters such as Jay Gatsby, whose pursuit of wealth and social recognition symbolizes ambition, aspiration, and hope.

In contrast, mid-twentieth-century literature presents a clear shift toward disillusionment. Works by Arthur Miller and John Steinbeck highlight structural barriers, social pressures, and economic constraints that limit individual achievement. In this context, the American Dream becomes less a promise of success and more a source of frustration and emotional collapse. Willy Loman's experience, in particular, illustrates how systemic limitations within a capitalist framework contribute to personal failure rather than fulfillment.

In contemporary literature, including the work of Toni Morrison, the representation of the American Dream becomes more critical and complex. Issues of race, gender, and class intersect to shape access to opportunity, revealing how structural inequality influences lived experience. Characters such as Pecola Breedlove reflect the psychological consequences of unattainable ideals, particularly within marginalized communities. This shift indicates a move away from earlier idealism toward a more layered and critical understanding of the Dream as a socially conditioned construct.

### **Linking to Literature**

These findings align closely with existing scholarship on the American Dream, which traces its transformation from an ideal of hope to a subject of critique. The shift observed in mid-twentieth-century literature corresponds with the arguments of Cullen (2003) and Castronovo (2017), who emphasize the growing literary skepticism toward traditional narratives of success. Furthermore, the integration of Marxist and Feminist theoretical perspectives strengthens the interpretation of contemporary texts. This reflects the work of Hochschild (1995) and McGowan (2014), who highlight how race, gender, and class shape access to the American Dream and influence individual outcomes.

The findings also correspond with broader historical and socio-economic developments. Economic instability, social movements, and cultural change have continuously reshaped the meaning of the Dream. The critique of capitalist structures and inequality, as discussed by Lawson (2012), is clearly reflected in the texts analyzed, reinforcing the need for critical engagement with the ideology of the American Dream.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study examined the representation of the American Dream in English literature across different historical periods. The analysis demonstrates a clear evolution from optimism to critique, reflecting changing social realities and cultural expectations.

#### **Key findings show that:**

- Early twentieth-century literature presents the American Dream as an attainable ideal based on effort and perseverance.
- Mid-twentieth-century literature reveals growing disillusionment and highlights systemic barriers to success.
- Contemporary literature emphasizes intersectional inequalities related to race, gender, and class, exposing structural limitations within the Dream.



Overall, the study concludes that the American Dream is not a fixed concept but one that continuously evolves in response to shifting historical and social contexts.

### **Limitations**

Although this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The selected texts, while representative of major literary periods, do not encompass the full diversity of perspectives on the American Dream. In addition, the focus on well-known authors may exclude emerging or less mainstream voices that offer alternative interpretations.

Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the study allows for in-depth interpretation but limits generalizability. A complementary quantitative approach could further strengthen the analysis by examining thematic frequency across a broader corpus of literary works.

### **Recommendations**

Future research may expand in several directions to deepen understanding of the American Dream in literature.

First, broader inclusion of voices from marginalized communities is recommended in order to develop a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of how the Dream is experienced across different social contexts.

Second, further investigation into contemporary media such as film and digital storytelling may provide additional insight into how modern representations continue to reshape ideas of success, identity, and aspiration.

Third, educational discourse should also be considered in shaping interpretations of cultural and literary concepts. As discussed in Khan et al. (2026), comparing educational approaches highlights how moral reasoning, social behavior, and language development are influenced when learning is grounded in learners' cultural and religious backgrounds. Such contextual alignment makes learning more relatable and supports deeper understanding and long-term retention of ideas. In this way, culturally responsive content design contributes to more effective educational outcomes (Khan et al., 2026).

Additionally, future studies may explore the impact of globalization and technological advancement on the evolving meaning of the American Dream. As societies continue to change, literature is likely to reflect new forms of aspiration as well as new forms of disillusionment, requiring further critical attention.

Overall, this study suggests that the American Dream remains a dynamic concept shaped by cultural, social, educational, and global forces, and it continues to play an important role in understanding identity and society in the modern world.

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