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# The American dream and literature: how the themes of self-reliance and individualism in American literature are relevant in preserving both the aesthetics and the ideals of the American dream

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**The American Dream and Literature:  
How the Themes of Self-Reliance and Individualism in American Literature Are Relevant in  
Preserving Both the Aesthetics and the Ideals of the American Dream**

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## Introduction

Over time the American dream has proved a resilient and unique concept that Americans have come to understand and define in different ways as relevant to their own life narratives and experiences. Not defined or rooted in lineage, religion, or some form of a shared history the American dream, unlike any other form of national identity in the world, is shaped and defined by collective values. These values and principles rooted in individualism, self-actualization, and self-reliance where people are able to fulfill their own destiny, be self-reliant, and believe in the promise that through hard work and perseverance life can be different and better. The apparent timeless notions of these values in relationship to pursuing and defining what we now understand as the American dream are deeply embedded in the fabric of the cultural landscape of America because they inform and preserve the mythology of the American experience. The American dream is a myth that endures and lasts because it promotes an aspirational experience that both lies and finds fulfillment in one's life or in the lives of other Americans.

The resiliency of what has now been defined and understood as the American dream can be examined and traced to the Declaration of Independence in 1776 which proclaimed people were entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" pursuits that ended with people achieving some level of fulfillment through hard work, tenacity, and perseverance. With that being said, the very term or phrase "American Dream" did not truly receive some sort of formal definition until 1931. Amid the Great Depression, James Truslow Adams, in *The Epic of America* defined the "dream" in concrete terms as a vehicle that promises and allows all it

citizens, regardless of origin or social status prosperity in a society founded on free and equal opportunity. In an effort to not make class a concern in his definition of the American dream, Adams distinguished that his vision of the dream transcended monetary aspects. Adams writes,

But there has been also the American dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyman with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement...it is 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 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. (404)

Adams's faith in the enduring spirit and optimism of the American dream during the Great Depression served as a reminder that the values which defined the American dream were a state of mind and part of the American consciousness. For Adams the "dream" was not about the past but about the future. He states:

It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. And that dream has been realized more fully in actual life here than anywhere else, though very imperfectly even among ourselves. It has been a great epic and a great dream. (405)

Through adversities and difficulties the American dream endures, as Adams suggests, because of Americans' unrelenting optimism and devotion to that journey of fulfilling one's destiny.

Similar to Adams, Jim Cullen also emphasizes that the American dream is not a journey about wealth or material things, but rather a quest for personal fulfillment and a vision for self-actualization. In his book *American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (2003), Jim Cullen examines the complexities of the concept known as the American dream and suggests that although at the very core of 'the dream' lies the belief that with effort, things can be different and better and that there are multiple American dreams behind the singular phrase. Cullen explains:

The Dream also involves acknowledging another important reality: that beyond an abstract belief in possibility, there is no one American Dream. Instead there are many American Dreams, their appeal simultaneously resting on their variety and their specificity...Sometimes "better and richer and fuller" is defined in terms of money-in the contemporary United States, one could almost believe this is the only definition-but there are others. (7)

Interestingly enough, as Cullen discusses that we are a nation comprised of American dreams he comes to the conclusion that the multiple "dreams" are ultimately united by the timeless ideas of personal freedom, self-reliance, and individualism. Cullen writes:

However variegated its applications—which include the freedom to commit as well as freedom from commitment—all notions of freedom rest on a sense of agency, the idea that individuals have control over the course of their lives. Agency, in turn, lies at the core of the American dream; the bedrock premise

upon which all else depends...the Dream assumes that one can advance confidently in the direction of one's dream to live out an imagined life. (10)

The phrase so boldly declared in the Declaration of Independence, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and the phrase the "American Dream" Cullen further suggests are both part of the American consciousness, however ambiguous or mythic they may be, for the phrases provide both legal and ideological grounding for people to embark on the path to manifest their vision of the American dream.

Adams points out that through every period of triumph, failure and tragedy in America's history, the American dream was the glue that kept the country together. Looking forward from the vantage point of the Great Depression, he forecasts, "We have a long and arduous road to travel if we are to realize the American Dream in the life of our nation, but if we fail, there is nothing left but the eternal round. The alternative is the failure of self-government, the failure of the common man to rise to full stature, the failure of all that the American Dream has held of hope and promise for mankind" (416). As both Adams' and Cullen's ideas have reverberated throughout the decades through the continuing vitality and endurance of the American dream, we have not only political leaders, government documents, and presidential speeches that have sustained the 'dream' or where it has solely found its expression, but also popular culture and other forms of artistic expression within the American culture that have given this dream a powerful and enduring voice.

The American experience has long been a narrative with a life cycle of its own in our nation's history. The beliefs in individualism, self-actualization, and self-reliance, which understand one as having the potential to fulfill his or her destiny and believe in the promise

that life can be different, are beliefs that have been omnipresent in the American consciousness. One cannot fully enter the discourse of preserving and sustaining the American dream without examining the aesthetics and ideals of the national literature of America. As Fredrick Carpenter explains in *American Literature and the Dream*,

The American dream has never been defined exactly, and probably never can be. It is both too various and too vague: many men have meant many different things by it...But "American Literature" has been defined more exactly and has been outlined in courses and embodied in anthologies. Most men agree that it is something very different from English literature, and many have sought to describe the difference...American literature has differed from English because of the constant and omnipresent influence of the American dream upon it. (3)

The various voices and multitude of perspectives within American Literature, without specifically referring to the American dream, inherently all have elements of the values that define the "dream." With the American dream capturing a distinct and unique national spirit, Carpenter claims that readers can learn about American beliefs by understanding how the "dream" has shaped our national literature. He contends, "The American dream, and the patterns of thinking and feeling which it has inspired, has given form and significance to American literature" (10).

Based on these definitions of the American dream and its close association with the American literature, the goal of this paper is to explore and examine how selected works in the American literary canon contribute to defining, constructing, and sustaining the basic principles of the American dream, in which each individual has the unlimited opportunities to achieve

personal freedom and wealth. The paper will specifically focus on key texts by Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, and F. Scott Fitzgerald that capture different aspects and perspectives of the American culture and the American dream. By weaving and tracing the values of individualism, self-reliance, and personal freedom that constitute the American dream through their works and I will examine why their pieces remain relevant in the modern American culture. Through the examination and analysis of *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Self-Reliance*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* the project will demonstrate how from one generation to another, from one literary period to another, these works are sacred texts because like the American dream they are rooted in the themes of self-actualization and individualism, and because they provide examples of all the possibilities the American dream offers when given the opportunity to pursue it.



## **Blueprinting the American Dream: The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin**

From the very beginning the national literature of America has been preoccupied with questions of the self and identity. Even before the Founding, Americans conventionally have had the perception of themselves both as idealists pursuing the noble dream of establishing a just society that is ever evolving and forward thinking. During the Revolutionary Period, America began to establish a cultural identity of its own and the newness of an emerging American culture led many to explore the questions of the American identity and what it meant to be an American. While political writings dominated the literature of the Revolutionary War period, a good deal of literature produced then was one of discovery of the self, of a new country, and of a new culture being crafted and defined. An important text to emerge from the period that exemplifies the promise of America is Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. In his autobiography, Franklin tells the "rags-to-riches" story of a determined young man who came from nothing and through hard work and perseverance made something of his life. With its purpose being to define himself as the archetypical American and as the promise for which America stood, Franklin defined himself as someone whose idealism and success could be imitated and achieved by all Americans. If much of American literature serves as a vehicle for constructing and sustaining the aesthetics of the American dream where individualism is celebrated, self-actualization is promoted, and self-reliance is encouraged, then Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* serves as the preliminary narrative that establishes the foundation for the American dream in the national literature of America.

Written in four parts throughout the course of his later life, Benjamin Franklin's initial intention for his autobiography was to tell the story of his rise from poverty to a man of affluence for his son William. Not soon after he began to write his autobiography, the intention of the project evolved to establish his life narrative as the blueprint or a model American in a burgeoning new nation. In the opening letter to his son in the *Autobiography*, Franklin writes:

Dear Son: I have ever had pleasures in obtaining any little anecdotes of my ancestors...Imagining it may be equally agreeable to you know the circumstances of my life...I sit down to write them for you. To which I have some other inducements. Having emerged from the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world, and having gone so far through life with a considerable share of felicity, the conducting means I made use of, which with the blessing of God well succeeded, my posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own situations and therefore fit to be imitated. (5)

By casting himself in his *Autobiography* as the model American, Franklin sees the means that a person can use in order to create a life for himself or herself, to shape it into whatever form that he or she may choose. Intended for everyone now, Franklin's story would serve as the example for young Americans seeking to achieve some form of success and prosperity. In many ways, he set out to demonstrate just as America had succeeded in creating itself a nation, he the representative American went about carving out his own character and life.

As Franklin christens himself as "The American" in his *Autobiography*, he included letters from Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan to solidify his intention for writing his life

narrative and the bigger purpose it would serve in inspiring the people of America. Both James and Vaughan viewed Franklin's life as an example for young Americans to follow in a rising nation. In a letter dated January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1783 Vaughan writes,

Sir, I solicit the history of your life from the following motives: Your history is so remarkable, that if you do not give it, somebody else will certainly give it; and perhaps so as nearly to do as much harm, as your own management of thing might do good. It will moreover present a table of the internal circumstances of your country, which will very much tend to invite to it settlers of virtuous and manly minds...All that has happened to you is also connected with the detail of the manners and situation of a rising people. (63)

Similarly, James encouraged Franklin to write because he felt his story would be useful in the educating of a new nation. In his letter to Franklin, James also writes,

Life is uncertain as the preacher tells us; and what will the world say of kind, humane, and benevolent Ben. Franklin should leave his friends and the world deprived of so pleasing and profitable a work; a work which would be useful and entertaining not only to a few, but to millions? The influence writings under that class have on the minds of youth is very great, and has nowhere appeared to me so plain, as in our public friend's journals. (62)

By consciously including these letters in his *Autobiography* Franklin knew they would both compliment and advertise his purpose because he was very aware that the literature of the time was influencing more and more people to look at this "rising" nation as a place where the American dream in its earliest version could be fulfilled. As James further writes in his letter,

Should thine, for instance, when published, lead youth to equal the industry and temperance of thy early youth, what a blessing with that class would such a work be! I know of no character living, nor many of them put together, who has so much in his power as thyself to promote a greater spirit of industry and early attention to business, frugality, and temperance with the American youth. Not that I think the work would have no other merit and use in the world, far from it; but the first is of such vast importance that I know nothing that can equal it. (62)

By providing values and virtues conducive to personal and social improvement, Franklin's life narrative would define his version of the American that one could fulfill or even possibly become a version of Franklin.

While the purpose for Franklin's *Autobiography* shifted from a memoir to his son to a piece of literature that fostered individual pride and industry to an emerging nation, his tone and language remained simple and plain in style. Being conscious and aware that his story would circulate and possibly reach the masses his rhetorical goal in keeping his language and writing style simple was to ensure that his story could be understood by the average man rather than a select group of elite people. For example, in his letter, James also addresses the diction and syntax of Franklin's narrative. James writes,

This style of writing seems little gone out of vogue, and yet it is a very useful one; and your specimen of it may be particularly serviceable, as it will make a subject of comparison with the lives of various public cutthroats and intriguers, and with absurd monastic self-tormentors or vain literary triflers. If it encourages more writings of the same kind with your own, and induces more men to spend

lives fit to be written, it will be worth all Plutarch's Lives put together. (65)

Remarkably, as the language remains plain in style so did its content. The edition of Franklin's *Autobiography* commonly read never delves or enters in the discourse of the later and more influential years of his life. It does not deal with his actual success itself.

Franklin's purpose is to demonstrate and illustrate the formation of the character that makes success possible and achievable through the example of himself. While the *Autobiography* becomes the blueprint for defining the model American citizen and achieving success, it also serves to define the philosophy of what one would come to understand as the American dream where the possibilities for achievement are endless if one chooses to be self-reliant and manifest their own destiny. When speaking of the decision to leave Boston and step out of the shadow of his brother James, Franklin explains:

At length, a fresh difference arising between my brother and me, I took upon me to assert my own freedom, presuming that he would not venture to produce new indentures...My friend Collins, therefore, undertook to manage a little for me. He agreed with the captain of a New York sloop for my passage...So I sold some of my books to raise a little money, was taken on board privately, and as we had a fair wind, in three days I found myself in New York, near 300 miles from home, a boy of but 17, without the least recommendation to, or knowledge of any person in the place, and with very little money in my pocket. (21)

Scholar Steven Forde examines Franklin's peculiar but deliberate effort to not focus on his success but rather portray himself as the imitable by "all" Americans. He writes, "The most thoroughgoing is Franklin's downplaying of the aspects of his life and activity that put him too

far above the average man" (366). Franklin's description of his journey and initial arrival in Philadelphia further demonstrates his intention to define himself as the common man who struggled, but was determined to pursue his dreams. In the *Autobiography* Franklin explains,

In the evening I found myself very feverish, and went in to bed...my fever left me, and in the morning, crossing the ferry, I proceeded on my journey on foot, having fifty miles to Burlington, where I was told I would find boats that would carry me the rest of the way to Philadelphia...I have been the more particular in this description of my journey, and shall be so of my first entry into that city, that you may in your mind compare such unlikely beginnings with the figure I have since made there. I was in my working dress, my best clothes being to come round by sea. I was dirty from my journey; my pockets were stuffed out with shirts and stockings: I knew no soul, nor where to look for lodging. (23-24)

The *Autobiography* presents the reader with a narrative that highlights the humble beginnings of Franklin's life without focusing too much on his extraordinary career.

While in his *Autobiography* Franklin consciously crafts his early life to serve as the archetypal example of upward mobility and success, his list of thirteen virtues are also emblematic of the way he constructed his own identity but also how he felt an individual should define their own identity. Aware of the influence his life narrative would have on people, Franklin included the list of thirteen virtues which he believed would lead him to success to further illustrate the potential people had in achieving success while becoming Americans of character. In his *Autobiography* Franklin writes,

It was about this time I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wish'd to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right or wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other...I concluded at length that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous, was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. (71)

Franklin lists the virtues in what he believes to be followed in developmental sequence. He says, "I propos'd to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas annexed to each, than few name with more ideas...and annexed to each a short precept, which fully express'd the extent I gave to its meaning" (71). These names of virtues, with their precepts were:

1. *Temperance. Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.*
2. *Silence. Speak not but what may benefit others to yourself; avoid trifling conversation.*
3. *Order. Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.*
4. *Resolution. Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.*
5. *Frugality. Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; waste nothing.*
6. *Industry. Lose no time; be always employ'd in something useful.*
7. *Sincerity. Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and if you speak accordingly.*
8. *Justice. Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.*
9. *Moderation. Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.*

10. *Cleanliness. Tolerate no uncleanness in body, cloaths, or habitation.*  
 11. *Tranquility. Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.*  
 12. *Chastity. Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your or another's peace or reputation.*  
 13. *Humility. Imitate Jesus or Socrates.*

Franklin then adds a progress chart to track how well he practices each of the virtues to “habitude” during the seven days of each week. In his *Autobiography* he says, “I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I rul’d each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I cross’d these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue that day” (73).

This method of self-improvement—listing goals, focusing effort, and charting progress—is further evidence of Franklin’s purpose to use his *Autobiography* as a template for defining one’s life in an emerging American culture. Stephen Carl Arch examines Franklin’s virtues and comments on Franklin’s inclusion of the virtue “Humility” and his precept for defining that virtue. Arch’s suggests that the thirteenth virtue reveals Franklin’s usefulness of imitation as means for achieving success. Arch says,

In his remarks on each of the thirteen virtues, Franklin commented about humility: “‘Imitate Jesus and Socrates.’” The injunction to imitate is, to my mind, at the heart of Franklin’s method throughout the *Autobiography*. From Franklin’s youthful method of learning to write well by imitating the *Spectator* papers to his notion that his posterity may find some of the means of his success suitable



to their own situations...imitation is central to the way in which Franklin imagines both life and art. (164)

When speaking of the virtue of humility Franklin explains,

My list of virtues contain'd at first but twelve, but a Quaker friend having kindly informed me that I was generally thought proud; that my pride show'd itself frequently in conversation; that I was not content with being in the right when discussing any point, but was overbearing, and rather insolent...When another asserted something that I thought an error, I deny'd myself the pleasure of contradicting him abruptly, and of showing immediately some absurdity in his proposition; and in answering I began observing that in certain cases or circumstances his opinion would be right, but in the present case there appear'd or seem'd to me some difference, etc, I soon found the advantage of this change in my manner; the conversations I engag'd in went on more pleasantly. (79-80)

Through his *Autobiography*, Franklin would teach people the importance of practicing humility when achieving success and being a citizen of character. For Franklin, the practice of humility in his own life would, as he imagined, affect the readers of his *Autobiography* to do the same.

Much of the national character is implicit in Franklin's career because he represents the values that have remained constant in American society. Franklin's *Autobiography* is not a recitation of his involvement in nation-shaping events or being one of the Founding Fathers of America, but rather on the making of his character and resolve as a man in an emerging American culture and society. Nian-Sheng Huang and Carla Mulford further discuss the function of Franklin's *Autobiography* with regards to the theme of the American dream by explaining

how “Franklin represented the possibility of personal success to aspiring common people who were as passionate about individual (political) freedom and personal (material) success...Franklin was the personification of American national character in a world of change, where an individual’s hard work and self-determination for upward mobility were as important as all citizens’ collective striving for independence and self-government” (150-151). When speaking of his upward success in Philadelphia as young man Franklin says,

I began now gradually to pay off the debt I was under for the printing house. In order to secure my credit and character as a tradesman, I took care not only to be in reality industrious and frugal, but to avoid all appearances to the contrary. I drest plainly; I was seen at no places of idle diversion. I never went out fishing or shooting; a book, indeed, sometimes debauch’d me from my work but was seldom snug, and gave no scandal; and to show that I was not above my business, I sometimes brought home the paper I purchas’d at the stores thro’ the streets on a wheelbarrow. Thus being esteem’d an industrious, thriving young man, and paying duly for what I bought. (58)

Franklin stands well defined as a model American because his life narrative is a witness to the endless possibilities of achieving success amid a culture in constant change.

As Huang and Mulford further suggest, Franklin’s *Autobiography* serves a purpose because “we are now aware that American dream image of honest, frugal, and hard-working Franklin was an invention that began with Franklin himself, an invention that at most basic level fostered individual dignity” (156). After his death in 1790, Franklin’s ideals that everyone was able to improve their lot in life through talent, hard work, a simplified life, and perseverance

became tremendously popular because what he constructed and defined through his own life underscored the ideology of the American dream. As his legacy was particularly dear to printers who were extremely proud of his life, many of them took it upon themselves to print several pieces of Franklin's *Autobiography*. His *Autobiography* impacted the lives of many and most importantly found its way into the hands of young Americans.

Of how Franklin's example worked Huang and Mulford explain that "evidence further suggests that Franklin had his most serious impact on the minds of many young people not from textbooks, but from individual readings after school. Silas Fenton of Marlborough, Massachusetts, for instance, obtained a copy of Franklin's *Autobiography* as early as 1796 when he was 18 years old. "I perused them attentively," he said, "and found many very valuable precepts, which I endeavored to treasure up and follow" (150). Interestingly, the general culture of the early nineteenth century fostered an environment where Franklin's ideas thrived and although many realistically understood that the success Franklin achieved in his life was perhaps not achievable for everyone, the optimism and possibility of it coming to fruition endured. Huang and Mulford provide another anecdote with regards to the impact of Franklin's story within the American culture. In their essay they state:

Having learned the printing business and studied Franklin's life, Orion Clemens, a printer in Missouri, wrote to his mother that he was "closely imitating" the great Franklin. For awhile he lived on bread and water, and he was amazed to discover how clear his mind had become on such a spare diet...His teenage brother, who was serving as his apprentice, often complained...Facing deteriorating environment, the younger brother, who was never paid a penny, left the print

shop to explore a different life. He was Samuel Clemens, an inventive printer but perhaps a better writer, now known, of course, as Mark Twain. (151)

Franklin's *Autobiography* being is first example in literary form that encompasses the American dream where individualism is celebrated, self-actualization is promoted, and self-reliance is encouraged. As an important part of the American literary canon, the *Autobiography* exemplifies how an important and vital form of artistic expression can establish, uphold, and safeguard the aesthetics of the "dream" in a rising nation. His *Autobiography* promotes a philosophy of hope and optimism, and proves to be the bedrock on which the subject matter and themes of the American literary canon are founded.

## **The American Narrative: Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and the American Dream**

From the new spirit of American individualism and identity of the Revolutionary Period, many literary voices emerged during the nineteenth century to establish the American Literary Renaissance. With a fresh and vastly expanding American culture, writers such as Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman published works that distinctly defined and constructed a literary tradition in the United States rooted in the ideals of individualism, nature, and self-reliance. During the nineteenth century, what one would come to understand as the American dream served as the basis for American Renaissance writers' cultivation of a narrative of the American character and experience. Most notably, the works published by Ralph Waldo Emerson epitomized the emerging idea of the American dream and solidified many prominent American ideals first characterized in the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. With themes rooted in what would later be characterized as the American dream, Emerson's literary works allowed for American literature to reject the European literary aesthetic by asserting that inspiration and intelligence developed from individuals and their experiences rather than from any longstanding national customs or traditions.

From individualism to intuition and self-reliance, Emerson's transcendental philosophy and literary works emphasize the responsibility which resides in each individual to manifest their own destiny. As a lens for understanding the enduring spirit of the American dream, the literary works of Emerson, and more specifically his essay "Self-Reliance," informs and demonstrates the persistent ideals that constitute the American dream in American literature. If the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* established and expressed in literary form the

intrinsic relationship between the American dream and American letters during what he called a “rising nation,” then Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” expands the notion of the American dream by boldly defining an image of the self-reliant American who believes in the unflinching sanctity of the individual who seeks to manifest his or her personal destiny in a nation filled with opportunities.

Credited with defining an American version of Romanticism in literature, Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance,” emphasizes the essential uniqueness which resides in each individual and asserts that true fulfillment transcends rationality, science, and societal customs. True fulfillment and enlightenment is only accessible through individual experience and intuition. Championing one of the pervasive tenets of the American dream, Emerson claims that cultivating and realizing one’s genius comes from seeking individual freedom and truth. In “Self-Reliance” Emerson writes, “There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better or worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till” (176). Encouraging people to embrace and acknowledge the internal genius that he sees as residing within the soul, Emerson desires people to trust themselves and realize their own journey in life because no one else can live or define their particular life for them. When an individual follows a path defined by someone else or imitates someone else’s life, Emerson claims an individual is oppressed and broken; therefore, they must trust in the goodness and justice their personal experience.

In “Emerson’s Transcendental Individualism,” David Lyttle examines Emerson’s notion of the divine spirit which resides in each individual and discusses Emerson’s belief that each individual has the capability to actualize his or her own genius. Lyttle explains:

The individual’s true uniqueness is what Emerson called his “genius” and his calling in life is to realize his genius...genius does not originate in biology or in the environment. It is, for Emerson, given at birth; it is spiritual or transcendental. Since genius is innate, and since each individual, in his genius, is different from any other individual, only the individual can discover what his genius is; society cannot inform him. (90)

Articulating the rallying cry of the Transcendentalist movement that personal enlightenment and genius resides in the individual’s soul, Emerson demonstrates how the principles of individualism and seeking personal freedom had in shaping the American consciousness and subsequently American literature.

In *The Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams affirms Emerson’s significance and influence in defining the American consciousness:

In no other author can we get so close to the whole of the American spirit as in Emerson. In him we sense the abounding vitality and goodness of life, the brushing aside of the possibilities of failure, evil, or sin, the high value placed on the individual, the importance ascribed to the very act of you and me, the aspiration towards the stars and the calm assurance that the solid earth is ours, the worship of culture combined with the comforting assurance that the

spontaneous glance may be best, the insistence on a strenuous individuality...with the dicta that we are all wise. (199)

As both Adams and Lytle suggest, for Emerson the self-reliant individual had access to the American dream because each individual was born with the resources for success within him or herself. As Emerson states, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private is true for all men,--that is genius" (175).

Emerson's praise of the individual spirit in "Self-Reliance" demonstrates the promise and optimism of the American dream by illustrating that the path toward self-reliance comes from self-trust and not from conforming to traditions and societal customs. In the essay he states:

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place divine providence has found for, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort and advancing on Chaos and the Dark. (177)

Speaking to the values of individual expression and self-confidence that are central principles of the American dream, Emerson again urges individuals to trust in the integrity of their individual experience and in the possibilities for enlightenment and success which reside in each unique



experience. As Adams explains of this philosophy, “Without any thought-through system, a fact which perhaps has endeared him all the more to Americans, Emerson was imbued completely with the new spirit of American optimism and with the religion of the new infinite possibilities in the individual common man” (198).

Similar to Adams’s thoughts on Emerson’s influence in constructing an American consciousness rooted in perpetual optimism and in the possibilities of change that nation offered, Frederic Carpenter places Emerson’s literary works and his transcendental philosophy of self-reliance and self-trust as a symbolic projection of the American dream in American literature. Though the American dream was vaguely defined during the nineteenth century, Carpenter asserts that the Transcendentalists’ belief in intuition and self-reliance as a means to construct an American ideal of a perfect democracy rooted in ideal liberty gave shape to a philosophical expression of what came to be understood as the American dream. With an idealized conception of an independent American identity and the rejection of European “gentility,” Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” demonstrates the influence American literature had in defining the American identity and shaping the American dream. Carpenter explains:

Emerson did dream that America would develop new ways of life different from the old ways of Europe. He dreamed that the new world would progressively realize the ideals of freedom and democracy enunciated by the Declaration of Independence. And he believed that these American ideals would be realized, not because they were ideal, but because they were appropriate to the facts of American life...his writing gave expression to the American revolt

from the genteel tradition of the European past, to the celebration of the democratic ideals of the American present. (25)

Emerson's view of the New World was rooted in the belief that the ideals of freedom and democracy expressed by the Founding generation could and would be progressively realized. As Carpenter further explains:

Emerson rejected the authority of tradition—which was essentially a formulation of other people's past experience—primarily because he believed the conditions of modern American life were as different from those of the “courtly” or “feudal” past as to make the old traditions invalid for the new times. He emphasized the need of intuition and of self-reliance...Revolting against past tradition, reflecting present experience, appealing of necessity to the failure, Emerson's thought became typically the American philosophy, or “dream.” For America was founded by men who held an irrational and fundamentally mystical belief in the potentialities of life in the New World. (29)

For Carpenter, the patterns of thinking, feelings, and attitudes presented in Emerson's works are reactions to the omnipresence of the American dream in American literature. “The American dream, and the patterns of thinking and feeling which it has inspired,” Carpenter argues, have “given form and significance to American literature” (10).

“Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist,” Emerson boldly declares in “Self-Reliance.” With actualizing one's individual freedom and attempting to define the American character being consistent themes in America's cultural narrative, Emerson rejects a society

which creates a herd-like mentality that does not allow an individual to think for himself. In the essay Emerson states:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most requests is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. (178)

Enlightening the American consciousness of the significance of nonconformity, Emerson expounds that self-reliance is conformity's aversion because self-reliance encourages Americans to define one's own path in life, to think for oneself, and to embrace the experiment known as the American experience with courage and creativity. No government or church can explain an individual's heart to them, and so each individual must resist institutional authority when defining one's own path and discovering the very foundation of one's being.

Richard G. Geldard examines Emerson's intentions in providing a mature and truthful vision of the future for the American culture by claiming that Emerson's intention in discussing self-reliance was perhaps to assert that what is true for us as individuals is also true for the nation. As Geldard explains, "True self-reliance comes, then, from a power that is agent, that is, a power enabled through our very nature to act on behalf of our self-recovery from wilful conformity and the seductions of party, which in Emerson's vocabulary means that agent both within and without that speaks to us from the hidden universal source of life itself" (49). These principles are illustrated in "Self-Reliance" when Emerson says:

Why then do we prate of self-reliance? Inasmuch as the soul is present, there will be power not confident but agent. To talk of reliance is a poor external way of speaking. Speak rather of that which relies, because it works and is. Who has more obedience than I masters me, though he should not raise his finger. Round him I must revolve by the gravitation of spirits. We fancy it rhetoric, when we speak of eminent virtue. We do not see that virtue is Height, and that a man or company of men, plastic and permeable to principles, by the law of nature must overpower and ride all cities, nations, kings, rich men, poets, who are not. (191)

For Emerson the true meanings of self-reliance are the spiritual principles of self-trust and self-confidence—the realization that individuals possess within their nature the capacity for realizing their path in life. Despite society's pressures one must remain loyal to the internal inspiration which directs one's choices. As Emerson declares, "Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions. Your conformity explains nothing. Act singly, and what you have already done singly will justify you now. Greatness appeals to the future" (184).

While the path toward realizing and manifesting one's destiny may lead in various and ever-changing directions, Emerson urges that such inconsistencies should not be feared. By speaking to the negative effects of consistency and complacency Emerson affirms the principles that are central to sustaining the American dream in American letters: newness, change, and optimism. The preoccupation with consistency keeps individuals from self-reliance and trusting themselves. Emerson says:

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today. (183)

Emerson seeks to persuade the individual that such adherence to consistency for consistency's sake has no value and rather than clinging to ideas that keep an individual from cultivating their own destiny, the self-reliant individual must be willing to embrace new revelations and beliefs. In disregarding old beliefs, one is not creating new truths or embracing new ideas that come into fashion, but moving ever closer to the one universal truth. As Emerson states, "Is it bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood" (183). Here Emerson illustrates that great men of the past were often misunderstood because they were self-reliant and stayed true their unique individual genius. However, Emerson also suggests that great thinkers of the past are no more important than those of the present. They only serve as models as to how an individual must stay true to oneself. Robert Richardson elaborates on this idea: "Self-trust or self acceptance is liberation from the tyranny of the past and from the injurious superiority of the great and famous. Emerson's lasting importance is as a liberator. In poetry, in politics, in personal ethics he teaches the possibility of self-emancipation as the necessary first step toward an autonomous free life" (14). Emerson's purpose in writing and speaking about self-reliance was to liberate the self to the discovery of the transcendent self in American society that was ever-

evolving. In the essay Emerson says, “Whenever a mind is simple, and receives divine wisdom, old things pass away—means, teachers, texts, temples fail; it lives now and it absorbs past and future into the present hour. All things are made sacred by relation to it,—one as much as another” (188).

Of the revolutionary nature of Emerson’s ideals of the American dream, Adams further explains that the belief in “the value of the common man and the hope of opening every avenue of opportunity to him—was not a logical concept of thought. Like every great that has stirred and advanced humanity, it was a religious emotion, a great act of faith, a courageous leap into the dark unknown. As long as that dream persists to strengthen the heart of man, Emerson will remain one of its prophets” (198). Positioned by F.O. Matthiessen in *American Renaissance* as the father of America literature, Emerson established a literary tradition in America that characterized the key themes of individualism and self-reliance in the American culture. With his essay “Self-Reliance” emphasizing the responsibility each individual has in manifesting their own destiny in a nation filled with opportunities and illustrating that true enlightenment can only come from within, Emerson’s transcendental philosophy gave expression to what one would come to understand as the American dream. With Emerson as its initiating force, his essay “Self-Reliance” affirms and expresses the unrelenting spirit of the American dream in American literature.

## Huck, Jim, and the American Dream

In his book *American Literature and the Dream*, Frederic I. Carpenter gives literary life to the American dream and argues that there is much to be learned about American beliefs by looking at how the dream has been shaped and reshaped by different periods in American literary history. Giving little attention to the historical tradition and narrative of the self-made man as first expressed in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, Carpenter credits Emerson with truly defining and realizing in literary form the ideal American self and dream, in which the principles of liberty and human dignity are preserved in law and lived, where fundamental human rights for all regardless of race or background triumph, and a life can be lived with dignity without any form of oppression. However, Emerson's articulation of self-reliance, individualism, and the integrity of one's own mind and—soul values that would come to define the American dream—were severely challenged by the institution of slavery. Under the influence of slavery, the literature of the nineteenth century transitioned from portraying the seemingly endless and limitless romantic notions of the American dream to portraying the true and often harsh realities of the American experience. When examining the history of the American dream in literature as it pertains to issues like the institution of slavery and racism in the nineteenth century, no novel in American literature better captures the struggles the American dream had to confront and overcome amid an era of intense racial discrimination and legal barriers to freedom than Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Published in 1885, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is regarded by many critics as the greatest literary achievement in American literature. Ernest Hemingway wrote perhaps the

most famous assessment of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, declaring, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*...There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since" (quoted in introduction to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, XXV). Although the novel was written in wake of the Reconstruction era where the country looked to rebuild and unify itself after the Civil War, Twain sets the story during slavery times, to tell the story of Huck Finn and Jim, an escaped slave, traveling down the Mississippi in search of their vision of individual freedom before the Civil War. By setting the novel in the recent past, Twain was able to critique and satirize indirectly the prejudices of southern whites that had laid the foundation for slavery and that persisted in the Jim Crow South post-Civil War. With individual freedom being a foundational value and theme in both American literature and the American dream, Twain writes a social critique of the idea of individual freedom by juxtaposing the idea of freedom against the institution of slavery and society. If Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson craft in literary form an idyllic and tangible vision of the American dream toward which all can seemingly aspire, then in *The Adventures Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain's fictionalized characters, Huck and Jim, expose the hypocrisies and limits that prevent some individuals from achieving the American dream because of their race. Although Twain begins the novel with an introductory warning that "persons attempting to find a Motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a Moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a Plot in it will be shot," it ironically suggests the presence of each in the novel.

The central theme of *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* is the constant struggle between freedom and slavery, broadly defined. The struggle for personal freedom exists for



both Huck and Jim. For Huck the struggle for freedom exists in the captivity of thought and behavior he so despises as Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas attempt to “civilize” him, while for Jim the struggle for freedom exists in the shadows of the institution of slavery. Although Huck has been taken in and adopted by the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, he feels shackled by the constraints in which they attempt to “civilize” him. As Huck says, “The widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would civilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways...” (1). Miss Watson “pecks” relentlessly at Huck. Convinced of his unredeemable uncivilized qualities she is constantly reminding Huck of hell, or “the bad place,” as she describes it. The differences between right and wrong or good and evil are startling and perplexing to a naïve and “uneducated” Huck. When speaking of “the bad place” Huck says,

Miss Watson would say, “Don’t put your feet up there, Huckleberry,” and “Don’t scrunch up like that, Huckleberry—set up;” and pretty soon she would say, “Don’t gap and stretch like that, Huckleberry—why don’t you try to behave?” Then she told me all about the bad place, and I said I wished I was there. She got mad, then, but I didn’t mean any harm. All I wanted was to go somewhere; all I wanted was a change—I warn’t particular. She said it was wicked to say what I said; she said wouldn’t say it for the whole world; she was going to live so as to go to the good place. Well, I couldn’t see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn’t try for it. (4)

Huck’s innocent and naïve explanations of his thoughts that appear logical to him are sacrilegious to Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas. The ladies represent the “civilized” culture

and Huck views himself as wicked and a sinner as he struggles to conform to their ways.

Exposing the hypocrisy of a culture that perceives itself morally good and righteous amid the height of slavery, Twain satirizes Watson's Christianity and belief of the "good place" as she is a slaveholder and the owner of Jim. As Elaine and Harry Mensh have explained,

Literal-minded though he may be, Huck's questioning of Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas places a certain distance between him and society's expectations...Twain's oblique message about a slaveowner who says she thinks only of the welfare other people, who reads to Huck from Bible "makes it clear that she is completely" oblivious that she is attempting to inspire him [Huck] with reverence for an infant [Moses] who grows up to lead his people out of slavery. (22)

While Huck appears to understand the teachings of religious redemption and providence, he struggles to resolve in his mind the value of such teachings that on the surface appear contradictory, impractical or untrue. He does not reject religion, but his literal mindset does not allow him to fully understand its value or worth. Thus, making Huck believe he is a sinner and unredeemable. Huck explains,

I went into the woods and turned it over in my mind a long time, but I couldn't see no advantages about it—except for other people—so at last I reckoned I wouldn't worry about it any more, but just let it go. Sometimes the widow would take me one side and talk about Providence in a way to make a body's mouth water; but maybe next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again. I judged I could see that there was two Providences, and a poor chap

would stand considerable show with the widow's Providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there warn't no help for him anymore. I thought it all out, and reckoned I would belong to the widow's, if he wanted me, though I couldn't make out how he was agoing to be any better off then what he was before, seeing I was so ignorant and so kind of low-down and ornery. (14)

Although Huck would like to be a valuable part of a "civilized" society, his youthful idea of personal freedom clashes with the social constraints and pressures of society lead him to make the decision to runaway.

As Huck's conscience about what is right and what is wrong begins to form and his quest for personal freedom begins to stir in his mind, Jim's quest for personal freedom is more complex as he attempts to escape the bonds of slavery. Having learned that Miss Watson intends to sell him to a plantation in New Orleans, away from his family, Jim takes flight to the North. But Jim is chasing a more concrete ideal of personal freedom than Huck. For Jim, personal freedom literally and legally means not being a piece of property. After being kidnapped and held captive by his father, Huck plans his ultimate escape by faking his death and taking to the Mississippi River. When he arrives at Jackson's Island, he is surprised to discover Jim there as well.

With both characters thus placed in similar circumstances--one running from the chains of civilization and his negligent father, the other seeking freedom from slavery--Huck and Jim embark on their journeys to freedom together. As Huck attempts to do what is right by his own heart and conscience, he cannot help but feel that his actions and decisions are wicked and immoral because of his corrupt and hypocritical upbringing. For example, when Huck firsts

learns of Jim's running away from Mrs. Watson he promises not to reveal his secret. In the novel Huck says, "'Well, I did. I said I wouldn't, and I'll stick to it. Honest injun, I will. People would call me a low-down abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum—but that don't make no difference. I ain't going to tell, and I ain't agoing back there, anyways'" (53). Even though he feels that he is the wicked one, not the institution of slavery, Huck embraces his "wickedness" and makes peace with it as he begins to recognize Jim's humanity. In doing so, Huck demonstrates to Twain's post-Emancipation readers that doing what is consciously right and following traditions or what society deems right are not always the same.

As Huck and Jim seek individual freedom from the constraining customs and laws of society, Mark Twain examines the notion of equality and the lack thereof within the American culture by exposing the depths of racism and the hypocrisy of a society supposedly built upon the values of individual and universal freedom and equality. In the novel, Twain uses Huck's father Pap to illustrate the deep racial prejudices of society. In one of his angry drunken outbursts he becomes furious when he encounters a free black man who is highly educated and can vote. As Pap explains of the encounter,

There was a free nigger there from Ohio; a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat; and there ain't a man in that town that's got as fine clothes as what he had; and he had a gold watch and chain, and a silver-headed cane—the awfulest old gray-headed nabob in the state. And what do you think? They said he was p'fessor in a college...They said he could vote, when he was at home. Well that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a coming to? It was 'lection day, and I was just

about to go and vote myself, if I warn't too drunk to git there; but when they told me there was a state in this country where they'd let that nigger vote, I drew out. I says I'll never vote again...And to see the cool way of that nigger— why he wouldn't a give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out o'the way. (34)

Pap exemplifies the characteristics of a racist, uneducated white man of the time. His criticism of an educated, well-to-do black man is an ironic contrast to himself, an uneducated drunken white man. The irony in the contrast lies in the fact that while Pap, himself, represents the lowest class in Southern white society he still feels superior to the educated African American. What is even more ironic in the contrast between the well-to-do black man and Pap is the description of Pap. Whereas the well-to-do black man is neatly dressed, Pap is described with long and greasy hair that hung down so low “you could see his eyes shining through, like he was behind vines. It was all back; no gray...There warn't no color in his face where his face showed, it was white; not like another white's, but a white to make a body sick...As for his clothes—just rags, that was all” (23). Pap's animosity for the rights that the “mulatter” possesses illustrates Twain's attack on the idea that white people are entitled to more rights than blacks and exposes the racism and ignorance still present in Southern white society during the Reconstruction period. As Elaine and Harry Mensh explain:

The supposedly great divide between Pap and respectable citizens narrows if a reader detaches Pap's sentiments from his disreputable character. Not only would proper, well-to-do townspeople be as outraged as Pap at a black man's voting; they would also be as furious as the ragged Pap at the sight of well-dressed free black, albeit for a different reason; they would regard him as a

deplorable example for their slave. And however critical the respectable ones might otherwise be of Pap, none would reprimand him for pushing a black man off the road. (70)

It is also possible that Pap's drunken rant serves an allegory for the era in which Twain wrote *Huck Finn*, when African Americans were being disfranchised by violent means such as lynching. Either way, through this one episode, Twain further illustrates the complexities of achieving the American dream and the boundaries that keep many from it when discussing the issue of race in America.

While the journey on the Mississippi River is both an actual and a moral journey for Huck, it also represents his search for identity, a theme that is common to both American literature and the fulfillment of the American dream. On the river and, thus, away from civilization slavery does not violate the natural ties between two human beings. In one of the most important scenes on the river, Huck and Jim are separated by a thick fog. Not being able to find Jim and the raft for some time, Huck eventually discovers the raft floating along the Mississippi and sees Jim sleeping. Resorting back to his mischievous ways, Huck decides to make Jim believe that they were never separated by the fog and it was all just a dream. When Jim wakes and sees Huck he is filled with joy. Jim says, "Goodness gracious, is dat you, Huck? En you ain't dead—you ain't drowned—you's back agin? It's too good for true, honey, it's too good for true. Lemme look at you, chile, lemme feel o'you. No, you ain't dead! You's back again, 'live en soun', jis' de same ole Huck—de same old Huck, thanks to goodness!" (103). Yet Huck's attempt to fool Jim that the whole incident was merely a dream quickly back-fires and Jim is upset by his shenanigans. When Jim realizes he has been fooled, he says, "En when I wake up and fine you

back agin', all safe en soun', de tears come en I could a got down on my knees and kiss' yo' foot I's so thankful. En all you wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's an makes 'em ashamed" (103). It is in this moment that Huck sees Jim's humanity.

Scholar Forest Robinson interprets this moment as "decisive in Jim's development, for it is the first and perhaps the only time that he gives direct expression to his feelings" (218). Huck's reaction demonstrates the beginning of his moral journey in seeing Jim as human being with real emotions. He explains, "It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger—but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way" (105). Neil Schmitz highlights the enormity of Huck's reaction, noting that Huck "formalizes his apology so that it comes not just from Huck, but from the white boy, and goes not just to Jim, but to the black man, the whole race" (104).

Throughout the novel, Huck's main struggle is with his conscience and the set of morals with which he has been raised. As they get closer and closer to Cairo and Jim begins to boast about his freedom, Huck is hit with the reality that he is helping a slave gain freedom, something that the society Huck has been brought up in believes to be sinful and criminal. Of this realization, Huck narrates:

Well, I can tell you it made me all over trembly and feverish, too, to hear him, because I begun to get it through my head that he was most free—and who was to blame for it? Why, me. I couldn't get that out of my conscience, no how nor no way. It got to troubling me so I couldn't rest; I couldn't stay still one place. It

hadn't ever come home to me before, what this thing was that I was doing. But now it did; and it staid with me, and scorched me more and more. I tried to make out to myself that I warn't to blame, because I didn't run Jim off the from his rightful owner; but it warn't no use, conscience up and says, every time, "But you knowed he was running for his freedom, and you could a paddled ashore and told somebody." That was so—I couldn't get around that, noway. (123-124)

In an attempt to relieve his guilt, Huck sets off to shore with the intention of not asking if they had passed Cairo, but rather to turn Jim in. A critical moment in Huck's development occurs during this apparent crisis, when he meets two men on the river looking for a runaway slave. The two men ask him about the man on board the raft and Huck protects Jim by making up an elaborate tale about his dad who is dying of smallpox. Reflecting on this deception, Huck decides that he has done so because he is naturally evil and wicked, and he only did what naturally made him feel better. Huck explains his rationalizing:

I got aboard the raft, feeling bad and low because I knowed very well I had done wrong, and I see it warn't no use for me to try to learn to do right; a body that don't get started right when he's little, ain't got no show—when the pinch comes there ain't nothing to back him up and keep him to his work, and so he gets beat. Then I thought a minute, and says to myself, hold on,—s'pose you'd a done a right a give Jim up; would you felt better than what you do now? No says I, I'd feel bad—I'd feel just the same way I do now. Well, then, says I, what's the use in learning to do right when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? I was stuck. I



couldn't answer that. So I reckoned I wouldn't bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever comes handiest at the time. (127)

As many critics view this moment crucial to Huck's moral development and conscience, they also see this moment crucial in the novel's treatment of racism and slavery. Neil Schmitz explains that "[t]he distance between the boy and the man, between the black man desperate for a secure and honorable place in society and the white youth in desperate flight from that same society, is here sharply defined" (105). When discussing the pressures of society Leo Marx notes that "[t]he conflict between what people think they stand for and what social pressure forces them to do is central to the novel...Huck knows how he feels about Jim, but he also knows what he is expected to do about Jim" (57). In not being able to recognize the enormity of his actions, Huck thus fails to recognize that he has taken a stand against what Twain viewed as a morally corrupt society at the time.

As the novel moves from one episode to another, Huck and Jim run into the King and Duke, two con artists who eventually turn in Jim for the monetary reward offered for his capture. It is in this episode in the novel where Huck's sound heart, yet still-deformed conscience further turns and changes for the better. Shortly after the King and Duke make their way onto the raft, Huck once again clearly sees Jim's humanity when he catches Jim talking in his sleep and hears Jim's longing for his family. Huck narrates,

When I waked up, just at daybreak, he was setting there...moaning and mourning to himself...He was thinking about his wife and his children, away up yonder, and he was low and homesick...nights, when he judged I was asleep, and

saying "Po'little 'Lizabeth! Po'little Johnny! It might hard; spec'l ain't ever gwyne to see you no mo', no mo'! (201)

Following these touching moments of unmediated access to Jim's humanity, Huck begins to demonstrate his growing respect toward Jim. Speaking of Huck's moral evolution, Chadwick explains that-

Huck, a product of his environment, could not initially identify Jim as a loving, caring husband and father. But now, in a major turning point in the novel, he sees a father who is most contrite for his mistakes. Twain elevates Jim to a stature in this chapter unparalleled by any characters yet introduced...In one crystalline moment, Jim's manhood emerges. Here is a man who has undertaken the most dangerous quest possible for a southern African American in the nineteenth century. Here is a man who can show emotion over the loss of his family. Here is a man who shares with us his dark truth about himself as a father. (105)

Huck's understanding of Jim's humanity is also demonstrated when he realizes that Jim has been sold to the Phelps by the King and Duke. Upon learning of Jim being sold Huck laments, "After all this long journey, and after all we'd done for them scoundrels [the King and Duke], here was it all come to nothing, everything all busted up and ruined, because they could have the heart to serve Jim such a trick as that, and make him a slave again all his life and amongst strangers too, for forty dirty dollars" (268).

Up until this point Huck had only protected Jim from discovery, but in the last episode of the novel he now plots Jim's escape from the Phelps farm. Rather than let his socially-formed conscience guide him, he listens to his heart which now tells him that Jim is a human being. He

turns his back on society's beliefs and does what feels right in his heart. When contemplating writing a letter to Miss Watson, Huck says, "It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath and then says to myself: "Alright right, then, I'll go to hell"—and tore it up" (271). Scholar Charles Nilon explains the complexities behind this fateful decision:

Up to this point [Huck] he has been able to conduct his relationship with Jim, as he has learned and wanted to, with increasing decency. His decision not to send the letter proclaims his moral quality and his deviation from southern conventions...like some people in the South who felt about black people and their freedom as has learned to feel about Jim, Huck knows that if he wishes to help Jim, he will have to do it without offending those in power, to who he cannot speak openly and honestly about his purposes. It becomes clear in Chapter 31 that Huck may have to compromise and dissemble. (66)

Aside from Twain's use of the word *nigger* throughout the novel, much of the controversy surrounding *Huck Finn* comes from the story's ending. Through a series of fantastical coincides, Huck arrives at the Phelps farm and is soon joined by Tom Sawyer who enthusiastically agrees to help in the freeing of Jim. As Huck describes, "Well, I let go all holts, then, like I was shot. It was the most astonishing speech I ever heard—and I'm bound to say Tom Sawyer fell, considerable, in my estimation. Only I couldn't believe it. Tom Sawyer a nigger stealer" (284). While Huck's deformed conscience appears to have evolved to reflect his sound heart, with Tom's arrival he slips back into the whimsical and irresponsible world of childish

adventures he has left behind. Leo Marx believes it is this moment in the novel that “makes so many readers uneasy because they rightly sense that it jeopardizes the significance of the entire novel” (53). Even though Huck does not know that Jim has been freed, he agrees to Tom’s scheme of freeing Jim and allows for Tom to turn Jim’s escape into a game. Huck allows for Tom to dangerously toy with Jim’s life. As Marx notes, “But at this point Tom reappears. Soon Huck has fallen almost completely under his sway once more, and we are asked to believe that the boy who felt pit for the rogues is now capable of making Jim’s capture the occasion for a game. He becomes Tom’s helpless accomplice, submissive and gullible” (57). Consumed by Tom’s adventurous spirit, Huck becomes insensitive to Jim’s feelings and forgets about the importance of Jim’s friendship. Further explaining Tom’s role in Jim’s freedom from the Phelps farm, Nilon compares it to the actual historical situation of the time and perhaps Twain’s comment on the times: “People who behaved like Tom Sawyer defined “the Negro problem” developed the concept of gradualism, and persuaded a nation to accept the “separate but equal” principle as just. The Tom Sawyers of the South made attempts of the Huckleberry Finns to free themselves and black people difficult and sometimes prevented or perverted their efforts” (67).

What is most controversial about the ending of the novel is the degradation and unraveling of Jim. Throughout the journey, Jim’s humanity makes him the most sensible character in the novel. He is a father figure to Huck. He teaches Huck about friendship and life, but at the end of the novel he is portrayed and brought back to the traditional stereotype of a submissive and naïve slave. During the Phelps farm episode Jim is more enslaved than before. He gullibly goes along with Tom’s scheme of escape and when things fail measurably, Jim

submissively returns to the farm and is enslaved once again. When describing Jim's return, Huck says, "Jim never said nothing, and he never let on to know me, and they took him to the same cabin...and chained him again" (352). The emasculation of Jim's character in the final chapters exposes the hypocritical and harsh realities of the times. As Leo Marx explains, "[Jim] has been made over in the image of a flat stereotype: the submissive stage-Negro. These antics divest Jim, as well as Huck, of much of his dignity and individuality" (57). Although Jim is technically a "free" man, his degradation and emasculation at the end of the novel demonstrates Twain's attempt to expose the truth on racism persisting in America. While the ending of the novel becomes one giant farce, Twain illustrates that even though African Americans are legally free, the issues of race and equality remain a problem within the American culture. Scholar Gerald Graff notes, "Many readers have felt [the final chapters] constitute an anticlimactic letdown, even a betrayal, in which Twain lapses into trivial slapstick comedy and thus loses sight of the heroic moral theme he has developed up to this point— Jim's struggle for freedom from slavery" (279). Even so, the novel ultimately serves as a critical commentary on the limitations to achieving the American dream during Reconstruction where African Americans were effectively being legally re-enslaved in the Jim Crow South. When discussing the last section of the novel, Chadwick claims that: "[t]he ending completes Twain's message about the failure and yet the untapped potential of the post-Reconstruction period. This section—this allegedly failed section—painfully and carefully depicts the thorny path that African-American had yet to tread during Twain's own day" (131). As a satire on racism—issues that persist in our time—the novel stands the test of time and as a model of the fundamental

racial ambiguities and complexities of actualizing the American dream, even as it maintains the dream's ideals by showing that they have yet to be fully realized.

## **Gatsby and the Corruption of the American Dream**

In “Self-Reliance” Emerson cautions, “Do not seek yourself outside yourself” (203). In the nineteenth century Emerson envisioned a culture where truth, self-reliance, intuition, and the divine spirit shaped each American individual and defined the path toward fulfilling what we came to call the American dream. Emerson further believed that those who chose to conform and give into the pressures of society were forced into artificial and superficial behavior that distracted and discouraged people from fulfilling their own personal truth in a country full of endless opportunities. As he states, “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in the solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (181).

At the turn of the twentieth century, particularly during the 1920s, the wide-eyed optimism and historical tradition of fulfilling the American dream became equated with social status, material possessions, and financial wealth. But in an era of infinite possibilities where the manifestation of achieving success and wealth was plausible, some works of American literature also sounded a note of caution, suggesting that the American dream was becoming corrupted with materialism and excess. Specifically, with his literary portraits and descriptive images of the “Jazz Age,” F. Scott Fitzgerald gave life to the gaiety and intended unconventionality of a wealthy American culture during the early 1920s. With *The Great Gatsby*, he offered a powerful critique of an era that had become increasingly obsessed with material possessions and financial wealth as the means for indicating success. Published in 1925, *The Great Gatsby* tells the fictionalized story of Jay Gatsby a self-made man whose

misguided pursuit and attainment of success personifies the decay and corruption of the American dream in the 1920s, where the “dreamer” solely aspires to acquire wealth, material things, and social status. In the novel, the original principles and values that defined the hope and optimism of the American dream are replaced by corrupt and self-indulgent values. Whereas Emerson believed in the unfailing sanctity of an individual’s pursuit of the authentic self and personal freedom as a means for achieving the American dream, in *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald illustrates how the fundamental principles of the American dream can become tainted when the motivation to achieve success and personal fulfillment are exclusively fueled by attaining financial and material wealth.

In the novel, Fitzgerald uses Jay Gatsby to personify the romantic promise and disillusionment of the American dream. In the course of the novel, we learn that Jay Gatsby was born in the Midwest as James Gatz—a young man without money or an education. His desire to break out of the poverty and limits of his upbringing demonstrate a fundamental principle and belief of the American dream: that one can achieve anything through hard work and perseverance. Reinventing himself as Jay Gatsby, he is eager to get out of the small farm town he was born into and make a name for himself. In the novel, the narrator Nick explains of Gatsby:

James Gatz—that was really, or at least legally, his name. He had changed it at the age of seventeen and at the specific moment that witnessed the beginning of his career...I suppose he’d had the name ready for a long time, even then. His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was the Jay Gatsby of West



Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything means just that...So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end. (98-99)

The changing of his name to Jay Gatsby symbolizes the beginning of a new life in pursuit of his romantic notion of the American dream. When speaking of a young Gatsby's anxiousness to make something of himself, his father says "of course we was broke up when he run off from home, but I see now there was a reason for it. He knew he had a big future in front of him...Jimmy was bound to get ahead" (174-175).

Gatsby's opportunity to get out of the Midwest comes when he encounters a man by the name of Dan Cody, who introduces and educates Gatsby on the shady business world of illegal trades. The education in ruthlessness that Gatsby receives from Dan Cody suddenly provides him the ability to meet his goal of attaining financial and material wealth the quickest and easiest ways possible. Of Gatsby's initial encounter with Dan Cody, Nick laments:

He [Dan Cody] had been coasting along all too hospitable shores for five years when he turned up as James Gatz's destiny in Little Girl Bay. To young Gatz, resting on his oars and looking up at the railed deck, that yacht represented all the beauty and glamour in the world. I suppose he smiled at Cody—he had probably discovered that people like him when he smiled. At any rate Cody asked him a few questions (one of them elicited the brand new name) and found that he was quick and extravagantly ambitious. A few days later he took him to Duluth and bought him a blue coat, six pairs of white duck trousers, and a

yachting cap. And when the yacht left for the West Indies and the Barbary Coast  
Gatsby left too. (101)

Throughout the novel, it becomes apparent that Gatsby has fallen victim to the seduction of the monetary element of the American dream by the methods he is willing to take to achieve it. Although it is never clearly confirmed as to how Gatsby attained his wealth, it is implied that he has attained his wealth through the bootlegging business and racketeering. It becomes more important for Gatsby to become successful and achieve his version of the American dream than to live by the morals, values, and standards with which he was raised. By consciously choosing to go against the morals and principles that once guided his life, Gatsby demonstrates how he becomes a victim of a corrupt American dream that views financial wealth and excessive materialism as true fulfillment.

Scholar William Fahey has examined Gatsby's pursuit of the American dream and discusses how his romantic view of wealth did not prepare him for the self-absorbed, conceited, and corrupt group of people he would associate himself with. Fahey says, "Gatsby's dream is a naïve dreamed based on the fallacious assumption that material possessions are synonymous with happiness, harmony, and beauty" (70). Gatsby is a man who equates quantity with quality, cost with value. He throws lavish parties for countless people, but has no desire to make friends. He has an extensive library with real books, but no knowledge of books. He entertains large groups of society's elite because of his unexplainable desire for something more, something greater. At the novel's beginning Nick declares:

Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction—Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected

scorn. If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promise of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away...it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall never find again. No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men. (2)

For Nick, Gatsby is a mythic character who embodies the conflict between the illusions and realities of wealth and materialism at the core of the American experience during the 1920s.

In the novel, Nick does not meet Gatsby face to face until he attends one of his extravagant and over the top parties. Fitzgerald does not let the reader meet Gatsby until he has concretely crafted the image of the opulence of Gatsby's fantastical world. Nick describes his introduction to this world:

There was music from my neighbor's house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the stars. At the high tide in the afternoon I watched guests diving from the tower of his raft, or taking the sun on the hot sand of his beach while his two motor-boats slit the waters of the Sound...On week-ends his Rolls-Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city between nine in the morning and long past midnight, while his station wagon scampered like a brisk yellow

bug to meet all trains. And on Mondays eight servants, including an extra gardener, toiled all day with mops and scrubbing-brushes and hammers and garden-shears, repairing the ravages of the night before. (39)

While the extravagance of Gatsby's parties demonstrates the amount of wealth he has accumulated, the parties also illustrate the illusion of a fulfilled American dream. Scholar John W. Aldridge discusses the reasons why people attend Gatsby's parties. As Aldridge has suggested that except for the extravagant material possessions Gatsby offers, the people that attend his parties are in pursuit of a reality from which they have become separated. He writes, "The guests come to his parties in pursuit of some final ecstasy, some ultimate good time that the American dream has always promised them. Gatsby is the self-appointed agent of the dream, but they can never get close to him or discover his true identity, just as neither he nor they can hope to discover an identity for the dream" (59). Ironically, it is through Gatsby's elaborate and opulent gatherings where the shattered illusions of the American dream and reality go their separate ways.

As Fitzgerald uses Gatsby to personify the romantic promise and disillusionment of the American dream, the intrinsic relationship between American literature and the ideals of the American dream is also made clear in the novel when he roots a young Jay's vision for success in Franklin's thirteen virtues proclaimed in his *Autobiography*. Scholar Thomas Stavola has examined Gatsby's creation and devotion to the "schedule" and "general resolves" he kept and connects them to Benjamin Franklin's belief in hard work as a path toward success and fulfillment of the American dream. Stavola notes, "With boyhood ambitions Gatsby was eager to get ahead, in a copy of *Hopalong Cassidy* he noted a schedule and general resolves...a rigid

formula reminiscent of the writings in Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* which often stressed the importance of self-improvement and hard work if one is to succeed in America" (134). As Stavola suggests, the "schedule" and "general resolves" bear a striking resemblance to the thirteen virtues put forth by Franklin in his *Autobiography*. Written on the back cover *Hopalong Cassidy*, Gatsby outlined his "schedule" and "general resolves":

Rise from bed.....	6.00 A.M.
Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling.....	6.15-6.30
Study electricity, etc.....	7.15-8.15
Work.....	8.30-4.30 P.M.
Baseball and sports.....	4.30-5.00
Practice elocution, poise and how to attain in....	5.00-6.00
Study needed inventions.....	7.00-9.00

#### General Resolves

No wasting time at Shafters or [a name, indecipherable]  
 No more smoking or chewing  
 Bath every other day  
 Read one improving book or magazine per week  
 Save \$5.00 [crossed out] \$3.00 per week  
 Be better to parents. (174)

Of the parallels between young Gatz's "schedule" and "resolves" and Franklin's Virtues, Floyd Watkins explains:

Many of the "GENERAL RESOLVES" listed at the bottom of Gatsby's schedule can be traced to Franklin's list of thirteen virtues, and the result of the comparison is often comic as well as pathetic. Franklin's "Cleanliness" becomes for Gatsby "Bath every other day"; "Industry" is "No wasting time at Shafters or [a name, indecipherable]"; "Frugality" is "Save \$5.00 [crossed out] \$3.00 per week"; "Temperance" is "No more smokeing or chewing"; "Sincerity. Use no hurtful deceit" and "Justice. Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty" possibly be-come for Gatsby more specific and less inclusive: "Be better to parents." Perhaps a source for Gatsby's "Read one improving book or magazine per week" may be found in Franklin's scheduled notation to "Read" during his noon hour. From five to six o'clock during the day Gatsby plans to "Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it," but in this resolution he remembered none of the virtue to be found in Franklin's description of "Sincerity": "think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly." In every single parallel Gatsby took Franklin's general virtue and listed in its stead one concrete and very specific resolution which was less demanding than that found in his source. These parallels leave only two activities or resolves that are scheduled by Gatsby and that are not to be found in Franklin: "Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling," from 6:15 to 6:30 in the morning; and "Baseball and sports," from 4:30 to 5:00 in the afternoon. The earlier American's recreations, "Music or diversion, or conversation," were too inactive and intellectual for his follower. (252)

While a young “Jay Gatz” is an ambitious and hard-working whose “schedule” and “general resolves” are evocative of Franklin’s virtues, the resolutions become only memories for Jay Gatsby. For him, noble and honest values such as hard-work and the pursuit of happiness have been disregarded for materialism and financial wealth.

As the plot of the novel unfolds and more of Gatsby’s past is revealed, we become aware that everything that was once pure and noble in his Franklinian and Emersonian dream of self-realization has been corrupted by his pursuit of material and financial wealth in the interest of winning the love of Daisy Buchanan. Fitzgerald uses Gatsby’s pursuit of achievement and fulfillment as a symbol of a corrupt American dream because Gatsby genuinely believes that material and financial wealth can acquire anything, including love. Nick slowly reveals that most of the lavish and opulent parties Gatsby throws are not to make friends or socialize but to attract Daisy. Gatsby’s misguided perception of material and financial wealth as a path toward personal fulfillment is a product of his misconception of the principles that define the American dream. As Fahey suggests, “He has lived not for himself, but for his dream, for his vision of the good life inspired by the beauty of the lovely rich girl” (71). His idealism is so great that even though Daisy is married and they resume their affair, he still views Daisy as the golden girl he knew five years ago and is set on having a future with her:

“And she doesn’t understand,” he said. “She used to be able to understand.

We’d sit for hours—”

He broke off and began to walk up and down a desolate path of fruit rinds and discarded favours and crushed flowers.

‘I wouldn’t ask too much of her,’ I ventured. ‘You can’t repeat the past.’

‘Can’t repeat the past?’ he cried incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’

He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house just out of reach of his hand.

“‘I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before.’” he said, nodding determinedly, “‘She’ll see,’” (111)

For him the five years are as nothing, everything is now exactly as it was then. Aldridge further examines Gatsby’s idealized belief in a dream far larger than any possibility of fulfillment noting that:

He shares with them all the deficiency that makes them “subtly unadaptable to Eastern life,” but he also shares their fate of inhabiting a culture in which dreams along with most demands of the spirit have no place. He aspires to the good life as though it were a thing of material achievement—a material woman or a woman corrupted by materialism...For the Buchanans, wealth is not a means to the fulfillment of any dream; it is the hard fact of life against which the hard fact of Gatsby’s manipulations can have no effect. (59)

Gatsby’s lapse in judgment is in not understanding that Daisy represents both the material success and corruption that wealth can bring. She is careless with the lives of others. She lets Gatsby take the fall for the unintentional killing of Myrtle Wilson. Her careless actions eventually result in Gatsby’s demise.

Moreover, Daisy and her husband Tom Buchanan embody the decay of the American dream in the novel. While they belong to the exclusive and elitist West Egg social circle and are extremely wealthy, they are consistently depicted as useless and unhappy. Tom Buchanan is



dissatisfied and like Gatsby seems to be searching for something more even though he is wealthy and has access to anything he desires. Although Daisy and Tom have committed infidelities they are united by their shallow, boring lives. As Fahey suggests of the Buchanans, “They instinctively seek out each other because each recognizes the other’s strength in the corrupt spiritual element they inhabit” (72). Upon learning of the death of Myrtle and Gatsby, they show no sense of remorse and carry on with their lives. Nick perceives them to be heartless and careless examples of the damaging and emotionally deadening effects that excessive wealth has on anyone who lives without principles other than materialism. Their focus on appearance and monetary value demonstrates that achieving power and wealth does not result in happiness. As Nick concludes of the Buchanans, “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made” (180-181).

The green light that shines at the dock of the Buchanan’s not only symbolizes Gatsby’s longing for Daisy but also Gatsby’s quest for even more—his version of the American dream. Even though he has acquired all things money can buy, the green light stands for all of Gatsby’s unfulfilled dreams. Returning from an evening at the Buchanan’s, Nick hangs out on the lawn for a final moment under the stars and suddenly becomes aware that Gatsby is near. At the end of Chapter I, Nick observes Gatsby looking at the green light:

I decided to call to him...But I didn’t call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone—he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was

trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness. (21)

A clear description of what the green light symbolizes is illustrated in Chapter V when Gatsby is speaking to Daisy as they stand at one of the windows of his mansion:

“If it wasn’t for the mist we could see your home across the bay,” said Gatsby.

“You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock.”

Daisy put her arm through his abruptly, but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching he. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on the dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (94)

The green light appears several times throughout the novel, most notably at the end:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...and one fine morning—

So we beat on, boast against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (182)

If adhering the Franklinian and Emersonian ideals of individualism and self-reliance, the green light would symbolizes the endless possibilities of the American dream where genuine hard

work and perseverance is rewarded with the promise that life can be different and better. But in Gatsby's decadent American world of materialism and excess, the promise of the American dream lies beyond the green light, always out of reach, because it is rooted in the shallow and hollow values of materialism and financial wealth.

The inevitable difference between promise and achievement, between illusion and reality is the story of the American experience and American dream, and Gatsby represents a man who wants to have more than he has, to be more than he is. Fitzgerald illustrates the parallels between Gatsby's life and the American experience. Fitzgerald concludes the novel with Nick saying:

Most of the big shores places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to capacity for wonder. (182)

Fitzgerald's vision of corrupt and decayed American dream in *The Great Gatsby* forces one to question whether the seemingly timeless notion of the American dream is corrupt and deceitful in itself, or if it is society that manipulates and alters the original principles and values of the

American dream. Fitzgerald offers a critique of a materialistic society and the effects it can have in tarnishing the American dream and the American experience. The American experience, as Fitzgerald's views it, may be one of aspiration and failure, but in that it is also open to critique and renewal, it is ultimately one of hope.

## Conclusion

The multifaceted and evolving concept of the American dream has been researched and studied for well over a century. Since our culture and nation are not defined by a single shared history, religion or language, the ideals defined in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence have allowed for the notion of the American dream to evolve over time, such that it has expanded and united racial and social classes. The ideas central to what one thinks of as the seemingly timeless American dream have been present since the beginning of our nation. The beliefs in individualism, self-actualization, and self-reliance, which one understands as having the potential to fulfill his or her destiny and believe in the promise that life can be different, are beliefs that have been meticulously interwoven into the fabric of the American culture from the Founding to the present.

While the American experience is a narrative with a life cycle of its own, the national literature of America has inspired, documented, and reflected the evolution of the American dream. The American literary canon has proved to be an important and vital catalyst of artistic expression that upholds and safeguards the aesthetics and principles of the dream. While there have been many voices and a multitude of perspectives in American literature that have portrayed elements of the American dream, the literary works of Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain and F. Scott Fitzgerald remain pillars of the American literary canon because they masterfully capture and depict perspectives of the American dream that both celebrate its persistence and challenge the various shapes that it has taken.

From Franklin and Emerson's beliefs in the unfailing sanctity of the self-reliant individual's innate ability to actualize his or her own destiny in a society full of endless possibilities, to Twain and Fitzgerald's examination of a muddled American dream where the founding principles of the "dream" are challenged by intense racial discrimination or corrupted by excess materialism and financial greed, their works remain relevant because they exemplify the resiliency of the American dream during periods of triumph, failure and tragedy in our nation's history. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, "Self-Reliance," *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Great Gatsby* are sacred texts of the American literary canon because each one of them demonstrates the promise and enthusiasm of the American experience while also serving as cautionary reminders that the American dream has proven inaccessible during moments in our history due to the barriers of race or social class in a supposedly egalitarian society. In an ever-evolving society where the "dream" is shaped and redefined by one generation to another, the constant presence of these literary pieces in the narrative of the American experience demonstrates the vital role American literature serves for preserving and sustaining—and, if necessary, critiquing—the fundamental values that construct and define the American dream.

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