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The American Dream in Twentieth-Century American Fiction: Myth and Reality

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the American Dream has remained one of the most influential themes in twentieth-century American fiction, representing ideals of success, freedom, prosperity, and social mobility. This study examines the portrayal of the American Dream in major twentieth-century American novels and analyzes the tension between its mythic promise and lived reality. Through a literary and thematic analysis of selected works by writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Arthur Miller, John Steinbeck, and Toni Morrison, the research explores how fiction reflects the changing socio-economic and cultural conditions of American society. The study highlights how early representations of the American Dream emphasized ambition, individualism, and material success, while later literary works exposed issues such as inequality, racial discrimination, moral decline, alienation, and the collapse of personal aspirations. The paper further argues that twentieth-century American fiction transforms the American Dream from a symbol of hope into a critique of capitalism, consumerism, and social injustice. By comparing idealized visions with harsh realities depicted in literary narratives, the study demonstrates that the American Dream often functions as both an inspiring national myth and a source of disillusionment. Ultimately, the research reveals the evolving complexity of American identity and values through literary expression.

Keywords: American Dream, Twentieth-Century American Fiction , Myth and Reality , Capitalism and Society, Literary Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the American Dream has occupied a central position in American culture, society, and literature throughout the twentieth century. Traditionally associated with ideas of freedom, equality, prosperity, and social mobility, the American Dream reflects the belief that every individual can achieve success and happiness through hard work and determination. Over time, however, this ideal has evolved into a complex and often contradictory concept shaped by economic inequality, social conflict, industrialization, urbanization, and changing moral values. Twentieth-century American fiction played a significant role in examining both the promises and limitations of this national ideal, revealing the tension between myth and reality in American life.

American novelists used fiction as a means to explore the aspirations, struggles, and disappointments of individuals pursuing success and identity within modern American society.



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While some literary works portray the American Dream as a source of hope and opportunity, others expose its failures, illusions, and moral consequences. Through the experiences of fictional characters, writers questioned whether the dream of material success and personal freedom was genuinely attainable or merely an unrealistic myth promoted by society. Themes such as class inequality, corruption, alienation, racial discrimination, materialism, and the decline of moral values became central to literary representations of the American Dream.

Writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller, and Toni Morrison critically examined the social realities hidden behind the idealized image of American prosperity and success. In works like *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Beloved*, these authors reveal the emotional, economic, and psychological consequences of pursuing unattainable dreams in a deeply unequal society. Their writings portray the conflict between individual ambition and social reality, demonstrating how the American Dream often becomes a source of frustration, disillusionment, and identity crisis.

This study aims to analyze the representation of the American Dream in twentieth-century American fiction by exploring the relationship between myth and reality in selected literary texts. It seeks to examine how American writers portray the dream as both an inspiring ideal and a problematic illusion shaped by historical, social, and economic conditions. The study also intends to investigate the impact of class, race, capitalism, and materialism on the pursuit of success and personal fulfillment in American society. Through literary analysis, the research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural significance and literary interpretation of the American Dream in modern American fiction.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The American Dream has long been regarded as a defining ideal of American society, symbolizing success, equality, freedom, and upward social mobility. However, twentieth-century American fiction increasingly reveals the gap between the idealized vision of the American Dream and the realities of social, economic, and cultural life. While the dream promises opportunity and prosperity for all individuals, many literary works expose its limitations, contradictions, and failures, particularly for marginalized and economically disadvantaged groups.

A major problem addressed in this study is the conflict between the myth of universal success and the reality of inequality, materialism, alienation, and social injustice portrayed in American fiction. Writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller, and Toni Morrison challenge the traditional belief that hard work alone guarantees achievement and happiness. Their works demonstrate how economic depression, racial discrimination, class divisions, and moral decline often prevent individuals from realizing their dreams.

The study therefore seeks to critically examine how twentieth-century American fiction represents the American Dream as both a cultural myth and a social reality. It aims to analyze



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the literary portrayal of aspiration, failure, identity, and disillusionment within the broader framework of American society and culture.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the concept of the American Dream in twentieth-century American fiction and analyze its representation as both a cultural ideal and a social illusion within changing historical contexts.
- To analyze how selected American writers portray themes of success, failure, ambition, materialism, social mobility, and disillusionment through characters struggling to achieve the American Dream.
- To study the impact of class inequality, capitalism, racial discrimination, and economic hardship on the pursuit of personal fulfillment and identity in twentieth-century American literary narratives.
- To compare different literary interpretations of the American Dream in selected novels and plays in order to identify similarities, contradictions, and evolving social perspectives across the century.
- To evaluate the contribution of twentieth-century American fiction in exposing the conflict between myth and reality and in critically reflecting the moral and social conditions of American society.

4. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on the representation of the American Dream in selected works of twentieth-century American fiction. The research examines how American novelists and dramatists portray the relationship between the idealized myth of success and the social realities of American life. The study primarily includes literary works that critically explore themes such as ambition, wealth, materialism, class conflict, racial inequality, alienation, identity crisis, and disillusionment.

The research is limited to selected texts by prominent American writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller, and Toni Morrison. Works such as *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Beloved* are studied to understand different perspectives on the American Dream across various social and historical contexts. The study employs textual and thematic analysis within the framework of American literary criticism and cultural studies.

The scope of the research is confined to literary interpretation and does not include detailed political or economic analysis beyond what is necessary for contextual understanding. The study also compares the experiences of characters from different social backgrounds to examine how the American Dream functions differently across class and racial divisions. Through this analysis, the research aims to provide a critical understanding of myth and reality in twentieth-century American fiction.



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5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative and analytical research methodology to examine the representation of the American Dream in twentieth-century American fiction. The research is interpretative and descriptive in nature, focusing on the relationship between myth and reality as portrayed in selected literary texts. Since the study deals with literary themes, social criticism, and cultural representation, qualitative textual analysis is considered the most appropriate method for understanding the complexities of the American Dream in fiction.

The study is primarily based on close reading and comparative analysis of selected novels and plays written by major twentieth-century American authors. The selected texts include works by F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller, and Toni Morrison. Literary works such as *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Beloved* are chosen because they critically examine the ideals and failures associated with the American Dream. These texts provide different perspectives on success, materialism, social inequality, race, identity, and disillusionment within American society.

The research uses both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of the original literary texts selected for analysis. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, research papers, literary criticism, dissertations, and scholarly essays related to American literature, cultural studies, capitalism, and the American Dream. Critical theories concerning ideology, class conflict, race, consumerism, and social realism are also consulted to establish a theoretical framework for interpretation.

The methodology employs thematic analysis to identify recurring themes associated with the American Dream. Themes such as ambition, wealth, moral decline, economic struggle, racial discrimination, alienation, identity crisis, and social mobility are examined in relation to the selected texts. The study investigates how different authors represent the dream either as an achievable ideal or as a deceptive myth shaped by capitalist values and social inequalities.

A comparative approach is also used to analyze similarities and differences among the selected literary works. This method helps in understanding how the concept of the American Dream evolved across different decades and social conditions during the twentieth century. The study further examines how characters from various social, economic, and racial backgrounds experience success, failure, and disillusionment in distinct ways.

Close textual reading forms an essential part of the research methodology. Through detailed examination of characterization, symbolism, narrative structure, dialogue, and imagery, the study interprets the deeper social and psychological meanings embedded in the literary texts. The research is limited to selected works of twentieth-century American fiction and does not attempt a complete historical analysis of all American literature. By applying qualitative, comparative, and thematic methods, the study aims to provide a critical understanding of the American Dream as both myth and reality in American fiction.



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6. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

James Truslow Adams (1931)

In *The Epic of America* (1931), James Truslow Adams introduced the concept of the American Dream as the belief that every individual should have the opportunity to achieve success and a better life through hard work and determination. Adams explains the dream as a democratic ideal rooted in equality, freedom, and personal fulfillment rather than material wealth alone. His work became foundational in understanding the cultural and historical significance of the American Dream. The book is important for literary studies because it provides the ideological framework through which twentieth-century American fiction can be interpreted and critically analyzed.

Lionel Trilling (1950)

Lionel Trilling in *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) examines the moral and social dimensions of modern American literature. Trilling argues that twentieth-century American fiction reflects the conflict between idealism and reality within American society. He particularly discusses how writers portray individual ambition, social inequality, and moral disillusionment. According to Trilling, literature reveals the psychological pressures created by materialism and social expectations. His critical approach is valuable for understanding how the American Dream operates as both a motivating ideal and a source of frustration in American fiction and cultural consciousness.

Marius Bewley (1954)

In his essay "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America" (1954), Marius Bewley analyzes F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as a critique of the American Dream. Bewley argues that Fitzgerald exposes the corruption and emptiness hidden beneath the pursuit of wealth and success. He explains how Gatsby's dream represents the failure of idealism in a materialistic society dominated by class privilege and moral decay. The essay highlights the tension between aspiration and reality in American culture. Bewley's work remains significant in studies related to the myth and disillusionment of the American Dream.

Warren French (1961)

Warren French in *John Steinbeck* (1961) examines the social criticism present in the works of John Steinbeck. French argues that Steinbeck portrays the struggles of poor and marginalized communities affected by economic hardship and social injustice. He particularly emphasizes *The Grapes of Wrath* as a critique of capitalist exploitation and the failure of the American Dream during the Great Depression. The study highlights how economic inequality and displacement challenge the ideal of equal opportunity. French's work is useful for understanding the relationship between social reality and literary representation in American fiction.

Christopher Bigsby (1987)



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In *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama* (1987), Christopher Bigsby analyzes the dramatic representation of American social values and personal aspirations. He discusses Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* as a powerful critique of the American Dream and capitalist ideology. Bigsby explains how the character of Willy Loman symbolizes the emotional and psychological collapse caused by unrealistic expectations of success and material achievement. The study highlights themes of alienation, identity crisis, and failure. Bigsby's work contributes significantly to understanding the dramatic portrayal of myth and reality in American literature.

Houston A. Baker Jr. (1984)

Houston A. Baker Jr. in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984) examines African American literary responses to social inequality and racial oppression. Baker argues that the American Dream often excludes marginalized racial communities despite its claims of equality and freedom. He discusses how African American writers challenge dominant cultural myths and expose systemic injustice in American society. His study is important for understanding how race influences access to the American Dream in literature. Baker's critical perspective broadens the discussion of myth and reality beyond economic success to include racial and cultural identity.

Toni Morrison (1992)

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison explores the relationship between race, identity, and American literary tradition. Morrison argues that American literature often constructs national identity through racial exclusion and cultural hierarchy. She examines how the myth of the American Dream ignores the experiences of African Americans and marginalized communities. Morrison's critical insights reveal the hidden racial assumptions underlying American ideals of freedom and success. Her work is significant for understanding how twentieth-century fiction questions the inclusiveness and reality of the American Dream.

Donald Pease (2009)

Donald Pease in *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009) examines the evolving ideology of American identity and national myth in literature and culture. Pease argues that the American Dream functions as a powerful cultural narrative that shapes ideas of success, patriotism, and social mobility. However, he also explains how literature exposes contradictions between national ideals and social realities such as inequality, racism, and economic instability. The study highlights the role of fiction in questioning dominant cultural myths. Pease's work provides a contemporary critical framework for analyzing myth and reality in American literary studies.

7. EXPECTED OUTPUT

The proposed study is expected to provide a critical understanding of how twentieth-century American fiction represents the American Dream as both an inspiring national ideal and a



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problematic social reality. The research will highlight the contrast between the myth of unlimited opportunity and the actual experiences of individuals affected by class inequality, economic hardship, racial discrimination, and moral decline. Through the analysis of selected literary texts, the study is expected to demonstrate how American writers use fiction to question the promises of success, freedom, and prosperity traditionally associated with the American Dream.

The study is also expected to reveal that the pursuit of material wealth and social status often leads to alienation, frustration, identity crisis, and emotional disillusionment. It will show how different authors portray the American Dream differently according to historical periods, social conditions, and cultural perspectives. The research aims to establish that literature serves as a powerful medium for exposing the contradictions between national ideals and social realities in American society.

Furthermore, the findings are expected to contribute to academic discussions related to American literature, cultural studies, and social criticism. The study may help students and researchers better understand the literary representation of aspiration, failure, and identity while encouraging further research on the evolving meaning of the American Dream in modern literature and society.

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