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## American Dream Decay

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### **Abstract**

This dissertation studies the decay of the American Dream in selected works of American literature. The American Dream has traditionally been associated with freedom, equality, opportunity, self-making, and the hope of a better life. However, American literary texts often reveal that the dream becomes unstable when it is shaped by materialism, capitalism, racial hierarchy, gender roles, class inequality, historical violence, and consumer culture. The study examines major works including F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. Through these texts, the dissertation argues that American Dream decay is not merely the failure of individual ambition but the exposure of contradictions within national ideology. The study uses Marxist criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, New Historicism, race studies, gender criticism, and ideology critique. It finds that the dream survives as desire but decays as moral, social, and economic promise when success becomes commodified and unequal. The dissertation concludes that literature critiques false dreams while also suggesting more ethical forms of hope based on dignity, memory, community, and justice.

**Keywords:** American Dream, Decay, Disillusionment, Capitalism, Race, Gender, American Literature, Materialism, Identity

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The phrase American Dream has become one of the most powerful cultural expressions in United States history, yet its literary representation is rarely simple or celebratory. In political language it suggests freedom, opportunity, equality, and the possibility that effort may transform ordinary life into achievement. In literature, however, the same phrase often appears as a disturbed promise. American writers repeatedly dramatize the distance between the dream as national faith and the dream as lived experience. This dissertation studies that distance



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through the idea of decay. Decay does not mean that the dream disappears suddenly; rather, it means that a hopeful ideal gradually loses ethical strength under the pressure of money, status, race, class, gender, consumerism, and historical violence. The American Dream survives as a desire, but its moral foundation becomes unstable. Through selected works of American literature, this study examines how characters continue to believe in success while the social world around them converts that belief into anxiety, alienation, exploitation, or tragedy. The background of the study is rooted in a broad movement of American literary history. From early narratives of settlement and selfmaking to twentieth-century novels and plays of disillusionment, writers have explored the tension between promise and reality. F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller, Lorraine Hansberry, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Don DeLillo represent different moments of this movement. Their texts do not reject hope in the same manner, but they reveal that hope is often organized by systems beyond individual control. *Gatsby* imagines wealth as access to love and social recognition; the *Joads* discover that labor and land do not guarantee dignity; Willy Loman mistakes popularity for value; the Younger family confronts racial barriers to property and belonging; Ellison's unnamed narrator learns that visibility is withheld by social power; Morrison exposes the afterlife of slavery within freedom; and DeLillo shows consumer culture turning identity into performance. Together these texts provide a foundation for studying American Dream decay as a literary, social, and ideological problem.

## Meaning and Origin of the American Dream

The term American Dream is commonly associated with James Truslow Adams, who described it as a dream of a better and fuller life for every individual according to ability and achievement. Although Adams gave the phrase its famous formulation in *The Epic of America*, the idea existed earlier in colonial, revolutionary, and democratic traditions. It was connected with settlement, religious freedom, property ownership, republican virtue, westward mobility, and the belief that the individual could escape fixed hierarchies. The dream therefore carried both moral and material meanings. It promised not merely wealth but dignity, not merely private ambition but social possibility. In its ideal form, it suggested that birth should not permanently determine destiny. This democratic emphasis made the dream attractive, especially in a society that contrasted itself with old-world aristocracy. At the same time, the origin of the dream is marked by contradiction. The promise of freedom developed alongside slavery, Indigenous dispossession, racial exclusion, patriarchal limitations, and uneven access to land and wealth. American literature often remembers these contradictions more sharply than public rhetoric does. The self-made individual appears in fiction as admirable, but also as anxious and morally compromised. The dream's origin, therefore, should not be understood as a pure beginning later corrupted by modernity. It was always a contested myth. What changes over time is the form of its contradiction. In the twentieth century, industrial capitalism, advertising, suburban life, and consumer desire altered the dream by making success increasingly visible through



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commodities. The dream became less about communal freedom and more about ownership, display, and competition. This transition prepares the ground for decay.

## II. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

### The American Dream in Early American Thought

The American Dream began before the phrase itself became famous. Early American thought imagined the continent as a place where old limitations might be left behind. Colonial and revolutionary writings often connected America with renewal, providence, liberty, and property. The new land appeared to many European settlers as a space in which history could begin again. Such thinking produced powerful narratives of selfmaking and communal promise. Yet these narratives were not innocent. They often ignored the displacement of Indigenous peoples, the exploitation of enslaved Africans, and the exclusion of women from full citizenship. From the beginning, therefore, the dream contained a double movement: it offered freedom while limiting the subjects who could fully claim that freedom. This early contradiction is important for literature because American writers often return to origins in order to expose the instability of national ideals. The dream of a new world encourages individual aspiration, but it also creates forgetfulness. Characters who pursue success frequently depend on myths that conceal violence or inequality. Gatsby's reinvention of himself as a new man, for example, echoes the larger cultural belief that identity can be remade through will. Yet his failure demonstrates that the past cannot be erased so easily. Similarly, Morrison's *Beloved* challenges any dream of American freedom that refuses to remember slavery. Early American thought therefore provides both the source of the dream and the conditions of its decay.

### Puritan Ideals and the Promise of Success

Puritan culture contributed significantly to the moral vocabulary of the American Dream. The Puritans emphasized discipline, work, calling, selfexamination, and the belief that worldly conduct could reflect spiritual order. Max Weber's analysis of the Protestant ethic helps explain how religious discipline could become connected with economic life. In American culture, hard work and moral seriousness gradually became associated with success. The promise of success was not originally merely material; it was attached to virtue, responsibility, and community. The self was expected to struggle, improve, and prove itself. This early discipline later shaped the cultural admiration for the self-made person. However, when Puritan ideals entered capitalist modernity, their ethical meaning changed. Work could become less a sign of moral calling and more a demand for productivity. Discipline could become a pressure to perform. Failure could be interpreted not as social injustice but as personal weakness. American literature frequently criticizes this transformation. Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* is destroyed by a secularized version of the old success ethic. He believes that worth must be publicly recognized and economically rewarded, but he lacks a stable moral framework beyond



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salesmanship and approval. The Puritan promise of success thus decays when spiritual purpose is replaced by market measurement. The result is guilt, anxiety, and the fear of being useless.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### **Marxist Criticism and Class Conflict**

Marxist criticism provides an important framework for analysing American Dream decay because the dream is deeply connected with property, labor, class mobility, and economic ideology. Marxist theory asks how material conditions shape consciousness and how social systems present inequality as natural. The American Dream often tells individuals that success depends on effort, talent, and discipline. Marxist criticism questions this claim by examining the class structures that limit access to opportunity. It reveals how the dream can operate as ideology: it encourages people to believe in personal achievement while obscuring exploitation, inherited privilege, and unequal ownership of resources. In the selected texts, class conflict appears in different forms. Gatsby's wealth cannot overcome the inherited class power of Tom and Daisy Buchanan. The Joads lose land and dignity because banks and owners control production. Willy Loman internalizes capitalist values and measures himself according to sales and popularity. In each case, dream decay is tied to the contradiction between individual hope and class structure. Marxist reading does not deny personal responsibility, but it refuses to treat failure as purely private. The dream decays because it promises mobility in a society where mobility is controlled by economic power. Literature exposes this contradiction through characters whose desires are shaped and damaged by capitalism.

#### **Capitalism and the Commodification of Human Values**

Commodification means the transformation of things, relationships, abilities, or identities into objects of exchange. In capitalist culture, human values may become measured by market usefulness. The American Dream decays when love, dignity, personality, education, family, and even memory are evaluated in terms of status or profit. Commodification is visible in Fitzgerald's world of parties and luxury, Miller's world of sales and personality, and DeLillo's world of consumption and media. The dream no longer asks what kind of life is meaningful; it asks what kind of life appears successful. This framework is especially useful for reading *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman believes that charm, appearance, and being well liked are economic assets. His tragedy lies in the fact that he treats himself as a product and judges his sons by their market promise. The family becomes a site where capitalist values are reproduced. In *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy becomes linked to wealth and status, not only as a person but as an object of Gatsby's dream. In *White Noise*, consumer spaces provide emotional reassurance but also deepen dependence on commodities. The commodification of human values therefore shows how the dream loses moral substance. It becomes a market fantasy that converts life into performance.



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## **Psychoanalytic Reading of Desire and Failure**

Psychoanalytic criticism helps explain why characters continue to pursue dreams that harm them. The American Dream is not only an economic idea; it is also a structure of desire. It attaches hope to objects such as money, houses, lovers, careers, children, or public recognition. These objects promise completeness, but they cannot fully satisfy the lack within the subject. Psychoanalytic reading examines fantasy, repression, repetition, denial, and self-deception. It shows how dream decay occurs not only outside the character but also inside the mind, where desire turns into obsession or illusion.

## **IV. AMERICAN DREAM AND ITS DECAY IN SELECTED LITERARY TEXTS**

### **The Illusion of Wealth and Success**

The illusion of wealth and success is most vividly represented in *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby's mansion, parties, imported shirts, and expensive car create an image of triumph. Yet Fitzgerald carefully separates appearance from fulfillment. Gatsby possesses the signs of success, but he remains outside the secure world of inherited privilege. His wealth produces spectacle rather than belonging. The dream decays because success is measured by surfaces that cannot repair emotional loss or social exclusion. Gatsby believes that money can recover Daisy and repeat the past, but Daisy's world is protected by class power. The tragedy lies not only in Gatsby's illusion but also in the society that encourages such illusion. A similar illusion appears in *Death of a Salesman*, where success is imagined through popularity, confidence, and professional recognition. Willy Loman's dream is not based on actual achievement but on a marketable personality. He mistakes social charm for economic security and teaches his sons the same error. The illusion of success becomes destructive because it prevents honest self-knowledge. In *White Noise*, success is associated less with wealth itself than with consumer comfort and institutional identity. Jack Gladney's academic role and family consumption create a shield against fear, but that shield is fragile. Across these texts, wealth and success appear as images that promise stability while hiding emptiness.

### **Moral Corruption and Social Decline**

Moral corruption is central to the decay of the American Dream. When the dream becomes attached to wealth and status, ethical judgment weakens. Fitzgerald presents this corruption through the Buchanans, whose money allows them to damage others and retreat into safety. Their carelessness exposes the moral failure of an upper class that benefits from the dream's language but refuses responsibility. Gatsby himself is morally ambiguous because his wealth is linked to questionable means, yet his dream retains a strange innocence compared with the empty privilege around him. The novel therefore distinguishes between corrupt desire and corrupt social power. Moral decline is also visible in the economic world of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Banks and landowners operate through systems that appear impersonal, making cruelty seem administrative rather than personal. Families are displaced not because of individual



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hatred but because profit is prioritized over human life. In *Death of a Salesman*, moral corruption is quieter but equally serious: the culture teaches Willy to value appearance over honesty and sales over self-knowledge. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the corrupt force appears through racial exclusion and exploitative temptation. Moral decay therefore takes many forms: class carelessness, institutional cruelty, self-deception, and social discrimination.

## **Failure of Individual Aspiration**

The American Dream often begins with individual aspiration. Characters believe that they can move beyond their present condition through effort, imagination, or courage. Literature, however, repeatedly shows that aspiration alone is insufficient. *Gatsby's* aspiration is extraordinary, but it is directed toward an impossible object. Willy Loman's aspiration for his sons is intense, but it is based on false values. The Joads aspire to work and survival, but economic systems exploit their labor. Beneatha Younger aspires toward education and self-definition, but her possibilities are shaped by family resources and racial structures. Individual aspiration fails when it meets social realities that the dream refuses to acknowledge.

## **V. MAJOR THEMES IN AMERICAN DREAM DECAY**

### **Materialism and Consumer Culture**

Materialism is one of the most visible signs of American Dream decay. The dream begins to weaken when success is measured primarily through possessions rather than ethical or communal fulfillment. In *The Great Gatsby*, material display creates glamour but also emptiness. The mansion, parties, shirts, and cars are impressive, yet they cannot produce love or belonging. In *Death of a Salesman*, success is imagined through sales, appearance, and economic recognition. In *White Noise*, consumer culture becomes almost a spiritual environment. The supermarket gives comfort, the media gives images, and objects help characters manage fear. Consumer culture intensifies decay by making desire endless. Once the dream is linked to consumption, fulfillment is always postponed because new objects and images constantly appear. People become attached to lifestyles rather than values. Literature criticizes this process by showing the emotional poverty behind abundance. Fitzgerald's wealthy characters lack moral depth; Miller's salesman lacks secure identity; DeLillo's consumers lack stable reality. Materialism does not simply corrupt individuals from outside. It becomes a language through which they understand themselves. The decay of the dream therefore occurs when identity is translated into ownership and consumption.

### **Capitalism and Economic Inequality**

Capitalism and economic inequality are central themes in American Dream decay. The dream often presents the market as a space of opportunity, but the selected texts show that the market can also produce exploitation and insecurity. *The Grapes of Wrath* exposes this contradiction most directly. The Joads are hardworking, but hard work does not protect them from dispossession. Banks, farms, and labor systems reduce human beings to economic units. Death



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of a Salesman shows the same logic within white-collar life. Willy Loman gives his life to work, but the company does not honor him when he becomes unprofitable. Economic inequality also shapes *The Great Gatsby*, where inherited wealth has more social authority than newly acquired money. Gatsby's fortune cannot overcome the invisible boundaries of class. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, economic limitation intersects with race, making opportunity doubly restricted. Capitalism promises mobility but often preserves hierarchy. The dream decays because it teaches people to interpret inequality as personal failure rather than structural arrangement. Literature challenges this interpretation by showing the social systems that produce suffering. Economic inequality is therefore not background; it is a driving force in the plot, psychology, and symbolism of American Dream literature.

## **Loss of Morality and Spiritual Emptiness**

The loss of morality and spiritual emptiness appear when the American Dream becomes detached from ethical purpose. Early versions of the dream contained ideals of dignity, freedom, work, and improvement. In many modern literary texts, these ideals are replaced by wealth, image, and competition. *The Great Gatsby* presents a world where pleasure lacks responsibility. The valley of ashes symbolizes the waste produced by wealth and moral neglect. *Death of a Salesman* presents spiritual emptiness through Willy's inability to find value outside market success. He plants seeds, but the gesture expresses desperation rather than renewal. *White Noise* presents spiritual emptiness in a later form. The characters live amid information, technology, and consumption, but they remain terrified of death and uncertainty. Traditional sources of meaning have weakened, and consumer culture provides only temporary comfort. *Beloved* offers a different perspective by suggesting that moral life requires remembrance. A society that forgets slavery cannot be spiritually whole. Across the selected texts, spiritual emptiness appears when the dream denies history, community, or ethical responsibility. The decay of the dream is therefore not merely material failure; it is a crisis of meaning.

## **VI. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

### **Similarities in the Representation of the American Dream**

The selected texts share several similarities in their representation of the American Dream. First, they all present desire as future-oriented. Characters imagine a better life beyond their present condition: Gatsby imagines Daisy and social recognition; the Joads imagine work and survival; Willy imagines success for himself and his sons; the Youngers imagine a home; Ellison's narrator imagines recognition; Sethe imagines freedom from the past; Jack Gladney imagines security against fear. Second, the texts show that this desire is shaped by social values. Characters do not dream in isolation; they dream through the language provided by culture. Another similarity is the repeated use of symbols. The green light, the road, the house, seeds, the plant, invisibility, haunting, and consumer spaces all symbolize the tension between aspiration and limitation. The texts also share a pattern of disillusionment. Each reveals that



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the dream is harder, narrower, or more corrupt than it first appears. The emotional tone may differ, but the structure is similar: hope meets reality, and reality exposes hidden inequality. These similarities justify studying the texts together under the theme of American Dream decay.

## **Differences in Social and Historical Contexts**

Despite shared patterns, the selected texts differ significantly in social and historical context. *The Great Gatsby* belongs to the Jazz Age, a period of wealth, spectacle, and post-war restlessness. *The Grapes of Wrath* belongs to the Great Depression and emphasizes economic dispossession. *Death of a Salesman* reflects post-war business culture and middle-class anxiety. *A Raisin in the Sun* is rooted in racial segregation and Black family aspiration in mid-twentieth-century America. *Invisible Man* explores racial identity, ideology, and institutional betrayal. *Beloved* returns to the legacy of slavery and Reconstruction memory. *White Noise* belongs to late twentieth-century consumer and media culture. These differences matter because the American Dream does not decay in one universal way. For *Gatsby*, decay is tied to class and romantic illusion. For Steinbeck, it is tied to economic exploitation. For Miller, it is tied to capitalist personality and masculine failure. For Hansberry, it is tied to racial exclusion and family dignity. For Ellison, it is tied to invisibility and power. For Morrison, it is tied to historical trauma. For DeLillo, it is tied to consumer simulation and fear. Comparative study therefore prevents oversimplification. It shows that dream decay is historically flexible and socially specific.

## **Individual Failure Versus Systemic Failure**

A major comparative issue is the relationship between individual failure and systemic failure. Some characters make serious mistakes. *Gatsby* idealizes Daisy and refuses the limits of time. Willy Loman clings to false values and pressures his sons. Walter Lee makes a dangerous financial decision. Jack Gladney hides behind performance and denial. These individual failures are important because literature does not remove agency from characters. They are responsible for choices, illusions, and moral weaknesses. However, the texts also show that individual failure cannot be separated from systemic pressure.

Systemic failure appears through class hierarchy, capitalism, racism, patriarchy, slavery, consumer culture, and institutional power. *Gatsby's* illusion is encouraged by a society that equates wealth with worth. Willy's breakdown is shaped by a market that commodifies personality. Walter's desperation grows from racialized economic limitation. Ellison's narrator is used by institutions that deny his selfhood. *Sethe's* trauma is the result of historical violence, not private weakness. The comparative perspective therefore suggests that American Dream decay occurs where personal desire and social structure meet. The most powerful texts refuse simple blame and instead reveal the complexity of failure.



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## VII.CONCLUSION

This paper has examined American Dream decay as a major theme in selected works of American literature. The study began by defining the American Dream as a cultural promise of freedom, opportunity, self-making, dignity, and success. It then explained how this dream gradually decays when transformed by materialism, capitalism, inequality, racial exclusion, gendered limitation, historical trauma, and consumer culture. The historical background showed that the dream has never been simple or pure. It emerged from ideals of renewal and liberty but was always marked by contradictions involving slavery, dispossession, class hierarchy, and unequal citizenship. The theoretical framework used Marxist criticism, commodification, psychoanalysis, New Historicism, race and gender studies, and ideology critique to interpret the selected texts. The textual chapters studied *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Death of a Salesman*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Invisible Man*, *Beloved*, and *White Noise*. These works reveal different versions of dream decay: the illusion of wealth, the cruelty of economic systems, the collapse of market-defined masculinity, the racial struggle for home, the denial of visibility, the haunting of slavery, and the emptiness of consumer life. The dissertation has argued that American literature uses decay to expose the gap between national promise and lived reality.

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