The American Dream in the Twentieth Century

Introduction
The American dream has long been an ideal of prosperity not just for Americans, but for people across the globe. The promise of freedom and a better life drew hopeful immigrants before there was even a country to call home, and has continued to draw countless millions ever since. In the 1900s, the backgrounds of people dreaming the dream had never been broader. The economic ups and downs of a century had never been sharper. The scope of international interest and impact had never been wider. As the modern age arrived and cynicism began to rival idealism in the national mindset, the dark lining of the American dream loomed large in twentieth-century literature.

Small-Town Life
Just after the beginning of the twentieth century, one widely accepted literary vision of the American dream involved life in a small, tightly knit community where residents were free from secrets and ill will. This idealized vision of a perfect American town, far removed from the tumult of the rest of the world, became a symbol for how the United States viewed itself in the larger community of the world. The reality of American small-town life may not have matched this vision very closely, but it was not until just prior to World War I that American writers began to explore this discrepancy in a meaningful way.
Edgar Lee Masters, in his poetry collection *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), employs an ingenious technique for stripping away the rigid customs and traditions of American small-town life: Each poem is narrated from beyond the grave by a resident of the local Spoon River cemetery. These narrators are free to speak the truth about their own dreams and habits, and to expose the ways in which their seemingly idyllic town falls short of the idealized American dream. In “Doc Hill,” the town caregiver admits he worked long hours because “My wife hated me, my son went to the dogs.” In “Margaret Fuller Slack,” the mother of eight recalls that, though she wanted to be a writer, her choices were “celibacy, matrimony or unchastity,” and concludes, “Sex is the curse of life!” In “Abel Melveny,” an apparently wealthy man laments the things he bought but never needed or used and sees himself “as a good machine / That Life had never used.”

Even as he exposes the dark side of Spoon River, however, Masters affirms the intimate nature of the community by showing connections between many of the deceased characters. With the advent of World War I, the notion of America as a tightly knit community isolated from the rest of the world came to an abrupt end.

**Questioning Conventions**

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s first novel, the semi-autobiographical *This Side of Paradise* (1920), was published after World War I. At the time, the horrors of modern warfare had led many people to question their traditional beliefs in a number of ways; in *This Side of Paradise* Fitzgerald introduces themes that would capture the public’s growing disillusionment with the conventional American dream. In the novel, Amory Blaine, an intelligent but restless young man from a wealthy family, embarks on a quest to discover his own definition of what makes a
meaningful existence. Blaine’s family falls upon hard times financially, and he leaves Princeton without finishing his degree so that he can fight in the war. When he returns, he falls in love with a socialite named Rosalind. Like Blaine, Rosalind at first appears to reject the conventions of the wealthy social circles in which she lives; she tells Blaine of the many men she has kissed, and she even kisses him after knowing him only briefly. Rosalind—who has so strongly rebelled against her mother’s views on marrying into wealth—eventually breaks up with Blaine because he is too poor. Having lost both love and wealth by the end of the novel, Blaine is finally free to discover his true self. In this way, Fitzgerald depicts the new American dream as a search for one’s identity. “It was always the becoming he dreamed of, never the being,” Fitzgerald writes of Blaine.

**The Depression**

At his poorest, Fitzgerald’s Amory Blaine embraces the ideals of socialism: the belief that citizens should collectively share ownership of resources in a society, rather than allowing a small number of wealthy individuals to own most of the resources. This notion, an important facet of the American dream since Winthrop’s Massachusetts Bay Colony in the early seventeenth century, gained popularity throughout the Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s. Folk singer Woody Guthrie, who spent years living among the impoverished Okies and other migrant workers in California, wrote “This Land is Your Land” in 1940; the song has endured as one of the most popular American folk songs of all time. Guthrie’s patriotic tribute emphasizes themes of community and cooperation among all Americans, and celebrates the freedom to explore the vast and varied geography that makes up the United States, with its familiar refrain, “This land was made for you and me.” The song has appeared in many slightly altered versions over the years; verses that criticize private land ownership and the government’s failure to look after the poor are often left out.

**Let Us Now Praise Famous Men** (1941) by James Agee and Walker Evans explores some of the same issues Guthrie memorialized in song. The book documents in words and pictures the lives of three families of white tenant farmers in the South during the Great Depression. Agee’s rich descriptions and Evans’s stark photographs highlight the harsh life faced by millions during the 1930s, when dreams of prosperity were replaced with nothing more than simple hope for survival. Agee also reflects on the split American identity represented by the “haves”—which included in some ways the Harvard-educated Agee himself—and the many desperate “have nots.”

**Emerging Superpower**

“The Gift Outright” (1942) by Robert Frost directly addresses the idea of establishing an American identity. “The Gift Outright” can be read as a brief synopsis of early American history. The first line sums up America’s colonial roots: “The land was ours before we were the land’s.” In the poem, Frost contends that only after Americans fully gave themselves to this new land—by breaking free of ties to England and other European empires—could an American identity truly be formed. Frost describes this as “salvation in surrender” and suggests that the legacy of what it means to be an American has proven more valuable than the land on which the country was founded. Frost recited the poem from memory at President John F. Kennedy’s inauguration in 1961, after the aged poet was unable to read another poem he had written specifically for the occasion. Composed as the country entered World War II, and invoked amid Cold War anxiety twenty years later, the poem captures the feeling that the United States has a great destiny yet to fulfill.

**Disillusionment**

J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) presents Holden Caulfield, an anti-hero who has been the model for disaffected American youth for half a century. He is a bright young man who nonetheless finds himself failing academically. After he is expelled from prep school, he spends a few unchaperoned days in New York, killing time until his family expects him home for the Christmas holiday. He drifts into and out of the lives of several friends and acquaintances, making no meaningful connections with anyone except his younger sister Phoebe. He toys with grown-up ideas and situations and uses cynicism to mask his juvenile befuddlement about such adult things. He dismisses adulthood—and all the conventional notions of the American dream that accompany it—as phony.

The novel’s frank language and discussion of sexuality and its anti-establishment tone created controversy in the idyllic prosperity of...
post–World War II America. *The Catcher in the Rye* became and remains one of the premier works defining the mid-century counterculture and its disillusionment with the American dream. Counterculture and disillusionment are also important themes in Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” (1955). Beginning with the line “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,” the poem is a rambling, hallucinatory epic that covers topics such as the evils of industrialization and the role of the artist in modern society. Ultimately, it challenges the accepted notions of American traditions and ideals, using profane language, challenging religion, and depicting graphic sex. Shortly after the poem was published, the publisher was charged with indecency. Although “Howl” is often regarded primarily as a statement against conformity and the status quo, it also embodies the themes of searching for identity and meaning, much like Fitzgerald’s more straightforward *This Side of Paradise*.

**Modern War**

In the mid-1960s, a generation raised in unprecedented prosperity and still searching for its own identity found itself embroiled in the Vietnam War. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) is often cited as a literary response to events in Vietnam, though Vonnegut was writing of his personal experiences surrounding the Allied bombing of Dresden during World War II. The central gimmick of the novel is that main character Billy Pilgrim has become “unstuck” in time and experiences scattered moments from throughout his life in no particular chronological order. This allows Vonnegut to tell his semi-autobiographical story obliquely, to convey the full experience of war without using a traditional story structure; as Pilgrim notes, “there is nothing intelligent to say about a
massacre.” Similarly, Tim O’Brien based the stories contained in his collection *The Things They Carried* (1990) on his own experiences in Vietnam, but he was careful to select story “truth” over fact to make his points. As O’Brien himself puts it, “You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened . . . and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain.” Both authors drive home the message that war has no winners; even those who survive carry the burden of their experiences with them until they die. Though the two works were published more than twenty years apart, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Things They Carried* both illustrate an important shift in how Americans viewed war in the decades following World War II.

**Counterculture**

War was just one of many topics considered from a fresh perspective during this time. Appearing at the end of the 1960s, *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) by Phillip Roth reflects the American public’s growing openness about sexuality as an important element in a happy life. In the novel, which is an extended monologue issued by Portnoy to his psychoanalyst, the main character reveals that his more virtuous impulses are constantly at war with his increasingly perverse sexual urges. An uneasy mix of guilt, openness, titillation, and shame, Portnoy is the embodiment of the sexual revolution that shaped the American dream of the latter part of the twentieth century.

Like *Portnoy’s Complaint*, journalist Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971) reflects a fundamental shift in the values and dreams of America as a whole. The book, which is loosely based on Thompson’s own experiences, shattered taboos with its open and detailed discussion of drug use. The two main characters, Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo, engage in a comic, frightening, drug-fueled search for the true nature of the American dream (literally, as it is Duke’s journalism assignment and the impetus for the trip and the story). At the same time, they repeatedly attack elements and symbols of what they consider mainstream American culture. For these characters, the essence of the American identity is not what exists in the most popular public arenas, but what exists at the fringes of American society.

**Age of Excess**

During the 1980s, the popular notion of the American dream shifted once again: While the traditional notion of success included little more than a family, a home, and a secure means of supporting both, toward the end of the twentieth century the American dream of prosperity became increasingly associated with wealth, fame, and power. Thomas Wolfe captures the timbre of the time in his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), which tells the tale of a wealthy New York bond trader named Sherman McCoy whose mistress runs over a black man while driving McCoy’s car. The incident brings out the worst in many of the characters, who each see it as a way to achieve their own personal ends at the expense of others. Wolfe’s novel is a clear condemnation of the shallowness and materialism of the 1980s.
The Dream versus Reality

The final decade of the twentieth century saw the publication of two works that emphasize the distance between the accepted notions of the American dream and the reality of American society. In *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) by Douglas Coupland, the three main characters, dismayed at their bleak futures in mainstream society, “opt out” and live a simple existence outside the normal bounds of American culture. The narrator says of Tobias, an age-peer who opts to pursue the American dream of prosperity,

I realize that I see in him something that I might have become, something that all of us can become in the absence of vigilance. Something bland and smug that trades on its mask, filled with such rage and such contempt for humanity, such need that the only food left for such a creature is their own flesh.

Coupland’s characters are apathetic about the traditional American dream, which they feel is simply no longer attainable. Others of the same generation reacted to the same sense of disenfranchisement with rage. In *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* (1994), playwright Anna Deveare Smith offers a piece constructed from the actual words of Los Angeles residents who experienced the effects of the 1991 Rodney King assault, the 1992 trial, and subsequent citywide riots firsthand. Smith suggests that the riots are more than a failure of the American dream, however. They represent an opportunity to open a dialogue about issues of race, justice, and social class that have been ignored because they do not fit comfortably into the mainstream American identity.

Conclusion

From 1900 to 2000, the notion of the American dream assumed more forms, affected more dreamers, and encountered more backlash than ever before. In the twentieth century, Americans dreamed of the same things as their forebears—things such as freedom, wealth, and meaning. It is hard to say whether twentieth-century Americans were any more or less successful achieving their wishes than the generations that came before them. The undertcurrent of disappointment explored in these few titles should not be taken to mean that the American dream has been rejected. Whether their dreams led to joy or heartbreak, the fact that writers return to the theme again and again with new aspects to explore and new perspectives to present tells readers that Americans continue dreaming the dream.

**SOURCES**


