

In His Name



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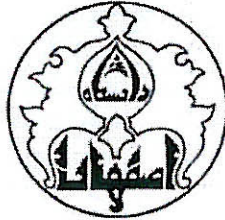
**The American Dream in Three Plays by Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee
Williams, and Lorraine Hansberry**

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Abstract

This study examines the myth of American Dream in a number of twentieth-century American plays: Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (1940), Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958). The objective is first to survey the theme of the American Dream and trace its formation from its birth to the time of the publication of the plays and then to see what these modern playwrights' and the major characters' attitudes towards the mythical Dream are and how significant and plausible the notion of the American Dream is in the plays with regard to the social, political and economic life of America. Then the attitudes of the main characters of each play are compared in these modern plays to see how and to what extent they change, from playwright to playwright and through time and what remains unaltered, reaching the conclusion that contrary to the grand promises the American Dream made during its birth, to many Americans it has turned into mere materialistic pursuits in the modern times, losing its idealistic aspects of personal fulfillment and achievements and for many others, facing the hardships of coping with the modern state of life, the Dream has turned into illusion. Also in this era the groups bared from sharing the promises of the American Dream, such as the African-Americans, began voicing their call for equality.

Key Words: The American Dream, Twentieth-Century American Drama, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Lorraine Hansberry, *The Iceman Cometh*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *A Raisin in the Sun*

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Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

1-1 Thesis Statement

America is a nation which prides itself on a Dream. The American Dream permeates the minds of the American people and has lured millions of people to America during decades. Since its founding in 1776, the United States has regarded and promoted itself as a beacon of liberty and prosperity achieved through a combination of the philosophical and ethical principles propounded by its founders and implemented in their most perfect form. In tandem with this is its natural wealth and bounty within the New World.

According to Boorstin, the meaning of the *American Dream* has undergone gradual change over the course of history. While historically traced to the New World mystique –the availability of land and the continuing American expansion– the ethos today simply indicates the ability, through participating in the resonant society and culture of the America, to bring prosperity to oneself. According to

American Dream, this includes the opportunity for one's children to grow up and receive an American education and its consequent career opportunities. It is the opportunity to make individual choices without the restrictions of class, caste, gender, religion, race or ethnic group. In recent years, the concept of the American Dream as a national ideal has been studied by various organizations, the conclusions of which, as noted by Guerin et al. (217), indicate that during the recent decades, an increasing number of people confess to having lost faith in the American Dream.

Here, in the light of these ideas about this concept, three modern plays are examined to see how this concept is reflected and treated and how the characters respond to it. In the study, the attitudes of characters, and the symbols, images and metaphors used by the playwrights are examined to see:

- whether the different characters share the American Dream
- how successful the American Dream is in its promises
- whether it in reality promises the individual freedom or it stifles the individual aspirations for the sake of allegiance and conformity
- if the American Dream, as a social force, really empowers individuals in pursuit of their personal aspirations
- what the stand of the American Dream is regarding the minorities

1-2 Methodology

The reason for choosing these works, apart from personal interest, is the fact that the motif of the American Dream is quite noticeable in them, plus the fact that during the period of these plays' creation, the Great Depression of the 30's and the dismal social situation of the country, negative attitudes to the Dream prevailed and reached high and became more visible themes in the works produced. Also the three playwrights, being contemporaries, give a somewhat shared picture of the social milieu of the country and how its national ethos fares in the eyes of the citizens of the country.

The study follows a formalistic approach in its analyzing the viewpoints of the characters and the playwrights about the American Dream. Also historical approaches are taken into consideration in the study of the American Dream concept and its evolution through history. Biographical and historical approaches play a fundamental part both in examining the lives of the authors and the era their plays are set in. Each play is analyzed in its major characters' stand towards the American Dream to find recurrent themes and ideas.

1-3 Definition of Key Terms

American Dream: The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States of America in which democratic ideals are perceived as a promise of prosperity for its people. In the American Dream, first expressed by James Truslow Adams in 1931, citizens of every rank feel that they can achieve a "better, richer and happier life." The idea of the American Dream is rooted in the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence which states that "all

men are created equal” and that they are “endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights” including “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” in Thomas Jefferson's phrasing. It is also a theme in American literature, film, and art that expresses optimistic desires for self-improvement, freedom, and self-sufficiency. Harry Shaw notes that the term can have no clear and fixed expression because "it means whatever its user has in mind a particular time" (12). One expression of this is the materialistic "rags-to-riches" motif of many nineteenth-century novels. Here, a young pauper through hard work, cleverness, and honesty, rises in socio-economic status until he is a powerful and successful man. An example here would be the stories by Horatio Alger. Other expressions of this theme focus on more abstract qualities like freedom or self-determination. Many critics have argued that this dream is in many ways a myth in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, given America's frequent discriminatory treatment of immigrants and its continuing economic trends in which an ever smaller number of wealthy people acquire an ever larger percentage of material wealth with each generation. They have noted that despite deep-seated belief in the egalitarian American Dream, the modern American wealth structure still perpetuated racial and class inequities between generations. They contend that advantage and disadvantage are not always connected to individual successes or failures, but often to prior position in a social group. Other events, such as the loss of the American frontier, segregation and exclusion of minorities, McCarthyism in the 1950s, unpopular wars in Vietnam in the 1960s, and gradual ecological devastation over the last hundred years, together have inspired literary works that criticize or question the American Dream—often seeing it as ultimately selfish or destructive on one or more levels. Examples of

these writing would be Miller's *Death of A Salesman*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

As Guerin et al. (217) note, the American Dream has been credited with helping to build a cohesive American experience but has also been blamed for overinflated expectations. In common parlance, the term American Dream, is often used as a synonym for home ownership since homes have historically been seen as status symbols separating the middle class and the poor.

Myth: the dramatic or narrative embodiment of a peoples' perception of the deepest truths. Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories—some no doubt fact, and some fantasy—which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of their inner meaning of the universe and of human life (Watts 39).

1-4 Review of Literature

In her book, *Tennessee Williams*, Signi Falk considers subjects such as Williams' search for a medium, the controversy about his plays, his views of Southern womanhood, his Southern wenches, and his desperate heroes. This study also contains a critical analysis of his major works, evaluates his materials and attitudes, appraises his technical brilliance and difficulties, and assesses his contributions to the contemporary theater. Signi Falk contrasts Williams the poet

and the average man and finds in him a nobler sense of values and compassion for humanity.

Facing Up to the American Dream by Jennifer Hochschild Makes two claims about the American Dream. The first is that the American Dream has been for decades the central ideology of Americans and tries to define the American Dream ideology in a way to encompass both its ideological and its materialistic aspects and in that she emphasizes the defects of the American Dream ideal by foregrounding its failing to be inclusive, its wax and wanes through history, and its changing identity through time. The second claim is that in modern times the American Dream ideology is faced with challenges. One of these challenges, she notes, is the confrontation of blacks and whites and their antagonism towards each other in their pursuit of the Dream. She concludes: “My particular combination of values and pessimism leads me to argue that Americans’ best chance for a future that we want our children to inherit is to insist that the practice of the American dream be made to live up to its ideology. That is, Americans must face up to their dream and decide whether they really mean it to be a reality” (xii).

Hehen Keyssar in her *Sounding the Rumble of Dreams Deferred*, analyses Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and believes that Hansberry aims to reveal to the white audience how the Blacks are alike in their desire for the fulfillment of their dreams of betterment and contends that the play rejects the belief in an identical

opportunity for all middle class people and calls into question the nature of the values and opportunities being presented as shared equally. She analyzes Hansberry's biography and discusses how her works have taken their themes from incidents in her life and how they differ.

In his *the Burden of the Past in the Major Play of Tennessee Williams*, William Bray identifies Williams' specific concern with the role of the memories of the past as a burden upon the present lives of characters in Williams' plays and as a recurrent theme in his major plays.

He analyses both the personal past of the characters of the plays and the historical past of the South as dynamic forces that stubbornly continue to affect the lives of the characters. It foregrounds the plays' preoccupation with reminiscences of the past and how many of his major characters are victimized by their deluded references to personal and historical pasts. Bray contends that the past is an inexorable force in Williams' plays that shapes characters' present and future.

C. W. Bigsby in his *Tennessee Williams: the Threatening Self* analyses Williams's works according to the social milieu in which they were produced. He notes that the drama of the era suggests the end of a particular model of America and of individual character. Time seems to be gathering pace and basic myths doing with family, civility, community, style and spirituality getting dissolved and

“the future seemed to offer little more than a bland materialism or a drugged conformity.” Considering the changes the invasion of modernity wages to the lives of the characters, he analyzes the plays and the reaction of the protagonists to the new culture.

In his book, *The Image or What happened to the American Dream*, Daniel Boorstin discusses the illusion the American Dream has turned into. He argues that the American Dream was the most accurate way of describing the hopes of men in America. It was an exhilaration and aspiration because it symbolized the disparity between the possibilities of New America and the old hard facts of life. But he argues that “only the profitless visionaries—the utopians in their narrow ideal communities—ever thought they could make the dream a mould in which to live” (88). He considers the American Dream a fictitious ideal the unreality of which generations suffered to discover.

Helen Keyssar in her *Discrimination and the American Dream in Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun*, surveys the social milieu of the era of the *Raisin* and considers its social context. In the 1920s, most Chicago blacks were domestic workers; moreover, Chicago blacks were often unemployed. There was a slackening of the demand for black labor when post-war demobilization caused heavy unemployment. In Chicago, many black laborers were out of work. Furthermore, in the period following the Great Migration of the 1920s, blacks like

Raisin's Big Walter rarely received respect or decent jobs in urban settings because white Americans commonly denied blacks their humanity, dignity, and value. American thought of the period 1880-1920 generally lacks any perception of the Negro as a human being with potentialities for improvement. Big Walter's predicament was a direct effect of the educational, economic, and social discrimination that confronted African-Americans in the first half of the twentieth century.

In his essay, *Eugene O'Neill, an Exercise in Unmasking*, Eugene Waith discusses the effectiveness of O'Neill's dramatic strategies of *The Iceman* and argues that its "effectiveness derives from the progressive stripping of the characters, brought about by their interaction" (12). O'Neill's strategy is playing two characters against each other, characters who instead of being opposites, are equivalents with only their careers counter pointed. Waith likens the movement of the play to the advances and retreats of a wave in which first they are enticed to action and then are flung away from it.

Doris Alexander in "Eugene O'Neill as Social Critic," analyzes O'Neill's life and plays and examines them as criticizing the social life of American society and societies in general. Alexander locates the patterns of O'Neill's worldview in his plays such as *The Hairy Ape* and *The Iceman*, in which O'Neill presents his own

view about the modern society. In Alexander's view, to O'Neill every person has no more than three choices in the society of modern, industrial life. He either has to totally surrender and accept the industrial society as it is, or long for the old days before the modern industrial time. The last choice which he proposes and advocated is to fight, to reform the society.

O'Neill does not believe in the idea of progress and does not see any hope for mankind in his improved methods of production and development. For him the vicious effect of the industrial society are not physical, but spiritual. Alexander labels O'Neill's personality as anarchist, and a type of anarchist he calls "individualistic anarchism" which sees the social structure as evil and seeks revelation only in destructive acts (352). He is cynical of the capitalist state and criticizes it, but does not see any hope in any other political, and societal system as well. To him the only way is for the individuals, to gain the courage to change their mentalities and their materialistic thinking. Like Larry Slade in *The Iceman Cometh*, he believes: "The material the ideal free society must be constructed from is men themselves and you can't build a marble temple out of a mixture of mud and manure. When man's soul isn't a sow's ear, it will be time enough to dream of silk purses." (*The Iceman Cometh*, II. 88). For O'Neill, it is not a better state that makes better men, but better men who make a better state.

Chapter Two:
THE AMERICAN DREAM

I have learned this, at least from my experience: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.

(Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, qtd. in Ray)

2-1 Introduction

This chapter is intended to deal with the concept of the American Dream, to highlight the concept, take a glance at its history, look for its origins, find and categorize its elements, and also discuss its negative aspects. It will look at its reflections in American literature.

2-2 Origins and History

To trace the origins of the myth of the American Dream one must go back as far as the old world and observe the dreams of a land not yet discovered. Historians Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager see the sixteenth century as the origin of the dream in Europe. Its origin, they believe, dates back to Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, which was written after the then recent explorations in the New World where More describes a society free from the miseries of the old world: "the abolition of money and private property has prevented any neurotic attachments to goods and status and the parasitic classes—nobles, lawyers, idle people,... —have been eliminated" (Abrams et al. 504, 505).

Depressed and disappointed by the stagnation of the European social system, the Europeans were looking for a new imaginary land where they could establish their ideals and for the first European explorers, America seemed the ideal, the Promised Land. Much Biblical imagery is used in the early explorers'

descriptions of the land. Columbus writes: "It is a thing of wonder to behold those valleys and those rivers and fair springs of water... everything in the world that a man could desire" (Jones 101). For the European explorers, the new land was the true land of liberty; no barriers whether social, political or religious existed and it was a place offering limitless riches and resources.

James Truslow Adams, who holds the title of "historian of the American Dream," believes that this concept originated from the first settlements of the new continent. In his book, *The Epic of America*, Adams maintains that American development from its start had been dominated by a dream, the dream of a "better, richer and happier existence for every citizen of every rank or condition" (11). Adams contends that American history and the American Dream are interwoven and that the American Dream was not just one dream but many. The Dream has grown with our nation and is the result of "the millions of souls that have come to us from all nations" (385).

Many historians and scholars credit Thomas Jefferson with the first notions of the concept of American Dream and link it to the colonial history and the Declaration of Independence. The first verbal statement of the American Dream, made by Thomas Jefferson in 1776 reads: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Although Thomas Jefferson is not the originator of the concept, he defined it in words and gave it substance: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Jefferson outlined the American Dream concept and propagated individualism and the possibilities for the individual. Morman in his *Thomas Jefferson and the American Dream* writes: “Jefferson’s words have been so essential to our identity and our definition of the American Dream, because they have empowered this nation to define itself” (23).

The credit for the coinage of the phrase, “The American Dream” is given by many authors to James Truslow Adams. Cullen says that The American Dream was the original name Adams had for his book, but when he faced the disagreement of the publisher objecting to it on the grounds that no one would pay to buy a dream, he changed it to *The Epic of America*. Despite the fact that many people came to America in pursuit of a dream. It was not until 1932 that the phrase was coined. Adams, stressing that the dream is not just of material progress, defines the American Dream as

A dream of being able to grow to the fullest development as a 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 had been realized in actual life here than anywhere else. (405)