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THE AMERICAN DREAM: A PLACE OF MY OWN, A PLACE TO CALL HOME

By

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	vi
1. THE AMERICAN DREAM.....	1
2. THE DREAM AND AMERICAN LITERATURE .....	24
3. HEMINGWAY'S <i>TO HAVE AND HAVE NOT</i> AND THE DREAM.....	47
4. HURSTON'S <i>THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD</i> AND THE DREAM.....	69
5. RAWLINGS' <i>CROSS CREEK</i> AND THE DREAM.....	98
6. CONCLUSION .....	124
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	128
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	136

## ABSTRACT

This study uses literary texts from the twentieth century to explore the interaction between liberty and democracy at the heart of the American Dream. Of particular interest is the way in which the Dream is invoked and then called into question in Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937), Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' *Cross Creek* (1942). These works demonstrate the failure of a social order meant to guarantee individual success. The protagonists are forced to counter expectations of normalcy concerning the identity politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality in order to achieve the Dream's goal of a good life rooted in domestic happiness.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE AMERICAN DREAM

The April 2009 issue of *Vanity Fair* featured an article by David Kamp entitled “Rethinking the American Dream.” Well-timed, the article appeared as Americans, staggering under a mountain of personal and national debt, asked whether the nation was heading towards another Great Depression. Amid Norman Rockwell-esque photographs of the 1950s and 1960s, Kamp asks whether the shared ideal of the American Dream is truly dying, or “has it simply been misplaced?”<sup>1</sup> Kamp offers copious cultural images and statistical data in his chronicle of the American Dream in the twentieth century, showing how the Dream has been historically realized, at least superficially: the standard of living has risen, material plenty underpinning popular conceptions of the Dream abounds. He also notes, however, that the Dream has shifted from a national ideal for a “better, richer, and fuller life” to a debt-ridden reality driven by extreme consumption and the cult of celebrity. Focusing on a malaise among American dreamers, he concludes, “What needs to change is our expectation of what the Dream promises—and our understanding of what that vague and promiscuously used term, ‘the American Dream,’ is really supposed to mean.”<sup>2</sup>

Defining and realizing the American Dream has been constant in America’s cultural narrative. From Franklin D. Roosevelt’s *Four Freedoms* to Fox television’s *American Idol*, evocations of the American Dream have been impossible to avoid. All dimensions of the American ‘imagined community’—political, social, economic, religious, cultural—can be

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<sup>1</sup> David Kamp, “Rethinking the American Dream,” *Vanity Fair* (April 2009): 118-123 and 177-180.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

addressed through the rubric of the Dream.<sup>3</sup> Though the term was not coined until 1933, its meanings, tenets, and models have been present since Jefferson asserted the “unalienable rights” of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Scholars have often placed the Dream’s inception within the Puritan enterprise and traced it throughout American history. Such cultural texts consider the ways the Dream has been conceived and applied, revealing hope and optimism mixed with uncertainty and despair.

As a lens for understanding American culture and more specifically American literature, the Dream is a useful concept for analyzing the writing of such canonical authors as Ernest Hemingway, Zora Neal Hurston, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. This lens enhances and clarifies issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality as elements—positive and negative—in the role of the American Dream. Such authors invoke the American Dream as a cultural ideal and call into question presuppositions associated with “traditional Dream narratives.” For them, the Dream is found lacking in its ability to ameliorate the conflict caused between liberty and democracy—the individual and the collective. Particularly noteworthy are acts affecting the family and domestic space. Failure of the Dream in this space suggests, metaphorically, the frustration and exclusion in the larger imagined family—the community, the nation.

Functioning as a cultural ideal, the American Dream embodies an array of images, feelings, and opinions, which begs precise definition or codification. As Jim Cullen notes in his 2003 monograph *The American Dream*, “It’s as if no one feels compelled to fix the meanings and uses of a term everyone presumably understands.”<sup>4</sup> Although Walter Lippmann first suggested the phrase “American Dream” in *Drift and Mastery* (1914), most historians and

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase “Imagined Community” is used by Benedict Anderson as a definition for nationalism. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Jim Cullen, *The American Dream* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.



cultural critics agree that the expression was introduced into the lexicon as an *ideal* by early twentieth century historian essayist and social critic James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America* (1933).<sup>5</sup> Adams sought to interpret American history based on an ideal or driving force. What he referred to as the “American Dream” was a dream “of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man,” and where opportunity is afforded to “each according to his ability or achievement.” Moving away from notions of material gain—the acquisition of “motor cars,” “high wages,” and “keeping up with the Joneses”—to a progressive (and liberal) belief in individual achievement, Adams roots the dream in a “social order” in which the innate capability of the individual triumphs over “birth or position.”<sup>6</sup>

Though present in the Dream, material plenty yields to “being able to grow to one’s fullest development,” unhampered “by barriers which had been slowly erected in older civilizations”—barriers historically rooted in social class, whether hierarchical or economic.<sup>7</sup> Growth and development garnered from economic stability are realized through the reward of increased leisure, affecting happiness in the ability to enjoy the abundance, not in the unending attainment of material things. One works to live, not the reverse. Adams clearly believes that too often throughout American history, conquest and exploitation have been the end result of business, moneymaking, and material improvement—ends unto themselves, not means for achieving the Dream. Moreover, specific individual conceptions of the Dream rooted in personal liberty may conflict with broader community values, especially when hegemonic conceptions of normalcy deny or seek to inscribe individuals historically marginalized.

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 178.

<sup>6</sup> James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1933), 374.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

Though certainly important, Adams asserts that higher wages (wealth) should not be an end in itself and would in fact lead away from the freedom espoused by the notion that they bring a greater degree of freedom, or opportunities for increased leisure, leading to the Dream of a richer and better life. Adams warns that a Dream rooted solely in higher wages will not make a “better type of man,” but rather will have one end: “the sole avowed purpose of increasing his [the individual’s] powers as a ‘consumer.’”<sup>8</sup> For Adams, pure consumerism becomes a point of enslavement, not a means for achieving a better and richer life. The individual is asked, or “pressured,” to spend wages on goods to justify having the increased wage—a “use it or lose it” mentality. The employee, or consumer, is “warned that if he does not consume to the limit . . . he may be deprived not only of his high wages but of any at all.” In so doing he falls into a cycle, or treadmill, of earning not for enjoyment, but for spending in order to make others richer. Such an approach may increase the aggregate value of the collective economic base, but may, or may not, make life “richer,” “better,” and “fuller” for individuals. It is in the “people” and a general notion of “values” that Adams addresses an underlying aspect of the Dream, a “better and richer life for all men,” when he asks: “what is better” and “what is richer?”<sup>9</sup> The asking of such questions is no mere desire for the quantification of the Dream, but rather a desire for a “better type of man.” In Adams’ estimation, the growth and development of the individual towards a shared communal end is the best way to ensure the health and vitality of the American Dream.

In a twenty-first century society driven by media and consumption, the Dream is a personal thing. As Cullen reminds us, “beyond an abstract belief in possibility, there is no one

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<sup>8</sup> Adams, 375.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 377.

American Dream.”<sup>10</sup> According to Cullen, what gives the Dream its currency is that it simultaneously rests both on variety and specificity. Each individual is allowed to construct a Dream and outline its parameters as they see fit. The Dream characterizes all the hopes and aspirations of the body politic, pliable to individual want and need—a general push to success, personally defined and publicly recognized—basically, “anything is possible if you want it bad enough.”<sup>11</sup> All are able to achieve the Dream “through actions and traits under their own control.”<sup>12</sup> Fundamentally then, the Dream rests squarely on the creedal values of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” expressed in Jefferson’s *Declaration of Independence*.

Openly articulating a desire to convey “an expression of the American mind” assigning a “proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion,” Jefferson professes the essential equality and basic unalienable rights of all mankind vital for individual constructions of the Dream.<sup>13</sup> In this, autonomy and agency, life and liberty become necessary conditions for the possibility of happiness. Liberty, equality, and individualism combine with the remaining tenets of Classical Liberalism—populism, laissez-faire capitalism and the rule of law under a constitution—to provide the basis for an “American Creed.”<sup>14</sup> Though such values were expressed on both sides of the Atlantic during the eighteenth-century, this creed is predicated on what has generally been defined as “American Exceptionalism.” A belief first extolled by Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America*, American Exceptionalism geographically situates these values and positions them as being unique among Western democracies. Cal Jillson, in his 2004 *Pursuing the American Dream*, reminds the reader: “America offered opportunities for a good life that

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<sup>10</sup> Cullen, 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Hochschild, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Qtd. in Jillson, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Jillson draws on the scholarship of Samuel Huntington and Seymour Martin Lipset to summarize the basic tenets of the “American Creed.”

were simply unavailable in the Old World.”<sup>15</sup> However, Jillson also asserts that the “American Creed” presents conflicting values such as, “liberty against equality, individualism against the rule of law, and populism against constitutionalism.”<sup>16</sup> It is in the American Dream that he locates the reconciliation of these conflicts. The American Dream is an ideal that he defines as “a fair chance to succeed in open competition with fellow citizens for the good things in life.”<sup>17</sup>

In construction and application, Jillson evokes the American Dream as being both an interpretative key and the “spark that animates American life.”<sup>18</sup> The inherent conflicts in the creedal values are given the space to be balanced to ensure availability of opportunity and success. The Dream promises that if one works hard, learns, saves, perseveres and plays by the rules, he or she has a reasonable chance to grow and prosper.<sup>19</sup> Through the Dream, individual growth and prosperity coexist with the collective in a constant dialogue ensuring mutual and continued survival—even when appearing at odds with each other. To this end, Jillson states: “the American Dream insists that this must, and must increasingly, be a country in which opportunity is available to all,” as well as “hard work yields the chance to succeed and thrive.”<sup>20</sup> Present in such a sentiment is an admonition for both individual and collective success, even when historically this has not been the case.

Most locate the American Dream in the idea of success. In fact, more often than not, the two are used interchangeably. However, it is important to realize that one is a condition of the other. The American Dream provides an objective measured as successful or not. For many, the Dream begins with being “successful,” and then the particulars/details are added. Simply put,

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<sup>15</sup> Jillson, xii.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, respectively 5 and 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

success equals happiness, and happiness equals success, thus the Dream. Of course success and opportunity are directly connected: one must first have the opportunity to be successful. When notions of success and the American Dream are articulated in the same statement, it often takes shape or is defined along lines that are economic, social, personal, and/or material. Though certainly linked to one another, an important distinction is to be made between the various forms of success associated with the American Dream. Economic success implies achieving a certain economic or income level that can be measured through monetary means. This comes in the form of a desire to earn a six-figure income or to be economically “comfortable”—able to pay one’s bills, or having no worry regarding money. Economic success most often aligns with material success where the acquisition of “stuff” becomes the central goal. On a basic level, this is most often characterized by one owning a home, or in the extreme, the realm of conspicuous consumption where it becomes homes combined with cars, yachts, and other material things. Social success is the achievement of a given social position or status, either from a point of celebrity or in a given socio-economic class such as middle and upper class. Some even seek a combination of both, social and economic success. Finally, personal success resides in the achievement of one’s goals, however defined.

In order for success to be determined, there must be a way to measure its existence or arrival. Jennifer Hochschild, in *Facing Up to the American Dream*, defines success as measured in three ways: absolute, relative, or competitive.<sup>21</sup> Each form includes some level of achievement. The reaching of a threshold of well-being, higher than where one began, comprises the *absolute*. *Relative* success is discerned by one’s comparison to others.

Hochschild constructs such comparison points as possibly being, “one’s childhood, people in the

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<sup>21</sup> Hochschild, 16 and 17.

old country, one's neighbors, a character from a book, another race or gender." Essentially the measure becomes anyone or anything to which one can compare. Finally, *competitive* success assumes winners and losers. In the case of the economic, one's success is often at the expense of another's—a piece of the proverbial pie where the increase of any one share means the decrease of others. The American Dream operates in the realm of success measured on an absolute and relative level, though; an individual may construct the Dream as being the best of any form of success. To give shape to the achievement of success, Hochschild presents four tenets that are shared and unconsciously presumed, thus constructing an American Dream ideology.

As an ideological construct, Hochschild's measures for the achievement of the American Dream are thus found in answering her four tenets: "*Who* may pursue the American dream; In *what* does the pursuit consist; *How* does one successfully pursue the dream; and *Why* is the pursuit worthy of our deepest commitment?"<sup>22</sup> The Dream's currency and initial viability is found in her response: the Dream is available to everyone with a reasonable anticipation of success through actions and traits under ones own control, and that success in the American setting is inherently linked with virtue. With the presumption of "everyone," the Dream infers equal access and equal opportunity. An individual is not limited by social class, family background, ascriptive traits, personal history, or affiliations. The identity politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality are immaterial. A "reasonable anticipation of success" is founded upon the idea that resources are available to support the success of all, and one can expect to succeed by following the general guidelines present in the Dream. Hochschild links "anticipation" with "expectation"—a sense of certainty, if the Dream is approached correctly. Success realized through actions and traits under one's own control is rooted in the individual. If one presents the

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<sup>22</sup> Hochschild, 18.

right kind of traits and engages in the right kind of actions—especially hard work—then success will follow. Finally, the association of success with virtue is found in the collective belief that, “virtue leads to success, success makes a person virtuous, success indicates virtue, or apparent success is not real success unless one is also virtuous.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, one is successful because he or she possesses the “right” virtues, and subsequently, if they fail they must possess the “wrong” virtues. Such elements and characteristics have historically and socially connected with the Dream. However, the focus of Hochschild’s work demonstrates the flaws in these tenets.

The centrality of the American Dream of success to the greater American character is affirmed by two recent historical studies by Jim Cullen and Cal Jillson. Both monographs present the Dream as a historical and contemporary ideal at the foundation of the American national and cultural narrative. As Cullen notes, the American Dream, “has long since moved beyond the relatively musty domain of print culture into the incandescent glow of the mass media” and has become “enshrined as our national motto.”<sup>24</sup> Jillson positions the Dream as a distinctive ideal that “took shape very early in our national experience, defined the nation throughout its growth and development,” and is “central to our national ethos and collective self-image.”<sup>25</sup> With both authors, the Dream’s currency and relevance lies in a historical thread extended from early colonization to the present. Though both are chronological in approach and overlapping in their examples of the Dream, they differ in their intent. Cullen’s text invokes the Dream through a series of narratives thematically oriented and organized in a loose chronology. Jillson conversely explores the Dream’s ongoing position in reconciling liberty and democracy

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<sup>23</sup> Hochschild, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Cullen, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Jillson, xii.

through major historical figures, and both political and cultural institutions. Together these two works outline the historical models often associated with the Dream.

In Cullen's estimation, the efficacy of the American Dream relies on its ability to describe something contemporary while at the same time resting squarely in a historical tradition. As a "complex idea with manifold implications" that "can cut different ways," the Dream acts as a unifying agent in the creation of the national identity; a "lingua franca" providing universal access despite the ambiguity and uncertainty of its application.<sup>26</sup> From immigrant to celebrity, the Dream holds a mythical power constituting a national consciousness underlying this identity. This power rests on the idea that there is no single American Dream, but rather a basic belief in possibility, or an unfettered desire for a life that is "better and richer and fuller."<sup>27</sup> Like Adams, Cullen questions what is meant by a better, richer, and fuller life. Willingly, he acknowledges how often the Dream is realized in terms of money—bemoaning the contemporary obsession with such—yet, his primary point is that there are other versions of the Dream, from religious transformation, political reform, educational attainment . . . to sexual expression, a veritable "endless list." Such versions have come into and out of what is often referred to as "common sense,"<sup>28</sup> and have become what the current study refers to as traditional Dream narratives: conceptual models for achieving the Dream. From this perspective, Cullen defines and traces the Dream through American history.

With no desire to be exhaustive in his study, Cullen discusses a few of these varieties. In a loosely chronological fashion, he describes a series of American Dreams noting their origins, dynamics, and relevance to the ongoing presence of the Dream in American culture. With

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<sup>26</sup> Jillson, 6.

<sup>27</sup> See James Truslow Adams' definition of the Dream in his *The Epic of America*. Also qtd. in Cullen, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Cullen, 7.



freedom rooted in agency as his backdrop, Cullen presents six versions of the Dream under the headings of “The Puritan Dream,” “The Declaration of Independence,” “Upward Mobility,” “The Dream of Equality,” “The Dream of Home Ownership,” and “The Coast.” Each provides enduring characteristics that become associated with the Dream. These versions of the Dream are made possible by the ideals of liberty and equality. Cullen (as well as Jillson) sees the *Declaration* as a charter for the American Dream. The freedom asserted and implied in the *Declaration* makes the Dream possible, giving an objective to the Dream—the pursuit of happiness. Initially this pursuit was limited to white male landowners. The obvious points of exclusion created what made equality, for many, a major component of the Dream, or even a Dream unto itself. As Cullen notes, the movements for Civil Rights called “attention to the yawning gap between the cherished ideals of the *Declaration* and the appalling realities of American life.”<sup>29</sup> This aspect of the Dream is best characterized by the legitimization of “separate but equal” laws in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and the active attempt by individuals such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to point out the inequality created by such laws. Nonetheless, despite the reality of inequality, “at some visceral level, virtually all of us need to believe that equality is one of the core values of everyday American life, that its promises extend to everyone.”<sup>30</sup> The Dream has permanence despite its limitations. Its efficacy is the belief in its equal application to all and that all are able at least to work toward its realization.

In what he calls the “First American Dream,” Cullen begins by noting the imprecise and illusive application of the term “Puritanism.” Citing a “Puritan Experience” ranging from William Bradford to John Adams, Cullen retreats to the “irreducible foundation of all varieties of Protestantism” when he asserts their common faith in reform, or rather, a cornerstone of the

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<sup>29</sup> Cullen, 56.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

Dream that “Things—religious or otherwise—could be different.”<sup>31</sup> Essentially a reset, this belief in reform and a sense of newness constitutes a core component of the Dream. Each generation accounts for its own dreams and desires for success, while at the same time fostering a genuine hope that “one’s children might have a better life.”<sup>32</sup> Underpinning this belief is an overly empathetic bent for self-improvement, becoming to this day, “an indispensable means for the achievement of any American Dream.”<sup>33</sup> For these early colonists, principles of hope and liberty provide the basis for mastering one’s own destiny while making it possible to create the “City Upon a Hill” as a model for the world to follow. However, as Cullen points out, the reality of this example was far from unified and was marked by obvious forms of exclusion. The dissent of individuals such as Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson and the venerable Salem Witch Trials demonstrated the ongoing tension of the Dream embodying, “the degree to which the dreams of individuals compromised collective aspirations.”<sup>34</sup>

Without exception, the desire for the “Good Life” is a core belief of the American Dream. Its basic premise equates the achievement of such with the happiness promised in the *Declaration*. The pursuit of happiness in all its ambiguity provides both an underlying characteristic linking the unlimited variety of Dreams, as well as the possibility for their very existence. Cullen notes, “that among all the possibilities, as variegated as any American who has ever lived, are basic classes of dreams that rest on concepts whose meaning both transcends a particular context and gets defined by that context.”<sup>35</sup> Basically, the notion of what a “good

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<sup>31</sup> Cullen, 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Cullen, 32, “More than three centuries later, the American Dream still straddles—perhaps it’s more accurate to say it blurs—the tension between one and many, a tension we still all too often fail to recognize, let alone resolve.”

<sup>35</sup> Cullen, 59.

life/happiness” meant, though consistent as a general desire, changed over time. The Puritan approach to this was situated in a desire to create a community bound by one’s allegiance to a holy covenant and the precepts associated therein. Though material well-being was very much a part of Puritan life, the ultimate objective was otherworldly and not individualistic.

The commercial success and “upward mobility” expected within the Dream today is an example of a major class of American Dreams that has come to define the “Good Life.” The power of upward mobility is fueled by a general sense of collective ownership, and the “assertion of universal enfranchisement” routinely reaffirmed by the Dream’s boosters promotes the idea that “anyone can get ahead.”<sup>36</sup> As Cullen observes: “For hundreds of years, American readers and writers have had tireless appetites for tales of poor boys (and, later, girls) who, with nothing but pluck and ingenuity, created financial empires.” These empires have become a fixture in the national imagination and have quite literally “towered” over the national landscape.<sup>37</sup> Such tales affirm the importance of working hard and having fortitude as a means for upward mobility, and they explain away failure, or immobility, as a lack of one or both. The nineteenth century narratives of Horatio Alger, Jr. provide the best example.<sup>38</sup>

One of the most distinguishable signs of upward mobility and the “Good Life” is the acquisition and development of land. From the Homestead Act of 1862, to the growth of modern day suburbia, the importance of land and home ownership has been an essential component of the American Dream. Cullen underscores the compulsion of this Dream when he asserts: “No American Dream has broader appeal, and no American Dream has been quite so

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<sup>36</sup> Cullen, 60.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See John Tebbel’s *From Rags To Riches: Horatio Alger and the American Dream* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), for a thorough discussion of Alger’s work.

widely realized.”<sup>39</sup> Under the guise of a “free,” “open,” and “virgin” landscape, individuals—initially white males, but ultimately including others—were able to provide a basis for their security and material well-being. The democratization of land ownership was due in large part to its ready availability. The colonial enterprise of the Spanish, French, Dutch, and British gave way to the expansionist policies of the newly formed United States. Such policies included the North West Ordinances of 1785 and 1787, codifying federal supervision of newly acquired territories, as well as laws for their admission to the Union. The 1862 Homestead Act allowed for the claiming of 160 acres of public land for development by individuals who promised to pay a small registration fee and live on it for five years. According to Cullen, these policies, “held out promise for a society in which an unprecedented proportion of a national polity could, and did, literally have a stake in their country.”<sup>40</sup> The owning of land signified the true meaning of freedom. The icons of this “frontier state”—the hunter, trapper, cowboy, and farmer—became models of the American Dream. However, with the closing of the frontier, advances in transportation, and growth of a national infrastructure, these models gave way to new examples of the Dream—the researcher, engineer, bureaucrat, consumer—whose domain became the growing urban landscape and that post-World War II refuge, suburbia.<sup>41</sup>

Cullen’s final version of the Dream, one that he believes dominates the current moment, goes beyond material prosperity and hard work into the realm of personal or individual fulfillment. With its geographical setting of the coast—more specifically, California—this Dream champions achievement without effort, and fame and fortune represented in the cult of celebrity. An insistently secular Dream—a desire for wealth, fame, looks, and health—is “less

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<sup>39</sup> Cullen, 136.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 143.

about accumulating riches than about living off their fruits, and its symbolic location is not the bank but the beach.”<sup>42</sup> In short, this Dream is about making it big and having a life of ease. The best expression of this Dream sprung from the 1848 discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill in Coloma, CA. The Gold Rush that followed “cast a deep and lasting spell on the American imagination” in the “notion that transformative riches were literally at your feet, there for the taking.”<sup>43</sup> Despite the reality of limited success in gold mining, California attracted thousands of “forty-niners” who hoped to strike it rich, as well as entrepreneurs who sought to cash in on the boom economy that came with the sudden influx of people. As Cullen notes, “even when the promise of the gold rush proved illusory . . . it continued to have enormous metaphorical power for generations of Americans.” For each, “California (a.k.a. “the Golden State”) offered the potential for riches of many kinds.”<sup>44</sup> The railroad followed bringing speculators, and with an ongoing presence of a temperate climate, agribusiness turned California into the nation’s breadbasket during the 1860s and 1870s. California came to represent the “Good Life.” Cullen likens the popular perception of the state in the twentieth century as a sort of Mediterranean Paradise: “a haven of sorts from the hard-driving tenor of much of the rest of national life.”<sup>45</sup> The embodiment of the “California Dream” became the growing film industry—America’s dream factory—Hollywood.<sup>46</sup>

Hollywood becomes a magical place where the American Dream is given life and an opportunity for a wider distribution. Not only can people now see the Dream—traditional dream

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<sup>42</sup> Cullen, 160.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>46</sup> Cullen, 174, “At its most compelling, California could be a moral premise, a prescription of what America could and should be. At its most trivial, it was a cluster of shallow dreams, venial hankerings which mistook laziness for leisure, selfishness for individualism, laxity for liberation, evasion and cheap escape for redemption and a solid second chance.”

narrative constructed in a visual space—but their fictional representations and those who play them, become the Dream. Being young, rich, and famous *is* the new Dream. Hollywood combines the Dream with consumerism to create a culture of consumption promulgating a given lifestyle. The Dream goes beyond the achievement of a given goal or social status, favoring instead a given “look.” Oftentimes this “look” supersedes that which it represents and becomes a location for the Dream itself. Cullen points to the status of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, America’s first celebrity couple. Their romance and its physical representation, a two-story colonial estate called Pickfair, became “a collective dream house, a place fans felt they instinctively knew even if they had never actually been there.”<sup>47</sup> Instead of Benjamin Franklin’s or Abraham Lincoln’s Dream focused on the development of character, the modern celebrity Dream rests in personality. Cullen states: “They were celebrities, people whose fame rested not on talent, however defined, but on simply being famous.”<sup>48</sup> Because of Hollywood and the popular culture spawned by it, the American Dream and notions of success have become rooted in the pursuit of a lifestyle with material consumption at its foundation. This created a culture free from the burden of history. The only thing that matters is the image created in the moment, and how to obtain that which is desired for the future. Cullen concludes: “At the core of many American Dreams, especially the Dream of the Coast, is an insistence that history doesn’t matter, that the future matters far more than the past.”<sup>49</sup>

Cal Jillson argues that as a “distinctive ideal” the Dream was and is the underlying motivation of the American national project. From John Winthrop to George W. Bush, and from Jefferson’s yeoman farmer to Daniel Bell’s warning against the shift to a service economy,

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<sup>47</sup> Cullen, 175.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 184.

Jillson posits the Dream as being the guiding force to create, “a more open, diverse, and genuinely competitive society.”<sup>50</sup> Although common elements of the Dream—hard work, perseverance, a little bit of luck, and hope—are maintained from colonization to the present, the application and content of the Dream has, “evolved and expanded over the course of American history.”<sup>51</sup> Jillson reminds his reader that the rhetoric may have been the same—freedom, autonomy, opportunity, and work—but the meaning was quite different. The structure of his text traces this evolution over the centuries through major historical figures that have given shape and scope to the Dream. In each chapter/historical period, he addresses how the Dream was articulated and the ways in which it was embedded in institutions, laws, and policy. The arc of Jillson’s argument is ultimately situated in a conversation concerning those included in the Dream and those excluded, and how inclusion/exclusion allowed for the fruition of the Dream for some, and turned it into a nightmare for others.

Like Cullen, Jillson extends the Dream back to early settlement of the North American continent. The promise of life in the New World and the creation of a shining “City Upon A Hill” are realized in a holy commonwealth through a religious covenant. A shared social structure rooted in religious conformity underpins the “Dreams” of early settlement leaders like John Winthrop and William Penn. With the unsullied backdrop of the New World, they strove to create a model religious existence that featured an extreme reverence for God, the community, and religious leaders. The individualism associated with the American Dream, as it is known today, was distained by Winthrop’s Puritans and Penn’s Quakers. “Freedom” meant the freedom to create the “City Upon a Hill” and realize the dream of “peaceful, prosperous communities in

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<sup>50</sup> Jillson, xi.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

which they might tend the inner plantation of the soul and walk humbly with their God.”<sup>52</sup>

Jillson notes hard work and allegiance to the community, *not* individualism, were valued most in these settlements. The Puritans nonetheless provide the first assertion of hope so central to the Dream.

Jillson positions the colonial enterprise of the Virginians as having an independent spirit and wanting the freedom to grow economically. Here, individualism, competition, and luck were the primary motivation. The growth of the “individual estate”—lands, slaves, buildings—were at the heart of this Dream. As Jillson points out, “Virginians wanted the freedom to contest for wealth and status and to enjoy what they won.”<sup>53</sup> Success was rooted in an abundance of land and unfettered opportunity. Laws and social institutions existed merely to create the possibility for obtaining economic viability (the Dream), rather than the maintenance of a religious covenant. In the end, as more settlers arrived and territorial expansion accelerated, the religious authority of Winthrop and Penn gave way to the individualist spirit of the Southern colonies. What remained, and ultimately became defining characteristics of the Dream, were their professed virtues, or values, combined with the rugged individualism of colonial expansion. This legacy was then realized in the first direct expression of the American Dream, that of the “Founding” generation.

For Jillson, the earliest model of the American Dream as conceived today, is found in the life and writings of Benjamin Franklin. In the popular mind he is one of the first examples of the self-made man. Franklin and his surrogates—Silence Dogood, Father Abraham, and Poor Richard—provided the enduring core values of the Dream.<sup>54</sup> With the goal of self and social

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<sup>52</sup> Jillson, 20.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 34.



improvement, “Franklin contributed to the moral core of the American Dream” by emphasizing the importance of education, work, thrift, dedication, and a degree of good fortune.<sup>55</sup> At an early age while an apprentice for his brother, under the pseudonym of “Silence Dogood,” Franklin championed freedom of speech and conscience. In his *Autobiography* he emphasized the value of education, noting his ongoing effort to improve upon the limited formal education he received, developing an insatiable appetite for reading and a love of writing. He also worked hard to perfect his personal habits. Taking a cue from Penn, Franklin in his “The Way to Wealth” described the process he went through in order to master the “Art of Virtue.” After reviewing a plethora of materials, he deduced thirteen virtues that one should make permanent and a habitual part of their life. One week at a time, per virtue, he practiced temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility in hopes of avoiding the pitfalls of his peers. Jillson concludes, Franklin and his surrogates, Father Abraham and Poor Richard, espoused a view that “self-control and self-improvement led to sufficiency, security and respect,” and that “respecting the persons and property of others led to community, peace, and order.”<sup>56</sup> As a point of inclusion, Franklin’s approach was highly democratic because anyone could engage in the very same process, thus leading to success and the realization of the American Dream. The inherent right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness expressed by Franklin and his fellow Founding Fathers made possible this democratic vision—thus the Dream.

Jillson notes that the assertion of personal freedom and the nation-building project of the founding generation brought into focus the Dream’s ongoing position reconciling liberty and democracy in a geographical space. The “exceptionalism”—the American project being both an

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<sup>55</sup> Jillson 34.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

exception to the historical narrative and exceptional in its ideals—later noted by de Tocqueville was inherent in the colonial expansionist enterprise of Europe and was later legitimized with the American Revolution. Jillson captures the sensibility and mood of the moment when he asserts: “Americans were convinced that God had set aside the new nation for a special experiment in human freedom.”<sup>57</sup> He outlines a three-fold reason for the sense of exceptionalism Americans felt post-Revolution. In the first reason, Americans capitalized on their New World designation, free from the history and entanglements of the Old World, allowing for feelings of security, peace, and order to prevail. The second and third reasons stem from the general belief in inclusion created by the prevailing sense of liberty and democracy universally felt after the Revolutionary War. Unlike the Old World and regardless of birth or position, individuals were free to dream, strive, and achieve. This created a condition not only for economic prosperity, growth, and development of human intellect and character, but also for “learning, the arts, morality, and religion.”<sup>58</sup> Whether born in America or newly immigrated, the sentiments of individual success and collective good solidified and cemented the Dream in the newly formed American nationalism. The art of this project would be the ongoing reconciliation of the two ideals—liberty and democracy—from which would spring conceptual models for achieving the Dream.

The Dream’s function of reconciling the competing creedal ideals of liberty and democracy is brought to light in the great Jefferson/Hamilton debates. Jillson remarks, “Jefferson saw the American Dream as widespread, comfortable security; Hamilton saw it as a fair competition for society’s best places.”<sup>59</sup> The two views, one firmly established in individual

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<sup>57</sup> Jillson, 54.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 63.

liberty, the other in a strong sense of nationalism rooted in community, are posited by Jillson as providing competing models for ensuring or achieving the Dream. For Jefferson, the best approach for realizing success in the America landscape was for government to maximize individual liberty and help its citizens take advantage of opportunity. The individual autonomy and independence central to his agrarian dream was predicated on a well-educated polity. Through education, individuals would be better suited to self-govern and more able to realize the way in which the necessities of community can be kept in line with the needs of the individual, thus allowing for the realization of the Dream. This positive view of humanity placed Jefferson at odds with Hamilton's negative belief that society was a theater of perpetual conflict.<sup>60</sup> For Hamilton, the best way to ensure the continued possibility of the Dream was through a strong national government secured through laws and a healthy market place. Jillson rightly discerns the disposition of the two nation builders, architects of a working space for the American Dream, when he summarizes that "Jefferson depended on local democracy and schools to guide men's choices and behavior," while "Hamilton depended on markets and law, with the strong arm of government ever ready to shape and enforce both."<sup>61</sup> The arc of Jillson's application of the Dream through American history is oriented around the ongoing interaction of these two approaches in national institutions and culture.

Each of these authors look to historical, at times dogmatic, context to provide a framework for the Dream; however, literature perhaps provides the greatest lens to view the Dream as a socio-cultural framework for understanding the American identity. This study, therefore, uses literary texts from the twentieth century to explore the interaction between liberty

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<sup>60</sup> Jillson, 61, quotes Bernard Weisberger who observed: "Hamilton saw society as a theater of perpetual conflict rather than cooperation for security."

<sup>61</sup> Jillson, 63.

and democracy at the heart of the American Dream. Of particular interest is the way in which the Dream is invoked and then called into question in the selected literary examples. Issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality figure prominently in expectations of normalcy regarding the Dream. Specifically, this study hopes to examine in these narratives the American Dream of the “Good Life” and the Dream’s viability in the greater “American identity.”

The specific texts under consideration, Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not* (1937), Zora Neal Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’ *Cross Creek* (1942), set Florida as the geographical location and Depression-era America for their evocation and criticism of traditional Dream narratives. In *To Have and Have Not*, seemingly all avenues for achieving the American Dream are examined and found wanting. The hardships of the Depression, including the New Deal “solutions” of the Roosevelt administration, and the failures of educated but corrupt businessmen and writers cause the Dream to collapse, damaging family life and prospects. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston traces Janie Crawford’s Dream—the realization of selfhood and an organic union with another—against a backdrop of traditional expectations of womanhood in rural Florida. Never settling, and in a constant state of development, Janie resists the limiting and confining notions of normalcy sprouting from three very gendered communities. Rawlings in *Cross Creek* explicates a love affair between person and place creating a Dream challenging modern gender norms. In her chronicle of Florida’s natural elements and the frontier existence of Creek life, she gives shape to her Dream. Each of these texts offers historically oriented examples of the American Dream and the realities of its application. In all three, individual constructions of the Dream conflict with collective beliefs regarding social and domestic success and happiness in the larger community. Each recognizes and explores the powerful, often painful, strain within the Dream

to touch on communally understood ideals at odds with individually defined conceptions of the  
“Good Life.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE DREAM AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

Benedict Anderson first used the phrase “Imagined Community” as a means for defining nationalism. In his work of the same name, he defined the nation as an imagined political community both limited and sovereign in scope. Anderson believes, “that nationality . . . nationness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts [*sic*] of a particular kind.”<sup>1</sup> Such an approach steps away from the fixity of nationalism—where nations believe themselves to be “new” and “historical” at the same time—and roots it squarely as a cultural phenomenon. Nations imagine themselves into existence with a shared sense of “fraternity” or “comradeship,” with a “sacred language” and ancestral past projected into a limitless future. All members of this community believe themselves to be part of a greater whole participating in the same existence regardless of ever having met one another.

The American Dream functions as an underlying shared narrative binding the nation into one imagined community. The American Dream’s characteristics, elements, and represented narratives merge with the politics of identity to create a commentary on expectations of normalcy within American culture, or imagined community. The American character is constantly in the making while at the same time predicated on an ever-fixed view of itself. Historically, this view has been drawn along the lines of success or failures in terms of the Dream’s application—often transmuting the Dream into a Nightmare. An analysis of the American literary tradition outlines the degree to which the Dream is a nationalizing force. Such analysis must be addressed in order to truly understand the larger American identity that forms the American imagined community.

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983), 4.

Frederick Carpenter in his 1955 *American Literature and the Dream* positions the American Dream as a symbolic and experimental projection of American Literature. Though vaguely defined at any point in history, the Dream has “influenced the plotting of our fiction and the imagining of our poetry.”<sup>2</sup> The constant influence and omnipresence of the Dream sets American literature apart from that of other national literatures, especially the oft-compared British. Carpenter renegotiates traditional categories of American literature such as “romantic,” “realistic,” “transcendental,” and “genteel,” in light of the ubiquity of the Dream. He dismantles and situates the historically oriented writers of the “Romantic period,” like Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe, based on their approach to an American ideal of a perfect democracy rooted in ideal liberty. As such, each designation and its ascribed attributes, authors, and works become critical commentaries on the Dream’s presence in the American imagined community. Supporting Carpenter’s study is the belief that the Transcendentalists and their writings are the “philosophers” of the Dream; the genteel traditionalists are its “opponents;” the Romantics serve as its “enthusiasts;” and the Realists speak as “sympathetic critics.”<sup>3</sup> The patterns of thinking, feelings, and attitudes presented in the works of such authors are a reaction to the presence of the American Dream. As he states, “The dream has always been a fact of American history, and even if a delusion, it remains a motivating force.”<sup>4</sup>

As “philosophers” of the Dream, the Transcendentalists inherited an intense sense of faith from their Puritan ancestors. As such, the Transcendentalists work towards an idealized conception of the Dream. By following “the discipline of nature” rather than the traditions of man, they looked to make the world of “today” better. The Transcendental dream, according to

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Carpenter, *American Literature and the Dream* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1955), 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Carpenter, “sought to use the real opportunities of the new world,” and the “real changes which science was bringing about, to make the American world more free and more democratic.”<sup>5</sup>

Puritan morality ends up transferred to the realm of individual conscience while Puritan faith developed into a philosophy of secular idealism—i.e. the Dream. Individuals such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman escape the emotionalism of the Romantics and the Puritanical moralism of the past in favor of what will become the realism of modern America. Their assertion of an independent American identity and the subsequent rejection of European gentility gave shape to a philosophical expression of the American Dream.

Emerson and Thoreau’s ideals regarding the Dream are seated in the philosophy of self-reliance. Carpenter sees in Emerson’s most famous address, “The American Scholar,” an assertion of this truly American identity giving shape to the American Dream. As he states, “Emerson’s ‘American Scholar’ suggested that the new American idea was to be democratic and realistic, in contrast to the ‘courtly’ tradition,” thus breaking from European gentility in favor of an individual and “new” tradition.<sup>6</sup> Underpinning Emerson’s view of the New World was a belief that the ideals of freedom and democracy expressed by the Founding generation could and would be progressively realized, as opposed to a Romantic pining for some utopia. The poetic realization of this ideal identity is brought to life in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. In it he gives poetic expression to the Dream’s edification of the “self-made” man. Like Emerson, he rejects European cultural dominance in favor of reconstructing and celebrating an American ideal self. Carpenter places the American bard as being fundamental to the evocation of the American Dream in his statement that “‘Walt’ Whitman personified, in poetry and in life, the American

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<sup>5</sup> Carpenter, 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.



Dream of popular democracy.”<sup>7</sup> The Transcendentalists claim a uniquely American space and assert the Dream of cultural independence, individual liberty and pioneer initiative in their life and writings.

Carpenter finds the opponents of the transcendental idealist expression in what he refers to as the “The Genteel Tradition.” With a bent towards conservatism in relation to Old World traditional, aristocratic ideals, these writers demonstrated the futility of the Dream and believed that it couldn’t be fully realized. They emphasized the old Puritan and Franklin virtues of hard work, discipline, and moderation, and castigate the seemingly competing notions of rebellion, self-reliance, and egalitarian democracy. Essentially, the genteel tradition remains narrow, conservative, and opposed to everything modern.<sup>8</sup> Their use of the Dream functions more from a point of caution than as an ideal, especially as counter-points to their Transcendental and Romantic peers. Writers such as Hawthorne and Melville reject the escapism of the Romantics (like Poe) and saw the danger of the transcendental Dream of individual independence (like Thoreau) as unseating the communal process. As Carpenter notes, “the anti-transcendental morality of Hawthorne,” and “the tragic vision of Melville” describe the ineffectiveness of the transcendental ideal and uselessness of Romantic utopianism as it applies to the ongoing competition between the individual and the community at the heart of the American imagined community.<sup>9</sup> Both writers view extreme independence, individual freedom, and fanatical determination as dangerous, even bordering on disastrous. For Carpenter, Hawthorne and Melville invoke the Transcendental and Romantic ideal highlighting the individual “integrity” of Hester Prynne in the former, and acknowledging the “magnificence” of Ahab as a Romantic

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<sup>7</sup> Carpenter, 45.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 52.

ideal in the latter, only to retreat back to the genteel tradition condemning both protagonists for the futility of their Dreams. Carpenter notes: “In *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne recognized a certain heroism in self-reliance, but emphasized its greater evil. And in *Moby Dick*, Melville described the heroism of Ahab, but also his fanatical delusion.”<sup>10</sup> Prynne and Ahab thus become cautionary tales against the extreme Transcendental and Romantic approaches to the Dream.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Prynne’s actions are viewed by the traditionalists as being wholly sinful. She breaks the commandments of her religion while at the same time fracturing the covenant upon which her community stands. Her passion becomes the catalyst for the sins of her lover and those of her husband. She openly and defiantly lives a life of deception and concealment. In so doing, Hester asserts an individuality counter to traditional Puritanism. Her sin and the resulting tragedy have come to “symbolize the eternal failure of the American Dream.”<sup>11</sup> Her “Romantic idealism” of individuality and freedom conflict with morality, tradition, and the eternal immutability of sin. The paradox noted by Carpenter is that “Explicitly, he [Hawthorne] condemned Hester Prynne as immoral; but implicitly, he glorified her as courageously idealistic.”<sup>12</sup> This paradox highlights the ongoing confusion regarding *The Scarlet Letter* in its position in the literary canon. On the one hand Prynne is seen as sinful and doomed by tragedy—the traditional/orthodox view. On the other, she is positioned more heroically by the Romantics and Transcendentalists—giving all to love in one view, and championing individual freedom in the other. Despite this confusion, Prynne “embodies the authentic American Dream of a new life in the wilderness of the new world, and of self-reliant action to

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<sup>10</sup> Carpenter, 52.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 63.

realize that ideal.” Hawthorne damns her transcendental beliefs for her romantic immorality—higher truth and ideal love—as a lesson for the reader.<sup>13</sup>

Melville’s *Moby Dick* brings to the table a tragic commentary on the American Dream of democracy. With the *Pequod* positioned as a metaphorical ship of state, Ahab’s fanaticism and his crew’s weakness highlight two great dangers inherent in all democracies. The first acknowledges the danger of men surrendering their own free will. The second is the danger of confusing the democratic dream with that of the old Romantic dream of absolute empire. As Carpenter notes, in order to “make the world safe for democracy,” the captain and the crew of the *Pequod* “abandons democracy; and to destroy evil, commits evil.”<sup>14</sup> Through their surrender of liberty, and the confusion of the ship’s leaders, the Dream ultimately fails. The failure of the democratic Dream is seen in the crew’s failure to do the right thing and their willingness to surrender their liberty. Ahab, though fully committed to his task, is blinded by his fanaticism. Although Melville champions democratic freedom and criticizes authoritarian rule in the realm of the ideal, in the world of the actual, he acquiesces to the inevitability of human weakness and false ideals. Melville believed the history of mankind was marked by war and the inevitability of war would ultimately lead to martial law, thus negating the democratic Dream. In this sense, Carpenter asserts: “*Moby Dick* prophesied the ultimate failure of the American dream, without distortion or confusion.”<sup>15</sup> The conclusion is that Melville valued the American dream as an ideal, but didn’t believe in its attainment in reality.

From these two approaches Carpenter traces the Dream in American literature from Reconstruction forward. On the whole he believes the Dream is merely an extension of these

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<sup>13</sup> Carpenter, 71.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 78 and 79.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

two opposing views. The Romantic/Transcendental idealism and genteel skepticism found in the authors of the nineteenth century emerge in the pragmatic realism at the turn of the century and the modernists of the post-World War I era. The age of realism following the Civil War contained many of the ideals (liberty and escape) of the Romantics and Transcendentalists, but, like the traditionalists, the age rejected the notion of idealism and dreaming in favor of a more realistic and pragmatic approach. Nonetheless, the Dream still exists as ever-present elements of the American identity. A “pragmatic awakening” emerged post-Civil War. The cold philosophy of facts, Carpenters notes, pushed aside the Emersonian metaphysics and “gave way to the scientific realism of Peirce, the radical empiricism of William James, and instrumentalism of John Dewey.”<sup>16</sup> Essentially, the idealism of the Dream was directed to a more practical and measurable effort rooted in fact. Peirce translates the idealism and vagueness of Transcendental idealism into practical terms. James urged the immediate testing of ideas for their practical realization, and the elimination of those that are invalid. And Dewey, acknowledging that certain ideas have been legitimized as practical and others have not, positions them as instruments for social realization. The old idealism underpinning the Dream is maintained, but only so far as it has useful and practical value to society. Carpenter’s conclusion on these points as it relates to the American Dream: “Pragmatism has interpreted the ideas and principles of the American past in terms of the conduct which those principles imply for the American present.”<sup>17</sup> It is through the American “present” and the reality of the human condition in a technological world that the modernists approach the American Dream.

Taking their cue from the Pragmatic Realists at the turn of the century, the American modernists attempted to reconcile the reality of the Dream with its inherent possibilities. They

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<sup>16</sup> Carpenter, 83.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 85.

celebrated its professed ideals while at the same time exuding a general sense of distrust regarding the Dream. According to Carpenter, “the American dream has sometimes seemed admirable and desirable, sometimes deluded and impossible.”<sup>18</sup> Though disillusion and tragedy are accepted as a part of modern life, they still deal with the Dream as if it were a fixture of the American identity, and at a minimum celebrated the Dream for its inherent beauty, even if as a lament. He continues by stating, “the dream persists, in spite of the delusions of its supporters, and the misinterpretations of its critics. It imagines a way of life which the disillusion of modern times has not discredited.”<sup>19</sup> Sinclair Lewis, Eugene O’Neil, Robinson Jeffers, Thomas Wolfe, John Steinbeck, William Saroyan, and Ernest Hemingway serve as Carpenter’s specific examples of modern authors who deal directly and indirectly with the Dream, whether as a point of realism or idealism.<sup>20</sup> Criticisms of the Dream, its application, or absence, have been the themes present in such authors’ works. Carpenter finds delusion occurring regarding the Dream when it is found as being merely romantic, messianic or self-righteous, a fact of material progress, or when presented as a subject of nationalism.

American literature in the modern period brings these issues to the forefront while holding to what Carpenter believes to be the truth regarding the American Dream: “It praises—not nationalism, but freedom for all men; not materialism, but the progress of science; not the compulsory reform of society, but the education of the individual,” nor is it a “mere success, but self realization through struggle and even tragedy.”<sup>21</sup> The works of Lewis highlight the conflict between individuals’ dreams and the reality of the moment. Carpenter finds Lewis’ move from

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<sup>18</sup> Carpenter, 194.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>20</sup> Carpenter also makes assertions about other authors like Faulkner, Dos Passos, Conrad Richter, and Walter Van Tilburg.

<sup>21</sup> Carpenter, 198.

fervent idealist to staunch realist as an illustration of an American tragedy. His earlier works such as *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Arrowsmith* are described as addressing the conflict between idealism and materialism in “pragmatic or comic terms.”<sup>22</sup> *Main Street* concludes with the failure of its heroine’s (Carol Milford Kennicut) romantic idealism in the light of reality, but still maintains the importance of her ideals. George F. Babbitt, positioned as an archetypal American, struggles in a sea of confusion created between the reality of the society in which he thrives and a desire to escape into a world of idealism. Lewis brings his idealism regarding the Dream to its fullest realization in *Arrowsmith*. Martin Arrowsmith “incarnated for modern Americans the best of this spirit of science; independence of mind, objectivity, and ideal of intellectual discovery,” all in an attempt to escape the delusions of material progress.<sup>23</sup>

The ugliness of material progress is contrasted by an ideal beauty located beyond the horizon in the works of Eugene O’Neill. The search for such a perfect beauty—an ideal world—leads his characters to tragedy. When they acquiesce to material reality, they are damned. Carpenter concludes the arc of O’Neil’s oeuvre demonstrates “man’s dream of perfection is impossible and if worldly compromise is ignoble and materialist, then man is doomed to despair in this world.”<sup>24</sup> Robinson Jeffers’ poetry of absolute freedom results in moral anarchy. Yet in Thomas Wolfe, the Dream marches to maturity throughout his works. From *Mannerhouse* to *You Can’t Go Home Again*, Wolfe reconciles the idealism associated with the dream of a perfect democracy with the reality of the moment, not to the point of despair, but through growth and epiphany—“Eternal progress may be illusory, and the American dream of a perfect equality impossible; but the illusion is nevertheless ‘true’ for ‘Man-Alive’ and the dream

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<sup>22</sup> Carpenter, 125.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 142.

indispensable.”<sup>25</sup> Finally, in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* hope and possibility are rooted in an individual being part of the whole, while Hemingway’s “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” happiness is only realized in the face of tragedy. In Carpenter’s analysis of these and many other works, he gives legitimacy to the Dream’s presence in the American imagination and solidifies its usefulness as a point of analysis.

The American Dream as a viable means for understanding and analyzing American literature is argued by David Madden in his 1970 collection of essays entitled *American Dreams, American Nightmares*. He states in the introduction, “American writers from the beginning have projected visions of dreams and nightmares. No single dream has bemused us from the beginning, no single nightmare has haunted us.”<sup>26</sup> The core of Madden’s argument relies on the concept that the American Dream devolves into an “American Nightmare.” Similar to Carpenter, Madden frames his explanation of the Dream along the lines of those who believe in it, those who don’t, and those who are critical of its implementation: true believers, atheists, and agnostics. True believers take responsibility for making the Dream and remembering its heroes. The Dream’s detractors help create victims of the Dream. Contemplating the interaction between “dubious heroes and their vulnerable witnesses” agnostics approach the Dream cautiously, saying “maybe.”<sup>27</sup>

Madden’s explication of this idea runs the gamut from colonial optimism to the space age; from popular culture to serious culture. On the whole, he believes two Dream myths occur: “the Old Testament idea of a paradise hopelessly lost, followed by endless nightmare suffering;

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<sup>25</sup> Carpenter, 166.

<sup>26</sup> David Madden, ed. *American Dreams, American Nightmares* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), xvii.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

and the New Testament idea of a paradise that a new American Adam will eventually regain.”<sup>28</sup> He goes on to assert, “most serious fiction is slanted against the New Testament vision; hope for clear vision lies in the ambiguous area between Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained.” Belief in the Dream resonates in Cotton Mather’s hope and optimism in *Christianizing the New World*, as well as J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s construction of a “New American” in *Letters from an American Farmer*. Referenced too, is Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation that America is a land of wonders and full of change rooted in possibility. With individual freedom and liberty at the forefront, Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau are invoked. Underpinning all of Madden’s argument is the importance of the land itself: the Garden of Eden, or Virgin landscape upon which the Dream is possible. Fredrick Jackson Turner’s essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” solidifies the connection between the land and the Dream. The battle between the land and the machine attempting to subdue it, gives rise to the capitalist dream of rags-to-riches. Examples of this can be found in the characters of Horatio Alger and Steinbeck’s Okies. Of course, Madden also recognizes tried and true dreams of a perfect democracy and an ideal liberty, such as Walt Whitman’s new American Adam.

Non-believers, or “atheists,” approach the Dream as either myth or nightmare. As Madden states, “Listening to atheists of the American Dream, we hear that if the American Adam is not pure myth, he has certainly fallen, he has lost his chance to regain paradise, there is no redemption, no resurrection.”<sup>29</sup> The Dream for such critics is a locus of decay and destruction derived from a failure of application—failed dreams—and the general psychosis it creates in the American mind—the Dream itself as failed enterprise, thus creating anxiety and despair. Madden believes through industrialization, world wars, and technology, the Dream has

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<sup>28</sup> Madden, xxxix.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., xxvi.



morphed into nightmare.<sup>30</sup> Though an agnostic in *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald describes the atheist's version of the Dream in his 1945 work *The Crack-Up*. Men like Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe explore inner hells and nightmares. Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* records a "nightmare disillusionment when social injustice and a cruel environment prevent common people such as Clyde Griffith" from realizing the Dream.<sup>31</sup> The failures of the promises inherent in the Dream are quite acute in the social protest literature of the 1930s. Here Madden points to the "tough guy" fiction of the decade where individuals are down-and-out or at the mercy of an uncaring social system. Examples include the mobster in Ira Wolfert's *Tucker's People* (1943); the hard-boiled private eye in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929); and in Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940). The disillusionment brought on by poverty is found in Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* (1933), Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930). From Hemingway to Kerouac, Madden aptly notes "Serious American literature readily exposes the fraudulence of the 'spiritual' and ethical rhetoric that various institutions spout in service of meretricious dreams."<sup>32</sup>

The Dream's agnostics (or priests as he warmly refers to them) speak of the possibility, redemption, resurrection, and recreation found in the fall experienced by the dreamer. Their dilemma is to avoid being suspended in "moral and literary limbo."<sup>33</sup> According to Madden, agnostics are concerned with the role of the individual compared to the group in the American Dream process. He couches this in terms of the hero and his witness against anonymous groups. The heroes are those explorers, missionaries, dreamers, and doers who in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries set the examples, or become legends for witnessing

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<sup>30</sup> Madden, xxvi.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., xxx.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., xxxviii.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., xxxix.

individuals who wanted to achieve easily what the heroes did through extreme hardship and risk. Madden cites such heroes as Columbus, Washington, Boone, Crocket, and Jefferson, whose biographies became models of the American Dream achieved for the nineteenth century. As a result of industrialization and commercialization of the American enterprise, the twentieth century emerges with an absence of any real hero and the individual is left to find models in passing mythology brought through cultural memory and the hyperbole of popular culture. As Madden notes: “With the passing of the hero, precedence replaces the cult of experience as source of authority. Security and the computer mentality replace self-reliance and self-confidence.”<sup>34</sup>

Madden laments the shift from the importance of individual dreams—complete with audacity, ruggedness, aggression, and competitiveness—towards mass consumption and group security where relativism becomes the order of the day. Rejecting absolutes and embracing paradoxes and contradiction, modern intellectuals have created a cultural landscape that encourages mediocrity. The certitude of the past gives way to ambiguity. Harbingers of the Dream—churches, schools, governments, business, and public groups—which preached and protected the Dream, become no longer viable. Instead, consumption becomes the focus. Early examples of the agnostic double vision are found in the works of Henry James and Mark Twain. However, novelists of the twentieth century—Saul Bellows, Norman Mailer, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Robert Penn Warren—find the greatest degree of agnostic ambiguity and criticism of the Dream. It is upon this criticism that the meat of Madden’s anthology is focused.

Like most critics of the Dream, Maxwell Geismar, in “The Shifting Illusion: Dream and Fact,” asserts the centrality of the Dream’s presence as a “ruling myth.” He goes on to say:

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<sup>34</sup> Madden, xl.

“This dream was bodied forth in all our major statements and documents, political, cultural, and literary for almost two hundred years.”<sup>35</sup> But beyond its historical omnipresence, the Dream, “still persists as a cultural idea in our mass media and in the popular notion of the American democracy; even now no American president could rise to office without a public acknowledgment of, a formal obeisance to, the American Dream.” Though he made this argument in 1970, the same holds true today. In Geismar’s estimation, American literature has focused on the American Dream principle in terms of both social criticism and social injustice. The writings of William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, Sherwood Anderson, Ellen Glasgow, and Theodore Dreiser bear witness to such. Geismar’s point is that these writers frame the Dream with a great deal of hope, while also illustrating a sober, darker side that leads to the cynicism of H.L. Mencken, Hemingway, Henry Miller, and Richard Wright—the modernists of the post-World War I era. Indeed, Geismar presents these early modern writers as obsessed with the nightmare aspect of the Dream.

The first real test of the Dream’s efficacy comes post-Civil War with the rise of American industrialism and the social inequities of the Gilded Age. William Dean Howells and Mark Twain were well positioned to remember the agrarian individualism of the first half of the nineteenth century, but also experienced the onslaught of industrial capitalism. Contextually, Geismar notes, “both these writers grew up in the days of the old republic, a rural, small-town, agrarian-merchant-artisan nation which still prized individual character—virtue, honor, and independence.” Yet, they were also “confronted with the enormous social corruption of the great fortunes in the Gilded Age.”<sup>36</sup> Howells’ move to New York and the novels that followed—*A*

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<sup>35</sup> Maxwell Geismar, “The Shifting Illusion: Dream and Fact,” in *American Dreams, American Nightmares*, ed. David Madden (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), 24.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

*Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), *The World of Chance* (1893), and *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894)—bespoke of social unrest and social criticism in the midst of capitalistic nightmare. Geismar sees Howells’ works as confronting this nightmare in a “rather sweet and romantic” way while promoting a doctrine of Utopianism and/or Socialism.<sup>37</sup> However, Twain brought to the table a “far more rebellious, bolder, shrewder, angrier, funnier, more penetrating and eloquent” social commentary.<sup>38</sup> Twain, while acutely aware of social injustice, noted the discrepancy between the American enterprise and the nightmare it created for individuals who saw truth in nature and the native—*Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Twain interpreted the disguised American imperialism as nothing more than a means for control and exploitation. Though Twain’s “career had best epitomized all the glowing virtues of the American Dream,” he nevertheless “ended up as the historian of its demise and as the author of dark and nightmarish parables.”<sup>39</sup>

After Twain, Geismar finds the next full revival of the American Dream in the early writings of London, Cather, Glasgow, Wharton, Anderson, and Dreiser. Under the category of Social Realists and Radical Critics, he celebrates their writing and importance to later American authors, while also noting their shift from celebrating the Dream to acquiescing to the nightmare. He starts with London and his move from “revolutionary socialism” to a “disenchanted hack writer, a paranoid alcoholic, an early advocate of fascism and the superman.”<sup>40</sup> Willa Cather returns to the romance of the western frontier. Anderson retreats from the urban decay and poverty of New York and Paris to small-town Virginia in order to preserve, “his faith in old-

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<sup>37</sup> Geismar, 48 and 49.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

fashion American Democracy.”<sup>41</sup> Finally, Theodore Dreiser, “most clearly showed the twisting and turnings of the American Dream concept” in his 1925 *An American Tragedy*.<sup>42</sup> In it, Dreiser showed how the monstrous trap of society corrupted average individuals such as Clyde Griffiths. Geismar positions such writers as being initially enchanted by the possibilities of the Dream, only to realize its nightmarish ending. Writers from the Lost Generation on—Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Eliot, etc.—are acknowledged for their initial literary greatness and ability to deal with a lack of social center. Ultimately, however, the condition of being “twice lost”—as a result of the war and then from contemporary culture at large—caused them to lose sight of the Dream. The only exception to this can be found in the literature of the Great Depression where the Dream enjoyed a brief renaissance; such is the case with Anderson, Wolfe, Steinbeck, and even Faulkner. American literature and Dream, Geismar concludes, consists on the whole as a few individuals at small moments in time who managed to keep the Dream alive and proliferate it beyond a small sphere of influence; otherwise the Dream remained in a state of constant flux between the hope inspired by its ideals and the reality of its nightmares.

The notion of the Dream as Nightmare comprises the backbone of Irvin Malin’s “The Compulsive Design.” With a cursory jaunt through American literature from Washington Irving to Hemingway, Malin finds the root of the Nightmare in the authors’ consistent attempts to forge a “compulsive design” where their characters are forced to reckon with a “design inhibiting their human completion.”<sup>43</sup> Because of the underlying trauma caused by this reckoning, the Dream loses ground as a means for achieving happiness and success. Instead, such designs exist as a coping mechanism in a world marked by anxiety over perceived authoritarianism. Instead of a

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<sup>41</sup> Geismar, 50.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Irving Malin, “The Compulsive Design,” in *American Dreams, American Nightmares*, ed. David Madden (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), 75.

Dream of freedom, the literary heroes construct rigid systems in order to deal with this anxiety only to replace one source of authority with another—their compulsory design, or code—and thus create an American Nightmare. As Malin notes, “They try to construct a design—a pattern to master their environment—but it becomes an inflexible measure which eventually destroys the self.”<sup>44</sup>

The “natural law” of Irving and James Fenimore Cooper constructs a design of decorum founded upon “God’s Plan” and the “great chain of being.” Society is ordered and comprised of mutually supporting parts that recognize the importance of each other. William Charvat’s introduction to the 1958 Houghton Mifflin edition of *The Last of the Mohicans* positions Cooper’s design as an arid ground for the nightmare. For Charvat, in Cooper’s fiction “each unit within this order, whether large (nation or race) or small (the family), has stable characteristics by which individuals within it are understood and can understand each other.”<sup>45</sup> When a character is presented as going against this order, Malin determines that they usually do so because of their own compulsion—thus a nightmare of sorts. In both Irving and Cooper, the means for avoiding self-destruction is through comedy or social reform. Here the nightmare is the “oddness” or “weakness” of such individuals against the natural order. Examples include Irving’s William the Testy from his Book 4 of *A History of New York* (1809) and Cooper’s Ishmael Bush in *The Prairie* (1827). In the former, William the Testy become despotic to compensate for his feeling of inferiority, and in the latter, Bush is presented as continually hostile due to a perceptibly unfair social stratification. Both characters represent the nightmarish side of a compulsive design, but are tempered by the authors’ attempts to reform them—a fact that causes Malin to view them as literarily flawed.

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<sup>44</sup> Malin, 58.

<sup>45</sup> William Charvat qtd. in Malin 59.

In opposition to Irving and Cooper's natural/social order is Edgar Allan Poe's siding with his "anxious heroes." Poe's "The Black Cat" confronted the reader with "the compulsive design to grasp the thing, whatever it may be." In doing so, the "designer" believes "he can gain unlimited control over his environment, neglecting that anxiety [usually resulting from perceived authority] which forces him to act compulsively."<sup>46</sup> In Poe, the dilemma of the nightmarish design is psychological as his hero is compelled to destroy an analog of authority, the cat Pluto, only to find no relief and be forced to do so again, killing his wife in the process. As Malin concludes, "Poe made a metaphysical design out of neurosis."<sup>47</sup>

In twentieth century literature, Malin finds the compulsive design in the works of Faulkner and Hemingway. With endurance as a chief goal, "both writers stress the violent insecurity of their characters."<sup>48</sup> Noting Faulkner's Nobel address where the author contextualized the "age of anxiety" around the all-consuming question of "when will I be blown up?," Malin solidifies his belief that Faulkner's answer to this question is in individuals creating rigid patterns of behavior in order to ensure self-preservation, and thus find security.<sup>49</sup> In Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), Malin notes Hightower's deliberate attempt to pattern his life after his grandfather in order to obtain status in the town of Jefferson. In *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Malin sees Addie Bundren's life as a compulsive design in preparation for death. In *Sanctuary* (1931), unconscious childhood patterns compel Popeye. In Hemingway, Malin finds anxiety and uncertainty assuaged in a "compulsive dream of health" with what Philip Young refers to as learned "code." Through such a code, a Hemingway character "might maneuver, though crippled" and practice "the rites which for him might exorcise the terrors born of the events that

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<sup>46</sup> Malin, 60 and 61.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>49</sup> Faulkner qtd. in Malin, 73.

crippled him.”<sup>50</sup> The characters endure the fact that “living is terrible” and wrought with authoritarian images through practiced patterns. A great example can be found in Hemingway’s 1925 short story, “Big, Two-Hearted River.” In it, Nick attempts to live with a “terrifying existence” through patterns and rituals. Though not directly articulated by Nick, the reader experiences them while accepting the environment as an inherently good thing. However, though Nick is able to navigate the experience of fishing in the river, his limited approach—practiced patterns/compulsive design—becomes stymied when confronted with the swamp. In both cases, and those of the previous century, Malin finds an American Dream rooted in a “compulsive” design as actually creating an American Nightmare.

The most recent analysis of the American Dream in American literature is found in Harold Bloom’s 2009 anthology, *Bloom’s Literary Themes: The American Dream*. Framing his brief introduction with Barack Obama’s election to the presidency and the president-elect’s invocation of the American Dream, Bloom—like the critics discussed in this study—positions American literature along a continuum between those in the “party of hope” and those who view the dream as “nightmare.” As Bloom notes, “The major American writers who have engaged the dream—Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Mark Twain, Henry James, Willa Cather, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Ernest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, Hart Crane,” have affirmed the American Dream, even while calling its application into question. Among the nineteen literary works analyzed by critics in Bloom’s anthology are classic twentieth century Dream texts such as Albee’s *The American Dream*, Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, and Kerouac’s *On the Road*.

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<sup>50</sup> Philip Young, *Ernest Hemingway* (1952), qtd. in Malin, 74.



Nicholas Canaday asserts Albee's play mirrored, "the meaninglessness of American life," through its "caricature and the comic irrelevancy of its language."<sup>51</sup> The Dream is invoked as a myth, "beautiful in appearance but without real substance." In Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman suffers from dreams both incoherent and misplaced. Merritt Moseley concludes his study asking, "is there something heroic about refusing to abandon one's dreams," and, is Willy wrong in "holding some version of the American Dream—some romantic insistence that every man can be extraordinary?"<sup>52</sup> Fitzgerald evokes the Dream through optimism and romantic readiness, but is confronted with, as Tanfer Emin Tunc believes, "societies' spiritual emptiness and gratuitous materialism," ultimately leading to a tragic death.<sup>53</sup> In Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Peter Lisca sees the experiences of George and Lennie as an extension of the human condition. The hope and possibility inherent in the Dream is tempered by the reality of tragedy in this application of Depression-era America. The power of the story is achieved through a "delicate balance of the protagonists' free will and the force of circumstance."<sup>54</sup> Finally, Jeff Williams sees Kerouac's *On the Road* as encompassing the "Discrimination—racial, gender, and class prejudices—[that] often worked against American dreamers."<sup>55</sup> In providing a slice of mainstream America, Kerouac reveals the thought that, "These hard-working people are disenfranchised from the traditional dream." For them, "their idea of the American Dream is

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<sup>51</sup> Nicholas Canaday, Jr., "Albee's *The American Dream* and the Existential Vacuum," in *The American Dream*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009), 12.

<sup>52</sup> Merritt Moseley, "Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*," in *The American Dream*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009), 51 and 55.

<sup>53</sup> Tanfer Emin Tunc, "*The Great Gatsby*: The Tragedy of the American Dream on Long Island's Gold Coast," in *The American Dream*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009), 67.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Lisca, "*Of Mice and Men*," in *The American Dream*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009), 137.

<sup>55</sup> Jeff Williams, "Alternative Routes along the Road: Kerouac and the Multifaceted American Dream," in *The American Dream*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009), 164.

simply the ability to survive from day to day, but they are happy and content with their life.”<sup>56</sup>

In each of these studies the existence of the Dream is affirmed and maintained, but critics see the authors as calling into question the Dream’s application.

The preceding arguments demonstrate an active engagement with foundational works of American literature coupled with the underlying narrative of the American imagined community and its fundamental narrative, the American Dream. American literature (and culture) cannot escape the ever-present mythos that is the American Dream and the historically accumulated ideals, aspirations, and examples associated with it. From the Puritan enterprise to present day, the Dream is something with which all writers must contend, whether directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously. Simply put, the American identity is the American Dream. When Jonathan Winthrop spoke in 1630 of the “Shining City Upon a Hill,” he invoked the ideals of hope and opportunity making the Dream possible, as well as positioning the activity in North America as something to be emulated. The first, truly American self-made-man, Benjamin Franklin, gave a prescription for achieving wealth—a state of existence as much as it is capital. Education, work, thrift, dedication, and a dash of good luck become the tools for individual success in a newly formed nation. Jefferson’s assertion of the creedal values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, creates the necessary condition for the realization of the success envisioned by Franklin: that is to say, the American Dream. When de Crevecoeur asks, “What then is this American, this new man?” he invokes—like de Tocqueville in the next century—a sense of America’s uniqueness and the possibilities of the good life associated with it. From Emerson to Melville, Hemingway to Albee, the Dream presents itself throughout the whole of American literature.

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<sup>56</sup> Williams, 168.

When applying the Dream as a means for understanding American literature, the issue is not one of support, denial, or damnation of the Dream. Instead, it is the acknowledgment of the Dream as integral fact. This must be addressed as an elemental, if not foundational, factor in such texts. In many literary works, the Dream is problematic in its failure among the body politic, as well as in its inherent inclusion of conflicting values: the individual versus the community. Since its inception, the American project has contended with the competing goals of liberty and democracy—the individual and the community. The American Dream is the arena in which this interaction occurs, and it is in American culture broadly, and American literature specifically, that it is captured. When this discussion extends into an analysis of modern American literature, the Dream either collapses, or is recontextualized beyond societal norms and expectations to yield either a feeling of despair, or a strange triumphal isolation resembling a pyrrhic victory.

Ironically, the Dream promotes a notion of individual construction of success, yet in reality, when individuals don't conform to expectations of normalcy—especially if failure is present—they are marginalized or relegated to “otherness.” This occurs despite realizing the Dream in the construction of community—or as James Truslow Adams asserted, “a social order.” An examination of this process reveals the reality of “otherness” in the American Dream project. Individuals categorized by race, class, gender, and sexuality are limited to lesser roles—positions of failure regarding the Dream and society—or are forced to reconstitute the Dream into their own narrative ideal.

The works in the present study extend the American Dream analysis from the imagined community of the nation, to the regional experience of Florida and the American Dream. Florida, with its variety of opportunities and individual approaches to the Dream, provides fertile

ground for narratives invoking the Dream while also calling it into question. As Gary Mormino states in his *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida*, Florida in its shifting dreamscape is a “powerful symbol of renewal and regeneration.”<sup>57</sup> With its good weather, natural abundance, and being relatively inexpensive, Florida has existed as a historic location for individuals seeking the Dream of a richer, better, and fuller life. Though the Dream is possible in other locales, Florida provides the physical and social space for individual autonomy embedded in a social order favoring growth and prosperity. In the modern era, “Florida holds . . . the promise of dignified endings and new beginnings.”<sup>58</sup>

The three works analyzed in this study draw on the Florida landscape in its possibilities and inherent dangers as a foundation in the evocation, realization, and critique of the American Dream. Florida and the Dream frame each of the three works. In their character development, narrative diegesis, and final assertions, the Dream is at best re-envisioned beyond cultural norms, and at worst dismantled to the point of despair. Ernest Hemingway, Zora Neale Hurston, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings serve as case studies for ameliorating the conflict between liberty and democracy, as well as the disparity between the Dream’s ideal and its reality. The geographical landscape of Florida provides the proper setting for the inception and gestation of individual dreams. The end result solidifies the American Dream as a problematic social narrative: espousing freedom of opportunity yet limited by the social barriers it professes to unseat in the American—Florida—imagined community.

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<sup>57</sup> Gary R. Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 2.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

## CHAPTER THREE

### HEMINGWAY'S *TO HAVE AND HAVE NOT* AND THE DREAM

Ernest Hemingway's 1937 *To Have and Have Not* is considered by most critics among the least of his novels. Carlos Baker notes that though *To Have and Have Not* contains some of Hemingway's best writing, the novel has "marked deficiencies as a work of art."<sup>1</sup> However, despite structural flaws and other "deficiencies," the novel, as Baker concludes, stands as, "a persuasive social documentary."<sup>2</sup> Presenting the "Haves" and "Have Nots," Hemingway documents the reality of Depression-era America. John K. M. McCaffery asserts, "in form, content and attitude, this novel is an extraordinary recreation of the chaos, brutality and fear of a society on the edge of an abyss."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, going beyond mere documentation of social ills, *To Have and Have Not* expresses Hemingway's view of America's foundational narrative, the American Dream. In his evocation of the Dream, no party is held harmless, and the reader must sympathize with the most unlikely of characters while lamenting that, on the whole, the American Dream collapses upon itself.

Set in 1930s Key West and Havana, the novel partially responds to the criticism that Hemingway was unconcerned with the social conditions and politics following the economic collapse of 1929. Critics such as Wyndham Lewis accused him of being more interested "in the sports of death, in the sad things that happened to those in the sports of love . . . in war," rather

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<sup>1</sup> Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1952), 205.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>3</sup> John K. M. McCaffery, *Ernest Hemingway: The Man and His Work* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1969), 14.

than those things that cause wars or involve people in them.<sup>4</sup> Tying literature to politics in the 1930s caused writers to be judged on their social awareness. Hemingway's publication of *Death of the Afternoon* (1932), viewed by many as a "manual of bull fighting," seemed meaningless to critics—or "the boys" as Hemingway refers to them—when "Americans were selling apples on street-corners, fighting over restaurant garbage cans for food, or being laid off in wholesale lots."<sup>5</sup> Largely misunderstanding Hemingway's work, these critics busily championed writing expressing ideology (social realism) elevating the common man—the workingman—to the status of the hero. *To Have and Have Not* is Hemingway's counter-proposal to such works.

Though seemingly a work of social realism, *To Have and Have Not* is far from, "the soap-bubble proletarian literature which appeared, shone brightly, and vanished down-wind."<sup>6</sup> Absent are long speeches highlighting class disparity directly advocating capitalist republicanism, socialism, communism, and/or fascism. *To Have and Have Not* contains Hemingway's "notes towards the definition of a decaying culture, and his disgust with the smell of death to come."<sup>7</sup> It recreates the conditions of social illness without prescribing a cure. As Baker notes, Hemingway dramatically summarizes, "the moral predicament of his time" by "presenting and evaluating the things he has known."<sup>8</sup> What he knew was the social and cultural geography of Key West, Cuba, and Western Civilization in general.<sup>9</sup> He gave voice to his displeasure over encroaching big government in the United States and questioned the practical value of revolution as a means for freedom. A close reading of the novel through the lens of the American Dream and the competing creedal values of liberty and democracy reveals deep

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis qtd. in Baker *Writer as Artist*, 203.

<sup>5</sup> Baker, 202.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

understanding of the social “reality” during the period. As Hemingway noted to his brother Leicester, *To Have and Have Not*, “was in many ways the most important story he had ever written.”<sup>10</sup> Where as before he hadn’t cared for life and was only concerned with his own productivity as a creator, now “he really gave a damn about other peoples’ lives.”

One of the earliest conversations directly relating *To Have and Have Not* to the American Dream is Charles Hearn’s *The American Dream in the Great Depression* (1977). Hearn looks at the cultural myth of success—the American Dream—as it collided with the reality of the Great Depression. Drawing on a variety of cultural texts, from how-to-succeed guidebooks, inspirational works, fiction and nonfiction, to popular magazines, sociological studies, gangster/tough-guy/proletarian novels to the drama and fictions of major writers like Hemingway, Hearn attempts to capture the cultural phenomenon anchoring the Dream. His conclusion strikes at the contemporary reality of the American Dream: “attitudes . . . endlessly complex, confusing, and contradictory.”<sup>11</sup> Such complexities are found in popular fiction where the rags-to-riches myth of success is reaffirmed amid disillusionment and despair. Popular magazines and how-to guides proffered Horatio Alger prescriptions for success. “Cautionary tales” qualified the Dream, acknowledging the reality of the times. Yet many Americans held tightly to their expectations of the Dream while, “ignoring or distorting objective reality” despite the major novelists and playwrights of the period showing nothing but disillusionment with the traditional American Dream of success.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Qtd in Robert W. Lewis, *Hemingway on Love* (Texas: University of Texas Press, Austin, 1965), 113.

<sup>11</sup> Charles R. Hearn, *The American Dream in the Great Depression* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 192.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

Hearn places Hemingway among those writers who showed an interest and sympathy for “ordinary little men, the losers, and the outsiders of American society.”<sup>13</sup> In many forums, such individuals in the 1930s came to replace the business tycoons as American Dream heroes. Captains of industry who had developed financial and social empires from nothing were cast aside in favor of average individuals who garnered a meager measure of success, if any at all. The “gangster-tough guy” tradition emergent during the Depression, laced with hardboiled detectives, gangsters, racketeers, and losers, provided a more appealing example of a struggle to survive than did the meteoric rise of the likes of Carnegie or Rockefeller. “Cynical, sometimes brutal and often self-destructive struggles to survive and succeed in a jungle world,” Hearn asserts, “represent a dark contrast to the tradition of the idealistic, ambitious, and fabulously successful self-made man.”<sup>14</sup> Writers such as Steinbeck, Dos Passos, Saroyan, and West provided readers with struggling characters such as poor farmers, the dispossessed, the grotesque, prostitutes, losers, misfits, and other outsiders. The “victim-hero” resonated with readers in the 1930s. Hemingway’s Harry Morgan is just such an individual.

*To Have and Have Not* constitutes serious literature featuring the “tough-guy” hero. Harry Morgan, outsider, loser, and victim, combines tenacity and refusal to succumb to the circumstances of the depression—a “tough-guy hero par excellence.”<sup>15</sup> In truth, Harry’s American Dream story is less a dream, and more a nightmare. The world of the Hemingway protagonist throbs with poverty, exploitation, and injustice. To survive and support his family, Harry must function outside the law and skirt social norms. Being a “Have Not” continually restricts him. Tough and determined, he moves among systems of inequality meant to maintain

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<sup>13</sup> Hearn, 109.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.



class distinctions. Harry's struggle to survive lacks in morality. He is a man, more of "cold ruthlessness than sentiment."<sup>16</sup> Despite rugged individualism rooted in physical strength and a strong sexuality, Harry continues in steep decline, taking every attack and punishment head-on. Citing Hemingway's acknowledged theme of the novel, Hearn observes "the decline of the individual" and Harry's dying words—"No matter how a man alone ain't got no bloody fucking chance"—constitute, a "powerful, negative study of the viability of individualism in modern America."<sup>17</sup> In essence, individuals like Harry, despite classic American Dream traits of rugged self-reliance, hard work, and strength of character, fight a losing battle, finding no room in a "cramped world of brutal competition and limited possibility."<sup>18</sup> Key West of the 1930s offers Hemingway a cross-section of such a world.

By putting Key West, Florida—and to a lesser degree, Havana, Cuba—under a microscope, Hemingway captured the diseased organism that was the American Dream in the Great Depression. Baker notes that Hemingway could then examine the "smear on the slide to see what malignant forces were at work."<sup>19</sup> At work was a locale that included every level of society, including Conchs, who eked out a subsistence living and who represent the underclass, all marginalized because of the economic downturn: Harry, Albert, Freddie and Bee-lips. They, like the Vets in the novel are the common men. Juxtaposed is a burgeoning group of New Dealers determined to lift Key West out of poverty by making it a destination for tourists—a project in gentrification. The outer margins of the United States would become a playground for the intellectual elite (Gordon and MacWalsey), the rich (from Bradley to the grain broker), and bureaucrats in the Federal administration (Harrison), ignorant of and uncaring toward the local

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<sup>16</sup> Hearn, 125.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Baker, 206.

inhabitants displaced by the Federal Emergency Relief Agency (FERA). The novel offers Hemingway's commentary on the Great Depression, the evils of capitalism, the failure and encroachment of the government, his disdain and distrust for "fashionable writers," ideological extremes, and a lament over a lack of space for "sporting people" in the modern American Dream.<sup>20</sup>

Toni Knott, editor of *One Man Alone*, essays on *To Have and Have Not*, observes: "Geographic and historical grounding is an integral part of *To Have and Have Not*."<sup>21</sup> In terms of time and place, Knott is quick to remind the reader that although *To Have and Have Not* is fiction, the larger context of Key West in the Great Depression is an integral element to a reading of the story. Each of the narrative lines—Morgan's life, the people on the yachts, the Gordons and the Vets—stands as a complete entity meant to be read against the others. Nonetheless, a Hemingway work, "demands thorough grounding in the place and times upon which it centers."<sup>22</sup> Knott demonstrates how the novel is accurate in its depiction of current events. Hemingway witnessed the devastation, depression, and change suffered by a place he loved. Late 1920s Key West offered Hemingway, "a total immersion in the sensuous experience of living."<sup>23</sup> The Gulf Stream, the food, the initial seclusion, his "Mob" or gang of regulars, provided him the opportunity to strike a balance between life and work. Lawrence R. Broer notes: "The island harmonized tension within his complex nature, allow(ing) him to resolve

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<sup>20</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *To Have and Have Not* (New York: Scribner, 1937), 93.

<sup>21</sup> Toni D. Knott, ed. *One Man Alone: Hemingway and To Have and Have Not* (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1999), 65.

<sup>22</sup> Knott, *One Man Alone*, 66.

<sup>23</sup> Baker qtd. in Lawrence R. Broer, "Only in Key West," in *Key West Hemingway: A Reassessment*, ed. Kirk and Sinclair. (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2009), 45.

(albeit tentatively) conflicting roles with which he struggled all his adult life.”<sup>24</sup> Mornings were dedicated to work; afternoons allowed for “monstering”—fishing for giant marlin. He also found a kindred connection with several of the locals such as Joe “Josie” Russell, Bra Sanders, and transplant Toby “Tobes” Bruce.<sup>25</sup> However, three major events changed the tenor of Hemingway’s “enchanted island”: the building and opening of the Overseas Highway; the market crash of 1929 with its ensuing economic depression producing FDR’s New Deal program; and the 1935 Labor Day Hurricane. Each event profoundly affected Hemingway’s thinking about the Dream.

Dan Monroe explains that, unlike the rest of Florida in the 1920s, Key West missed the economic expansion experienced by most of the state as a boom. A tariff on pineapples killed a major canning employer, the sponge trade all but vanished, and the cigar industry uprooted and moved to Tampa. Prior to the market crash, the Key West community had lost some fourteen thousand jobs. These factors and the imminent downturn after 1929 reduced the “remaining islanders” to “stark penury.”<sup>26</sup> By July 1934, nearly 80% of the island’s inhabitants were on relief.<sup>27</sup> Even prior to the crash, the island’s governing body was looking for a way to spur economic growth. Thus, as Shiflet and Curnutt note in their essay “Letters and Literary Tourism,” “while Hemingway believed he had discovered a realm whose rusticity was conducive to writing, he was actually relocating to a place already desperate to sell itself as a tourist

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<sup>24</sup> Broer, 49.

<sup>25</sup> See Lawrence R. Broer’s essay “Only in Key West: Hemingway’s Fortunate Isle” for a more indepth sketch of Hemingway’s Key West experience.

<sup>26</sup> Dan Monroe, “Hemingway, the Left, and Key West,” in *Key West Hemingway: A Reassessment*, ed. Kirk and Sinclair (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2009), 92.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

destination.”<sup>28</sup> This goal was brought to fruition when regional FERA administrator Julius F. Stone, Jr. descended on Key West and commenced a series of New Deal programs meant to provide relief. Aside from manual labor projects (like those in *To Have and Have Not*), the Administration had its sights set on making the island a tourist destination.

Residential homes were rented out to winter tourists, manual labor projects employing those on relief beautified the island, and an active campaign of promotion began.<sup>29</sup> Stone had a full-color travel guide created, *Key West in Transition: A Guidebook for Visitors*, including among its highlights Hemingway’s Whitehead Street house.<sup>30</sup> Hemingway objected to being advertised as a local celebrity, as he noted in an *Esquire* essay entitled “The Sights of Whitehead Street.” In it, he repudiates the positioning of a serious author as a celebrity. The essay, as Shiflet and Curnutt explain, “reflects Hemingway’s effort to reestablish his artistic reputation in the mid-1930s by relocating his writing from the timelier contexts,” avoiding the “fashionable” writing expected by his critics. The publication of the visitors guide combined with the Overseas Highway, increased the island’s share of tourism between 1934 and 1935 by roughly 80%.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, from beginning to end, Hemingway disdained both the tourists—typically the wealthy writers, artists, and “fashionable men”—and FDR’s New Deal, castigating them in *To Have and Have Not*. Finally, to add insult to injury, the government’s refusal to evacuate the bonus-marching veterans—World War I veterans placed in Key West to build the Overseas

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<sup>28</sup> Shiflet and Curnutt, “Letters and Literary Tourism: Hemingway as Your Key West Correspondent in ‘The Sights of Whitehead Street,’” in *Key West Hemingway: A Reassessment*, ed. Kirk and Sinclair (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2009), 224.

<sup>29</sup> Both Knott and Monroe cite Garry Bouland’s “‘State of Emergency’: Key West in the Great Depression,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 67 (October 1988): 166-83.

<sup>30</sup> Shiflet and Curnutt, 227.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

Highway—and the local inhabitants prior to the 1935 Labor Day Hurricane, solidified Hemingway’ view of the administration.

In a letter to Maxwell Perkins dated September 7, 1935, Hemingway recounted his horror upon entering Lower Matecumbe Key after the hurricane passed. With 700 to 1000 dead and unburied, Hemingway concluded: “The veterans in those camps were practically murdered.”<sup>32</sup> Comparing the scene to carnage he experienced in World War I, Hemingway grew furious. He blamed the Roosevelt administration and the National Weather Bureau. In his letter to Perkins and later again in his *New Masses* article “Who Murdered the Vets,” Hemingway, as James H. Meredith notes, writes “a searing indictment of bureaucratic callousness that . . . accused Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration not of reckless indifference or even manslaughter but of homicide.”<sup>33</sup>

Hemingway mournfully asserts, plenty of time existed to evacuate the inhabitants of the upper Keys. A train wasn’t sent until the storm started to hit, and it didn’t get within thirty miles of the two lower veterans’ camps before being washed away. Hemingway writes, “If they had taken half the precautions with them that we took with our boat not one would have been lost.”<sup>34</sup> The collective camp’s population—Vets, officials, and support personnel—represented a cross section of 684 draftsmen, lawyers, high-school principals, actors, and a boxer. Of course, there were also those individuals typically associated with the Depression such as itinerants and the

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<sup>32</sup> Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961* (New York: Scribner Classics, 1981), 421.

<sup>33</sup> James H. Meredith, “Hemingway’s Key West Band of Brothers: The World War I Veterans in ‘Who Murdered the Vets?’ and *To Have and Have Not*,” in *Key West Hemingway: A Reassessment*, ed. Kirk and Sinclair (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2009), 244.

<sup>34</sup> Baker *Selected Letters*, 423.

dispossessed.<sup>35</sup> These victims were building the Overseas Highway. The project was the Roosevelt's administration's attempt to deal with those Vets who'd participated in the 1932 "Bonus-March" on Washington demanding that Congress pay early on the benefits promised. Eventually General Douglas MacArthur (under President Hoover) was called in to remove those Vets who wouldn't take a deal and leave, many of whom were relocated to the Overseas project.<sup>36</sup> Hemingway fully recognized that many of the Vets were mentally unstable, even pathological; however, he also demanded they be recognized as human beings, not property.

In *To Have and Have Not* Hemingway recognizes the cost of war on the Vets and their ignored humanity. He viewed them beyond mere labor for exploitation and asserted the need for fair compensation, not a dole wage that couldn't feed them. Meredith places Hemingway's treatment of the Vets within the frame of the larger collective by stating, "the suffering of all standing for the sufferings of the one."<sup>37</sup> He notes, "Hemingway depicts the veterans as a collective." They, like the Conchs, are cast aside for the individualism represented by the material "Haves." Through his evocation of the American Dream, Hemingway demonstrates that neither the success of capitalism rooted in rugged individualism, nor the collectivism of the New Deal provides any means for achieving the Dream.

Despite Hemingway's "decline of the individual,"<sup>38</sup> all the elements for achieving the American Dream of a better, richer, and fuller life noted in the first chapter, are present: rugged individualism, equality of opportunity, laissez-faire capitalism, social mobility, a gospel of work, self-reliance, material acquisitiveness, ambition, education and luck rooted in hope. No one character embodies all of these traits. The collective ensemble functions as an example of the

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<sup>35</sup> Meredith, 244.

<sup>36</sup> See Meredith for a thorough discussion of the "Bonus March" Vets.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 246 and 247.

<sup>38</sup> Baker, 448.

Dream applied—each individual representing some aspect or version of the Dream. Broadly, these versions fall into two categories: those who champion the individual, and those who underscore the greater needs of the community—representing the often competing as well as aligned values of liberty and democracy. Hemingway’s evocation of the Dream is not meant to affirm its existence or to provide instructions for its achievement. It is a deadly serious commentary on the expectations traditionally associated with the Dream while calling into question its efficacy and demonstrating its total collapse.

On the surface, *To Have and Have Not* presents a series of narratives and characters representing the hallmarks of the American Dream achieved. As a destination for others, the material “Haves” embody social mobility rooted in laissez-faire capitalism, material acquisitiveness, ambition, and education. In the popular mindset, they are the models for a better, richer, and fuller life, worthy of emulation. Impervious to the social malaise of the Great Depression they are the middle and upper classes of the economic ladder to whom lower classes should aspire. They are examples of the American Dream made good. Gordon, Laughton, and MacWalsey, elite educated intellectuals, champion the popular social order that makes the Dream possible. Above them, the fullest potential of the Dream is realized with the uber-rich in the yacht basin. The epitome of the material “Haves,” they bring to the narrative old money (Wallace Johnston and Henry Carpenter), capital gain (a sixty-year-old grain broker), and Hollywood fame (Dorothy Hollis), each emblematic of a richer life and the successful application of the Dream.

Having money, success, and social status, the people in the yacht basin serve as a model, for both the reader and the “Have Nots,” of the American Dream made good. They, like Helene and Tommy Bradley, are the fashionable elite who give a “look” to the Dream. Wallace

Johnston is a composer of international fame whose money is garnered from silk mills—given his age, Old Money. Owner of the *New Exuma II*, the 38-year old graduate from Harvard travels the world with his crew enjoying Bach, Scotch, and his “special pleasures.”<sup>39</sup> Among the gambling, drink, and sexual play, he enjoys the company of another dilettante, Henry Carpenter. Carpenter, like Johnson, enjoys the money earned by others. Despite his trust fund’s limits, his value as entertainment and good company provides him access to the privileged world of wealth.

A seminal component of the elite moneyed world is the classic American capital entrepreneurs such as the sixty-year-old grain broker. Whereas Johnston and Carpenter can be viewed as the byproducts of Old Money, the grain broker represents the dogged determinism of business success—new money and the American Dream. Lying in his pajamas on the largest yacht in the basin, reading Darwin’s account of his trip to the Galapagos, he is, as Randal Meeks suggests, the embodiment of Social Darwinism at its best. With the conviction of “survive or perish,” the grain broker, “does not regret the business dealing he has had with others over the years, transactions which—while highly advantageous to his financial status—have left others destitute and ruined.”<sup>40</sup> Pragmatic in his dealings with the world, “he did not think in any abstraction, but in deals, in sales, in transfers and in gifts.”<sup>41</sup> As Calvin Coolidge once said, “The Business of America is business.” All are equal, and if they pull themselves up by their bootstraps, with luck and determinism, they will succeed. To that end the grain broker thought,

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<sup>39</sup> Hemingway, 232.

<sup>40</sup> Randall A. Meeks, “Winner Takes Winner Takes Winner: Social Darwinism,” in *One Man Alone: Hemingway and To Have and Have Not*, ed. Toni D. Knott (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1999), 82.

<sup>41</sup> Hemingway, 234.



“in shares, in bales, in thousand of bushels, in options, holding companies, trusts, and subsidiary corporations,”<sup>42</sup> while living under the moniker: only suckers worried.”<sup>43</sup>

The personification of virility and vitality, the grain broker had the common sense, willingness, and skepticism to game the world of business and finance. With his success, wealth, and consumption of individuals—women as sexual objects; men as assets to be acquired, exploited, and cast aside—he is the logical conclusion of Horatio Alger’s American Dream using Darwin’s theory of natural selection—boy gets lucky (the grain broker marries into money), boy uses guile and ingenuity to build a financial empire (the grain broker uses his ability to manipulate people without regard to morality, pity, or remorse), boy becomes the Dream (the grain broker as the Dream).<sup>44</sup>

The business success of the grain broker, and the success of the happy family on the yacht next to his, emboldens the Dream of financial success for all. They, capitalized, as he did, on the heartbeat of free enterprise, profit. Mother (dreaming of her garden), Father (man of civic pride), daughter Frances (dreaming of her fiancé), all sleep soundly and lovingly having made their money from, “selling something that everybody uses by the millions of bottles, which cost three cents a quart to make, for a dollar a bottle in the large (pint) size, fifty cents in the medium, and a quarter in the small.”<sup>45</sup> The users of their product are grateful and continue to discover new applications, available to all at the same price whether poor or a millionaire. Through the production of “one good thing” at a “good price,” they’ve become rich through mass demand—much in the same way that Hollywood provides its product and makes millionaires of its venture capitalists. Hemingway’s sketch of successful American Dreams is centered on the pillar of the

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<sup>42</sup> Hemingway, 234 and 235.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>44</sup> See Meeks for a more detailed discussion of Social Darwinism and *To Have and Have Not*.

<sup>45</sup> Hemingway, 241.

twentieth century American Dream: venture capitalism. Aboard the *Irydia IV*, Dorothy Hollis, a wealthy director's wife, enjoys the fruits garnered from the factory of dreams, Hollywood, peddled to millions at an equal price. In each example, Hemingway constructs a Dream rooted in consumption, wealth, and fame.

The people on the yachts are vapid, broken individuals who smash things up, and are far from happy. Wallace Johnston, known from Algiers to Biskra, is infamous to the point of being banned from Paris. His "special pleasures" have resulted in blackmail by busboys and sailors alike. Hemingway marginalizes Johnston from his own social milieu. Henry Carpenter, whose "friends had felt for some time that he was cracking up," his monthly income cut in half, ultimately commits suicide. Hemingway carefully reminds the reader, "the money on which it was not worthwhile for him to live was more than the fisherman Albert Tracy had been supporting his family on at the time of his death."<sup>46</sup> The grain broker, alone and impotent, spends the nights worrying, despite his belief "that only suckers worried," unable to stave off death by alcoholism, and the reality of impending tax evasion charges. Finally, for Dorothy Hollis, sexual gratification and Luminal are the only options to combat the insomnia brought on by a vain life marked by the infidelity and fickleness of men. In their success, rooted in extreme individualism, the material "Haves" achieved the American Dream at the expense of others. In *To Have and Have Not*, Hemingway intentionally includes the damage done by the grain broker (inducing despair and suicide in others), the emptiness of Johnston's and Carpenter's lives despite their wealth, and the constant want and lack of satisfaction Hollis' life has despite her multiple lovers and the ability to travel the world. The commercialism and consumption that

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<sup>46</sup> Hemingway, 233.

give them their status as “Haves” are underpinned by the very capital marketplace that has failed—even destroyed—the “Have Nots” in the novel.

Like the material “Haves,” Hemingway demonstrates the failure of the intellectual elite to counter the effects of the Depression. Historical examples and anecdotal beliefs charge academia and culture with the task of bringing into focus the reality of social inequities and individual despair. The Social Realists of the 1930s believed their cause to be one of crusading against social inequities. Hemingway had nothing but disdain for them and the critics that elevated their work. In a letter to Ivan Kashkin, he states plainly, “Here criticism is a joke.”<sup>47</sup> Hemingway concludes that writers and “bourgeois” critics with a penchant for using political ideology as a benchmark for good writing “do not know their ass from a hole in the ground,” and he believed, “none of it has anything to do with literature.”<sup>48</sup> Critics like Granville Hicks, in his review of *Green Hills of Africa*, wanted Hemingway to address the “contemporary American scene.” Hicks asserted: “I should like to have Hemingway write a novel about a strike . . . because it would do something to Hemingway.”<sup>49</sup> They hoped by writing about strikes, Hemingway’s work would become more socially relevant. Hemingway noted to his brother that in writing *To Have and Have Not* he had changed; nevertheless, his approach to Social Realism and the value of the academy as a means for fixing the plight of the dispossessed and alienated remained constant. In *To Have and Have Not*, such “fashionable writers” are depicted as insecure, frivolous, and impractical in their approach.

As writers of Social Realism, Gordon and Laughton in the novel are the supposed voice of the proletariat. They are the ones who have to “know about everything” in order to make the

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<sup>47</sup> Baker *Selected Letters*, 417 and 418

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 417 and 418.

<sup>49</sup> Qtd in Monroe, 93.

Dream possible.<sup>50</sup> Observers of “social phenomenon,” they create tales of strikes in textile factories and social unrest where the workers are brought to revolt by labor organizers. Like the “fashionable” writers Hemingway castigates in his letters, they seek to capitalize on their idealized notion of social analysis, under the belief that they have a keener eye than most—despite the reality of their skewed vision. Notwithstanding Robert O. Stephen’s comment that Hemingway’s sketches of such characters are “too theatrical and too obvious to be wholly convincing,” they strike a significant chord in their comparison to the class below them and their clear lack of insight into the plight of the “Have Nots.”<sup>51</sup>

Though heralded in classic Dream narratives as bearers of the Dream—social conscience, education, and an ability to see the inequities—the Haves fail completely. Richard Gordon, a bitter and jealous writer, changes his politics based on what’s fashionable and is accused by his wife of, “sucking up to people’s faces and talking about them behind their back.”<sup>52</sup> Arrogant and lost, like James Laughton in a fog of alcohol, Gordon is presented by Hemingway in a manner exposing both his deluded sense of self and failure to represent the ideals he believes will make the Dream possible. The complete sketch of Gordon’s creative process in chapter nineteen exposes his failures. With a greater degree of knowledge than Gordon, the reader witnesses him contextualize Marie Morgan as “appalling,” a “big ox” looking like a “battleship.” He falsely imagines her husband having nothing but derision for her, and in what he believes to be true insight, concludes: “Her husband when he came home at night hated her, hated the way she had coarsened and grown heavy, was repelled by her.”<sup>53</sup> In fact, as the reader knows, Harry loves

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<sup>50</sup> Hemingway, 140.

<sup>51</sup> Robert O. Stephens, *Ernest Hemingway: The Critical Reception* (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., Inc.), 183.

<sup>52</sup> Hemingway, 186.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 176 and 177.

Marie in every aspect of her existence and although Gordon believes his own “flash of perception” to be true, it fails to capture Harry’s constant regard and care for Marie and the girls. Finally, just as Gordon misses the mark, Hemingway presents Professor MacWalsey (ironically an economist in the Great Depression) as a failed academic who has anesthetized his emotional pain with alcohol, and seeks a long-term solution to his loneliness by stealing another man’s wife.

Hemingway continued his criticism of the Dream’s perversion in his unflattering assessment of FDR’s New Deal representatives. Hemingway relates his anger and aggravation with the government’s role in the realization of the American Dream in Frederick Harrison’s hunt for Harry Morgan and the inability of Albert to feed his family while on Relief. Harry tells Albert in frustration: “There ain’t any work at living wages anywhere.” An indictment of the capital narrative, Harry reminds him that he digs sewers for seven and a half dollars a week. The safety net of the Dream is a failure. Harry, full of resentment, asserts to Albert: “You got three kids in school that are hungry at noon. You got family that their bellies hurt.”<sup>54</sup> The government of the people, by the people, and for the people, doesn’t listen to or care for the people, even when they protest as a community. A meager wage that doesn’t feed a family is tantamount to slave labor. Captain Willie exclaims in frustration: “Who the hell do you eat off of with people working here in Key West for the government for six dollars and a half a week?”<sup>55</sup> Despite the reality of Willie’s protest, Harrison and his secretary believe it to be more sporting hunting down people like Harry and Wesley—“This is better fun than fishing, eh, Doctor?”—than fulfilling their proper role as facilitators of the Dream.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Hemingway, 95.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

Despite critics finding Hemingway's inclusion of those narratives other than Morgan's as excessive, they are a necessary counterpoint for understanding his larger message concerning the American Dream. Through them, Hemingway is able to give an ironic twist to historical expectations of the Dream, especially when compared to Harry and the other Have Nots. In *To Have and Have Not* the Dream is turned inside out. Whether from a point of irony or satire, Harry is the truest measure of the American Dream. Yet, arguably, as murderer, smuggler, and robber, he is the most despicable character in the novel. As Carlos Baker notes, Morgan is the rugged individualist fighting against the odds. Like an American frontiersman, he seeks success in Hemingway's last frontier, the Gulf Stream. It, and other such ocean currents are, "the last wild country there is left," affirming a geographical aspect often associated with the Dream.<sup>57</sup> Like the Western landscape, the "Stream," in its untamed and untapped state, provides the greatest possibility for the application of "pluck and luck."

Harry knows this landscape, understands it, and is able to capitalize on the experiential knowledge he has gained from it. He knows how to navigate the waters between Key West and Havana, and, as helmsman, "to have confidence steering."<sup>58</sup> He knows his trade and is true to it. With his boat, he has a chance to work hard and experience luck and hope, "instead of just watching it all go to hell."<sup>59</sup> He knows that in order to catch big fish like marlin, one needs, "the best tackle you can buy."<sup>60</sup> Morgan has the skill to understand the nuance required for a successful day on the water. When one fishes for such "monsters" he needs to "keep the drag off so you can slack to him when he hits,"<sup>61</sup> because "there isn't any line will hold them."<sup>62</sup> The

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<sup>57</sup> Hemingway qtd. in Baker, 176.

<sup>58</sup> Hemingway, 67.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 12.

best line, tackle, even bait-man are required to hook one “good.” He understands the Stream’s currents and its inhabitants. When he looks out over the Stream and sees it running “nearly purple with whirlpools” and flying fish casting shadows like Charles Lindberg crossing the Atlantic, he tells Johnson, “I think you’re going to have a chance to fight one today.”<sup>63</sup> The boat is headed in the right direction at the right speed and the bait is “bouncing along on the swell.” Acknowledging a perfect day—the right time, the right wind, and possibly the right luck—Harry makes possible Johnson’s desire, “to hook, fight, and land my fish myself.”<sup>64</sup>

All the conditions are present for giving Johnson the rugged-individualist frontier experience epitomizing a desired sense of masculinity. However, Johnson doesn’t measure up; he will not be the classic Dream hero that Harry represents. In fact, Johnson is the antithesis of what is expected of an American Dream hero. On the most basic level of the Dream, he is unwilling to grow and learn. He, like the other Haves, merely wants to exude success, rather than possess it. Ineffectively, Harry admonishes him to “keep the rod butt in the socket on the chair” and “keep the drag off” to prevent being pulled out of the chair or giving the fish an opportunity to snap the line.<sup>65</sup> Given more than one opportunity, Johnson nonetheless fails, losing fish and tackle, and flying off without paying; the latter act leaves Harry without any chance to recoup his losses. Hemingway’s view of Johnson is markedly given when Harry notes, “it was a sloppy way to fish.”<sup>66</sup> Hemingway reminds the reader of the importance of a job well done and the importance of doing things properly—neither of which Johnson does. He and such individuals are the counterpoint to Harry. Though they are, as Lewis notes, the financial

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<sup>62</sup> Hemingway, 18.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Haves, they are in reality, the Have Nots in their lack of substance as individuals, as well as their lack of concern and connection to the greater community at the heart of the American Dream.<sup>67</sup>

Throughout the narrative Harry demonstrates the autonomy and agency necessary for the realization of the American Dream. In his dying assertion—“No matter how a man alone ain’t got no bloody fucking chance”—Hemingway affirms the importance of community that is encapsulated in Harry’s fight for the family.<sup>68</sup> Self-reliant to a fault, through hard work and determination, Harry ekes out an existence maintaining a perceived independence as provider for his family. For Harry, the locus of a better, richer, and fuller life—the Dream—is the preservation of the domestic space: his home, his wife Marie and their three daughters. All that he does in the narrative, both good and bad, is directed toward this effort. Rather than go on Relief, he asserts that his “kids ain’t going to have their bellies hurt and I ain’t going to dig sewers for the government for less money than will feed them.”<sup>69</sup> Putting him at the margins of society, he engages in risky behavior to stave off the privation experienced by others. Activities such as smuggling, rum running, theft, and murder underpin his individualist belief: “I don’t know who made the law but I know there ain’t no law that you got to go hungry.” The killing of Mr. Sing, the willingness to kill Eddie, along with defrauding the twelve Chinese he promised to carry to the States, and the debacle of the trip with Wesley, are all examples of his willingness to do whatever it takes to maintain his American Dream: the preservation of family.

Harry’s Dream of domestic bliss is succinctly drawn at the end of part one. Sitting in his living room smoking a cigar, drinking whiskey and listening to Gracie Allen on the radio with his wife Marie, while his girls are at the movies, he lives a life different from the other Conchs.

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<sup>67</sup> See Lewis for an in depth discussion of “agape” love in *To Have and Have Not*.

<sup>68</sup> Hemingway, 225.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.



The love he and Marie have for each other stands in direct contrast to other couples in the narrative, especially among the Haves. Throughout his decline, Harry has nothing but regard and concern for Marie, a fact reiterated as he lays dying on the boat thinking: “I wish I could do something about Marie.”<sup>70</sup> Marie, at every turn professes her love for Harry in her belief that, “They don’t know what I’ve got. They won’t never know what I’ve got.”<sup>71</sup> Despite their categorization of being the least admirable in society—Harry an ex-police officer who has committed horrific crimes; Marie an ex-prostitute—they stand in direct contrast to the failed relationships of Albert and his wife, as well as Helen and Richard Gordon. Albert does everything he can to be away from his nagging and disdainful wife. Helen Gordon concludes correctly that Richard Gordon’s “picknose love” is really “just another dirty lie.”<sup>72</sup>

Despite his determination to provide for his family at all costs, whether directly or indirectly, Harry’s approach continually isolates him and puts him at odds with the greater community. He sacrifices his interpersonal connections and ultimately his own humanity. In Albert’s narrative, Harry’s asserts: “It would be better alone, anything is better alone.” Here, Hemingway acutely demonstrates the degree to which Harry has become a loner.<sup>73</sup> Albert laments how Harry has changed, mean and full of self-pity. Harry is trapped by the need to participate in a doomed venture, asking, “what choice do I have.” Harry’s downward spiral and his actions complicate his position in the Dream narrative. In this and Hemingway’s castigation of the other characters, the reader is left with the realization that the Dream altogether fails. At no point in the narrative is it not complicated by social and personal failure. Effectively, Hemingway uses “those admirable American instruments” of the Colt and Smith & Wesson, “so

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<sup>70</sup> Hemingway, 174.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 185 and 186.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 104.

easily carried, so sure of effect, so well designed to end the American dream,” when it becomes a nightmare.<sup>74</sup> The mess left for “relatives to clean up” is the end result of a pursuit that as a cultural ideal is flawed when applied.

Hemingway uses the social circumstances of Key West in the Great Depression to demonstrate the failure of the American Dream as traditionally conceived. The social order of James Truslow Adams is found wanting and Jeffersonian rugged individualism castigated for its isolationism. The burgeoning New Deal community and the super rich have no room nor concern for the plight of Harry Morgan and his peers. Hemingway’s consternation over the gentrification of the island emerges in the downward spiral of Morgan and the death of Tracy. Despite Morgan’s criminality, Hemingway gives him access to the Dream through the domestic space represented in Marie. In Harry’s actions and desperation, he embodies the spirit of determination and fortitude that is the bedrock of the Dream, but the social order destroys any opportunity for realizing his Dream of the “Good Life”—the family. Hemingway’s parting message is an indictment not of the Dream, but of the application and expectations of the Dream in a society that has no room for the individual who, in the struggle to achieve the Dream, fails to fit cultural expectations of normalcy.

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<sup>74</sup> Hemingway, 239.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* AND THE DREAM

Richard Wright, in his 1937 review of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, castigates the author for writing prose cloaked in, "facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the day of Phillis Wheatley."<sup>1</sup> Though he attempts to praise Hurston's novel for dialogue managing, "to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk mind in their pure simplicity," he concludes, "the sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought." A year later, Alain Locke notes the novel's importance as, "folklore fiction at its best." However, in the same breath, he expresses frustration, asking "when will the Negro novelist of maturity, who knows how to tell a story convincingly—which is Miss Hurston's cradle gift, come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction?"<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, Otis Ferguson begins his *New Republic* review, stating, "It isn't that this novel is bad, but that it deserves to be better."<sup>3</sup> Like the men and communities in the life of Hurston's heroin Janie, these critics project on Hurston's novel an expectation rooted in their own sense of normalcy. Rather than accepting the novel, they deny Hurston the very agency she seeks to evocate. The "theme," "message," and "thought" are located in Janie's American Dream. It is a Dream fundamentally linked to her realization of selfhood and an organic union with another in a period when women,

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Wright, "Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937)," in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 16 & 17.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Locke, "Opportunity, June 1, 1938," in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Otis Ferguson, "The New Republic, October 13, 1937" in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 22.

especially women of color, are forced to accept traditional expectations of womanhood both confining and subservient. Never settling, and in a constant state of development, Janie resists the confining notions of normalcy dominating three very gendered communities. In her quest, she realizes an American Dream founded in self-actuated agency.

The American Dream is predicated on the creedal values found in Jefferson's *Declaration*. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness create the necessary conditions for the Dream. Individual agency is a cornerstone: "the idea that individuals have control over the course of their lives."<sup>4</sup> As Cullen notes, "Agency . . . lies at the very core of the American Dream, the bedrock promise upon which all else depends."<sup>5</sup> From home ownership to fame and fortune, acceptance as equal members of the imagined community constituted the necessary step to other classic Dream characteristics. However, throughout U.S. history, for many—women, people of color, and immigrants—acquiring agency has been primary. The dream of "equality," as Cullen calls it, or Jillson's "inclusion," underlies the progressive march to James Truslow Adams' "social order." Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* invokes this historical process as context for Janie's path to the horizon. As Michael Awkward observes, Hurston was writing in "an era when Afro-American literature was viewed by many intellectuals and white readers as an occasion for direct confrontation of white America's racist practices and its effects on Afro-Americans."<sup>6</sup> He concludes, "Hurston's imaginative landscape, which generally did not include maniacal white villains or, for that matter, superhumanly proud, long suffering blacks, seemed inappropriate and hopelessly out of step." Although the novel doesn't deal substantially with

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<sup>4</sup> Cullen, 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Awkward, *The American Novel: Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990), 10.

“issues of the color line”<sup>7</sup>—much to the chagrin for Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright—identity issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality as limitations, or as points of exclusion, do frame Hurston’s narrative.<sup>8</sup>

The novel is squarely rooted in the African American community. With the exception of Tea Cake’s conscription after the 1935 hurricane, Janie’s trial, and Nanny’s past as a slave, the narrative doesn’t deal overtly with issues of white patriarchal racism and the degradation of the African American race at the hands of white society. The work isn’t a “protest” novel, as many critics would prefer. Rather, the novel focuses on the gendered intricacy of rural Florida African American communities between the wars. As June Jordan states in her oft-quoted 1974 *Black World* essay, “whites do not figure in this story of Black love; white anything or anybody is not important.”<sup>9</sup> Hurston’s narrative is really, according to Jordan, a story of “Black affirmation.” Noting the novel’s sense of its own “Black reality,” Jordan asserts it as a story, “where Black people don’t represent issues.” They represent, “their own, particular selves in a family/community setting . . . that fosters the natural, person-postures of courting, jealousy, ambition, dream, sex, work, partying, sorrow, bitterness, celebration, and fellowship.”<sup>10</sup> Freed from oppression and constraint, and filled with “Black possibilities of ourselves,” the novel is as Jordan concludes, “the most successful, convincing, and exemplary novel of Blacklove that we have. Period.” It is thus no wonder that since Alice Walker rediscovered Hurston, her novel has served as a model for all modern female African American fiction.<sup>11</sup> This model draws upon a

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<sup>7</sup> See W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903).

<sup>8</sup> See Gates Jr. and Appiah, as well as King, for a more in-depth conversation on the initial critical response of Hurston’s work.

<sup>9</sup> June Jordan, “On Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston: Notes toward a Balancing of Love and Hatred” *Black World* 23.10 (1974): 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Awkward*, 4.

shared socio-historical past that affirms the existence of individual and community agency despite the realities of racial oppression surrounding those communities.

Hurston's between-the-wars narrative explores this Dream of agency in an established African American community. Not a work of "protest" and one that is rooted in a self-constructed community of "Black Affirmation," the novel nevertheless reflects the historical experience of chattel slavery and the reality of the Jim Crow South. Robert Hemenway, in his seminal Hurston literary biography, notes, "parts of the book do capture the 'smoldering resentment' of the black South."<sup>12</sup> This resentment is directly exhibited in the experience of slavery that Nanny represents, the assertion of racial hierarchy in the deaths resulting from the hurricane, and the disdain of the Muck community when Janie is tried by a white male jury for Tea Cake's murder and found innocent.

Nanny embodies both the physical and emotional exploitation a female slave endured at the hands of white society. Susan Meisenhelder, in *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston*, aptly positions Nanny's worldview: "Drawing her model of black female identity from her own experience with the harshest forms of racial and sexual oppression (slavery and rape), Nanny is both accurate in her assessment of the world . . . and limited in her conception of alternatives."<sup>13</sup> Her assessment, motivating her dream(s) for Janie, emanates from her belief that, "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see."<sup>14</sup> In her assertion: "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as

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<sup>12</sup> Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 240.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Edwards Meisenhelder, *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston*, (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1990), 63.

<sup>14</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper perennial Modern classics, 1937), 14.

Ah been able tuh find out,” Nanny has known exploitation as a female slave: rape (hers and her daughter’s); her impending abuse by her white mistress; and escape into freedom in order to keep her unborn child.

Nanny’s admonition to Janie directly connects to the literary tradition of the *slave narrative*—tales of escaped ex-slaves whose stories became weapons in the fight for abolition.<sup>15</sup> Her narrative is in line with Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861). Harold Bloom further defines Nanny: “As former slave . . . Nanny, is haunted by the compensatory dream of making first her daughter, and then her granddaughter, something other than ‘the mule of the world.’”<sup>16</sup> Bloom concludes that Nanny’s “dream is both powerful enough, and sufficiently unitary, to have driven Janie’s mother away, and to condemn Janie herself to a double disaster of marriages.” Nonetheless, Nanny reminds Janie of the connection to degradation brought on by chattel slavery. In a moment of maternal tenderness, following an outburst of fear and violence after catching Janie kiss Johnny Taylor, she tells Janie, “us colored folks is branches without roots . . . Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and do.”<sup>17</sup> Despite her desire to, “preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high,” the reality of Janie’s birth left Nanny without a pulpit. Janie will bring this sermon to fruition, but not in a manner consistent with traditional slave narratives and not as a protest about racial issues.

Hurston’s narrative focuses on African American communities and their individuality in rural Florida, but the historical underlay of the narrative is the reality of the Jim Crow South.

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<sup>15</sup> See William L. Andrews. *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993) for a greater discussion of slave narratives.

<sup>16</sup> Harold Bloom, ed. *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Hurston, 16.

Like Nanny's slave experience, Hurston includes distinct incidents and cultural markers reminding the reader that these communities existed in a larger racialized society. Janie's early childhood in West Florida among the white Washburn children is the first moment in the narrative focused on the reality of racial difference. The initial relating of her early childhood to Phoeby after returning from the Muck—when remembering that Hurston's novel begins and ends in the same place, Janie having already lived the narrative—produces an utopic air. Her story begins with Nanny raising her, she and the white family she worked for who helped her build a house on her own property. Janie emphasizes the context of this arrangement: "They was quality white folks up dere in West Florida. Named Washburn."<sup>18</sup> Janie grew up among the Washburn children as an equal, not as a racialized other: "As was wid dem white chillun so much till Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till As was round six years old." The reader is comforted by a seemingly colorblind childhood—Janie not a racialized being. However, the physical reality of her difference becomes clear when the children are all photographed together. Six-year-old Janie, upset at not being able to find herself in the photograph, in tears asks: "Dat's were Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, 'where is me? Ah don't see me.'"<sup>19</sup> Amidst laughter from both the Washburn children and adults, Miss Nellie (daughter of the Washburns), "pointed to de dark one and say, 'Dat's you, Alphabet, don't you known yo'ownself?'" Young Janie realizes: "'Aw, aw! Ah'm colored!'"<sup>20</sup> The visual distinction of difference, reaffirmed by the white Washburn family, orients Janie and the reader to the reality of racial difference. The theme of outside-other follows Janie through the novel: "But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest."

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<sup>18</sup> Hurston, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



Framing Janie's later narrative is a parallel experience where not being, "just like de rest," combines with the reality of the color line to place Janie outside her community. Although the Muck seems "something of a primal never-never land," as Susan Willis suggests, with an amalgamation of migrant workers drawn from a variety of settings, all getting along in work and merriment, it also becomes a location for the assertion of white patriarchal authority.<sup>21</sup> Daniel J. Sundahl observes, "in this section of the novel Hurston also probes (in a minor chord) the consciousness of racial oppression."<sup>22</sup> Though life on the Muck is marked by the mutually satisfying maturation of Tea Cake and Janie's relationship, and Janie's inclusion in the community of workers, two notes of racial difference emerge: the first in Mrs. Turner's worship of Janie's light skin, and the second in the events following the hurricane.

Mrs. Turner serves as both a comedic foil and Hurston's referencing of a common theme in the cultural expression of Harlem Renaissance, the art of "passing." As a narrative trope and as reality for some African American men and women, passing, according to Loyal King, "opened up a world of opportunity and social mobility."<sup>23</sup> It also addressed America's growing concern with race-mixing or miscegenation. The "tragic mulatto" as a character is often depicted as "someone who faced a crisis of identity or a reversal of fortune upon being exposed as black." They often "faced the question of whether they should pass for white." Although Hurston clearly codes Janie as mulatto, with "coffee-and cream complexion and her luxurious hair," as

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<sup>21</sup> Susan Willis, "Wandering: Hurston's Search for Self and Method," in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr, and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 125.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel J. Sundahl, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Voice of Her Own/An Entertainment in Herself," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 30.

<sup>23</sup> Loyal King, *The Cambridge Introduction to Zora Neale Hurston* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 26.

King notes, she doesn't make her tragic.<sup>24</sup> However, Janie's position as mulatto does inform how others, like Mrs. Turner, view her.

Throughout the narrative, Janie's appearance serves as the impetus for male sexual desire and for female scorn, but on the Muck, it causes Mrs. Turner—a “milky sort of a woman that belonged to a child-bed”—to try and lead Janie away from Tea Cake and the community of migrant workers.<sup>25</sup> Janie quickly realizes that “Mrs. Turner took black folk as a personal affront to herself.”<sup>26</sup> She couldn't understand why Janie would marry Tea Cake—someone blacker than herself—so she sets out to persuade Janie to take interest in her brother. Hurston tells the reader, “Mrs. Turner, like all other believers had built an altar to the unattainable—Caucasian characteristics for all.” So it is understandable that Mrs. Turner “felt honored by Janie's acquaintance,” and believed “anyone who looked more white folkish than herself was better than she was in criteria.”<sup>27</sup> In Mrs. Turner's assessment, Janie's ability to pass placed her outside of the community of migrant workers, a community she had found the greatest amount of joy and affinity. Meisenhelder concludes, as Hurston draws her, Mrs. Turner as a result of “her worship of white gods,” demonstrates her own, “spiritual insipidity and deformed identity.”<sup>28</sup> Fortunately, through her actions and failure to lead Janie away, Mrs. Turner becomes a focal point of humor. Ironically, although Janie doesn't follow Mrs. Turner's lead, and instead chooses Tea Cake and the community in the Muck over Turner's brother, it is with this very community that Janie finds herself at odds later in the story.

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<sup>24</sup> Hurston, 140.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>28</sup> Meisenhelder, 71.

The 1935 Labor Day hurricane that swept across South Florida and is highlighted in Hurston's narrative, serves as a socially leveling force and the bearer of 1930s racial reality. A manifestation of nature's fury, the storm attacks all inhabitants alike, disregarding racial designation or social class. In *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Literature*, Samira Kawash notes that the flood that followed the hurricane, "set into motion an uncontrollable overspilling of boundaries, disrupting the system of discernibility that ensures racial order."<sup>29</sup> Egalitarian floodwaters do not discriminate. Kawash continues: "Neither black nor white are immune to its effects; black and white bodies drown indifferently and are collected into a community of the dead to which race cannot apply." Like the rabid dog on the cow's back, the snake, and the man in the cypress tree, the storm affected all equally, but not all would be treated equally in its aftermath.

Hurston, in her description of the storm's effects, anthropomorphizes the lake: "It woke up old Okechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed."<sup>30</sup> In response, "the folks in the quarters and the people in the big houses further around the shore heard the big lake and wondered." They wondered, but did not act. Each sat in complacency, not heeding the warning received by the animals and Native American population—coded as directly connected to nature and the natural world—both of which marched to higher ground. But, as Hurston conveys, "The people [whites] felt uncomfortable but safe because there were the seawalls to chain the senseless monster in his bed." The "folks"—the migrant workers—"let the people [whites] do their thinking. If the castles thought themselves secure, the cabins needn't worry." Both, of course, would be gravely wrong in their approach. The great lake "seized hold of his dikes and

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<sup>29</sup> Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 203.

<sup>30</sup> Hurston, 158.

ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed after his supposed-to-be conquerors.” It continued its effect, “rolling the dikes, rolling the houses, rolling the people in the houses along with the timbers.”<sup>31</sup> All were swept away in its wrath. Although “Common danger made common friends,”<sup>32</sup> and “Nothing sought a conquest over the other,” Hurston subtly introduces racially motivated elements, such as when Janie and Tea Cake approach the six-mile bridge. There they find that “White people had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room.” They then had to climb one side, then the other, with “Miles further on, still no rest, for the tempest-tossed creatures. A small point of difference, but it is also a historical reality in Hurston’s narrative.

After the storm passes, in the Everglades, “the wind had romped among lakes and trees,”<sup>33</sup> washing the Muck away. But in the city, the storm “had raged among houses and men.” When Tea Cake and Janie arrive in Palm Beach, they stand upon the edge and look at the desolation—“the hand of horror on everything.”<sup>34</sup> They saw “houses without roofs, and roofs without houses.” Together, steel and stone were all “crushed and crumbled like wood.” Hurston concludes, “the mother of malice had trifled with men.” Corpses are strewn everywhere, not just among the wreckage of houses: “They were under houses, tangled in shrubbery, floating in water, hanging in trees, drifting in wreckage.”<sup>35</sup> Neither skin color nor social class determines the dead. Bodies from the city mingle with those brought in by truck from outlying areas. Some of them are clothed, and some of them are naked. Some are “with calm faces and satisfied hands,” and some are with “fighting faces and eyes flung wide open in wonder,” where “Death

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<sup>31</sup> Hurston, 161 and 162.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

had found them watching, trying to see beyond seeing.” Each of the dead, are equally in need of being collected and buried.

Having been conscripted into forced labor and tasked with burying the dead, Tea Cake amongst such men, “Miserable, sullen men, black and white under guard had to keep on searching for bodies and digging graves.”<sup>36</sup> However, the graves would not be equally filled. In their efforts to quickly bury the dead, the gravediggers would have to look at each corpse, and “Examine every last one of ’em and find out if they’s white or black.” Simple cheap pine coffins would be given to the white bodies; the nonwhite bodies would be dumped in a common pit, covered in lime, and buried. The best method for designating one race from another, “look at they hair,” as to not be, “wastin’ no boxes on colored.”<sup>37</sup> Tea Cake observes: “Look lak dey think God don’t know nothin’ ‘bout de Jim Crow law.” Even in death, though equally dead, individuals are distinguished along racial lines. Nature knows no distinction, proving a leveling force in its destruction; man, however, reasserts a racial hierarchy within his purview.

Meisenhelder sees Hurston using the storm as a narrative tool to deal with expectations of racial, gender, and social conformity. Beyond mere dramatic action, the storm is “a symbolic ritual of purification, a rejection of those characters who have betrayed the sexually egalitarian and culturally autonomous values of black life on the Muck.”<sup>38</sup> In her analysis, those whom “Hurston paints as ethnically secure and immune to Mrs. Turner’s influence [Lias, Stew Beef, and Motor Boat], survive;” those who look to the white world for answers are casualties of the storm—among them, Tea Cake. The storm essentially functions, as “the symbolic destroyer of white power.” The power of white society—the “people” mentioned earlier—to control the lake

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<sup>36</sup> Hurston, 170.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>38</sup> Meisenhelder, 74.

is overcome by the storm. Likewise, the power of white society to impose social hierarchy is made nearly nonexistent by the storm. The “white principles embraced by Starks and rekindled by Tea Cake,” are extinguished by the storm. Meisenhelder believes that the storm is coded as feminine in Hurston’s description of its wrath. The “Mother of Malice,” as she believes it to be, is a representation of “black, female power” that “cleanses the world through its flood, freeing even its male counterpart.”<sup>39</sup> The male counterpart is the lake itself, consistently referred to as “he.”

The literal cleansing is clear in the physical devastation and the indistinguishable bodies—black from white. However, the removal of individuals such as Tea Cake and the disruption of the South Florida migrant-labor based economy, demonstrate a symbolic cleansing. For Meisenhelder, Tea Cake is the embodiment of hierarchical principles asserted by white patriarchal society. His violent assertion of his “ownership” of Janie in the light of Mrs. Turner’s antics, positions him as subscribing to such an order. Meisenhelder notes, “His death is not merely a tragic ending to a love story but rather the symbolic expurgation of the false values he has come to represent.”<sup>40</sup> In Hurston’s comparison of Tea Cake to the rapid dog, Meisenhelder sees Tea Cake coded as “the oppressive male dog of black folk culture . . . he is the mad dog and not its noble victim.” Though, he is the progenitor in Janie’s quest for the horizon—her agency—he simultaneously functions along traditional lines of racial, gendered, and cultural expectations. As Kersuze Simeon-Jones notes, “Tea Cake follow[s] the example of the black man who publicly displays his image of maleness through the physical abuse of the black

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<sup>39</sup> Meisenhelder, 75.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 76.

woman.”<sup>41</sup> Such a display is underscored by the theory that the black male’s disenfranchisement and lack of social authority places the black woman as “the victim of his anger and frustration.” Therefore, his removal from the narrative as a result of the storm’s devastation frees Janie from the expectations and dominance that he represents. However, Janie must first go through a ritualistic extrication from these expectations, both those embodied in the community of migrant workers on the Muck and those asserted by white society.

Tea Cake’s contraction of rabies from the rabid dog and his deterioration into madness set the circumstances for Janie’s ultimate act of agency. Her self-defense killing of Tea Cake places her liberty in the hands of white judicial society and puts her at odds with her peers on the Muck. Temporarily, her narrative is appropriated and determined by two very distinct views of acceptability. She is fully denied her own agency by one, and isolated and disdained by the other—much as when she was a young girl. White civil society appropriates Janie’s agency in determining her guilt or innocence. The community on the Muck believes she killed Tea Cake out of malice. Despite the reality of Tea Cake’s condition and his overt attempt to kill Janie, she is immediately arrested and jailed. Although the sheriff and the judge, based on the doctor’s explanation of Tea Cake’s condition, conclude that Janie should be tried that very day, for three hours and the duration of the court proceedings, she is denied the very freedom and autonomy that marks her agency within the American Dream paradigm. Furthermore, white patriarchal society appropriates Janie’s story in the course of justice and mercy.

Janie’s guilt or innocence is predicated on the interpretation and understanding of hers and Tea Cake’s story by others. Janie sits powerless while “twelve strange men who didn’t

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<sup>41</sup> Kersuze Simeon-Jones, “Masculinity in Hurston’s Text,” in *“The Inside Light”*: *New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. Deborah G. Plant (California: Praeger, 2010), 30.

know a thing about people like Tea Cake and her were going to sit on the thing.”<sup>42</sup> Janie’s biggest fear is not death: “It was misunderstanding,”<sup>43</sup> others’ misunderstanding of the love that Janie and Tea Cake shared. In prosecution, the sheriff and the doctor tell how they found things. In defense, Janie tries with great effort to get them to understand “how she and Tea Cake had been with one another so they could see she could never shoot Tea Cake out of malice.” In his instructions to the jury, the judge frames Janie’s circumstances—either cold-blooded murderer, or “a poor broken creature, a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstance who . . . did a great act of mercy.” Were her actions that of malice and greed, or was she a person who committed an act of self-defense?<sup>44</sup> From beginning to end, the viability of Janie’s story rests on an act of homicide being deemed acceptable/justifiable by white society. Meisenhelder rightly asserts that the jury’s acquittal, “thus demonstrates not their understanding but rather their misinterpretation and appropriation of a black woman’s story for their own purposes.”<sup>45</sup>

The trial is for white society to justify its laws and processes, based on justified/unjustified as deemed by law, rather than an understanding of Janie’s inability to kill the man she loved out of malice. The trial, therefore completely negates the sense of justice for the community on the Muck. The reality of this racial distinction is made quite clear when the judge informs Sop-de-Bottom: “We are handling this case. Another word out of you, out of any of you niggers back there, and I’ll bind you over to the big court.”<sup>46</sup> In outcome, Janie isn’t acquitted based on the truth of her love for Tea Cake, but rather in her actions as being seen as an

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<sup>42</sup> Hurston, 185.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>44</sup> Hurston, 188.

<sup>45</sup> Meisenhelder, 83.

<sup>46</sup> Hurston, 187.



act of mercy defined by white society. Despite her being set free, the process dismisses the loss felt by her and that of the community on the Muck.

The appropriation of Janie and Tea Cake's story by white society provides Hurston an opportunity to demonstrate the divide that exists between it and the community on the Muck. As Hubbard notes, "If Hurston's intent in the first two sections . . . is to screen out white antipathy, then the last section shows the response of the community to this oppression and to black society's assigned marginality."<sup>47</sup> Consistent with the Jim Crow South, the community from the Muck is "Packed tight like a case of celery, only much darker than that," and forced to stand in the back of the courtroom. Their love and admiration for Tea Cake is given no outlet. In their view, "Tea Cake was a good boy. He had been good to that woman."<sup>48</sup> They sit in judgment of Janie, all against her, "pelting her with dirty thoughts."<sup>49</sup> Their loss is palpable: "All they wanted was a chance to testify" to their love of Tea Cake and the injustice of his death.<sup>50</sup> However, there would be no opportunity for such, as they are warned: "If you know what's good for you, you better shut your mouth up until somebody calls you."<sup>51</sup> Silenced and disaffected, the community on the Muck is forced to remain marginalized in the midst of white social justice. However, this doesn't keep them from concluding among themselves: "Well, you know whut dey say 'uh white man and a uh nigger woman is de freest thing on earth.' Dey do as dey

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<sup>47</sup> Dolan Hubbard, "'As said Ah'd save de text for you': Recontextualizing the Sermon to Tell (Her)story in Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 45.

<sup>48</sup> Hurston, 186.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

please.”<sup>52</sup> In so doing, they articulate the reality of Janie’s gendered and racial otherness—her being not “just like de rest.”

The lack of justice for Tea Cake is seen as a direct affront to the identity of black masculinity he represents. Throughout their stay on the Muck, Tea Cake exists as a centralizing force in the community. Hurston tells the reader, “Tea Cake’s house was a magnet, the unauthorized center of the ‘job.’”<sup>53</sup> His presence brings joy and laughter, and his possession of Janie, admiration. Sop-de-Bottom, Stew Beef, Bootny, Motor Boat and alike, admire and love Tea Cake as much as Janie does. To them, like her, “Tea Cake was the son of Evening Sun, and nothing was too good.”<sup>54</sup> He attracts them with his music, his prowess at games, and his assertion, both verbal and physical, that “Janie is wherever Ah want tuh be. Dat’s de kind uh wife she is and Ah love her for it.”<sup>55</sup> His American Dream reigns. In his swagger, strong loving, and affirmation of ownership in his beating of Janie, Meisenhelder concludes that Tea Cake “represents an ideal of masculinity.”<sup>56</sup> He also embodies an ideal representation of what the community on the Muck believes itself to be. In determining the fate of Tea Cake’s legacy in its application of legal justice, white society robs the community on the Muck of its own agency. Tea Cake’s unavenged death disrupts their autonomy, leading them to conclude—and be in fear of—“Yeah, de nigger women kin kill up all de mens dey wants tuh.”<sup>57</sup> It is only when white civil society is extricated from the narrative and through Janie’s grand funeral for Tea Cake that the community on the Muck is able to return to its own identity. Unfortunately, though Janie is

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<sup>52</sup> Hurston, 189.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>56</sup> Meisenhelder, 170

<sup>57</sup> Hurston, 189.

forgiven and rendered justified in her killing of Tea Cake, she is isolated from both communities—white society and the racialized other of the Muck.

The Muck's reaction to Janie's acquittal and later forgiveness for Tea Cake's death solidifies the main theme of Hurston's narrative. Throughout the entire story, Janie is forced to navigate such communities—North Florida, Eatonville, and the Muck—with each having its own sense of normalcy, identity, and expectations of Janie. Hurston's novel seeks to explicate the intricacy of these individual communities as autonomous entities that have agency themselves despite the ever-present threat of Jim Crowism. In many ways, these communities represent the American Dream achieved. In so doing, they also embody the inherent dualism between liberty (the individual) and democracy (the community) at the center of the Dream narrative. Janie's search for the Horizon, her American Dream, occurs within these communities, and results in her having fully realized a sense of agency despite them. The path to this Dream is overshadowed by three male versions of the Dream that encompass a public desire for domestic idealism founded in expected roles that position Janie as feminine and thus submissive, and the men she marries as masculine and dominant. Even Nanny's version of the Dream is rooted in public perceptions of respectability—she being directly linked to Logan's assertion of his American Dream. However, as an epic narrative, Janie does achieve her Dream—agency and autonomy.

Janie's first experience of individual autonomy occurs as a young girl living in North Florida with her grandmother, Nanny. Freshly aware of her awaking body and individuality, she is attuned to the sensual in nature and the natural world. Her independence from her grandmother's world begins to take shape on a warm Florida spring afternoon. Her "conscious life" having "commenced at Nanny's gate," she awakes to the possibilities and limitations placed

on her by others.<sup>58</sup> Through the “blossoming pear tree in the back-yard,” Janie becomes aware of life, love, and of her own ideas of an organic union with another. She becomes conscious of her physical, sensual, and spiritual self. She watches as the tree turns from “brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom.” Stretched out on her back beneath the pear tree under the “gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze,” she sees “a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom” as “the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace.” Her conclusion: “So this was a marriage!”<sup>59</sup> The pear tree, bloom, and bee serve as organic metaphors for the increasingly aware young Janie. Aware of herself, like the tree, she is coming into bloom. In search of meaning and this connection, Janie aches with anticipation: “Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world!” Desiring this union, and to have her individuality met on her own newly realized terms, she searches the limits of Nanny’s property to no avail, until finally she comes to the front gate, “Waiting for the world to be made.” What she finds is Johnny Taylor.

The kissing of Johnny Taylor, a tall, lean and shiftless boy, is Janie’s first step as an autonomous person who acts with a sense of agency. A “glorious being,” he is the answer to Janie’s quest for the organic union she witnessed between the bee and the flower. Though this union—the kiss—is merely an adolescent attempt to realize the burgeoning desires of youth, it does mark the journey towards individuality through a series of relationships in her quest for the ideals brought forth under the pear tree. Scholars have wrestled with Hurston’s use of these relationships in Janie’s growth and development, but they are directly in-line with what the young Janie defines as an ideal existence—conflating her own sense of self and desire, with the union between two natural entities. Janie develops this connection through her individually

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<sup>58</sup> Hurston, 10.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

realized sense of agency. Her difficulty derives from the expectations of the men and their communities—both clearly defined by their conception of the American Dream and Janie’s place in it.

Immediately after her awakening of desire, Janie is snapped back into the world of Nanny. The old woman, half asleep, hearing Janie’s soft whisper mixed with a male voice, “bolted upright and peered out of the window and saw Johnny Taylor lacerating her Janie with a kiss.”<sup>60</sup> Ending Janie’s “dream,” she calls the young girl into her house and declares, “Janie, youse uh ‘oman, now.” The next step in Nanny’s worldview is, “Ah wants to see you married right away.” Janie sees then “the end of her childhood,” and the beginning of society’s forced expectation of normalcy. Nanny’s desiring Janie to marry is the first of three American Dreams threatening to circumscribe her. Dispelling the beauty of her first moment of agency, Nanny asserts, “Ah don’t want no trashy nigger, no breath-and-britches, like Johnny Taylor usin’ yo’body to wipe his foots on,” makes the moment “seem like a manure pile after a rain.”<sup>61</sup> No longer able to protect the little girl from herself and the impending forces of nature, Nanny can only find safety and security in transferring Janie from the confines of her home to that of a legitimate marriage—the home of another. Under the guise of “protection,” Nanny insists that Janie marry Logan Killicks. Recognizing her own impending mortality, Nanny observes, “One mornin’ soon, now, de angel wid de sword is gointuh stop by here.” Nanny forces Janie to accept, “my head is ole and tilted towards des grave. Neither can you stand alone by yor’self.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Hurston, 12.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 15.

Despite believing that Logan Killicks looks “like some ole skullhead in de grave yard,” Janie marries him to appease her Nanny.<sup>63</sup>

Nanny’s Dream is that Janie’s marriage to Logan Killicks and his sixty acres of farmland will provide legitimacy, keeping the young girl from being used as “a mule uh de world.”<sup>64</sup> Trying to break the cycle of degradation that began with her own rape and then the rape of her daughter Leafy by the white schoolmaster, Nanny sees marriage as the only real means through which Janie will be able to avoid their fate. Nanny’s and Logan’s traditional expectations of gendered domestic roles supersede Janie’s desire for an organic union with another and the metaphor pear tree. Nanny tells a despondent Janie, who, after waiting for love to begin, seeks the old woman’s advice: “If you don’t want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo’parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road.”<sup>65</sup> A classic “traditional” American Dream, property and possession, to Nanny, are the only real means for legitimacy and success.

Logan Killicks is the epitome of the Jeffersonian Rugged Individualist Agrarian Dream. Believing himself “too honest and hard-workin’,” he expects Janie to fulfill his notions of what she should do and ought to be.<sup>66</sup> Exasperated that she, “don’t take a bit of interest in dis place,” Logan informs Janie, “You ain’t got no particular place. It’s wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick.”<sup>67</sup> Where he “needs” her is both in the kitchen and around the farm. He expects Janie to cut potatoes, shovel manure, and ultimately, to handle a plow like his previous wife. Nanny defines legitimate existence for Janie, and so too does Logan Killicks. He

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<sup>63</sup> Hurston, 13.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

aims for her to be working in the fields with him and not out searching amongst the “words of the trees and the wind” for her sense of self. Looking “up the road towards way off” after realizing that her “first dream was dead,” Janie waits. What she finds is Joe Stark walking up the path one day, an individual embodying everything Nanny and Logan Killicks have warned her against.

Janie’s relationship and marriage to Joe “Jody” Starks comprises much of her life. For twenty years, she endures being “classed off.”<sup>68</sup> Becoming a “big voice” and a commercial success and social power in accord with the expectations of the men and women in Eatonville forces Janie into a rigid “trophy” wife status. Her voice denied and individuality defined by others, she, like the stock in Joe’s store, sits on a shelf.

When Joe first enters Janie’s life, he “spoke for the far horizon.”<sup>69</sup> She sitting in the barn cutting up Logan’s seed taters, she spots, a “citified, stylish dressed man with his hat set at angle that didn’t belong in these parts.”<sup>70</sup> Joe Starks, “from in and through Georgy,” hears about this all-“colored folks” town in Florida, and “he meant to get dere whilst de town wuz yet a baby.”<sup>71</sup> It had always “been his wish and desire to be a big voice,” and this town would provide him the opportunity. In his estimation, Janie “ain’t got no mo’business wid uh plow than uh hog is got wid uh holiday!” He believes, “A preddy doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self and eat p’taters dat other folks plant just special for you.”<sup>72</sup> And to this belief he is faithful until his death; however, his belief also forced Janie to accept his American Dream—the good life for him and isolation from the community for her—and so after “the spirit

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<sup>68</sup> Hurston, 112.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor,” Janie “pressed her teeth together and learned to hush.”<sup>73</sup> In the course of the twenty years and even beyond, others exterior to herself define her role: Joe, the men of Eatonville, and the women of Eatonville.

Florida in the 1930s serves as an active geographical location for Hurston’s American Dream narrative. Even in spite of the real-estate bust of 1926, the “Land of Sunshine,” “The Dream State,” remained a land of possibility owing to its warmth and relatively undeveloped land. Mark Derr notes, “many came from broken areas to seek a new start where, at least, it was warm.”<sup>74</sup> Despite Florida’s leading the nation in lynching between the wars and its systems of peonage—forced labor—the State had a fairly mobile African American population.<sup>75</sup> Morris and Dunn, in “Flora and Fauna in Hurston’s Novels,” characterize Hurston’s relationship with Florida: “Hurston knew virtually all parts of her home state, for she had traveled the length and breadth of it gathering folktales and working in various capacities.”<sup>76</sup> At the center of her travels was her hometown of Eatonville. Among the earliest incorporated “all black” municipalities, it was the locus for much of Hurston’s work. As she relates in *Dust Track on the Road*, “I was born in a Negro town. . . . Eatonville, Florida, is, and was. . . a pure negro town—charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all.”<sup>77</sup> In this autonomy, Hurston seizes the opportunity to explore the intricacies of Black life during the period. However, instead of romanticizing the town, she

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<sup>73</sup> Hurston, 71.

<sup>74</sup> Mark Derr, *Some Kind of Paradise: A Chronicle of Man and the Land in Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 313.

<sup>75</sup> See Michael Gannon, *Florida: A Short History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 86.

<sup>76</sup> Ann R. Morris and Margaret M. Dunn, “Flora and Fauna in Hurston’s Florida Novels,” in *Zora in Florida*, ed. Steve Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991), 2.

<sup>77</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1942), 2.



presented it as it was: “It [*Their Eyes Were Watching God*] is both her most accomplished work of art and the authentic, fictional representation of Eatonville.”<sup>78</sup>

This “authenticity” is Hurston’s avoidance of overly romantic and noble characters meant to champion the causes of the race. Delia Caparoso Konzett observes that Hurston wrote, “counternarratives, depicting the lives and communities of African Americans and their various reshaping of the country’s cultural and social terrain.”<sup>79</sup> Though Hurston was initially castigated by the likes of Locke and Wright for what they thought was her use of racial stereotypes—such as the mammy, sambo, coon, etc.—in reality, as anthropologist and writer, she attempted to capture the town’s personality, its own narrative of itself, by presenting dueling choruses: the community of men and the community of women. When Janie and Joe enter Eatonville, and again when Janie returns to Eatonville, as well as during Janie’s time in the town, the two communities come to life as Hurston demonstrates “her recognition and celebration of the quality of black communal life.”<sup>80</sup> However, this celebration should not be read as some hyperbolically ideal notion of Black solidarity, as is evidence by Janie’s outsider status in the community and the denial of her Dream—the horizon.

When Joe and Janie enter Eatonville, they immediately become the center of the town’s conversation and interest. Joe, in his belief that the town was “bound to need somebody like him,” asserts his “big voice” upon realizing that the town, “’tain’t nothing but a raw place in de woods.”<sup>81</sup> Informing Amos Hicks and Janie at the same time, Joe asserts: “Ah’m buyin’ in here,

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<sup>78</sup> Hemenway, 233 and 234.

<sup>79</sup> Delia Caparoso Konzett, *Ethnic Modernism: Anzia Yezierska, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Dislocation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 69.

<sup>80</sup> David Headon, “Hurston’s Critics Misrepresent Her Politics,” in *Social Issues in Literature: Women’s Issues in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God**, ed. Gary Wiener (New York: Greenhaven Press, 2012), 49.

<sup>81</sup> Hurston, 34.

and buyin' in big.”<sup>82</sup> After renting the biggest house in town, Joe starts a series of meetings with the town’s men to begin realizing his dream of making himself an important man and Eatonville a proper town. Consistent with the foundational characteristics of the American Dream, the first thing Joe does is purchase more land to add to the town’s boundaries. Though the idea seems “funny” to the town’s men, within days Joe, brings to the town more land, a store, a post office, a mayorship—to which he is elected—and a street light, all under his leadership. Through Joe’s, and Janie’s, position in the town, Hurston brings to life the two communities. As mayor, and arguably the most powerful person in the town, Joe is both admired and disdained for all that he possesses, including Janie. Hurston writes, “There was no doubt that the town respected him and even admired him in a way. But any man who walks in the way of power and property is bound to meet hate.”<sup>83</sup> She goes onto relate, “There was something about Joe Starks that cowed the town . . . Something else made men give way before him. He had a bow-down command in his face, and every step he took made the thing more tangible.”<sup>84</sup> In this and his rising status, Janie soon realizes, as wife of the mayor, “she slept with authority and so she was part of it in the town mind.”<sup>85</sup>

Though the men in the town admire Joe for his achievements, their jealousy and envy isn’t far behind. In her status as the mayor’s wife, so, too, is she the envy of the women who see her as existing above them. Money, property, and status aside, Janie’s position in the town serves as a common point of envy and disdain. The men envied Joe’s possession of Janie. To them, she is the greatest prize of all. Her beauty fascinates them. When Janie first arrives Amos Hicks and Lee Coker banter back and forth about how a women like that could be theirs, if they

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<sup>82</sup> Hurston, 35.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 46.

had “money tuh feed pretty women.”<sup>86</sup> Hicks even tries, to no avail, to gain Janie’s interest when Joe is off trying to spur the town to prosperity. Joe forced Janie to wear the head-rag because he caught Walter, “standing behind Janie and brushing the back of his hand back forth across the loose end of her braid.” Jealous to no end, and forceful in his harboring of Janie away from the men, “He never told her how often he had seen the other men figuratively wallowing in it [her hair and beauty] as she went about things in the store.”<sup>87</sup>

In the start of the narrative, Hurston makes quite distinct the degree to which Janie is sexualized and fetishized by the men, and disdained by the women. Returning after having been to the “horizon” and back, they watch and contextualize her into their rigid paradigm of sexual objectification as well as social outcast. The men, “noticed her firm buttocks like she had grapefruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt.”<sup>88</sup> The women in their disdain “took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance.” What the women hope to do is use her appearance as weapon against their perceived sense of her superiority and beauty—“her strength.” As Janie and Joe’s tenure in Eatonville progresses, Janie becomes more and more marginalized to the point of being completely isolated. Early on, she realizes, “she couldn’t get but so close to most of them in spirit.”<sup>89</sup> Joe, as postmaster, mayor, landlord, and most powerful man in town, creates expectations of Janie isolating her from the “porch talk” and the community of women that should have been her refuge. In fact, even the poor mule Joe frees has more agency than Janie.

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<sup>86</sup> Hurston, 36.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

Taking their lead from Joe, the men and women in Eatonville see Janie as fitting a specific role of respectability. Janie is the mayor's wife and, "he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her."<sup>90</sup> She is confined to the context of the store and the position of Joe's wife. Her status is essentially Joe's trophy. She is a curiosity that only he has access to, and the town can admire from afar. When Janie is asked to speak, Joe quickly reminds the town, "mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speak-makin'. Ah never married her for nothing' lak dat. She's uh woman and her pace is in de home."<sup>91</sup> Janie is denied her own thoughts, leaving her nothing to do but follow him, "down the road behind him that night feeling cold." Solidifying this denial of voice, Joe refuses Janie access to the town's greatest passion, "mule talk" on the porch of the store. Fully wanting to participate in the conversation and having good stories of her own, "Joe had forbidden her to indulge."<sup>92</sup> She is even denied the right to attend the town's funeral of Matt's—later Joe's—mule. Both the men and women in the town are acutely aware of Janie's isolation, but rather than seeing Joe as the originator, they view Janie as "classing" herself off. When Janie expresses her discontent to Joe, he has nothing but resentment for her. In his mind, "here he was just pouring honor all over her; building a high chair for her to sit in and overlook the world and she here pouting over it."<sup>93</sup>

Believing, "somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows," Joe continues to isolate Janie and belittle her to alleviate his fear and jealousy.<sup>94</sup> His American Dream is in part predicated on Janie's status as a possession and a symbol of his authority. With her individuality continually denied, Janie bifurcates herself to "an inside and an outside." She

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<sup>90</sup> Hurston, 41.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

realizes that Joe is not the real figure of her dreams, but rather “just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over.”<sup>95</sup> Janie’s path over time is limited to the distance between Janie and Joe’s house and the store—her never a part of the community and expected to act in a specific manner. This is the American Dream to which the town of Eatonville and Joe prescribe and insist Janie conform.

Even after Joe’s death, Eatonville has its expectations of Janie as the former mayor’s wife. Casting a “wall of stone and steel” in Janie’s direction at Joe’s funeral, the town can never possibly understand why Janie would send “her face to Joe’s funeral” and herself, “rollicking with the springtime across the world.”<sup>96</sup> The town expects Janie to maintain the role and status—existence—that Joe forced Janie into. They expect her, like Nanny earlier, to marry an individual that they deem respectable and acceptable according to the model set by Joe. When Janie rejects the undertaker from Orlando in favor of Tea Cake, their only response was to cast aspersions and hope, “she might fall to their level some day.”<sup>97</sup>

Though Tea Cake and later the community on the Muck circumscribe Janie into their notion of what her role should be, it is in her relationship with Tea Cake, and his death, that Janie is able to finally realize her American Dream. Their courtship, despite the fact that it is viewed by the community of Eatonville as merely a means for Tea Cake to take advantage of Janie, serves as a vehicle for Janie to blossom into the very pear tree she has always dreamt of being. Through him Janie is given life outside the store. He teaches her to play checkers, to drive a car, and to fish. On the Muck, she learns how to shoot a gun—becoming a better shot than Tea Cake—and she works side by side with him. She is treated as an equal. True, Tea Cake

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<sup>95</sup> Hurston, 72.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 2.

functions from a paradigm of ideal masculinity and thus directs the community on the Muck to view Janie in the same gendered terms as he does, but he is also the bee to her flower in his earnest desire to make her his partner in all. Missteps such as disappearing and not including Janie in his escapades in Jacksonville and hitting Janie aside, once he realizes she, “aims tuh partake wid everything,” they become equal agents in their negotiation of life together.<sup>98</sup>

Hurston presents Janie’s march to the horizon, her American Dream of individuality, as a process in the form of a quest. The three marriages and the various communities’ attempts to define Janie are merely the points of education and growth needed for Janie to realize her Dream of agency. In truth, Janie’s continuous effort to realize the horizon and never give up on it is the very thing that marks her Dream. In essence, Janie always has her American Dream; she just has to bring it into focus and realize it to the fullest. There’s no doubt Hurston is commenting on the reality of a racialized South, the individuality of various African American communities despite racism, and the limited roles of women in these communities. However, by giving Janie the drive to seek her “good life” even in the midst of circumscribing notions of normalcy, she solidifies the importance of individual action and the need for communal acceptance without restrictions or expectations when the socio-historical narrative is just the opposite. In having Janie kill Tea Cake in order to save her own life, Hurston unequivocally punctuates the importance of the individual in the realization of the American Dream narrative. Janie’s conclusion that “Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons,”<sup>99</sup> brings this individuality back into a self-realized domestic space that exists in a greater community. In so doing, Hurston actively situates the reader in the dueling

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<sup>98</sup> Hurston, 124.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 191.

concerns of liberty and democracy that the American Dream negotiates, and posits Janie and the African American communities that she navigates as models of this engagement.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RAWLINGS' *CROSS CREEK* AND THE DREAM

From Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches journey, to the Hollywood Dream of fame and fortune, the American Dream boils down to the idea of "the Good Life." When James Truslow Adams asserted the American Dream comprises a life that is "better and richer and fuller for every man," he invoked a level of existence that goes beyond material means; "motorcars" and "higher wages" give way to a "social order" where individuals can grow to their fullest "stature" and be "recognized for it." The idea of place, rooted in a geographical location, frames such an existence. Whether it be private property or one's connection to a geopolitical boundary, a sense of place gives permanence to the American Dream and thus allows for "the good life" to materialize. In her literary memoir, *Cross Creek*, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings uses place as both a measure of achievement as well as a physical location for "the good life."

Rawlings' *Cross Creek* is a literary chronicle of her first thirteen years in a rural North Central Florida community. Although the memoir contains twenty-three sketches, most critics view the work as literary rather than autobiographical, for it accounts for more than Rawlings' life on the Creek and her perceptions of its inhabitants. As Gordon Bigelow states in *Frontier Eden*—the first critical treatment of Rawlings—the work "was both narrative in part and essay in part; it contained both light, comic passages and serious, reflective passages; it was realistic, using real names and true events, yet it also had an idyllic cast."<sup>1</sup> Rawlings herself acknowledged: "I have used factual background for most of my tales, and of actual people a

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon E. Bigelow, *Frontier Eden: The Literary Career of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1966), 39.



blend of the true and the imagined.”<sup>2</sup>

Rawlings begins the narrative by positioning the reader in the geography and polity of the locale. Cross Creek was “a bend in a country road, by land, and the flowing Lochloosa Lake into Orange Lake, by water.”<sup>3</sup> Sandwiched between the village of Island Grove and a turpentine still, the Creek contained “five white families”—“Old Boss” Brice, the Glissons, the Mackays and the Bernie Basses—and “two colored families”—Henry Woodward and the Mickenses. Together, the people and the natural characteristics of North Florida served as source material for Rawlings’ evocation of the Dream of the “Good Life.”

In 1928, Rawlings moved to the Florida frontier of Cross Creek from Rochester, New York. With her husband, Charles, Marjorie took a “sea trip” down the eastern seaboard, ending at the mouth of the St. John’s River and culminating with a tour of Florida. After exploring the Florida interior, Marjorie declared: “Let’s sell everything and move South!”<sup>4</sup> She became charmed by the beauty of Florida and enchanted by “native Cracker men hunting, fishing, and cultivating small farms,” as well as “the deeply tanned women washing outdoors in iron kettles over open pinewood fires and sweeping their cabins with homemade brooms.”<sup>5</sup> As Rawlings’ biographer Elizabeth Silverthorne notes, the rivers, lakes, islands, palm trees, live oaks, and fragrant orange groves, combined with the “half-wild remoteness and mystery of the Scrub,” fascinated Rawlings as much as the “simplicity of people’s daily lives.” The literary images of William Bartram and Sidney Lanier came to life for Rawlings. By November 1928, Rawlings purchased 74 acres in a hamlet of Cross Creek. The property included an eight-room farmhouse,

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<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *Cross Creek* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1942), 72.

<sup>3</sup> Rawlings, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Silverthorne, *Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings: Sojourner at Cross Creek* (Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press, 1988), 55.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

a four-room tenant house, a barn, roughly 3,300 orange trees, and nearly 800 pecan trees. For \$9000 Charles and Marjorie had seized the “opportunity they had been waiting for” and acquired an “Enchanted Land.”<sup>6</sup> Silverthorne notes: “For her [Marjorie] the enchantment never wore off from the first moment she saw it [Cross Creek] and fell under the spell of its timeless, natural beauty.”

A world unto itself, Cross Creek featured the isolation Rawlings craved and became a creative force behind much of her writing. In a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, Marjorie indicated she didn’t “understand people like us—and what little I do understand, terrifies me.”<sup>7</sup> Instead, she found solace and source material in “very simple people whose problems are only the most fundamental and primitive ones.” Unable to understand the battling ideologies of the post-World War I era, she found the Florida backwoods “an escape from the confusion of our generation.” Through this escape she discovered a powerful connection between people and place. Indeed, she believed there was a direct connection between human happiness and a sense of place. In the introduction to the selected letters of Rawlings, Bigelow and Monti assert that Rawlings believed places, like people, have a distinct character; individuals are drawn to a given character of place just as they are to the character of a person. The affinity one has to a given place is where a person can find “lasting happiness and fulfillment.”<sup>8</sup> The human spirit finds peace when harmony is achieved within a given place. Likewise, frustration “amounting to a kind of death,” occurs when one lives out of harmony with a given place. Rawlings’ isolated orange grove provided her the very connection she thought important for individual happiness: a connection founded upon “a sense of place.”

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<sup>6</sup> Silverthorne, 56.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon E. Bigelow and Laura V. Monti, *Selected Letters of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1983), 122.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Writing based on one's connection to place has been a constant in American literature since the nineteenth century. The American Transcendentalists, chiefly Thoreau and Emerson, solidified the importance of an individual's link to nature and legitimized such a bond as central to the American identity. Although the post-World War I American literary landscape was marked by the modernism of writers like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner—"The Lost Generation"—Rawlings was more in-line with her Romantic forebears than with her modern contemporaries. Indeed, she wrote about Southern poor whites and African Americans during the Great Depression. During the 1930s and 1940s, however, Bigelow concludes: "Her important writings . . . reflect very little of the prevailing naturalism or social consciousness of those years."<sup>9</sup> Rawlings wrote "with unusual candor and lucidity" about "poor-whites in an exotic semitropical setting," but "without showing them as the victims of corrupt capitalism or as depraved moral degenerates." A writer of the "American Scene" and, though she detested the label, a *regional* writer, Rawlings built upon "a sense of place" as the foundation of her writing.

In the first pages of *Cross Creek*, Rawlings states, "there is of course an affinity between people and places."<sup>10</sup> Biblical in her allusions, Rawlings reminds the reader: "the consciousness of land and water must lie deeper in the core of us than knowledge of our fellow beings." Born first of the earth, and being able to live without mother, father or kin, "We cannot live without the earth or apart from it."<sup>11</sup> In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, Rawlings confirmed her commitment to place: "The sense of knowing a particular place and people with a deep, almost Proustian deepness and intimacy and revelation, with my own feeling about things back of it, is

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<sup>9</sup> Bigelow, *Frontier Eden*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Rawlings, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

what I want.”<sup>12</sup> As Anne Rowe notes: “For Rawlings life at the orange grove at Cross Creek was as close to an idyllic life as is possible on earth. Her Florida of groves, scrub, and rivers was a largely unspoiled paradise.”<sup>13</sup> Though Rawlings quickly reminds the reader of the dangers present in paradise—ants, skunks, snakes, and alligators—she romanticizes the Creek in a rhapsodic nature similar to the American Transcendentalists. Critics from Bigelow to Rowe have characterized Rawlings’ *Cross Creek* as a Florida *Walden*. In her ability to observe and relate the intricacies of the relationship between man and nature, Bigelow notes: “Like Thoreau she felt the life in plants, the spirit of a river or of great storm.”<sup>14</sup> Also like Thoreau, Rawlings was attuned to the seasons and the cycles of life. As Bigelow remarks, she “used a cycle of the seasons as one of the main organizing devices of her own book, *Cross Creek*.”<sup>15</sup> Her description and use of the Creek’s natural elements gives the reader a sense of the intimacy shared between the author and her surroundings. This intimacy with nature informs both her sense of place and the good life derived from it.

When she first stepped foot on the Creek, Marjorie fell into a state of deep ecstasy. Clearly, in the Creek she had found her “home.”<sup>16</sup> According to Bigelow and Monti, “her encounter with the Florida countryside, had many resemblances to a love affair.”<sup>17</sup> For Rawlings, the Creek, grove, and farmhouse created a sense of both fear and warmth. In the first sketch, “For This Is an Enchanted Land,” Rawlings mingles the disparate feelings of a newly-developed affection with profound love when she proclaims: “there was some terror, such as one

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<sup>12</sup> Bigelow and Monti, 195.

<sup>13</sup> Anne E. Rowe, *The Idea of Florida in the American Literary Imagination* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992), 108.

<sup>14</sup> Bigelow, 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 76. It was Maxwell Perkins’ idea to organize the book around the seasons.

<sup>16</sup> Bigelow and Monti, 35.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

feels in the first recognition of a human love, for joining of person to place.” Like the relationships between people, there was “a commitment to shared sorrow, even as to shared joy.”<sup>18</sup> The Creek was not a mere means of escaping the struggles of modernity that marked city life; it provided a “source of spiritual renewal.”<sup>19</sup> While on one hand the Creek provides “a certain remoteness from urban confusion,” it does so while offering “such beauty and grace that once entangled with it, no other place seems possible.”<sup>20</sup> The inhabitants of the Creek need very little, but what they do need remains specific to the place they live—the Creek. Rawlings writes: “We must need flowering and fruit trees . . . a certain blandness of season . . . the sound of rain coming across the hamaca, and the sound of wind in trees.” The Creek provides for each of these needs in its own unique way. As for the inhabitants, Rawlings demonstrates that for those who live there, “Cross Creek suits us—or something about us makes us cling to it contentedly, lovingly and often in exasperation, through the vicissitudes that have driven others away.”

Though Bigelow and Rowe approach Rawlings’ concept of Cross Creek as Eden-like and idyllic—in line with the American pastoral tradition—it is much more. Rawlings goes past traditional views of the pastoral. In *Clear-Cutting Eden: Ecology and the Pastoral in Southern Literature*, Christopher Rieger extends the pastoral metaphor far beyond the confines of earlier periods where the link between the South and nature served as an antebellum retreat and justification for a hierarchal social order. Instead, Rieger’s theory of the “ecopastoral” combines the reemerging significance of the pastoral in Southern literature during the 1930s and 1940s with an increased sense of environmentalism present throughout the twentieth century. The South’s changing economy and society, from agrarian to industrial, resulted in this “ecopastoral”

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<sup>18</sup> Rawlings, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Rowe, 109.

<sup>20</sup> Rawlings, 11.

literature. Such works are “more complex than their predecessors even in their retention of the basic pastoral strategy criticizing present society by a set of purer standards . . . critically interrogating and demythologizing the past.”<sup>21</sup> The works in his study, such as Rawlings’ *Cross Creek*, turn toward the “nature” side of the historical pastoral, elevating it over the propaganda historically present in traditional Southern pastoral narratives. Modern Southern authors, according to Rieger, “reinvent and reinterpret the pastoral literary mode as a way of reconceiving Southerners’ relationship with the natural world.”<sup>22</sup> Such authors “reconfigure the use of nature in their fiction in conjunction with modernist analysis of the self and the South.”<sup>23</sup> Bringing nature to the foreground, such narratives interweave concerns regarding issues of race, class, and gender in Southern culture and the disappearing landscape central to a sense of place.

Rieger categorizes *Cross Creek* as a work of ecopastoralism with its emphasis on individual connection to place—the elemental nature of Cross Creek—and Rawlings’ reconfiguration of pastoral norms. In the combination of her spiritual connection to the landscape and the perceived elemental, timeless abundance therein, Rawlings locates freedom and equality in the wilderness as a natural foundation for modern society. This is the opposite of the historical pastoral norm where social hierarchy is reaffirmed in a bucolic ideal. Referring to it as a pastoral middle ground, Rieger sees *Cross Creek* not as a harmonious blend of culture and nature, but rather as an “ideologically loaded transfer of culture into a rural setting.”<sup>24</sup> Though Rawlings avoids issues concerning race—despite the fact that race is very much present in the work—she does reconfigure traditional expectations of gender. In essence, Rawlings frees

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<sup>21</sup> Christopher Rieger, *Clear-Cutting Eden: Ecology and the Pastoral in Southern Literature* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

“women from the narrow limiting gender roles that are often reproduced in the traditional pastoral context.” In so doing, she retreats from modern civilization, its concerns, and its limitations. This allows Rawlings the opportunity “to grapple with the problematic oppositions of the culture she left behind,” including “those between civilization and wilderness, men and women, and the individual and the community.”<sup>25</sup> These issues underpin her sense of place and help create the framework for her American Dream narrative.

Rawlings creates an ecopastoral specific to the Florida landscape. Florida’s flora, fauna, and subtropical climate all combine to become as much a character in her narrative as the inhabitants. Not a passive landscape, but rather an active agent, Florida, as person/place, lies at the heart of her love affair—the root of her American Dream of the “Good Life.” The natural affinity for place becomes in *Cross Creek* a shared relationship, where the “place” communes with its inhabitants. The individual must, “accept blindly the communion cup of beauty.”<sup>26</sup> Like the relationship between two lovers, “an act of faith is committed.” This faith, engendered by the abundance and enchantment of the landscape, is both real and magical. Its presence is felt directly in the beauty of its individual parts, and by the ominous whole. From a specific magnolia tree to an entire orange grove, and from a creek connecting two lakes to the whole of the St. John’s River, there exists a relationship valuing individual autonomy as well the interconnectedness of the collective whole— much like that of the American Dream itself. Through this connection, one realizes that “Life is vital, and one’s own minute living a torn fragment of the larger cloth.”<sup>27</sup> Rawlings communicates this point best by noting: “It was

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<sup>25</sup> Rieger, 57.

<sup>26</sup> Rawlings, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 47.

important only to keep close enough to the pulse to feel its rhythm, to be comforted by its steadiness.”

Rawlings reflected on such closeness in chapter three, “The Magnolia Tree.” She recognizes the Creek’s elemental nature and her valuing of the individual parts by espousing her affection for a single magnolia tree. Beautiful year round, the tree fulfills Marjorie’s basic spiritual needs. A “tree-top against a patch of sky,”<sup>28</sup> the magnolia provokes a feeling of happiness quenching an “irreducible minimum” fundamental to her being. The magnolia tree embodies the existence of one among many. Perfect in its symmetry despite its environment, it is “one of the few trees that may be allowed to stand in an orange grove,” for as Rawlings notes, “Neither is its development ruthless” nor “achieved at the expense of its neighbors.” When young, the tree is courteous, “waiting for the parents to be done with life before presuming to take it over.”<sup>29</sup> In essence, the magnolia tree is Rawlings’ embodiment of the Dream. It flourishes as an individual while functioning as part of a larger community. Its worth and value is found in the beauty of its own existence—dark polished jade leaves and great white blossoms eight to ten inches across, the perfume of which “is a delirious thing on the spring air”—and the sustenance given to Rawlings.<sup>30</sup> The tree, a fixture in her life at the Creek, was a source of spiritual and emotional nourishment in “lean time[s],” and in her love and commitment, she vowed to protect it “from everything short of lightning.” Through this relationship and the experience garnered from it, Rawlings learned that “magnolias . . . are good things in a grove, breeding and harboring many friendly parasites,” and although her human relationships had left

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<sup>28</sup> Rawlings, 36.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.



her “alone a long time,” the magnolia tree “is still here.”<sup>31</sup> Thus the magnolia fulfills its duty to itself, to Rawlings, and to the greater whole of the orange grove.

The orange grove allows Rawlings to experience viscerally the transition from the outside world of society to the inside world of the Creek. The enchantment of the Creek and her union with it is felt best when entering the orange grove. The “heart of another”—the grove—is encountered as one steps, “out of the bright sunlight into the shade of orange trees.”<sup>32</sup> Here, one walks “under the arched canopy of their jadelike leaves,” witnessing the “long aisles of lichened trunks stretched ahead in a geometric rhythm,” and palpably feeling “the mystery of a seclusion that yet has shafts of light striking through it.” The natural border of the Florida hammock surrounds the grove and gives it dimension.

Rawlings views the relationship between the grove and its human counterpart as symbiotic. The trees exist as themselves and flourish from generation to generation, yet also need care and commitment on the part of its human symbiotes. Ironically, the orange trees were once as foreign to the Florida landscape as its human inhabitants, but centuries of cultivation have made them part of the land’s identity. Rawlings’ grove was part of the original Spanish land grant. The Creek exists at the northern edge of the citrus belt. Rawlings and “Old Boss” maintain fairly substantial groves composed of both new trees—Rawlings planted ten acres of Valencia orange—and well-established trees—remnants of the old Fairbanks groves going back to the original grant. When not decimated by weather or insects, the “golden apples” bring wealth to their owners who, in turn, care for the groves by keeping them trimmed, cleared, and warm. Grove caretakers must fight the cold and fruit flies like lovers fighting for their adored. When temperatures drop below freezing, bonfires are built to keep the trees warm and

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<sup>31</sup> Rawlings, 39.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

maintained through the bitter cold. Young trees are buried in mounds of dirt. The entire community fights the ravages of the cold. In this fight, the bond between the individual and place is solidified. For Rawlings, “There is a healthy challenge in danger and a certain spiritual sustenance comes from fighting it,” thus making for a richer and fuller life.<sup>33</sup> Beyond material gain, the real reward is the presence of the groves as part of the greater whole and the impact they have on the landscape and its inhabitants. The groves exist as an equal entity in their relationship to other inhabitants on the Creek. In spring the orange blossoms give shape to the happiness drawn from this relationship: “For a month or six weeks we shall be giddy by day with them and at night drown in a sea of perfume.”<sup>34</sup> Both the grove and the people thus coexist in the same “Good Life.”

The distinctive features of the Florida landscape in *Cross Creek* are the hammocks and bodies of water surrounding the groves. Both give shape and dimension to the locale and encompass people, plant, and animal alike. The Creek is defined by two lakes and is within a short distance of the St. Johns River—a definitive feature of North Florida. Cross Creek is located within one of Florida’s great hammocks. Hammocks became so central to Rawlings’ perception of Florida that she originally wanted to call her work “Hamaca.” In conceiving the project, she hoped to indicate “the triumphs and defeats that different kinds of men have encountered in this hammock county.”<sup>35</sup> Perfect for a subsistence living, the Hammocks are made of soil that is “dark and rich, made up of centuries of accumulation of hummus from the droppings of leaves.” They are marked by distinct trees—“live oak, the palm, the sweet gum, the ironwood and hickory and magnolia”—all defining the rich land they inhabit. Some low, some

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<sup>33</sup> Rawlings, 344.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 42.

high, some featuring more oaks than palms, hammocks are often near a body of water. Although the piney woods and flatwoods are “more open and therefore more hospitable, in spite of their poorer soil and dryness,” the hammocks shared borders with marsh and swamp, and mark “the great mystery of Florida.” They are, therefore, an elemental feature of Rawlings’ sense of place.

In Florida, water is an ever-present dimension of the landscape, and of Rawlings’ sense of place. Both geography and people are defined by its ubiquity. From the peninsula’s borders of the Atlantic and the Gulf, the land moves inward from beach to hardwood hammock, to dry pinewood forests and back again in reverse order. Amidst these layers are lakes, springs, rivers, and swamps all creating the character and depth that so charmed Rawlings. Indeed, water remains as much a part of her sense of place as the hammocks, trees, and people who live on the Creek. Professing an inability to understand how “one can live without some small place of enchantment to turn to,” Rawlings conveys the joy she gained from the shores of Orange Lake.<sup>36</sup> She begins by giving life to the boundary created by the hammock and lake: “In the lakeside hammock there is a constant stirring in the tree-tops, as though on the stillest days the breathing of the earth is yet audible.” Flowers permeate the senses through each season. From spring’s yellow jessamine, to summer’s red trumpet vines, and winter’s holly berries, Rawlings’ enchanted land always teams with life. Witnessing squirrels, quail, and water birds like the long-legged herons and cranes, Rawlings acquiesces to the idea: “It is impossible to be among the woods animals on their own ground without a feeling of expanding one’s own world, as when any foreign country is visited.”<sup>37</sup> From cypress swamps, to lakes, to rivers, Rawlings’ sense of place and the good life is predicated on the allure created by Florida’s waters.

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<sup>36</sup> Rawlings, 45.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

In one of the final sketches, “Hyacinth Drift,” Rawlings fully realizes the water’s prominence in her notion of place and wellbeing. Feeling a sense of despair and indifference to the love she once had for her beloved Creek, she and her friend Dessie took a river trip from the head of the St. John’s River up through to her home river in Oklawaha. The impetus for the trip was the desire to reconnect to the Creek. Through “hardships that seemed . . . more than one could bear alone,” she had “lost touch with the Creek.”<sup>38</sup> The trip on the St. Johns was a cathartic and instructive journey bringing Rawlings back to the sense of enchantment and love she’d first had for the Creek. She realized that the Creek was home and “that the only nightmare is the masochistic human mind.”<sup>39</sup> Amidst a sea of hyacinths, she came to an understanding: “it was very simple. Like all simple facts, it was necessary to discover it for oneself.”<sup>40</sup>

In describing her realization that the hyacinth blooms move faster in the channel’s current than the surrounding water, she discovered the importance of trusting the natural world for what it has to give. Fishing, camping, and engaging with the diversity of people and elements along the river, Rawlings opened up once again to the beauty her chosen “place” had for her, and emerged with a greater sense of self and acceptance, thus allowing her Dream to bloom as it had before. In essence, “Rawlings uses rivers in her writings,” as Lamar York concludes in his study of her work, “as the chief aspect of place and the chief element of setting.”<sup>41</sup> Rawlings presents the river as having its own personality: “Helping at times, hurting at others . . . seldom made deliberately benevolent or malevolent, the river nevertheless operates as a deciding factor in the

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<sup>38</sup> Rawlings, 354.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 370.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>41</sup> Lamar York, “Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’s Rivers,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 9.2 (Spring 1977): 91-107, 92.

lives of those who live on or near its banks.”<sup>42</sup> In Rawlings’ life and her American Dream, the river provides the necessary elements for constant engagement of her sense of place and the opportunity to rekindle the love affair she has for it. The river coexists with the lakes, the hammocks, the orange groves and the living inhabitants making a microcosm of a social order on the level discussed by James Truslow Adams.

Located in this place—the river, the hammock, the orange groves, the Creek—are a bevy of life forms eliciting admiration from Rawlings. Their connection to the Creek is a model for her sense of place, the Dream, and is a defining feature in her admiration. She must adapt and become a part of the Creek like they have. As observer, she notes: “The matter of adjustment to physical environment is as fascinating as the adjustment of man to man, and as many-sided.”<sup>43</sup> The ability to adapt, grow, learn, and thrive in a locale is an important component in the success of the American Dream. Rawlings recognizes, where others have not, “that much human unhappiness comes from ignoring the primordial relation of man to his background.” In application, she asserts: “Certainly the creatures are sensitive to this.” Like humans, some are happy for change and thrive, others become despondent.

The experiences on the Creek of her dog, a Scotty named Dinghy, and her cat, named Jibs, represent this process. Dinghy hated the Creek. He hated the sun, the people, the open spaces, and the long quiet nights: “From the beginning, he sat on his fat Scotch behind and glowered.” Jib, on the other hand, thrived: “All the generations of urban life were dissolved in a moment, and he prowled the marsh and hammock as though he had known them always.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> York, 96.

<sup>43</sup> Rawlings, 39.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 40.

Before long Dinghy was sent to the city, but old Jib remained. In the same manner, Rawlings sent her husband and his brothers back to the city, while she stayed, and thrived in her Dream.

She adapted to Creek life, to the ants, snakes, fowl, and animals. She became an intricate part of their existence as much as they became part of hers, despite her gender. Though not always in complete harmony, she saw them as part of her place and therefore became elemental to her American Dream of the “Good Life.” In the chapter “Toady-frogs, Lizards, Antses, and Varmints,” Rawlings admits her limited knowledge of the Creek’s non-human inhabitants. However, she admonishes herself to remember: “I have learned enough, however, in years of enforced intimacy, to turn them from aliens into friends, or at least into bowing acquaintances.”<sup>45</sup> The aliens turned acquaintances were the many species of snake on the Creek. When she first came to Cross Creek, her fear of snakes was so great, “that a picture of one in the dictionary gave me [sic] what Martha calls ‘the all-overs.’”<sup>46</sup> In the sketch “The Ancient Enmity,” Rawlings unveils the process in which she and the snakes came to a state of respectful coexistence—a social order of sorts. At the invitation of her friend, Ross Allen, a Florida herpetologist, she went on a rattlesnake hunt in the Everglades. Determined to face her fears, she ripped at “the veil of panic” that stood between her and the facts.<sup>47</sup> Through Ross’ guidance, education, and easiness with the snakes, she was able to return to the Creek and “watch the coming and goings of various reptiles with conjectures as to their habits and to consider them as personalities.”<sup>48</sup> Rather than agents of paralyzing fear, they became fascinating points of interest and an integral aspect of life on the Creek.

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<sup>45</sup> Rawlings, 152.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 184.

Among the friends were the ubiquitous frogs. On many moonlit nights intoxicated with the scent of orange blossoms, she wept at the tenor of their symphony. In their chorus, “The frog Philharmonic of the Florida lakes and marshes is unendurable in its sweetness.” As beautiful as they sound, certain species are just as beautiful to see. Martha’s “rain-frogs,” inch long, “animated pieces of pale green enamel,” are “a jewel-like perfection.”<sup>49</sup> Like Rawlings, they choose their setting. From Spider Lily leaves to the blooms of Amaryllis and Allamanda blossoms, they take residence in “apartments suitable to reincarnated Chinese emperors.” And like Rawlings and the Creek, there exists between frog and bloom “a mystic affinity.”<sup>50</sup> In their distant cousin, the jumping frog, Rawlings finds an epicurean delight. From her friend, Fred Tompkins, she learned to hypnotize the future delicacy with a flashlight while scampering about the lake in the moonlight. Though skinning them herself proved too sickening a task, their position on Northern tables have been “a boon to the otherwise unemployed of the Creek and village.”<sup>51</sup>

From frogs to “varmint,” be they possum, skunk, or a semi-domesticated raccoon, each is a part of the Creek and the natural world that marks Rawlings’ affinity for this place. Combined with the remoteness inherent in the Florida landscape, the fauna provided a purposeful alternative to the urban existence she sought to escape. They exist as characters and members of the greater order that made possible the good life Rawlings imagined and brought into existence.

In the process of defining the natural social order of her sense of place, Rawlings also brings to life the human inhabitants who form the community on which the Creek revolves. They serve as examples of the American Dream made good, even when their existence is barely

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<sup>49</sup> Rawlings, 153.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 155.

above the level of destitute. Unique in both their identity and connection to the Creek and Rawlings, they “have chosen a deliberate isolation, and are enamored of it.”<sup>52</sup> They are the “Crackers” who served as source material for much of her writing.

Florida Crackers, typically poor whites who migrated from Georgia and South Carolina after the Civil War, provided Rawlings “a subject matter which appealed powerfully to her imagination and allowed her romantic sensibilities fullest exercise.”<sup>53</sup> Like her, they drew their conclusion about the world from their “intimate knowledge of one small portion of it.”<sup>54</sup> Through them and her attempts to live like them, she experienced the classic Jeffersonian Rugged Individualist American Dream of subsistence living. As Bigelow argues: “Her symbolic landscape was, in general, north central Florida, and her idealized husbandman was, in general, the cracker.”<sup>55</sup> In the Crackers and their life on the Creek, “She had the sense that she was watching the American frontier past somehow come to life.”<sup>56</sup> In them, Rawlings could, “step out of the modern world, back in time, back to the frontier childhood of the American people, back to the way life was before machines, before things got complicated and mixed up,” to a time “when a man could enclose the basic facts of his life with his own mind and confront them with his own strength and skill.” It is this American Dream that Rawlings lives and which she chronicles in *Cross Creek*.

Extreme poverty marked life on the Creek for most of the inhabitants, both white and African American. With the exception of Rawlings and Old Boss—and even they had times of being steps from starvation—the other families existed on what they could glean from the

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<sup>52</sup> Rawlings, 10.

<sup>53</sup> Bigelow, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Rawlings, 372.

<sup>55</sup> Bigelow, 121.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.



Creek's natural offerings and what little work grove life provided. The frontier existence that comprised Cracker life on the Creek was rooted in individual effort and communal understanding. Steven Mizrach describes the Cracker existence: "Cracker homesteaders subsisted off the land, feeding themselves and their families with their small plots, sometimes supplementing their way of life with occasional fishing or a trip into town."<sup>57</sup> Like Jefferson's conception of the American Dream, each individual accounts for his or her own success and failures on the Creek while the larger community provides assistance when most needed, though on the whole leaving each other alone. The community exists in a common social order that values individual autonomy yet professes an equality of love for Creek life and a willingness to help those who are of a similar disposition. Those who live on the Creek have sought the remoteness that it provides. Isolation and exclusion mark their Dream of the Good Life. As Mizrach notes, "Crackers valued their autonomy over all else, and were constantly afraid of changes that would infringe on their cherished, if difficult way of life." Very few people are suited for Creek life, and those who are, have little room for outsiders. There exists in them something that causes each to "cling to it contentedly, lovingly and often in exasperation," while others have been driven away.<sup>58</sup> She believed that this Cracker Dream was rapidly becoming a forgotten dream.<sup>59</sup>

The forgotten dream begins with Martha's professed belief that "Ain't nobody never gone cold-out hungry here."<sup>60</sup> Those who were willing, managed to continue in one way or another. And as "the old black woman" said, "All the folks here ahead o'you has fit cold and

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<sup>57</sup> Qtd in Alison Graham-Bertolini, "Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and the Reckoning of Ideology," *The Southern Quarterly* 43.1 (Fall 2005): 49-62, 49.

<sup>58</sup> Rawlings, 10.

<sup>59</sup> The 1930s marked a massive decline of the agrarian dream.

<sup>60</sup> Rawlings, 29.

wind and dry weather, but ain't nary one of 'em had goed hungry." The Creek's abundance of orange groves and rich fertile land made some measure of subsistence living possible. Rawlings like her fellow inhabitants, realizes that all she had to do is "hold tight to the earth itself and its abundance."

The abundance not only provided a cash crop, but raw material for one's existence. In "Our Dailey Bread," Rawlings outlines some of the culinary delights possible from the resources available on the Creek. Initially she found it challenging to adapt her already honed cooking skills to the new foods, yet she "learned more about cookery in my [*sic*] years at the Creek than in those that preceded them," asserting that "some of my best dishes are entirely native and local."<sup>61</sup> From rattlesnake to variations of "bread"—baked wheat loaf, cornbread, cornpone, yeast bread, and hush-puppies—she brought to life the abundance given from her beloved sense of place. Native to Florida is the delicate "hearts of palm," or as those on the Creek called it, "swamp cabbage." Parboiled, then thinly sliced and cooked with butter until tender and dry, then moistened and heated with heavy cream, "it melts in your mouth."<sup>62</sup> Greens cooked in white bacon were a ubiquitous staple. In addition to the oranges, there bloomed "guava bushes along almost every fence row."<sup>63</sup> Two types of jellies, roselle and may-haw, were a regular fixture on the Creek. The most exotic dishes prepared at the Creek were the meats. Alligator steaks, hard-shell cooter turtles, and seafood ranging from crab to frog-legs provided a constant source of protein. Added to this mix were regular game meats like bear, deer, and fowl. In each, the Creek upholds its end of the love affair that existed between person and place.

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<sup>61</sup> Rawlings, 217.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

For the other families on the Creek, the love affair was more practical than literary. Although they chose the Creek existence, for most, the realities of poverty were ever present. Noting how “Their houses reflect their fortunes,”<sup>64</sup> Rawlings acknowledges that the battle for the good life is not equally had by all. She writes: “One or two have gone ahead, some hold precariously to the narrow ledge of existence, and others have slipped back, and back, until each day’s subsistence has become a triumph.” Like Rawlings, Old Boss did well. Tom Glisson and his wife embody the Dream of the next generation being better off than the previous. Illiterate, and having been put behind the plow at a young age, Glisson vowed: “my young uns would get a better chance than their daddy.”<sup>65</sup> He and his wife raised hogs, cattle, a small grove, and engage in any profitable venture that came their way. They “fought ill health as well as poverty,” leading Rawlings, using the rhetoric of the American Dream, to conclude: “it is sometimes hard to feel sympathy for what seem offhand less fortunate people, knowing what can be done with courage and hard work and thrift.”<sup>66</sup> However, the desire to climb up in the world in the traditional sense isn’t for all on the Creek. The Townsends, though quite destitute, found a greater joy in fishing despite Rawlings’ attempts to bring them into prosperity.

In sketches such as “The Pound Party,” Rawlings demonstrates the dialectic between individual autonomy and the communal social order necessary for the Dream. Freshly installed at the Creek, she accepted an invitation to the Townsends’ for what they labeled as a *pound party*. Initially believing this to be a social gesture including the whole community, she arrives with a double batch of her best cake, only to realize she was the sole guest. The entire evening had been built on her “innocent acceptance” of the invitation. Rawlings would later conclude the

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<sup>64</sup> Rawlings, 18.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 22 and 23.

invitation was out of the ordinary for life on the Creek. Those living on the Creek “pay no attention to a new comer.”<sup>67</sup> Eventually, after residing on the Creek long enough, one’s path “crosses that of the other inhabitants and friendship or enmity or mere tolerance sets in.” The Townsends, described as a community onto themselves—mother, father, and countless children—recognized the possibility of profiting from their new neighbor, though not in a malicious way, but pragmatically. Although she describes the relationship with them as being that of a friendship, she later acknowledges her gullibility in accepting the invitation and trying to change the condition of their existence.

Their state of poverty was made quite clear at the pound party. Hungry eyes followed the meager meal of crackers and peanut butter; the cake devoured with nary a crumb left. In future visits Rawlings set it as her task to bring a greater degree of food than her required share. Throughout the course of their interactions she sought to get them educated and properly dressed for school—going so far as to make their clothing. When it became apparent the children suffered from hookworm, she forced the required cure. In each instance, they accepted graciously, but it became clear to Rawlings that the autonomy of their preferred existence weighed more than her sense of community and prosperity. They took the food graciously. The children attended school long enough to justify the clothes. And Rawlings eventually came to the understanding that for the entire family: “surely it is pleasanter and more profitable to spend one’s time on the lovely lake, dangling a bamboo pole for the bream,” than achieving the better life professed by the American Dream.<sup>68</sup> For the Townsends the “Good Life” was not in

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<sup>67</sup> Rawlings, 48.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

prosperity, but a “precarious living fishing on Orange Lake.”<sup>69</sup> They valued the autonomy of existence made possible by Creek life.

Though all on the Creek value individual autonomy, life there is marked by the connections to each other. Rawlings’ own connection to her fellow inhabitants demonstrates the importance of one’s place in the communal social order of Cross Creek. In the needs and maintenance of her Jeffersonian Agrarian Dream she provides opportunities for others on the Creek. Such opportunities range from the fruits of established friendships—giving and taking—to the needed labor for house and grove keeping. Rawlings’ relationship with Moe the carpenter embodies the give and take of those who love life on the Creek. In the sketch “My Friend Moe,” Rawlings shapes this connection, giving dimension to the unlikely friendship and their mutual dependence despite individual autonomy. Moe openly proclaims: “Me and her is buddies, see? If her gate falls down, I go and fix it. If I git in a tight for money she help me if she’s got, and if she ain’t got it, she gits it for me.”<sup>70</sup>

This friendship, with “no apparent reason for existence,” is brought to fruition despite the fact that both are “set apart by every circumstance of life.”<sup>71</sup> When Rawlings was at her most desperate—all the hired help gone, an un-milked cow roaming free, and unfed stock to boot—Moe stopped by and set himself and his boys to put all back in order. In another instance, Rawlings was away and a hard freeze threatened her new grove of Valencias. When she returned, the young trees were covered to their tops in dirt. Moe had organized a work crew to protect them. Rawlings believed “Moe followed the fortunes of my grove as closely as if it had

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<sup>69</sup> Rawlings, 53.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 116.

been his own.”<sup>72</sup> In return, Rawlings saw to it he was hired for building projects, like the additions to her house. When Moe’s daughter Mary was near death, Rawlings delayed her trip to New York, hurried to the child’s side, and drove to Ocala to arrange for a doctor. Though he died early from, “years of improper food and over-work, of anxiety over the future of his family,” Moe held up his belief in friendship: “We stick together. You got to stick to the bridge that carries you across.”<sup>73</sup> And, in him Rawlings found a “warm tenderness,” that went beyond the admiration “of something in each other that might pass for courage.”

Rawlings’ continued efforts to find a grove man, housemaid, and manual labor for the ever-present tasks of her agrarian existence created a means for others to partake in the Creek’s bounty, especially the African American inhabitants. Though providing the opportunity to work and finding suitable help was a constant source of frustration that revealed her more racist views, her approach was equal in its desire to provide the “good life” for others.<sup>74</sup> Her most useful and constant helpmate was Martha Mickens. In Martha, Rawlings found a “natural aristocrat” and a steady source of support.<sup>75</sup> Martha extolled her learned wisdom from decades of being on the Creek and filled in at the times when Rawlings’s hired help failed her. Though Rawlings categorized Martha according to her race, there was an equality of exchange in their interactions. Martha had “her own standards of payment for services rendered,” and “she accepts nothing from those too poor to pay.” When Rawlings herself was in lean times, Martha accepted the small sum that could be afforded, and when fortunes turned, Martha accepted “the over-pay with equal understanding.” In the most difficult times at the Creek, it was Martha, “who drew aside a

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<sup>72</sup> Rawlings, 124.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>74</sup> Many of the sources cited address Rawlings’ views on race, specifically African Americans. For a more thorough treatment, see Carolyn M. Jones, “Race and the Rural In Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’s *Cross Creek*,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 57.2 (Spring 2004): 215-230.

<sup>75</sup> Rawlings, 33.

curtain” and led Rawlings “in to the company of all those who had loved the Creek and been tormented by it.”<sup>76</sup>

The steadiness that Martha provided offset the uncertainty and despair Rawlings faced over finding a housemaid and a grove man. At picking time, migrant workers could be had easily, and paid a higher than average wage. However, finding suitable help that met the needs of both her inside good life and outside good life, proved difficult. Rawlings’ description of meeting such needs is filled both with a desire for comradeship and an underlying racism. For a grove man she had the easiest of parameters: “a good man on the place” was someone who did his work, was attentive, and not lazy or quarrelsome.<sup>77</sup> The problem was finding one who fit the bill and was willing to do the work. Rawlings principally hired African Americans, despite there being, “resentment in the village at my [*sic*] using Negro help.”<sup>78</sup> Her experience with Lum and Ida proved, “It is impossible to make a servant of any southern white,” and that a “white country woman would be much more of guest than a maid.”<sup>79</sup> Ida was unsuited for the work, and Lum refused to step up to the work, protesting: “They aint no time for a feller jest to set and rest and think.”<sup>80</sup> Therefore, with the one exception, she only hired African Americans—“negroes.”

Grove men came and went, as did the housemaids, but in the women she brought in, Rawlings had a higher degree of emotional investment. In “Dark Shadows” she speaks of “The long line of Negroes” that had “come and gone like a string of exploding firecrackers, each one arriving on the smoking heels of another and departing as violently.”<sup>81</sup> All were taken away by “insanity, mad love affairs, delirious drunkenness and shooting.” In each housemaid—Georgia,

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<sup>76</sup> Rawlings, 27.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

Patsy, Geechee, Ardena, Kate, and even Martha—Rawlings sought a servant who accounted for both her physical and emotional needs. In “Catching One Young” she outlines her experience of following the practice of taking “over a very young Negro girl and train[ing] her.”<sup>82</sup> Several of Rawlings’ friends indicated that this was “the surest way to keep a maid at the Creek.” However, it turned out a greater failure than Rawlings had expected. In the girl Georgia, whom Rawlings bought for five dollars from the child’s father, Rawlings learned “the futility of taking a child and expecting result any sooner than seven or eight years.”<sup>83</sup> In Patsy, Rawlings failed because they “had too good a time together.” Geechee was tangled in a love affair with an ex-convict, and suffered from alcoholism. Ardena was “man crazy.” Kate and her husband Raymond ended up in a sordid affair involving another man. Yet, despite these problems, Rawlings continued to employ, train, and dispatch various individuals. She paid higher than most, knowing she likewise expected more than others. As with other relationships on the Creek, Rawlings proved a fair provider to the existence of others seeking to live the “Good Life.”

Like Hurston, Rawlings attempted to account for a way of life that was disappearing. To her, the subsistence living of Creek life created the necessary conditions for the intimacy inherent between individuals and a sense of place. As Lillios notes, “Rawlings sees the destiny of her Cracker characters intertwined with the power of nature.”<sup>84</sup> However, Creek life is neither purely Thoreau-like spiritualism, nor the absolute pragmatism of the yeoman farmer. In Rawlings’ evocation, subsistence living on the Creek is given spiritual dimension in the sense of place that comes from the love affair she believes to be central to individual happiness, but it is balanced against the realities of living where one depends on the resources of a given locale and

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<sup>82</sup> Rawlings, 85.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>84</sup> Anna Lillios, *Crossing the Creek: The Literary Friendship of Zora Neale Hurston and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 77.



the uniqueness of it. Despite all, Creek life is a choice. Those who choose to live on the Creek exist in a sort of vacuum isolating themselves from the effects of the Great Depression and the dueling ideologies of communal socialism and individual capitalism—as indeed, Rawlings herself wished to avoid such confrontations. This is not to say that life on the Creek was a panacea or some sort of utopia, but rather an opportunity for the individual to assume greater control of their destiny rather than the determinism of socio-political ideologies. Rawlings neither calls for pure libertarianism, nor the communalism believed to be part of the socialist agenda. Her American Dream of the “Good Life” is a multidimensional model unseating gendered norms, and given shape by the sense of place that is the Creek, thus balancing the conflicting American creedal ideals of liberty and democracy.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

Since the earliest settlers, the American Dream has remained a distinct ideal in the structural framework of the American community. In combining the creedal values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness with a social order valuing liberty and democracy, the founding generation gave permanence to the Puritan concepts of “hope and possibility” within the shining “City Upon the Hill” and an outlet for all to accomplish the Dream. Franklin’s moral prescription for achieving the American Dream of the “Good Life”—education, work, thrift, dedication, and a dash of good fortune—melds with Jefferson’s personal success in the Rugged Individualist Agrarian Dream. Despite this paradox, Hamilton’s “theater of perpetual conflict” is held in check by a social order valuing collective concerns leading to individual success. As both Cullen and Jillson conclude, the American Dream ameliorates this inherent conflict between the individual and the community. The arc of U.S. history, and the ongoing project of the American identity, reflects the omnipresence of the Dream as an active force buffering these conflicting values.

American literature specifically accounts for this process by invoking the Dream’s elements and characteristics to present examples of the Dream made good. Classic American Dreams such as freedom, social inclusion, rags-to-riches, fame, home ownership, and fortune, are born on the pages of authors such as Melville, Thoreau, Poe, Fitzgerald, Albee, and Miller. Like the works in this study, these authors celebrate the Dream’s presence while at the same time questioning its efficacy. Despite the Dream’s existence as an ideal and guiding force, these authors find traditional applications of the Dream wanting and often exclusionary. The literary

works examined herein demonstrate a failure of approach in a social order meant to guarantee individual success. The protagonists in *To Have and Have Not*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Cross Creek* are forced to counter expectations of normalcy concerning the identity politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality in order to achieve the Dream's goal of a good life rooted in domestic happiness. Hemingway, Hurston, and Rawlings construct an American Dream narrative by drawing on such expectations to reveal either the historically inherent flaw in its application or to offer a counter proposal for the Dream's inception and realization.

Hemingway in *To Have and Have Not* sees his Dream locale in Depression-era Key West. All avenues for achieving the Dream are called into question and found to be at best, lacking, and at worst, destructive. Harry Morgan fights to the bitter end. Uncompromising, he rejects the reality of the privation experienced by his fellow Conchs. Although his struggle ultimately leads to his death, Harry risks all for the Dream represented in the domestic: sitting with his wife Marie, listening to Gracie Allen on the radio, and feeling "good." This moment of domestic tranquility distinctly contrasts with the downward spiral marking his subsequent narrative. Though a murderer and rumrunner, and extremely isolated from his community, Morgan is Hemingway's only avenue for the American Dream. Representing various levels of society, the other figures in the novel—the Gordons, MacWalsey, Harrison, and the yacht people—come up short and are depicted as vapid creatures who live insular lives, oblivious to the plight of those like Morgan and indifferent to their own culpability and desperation. Hemingway clearly marks their failure to "measure up" to the American Dream, despite their position as traditional examples of the American Dream made good. Humanized by Marie's love and his own unfaltering commitment to the domestic, Morgan maintains an approach to the Dream that offers the best possible avenue in the novel.

Creating a path for achieving a Dream counter to the expectation of the community in which one exists lies at the heart of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Self-actuated agency and autonomy mark Janie's path to the horizon. From the budding pear tree of her adolescence, to the reflective maturity present in her return to Eatonville, Janie reconstitutes the American Dream against three traditional expectations rooted in very distinct and gendered communities. Modeled from the bee and bloom, Janie's youthful Dream of "marriage" gives way to Nanny's pragmatic desire to keep her from becoming a mule of the world. In achieving his life's goal of becoming a leader in the first all-African American incorporated town, Joe Stark isolates Janie to trophy status. "Classed off," she is denied access to the community she so desperately desires, relegated instead to a position of outside-other. In her relationship with Tea Cake, Janie finally finds the organic union first conceived as young girl under the pear tree. Ultimately, however, in her self-defense killing of Tea Cake, she commits the final act of agency—self-preservation. A novel of "Black Affirmation," Hurston takes Janie on an epic journey deconstructing the American Dream from its normal communal expectations, freeing herself to be an autonomous being.

The freedom to be and live as one chooses is found in Rawlings' conception of the "Good Life." Constructing an American Dream among the hammocks, orange groves, lakes, and rivers of Florida, Rawlings' *Cross Creek* invokes a classic frontier Dream while shifting expectations of gender. As frontier hero, she takes center stage displacing feminine and masculine norms in favor of a re-envisioned Dream. A connection between person and place resembling a love affair underscores the subsistence living marking life on the Creek. Together, she, the Crackers, and the natural elements comprise a social order making this Dream possible. They exist in a symbiotic relationship valuing individual autonomy while together, loving the kind of life

provided by the Creek. Though still an individual, each part contributes to the greater whole. From a magnolia tree in an orange grove to the unlikely friendship with Moe, Rawlings' multidimensional Dream balances the conflict caused between liberty and democracy. No one individual claims an ideal Dream; each constructs the good life as they choose. In her Transcendental-like narrative, Rawlings escapes the failures and conflicts of the period to realize an ecopastorial Dream set apart from historically driven Dream narratives.

Each of the works in this study evokes the American Dream while deviating from the expectations of normalcy present in traditional Dream narratives. Taking Florida in the 1930s as their geographical and social foundation, they call into question the viability of the Dream's application. At the heart of their criticism lies the conflict caused between the will of the individual and the community's views of acceptable paths for achieving the Dream. The end result is a Dream that either collapses altogether, or is remade beyond societal norms leaving the individual isolated from the imagined community.

In Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Rawlings' *Cross Creek*, the Dream as foundational narrative fails to account for the individual although the ideals of its existence are predicated on individual want and happiness. Franklin's prescription for success (education, work, thrift, dedication, and a dash of good luck), Hochschild's tenets of the Dream, and James Truslow Adam's better, richer, and fuller life fail to ameliorate the exclusion and isolation of individuals based on their placement within the politics of identity. In each work, the end result is an uncomfortable mix of American Dream idealism and social exclusion leaving the reader questioning the shared values of the Dream.

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Jason M. Gibson received an Associate in Arts degree in Humanities and Music from Seminole Community College in Sanford, Florida. At the University of Florida, he completed a Bachelors of Arts in Music History writing a senior thesis on the African American influences on the music of William Grant Still. As a graduate student at Florida State University he completed a Master's degree in Humanities with an emphasis in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Humanistic traditions. During this time he also completed a graduate certificate in Museum Studies. Prior to entering the doctoral program in Humanities at Florida State University, Mr. Gibson worked as the Teacher and Student Resource Coordinator at the Orlando Museum of Art and served as an adjunct instructor of Humanities at the University of Central Florida. Upon entering doctoral candidacy, Gibson served as the Office Manager and Undergraduate Adviser for the Program in American and Florida Studies at Florida State University. Currently, Jason M. Gibson is a full professor of Humanities and Literature at Florida State College at Jacksonville.