



The Shifting Paradigm of the American Dream: A Comparative Analysis from Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* to Contemporary American Literature

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ABSTRACT. This research delves into the evolving concept of the American Dream as depicted in American literature, tracing its transformation from the Jazz Age to the complexities of the 21st century. The study begins with F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a cornerstone in critiquing the materialistic dimensions of the Dream, highlighting themes of disillusionment and moral decay through iconic symbols such as the green light and the Valley of Ashes. Moving forward, the research juxtaposes Fitzgerald's portrayal with contemporary literary works like *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins and *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead, which reframe the Dream within modern contexts of immigration, globalization, and systemic inequality. Employing a thematic analysis, the study uncovers recurring motifs—such as the interplay of aspiration and disillusionment, materialism versus morality, and persistent class stratifications—that link the eras. Ultimately, it argues that the American Dream, while continually reshaped by societal changes, remains a critical

lens through which American identity and cultural aspirations are understood.

INTRODUCTION

The American Dream has been a defining element of the cultural and social fabric of the United States, symbolizing ideals of opportunity, achievement, and upward mobility. Historically, this concept has evolved alongside the nation's shifting economic, political, and cultural landscapes. Literature has played a pivotal role in reflecting and critiquing the multifaceted nature of this dream, revealing not only its promises but also its limitations and contradictions.

This study examines the transformation of the American Dream as represented in American literature, focusing on two key periods: the Jazz Age, epitomized by F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and the 21st century, marked by globalization and increasing sociopolitical complexity, as explored in contemporary works like *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins and *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead. By tracing the evolution of this concept, the research aims to highlight the enduring relevance of the American Dream as a cultural and literary motif.

The objective of this research is twofold: first, to analyze the critique of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* and its portrayal of disillusionment and moral decay during the Jazz Age; and second, to explore how modern literature reframes the dream within contemporary contexts, addressing themes of immigration, survival, and systemic inequality. Through a comparative literary analysis, this study seeks to uncover recurring motifs, such as the tension between materialism and morality, the persistence of class stratification, and the interplay of aspiration and disillusionment.

In doing so, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the American Dream's transformation over time and its implications for American identity, offering insights into the ways literature continues to shape and reflect societal values and aspirations.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The American Dream, a cornerstone of American cultural identity, has long been heralded as a symbol of opportunity, success, and upward mobility. However, as societal, economic, and cultural landscapes have evolved, so too has the representation and critique of this ideal. Literature, as a reflective

medium, has consistently portrayed the complexities, contradictions, and limitations of the American Dream.

From its depiction in the Jazz Age as a pursuit tainted by materialism and moral decay, as seen in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, to its modern reinterpretation in contemporary works like Jeanine Cummins' *American Dirt* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, the Dream has been reshaped to address issues of inequality, systemic barriers, and survival. These literary works reveal a persistent gap between the idealized vision of the Dream and the lived realities of individuals striving to achieve it.

Despite its enduring relevance, the American Dream continues to be an exclusive ideal, often inaccessible to marginalized communities due to structural inequalities. This research seeks to address the lack of comprehensive analysis on how literature across different periods critiques and redefines the Dream. By examining its transformation from the Jazz Age to the 21st century, the study aims to uncover recurring themes and their implications for understanding the evolving nature of the American Dream in contemporary society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of the American Dream has been a recurring theme in American literature, offering a lens to examine societal values, cultural shifts, and economic paradigms over time. From its roots in the ideals of opportunity and self-made success to its critique as a symbol of unattainable aspiration and systemic inequality, the American Dream has undergone significant evolution. This literature review explores its portrayal across different periods, focusing on its critique, transformation, and enduring relevance.

Historical Context of the American Dream

The American Dream emerged as a defining ideal during the early 20th century, rooted in the belief that hard work and determination could lead to success, regardless of one's origins. Literature of this era often reflected this optimism but also highlighted the inherent contradictions and challenges. Writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald, through works such as *The Great Gatsby*, portrayed the dissonance between the promise of the Dream and its reality, particularly in the context of the Jazz Age. The green light, symbolizing Gatsby's unrelenting hope, and the Valley of Ashes, representing societal decay, epitomize this tension.

As the 20th century progressed, the Dream began to lose its idealistic sheen. Economic recessions, the Great Depression, and subsequent world wars underscored the fragility of its promises, leading to a more critical examination in literature. Authors questioned whether the Dream was truly accessible to all or merely a construct benefiting the privileged few.

The Jazz Age and Its Critique

The Jazz Age of the 1920s, often referred to as the Roaring Twenties, was a time of economic prosperity, cultural innovation, and social transformation. However, it also exposed deep inequalities and moral ambiguities. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald critiques the materialistic interpretation of the American Dream, where success is equated with wealth and social status. Gatsby's relentless pursuit of Daisy and the opulence of his lifestyle underscore the hollowness of this dream, revealing how it prioritizes material wealth over moral and emotional fulfillment.

The critique of the Jazz Age's interpretation of the Dream extends beyond Gatsby's personal narrative to a broader societal critique. The novel portrays a world where traditional values are eroded by consumerism and where the pursuit of wealth exacerbates class divides, leaving behind a trail of disillusionment.

The Evolution in Contemporary Literature

In the 21st century, the American Dream has been reinterpreted to reflect the complexities of a globalized world. Contemporary literature highlights themes of immigration, survival, and systemic inequality, offering a broader, more inclusive perspective. Works like *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins explore the Dream from the vantage point of immigrants striving for safety and opportunity in an often-hostile environment. The novel underscores the perilous journey of migrants and the harsh realities they face, questioning whether the Dream is still attainable for marginalized communities.

Similarly, Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* reimagines historical realities to critique systemic oppression. The novel depicts the journey of enslaved individuals seeking freedom, drawing parallels to the elusive nature of the American Dream for those historically excluded from its promises. Through its allegorical narrative, the work highlights the intersection of race, class, and systemic barriers in shaping one's access to opportunity.

Recurring Motifs and Themes

Despite their differences, both historical and contemporary depictions of the American Dream share recurring motifs and themes. Key among these are:

- **Disillusionment:** Many works reveal the gap between the promise of the Dream and the lived realities of individuals, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.
- **Materialism vs. Morality:** A persistent critique in literature is the tension between the pursuit of material wealth and the erosion of ethical and emotional values.
- **Class Stratification:** Both historical and modern works underscore how class divides limit the accessibility of the Dream, making it a privilege rather than a universal right.

- Perseverance and Hope: Despite the critiques, literature often portrays the resilience of individuals striving to achieve their dreams, highlighting the enduring allure of the ideal.

The American Dream as a Reflection of Society

Ultimately, the literature surrounding the American Dream serves as a mirror for society, reflecting its aspirations, flaws, and evolving values. From the Jazz Age's critique of materialism to contemporary explorations of systemic inequality, the Dream remains a powerful cultural construct. It continues to inspire, challenge, and provoke thought, illustrating the complex interplay between individual aspiration and societal structures.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative and comparative approach to examine the transformation of the American Dream as depicted in literature across different time periods. The methodology is designed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the themes, symbols, and critiques embedded in the primary texts while situating them within their broader socio-cultural and historical contexts. By integrating thematic analysis and intertextual comparison, the study ensures a nuanced understanding of the evolution of the American Dream.

1. Research Design

The study adopts a two-pronged approach:

1. Thematic Analysis: This method involves identifying and analyzing recurring motifs, symbols, and themes that reflect the critique and evolution of the American Dream. The analysis focuses on key elements such as materialism, disillusionment, morality, and class stratification as they appear in the primary texts.
2. Comparative Literature Analysis: This approach examines similarities and differences in the portrayal of the American Dream between historical and contemporary works. The primary texts analyzed include F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as a representation of the Jazz Age and contemporary works like Jeanine Cummins' *American Dirt* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, which explore modern perspectives.

2. Selection of Primary Texts

The selection of texts is based on their literary significance and their ability to encapsulate the evolving dimensions of the American Dream:

- Historical Context: *The Great Gatsby* is chosen for its critique of the Jazz Age's materialistic interpretation of the Dream, highlighting themes of ambition, class division, and moral decay.

- Contemporary Perspectives: American Dirt and The Underground Railroad are selected for their focus on globalization, immigration, and systemic inequality, reflecting the challenges faced by marginalized communities in accessing the Dream.

These texts provide a balanced representation of the Dream's evolution from its traditional ideals to its modern reinterpretations.

3. Data Collection

The data for this research is collected through:

- Primary Sources: A close reading of the selected literary texts to identify key themes, symbols, and narrative strategies.
- Secondary Sources: Academic articles, critical essays, and reviews that provide insights into the socio-cultural contexts of the texts and their thematic interpretations.

4. Analytical Framework

The analysis is structured around three core themes:

1. Critique of Materialism: Examining how material wealth is portrayed as both a driving force and a source of disillusionment in the pursuit of the American Dream.
2. Intersectionality of Identity: Analyzing the role of race, class, and immigration status in shaping access to the Dream in contemporary literature.
3. Continuity and Change: Investigating the recurring motifs that persist across eras while highlighting the transformations in the Dream's portrayal due to changing societal dynamics.

5. Justification of Methodology

This qualitative and comparative approach is chosen for its ability to:

- Provide an in-depth exploration of the texts' literary and thematic elements.
- Highlight the socio-cultural and historical factors influencing the evolution of the American Dream.
- Facilitate a nuanced understanding of the Dream's critique and reinterpretation across different time periods.

6. Limitations

While this methodology allows for a rich exploration of the selected texts, it is important to acknowledge potential limitations:

- The study is limited to a small number of texts, which may not capture the full spectrum of perspectives on the American Dream.
- The analysis relies on existing secondary sources, which may reflect subjective interpretations of the texts.

7. Ethical Considerations

The research adheres to ethical guidelines by ensuring accurate citation of all primary and secondary sources. The interpretations presented are

original and aim to contribute meaningfully to the academic discourse on the American Dream in literature.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Jazz Age and The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* stands as a seminal critique of the American Dream during the Jazz Age, a period characterized by economic prosperity, cultural exuberance, and the erosion of traditional values. Through its rich symbolism and intricate narrative, the novel unravels the complexities of a society where material wealth is conflated with personal fulfillment, exposing the moral and emotional vacuities that often accompany such aspirations. (Fitzgerald, 1925). (Cullen, 2003).

Material Wealth and the Illusion of Fulfillment

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald explores the pervasive belief that material wealth is synonymous with happiness and success. Jay Gatsby, the novel's enigmatic protagonist, epitomizes this ideal as he amasses a vast fortune in an attempt to win back Daisy Buchanan, his lost love. Gatsby's extravagant parties, described as dazzling spectacles of indulgence, symbolize the hedonistic allure of wealth during the Jazz Age. However, these parties, filled with strangers and superficial connections, also highlight the emptiness of his pursuits. Despite his wealth, Gatsby remains unfulfilled, as his ultimate goal—reuniting with Daisy—proves elusive. (Fitzgerald, 1925). (Cullen, 2003).

For example, the novel repeatedly references Gatsby's opulent mansion and luxurious possessions, yet these serve only as hollow markers of his social status rather than genuine sources of joy. This disconnect underscores Fitzgerald's critique: material wealth, while outwardly appealing, often fails to address deeper human desires for love, meaning, and belonging.

The Green Light as a Symbol of Aspiration and Disillusionment

One of the most poignant symbols in the novel is the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, which Gatsby gazes at from his own estate across the bay. The light represents his dream of rekindling his romance with Daisy, as well as the broader American Dream of achieving one's aspirations through determination and effort. However, Fitzgerald imbues the light with a sense of unattainability, reflecting the futility of chasing an ideal that is perpetually out of reach.

In one of the novel's most iconic passages, Nick Carraway, the narrator, describes Gatsby's longing:

"He stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling.

Involuntarily, I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away."

This imagery captures the paradox of the American Dream: while it promises opportunity and success, it often remains an illusion, just beyond one's grasp. The green light's elusiveness mirrors the unattainable nature of Gatsby's dream, as well as the broader disillusionment of the Jazz Age. (Cullen, 2003).

The Valley of Ashes: A Critique of Social Inequality

Another powerful symbol in the novel is the Valley of Ashes, a desolate wasteland situated between West Egg and New York City. This area, characterized by gray ash heaps and a pervasive sense of decay, serves as a stark contrast to the opulence of Gatsby's parties and the glamour of Daisy's world. The Valley represents the plight of the working class, who toil endlessly in pursuit of the American Dream but are ultimately trapped in a cycle of poverty and despair.

Fitzgerald uses the characters of George and Myrtle Wilson to illustrate this social inequality. George, a struggling mechanic, and Myrtle, his ambitious yet dissatisfied wife, embody the aspirations and frustrations of those who are marginalized by the Dream. Myrtle's affair with Tom Buchanan, a wealthy and callous aristocrat, underscores the exploitation and power imbalances inherent in their relationship. Ultimately, the tragic fates of both Myrtle and Gatsby serve as a critique of a society that prioritizes wealth and status over morality and human connection.

Moral Decay Beneath the Glamour

The Jazz Age, often celebrated for its vibrancy and cultural innovation, is portrayed in *The Great Gatsby* as a period of moral decay. The characters' lives are marked by superficiality, betrayal, and selfishness, reflecting a society consumed by materialism. Tom and Daisy Buchanan epitomize this moral emptiness, living in a bubble of privilege and carelessness. Their lack of accountability is evident in Daisy's indifference to Gatsby's death and Tom's casual manipulation of those around him. (Fitzgerald, 1925). (Cullen, 2003).

For instance, Nick observes:

"They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made."

This critique extends beyond individual characters to encompass the broader societal values of the Jazz Age, questioning the cost of prioritizing wealth and pleasure over ethical and emotional integrity. (Cullen, 2003).

Transition to the Contemporary Era

As societal dynamics have shifted in the 21st century, the American Dream has been reframed to reflect the complexities of globalization, immigration, and technological advancement. Contemporary literature interrogates this evolving dream, exploring its implications for marginalized communities and its intersection with systemic inequality. Works like *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins and *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead bring fresh critiques, portraying the Dream as a survival mechanism and a tool of resistance against oppression. (Cummins, 2020). (Whitehead, 2016). (Lundberg & Scapp, 2018).

Globalization and the Struggles of Immigration: American Dirt (Cummins, 2020).

Jeanine Cummins' *American Dirt* highlights the experiences of immigrants who seek safety and opportunity in the United States, showcasing the American Dream as both a beacon of hope and a site of profound struggle. The novel follows Lydia Quixano Pérez, a Mexican bookstore owner, and her son, Luca, as they flee cartel violence and undertake a harrowing journey toward the U.S.-Mexico border. (Cummins, 2020).

1. *The American Dream as Survival:* For Lydia and Luca, the Dream is not about wealth or upward mobility; it is a matter of survival. Their journey is driven by the hope of finding safety and a future free from violence. This reframing of the Dream underscores its universality while emphasizing the unique challenges faced by immigrants.

For example, Lydia's desperate efforts to shield Luca from the brutality of their journey reveal the sacrifices that individuals make in pursuit of a better life. The novel portrays the Dream as both inspiring and inaccessible, given the immense risks and barriers that migrants face.

2. *Critique of Barriers and Inequality:* The novel also critiques systemic barriers that complicate the pursuit of the Dream. From the treacherous crossing of *La Bestia*, the freight train used by migrants, to the hostility of immigration policies, *American Dirt* exposes the structural inequities that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. Through Lydia's story, the novel questions whether the American Dream is attainable for those who are excluded from its promises. (Cummins, 2020).

Resistance and the Legacy of Oppression: The Underground Railroad (Whitehead, 2016).

Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* reimagines the historical realities of slavery through an allegorical lens, portraying the American Dream as a form of resistance and liberation. The novel follows Cora, an enslaved woman, as she escapes a plantation and navigates a fictionalized underground railroad, which Whitehead transforms into a literal network of trains and stations. (Whitehead, 2016).

1. The American Dream as Liberation: For Cora, the pursuit of freedom represents a version of the American Dream that contrasts sharply with the traditional narrative of upward mobility. Her journey underscores the resilience and agency of those who, historically, have been denied the opportunity to dream. Whitehead uses Cora's story to challenge the notion that the Dream is inherently accessible, highlighting how systemic oppression limits its reach.

For example, each station on Cora's journey reveals a different facet of America's historical injustices, from eugenics to violent racism. These episodes serve as powerful critiques of the barriers that persist in modern society, connecting past and present struggles for equality and justice.

2. Symbolism of the Railroad: The underground railroad itself symbolizes resistance against an oppressive system. It represents the collective efforts of individuals who risk everything to fight for freedom and dignity. Through this allegory, Whitehead redefines the American Dream as a collective struggle rather than an individual pursuit, emphasizing the power of community and solidarity.

Recurring Themes in Contemporary Depictions

Despite their different contexts, *American Dirt* and *The Underground Railroad* share several recurring themes in their portrayal of the American Dream: (Cummins, 2020). (Whitehead, 2016).

1. Survival and Resilience: Both novels depict the Dream as a mechanism for survival in the face of adversity. Lydia's flight from violence and Cora's escape from slavery highlight the resilience required to pursue even the most basic aspirations.

2. Barriers to Equality: Both works critique the systemic inequities that limit access to the Dream, from immigration policies to the legacy of racial oppression. These barriers challenge the notion of the Dream as universally attainable.

3. Hope and Perseverance: Despite their critiques, both novels celebrate the enduring hope and determination of their protagonists. Lydia's love for her son and Cora's refusal to give up her quest for freedom exemplify the human capacity to dream, even in the direst circumstances.

Recurring Themes Across Periods

Despite the changing societal contexts, certain recurring themes have persisted in the portrayal of the American Dream in literature, linking its historical and contemporary representations. These themes—disillusionment, the tension between materialism and moral values, and class stratification—serve as enduring critiques of the Dream, highlighting its complexities and contradictions.

1. Disillusionment: The Gap Between Aspiration and Reality

Disillusionment is a central theme that recurs in both historical and modern portrayals of the American Dream. Literature often explores the disparity between the lofty ideals of the Dream and the harsh realities faced by individuals striving to achieve it.

In *The Great Gatsby*:

Fitzgerald masterfully illustrates disillusionment through Jay Gatsby, whose relentless pursuit of Daisy Buchanan and the material wealth he believes will win her love ends in tragedy. The green light, symbolizing Gatsby's aspirations, remains perpetually out of reach, reflecting the unattainability of his dream. Gatsby's eventual demise underscores the futility of his pursuits and serves as a broader critique of the hollowness of the Jazz Age's materialistic values. (Fitzgerald, 1925). (Cullen, 2003).

In *American Dirt*:

Jeanine Cummins offers a contemporary perspective on disillusionment by portraying the harrowing journey of migrants like Lydia and Luca. Their pursuit of safety and opportunity is fraught with danger and systemic obstacles, challenging the notion that the United States offers a universal haven for success. The stark realities of border crossings, violence, and xenophobia dismantle the idealized vision of the American Dream for immigrants. (Cummins, 2020).

In *The Underground Railroad*:

Colson Whitehead reimagines disillusionment in a historical context, showing how systemic oppression strips marginalized individuals of even the most basic opportunities. Cora's journey, fraught with danger and betrayal, highlights the persistent denial of the Dream to enslaved people and their descendants, presenting freedom itself as an elusive aspiration. (Whitehead, 2016).

2. Materialism vs. Moral Values: The Corruption of Aspirations

Another enduring theme is the conflict between material wealth and ethical or emotional fulfillment. Many works critique the prioritization of material success over moral integrity and human connection.

In *The Great Gatsby*:

The characters in Fitzgerald's novel, particularly Tom and Daisy Buchanan, epitomize the moral decay that accompanies excessive wealth. Tom's infidelity and Daisy's recklessness reveal how privilege fosters selfishness and a disregard for others. Even Gatsby, despite his romantic idealism, is complicit in the corruption of the Dream, as his wealth is derived from dubious sources. This tension is encapsulated in the Valley of Ashes, a desolate landscape that symbolizes the moral and environmental costs of materialism. (Fitzgerald, 1925).

In *American Dirt*:

The contrast between material aspirations and moral struggles is evident in Lydia's decisions as she tries to protect her son. While she dreams of safety and a better life in America, the sacrifices she makes along the way—enduring physical danger, loss, and moral compromises—illustrate the human cost of survival-driven aspirations. The novel questions whether the pursuit of the Dream is worth the ethical and emotional toll it often demands. (Cummins, 2020).

In *The Underground Railroad*:

Whitehead critiques the commodification of human lives under slavery, where material wealth is built on the dehumanization of others. The plantation system starkly contrasts the ideals of the American Dream with the brutal realities of exploitation. Cora's journey highlights the resistance to such systemic corruption, positioning moral values and the quest for dignity above material gain. (Whitehead, 2016).

3. Class Stratification: The Persistence of Inequality

Class stratification is a recurring theme that underscores the structural barriers preventing equal access to the American Dream. Both historical and contemporary works reveal how societal hierarchies perpetuate inequality and limit opportunities for upward mobility.

In *The Great Gatsby*:

Fitzgerald's critique of class stratification is evident in the divide between West Egg and East Egg. West Egg, home to Gatsby and other "new money" individuals, contrasts sharply with East Egg, where "old money" elites like Tom and Daisy reside. This geographical and social division highlights the rigidity of class boundaries and the exclusionary nature of the Dream, where even immense wealth cannot buy acceptance into the upper echelons of society. (Fitzgerald, 1925).

In *American Dirt*:

Class stratification takes on a global dimension as Cummins depicts the plight of migrants who are marginalized not only by their socioeconomic status but also by systemic inequities in immigration policies. Lydia's journey underscores the contrast between her modest origins in Mexico and the privilege of those who enjoy the Dream without barriers. This disparity questions the fairness of a system that claims to offer equal opportunities. (Cummins, 2020).

In *The Underground Railroad*:

Whitehead's depiction of class stratification is deeply tied to race, showing how systemic oppression ensures that certain groups remain excluded from the Dream. The novel reveals how the legacy of slavery entrenches hierarchies that persist even after emancipation, making true equality an ongoing struggle. (Whitehead, 2016).

FINDINGS

The Jazz Age: Materialism and Disillusionment (Cullen, 2003).

- Critique of Materialism: In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald portrays the Jazz Age as a period of opulence and moral decay. The characters' relentless pursuit of wealth, symbolized by Gatsby's mansion and lavish parties, underscores the conflation of material success with personal fulfillment. However, the hollowness of these pursuits leads to profound disillusionment, revealing the Dream's failure to deliver genuine happiness. (Fitzgerald, 1925). (Cullen, 2003).
- Symbolism and Themes: The green light represents unattainable aspirations, while the Valley of Ashes serves as a stark reminder of the socio-economic inequalities perpetuated by the Dream. These symbols highlight the inherent contradictions within the ideal, suggesting that the Dream's promises are often exclusive and unattainable for many.

Contemporary Perspectives: Survival, Resistance, and Inequality

- Immigration and Survival: In *American Dirt*, the Dream is reframed as a survival mechanism for marginalized communities. Lydia's journey reflects the immense sacrifices and systemic barriers faced by immigrants striving for safety and opportunity. The novel critiques the inequities in immigration policies and the dangers migrants endure, questioning the accessibility of the Dream in a globalized world. (Cummins, 2020).
- Resistance Against Oppression: *The Underground Railroad* redefines the Dream as an act of resistance against systemic injustice. Cora's journey represents the pursuit of freedom and dignity in the face of oppression. The literal underground railroad serves as a powerful symbol of collective struggle, emphasizing the role of community in achieving liberation. (Whitehead, 2016).
- Globalization and Inequality: Both contemporary works highlight how globalization and systemic inequality shape modern interpretations of the Dream. They underscore the barriers faced by marginalized groups, illustrating the exclusivity of the ideal for those outside privileged societal structures. (Lundberg & Scapp, 2018).

Recurring Themes Across Periods

- Disillusionment: A consistent theme in all works is the gap between the promise of the American Dream and the lived experiences of those pursuing it. This disillusionment is particularly evident in the fates of Gatsby, Lydia, and Cora, whose aspirations are thwarted by systemic and personal obstacles.
- Materialism vs. Moral Values: The tension between material wealth and moral integrity persists across eras. While the Jazz Age

critiques the moral decay caused by materialism, contemporary works emphasize the ethical compromises and emotional tolls involved in survival-driven pursuits. (Cullen, 2003).

- Class Stratification: Both historical and modern texts highlight class divisions as a significant barrier to achieving the Dream. In *The Great Gatsby*, this is symbolized by the divide between East Egg and West Egg, while in *American Dirt* and *The Underground Railroad*, systemic inequities reflect the persistent stratification that limits access to opportunities. (Fitzgerald, 1925). (Cummins, 2020). (Whitehead, 2016).

Evolution of the American Dream

- The findings suggest that the American Dream has evolved from an ideal centered on wealth and upward mobility to a broader, more nuanced construct shaped by survival, resistance, and critique of societal inequalities.
- While historical depictions focus on materialism and its moral implications, contemporary portrayals expand the narrative to include the struggles of marginalized communities, highlighting issues of immigration, race, and systemic oppression.

CONCLUSION

The American Dream, a cornerstone of American identity, has undergone profound transformation in its portrayal across literature. From its origins as an ideal of opportunity and success rooted in hard work, it has evolved into a nuanced critique of societal inequalities, reflecting the complexities of a rapidly changing world. Through the lens of literature, this research has explored how the Dream encapsulates both the aspirations and disillusionments of individuals and communities across time.

In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald critiques the Jazz Age's materialistic interpretation of the Dream, exposing its moral decay and the inherent tension between wealth and fulfillment. The novel highlights the gap between aspiration and reality, illustrating how the Dream often remains unattainable for those outside the privileged elite. Symbols like the green light and the Valley of Ashes serve as timeless reminders of the Dream's allure and its contradictions.

Contemporary works such as *American Dirt* and *The Underground Railroad* extend this critique to modern contexts, addressing themes of immigration, globalization, and systemic inequality. These texts highlight the resilience and sacrifices of marginalized individuals striving for survival and dignity. At the same time, they expose the barriers that persist in accessing the Dream, emphasizing its exclusivity and the toll it exacts on those who pursue it.

Across periods, recurring themes of disillusionment, materialism versus morality, and class stratification serve as unifying threads, underscoring the enduring challenges and inequities tied to the Dream. While the contexts and narratives vary, these works collectively reveal the American Dream as a dynamic and contested ideal that mirrors the societal values and struggles of its time.

This research demonstrates the American Dream's dual nature: it is both an inspiring vision of possibility and a mirror reflecting systemic flaws. Its portrayal in literature continues to shape and redefine cultural discourse, offering insights into the evolving aspirations and realities of American life. By engaging with these texts, we gain a deeper understanding of the Dream's enduring complexity and its profound impact on the individual and collective psyche. Ultimately, the American Dream remains a powerful and multifaceted cultural construct, inviting reflection on its promises, limitations, and significance in an ever-changing world.

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