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Teixidó, Clara; Owen, David, , dir. Chasing the Dream : A Marxist Perspective on the American Dream through Literature. Bellaterra: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2024. 30 pag. (Grau en Estudis Anglesos)

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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I GERMANÍSTICA

Chasing the Dream: A Marxist Perspective on the American Dream through Literature

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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May 2024

Statement of Intellectual Honesty

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Clara Teixidó', written in a cursive style. The signature starts with a large, stylized 'C' and ends with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke.

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Abstract

The American Dream is a concept that embodies the idea that equality of opportunity is available to any American, and that anyone, regardless of class, race, and gender, can accomplish anything through talent, effort, and dedication. The Dream is a vital aspect of American identity, and has become a recurring theme in American Literature, especially in the works selected for this project. This project is concerned with the representations of labour and exploitation in the selected works, namely *Moby Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Hunger Games*, and how these challenge the dominant narratives of meritocracy and success associated with the American Dream. The TFG's objective will be carried out through a close reading and comparative analysis of the primary sources. The selected primary texts belong to different time periods, a choice made with the specific intention of suggesting a decline in the perception of the American Dream. The analysis will compare the representations of labour in the novels from a Marxist perspective, and hopes to provide insight into the systemic inequalities within capitalist societies that challenge the attainability of the American Dream. The project aims to show how C19-C21 representations of labour in American literature expose the mythical nature of the American Dream by revealing how systemic inequality and economic exploitation prevent class mobility.

Keywords: American Dream, class mobility, meritocracy, labour, inequality, myth.

0. Introduction

In American literature and identity, few concepts are as essential or have as much significance as the American Dream. Personally, the exploration of the American Dream and its portrayal in literature comes from a curiosity about the narratives that shape our understanding of success and meritocracy. Literature and social commentary often intertwine in a way that I find fascinating, which is why this study aims to explore how representations of labour in American literature expose the mythical nature of the American Dream by revealing how systemic inequality and economic exploitation prevent class mobility. In order to do so, three works of American literature belonging to different time periods, namely *Moby Dick* (1851), *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and *The Hunger Games* (2008), have been carefully selected to show the ongoing literary critique of meritocracy and the American Dream. This will be accomplished by a close reading of these primary sources that will examine the portrayals of labour and class dynamics in each work in a way that aims to uncover the underlying critiques of the American Dream within these narratives. Moreover, by taking a Marxist perspective, the analysis aims to offer commentary on how the primary sources show the systemic inequalities within capitalist societies that challenge the attainability of the American Dream.

Before discussing the primary texts, however, it is essential to examine previous critical discourse surrounding the American Dream and its representations in literature. The concept was coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931, in his work that concluded that the country had “lost its way by prizing material success above all other values” (Churchwell, 2021). To Adams, the American Dream was not one of material success, but rather of spiritual success and happiness. What Adams was criticizing in his work is perhaps the idea spread by Horatio Alger’s novels of rags to riches, which has long been

associated with the concept of the American Dream. Walter Lippmann, on the other hand, thought that the American Dream meant assuming that every man was inherently good, and therefore argued that “the American Dream was a delusion not because upward social mobility was a myth, but because undisciplined goodness is” (Churchwell, 2021). However, Paul Ryan, 54th Speaker of the House of Representatives, would disagree with the idea that the American Dream is a delusion. On a 2021 interview with *The Catalyst*, he explained that “we are on the cusp of breakthroughs in poverty policy and policy designed to ignite upward mobility”, and stated that he believes that “if we can accomplish these goals [...] we can reignite this glorious idea that the condition of your birth does not determine the outcome of your life, that if you have worked hard, you can make it, and that opportunity and the American dream is alive and well” (Ryan, 2021). Ryan’s perspective on the American Dream is not entirely pessimistic, but it does confirm arguments about the unattainability of the Dream, since I believe that, in his reasoning, he admits that new policies and social change are needed in order to make the American Dream a realistic aspiration for most American citizens.

Having reviewed these critical sources, and re-assessing my topic in light of this criticism, I have established the following thesis question: How do representations of labour in the selected works collectively suggest a decline in the American Dream over time? To answer this question, my project will be structured as follows: in Chapter 1, I will attempt to explain the concept of the American Dream; in Chapter 2, I will explain and summarise the concept of social class; in Chapter 3, I will examine the representations of labour and the American Dream in *Moby Dick*; in Chapter 4, I will do the same with *The Great Gatsby* and, in Chapter 5, with *The Hunger Games* trilogy; and I will finish my analysis with my conclusions and some brief suggestions for further research.

1. The American Dream

The American Dream is a concept that embodies the idea that equality of opportunity is accessible to all American citizens and that anyone, regardless of class, can achieve anything through talent, effort, and dedication. As Roger Pearson states: “It is the belief that every man, whatever his origins, may pursue and attain his chosen goals, be they political, monetary, or social” (Pearson, 1970: 638). This concept that has long been a fundamental part of American culture, politics, and literature, is believed to have its roots on *The Declaration of Independence*, which serves as the foundational document of American ideals and values and states that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (The Declaration of Independence, 1776). The Declaration’s proclamation of equality of opportunity is what establishes the basis of the American Dream. However, scholars such as Jim Cullen argue that the Puritan ideas of progress and transformation had already laid the groundwork for this concept, despite the term itself not being coined until 1931 in James Adams’ work entitled *The Epic of America*:

But there has been also the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement... It is not the dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (Adams, 1931: 333)

Such a longevous concept has, of course, evolved over time in response to historical, social, and economic developments. From the Puritan settlements to the present day, Cullen explains, various factors such as the Industrial Revolution have shaped the interpretations of the American Dream, and there have been shifts in cultural values, such as globalization and the rise of consumerism, that have contributed to changing the

perception of success. Central to the American Dream are several ideas that sustain its principles, such as the belief in individual agency and self-determination, the value of hard work, and the pursuit of happiness. The Dream encompasses notions of upward mobility and social progress regardless of one's background or circumstance at birth, but there are still ongoing debates on the extent to which the American Dream is truly accessible to everyone, given the persistent disparities in wealth, opportunity, and social mobility, which raise questions about its equity and inclusivity. Cullen concludes that he "hoped to show that the American Dream has functioned as a shared ground for a very long time, binding together people who may have otherwise little in common and may even be hostile to one another", while also arguing that the Dream should not be used as an excuse to "ignore, or even consciously obscure, real divisions in American society" (Cullen, 2003: 189).

Throughout the centuries, the American Dream has been a recurring theme in many works of American literature. The primary works for this paper have been carefully selected in order to show how the concept has been developed in American literature over time. The first novel commented on this paper will be Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, which presents a complex portrayal of the American Dream. Captain Ahab's obsession with revenge and the fact that he continues to work despite his mental health highlight the exploitative nature of capitalism. Through Ishmael's work and salary, the novel offers a clear view into social stratification and shows the difficulties in upward mobility. Also related to the American Dream is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which offers a critique of the American Dream during the Jazz Age. The character of Jay Gatsby explores the notion of the self-made man, and his impoverished upbringing and economic success reflect the idea that anyone can achieve anything regardless of their background. However, Gatsby's fatal end and his ultimate failure to

win Daisy's love underscore the disillusionment that so often accompanies the Dream in stratified societies. The narrative style of the novel also offers insight on the fetishization of commodities and how human effort and labour are often ignored and even forgotten, shedding light, again, on the problems with upward mobility through effort alone. The most recent literary work included in the paper is Suzanne Collins's trilogy *The Hunger Games*, which offers a dystopian interpretation of the American Dream by exploring inequality, survival, and resistance, and defies the notion of equal opportunity and upward mobility in a stratified society. Katniss' story questions the legitimacy of the American Dream in a society based on exploitation and injustice through the social structure of Panem and District 12. In addition, Snow's rise to power through deception and manipulation suggests that the American Dream cannot be accomplished through honest work and talent, but rather through immorality and fraud.

2. Class

The American Dream is a concept that is greatly intertwined with the notion of class, but an accurate definition of class, much like an accurate definition of the American Dream, is difficult to obtain. A social class is understood as a division of society based on social and economic status, but how to make that division is a much more complicated question. In 1848, Marx and Engels stated that "we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank" (Marx and Engels, 1848: 14), and described this arrangement as a class conflict that involved the clash of the two social classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the former referring to the owners of the means of production, and the latter to the workers.

Marx and Engels argue that:

In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed – a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so

long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market. (Marx and Engels, 18)

Even though the Marxist class conflict is focused on the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, Marx and Engels also mention the “middle class”, which they assert includes, for example, shopkeepers and tradespeople, and who they believe “sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on” (Marx and Engels, 1848: 18). Therefore, it could be argued that there are three social classes: the bourgeoisie, the middle class, and the proletariat, but such a class division is perhaps outdated. As youtuber Natalie Wynn points out, “Marxist typical examples are a factory owner and a factory worker [...] personally, I have never met a factory worker or a factory owner for that matter. They must all be on a brand trip to China” (Wynn, 2019), so the Marxist division of social class becomes rather inaccurate when applied to the present-day United States. In 1983, Paul Fussell’s book *Class* attempted to examine class distinctions in American society, which he divided into nine different social classes, arguing that it’s not money, but how that money is obtained, that defines a social class:

As a class indicator the amount of money is less significant than the source. The main thing distinguishing the top three classes from each other is the amount of money inherited in relation to the amount currently earned. The top-out-of-sight class (Rockefellers, Pews, Dupoints) lives on inherited capital entirely. No one whose money, no matter how copious, comes from his own work - film stars are an example - can be a member of the top-out-of-sight class. (Fussell, 1983: 30)

Fussell’s definition of class is, therefore, thoroughly contradictory of the most basic values of the American Dream, i.e. the possibility of class mobility regardless of one’s situation at birth. When the upper class is defined as that which inherits the money, no amount of effort can lead to a place in said social class. Fussell goes on to explain other

class indicators¹, such as safe and dangerous labour, placing those whose work is dangerous, exemplified by soldiers, and those whose work is safe, like bank workers or university professors, in different social classes. Despite not directly referencing the unattainability of the American Dream with which this paper is concerned, Fussell's class markers undoubtedly show such unattainability, for instance in his quoting of George Orwell:

Economically, no doubt, there are only two classes, the rich and the poor, but socially there is a whole hierarchy of classes, and the manners and traditions learned by each class in childhood are not only very different but generally persist from birth to death. It is very difficult to escape, culturally, from the class into which you have been born. (Orwell qtd. in Fussell, 27)

According to both Orwell and Fussell, then, social mobility is not a realistically attainable goal for most people, an argument that goes against the very basis of the American Dream. One of the things that Marx and Fussell's works have in common is that they both use labour as a means to distinguish and define different social classes. In order to describe how the mythical nature of the American Dream is represented in the selected works, I have decided to analyse how labour is represented in the works, and how these representations show the unattainability of the American Dream.

3. *Moby Dick*

Set primarily on a whaling ship called the Pequod, *Moby Dick* follows the story of Ishmael, a young sailor, and the ship's captain, Ahab, who is obsessed with getting revenge on the white whale that took his leg. Historically, *Moby Dick* belongs to a period of industrialization in the United States in which the whaling industry was at its peak. This context of industrial growth provides the background for the novel's portrayal of labour and its significance in the pursuit of the American Dream. Ishmael, the novel's protagonist, embodies a sentiment that resonates with the Dream's narrative,

¹ See Appendix A.

as he wants to pursue his aspirations and shape his own destiny. This narrative is often represented in American literature through travelling, for instance to a promising place in which better work conditions will be achieved. This is made evident in works such as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), both of which narrate a literal, physical journey through America that at the same time represents a personal journey towards freedom and independence, as well as a quest for a better life. Whether it's Huck's search for freedom or George and Lennie's hope of land ownership, travel serves as a metaphor for the American Dream. Similarly, the opening lines of *Moby Dick* reflect Ishmael's longing for freedom and self-discovery that a voyage at sea will, in his opinion, grant him:

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; [...] then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. It is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me. (Melville, 1851: 1)

Deciding to sail with “little or no money in my purse” suggests embarking on a journey that will lead to more money, which encapsulates the idea of seeking opportunity through adventure on a quest for self-discovery and fulfilment that is so embedded in the narratives of the American Dream. Furthermore, Ishmael's melancholic feelings and inner turmoil that lead to his longing for escape resonate with the notion of overcoming adversity and pursuing ambition despite any possible hardships. However, the novel shows how his situation is far from that of someone who could achieve the American Dream.

3.1. Labour and Exploitation in *Moby Dick*

Labour is depicted in *Moby Dick* through the daily tasks of whaling and ship maintenance and is therefore portrayed as physically demanding. The novel portrays labour as both a means of livelihood and a pathway to personal fulfilment, and the characters aboard the Pequod engage with labour from different motivations, ranging from survival to ambition. However, the novel also explores the harsh realities of maritime labour, portraying the rough conditions, the physical danger, and the constant threat of death that the workers are subject to. The hierarchical structure in which the crew of the Pequod is organised reflects societal divisions, with captain Ahab holding power over his subordinates, whose leadership and responsibilities are structured racially, with white officers and racialised sailors. As Ishmael claims: “the same, I say, because in all these cases the native American liberally provides the brains, the rest of the world as generously supplying the muscles” (Melville, 1851: 94). Through these representations of labour, *Moby Dick* offers a nuanced exploration of the American Dream, revealing both its promises and its limitations. The novel portrays labour as a means of achieving success and social mobility, while at the same time reflecting on exploitation, alienation, and the elusive nature of personal fulfilment and success. Examining these portrayals of labour will, in my opinion, grant insight into the complexities of the American Dream and the ways in which it intersects with themes of success and social mobility.

The first encounter with capitalist labour in *Moby Dick* occurs not aboard the Pequod, but during Ishmael’s negotiation for payment and employment. Just after Ishmael and Queequeg have met, Ishmael decides to look for a suitable ship to work at and approaches the Pequod. There, he finds two of the ship’s previous captains: Peleg and Bildad, with whom he negotiates a salary in exchange for his work in the whaling

ship. As Kristina Urvanová argues, this negotiation is “one of the most obvious illustrations of capitalism at work in *Moby Dick*” (Urvanová, 2021: 21). Urvanová explains the interaction between Ishmael and the captains through a Marxist lens, stating that “Peleg and Bildad hold the means of production; Ishmael possessed as a commodity his own labor-power. Peleg and Bildad are the capitalists, Ishmael is the worker” (Urvanová, 21). Taking Marx and Engel’s definition of social class, then, Ishmael would belong to the proletariat, while Peleg and Bildad represent the bourgeoisie. Given the year of publication of the novel, it is more accurate to express the social class in which these characters belong to through a Marxist lens. However, I do want to point out that, even if Ishmael’s salary was higher, as I can only assume Captain Ahab’s is, he would still belong to the lower classes according to one of Fussell’s class indicators: safe and dangerous labour. This would still place Bildad on a higher class than Ishmael and Ahab, since he “had concluded his adventurous career by wholly retiring from active life at the godly age of sixty and dedicating his remaining days to the quiet receiving of his well-earned income” (Melville, 66), and therefore did not sail with the rest of the crew, but would place all sailors aboard the Pequod on a lower class than other workers with similar wages, who Marx and Engels would also call proletarians. So according to Marxist class structure, Peleg would belong, with Bildad, to the bourgeoisie because he owns the means of production, but according to Fussell’s class structure, he would belong to a lower class than Bildad, since his work is as dangerous and life-threatening as that of the rest of the crew.

The discussion results in an agreement on Ishmael’s wage which is so low that, as Ishmael himself puts it, “if we had a lucky voyage [the pay] might pretty nearly pay for the clothing I would wear out on it” (Melville, 68). This clashes with the reality of the ship owners, who will remain on land and make profit off the labour of an underpaid

sailor, which reinforces their place as typical capitalists, hoarders of a wealth that is acquired through the exploitation of underpaid workers. The poor compensation that Ishmael receives reflects the reality faced by workers like him, whose earnings barely cover necessities, let alone offer opportunities for upward mobility. In fact, Ishmael, despite already being an experienced sailor, is unlikely to gather enough wealth to become a ship owner himself. The exploitative nature of capitalism is further highlighted in the novel through captain Ahab. His previous voyage and encounter with the white whale have led to the loss of his leg, and therefore a lot of suffering, which has caused his mental health to deteriorate:

He keeps close inside the house; a sort of sick, and yet he don't look so. In fact, he ain't sick; but no, he isn't well either [...] I know that on the passage home, he was a little out of his mind for a spell; but it was the sharp shooting pains in his bleeding stump that brought that about, as any one might see. I know, too, that ever since he lost his leg last voyage by that accursed whale, he's been a kind of moody - desperate moody, and savage sometimes, but that will all pass off.

This sickness is acknowledged by Peleg and Bildad – and the rest of the crew – but far from preventing him to embark on another journey in that mental state, the captains – and pretty much the entire island of Nantucket – allow him to pursue another job at sea with the hopes that his newfound ambition, fuelled by revenge, will bring back a ship filled with oil. He is exploited, then, in the sense that “more value is put on his potential productivity than on his health or wellbeing” (Urvanová, 39).

Ishmael and Ahab's situations are, then, in undeniable contradiction with the basic ideals of the American Dream, according to which effort is the key to achieving social mobility, success, and a comfortable lifestyle. The underpayment and exploitation of workers like Ishmael, who obviously employ considerable effort in their work, refute this ideal. Ishmael and Ahab serve as examples of the systemic barriers to upward mobility and the exploitation that are inherent in capitalist societies, where the

accumulation of wealth and ownership of the means of production remain elusive dreams of the lower, working classes.

4. *The Great Gatsby*

At first glance, it may seem that *The Great Gatsby* endorses the American Dream through Gatsby's classic story of rags to riches, which embodies the "started from the bottom now we here" (Drake, 2013) narrative of success that Horatio Alger famously spread with his novels, and that is so often present in American society and, consequently, literature. However, further analysis shows that, despite his immense wealth, Gatsby fails to achieve true social mobility and that his story is, in fact, a critique of the American Dream and the social barriers that prevent genuine progress and upward mobility. Gatsby's struggle and ultimate failure to win over Daisy's love, as well as the lack of acceptance that he receives from the other "old money" characters, reflect George Orwell's idea that "it is very difficult to escape, culturally, from the class into which you have been born" (Orwell qtd. in Fussel, 27). In fact, as Pearson states, "Daisy, a rather soiled and cheapened figure, is Gatsby's ultimate goal in his concept of the American Dream" (Pearson, 5). Daisy's love symbolises for Gatsby the social status and acceptance into the old money class that he lacks, so seducing Daisy is the final step in his pursuit of upward social mobility. This is represented, in the novel, by the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, which represents both Daisy and the American Dream:

Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (Fitzgerald, 1926: 90)

The green light serves as a symbol of Gatsby's aspirations and signifies his desire for Daisy, as well as his longing for social status and acceptance into the old money class.

In Mariyam Farzand's words, it "represents not only Daisy's presence but also the

elusive dream of success, wealth, and happiness that Gatsby associates with her” (Farzand, 2023: 1). The light is always out of Gatsby’s reach, portraying the elusive nature of the American Dream and showing its unattainability. As Farzand points out, “Just as Gatsby can never reach the green light, the American Dream remains tantalizingly out of reach for many in the novel. The green light, in this sense, becomes a poignant reminder of the dream's unattainable nature, especially in the face of materialism and moral decay” (Farzand, 1). Gatsby’s failure in seducing Daisy and thus achieve his version of the American Dream is, in my opinion, not due to his lack of money but to his humble origins. Through Gatsby’s failure, Fitzgerald is echoing Orwell’s idea of the difficulty in socially escaping the class one has been born into, an idea that has been present in American media to this day. In fact, the series *Gossip Girl* is a great example of this notion of class stratification: “You’ll always use your desert fork for your entrée. You’ll always feel underdressed no matter what you wear. And at dinner parties, it will be as if there’s a language that sounds like English and you think you speak it, but they don’t hear you and you don’t understand them” (“Hi, Society”).

One could argue, however, that even though Gatsby will never achieve the social aspect of class mobility that the American Dream promises, he did achieve the material success and wealth of the Dream, and therefore anyone can achieve great wealth through talent and effort. This could seem realistic at first glance, but Gatsby’s wealth was acquired not through honest work, but through illegal bootlegging: “he and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drugstores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That's one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him, and I wasn't far wrong” (Fitzgerald, 127). Gatsby’s illegal manner of acquiring wealth shows, in my opinion, the corruption inherent in capitalist societies, and contrasts with the reality of Ishmael, for instance, whose work is legal, honest, and

physically demanding, but whose wealth is far from that of Gatsby. The comparison of both characters thus shows the corruption that leads to honest workers barely making a living while bootleggers and other criminals become wealthier every day.²

4.1. Commodities

Opulence and extravagance are key to an accurate understanding of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, as these concepts are characteristic of Jay Gatsby's lifestyle, which is illustrated in the novel through meticulous description of the parties that he hosts. Analysing these descriptions through the lens of Marxist commodity fetishism provides insight into the nature of commodities within capitalist societies. In his work *Capital* (1867), Karl Marx defined a commodity as being "an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another" (Marx, 1867, 27), and explained the fetishism of commodities as "a definite social where relation between men assumes the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx, 48). Commodity fetishism is, then, the idea that the economic value of the commodity is inherent to it instead of a product of the labour force behind it. The fetishization of commodities is dangerous because ignoring the human labour that creates the commodity conceals the inherent exploitation and inequality within capitalism. Marx's idea of commodity fetishism is present in Fitzgerald's descriptions of Gatsby's parties:

Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York — every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves. There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb. (Fitzgerald, 1925: 41)

Rather than just mere fruits, the lemons and oranges involved in the preparation of the party become, in Gatsby's mansion, symbols of wealth, luxury, and extravagant consumerism; they are, when read through a Marxist perspective, commodities. Their

² See Appendix B.

regular arrival and fast consumption highlight the excess that so famously characterises the protagonist's parties. The fruits are consumed and discarded in a manner that shows not only the wasteful nature of the parties, but also the emptiness of the wealth and pleasure that they offer. Despite Gatsby's uncountable wealth, there is a prevalent sense of futility and dissatisfaction that is present in both the passage and throughout the novel. In the passage, "Fitzgerald frames inanimate objects [...] as being the agents of the action. The oranges and lemons "arrived" as if on their own; the machine in the kitchen magically "extract[ed]" the juice; then the oranges "left" after forming themselves into a pyramid shape" (Jernigan, 2024: 1). This way of framing the action completely ignores all the human labour involved in the acquisition of the final product, making it seem like the commodities themselves are the ones making the party happen. In fact, it is not the butler, but his thumb, that is doing the action of pressing the button.

As Dan Coleman points out:

The butler doesn't press the button; the button is pressed by a butler's thumb. [...] This seemingly explicit account of the origins of the juice consumed at Gatsby's party obscures entirely the agency of those responsible for making the fruit arrive as oranges and lemons and leave as empty peels (Coleman, 1997: 219).

This description echoes the Marxist idea of commodity fetishism, as it obscures the social relationships behind the commodities. In the context of the American Dream, commodity fetishism could manifest as a fixation on material success – so present, in fact, throughout the entire novel – that ignores the labour needed to attain that success. The narrative of this particular fragment gives the party a sort of magical edge: "reigning over West Egg is a sense of unreality, a strangeness of tone partially accomplished by the sudden shift of tense by means of which Nick drives his story into the present" (Coleman, 220). This sense of unreality is further intensified in Nick's description of the party, when he says that "the bar is in full swing, and floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden outside" (Fitzgerald, 42), a description that presents the

opulence of the party as surreal, underscoring the disconnection between the promises of the American Dream and the realities of the capitalist system.

5. *The Hunger Games*

Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy, consisting of *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010), is set on a dystopian, future society that contrasts with the most basic ideals of the American Dream. The saga is set in the post-apocalyptic nation of Panem, which is structured into 12 districts that work to supply the Capitol. Through the story of Katniss, the protagonist, the novel explores themes of power and resistance against an authoritarian and oppressive regime. This section aims to provide an insight into the saga's critique of the American Dream by highlighting the inequalities and ethical compromises inherent in the ambitious pursuit of success within a stratified society. Given that Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy and *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2020) – the most recently published prequel of the original trilogy – are relatively recent publications, there is a notable lack of academic discourse concerning the novels. Consequently, the following analysis is largely based on the primary source and other theoretical frameworks. This paper aims to contribute to the emerging body of critical work on Collins' novels.

5.1. Meritocracy and Upward Mobility

In the dystopian world of Panem, labour is tied to the socio-economic structure that assigns specific industries to each district. The narrative of *The Hunger Games* portrays a world where the possibility of upward mobility is limited by an authoritarian regime that exploits its citizens, especially those from the most impoverished districts. The 12 districts of Panem are each responsible for working in one industry, and the result of their labour is sent to the Capitol and enjoyed by its citizens. Despite being aware of the

fact that district workers are the ones providing the commodities, Capitol citizens engage in discourse that is both grateful to the Capitol for providing luxury, and that dehumanises district citizens in a way that echoes Marxist commodity fetishism, since it does not exactly obscure, but instead trivialises the exploitation that the district workers are subject to by dehumanising them and referring to them as “animals” or “district scum” (Collins, 2020: 3).

The division between districts and Capitol results in a rigidly stratified class system in which upward mobility is nearly impossible, a notion that contrasts with the core principle of the American Dream. Katniss, the protagonist, comes from “District 12. Where you can safely starve to death” (Collins, 10), arguably the most impoverished of the districts. District 12 is dedicated to coal mining, and life in the district is in a striking contrast to life in the Capitol. Katniss explains that “electricity in District 12 comes and goes, usually we only have it a few hours a day. Often the evenings are spent in candlelight” (Collins, 113) but describes the Capitol as somewhere where “there would be no shortage. Ever” (Collins, 113). A Marxist analysis of this society would describe the Capitol, which holds the means of production, as the bourgeoisie, while stating that the districts belong to the proletariat. However, class distinctions in the novel are not that simple. District 12, for instance, has a stratified society within itself, with its citizens divided between the Seam and the merchant town. The coal miners of District 12 live, together with their families, in the Seam, and constitute the lower class of the district. The merchant class, on the other hand, could possibly represent the middle classes. Despite their constant working, families of the Seam live in abject poverty and often starve and, while the merchants do not starve, their life proves to be challenging as well. In fact, the merchant middle class is closer to the lower classes than to the Capitol. As Sofie Pettersson argues, “the literary portrayal of the differences and

similarities between the Seam and the merchant area in the novel indicates a narrowing of the gap between the lower and middle class” (Pettersson, 2023: 22), a statement that echoes Marx and Engel’s idea that “the middle classes [...] sink gradually into the proletariat” (Marx & Engels, 1848: 18). The middle and lower classes of Panem are placed so far apart from the upper class, the Capitol, that any social mobility becomes unimaginable. It could be argued, perhaps, that there is a possibility of social mobility within the districts themselves, but I believe that any upward mobility from the Seam to the town is rare if not entirely unheard of. In fact, Katniss’ mother was born into a merchant family, but her marriage to a miner forced her into a life in the Seam instead of allowing her husband to become a merchant himself. The physical distinction between the middle and lower classes could possibly be another factor that influences social stratification, as the town merchants are blonde and blue eyed, while people from the Seam have black hair, olive skin, and grey eyes.

In some of the districts, however, there is an illusion of upward mobility brought by the Hunger Games. It is worth noting that that is not the case in more impoverished districts such as 11 or 12, whose weak and starving citizens could never even imagine winning the Games. Some of the wealthier districts, however, do train their tributes from childhood so that they will eventually volunteer in the Reaping and hopefully win the Games: “In some districts, in which winning the reaping is such a great honor, people are eager to risk their lives, the volunteering is complicated. But in District 12, where the word tribute is pretty much synonymous with the word corpse, volunteers are all but extinct” (Collins, 32). Each district has an area dedicated to the victors of the Games – the Victor’s Village – where they will be able to move in with their families once they achieve the glory and economic compensations that come with winning the Games. Using the Games as a means to achieve social mobility is in itself a depiction of

exploitation. If the Games are read as employment – and they could be, since they require effort and training and generate wealth and entertainment for the Capitol – then the tributes are subject to what is, in my opinion, the highest possible level of job exploitation, given the fact that they would be risking their lives at work. The American Dream could be defended in this reading, however, as the tributes – the lower classes – have the possibility of becoming Victors and thus acquiring wealth through using their talent and effort to win the Games. Once they have won the Games, however, the victors are far from being members of the higher classes, and even though they enjoy a wealthier life than regular district citizens, they could never aspire to a life in the Capitol. Collins' novels, then, show the impossibility of upward mobility in a stratified capitalist society, thus rejecting the notion of the American Dream as something that one could aspire to accomplish.

5.2. Corruption and the American Dream

The novels commented on up to this point have undoubtedly shown the unattainability of the American Dream. However, the fourth novel of the saga, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* shows how corruption and dubious morality, rather than effort and dedication, are inherent in the pursuit of success, power, and wealth. This is an idea that has already been discussed, and that I believe to be present in the character of Jay Gatsby, as well as in Coriolanus Snow, the authoritarian President of Panem.

Snow's story is that of a young man who rises from relative money to power not only through pure effort and talent, but also through relentless ambition, manipulation and assassination: "Such a young man when he rose to power such a clever one to keep it. How, you may ask, did he do it? One word, that's all you really need to know. *Poison*" (Collins, 2010: 164), highlighting the inherent corruption in the pursuit of power and success. Snow's story is therefore a critique of the morality of the success

that the American Dream promises and shows how the ideals of hard work and meritocracy can be twisted by those in power in order to justify and perpetuate systemic inequality. Snow begins his journey in poverty after his prestigious family has lost their estate, a setup so similar to that of the classic rags to riches story: “his family; despite residing in the penthouse of the Capitol’s most opulent apartment building, was as poor as district scum” (Collins, 2020: 3). This situation is, however, so much different than that of Gatsby, for instance, since both characters lack money at the beginning, but only Gatsby lacks the prestige that comes with an aristocratic family name. It can be argued, then, that Snow’s success is possible only because he has caste, he is already a member of the aristocracy. However, his success does not come from honest talent and effort, but through constant manipulation and betrayal. During the 10th Hunger Games, when Snow is mentoring Lucy Grey, he cheats repeatedly in order to help her win. These actions may seem noble, given that they will ultimately save her life, but his reasoning behind them is more questionable, since his inner monologue shows how he is not as concerned with saving Lucy Grey’s life as he is with winning the competition against his classmates, who are mentoring other tributes, in order to get the scholarship that will allow him to go to University: “Coriolanus had never really considered her a victor in the games. It had never been part of his strategy to make her one. He had only wished that her charm and appeal would nub off on him and make him a success” (Collins, 2020: 157).

6. Conclusions, Consequences, and Further Research

In conclusion, the representations of labour in the selected works suggest a decline in the American Dream by exposing the systemic exploitation and inequalities within capitalist societies. *Moby Dick* offers a compelling critique through the crew of the Pequod that highlights the harsh, exploitative realities of capitalist labour. A Marxist

analysis of the novel describes Ishmael as a proletarian, and his low wage, which will never allow him to own the means of production, shows the impossibility of upward mobility through honest work for the lower classes. Captain Ahab's experience serves as a critique of the dehumanizing effects of prioritizing productivity over well-being, and the low wages, as well as the psychological effects of the whaling industry, show how social mobility is an illusion for the lower classes, revealing the American Dream is not truly attainable to everyone.

The Great Gatsby further critiques the American Dream by exploring the opulence and extravagance that mask the exploitation and inequality of capitalist societies. Fitzgerald depicts Gatsby's parties as symbols of wealth and luxury while concealing the human effort and labour that make them happen. This portrayal echoes Marx's commodity fetishism and suggests that the effort and dedication of the lower classes are ignored, thus questioning the idea that effort and dedication can lead to upward mobility. Fitzgerald's writing also emphasises the emptiness and futility of material success, and the surrealness of Gatsby's parties creates a sense of magical unreality that further obscures the human labour involved in them, exposing the hollowness in the pursuit of materialism, and revealing a disconnection between the Dream's promises and the realities of achieving them.

The Hunger Games also exposes the systemic inequalities of a stratified society in its critique of the American Dream. The rigid class structure of Panem heavily restricts upward mobility, showing the falsehood of meritocracy. Moreover, the impoverished, starving districts contrast with the opulent Capitol, highlighting the inequality of exploitation and oppression within capitalist societies, and Katniss' descriptions of District 12 illustrate the inability to achieve social mobility through hard work alone. In the trilogy, the Games are viewed as potential path to upward mobility, a

notion that is nothing but a cruel illusion for the people of most districts and that emphasises the hopelessness of the lower classes. The prequel's portrayal of Snow's rise to power through manipulation and corruption critiques, much like Gatsby's bootlegging, the morality of the success narrative of the American Dream. Such a portrayal suggests that social and economic mobility is often dependent on pre-existing privilege and blatant immorality rather than effort and talent. Therefore, the works collectively question the traditional definitions of social mobility and meritocracy by suggesting that success is influenced by pre-existing privileges.

The conclusions drawn from the analysis of the novels lead to consequences that reflect the broader implications of the critique of the American Dream. Since these literary works collectively suggest a growing disillusionment with the concept, they could likely lead to a shift in cultural narratives that will reflect the realities of upward mobility and thus question the attainability of the American Dream. This could trigger the "policies designed to ignite upward mobility" (Ryan, 2021) that Ryan refers to when asked about the American Dream.

Throughout my research on *Moby Dick* and *The Hunger Games*, I have noticed that the lower classes are often represented through a racial lens. Such is the case of the crew of the Pequod, whose power on board is organised hierarchically based on race, and of District 12, the population of which is also divided racially, with blond merchants and olive-skinned mine workers. Further research could analyse these works and other American authors, such as Toni Morrison, in order to show how race is linked with the illusion of upward mobility and the unattainability of the American Dream. By reflecting on how racial hierarchies intersect with economic exploitation, this analysis would explain how racial inequality is key to an accurate understanding of social mobility in America.

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APPENDIX A – FUSSELL’S CLASS STRUCTURE

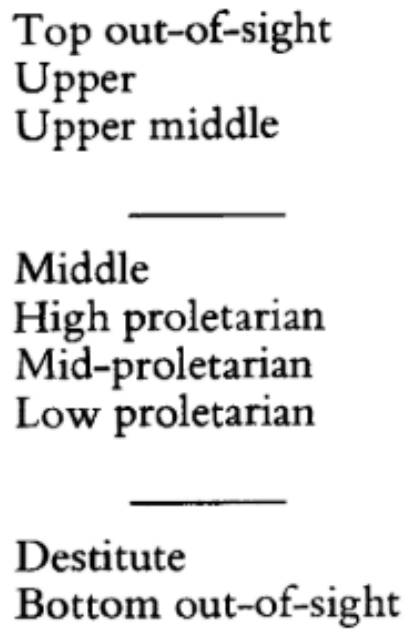


Figure 1: Paul Fussell’s class structure.

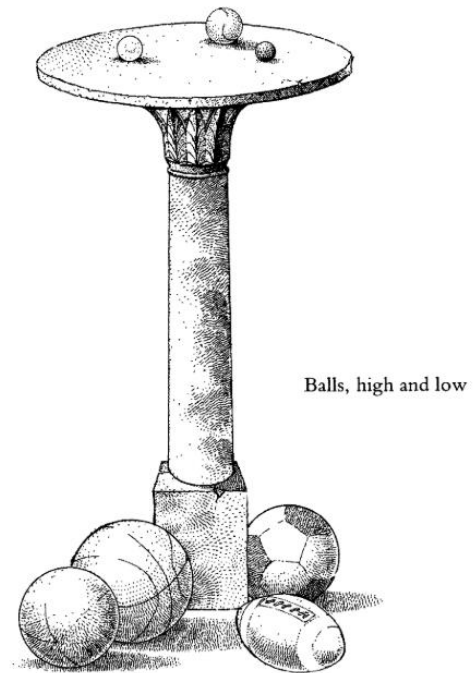


Figure 2: Paul Fussell’s class indicator, the higher the social class you belong to, the smaller the balls of the sports you play.

A high prole regarding a destitute with disdain, but less for his poverty than for his style



Figure 3: “It’s less money than taste and knowledge and perceptiveness that determine class” (Fussell, 29).

APPENDIX B – A BIT OF GATSBY IN TRUMP



Figure 4: GatsbyTrump’s opulent mansion.

Source: Horine, Sam. “Why we should never forget the monstrosity that was Donald Trump’s gold apartment”. House & Garden, 24 Jul. 2020, <https://www.houseandgarden.co.uk/gallery/donald-trump-gold-apartment>

PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF NY v DONALD J TRUMP			
Count 1	GUILTY	Count 10	GUILTY
Count 2	GUILTY	Count 11	GUILTY
Count 3	GUILTY	Count 12	GUILTY
Count 4	GUILTY	Count 13	GUILTY
Count 5	GUILTY	Count 14	GUILTY
Count 6	GUILTY	Count 15	GUILTY
Count 7	GUILTY	Count 16	GUILTY
Count 8	GUILTY	Count 17	GUILTY
Count 9	GUILTY	Count 18	GUILTY
Count 19	GUILTY	Count 20	GUILTY
Count 21	GUILTY	Count 22	GUILTY
Count 23	GUILTY	Count 24	GUILTY
Count 25	GUILTY	Count 26	GUILTY
Count 27	GUILTY	Count 28	GUILTY
Count 29	GUILTY	Count 30	GUILTY
Count 31	GUILTY	Count 32	GUILTY
Count 33	GUILTY	Count 34	GUILTY
GUILTY 34		NOT GUILTY 0	
NO VERDICT 0			

Figure 5: Verdict on Trump’s trial, 2024.

Source: X (Formally known as Twitter). DylanTateA. “gop got their red wave #verdict”. X, 30 May 2024, <https://x.com/DylanTateA/status/1796289555080872443>