

The synthesis of american individualism across genres and intents essays examples...

[Art & Culture](#), [American Dream](#)



Implicit in any writer's work are the ideologies of the culture under which the writer was raised. American culture has values, which place emphasis on the individual. In an essay like Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" the self-sufficiency is the topic explored. In other essays, like Malcolm Gladwell's "Small Changes: Why The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted" this individual autonomy from groups is an assumption that Gladwell assumes the audience would share with him when he analyzes the impact of social media on identity and its limitations in driving individuals to action. William F. Buckley Jr. believes in this American identity of individualism in his essay "Why Don't We Complain." His essays worries that technology changes and political structures are diluting this American tendency towards assertive individualism. All of the writer's put forward a similar archetype of American individualism as their references to uniquely America ideal of an individual. This ideal is not just the territory of article and essay, but is also found prevalently in American fiction. At its most stereotypical base, Horatio Alger forwards this notion of bootstrapping individuals. The purpose of this essay is to forward the definition of American individualism as encapsulated in Alger's novel Ragged Dick.

Whether a person is a first generation American or an American whose roots reach back to our revolutionary period, all Americans exist as such because of the American dream. The dream not only helped create this country, but it also continues to sustain citizens with a vision of hope that looks beyond present circumstance to something greater looming in a graspable future. This same ideology that helped form America as a whole is found within citizens of all circumstance within the country. Although there are some

critics who will readily state instances in which The American Dream causes harm to a society, Horatio Alger in his novel *Ragged Dick* presents a narrative that shows the good the dream is able to foster within an individual, the positive change the dream is able to affect in one's life, and the benefit to society that the changed individual is able to become.

The hero of Alger's novel, *Ragged Dick*, is first introduced to the reader as a street-smart vagabond without goals or plans for the future. In the first chapter Alger describes him as such saying, " Our ragged hero wasn't a model boy in all respects. I am afraid he sometimes swore, and now and then he played tricks upon unsophisticated boy from the country or gave a wrong direction to honest hold gentleman" (Alger, 42). These descriptions are contrasted by Alger establishing him as honest, kind to those less industrious than himself, and against stealing on all grounds.

This introduction of *Ragged Dick* serves to promote a basis for the American dream to take hold. The American dream is not found in those who have already achieved success. Instead, it must begin in those that have nothing to lose and therefore everything to gain. Such was the case with *Ragged Dick*, on the morning the reader is introduced to him he has just woken up in a box in an alley wearing the only pair of clothing he owns and blacking shoes as a means for survival.

It is because *Ragged Dick* is such a societal blank slate that readers can observe the drastic difference in demeanor and lifestyle that the American dream can foster within *Ragged Dick*. At first, the change is merely external. A new suit and bath both given by a generous man, Mr. Whitney, allow him to see visually that he is capable of looking like a respectable member of

society.

The real change occurs when Ragged Dick first contemplates that he is capable of becoming the respectable and successful person that he outwardly appears to be with his new attire. This is where the American dream as an ideology must begin. Just as America began with the realization that the colonies could become independent of England, the American dream begins with the insight that a person is capable of becoming more than he presently is. Ragged Dick does shows this when he states “ I never thought of how awful ignorant I was till now” (Alger, 89). Along with this recognition comes his friend Frank’s sensible advice, which gives Ragged Dick insight into how he may improve himself. Without such information, his present state could merely be accepted as a reality that will always be.

Once Ragged Dick gains for himself a version of the American dream to base his plans, the dream begins to manifest the positive effect it is capable of developing within his life. By employing the services of a friend, he can educate himself in many areas in which was previously ignorant. Alger relates his version of the American dreams as one that can have a domino effect improving the whole of society. When Ragged Dick finds himself in improved circumstances, he attempts to serve as a match lighting a fire within other’s as had been lit within him. One of Ragged Dick’s friends in particular, Johnny Nolan, is encouraged by him to improve. “ You’re lazy, Johnny,--that’s what’s the matter. How’d you ever expect to know anything if you don’t try” (Alger, 204). Alger, through the characteristics he has bestowed upon the character Ragged Dick, implies that perhaps such occasions of self-improvement among people can be passed to others in a

way that would cause improvement among people to grow exponentially.

The American dream then, while individual in its philosophy, has the effect of being beneficial to the whole of society. It can first be contemplated as an idea, put into action to improve the life of an individual, and then go on to benefit the whole of society.

This dream is present clearly in Henry David Thoreau's take on what a person should do when the freedoms of this dream is denied them. Thoreau believes in passively resisting any society, which violates the freedoms enshrined in American individualism. This belief is an extension of Thoreau's view on human nature. He writes, "I was not designed to be forced. I will breathe after my fashion. Let us see who is the strongest" (Thoreau, n. p).

William F. Buckley Jr. worries that this dream is being compromised. His essay is about his personal experience with remaining silent rather than comment on annoying situations that can easily be remedied. He wonders why, Americans, who are supposedly supposed to be assertive by nature are staying silent in the face of annoyances. Buckley believes "Our notorious political apathy is a related phenomenon." He believes that the monotony of the two party system "drains away from the individual to feed vast reservoirs in far-off places; and we have less and less say about the shape of events which shape our future" (Buckley, 69).

Gladwell in his essay "Small Changes" agrees with Buckley that the state of technological affairs is interfering with the political agency of American citizens. He sees limits to how individuals can collectively bargain on social media and thinks that social media is compromising what makes Americans resolutely Americans—their ability to have their political will enact through

the free process of democracy. Social media relationships are based on weak-ties, and a strong-tie connection has been a necessary component to political activism. Gladwell writes “ The kind of activism associated with social media isn’t like this at all. The platforms of social media are built around weak ties” (Gladwell, 45).

Buckley and Gladwell don’t agree on exactly the same reason that Americans are losing their agency, but both believe it is occurring. Buckley is looking at the individual level and Gladwell focuses on the collective impact it has on the society in which those individuals’ lives. What all four of these authors have in common is a similar notion of what rights human nature should extend to individuals.

Works Cited

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