

The concept of
goodness: as
captured by fear and
loathing in las vegas
and the bo...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In “ Book VI” of the Republic, Plato states that the good in our souls is the “... authentic source of truth and reason,” that the good is the cause of all”... that is right and beautiful (Plato 517c),” that it is through reference to the idea of the good that “...just things and all the rest become useful and beneficial (Plato 505a).” The Good, therefore, according to Plato, is the cause of the forms as well as the cause of knowledge and reason (Davis). In other words, the good is the cause of the exact qualities which we have up to this point found essential to the grasp of what goodness is. The three novels share the characters’ experience with both “ goodness” and the deterioration of this “ goodness” in many facets. And so, perhaps the most evident theme within these three titles (Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, The Lives of Girls and Women, and The Book of Daniel) is the corruption of this “ goodness”. Each novel attempts to define “ goodness” through its characters’ contention in order to exhibit human existence without this “ goodness”.

Initially, in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas Dr. Gonzo and Raoul Duke discuss this falling out with goodness as it pertains to the American Dream and the people’s quarrel with their trust in the American bureaucracy. As suggested by the text’s subtitle, ‘ A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream’, Duke’s quest to find the American Dream drives his every action during his inebriated journey through Las Vegas. Duke notes that, “ this is the American Dream in action! We’d be fools not to ride this strange torpedo all the way out to the end” (Thompson 11), when he refers to the great sum of money he was gifted by a man in Beverly Hills. The “ strange torpedo” symbolizes the volatility of the traditional concept of the American Dream; “

strange” is used to describe the unfamiliarity or alien-like quality of the American Dream, as if it had never existed or at least no longer exists.. However, Duke does not accept the traditional version of the American Dream—that is, hard-earned capitalist success, classic standards of family life and morals, which he believes to be a dated and undesirable goals. Instead he believes that the counterculture ultimately failed to debunk the capitalist paradigm and views his voyage as a continuation of this search (Weiss). Duke explains his search when he says,

“ Let me explain it to you, let me run it down just briefly if I can. We’re looking for the American Dream, and we were told it was somewhere in this area. Well, we’re here looking for it, ‘ cause they sent us out here all the way from San Francisco to look for it. That’s why they gave us this white Cadillac, they figure that we could catch up with it in that...”(Thompson 164). Dr. Gonzo and Raoul Duke attempt to find a physical manifestation of the American Dream, but it is destroyed when they discover that it is “ a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds [that] ... burned down about three years ago” (Thompson 168).

This is a paradox because (according to Duke) faith in the American Dream and therefore, goodness, gives many believers strength but it does so by forcing them to relinquish their power to become a part of a society that accepts this frail idea of what America “ should” be.

Moreover, in *The Book of Daniel* by E. L Doctorow, forever scarred by their parent’s arrest, trial and execution, Daniel and Susan experience the swift corruption of their innate goodness. Susan’s suicide and Daniel’s twisted

personality traits are a direct reflection of the turmoil they suffered throughout their childhood. Susan and Daniel both deal with the legacy of their parents in radically different ways. Daniel visits Susan after she has been institutionalized and he notes that, “ Today Susan is a starfish. Today she practices the silence of a starfish. There are few silences deeper than the silence of the starfish. There are many degrees of life lower before there is no life” (Doctorow 207). Daniel observes his sister as a starfish because she is so lifeless, so inert, so silent and immutable (Estrin). Daniel believes his sister died from a “ failure to analyse”. She could not fully internalize what happened to their parents since she was very young when the events of the trial and execution occurred. It was then when she became confused (thinking the Shelter was jail) and evinced signs of inner turmoil and craving for control (incontinence).

Daniel, however, progresses with the experience of his parents legacy in a very different way. Daniel’s personality changes in conjunction with his parents execution. Probably one of Daniel’s most disturbing personality traits is his disposition towards his wife. He explains to the reader, his pride in exposing Phyllis’ insecurities and weaknesses, especially her sexual ones. Daniel recounts numerous times throughout the novel, on his sexual endeavors with Phyllis, deeming her a “ sex martyr” and eventually comes to the conclusion that this is why he married her. Daniel goes so far as to tell the reader that his actions are directly a cause of his childhood when he says, “ We tried to share responsibility for my actions. We considered me as our mutual problem. I was shameless (Doctorow 99), and instead he and his wife understand this burden and have agreed to share its repercussions. It is

this shift in moral compass after his parent's execution that Daniel begins this unrighteous course of abuse and destruction.

Ultimately, Thompson and Doctorow both demonstrate how a lack or loss of "goodness" explains the mal-experience of the characters within their stories. Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo's quest for the American dream can be likened to a quest for traditional "goodness" in America during the early 1970's, burned down (Thompson) and destroyed. Daniel's corrupt sense of "goodness" is far from tangible throughout Doctorow's unsettling story, as the reader experiences the shift in Daniel's personality with Daniel and the other characters affected by his wrath. It is the culmination, however, of Thompson, Doctorow, and Plato that truly explains how without "goodness" the human experience is impossible.