

# Formal essay on "hymn of not much praise for new york city" by thomas merton



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In his poem Hymn of Not Much Praise for New York City, Thomas Merton effectively describes a society governed by immorality, fueled by materialism, and spawning inhumanity. It is derived from a mindset focused solely on the achievement of wealth, and inspired from stories of rags-to-riches and sudden successes rewarded to hard workers. However, while the American Dream evokes an optimistic outlook from a person, it inspires a lifetime of constant hard work that may not always be paying off. Hymn of Not Much Praise for New York City addresses the immoral effects on the physical and emotional well-being of humanity through the American Dream's effects on materialism, nature, and humanity's self-perspective in the physical embodiment of the American Dream in the 20th century.

While much can be said on the idea of materialism in the modern world, it was never so prominent as it was during the era in which the American Dream reigned. The constant need for "more" is a humane flaw that affects those in pursuit of success most strongly. Merton perfectly captures this idea of ceaseless desire in his poem, especially with his descriptions of New York as "rich as a cake, common as a doughnut" (Merton 11). While the American Dream is symbolised by New York City, it is so because of its incredible amount of ceaseless competition and alluring success stories (symbolised by the cake and doughnuts in this quotation) that embody the success that is possible while portraying the wide variety of rich, poor, hopeful, and hopeless people that are created by the American Dream. Materialism is a key component of the American Dream entirely for the purpose of displaying what a person has succeeded, though it is often useless and only raises the self-confidence of the holder – and even that is debatable. When Merton

describes New York as “ expensive as a fur” (Merton 12), he points out the frequent connection between materialism and self-confidence. Because the American Dream is all about succeeding and displaying your success, Merton shows the silly notion that American Dreamers often believe how they appear affects their personality. These quotations contribute to Merton’s theme of the degrading effects of materialism in popular society through which it combines all dreamers into a strive for success.

Merton’s description of materialism is furthermore conjoined by humanity’s unnatural attempt at possessing nature – yet another display of materialism in human society. A motif of cages, zoos, and animals in the poem creates a feeling of restlessness, greed, and hopeless desire. After describing the towering buildings of New York as “ monkey-houses of the office-buildings” (Merton 7-8), Merton continues on to speak of the New Yorkers exclaiming that “ we love to hear you shake, your big face like a shining bank” (Merton 13-14). The diction in these quotations illustrates an idea of wilderness and animalistic behaviour. This directs the reader’s attention to the human trait of capture and possession that humanity is so obsessed with, creating an undeniable connection between materialism and nature that can still be observed in today’s culture. Furthermore, it strengthens the immoral atmosphere present in the 20th century corporate America. In essence, it develops the theme of humans in constant pursuit of capturing what they don’t necessarily have the rights or capability to possess.

When observed closely, it can be evident that the American Dream is unnatural in terms of human nature. It is an idea that any human is capable of possessing more material and reputation than they need, and the fact that <https://assignbuster.com/formal-essay-on-hymn-of-not-much-praise-for-new-york-city-by-thomas-merton/>

this is a nation-wide goal is slightly concerning and unnatural. In New York, where “ even the freshest flowers smell of funerals” (Merton 40) and its inhabitants are “ stupefied forever by the blue, objective lights” (Merton 34), it is evident that the American Dream detracts people from a natural well-being to being obsessed with this idea of material and reputational success. There is significance in the blue objective lights which Merton uses to describe the effects of humanity on a place that was once not blue and objective, but full of greens and yellows and browns with rich blues and whites obscuring the distance of skies. Merton uses the blue objective lights to attract attention to the destruction humanity has wreaked over their only planet and conscious; because not only has humanity destroyed their natural environment, but they have destroyed their happiness and self-perspective.

With the revival of hope and determination brought with the American Dream comes a combination of materialism and unnaturalness, resulting with a deteriorating sense of self-perspective and an often clouded view of oneself. Often brought on upon by the dizzying idea of the endless competition in New York, an American Dreamer can be led to believe they are much more (or much less) successful than they truly are, which obscures their sense of self-identity and motives. In a city where “ elevators clack their teeth and rattle the bars of their cages” (Merton 5), there comes an inevitable feeling of defeat that permeates every cell of the city – even the dizzying towers that hold the most successful dreamers. The diction that Merton uses describes an atmosphere of competition intertwined with defeat and capture. While he describes humanity’s obsession with capturing nature, he mingles this idea with humanity’s need for captivity. The citizens of New

York, screaming to “ lock us in the safe jails of thy movies” (Merton 30) express an idea that the American Dream acts as a prison to house both those who have succeeded and those who have not – a jail that is filled with people aware of their faults yet turning a blind eye to them. The pure conflict between human nature and success is perfectly captured within Merton’s description of citizens’ pleading to America to “ sentence us for life to the penitentiaries of thy bars and nightclubs” (Merton 33). The expression of a jailed life in a bar effectively expresses the low self-perspective held by humanity and the negligence towards it.

Hymn of Not Much Praise for New York City conveys the immorality of the American Dream and its effects on the city dweller while expressing the physical and emotional atmosphere of 20th century corporate America, incorporating description of materialism, nature, and humanity’s self-perspective. Merton uses this poem to illustrate the chronic inhumanity instilled by the American Dream while building upon other pieces of American literature. While the American Dream is less prominent today as it was in the 20th century, it still plays a major role in corporations around the country, and even around the world. Since the time when New York was the epicenter of ambition, the American Dream has spread all around the world – to China, where mass-production is their lifeline, to Dubai, where towering buildings overshadow man’s ability to succeed. The American Dream is no longer an American Dream, but an International Goal to become as successful as it is humanly possible to be.