

Who is the
dreamer? :
complications of the
american dream



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The core of the American Dream, for many, entails liberty, a value historically represented through New York's famed amusement park Coney Island. Millions of spectators visited the park as a place of leisure to escape social prescriptions as well as the humdrum everyday life. In reality, the park represented the rapid emergence of consumption through manipulative cooperation with industrial society. Like Coney Island, America's hegemonic structure is really disguised behind its appeal of autonomy. Forced migrants and immigrants quickly realized that America's picturesque aesthetics left little to no room for them. According to the American Dream, everyone has a fair chance at wealth if the individual is driven and hardworking. This façade, painting the country as the harbor of freedom and liberty, promotes the nostalgia of an America that exists for the "other" only after confronting the dynamics of America's hegemonic society or conforming to its mass economic culture. This complex reality is notably exemplified through two facets of American popular culture: the transformation of an Eastern European family in *Ragtime* and the perspective of an African-American poet, Langston Hughes, through "Let America Be America Again."

The beginning of Hughes' "Let America Be America Again" complicated the notion that America is the land of the free through the medium of two perspectives. The first three stanzas resonant a voice of privilege and ignorance, in contrast to a learned voice (enclosed by parenthesis) that reveres with personal experience. The first narrator yearns for America to be "America again" (Hughes). This desire in itself suggests two things, one about the country and one about the narrator: that the country has undergone an ideological shift and that the narrator is a conservative who is

unhappy about it. The voice continues by describing the America that they want back. Perhaps reminiscent of the early settlements in the New World, the description specifically calls for “ the pioneer on the plain [to seek] a home where he himself is free” (Hughes). Such a reference is suggestive of the beginnings of American prosperity, which was at the cost of Native American disenfranchisement. As the parenthetical voice suggests, “ America never was America” for everyone (Hughes). While one group gained freedom from “ kings connive” and “ tyrants scheme,” the other became displaced. Hughes conveys two perspectives that paint two distinct portraits of America (Hughes). The dominant voice describes an America where “ opportunity is real, and life is free, [and] Equality is in the air” (Hughes). If not for the parenthetical voice who insists that America has never offered them equality or freedom, the other perspective may hold full dominance and purity to the audience. Through punctuation and position, Hughes gives a sense of authority to the voice of the stanza; comparingly, the parenthesized voice is limited and dependant. The use of parenthesis in this instance makes clear that a different perspective is present but also that this voice is less significant. If performed, the back-and-forth might look like a monologue –focused on one principal character– while the other voice barely whispered in the background. Indeed, the reader may be tempted to skip the insertions altogether. On the other hand, stanzas are poetry’s mandatory vehicles, and the voice of the stanzas places authority and superiority over the parenthesized sentences. Punctuation permits this distinction but so does position where the almost muted parenthesized voice is always placed after the dominant perspective. This placement suggests that the

parenthesized voice is merely a response to its counterpart and would not exist without the voice of the stanza.

In the America implicitly described by the first three stanzas, the disenfranchised Americans are inferior to and dependent on “ the pioneer” (Hughes). The rise of the now non-parenthesized voice as the narrator taunts the first narrator’s illustration of the America by teasing out ideals of exploitation as a means of privilege. The narrator begins by demonstrating that the “ me” in the parenthesized intervals of the past are several interconnected tribes including poor whites, black people, Native Americans, immigrants, farmers, and workers. These people are excluded from the American Dream, yet they constructed it. The narrator confesses that they too had a dream that was quickly disseminated after “ bearing slavery’s scars,” being “ driven from the land,” being “ fooled and pushed apart,” or being pitted against each other (Hughes). Together, as the narrator points out, these overworked individuals made this dream possible for the privileged; they “ made America the land it has become” (Hughes). From America’s popular culture down to its industrial society, “ every brick and stone” should be credited to “ the people” (Hughes). Having constructed the very fabric of America, the narrator says “ we, the people, must redeem the land...And make America again” (Hughes). By grouping the often-separated groups of minorities, the narrator has constructed a counterhegemonic structure and hints at moving to hegemonic influence as a way to gain freedom and break the chains of exploitation.

Like Hughes, Mameh, Tateh, and The Little Girl in E. L. Doctorow’s Ragtime challenge the notions of freedom within the American Dream. Immediately <https://assignbuster.com/who-is-the-dreamer-complications-of-the-american-dream/>

upon their arrival, the family encountered authoritative figures (immigration officers and judgmental police officers) who imposed a threat upon their hopes of freedom (Doctorow 14-15). Officers pushed them through a mechanical procedure in a “human warehouse” where immigrants were tagged, given showers, and arranged on benches (Doctorow 14). Their first interactions in America commodified them in a way that would soon become all too familiar. Even the narrator of chapter three, limits these individuals to a people who “killed each other casually,” “raped their own kind,” “stank of fish and garlic,” and “had no honor” (Doctorow 14). The family settles in the Lower East Side of New York with jobs and dreams of prosperity. From morning until nights, The Little Girl and Mameh sew knee pants, earning a total of seventy cents per dozen. The father, on the other hand, “made his living in the streets” as a silhouette artist (Doctorow 15). With their combined income, the family can only afford to live in an unsanitary closet-sized tenement. The family is clearly in poverty, but that fact runs contrary to their effort. Like so many other immigrants, America exploits them by capitalizing from their work and returning mere pocket change.

Simultaneously, this mechanical system commodifies individuals and strips them of freedom. Any attempts that the family makes to get ahead only pushes them backwards, proving their limitations and further installing their role in America as commodities. The girl’s entry to school signified a loss of revenue for the already-poor family.

Education is a means of bettering oneself; it is a commitment that should yield long-term success. Rather than viewing it this way, “the crisis” left Mameh and Tateh in disarray (Doctorow 16). America’s systematic abuse of

their labor made them view themselves as well as their daughter as a commodity. When The Little Girl took sick, Tateh helplessly stood over his daughter; he did not want to leave her alone but also knew that a day without work would cost him (Doctorow 47). Mameh took notice of her value as a sexual commodity and utilized it, which in turn resulted in Tateh driving her away (Doctorow 15). The industrial complex of America takes a psychological toll on its workers. Because work provides such slim earnings, the workers overwork themselves and prioritize work over education, health, and love –commodifying themselves in the same ways that America does. Renaming himself “ Baron,” Tateh realizes that he must sever connections himself from America’s working class and conform to the socialite society to achieve the freedom advertised by the American Dream. Doctorow reintroduces Tateh as a new character as he and his daughter vacation in Atlantic City. He introduces himself to Mother as Baron Ashkenazy, a man of the moving-picture business but never mentions his Jewish roots (Doctorow 254). This “ new existence,” perpetuating the ills of consumer culture, participated in the capitalism that Tateh had previously observed with disgust (Doctorow 15, 258). Tateh and The Little Girl now wined and dined with privileged families like Mother and Father. Gramsci’s concept of “ contradictory consciousness,” as explained by T. J. Jackson Lears, suggests that subordinate groups (like Tateh and The Little Girl who represent Jewish immigrants) may become compelled to identify with the dominant culture, even as they has previously resisted (Lears 576).

Ultimately, assimilation became the rational solution for them. Despaired by the boundaries of America’s work society, Tateh saw no other way out. The

American Dream advertises ideals of freedom, liberty, and prosperity but fails to give proper credit to those from which it exploits. Instead, the Americanist superiority complex imposes tools of exclusion and commodification to limit the “ other” or “ the people,” as Hughes’ refers. Nostalgic views of America then are only applicable to the dominant group while the subordinates only receive a fraction of this freedom, unless they conform. It is the nostalgic appearance of America, though, that continues to lure people in with the sense of false opportunity as Tateh and his family did. This system is a sequence in which the disenfranchised continue to blindly propel the hegemonic structure by remaining complicit in their exploitation or by assimilating with the hierarchies of society and turning their backs on heritage.

References

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