

# The american dream essay

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Caroline Darragh Moen English III Honors October 3, 2010 Greed: Corrupting the Wants and Needs of American Minds Throughout one's life, a person will strive to reach a certain level of success. Each individual determines what he wants in life, and to what extent he will go to reach it. However, as The United States of America has risen so have these standards, resulting in many people determined to obtain items they do not need in order to achieve the temporary bliss of being better off than others.

In 1931, James Adams coined the term " American dream," stating that it was " that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (Adams 404). Despite the fact that many of the citizens of America live truthfully to this dream, others would agree that with advances in technology and living standards, the so called " American dream" has changed. Another, more modernized version of the American dream has emerged stating that it " has become the pursuit of material prosperity - that people work more hours to get bigger cars, fancier homes, the fruits of prosperity for their families - but have less time to enjoy their prosperity" (American Dream). Many Americans have become more interested in having enough money to buy worldly and unnecessary possessions rather than living in a society where each person has the potential to reach his own goals. Throughout American literature, authors have portrayed how greed has intertwined itself with the progressing American dream of having material prosperity, resulting in a corrupt society. Born in 1590 in the Yorkshire farming community of Austerfield, England, William Bradford was at a young age when his parents died. As a child he was shuffled around between relative but never managed

to find a permanent home. At the age of twelve, Bradford attended a church service in the neighboring town of Scrooby and was astonished by the radical ideas of the members.

Time and time again he returned, becoming more involved with the church that challenged the ideas of the Church of England. When the news spread to the members of the church that King James I intended to imprison them, the congregation fled to the Netherlands. For twelve years they lived in Amsterdam but were harassed by the church. Soon enough, their pastor suggested that they make a new home overseas in the new world. They planned to live under King James' rule but far enough to not be harassed for their religion. At the time of their departure, Bradford was thirty years old and married with a young son. On the voyage over, Bradford's wife died after falling overboard and drowning.

After the first winter, almost half the people were left dead, including the first elected governor. What was left of the congregation choose Bradford to be their new governor, and Bradford would remain at this position up until a few months before his death. In 1657, at the age of 67, Bradford died.

(Kelso) In his personal journal, Bradford describes his journey over to the new world, and into a world free of persecution. The Puritans faced many difficult tasks while at sea, including weather. Fair winds and weather stayed with them for a season, but soon treacherous weather emerged and fierce storms shook the boat. At times, the storms were so strong that they would have to stay under deck and trust their lives in the hands of their god. Only

one passenger died on the way over; William Butten, who was a servant to Samuelli Fuller.

Soon enough they reached Cape Cod and everyone rejoiced for land. After some deliberation, they decided to go southwest and look for a place along the Hudson River to settle. After about a half of a day traveling the Hudson, rough winds fell upon them, and they returned to Cape Cod.

After getting onto land, the congregation praised their god for delivering them safely onto shore. They soon realized that they had no friends, no company, and no houses to arrive to. It was simply them and the new world. The Puritans put their faith in their god and set to build a new place to live. Having escaped from the oppression of their faith in England, they were free to have a better and richer life, living by the rules of their own religion.

Bradford documented everything that the Puritans did, from the reasons to their leaving England to their arrival and survival in the New World. The Pilgrims held to a Congregational rather than a Presbyterian form of church government," and were therefore abused in England. To escape this mistreatment, they fled to the new world in hopes of living freely, with their own religion.

The Puritans fled to an isolated place, knowing that they would live alone, but still choosing it over cruelty. They left their friends, their family and almost all of their belongings to come to a new place where they could worship without the maltreatment that they received in Europe. The [original] American dream, American government, American values, and

American ideologies were based on the Puritans beliefs and the struggles they went through” to escape into a life where everyone has an individual opportunity to achieve greatness. (Of Plymouth... Analysis) The Puritans were the founders of the American colonies, and therefore set the guidelines on what was important. Focusing on their religion, the founders believed that most everyone should be treated equally and should have the opportunities to achieve greatness. This idea founded the first American Dream of being a place of equal prospects. The Puritans helped establish the first definition of the American dream, making the New World a place of true opportunity where one can achieve anything they set their mind to. The son of John Clemens, a judge, and Jane Clemens, Samuel Langhorne Clements, who later took on the pseudonym of Mark Twain, grew up in the growing city of Hannibal, Missouri.

Twain was born on November 30, 1835. Living with six siblings, Samuel spent most of his time indoors due to many ailments. However, once recovering from these around the age of nine, Clemens joined the rest of his brothers and sisters outdoors. At the age of twelve, Samuel’s father died of pneumonia, and at thirteen, Samuel left school to become a printer’s apprentice. Two years later, he joined his brother’s newspaper as a printer and editorial assistant where he discovered his love for writing.

Even more than he loved writing, Samuel loved the river. At seventeen he left behind Hannibal for a printer’s job in St. Louis where he also became a licensed river pilot. When river trade was brought to a standstill by the Civil War in 1861, Clemens began working as a newspaper reporter for many

newspapers. In 1870, Clemens married Olivia Langdon, and they had four children, one of whom died in infancy and two who died in their twenties," (Biography). While writing, Clemens took on the name of Mark Twain.

Twain's early work was letters published in regional newspapers describing the adventure and risk of life on the frontier. Often he exaggerated greatly, to entertain readers.

" Astounding for both is quantity and quality, Twain's work is best known for its humorous rendering of human imperfection," (Emerson). Throughout his writing career he addressed human imperfection with good humor. Twain's later writings took on a more moralistic and gloomy tone, due to troubles in his personal life. Towards the end of his life, Twain was bankrupt due to failed investments, and the loss of his daughter, Susy, while on a lecture tour in Europe.

Twain died on April 21, 1910, of angina pectoris. " The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," opens up to a description of Hadleyburg, U. S. A. , as an upright and morally sound town. The town enjoys its national recognition for protecting every citizen from all temptation their entire life. Even the town's motto reads, " Lead us not into temptation. The tale describes the thoughts of a bitter and offended stranger who once visited Hadleyburg.

The stranger plots his revenge and decides to corrupt the entire town. He puts his plan into action when he brings a sack of money worth forty thousand dollars to the house of Mary and Edward Richards. Mary initially panics when left with the sack, until she reads the note attached.

The note tells of a corrupt ex-gambler who arrived in Hadleyburg with no money. Upon arriving, the man was given twenty dollars and wise advice from a citizen. The ex-gambler wants to repay the citizen who can be found by repeating the advice which he gave the man. Sealed inside the bag is a letter with the words of advice on it. When Edward arrives home, Mary explains what has happened and Edward jokes about keeping the money for himself.

Immediately, Edward goes to the newspaper office to advertise the sack. The next day Mary comes across a letter she received earlier from Howard Stephenson who claims to know the words the man once told the ex-gambler. Howard reveals the man as Goodson and says that Edward once helped Goodson and is now the heir of the money. Howard says the advice is, " You are far from being a bad man: go, and reform.

Eighteen other couples have received the same letter from " Howard," only with their names replacing that of Edwards. Each couple reconstructs an account of a " service" they performed for Goodson, and prepares to inherit the money. The residents of Hadleyburg gather at the town hall for the revealing of the identity of the sack's rightful owner.

As they open the sack, they find that Deacon Billson is the owner, and that the advice is still, " You are far from being a bad man. Go, and reform. " After the urging of the crowd, they open the sack to get the sealed envelope. Instead they find two, and they open the unmarked envelope first. The unmarked envelope contains a note that reads, " Go and reform - or mark

my words – someday, for your sins, you will die and go to hell or Hadleyburg – try and make it the former.

” The note exposes the greed of the people who claimed to be the rightful owners and the hypocrisy of the town. Then, one by one, the names of those who claimed to own the sack are read, causing them to be publically humiliated. Mary and Edward wait for their names to be called but the names are stopped after only eighteen. As the town celebrates the sole virtuous couple, their hypocrisy weighs down on them. As time passes Mary and Edward become sick and paranoid, and Edward finally admits to claiming to own the sack on his death bed, proving that the stranger did indeed, corrupt all of Hadleyburg. (Twain). The town of Hadleyburg is used as a mini-America, comparing the activities of many of those who lived there, to the different features of the American personality. “ The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” epitomizes the want and need for revenge, and the corruptness of society.

In the late nineteenth century, the time of the story, American was a fragmented nation. It was... a time when... unity was thrown into question as the common American citizen realized that her low-paid, back-breaking work was mainly contributing to the outlandish wealth of a few powerful men,” (Chang). At this time in America’s history, the majority of the population worked low wage jobs while the few wealthy got the money.

The uneven distribution of wealth kept our nation distinctly separated between the wealthy and the poor. Not only did we have our own citizens working for low paying jobs, but we had new immigrants coming in to reach

the so called “ American dream. “ These new Americans were often seduced by the “ American dream,” the still ubiquitous myth that if only one works hard, one will no doubt achieve prosperity,” (Chang).

However, little did these immigrants know that all the power, the money, the material possessions lay in the hands of the small upper class. These upper class people were fueled by the greed inside of them. They needed to have more than others in order for them to feel good about themselves, so while other people were breaking their backs to put food on the table, the wealthy were spending money that they did not actually need. Chang states that the “ myth of the American dream is an ideology, that is, a powerful abstract concept that aligns diverse individuals towards a common goal for the benefit of the powerful few,” (Chang. ) Chang views the American dream as something that brings Americans together, so that we can make money for the already rich. Helen Nebeker believes that “ for man, by nature corrupt, can never, even in a new world, resist temptation - especially in the form of gold or materialism,” (Nebeker). Humans are flawed and will always be tempted; it’s the nature of the species.

To resist temptation is an accomplishment in itself. When material things are set before someone, they will want it to have the advantage. In “ The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg,” “ Edward Richards’s immediate reaction to the stranger’s note is to print it in the newspaper, gleefully anticipating the “ noise it will make” in “ mak[ing] all the other town’s jealous” that Hadleyburg was entrusted with such a sum of money,” (Chang). As it comes down to it, the citizens of Hadleyburg do not necessarily want material

possessions but want the bliss of having every other town in the United States of America jealous that someone would trust them to give the money to the right person. Though portrayed as “ virtuous” and having good morals, the citizens of Hadleyburg only care about being better off and having a better reputation than everyone else. “ The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” by F. Scott Fitzgerald tells of a young boy, John T. Unger, from Hades, Mississippi. During his sophomore year, a new student named Percy Washington is placed in Unger’s dorm and will only speak to him.

One day, Washington invites John to his summer home in the West, an invitation John accepts. On their way to the house, Percy boasts that his father is the richest man in the world, stating that he owns a diamond bigger than the Ritz Carlton Hotel. Little does John know that the story Percy tells is true. Washington’s grandfather, in his time, decided to head west, leaving Virginia, and become part of the sheep and cattle ranching business. However, instead of finding sheep and cattle, he found not only a diamond mine, but a mountain consisting on one solid diamond. Percy’s grandfather immediately made his plans to protect the diamond and make sure no one in the outside world discovers the diamond.

He travels the world only selling a few diamonds at a time to avoid suspicion but also enough to make him very rich. To protect the mine and their wealth, the entire Washington family takes enormous measures to keep the diamond a secret. Any planes who wander into the area are immediately taken down and the pilots are kept in a dungeon. Anyone who enters the property is killed and their family is informed that they have died due to an illness

contracted while visiting the area. And thus far, no one has found out about the diamond.

When John and Percy arrive, John falls in love with Percy's sister Kismine, who accidentally tells John that he must be killed as well. That very night, airplanes launch an attack on the Washington property. John, Kismine, and Jasmine, another of Percy's sisters, escape while Percy and his parents decide to blow up the mountain rather than let anyone else have it. Left poor and alone, John, Kismine, and Jasmine are left to ponder their fate (Fitzgerald). Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in Saint Paul, Minnesota to Edward and Mary Fitzgerald on September 24, 1896. Fitzgerald's father failed as a wicker furniture manufacturer in Saint Paul and then a salesman for Procter and Gamble in New York.

When Edward was dismissed from his job in 1908, the family returned to Saint Paul and lived off of his wife's inheritance. As a child, Scott Fitzgerald attended Saint Paul Academy where his first signs of an interest in writing appeared. From 1911 through 1913 Fitzgerald attended a Catholic prep school in New Jersey where Father Sigourney Fay mentored him and encouraged him to reach his aspirations. Though Fitzgerald was a member of the Princeton Class of 1917, he ignored his studies and focused on his literary talent, which included writing scripts and songs for the Princeton Triangle Club musicals. Because of his grades, Fitzgerald was unlikely to graduate and therefore joined the army in 1917. While assigned to Camp Sheridan, Fitzgerald fell in love with the highly sought after, Zelda Sayre, the daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court judge. The pair's romance grew and

they were soon engaged. However, the war ended just before Fitzgerald was supposed to be sent overseas and he moved to New York City to find his fortune to marry Zelda.

However, Zelda was unwilling to wait for his money and she soon broke off the engagement. (Brucoli) Works Cited Adams, James Truslow. The Epic of America. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1931. Print. " Biography of Mark Twain.

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