

THE REFLECTION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN EARLY 20TH-CENTURY  
AMERICAN LITERATURE

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**Abstract**

The concept of the American Dream has long been a central theme in American cultural and literary discourse. This study examines how the American Dream is reflected and critically interpreted in early 20th-century American literature. By analyzing selected literary works, the research explores how authors portrayed ambition, social mobility, disillusionment, and moral conflict during a period marked by rapid industrialization and social change. The findings reveal that while the American Dream was initially associated with opportunity and success, it was increasingly depicted as unattainable or corrupted. This paper contributes to the understanding of the intersection between literature and socio-cultural ideals within the field of foreign languages and literature.

**Introduction.** The American Dream, broadly understood as the pursuit of prosperity, success, and upward social mobility, has played a defining role in shaping American identity. In the early 20th century, this ideal underwent significant transformation due to economic expansion, urbanization, and shifting social values. Literature of this period serves as a mirror reflecting both the aspirations and contradictions embedded within the American Dream.

Writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Theodore Dreiser, and Upton Sinclair critically engaged with the concept, revealing the complexities behind the promise of success. Rather than portraying the Dream as universally attainable, these authors often exposed its limitations, highlighting issues such as inequality, materialism, and moral decay.

This study aims to analyze how early 20th-century American literature reflects and critiques the American Dream. The research seeks to answer the following questions: How is the American Dream represented in literary texts of this period? What themes and symbols are used to convey its evolution? And to what extent do these representations align with or challenge the traditional understanding of the Dream?

**Methods.** This research adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach within the framework of literary studies. A selection of key literary works from the early 20th century was analyzed, including *The Great Gatsby*, *Sister Carrie*, and *The Jungle*. These texts were chosen due to their thematic relevance and their critical engagement with socio-economic realities.

The analysis focuses on identifying recurring themes, narrative techniques, and symbolic elements that relate to the American Dream. Concepts such as ambition, wealth, social mobility, and disillusionment were used as analytical categories. Additionally, a contextual approach was applied, taking into account the historical and cultural background of the period.

Secondary sources, including scholarly articles and literary critiques, were also reviewed to support the interpretation of primary texts and to ensure academic rigor.

**Results.** The analysis reveals several key patterns in the literary representation of the American Dream. First, the Dream is frequently associated with material success and social status. Characters often pursue wealth as a means of achieving personal fulfillment and recognition.

However, the findings also indicate a strong presence of disillusionment. In *The Great Gatsby*, the protagonist's pursuit of wealth and love ultimately leads to tragedy, illustrating the

emptiness behind superficial success. Similarly, *Sister Carrie* presents a complex portrayal of ambition, where success is achieved at the cost of moral compromise. In *The Jungle*, the Dream is depicted as an illusion for immigrants, who face exploitation and harsh living conditions.

Another significant finding is the use of symbolism. For instance, the green light in *The Great Gatsby* symbolizes unattainable aspirations, while urban settings often represent both opportunity and alienation.

Overall, the results demonstrate that early 20th-century literature presents a critical and often pessimistic view of the American Dream.

**Discussion.** The findings suggest that early 20th-century American literature plays a crucial role in redefining the American Dream. Rather than reinforcing the ideal as a universal truth, literary works of this period challenge its validity and expose its contradictions.

The shift from optimism to skepticism can be linked to broader socio-economic changes, including industrialization, class division, and the rise of consumer culture. Authors used their works as a platform to critique these developments, revealing how the Dream was increasingly influenced by materialism and inequality.

Furthermore, the portrayal of disillusionment reflects a growing awareness of the gap between aspiration and reality. This aligns with literary movements such as realism and naturalism, which emphasize the influence of environment and social conditions on individual outcomes.

From a foreign languages and literature perspective, the study highlights the importance of literary texts as tools for understanding cultural values and ideological shifts. The American Dream, as depicted in these works, becomes not only a national ideal but also a subject of critical examination.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, early 20th-century American literature offers a complex and often critical reflection of the American Dream. Through the works of prominent authors, the Dream is portrayed as both an ideal and a flawed concept shaped by socio-economic realities.

The study demonstrates that literature serves as a powerful medium for exploring cultural ideals and their transformations. By examining the representation of the American Dream, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of American literary traditions and their relevance within the field of foreign languages and literature.

## References

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