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Evolution of the American Dream

Achievement of the American Dream is and has always been a hope of many Americans. Like many other aspirations, however, the American Dream itself is continuously evolving. The promises of the modern American Dream differ considerably from the possibilities voiced by early Americans. As described by Crèvecoeur and Franklin, the original American Dream is the potential of economic success regardless of birth or class. However, David Kamp, Bharati Mukherjee, Jonathan Kozol, Malcolm Gladwell, and Bill McKibben present a less-idealistic modern American Dream. In comparison to the modest, attainable, and satisfying original, the modern American Dream is more extravagant, less accessible by the poor, and less fulfilling.

The early American Dream is distinguished by its moderation and lack of excess. Franklin refers to economically prosperous people as members of a “happy mediocrity” (529). Crèvecoeur uses a similar phrase, stating that America is characterized by “a pleasing uniformity of decent competence” (324). Their descriptions demonstrate that the early American Dream involves only moderate wealth. Franklin sees the upper-class in America as a very small minority, observing that “there are...very few that in Europe would be called rich” (529). Likewise, Crèvecoeur states that, in America, there are “no aristocratical families...no great refinements of luxury” (324), suggesting the original American Dream does not refer to wealth, but rather an ability to subsist.

In contrast, the modern American Dream is an expectation of extreme wealth. Kamp clearly describes this view, stating that the American Dream “has often been interpreted to mean ‘making it big’ or ‘striking it rich’”. This unrealistic perception of the American Dream epitomizes its excessiveness. Mukherjee also documents a remark made by a new immigrant to America that reveals the prodigal nature of the American Dream: “The two must-have cars for

the driveway are a Beemer and a Lexus” (83). Both cars named are expensive, luxurious vehicles, not realistically owned by most American families. The immigrant’s desire for them exemplifies the American Dream’s inflated promise of material wealth and excess.

Another defining characteristic of the original American Dream was its accessibility to the poor. Both Franklin and Crèvecoeur contend that the poor of any European country could be economically successful in America as long as they are willing to work. Franklin illustrates the possibility of economic prosperity by stating, “If they are poor, they begin first as servants or journeymen; and if they are sober, industrious, and frugal, they soon become masters, establish themselves in business, marry, raise families, and become respectable citizens” (531). Similarly, Crèvecoeur insists that hard work is the only requirement for success, suggesting that prosperity is available for anyone who works for it: “Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labor” (326).” Franklin also states that it is possible for children from poor families to become prosperous through apprenticeship. He declares, “It is easy for poor families to get their children instructed; for the artisans are so desirous of apprentices, that many of them will even give money to the parents” (533), demonstrating the possibility of upward social mobility for poor children in America.

Conversely, the modern authors suggest that the poor today are less able than those who are wealthier to achieve the American Dream due to childhood disadvantages. Gladwell states that the cultural context of poorer families causes their children to be less confident and thus less capable of achieving their ambitions. He observes that while rich children have a “sense of entitlement” that is “perfectly suited to succeeding in the modern world” (106), poor children are “characterized by ‘an emerging sense of distance, distrust and constraint,’” (105). Thus, the poor children are less capable of creating situations that suit their interests, and are disadvantaged in

trying to achieve economic success. Similarly, Kozol observes that though poor children strive for higher education and higher-paying careers, they are set behind by the insufficient education provided to their social class. He describes a student forced to take classes that prepare her for labor instead of higher education: “Mireya, for example, who had plans to go to college, told me that she had to take a sewing class last year and now was told she'd been assigned to take a class in hair-dressing as well”. Mireya’s disadvantage, caused by her inadequate education, demonstrates the modern American Dream’s inaccessibility to the poor.

A third defining characteristic of the original American Dream is its fulfilling nature, as prosperity satisfies the early Americans. Crèvecoeur describes the contentment of early American families, stating that “Wives and children, who before in vain demanded of [the father] a morsel of bread” became “fat and frolicsome” (326). He similarly states, “Happy those to whom this transition has served as a powerful spur to labor, to prosperity” (331), suggesting that the economic prosperity brought about by emigration to America makes people content. Franklin’s assertion, “every one will enjoy securely the profits of his industry” (530), reveals that the success of the early American Dream is fulfilling.

The modern American Dream is less satisfying because it promises such extreme wealth that even those who are seemingly prosperous are not content. McKibben clearly observes that “we’re richer, but we’re not happier”, illustrating that though people are living comfortably, they do not feel satisfied. Kamp contends that the high expectations of the American Dream causes people to continue striving for more instead of being grateful for what they have, causing discontentment. Describing the American Dream of modern society, he states, “The American Dream was now almost by definition unattainable, a moving target that eluded people’s grasp; nothing was ever enough. It compelled Americans to set unmeetable goals for themselves and

then consider themselves failures when these goals, inevitably, went unmet". McKibben also asserts that people today no longer recognize when they should be satisfied: "We imagine we're in that Little House on the Big Prairie, when most of us inhabit the Oversized House on the Little Cul de Sac" (44). This delusion suggests that even the wealthy are no longer satisfied and continue to want more.

The modern American Dream is less modest in terms of economic prosperity, less attainable by the poor, and less satisfying in comparison to the original American Dream. These changes are clearly portrayed in the stark contrasts between the writings of Crèvecoeur and Franklin, and those of Kozol, McKibben, Gladwell, Kamp, and Mukherjee. Though both visions of the American Dream involve a desire for economic prosperity, the moderation, accessibility, and fulfillment of the original American Dream is undermined by an exorbitant definition of economic success and inherent inequality in modern society. The American Dream is indeed a concept that has evolved through time.

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