

Matt Dunham

April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006

### **The Reality of the American ‘Dream’**

Often archetypically regarded as the home of the free and the land of the prosperous, America as a nation is at a unique crossroads in its history. Throughout the course of human events, a cyclical tendency of rising and falling can be seen. The Egyptians, the Romans, and the English, among others, all experienced periods of superiority over the rest of the world—intellectually, monetarily, and militarily. America, the United States, has reached that point. If the country wishes to survive the inevitable downfall, shown by the fates of the past empires, the American ‘dream’ must be washed of its unreality, and set forth for everyone to see what it really is: an idealistic attempt to give hope to all, rather than a tangible goal.

From birth, there is a pervasive sense of superiority among Americans over the rest of the world; this is not simply the parents’ fault. The blame must lie with far larger entities, such as the media as a whole, the bureaucracy the government has become, and the propaganda both pump out. As children progress through their formative years, the country they live in is so large and indefinite they think of it as they have been taught by what they’ve seen and heard. Their ideas, for the most part, are not their own, and they continue to build on implanted visions. Success is at every corner and dark alleyway of the imagination—the tabloids constantly report on the lavish lifestyles of the celebrity elite, movies portray unrealistic worlds where every problem has an easy solution, and children are taught that if they follow their dreams, they will come true. All of that misleads the youth of America, and leads to the main reason why the phrase ‘the

American dream' represents the oldest and deepest cliché in American life. The illusions give hope to the people that there is something better for them to strive for, something their current position in life lacks, and that they have it intrinsically within themselves to attain those things. Delbanco writes, "...hope in America must, therefore, make room at its center for [the] dogged companion of hope—the lurking suspicion that all our getting and spending amounts to nothing more than fidgeting while we wait for death," (3). He addresses the idea that every point has a counterpoint, and the America 'dream' certainly is no exception. At the very heart of the phrase lies a word whose definition is: "...a vision of fancy...indulged in when one is awake...especially as being unreal or idle," (OED). If dreaming is synonymous with indulging oneself in unreal visions of the future, then the American dream can never be construed with something completely positive.

Silas Lapham best conveys this idea, and through his version of the American dream one can see the sometimes-futile nature of it. He is an entrepreneur, one of the many of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in America, and his money came to him quickly. His rise to wealth embodies the stereotypical American dream—he and his family are from a rural portion of the country, cut off from the forward movement of the technology and ideas of the time, and they suddenly find themselves with the means to enter a higher class. However, the avenue of Silas's contemporary America is already so filled, and everything is moving so fast, that they quickly find themselves swept away. Silas tries to create a foothold for his paint business, and by extension his family, in the Brahman class of Boston, but he is stymied by his ignorance of the 'correct' way to behave. His American dream—the version he had built up in his own mind—did not account for this difference in sophistication so evident between himself and the class he wants to join.

Bromfield Corey, of the Brahmins, states, “They are very simple, unfashionable people, and unworldly...” (Howells 170). Silas hopes his money can get him into a segment of American life he thinks is better, but the reality of the situation remains. All of his ‘getting and spending’ only amounts to delaying the unavoidable outcome: his American dream cannot exist. It cannot exist because of the ingrained structure of American society, and because he does not have the means to bend it to his will.

Another character of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Tom Corey, lives a similar series of events, only in reverse. “He was rated as an energetic fellow,” Howells writes, “a little indefinite in aim, with the smallest amount of inspiration that can save a man from being commonplace,” (127). Tom does not have very many definite goals, and Howells points this out several times throughout the novel. His only noticeable ambition throughout the novel is to get into Silas’s business at some level. One wonders, though, if he does not have many goals, is he capable of having an American ‘dream’? Tom already has money and comfort enough for a lifetime, and is already part of that elusive Brahmin culture Lapham sought so readily, so he could not possibly want or dream for anything more. Instead of looking upward, he looks ‘downward’, so to speak; his dreams consist of a yearning for an ‘unsophisticated’ girl of a lower class. Penelope Lapham caught his attention, and she becomes his ‘vision of fancy’. His dream is not one of wealth; rather, it is one of happiness, and he sees himself attaining that through winning Penelope’s heart. Though not the same, this dream is as unrealistic as Silas’s was—the barriers between the classes are too large to overcome. By the end of the novel, Penelope and Tom are together, but they have only pseudo-happiness. Both families, the Coreys *and* the Laphams, regard the marriage with some level of disdain—“The marriage came after

so much sorry and trouble, and the fact was received with so much misgiving for the past and future, that it brought Lapham none of the triumph in which he had once exulted at the thought of an alliance with the Coreys,” (Howells 358); similarly, “But the differences remained uneffaced, if not uneffaceable between the Coreys and Tom Corey’s wife,” (359). The realization of his dream was tempered by the fact that his relationship would never be completely accepted, and that it was only an illusion of what he had hoped it could be. Again, all of Tom’s ‘getting and spending’, this time with regards to Penelope, was ultimately fruitless. He may have a wife, and he may love her, but he has partially alienated his family.

Family is a recurring theme of Edith Wharton’s *Summer*, and symbolizes the dreams and aspirations of many of her characters. Charity Royall, for instance, is bereft of her biological family, and is constantly wondering what life would have been like if she could remember them. Mr. Royall, her caretaker, also has no family, due to the early death of his wife; Charity is the only person that remains close to him, or close enough, at least, to feel each other’s presence. Finally, Lucius Harney has lost his purpose, as well, and is searching for it along with Charity and Mr. Royall. These three characters, in the interwoven nature of their conflict, represent another portion of the American dream: to love and be loved in return. Delbanco says, “It comes from John Winthrop’s lay sermon preached aboard the ship that was carrying him to America: ‘To love and live beloved is the soul’s paradise,’” (36). So, from the very earliest stages of America, this idea was believed to stand for something everyone should desire, and hopefully attain.

Charity’s first lines are, “‘How I hate everything’,” (Wharton 2). Right from the start, one can see that she is nowhere near accomplishing the above maxim. Her heart

has grown cold from her years of living in a very rural village, cut off from everything she thinks is important in life. Her short glimpse of Nettleton, the closest ‘metropolitan’ area, gave her just enough of a taste of the life she’d longed for that she thought she wanted more of it. Enter Lucius Harney, from Fifth Avenue in New York City, which is one of the most metropolitan square miles in the world, and she immediately latches onto him as a sort of connection to bigger and better things. However, it would be a disservice to her to imply that was the only reason she and Lucius were together—they also have reasons rooted deeply in the desire to be wanted. Charity comes from ‘the Mountain’; a place spoke of in hushed whispers and vague allusions. The people there are outlaws, living like cavemen and women, and are just as removed from the conventions of rural life as Charity is from urban life. She has never experienced what a real family can be like, such as the intimacy living with a close group of people for years brings, and vaguely wonders if Lucius could convey that. Mr. Royall is out of the question, at least at first, because of the repugnance of what he tried to do. Similarly, Lucius is adrift in this rural New England setting, though he’s drawing architecture from decades or a century before, for his profession. He has a fiancé, but Charity provides more of a real human connection to him. His work is impersonal—drawing houses requires little emotion—but the fact that he can share it with someone helps him. He never could have done that with his fiancé. Charity is able to express herself outside of the bounds of the class Lucius comes from, and she is not tainted by the metropolitan elitism his fiancé has been. Charity and Lucius start to care for each other, and an indistinct dream forms: they are beginning to actually love and be loved in return.

Of course, though, the reality of the dream they have set upon soon presents itself. Lucius, hailing from a huge and bustling metropolis such as New York, and Charity, from the very smallest of rural villages, contradict each other in the most fundamental ways. When they arrive in Nettleton for the Fourth of July, Lucius sees the celebration as a mockery of America—they end up eating in, “...a little open-air place in a back street that called itself a French restaurant...” (Wharton 96). For Charity, on the other hand, “The noise and colour of [the] holiday vision seemed to transform Nettleton into a metropolis,” (92). Their dream can never be a truth, but they fruitlessly pursue it for many months following that celebration. It gives them hope—the hope of the loved, the hope of the accepted, and the hope of the wanted. It shows them that there is reason to believe in a better life and a better version of the America they live in. When it doesn’t pan out for Lucius and Charity however, because the differences between them are so great, they separate. She’s pregnant, just as adrift as he was before he came, and desperate. She does the only thing she knows to do, and attempts to see her family on the Mountain. Charity has built up a false image of the place, much like the dream she built up with Lucius, and it shatters once she reaches her destination, again similarly to her fantasies about Lucius. Nothing like she thought it would be, she leaves the Mountain with two of the fundamental American dreams gone: family and love. Mr. Royall intervenes, though, and she realizes how comfortable they really are with each other. The vague dreams that made her say she hates everything at the beginning of the novel are gone, and now she recognizes Mr. Royall for whom he truly is: “‘I guess you’re good, too’,” she says, coming full circle from her first lines (Wharton 205).

Lastly, one cannot consider the American dream without thinking about the character of Jay Gatsby from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; in direct contrast to Charity Royall's state of mind at the end of *Summer*, Gatsby does not know when to give up his dreams. Nick Carraway prefaces his narration by asserting, "...it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out [his] interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men," (Fitzgerald 2). A weighty sentence, for sure, but if one dissects it, it makes perfect sense. The 'abortive sorrows' are simply ones that come to naught; they are fruitless. 'Short-winded elations' refer to the dreams of men, which are nothing more than the desires of all humankind to better themselves. Nick is referring to exactly what plagued all of the other characters—dreams, and by association all 'American' dreams, are temporary, ill conceived, and most often unreasonable. Gatsby has had a very long time to build up his image of Daisy, and his dreams are unrealistic when it comes to her. When Gatsby and Daisy finally come together, for the first time following that five-year span, Nick makes several key observations about the nature of their relationship. Fitzgerald writes, about the light on the end of Daisy's dock, that

Possibly it had occurred to [Gatsby] that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her...Now it was again a green light on the dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one (93).

Gatsby has lived for so long with the dream of Daisy, that it has given him false hope for his own life. The American dream, in all its stereotypical glory, is perhaps most wrongly lauded for giving hope to the American people. The tragic story of Gatsby's life is the perfect metaphor for an ideal gone wrong. He's poisoned himself with his dreams, and

he lives in a fake reality waiting for them to come to fruition; the American people have a tendency to do much the same, and therefore lose sight of what's of what they can *really* accomplish. Fitzgerald says, "There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of [Gatsby's] dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion," (95).

Can one fault Gatsby? Or Charity or the Laphams? Can the blame be placed upon them for their false dreams, or must it lie with America in general? Delbanco says

It is possible to chart the acceleration of locomotion and communications since the industrial age, the growing percentage of households with indoor plumbing and central heating since the Second World War, the jump in life expectancy since the discovery of antibiotics. But it is equally possible to graph the rising rates of illegitimacy, divorce, juvenile crime, and the expanding disparity between the incomes of the rich and the poor (6).

America is supposedly the leading nation in the world in terms of technology, healthcare, and education, but all around there are signs—clear, unmistakable signs—that this is not the truth. The truth is that those ideas are mere pipe dreams, very much like the ones all of these characters expressed in some way or another. They pursue them blindly, using all of their energy in trying to achieve something unreachable. "Gatsby believed in [that] green light...[and] the future that recedes year by year before us," and he wasn't completely wrong to; rather, he didn't see that it had already escaped him (Fitzgerald 180). The dreams one lives by are nothing without the initiative to do something about them, and even then they must be realistic—as in, they can be achieved with a great deal of perseverance and a small amount of luck. Most 'American dreams' are impractical, and are the product of a country that doesn't know which direction it wants to go.



Americans' lives cannot be determined by the American dream, because if they are, they "...beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past," (Fitzgerald 180). America's past is the same as its future: if not handled with care, they could be washed away like the failed dreams of Jay Gatsby, the Laphams, and Charity Royall.