



## **Self-Reliance And Individualism, Relevant For Preserving The Aesthetics And The Ideals Of The American Dream And Literature.**

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**Abstract :** Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan's letters were included in Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, in which he refers to himself as "The American," to support his claim that he was "The American" and to demonstrate the significance of the book's larger goal of inspiring Americans. The Great Gatsby, "Self-Reliance," The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin are revered works of American literature because each one of them both exemplifies the promise and fervor of the American experience and serves as a sobering reminder that the American dream has occasionally proven to be out of reach because of racial or social class barriers in a supposedly egalitarian society.

**Keywords :** American dream, individualism, resilience, fulfillment, own destiny.

**L'autonomie et l'individualisme, pertinents pour préserver l'esthétique et les idéaux du rêve et de la littérature américaines.**

**Résumé :** Les lettres d'Abel James et Benjamin Vaughan ont été incluses dans l'autobiographie de Benjamin Franklin, dans laquelle il s'identifie comme « l'Américain », pour soutenir son affirmation qu'il était « l'Américain » et pour démontrer l'importance de l'objectif plus large du livre d'inspirer les Américains. The Great Gatsby, « Self-Reliance », The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn et The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin sont des œuvres vénérées de la littérature américaine parce que chacune d'elles illustre à la fois la promesse et la ferveur de l'expérience américaine et sert de rappel qui donne à réfléchir que le rêve américain s'est parfois avéré hors de portée en raison des barrières raciales ou de classe sociale dans une société prétendument égalitaire.

**Mots-clés :** Rêve américain, individualisme, résilience, épanouissement, destin propre

### **Introduction**

The American dream has proven to be a resilient and distinctive idea over time, one that Americans have learned to comprehend and define in various ways as applicable to their own life stories and experiences. The American dream is shaped and defined by collective values, unlike any other national identity in the world, and is not defined or rooted in lineage, religion, or some aspects of a shared history. These values and principles are based on individualism, self-actualization, and self-reliance, and they encourage people to believe that by working hard and persevering, their lives can change for the better. Because they shape and preserve the mythology of the American experience, these values'

ostensibly timeless ideas about pursuing and defining what we now refer to as the American dream are deeply ingrained in the fabric of American culture. Because it encourages an aspirational experience that both lies and finds fulfillment in one's life or in the lives of other Americans, the American dream is a myth that endures and persists.

The Declaration of Independence's 1776 proclamation that people had the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"—pursuits that resulted in people finding some measure of fulfillment through hard work, tenacity, and perseverance—is where the resiliency of what is now understood to be the American dream can be examined and traced. Despite this, it wasn't until 1931 that the phrase "American Dream" actually received a formal definition.

The purpose of this essay is to explore and examine how particular works in the American literary can contribute to defining, constructing, and upholding the fundamental ideas of the American dream, according to which each person has limitless opportunities to achieve personal freedom and wealth. These issues are so important to the point of raising the questions : what could be the real new meanings behind the notion of American dream ? How can the notion of American dream be transcribed in literary books ? Is the American just related to making money and material wealth ? This goal is based on these definitions of the American dream and its close relationship with American literature. The key texts by Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, and F. Scott Fitzgerald that capture various facets and viewpoints of American culture and the American dream will be the subject of the paper.

In an intertextual study and a sociocritical analysis of Claude Duchet, through their works, I will weave and trace the individualism, independence, and personal freedom that make up the American dream, and I will consider why their works are still relevant in contemporary American culture by examining and analyzing *The Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin, *Self-Reliance* by Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. In the course of this research paper, I have decided to conduct a critical analysis on the for narrative by a clear-cut redefinition of the American dream by reconceptualizing it. This critical analysis based on a sociocritical study will probe the blueprinting of a new cultural identity and the revisited concept of American dream which is free of pride and selfishness with the final objective to show that the American dream is not just about making material riches which have failed to change the world.

## **REWRITING THE AMERICAN DREAM AND JUDGING THE CONCEPT : Reconceptualising the American Dream**

James Truslow Adams defined the "dream" in *The Epic of America*, written during the Great Depression, as a means of transportation that promises and makes possible all of its possibilities. Adams made the distinction that his interpretation of the American dream went beyond materialistic elements in an effort to avoid making class a factor. Adams claims:

However, there has also been the American dream, which is the idea of a country where everyone should have access to opportunities based on their abilities or achievements. This dream is not just one of expensive cars and high salaries, but also one of a society where men and women will be able to reach their full potential and be accepted for who they are, regardless of their differences. (Adams, p.404)

During the Great Depression, Adams' belief in the perseverance of the American dream and optimism served as a reminder that the ideals that made up the American dream were a way of thinking and a component of the American consciousness. Adams' "dream" was focused on the present rather than the past. He claims:

It has long been a dream to be able to reach our full potential as men and women, free from the constraints that older civilizations had slowly erected and the repression of social structures that had evolved for the benefit of classes rather than the simple human being of any and every class. And even among ourselves, that dream has been very imperfectly realized here in real life more than anywhere else. (Adams, p405)

According to Adams, it is because of Americans' unwavering optimism and dedication to the pursuit of achieving one's destiny that the American dream endures despite challenges and adversity. Jim Cullen, like Adams, emphasizes that the American dream is a quest for personal fulfillment and a vision of self-actualization rather than a journey about wealth or material things. Jim Cullen explores the complexities of the notion of the "American dream" in his 2003 book *American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. He contends that while the idea that things can change for the better with effort lies at its very core, there are actually several American dreams hidden behind the single phrase. Cullen clarifies:

The Dream also involves acknowledging another important reality: that beyond an abstract belief in possibility, there is no one American Dream. Instead there are many American Dreams, their appeal simultaneously resting on their variety and their specificity...Sometimes "better and richer and fuller" is defined in terms of money- in the contemporary United States, one could almost believe this is the only definition-but there are others. (Cullen, p7)

Interestingly, Cullen argues that our country is made up of different "American dreams" and that these various "dreams" are ultimately united by the timeless ideals of individualism, freedom, and self-reliance. Cullen claims:

However variegated its applications—which include the freedom to commit as well as freedom from commitment—all notions of freedom rest on a sense of agency, the idea that individuals have control over the course of their lives.

Agency, in turn, lies at the core of the American dream; the bedrock premise upon which all else depends...the Dream assumes that one can advance confidently in the direction of one's dream to live out an imagined life. (Cullen, p10)

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, which was so forcefully proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, and the phrase "the American Dream," which Cullen further suggests, are both parts of the American consciousness, however ambiguous or mythic they may be, because they give people the ideological and legal foundation they need to start down the path of realizing their version of the American dream.

Adams notes that the American dream served as the nation's unifying principle throughout all of the country's historical triumphs, setbacks, and tragedies. From the perspective of the Great Depression, he predicts :

If we fail, there is nothing left but the endless circle. But we have a long and difficult road to travel if we are to realize the American Dream in the life of our nation. The alternative is the failure of self-government, the underachievement of the average person, and the failure of everything that the American Dream represented in terms of human potential and hope (Adams, p416).

In the history of our country, the American experience has long been a story with a distinct life cycle. Individualism, self-actualization, and self-reliance are beliefs that have permeated every aspect of American culture. They hold that each person has the potential to realize their own potential and that life can change for the better. Examining the aesthetics and ideals of American national literature is a prerequisite to engaging in the conversation about defending and sustaining the American dream. *American Literature and the Dream*, by Fredrick Carpenter, provides an explanation :

The American dream has never been defined exactly, and probably never can be. It is both too various and too vague: many men have meant many different things by it...But "American Literature" has been defined more exactly and has been outlined in courses and embodied in anthologies. Most men agree that it is something very different from English literature, and many have sought to describe the difference...American literature has differed from English because of the constant and omnipresent influence of the American dream upon it. (Carpenter, p3)

He continues, arguing :

The various voices and multitude of perspectives within American Literature, without specifically referring to the American dream, inherently all have elements of the values that define the "dream." With the American dream capturing a distinct and unique national spirit, Carpenter claims that readers can learn about American beliefs by understanding how the "dream" has shaped our national literature. He contends, "The American dream, and the patterns of thinking and feeling which it has inspired, has given form and significance to American literature" (Carpenter, p10).

## **BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY, BLUEPRINTING THE AMERICAN DREAM**

### **1. Developing an american cultural identity**

America's national literature has been preoccupied with issues of self and identity from the very beginning. Americans have traditionally viewed themselves as idealists who are striving to create a just society that is ever-evolving and forward-thinking, even before the American Revolution. America started to develop its own unique cultural identity during the Revolutionary Era, and the novelty of this newly emerging culture inspired many to investigate the meaning of being an American. While political writings predominated during the Revolutionary War era, there was also a significant amount of literature written about the self-discovery, the formation of a new nation, and the emergence of a new culture. Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography is a significant work from the era that demonstrates the promise of America. In his autobiography, Franklin describes the "rags-to-riches" journey of a driven young man who started out in obscurity and, through tenacity and determination, succeeded in making something of his life. Franklin defined himself as someone whose idealistic success could be imitated and attained by all Americans with the intention of positioning himself as the archetypal American and as the promise for which America stood.

If Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography is the introductory story that lays the groundwork for the American dream in the national literature of America, then much of American literature serves as a vehicle for creating and maintaining the aesthetics of the American dream where individualism is celebrated, self-actualization is promoted, and self-reliance is encouraged. Written in four parts throughout the course of his later life, Benjamin Franklin's initial intention for his autobiography was to tell the story of his rise from poverty to a man of affluence for his son William. Not soon after he began to write his autobiography, the intention of the project evolved to establish his life narrative as the blueprint or a

model American in a burgeoning new nation. In the opening letter to his son in the *Autobiography*, Franklin writes:

Dear Son: I have ever had pleasures in obtaining any little anecdotes of my ancestors...Imagining it may be equally agreeable to you know the circumstances of my life...I sit down to write them for you. To which I have some other inducements. Having emerged from the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world, and having gone so far through life with a considerable share of felicity, the conducting means I made use of, which with the blessing of God well succeeded, my posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own situations and therefore fit to be imitated. (Franklin, p5)

Franklin understands the means that a person can use in order to create a life for himself or herself, to shape it into whatever form he or she may choose. This is why he casts himself in his *Autobiography* as the model American. Franklin's story, which was meant for everyone at the time, would serve as an inspiration for young Americans hoping to find success and prosperity in some way. In many ways, he sought to show how, just as America had been successful in forging itself into a nation, the representative American went about forging his own identity and way of life. Franklin, who refers to himself in his autobiography as "The American," included letters from Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan to support his decision to write his life story and the larger goal it would serve in motivating the people of America. Franklin's life served as an inspiration for young Americans to emulate in a nation that was rising, according to James and Vaughan. Vaughan penned the following in a letter dated January 31, 1783:

Sir, I solicit the history of your life from the following motives: Your history is so remarkable, that if you do not give it, somebody else will certainly give it; and perhaps so as nearly to do as much harm, as your own management of thing might do good. (Vaughan, p63)

In a similar vein, James pushed Franklin to write because he thought his account would be valuable in educating a young country. James adds the following to his letter to Franklin:

Life is uncertain as the preacher tells us; and what will the world say of kind, humane, and benevolent Ben. Franklin should leave his friends and the world deprived of so pleasing and profitable a work; a work which would be useful and entertaining not only to a few, but to millions? The influence writings under that class have on the minds of youth is very great, and has nowhere appeared to me so plain, as in our public friend's journals. (Franklin, p62)

Franklin was very aware that the literature of the time was influencing more and more people to view this "rising" nation as a place where the American dream in its earliest iteration could be realized, so he purposefully included these

letters in his Autobiography knowing they would both compliment and advertise his purpose. James continues in his letter by saying :

Should thine, for instance, when published, lead youth to equal the industry and temperance of thy early youth, what a blessing with that class would such a work be! I know of no character living, nor many of them put together, who has so much in his power as thyself to promote a greater spirit of industry and early attention to business, frugality, and temperance with the American youth. Not that I think the work would have no other merit and use in the world, far from it; but the first is of such vast importance that I know nothing that can equal it. (Franklin, p62)

Franklin's life story defined his version of the ideal American that anyone could aspire to or perhaps even become by offering values and virtues that are conducive to both personal and social improvement. The goal of Franklin's Autobiography changed from being a memoir to his son to a work of literature that encouraged individual pride and industry in a young nation, but his tongue and language remained straightforward and unadorned. The author's rhetorical goal in using straightforward language and a straightforward writing style was to make sure that his story could be understood by the average man rather than a small circle of elite individuals. He did this because he was aware that his story would spread and possibly reach the masses. James, for instance, discusses the vocabulary and grammar used in Franklin's narrative in his letter. James says:

This style of writing seems little gone out of vogue, and yet it is a very useful one; and your specimen of it may be particularly serviceable, as it will make a subject of comparison with the lives of various public cutthroats and intriguers, and with absurd monastic self-tormentors or vain literary triflers. If it encourages more writings of the same kind with your own, and induces more men to spend lives fit to be written, it will be worth all Plutarch's Lives put together. (James, p65)

Surprisingly, the content followed the language's simple style. The version of Franklin's autobiography that is most frequently read never explores or engages in the conversation of the later and more significant years of his life. It doesn't discuss his success in and of itself. By using himself as an example, Franklin hopes to show and explain how to develop the kind of character that makes success possible and attainable. While the autobiography serves as a guide for defining the ideal American citizen and achieving success, it also defines the philosophy of what one might come to understand as the American dream, according to which there are limitless opportunities for success if one chooses to be independent and control their own destiny.

## **2. Brushing-off pride and selfishness : incentives for making dreams real**

Franklin made an odd but deliberate effort to downplay his achievements and instead present himself as a role model for "all" Americans, which is

something that academic Steven Forde examines. "Franklin's downplaying of the aspects of his life and activity that put him too far above the average man" is what he calls the most thoroughgoing (366). Franklin made a point of defining himself as a common man who struggled but was adamant about pursuing his dreams, as evidenced by his account of his journey and initial arrival in Philadelphia. Franklin describes this in his autobiography :

In the evening I found myself very feverish, and went in to bed...my fever left me, and in the morning, crossing the ferry, I proceeded on my journey on foot, having fifty miles to Burlington, where I was told I would find boats that would carry me the rest of the way to Philadelphia...I have been the more particular in this description of my journey, and shall be so of my first entry into that city, that you may in your mind compare such unlikely beginnings with the figure I have since made there. I was in my working dress, my best clothes being to come round by sea. I was dirty from my journey; my pockets were stuffed out with shirts and stockings: I knew no soul, nor where to look for lodging (Franklin, p23-24).

The reader is given a narrative in the autobiography that emphasizes Franklin's modest upbringing without overly emphasizing his remarkable career. Franklin is clearly characterized as a role model for Americans because his life story shows the limitless opportunities for success in a society that is undergoing constant change. As Huang and Mulford further suggest, Franklin's *Autobiography* serves a purpose because "we are now aware that American dream image of honest, frugal, and hard-working Franklin was an invention that began with Franklin himself, an invention that at most basic level fostered individual dignity" (Franklin, p156).

Franklin's beliefs that anyone could improve their lot in life through talent, labor, living simply, and perseverance gained enormous popularity after his death in 1790 because what he created and defined through his own life emphasized the philosophy of the American dream. Because printers were particularly attached to Franklin's legacy and deeply proud of his life, many of them decided to print portions of his autobiography. His *Autobiography* had a significant impact on many people's lives, but most importantly, it was read by young Americans. How Franklin's illustration functioned "Evidence further suggests that Franklin had his most significant influence on the minds of many young people not from textbooks, but from individual readings after school," write Huang and Mulford. For instance, Silas Fenton of Marlborough, Massachusetts, who was 18 years old at the time, acquired a copy of Franklin's *Autobiography* in 1796. He stated, "I carefully read them and discovered many very valuable precepts, which I tried to treasure up and follow". It's interesting to note that the general culture of the early nineteenth century contributed to the success of Benjamin Franklin's ideas. Despite the fact that many people

understood that the success Franklin achieved in his life may not be possible for everyone, the optimism and possibility of it happening persisted. Another anecdote from Huang and Mulford about the influence of Franklin's tale on American culture. They write in their essay:

Having learned the printing business and studied Franklin's life, Orion Clemens, a printer in Missouri, wrote to his mother that he was "closely imitating" the great Franklin. For awhile he lived on bread and water, and he was amazed to discover how clear his mind had become on such a spare diet...His teenage brother, who was serving as his apprentice, often complained...Facing deteriorating environment, the younger brother, who was never paid a penny, left the print shop to explore a different life. He was Samuel Clemens, an inventive printer but perhaps a better writer, now known, of course, as Mark Twain. (Huang and Mulford, p151)

Orion Clemens, a printer from Missouri, claimed in a letter to his mother that he was "closely imitating" the great Franklin after studying his life and learning about the printing industry. He only consumed bread and water for a while, and he was surprised to find how sharp his mind had become on such a basic diet. He was an apprentice, and his younger brother frequently grumbled. The younger brother, who never received any compensation, left the print shop to pursue a different life because of the environment's deterioration. Samuel Clemens, now more famously known as Mark Twain, was a creative printer who may have been a better writer.

## **Conclusion**

For well over a century, scholars have investigated and studied the multifaceted and constantly changing idea of the American dream. The ideals outlined in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence have allowed for the idea of the American dream to develop over time, expanding and uniting racial and social classes. This is possible because the American culture and nation are not defined by a single shared history, religion, or language. Since the founding of the United States of America, the concepts at the heart of what many people refer to as the enduring American dream have existed. Individualism, self-actualization, and self-reliance are beliefs that have been painstakingly woven into the fabric of American culture from the founding to the present. One can understand these beliefs as having the potential to fulfill one's destiny and believing in the promise that life can be different.

This research paper is intended to show how, from one generation to the next and from one literary era to the next, these works have been revered as

sacred texts because, like the American dream, they are rooted in the themes of self-actualization and individualism.

The notion American dream as it was meant for decades as a social and material satisfaction has to be revisited. It has to be assimilated, on top of its original meaning, to the moral and cultural satisfaction of not only being an american, but a person embracing values as universal, uniting individuals from all walks of life for their betterment. As coined by James Truslow Adams a "life better, richer and fuller" in *Epic Of America*, in the four books we had under scrutiny, it is redefined as a social contract between people sharing respect and peaceful relationships as their values. The American dream will not just be about making money and material, but ensuring permanent coherence between national values and individual ideals. The American dream should not only be guided by making money and wealth, but by living in accordance with the positive morality and ideals advocated not only by America but also by other national and worldwide figures. Reading these four books is voicing out, both from our reading and the authors penning is that, money has failed or can't change the world, only active idealism and acting morality can change it.

The American experience is a story with a cycle of its own, but the development of the American dream has been inspired, recorded, and reflected in American national literature. The American literary canon has established itself as a significant and essential catalyst for artistic expression that upholds and safeguards the ideals and tenets of the American dream. Although the American experience is a cycle in and of itself, American national literature has inspired, documented, and reflected the evolution of the American dream. The American literary canon has established itself as an important and crucial catalyst for creative expression that upholds and safeguards the principles and tenets of the American dream. Franklin and Emerson believed in the unfailing sanctity of the self-reliant individual's innate ability to actualize his or her own destiny in a society full of limitless possibilities. Twain and Fitzgerald examined a muddled American dream where the guiding ideals of the "dream" are threatened by severe racial discrimination or tainted by excessive materialism and financial greed. *The Great Gatsby*, "Self-Reliance," *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* are revered works of American literature because they each show the promise and fervor of the American experience while also acting as sobering reminders that the American dream has occasionally proven to be out of reach because of racial or social class barriers in a supposedly egalitarian society. The constant presence of these literary works in the narrative of the American experience shows the crucial and role American literature serves for maintaining and criticizing the fundamental values that

construct and define the American dream in an ever-evolving society where the "dream" is shaped and redefined by one generation to another.

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