Chapter II

THE AMERICAN DREAM

The history of mankind, if it is to be summed up in a few words, is a long story of man’s unquenchable thirst for a better and a higher life. Man’s quest for a pious and sublime existence on this earth, though utopian, has guided his mind and actions right from the dawn of civilisation. Philosophers and saints, imaginative statesmen and great literary scholars, all alike have striven for creating an urge in man to give up his mundane and sterile existence for a higher moral and spiritual order. The American dream was, likewise, an insistent urge to make living compatible with the eternal dream. Man failed in the Garden of Eden but, given another chance, he might undo his greatest blunder; he might succeed in the New World. The garden-like geographical conditions of the "Virgin Land" instantly fascinated him and, in his yearning for spiritual reincarnation, it came to stand for the Earth’s Paradise with infinite possibilities of ethical and spiritual rejuvenation. The discovery of America rekindled the smouldering fire in man of realising a utopian world which, in the idyllic conditions of the fairyland, seemed quite realisable, and thus it at once became symbolic of the dreamy and ideal life, a millennium on the earth. Emphasising the significance of the American dream, Seareid observes: "It was rebirth, the eternal, haunting craving of men to be born again, the yearning for the second
chance. The New World was the second chance."

America is "the only nation that prides itself upon a
dream and gives its name to one, 'the American dream',," remarks
Trilling in his perceptive essay on Fitzgerald. But what does
this dream exactly stand for? The term has generally evoked
vague mystical connotations and, though appreciably used by
various critics, has defied an exact and precise definition.
Carpenter feels that the phrase "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." The absence
of a precise definition has encouraged different interpretations
of the term at the hands of critics who have used it to support
one theory or the other, sometimes quite alien to each other.
But howsoever vaguely understood, it has been the motivating
force of all historical and cultural experiences of the nation
and has been the recurrent theme in American literature. Though
the divergent interpretations and conflicting opinions, including
the relevant weight attached to different aspects of the American
dream, are quite confusing and make the phrase quite elusive, it

1 Eric Sevareid, "The American Dream", in The American
Dream in Literature, ed. Stanley A. Werner (New York:
Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 3. Hereafter the
compilation cited as American Dream.
2 Lionel Trilling, "F. Scott Fitzgerald", in Critical
Essays, p. 17.
3 Frederic I. Carpenter, American Literature and the Dream
Hereafter cited as American Literature.
cannot be simply dismissed as one of the vague generalisations. It is the most significant cultural phenomenon of America and a historic landmark in the eternal quest of man and, therefore, needs an accurate understanding. Adams, for the first time in 1931, seems to have specifically used and defined the phrase as that dream "of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank which is the greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought and welfare of the world." But curiously enough, in the concept of the American dream material progress was not sought to be discarded; rather it was regarded as essential to the realisation of a perfect and ideal society. The dream of a higher, richer and better life rested in the abundant physical and material progress which must in turn generate intrinsic pleasure and aid in the spiritual, moral and aesthetic regeneration of man. It thus came to stand for the ideal fusion of the two worlds, material and spiritual. Fitzgerald's dream too was particularly American and reflected this concept of the fusion of the ideal and the material. In 1936, in one of his "Crack-Up" essays, he described it as the "old dream of being an entire man in the Goethe-Byron-Shaw tradition, with an opulent American touch, a sort of combination of J.P. Morgan, Topham Beauclerk and St. Francis of Assisi...." The

5 Fitzgerald, Crack-Up, p. 84.
complex and generally misunderstood attitude of Fitzgerald towards money is quite compatible with American cultural experience where, even when acknowledging the corrupting power of money, it is recognised that an ideal life of one's imagination is hardly possible without the grace and mobility that money alone can provide. Mizener also defends this peculiarly American attitude and relates it to the concept of the American dream:

Americans are no doubt proud of their wealth and of the enterprise that is at least in part responsible for it. But they are seldom content with a material life; that kind of life seems to them, as Gatsby's life seemed to him after he lost faith in Daisy, material without being real. Only when it is animated by an ideal purpose does it seem real to them. This is, in fact, what we mean by the American dream, insofar as that dream is something possessed by each of us individually. (6)

It is, however, unfortunate to realise that man could not measure up to the concept and failed to maintain the delicate balance between the ideal and the material. Tempted by the more tangible gains, he brutally bartered the sanctity of the self and the purity of the imaginative ideal for material pleasures. Essentially a Platonic conception with all its "built-in contradictions", it has also posed several problems, and whenever the proportion of the components has been disturbed, it has created unimaginable confusion. Bewley points out

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to the peculiar dilemma of the American artist springing from this cultural blend of the material and the spiritual:

Essentially this phrase "American Dream" represents the romantic enlargement of the possibilities of life on a level at which the material and the spiritual have become inextricably confused. As such, it led inevitably toward the problem that has always confronted American artists dealing with American experience—the problem of determining the hidden boundary in the American vision of life at which the reality ends and the illusion begins. (7)

A brief survey of the various phases and interpretations it has passed through in the successive periods of American history will be helpful for a proper understanding of the concept.

The discovery of America was such a momentous event in the history of mankind that Eric Hoffer remarked: "America is the only new thing in history." The whole Europe turned its oppressed eyes to it in the hope of salvation from strife-torn and class-stricken society. Religious rivalries and persecutions, internal conflicts and wars during the sixteenth century had made it almost impossible for an independent and conscientious man to live peacefully. The New World seemed to him a place of solace and comfort. The West had always been supposed, in European legends, to contain an ideal land beyond the known limits of the world. It had both mythical and mystical connotations. The ideal land was laid bare before them now where

8 Quoted in Werner, American Dream, p. 3.
they could reshape their destinies according to their choice, free of the oppressions of any kind. Man once again became the master of his own fate. The discovery of America seemed almost a divine blessing for those who wanted to shape their lives according to their inner urges and free will. America became the symbol of hope for the human race. It came to stand for freedom, equality, justice, brotherhood and infinite possibilities. It became a haven for the oppressed, a beacon of hope for the depressed, symbolic of everything that enables man to mould his own destiny and be judged solely by his accomplishments. This hopeful attitude was bred into the bone of America and became "the hard kernel, the seed from which the American dream would grow into unpruned luxuriance...."

The pioneers who braved all the dangers posed by nature were determined to make a new start and reshape their destinies according to their aspirations. They were not the hunters of the gold-mines, supposed to be laid in the West, which was the prime motive of a few earlier missions. Emphasising the sacred and divine motive of the pioneers, Baritz observes:

It is necessary, in order to share their mood, to think of this Great Migration not as some merely human act, undertaken with whatever motives, but to think of it as a necessary step leading to nothing less than the redemption of the entire world. Should they fail, their

failure too would radiate outward, and the human race would know that a divine opportunity had been lost, that a chance for progress toward God had been missed. Thus it was that Winthrop thought of this first wave of immigrants not as mere human beings, not as mere colonists of England, but as God's agents, as community with a unique and compelling commission from God to build that city on a hill.... Mankind's destiny was at stake. (10)

It was with this lofty ideal of spiritual regeneration that the Puritans migrated to create a "city on a hill." Refuting the arguments of certain critics that the pioneers were not driven by any spiritual hunger and were none else but the persons driven out of England, by fear or force, Perry Miller remarks: "These were not—despite their analogies with Moses and the tribes of Israel—refugees seeking a promised land, but English scholars, soldiers and statesmen, taking the long way about in order that some day they, or their children, or at least their friends, might rule in Lambeth ... but it was unthinkable that children conceived and educated in Massachusetts and Connecticut would become preoccupied, not with universal Christendom, but with provincial merchandise." America, like Gatsby, had sprung from "Platonic conception" of itself and sought to offer man the opportunity of realizing the paradise on the earth. Referring to the lofty hopes of the Founding Fathers,


Miller observes:

On the Arbella Winthrop predicted that what "the most" maintain as truth only in profession, "we must bring into familiar and constant practice." To comprehend America, you have to comprehend this sentence. Americans would be Englishmen who attained in America what their English and European brethren were seeking. America meant opportunity because there potentiality might become act. The purification for which Calvinists on the Continent and Puritans in England had striven for three generations was to be wrought in a twinkling upon virgin soil. (12)

The New World, a repository of all hopes and aspirations, became the Garden of Eden where man resolved not to repeat the earlier folly; he was not to be duped by the materialistic Satan who had already corrupted man in Europe. The virgin soil of the new continent was abounding in material wealth, rich natural resources and garden-like purity, and in such favourable conditions man could create a heaven on the earth and lead a sublime life. Matter was to be sought and the abundant natural resources of the continent were certainly to be exploited, but the materially richer life was meant only to facilitate man to achieve spiritual enlightenment. The eternal yearning for a higher and better life could not be realised by men half-fed or starving; material well-being was considered essential for the moral regeneration of the soul-seekers, and so 'work-ethic' formed an important ingredient of the Puritan theology. This Calvinistic principle got fused into the New England Puritan creed resulting in the idea

12 Ibid., p. 8.
that one could seek matter but accept it only as a divine gift for one's better urges. The hope was that such an ideal fusion of the material and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible, could well lead the depraved humanity to redemption. Plato's *Republic* seemed to be taking a tangible form; man appeared to be approaching godliness. According to Allen, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* was appropriately located in "South America, in the New World. For the point is, it was a New World, a world where anything was possible, in which all dreams of perfection might be realised in actuality." America was both Utopia and fairyland, a land of infinite promises. Alluding to the infinite possibilities in the New World, Jefferson had declared: "I join you ... in branding as cowardly the idea that the human mind is incapable of further advances.... To preserve the freedom of the human mind ... every spirit should be ready to devote itself to martyrdom." Individual freedom to Jefferson was central to any hope of human redemption. French Revolution thus seemed to him a symbol of all the ideals man could aspire to, and echoing the regret of Rousseau that "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains", he forcefully championed the cause of individual liberty: "Were there but an Adam and an Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than as it now is." But

15 Ibid., p. 42.
there were certain "built-in contradictions" in the Dream itself and the philosophical aim hardly corresponded to the actual freedom allowed to the people.

Puritanism allowed every individual a right to interpret the Scriptures as seemed best to him and make his own religion out of it. There was no scope for religious domination or tyranny. But this right was not granted to all in New England because of the fear that it would lead to chaos. The interpretation of the Scriptures was supposed to be the work of the learned men and religious toleration was visibly absent. Extreme Puritans like Roger Williams, who preached religious liberty, were banished and Quakers like William Brewd, who advocated the principle of inner light, were lashed. "Bradford and Winthrop", comments Allen, "may have gone to America in order to worship God as they wished, but it was not a right they granted to others." Another contradiction arose out of the Puritans' belief in the original sin and arbitrary choice by God for salvation, the concept clearly brought out in Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." But, forced by the circumstances, the New England Puritan leaders advocated that one visible sign of God's Election could be the material prosperity, worldly success and distinction in one's vocation. Pointing out to the Puritanical belief of the close relationship between the economic growth and salvation, Allen observes:

16 Allen, The Urgent West, p. 22.
"Prosperity was taken to be the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It was as though material blessings were assumed to pour down upon the chosen of God. Riches and success became a proof of Election." This contradiction, that material success went hand in hand with salvation, or that lack of worldly success was a visible evidence of one's rejection by God, proved disastrous for the dream of spiritual regeneration. Amassing of wealth, as long as conscience was pure, became, according to this precept, the greatest service of God. The intentions of the Puritan leaders might have been to inculcate in the people a spirit of hard work, industry and frugality, the qualities that were considered essential for their survival in the wilderness of the New World. Giving religious sanction to the pursuit of wealth was intended to encourage the settlers to exploit the infinite material promises of the promised land. But in their eagerness to establish themselves firmly in the New World and realise their higher objectives, the Founding Fathers, in according this religious sanction, ignored the general pattern of human behaviour. No other precept proved more harmful to the realisation of the American dream than this one because with each succeeding generation the original idea of the Founding Fathers got lost in the temptation of tangible gains, and the ideal fusion of the material with spiritual world was gradually eroded to the increasing advantage of the former, and ultimately

17 Ibid., p. 25.
in the late nineteenth century, the spiritual content got largely eliminated. But despite these inherent contradictions, the Dream always remained an integral part of the American thought and imagination. After all, the New World represented the chance of a wholly new start which had probably never happened in history before. The promised land provided them an occasion where men could live as they desired, according to the highest ideals, unmolested and uncontaminated by evil forces. It was "God's own country" and in this "man's paradise" everything could be made possible.

The ideal of democracy or equality has always remained an integral part of the American dream. Originally the settlers might have been forced by the nature of their existence in the New World, where they had to contend with the dangers both from the wild beasts and the Red Indians, to either live collectively or perish. In the circumstances they could survive only if the general will of the settlers prevailed. Every congregation was, therefore, accorded a democratic character where every individual counted. They were all equal and members of the family of God whose head was not a lord but Christ Himself. It was a place where people worked not for the glory of a few rich nobles or kings but for themselves. Free of the classes and ranks, the New World became an inspiring source to the creative individuals. Individualism was not to be sacrificed at the altar of the foolish will of a few lords, as was common in the European countries. But
this was the ideal and, no doubt, historically "the dream of realising a heavenly commonwealth had been projected upon America, but the old habits of thought and the old ways of life usually dominated the early colonies." Consequently, a new orthodoxy crept in the Puritan doctrines. A few dreamy enthusiasts like Jonathan Edwards hoped and worked for the establishment of a millennium on the earth, a 'kingdom of God' in the West, but "for the most part colonial Americans followed the old traditions, and even when they indulged in dreams of a new world, felt them to be doubtful, and perhaps heretical." The argument seems convincing because the large number of people from all parts of Europe who migrated after the original settlers could not be supposed to be driven by the ideal considerations, most of them migrating for purely economic reasons. But the Dream always remained the driving force of the visionary individuals who were largely responsible for turning the tide of American history. The American Revolution, one of the most significant points in the national history, was the final blow to the outside authority and exhibited the determination of the Americans to carve out the golden dish for themselves. The Declaration of Independence of 1776 remains the greatest historical document lending an official sanction to the Dream. The unanimous Declaration drawn up by Jefferson declares: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,

18 Carpenter, American Literature, p. 7.
that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Never in the history of mankind such a revolutionary thing had happened. The sentence represented the fulfilment of the eternal aspirations of man. The "quasi-religious" assumptions of freedom and equality as the inalienable rights of all individuals became the basis of the democratic ideal. The Declaration might have certain ambiguities, as suggested by Allen, but it became the ideal upon which the foundation of the nation was to be laid. The importance of the Declaration must not be discounted because even today, after two hundred years of the Declaration, in many countries, liberty is not admitted as every person's inalienable right. It would be no exaggeration to say that the Declaration contained the seeds of Rousseau's famous lament, or the French Revolution, or all the succeeding revolutions whereby man has sought to free himself from the shackles of slavery of various types.

Six years after this Declaration, Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, a French immigrant farming in New York State, wrote his classic essay, 'What is an American?' affirming the ideals of America. He found that America is not composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess everything, and a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no aristocratic families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great

19 See Allen, *The Urgent West*, p. 4.
manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinement of luxuries. The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe.... We are all animated by the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself.... We have no princes, for whom we toil, starve and bleed: we are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free as he ought to be.... (20)

Along with painting this idyllic picture of the American society in the 18th Century, he also describes an American as "a new man, who acts on new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labour, he has passed from toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence.—This is an American." He claims the American society as the most perfect one where man enjoys unhindered freedom; his picture is that of the millennium existing on the earth, the Dream realised. But at this stage it is essential to understand the fundamental bases of this ideal society which are clearly indicated in this essay. Crevecoeur emphasises that there are no great manufacturers employing thousands of men or in other words there are no big industries, and that all the Americans are "tillers of the earth", meaning, thereby that they are essentially an agrarian society. The shift from the agrarian society

20 Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, "What is an American?", in American Dream, p. 12.
21 Ibid., p. 15.
to the industrial society was the primary reason that turned 'the most perfect society' into the most restless society of the world.

Jefferson's view of an ideal society was, in sharp contrast to Franklin's aristocratic capitalism, the agrarian democracy. Jefferson's ideal was a self-contained, self-sufficient farm identified with a man and his family. Co-operation rather than competition among men was to be the governing principle of the agrarian society which envisaged free, contented and self-sufficient individuals with the least interference from the government, and it was implied that "the best government is that which governed the least." Jefferson held that agriculture was man's most exalted pursuit and that land was the most legitimate and precious form of wealth. He imagined an ideal society with an abiding conviction that free individual's identity should be held sacred and that his dignity and integrity should at no cost be violated. In one of his most famous passages, he exalted the farmer to the highest position:

Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which He keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth... The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government as sores do to the strength of the human body. (22)

It was the strongest indictment of the craze for industrialisation and urbanisation that was soon to take over America.

22 Quoted in Bewley, The Eccentric Design, p. 44.
By the end of the eighteenth century a new mood had over­
taken the American people. With the Declaration of Political
Independence, they yearned to get rid of the religious dogmas
that had lately crept into Puritanism, and consequently an
extreme reaction set in. In Boston, if not in the whole of New
England, Puritanism gave way to Unitarianism which, besides
other doctrines, did not believe in the original sin of man. It
preached that man was fundamentally good and not depraved as
stressed by Puritanism, and also that God was kind and benevolent,
and advocated against the Puritan concept of the 'angry God' and
His 'arbitrary election'. Thus Unitarianism was another mile­
stone on the road of the realisation of the American dream as,
it was argued, depraved human beings could not be supposed to
realise a spiritually higher life. Unitarianism, therefore,
stressed the original innocence and goodness of man to usher in
the Golden Age in the New World. As a reaction against the rigid
and rationalistic formulations of Unitarianism, Transcendentallw
became the philosophical creed of a new wave of resurgence.
Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman were the three great exponents of
this new and refreshing concept and feverishly preached the gospel
of the American dream. Though largely a vague mystical doctrine,
Transcendentalism expressed "an attitude of mind and quality of
spirit typically American. It described the philosophy of
American dream." It raised man to the highest status and

23 Carpenter, American Literature, p. 11.
dreamed of making the New World better by following 'the discipline of nature' rather than the traditions of man. It completely broke away with the past and advocated the gospel of individual conscience and private intuitions. The best guide of man, according to Transcendentalism, was not the rules and laws laid down by the Church and the State, but the intuitive understanding of man. The German imperatives of "God, freedom, and immortality" were freely translated into "the American principles of natural law, liberty and the infinite potentiality of the individual." Individualism, Democracy, Idealism and Optimism, all the component parts of the American dream, thus found the fullest exposition in Transcendentalism. Considering an individual as the most important unit of the whole social system, Transcendentalists rejected the early Puritans who had "sought to 'purify' the church of its worldliness" and argued that "all institutions were inevitably corrupt." They, therefore, "appealed anew to the kingdom of God, within the individual self." Puritans, even while rejecting Catholicism and appealing to the Protestant ideal of individual freedom, had retained the Catholic ideal of institutional authority. The Transcendental dreamers, argues Carpenter, "merely carried the logic of puritan 'piety' to its inevitable conclusion. Opposing the genteel traditionalists who developed the logic of puritan

24 Ibid., p. 12.
'moralism', the transcendentalists preached that 'the kingdom of God' exists within every self, and that through 'self-reliance' it may be realized on earth." Though they were influenced by the Romantics of England, they did not seek an escape from the corrupt society. They also craved a millennium but "unlike the romantic dreamers of a perfect age to come, these American idealists sought to project the opportunities of the present into the future, and to realize them through individual thought and efforts." Ralph Waldo Emerson became the chief exponent of the Transcendental movement which markedly influenced, one way or the other, the imagination of most of the American writers and thinkers. He embodied in himself the various component parts of the American dream. He denounced all sorts of institutions and institutional authority, and advocated the principle of individual communing with God through nature. His optimism about man has sometimes been regarded as facile but Emerson was convinced that man was capable of infinite goodness, and if he was corrupted, it was only through the society. For him evil scarcely exists and every "natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact." In his essay 'Nature', his optimism exhorts the Americans:

27 Ibid., p. 16.
Know then that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see. All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do. Adam called his house, heaven and earth; Caesar called his house, Rome; you perhaps call yours a cobbler’s trade; a hundred acres of ploughed land; or a scholar’s garret. Yet line for line and point for point your dominion is as great as theirs, though without fine names. (29)

By equating an ordinary man with Adam and Caesar, he glorified the New Man whose liberty and equality he advocated almost in Rousseauistic terms: "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of everyone of its members. Society is a joint stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and the culture of the eater." He pleaded a total break with not only the choking restrictions of the society, but also with the traditional past of Europe, both of which, he thought, smothered the individualism of the New Man. Only then, in his opinion, could the New World be self-reliant and achieve the dream of realising a better, higher and ideal life. While political freedom had been achieved with the Declaration of Independence, he still found American thinkers and writers looking to Europe for guidance and inspiration. He, therefore, exhorted the American thinker to shed away his servile attitude

29 Quoted in Allen, The Urgent West, p. 141.
and inferiority complex and accomplish the idea of self-reliance on the national level. "The American Scholar" attacks the pedantry and traditionalism in American literature and stresses the need for free thinking for a free nation and has, therefore, appropriately been described as America's intellectual Declaration of Independence. Announcing that "we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe", it makes the boldest intellectual declaration:

> We will walk on our feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. The study of letters shall no longer be a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence. The dread of man and the love of man shall be a wall of defence and wreath of joy around all. A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men. (30)

Evaluating Emerson's contribution to the concept of the American dream, Adams observes: "The American Dream ... was not a logical concept of thought. Like every great thought that has stirred and advanced humanity, it was a religious emotion, a great act of faith, a courageous leap into the dark unknown. As long as that dream persists to strengthen the heart of man, Emerson will remain one of its prophets."

While Emerson spelt out the philosophical creed, Henry David Thoreau, an arch-individualist and a complete non-

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30 Emerson, "The American Scholar", The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 63.

31 Adams, The Epic of America, p. 198.
conformist, tried to put into practice the maxims of the philosopher. The precepts contained in 'The American Scholar' and 'Self-Reliance' found their true manifestation in the experiments of Thoreau. He went ahead of his master and condemned any compromise with one's conscience. He advocated in "Civil Disobedience" that man's primary duty was to his own conscience. Finding that life of conformity that most of the people led was utterly meaningless, he declared that he "did not wish to live what was not life...." The realisation that most of the acts that men perform in their lives are frivolous and have no spiritual significance pained him, and he went out to the woods to live a life of inner fulfilment:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life.... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.... (33)

Through his spiritual and moral experiments, Thoreau did more than any other literary figure of the Transcendental Movement to prove that the essential life was not the fret and fury of the quotidian existence, but the spiritual life lived through


33 Ibid., pp. 81-82.
one's own conscience. He learned from his unique experiment of the sojourn at Walden that "if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours." Thus Thoreau belied all the fears that the American dream was not realisable and emphasised that man was capable of leading a divine life according to the dictates of his conscience, and, if he was determined, no impediments could stand in his way. He declared: "No man loses ever on a lower level by magnanimity on a higher. Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul." His quest of the self was purely spiritual, and in his creed the material content of the American dream was sought to be completely eliminated.

The democratic ideal found its chief votary in Walt Whitman who centred his attention upon the New Man, and thus became the champion of the dreams and aspirations of the common man. Democracy became a religion for him, and he sang songs that eulogised the actions and the feelings of the New Man. He broke away with the past traditions, rejected the aristocratic culture of the European nations and celebrated democracy and the common man with his 'barbaric yawp'. The ideal Walt Whitman was "a

34 Ibid., p. 233.
35 Ibid., p. 293.
personification of that democratic dream which Emerson had earlier described abstractedly." Carpenter rightly points out that Whitman "personified, in poetry and in life, the American dream of popular democracy, insofar as that differed from, and came into conflict with, the genteel tradition of the American past, in which the young Walter had been reared." His ideal was the New World, as an antithesis of Europe. As Emerson had urged upon the American scholar to reject "the courtly muses of Europe", in the same way Whitman called upon his muse to "migrate from Greece and Ionia" and inspire the vulgar, rough but innocent and honest poets of the New World. He sang about everything that was American and rejected everything that was European because Europeanised America, he felt, could not realise the American dream. The most common man seemed divine to him because he possessed the qualities common to all, and to glorify the commonest living thing in all nature—the grass—he called his poetry, *Leaves of Grass*. He presented America as the custodian of the future of humanity and stressed the unique position of the Americans in his poem, "Pioneers! 0 Pioneers!!":

"We, the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
Pioneers! 0 Pioneers!!"

While he lauded the material achievements of America, he also exulted at finding the American

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36 Carpenter, *American Literature*, p. 43.
37 Ibid., p. 45.
idealism returning to the Oriental fold of spiritualism. In "Passage to India", he urges: "Passage indeed 0 soul to primal thought/ Not lands and seas alone...." Thus Whitman once again blended the material and the spiritual aspects of the American dream and found America bound for her unique destiny. His preface to Leaves of Grass is the greatest document that places America in a unique position. He found that America was the spiritual manifestation of God's meaning: "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States are themselves essentially the greatest poem.... Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations." The poetical nature of the United States can largely be attributed to the moral and the spiritual possibilities of the American dream. And what gives her a dynamic character is not the glorious past or the feudal or aristocratic character of the society or her conquests because America has none of these. Her people and their love for freedom and equality, individualism and independence, positive thinking and open-mindedness, self-esteem and optimism are what, according to Whitman, make this nation unique and destined to realise the Dream. This lofty and ideal America, he pleaded, must be seen and sung in its new form, and not in the tradition of the...

39 Ibid., p. 349.
40 Ibid., p. 29.
European poets. Whitman, therefore, paid scant respect to the requirements of the established traditions of poetry concerning diction, rhyme, rhythm or metre and talked plain about everything and everyone. The national bard of America considered even Shakespeare belonging "essentially to the buried past" and insisted: "Defiant of ostensible literary and other conventions, I avowedly chant 'the great pride of man in himself', and permit it to be more or less a motif of nearly all my verse. I think this pride indispensable to an American." The whole panorama of the American life becomes his subject matter and, to affirm his faith in the democratic ideal, he accords equal status even to the pettiest thing, a leaf of grass: "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars."

While the Transcendentalists were preaching the original gospel of individual freedom in an egalitarian society and drawing the attention of the people towards the idea America was born with, certain fundamental changes with far-reaching consequences were taking shape. In the nineteenth century, frontier had not completely disappeared, as is the case today. Frontier, symbolic of the movement towards the West, remained the great conditioning factor of the American character. It represented the American sense of possibility, and in a way stood for the concept of the infinite possibilities of man's achievement. It thus always was "one of the main components of the American

41 Ibid., p. 379.
42 Ibid., p. 97.
dream, one might say of America as a dream—of uninhibited freedom. Turner considers the frontier as the most significant aspect of America as a dream and believes that democracy is a product of the frontier. Living in the wilderness fostered individualism, independence and confidence in the common man that gave encouragement to the self-government. The New World was a clean slate on which the idealists could transcribe their dreams for a better life. Turner concludes that "the very fact of wilderness appealed to men as a fair, blank page on which to write a new chapter in the story of man's struggle for a higher type of society." The natural difficulties that people had to suffer in their westward movement made them tough, intelligent and clever and they always depended upon their ingenuity and improvisation for overcoming various hurdles. They adapted themselves to the new environment and were always prepared to face the worst. It also led them to discover newer means of trade and enterprise and the situation of their existence brought them ultimately to discover the new manufacturing process. The modern demon, MACHINE, was thus discovered in America first of all to overcome the difficulties man faced in harnessing nature. The first four decades of the nineteenth century, the initial stages of the new mechanical discoveries,

43 Allen, *The Urgent West*, p. 58.


were the decades of mixed reactions towards the new machines, but as Leo Marx, in his perceptive study, *Machine in the Garden* (1964), has shown that the general feeling of the people, barring a few intellectuals like Hawthorne and Thoreau, was in favour of the new inventions. They were great aids to man, they supposed. The railroad network fast expanded throughout the country and gave mobility to an already mobile race. But the Civil War proved to be the decisive factor. The "Gilded Age", as Twain called the years after the Civil War, changed the whole complexion of the continent. Enormous expansion of the industry in the North because of the Civil War was the major factor that brought pragmatic and materialistic outlook of the entrepreneurs to the forefront. Machine which was hitherto considered assisting man in solving his problems became the symbol of struggle and victory. Unscrupulous individuals exploited the situation to become millionaires and financial greed appeared to be the motivating force behind the manoeuvres of the industrialists. Rapid industrialisation was the natural outcome.

The thirteen virtues including those of frugality, industry, diligence, perseverance and self-reliance, as preached by Benjamin Franklin, for raising the individual to a higher plane, got their contemporary spokesman in Horatio Alger who turned the spiritual and moral meaning of the American dream into the material concept of the self-made man. The quintessence of the success myth as represented by Alger hero is that every young man is capable of rising to the topmost rung of the ladder of the
worldly success. Analysing the concept Lynn remarks: "The Alger hero represents a triumphant combination—and reduction to the lowest common denominator—of the most popular concepts of the nineteenth century American society. The belief in the potential greatness of the common man, the glorification of individual effort and accomplishment, the equation of the pursuit of money with the pursuit of happiness and of business success with spiritual grace: simply to mention these concepts is to comprehend the brilliance of Alger's synthesis." Alger wrote about one hundred thirty stories, from 1866 onwards, for young lads representing poor boys struggling through poverty and squalor of the city life, and through diligence, industry and wisdom, reaching the zenith of wealth and fame. He also exploited the biographies of the self-made statesmen like President Benjamin Franklin and James A. Garfield. "From Log Cabin to White House" or "From Rags to Riches", became the motto of almost every young American, and in the changing environment it all seemed quite possible. During these years, Curti observes, faith in the possibility of fame and fortune for any man possessing the virtues of perseverance, frugality, industry and intelligence thus became more popularised than ever before.


Industrialisation and the consequential urbanisation in America rose steeply at an unprecedented rate during the last three decades of the nineteenth century when these stories were published. In a big city, an unknown, unaided boy rising to the top fascinated the romantic imagination of the young Americans and this success myth became a grand dream replacing the original idea of the American dream. It was more easily realisable, more tangible and more fruitful and, therefore, caught their fancy easily. In the hands of Horatio Alger, worldly success became the most pious goal to be pursued by every individual. The Alger hero almost changed the entire structure of American civilisation which, as has been seen, was founded on the agrarian, democratic self-reliance wherein there was no use for the city and modern economy based on big industries. The wide popularity of the Alger stories during the last decades of the nineteenth century reveals the change in the outlook of the contemporary American world. Jinzaki ridicules the pretentious nature and dangerous effect of these stories as under:

The belief that any one could rise in the world, if only he strove for success, was thus hammered into the mind of the people and formed the central thought of the "Lowbrow", majority of the American people at that time. Since the years following the Civil War were suffering from the problems of the contraction of credit, the downward trend in farm prices, the recurring periods of depression and unemployment, and the small enterprise under pressure of the big business, the men and women responsible for the popularisation of this belief might have felt the necessity to drive away a general feeling of unrest by making them reaffirm that there still existed a traditional American dream—the ideal of Jacksonian democracy: the possibility of eternal prosperity and
success through free competition, laissez-faire, and the equality of opportunity in the society of old middle-class independent farmers. (48)

No doubt, the dramatic rate of industrial growth transformed the face of America at an incredible speed and made it a world-power, but the consequences of the mad pursuit of wealth and worldly success rang finally the death-knell of the Dream. Bewley points out that the American dream "which had started innocently enough when there had been a vast unexploited continent to support the possibilities it seemed to promise, had become brutalized as the only means of realizing them had more and more centred in money with the passing of the frontier and the advent of the Gilded Age." The American dream literally turned into the American nightmare. Social life broke up and everyone felt that the results were really disgusting. The alarming results of this mad race have been perceptively summarized by Lynn:

But when children born in the year of Ragged Dick began to come of age in the late 30's and early 90's they discovered that America's spectacular growth had also spawned a host of problems too big to be ignored. Industrial warfare, political explosions in the farm-belt, rising popular bitterness about monopolies and outbursts of Xenophobic hatred were simply the most sensational signs of social trouble. The soaring divorce rate and the increased concern of the medical profession with nervous disorders and mutual breakdowns...


were evidence that the maladjustments generated by the great race of American life were personal as well as public. (50)

The predicament of the middle and the lower classes was indeed inexplicable. Within a few years, America of their memory had vanished. Everything in this pretty land of theirs seemed unfamiliar and foreign. The immigration and the industrialisation increased the population to unmanageable proportions and the common man seemed bewildered. The belching smoke and soot from the new factories coarsened the lives of the people. Everyone there was a stranger. Villages gave place to towns which in turn grew into cities of incredible size. And in this mobile world of American society, a poor man was supposed to rise. Failure was a sign of some personal flaws, physical as well as moral. But in actual life and the strenuous conditions of the society everyone could not be the Alger hero, and this resulted in the widespread frustration leading to the alarming rate of mental disorder and suicides. Marriages broke down because of the failure of the men to rise in life. Sexual relations also got corrupted because of the craze for money and mobility. Love became a trading commodity. Everywhere there was the moral degradation. Even success did not necessarily mean happiness; in the stiff competition of the free enterprise, monotony, boredom and exhaustion left even a successful man frustrated. The materialistic culture thus

50 Lynn, The Dream of Success, p. 9.
engendered unhappiness everywhere.

In this transitional period, when all the old values that America had aspired to in terms of the American dream were replaced by the monotonous, dull and dreary stories of success, great writers like Norris and Dreiser cried to put a halt to this malady. They found no relationship between the historic America and the America of the last decades of the nineteenth century. Henry James complained of the lack of literary imagination in the United States and William James remarked that "the exclusive worship of the bitch goddess SUCCESS ... is our national disease." Van Wyck Brooks also scolded the American writers for their failure "to move the soul of America from the accumulation of dollars." Devotion to the dollar became the ruling passion of the Americans and, in the altered conditions, the spiritual content of the American dream became almost redundant. John C. Van Dyke in 1903 said in his book, The Money God: "Everyone knows that success with the great masses spells money. It is money that the new generation expects to win, and it is money that the parents want them to win. The boy will make it, and the girl, if she is not a goose, will marry it. They will get it in one way or another." They all seemed to be following the advice of Andrew Carnegie that the "Creator made man a success-machine and failure is as abnormal to him as

51 Quoted in Lynn, The Dream of Success, p. 248.
Thus we find that the American dream was originally conceived as a spiritual urge for a materially richer and morally higher life. The Dream was in fact compatible with the intense desire of man to start anew and redeem the suffering humanity. The geographical conditions of the Virgin Land were, in a way, responsible for the heightened vision of the Founding Fathers. In the New World, man was at liberty to carve out a new destiny for himself and it seemed quite probable that his infinite potentialities would be turned into realities. As happens with every new idea, it also passed through different phases and varying interpretations at the hands of succeeding generations. While the visionary statesmen wove the Dream into the political fabric of the country, the Transcendental writers made it an integral part of the American cultural experience. But during the nineteenth century, after the Civil War, the established social structure of America started shattering. The concept of the agrarian society, one of the conditioning factors for the realisation of the American dream, gave way to industrialisation which, in turn, resulted in urbanisation. This proved disastrous, for in the new mechanical age man lost his identity and pursued only the material advancement. The dream of leading a divine life was replaced by a life of material pleasures and worldly success. Horatio Alger, through his success-stories,
convinced the frustrated young men pursuing merely the material success that they were struggling to realise the gospel of the American dream. Failure was projected as a sign of some physical or moral flaws. The results of this mad race were disgusting, and the Dream in fact turned into a nightmare, particularly for those who belonged to the transitional period.

Fitzgerald was born in 1896 when money had become the driving force of all human activities. Dreiser and Norris were bewailing the death of the potential greatness of man and moral and spiritual bankruptcy of the American life. The American dream had given way to the sordid success-myth. The American world was increasingly out of joint and people were finding it more and more difficult to adjust themselves to the fast changing industrialised and urbanised world. The generation of Fitzgerald was being brought up on the vulgarised form of the success stories of Horatio Alger. It was a transitional period but there was no respite; rather much worse was to follow in the 1920's which were the apex of the increasing lust for money. It was in the 1920's that Fitzgerald appeared before the public as a writer, and through his works revealed that the country had travelled a long way in the wrong direction, and in the changed atmosphere the Dream was not realisable. The stray voices that had been heard earlier had not been heeded and the situation worsened. The 1920s have generally been regarded as the most turbulent period in American history but the change was not sudden. It had been building up gradually but the First World
War ignited the flames and everything got burnt up. The social and intellectual milieu of Fitzgerald, covering the two most stormy decades of the twentieth century, therefore, forms the subject-matter of the next chapter.