
The American Dream In Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas

The American Dream is a concept that first takes on its concrete form in *The Epic of America*; it is described as "That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement...That dream or hope has been present from the start." (Adams, xvi). And though it is certainly a term taken ambiguously at best, this classification is one that rings mostly true to its central idea, which is akin to the Horatio Alger pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps ideal. It has several tangents and different interpretations, but it is largely regarded as associated with wealth or advancement of some sort. What Hunter S. Thompson seeks to do in his painfully satirical novel, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: a Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, is not only to deconstruct and realize the absurdity of such an idea but to kick it while it is down and make a mockery of it. Thompson rejects the idea of the American Dream with such severity that he associates it with a hallucination-crazed, drug-induced weekend binge of absolute nonsensicalness.

To begin, it is necessary to get a slightly more exhaustive grasp on the American Dream as an ideal. One of its essential properties is that every American ought to have equal opportunity and that anyone can reach success or prosperity through hard work. This needs some unpacking, and this is where seriously vast interpretations begin to surface. What exactly is success or prosperity? There is, of course, no universal answer to this; some would consider a modest life with all the modest trappings that come with it as successful whereas to others it may be superfluous wealth and luxury, etc. To Thompson (if we look at *Fear and Loathing* as rooted in autobiography, which is a reasonably safe and agreed-upon claim), it is subjecting himself to every drug imaginable and going on misadventures throughout Las Vegas. Duke, Thompson's alias, says the following while driving down Main Street, blasted on drugs: "Ah yes. This is what it's all about. Total control now. Tooling along the main drag on a Saturday night in Las Vegas, two good old boys in a fireapple-red convertible...stoned, ripped, twisted...Good People." (Thompson 29). Subjective success is as varying as snowflakes, so already the idea of the American Dream begins to see some distortion across the board. The above passage could hardly be considered anything even close to a universal idea of success; however, to Thompson, it is. Or at least it can be interpreted as such.

What exactly constitutes "hard work"? Is it working an exhaustive sixty hours a week? Important to note too is that hard work often is not included in one's ideal picture of success. And is it a truthful claim to say that all Americans have equal opportunity? If a Black person, a White person, a Middle-Eastern person, and a Mexican person somehow all put in an equal amount of "hard work", is it intellectually honest to say they will all yield the same benefits?

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Already there is a formidable margin that begins to form.

When Duke is at the Circus-Circus sitting at the bar, negotiating buying a monkey (“Goddammit...I want that ape”), he claims to be sitting in the heart of the American Dream:

He seemed surprised. “You found the American Dream?” he said. “In this town?”

I nodded. “We’re sitting on the main nerve right now,” I said. (Thompson 190, 191)

He then goes on to relate the story of the manager who, as a kid, wanted to run away to the circus. And now he had his own circus. Bruce, the person he is talking to at the bar, says, “Now the bastard has...a license to steal, too...You’re right—he’s the model.” (Thompson 191).

What is absolutely crucial to Thompson’s view of the American Dream is the fact that he places the “nerve” of it in not only in Las Vegas, which is portrayed as a nonsensical, crazy town, but in the Circus-Circus no less, the epicentre for the absurd and harebrained. This could be interpreted through a couple different lenses. One interpretation is that the idea of “success” in the American Dream is so personal, so random, so subjective that these ideas could be so medley as to be comparable to the chaos that is the Circus-Circus. However, from what is known of Hunter S. Thompson and his eccentricities and views on government/big-business America, a more likely interpretation is that the very idea of an “American Dream”, with all its ambiguities, false promises, and romanticism, is such a completely absurd and ridiculous idea that it is not only as ludicrous as a circus, but is comparable to the Circus-Circus while having been on a motley of hallucinogens.

Along with that, the agreed upon “model” for the American Dream is, as claimed by Duke, someone who wants to join a circus, receives his own, and then is able to steal. The end line here is that the Circus-Circus manager’s success is defined by his being able to steal. This is hugely satirical towards the American Dream, Americans themselves, and it even extends to capitalism. Thompson, in the above passage, depicts the American Dream to be goofy, nonsensical, and selfish. With such being the epitome of the American Dream and everything it stands for, Thompson sends a significant attack on America and its ideals, prompting perhaps a re-evaluation of such.

Another of Thompson’s comparisons is seen when Duke and Dr. Gonzo are inquiring about the

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American Dream, and a waitress and a man named Lou take it as a physical place. Thompson plays with words here by having the waitress recall the physical place's location on a street called "Paradise". This, of course, deals with the idea that the American Dream will yield some modern sort of capitalist "paradise" or some accessible paradisiacal form of success. Also important to this idea is that the waitress and Lou both cannot exactly pinpoint this supposed place's location. What Thompson shows here is that the American Dream cannot be found because it does not exist. It is the chase towards success that people can never escape, and the American Dream is ultimately unattainable. Continuing on this tangent, Lou later asks, "...did somebody just send you on a goose chase?" (Thompson, 165). Again, this further concretizes Thompson's message that the American Dream is a nonsensical and unreachable ideal. Success is so subjective, America can oftentimes be criminally judgemental and unequal, and it is essentially just an insane idea to even consider. After an entire chapter devoted towards trying to ascertain the American Dream's location (the supposed physical place), Duke and Dr. Gonzo eventually reach what used to be a psychiatrist's club that is described as such: "...a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds. The owner of a gas station across the road said the place had 'burned down about three years ago.'" (Thompson 168). This is the icing on Thompson's metaphorical cake: a psychiatrist's purpose is to diagnose and treat mental illness. The comparisons are clear. Chasing the American Dream is akin to a sort of mental illness, a delusion; Thompson might even extend that comparison perhaps to a drug-induced weekend of hallucinations and absurdity. Not only that, but the place itself, the American Dream, had burned down. Thompson implies here that if there ever was an American Dream, in the abstract sense, that it is long gone, it is completely desecrated, and it has been in such a state for so long that a lot "full of tall weeds" had been able to flourish.

On a larger scale, the reader may look at the trip in general in a metaphorical, while not too abstract, light in which it relates to the American Dream. Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo both are under the influence of an intense amount of hallucinogens, which are, of course, known best in accordance with the counterculture of the 1960s. Keep in mind that Duke is from the very beginning of the novel claiming to be looking for "the American Dream". The reader may look at this hallucinogen-binge as Duke's, and on a larger scale the youth and counterculture of the 1960s, attempt to reclaim and in turn remold what society looked at as the American Dream. Until then, it was perceived to be that of an essentially capitalist system. Duke, and the 1960s counterculture, attempted to deny this and to consequently create their own, independent version of the American Dream. Going further down the line of this metaphor, the reader may also look to how the trip ultimately turned out for Duke: with an intense hangover and no sign of having found this American Dream which he had originally set out for. The same can apply in a sense to the entirety of the 1960s counterculture. While the movement gradually ended and emerged with a societal "hangover", they were left without having "found" the "American Dream".

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That is not to say that there were no reformations, perhaps even in the idea of the American Dream itself. To many of the participants in the counterculture, they were, whether it was through drug-induced hallucinations or not, able to ascertain that there is no real grasp of a universal American Dream. Their misadventures led them to the fact that it is in fact chimerical. The reader may see this view reflected in Thompson's writing in that the "main nerve" of the American Dream was found in a circus.

One may look at the novel from the viewpoint that "Hunter S. Thompson is America..." (Copetas), and this is to say that Thompson's exploits in Las Vegas represent the vulnerable, misguided, and fragmented people of the counterculture in 1960s America. Thompson, and all of the individuals sharing his worldview, shares some parallels with existential philosophy as well. In a time where everything has fallen apart and there is no direction to be found, one is faced with indecision and uncertainty; however, by the same token, one is also allowed to rebuild the fragments in any way one wants. It is a time of possibility as well as chaos. Thompson's journey to Las Vegas is a first step in testing the waters and in finding not the American Dream, but rather his own sense and purpose in life.

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