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THE AMERICAN DREAM: ITS
EVOLUTION THROUGH FITZGERALD'S
THE GREAT GATSBY AND STEINBECK'S
THE GRAPES OF WRATH

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ABSTRACT

This study will analyze the presence and evolution of the concept of “the American Dream” in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Through these novels, an analysis of the American Dream will be undertaken with the aim of understanding and analyzing the different and complementary perspectives of the American Dream, from the superficiality of the Roaring Twenties in *The Great Gatsby* to the struggle during The Great Depression in *The Grapes of Wrath*. These novels explore how the American Dream transforms itself, evolving from a promise of happiness and prosperity in the twenties to a full-blown nightmare engulfed by crisis in the thirties.

Key words: American Dream, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Great Gatsby*, American society, evolution.

RESUMEN

En este estudio se analizará la presencia y evolución del concepto “el sueño americano” en *The Grapes of Wrath*, escrita por John Steinbeck y *The Great Gatsby*, escrita por F. Scott Fitzgerald. A través de estas obras literarias se realizará un análisis del sueño americano desde una perspectiva literaria con el objetivo de comprender y analizar las perspectivas diferentes y complementarias del sueño americano, desde la superficialidad de los Felices Años 20 en *The Great Gatsby* hasta la lucha durante la Gran Depresión en *The Grapes of Wrath*. Estas novelas exploran como el sueño americano se transforma, es decir, evoluciona desde una promesa de felicidad y prosperidad a una completa pesadilla inundada en una crisis.

Palabras clave: sueño americano, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Great Gatsby*, sociedad americana, evolución.

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1- Introduction

The concept of the American Dream has been a repeated theme in numerous articles and novels related to American literature, showing the realities and aspirations of American society over the decades.

The selection of this topic and the inclusion of these two novels will allow this study to explore in depth the historical and social context of American society over a particular era. Both novels are widely regarded as highly representative portrayals of this complex historical period. Moreover, they offer us different visions, perspectives, and points of view of the American dream. On the one hand, *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925 and written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, represents the decadence of the Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties. It casts a look at the American Dream from the top down, focusing on the dark side of those that made it. On the other hand, the novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939 and written by John Steinbeck, casts a look from the bottom up, reflecting on the struggle, despair and problems faced by impoverished farmers during the Great Depression. Through the study of these two literary works, focusing on the different visions that they offer us about this concept, we will be able to explore the evolution of the American Dream from the Roaring Twenties to the Great Depression.

This study is composed of four distinct sections. The first, this introduction, aims to establish the purpose of this work, as well as provide a brief explanation of the concept of the American Dream. In the second section, the historical context of both novels will be explored, addressing both the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression. In addition, a detailed summary of each work will be included, highlighting the major themes addressed in them. The third section constitutes the substantial part of the study. Through this section, an analysis will be carried out to achieve the main objective of the paper, which is to examine the evolution of the American Dream from the twenties to the thirties and to observe how the characteristics of this concept are reflected in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Great Gatsby*. Finally, a conclusion will be presented that will synthesize the main ideas and key points of the study.

The concept of the American Dream was initially introduced by the independent journalist James Truslow Adams in his publication “The Epic of America” (1932), where he provided its definition as:

That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (Adams 404)

According to Alexander Bruno, we can define the concept of American Dream as “the original plot which is played out by Americans in their determination to thrive” (2019, 1). That is, the American Dream symbolizes and depicts the belief in prosperity, success, achievement, and social mobility. All through strong determination and hard work.

To sum up, this study will conduct an analysis of the novels *The Great Gatsby* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, with the objective of examining the evolution of the concept of the American Dream over a particular period time. These literary works provide a clear perspective of how the American Dream has gone from being an idealization of superficiality and personal success during the 1920s with the Roaring Twenties to facing a deep crisis during the Great Depression. The analysis of these two novels allows us to immerse ourselves in the experiences and characteristics of that era, as they reflect the historical and social reality of American society at that time.

2- From the Roaring Twenties to the Great Depression

American society has traditionally been represented to believe in achievement, success, and materialism. This combination of values, in conjunction with equal opportunity, ambition, and hard work and the means of attaining it, could be considered integral elements of the American Dream.

The American Dream involves a few decades where cultural changes and economic prosperity stood out above all else. However, this period was influenced and affected by a series of events such as The Great Depression, the Wall Street Crash of 1929, The Great Drought or forced migrations (Joseph and John, 1996).

However, these principles and values have not remained stable through time, and have not been experienced the same way by American society in different periods of history. Perhaps, one of the most drastic reevaluations of the American Dream can be seen in the transition of the concept from the glorious 1920s to the depressing 1930s.

2.1- The Roaring Twenties

The Roaring Twenties or Happy Twenties, concepts used to denote the 1920s, encompass an era of great changes in the culture, economy, and society of the United States. The end of World War I (1914-1918) ushered in the Roaring Twenties, while the economic collapse of 1929 brought the decade to an end, ushering in The Great Depression. Some of the major changes that the earlier decade entailed include great economic prosperity. After World War I, the United States underwent major economic changes that led to great economic growth. “For the first time, more Americans lived in cities than on farms. The nation’s total wealth more than doubled between 1920 and 1929, and gross national product (GNP) expanded by 40 percent from 1922 to 1929. This economic engine swept many Americans into an affluent ‘consumer culture’ in which people nationwide saw the same advertisements, bought the same goods, listened to the same music, and did the same dances.” (Onion, 2023). In addition, economic growth led to increased industrialization resulting in the development of new household appliances and electricity, as Onion contends, “In 1912, an estimated 16 percent of American households had electricity; by the mid-1920s, more than 60 percent did. And with this electrification came new machines and technologies like the washing machine,

the freezer and the vacuum cleaner eliminated some of the drudgeries of household work.” (Onion, 2023).

Major changes in gender roles (“The New Woman”) also occurred during this time. Before Roaring Twenties, the role of women was primarily based on staying at home to take care of the children and the husband. However, the adoption of women's suffrage in 1920 radically changed the situation. Women gained some of the freedoms they had lacked years earlier, gaining greater autonomy. This led to the emergence of a “new woman” known as the flapper¹. This resulted in women being able to enter the workplace, participate in social and political activities, or access higher education.

Changes in American culture were also significant during this decade. The Jazz Age and the Charleston Dancing emerged among others. These new musical styles quickly became well known, giving rise to a liberalization of dance and music.

Prohibition was another notable development of this era. The Prohibition Era² consisted in the elaboration of a law prohibiting the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages. However, this measure did not work as expected since smuggling and clandestinity emerged in some bars. That is to say, as a consequence of this measure, American society instead of going to normal bars, went to clandestine bars where they could consume alcohol. “Although Prohibition was very imperfectly enforced and prosperity had many soft spots, it was commonly believed that Prohibition furthered the prosperity.” (Barlett C. Jones, 1975)

In short, the Roaring Twenties is the period from the end of World War I to the Wall Street Crash of 1929. The 1920s in the United States was a period of great change in all aspects, social, economic, and cultural. As I mentioned above, this decade is characterized by the unprecedented economic growth, which gave rise to a consumerist society and to industrialization growth. The existence of new technologies, as well as electricity or some household appliances, greatly transformed the way of life of American society.

¹ Young woman known for wearing short dresses and bobbed hair and for embracing freedom from traditional societal constraints. Flappers are predominantly associated with the late 1910s and the '20s in the United States.

² Law enshrined in the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1919.

2.2- The Great Depression

According to the definition provided by Britannica.com, The Great depression was a “worldwide economic downturn that began in 1929 and lasted until about 1939. It was the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world, sparking fundamental changes in economic institutions, macroeconomic policy, and economic theory”. In other words, the Great Depression is the period of time in which the United States experienced the greatest economic crisis, beginning in 1929 and ending during World War II. This great crisis arose as a consequence of several factors.

Financial speculation and over-indebtedness played an important role. Following the economic growth of the Roaring Twenties, people thought that getting rich was going to be a piece of cake. However, this was not the case. Many people invested large amounts of money in stocks, thinking that they were going to make huge profits in a very short time, causing stock prices to rise sharply. This gave rise to the speculative bubble created in the Wall Street stock market. This bubble burst³, as many of these investments were based on loans and credit, which caused the stock market crash of 1929, resulting in the indebtedness of many people.

Moreover, during this decade, a process of automation and mechanization began, which resulted in a major change in production processes. “By 1938 five men could complete work that required 350 pairs of hands prior to automatization.” (Kroes, 2021). The era was characterized by overproduction and underconsumption exacerbated by improvements in industrialization and production that led to an overproduction of goods. However, workers' wages did not increase. This resulted in a large increase in the supply of goods, but a low demand, for example, an imbalance between production and consumption.

In addition, in 1913 a Federal Reserve System was created with the aim of guaranteeing the economic stability of the United States. However, the lack of supervision, swift and forceful action caused the economic crisis to amplify and prolong, causing greater suffering and despair among the population.

The Gold Standard had always ensured the stability of economies. The Gold Standard is a “monetary system in which the standard unit of currency is a fixed

³ October 28, 1929.

quantity of gold or is kept at the value of a fixed quantity of gold. The currency is freely convertible at home or abroad into a fixed amount of gold per unit of currency.” (*Britannica Money*, 2024). Despite its intentions to ensure financial stability but its rigidity in the money supply caused the economic crisis to escalate.

The creation of the Smoot-Hawley Act. This Act can also be referred to as the Tariff Act of 1930. This law considerably raised U.S. tariffs on imported goods in order to stimulate the economy and benefit sellers. Nevertheless, this law failed, since other countries established higher tariffs on exports coming from the United States.

2.3- F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby*

The Great Gatsby is a novel written by Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald and published in 1925. Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was an American military officer, novelist, and writer, celebrated as one of the best writers of the 20th century. During his early youth, he witnessed World War I and its devastating consequences. However, in the 1920s everything changed. During those years, Fitzgerald achieved his greatest successes, one of his greatest achievements being the publication of *The Great Gatsby* in 1925. As I mentioned before, this novel is set in the 1920s, an era characterized by economic and industrial growth and consumerism. Therefore, the novel reflects an atmosphere full of parties, wealth, and power, which triggers social and economic inequalities that I will explore later.

We can “define” this novel as “a confession of lost faith in social progress” (Michael Hollister, 2014). The novel reflects the disillusionment and disenchantment with the idea of the American Dream. This novel is narrated by Nick Carraway, a man from a wealthy family who moves to West Egg (Long Island neighborhood). There, he has Gatsby as a neighbor, a wealthy man who is known for the huge and extravagant parties he organizes. In addition, he is an enigmatic man — it is believed that his money was obtained illegally—, and thanks to the events that occur throughout the novel, we discover secrets about him and his social circle. For example, we discover that Gatsby is still deeply in love with Daisy Buchanan (Nick's cousin and Tom Buchanan's wife). Several years ago, the two had already had a love affair). To Gatsby's misfortune, Daisy lives across the street in East Egg, so Gatsby throws numerous parties to see if Daisy will attend one. Daisy commits an act of infidelity, Tom finds out, and she confesses that she loves them both, her husband Tom and Gatsby. However, Tom had also

committed an infidelity, as he had been cheating on Daisy with Myrtle Wilson (who was married to George).

Conflicts begin to surface especially between Tom, Daisy, and Gatsby, with the trip to New York. During this trip, an automobile accident occurs in which Myrtle is killed by a car driven by Daisy. However, Daisy opts to continue driving, leaving Gatsby to shoulder the responsibility. This situation causes a turn of events in the novel, as it is now Gatsby, rather than Daisy, who is to blame for the death of Tom's mistress.

As the novel progresses, it is discovered, thanks to Tom, that it was Daisy who was responsible for the accident. This act results in a great confrontation and argument between Tom and Gatsby, because despite Tom saying that, Gatsby continues to defend and protect Daisy above all else. Finally, all these tragic events and confrontations end up causing Gatsby's death. George, Myrtle's husband, murders Gatsby as an act of revenge, as he believes that he is responsible for his wife's death and that she and Gatsby were lovers.

Regarding the topics covered throughout the novel, we can observe the presence of different themes of great importance that show the society, economy, and culture of the 1920s in the United States. In this novel, the different social classes and therefore, the social inequality, are more than evident and have a fundamental role in the development of the plot and the evolution of the characters. For example, on Long Island there are two different areas, West Egg and East Egg. West Egg is the residential area of the new money (people who have recently acquired wealth through business), as is the case of Gatsby or Nick; on the contrary, East Egg (the area where Tom and Daisy live) is the residential area of people who come from wealthy families. Starting with George and Myrtle, both are people who have a low social status, and who struggle to get out of poverty and move up the social ladder. However, they are marginalized by people who have a high social status. Following with Tom and Daisy Buchanan, people who belong to an upper social class, and demonstrate throughout the plot their indifference and apathy towards people with few economic resources. This, they demonstrate by showing an attitude of superiority. And finally Gatsby, who is obsessed with attaining wealth, since his greatest desire is to move up in class and be accepted in an elite social circle, however, this is not the case. Although he has earned a lot of money, his humble origins do not allow him to belong within high society.

Another key theme throughout the plot especially in the development of the characters is that of identity. Jay Gatsby is in a constant search for identity in the midst of an atmosphere full of superficiality and wealth. He is characterized as a wealthy individual, whose origin, however, is humble. This difference between his current economic status and his modest past provokes his constant search for wealth and social acceptance. Therefore, he is forced to invent his past, that is, he creates an invented story about his origins and his life prior to wealth. He does this in order to achieve several goals, one of which is to win Daisy's love.

The theme of love is also relevant in the narrative, inasmuch as throughout the novel love and obsession are closely related. Love is clearly represented by Gatsby's obsession with Daisy, a woman with whom he had an affair in the past and who is now Tom's current wife. Throughout the novel, he tries to elaborate strategies to conquer her, however, due to the economic and social circumstances surrounding Daisy, the love between the two of them becomes an impossible love. In summary, this literary work shows us how uncontrolled love and obsession can lead to personal destruction, and therefore, tragedy.

Finally, the key theme that runs throughout this novel is the American Dream. In section 3.1 of this study, we will see how this concept is treated throughout this novel, how it is questioned and how a critique of the superficiality of the American Dream is presented.

In summary, through all the above, we can see that this novel suggests and shows us that having a high social status, or the constant pursuit of wealth is not synonymous with happiness. In fact, it shows us that the obsession for wealth triggers superficiality and moral decadence, aspects that are the opposite of happiness.

2.4- John Steinbeck and *The Grapes of Wrath*

The Grapes of Wrath is a novel written by John Steinbeck and published in 1939. Steinbeck (1902-1968) was an American writer and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. During the Great Depression, he observed the hardships and precarious situations that migrant workers faced. Witnessing this had a great influence on *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel depicting the complications and unpleasantness of

workers' lives during the Great Depression. Thanks to this novel, Steinbeck received the Pulitzer Prize in 1940. Some of his most acclaimed literary works are *East of Eden*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Cannery Row*.

The Grapes of Wrath is practically the opposite of *The Great Gatsby*. This novel begins with Tom Joad's family, a farming family. Tom Joad, the protagonist of the novel, had just been released from McAlester⁴ Prison. When Tom returns to his parents' farm, he crosses paths with Jim Casy⁵. Casy and Tom head to the farm together. Once they arrive, they discover that they have been evicted from Oklahoma⁶ because of the drought and the Great Depression. Due to this difficult economic situation, they have no resources to pay rent or buy a new home, so the family moves in with John, their uncle.

Later on, Joad's family learns through the media that the government is offering jobs in California⁷, so they decide to move there. By moving to California, they see a chance to get out of poverty and thus, achieve a decent future. However, this trip was not entirely successful, and they encountered many obstacles and difficulties. On the one hand, they had extreme weather conditions — dust storms — and difficulties on the road because they were full of cars that were also going to California in search of a better life. On the other hand, during this long journey the merchants charged the migrants exorbitant prices for basic foodstuffs, that is to say, they took advantage of them since they were in a situation full of need and desperation.

When they arrive in California, the family meets a man who is leaving California because he has not found a job, however, they decide to continue their trip without expecting that during the trip the grandmother would die. During the trip, her health condition worsens little by little until she dies⁸. Her living conditions are so bad

⁴ Tom was sentenced to seven years in prison because during a dance he got drunk and had a conflict with a man. The man attacks Tom with a knife and Tom reacts by hitting him in the head with a shovel. The man ends up dying and Tom is sentenced to prison, however, the sentence is reduced to four years because of his good behavior.

⁵ Jim was a religious preacher ("I was a preacher, "said the man seriously"). However, at the beginning of the novel, he reveals that he has lost his faith ("The sperit ain't in the people much no more; and worse'n that, the sperit ain't in me no more"). In addition, he was also the sacker who baptized Tom.

⁶ Place where Tom Joad's family farm was located. Oklahoma was one of the states hardest hit by the economic crisis and drought.

⁷ Tom's family and the migrant workers who go to California to work are called "okies" by the people who live there. This term is used with a pejorative connotation since the locals in California perceive the migrant workers as people who will take their jobs away from them, that is, they consider them as competition.

⁸ The death of the grandmother symbolizes the suffering and hardship suffered by the family during their migration to California.

that they don't even have enough money for a burial and end up leaving the grandmother's body at the coroner's office. Migrants build "Hooverilles" in order to survive. They are makeshift settlements built by migrants, that is to say, they are places where people who have lost their homes during the Great Depression take shelter.

Once again Tom is warned of the ordeal in California, in this case, by Floyd Knowles. Floyd says that there is no work, that wages are too low and that if you go against the landowners or the authorities you will be called "red"⁹. The fear of the migrants leads them to form gangs to try to terrorize the "okies"

Later, Joad's family arrive at Weedpatch, a government-provided camp for migrant workers that is surprisingly equipped with water, showers, and toilets. There, Tom is lucky enough to be hired to harvest the crops. In the evenings, they organize a dance that serves as an opportunity for the migrants to forget for a short period of time the hardships they endure and enjoy themselves. During the dance, conflicts arise as there are three men who have been paid to organize a riot and a fight breaks out in which the authorities have to intervene.

With the arrival of spring came a great drought, which caused the farmers' crops to wither. After a month in the camp, they decide it is time to leave because they have been told they can work picking peaches. Although the pay is minimal, they decide to take the job. Finally, they leave the job and start working in cotton fields. However, the precarious situation remains much the same and the migrant workers decide that the working conditions are impossible to bear, so they go on strikes and protests to demand an improvement in working conditions and an increase in wages. This situation moves the landowners to start using violence. Finally, after the great violence of the authorities, the Joad family decides to begin a journey westward in search of work opportunities.

In short, this novel is a clear example of the precarious situations suffered by workers during the Great Depression and the migrations they were forced to undertake. Joad's family symbolizes the struggle of workers trying to survive in the midst of a great crisis.

Regarding the different themes explored in the novel, some of them represent the situation in the United States during the Great Depression. Starting with the struggle for

⁹ Word associated with communism. Communism was seen as a threat to the capitalist system in the United States.

survival and against injustice, we can see how Joad's family is constantly struggling to survive as the larger farmers were taking advantage of the migrant farmers. This is closely related to the importance of family in this novel. Joad's family is a symbol of unity, that is, despite all the difficulties they remain together and united, transmitting values of love and loyalty. ("twenty families became one family; the children were the children of all").

Continuing with labor activism, as a consequence of the harsh working conditions and exploitation suffered by the workers, they organize and participate in strikes and protests demanding better working conditions and a living wage. In fact, Jim Casy becomes a labor activist in order to help and encourage his co-workers and the rest of the people.

Following on from nature and the land, the main characters are farmers, i.e. people who are closely related and connected to the land. However, at the beginning of the novel they are forced to leave their land, and for example, Joad's grandfather almost dies as a result of depression and bitterness at having to leave his land.

Finally, the main theme of this novel is the struggle for the pursuit of the American Dream. In section 3.2 of this study, we will see how this concept is treated throughout this novel, how it is questioned and how it is challenged by showing that the promises of improvement and prosperity of the American Dream are unattainable.

3- Analysis

3.1- *The Great Gatsby*

As mentioned above, *The Great Gatsby* is set in the 1920s, —known as the Roaring Twenties—, characterized by great economic prosperity in which industrialization was booming. There was also a cultural and social change in which jazz and dance became especially popular. Throughout this section, we will explore how the central characteristics and principles on which the American Dream is based are reflected and refracted in the novel.

The wealthy protagonist of the novel, Jay Gatsby is described as a mysterious and enigmatic man. Gatsby himself mentions that he usually keeps his thoughts to himself “I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me” (Fitzgerald 4). Some aspects of his personality are so enigmatic that even some members of his own family admit to not knowing who he really is or what he has done throughout his life: “I don't think it's so much THAT, it's more that he was a German spy during the war” (Fitzgerald 35).

In addition to Gatsby's enigmatic and mysterious personality, he is also portrayed as an extremely ambitious, optimistic, idealistic individual, constantly striving to build a facade of success, despite the reality of his life being the opposite, i.e. being shrouded in myths and lies. At the beginning of the novel, Gatsby mentions that he comes from a wealthy family, however, as the plot progresses, we discover that this is not true, since his origin is in a humble family with few economic resources. To avoid being discovered, he created a new identity by changing his name.¹⁰

There was one persistent story that he didn't live in a house at all, but in a boat that looked like a house and was moved secretly up and down the Long Island shore. Just why these inventions were a source of satisfaction to James Gatz of North Dakota, isn't easy to say (Fitzgerald 75).

This atmosphere of mystery, success and myths surrounding Gatsby clearly reflects the nature of the American dream. That is, it reflects how the American dream is

¹⁰ His original name was James Gatz.

based on unrealistic aspirations that end up becoming myths and illusions, not reality. But at the same time, those myths and illusions shape the life of the individual.

Gatsby's optimistic and idealistic sense of self is closely linked to the American dream, which is based on the belief in the possibility of achieving success, well-being and happiness through perseverance, determination and hard work, no matter what your origins or social status. For example, Gatsby deeply idealizes the relationship he once had with Daisy. He sees her as a symbol of success and happiness as the memory he has of their prior relationship is pure happiness. Therefore, Gatsby struggles to regain the love between them. How does he do it? By flaunting his wealth through his mansion, the extravagant parties he throws and his luxurious automobiles. However, Gatsby's idealization of his relationship with Daisy triggers a series of misunderstandings on both sides. For example, Daisy does not see herself as capable of committing to Gatsby since she is married to Tom, a manipulative man who does not tolerate Daisy leaving the marriage. In summary, we can see how Gatsby embodies the materialism of the American dream by trying to achieve wealth and success as a means to find happiness.

Gatsby is the character in the novel that perfectly represents the individual who pursues the ideals of the American dream with determination, trying to achieve happiness through wealth and a good social position. However, the narrator comments, "Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" (Fitzgerald 5), shows how the relentless pursuit of these ideas can lead to emotional emptiness instead of full happiness. "All right at the end", this quotation by the narrator implies that Gatsby finally succeeded in achieving the goals he had in mind. On the contrary, if we consider that Gatsby's ending is that he was killed by mistake, we can interpret that Gatsby is seen by the narrator as an admirable person, despite his tragic end. In fact, if we compare him with other characters, Gatsby is seen as an authentic character who struggles faithfully to achieve the American Dream, quite the opposite of Tom Buchanan, a selfish and superficial person. Through this example we can observe the irony of the American Dream, that is, although Gatsby achieves great wealth, his life finally ends in tragedy.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the principles on which the American dream is based is hard work.

The Carraways are something of a clan, and we have a tradition that we're descended from the Dukes of Buccleuch, but the actual founder of my line was my grandfather's brother, who came here in fifty-one, sent a substitute to the Civil War, and started the wholesale hardware business that my father carries on to-day. (Fitzgerald 5)

Nick lies when he claims that his family, the Carraways, are descendants of the Dukes of Buccleuch¹¹. However, he says it for several reasons. One is to embellish his family history. That is, he wants to appear to have a higher social status in order to be socially recognized in his desire to achieve the American Dream. On the other hand, through this fallacy we observe the contrast between illusion and reality, since Nick's illusion was to have a background of wealth and prestige, but the reality is that the "founder" of the Carraways is an immigrant who came to the United States and founded a hardware store. In summary, through this quotation we observe the difference between the idealized stories of some characters versus the reality of their humble origins.

One of the principles on which the American dream is based is the promise of second chances, that is, having the opportunity to leave the past behind and start a new life. However, as I mentioned earlier, Gatsby intends to regain Daisy's love and revive the relationship they had, i.e., Gatsby has a deep obsession with reliving the past, since through Daisy's love he sees an opportunity to redeem his past and hide his humble origins. This idea derives in public perception versus reality, as Gatsby is seen as both a mysterious man and a wealthy and successful one. However, the reality is quite the opposite, an idea that gives us to understand that the concept of the American dream may simply be an idealized idea, since it does not always correspond to what really happens.

The famous and extravagant parties organized by Gatsby are a clear illustration that the American dream is based on enjoying life to the fullest, without respecting the

¹¹ Scottish noble family of the 17th century.

rules and laws, by participating in illegal activities such as smuggling. As I mentioned in section 2.1, during the Prohibition Era a federal law prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages. However, this law is violated during the novel, as Gatsby himself is involved in the smuggling of alcoholic beverages to obtain more wealth and impress Daisy. These parties were full of illegal alcohol, which makes us see that this law produces the opposite effect, instead of curbing the consumption of alcoholic beverages it intensifies it in an illegal way. In other words, these extravagant parties organized by Gatsby are a symbol of superficiality, illegality and moral decline that often occurs as a consequence of the unbridled pursuit of success and wealth leaving aside ethical and moral values. In short, these ostentatious parties at Gatsby's house are a reflection of the smuggling during the Roaring Twenties, the falseness of the upper social classes, and how the American dream often leads to the involvement in illegal activities in the pursuit of wealth, success and power.

‘I found out what your ‘drug-stores’ were.’ He turned to us and spoke rapidly. ‘He and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drug-stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That’s one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him, and I wasn’t far wrong’. (Fitzgerald 103)

In addition to these illegal activities practiced during Gatsby's extravagant parties, we can observe the exclusion and superficiality in relationships. “I believe that on the first night I went to Gatsby's house I was one of the few guests who had actually been invited. People were not invited - they went there.” (Fitzgerald 33). Nick is really surprised that so many people have gone to Gatsby's party even though only a few of them were officially invited. Through this, we can see that most of these people have come to the party simply for the show and the fun, rather than for having a real bond of friendship with Gatsby. These actions demonstrate the superficiality of relationships, and that what really attracts people is wealth.

In addition to the above mentioned, throughout the novel we can identify different symbols that refer to the American dream, for example, the already analyzed parties organized by Gatsby. Continuing with automobiles, very luxurious and fast

automobiles are mentioned throughout the novel, symbolizing the social mobility associated with the American dream. That is, Fitzgerald uses automobiles as a symbol to differentiate between rich and poor or working-class characters. For example, Gatsby owns a convertible sports car; however, George Wilson does not own any car, but a service station where cars are bought and sold, but there was only one, a very old and neglected Ford “GEORGE B. WILSON. Cars bought and sold.— and I followed Tom inside. The interior was unprosperous and bare; the only car visible was the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner” (Fitzgerald 21). We can also observe differences between the characters who own a car. In Tom's case his car is “easy-going blue coupe” (Fitzgerald 96), a subtle way of showing his wealth, while Gatsby's car is a Rolls Royce described as “gorgeous” (Fitzgerald 50).

Owning a car was not only useful to show your social position in front of the rest of the people, but it was also a means to achieve freedom, that is, owning a car allows you the freedom and autonomy to go anywhere you want. This fact broke the gender limitations since women also drove. “Was Daisy driving? ‘Yes,’ he said after a moment, but of course I’ll say I was” (Fitzgerald 110).

In short, automobiles represent the ‘dark side’ of the American dream, as they are a symbol of materialism, and illustrate the social inequality of the time. Moreover, at the end of the novel, automobiles are associated with tragedies, for example, Myrtle Wilson is run over by Gatsby's car.

We can also observe the presence of the green light, used as a symbol of hope. For Gatsby, the green light represents his desires and hopes of being able to recover his love and relationship with Daisy.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter — to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning ——— So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (Fitzgerald 138)

Finally, we can see the constant presence of white and gold. These colors are associated with wealth and nobility throughout the novel. On several occasions, the characters mention that their costumes and clothes are of these two colors, reflecting

their high social position “In the foreground four solemn men in dress suits are walking along the sidewalk with a stretcher on which lies a drunken woman in a white evening dress” (Fitzgerald 135)

Across the courtesy bay the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water that was as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire Gatsby, in a white flannel suit, silver shirt, and gold-colored tie, hurried in. (Fitzgerald 65)

Regarding the social classes, the novel shows how the American dream manifests itself differently depending on the social status of each character, and how social inequality can be an obstacle to success and happiness. In fact, in chapter 1, the novel attempts to make the reader aware of the privileges and rights that people belonging to the upper class have. However, The American Dream promotes the idea of equal opportunities for all people, regardless of social class or origin. In addition, it can also be interpreted as a criticism of the superficiality, materialism and lack of empathy in which people who eagerly seek success are involved. In other words, it criticizes individualism and the idea of focusing only on oneself, showing the importance of empathizing with people who have not had the same opportunities.

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since.

‘Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,’ he told me, ‘just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.’ (Fitzgerald 4)

Starting with the upper class (Old Money), to which wealthy families belong, for example, characters like Daisy or Tom Buchanan. For them, maintaining their social status and privilege is intrinsically associated with the concept of the American dream. Then, there is the middle class (New Money). To this social position belongs Gatsby, a person who has acquired much wealth through illegal or questionable practices. For these people, the American dream is based on the possibility and hope to move up the social ladder since they are often discriminated against by the upper classes. Finally, the working class. Myrtle Wilson constantly struggles to survive, therefore, for her, the

American dream is associated with the hope of a better life, achieving a better social position and economic stability.

This social position is closely related to the houses that are described throughout the novel. For example, Tom and Daisy live in East Egg, where the houses are very large and elegant, representing money and aristocracy, “Across the courtesy bay the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water, and the history of the summer really begins on the evening” (Fitzgerald 7). The Gatsby mansion, located in West Egg, represents the beginning of the American Dream based on the possibility of upward mobility. In contrast, Myrtle and George Wilson live in a small apartment in the Valley of Ashes, a place that represents the working class. In summary, the description of the houses throughout the novel represents the different social classes and how the American dream is represented for each of them.

Finally, throughout *The Great Gatsby*, gender is closely related to the American dream. In Daisy's character, we can see some of the limitations she has to face simply because she is a woman. Daisy embodies the idea of the beautiful and fragile woman, which makes many men praise her because they see her as unattainable. “The officer looked at Daisy while she was speaking, in a way that every young girl wants to be looked at sometime, and because it seemed romantic to me I have remembered” (Fitzgerald 58-59). In other words, she represents the American dream, wealth, high social status and beauty. She is married to Tom but is living an unhappy marriage from which she is unable to separate, and as a consequence, is unable to achieve her personal ambitions.

In summary, this novel shows how the American dream is manifested and interpreted according to the social position of each character, representing that anyone can rebuild their lives and achieve success and wealth, regardless of their past.

3.2- *The Grapes of the Wrath*

As mentioned above, *The Grapes of the Wrath* is set in the 1930s, —known as the Great Depression—. This period was marked by great economic prosperity and, by the rise of industrialization. In addition, it is characterized by the social and cultural change that accompanied the birth of jazz and dance as forms of entertainment. Next, we will analyze the different symbols and characteristics of the American Dream present in the novel.

The protagonists of the novel are the Joad family, representatives of the working class. At the beginning of the novel, the Joad family was forced to abandon their farm in Oklahoma as a consequence of the drought, the Great Depression, and consequently, the great economic crisis in which they were involved. For this reason, we can consider that the Joad farm represents the ideal of the American dream, since through it the family has the opportunity to own land and obtain wealth through hard work and perseverance. However, as a result of the drought, the land becomes infertile and they are forced to abandon it, illustrating that the American dream may be unattainable for some people, especially those who have financial problems or are directly linked to their humble origins.

As a consequence of this drought, they decide to take a trip to California. “Why don't you go on west to California? There's work there, and it never gets cold. Why, you can reach out anywhere and pick an orange. Why, there's always some kind of crop to work in. Why don't you go there?” (Steinbeck 32). California is presented as an ideal place, where the climate is perfect, and the work opportunities are endless. Through the sentence “there's always some kind of crop to work in”, he represents the abundance of opportunities that exist in California, that is, Steinbeck presents this place as a paradise of opportunities for anyone who wants to work, where you can easily find a job.

Maybe we can start again, in the new rich land—in California, where the fruit grows. We'll start over.

But you can't start. Only a baby can start. You and me—why, we're all that's been. The anger of a moment, the thousand pictures, that's us. This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us. We can't start again. (Steinbeck 72)

In this dialogue we observe the existing connection between people and the land in which they live. On the one hand, we have a character who proposes the possibility of going to California to start a new life. On the other hand, we have another character who says, “only a baby can start”, implying that it is not possible to start again, since the land in which they live is the one that has forged their identity, formed by experiences “the thousand pictures”.

‘Tom, I hope things is all right in California.’

He turned and looked at her. “What makes you think they ain’t?” he asked.

‘Well—nothing. Seems too nice, kinda. I seen the han’bills fellas pass out, an’ how much work they is, an’ high wages an’ all; an’ I seen in the paper how they want folks to come an’ pick grapes an’ oranges an’ peaches. That’d be nice work, Tom, pickin’ peaches. Even if they wouldn’t let you eat none, you could maybe snatch a little ratty one sometimes. An’ it’d be nice under the trees, workin’ in the shade. (Steinbeck 74)

Throughout this excerpt, we see Joad's mother reflect on how many job opportunities exist in California, and how good the working conditions are compared to Oklahoma. In fact, she mentions the “han'bills”, which are a kind of pamphlet advertising high-paying jobs. He also mentions the opportunity to work outdoors picking grapes, oranges or peaches, conveying an idyllic vision of the situation in California.

However, as the novel unfolds, we see that migrant workers arriving in California face multiple challenges in finding decent work. In many of these jobs they are discriminated against, with very low wages and inhumane working conditions. In short, this quotation symbolizes the difference between the promise of the American Dream and the true reality of American society during the Great Depression.

Soften’em up, Joe. Jesus, I wisht I had a thousand jalopies! Get’em ready to deal, an’ I’ll close’em.

Goin’ to California? Here’s jus’ what you need. Looks shot, but they’s thousan’s of miles in her.

Lined up side by side. Good Used Cars. Bargains. Clean, runs good. (Steinbeck 56)

In this excerpt, we observe the exploitation of migrant workers by employers. An automobile salesman insists that his fellow workers manipulate the migrant workers into buying used vehicles, which are in deplorable condition. This is a no-brainer, as the migrant workers express throughout the novel their need to find some means of transportation to get to California, the supposed paradise of job opportunities. In this quotation, the automobiles are described as “bargains” or “good used cars”, phrases used by the employers to persuade and manipulate the migrant workers by implying that the automobiles are in perfect condition and are perfect for their journey to California. In summary, the automobiles reflect some of the positive and negative aspects of the American Dream, aspects that we will explain below.

The Joad family are described as “dream walkers”. “And still the family stood about like dream walkers, their eyes focused panoramically, seeing no detail, but the whole dawn, the whole land, the whole texture of the country at once” (Steinbeck 91). In other words, the family pursues a dream, to achieve a better life. However, this dream is idealized, since they do not pay attention to the difficulties that arise and will arise in the future. They have the firm belief that life in California will be much better. These thoughts are deeply related to the belief in the American Dream, since this concept offers possibilities of achieving a prosperous life, but this is not always achieved.

In summary, California is one of the symbols that best represents the concept of the American Dream throughout the novel. It is presented as a place full of opportunities, good weather and fertile land suitable for cultivation. In other words, it is described as an idealized place for families with economic problems, where dreams come true, promising a better life for those who work hard.

In addition, as in the novel *The Great Gatsby*, automobiles also symbolize the American Dream.

Joe, did you know you was talkin' to pikers?

I ain't a piker. I got to get a car. We're goin' to California. I got to get a car.

Well, I'm a sucker. Joe says I'm a sucker. Says if I don't quit givin' my shirt away I'll starve to death. (Steinbeck 55)

Through this dialogue, we can observe Joe's struggle and perseverance to get a car. Through this struggle, we realize the great importance of mobility and access to transportation in order to migrate to California in search of a prosperous life. The automobile helps and favors new opportunities and the search for employment, that is, for a family with scarce economic resources, an automobile can mean the difference between misery or the opportunity to survive.

In the novel, the term "piker" is used by employers and bosses to designate migrants who travel to California in search of work. These leaders see the workers as cheap labor and people to be easily exploited and influenced. Thus, "piker" is used in a derogatory manner and with negative connotations. In the above fragment, Joe says "I ain't a piker", that is, despite the challenges and difficulties he faces, he refuses to be called that way, since his goal is to fight for survival.

Other aspects that reference the American dream are hope, perseverance and solidarity. "Ma said, 'You won't be no burden. Each'll help each, an' we'll all git to California. Sairy Wilson he'ped lay Grampa out,' and she stopped. The relationship was plain." (Steinbeck 119). In this quotation we can observe the help that some people give each other, especially when Ma Joad says, "each'll help each other", reflecting the solidarity among them to achieve a prosperous life full of success. This phrase is followed by "we'll all git to California", showing how migrants help and support each other to achieve success.

Regarding perseverance, at the beginning of the novel we observe the presence of a turtle. This turtle tries to cross the highway, even though it has previously been hit several times by cars, however, it does not give up and continues walking towards its destination. In other words, the turtle becomes a symbol of perseverance, showing the problems that hard-working migrants suffer when going to California, representing the values of perseverance and hard work on which the American Dream is based.

Continuing with solidarity and mutual help, "In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream."

(Steinbeck 155). In this fragment, twenty families become one family, that is, once again we see reflected the values of the American dream. Although they are different families, they all have the same goal, the search for a better life, and therefore, they all support each other. In addition, the phrase “the children were the children of all” describes the children as a symbol of union for the families.

‘I’m hungry,’ Ruthie whined. ‘No, you ain’t,’ Ma said. ‘You had good mush.’
‘Wisht I had a box a Cracker Jack. There ain’t nothin’ to do. Ain’t no fun.’
‘They’ll be fun,’ Ma said. ‘You jus’ wait. Be fun purty soon. Git a house an’ a place, purty soon.’ ‘Wisht we had a dog,’ Ruthie said. ‘We’ll have a dog; have a cat, too.’ (Steinbeck 359)

Although the family is going through difficult times, we see how Ma Joad tries to comfort her children, promising them that they will eventually have a house where they can enjoy the company of a pet, as Ruthie wishes to have a dog. This is something that we can associate with the American Dream, since this concept not only implies success or economic prosperity, but also happiness. In other words, in this fragment we see how Ma Joad is a symbol of hope, and thanks to her the family is united. These ideas are closely related to the importance of family throughout the novel. “Almost she don’t want to go to California, fear she’ll never see you no more.” (Steinbeck 60). In this case, we see Ma Joad’s anguish when one of her sons separates from her to head to California in search of a better life. This worry and anguish reflect the hardships suffered by some families during migration in the period of the Great Depression.

On the other hand, tractors are also used in the novel as a symbol to represent the American Dream. As I mentioned earlier, during the Great Depression the process of mechanization and automation emerged, especially in the agricultural world. This has the positive aspect of efficiency and productivity, in other words, it reduces time while increasing products. However, it reduces human labor, which triggers an increase in unemployment. This forces many families to leave their land and move in search of employment, something that happens to the Joad family. One of the principles of the American Dream is to settle on one’s own land, and through hard work and perseverance, obtain wealth. However, this forced migration breaks with this ideal of the American Dream. Finally, the introduction of new technologies, automation and

mechanization has the consequence that wealth is in the hands of the leaders, something that also goes against the equality of opportunity that the American Dream represents.

Finally, the title of the novel, *The Grapes of the Wrath*, also plays a fundamental role in symbolizing the ideals and principles of the American Dream. On the one hand, we have the grapes representing promise and prosperity. Throughout the novel, California is presented as a place of opportunity, where fruit, especially grapes, act as symbols of abundance. On the other hand, wrath. Wrath can represent the anguish and injustice faced by migrant workers in their quest for a better life. In short, the title symbolizes and criticizes the injustices and inequalities that some people suffer and that challenge the ideals and principles on which the American Dream is based.

4- Conclusion

The American Dream is a concept rooted in American culture and identity. It is based on the principles of hard work, determination, and equal opportunity to achieve happiness. However, over time it is a concept that has evolved significantly.

In American literature we have multiple literary works that analyze the American dream. In this study we have analyzed the novels *The Great Gatsby* written by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. Both novels offer different perspectives and ideas about this ideal, exposing its contradictions and aspirations. In order to carry out this research, an in-depth analysis of the symbols and key aspects present in these novels in relation to the American Dream has been carried out.

On the one hand, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel set in the 1920s, the era of the Roaring Twenties. Throughout this novel, the American Dream is depicted as an ideal loaded with materialistic and superficial aspirations and goals. The protagonist, Jay Gatsby, is in constant search of wealth and success in order to be socially accepted and to win the love of Daisy Buchanan. His origins are humble, but he ends up achieving a good social status. However, he obtains that wealth through illegal practices and lies, which shows that corruption is linked to the relentless pursuit of wealth. In summary, the author of the novel, F. S. Fitzgerald, uses Gatsby's story and exploits to criticize the lack of values, superficiality, and materialism, demonstrating that wealth is not synonymous with happiness.

On the other hand, *The Grapes of the Wrath* is a novel set in the 1930s, a time known as the Great Depression. Unlike *The Great Gatsby*, this literary work focuses on showing readers the importance of solidarity and community, criticizing inequality. In other words, it shows that in order to achieve the ideals on which the American Dream is based, it is necessary to establish a sense of community, in which individuals support each other in a reciprocal way. The protagonists are the Joad family. This family emigrates to California in search of a better life, showing the difficulties and challenges they have to face. In summary, this novel demonstrates that to achieve the principles of the American Dream you have to work hard, fight injustices and inequalities, have hope, and stand in community.

However, although both novels offer different perspectives of the American Dream, both perspectives are complementary and share symbols that represent the American

dream. For example, in both novels, the symbol of travel becomes relevant. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick travels to New York in search of new opportunities and with the goal of achieving the American dream. However, when he gets there, he realizes that life in New York reflects corruption and superficiality. In the case of *The Grapes of the Wrath*, the Joad family travels to California in the hope of a better life, as they are in the midst of an economic crisis. This trip represents the illusion and the Hope to improve their living conditions, however, when they arrive in California, the Joad family realizes that the living conditions there are deplorable, that is to say, they find a reality very different from what they expected.

In summary, this research has explored how the American Dream manifests and evolves throughout the 1920s and 1930s in American literature. In addition, the reading of both novels invites the reader to reflect on whether the American Dream is an aspiration for any individual or simply an illusion.

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