

# Američki san u književnosti 20. stoljeća

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Preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i mađarskog jezika i  
književnosti

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**The American Dream in Twentieth Century Literature**

Završni rad

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## Abstract

Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* are works that were written during the period of the Great Depression, a time of hardship when the American dream lost its value as people lost their belief in equality, prosperity and success. There are many different views of the American dream, and each of the three selected writers incorporate the effects of the Great Depression in their works in order to present a focus on a particular aspect of the American dream. In *The Great Gatsby*, Francis Scott Fitzgerald highlights the false hopes of the idealized dream of getting rich which leads to disillusionment and failure. In a similar manner, Lorraine Hansberry, in *A Raisin in the Sun*, depicts the broken dream and harsh reality of living as an African-American in Chicago during the period between the 1920s and the 1930s. Likewise, in *The Day of the Locust*, Nathanael West shows the complete failure of the American dream when people are enchanted with the tales of easy money. The depression-era literature revealed facts of American life, with a particular focus on the decayed social and moral values and the decline of the American dream. In contrast to the works depicting the loss of the American dream, there were also those who stressed the power and durability of the dream that helped Americans face the hardships with fortitude and hope in rebuilding the economy as well as the nation and its values. The popularity of the socially critical literary works of the Great Depression shows the public concern with the ills of society as the belief in the rebuilding of the pure, old values for which their ancestors were fighting.

*Keywords:* American dream, freedom, equality, disillusionment, *The Great Gatsby*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Day of the Locust*, twentieth century literature

## Introduction

Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* are literary works from the twentieth century that deal with the American dream from three different perspectives. This paper analyses the works with the aim of presenting the writers' disillusionment with the American dream. The Introduction presents the topic of the American dream by highlighting its origin and significance and traces its presence over the course of the major periods of American history. It focuses particularly on the period of the Great Depression by presenting the collapse of the American dream as reflected in the selected works of three writers of the period. Firstly, the paper deals with the theme of failure of the American dream through the experience of Jay Gatsby, the main character in *The Great Gatsby*. Secondly, the paper explores Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* with a particular focus on life in Chicago during the 1920s and 1950s through the experience of an African-American family, the Youngers who are the main characters. Thirdly, an emphasis is placed on Hollywood, a city where, according to Nathanael West, the basic values as well as the American dream are corrupted for good without a chance to improve.

## 1. Understanding the American dream

There is something in which every American strongly believes and fights for and that is the American Dream. In order to completely understand the aim of this paper, there is a need for an explanation of that important term and how it has been functioning through history. To begin with, the American dream is a mythic structure; a set of ideals and beliefs in freedom, prosperity and the possibility to achieve goals of becoming rich and to create a perfect and safe environment for families. For a long time, the American dream has been an ideal for prosperity, not only for Americans but also for people across the globe. “Believers in the American Dream assume that America is a land of opportunity where, if one is virtuous and works hard, one will achieve wealth and success”, claims dr. Aimable Twagilimana (qtd. in Bloom 203).

During the Colonial Period, people from all over the world, especially Europe, believed in the stories of a place with abundant lands and wealth, as well as the chance to start a new life in a new world - that place was America. So for different reasons, people started coming more and more to that newly-found land. Soon, Europeans populated the East Coast and moved forward to explore the land and its possibilities, and there their dreams turned into rights. Personal freedoms, political and religious freedom, the right to prosper and create a business are some of the rights that became achievable on the American continent. Those rights and dreams very quickly became a part of the American heritage and tradition. The Pilgrims maybe did not talk about the American dream in these words, but they did have an idea of it somewhere in their minds for they did live it as people who imagined and created a destiny for themselves. Through time, it has become a unique concept that Americans have accepted and defined in different ways according to their own life and experience. The first literary reference to the American dream can be found in “Epic of America”, James Truslow Adams’ novel from 1931. In this novel he wanted to explain what attracted all of those people across the world to settle in America. In his works, Adams emphasized important historical themes and to him the most important one was what he called

...that American Dream of a better, richer and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world. That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an

uprising of ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming it. (qtd. in Cullen 4)

From that quote the usage of the term American dream is noticeable but it is still “not clear whether he actually coined the term or appropriated it from someone else” (Cullen 4). As Cullen further states, “the phrase rapidly entered common parlance as a byword (...) not only in the US but in the rest of the world,” and today everyone knows at least something about the American dream that has spread across the globe and has become a component of an American identity as well as an association of the American nation (Cullen 4). The American dream also means the right to equality, whether political or religious, life, and a sense of identity as it is rooted in the Declaration of Independence which proclaims that “all men are created equal” and have a right to pursue their dreams. The history of the United States, however, shows that these ideals were not extended to women, African-Americans or Native Americans although all of these people had to fight for their freedom to have control over the course of their lives and, more importantly, for equality on the whole. Even today, these alleged, birth-rights are not something every citizen of the United State has. Nevertheless, the power of belief in a better life resides in most of the people and they are prepared to work hard for it. That is the reason why people are still coming to America. All newcomers strive to achieve the greater status through dedication and therefore to become successful. The term today “appears to mean that in the United States anything is possible if you want it badly enough” (Cullen 5).

Some people tend to misunderstand the real meaning of the American dream so they come to the United States and think that the riches will just fall from the sky or that they will get rich overnight. They all believe in the rags-to-riches dream, the extraordinary upward journey from poverty to richness, and that it is happening to everyone who is willing to work hard for it and to succeed. But the truth is different and people often stay disappointed, especially those who come from different parts of the world to the United States just because of all those stories of easily earned money. The American dream is not just coming and gaining money, it is a lot more. It promises not freedom to do whatever somebody wants, but freedom to dream and that dream asks for a risk and sacrifice and in return, the person gets self-fulfilment and dignity as well as wealth.

According to Cullen, everybody has a different dream and, therefore, there are several kinds of dream. According to him, the first American dream is, that of the Pilgrims, which was the desire for a better life for their future generations. The second is stated in the Declaration of Independence, which is also the foundation of the US Constitution. Another,

one that is the most familiar is “the dream of upward mobility, a dream typically understood in terms of economic and social advancement” (Cullen 8). It is a dream of rising from poverty to fortune and fame, where every person wanted to become someone and not be left behind; everybody wanted to rise from rags to riches.

Everything functioned perfectly until the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the American dream had its challenges. The Great Depression caused widespread difficulties during the 20’s and 30’s and many of those who were directly affected experienced disillusionment with the dream. The Depression caused the loss of the “old idea – and faith – that America was a land of infinite possibilities and honesty” (Kochan 2). During these years the biggest struggle was that “of the ordinary man to hold fast to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ which were vouchsafed to us in the past in vision and on parchment” (qtd. in Cullen 4). In order to express their disappointment with the current state in their country as well as great disillusionment with the fact that the United States had been turning into a heartless, materialistic and overly consuming society, many writers created works to express their critical views. They wanted to show how their country was out of control and that it was nothing near what their ancestors fought for. Many works express the idea of the American dream turning out badly and being unachievable instead of being easy to reach. It can be said that they are turning to the pessimistic side, which was not the case before the Great Depression when people strongly believed in every possible chance of easily earned money. As a situation and event itself says, people and writers were depressed and they wanted to show and express their feelings to a broader audience and to reach out to the ordinary men and women. Texts such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and Nathanael West’s *The Day of a Locust* question principles of the American dream. These stories are exploring the path to the achievement of the American Dream as well as the hardships in achieving it. Through different situations and perspectives, writers tried to depict the reality of life in the twentieth century and the corruption of the American dream when people forgot its basic meaning; they just wanted to get rich, no matter what the cost. Money, great wealth, respectable positions in circles of important people and fame are what became admirable and important. Americans had drastically changed and reversed the national focus from values such as progress, hard work, self-reliance, perfectibility, humility, dignity and happiness to the devaluing of values through excess, selfishness and vanity. They corrupted not only the American dream, but also the dreams of their ancestors.



## 2. Failure of the American dream in *The Great Gatsby*

Francis Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* was published in New York in 1925. Those were the 1920s, often referred to as the Roaring Twenties. That was a time of great social change, jazz music was being played everywhere, and material success was seen as the most important aspect of the American dream. Because of the popularity of jazz music, that decade is also called the Jazz Age. During the 1920s, people in America wanted to build a great economic empire in order to prosper as much as they can. That seemed like a very good plan but people were too focused on the present and not thinking of the future. This means that they made their lives easier and enjoyed life to the maximum. However, the enjoyment did not last for a long time; their dream of building a utopia and living in it quickly turned into a downfall. What led them into the failure were pure materialism and a constant wish to get more and more. People forgot what really mattered and that is "the pursuit of progress for happiness"; instead they became "purely materialistic and corrupt" (Bertrand 3). What Fitzgerald wanted to show with this novel is the corruption and decay of the old American dream. It is a novel "commenting on the myth of American ascendancy" (Bloom 67). Through *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald showed how people were behaving and living in America and how the rest of the world saw America - as a land of a great wealth, a continent of complete dominance and superiority. The setting is the city of New York in the 1920s. His depiction of Long Island "captures the aspirations that represented the opulent, excessive and exuberant 1920s" in a very revealing manner (Bloom 67). Although the era was one of the most optimistic, the dreams of those people who were only seeking a better and higher social status became nightmares. *The Great Gatsby* perfectly captures the betrayal of the belief in the American dream in a corrupt society. This will be the most visible through characterization of the main characters in the events and situations that occur in the novel.

The first character to start with is Jay Gatsby, an ultimate dreamer. He is a perfect example of a self-made man, rising from poverty to great riches and prosperity.

He had one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced, or seemed to face, the whole external world for an instant and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself. (Fitzgerald 53)

This quote presents a very good description of Gatsby's character and appearance. "Gatsby is such a man who equates quantity with quality, cost with value" (Kochan 3). He is a decent and humble mid-western boy who strongly and decisively wanted to succeed in life and make something of himself. "Gatsby is a *mythic* character," just like the American dream: stuck between illusion and reality of life (Kochan 3). His flaw was that he lived in a world of complete deception; he created a whole new life for himself:

The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end. (Fitzgerald 105)

He even adjusted his way of talking, using phrases such as "old sport," just to show that he was always a part of that rich world: "Of course, of course! They're fine!" and he added hollowly, "...old sport" (Fitzgerald 90). What is more, he acquired false riches; he gained his wealth illegally by participating in organized crime, including distribution of alcohol which was illegal in the 1920s. Because he was poor, Gatsby dreamt of the life where he has everything: a big mansion, a woman he loves, so much money that he does not have to worry about anything and he stuck to his dream until the very end of his young life. Besides his childhood dream of becoming rich, the other reason why he wanted to gain enormous wealth was Daisy. They met and fell in love during the war when Gatsby was a soldier, but they got separated from each other because of the war. Years and years passed by and he still held on to his mission of reuniting with her, always thinking: "Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. "Why of course you can!" (Fitzgerald 118). Gatsby did not stop thinking about Daisy for even a second, being in love with the image of her that he created:

There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams -- not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart. (Fitzgerald 103)

Once Gatsby reunited with her, he

hadn't once ceased looking at Daisy, and I think he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes.

Sometimes, too, he stared around at his possessions in a dazed way, as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real. Once he nearly toppled down a flight of stairs. (Fitzgerald 98)

This is the description of a man in love, a man full of affection and admiration for a woman that he loves more than himself. Daisy, whose voice and thoughts are “full of money,” is Gatsby’s “silver idol” of illusion (Fitzgerald 122-128). Gatsby’s mansion in West Egg proves that he strove to make his fortune to impress Daisy and to be closer to her:

“It was a strange coincidence,” I said.

“But it wasn’t a coincidence at all.”

“Why not?”

“Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay.”

(Fitzgerald 84)

It is important to note that this novel, as well as Fitzgerald’s other novels, is based on a concept of social classes which means that he is “the first American writer who seems to have discovered that such a thing as an American class really existed” (Kochan 2). The division of social classes is best seen by the place where each character lives since there is “a strong relationship in the novel between the geography of the roads and the characters’ social values” (Bertrand 4). Nick Carraway, Daisy’s cousin and now Gatsby’s neighbour, came from the Midwest to New York. He is in search of the world that is “in uniform, and at a sort of moral attention forever” (Fitzgerald 4). The reason is his disillusionment caused by the death and destruction of World War I and he wants to find his fortune somewhere else, he wants to start a new life. He was hoping to find his happiness and fulfilment

...on that slender riotous island which extends itself due east of New York...twenty miles from city... (where) a pair of enormous eggs, identical in contour and separated only by a courtesy bay, jut out into the most domesticated body of salt water in the Western Hemisphere, the great wet barnyard of Long Island Sound. (Fitzgerald 7)

But, all he found was a decay of morals. Fitzgerald portrayed that moral emptiness of people through the Valley of ashes – a polluted environment and black depiction of humanity:

This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. (Fitzgerald 26)

That is the description of the lowest class of people and the environment where they lived. They were on their way to the West Egg, where Gatsby and Nick lived.

While the Valley of Ashes represents the lowest class of people, West Egg represents the newly rich Americans such as Gatsby. They made their fortune during the rising years of the US stock market or through illegal means. The newly rich or new money are “crude, garish and flamboyant” as well as tasteless and extravagant (Bloom 69). One of the examples for that is Gatsby’s mansion: “The one on my right was a colossal affair by any standard – it was a factual imitation of Hotel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking a new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool and more than forty acres of lawn and garden” (Fitzgerald 7). Once Gatsby became rich, he wanted to show off to others, to flaunt his great wealth. However, despite all of the obvious riches, newly rich are just “cheap materialistic imitations of the American dream” (Bloom 69).

In contrast to West Egg, East Egg represents old wealth or old money and Tom and Daisy are part of that world. They belong to the upper class of people, white Anglo Saxon Protestant Americans who care only about themselves because, after all, they were born in abundance and wealth; they inherited all of their money from their ancestors. The newly rich Gatsby constantly tries to get closer to the old money but he will never be able to cross the bridge between the two classes. The reason is that they possess old-wealth taste, tradition, and heritage; something the newly rich will never have. Tom and Daisy Buchanan have an elegance and grace since they have always been living lives of rich people. Their elegance is seen from the look of their home: “cheerful red and white Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay” (Fitzgerald 9).

Even though East Coast aristocracy possesses “sophistication, refinement and breeding”, they are not the embodiment of the real American dream of self-made individuals (Bloom 70). As Nick says, they are “careless people, Tom and Daisy — they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money of their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.” (Fitzgerald 191). This shows that they are actually a perfect match and poor, innocent Gatsby does not belong to their world.

As much as Gatsby was obsessed with Daisy and reliving the past, he was obsessed with money as well. He just did not want to get back to his old life as a poor man and, as Nick says “Americans, while occasionally willing to be serfs, have always been obstinate about being peasantry” (Fitzgerald 95). Gatsby escaped from that world of “peasantry” through mainly materialistic things such as his trophies, piles of silk shirts, crazily expensive cars, a

tacky mansion and enormous library full of unread books. To Gatsby, these things represented everything he ever wanted, they were symbols of the American dream:

he opened for us two hulking patent cabinets which held his massed suits and dressing-gowns and ties, and his shirts, piled like bricks in stacks a dozen high... He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. (Fitzgerald 99)

At that moment, Daisy realized that these shirts represent Gatsby's obsession with the American dream, but he sees it only as the accumulation of wealth. He also wanted to show his wealth by throwing his famous weekend parties: he never showed up to them but people knew about him: "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 45). They are a metaphor for the greed, material excess and desire for pleasure — things that represented the Roaring Twenties. His guests were mostly newly rich people who wanted to become someone and to climb a social ladder as high as they could.

Despite these fancy parties, endless piles of shirts and his big mansion, Gatsby did not win over the only person he ever loved — Daisy. She was just a bitter manifestation of the American dream — a fickle, materialistic woman of the 1920s who did not know what to do with herself. Gatsby eventually realizes that his fascination with Daisy is just a worthless dream, a memory which he should have left in the past, as Nick concluded after the conversation between them: "He wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was" (Fitzgerald 118). After facing the truth, Gatsby became disappointed and his optimism turned to cynicism. In the end, Daisy chooses Tom which shows the victory of materialism and wealth over goodness and love. Gatsby became a victim of the greed, apathy and elusive American dream that led him to death. In his pursuit of happiness to gain success, status and wealth, Gatsby "follows a dream that ultimately becomes a nightmare" (Bloom 79). Nevertheless, Fitzgerald did not finish his novel in the dark of complete pessimism:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And then one fine morning—So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (Fitzgerald 193)

Fitzgerald still believed that there is a future for everyone who got stuck in the past and that the possibility to relieve the old American dream is still present.

### 3. African-Americans and the American dream in *A Raisin in the Sun*

Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* was first produced on Broadway in 1959. The best words to describe the play are that "A Raisin in the Sun is a celebration of African American hope in the future and belief in the ultimate, if long delayed, justice implicit in the documents of American democracy. It also reflects the determination of African Americans to be seen by the white majority as real people, sharing universal values and dreams" (Sternlicht 165). What is more, it "discusses the impact of labour and housing discrimination on the American dreams of these black populations through experiences of two generations of the Younger family" (Bloom 171). It was a huge success since the theme concerning African-Americans was not very common during that time. For this play, Hansberry took the title from the famous long poem titled "Harlem", written by Langston Hughes, in which he asks "What happens to a dream deferred, / Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun" (Hughes). Hansberry's play helps us understand the challenges that African-American workers in Chicago had to go through during the period between the 1920s and the 1950s. The lives of African-Americans in Chicago were everything but easy because they were living under racial segregation. The play has some autobiographical elements since Hansberry wrote the play according to what she was witnessing while growing up. As already mentioned in the previous section, 1930 is the year that is the most associated with the Great Depression. Nevertheless, Hansberry's family stayed economically stable through this period. For the 1930s standards, the Hansberry's belonged to upper middle class, unlike the most of African-Americans who lived in degrading poverty at that time. In her plays, Hansberry focuses on the harsh reality of African-Americans, whom she cared very much about even though she did not feel all the difficulties they were going through. Willing to help other African-Americans in their struggle to achieve their constitutional rights, her family fought against segregation. Her father even challenged a Supreme Court decision against integration. Showing that African-Americans have opinions and voices, as well as the strong will to fight for the equality, he realized his right to buy a house in a Chicago neighbourhood where up to that point only white people had lived. Being black in a white neighbourhood was very difficult, as is evident in the incident when Hansberry herself was nearly killed by a brick that was thrown through a window by angry whites. Hansberry's memory of her mother's loaded gun which served to protect her family from the violence of racism also illustrates the hardships. Such traumatic memories got stuck in her mind so they were probably a part of the reason why Hansberry chose the theme of a black family's brave decision to move into a new

and unfriendly environment for her first play. Another important event from her life that she incorporated in her play was her father and his early death which deeply touched Hansberry. We can connect the character of Big Walter with her father. The cause of much of the action in *Raisin* develops as a consequence of the death of Big Walter, a character whom the audience never sees, although there are many references to him in the dialogues.

Even though Hansberry never lived in a household that is like the Younger's, she was familiar with such households throughout her childhood so she had enough material for her play. The plot is built around the Younger family, whose members do not know the comforts middle-class families have since they are living in a small, crowded apartment.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, thousands of African-Americans moved to northern industrial cities in order to achieve wealth and their American dream; to find jobs that would create a better life for them and their families, and the Youngers were one of them. The play reveals frustrations that complicate their dreams for success. The matriarchal figure is Mama who takes care of her son Walter Lee, his pregnant wife, and her younger daughter. Her husband died, leaving a ten-thousand-dollar insurance policy and Mama is the beneficiary. Now, the real problem pops up because every member of the family has different plans for spending that money; they have different dreams they want to accomplish. Mama wants to buy a house to finally fulfil a dream she had with her deceased husband. Mama's son, Walter Lee, would rather invest the money in a liquor store with his friends because he believes that it is a sure deal and that the investment will solve their financial problems forever. Walter's wife, Ruth, supports Mama rather than her husband with hope to provide more space and opportunity for their son, Travis. Finally, Beneatha, Walter's sister and Mama's daughter, wants to invest the money in her education in medical school. Moreover, she wishes that her family members were not so interested in moving to the white neighbourhood and blending in the white world. However, their dreams and wishes were hardly achievable because of segregation, racism, intolerance and violence against which Hansberry's father was fighting. Although the position of African-Americans was at the lowest point; the Youngers knew that, if they wanted to accomplish even the smallest thing, they will have to struggle to the maximum, especially to live their American dream of "success, equality and freedom" which is seen "as an ambiguous process" (Bloom 175). Political scientist Jennifer Hochschild collected data and, in her book *Facing Up to the American Dream* from 1996, suggested that "working-class black Americans, for example, believe in it with an intensity that baffles and even appals more affluent African-Americans, who see the dream as an opiate that lulls people into ignoring the structural barriers that prevent collective as well as personal advancement"



(Cullen 6). The fact is that African-Americans were discriminated and did not have the same opportunities as whites. Still, they did not lose their faith. The working conditions of Chicago blacks were very harsh, which is represented through the experience of Big Walter Lee, told by Mama. She presents him as a brave man who fought for the happiness of his family: “That man worked himself to death like he done. Like he was fighting his own war with this here world...” (Hansberry 503). Mama wants to say that his life was a constant struggle against a personal hardship and hateful economic and social surroundings. Also, she insists that the money they received when Big Walter Lee died was not anywhere near the value of his life:

MAMA (*She holds the check away from her, still looking at it. Slowly her face sobers into a mask of unhappiness*) Ten thousand dollars. (*She hands it to RUTH*) Put it away somewhere, Ruth. (*She does not look at RUTH; her eyes seem to be seeing something somewhere every far off*) Ten thousand dollars they give you. Ten thousand dollars.

TRAVIS (*To his mother, sincerely*) What's the matter with Grandmama don't she want to be rich? (Hansberry 519)

Her frustration reveals to the readers her disappointment with the unjust assessment of the value of her husband's life and the American dream. Although ten thousand dollars was quite a lot of money in the 1950s, it cannot replace Big Walter's worth in Mama's life and in society. She realizes that the American dream she heard so much about is now twisted by the corrupt society through violence, inequality and constant disrespect of African-Americans. The vision of a peaceful and secure life that black Southern migrants, such as the Youngers, hoped to have when they escaped to the North to find justice and jobs, was now crushed:

MAMA: Oh—So now it's life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it's money. I guess the world really do change . . .

WALTER: No—it was always money, Mama. We just didn't know about it.

MAMA: No . . . something has changed. You something new, boy. In my time we was worried about not being lynched . . . You ain't satisfied or proud of nothing we done. I mean that you had a home; that we kept you out of trouble till you was grown; that you don't have to ride to work on the back of nobody's streetcar—You my children—but how different we done become. (Hansberry 523)

Mama and Big Walter were industrious and ambitious; they had been, unfortunately, assigned the demeaning roles of servants, dependents and unskilled workers: “My husband always said being any kind of a servant wasn't a fit thing for a man to have to be. He always said a man's

hands was made to make things, or to turn the earth with - not to drive nobody's car for 'em – or – (*she looks at her own hands*) carry them slop jars” (Hansberry 543). Mama was always determined to take care of her family, even if that meant to take low-paying jobs. She even considers taking on an additional job: “I could maybe take on a little day work again, few days a week” (Hansberry 502). She does whatever she can to take the best care for her family, she “hopes for the day when her children will be able to achieve more in life than she did” (Bloom 176). For her, most important is her family's happiness: “...Big Walter used to say, he'd get right wet in the eyes sometimes, lean his head back with the water standing in his eyes and say, “Seem like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams – but He did give us children to make them dreams seem worth while” (Hansberry 503).

African-Americans rarely got respect or decent jobs because “white Americans commonly denied blacks their humanity, dignity and value” and achieving anything, especially American dream, was hard for them (Bloom 177). Results of such discrimination were their exhaustion, poverty, great anger and disappointment, as it can be seen from Big Walter's life from Mama's words: “I seen...him...night after night...come in...and look at that rug...and then look at me...the red showing in his eyes...the veins moving in his head...I seen him growing thin and old before he was forty...working and working and working like somebody's old horse...killing himself” (Hansberry 562).

The play also shows how job discrimination affected the generation of the 1950s, like Mama and Big Walter's son and his wife Ruth who are deeply dissatisfied with their work:

WALTER A job. (*Looks at her*) Mama, a job? I open and close car doors all day long. I drive a man around in his limousine and I say, “Yes, sir; no, sir; very good, sir; shall I take the Drive, sir?” Mama, that ain't no kind of job . . . that ain't nothing at all. (*Very quietly*) Mama, I don't know if I can make you understand. (Hansberry 522)

To Walter, having a job as a car driver lowers his manhood, self-esteem and individual worth; he sees it as a servitude to white Americans. He just thinks that no one, not even Ruth, understands him:

WALTER (*Rising and coming to her and standing over her*)  
You tired, ain't you? Tired of everything Me, the boy, the way we live – this beat-up hole – everything. Ain't you? (She doesn't look up, doesn't answer) So tired – moaning and groaning all the time, but you wouldn't do nothing to help, would you? You couldn't be on my side that long for nothing, could you?  
(Hansberry 493-494)

Nevertheless, Mama was always there for all of them, to give them support and to remind them of always being optimistic and to believe: “MAMA: There is always something left to love. And if you ain’t learned that, you ain’t learned nothing” (Hansberry 573).

At the end, some members of the Younger family achieve part of their dreams so we can assume the faith and path of their lives: “Hansberry clearly suggest that the Younger family, as a whole, has legitimate grounds for hope for improvement in their employment opportunities and economic situation” (Bloom 184). While future work possibilities for Ruth seem hardly achievable, Beneatha, Mama’s younger daughter, has more chance of finding a good job with her education and Walter Lee will succeed financially because he becomes more reasonable: “Mama. You always telling me to see life like it is... You know it’s all divided up... Between the takers and the taken. (*He laughs*) I’ve figured it out finally” (Hansberry 570). This is a very positive sign that shows that Walter found new strength and optimism. He finally understands that life is not about having a dream, but doing your best in order to achieve it; one should stay strong and take risks.

*A Raisin in the Sun* shows optimism and transcends the hopelessness suggesting that Walter and Beneatha will eventually achieve their dream of success.

In 1960, one year after the publication of the play, the job market “opened widely for African-Americans through social welfare programs” (Bloom 183). This positive change in work opportunities was a big step in the realization of the American dream of economic success for African Americans. Despite the racial inequality, Hansberry always believed in the possibility to realize the American dream and she expressed her convictions in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

#### 4. Broken values in Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*

Another novel written as a response to the Great Depression that hit America with the stock market crash in October 1929 is Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*. The novel was written in 1939 with a setting in Hollywood, California. Unlike Hansberry's play that expresses optimism for the African-Americans and Fitzgerald's novel that shows hope for improvement of broken values, West wrote this novel with complete pessimism, leaving out every piece of faith in the American dream. *The Day of the Locust* depicts the harsh reality of living in Hollywood by showing the obscene, vulgar landscapes as a remainder of the country's poverty at that time. Hollywood was a place where people kept coming with the intention of realizing their dreams of wealth and success, but West saw the American dream as a spiritual and material betrayal in the years of this economic depression. In the introduction to the novel, David Thompson, British film critic and historian, states that

Nathanael West was one of the first writers to feel the disappointment in America and to relate it to the false promises, the shine of advertising, and the cult of being good-looking and happy... This is the classic American dream slipping over into nightmare; it is the locusts eclipsing the sunlight. ("97. *The Day of the Locust*")

Once again people created a false picture, this time of Hollywood, as a city where everyone can become someone easily and quickly. People wanted to be rich or at least famous, and what better place for that than Hollywood where people without money and talent could easily be both. This novel is exactly about that desire to become famous and rich; it tells the story of people who came to Hollywood in search of the American dream. But here, the American dream is represented as a dream of a personal fulfilment that reached the highest point of broken values, as Cullen writes:

Like the others, its roots go back to the origins of American life, from the so-called adventurers seeking sudden fortunes on the plantations of Virginia to the speculators mining their prospects in western cities like Las Vegas. But nowhere does this dream come more vividly into focus than in the culture of Hollywood - a semi-mythic place where, unlike in the Dream of Upward Mobility, fame and fortune were all the more compelling if achieved without obvious effort. This is most alluring and insidious of American Dreams, and one that seems to have become predominant at the start of the twenty-first century. (Cullen 9)

The characters in this novel dream about having a life of luxury, lots of money, and hoping to have their happily-ever-after ending. Todd Hackett, Faye Greener, and Homer Simpson travel west with the hope to pursue success in Hollywood and attain the life and happiness that come, as they think, with the American dream. Nevertheless, they all failed in that attempt. Like the European settlers who came to America, these characters had different reasons for coming but their goal was the same.

To begin with, Todd Hackett is the main character who comes to California when “A talent scout for National Films had brought Tod to the coast after seeing some of his drawings in an exhibit of undergraduate work at the Yale School of Fine Arts(...)to learn set and costume designing” (West 60). Being enthusiastic and wanting to succeed in his career of designing movie sets, “When the Hollywood job had come along, he had grabbed it despite the arguments of his Mends who were certain that he was selling out and would never paint again” (West 61). The moment he came to Hollywood, he was enchanted with it, especially with the people: “As he walked along, he examined the evening crowd (...) Scattered among these masquerades were people of a different type. Their clothing was sombre and badly cut (...) At this time Tod knew very little about them except that they had come to California to die” (West 60). Those were the Midwestern immigrants who moved to Hollywood where they became bitter and disillusioned because it did not offer them the dream they expected. At one point, he came to the conclusion that “they were the people he felt he must paint” (West 60). So, his biggest challenge became the depiction of that lower-middle class. Just as Europeans continued coming to the new world in colonial times, Tod felt and predicted at the beginning of the novel that Americans would continue coming to California. Tod sees them as victims who make up his apocalyptic painting “The Burning of Los Angeles”:

He was going to show the city burning at high noon, so that the flames would have to compete with the desert sun and thereby appear less fearful, more like bright flags flying from roofs and windows than a terrible holocaust. (...) And the people who set it on fire would be a holiday crowd. (West 118)

Tod, although “he was an artist, not a prophet”, strongly believed that these people, who came to Hollywood and realizing that their dreams would not fulfil, would revolt and end it in a riot (West 118).

His painter’s eye gives the close details of life in Hollywood, while his intellectual status opens up the critical opinions of various characters and their interactions and contributes to our seeing Tod as a non-participant in many ways above the other characters. Although Tod is

an observer for a while, his life begins to go downhill as he associates more frequently with the lower levels of Hollywood society and falls under Faye's influence, becoming her victim.

Faye is an untalented Hollywood actress who is shallow, heartless and manipulative: "Faye played one of the dancing girls. She had only one line to speak, "Oh, Mr. Smith!" and spoke it badly" (West 67). She came to Hollywood with the intention to become famous and rich and she eagerly stuck to that plan. No matter what it took, she wanted that fame, she wanted to conquer Hollywood and reach her goal: "I'm going to be a star some day," she announced as though daring him to contradict her.(...)"It's my life. It's the only thing in the whole world that I want."(...) "If I'm not, I'll commit suicide" (West 98). She was seducing men and, "when she had had as much as she wanted, she pushed him away" (West 112). Faye represents Hollywood and every male character from the novel wants to have her, wants at least a chance to be with her. Even Tod, who is a voice of reason in this novel, falls under Faye's temptation. She presents the beautiful and tempting; the outer beauty, not inner: "That was because her beauty was structural like a tree's, not a quality of her mind or heart" (West 126-127). With this description of Faye, West depicted the depth of Hollywood; it has good grounds for success and it is tempting to the people but it is empty. The surroundings became ugly because the people who are living there became bitter and greedy. She, as Hollywood, is the failure of the American dream, unable to fulfil what she promises; all she ever offered was false hope. Just like Gatsby, Faye is playing roles all the time, unable to be real to anyone. Nevertheless, everyone is constantly chasing her since they misunderstand her empty affection and flirting without any romantic intensions. That is why she represents a false dream. Tod realized her true behaviour and personality and even shows that on his painting:

In "The Burning of Los Angeles" Faye is the naked girl in the left foreground being chased by the group of men and women who have separated from the main body of the mob. One of the women is about to hurl a rock at her to bring her down. She is running with her eyes closed and a strange half-smile on her lips. (West 108)

Homer Simpson is the only character who stands out in *The Day of the Locust* because he does not fit easily into Hollywood life. He is not a performer, like Faye or her father Harry, but he is not a part of the crowds that Tod hopes to paint either. Nevertheless, Homer is the closest character to the disillusioned crowd who has come to California to die: "Tod examined him eagerly. He didn't mean to be rude but at first glance this man seemed an exact model for the kind of person who comes to California to die, perfect in every detail down to fever eyes and unruly hands" (West 79). In Hollywood, Homer is an outsider who came from the

Midwest “from a little town near Des Moines, Iowa, called Wayneville, where he had worked for twenty years in a hotel” (West 80). He is a largely empty character and a very small part of the novel focuses on Homer’s point of view since his life is blank. Early in the novel, Homer is rather shy than bitter. Yet, as the novel continues and Homer falls under Faye’s influence, his shyness and meekness become instruments of a new bitterness since she was only using him for financial purposes. Faye’s victimization of Homer creates in him tension that eventually erupts into the violence that occurs at the end of the novel when Homer becomes a part of the riot, just as the others who are left disappointed by Hollywood.

Hollywood is a city that sucks in every single person with the false hope, without exceptions and that is why Tod included even himself in the painting; he ends up, together with Homer, in the riot he predicted. All the characters in *The Day of the Locust* eventually realized that the picture of perfect life that Hollywood represents is not as easy to obtain as they thought. They grow discontented and disappointed with their lives, which indicate the downfall of this lower level of Hollywood society.

West’s modernism declared the death of the American Dream. He completely overturned the American dream and proved that it is hardly possible to create happiness, success and order out of the chaos of everyday life.

## Conclusion

The twentieth century was a century full of bitterness and dissatisfaction with the American dream and the corrupted, materialistic society. The cause of such negative perceptions was found in the harshness of the Great Depression. Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* are works written during that period concerning the theme of losing one's belief in the American dream. Despite the utter pessimism and complete dissatisfaction that is expressed in the novel *The Day of the Locust*, the novel *The Great Gatsby* and the play *A Raisin in the Sun* highlight the disillusionment but do offer some hope. Fitzgerald expressed a dose of optimism at the end of the novel with which he pointed out that the future of the American dream and fixed values still exists. Moreover, Lorraine Hansberry spoke openly about the position of African – Americans and their struggle to reach the American dream. With the happy ending, she expressed her belief that things can change and that all people, especially African – Americans, can achieve their dreams. The theme of broken values of the American dream that pervaded the twentieth century literature made the works popular, which shows that people do care about fixing the corruption of society and still have faith that equality of opportunity and progress can be achieved by bringing back the pure, old values for which their ancestors fought.



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