

Essay #1-American Ideals, the American Dream, and Meritocracy for All/Some

The trouble with ideals is that they are, by definition, not real. They are aspirational and certainly socially real because they exist in people's minds and are used by people to interpret and construct their realities, but ideals are fundamentally non-material despite their very real effects. The American Dream is rooted in the *Declaration of Independence*, which asserts that all "men" have a right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." But just because the United States originally conceived itself as a society without a hereditary nobility does not mean that the country has ever been a true meritocracy; the idea of the American Dream, much like the ideals laid out in the *Declaration of Independence*, is that of equal opportunity and meritocracy, but it contradicted by the obvious realities that some people do not have a fair chance to succeed. All of the readings we have covered so far in this course reflect this tension between an ideal of universal human rights and material success available to all and the realities of slavery, racism and sexism.

America, "the land of opportunity," owes the greater part of its resources to wealth expropriated from Native Americans and labor extracted from slaves, wage slaves, and women (as homemakers). Jackson called out the nation for violating the ideals the Founding Fathers put in place, pledging their "sacred honor" to uphold those principles in *A Century of Dishonor*. She recounts the history of the United States government making and then breaking treaties with various Native American nations. The American Dream was made possible by the this violation of Native Americans' right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* highlights the perverse system whereby a boy can have greater social status than a man by virtue of their race. Huck Finn has a chance of attaining the American Dream because he is White and has come into some money, while Jim, finally freed from slavery, will likely have an insurmountable challenge in freeing his enslaved wife and children.

In *American Ideals*, Roosevelt insists that any immigrant, be *he* Irish, German, or Scandinavian in origin, can become a true American if he rejects "his Old-World religious race and national antipathies," embraces "the complete separation of Church and State," and "revere[s] only our flag" (1139). Belongingness in the American nation is available to all (provided they are of male and of Northern European origin). This is repeated over and over again in American history-the American dream is available for all, provided they are already privileged by whiteness, masculinity, and relatively affluent socio-economic status.

The American Dream, at its core, is the ethic of prosperity based on hard work; any person should be able to work hard and succeed economically and personally in this "Land of the Free." But from the very beginning, the Declaration of Independence embraced the contradiction that "all men are created equal" even though some of those men, in addition to all women and children, were legally chattel.

Essay #2: The Southern Gothic and Regionalism

Abigail Heiniger 7/22/13 11:34 PM

Comment [1]: This statement of purpose guides the essay. All the body paragraphs use material from the readings to support this point.

Abigail Heiniger 7/22/13 11:37 PM

Comment [2]: Body paragraphs use material from the texts as support (in paraphrase or direct quotations) and make an argument on a SINGLE POINT.

Abigail Heiniger 7/22/13 11:38 PM

Comment [3]: These concise body paragraphs flow from the statement of purpose/thesis to the conclusion, making a single, coherent argument.

Regionalism was a major trend in US fiction, beginning in the later 19th century. It focus on particular areas, such as New England in the work of Jewett and Freeman or the US South in the work of Faulkner. Regionalist fiction challenges the assumption that there is a single, monolithic US culture and emphasizes the distinctiveness of the history, culture, and rhetorical style of different parts of the country.

Southern Gothic is a regionalist trend that reveals grotesque undercurrents in characters and situations that, might seem ordinary. For example, in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," the domestic sphere turns into a nightmare when it is discovered, years after the fact, that a wealthy daughter of the Southern aristocracy has not only murdered her suitor, but also slept next to his decaying corpse in a perverse twist on matrimony.

The Southern Gothic is haunted by the legacy of slavery. Underneath the every-day rests the deepest, most foul kinds of corruption. In Faulkner's story, the decay of the Grierson family home, with its fetid smell, is a symbol for the antebellum past and a critique of those who wish to romanticize it. Meanwhile, the townsfolk avoid direct conflict with Emily, since they cannot tell a lady her home stinks (796), assume that the smell must be Tobe's fault, originating from an animal he must have killed and failed to clean up (795), and sprinkle quicklime in her cellar (796), all to cover up and avoid dealing with the obvious facts of murder and corporeal decay. The body of Emily's lover is like the legacy of slavery-something that is obvious to all but seems easiest dealt with by ignoring it. Moreover, the legacy of slavery is embedded in the *local* community and linked to specific local slave-owning families.

The New England Regionalism of Freeman and Jewett differs from the Southern Gothic Fiction of Faulkner in that the former is realist, while the latter is grotesque. In Freeman's "A New England Nun," Louisa Ellis decides she prefers to remain unmarried despite her 15-year engagement to Joe Dagget. In "The Revolt of 'Mother'," a fed-up Sarah Penn decides to move the family into her husband, Adoniram's, new barn. Had either of these stories been written in a Southern Gothic style, these conflicts would have likely ended with the murder of one of these characters; the blunt, humorous rhetorical style of these New England authors is dramatically different than the grotesque hyperbole of the Southern Gothic. This distinction in tone and style challenges ideas of a cohesive national identity, suggesting that different regions of the US have different ways of thinking, not just different dialects and customs.

Finally, the communities in regionalist fiction are relatively hostile to outsiders. Whether it's the Northern interloper who is killed and hidden in Emily Grierson's home or Mrs. Toland who does not know how to behave in a New England church service, the outsider is disruptive and unwelcomed. The exclusivity of the local community directly undermines the concept of a cohesive national identity.

Abigail Heiniger 7/22/13 11:38 PM

Comment [4]: Good statement of purpose.

Abigail Heiniger 7/23/13 12:15 AM

Comment [5]: This paragraph is a STRONG close reading. Notice how it emphasizes the specific, symbolic meaning of details in the texts and uses that to make an argument (support the central thesis).

Abigail Heiniger 7/23/13 12:15 AM

Comment [6]: Again, this paper makes a smooth, cohesive argument.