VISIONS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM: F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, BOB DYLAN, AND NORMAN MAILER PROBE AT THE HEART OF THE NATIONAL IDEA

BOB BATCHELOR

> "I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it . . . I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken . . . And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall."
>
> — Bob Dylan, "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" (*Lyrics* 59)

> "[1960s America] was beyond our imaginations, it was more dramatic, more surrealistic, more fanciful, more incredible, more vivid, than anything we would have dared to write about."
>
> — Norman Mailer ("Interview," Bragg 260)

A YOUNG WRITER BEGINS A BOOK WITH AN OUTRIGHT LIE, an anonymous narrator boasts of sexual conquest, and a single drum beat snaps a rock and roll band to attention. These disparate incidents hardly seem the stuff of legend. Yet, in each case, the event sets its creator off on a journey to illuminate the American Dream, that powerful current that buttresses the national ethos. Taken together, the products of this quest—F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*, and Bob Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone"—explicate a vision of what resides at the heart of the Amer-

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ican Dream, as if its elusiveness can only be captured by presenting its extremes.

Mailer launches *An American Dream* with the image of a dashing, pre-presidential John F. Kennedy on a double date with another young congressman, who delivers the narrative. The two men share a past—war heroes who end up politicians. The brief passage concludes with sex, but it is not JFK who is exposed. Instead, the narrator asserts that he indeed seduced his female companion. She, however, is not a dull wallflower or someone plucked up from one of Washington's many secretary pools. Rather, he tells us, Deborah Kelly is a girl "who would have been bored by a diamond as big as the Ritz" (1). The homage to Fitzgerald's 1922 short story "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" not only signals her family's unimaginable wealth, but hints at the mysticism and magic behind the fortune, just like the Unger family's in the story.

Sex, alcohol, wealth, celebrity, and power propel Mailer's vision of the decay of antihero Stephen Rojack. Kelly, the young girl he seduced years earlier, eventually becomes his wife. However, Rojack kills her and throws her body from a high-rise balcony window to cover it up. No amount of family money can save her from his fury. Mailer is tackling the idea of the American Dream as a transcendent national ideology. The connection to Fitzgerald is explicit with the mention of "Diamond," but seems more overtly directed toward *The Great Gatsby*, the slim tome Mailer addresses (or perhaps updates or attempts to make more realistic) by applying its themes to early 1960s thinking.

Examining *An American Dream* necessitates an understanding of the post-JFK assassination, Vietnam buildup era, similar to the way one cannot look at Fitzgerald's work without an understanding of the nuances of the Jazz Age. From this cultural history perspective, the development of the American Dream from 1925 to 1965 is important, as is how the nation shook in the latter age, which I see symbolized by Bob Dylan's role as a cultural arbiter of that era. Although operating via music, Dylan (like Fitzgerald, a minstrel from the Minnesota hinterland) also took on the American Dream, recreating pop music as a result with the now-iconic "Like A Rolling Stone."

In this essay, I draw from Dylan, Fitzgerald, and Mailer to investigate how the American Dream transformed at the hands of three distinct cultural voices. Although the story unfolds chronologically, given Fitzgerald's early demise, the enduring power of *The Great Gatsby* to some degree guided both

Mailer and Dylan as they tackled the topic some four decades later—Dylan a 24-year old singer/songwriter and already globally famous and Mailer a 42-year old writer, perhaps the most celebrated literary star on the scene. The American Dream serves as the tie between Fitzgerald's 1920s and the mid-1960s of Mailer and Dylan. In each vision, the ability to confront the American Dream is intricately wrapped within the artists' era, as well as challenging the prevailing notions that support the idea from a historical perspective.

FITZGERALD'S AMERICAN DREAM

Rumors fill a cavernous ballroom already bursting at the seams with partygoers, illegal alcohol, and mountains of food. The parties last all night, yet the host remains a mystery. On the surface, it might seem as if the gala itself is the fulfillment of the American Dream for both the attendees and the wealthy man paying for the merriment. Soon, however, it is revealed that it is all a fraud, a canard built to lure a disillusioned beauty into a trap built on visions of lost love and possible redemption.

Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby is a deeply flawed hero, like other antiheroes all the rage in contemporary popular culture, such as Dexter Morgan, a serial killer who only murders bad guys, on the hit Showtime series *Dexter* or *Mad Men's* Don Draper, who possesses many Gatsby-esque traits, like changing his identity to create a new version of himself, yet still not finding contentment. That this kind of fictional character is popular now, in an era dominated by massive societal upheaval brought on by terrorism, warfare, and economic instability, brings to light some ideas about our cultural mindset.

America's popular culture heroes often do not operate within a black-and-white code, like superheroes in the golden age of comic books. Instead, they acknowledge or are forced to operate within the gray spaces that exist in day-to-day life. Some of this transformation reflects the vibrations radiating through history, for example, mirroring the rise and fall of individual politicians and larger political parties. As a result, the public is accustomed to looking for the fallibility in those it emulates, recognizing that those placed up on a pedestal often have flaws that may be revealed upon greater scrutiny.

Fitzgerald's insight into Jay Gatsby revealed, according to critic Alfred Kazin, the author's "tragic moodiness" and "a burst of self-understanding" that set the book apart from those of his 1920s contemporaries and writers

ever since (Kazin and Solotaroff 122). It took a special comprehension of the lives of the wealthy and the lives of ordinary people to create such a broad swath. "Fitzgerald could sound the depths of Gatsby's life because he himself could not conceive any other," he explains, "Out of his own weariness and fascination with damnation he caught Gatsby's damnation, caught it as only someone so profoundly attentive to Gatsby's dream could have pierced to the self-lie behind it" (Kazin and Solotaroff 122). Kazin's idea captures the strength and beauty of the novel and may actually reveal why it has such staying power. Fitzgerald, despite his claims of not really understanding Gatsby as he created him, desperately identified with the dreams the character espoused. He knew the pain of losing the girl and the joy in attaining her.

Fitzgerald understood the dual role of insider-outsider that enabled him to go deeply into the minds of his characters as they played out their goals and aspirations. For example, the ability to capture the lower class Myrtle Wilson and wealthy Tom Buchanan and then reveal how modern life could bring them together and eventually result in tragic consequences necessitated that Fitzgerald hold innate command of the people that inhabited the world in the 1920s.

Critic and biographer Arthur Mizener explains Fitzgerald's important turn, saying, "His use of a narrator allowed Fitzgerald to keep clearly separated for the first time in his career the two sides of his nature, the middlewestern Trimalchio and the spoiled priest who disapproved of but grudgingly admired him" (185). Even more important, though, his characters had to have timelessness too, the ability to transcend the age in which they were created and become akin to myths. As a result, Mizener contends, Gatsby himself could be idealist and a brassy thug. Fitzgerald's brilliance is in creating him with parts of both, but still enabling the reader to view the character as more, as the kind of person who could embody the American Dream, even if it is fulfilled illegally.

Ironically, Fitzgerald himself, the literary *wunderkind* and global celebrity, seemed to become more American or realistic in some strange sense after the commercial failures of *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night*. His overarching narrative arc changed from American success story to rags-to-riches-to-rags, which our national culture embraces, although he was not as poor as he remembered growing up and certainly had many advantages that others did not. The fall from grace, however, which began with the mediocre

sales of *Gatsby* changed Fitzgerald. Morris Dickstein discusses the author's transformation from literary and celebrity prince to "representative man," which led to him producing more "introspective" work. The result, Dickstein explains, was that the great novelist "virtually invented the confessional mode in American writing" (82). Because of the "Crack-Up" essays in *Esquire*, later writers felt free to explore the genre, including Norman Mailer in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959).

Writing about Fitzgerald in late 1963, critic Malcolm Cowley assesses the author's life as similar to one of his artistic creations, even greater than that perpetuated by Jay Gatsby. There is a certain duality, he concludes, between the study of *Gatsby* in high schools all over the nation and the author's life becoming "a legend like that of Poe or even that of Davy Crockett" (272).

Much of Fitzgerald's commitment to the American Dream for those who have studied his career is represented by two interrelated facts: first, he survived as a freelance writer; second, he built his career as the years went along to finance his mentally ill wife and provide his daughter with a first-rate education. Although Fitzgerald lived an exulted life in the early years, no one should overlook the hardship of the second half, particularly given his family responsibilities. "We should not forget that the publishing industry is a classic form of capitalism . . . a variety of gambling," explains literature scholar James L.W. West III. "For the first half of his career, F. Scott Fitzgerald was a good horse to bet on; the only problem was that there weren't all that many ways to wager" (95).

Amazingly, *Gatsby* fits into today's cultural climate and may be used as a vehicle for understanding our moment in time, just as it has for decades. Writer William Voegeli discusses how the fictional character fits within contemporary thinking, explaining, "Gatsby is not Everyman. He is an American, and the struggle to fashion a life guided by practical wisdom in America faces special challenges that make his story even more poignant . . . something moral, the principles on which the American experiment is founded, and something material, the place where it unfolds" (71). It is the commitment to their own sense of righteousness that drives many popular culture antiheroes. Like Gatsby, they live by a code that they are sure has justifiable ends, even if the means take them into areas outlawed by traditional society and laws.

Gatsby wears a mask with multiple consequences. Sometimes his mask enables him to get closer to his dream, while at other junctures his guise cov-

ers his fraudulent life and dubious focus on wealth. In contrast to Gatsby, Tom wears no mask. As a result, he seems a more "real" figure, stooping to the depths of a serial adulterer, elitist, and racist. Gatsby's lies all seem to have meaning, while Tom's lies just make him sinister.

Fitzgerald's creation of two central figures of this magnitude breathes timelessness into the novel, because Americans love dreamers, even if they are ultimately revealed to be frauds, while simultaneously begrudgingly admiring powerful figures like Tom, even if they are shortsighted morons. I think many people would lump today's corporate and business leaders, if not many politicians, into the latter camp.

We know that Gatsby is doomed, because unforeseen (almost predestined) forces rise up to stamp down dreamers. Few people—real or fictional—get everything they want, even when it seems so close. From a lifetime of popular culture influences, from blood-splattered movies and television shows to the sensationalism of the news industry, today's reader will recognize that Gatsby getting gunned down is more poignant than Fitzgerald could have ever imagined. One can almost visualize a similar scene today: a wealthy celebrity found murdered, the body of his stalker found nearby, dead of suicide. The resulting pictures would end up in a trashy tabloid and inevitably on the Web in full-colored gruesomeness.

ROLLING DOWN HIGHWAY 61

A spacious room is filled with oversized speakers and slim microphone stands arranged around clusters of instruments and musicians. At the center of the cacophony is a young man—thin—almost wisplike. He wears sunglasses, which occupy much of his narrow face. An acoustic guitar obscures his midsection. A contraption around his neck that looks sort of like a wire hanger contorted into a necklace. It holds a harmonica. There is a cigarette burning nearby—there is always a cigarette handy. Around the room, the musicians form an odd semicircle. They have instruments perched at their sides or on stands. The skinny guy in the dark suit with his shirt buttoned high on his neck is clearly in charge. And charge he does! The drummer cracks a note and the guitarist charges off. They all take off and the raucous sound gels into a song.

It is mid-June 1965 in a Columbia Records recording studio in New York City. Bob Dylan and a group of session players, led by Chicago guitar virtuoso Mike Bloomfield, are creating an album that will soon be heralded as a

masterpiece, *Highway 61 Revisited*. The young singer, most famous for writing and performing folk protest songs, like "The Times They Are A-Changin,'" is revamping his playlist, transforming into a rock and roll singer. The first single, "Like a Rolling Stone," clocking in at over six minutes as it tells the tale of a woman who seems near rock bottom, revolutionizes its category and forever changes what pop music might be. As a matter of fact, there are no longer enough accolades to encompass what this record or single meant to popular music.

President Lyndon B. Johnson used the annual 1965 State of the Union address before Congress and the American people to call for turning the United States into a "Great Society," a land of opportunity, equality, and socioeconomic progress. This new agenda, spearheaded by Johnson and primarily driven by his ambitions to reshape the country, focused on a far-reaching set of ideas that included civil rights, improving healthcare, reforming immigration, saving wildlife and forests, education reform, and creating a better arts infrastructure.

The goal of using national prosperity to fuel a better life were in line with the ideas at the forefront of progressive change at the time and, in fact, pushed Johnson further left that many in the country or his own party. Furthermore, Johnson seemed to be taking the nation beyond the mandates of his slain predecessor, demonstrating his commitment to improving the nation on the domestic front.

The year also marked the reopening of the New York World's Fair in Flushing Meadows. Running for two consecutive years, the expo once again showed visitors how the technology-based future might look. In response, millions of people flocked to the Fair to see the corporate-heavy exhibits, many created in cooperation between large business entities and Walt Disney. The NY World's Fair created a sense of unity and mission related to the future and its possibility for global cooperation, despite the ongoing challenges between the communist and noncommunist nations in such locales as the Dominican Republic and Vietnam.

Despite the hope represented by the Great Society legislative agenda and the futuristic world depicted at the New York World's Fair, the United States plunged deeper into the Vietnam War in 1965, which undercut the optimism and kept the pressure on via the student protest movement. Many of these related impulses intersected in July when President Johnson in the span of two days both announced that the U.S. would increase the number of troops

in Vietnam and draft more young people for the war effort, while also signing the Social Security Act of 1965 into law, which established Medicare and Medicaid. As a result, the nation seemed battling at divergent aims. On one hand, Johnson worked to keep the domestic Great Society agenda on course, but Vietnam threw a damper on the national dialogue.

Later in the summer the nation again confronted the dichotomy of its domestic progress versus international warfare when Johnson signed the Voter Rights Act into law on August 6, then on the last day of the month, signed a law that makes burning one's draft card an offense carrying a $1,000 fine and allowing imprisonment up to five years. All the while, operations in Vietnam are increasing, including the first big American ground battle when 5,500 Marines attacked and destroyed a Viet Cong stronghold near Van Tuong in Quang Ngai Province.

The chaos on the national scene mirrors the turmoil going on for Dylan as he charts a new course away from being labeled a "protest" singer and pumped up as the "voice of a generation." Obviously, it is impossible to equate the devastation of the Vietnam war and its consequences on the armed forces involved with the unease Dylan felt as a single person, since there were tens of thousands of people dying and many more soon would as the warfare expanded. However, is does seem difficult to completely divorce Dylan's personal agitation from what was going on around him, even if he did yearn for a way outside the labels people threw at him.

Dylan as an artist underwent a transformation. The working boots and blue collar attire of his folk years was replaced by a black leather jacket and seemingly-permanent Ray-Ban sunglasses. The intense, pained, deliberately working-class picture of Dylan on the cover of *The Times They Are A-Changin'* morphed into the shaggy-haired hipster featured in the D. A. Pennebaker documentary *Dont Look Back* and the aggressive, disillusioned expression on the cover of *Highway 61 Revisited.*

Ironically, for all the retrospective accolades the single has received in the nearly 50 years since its release, "Like a Rolling Stone" never reached number one on the pop charts, infamously got Dylan and his band booed at the Newport Folk Festival in late June and other performances, and got sliced up into three-minute segments by many radio stations that could not conceive of playing a song that long. Thankfully, enough people heard the full-length version and called the offending stations, demanding they play the whole song. Fatefully, given that the Beatles and other bands constituting the British

invasion had an impact on Dylan's musical direction, the single stalled out at number two behind the Beatles classic "Help."

"Like a Rolling Stone" sounded fierce when Dylan recorded it. Unlike so much music then and now, it is not over-produced and schmaltzy. There is rawness in the sound that is reflected in Dylan's voice, which at times growls, pleads, manipulates, and scoffs. What holds the song together is the sense that Dylan is reciting an epic with very contemporary themes, such as revenge, love, hate, and contempt. He mocks "Miss Lonely," but there is a sense that the scorn erupts from a fountain of love that existed at one time. Reportedly, the song first saw life as a 20-page prose poem that Dylan whittled down into lyrics. Remarkably, the songwriter pulled off that feat without losing its power or edge. Poet and writer Daniel Mark Epstein explains the song's connection to listeners, saying, "The song is pure theater, theater of cruelty as Dylan had studied it in the smoke-filled bars and railroad flats of Greenwich Village. It struck a chord because most of us have experienced hatred and longed for revenge" (158–9).

"Like a Rolling Stone" is also a supreme piece of music, primarily as Bloomfield's guitar and Al Kooper's organ create an intricate duel, each snatching up the guts of the song and propelling it forward. Writer Andy Gill reveals its musical sense, explaining, "its rippling waves of organ, piano and guitar formed as dense and portentous a sound as anyone had dared to offer as pop, smothering listeners like quicksand, drawing them inexorably down into the song's lyrical hell" (82). Greil Marcus, who wrote an entire book about the song, its writer, and American culture at the time, exclaims, "[W]hen the song hit the radio, when people heard it, when they discovered that it wasn't about a band, they realized that the song did not explain itself at all, and that they didn't care. In the wash of words and instruments, people understood that the song was a rewrite of the world itself" (6). Rewriting the world. That is quite a bit of weight to put on a song. Yet, in retrospect, the tune revolutionized popular music and continues to influence songwriters ever since.

Riding on the success of "Like a Rolling Stone" as a single, Columbia released "Positively 4th Street" as a follow-up, although it did not appear on the album or Dylan's next, *Blonde on Blonde*. The single did well for the singer, hitting the number seven spot in the United States and number eight in the United Kingdom. "Positively" is an angry song, but as typical with Dylan, the target of this ire can never be pinned down. The speculation ranges from

the unidentified "Miss Lonely" of "Like a Rolling Stone" to the entire Newport Folk Festival crowd that accused him of selling out by taking up rock and roll music. Since Dylan once rented an apartment on Fourth Street in Greenwich Village, some find the whole folk music crowd the most compelling scapegoat. Gill says, "If Dylan's intention was to inflict a more generalized guilt, he succeeded perfectly: everyone in the Village had the feeling he was talking about them specifically, and quite a few felt deeply hurt by the broadside" (90).

Perhaps not surprisingly, when Dylan left the cozy, folk confines of the East Coat, the tour picked up steam. Journalist Ralph Gleason wrote about two concerts at Berkeley's Community Theater for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, saying, "Dylan's rock-and-roll band, which caused such booing and horror-show reaction at the Newport Folk Festival and elsewhere, went over in Berkeley like the discovery of gold." He called "Rolling Stone," an "amazing emotional experience complimenting fully the lyrics of the songs," while "Positively" elicited "screams of joy both nights" (59). Clearly, the put-down vibes of each song took on new meaning as audiences heard them pounded out in rock and roll fashion. They signified Dylan's move from protest anthems to personal topics that could be just as powerful and cathartic for listeners. Dylan's transition to rock music might not have been universally praised, but the results on vinyl indicated that he would only grow more influential as he barreled across music history.

Those angered by Dylan's new direction could not deny the power of *Highway 61 Revisited*. Usually, Dylan served as a stern critic of his own work. With this album, though, even he could not look askance at its quality. "I'm not gonna be able to make a record better than that one," he explained. "*Highway 61* is just too good. There's a lot of stuff on there that *I* would listen to!" (81). The album served up notice that America's bard would make music that could stand with the British invaders, particularly the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.

For Dylan and many fans over generations, 1965 might simply be remembered as the year of "Like a Rolling Stone." Filled with anger and revenge (depending on which version of its creation one believes, since Dylan admits to both ideas), the song reimagined what a hit single might be in that era. Remember, the typical hit song clocked in at around three minutes long and usually told a pretty direct tale. This all changed, however, in June when

Dylan's song dropped and airplay began. Even the members of the Beatles took notice, not only of the single's length, but its elegant narrative.

For all the ups-and-downs of 1965, from the boo-birds at the Newport Folk Festival and at many performances on the subsequent tour to the success of the new, rock-driven sound on vinyl, Dylan's work from that year is a highlight in rock and roll history. Some people may have not fully appreciated it at the time, because they could not understand why he moved from folk anthems to rock and roll, but for music aficionados, Dylan's sound is legendary.

In 2004 *Rolling Stone* named "Like a Rolling Stone" the number one song of all-time. According to the magazine's editors, "No other pop song has so thoroughly challenged and transformed the commercial laws and artistic conventions of its time, for all time" ("500 Greatest"). Seven years later, U2 singer Bono, no slouch when it comes to great songwriting, extolls the virtues of the song, saying that it turns "wine to vinegar" and calls it "a black eye of a pop song. The verbal pugilism on display here cracks open songwriting for a generation and leaves the listener on the canvas." Examining it from the twenty-first century, Bono declares, "The tumble of words, images, ire, and spleen . . . shape-shifts easily into music forms 10 or 20 years away, like punk, grunge or hip-hop . . . Perhaps it is a glance into the future; perhaps it's just fiction, a screenplay distilled into one song" (56). The move from the macro to the personal helped establish Dylan as a poet/musician in many people's minds. Therefore, it is not much of a stretch to see him as a novelist of music as well, particularly since the catalog of his work in the mid-1960s might have been combined into a kind of rambling, intense narrative in the spirit of a novel. Either way, Dylan's transformation from protest poet to rock and roll storyteller did not diminish the view that he had important things to tell the world, regardless of whether or not electricity fueled the music.

ROJACK: MAILER'S ANTIHERO

Given Mailer's use of Kennedy, casual sex, and Fitzgerald's symbol of immaculate wealth all in the initial paragraph of a novel with this particular title, the reader realizes that he is portending his view of the American Dream. The tribute to Fitzgerald via the Ritz diamond comment announces a link between the two authors and a hint at what lies ahead in the novel,

published in hardback in 1965 after earlier serialization in *Esquire* (and forty years after Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*).

Mailer rocks the idea of a unifying American Dream to its core, which seems appropriate given the chaos of the early 1960s. By 1965, when the book appears in hardback, it seems as if the country moved at warp speed. At publication, the author told the *New York Post*, "I was merely trying to capture the superheated reality of an extraordinary set of events" (*Post* 102). Mailer mimics the nation's tempo in the novel's hard-charging style, depicting almost nonstop action over 32 hours in Rojack's demise and rebirth. Donald L. Kaufmann explains, "His [Rojack's] account is remarkably lucid and coherent despite his verging on insanity" (195). In essence, Mailer's vision of the Dream is funneled through Rojack as a nightmare bordering on madness, which then exposes how depraved the nation has grown.

From the most direct viewpoint, Rojack is a murderer and he gets away with it based on his father-in-law's power and influence. Yet, when discussing the characters, Mailer calls Barney Kelly "the focus of evil in the book" (Adams 209). The fact that Rojack is a murderer and Mailer does not present him as wholly evil led to the book getting crucified by an overwhelming majority of professional reviewers. The author himself, though, on several occasions named the book as his personal favorite.

What distinguishes Barney Kelly and his daughter's evil ways from Rojack's is that wealth causes the Kelly family to dance with the devil. They cement their power via control of the institutions that are nominally seen as the upholders of individual and societal rights and freedoms. Rojack, on the other hand, equates his escape from Deborah with usurping the forces that keep Kelly and his kind at the helm. His personal freedom is an ethical and moral victory, which almost makes killing his wife reasonable in his own mind. Her murder is not without consequences. Rojack understands that there is a psychic price to pay for the evil deed (eventually resulting in Cherry's death).

The difference between the elder Kelly and *Gatsby's* Tom Buchanan is that the former understands wealth's corruption, even as he is unable to ignore its siren song. Thus, when Kelly introduces magic and the Devil into the equation, it is meant to demonstrate the tight link between evil and wealth. Kelly explains, "you strike a bargain with the Devil, the Devil will collect. That's where Mephisto is found. In the art of collection" (241). He confesses his family secrets to Rojack as a means of tightening his grip over the man

and views the revelations as a means of purging his guilt over his incestuous relationship with his daughter.

As a product of wealth, rather than its creator, Buchanan is never wise enough to see the truth. He can overcome a rube like Gatsby with the help of dimwitted mechanic George Wilson, but he does not possess the insight of Kelly or the evil necessary in becoming a Kelly-like figure. In comparison, Buchanan is a lightweight. Mailer, in contrast to Fitzgerald, extends the evil inherent in wealth by revealing its depth. Fitzgerald viewed the wealthy class as corrupt, while Mailer defines them as malicious, running the gamut from the mafia to the Catholic church.

An American Dream is much more sinister than *Gatsby* and "Like A Rolling Stone," but it shares a breathlessness with the song that exemplifies the era in which they were created. As a result, Mailer's novel owes a debt to Fitzgerald's work, but travels a road akin to Dylan. Together, they tread in mysticism and ambiguity, which both explains and clouds whatever meaning might be placed on the status of the American Dream. When Dylan pleads, "How does it feel," one can sense Rojack's reply in the frenetic attempt at rebirth, as if the nerve endings now live on the outside and all senses are heightened to the moment.

Despite its power, *Gatsby* seems almost superficial in contrast to either Mailer or Dylan, who probe the stark soul of the American Dream. The novel and song place the achievement and fall from grace at the center of the American Dream in stark terms more menacing than Fitzgerald presented. According to Kathryn Hume, Mailer wraps the fulfillment of the American Dream in magic, which "offers us a way of reinscribing meaning in our high tech lives. We may even . . . come to feel we have souls after all" (136). Rojack's only chance at success, despite what seemed on the surface as an ideal life, was to kill his wife, whose spirit crushed his soul, thus preventing him from achieving the Dream.

THE AMERICAN DREAM EVOLVES

Lawrence R. Samuel bluntly proclaims that the American Dream "is the guiding mythology of the most powerful civilization in history" (1). The simple fact of the matter, he explains, is that it is a mythology, tightly wrapped up with the many other beliefs and principles that serve to create American culture. The mutability of the idea provides its power, because it can be almost anything to anyone who chooses to employ it as a driving narrative.

Moreover, the American Dream exists regardless of whether or not a person decides to pursue it.

The heart of the American Dream is the pursuit of freedom—the belief that individuals have the right to chase it, particularly if the primary obstacles are based on gender, race, religious views, or other cultural differences. In Fitzgerald's time and ever since, the American Dream has been a critical component of our cultural heritage. As the American Dream became more deeply entwined within popular culture, the idea fostered a sense of hope that enabled people to keep moving forward during the dark days of warfare, economic collapse, and personal strife. This idea itself is wholly American—we continually analyze the past to derive lessons, while at the same time, yearning to see into the future for glimpses of what is blurrily developing on the next horizon.

Employing the notion of the American Dream, the nation's citizens found a way to interpret themselves, those around them, and the world as a whole. We trumpeted our national vision, even when we did not live up to its ideals. Sometimes, this willingness toward self-delusion meant that people turned away from difficult societal challenges, instead finding solace in the latest film, radio program, or four-color advertisement for a flashy car. People used popular culture and the American Dream to serve their needs, whether to ignore problems or unify us in a common battle against such evils. Either way, the American Dream served as a force for reinterpreting the nation from within. Each person, it seemed, had the choice to use it as a way to assess society or mask reality in favor of a Hollywood dream version of life that ended with sunshine and rainbows. Regardless, the American Dream enabled these choices on a moment-by-moment scale.

After Rojack's escape from New York City, he heads west, to Las Vegas. Here, amid the constant heat and press of humanity, he can blend in. For a while, Rojack outruns his past, becoming nameless and faceless. However, the magic that filled him back East continues to pulse through him, which he decides is a gift from Cherry. Her spirit, which enabled her to see the future at the gambling tables, provides Rojack with the means to rebuild his life. Despite his intimate comprehension of money's evil, he cannot escape its necessity.

The Great Gatsby resides amidst a fog of ambiguity, because Fitzgerald wrapped the novel in so many ideas that almost any way a person might define the American Dream, he or she could uncover a means of examining it

through the book. Anthony Larson sees fiction "as a tool for revealing the truth about a world around us; the relationship between fiction and reality is reversed so that it is fiction which serves to better understand and read reality" (285). From this perspective, he says, "*Gatsby* is read as a moral lesson on the excesses and failures of a certain America and—perhaps—the American dream itself" (285). It is not in the excesses of Gatsby or Tom Buchanan that Fitzgerald fixes the failure of the American Dream in Larson's view. Rather, it is in the vast wasteland of George Wilson and the Valley of Ashes. Here, "the reader is quick to recognize the emptiness holding all of this up, the moral price paid by America for its capitalist excess" (286).

When the city's eyes begin to understand who he is, Rojack ventures into the vast desert, again risking his life. Yet, in the West, he is safe, truly reborn. At a phone booth, away from Vegas's crush on his soul, Rojack speaks with Cherry, who washes away his sins and grants him freedom. He heads for South America, a new frontier where no one knows or cares about Stephen Rojack. Mailer does not provide a simple answer to whether the central character achieves "an" American Dream, but like Dylan's "Miss Lonely," he fades into the blur that is contemporary America in the 1960s. Neither character has anything to lose, which is just another way of saying that the future is an open book. This freedom could be the prescribed route toward the American Dream.

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