

The Mythology of Meritocracy: Eligibility, Recognition, and Racial-Gendered Fractures in the American Dream

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Abstract

In its traditional conception, the American Dream has been expressed in terms of personal freedom, equal opportunities, upward mobility, and self-making. Within its modern conception, the American Dream cultural ideal can be viewed in relation to meritocracy – the notion that success in life ought to be based on one's talent, hard work, ambition, and determination (Encyclopedia of Diversity, 2022). However, the seeming impartiality of meritocracy does not preclude a preliminary question – who is allowed to participate in the competition that determines one's merit? This paper explores the concept of the American Dream as an ambivalent cultural construct through the analysis of themes and intersectionality in the works by F. Scott Fitzgerald "The Great Gatsby" (1925), Arthur Miller "Death of a Salesman" (1949), Ralph Ellison "Invisible Man" (1952), Toni Morrison "Beloved" (1987), and Margaret Atwood "The Handmaid's Tale" (1985). Utilizing theoretical concepts of meritocracy, social reproduction, recognition, critical race theory, and intersectionality, the study will show that the texts explore three related aspects of meritocratic exclusion – eligibility, legibility, and deservingness. Eligibility has to do with those structurally able to participate in the pursuit of upward mobility; legibility has to do with whose talents, labor, and hopes count as valuable; and deservingness has to do with the moral stories told about why people succeed or fail. Fitzgerald highlights the way that the inherited privileges continue to structure the world beyond the mythology of self-making; Miller shows how gendered and capitalist dynamics form the basis for the individualist ideology of success; Ellison dramatizes the way that racism produces social invisibility; Morrison historicizes the denial of autonomous personhood to Black subjects under slavery; and Atwood imagines the reproduction of gender and reproductive hierarchies as an institutional practice. The article argues that race, gender, and class are not exogenous barriers to the supposedly neutral meritocratic system, but rather are conditions within which merit is constructed, acknowledged, and rewarded. In reinterpreting the American Dream as not merely an unrealizable fantasy, but as a narrative technology for translating structural inequality into explanations for individual success and failure.

Keywords: American Dream; meritocracy; social mobility; deservingness; recognition; race; gender; class; intersectionality; social reproduction; modern American fiction

Introduction

Rarely has there been a cultural story that has had such a prolonged impact upon the American psyche as the American Dream. From the idea of self-making and mobility to the current celebration of

entrepreneurial success, the Dream has time and again portrayed America as a society where individuals have the ability to overcome their given condition by virtue of their effort and hard work. The power of the ideology inherent in this cultural story is precisely the promise that birth does not determine fate.

The concept of meritocracy makes this notion more potent. To start with, the word meritocracy can be understood as an approach to social stratification where individuals progress on the basis of their talents, abilities, and efforts, as opposed to their predetermined position in society. The notion of meritocracy is still linked to equality of opportunity and achievement through talent and hard work in modern academia (Encyclopedia of Diversity, 2022). However, the apparently straightforward nature of this notion becomes significantly more problematic when put in the context of the historical framework of race, gender, and class.

The problem, thus, is not only that certain people are unable to fulfill the promise of the American Dream. The underlying problem lies even before one's fulfillment of this promise, namely who gets the opportunity to compete in the first place in order to prove their merit? This particular theme of the problem lies in all the five literary works analyzed in this article. It is not just the case where the protagonists feel disappointed; rather there are systems which decide beforehand what kinds of aspirations, labor, identity, and failures qualify.

In the current research, the above dilemma is further investigated using the notions of eligibility, legibility, and deservingness. Eligibility is concerned with the structural features that enable the participant to take part meaningfully in the competition for upward mobility within society. Legibility is concerned with how some particular characteristics, such as intelligence, ambition, hard work, entrepreneurship, or creativity, become known as being important. Deservingness is about how the results are viewed from a moral perspective whereby success shows one's virtues while failure means not enough efforts were made.

In this manner, the essay manages to go beyond the standard approach which refers to the American Dream as a "myth." This may be a valid statement but it is quite generic. It is necessary to understand how the myth works. While meritocracy promises success for everyone who works hard, it offers the terminology that would help explain inequality. If people who were successful achieved everything they have by dint of effort, then inequality seems justified. On the other hand, inequality disappears if poor people have not been working hard enough.

These texts have been chosen because they provide rich examples due to the different historical manifestations of the contradiction presented. Fitzgerald's (1925) "The Great Gatsby" addresses wealth, class mobility, privilege and class anxiety of the 1920s. Miller's (1949) "Death of a Salesman" discusses the relationship between masculine identity, work under capitalism, and the potential for success. Ellison's (1952) "Invisible Man" shows the outcome of the effects of racial invisibility at the institutional level where talent is recognized. Morrison's (1987) "Beloved" takes the discussion back to slavery and how meritocracy is inherently impossible there due to reducing black people to property. Lastly, Atwood's (1985) "The Handmaid's Tale", although authored by a Canadian, gives a comparative dystopia by creating an example of a future US in which the gender hierarchy and reproduction become the basis of society.

Meritocracy, on the other hand, should not be seen as a process of rewarding, but rather as a cultural story of deserving. The chosen texts reveal the historical and ideological construction of deserving subjects who are made worthy, visible, valuable, and disposable.

Literature Review and Research Gap

There is a substantial amount of interdisciplinary literature on the American Dream. Sociological, political, economic, and literary research has addressed the notion of the Dream from such perspectives as social mobility, capitalism, individualism, consumerism, race, class, gender, and nationalism. Previous literary analysis used to construe the notion of the American Dream as a tension between idealism and materialism, especially in regards to Fitzgerald and Miller. The newer trend in literature has challenged this framework by considering structural inequalities and how ideas about worthiness influence the perception of social hierarchy (Taussig, 2021).

However, the idea of meritocracy also has a complex intellectual history. The notion of meritocracy was popularized by Young (1958), who portrayed a society where merit became the main organizing principle and turned out to be a source of oppression when intelligence and effort were used as grounds for inequality. Modern academic discussions of the term also differentiate the ideals of equal opportunity and of just reward, viewing meritocracy both as a way of fair treatment and as a discourse legitimizing inequalities. Thus, the definition of the term provided in the Encyclopedia of Diversity highlights its connection with equal opportunity and the American dream (Encyclopedia of Diversity, 2022).

What makes Rawls's (1971) theory of justice particularly relevant in this case is the challenge it poses to the idea that social and economic inequalities could be justified simply on the basis of individual success. While Rawls differentiates between formal equality of opportunity and fair equality of opportunity, he thereby makes explicit the institutional conditions in which competition takes place. What Bourdieu (1984, 1986) does differently to explore the issue is to illustrate the ways in which cultural, social, and economic capital perpetuates advantage while seemingly recognizing individual talent.

Such differentiation is crucial when it comes to Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*. Economic success on the part of *Gatsby* will not do away with the cultural and symbolic capital that is connected with wealth which comes as an inheritance. The fact that *Gatsby* manages to earn money does not imply that he automatically becomes legitimate in terms of the Buchanan's family status.

There is yet another theoretical aspect introduced by the work of Fraser (1995) in relation to redistribution and recognition. The theory states that there should be a balance between material distribution and recognition as aspects of justice. In this context, the concept is highly beneficial in the analysis of the novel *Invisible Man* by Ellison.

Critical race theory makes things even more complicated. Intersectionality, which is proposed by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), shows that the social categories of race and gender do not operate separately. Critical race theorists, including Bell (1992), question the idea that equal rights lead to equal situations in life. In terms of literary studies, this means that *Invisible Man* and *Beloved* are not only stories about discrimination but rather stories about how personhood and value are produced institutionally.

Intersectionality is equally significant in feminism. The works of Crenshaw (1989) show that the experience of Black women cannot be understood through either a racially based framework or a gender-based framework alone. Hooks (1981, 1991) discusses how class, race, and gender undermine the universality of womanhood. These frameworks become useful in analyzing the character of Sethe from the novel *Beloved*.

Academic research on *The Handmaid's Tale* has focused on how issues of reproduction, race, environment, and politics intersect. A more recent piece in *Women's Studies International Forum* contends that *The Handmaid's Tale*'s reproductive dystopia should be considered against the backdrop of racial erasure, environmental destruction, and the political milieu in which the novel was written ("Not an Instruction

Manual," 2020). Other recent studies have looked at the continued political relevancy of Atwood's depiction of reproductive rights and resistance (Tabuyo-Santaclara, 2024) as well as the political relevancy of *The Handmaid's Tale* as feminist dystopian fiction (Alwan, 2023; Deale, 2025).

Despite all this scholarship, there has yet to be any framework that integrates all five texts with each other in terms of how race, gender, and class influence the making of merit itself. Previous studies tend to study whether the characters succeed or fail in the American Dream story line. This paper seeks to investigate how the social structure influences the possibility for their hard work to be identified as merit in the first place.

Thus, the research problem does not lie in the lack of previous works on individual books. It lies in the absence of integration among them in regards to the question at hand.

Theoretical Framework: Merit, Recognition, and Social Reproduction

The main theoretical proposition of this paper is that merit is not something entirely individual in nature. For merit to have social significance, there must be institutions which acknowledge and reward certain abilities.

The above proposition can be analyzed using Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social reproduction. According to Bourdieu, economic capital is associated with cultural and social capital, which are distributed unevenly among social groups. The seemingly reward system of education and culture that rewards talent ends up reinforcing class advantages under the guise of individual meritocracy.

There is quite a lot of relevance between the meritocracy theory and the American Dream. The meritocracy story usually emphasizes the person who has been successful but does not show the connections, culture, education, family, and institutions that make success easier. Hence, meritocracy seems to emanate from inside the individual even when the social conditions of merit are outside.

The theory presented by Rawls (1971) is another complementary one. The difference between formal equality and fair equality of opportunity presented by him shows that just removing the legal barriers does not make competition equal. In cases where people start off with unequal social statuses, the same rules can make opportunities unequal.

This is key to the current discussion. The American Dream can be open as a matter of form, but still closed as a matter of substance. The idea of recognition that Fraser (1995) brings to bear on the issue makes this more clear. One can have talent, but still be disadvantaged because one's identity lacks recognition.

The narrator in Ellison's work presents one of the most coherent examples of such a difficulty. Invisibility in this context means that the individuality of the main character is ignored by the institutions of power, which constantly present themselves as offering some opportunities for advancement but require a kind of self-negation from their subjects.

What the concept of intersectionality adds to this theoretical framework is the fact that even the recognition process is shaped through different social categories. The work of Crenshaw (1989, 1991) becomes important at this point since Sethe's situation cannot be fully comprehended without taking into account the intersection of race and gender.

The framework can then be stated as follows: social structures regulate eligibility; institutions regulate legibility; and cultural discourses regulate deservingness. This triangular relation forms the basis of this paper's theory.

The American Dream and the Problem of Eligibility in The Great Gatsby

The Great Gatsby by Fitzgerald (1925) is frequently perceived as one of the most remarkable pieces of literature critiquing the American Dream. Gatsby's journey from James Gatz into an incredibly rich man seems to validate the potential of self-making. However, it becomes evident that there is an extent to which this transition can go.

Gatsby has economic capital but lacks cultural legitimacy that the Buchanans possess. The difference highlights the fact that upward mobility does not imply full social inclusion.

However, Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural and symbolic capital helps explain this contrast. While Gatsby can earn money, it does not mean that he can buy the legitimacy of old money. All his parties, mansion, clothes, and performance are an effort on his part to gain recognition, but it is not enough.

This paradox is at the heart of the portrayal of the meritocracy in the novel. Indeed, if economic success were enough to define the social standing, Gatsby's wealth would be equivalent to Tom's. However, it is evident from the novel that privilege has something more durable than achievement.

The racial aspect of the hierarchy is also very important. The racial worries of Tom show that the privilege associated with a higher class status involves the construction of a racial boundary, and that the rhetoric of Tom serves as part of the strategy of maintaining the social position of the old money elite.

Thus, Fitzgerald shows how the mobility promised by the American Dream exists side by side with mechanisms of maintaining the social hierarchy. Gatsby is allowed to get rich but not accepted. His tragedy is, to some extent, connected with his failure to distinguish between the two.

Masculinity, Labor, and Merit in Death of a Salesman

Death of a Salesman by Miller (1949) moves the issue of meritocracy from one based on inherited class background to one involving the capitalist labor market. In the case of Willy Loman, he assumes that good looks, drive, popularity, and hard work will yield economic success. The tragedy of Willy arises because of the tension between his assumption and the truth about the market system that considers workers as fungible.

The protest of Willy against fungibility is an expression of the tension between individuality and economic fungibility. What makes this tension theoretically important is the connection between merit and masculinity.

Willy not only needs money; he needs economic success as economic success acts as proof of manhood. Here comes the relevance of feminist theory despite the fact that Willy is the male protagonist of the play. The patriarchal society places the burden of provision on men, and at the same time, it underestimates the contribution of women at home (hooks, 1981; Young, I. M., 1990).

The effort of Linda helps the family survive; however, it lacks recognition due to the fact that her efforts do not fit into the criteria of economic worthiness set by Willy.

Meritocracy thus turns out to be a gendered system not only because there are different expectations for men and women but also due to the nature of acknowledgment of women's contributions to social reproduction being left out of the conventional measure of success.

Racial Invisibility and the Failure of Recognition in Invisible Man

Invisible Man (1952) by Ellison gives the clearest treatment of racialized legibility. The narrator is intelligent, ambitious, and has a capacity for education, but the system interprets him through pre-existing racial frameworks before recognizing his individuality.

The concept of invisibility therefore goes beyond being ostracized from society. It entails the inability of the dominant society to see individuality in Blacks.

This theory comes in handy because it questions the neutrality of institutions with regard to race (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989). The narrator's story shows us how one can have access to institutions and yet not be treated equally within them.

The fact that he is invisible means that there is an epistemic exclusion in this case. Even though he is present, he is not recognized in his identity. He talks, but his speech is analyzed within the parameters of institutional requirements. He works, but the value of his work is assessed based on racial considerations. He has ability, but this ability is constantly used for other purposes.

It is therefore no surprise that this novel becomes a strong literary criticism of meritocracy. It is impossible to make merit socially significant unless one receives recognition, and it turns out that the very recognition is determined by race. This is why Ellison makes his readers differentiate between having merit and being allowed to have merit.

Slavery, Property, and the Historical Impossibility of Merit in *Beloved*

The novel *Beloved* by Morrison (1987) makes a radical historicization of the concept of meritocracy. The American Dream implies the existence of the person whose social status would give him/her all opportunities for success. It is worth mentioning that slavery negated such prerequisites since the Black people were considered property.

Hence, through Morrison's novel, one may discover that there is a paradoxical contradiction within the American national mythology that lies in the coexistence of the rhetoric of freedom and opportunities and the reality of lack of these things for the whole race.

The personal nature of Sethe's experience makes this contradiction very relevant. Her work is exploited. Her body is subjugated. Her motherhood is subject to institutional violence. Her children lack the sense of security usually found in the autonomy of a family unit.

The intersectionality theory, as proposed by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), becomes necessary here. Sethe does not suffer from racism and sexism as different forms of discrimination. She suffers from the production of her identity as a Black woman and a mother in a system where racial property relations and reproductive control through gender intersect.

Thus, Morrison shows us that before we can talk about meritocracy, an individual must first be a person. This is the important theoretical difference between meritocracy and slavery, whereby one presupposes the existence of the other: meritocracy presupposes personhood; slavery reveals the political preconditions of being a person.

Gender, Reproductive Control, and Institutional Exclusion in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The Handmaid's Tale by Atwood (1985) provides an imaginative rethinking of the structural systems analyzed in *Beloved*. Social identity in Gilead is organized in terms of gender, fertility, marriage, and sexuality. Restrictions on women's ability to work, own property, read and exercise power are substantial. In this way, the novel presents a society where the exclusion of women from competitive meritocracy is institutionalized.

Recent academic works stress on the issues surrounding reproduction, erasure of race, environmental crisis, and the political background in which the novel was written ("Not an Instruction Manual," 2020). Recent literature focuses on the relevancy of the novel in the discourse of reproductive rights and feminist

activism (Tabuyo-Santaclara, 2024; Alwan, 2023).

As per the theory presented above, Gilead can be said to be the embodiment of the process of gendered institutionalization of ineligibility in which women are denied the very right to define for themselves what success means.

The reason why Offred's resistance through storytelling holds significance in this case is that storytelling turns out to be an act of self-recognition. It is through storytelling that Offred manages to evade total reduction to the institutionalized identity assigned to her. This is the reason why the novel highlights that recognition is inseparable from agency.

Intersectionality and the Architecture of Exclusion

Reading the five texts together makes clear that neither race, nor gender, nor class should be considered separate variables. These are interlocking systems of stratification where access to social goods is gained or denied (Crenshaw, 1991).

The example of *Sethe* shows how race, gender, motherhood, work, and property interlock. The example of Offred shows how race, gender, fertility, class, and politics interlock. The example of *Gatsby* shows how class mobility and race intersect. The example of Willy shows how class and masculinity intersect. It becomes possible through the use of the theory of intersectionality to move from additive thinking to structural thinking. The question that needs to be asked is not one of whether an individual is facing "race discrimination" and "gender discrimination," but rather of how these social categories intersect in order to generate a certain position within the social hierarchy.

This is especially important in the case of explaining why the American Dream can be universal in its rhetoric, yet differentiated in its social reality.

Class and the Reproduction of Merit

Class serves as the material foundation for the realization of the meritocratic aspect in terms of race and gender. The model by Bourdieu (1986), regarding social reproduction, is quite appropriate since it illustrates how privilege may be transferred through cultural, social, and economic capital, while presenting itself as personal competence.

It can help to understand why *Gatsby's* money is not sufficient enough for him to change his status. At the same time, this model can reveal why the efforts of Willy are not enough without the economic stability. Class is thus not only one more barrier that is in addition to race and gender. Class moderates the impact of these factors. The discussion of class and hyperincarceration by Wacquant (2010) provides a further example of how economic exclusion and racial hierarchy are interrelated institutionally in the current American context.

The difference made by Fraser (1995) between redistribution and recognition sheds additional light on this matter. Economic inequality is inextricably linked to cultural misrecognition. An individual can be economically disadvantaged as well as socially unrecognized.

The American Dream is rendered problematic by virtue of ignoring these disparities in the starting point altogether. The meritocratic story takes the tale too late; that is, it starts from the individual. However, in literature, the stories considered here begin much earlier, with the family, with the institution, with the market, with the racial hierarchy, with the gender system, and even with the past resource distribution.

Meritocracy as a Narrative of Deservingness

The most important theoretical implications of the current research are that meritocracy should be perceived as a narrative of deservingness. It shows people how to understand the existing inequalities. Success is represented by those who deserved to become successful due to their efforts. Failure is represented by those who were lazy and did not make enough effort. However, such a narrative may prevent people from recognizing the actual factors that contributed to the result.

The point made by Sandel (2020) regarding the issue of meritocracy is important in this regard because he states that meritocratic cultures not only create inequalities but also the feeling of deservingness among people. Those who have succeeded start believing that they deserve to have the results of their efforts, and those who failed start thinking about themselves as morally deficient; this was proven for gender inequality in pay and American Dream (Newman, 2016).

Such a trend is clear to see in the chosen literary pieces. Gatsby believes that money is the instrument through which he will be able to become worthy of Daisy. Willy believes that economic success is the indicator of personal and masculine worthiness. The narrator of Ellison's novel faces institutions, which evaluate the worthiness of his identity, prior to recognizing his abilities separately. Sethe has a world where her hard work and maternal identity are not considered valuable independently of her physical presence in the property system. Offred faces a world where her reproductive ability makes her valuable to the institution.

In all cases, an individual finds himself or herself inside a preexisting system of valuation. Merit cannot be defined as an individual attribute.

Toward a Critical Reconstruction of the American Dream

The literary critique advanced here should not necessitate the abandonment of normative goals which constitute the American Dream. Freedom, dignity, opportunity, and upward mobility retain their significance as normative objectives. The mistake is in conflating these normative objectives with the notion that the current distribution of social results is reflective of merit.

What would be necessary is a critical re-construction of the American Dream which makes a clear distinction between equality of aspiration and equality of conditions. Equality in terms of aspiration does not entail equality in terms of conditions such that individuals can be equally encouraged to dream yet unequally endowed with the capacities to actualize those dreams.

The five texts show how this contradiction is manifest in different historical forms. Their combined importance is that they make visible the way that meritocratic myths obscure the fact that institutions manufacture opportunity.

Conclusion

What makes the American Dream such an enduring concept is its articulation of a deeply democratic yearning, which is that individuals should have control over their own lives and be free from determinism on account of birth. However, in reading the literary works under study, one sees that the meritocratic articulation of the American Dream has an inherent instability.

Fitzgerald shows that economic self-making alone does not guarantee that class privilege will be transcended. Miller shows how the idea of linking value to productivity carries profound psychological and gender implications. Ellison shows how ability is socially meaningless without being recognized. Morrison reveals the conditions that historically deprived Blacks of the very humanity that is required by

meritocracy.

Collectively, these readings illustrate that the American Dream narrative is not just the narrative of people struggling for success but a narrative of the social structures that dictate what kinds of struggles are recognized, what kinds of individuals qualify as contenders, and what results are viewed as well-deserved. This conceptual framework of eligibility, legibility, and deservingness thus offers a useful way of approaching meritocracy in contemporary American literature. The issue of eligibility relates to one's access to the contest, while legibility refers to recognition in the contest itself, and deservingness has to do with morality of the results of the competition. Race, gender, and class play their role at all these stages: They dictate who joins, who gets recognized, whose work is appreciated, and whose failure is attributed to his/her personal faults.

Thus, meritocracy is not only about distribution of social rewards. Meritocracy takes part in construction of the category of a worthy subject. And this is the reason why the selected pieces of literature are relevant at all times. Not only they tell how the dreams of the characters are never fulfilled but show how unfair the process of dreaming, competing, succeeding and even becoming a worthy subject to compete for becomes.

In order to construct the idea of democratic American Dream, it is necessary to step away from celebrating personal successes and consider the structures organizing opportunities. Now the question is not whether individuals work hard enough to deserve success but whether it is possible to organize the society in such a way that effort would be acknowledged. And the everlasting importance of the literature presented consists in its ability to question the meritocratic discourse and make people see the history, identity, and power relations behind it.

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