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# American Performance: Artistic Experience and the American Dream

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# AMERICAN PERFORMANCE: ARTISTIC EXPERIENCE AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

by

SAVANNAH BARROW

(Under the Direction of Olivia Carr Edenfield)

## ABSTRACT

The American Dream was first epitomized by Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography* (1791), in which he instructs his fellow citizens on how to procure the American promises of social mobility and economic prosperity. However, the moral and social performances reinforced by Franklin's recipe-for-success promote an ideological system that prevents marginalized communities such as women, immigrants, and people of color, from procuring the Dream's most foundational features. Inequitable access to the Dream is a theme revisited throughout American literature, wherein disenfranchised characters consume the aspirational narrative of American social mobility through art, media, and propaganda. This essay tracks the representation of the American Dream throughout American literature, placing particular attention on the ways it manifests in artistic forms and experience. While Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861) anticipates a commodification of the Dream's most essential features through a conflict between artistic experience and privileged aesthetic indifference, works like Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) reveal the disillusioning effects such indifference bears on the disenfranchised, who are unable to perform within the standards Franklin defines. Meanwhile, though Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* (1952) challenges traditional notions of the Dream through an unconventional artist's attempt to reform her craft, it exposes a conflict between self-expression and social compromise.

INDEX WORDS: Benjamin Franklin, Rebecca Harding Davis, Stephen Crane, Ann Petry, Patricia Highsmith, Master's thesis, The American Dream, Artistic experience, American literature, Georgia Southern University

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B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2019

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The phrase “time is money” (1) was professed by Benjamin Franklin in his 1748 letter, *Advice to a Young Tradesman*. These words would come to serve as the emotive core of modern capitalism and, eventually, contribute greatly to Franklin’s creation of an idea that would come to be known as the American Dream. The economic values of frugality and industry would remain among Franklin’s most highly regarded virtues, even placing them at numbers five and six on a list of thirteen virtues Franklin considered as “necessary or desirable” in his recipe for “attaining moral perfection” (55). Of frugality, Franklin encourages his readers to “[m]ake no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing,” and of industry he calls us to “[l]ose no time; be always employ’d in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions” (56). As repeated hallmarks of success throughout Franklin’s narrative, frugality and industry became engrained as essential practices on the American journey toward upward mobility, the heart of the American Dream. Often credited for creating the ideals that would come to shape the American Dream, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1791) became America’s first “How to Succeed” book, propagating idealistic virtues within American culture and contributing to the popularization of the inherently American hope for social mobility.

However, although Franklin’s *Autobiography* remains a pillar of the Dream’s enduring legacy, the term itself would not be officially coined until James Truslow Adams’ *The Epic of America* (1931). Still ascribing to Franklin’s fundamentally American example of capital and social advancement over a century later, Adams defined the American Dream as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement... regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (404). Adams’ definition of the American Dream puts into explicit language what Franklin demonstrated in his life and *Autobiography*. Each articulates a promise of success allotted to any man willing to work hard enough for it; each promises an unbiased social system that will allow each “gift” to be used to the greatest of its ability, and be fairly compensated with a “richer and fuller life.” A social system in which advancement is universally

accessible—that is the American Dream that Franklin and Adams define. However, the American visions of social mobility and equal opportunity were not put forth by Adams first, nor were they created by Franklin’s aspirational narrative. It was literature published in Britain in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that inspired Franklin’s recipe for success.

The origins of American upward mobility can be traced to British liberalism, and a desire not only to separate American culture from that of its mother country but free American citizens from the shackles of fixed social standing. While Adams notes that the American “social order” he defines may be “a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately” (404), Franklin credits British liberalism for influencing the ideas he puts forth in his *Autobiography*. Franklin asserts that British liberalist authors like John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe “perhaps gave me a turn of thinking that had an influence on some of the principal future events of my life” (11). Thus, the quintessentially American narrative Franklin demonstrates in his *Autobiography* is based less on a unique vision of what American culture could be but, rather, what it should be in separating American culture from that of conservative England. Likewise, critic Edward Cahill notes that Franklin’s “narratives of striving and rising and his championing of prudential virtues and commercial success are less original inventions than brilliant adaptations” (544). Such adaptations can be traced through Franklin’s connection of social mobility and moral perfection. Class advancement was not readily available in England, where much of Franklin’s *Autobiography* is written and based, but was often advocated for by English authors like Defoe and Bunyan. However, it was the ideal and promise of social mobility demonstrated by Franklin that spurred the foundational ideas for what would come to be known as the American Dream. While countries like England maintained defined and inherited class structures, critics like Samuel R. Lawrence claim that for America, the reality that “our station in life is earned rather than inherited is one of the founding principles of the American Dream” (3). Through Franklin’s example, the appeal of social mobility became not just a matter of hope, but a promised result of virtue and strong work ethic demonstrated and proven by Franklin’s own narrative. However, the implementation of this ideal as the thesis for Franklin’s *Autobiography* suggests rather propagandist undercurrents. While Leon Howard attests that early

American writing and literature, such as Franklin's own, were originally developed to be "evidence rather than products" and typically focused on "religious, economic, and political problems," such works would nonetheless contribute to the "distinctive national character" and aesthetics on which American literature would inevitably "be based" (15). Therefore, as "evidence" for the American promise of upward mobility, Franklin's *Autobiography* becomes a foundationally American text that would influence the evolving "national character" present in American aesthetics— literature in particular.

Through Franklin's use of literature to instruct social order and convey a standard of American performance, Franklin commodifies the American Dream from its earliest origins, before the name itself was even given. Understanding literature's role as an art form that is sold for both vicarious pleasure and business, Franklin's narrative of success and upward mobility, as well as his recipe for moral perfection, blurs a specified distinction between sharing his subjective experience and selling an ideal tied to the formation a new country's developing ethos. This distinction becomes particularly blurred in his *Autobiography* when Franklin discusses his intention of writing works such as *Poor Richard's Almanac*, declaring that he viewed the literary form and his own writing "as a proper vehicle for conveying instruction among the common people, who bought scarcely any other books" (64). Through this instruction, Franklin mediates the perceptions of his audience by selling them an example of social mobility, and, thereby, influences the social structures of his time by further instructing his audience on what moral principles, habits, and social interactions they should practice. Sophus A. Reinhart claims that "Franklin's virtues were eminently social, depending on, and in turn being conducive to, questions of reputation, credit, and commercial sociability" (70). Since the "instruction" Franklin conveys is predominantly and "eminently social," his advice on success is framed around the prescribed roles he sees best suited for American society, thus situating the text as propaganda used to sell an American ideal.

The underlying propaganda embedded in Franklin's *Autobiography* is reinforced through the perpetuation of moral performance and patriarchal superiority present within the text. While Franklin offers a thirteen-step guide to achieving moral perfection, he also offers networking advice and demonstrates the ease of advancement with compliance to social performance. For example, though

Franklin himself “seldom attended any public worship,” he still had “an opinion of its propriety, and of its utility when rightly conducted,” ultimately encouraging his readers to go to church because it is good for business (54). Despite this performance in which Franklin found himself to be rather “thoughtless or indifferent about religion” (70), he nonetheless assumed the position of a proprietor among Philadelphia’s local Presbyterian ministry. He opted to invest in the moral performance despite his regarding it as lacking “moral principle” (55). Aside from offering advice on achieving perfection and how to use religion as a means of business networking, Franklin also neglects to consider whether or not the Dream he is creating and marketing to his readers is available to everyone who reads his book. While, say, his thirteen-step guide on achieving moral perfection is, albeit, a completely practical guide, the complete impracticality of perfection itself implies a conceited privilege that disregards the socioeconomic constraints of poverty, environment, and gender within a developing country.

Just as Franklin’s *Autobiography* was intended as a gift to his son, a man who shared much of Franklin’s own social benefits, his advice comes across as eminently patriarchal, as it excludes any vision or intention of women moving beyond the domestic sphere. Although Franklin argues that women should be educated, he claims it should only be done so that they can handle family finances and business if something befalls the man of the household. However, the mother would only handle such business until the eldest son is fit to take over, restoring the patriarchal order of the home. Franklin writes that the “branch of education for our young females, is likely to be of more use to them and their children in case of widowhood... till a son is grown up fit to undertake and go on with it, to the lasting advantage and enriching of the family” (65). Franklin’s models for women’s education and handling domestic finances reinforces two key elements of the American Dream: the nuclear family, in which a woman needs a husband and son in order to maintain her social position, and heteronormativity, as assigning the management of finances to men of the household excludes women from participating in financial independence. While Franklin seems to advocate for women’s education in a way that would be of “use to them,” his model only serves to reinforce domestic and social hierarchies. Even in a husband’s death, Franklin secures the role of breadwinner and head-of-the-household to the next man of suitable age, rather

than ever intending for the supervision of the household to be left under the care of the wife or mother. In making such exclusions, Franklin undermines the education of women and, as such, the ability of women to manage their domestic, financial, and individual autonomy. Furthermore, at no point does Franklin consider growth in citizenship, the possibility of freed slaves, or the vast number of immigrants<sup>1</sup> who would eventually flee to America in hopes of attaining the Dream, just as his foundation for modern capitalism neglects to consider the effects of an industrialized country on low-wage workers. Thus, his vision, although foundational and practical, would quickly become too narrow to be equally attainable for all citizens.

Since Franklin and Adams, scholars have attempted to define the American Dream in more universal terms. Jim Cullen describes the widespread belief in the American Dream as a long-standing tradition in American culture, a sort of destiny that our Founding Fathers, immigrants, and Americans today imagine for themselves, based on the idea that “anything is possible if you want it badly enough” (5). In 1955, Frederic I. Carpenter commented on the importance of the American Dream in establishing our national identity, claiming that a dream “creates an image of perfection which can only be achieved gradually and pragmatically” (7). Echoing Franklin’s practical approach to success and moral perfection, the image of perfection that Carpenter articulates is an essential feature of American 1950s culture, which emphasized heteronormative ideals and conformity. Furthermore, Post-War society also emphasized the importance of the nuclear family, another essential facet of the Dream. Tim Stanley describes the nuclear family as a “unit built around the nucleus of the father and mother” that, in the face of 50s America, emphasized a capitalist “self-reliance, freedom of religion and a degree of material comfort unparalleled in US history” (11-12). With the rise in media, department stores, and advertisements during the Post-War Era, the American Dream became increasingly centered on the demonstration of affluence through material capital. Thorstein Veblen defines this demonstration as “conspicuous consumption,” in which he claims “the utility of consumption as an evidence of wealth is to be classed as a derivative growth” (49). In a capitalist economy, the accumulation and projection of material capital serve as evidence to capital growth—evidence of success. More recently, critics have defined the Dream within the context of three

main elements: autonomy, social mobility, and the domestic environment. Lawrence R. Samuel claims that whether it's "economics, politics, law, work, business, education—the American Dream is there, the nation at some level a marketplace of competing interpretations and visions of what it means" (2).

Samuels goes on to attest, however, that its grounding is in the "ideal of equal opportunity" (3).

Understanding the nation as a "marketplace" for the American Dream is essential in understanding the Dream's ideological evolution within art and popular culture.

Just as Benjamin Franklin capitalized on his narrative via the literary form, the Dream itself has become increasingly capitalized, now sold en masse through various forms of media and entertainment. In 2019, a series of Realtor.com commercials cited the American Dream in each sales pitch, with one tagline stating: "At Realtor.com, we believe that owning a home is part of the American Dream." While this tagline exemplifies the commodified nature of domestic space within the American Dream, it also echoes an article by Kenneth Jackson, in which he describes the ways in which American suburban homes "project an image of success and affluence" (131). Accordingly, the houses featured in the Realtor.com commercial are not average homes; they are huge and expensive with multiple stories, grand foyers, spacious backyards with privacy fences, pools, gazebos, the list could go on. The homes being featured are of the "dream home" standard, not necessarily the homes they can afford.<sup>2</sup> Veblen argues that this "differentiation in consumption," this desire to project and prove one's status, is human nature, "traceable back to the initial phase of predatory culture," as it participates in a differentiation that is "largely of a ceremonial character" (49). He continues, claiming that it is at the earliest stages of culture that "the symptoms of expensive vice are conventionally accepted as marks of a superior status, and so tend to become virtues and command the deference of the community" (51). Thus, because we vie to differentiate ourselves from others through evidence of our capital growth, Americans are not being encouraged to settle for a comfortable, affordable roof over their heads, but, rather, are being trained to crave a home they can use to showcase their success and affluence with the intention of establishing superiority within the community.

With this materialized view of success on the rise, the Dream continues to be defined in capital terms. In 2019, a new mega entertainment and retail complex opened in New Jersey called The American Dream. This mall, which features over five floors and three-million square feet, doubles as an indoor amusement park and movie theatre, while advertising “Fantasy, Fashion, Family, and Fun” all in one location, so that consumers can enjoy all the material and physical successes of the American Dream in one place. Thus, as the country has developed into a more modernized and materialized culture, the American Dream has transformed as well. Although its origin is based on social mobility, the Dream has evolved into something more materialistic. Richard Yarborough defines the American Dream similarly, arguing that the Dream is an “imaginary arena of freedom and fair play where an individual may prove his or her worth and, upon doing so, earn the security, peace, material comforts, and happiness identified with success in the United States” (35). According to Yarborough’s definition, the Dream is not simply embodied in freedom or equal opportunity, but in the presentation of freedom; in attaining the Dream, one is also allotted the material comforts and financial security that are identified with it. Therefore, if such comforts are understood to be expected outcomes of a Dream attained, there is no separation between the American Dream and the consumer market it relies on to endure. Thus, a Dream that lies within the hope of social mobility, but is sold as an ideal within a cultural marketplace, cannot be a Dream of equal opportunity.

Representations of a commodified American Dream can be traced throughout American literature, particularly within the projection of the American Dream onto artistic experience, just as Franklin projects his American ideals onto an artistic format. John Berger claims that art and artistic experience, like literature, “surround us in the same way as language surrounds us” (32), and in a modern age, we enter a “language of images” (33). Thus, as art becomes manifestations of cultural experience, American literary characters interact with the Dream through artistic experience and a “language of images.” Berger expands on the role of art in a social context, claiming that while artistic experience was initially “set apart from the rest of life—precisely in order to be able to exercise power over it. Later the preserve of art became a social one. It entered the culture of the ruling class...” (32). However, the control of art by the

ruling class would not stop art from being created, nor would it prevent it from being perceived and internalized by the lower class. Therefore, as art becomes a manifestation of cultural experience, the effect of classist aesthetic indifference is revealed to bear disillusioning results on underprivileged groups, who find themselves deceived by the false projection of a universally accessible, aspirational Dream. Artistic representations of the American Dream can be traced throughout American Literature. Rebecca Harding Davis' "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861), Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), and Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* (1952) all feature protagonists who interact with the American Dream through domestic space and artistic escape. While the attainment of the Dream is represented by the home and its attendant "creature comforts," such fulfillments are marketed through its projection onto fantasy-driven art forms, particularly, plays and cinema.

When represented as a universal aspiration, the formation of the Dream's philosophy demonstrates a discrepancy in sociological consideration, in which underprivileged groups, by their lack of financial and individual autonomy, find their pursuit of the Dream fruitless. While "Life in the Iron Mills" exhibits an anticipation of this commodification through a conflict between artistic experience and privileged aesthetic indifference, works like *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *The Street* reveal the disillusioning effects such indifference bears on underprivileged groups like immigrants, women, and children. Meanwhile, though *The Price of Salt* challenges conventional notions of the Dream through an artist's attempt to reform her craft, it is unable to determine whether or not attainment of the Dream will become more universally accessible for those who fall short of its ideal. While the American Dream and the pursuit of social mobility remain defining aspects of the American literary tradition and of American culture, as long as the Dream continues to be capitalized on within popular culture, the Dream will remain one of limited access.

## CHAPTER 2

“A LADDER WHICH ANY MAN CAN[NOT] SCALE”: ARTISTIC EXPERIENCE AND THE AMERICAN DREAM IN REBECCA HARDING DAVIS’ “LIFE IN THE IRON MILLS”

Published in 1861, Rebecca Harding Davis’s short story “Life in the Iron Mills” was released toward the end of what was America’s great aesthetics debate. This debate primarily took place between the 1830s and 1865, encompassing both the short story’s publication year and its 1830s setting. The aesthetic debate sought to separate America’s artistic identity from that of the Europeans’. However, a conflict emerged about whether literature or the visual arts were more important in creating America’s artistic identity and about which form would be more essential in representing the nation’s character. Neil Harris claims that “Americans felt it necessary to be visually specific,” realizing that “the most meaningful forms were not universal,” but their “own novel visual experience” (14). However, the very creation of visual arts required materials not easily acquired by the average American. Harris notes that even the “simplest materials—paint, brushes, canvas—were difficult to obtain, and homemade substitutes often had to be used instead” (15). This dilemma often meant such materials “required importation, using up much of the precious stock of currency,” which inevitably created a class divide that “destroyed simplicity and equality, industry and frugality” (35), qualities America desired to project “to present to a new people visible reassurances of unity and harmony” (17). The subsequent imbalance of representation as the result of expensive materials created a new divide in aesthetics for America.

While countries like England and France long associated the procurement of art as a luxury, many Americans saw this luxury as superfluous in that they “served no real need” beyond being “passive, inert, and ornamental objects, the products of contemplation and leisured creation,” that had no place in a new society which placed value on energy, physical effort, and work ethic (34). Therefore, the expense of art, both in creating it and obtaining it, marked it not only as an endangerment to the virtues of America’s new world, but brought attention to the hierarchies embedded within this new world. Thus, criticism began to raise questions regarding the appropriate role of art in American society, particularly within the realm of literary criticism, which Anne Farmer Meservey claims lent a more advanced position, “since the value of

literature was not disputed” (73). Literary critics saw the call for native art to reflect a uniquely American experience, which meant that native art needed to reflect the sociological order and ideals of the nation. For the writer, Meservey argues, that meant “those who saw the true portrayal of observable American conditions as the only fit concern of native arts often viewed the artist-writer as an analyst, a recorder of social and psychological life” (73). Writing amid these debates, Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills” reflects Davis’s role as a “recorder of [American] social and psychological life.” She demonstrates economic and social class disparities through a laboring artist’s pursuit of the American Dream. In “Life in the Iron Mills,” art and the industrial environment are juxtaposed, demonstrating the overall lack of social mobility made available to immigrant laborers and underprivileged bodies in America.

Pursuit of the Dream by Davis’s protagonist, Hugh Wolfe, is exemplified through his interaction with art. As an underpaid immigrant worker, Hugh Wolfe is unable to afford the materials of a proper artist and must resort to “homemade substitutes” to produce his artistic vision. However, his ability to use recycled waste materials and still create a sculpture that is both “visually specific” and a “novel visual experience,” startles members of the upper class, who in turn reject investing in the inherent genius they nonetheless recognize in Hugh’s artistry. Accordingly, Davis presents a conflict between class hierarchies and social mobility through a focus on conflicting aesthetic experiences. Dana Seitler claims that “*Iron Mills* poses political questions as aesthetic ones. The text posits a coterminous relation between art and politics in the nineteenth century, most especially in its use of sculpture to dramatize class struggle and, indirectly, the problem of the woman writer” (524). Seitler goes on to discuss how Hugh Wolfe’s korl woman statue represents a dissatisfaction with “available conventions of expression and representation” for disenfranchised artists during its era. However, I want to pay particular attention to Seitler’s claim that Davis uses “sculpture to dramatize class struggle” by considering the history of sculpture in America and its relation to aesthetics and class.

Critic and historian Wayne Craven traces the origin of American sculpture (that is, the first time it was recognized as an art form within American colonies) to Philadelphia between 1785 and 1825, the

popularization of the art form being tied to our very own Benjamin Franklin. Craven claims that although before the American Revolution and in the early 1770s, cities such as New York, Charleston, and Williamsburg “were on the verge of introducing the sculptured image into the cultural life of their respective colonies,” they would not hold lasting impressions (5). For example, an English sculptor by the name of Joseph Wilton erected marble statues of William Pitt and George III in New York, while a “rich tradition in artisan wood carving” was thriving in cities like Boston. However, Craven attests that such statues and carvings failed to produce any “continuous tradition” within American culture (5). Since Craven predominantly focuses his article on tracking the development and tradition of sculpture in America, he does not speculate much on why the sculptural form had such a hard time establishing itself in the Colonies. However, one could speculate that the perpetuated image of British figureheads such as George III and prominent Tory statesmen William Pitt by English sculptors failed to embody the “fantasy of individual socioeconomic mobility” and freedom that is otherwise present in say, the korl woman of “Life in the Iron Mills,” and essential to the developing nation’s spirit (Seitler 524). Yet, the carved image of self-improvement emblematically captured in a bust of Benjamin Franklin, and gifted to his fellow Americans by Franklin himself, would contribute to the cementing of sculpture within American aesthetics, while also bringing attention to what could be viewed as an early example of aesthetic indifference afforded by class in American culture.

In the early 1780s, Benjamin Franklin wrote to Dr. Jan Ingenhousz in Vienna regarding a sculptor who was interested in coming to America in hopes of employment. Franklin dissuaded this interest, however, asserting that he found it hardly “worth [the sculptor’s] while at present to go to America in Expectation of being employ’d there,” for the majority of citizens and private persons were “not rich enough to encourage sufficiently the fine Arts... And the public being burden’d by its War Debts, will certainly think of paying them before it goes into the Expense of Marble Monuments” (*The Writings*, 44-45). Judgments such as this made it seem unlikely that the art of sculpture would find establishment as a serious form in the early years of American aesthetics. However, such hesitation was not found in Franklin himself, who, prior to this letter, had already invested in multiple busts of himself. Such busts

became, as Craven claims, “an early example in the corpus of high-art sculpture of exquisite quality that would rapidly develop in Philadelphia” (6). Within six months of being sent to Paris by the newly-founded American government in 1776, Franklin modeled for a French sculptor who rendered a cast of his portrait. Although the sculptor gave Franklin one cast of the portrait, it is said Franklin bought “as many as seven, all probably in plaster” (6). Already established as a renowned philosopher, American figurehead, and statesman, Franklin then proceeded to gift these busts to various friends and institutions, including libraries, museums, and hospitals, thus fortifying Benjamin Franklin as an icon of social mobility and American possibility. Shortly afterward in 1778, another French sculptor presented Franklin with an additional four busts carved in marble, which inevitably made their way to Philadelphia where they were once again gifted to Franklin’s friends and family. Just as Franklin’s autobiography was intended to be a gift to his son, so were these portraits a gift to his people. However, as will be demonstrated through Hugh Wolfe’s *korl woman* statue, the appreciation of art calls us to consider the implications which lie beneath “the mere thing itself” (19).

Franklin, unlike the majority of his fellow Americans, could afford to invest in the “Expense of Marble Monuments,” partaking in the age-old tradition of proving one’s title and affluence through the grand presentation of a portrait. Yet, this is no oil painting. Franklin makes a gift out of an art form largely unaffordable to the majority of American citizens and showcased the gift of his portrait in institutions frequented by common Americans so that all may not only be reminded of his contributions to American principles and development but that through his image they are reminded of his uniquely American journey of upward mobility and perseverance. No less, Craven’s notion that Franklin’s bust is an example of “the corpus of high-art sculpture” in America implies that we should not understand the presentation of Franklin’s image as just a portrait or bust, but as a work of art. Thus, we must view it as such. And, since these busts precedes the publication of Franklin’s *Autobiography*, the gifting of it to friends and institutions positions this sculpture as Franklin’s first attempt at “conveying instruction among the common people” (*Franklin* 64). As John Berger notes in his book *Ways of Seeing*, “when an image is presented as a work of art, the way people look at it is affected by a whole series of learnt assumptions

about art” including but not limited to, beauty, truth, civilization, and genius (11). Therefore, when someone is viewing the bust of Benjamin Franklin, a series of considerations regarding Franklin’s relation to truth, civilization, and genius affect the way his bust is perceived. Franklin’s busts, therefore, serve as another example in which Franklin presents himself as an ideal model of success and achievement, an impression made all the grander through the instilling of his face on a plaster form that would continue to be recaptured in a variety of materials, including wood and marble.

The stone reminder of Franklin’s rags-to-riches narrative displayed amongst the common people speaks to Franklin’s own disillusionment. His privileged story of perseverance and social advancement deludes him of the idealistic implications his bust incites as an art form. At no point is Franklin debilitated by his position as a white male in a white-dominated, heteronormative culture, thus preventing him from seeing the deeper implications the representation of his narrative may hold as an art form by those who see from an under privileged perspective. Bill Brown and Martin Heidegger discuss the role of art in reinforcing history. Brown states that we must consider, in the case of cultural implications, not “where or how art originates,” but “*what* art originates” (773). That is, what comes out of art? To this question, Brown echoes Heidegger and claims that “art originates... history” (773) and fundamentally “grounds history” (Heidegger 75). Justly, Brown claims we should always consider precisely “*what* art originates” and what each piece of art originates in and out of itself. However, while Brown pays particular attention to the creator’s perspective, of equal importance is the viewer’s experience and the classes in charge of choosing which experience is represented.

Franklin’s money and status allowed him to participate in constructing the narrative presented in art, cementing himself as a pillar of American idealism, not just through the written word— an artistic form which, depending on environment and education, maintains a rather specific audience— but through becoming part of “fine art,” something visual and, therefore, more accessible to the masses. Although Franklin has earned his place within American history, the accessibility of his image among common people begs for an interrogation of whether seeing art for what it simply appears to be, in this case, a portrait of Franklin, is a privilege that dismisses the internalized perception of underprivileged groups,

who, in considering the deeper implications of the bust, may perceive it as a recurring promise of the American Dream.

If the promise of the American Dream, as Franklin records it, is limited to those roles that Franklin outlines in his *Autobiography*, perhaps the conflict in understanding art as “grounding history” emerges in representation. Berger articulates that “history always constitutes the relationship between a present and its past. Consequently, fear of the present leads to the mystification of the past.” Berger defines the past as a “well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act” (11). Thus, a conflict emerges when, as Berger argues, the art of the past is “mystified because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes” (11). As a forefather in American history and a product of hard work and social mobility, the common viewer may see Franklin’s bust as just that: a well from which we may draw and plan our actions to achieve that ideal, an aspiration. However, if the branding hope of universal social mobility that Franklin stands for, and that is so deeply woven into the emotive core of the American Dream, is ever at risk of being challenged or presented visually as an illusion by those unable to attain it, the ideal and promise presented by those of ruling classes becomes threatened, along with the promise of the American Dream. Thus, in the case of the underprivileged partaking in the artistic experience, their work comes in danger of being “culturally mystified” and hidden from history. Such an occurrence can be seen in “Life in the Iron Mills” through Davis’s portrayal of the ruling class mill owners, who, eager to perpetuate a history enriched with the promise of social mobility, cite tales of social equality in order to justify their dismissal of exploited mill worker, Hugh Wolfe.

Throughout “Life in the Iron Mills,” Davis explores themes of class exploitation and art as escapism. The iron mill itself, along with the squalid home in which Hugh and Deborah live, provide a backdrop for exploring the living hell experienced by the working class immigrants during a time of booming industrialization and capitalism in the United States. While wealthy factory owners and entrepreneurs live out the American Dream and reap the rewards of the Industrial Revolution, factory workers are subjected to physical dangers and soul-crushing servitude. Davis calls attention to the effects

such exploitation and unkempt environments have on its subjects: individuals in search of autonomy and a new, better life, which are two basic attractions of the American Dream. In Rebecca Harding Davis' short story, "Life in the Iron Mills," art and the industrial environment are juxtaposed, demonstrating the overall lack of social mobility made available to immigrant laborers and underprivileged bodies in America.

The first few pages of the short story take place from within the narrator's middle-class home. As an important aspect of the American Dream, this is also important to Davis's attempt to portray Hugh sympathetically. The short story begins within a middle-class home before transitioning into the mill and sordid home conditions of the protagonists, spurring similar feelings of entrapment by moving from a home of relative comfort to a condition perhaps unfamiliar, but certainly uncomfortable. As Allison Tharp claims, this establishes "a tableau of containment, claustrophobia, and immobility that will last through the rest of the novella" (8). Where the home stands as a representation of affluence, success, and autonomy, the containment and immobility experienced by the characters, and thrust upon the readers, are essential in portraying the economic exploitation and social imprisonment of Hugh Wolfe.

Hugh is a millworker living with his father and cousin, Deborah, a cotton-picker who is "deformed, almost a hunchback" (43), in a house rented to half a dozen families, of which the Wolfes share two of the cellar rooms. In occupying two cellar rooms, and, therefore, physically inhabiting the bottommost part of the house, the Wolfes are immediately presented as characters at the bottom of the heap, even amongst the families who also live in their house. Thus, this detail positions Hugh as being on the bottom of the American "ladder," highlighting his aspiration for a more beautiful and better life. This incapacitating environment is expanded on when, from a window, the narrator describes the outside world and takes note of the smoke, which "rolls sullenly in slow folds from the great chimneys of the iron-foundries, and settles down in black, slimy pools on the muddy streets" (39). However, the smoke does not just affect the outside; it barrels inside the house, covering the figure of an angel in smoke and a canary that chirps "desolately" beside the narrator (40). While the smoke-covered angel foreshadows the Inferno-like qualities of the mill's work environment, the canary foreshadows the forthcoming display of

servitude and destitution faced by the mill workers. The narrator describes it as “dirty” and “desolate,” calling attention to the restraints that limit the caged bird’s life and freedom. Following this description, the narrator notes that the bird’s “dreams of green fields and sunshine is a very old dream – almost worn out, I think” (40). Here, Davis sets up one of the more Naturalistic themes of the story: a soul that dreams of a better life, beaten down by its environment. This metaphor is made more concrete by the next paragraph when the narrator describes the view of the river, the town, and its residents: “Masses of men, with dull, besotted faces bent to the ground, sharpened here and thereby pain or cunning; skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes; stooping all night over boiling caldrons of metal, laired by day in dens of drunkenness and infamy, breathing from infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness for soul and body (40). In this passage, there are many instances in which these “masses of men,” most notably Hugh, are compared to the canary. Like the canary, these men are dirty from being covered in smoke and ashes, and like a bird who stoops down to capture its prey, these men stoop over their work. Finally, like the canary who spends its whole life in a cage, trapped in saturated air, Hugh, Deb, and the other workers are also trapped for the rest of their lives. As a creature craving beauty, but trapped in a world it cannot escape, the canary thus embodies Hugh’s aspirations.

Furthermore, this canary brings attention not just to the entrapment caused by a desolate domestic environment, but of squalid and exploited working conditions. Canaries were customarily brought down in cages with miners to warn them of changes in pressure and dangerous gases. Before a gas would affect miners, the canary would die, serving as a warning to the workers, and thus serving one purpose: to live (and die) for the miners. Hugh works similarly. The lives of those who work for the mill revolve around their work. They live, breathe, and die for the sake of those in charge and receive little in return. This portrayal clearly notes that the lives of Hugh and Deb “were like those of their class: incessant labor, sleeping in kennel-like rooms, eating rank pork and molasses, drinking—God and the distillers only know what” (42). The narrator then asks the reader with a question: “Is that all of their lives?—of the portion given to them and these their duplicates swarming the streets to-day? So many a political reformer will tell you” (42). Recalling Seitler’s claim that the story “poses political questions as aesthetic ones” (524),

as the narrative continues, these political questions persist: Is this the extent of their lives? Are the foundationally American ideals of equal opportunity and agency truly a promise afforded to all classes? Likewise, the aesthetic questions posed to explore this phenomenon are related to the conflict Bill Brown articulates of “whether disinterested aesthetic appreciation is a classed privilege (disguised behind the façade of the universal) or whether aesthetic experience is, in fact, the very phenomenon that... dislodges the individual from hierarchal order...” (778). Likewise, Paul Stenner and Tania Zittoun’s claim that art becomes particularly relevant when hierarchal worlds “collide, unravel, blur, or are ruptured” (241). In “Life in the Iron Mills,” these questions are posed through the lens of Hugh’s artistic vision, demonstrated throughout the novella as he looks into “the clear depth of amber in the water below the bridge,” or in his ability to see through the jail window a market stall “like a picture . . . the dark-green heaps of corn, and the crimson beets, and golden melons!” (63, 68). However, the genius of Hugh’s talent is consistently challenged by the hopelessness of his position at the mill.

The narrator continues to establish the futility of Hugh’s position and the power of environment by comparing the mill to Hell. When the story first opens, the narrator assumes the role of guide, beckoning us to “hide [our] disgust” and “come right down with [her],—here, into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia” (41). The narrator spends a great deal of time detailing the scene, presenting it both as a sight and a machine: [b]y night and day the work goes on, the unsleeping engines groan and shriek, the fiery pools of metal boil and surge” (45). Describing the mill as a machine positions its workers as the “cogs” that keep it running all hours of the day. The story becomes more descriptive, furthering the imagery through Deb, who approaches the mills and sees “[f]ire in every horrible form: pits of flame waving in the wind . . . , over which bent ghastly wretches stirring the strange brewing; and through all, crowds of half-clad men, looking like revengeful ghosts in the red light, hurried, throwing masses of glittering fire. It was like a street in Hell” (45). As Maribel W. Molyneaux notes, this juxtaposition is important in portraying the “demonic image of both imaginative and economic exploitation of the workers who operate it” (159). Like lost souls in Hell, there “is no hope that it will ever end” (48). Tormented by an eternity of labor as their bodies become shaped and corrupted by the

inhuman environment, these workers have nothing to look forward to. The mill becomes an image of Hell on Earth, with the narrator even going so far as to compare it to Dante's *Inferno*<sup>3</sup> (50). However, Hugh's social conditioning has not yet completely beaten down his humanity, which lives on through his art.

When at work, Hugh works mindlessly. He "dully think[s] only how many rails the lump would yield" (49) until he is interrupted by the mill owner and some visitors. The narrator points out that Wolfe "seized eagerly every chance that brought him into contact with this mysterious class that shone down on him perpetually with the glamour of another order of being. What made the difference between them? That was the mystery of his life" (49). Hugh's interest in this upper class demonstrates an awareness of his low social standing. However, he perseveres in believing he can change the reality of his existence. He does not view his low station as something inescapable; rather, he thinks he can transform himself through social integration and interaction. Although Hugh is aware of his lower station, he is naively unaware that it leaves no room for his dreams of art and beauty.

Hugh's dream of social mobility, a life filled with art and beauty, is embodied by his kohl woman statue, which is discovered and ultimately dismissed by the mill visitors. It is when members of this "mysterious class" come for a tour of the mill where Hugh works that the narrator describes a "white figure of a woman": "a woman, white, of giant proportions..." (52). When one of the men steps "where the light f[alls] boldest on the figure," he sees it more distinctly: "There was not one line of beauty or grace in it: a nude woman's form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some one poignant longing. One idea: there it was in the tense, rigid muscles, the clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf's" (53). Although the reiterated whiteness of the sculpture, its large scale, and its nudity participate in the form of common, traditional sculptures, the process of Wolfe's production and the product by which it is created greatly deviate from tradition. Brown claims that the figure is displayed "to exploit disputes about the arts and the aesthetic in America," doing so by "reconfiguring the sculptural ambitions of the mid-nineteenth century" (777). Davis is not presenting a founding father, patriot, or the ideal American, but the immigrant; not through marble, or a model

studiously sketched and modeled in clay or plaster, but through waste metal extemporaneously and relentlessly hewn and hacked, like its creator.

Hugh is a skilled sculptor whose artistry catches the attention of the mill-owners, yet they offer him no help in cultivating his skills. When it comes to the visitors' confrontation with the korl woman, their exchange with Wolfe demonstrates a passivity that underscores the aesthetic indifference afforded by class. Just as Wolfe's coworkers belittle him while recognizing his work as "sometimes strangely beautiful," so do the visitors in awe of it. Thus, as Brown notes, the sculpture's "power [is] universally acknowledged" (784). Mitchell, a visitor on the tour, says that he "thought [the sculpture] was alive," while Dr. May says it is "[n]ot badly done," all the while becoming more entranced the longer he looks. Dr. May, surprised by Wolfe's genius, continues to vocalize his amazement: "Where did the fellow learn that sweep of the muscles in the arm and hand? Look at them! They are groping,—do you see?—clutching: the peculiar action of a man dying of thirst" (53). When he finally approaches Wolfe, asking the intention of the sculpture, Wolfe simply replies, "She be hungry," to which the doctor responds with criticism: "Oh-h. But what a mistake you have made, my fine fellow! You have given no sign of starvation to the body. It is strong,—terribly strong" (53). Misinterpreting what precisely the korl woman is hungry for, Wolfe "stammered, glanced appealingly at Michell, who saw the soul of the thing, he knew" and responds, "Not hungry for meat" (54). Seeing the soul within the art, Mitchell responds to the doctor: "[A]re you blind? Look at that woman's face! It asks questions of God, and says, 'I have a right to know.' Good God, how hungry it is" (54). Thus, the korl figure manages to articulate eloquently that which the stammering Hugh cannot muster.

Dr. May then reminds Wolfe that a "man may make himself anything he chooses. God has given you stronger powers than many men,—me, for instance" (56), affirming both his faith in Wolfe's artistic aptitude and social mobility. However, when he is urged by Mitchell to invest in Wolfe's talent, Dr. May says that he has not "the means": "You know, if I had, it is in my heart to take this boy and educate<sup>4</sup> him" (56). When at last Mitchell asks mill owner Kirby what he intends to do with those workers who seem to show some semblance of "genius." Kirby nonchalantly replies:

I have no fancy for nursing infant geniuses. I suppose there are some stray gleams of mind and soul among these wretches. The Lord will take care of his own; or else they can work out their own salvation. I have heard you call our American system a ladder which any man can scale. Do you doubt it? Or perhaps you want to banish all social ladders, and put us all on a flat table-land,—eh, May? (54)

Rather than concern himself with nurturing and cultivating the dreams of his workers, Kirby, evoking the American Dream, insists on letting their lives run their course. He believes that if Hugh is destined to move up in society, his talent will allow him to do so, as the American system is “a ladder which any man can scale.” The fundamentally American belief that any individual can rise above his or her station is apparent in Kirby’s description of the American system, and he clearly favors this idea to that of equal treatment for all<sup>5</sup>. However, like Franklin, Kirby fails to understand the powers of one’s environment: to give privilege and to inhibit it. Therefore, the story presents an American system that is broken, demonstrated through the apathy and lack of commitment demonstrated by the “mysterious class” towards the conditions of the mill workers—workers whose fates are in their control. This is precisely what makes them “mysterious” to Hugh; he cannot understand or ever hope to attain such disinterested privilege due to his experience as a downtrodden, exploited laborer. The men dismiss Hugh’s art and leave the potentially “great sculptor, [and] great man” to his “squalid daily life, the brutal coarseness eating into his brain, as the ashes into his skin,” a life only made worse by this scene of passing hope (58).

Unfortunately, Hugh does not yet recognize this flaw in the American system because he is still a canary in a cage, dehumanized by his environment. He is nameless to the man for whom he works, and even after receiving a little praise for his artistry, Hugh is cast aside. His art and the korl woman, therefore, become manifestations of his struggles to climb out of his low position and into a better life. At the end of the story, the narrator describes the korl woman as reaching with an “arm stretched out imploringly into the darkness” (74). In this description, it appears that the sculpture is trying to grab a hold of a ladder to lift herself up, trying to escape the darkness of her state. Lucy Morrison expands on this representation of the korl woman by discussing its reflection of Hugh’s desires: “the figure seems to

depict a mundane worker searching for more; hungry to grasp something further from life... the ‘poignant longing’ indicates that the figure is successful in conveying an indescribable and indefinite emotion that is nonetheless clearly recognizable...” (250). In conveying that same desire for an unspecified “something else,” the korl woman becomes a projection for both Hugh’s longing and the undefinable elements of the American Dream. Likewise, it is this very representation that startles the mill workers.

Right before noticing the sculpture, Kirby vocalizes his readiness to leave the mill, commenting that the close proximity of the experience was “a little too real” for him (52). However, their departure is interrupted when the millworkers see the korl woman, which is described as “crouching on the ground, her arms flung out in some wild gesture of warning” (52). Though the arms reaching for something unseen is consistent, the “wild gesture of warning” recognized by the millworkers is portentous. Thus, what comes to fruition in this scene is Berger’s notion that a “fear of the present leads to a mystification of the past” in order to justify the roles of the ruling classes. Hugh himself is unable to articulate his desires for artistic beauty and upward mobility, but these longings are nevertheless conveyed through his korl woman. In turn, the “strong powers” of Hugh’s talent startles the ruling class visitors. This “too real” experience with Hugh’s class— the “visually specific” revelation of gross differences in privilege between classes— threatens the false promise of social mobility the mill visitors cite throughout their visit. Therefore, it is not just a lack of money on Dr. May’s part that prevents Hugh’s talent from being presented among common people, but a lack of theoretical commitment by all parties due to a fear that this artistic revelation will disrupt their idealistic social order. Consequently, Hugh’s art is dismissed by the ruling class and mystified, accentuating the futility of the korl woman, whose face eternally stares longingly at what she cannot reach

The korl woman thus becomes a reflection of Hugh’s own longing and a representation of the irony that his artistry incites. Hugh uses korl for his woman, a scrap metal, a waste. This choice in material only emphasizes the irony of Hugh’s sculpture by matching his exploitation with his ability to find value in the waste metal he works over, the one thing he can control. Caroline S. Miles notes that “Wolfe’s artistic molding of bodies out of korl signals his attempt to gain agency... Wolfe works

symbolically to achieve self-control over his body by moving from labor alienated from the product to labor defined by ownership and control of production” (98). Despite his passive treatment, Hugh is clearly capable and desirous of creating beauty, but he cannot afford to devote his life to it. While physically serving as the very thing that offers him freedom and autonomy, the kohl scrap metal also signifies the very thing that keeps Hugh trapped. However, he begins to realize that without money or any investment from the “mysterious” upper class, his dreams of artistic endeavor have no future.

Thus, Hugh’s impending suicide is the death of his dreams— when at last he recognizes what life has denied him, he accepts that money, which he does not have, is essential in changing his position and pursuing his dream. As the wealthy mill owner and visitors leave the site, the narrator offers images of Wolfe’s life flashing before his eyes: “Do you remember rare moments when a sudden light flashed over yourself, your world, God? When you stood on a mountain-peak, seeing your life as it might have been, as it is?” (20). Here, the narrator makes a direct appeal, suggesting that the promise of upward mobility is a universal desire, despite the unlikelihood of their achieving it. Like the canary, Hugh craves “free air on a hill-side” and “sunshine” (59). As he contemplates whether or not to take the money that Deborah stole from Mitchell, he considers whether or not it will offer him an escape from his cage. Once he decides to give into his temptation and accept the stolen money, the sun sets over the hills and Hugh offers another artistic impression of the world: “inner depths unfathomable of glancing light. Wolfe’s artist-eye grew drunk with color. The gates of that other world!” (63). However, once Hugh makes the conscious decision to do wrong, he condemns himself in the process.

Although Hugh attempts to escape prison twice, he gives up trying to escape his mental imprisonment. Hugh’s jailer observes that “when he was first caught... [he] laid there on that pallet like a dead man, with his hands over his eyes. Never saw a man so cut down in my life” (65). Hugh begins to give up on his dreams of beauty and sunshine, of freedom. Yet, even as he lies there in despair, he still manages to find beauty, even in a jail cell. As he looks out his cell window, he admires a marketplace: “How clear the light fell on that stall in front of the market! and how like a picture it was, the dark-green heaps of corn, and the crimson beats, and golden melons! . . . Then came the sudden picture of what

might have been, and now" (68). The image of this market is two-fold. Through the market, we are reminded of the American marketplace and its importance to the American Dream. However, Hugh sees the market with an artist's eye, glorifying it with colorful descriptions. While concurrently calling attention to money and commodification, this shows that even at his lowest, Hugh continues to see the world with hope and appreciation for its beauty. Even the most pristine food and fruits require some semblance of money, and while the light shines down on that market, it shines down on the dream of prosperity, the ability to take care of one's self, the dream of a better life.

The prison window serves as the frame for Hugh's view, but also his dream, which he has come to realize is unattainable. Although he recognizes the beauty, he realizes the naivety of his artistic outlook. He can see his dream through the window frame, but he is unable to reach it. The window is the "sudden picture of what might have been, and now," and as he looked through it, "[h]e knew what it was to be in this penitentiary... He knew how in these long years he should slowly die, but not until his soul and body became corrupt and rotten..." (68). Here, Hugh is coming to terms with his new reality and rejects his artistic point of view. Similarly, Seidler argues that in this instance, Hugh is lamenting "not what didn't happen in the past, but whatever might have been in some counterfactual future" (544). The loss of this future leaves him dejected and suicidal. Therefore, the only alternative Hugh sees fit is death, as he tells Deb, "It is best" (69).

No longer suffering from disillusionment, Hugh cites beauty one more time before giving up entirely. He stops his train of thought while admiring a "mulatto" girl: "The picture caught his eye. It was good to see a face like that. He would try to-morrow, and cut one like it. *To-morrow!* He threw down his tin, trembling, and covered his face in his hands. When he looked up again, the daylight was gone" (70). The uniqueness of the "mulatto" girl's face provokes Hugh's natural appreciation for beauty, and he is momentarily inspired, until he remembers his entrapment and what tomorrow holds. For Hugh, suicide is his last chance to control his destiny: not an act of cowardice, rather the rejection of a life he refuses to continue living.

Hugh's korl woman sculpture outlives him and expresses those undefinable feelings with which Hugh struggles throughout the story. Of all the other figures he has carved, each was destroyed. He would work "at one figure for months, and, when it was finished, breaking it to pieces perhaps, in a fit of disappointment" (48). The fragility and temporariness of Wolfe's sculptures, that they are so often destroyed after working on them for months and months, marks a distinction between Hugh's personal artistic experience and the experiences represented in the lauded timelessness of high art marble. Not afforded access to more durable materials like marble, Hugh creates from a material that represents his own social standing, one that is indispensable. That the korl woman remains after his suicide, even though it is not finished, indicates that it is his one work of art that comes closest to an expression of his soul. Like the cuts on his wrist carved with an old tin, the korl woman is made of scraps, too—industrial waste—the essence of Hugh himself.

Through Welsh immigrant Hugh Wolfe, Davis disrupts the social hierarchy by distorting the conventionally privileged lens through which beauty and the American Dream are presented. The conflict Brown highlights of whether or not disinterested aesthetic appreciation is a classed privilege disguised as universal, or if the artistic experience dislodges us from hierarchal order, emerges in Hugh's korl woman, which both represents the artistic spirit from which it was born, proving his "master hand" (Davis 74), while maintaining the unsettling effect of underprivileged desperation. Wolfe's artistic "genius" (Davis 56) distinguishes him from his class, while the product, his art, returns attention to that class.

"Life in the Iron Mills" contrasts sociological and philosophical understandings of aesthetics in order to highlight the privilege of a system based on the promise of upward mobility at the hands of hard work. The "pick yourself up by the bootstraps" mentality of Benjamin Franklin has been a lasting foundation for finding one's way in attaining the Dream, but "Life in the Iron Mills" questions the validity of a universal promise based on perseverance and income. The gigantic proportions of a laboring woman hacked and hewn in korl, grasping desperately for something just out of reach, visually articulates Hugh's pursuit of social mobility and artistic freedom. Davis's demonstration of aesthetic privilege and indifference, therefore, displays an oversight in the consideration of the underprivileged within the arena

of a commodified American Dream. As adherents to the American Dream dismiss themselves from any social obligation to help those in need because the American system is “a ladder any man can scale,” “Life in the Iron Mills” reveals the flaws of an economic model that rests on the notion that any man or woman who possesses enough ambition will undoubtedly prosper.

## CHAPTER 3

ARISTOCRATIC FANTASIES: ENTERTAINMENT AND ENTRAPMENT IN *MAGGIE: A GIRL OF THE STREET* AND *THE STREET*

Artistic experience is not reserved for the creator alone but endures in the mind and experience of the seer. The success of artistic modes such as plays and cinema, in which artistic experience relies on the selling of a performance, bank on the identification and internalization of their narratives by audience members. Within Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), the voyeurism generated in plays and narrative cinema creates an interactive experience in which artistic escape and the act of seeing—of watching—is compromised by the projection of aspirational narratives. Such narratives not only sell the American Dream to their viewers through the perpetuation of homogenized and patriarchal ideals but offer sights of what the viewer may possess if they act in accordance with the performances represented. However, the promises represented, when internalized by the disenfranchised, lead to a cultural disillusionment, as the aspirations presented are marketed to audiences en masse, regardless of their individual ability to achieve them. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *The Street* are works that present the commodification of the Dream through entertainment, instating false agency and a general disillusionment amongst its characters, whose environments and biology hinder their ability to adapt the fantasies experienced through entertainment into their realities. Their shared disillusionment culminates in their domestic spaces, as they attempt to project the performances and material wealth they witness through interactions with higher classes onto their own domestic spaces.

Throughout Crane's novella, Maggie's interactions with melodrama position the American Dream as a concept sold to Bowery audiences, as the performances represented on stage reflect the promises of the American Dream: hopes of overcoming social entrapment, championing over the ruling classes, and ultimately rising above the Bowery's poverty. Accordingly, the melodrama offers an artistic escape for citizens of the Bowery. As Jacob Riis articulates in his photo-journalistic text *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), the tenement housing of New York's Bowery was the worst imaginable. After the War of 1812, tenements arose out of a need to house an influx of immigrants fleeing to America in search of a better

life. As the wealthy moved out of the East Side homes to avoid the coming masses, their rooms and apartments were chopped into smaller ones; one account had five families living in a 12 by 19-foot room (8). The effect of this environment, as Riis reveals, led to a culture of death, disease, and abuse, creating a class of people “from whom nothing was expected, and the most was made of them while they lasted. Neatness, order, cleanliness, were never dreamed of in connection with the tenant-house system” (7). Thus, Bowery residents become a class entrapped by the poverty that enveloped their neighborhoods. In an inscription to Hamlin Garland regarding his story of Maggie, Crane expresses his intention of demonstrating the oppressive effects of the Bowery, writing that “environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless” (1). In this context, the Bowery serves as a character of its own, a sort of antagonist used to keep Maggie and other members of the Bowery oppressed. Therefore, while the melodrama attended by the Bowery public offers artistic escape through the promise of aristocratic bliss gained through social perseverance, the very environment in which these narratives are perpetuated functions to keep members of the Bowery from attaining the aspirations represented on stage.

The melodramas featured in Crane’s story are frequently attended by the Bowery population, offering them the opportunity for artistic escape, as they cling to fantasies of social advancement and triumph. Consequently, it is the disillusionment caused by the faux narrative of the melodrama that contributes to Maggie’s downfall. While the fellow Bowery members serve as an important backdrop for Maggie’s experience, Crane uses Maggie’s family of exploited Irish immigrants, the Johnson household, as a stand-in for the larger Bowery public to demonstrate the incredible power environment holds over its subjects. In another letter, Crane writes that he “tried to make plain that the root of Bowery life is a sort of cowardice. Perhaps I mean a lack of ambition or to willingly be knocked flat and accept the licking” (2). Not only is Maggie’s Bowery a looming power capable of shaping the lives of its citizens, but the lifestyle it generates within its citizens is one rooted in a passive submission in which characters like Maggie and her comrades, seeing no way of escape, are resigned to the lives they live.

Crane establishes the gruesome nature of the Bowery within his own story. While, street names like “Rum Alley” and “Devil’s Row” articulate the alcoholism and futility that define the lives of Crane’s

Bowery poor, Maggie's neighborhood is described as a "dark region where, from a careening building, a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter," with buildings that "quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about its bowels" (6). These details draw attention to the filthy, cramped, and unsanitary conditions which further entrap the Bowery citizens and prevent them from attaining the triumphs of their on-stage representative. All they are afforded is the illusion of escape.

With the Johnson household serving as a stand-in for the larger Bowery population, Maggie's personal experience with the melodrama highlights larger social discrepancies pertaining to artistic experience, insight, and class consciousness. Thomas A. Gullason notes that "as Crane chooses to fix on one family, the Johnsons, he personalizes in small a large tragedy which affects and reflects on American society as a whole" (247). Although this novella focuses on Maggie and those close to her, the tragedy of the melodrama does not just pertain to Maggie and her family, or even just the people of the Bowery, but the debilitating power of inescapable poverty to entrap its subjects. The theme of entrapment is shaped most prominently within Maggie's own household, as she attempts to project her blossoming dreams of beauty and advancement onto her "mud puddle" of a home (16).

The dark and gruesome nature of the Bowery engulfs the inside of the tenement houses. Maggie, who attempts to assert control and pride over her life by decorating her home, consistently finds herself displeased with her unsuccessful attempts to add a sense of beauty to the Johnson household. After observing her brother's friend Pete, whom Maggie observed to be the "beau ideal of a man," Maggie becomes displeased with the lack of beauty in her home (19). As she attempts to "calculate the altitude of the pinnacle from which [Pete] must have looked down upon her," she begins to wonder how she could stage her environment to fit better with Pete's world (19). Maggie "contemplated the dark, dust-stained walls, and the scant and crude furniture of her home... The almost vanished flowers in the carpet-pattern, she conceived to be newly hideous. Some faint attempts she had made with blue ribbon, to freshen the appearance of a dingy curtain, she now saw to be piteous" (20). Inspired by Pete's middle-class "ideal" of a man, Maggie becomes dissatisfied with her attempts to improve her surroundings. Although she had

only seen Pete twice, he “had different suits on each time,” leading Maggie to believe that his wardrobe was “prodigiously extensive,” ultimately aligning Pete’s attire and presentation with a higher form of living (21). It is the hope of beauty and higher living that Maggie sees in Pete which initiates her disillusionment, for she is unable to recognize the full effect of Bowery life on its subjects.

In an attempt to project the role she wishes to play onto her home, a role which fits the “ideal” Pete appears to possess, Maggie begins redecorating in hopes of impressing Pete and matching his ideal. After Pete offers to take Maggie out on Friday night, she spends the days leading up to their outing “making imaginary sketches of Pete and his daily environment” while stooping over the “eternal collars and cuffs” she handles at her job in the textile factory (21). Already, the very thought of experiencing Pete’s world begins to provide Maggie escape from the monotony of her daily life. Just as Pete is drawn to Maggie’s “shape,” viewing her as an object and character rather than a girl, Maggie attempts to match that character (19). However, Maggie is nonetheless concerned that the “golden glitter” and “entertainment of many hues” offered at the place where Pete intends to take her will make her “appear small and mouse-colored” (21). Although excited to experience the world to which Pete will introduce her, she already fears her ability to perform within that ideal. However, Maggie’s fear that she will be perceived as “small” compared to the company and entertainment offered at the venue is not so much because of Maggie’s own self, but because of the smallness of her world, which limits her ability to perform as she should. Thus, in order to appear more appealing to Pete, she spends the days leading up to his arrival redecorating her home.

Maggie’s homemaking emphasizes her desire to perform as what she thinks Pete’s ideal woman should be. Maggie spends a week’s pay on the purchase of “flowered cretonne for a lambrequin” and hangs it over the stove in the kitchen. Just as flowers and the kitchen serve as representations for the ideal woman, an innocent angel-of-the-home, Maggie’s effort to join these symbols by decorating her kitchen in an expensive floral fabric in hopes that it will reflect well on her demonstrates Maggie’s willingness to invest in an ideal. Furthermore, she hopes that the appearance of money and a warm domestic environment will impress Pete and, thereby, facilitate her ability to escape the Bowery. Accordingly,

Veblen argues that within the “patriarchal tradition... the woman should consume only what is necessary to her sustenance,—except so far as her further consumption contributes to the comfort or the good repute of her master” (51). As Maggie buys her luxurious lambrequin in hopes of pleasing Pete, she simultaneously positions him as her “master.” However, this dream is destroyed when Maggie comes home from work on Friday to find that her mother, who had been drinking whiskey all morning, had “destroyed” the furniture, leaving “fragments of various household utensils ... scattered about the floor.” And, after her mother vented “some phase of drunken fury upon the lambrequin,” it laid “in a bedraggled heap in the corner” (21). Maggie’s mother, unsuited for the beauty Maggie attempts to incorporate into their home, and having abandoned her own role as a mother long ago, destroys the domestic set Maggie has staged. Likewise, when Pete arrives to pick up Maggie, she is described as “waiting for him in the midst of a floor strewn with wreckage. The curtain at the window had been pulled by a heavy hand and hung on one tack, dangling to and fro...” (21). Unlike the curtains that frame a stage and open onto its performance, the curtain used to frame Maggie’s performance cannot withstand the burden of its environment and, therefore, cannot offer Maggie a stage on which to perform. However, this does not stop Pete from taking Maggie to the play, where her unattainable dream of social mobility and beauty is reinforced on stage.

While Maggie’s attempt at creating beauty is destroyed by her mother, the melodrama Maggie attends sells her and fellow members of the Bowery public a tale of social mobility, a promise of social advancement afforded by perseverance and hard work. Here, the hero’s “erratic march from poverty... to wealth” leads to forgiveness and social reconciliation (27). However, the ideals of the American Dream represented on stage disillusion the Bowery public, who attend in hopes of enjoying the artistic escape afforded by the idealistic success of the on-stage heroes. Upon arriving at the “green-hued hall” of the theatre, the audience is described as a crowd “composed of people who showed that all day they strove with their hands. Quiet Germans, with maybe their wives and two or three children,” “the occasional party of sailors from a war-ship,” tipsy men, and impassive women: “the nationalities of the Bowery beamed upon the stage from all directions” (22). Here, Crane illustrates the “beaming” delight with which

the Bowery citizens attend the melodrama after spending a week working tirelessly with their hands. However, it is not just mere escape that this melodrama offers them; it is the affirmation of their exploited position and promise of social mobility. As the hero of the melodrama serves as a “representative of the audience,” his battle against ruling classes and unjust systems articulates the dreams of the Bowery public (27). As David Huntsperger claims, “Crane’s portrayal of Bowery theater suggests melodrama has subversive and perhaps even revolutionary undercurrents that exceed mere false consciousness or ideological obfuscation” (294-95). He adds that the members of the Bowery are not naively drawn to the melodrama, but “become participants in a show of class solidarity,” claiming that the Bowery public attends the melodrama because it “stages and clarifies socioeconomic inequities and injustices” (295). As Huntsperger suggests, as an art form, the experience of theatre has the ability to challenge common sociological perceptions and blur the distinction between ideological class separation. The play confirms socioeconomic inequities of which the Bowery public is already aware and allows them to imagine a world in which their hard work is compensated by the attainment of the American Dream. Therefore, one appeal of the melodrama for Bowery citizens lies within the theatre’s ability to offer Bowery citizens an evening in which social boundaries are blurred, a place where “citizens can pay to enjoy the phantasies of the aristocratic theatre-going public, at a reduced rate” (*Maggie* 23). As this line suggests, the play sells its audience an aristocratic fantasy—the quintessential American hope for social mobility. However, as Bill Brown claims, within “sociological knowledge, the poor must see only with the eyes of the poor” (779). Therefore, while the Bowery public attends the melodrama for the affirmation and articulation of class injustices of which they are already aware, they are unable to see the irony of the melodrama’s narrative—that it is a melodrama, a performance, a fantasy, and not a realistic tale.

Likewise, Maggie’s youth and determination to perform within a certain feminine ideal disables her from being able to leave the melodrama at the melodrama; she is unable to differentiate the fantasy from the entrapment of her reality. The play not only feeds her desire for social mobility but appears to promise it. Therefore, as the melodrama represents a flawed society, Maggie serves as a representative for those subjected to that society and who dream to rise above it. In the course of the play’s rags-to-riches

narrative, “the last act was a triumph for the hero, poor and of the masses, the representative of the audience, over the villain and rich men” (27-28). This hero prevails over the rich men and ruling classes who fail to compensate fairly their workers or invest in improvements to the Bowery, much like Maggie’s job at the textile factory. However, the attention to the male hero’s role in this narrative further illuminates Maggie’s personal and biological limitations—that she must rely on a man in order to advance socially.

Although not the story’s true hero, women do not go unaccounted for in the melodrama. In fact, the very feminine performance Maggie aspires to and the hope that Pete will save her from her environment are ironically adapted to the stage. The play showcases a “brain-clutching heroine ... rescued from the palatial home of her guardian, who is cruelly after her bonds, by the hero with the beautiful sentiments” (27). In this particular passage, the subject matter of the melodrama becomes a gross parallel to Maggie’s own experience, and this parallel particularly fuels Maggie’s fantasies by giving her a specific aspirational dream. On Maggie’s stage, Pete serves as the melodramatic hero who rescues her from her own home, although it is anything but palatial and she certainly has no bonds, introducing her to a world that allows her to dream. Thus, it is the hope of having a man that sparks Maggie’s hope of social mobility. As Giorgio Mariani argues, Maggie “finds projected on the stage the imaginary resolution to her actual social condition of exploited worker” (76) in a narrative that is based on “an ideological construct” (78). Just as this play sells the ideological hope of social mobility, it also sells an ideological construct in which women rely on men to define their success. However, unlike the hero presented in the melodrama, Pete hardly rescues Maggie. Instead, he inevitably flees out of fear that he may be responsible for her ruin. Still, because she has even less agency than Pete, Maggie must cling to a man in order to perform within the ideal she wishes.

Nonetheless, Maggie’s identification with the heroine on stage continues to fuel her fantasies. Affected by the melodrama’s artistic influence, Maggie always departs “with raised spirits from the showing places of the melodrama. She rejoiced at the way in which the poor and the virtuous eventually surmounted the wealthy and wicked. The theatre made her think” (28). Inspired by the triumphing,

triumphing, and social reconciliation between the rich and poor demonstrated on stage, Maggie “wondered if the culture and refinement she had seen imitated, perhaps grotesquely, by the heroine on the stage, could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirt factory” (28).

Within these two passages, Maggie begins to form her own idea of the American Dream. Her dream surpasses class advancement or the walls of a kitchen and bleeds into the vision of a fantastic environment in which she is surrounded by culture, art, and sophistication. This inspires her and enriches her life. As Jim Cullen states, “simply having a dream has sustained, even saved, lives that otherwise might not be deemed worth living” (7). For Maggie, the melodrama, at least for a while, does just that; it gives her a reason to live by evoking hope in a way that she had not been allowed to hope before.

However, the narrator rightly refers to the performance on stage as “grotesque,” for the performance that inspires Maggie is an exaggeration of real-life. Pete will not be her rescuer, and clinging to this dream will ultimately lead to her own downfall. However, Maggie is so illusioned by the performance on stage, eager to perform it herself, that she does not see this flaw in the American system— that her environment and the society which surrounds her will not let her escape. Thus, she projects the performance witnessed on stage onto her own life. Suitably, Huntsperger claims that “Maggie naively assumes that life follows art, and her thinking involves a confusion of melodrama with realism” (303). Maggie buys into the melodrama’s representation of the American Dream because, despite its exaggeration, it is a suitable reflection of the socioeconomic injustices and realities embedded in Maggie’s environment.

Because Maggie is so easily able to identify with the heroes on stage, she buys into the belief that she, too, will be able to socially triumph. The reinforcement of heteronormative and patriarchal ideals on stage with a heroine that parallels Maggie’s own experience disillusiones her further. When Pete leaves her, the facilitation of her dream disappears with him, along with her family, and she is left alone to sell the one thing she can control: her body. Thus, while the Dream represented on stage gives Maggie a reason to live, the limited attainability of it for someone of her gender and environment inevitably leads to her downfall and untimely death.

In Ann Petry's *The Street*, Lutie undergoes a similar disillusionment. Lutie has read Benjamin Franklin's autobiography and has convinced herself that, like Franklin, hard work and persistence will help her attain the Dream. While picking up dinner rolls for her and her son, she felt "the hard roundness of the rolls through the paper bag, [and] thought immediately of Ben Franklin and his loaf of bread" (63). Although Lutie reminds herself that she lives "in Harlem and [Franklin] was in Philadelphia a pretty long number of years ago," she can't shake her "feeling of self-confidence and she went on thinking that if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and prosper, then so could she" (64). While Lutie seems to understand the influence changing times and location have on her ability to climb socially, she overlooks the biological and racial boundaries that further differentiate her from Franklin.

Petry juxtaposes Lutie and Franklin to highlight the racial boundaries embedded in the fantasy of the American Dream. Whereas Franklin was a young, independent, white male in a new country whose social values had not yet been capitalized on, Lutie is a black, young, single mother in Post-World War II Harlem, trying to balance career advancement and caring for her coming-of-age-son, Bub. Clark Keith expands on the racial boundaries of the American Dream depicted through literature, arguing that "the race and class of the black character preclude even marginal access to the Dream and its attendant creature comforts" (495). Likewise, Lutie's race, gender, and environment all stymie her ability to procure social mobility, financial security, and a domestic environment capable of catering to the needs of both Lutie and Bub. The exterior forces that hinder Lutie's ability to perform in the Dream manifest in her varying environments. While interactions with upper-class domesticity provide a backdrop for Lutie to project her dreams, her Harlem residence consumes those dreams and disables her from achieving them.

Lutie's environment competes with her dream and threatens it, as it stands in stark contrast to the environment in which her dream was born. Lutie's vision of the American Dream comes to her after witnessing the life of wealth and leisure enjoyed by the Chandler household, where she works as a nanny and maid in their large Connecticut home. Upon growing accustomed to the Chandlers' lifestyle, often spending more time in their home and tending to their children than her own, Lutie's idea of the American Dream becomes tied to monetary success and social advancement. After "a year of absorbing

their talk, she absorbed some of the same spirit. The belief that anyone could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough” (43). As she absorbs their conversations and attitudes, Lutie becomes fixated on attaining a “good life” defined by material wealth. However, while the Chandlers’ house is like the houses featured in Realtor.com commercials, its grandeur only masks the imperfections of the family living inside it. It is the appearance of a Dream attained through the presentation of success and affluence.

While the Chandler home markets the appearance of domestic bliss, the internal struggles of the nuclear family residing inside it highlights the performative role of material success in the American Dream. While money procures the essence and appearance of success, it does not cure familial strife, nor can it secure domestic peace. On Christmas Eve, Mrs. Chandler’s mother and Mr. Chandler’s brother, Jonathan, visit the Chandler family. Lutie listens as the family argues into the night, “long after she had gone to bed,” and the arguments often “grew more and more violent” (46). When, on Christmas, Jonathan Chandler shoots himself in the head in front of his family, who open presents around a tree “covered with tinsel and stars and brilliantly covered baubles,” the Chandlers become determined to cover the tragedy (47). In an attempt to avoid “embarrassing” the family, and “on Christmas morning, too,” the family ultimately plays it off as an accident to the public (48). In aligning Jonathan’s suicide with an extravagant Christmas morning, Petry criticizes the capitalized performance of a holiday intended to celebrate birth and family.<sup>6</sup> No number of wrapped presents will be able to fix the domestic wounds that ail Jonathan Chandler. Yet, upon his death, the Chandlers continue to project their grief onto material comforts and find solace in excessive drinking. Lutie notes that there “were three cars in the garage now instead of two. And...there was talk of getting a bigger house.” Meanwhile, Mrs. Chandler “kept buying new clothes. Dresses and coats and suits,” which she would wear only a few times before getting tired of looking at them (50). Unable to bear the weight of such domestic tragedy, the Chandlers attempt to soothe their grief by investing even more into the American Dream. They seek additional modes of freedom and escape, a larger house in which to perform, and more luxury clothing to hide behind. Meanwhile, as Lutie reaps the benefits of Mrs. Chandler’s gently worn hand-me-downs, she takes some comfort in knowing that white people share the same domestic struggles as “colored people.” Still, this tragedy does not phase the

fantasy the Chandler home ignited in her. While Lutie learned that having money “wouldn’t necessarily guarantee happiness,” what she found to be more important was learning that “when one had money there were certain unpleasant things one could avoid – even things like a suicide in the family” (49). Therefore, while the deceiving veil—the lie that monetary success procures happiness—is lifted, the Chandler home still kindles Lutie’s fantasy. She knows now that, while happiness itself is not guaranteed, the unpleasantnesses of life are more easily avoided.

The longer Lutie works for the Chandlers, the more attached to their lifestyle she becomes, even causing distance to form between her and her own family. When she first begins working for the Chandlers, she is offered the opportunity to go home and visit her husband, Jim, and son, Bub, once a week. Initially, Lutie is uncomfortable working for the Chandlers due to an inability to cope with their “entirely different set of values,” and longs to go home to Jim and Bub (41). However, by the time Mrs. Chandler suggests that she go home once a month for four days in order to get a longer visit with her family, Lutie finds it easy to convince herself not to go. She even “point[s] out to Jim how she could save the money she would have spent for train fare” by not going home (44). Lutie, eager to acquire the monetary wealth Mrs. Chandler has, not only adjusts her schedule to fit Mrs. Chandler’s recommendation but neglects visits with her family in hopes of saving on train fare. Lutie’s attempt to regulate her visits and perform within Mrs. Chandler’s standard elevates her association of success with monetary value. She begins to mirror the performances of her environment because she desires that environment. Ashley Bourgeois explains it best: “in a controlled environment, a person becomes limited in his or her ability to envision terms of personal satisfaction; what provides pleasure within a given space often becomes desirable by all those who inhabit it” (106). While at the Chandlers’ house, Lutie ultimately rejects the pleasures that her time at home with Bub and Jim offers her in favor of being surrounded by material wealth, just as the Chandlers compensate for familial strife with material comfort.

In contrast to her apartment in Harlem, which she often describes as feeling as though its walls are closing in on her, the wealth and riches that surround her at the Chandlers’ house allow her to dream. In an interview with James W. Ivy, Ann Petry comments on the role of environment in the novel, saying that

she intended to show how “simply and easily the environment can change the course of a person’s life,” echoing Crane’s sentiments in regard to Maggie’s Bowery (48). Petry elevates the power of environment in her novel using personification. At the beginning of the novel, pedestrians of the street are described as trying to avoid the wind’s “violent assault” (1). Lutie herself falls subject to the wind’s attacks as it “touched the back of her neck, explored the side of her head,” and each time she tried to focus and read the sign for her apartment building the wind “pushed it away from her” (2), preventing her from peacefully entering. The predatory nature of the street harasses Lutie so that she is unable to find easily her way to the place where she hopes to build a new life for her and her son. Justly, the importance of the home and domestic space within the American Dream is revealed. For Lutie, her street vividly demonstrates the oppression and limitations of Harlem. Locals cannot even walk down the street without being assaulted, and these constant assaults, the action of being “pushed” around by one’s environment, only emphasizes the residents’ lack of agency. Joy Myree-Mainor claims that the importance of Lutie finding her own apartment so early in the novel is to emphasize Lutie’s “attempt to define her personal physical space” (50). Therefore, while the home is intended to represent a place where individuals can claim their autonomy, this street reminds its residents that they are not afforded any. Thus, in not wanting to leave the Chandlers’ home, Lutie buys into the notion that a greater home equals greater autonomy, a greater illusion of freedom. Just as the melodrama sells a dream in *Maggie*, homes also sell a dream—one of protection and escape.

However, homes are not the only part of *The Street* that works to sell the Dream. Popular entertainment recurs as a powerful presence throughout the novel, creating a disillusionment in Lutie and Bub that is similar to Maggie’s. Once Lutie takes up residence in Harlem with Bub, she lives paycheck-to-paycheck, trying to save for a better apartment. Eager to procure the wealth and ease of life demonstrated by the Chandlers, the allure of the entertainment business begins to alter Lutie’s perception, offering her images of a “shining future” (305). Junto, an old “white gentleman wanting to sleep with a colored girl,” owns various real estate and businesses throughout Harlem (417). However, his Bar and Grill is particularly known amongst the locals for providing “escape” from the street, for “the light

streaming from the windows and the music from its jukebox created an oasis of warmth” (141). Like the rest of the Harlem locals, Lutie is also lured to the Junto Bar and Grill by the escape of music. When Junto and Boots, the leader of a band, hear Lutie singing along to a song on the jukebox, they offer her a job as a singer for Boots’ band. After her first night singing at the club, the excitement of the experience alters her perception of her apartment. The experience “made her stand inside the door for a moment, not seeing the dimly lit hallway, but instead seeing herself and Bub living together in a big roomy place... as she stood there smiling, her face and body glowing with triumph, she looked almost as though she were dancing” (230). As she begins projecting her dreams of wealth and luxury onto her environment, Lutie’s perception becomes eclipsed by the glamour of show business. Not only is she beginning to fantasize about owning a large home of her own, but her triumphant performance on stage, for which she has not yet even been paid, makes her feel triumphant in life. Her performance follows her home as she imagines a spacious place more suitable for “dancing.” That is, the very thought of having a larger domestic space in which to perform leads her to participate in performative actions. In this way, entertainment, specifically the desire to attain the glamour of it and live out her rags-to-riches fantasy, leads to Lutie’s undoing as she trusts two men more interested in possessing her than watching her succeed.

Although the stage serves as Lutie’s escape and vision of a way out, it becomes a tool to further entrap her. Junto instructs the band not to pay Lutie so that she remain financially desperate. After being promised that “she could earn a living by singing,” Lutie, at last, inquires as to when she can expect to begin receiving her salary (304). When she is told that Junto does not think she is ready to start getting paid, Lutie feels worse “than being back where she started because she hadn’t been able to prevent the growth of a bright optimism that had pictured a shining future” (305). Enamored by the glamour and prestige of the entertainment industry, Lutie fantasizes of “moving away from the street,” having a life that enabled her to be home for her son when he returned from school, and being able to afford an apartment where they each had their own room. But upon realizing the financial dependence in which Junto is determined to keep her trapped, those “things [that] had become real to her...were gone” (305).

Lutie begins to realize how the glamour and independence falsely sold by the entertainment business have deluded her.

Lutie's dream of financial security and domestic autonomy crumbles upon realizing her race, gender, and class all prevent her from being taken seriously in the industry. While men like Junto wish to exploit her talent, they have no intention of actually investing in her art, just as the mill-owners in "Life in the Iron Mills" continue to exploit Hugh Wolfe as a millworker, despite the "genius" they see present in his korl woman sculpture (Davis 54). Veblen states that within the "ideal scheme of life" at this time, "it is the office of men to consume what women produce... it is a means to their continued labour, and not a consumption directed to their own comfort and fulness of life" (50). In expecting Lutie to continue to work for him without compensation, Junto shows a lack of concern for her own material comfort and "fulness of life." Likewise, to remind Lutie what little power she has, Junto attempts to possess her by offering to pay her only if she agrees to work as a prostitute for him, destroying the independence she sought in agreeing to work for his band. Vernon E. Lattin expands on this, claiming that both "Lutie and Junto fail to see reality. Lutie cannot escape by believing in the system, and Junto does not realize that Lutie will never be his whore: she has too much self-worth and rebellion within her" (70). Their shared disillusionment is produced by the fantasy of the entertainment business, but due to their differences in gender and race, entertainment sells them very different expectations. Lutie believes working in entertainment is the key to escaping her poverty, whereas Junto believes entertainment is his key to possessing Lutie. However, Lutie is not the only one enticed and fooled by popular entertainment in the novel. Her son, Bub, who loves movies, is fooled into thinking he can also play a part in the Dream.

As Bub is learning to observe his Harlem environment, films serve both as escapism and as models for what Bub could be. However, the threat of Bub becoming a product of his environment and being engrossed by spectatorship is elevated by the way he follows around Jones, relaying the latest movie plot he has seen. All the while Jones, the superintendent of Bub's apartment building, stalks the inside of Lutie's apartment. When Lutie is gone for work and Bub is home alone, Jones decides to go upstairs to the apartment and "look around" to see what "the apartment looked like now that she had been living in

it” (103). Upon entering their apartment, Bub exclaims to Jones, “I been to the movies... You shoulda seen it” (102). Ironically, the plot of this film is centered on the American Dream. It follows a man who goes “out to the West” to become a lawyer (102). Post-World War II, the West was quickly transforming into a separate ideal of the American Dream. While some were finding joy in the traditional industry and material comforts of the East, many saw the West as a new opportunity for free land, open spaces, and individuality. Bub consumes this narrative in hopes that he, too, will be able to attain such a life. He wants to be a man capable of supplying for himself and his mother, and the films Bub sees continue to fuel his desire to become a hero by selling him an idea of what it means to be a man. After describing the first movie he saw to Jones, Bub tells him that he actually saw two movies, the second about, “Gangsters... A man arrested ’em. He pretended to be one, only he was really a cop” (103). After watching so many movies about lawyers and cops, public figures that often stand as representations of local heroes, Bub begins to wonder what his place is in the Dream. He is desperate to help his mother and initially attempts to supplement their income by shining shoes, but Lutie chastises Bub for shining because she wants better for him. However, as these films sell him an idea of what it means to be a man, a hero, and how to provide, they fool him into thinking that he able to make a difference. Bub’s naivety to the social limitations placed on him by his race and environment also makes him naïve to the exclusivity of the narratives presented on screen.

Bub is unaware that movies of this time, and the institutions like the Motion Picture Production Code that controlled them, ensured that the on-screen narratives worked to sell an American ideal. Such ideals were maintained through the application of strict guidelines, principles filmmakers were required to adhere to, and which were enforced by a censorship board. The Code emphasized moral performances, with the very first principle stating that no “picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin” (2). This principle echoes Franklin’s ideas regarding the importance of moral perfection as one climbs toward capital success. Accordingly, not only was it necessary for these films to be morally uplifting, but they predominantly catered to a white, heteronormative audience. Bub is neither

like the man on screen who makes it West and becomes a lawyer nor like the cop who triumphs over crime and wrongdoing; therefore, his inability to perform in this ideal only makes it harder for him to overcome his environment. As John J. Bukowczyk argues in regards to Western representations on film, the “association of these reinforcing images—mobility and opportunity, homogenization, whiteness, natural beauty, American identity, and the American Dream—bore a more than casual connection to California social realities.” Bukowczyk<sup>7</sup> further articulates that the cultural industries of California like film, television, and music amplified “elements of social mobility, opportunity, and rootlessness to celebrate an image of ... a homogenized Anglo-American identity and unmarked whiteness” (94-95). Bub does not understand the use of cinema to portray the American Dream, let alone an American ideal; therefore, he is easily fooled into thinking the American Dream he sees projected on screen is an aspiration that leaves room for someone like himself to perform. Thus, as he becomes engrossed in the heroic narratives he sees performed on screen, he becomes deaf and blind to the limitations of his location and race, making him susceptible to the predatory nature of his environment.

The danger of Bub’s obsession with cinema narrative and fantasies is elevated through the juxtaposition of Bub’s film spectatorship with Jones’ compulsive spectatorship of Lutie, contributing to the predatory threat of the street on Bub’s own autonomy and his inability to perform within the ideal he wishes. While Bub goes to the movies to be consumed by fantasy, Jones stalks the inside of Lutie’s apartment when she is not home so that he may be consumed by the fantasy of her. While Jones is in the apartment, he fantasizes about what Lutie’s bedroom is like and bets her clothes would be “soft and sweet-smelling” (104). Meanwhile, Jones’ continued examination of Lutie’s environment is accompanied by Bub’s “endless telling of the movie” (104). Bub only stops talking about the movies when Jones finds one of Lutie’s lipsticks left on a table and holds it up to his lips, imagining “the way her mouth would smell and it would feel” (105). However, Bub, sensing the impropriety of Jones’ fixation on this object, snatches the lipstick from Jones in a “swift, instinctive, protective gesture” (105). While this action highlights Bub’s desire to protect his mother, the prolonged juxtaposition of Bub’s storytelling with Jones’ inspection of Lutie’s domestic and private space marks an underlying danger in the inability to

separate reality from fantasy. As Heather Hicks puts it, the “moment in which Bub intercepts the lipstick becomes one of a series in which Petry depicts Bub and the Super as characters who understand one another—who are, in fact, different versions of the same man at different stages of experience” (25). Their different stages of experience, in a very broad sense, can be framed around Bub’s and Jones’ shared loneliness. Jones’ spectatorship is fueled by the “deadly loneliness that ate into him day and night. It was a loneliness born of years of living in basements” (85). Likewise, Bub’s spectatorship of film is fueled by a need to fill the tedious hours his mom spends at work while he is at home alone.

By so closely connecting Bub’s retelling of what he has seen performed in the movies to Jones’ violation of Lutie’s space, Petry highlights the dangers of Bub’s spectatorship—that he will absorb and, in turn, become corrupted by the dominant behaviors of his environment. There is a link created by the masculine, heroic storylines Bub consumes onscreen and the cultural forces that are perpetuated in them: the masculinization of spectatorship. The scopophilia, the pleasure in looking, he enjoys at the movies is mirrored by Jones’ examination of Lutie’s home, thus Bub’s scopophilia risks turning into something more predatory due to the influence of his environment and the susceptibility of his loneliness. While film offers Bub an escape from his loneliness by allowing him to indulge in the inspiring narratives represented on screen, his experience within Harlem and his perception of it are mediated by the spectatorial gaze he is cultivating in interacting with cinematic fantasy and Jones, a man who increasingly functions as Bub’s mentor. Accordingly, Jones, eager to get rid of Bub, takes advantage of Bub’s film-induced disillusionment by convincing him that he can be a hero just like those he observes on-screen by stealing mail “for the police,” which eventually leads to his arrest (299). Thus, Bub’s desperate attempt to provide for his mother by trying to perform like the heroes he sees presented on screen leads him to believe, falsely, that he has a place in the Dream.

Bub’s experience with cinema aligns with the disillusionment shared by Maggie and Lutie, in which the ideal of social mobility is perpetuated and sold within idealistic narratives that hinge upon social compromise and performance. However, the limited access of this Dream is embodied in the subsequent downfall of each protagonist, who find themselves entrapped by the limitations of their environment,

gender, race, and age, and seek entertainment for artistic escape and the affirmation that their work will eventually be rewarded with social advancement and material gain. The melodrama in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* fuels dreams of social mobility and idealistic domesticity within Maggie by presenting a pseudo-narrative of social triumph that represents the Bowery poor. Likewise, due to the influence of the melodramatic mode, Maggie foolishly begins to believe that she can escape her Bowery environment, which serves to exploit and entrap the underprivileged citizens living within it. While the play in *Maggie* presents a commodification of American ideals like social mobility by selling Bowery poor tickets to a faux rags-to-riches narrative representative of their experience at a “reduced rate,” it also reinforces the notion that a woman should rely on a man in attaining such aspects of the Dream.

In *The Street*, entertainment plays a similar role in the downfall of Lutie and her son, Bub. After reading Franklin’s *Autobiography* and absorbing the values, luxury, and ease of life that defined the Chandlers’ lifestyle, Lutie becomes eager to attain such luxury herself. However, Lutie is not the kind of reader for which Franklin’s *Autobiography* is intended. Just as Maggie is fooled by the performance represented on screen, believing such a narrative leaves space for her to perform, Lutie is fooled by Franklin’s narrative and led to believe that following the social performances he prescribes will inevitably lead to her own success. While her Harlem environment actively thwarts her ability to find domestic peace, she finds hope in the glamour of the entertainment industry. However, when her ability to perform within the industry relies on two men who rather possess her than see her succeed, Lutie is reduced to her body and the deceptive veil of glamour is lifted. Consequently, Lutie loses all she holds dear, abandons her imprisoned son, and heads to Chicago in hopes of a fresh start. Likewise, her son, Bub, finds himself enamored by the heroic and idealistic narratives he consumes in film. However, unaware that the narratives on screen are intended to uphold a white homogenized and patriarchal ideal, Bub desires to adapt such performances into his own life, eager to be his mother’s hero. Yet, the danger of compulsively consuming such fantastic, unrealistic narratives is elevated by the juxtaposition of Jones’ compulsive spectatorship of Lutie. In relaying his fantasies to the Super while he stalks his mother, Bub demonstrates a naivety to the obsessive and dangerous habits of his own spectatorship. His desire to mimic the heroes

he sees portrayed on-screen inevitably leads to Bub's own downfall, as his eagerness to perform in this role fools him into thinking he has a part in the American Dream. Thus, while the artistic experiences shared by these characters instill and perpetuate the hope of social mobility and material capital, the subsequent loss of their autonomy at the hands of participating in the idealist performances represented exposes the exclusionary access embedded within the Dream's most fundamental features.

## CHAPTER 4

A DREAM “MISTY AT THE EDGES”: CHALLENGING THE AMERICAN DREAM WITH  
ARTISTIC EXPRESSION AND DEVIANT IDENTITIES IN *THE PRICE OF SALT*

“It was like a dream she looked out on, a scene without color, misty at the edges,” observes Therese as she wakes up one morning in Carol’s house to the sound of a “soft whistle” from outside her window. She looks out her window to find a “long open-topped car in the driveway, and a woman standing in it, whistling” (70). For Therese, a stage designer whose nonconformity and artistic visions are constantly refined to better fit the market of the world around her, this scene contains everything she wants: to be a woman of both wealth and leisure, free to *go* at a moment’s whim, a woman who has attained the American Dream. But the colorlessness of this scene suggests an unconventionality—a dream not fully realized— and just as this scene reflects Therese’s distorted perception of the world around her, so does her work in stage design. Therese’s ambivalence towards the American Dream is manifested in her stage designs, which illustrate her personal conflicts between the American Dream and artistic expression.

As an aspiring set designer, Therese’s stage designs reflect the conflict between artistic expression and the marketplace of American society. While Therese’s artistic vision becomes the aesthetic lens of the narrative, a projection of her identity and aspirations, her vision also constantly clashes with the American marketplace. The American marketplace in which Therese attempts to perform is one aimed at selling traditional ideologies of the American Dream, and it is the conflict between Therese’s identity and the traditional mold of the American Dream that influences her set designs. Therese interacts with varying aspects of the Dream through her encounters with individual characters. While characters such as Mrs. Robichek present a fallen artist and entrepreneur disfigured by an inability to keep up with the demands of the marketplace, others stand as a representation of the promises the American Dream secures under the contingency of social compromise. Through Richard, Therese finds herself on the cusp of attaining the American Dream, but it would mean sacrificing artistic pursuit in the name of conventionality, family, and comfort. Meanwhile, Carol, who, like Richard, has already attained

the Dream, caters to Therese's artistic pursuit. She offers insights into how Therese may be able to refine her own vision to compete better in the American marketplace so that she may find independence.

However, when Carol loses her daughter and American Dream upon the acceptance of her true sexual identity, it is called into question whether the American Dream leaves room for the unconventional person and artist— or even a woman who refuses to cling to a man for success.

The propagation of heteronormative lifestyles was of regular consumption for people in 1950s America. It was often assumed that proper nuclear upbringing required the presence of both a mother and father to maintain the symbolic order of the time. Likewise, failure to maintain such order was believed to lead to sexual abnormalities in children. Leaders in psychiatry, like Doctor Edward Strecker, emphasized traditional values of the nuclear family and heteronormativity, deeming anything that deviated from this convention as “poisonous” and “abnormal.” In 1953, Strecker published an article in *The Evening Star* regarding the effects of poor parenting on “sexual abnormalities” in their children. Strecker claims that leaving “our children a little better off than we are is a cherished part of what we call the American dream,” while positioning “expensive educations, fashionable clothes, [and] fine homes” as notable facets of the Dream parents should aim to offer their children. However, Strecker claims that the pursuit of these objects means nothing without the nuclear example of a “warm, rewarding relationship with a member of the opposite sex. It is the positive barometer of adult happiness. To be able to enjoy it at its best, within the framework of a happy marriage, is a heritage of all parents, rich or poor, can give their children” (7). Published in a Washington D.C. newspaper, and with Strecker's notable affiliation to not just professional psychiatrics but a Philadelphia location (both locales working as cornerstones for the development of the American national identity), this article works as a cultural artifact propagating heteronormative ideologies within American society. While deeming heterosexuality as the “barometer of adult happiness,” Strecker also positions homosexuality as an abnormality and side effect resulting from a lack of proper nuclear representation. Further aligning this representation with other “cherished” aspects of the American Dream, this article positions same-sex love as a deviance that excludes homosexuals from participating in the promises and material successes commonly attributed to the American Dream. Thus,

this article demonstrates the common consumption of propaganda associated with 1950s American culture and aptly demonstrates a common prejudice regarding homosexuality as endangering the social order of American society.

As a character coming to terms with her sexuality and lacking everything from the nuclear family to job security and material comforts, Therese is “abnormal” in multiple ways. Her interactions with various aspects of the American Dream, metonymically characterized by Richard and Carol, continually shape the relationship between her artistic vision and artistic product (her cardboard set designs), thus her coming-of-age journey becomes one hinging upon the hope of social mobility and the choice to either submit to the standards of conventionality or reject it. Through the various tenets and aspirations of the American Dream represented in *The Price of Salt*, Highsmith positions the Dream as an ideal that is sold and marketed en masse to citizens through elements of mass culture like theatre and the home. The limited conditions under which the American Dream is made attainable for deviant women in American 50s society are examined through Therese’s artistic experience. Furthermore, as an essential aspect of the American Dream, Therese’s experiences with social hierarchy also become a prevalent facet of her set designs. As a projection of Therese’s identity, her work in stage design reflects her struggle for social mobility and the attainment of a commodified Dream. Tom Perrin claims that Therese ultimately “accomplishes her dreams through compromise and willingness to subordinate her artistic desires to the demands of the marketplace” (392). However, Perrin fails to address the way such conventions stifle the very individuality of Therese’s designs and identity. While at once being the key to her social and career advancement, the call for refinement of unconventionality suggests an aesthetic indifference afforded to those of higher standing. Therese’s position as a young, white woman of promise presents her externally as a woman capable of attaining such promises for a better life, but her career as a set designer reflects her personal struggle to attain the American Dream as she is forced to construct worlds in which she can perform as her normal self amidst a society which deems her “abnormal.”

The American Dream is a dominant aspect of Therese’s journey from the novel’s opening in Frankenberg’s, the department store where she works. In beginning this narrative in the setting of a

crowded, oversized department store during Christmas, Highsmith puts into focus the capital nature of American society, the commodified focus of a religious holiday, and the classist privileges of being able to participate in this material world. It is at Frankenberg's that Therese's artistic vision is first introduced. She wonders, "What kind of set would one make for a play that took place in a department store?" (2). However, Therese does not dwell on what this set might look like. Instead, after a brief consideration of Richard and the career advancement his friend Phil is willing to help her find, she pivots her focus, articulating how the store represents and "intensifies" all she finds bothersome, had bothered her "as long as she could remember. It was the waste actions, the meaningless chores that seemed to keep her from doing what she wanted to do, might have done... money bags, coat checkings, and time clocks... so that the meaning, the message, the love, or whatever it was that each life contained, never could find its expression" (2-3). Therese perceives the "meaningless waste actions" of the department store as distractions from deeper human connection, meaning, and love, both as an employee and consumer. However, of most importance would be the stifling of self-expression, the inability to express "whatever" meaning each life contained due to the fixation on material fulfillment. They are leading inauthentic lives, out of sync with themselves.

This material-based American Dream is not for Therese. She does not wish to live in an endless cycle of clock-ins and waste actions, wondering if her life will take off—if she will go anywhere. As David M. Potter states, "Everyone is familiar with this burden of lament: American industry has forced the craftsman to abandon his craft, and with it the satisfaction of creative labor, and has reduced him to operating a machine or to performing a single operation... as if he were a machine himself" (71). The meaningless cycle of working just to get by, Benjamin Franklin's "time is money" mentality of the American Dream and society, suppresses artistic expression and individuality, something Therese already recognizes as taking a personal toll. Therese "would wonder... just how she happened to land here—she had answered an ad, of course, but that didn't explain fate—and what was coming next instead of a stage designing job. Her life was a series of zig zags" (3). As a struggling artist forced to work in a department store, Therese is unnerved by her lack of progress, particularly as it fails to nurture any skillset: "There

was no need for salesmanship. People wanted a doll, any doll, to give for Christmas. It was a matter of stooping, of pulling out boxes” (7). Not only is Therese’s artistic vision suppressed, but her job has reduced her to machine-like tasks.

Therese extends this social dilemma through the image of a lonely train that was “on a table by itself” in the store, noting that although “it was not a big fine train” like the one in the toy department, it had a “fury in its tiny pumping pistons” (5). She would watch the train whose “wrath and frustration on the closed oval track held Therese spellbound.” Through the train, she could see a “frenzied and futile pursuit of a tyrannical master. It drew three pullman cars in which minuscule human figures showed flinty profiles in the window... It was like something gone mad in imprisonment, something already dead that would never wear out” (5-6). This image echoes Richard Yarborough’s thoughts on “the predominant reactions evoked by the failure of the Dream: the cynical acceptance of defeat; explosive rage and then despair; and, finally, the desperate hope that something of the American Dream can be salvaged” (35). To Therese, this train amplifies those qualities that bother her about the department store: dead, cyclical, waste actions—the constraining ideologies of 50s American society. Just like the “minuscule human figures” on the train, Therese feels inescapably small.

The store also highlights the classist nature of the Dream through the competition of buyers and Mrs. Robichek. Therese offers a scene that describes the wealthy women in “mink and sable, who were generally the most arrogant, who hastily bought the biggest and most expensive dolls” in contrast to “the poor people, who waited their turn and asked quietly how much a certain doll cost and shook their heads regretfully and turned away” (7). Through her interactions with capital and the various classes which circulate Frankenberg’s, Therese begins her journey towards the American Dream, immediately recognizing the class privilege that comes with its attainability. As an artist, and therefore someone with a specialized skillset working a job that seems to require no skill, and as someone from a lower class who seems to see herself as above this lifestyle, Therese’s artistic vision begins to be shaped by her interactions with the Dream.

She begins to see just how hard it is to rise through her interactions with Mrs. Robichek. Before working at Frankenberg's, Mrs. Robichek was a dressmaker selling and creating archetypal feminine clothing of the time. She was an artist in control of her product market. After Mrs. Robichek invites Therese to have dinner with her at her home, she informs Therese that she used to have her own dress shop in Queens, a shop in which she sold the signature Caterina dress of the later 40s and early 50s: "You know, the dresses with V at the waist and the little buttons running up" (9). The Caterina dress was a style featured in popular women magazines of the time such as *Mademoiselle* and *Vogue*. Mrs. Robichek claims that she made the dresses and "[o]ther stores copied" (10). With the increasing popularity of the style, Mrs. Robichek's designs should have helped her maintain relevance and success in the marketplace, thus allowing her to continue climbing the social ladder. However, Mrs. Robichek is an artist lost to capitalist exhaust. Eventually, one of her eyes would go blind along with an onset of Glaucoma, which "still gave her pain. That and her back. And her feet. Bunions" (10). The onset of disabilities Mrs. Robichek endures prevents her from competing in the American marketplace, and without a family or money to fall back on, Mrs. Robichek is no longer able to pursue her artistic craft. When Therese realizes that Mrs. Robichek's intention of relaying these troubles was so that Therese, a fellow artist, "would understand why she had sunk so low as to work in a department store" for the past four years (11), Therese's true angst regarding her work at Frankenberg's comes to fruition: an artist alone and worn out by the American marketplace.

However, this is not where the similarities between Therese and Mrs. Robichek end. As a pair of artists "sunk so low" to be working at a department store, the result of losing touch with artistic endeavor becomes embodied in the image of Mrs. Robichek's lonely home. Therese notices that Mrs. Robichek's house is like the one she lives in, "only brownstone and much darker and gloomier. There were no lights at all in the halls... [and] the house was not very clean." Noticing the bed was unmade, Therese wonders if Mrs. Robichek would wake up "as tired as she went to bed" (9). As an artist without a family, living in a run-down home, and worn out by the American marketplace, Therese is startled by the reflection of what could easily become her future if she fails to perform in the Dream. After suddenly feeling strangled

by one of Mrs. Robichek's dresses Therese tried on, she sees Mrs. Robichek and her apartment as a "horrible dream she had just realized she was dreaming" (11), but "it was the hopelessness that terrified her and nothing else" (12). Therese sees Mrs. Robichek's dresses as beautiful, and she is even tempted to kiss her own reflection while looking at herself wearing it in the mirror. However, she rejects the dress, ultimately rejecting the ideal standard of femininity it represents, but also coming to the cruel realization that even the production of a beautiful, conventional work of art made by someone with a specialized skill, could still be lost to the American marketplace.

It is in this interaction with someone who has fallen short of the Dream, and who thus bears striking resemblance to Therese's own fears, that Therese's artistic vision begins to manifest in the world around her. While startled by the hopelessness feeding on Mrs. Robichek, Therese realized her mind "was at a distant point, at a vortex that opened on the scene in the dimly lighted, terrifying room" (12). Therese is terrified of becoming Mrs. Robichek, a woman working desperately in her craft, hoping to achieve artistic appreciation, yet stymied by the repercussions of class indifference and disfigured by her attempts to compete in the American market. The idea of this vortex opening onto a scene is the language of Therese's craft. The series of zigzags that has been Therese's life up to this point now threatens to transform into a vortex capable of consuming her hopes and identity. Through Mrs. Robichek, Therese has been offered a glimpse of her possible future—one she rejects along with the beautiful dress Mrs. Robichek offers her.

While her experience with Mrs. Robichek gives Therese a glimpse into the world of an artist struggling to compete in a consumerist society—and thus what failure to attain the American Dream looks like if one is unable to endure the "arena" that comes with it—her relationship with Richard can provide Therese with access to all aspects of the Dream. One of the first mentions of Richard is in tandem with the reference to his friend Phil McElroy, who works at a stock company and who is interested in helping Therese find a job in stage design. When Phil finally arrives in town, he comes ready to offer Therese a "real job" in the Village, her first opportunity for such experience since a two-day job in Montclair making a cardboard model for an "amateur group" (15). After Phil helps Therese secure the job

at the theatre, she begins to see opportunities opening around her, bringing her closer to Richard: “if the job were real, the play a success, and she could go to France with at least a single achievement behind her—Suddenly, Therese reached out for Richard’s arm, slid her hand down it to his fingers” (23). Richard is so surprised by the performance of this intimate action that he stops “in the middle of a sentence.”

Likewise, as her relationship with Richard continues to open doors for her, Therese is drawn closer to him. This perpetuates heteronormative ideals regarding the American Dream and even the nuclear family by suggesting that Therese needs the help of a man to succeed in her chosen field.

However, the aspects of the Dream Richard is capable of offering Therese do not stop at career advancement; Richard is also capable of giving Therese all that she lacked: security and peace attained through domestic space and a family large enough to fill that space. When Carol asks what Therese likes about Richard, she responds that along with appreciating the way Richard treats her like a person rather than “just a girl he can go so far with,” she also likes his family: “the fact that he has a family” (66). As a child, Therese lacked any semblance of family, financial security, and most notably maternal love. Forced into an orphanage after being rejected by her mother, Therese finds herself equally enthralled and humbled by Richard’s security and familial love. While at Richard’s family home for Christmas, Therese is spoiled. Richard gives her a skirt with “green and gold bands and embroidery” that she finds lovely, although she cannot imagine ever having an occasion to wear it (77). The details embroidered into the skirt suggest that Therese will never have a place to wear the skirt because she will never marry the man who has given it to her. While the green on the skirt symbolizes peace, financial security, and happiness, the gold bands symbolize marriage, the very thing needed to help Therese attain financial security and happiness. The intent of marriage that the skirt then symbolizes is precisely why Therese will never be able to wear it. To have an occasion for wearing the skirt, she would need gold bands, which would require her to “embroider” her life into something different than it is, into something that can fit Richard’s world. This idea is extended through the desire of Richard’s mother to make a handmade dress for Therese, suggesting there is a role Therese is intended to play, an ideal she is intended to fit into. Thus,

though Therese is drawn to the security and warmth of Richard's home, she ultimately rejects it, in part motivated by their differences in artistic experience.

The difference in artistic approaches between Therese and Richard's family elevates the ongoing conflicts between the American Dream and aesthetic experience in the novel. Though Richard's mother desires to make Therese a handmade dress, she consistently attempts to avoid this gift, ultimately refusing the standard of femininity it signifies, similarly to how the gift of Franklin's bust incites a standard of social performance. Furthermore, Therese refuses to accept a work of art that has been reduced to hobby; since Therese's art is not only the basis of her livelihood, but a manifestation of her experience, she does not want to accept a work of art that is made with spare time and given with expectation. While Mrs. Robichek is an artist whose life depends on her craft, even crippled and blinded in pursuit of it, Richard's mother does not rely on dress-making for income; it is a pastime afforded by her class. Accordingly, the aesthetic indifference of Richard's mother appears in Richard as well, whose lack of seriousness regarding his craft frustrates Therese. When at Richard's home for Christmas, she notes that painting only "took up a corner of his brain" (77), echoing her earlier sentiment that he wasn't "sincere in his ambition to be a painter" (66). While Therese informs us that Richard initially took up painting while in the Navy, suggesting the desire for artistic escape amid chaos, she notes that although Richard was good at painting when he first started, he was not good at life drawing and "doubted he ever would be," suggesting that he will not ever be a serious artist in life. Richard's inability to "life draw" metaphorically suggests that he is unable to faithfully portray real life due to his narrow perception. However, if he didn't "prove to his family that he was making some progress in his painting, he would probably have to go into his father's bottled gas business this summer" (17). Because he has the security granted from his father's bottled gas company, Richard is unmotivated, preventing him from being able to draw on life in his art, and therefore unable to portray life authentically. Therese even wonders how much longer Richard would go on painting before giving it up completely, although she often wonders "if Richard liked her only because she was sympathetic with his ambitions... and because he felt her criticism was helpful to him" (77). Still, Therese is certain that Richard will drop painting, just as he dropped "everything else [he] ever started"

(132). His indifference to losing jobs and his dilettantish attitude toward painting suggest that his artistic endeavor is merely a pastime, providing a way of prolonging boyhood, knowing that what he “ought to be doing and what [he’ll] finally be doing” is working for his father (132). This becomes an issue for Therese who sees art as a mode of expression for “whatever meaning each life contained” (3). While Therese relies on art to express her experience as a deviant of social norms, Richard’s narrow perception of life and the security he is granted by the circumstances of his family prevents him from finding authentic expression. Since Therese relies on art to live authentically, she is unable to accept such a valuable mode of expression being reduced to hobby.

Their conflict between art and craftsmanship comes to a head when Richard cuts the string to a kite he built to surprise Therese. Therese suspects that Richard built the kite the night before when she was staying at Carol’s, the night before she woke to the dream outside her window, the “scene without color, misty at the edges” (70). Nevertheless, she is excited to fly the kite and they take turns steering. However, as the kite is in the air, Therese feels as if “the kite meant something,” and as she begins questioning Richard on his experiences with love, the kite becomes a symbol of love—a love out of reach. It is when this kite is in the air that Therese truly begins exploring her sexuality within a social context. However, when she asks Richard if he has ever heard of two boys being in love, he claims that for “people like that... those things don’t just happen. There’s always some reason for it in the background” (81). Richard’s sentiment regarding same-sex love echoes many of the beliefs promulgated by leaders such as Dr. Strecker in the 50s. Meanwhile, the metaphorical significance of Richard cutting the kite despite Therese begging him not to becomes two-fold. On one hand, as the kite takes flight, so does Therese’s sexuality. As she watches the kite and thinks that it must mean something, she simultaneously begins entertaining the idea of homosexuality, suggested through her interrogation of social perceptions through Richard. On the other hand, Richard has taken this physical gesture of love and craftsmanship and literally cuts it loose, suggesting that he does not take his craft or his relationship with Therese seriously.

With Richard, Therese would be able to achieve the American Dream and all its aspects: the nuclear family, social mobility, money, and material luxury. However, all this is only if she can commit to him and conform to a conventional mold. Likewise, although she admits to wanting and admiring these aspects of the Dream that Richard can provide for her, she becomes aware, through an acceptance of her sexuality, that she does not fit the mold sculpted for her by American society.

While Therese is unable to compromise her identity for the sake of Richard, she is willing to refine her set designs in the name of career advancement, in hopes that such refinement will allow her to attain the Dream without sacrificing her identity. Therese is devoted to her career; however, her job also affects the way Therese sees the world around her, including Carol, as the artistic vision is one that surpasses the walls of the workplace or a cardboard figure. Carol's influence on Therese's artistic vision begins as soon as they meet, as Therese begins sketching Carol's figure. When Therese initially sees Carol, she describes her as a whole person, as if she were an actor on the stage, noting how she is "tall and fair, her long figure graceful in the loose fur coat that she held open with a hand on her waist" (27). Carol becomes both dynamic, and whole, as Therese focuses on her entire, sketched figure. It is this artistic vision, this skillset at life drawing, that enables Therese to interact with Carol. Lizebette Occasion-Russe asserts that while "Therese does not boast the same amount of cultural capital as Carol; she is afforded some cultural capital through her education and artistic abilities" (38). Thus, "Therese's otherwise low-brow character [is given] a bit of an edge that would land her in the middle-brow category," facilitating the interactions between Therese and Carol. Frankly put, "accessing the high-brow is more easily accomplished from the middle" (38). Occasion-Russe's alignment of Therese's artistic aptitude with a kind of social fluidity that allows her to interact more closely with highbrow societies speaks to classicist and commodified features of the aesthetic experience and is furthered by Carol's recommendations for refinement. The significance of Therese's artistic vision regarding the world around her becomes strikingly clear after her first introduction to Carol, who represents the promises and security that attainment of the American Dream secures for women.

Soon after their first meeting at Frankenburg's, Therese drafts a Christmas letter to Carol in which she tells her that she is "magnificent" and she loves her. However, Therese, concerned that the letter would be inappropriate, decides not to send it. Thus, when the ability to openly express herself with words fails her, she looks to art to express it for her. As she walks home from Frankenburg's, "an idea came to her for a stage set, a house interior with more depth than breadth, with a kind of vortex down the center, from which rooms would go off on either side. She wanted to begin the cardboard model that night" (31). Not only has her introduction to Carol already begun to influence her craft, but also launches Therese into her first time actively creating a set within the novel. As her sexual orientation becomes an increasingly relevant aspect of Therese's unconventionality, her set designs become manifestations of her inability to fit with American society. The vortex present in her set becomes highly suggestive of the ways Therese will find herself sucked into the vortex of her relationship with Carol, as she struggles to find a balance between her view of art as a mode for self-expression and the need to please the marketplace. Likewise, as this set inspiration comes just after Therese's decision not to send the letter professing her love to Carol, it also speaks to Therese's need to construct an artificial world in order to perform as her authentic self. Her set manifests the words she cannot say to Carol.

That Therese uses her stage designs to construct a world in which she is more capable of performing is reinforced through the immediate rejection of Therese's set by Mr. Donohue. Therese's original set for the play included a movable section that permitted the living room scene to be converted into the terrace scene. This accentuates Therese's desire to move between worlds. The fluidity of Therese's character, her uncertainty regarding what she will become in this world, is elevated through the fluidity of her set design. Therese wants to take a conventional setting like a living room and physically open it up onto an open space, bringing to it a new view and world. However, Mr. Donohue "seemed adamant against anything unusual or even simple" (94) and reminds Therese that a "set needs to grow out of the needs of the actors" (95). While Mr. Donohue is specifically referring to the needs of this particular play, reminding Therese that it isn't a "ballet," this quip also suggests that Therese is unable to create a world suitable for these actors because she is still uncertain about the world in which she wants to live.

Eventually, Therese will need to construct her own world, one in which she can perform as herself, but she is unaware of what that looks like. Meanwhile, Mr. Donohue wishes for her to embroider her current set and add décor. When Therese refines her set, it “indicated a fireplace, broad French windows giving onto a terrace, two doors, a sofa, and a couple of armchairs and a bookcase. It would look, when finished, like a room in a model house at Sloan’s<sup>8</sup>, lifelike down to the last ashtray” (94). Regarding the new set, Mr. Donohue says, “I like this very much. You see how much better this is than those empty walls you had before, don’t you?” (95). The walls for the previous set appeared empty because Therese does not know what to project onto them. As someone not typically represented in art, Therese does not know who she is or how she is meant to perform. Likewise, the bare walls present a set that seems incomplete because her identity is incomplete; she does not know who she is within her set or how to embroider her life into it. Furthermore, the contradiction between Mr. Donohue’s desire to portray a “lifelike” home and the subsequent success of Therese’s design that resembles model homes featured at Sloan’s<sup>1</sup> speaks to another classist experience with art. A home featuring broad French windows giving onto a terrace with a fireplace and covered walls is not at all the average “lifelike” home, but a dream home. The rejection of Therese’s original set in favor of a more luxurious depiction speaks to the commodified nature of the American Dream in theatre: that there is a standard for what is worthy of being sold to audiences.

This complicates Therese’s interaction with the Dream. While stage designs are a projection of her unconventionality and individuality, an artistic freedom afforded by amateurism, her job requires her designs to fit into a mold marketable to an American audience. In 1964, Marshall W. Fishwick discussed a conflict regarding the role of contemporary American theatre in either presenting “the rational world of our eighteenth-century forefathers” or “reveal[ing] a world that has gone mad” (3). He asserts that the problem facing the current generation of Americans “is to maintain the viability of their ideology in the midst of a dynamic, complex world” (29). Since Therese is unable to perform within the ideal world Mr. Donohue wishes to present on stage, her set walls are empty, reflecting her struggles to represent her own complex world within the ideological standards of her society.

Therese's growing awareness of her unconventional sexuality enhances her artistic vision. After spending an intimate evening with Carol, Therese's craft becomes attuned to the awakening of her sexual identity: "and all she saw, she seemed to see through Carol. She flung herself on her bed and drew a line with a pencil on a piece of paper. And another line, carefully, and another. A world was born around her, like a bright forest with a million shimmering leaves" (59). A fantasy begins to take over Therese's perspective. As her craft further becomes a projection of her desire, it emphasizes how her perception of the world is affected by the growth of her sexual identity. Paul Stenner and Tania Zittoun claim that when it comes to art and the imagination, "human development is not just a matter of a world expanding in time... but also of the capacity to move between the multiple worlds at play in any complex human society" (242). Therese's unconventional sets reflect her struggle to assimilate in a world in which her sexual identity is not only viewed as abnormal but as a dangerous mental illness. Thus, creating sets that seem normal to her, but unconventional to high society, and then refining their unconventionality, shows Therese's attempts to move between multiple worlds—one in which she is able to attain the Dream and one in which she is able to perform as her authentic self.

However, this attention to Carol as a muse also underscores the understanding that Therese must construct a world of her own if she is to live out her fantasy of being with Carol, conflicting with the normative American Dream that Therese is so close to attaining through Richard. If, as Fishwick claims, theatre is a tug-of-war between "reveal[ing] a world gone mad" and portraying ideology, then the production of theatre itself becomes a process inseparable from its social context, making the job of designing a set for that production a series of social compromises. Dilnot Clive claims that "the most significant aspect about design is that it is produced, received and used within an emphatically social context. The social is not external to the activity, but internal to it and determining of its essential features" (14). However, as Therese's unconventional sets continue to be rejected by highbrow society, it is unclear whether or not, socially, Therese is really in control of determining what "essential features" are marketed to the audiences viewing her sets. Based on Mr. Donohue's preferences, the play is intended to present the essential features of a Dream attained, suggested through the representation of a luxurious

home. However, this standard conflicts with Therese's mode for self-expression, as her abnormal sets are manifestations of her struggles to perform within her social context due to her ever-growing infatuation for Carol, who has also already attained the Dream through a series of social compromises, namely her marriage.

Through Carol, Therese gets glimpses into the world of a woman who has attained the American Dream. She has the beautiful home, control of her destiny, and the nuclear family—all aspects of the Dream that Therese desires. When Therese first goes to Carol's house, she spends a lot of time describing its luxurious details. From the moment they arrive at Carol's driveway, Therese describes the "white two-story house that had projecting side wings like the paws of a resting lion" (47). The image of a resting lion's paws suggests a masculine affiliation. While Carol is in possession of the Dream, it is not a dream she secured on her home, rather through her marriage. And although Harge, Carol's husband, is not present in this scene, the presence of his position, of his superiority, is reinforced by the image of the ruling, masculine figure of a lion; thus, the masculine presentation of Carol's home immediately reinforces the nuclear-family ideology both Carol and Therese struggle to reconcile with their sexual identities. Likewise, Therese's continued observations of the home continue to pull focus on the nuclear presence the home is intended to cater to.

Therese continues to observe the house as Carol leads her upstairs. She notices "an oil painting" of Carol's daughter, a garden featuring winding paths and a fountain, while the upstairs featured a "short hall with four or five rooms around it" before finally settling in a green room, where Therese typically rests while visiting Carol. The numerous bedrooms and extended gardens suggest this house is intended to cater to a large singly family. Accordingly, while Carol's car also suggests the attainment of freedom and autonomy, the most important part of the Dream to Carol is the nuclear family, highlighted through the oil portrait of her daughter on the wall. After Carol tells Therese of her divorce, she mentions that she wanted "two or three children" but figured she and Harge should stop out of fear that their "marriage was on the rocks anyway, even with Rindy" (67). The promise of the nuclear family securing domestic health and peace, a facet of Richard's life that appeals to Therese, is shattered by the revelation that the nuclear

family does not secure domestic bliss. This is furthered by the distorted dreamlike scene Therese experiences the next morning.

While her first visit to Carol's home in the previous chapter prompted the vision of a world featuring a "bright forest with a million shimmering leaves" being born around her, the news of Carol's divorce and the subsequent pressure by Carol to go see Richard (69) prompts a dream featuring a distorted view of a similar image. While Therese sleeps at Carol's that night, Therese dreams of birds "zipping through a black forest" (70). While Therese's fixation on birds suggests a desire to *go*, a black forest suggests a lack of direction that contrasts greatly with the fantasy Carol's house first engendered. This dream suggests that Therese has had a cruel awakening regarding her perception of the world: that while one may choose to submit to their prescribed role within society, such inauthenticity can only be maintained for so long. Although she could commit to Richard like Carol committed to Harge, her inability to fulfill her wifely role threatens the security the Dream promises. This is furthered when moments later, Therese awakes to her dreamlike "scene without color, misty at the edges," as Abby, Carol's unmarried friend, stands outside in the car, whistling (70). While the idea of a woman in control of her life and destination appeals to Therese, the lack of color suggests a Dream distorted. Although Abby and Carol are independent women in control of their lives and identities, the American Dream does not leave room for them to live authentically within the confines of its ideal aspects.

However, Carol is a woman who knows how to perform conventionally; she simply refuses to do so with Harge any longer, opting for authenticity and joint custody of Rindy instead. Because she knows how to perform, Carol is able to help Therese do the same. Carol helps Therese refine her sets to fit better with the American marketplace so that Therese does not have to conform to performative behavior. After helping Carol bring in her lawn furniture one afternoon, Therese mentions that she wishes there were "more plays that happened out of doors," suggesting that the open space of the outdoors is an easier venue to perform in than the confines of a theatre or a typical living area (138). However, when Carol asks Therese if she bases her set designs on "the kind of play it is, or of something she wants to see," Therese accuses Carol of being "determined to consider [her] an amateur" (138). However, Carol claims that it is

the subjectivity of Therese's designs that is truly amateurish, stating that "you have to know a lot to be absolutely subjective... I think you're too subjective—without knowing enough" (139). Here Carol articulates that it is Therese's focus on her personal feelings and tastes that prevent her sets from being well received. Because Therese has had such a limited upbringing and has seen no physical representation of her own sexual identity, Therese has not been afforded the opportunity to find herself within the American landscape, prohibiting her from truthfully portraying her own experience. Carol offers Therese the opportunity to find herself by taking her west; however, despite Carol's recommendations for refinement, Therese manages to find a director pleased by her unconventionality before leaving.

Before heading west, Phil McElroy connects Therese with another director, Mr. Harkevny. Although Mr. Harkevny does not promise Therese a job, he tells her to keep in touch and allows her to present three of her sets for consideration on a play he is going to direct in a few weeks. Therese says that he "looked very carefully at them, dismissed one as dull, pointed out some impracticality in the second, and liked best the hall-like set Therese had started the evening she had come back from the first visit to Carol's house. He was the first person who had ever given her less conventional sets a serious consideration" (145). Presenting her original set design with the vortex down the middle reveals Therese's hope that her identity will eventually be accepted and afforded representation on stage, as she hopes to be in life. Mr. Harkevny's acceptance of Therese's unconventional set shows a determination to represent a "world gone mad," as a vortex down the hallway of a dream-home focused set suggests a madness hidden within the walls of this ideal. Heading West offers Therese the opportunity to escape such madness, and find her place within the American landscape.

Carol and Therese's adventure out west puts brings in competing notions of the American Dream. While dominant representations of the Dream rely on ideals of social mobility, family, and the home, a competing ideal on the rise during the Postwar Era is based on individual identity found through open spaces and journeys to the West. However, their inability to make it all the way to California suggests that even this alternative of the Dream is not so easily accessible to women. As Lindsey Stephens suggests, Carol and Therese could have easily fled to Europe, like Richard wants to do with Therese. However,

their decision to head West suggests “the promise of open space and freedom... but at the same time, they risk becoming hypervisible against the backdrop of the region's hyperheteronormative culture and iconography” (373). With notable iconography like the cowboy, which Beth Loffreda characterizes as “irrefutably the apotheosis of American masculinity in all of its heterosexual splendor” (170), the West has long been associated with the men. David Potter expands on the masculine nature of the West and asserts that “the frontier had been a basic influence in shaping the character of the American people” by “providing economic opportunity in the form of free land” which “made the American economically independent and this independence made him more individualistic<sup>9</sup> and more egalitarian in his attitudes” (67). It is the wide-open spaces of the west that offers Carol and Therese liberation from the rigid heteronormative structures of their society, particularly for Carol whose soon-to-be ex-husband uses their only daughter as a pawn in his attempt to make Carol submit. However, through their encounters in the west, Carol uses this opportunity to train Therese on how to assimilate, how to perform, within the heteronormative, masculine landscape. This performance is elevated through the constant spectatorship inflicted on the couple by the private investigator hired to watch them. Even Carol’s car, a symbol of freedom and autonomy, is trailed on their way to the West. The constant presence of the P.I. forces them to continue their performance, even while in a space with the potential to offer them authenticity.

This performance is reiterated throughout their journey west. While in Waterloo, Therese and Carol walk around town, and at one point, Therese wishes to grab Carol’s hand. Therese “thought of people she had seen holding hands in movies, and why shouldn’t she and Carol?” (166). However, when she tries to take Carol’s arm, Carol murmurs, “Don’t,” preventing Therese from publicly displaying their relationship. Although American films of the time perpetuated heteronormative culture through the nearly exclusive portrayal of heterosexual relationships, Therese still buys into the belief that she and Carol will be able to openly acknowledge their relationship. Therefore, this line offers further insight into what drives Therese’s mock-sets: her desire to create a world in which she can perform authentically. Therese even mentions that being out West made her feel “like an actor, remembered only now and then her identity with a sense of surprise, as if she had been playing in these last days the part of someone else,

someone fabulously and excessively lucky” (174). Through the extension of her acting metaphor, Therese’s artistic vision continues to be augmented to match the Dream, despite not actively working on a set. While this instance she feels like an actor instead of a designer, this sentiment echoes Mr. Donohue’s earlier advice to Therese, that a set needs to “grow out of the needs of the actors” (95). The open-space landscape of the West offers Therese the set she needs to live authentically, but her awareness of the temporariness of her placement reminds her that this performance is also temporary, and it is further cut short when Carol receives word that Harge is filing for sole custody.

Therese and Carol never make it all the way to the West Coast. Just as the open space Therese longs for offers her the ability to perform as herself, as Stephens suggests, it also compromises their ability to perform authentically, as such a masculine landscape places these women in a position of hypervisibility. This hypervisibility backfires when the private investigator hired by Harge catches Therese and Carol having an affair, spurring Carol to rush home and fight for custody of her daughter. Now that her “fantasy” set has been collapsed, Therese must begin building her new one—one in which she is undoubtedly aware of her deviance—and thus, decide how to perform in the final act.

When Carol heads back to New York, she leaves Therese with the car, putting her in control of her future and destination. Not surprisingly, Therese doesn’t stay in the open space of the West for long, finding more possibilities for herself in cities. Expanding on his assessment of Western appeal, Potter states that the representational flaw of opportunity and identity regarding the West lies within its generalization concerning the economic opportunities afforded to women. Potter claims that women were only afforded some of the social benefits the West had to offer, primarily gained through the “opportunities available to their men” (68). On the contrary, Potter suggests that for women, as individuals, “opportunity began pretty much where the frontier left off. For opportunity lay in access to independent employment, and the employments of the frontier were not primarily accessible to women, [rather] in the growing cities” (69). Fittingly, Therese takes a job in Chicago working as a receptionist-filing clerk to earn some money before taking a general office job at a lumber yard. Although neither job

is the right fit for her, they afford her the pride that comes with financial independence and the confidence to return to New York and “look up some of the people she had run away from” (234).

Upon her return to New York, as a woman in control of her life and with work experience behind her, Therese finally feels assimilated into the culture. While standing outside a drug store, she recalls walking down “a certain street in the West Eighties once, the brownstone fronts, overlaid and overlaid with humanity, human lives, some beginning and some ending there, and she remembered the sense of oppression it had given her... Now that same kind of street filled her with tense excitement” (237). Now with life experience, Therese is no longer scared; no dark forests blur her future paths. She, at last, feels capable of competing in the American marketplace, able to attain the American Dream on her own terms. However, whether or not Therese is truly capable of performing authentically and of attaining the Dream at the same time is left unclear when she rejects the artistic crowd that welcomes her unconventionality. Instead, she chooses Carol.

Therese’s ultimate conflict has been a struggle to have her craft taken seriously within the marketplace of American theatre. Influenced by both Carol and directors like Mr. Donohue, she compromises her artistic approach to conform to the American ideal. Upon her reacquaintance with Mr. Harkevy, Therese is finally afforded a place within the American theatre, one in which her subjectivity, the representation of her personal experience, is welcomed and admired by a group of fellow artists. Yet, she rejects this crowd in place of Carol, well aware of what Carol has lost at the cost of her sexuality—her home, daughter, and financial security.

Therese’s work in set design ultimately reflects her rejection of American 50s society, which would demand she compromise her authentic self for the fleeting promises of the American Dream, which positions its desired aspects as only accessible through submission to heteronormative ideals. Therese interacts with varying aspects of the American Dream through her dealings with class hierarchies and artistic pursuit throughout *The Price of Salt*. These interactions represent competing perceptions of the Dream: one dominant Dream centered on conventionality and capital, and a Dream in development focused on freedom, liberation, and the quest for individual identity. While both perceptions share the

common aspect of social mobility, Carol's loss of her daughter and material capital due to her sexuality undermines the ideal of "equal opportunity" embedded in the American Dream. Furthermore, while Therese, at last, manages to get a job in set design that does not require her to alter her unconventional designs, Therese ultimately rejects the artistic culture that welcomes her in order to be with Carol, in order to be herself.

## CONCLUSION

The American Dream has been engrained within American ideology since the formation of American culture. An early articulation of the Dream's foundational ideals was put forth by Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography*. His "How to Succeed" narrative stressed the importance of perseverance and moral perfection in capital growth, and aligned with it the basic practices of industry and frugality, rewarded with social advancement. While the term itself would not be coined until James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America*, in which he defined the Dream on the basis of "opportunity for each according to ability or achievement," he, too, positions the Dream as something to "attain," and, like Franklin, considers it a universal aspiration, attainable for everyone regardless of "circumstance of birth" (404). However, while Adams defines what Franklin demonstrated in his own journey of social mobility, both parties neglect consideration of an American future in which independent women, immigrants, people of color, and various marginalized groups will also attempt to pursue the promise of the American Dream. While they promise a Dream universally attainable, they fail to consider the social obstacles faced by the marginalized, and the disillusionment caused by aspiring to attain a Dream of which their social positions exclude them from attaining. Characters like Hugh Wolfe, Lutie Johnson, and Therese Belivet demonstrate the marginal access to social mobility. Despite the unique talents "of which they are uniquely capable," they are dismissed by investors, revealing the limited attainability of advancement when without the privilege of community support and patronage (Adams 404). Furthermore, the perpetuation of this ideal through artistic modes, such as the literary form, positions the Dream as an ideal sold and marketed to citizens en masse, despite individual ability to attain it.

The propagation of the Dream's most essential ideals continues to be sold en masse through art, entertainment, and media. The core aspects of the American Dream have been defined in terms of financial security, domestic space, individual autonomy, the nuclear family, and, of most importance, social mobility. Even in a contemporary setting, Samuel R. Lawrence argues that while the American nation remains a "marketplace of competing interpretations and visions" of the Dream (2), its core remains in the "ideal of equal opportunity" (3). However, understanding the nation as a "marketplace" for

these ideals is essential in understanding not only the evolution of the Dream but in understanding the effects of this promise on underprivileged groups, who, although internalize such promises through art and popular culture, find their attempts to attain it stymied by the uncontrollable forces that entrap them. Today, these ideals continue to be capitalized on in the American marketplace. While realtor companies rely on the Dream to elevate the desire for grand and expensive homes, the material economy leans into Veblen's "conspicuous consumption" by positioning the successful attainment of the Dream as something to be publicized.

With a larger focus on material capital, access to the Dream and its attendant features become progressively more narrow, gradually more exclusive, yet continues to be represented in common modes of cultural seeing, like art. If we understand American literature in the same way we understand the American writer, whose originating role Anne Farmer Meservey positions as an "analyst, a recorder of social and psychological life," then American literature serves as a cultural artifact, a reference point for conveying the psychological and social effects of overlooked cultural difference, particularly as it applies to the perpetuation of a cultural promise based on social mobility, but recognized by monetary success (73). However, John Berger claims that we are in a "language of images" (33), attesting that "every image embodies a way of seeing" and the more imaginative the work, the more "it allows us to share the artist's experience" (10). Rebecca Harding Davis, Stephen Crane, Ann Petry, and Patricia Highsmith anticipate this "language of images" by combining the artistic and analytical form of literature with artistic experience to convey the inequity of a cultural Dream becoming increasingly materialized. Thus, as a mode of manifesting "experience," as Berger suggests, the artistic representation of one's subjective experience, and the subsequent internalization of that art by individuals, also bears larger cultural reflections. It is through this "language of images" that the characters of Davis' "Life in the Iron Mills," Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Petry's *The Street*, and Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* interact. These interactions culminate in their artistic experiences. For the underrepresented artist, it is a conflict between representing one's true experience, or attempting to regulate the representation of that experience to better fit the American market. For the seer, artistic experience becomes a demonstration of the

American Dream's exclusionary aspects through their inability to adapt the ideologies and fantasies they see represented through art into their realities.

Certainly, at its core, the American Dream still maintains the same freedoms and values upon which it was founded, but those freedoms are now represented as something we can buy, and rather than value being placed on moral principle, integrity, or autonomy, the value has become a price tag placed on the Dream itself and the American performance it entails. The marginal access that derives from this commodification reinforces a ladder-like hierarchal system in which those at the bottom helplessly compete for access to the top. In hopes that accessing the top will offer them personalized freedom and the ability to prosper as they choose, the disenfranchised adopt the standard of performance they see perpetuated in art by the ruling classes in hopes that it will procure their sponsorship. Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" demonstrates the flaw in the ideal of equal opportunity by presenting a broken-ladder system. Despite the latent "genius" (59) that is recognized by the "mysterious" (49) upper class in Hugh's sculpture, they dismiss investing in his craft, claiming that if his talents were truly remarkable, he could access social advancement on his own. Realizing that money is both the desired outcome of social mobility and the very thing needed to attain it, Hugh kills himself, refusing to remain a cog in their machine any longer.

The exclusionary access of the Dream is reinforced by the tragic endings met by Maggie, Lutie, and Bub. As each character finds themselves entrapped by the limitations of their environments, gender, race, and age, they seek artistic escape through entertainment. In consuming the grand narratives they see depicted, they begin to fantasize about a world in which they are able to perform within the roles they see represented, hoping their dedication will eventually be rewarded with social advancement and material gain. However, they find their pursuit of the Dream fruitless, and, as a result, their own narratives end in death, imprisonment, or the loss of all they hold dear. Meanwhile, *The Price of Salt* challenges common ideologies associated with the American Dream through an artist's attempt to reform her craft. However, when Therese's artistic experience becomes increasingly synced with her sexuality, the novel questions the validity of a Dream that relies on social compromise.

The tragic endings endured by the characters discussed in this essay demonstrate the flaw in the universal ideal of the American Dream. When represented as a universal aspiration, the Dream's most foundational features exhibits a discrepancy in sociological consideration, in which underprivileged groups, by their lack of financial and individual autonomy, find their pursuit of the Dream futile. As media and material comforts continue to define and perpetuate standards of ideal living, the commodification of the American Dream will undoubtedly continue. However, a Dream recognized on the basis of one's projection of success cannot be a Dream of equal opportunity. Conversely, if the American Dream is reframed as a defining American mythology, rather than a promised result of perseverance and strong work ethic, it can remain a cultural aspiration without compromising the authenticity of its adherents, or discounting the underprivileged experiences of its most desirous citizens.

## NOTES

1. 3.1 million out of the nation's four million slaves were freed as a result of the Emancipation Proclamation. In the 1890s, the time *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* takes place, over 20 million immigrants migrated to the U.S. That is over 23 million minority people who would eventually seek out the American Dream, none of whom are acknowledged by Franklin.
2. An article featured in a 1952 historical Atlanta newspaper offered a brief description of the aspects commonly associated with a Post-War American "dream-house." The house layout featured in the article includes aspects such as large walk-in closets, a breakfast nook and bar that was separate from the dining room, a separate family and living room, and a foyer (entry hall). Alongside this article was another article regarding the home, featuring the tagline: "House Buyers More Particular About... Outdoor Areas" (13D). In aligning these two articles, the American dream-home is understood to surpass mere internal space and extend to outdoor areas. The American dream-home comes with a yard—with land. The importance of the yard within domestic space elevates Kenneth Jackson's notion that the home projects "an image of success and affluence," while this article itself serves as an artifactual reference for understanding where the Realtor.com "dream home" standard derives.
3. When visiting members of the upper class are touring the mill, one comments to the millowner: "If it were not that you must have heard it so often, Kirby, I would tell you that your works look like Dante's *Inferno*" (50).
4. Although not a focus of my thesis, critics have also posited education as another aspect of the American Dream. Lawrence R. Samuel not only claims that education participates in the nation's "marketplace" of the American Dream but also suggests that a citizen's "right to an education" is an equally notable component to that of a "citizen's right to vote" (14). Edward Cahill argues that the widespread growth of education alongside "large governments, substantial estates, and commercial houses" led to the creation of a "burgeoning professional class" that supported the "interests of the elite," creating an ideal of social mobility that "sometimes functioned as a

sponsored mobility” in which youth were “selected for advancement at an early age” (547). The idea of being “selected” for advancement is interesting when considering the rejected investment in Hugh Wolfe’s advancement. Furthermore, Dr. Edward A. Strecker claims that the desire to give our children access to “expensive educations, fashionable clothes, [and] fine homes” are all cherished parts of the American Dream (7). That Dr. May would consider investing in Hugh Wolfe’s education if he had enough money suggests that he also understands education to be a notable aspect of American cultural assimilation, and essential to upward mobility.

5. The idea of equal treatment for all would be relatively fresh in the mind of readers as Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* would have appeared in 1848, just thirteen years before the publication of “Life in the Iron Mills.”
6. Mr. Chandler’s brother kills himself because he is having an affair with Mrs. Chandler. The Chandlers decide to cover up the suicide by claiming the gun went off by accident. Recalling Tim Stanley’s claim that the nuclear family was grounded in a capitalist “self-reliance, freedom of religion and a degree of material comfort unparalleled in US history” (11-12), this event not only represents a destruction of the nuclear family, but the emptiness of a material-based dream, and the impending resistance to it.
7. In support of the white homogenization that engrossed California culture, Bukowczyk offers many examples of movie stars of ethnic or immigrant decent that had to change their names in order to be marketable to American audiences. On this list, he includes stars with their original names: Natalie Wood (Natalia Nikolaevna Zacharenko), Rock Hudson (Roy Harold Fitzgerald, formerly Scherer), Kirk Douglas (Issur Danielovitch), and Tony Curtis (Bernard Shwartz) are a few of the many stars Bukowczyk mentions.
8. W. & J. Sloane was a popular luxury furniture store in New York City that catered to the prominent and wealthy. Before going bankrupt in 1985, the store was known for decorating homes for the country’s most elite people, including the White House, Rockefellers, and Vanderbilt families. Although the store Therese references is spelled slightly differently, the

shared locale of Therese's narrative with this historic furniture store and the similarity in names creates a subtle reference that would likely be familiar to a 1950s audience.

9. Potter's assessment regarding the appeal of the Western frontier echoes an ad for America's West Coast that was featured in a 1951 issue of *Life* magazine, which positioned the West Coast as one of "America's assets." The article claimed that the Coast "offers maximum temptation with minimum limitations," speaking to the material and social desires aligned with the American Dream. It further claims that one appeal of the West for American youth lies within its room "for the expansive spirit to grow." While such Western hopes spur a desire for Therese and Carol to go West, whether or not the West Coast landscape is able to fulfill these desires for Therese and Carol is never seen because they never make it all the way to the coast. Their journey is cut short.

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