
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Criticism and the American Dream: An Analysis of James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America* (1931)

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ABSTRACT

The current paper delves into the social criticism embedded in James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America* (1931), especially concentrating on his coinage of the "American Dream" and its connection during the Great Depression. Adams critiques the increasing disparity between socio-economic classes and the materialism that predicted America's founding ideals. By tracing the historical origins of the American Dream, Adams pinpoints its early transformation from a common vision of opportunity and egalitarianism to one increasingly maneuvering into wealth accumulation. Through historical manifestation, Adams exposes how the advent of industrialization and capitalism had compromised the nation's democratic values, resulting in social and economic injustice. This research paper draws on historical and literary origins to scrutinize how *The Epic of America* acts as both a critique of the early 20th century's social conditions and a hopeful call for returning to the principles of equality and opportunity. By reassessing the American Dream, this work remains a relevant lens through which to grasp the significance of societal aspirations and disenchantment in American history.

KEYWORDS

Social Criticism, the American Dream, James Truslow Adams, The Epic of America.

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1. Introduction

James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America* (1931) is a fundamental narrative in grasping the basic concept of the American Dream, which he notoriously coined. Narrated during the Great Depression, a period of socio-economic struggle, Adams searched to re-elaborate the meaning of the American Dream in a way that went beyond material success. He envisaged it as a spiritual quest for a better, wealthier, and fuller life that allowed individuals to achieve personal and collective fulfillment through equal chances, not merely the accumulation of wealth. In doing so, Adams provided a critical lens through which to scrutinize the socio-economic inequalities and moral crises of his time. His critique of rampant materialism, unobserved capitalism, and the loss of ethical/moral values challenged the prevailing notions of success in early 20th-century America.

This paper aims to analyze Adams' critique of American society and his reinterpretation of the American Dream. It seeks to contextualize his heated arguments within the historical and socio-cultural background of the Great Depression and the Gilded Age, when rapid industrialization and corporate power remodeled the American socio-political scenery. Drawing on Adams' work, this paper also manifests its intention of how his interpretation of the American Dream remains significant in contemporary discussions about economic inequality, social justice, and national identity.

2. Background of Study

The Epic of America (1931) narrated by James Truslow Adams during one of the most consequential periods in U.S. history, it is described as widespread unemployment, and economic crisis. The socio-economic context of the 1930s profoundly framed Adams'

reflection on the nation's ideals and the harsh realities of American life. Notwithstanding the concept of the American Dream had long been embedded in American culture, Adams' usage of the terminology marked a significant move from the materialistic interpretations that had dominated the Gilded Age and the early 20th century. His masterpiece was, in part, a reaction to the socio-political results of unobserved capitalism, as exemplified by the economic disparities that arose during this chaotic period of intense industrialization and urbanization.

Adams' vision of the American Dream was deeply influenced by the changing fabric of American society. He witnessed how industrial growth had led to vast inequalities, with a small elite accumulating immense wealth while the majority struggled for basic survival. This economic divide, compounded by the moral decay associated with excessive consumerism, led Adams to argue for a reexamination of the nation's core values. In *The Epic of America*, he articulated a more profound, ethical version of the Dream—one focused on equal opportunity, individual fulfillment, and collective progress, rather than purely material success. His criticism of social injustice, combined with his idealistic vision of what America could be, makes Adams' work a significant critique of the nation's trajectory during a pivotal time in its history.

This study explores how *The Epic of America* not only critiques the American socio-economic conditions of the 1930s but also provides an enduring framework for understanding the ideological shifts in the American Dream throughout the 20th century and beyond. By examining the text in relation to its historical context and subsequent reinterpretations, the paper seeks to reveal how Adams' critique continues to inform contemporary debates surrounding wealth inequality, social mobility, and the ethics of the American Dream.

3. Methodology

The methodology for this study will involve a qualitative, multi-pronged approach to analyze James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America* (1931), focusing on its exploration of the American Dream and the underlying social criticism embedded in his work. This research will be conducted through three main methods: textual analysis, historical contextualization, and comparative analysis, which together will provide a robust framework for examining the social and ideological dimensions of Adams' text.

First, a **textual analysis** of *The Epic of America* will be conducted. This will involve a close reading of the text to extract key themes related to Adams' interpretation of the American Dream and his critical stance toward American society, particularly in the context of the early 20th century. By focusing on his critiques of wealth inequality, materialism, and social mobility, this study will investigate how Adams redefines the American Dream as more than just the pursuit of individual success, emphasizing instead the collective well-being and the ethical dimensions of national progress. Key passages from Adams' text will be analyzed to understand his portrayal of American values, and how he addresses the tensions between idealism and the realities of economic hardship and social inequality.

Second, **historical contextualization** will be applied to set Adams' narrative within the socio-political and economic domain of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in the wake of the Great Depression. This will include the scrutiny of historical documents, economic data, and secondary sources that hopes to shed cast on the conditions molding American society at the time Adams was writing. Understanding the economic challenges and the failure of the capitalist system during the Depression will help explain the urgency of Adams' critique of the American Dream. His depiction of the Dream will be analyzed in relation to broader historical events such as the rise of industrial capitalism, labor struggles, and increasing social unrest.

Finally, **comparative analysis** will be used to contextualize Adams' social criticism within the broader intellectual and literary discourse of his time. By comparing Adams' work with contemporaries such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, and others who critiqued American society and the myth of the American Dream, this study will highlight the uniqueness and commonalities in Adams' perspective. This will involve drawing on theoretical frameworks related to capitalism, social justice, and meritocracy to compare Adams' interpretation of the Dream with others who wrote during or about the same period. Through this comparative lens, the research will explore how Adams' vision both aligns with and diverges from other critiques of American society.

By using this combined methodology of textual analysis, historical contextualization, and comparative study, this research will offer a thorough examination of James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America*. This approach will uncover the depth of Adams' social critique and illustrate how his work continues to resonate in discussions about the American Dream and social justice today.

4. Results and Discussion

James Truslow Adams, in *The Epic of America* (1931), presents a significant re-evaluation of the American Dream, which he notoriously describes 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" (Adams, 1931). However, beneath this idealistic view, Adams discloses deep social criticism, arguing that the harsh reality of America in the early 20th century fails to live up to the assurance and guarantee of this

Dream. The American Dream, as devised by Adams, is not merely the pursuit of material assets/wealth, but rather a broader outlook of social mobility, equality, and opportunity. This discussion will investigate how Adams critiques the socio-political and economic situations of his time, and how his abstract concept of the American Dream functions as both a reflection and a critique of American society.

Adams initiates by addressing the increasing socio-economic discrimination and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, particularly in the wake of the industrial revolution and the economic prosperity of the 1920s. He criticizes the affluent materialism that had come to define prosperity in America, arguing that the nation's values had diverted too far towards the pursuit of wealth at the expense of personal necessity and social cohesion. As Adams explains it, the American Dream had become misrepresented by a "worship of wealth" (Adams, 1931), which weakened the foundational principles of opportunity and social justice. His criticism aligns with the critiques of other contemporary writers, such as Sinclair Lewis in *Babbitt* (1922) and F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), who also explored the disenchantment with the materialistic and hollow aspects of the American Dream during the same epoch.

Furthermore, Adams analyzes the myth of social mobility, which further offers that anyone, devoid of background, can gain success through hard work and perseverance. He pinpoints the structural tackles that stops many Americans, particularly immigrants, the working class, and racial minorities, from fully participating in this ideal. Adams states that while America was established on basic principles of justice, equality and opportunity, in practice, these opportunities were unfairly distributed, with large portions of the population being excluded from the prosperity enjoyed by the wealthiest citizens. This major critique resonates with the socio-economic landscape of the Great Depression, where severe widespread poverty and unemployment shattered the illusion of a universally attainable American Dream.

Only a despotic government could have forced that policy on a people multiplying with incredible rapidity and bursting with energy. Given the introduction of machinery, the rapid expansion westward, our limitless resources, and our multiplying population, the swift accumulation of wealth was inevitable. In a society without barriers, where there were no established social distinctions, competition would be of unheard-of fierceness, but that was part of the American dream. It was an inevitable corollary of equality of opportunity. (Adams, 1931, p. 195)

In his detailed analysis, Adams also accentuates the significance of education as a means of social mobility and the realization of the American Dream. He further asserts that access to education is a key factor in determining an individual's capability to gain success, yet acknowledges that educational opportunities were often restricted by social class and race. Adams's introduction for education reforms shows a wider Progressive Era concern with the democratization of knowledge and the expansion of opportunities for all people from all walks of life, aligning with the visions of social reformers like John Dewey, who advocated for educational reforms to address social inequalities.

Moreover, Adams investigates the effect of industrial capitalism, which he believes had revolutionized American society into one where economic interests dominated all other societal principles. This subject is apparently clear in his tone of how the pursuit of profit had resulted in a disregard for the well-being of labourers and the environment. In this sense, Adams's critique of industrial capitalism reflects the concerns of other critics of the time, such as Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle* (1906) and Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), who also stressed the dehumanizing effects of capitalism and the unbridgeable gap between the well-off and the badly-off.

Adams's point of view for America was not utterly pessimistic, however. He was of the belief that the American Dream could be revived if the country returned to its fundamental principles of equality, democracy, and social opportunity for all. His critique of materialism and inequality is ultimately a wake-up call for a more just and equitable society, where the pursuit of wealth is matched with concern for the common good. In this sense, Adams's *The Epic of America* can be observed as both a critique of the present and a blueprint for a more idealistic future.

In this fashion, Adams's work challenges the notion that America had fully realized the Dream it so often celebrated. By manifesting the unbridgeable gulf between the ideal and the reality, Adams analyzes the socio-economic and political structures that perpetuated inequality and hurdled true social mobility. His social criticism in *The Epic of America* is not only a reflection on the failure of the American Dream in his time but also a wake-up call to reform and redefine the nation's values, making them more inclusive and just for all American citizens. His critique remains relevant today, as the American Dream continues to be debated in the context of ongoing issues such as economic inequality, systemic racism, and access to education.

4.1 Historical Context of American Dream

"The plow-man that raiseth Grain is more serviceable to Mankind than the Painter who draws only to please the Eye." — James Truslow Adams

Historically, the continent of Europe, three thousand miles across the sea, filled with energetic, restless peoples of various religious beliefs had often fought among themselves for political and economic advantages over each other. This had been witnessed in the fifteen and sixteen centuries by a marked increase of energy between these differing peoples, the tempo of their lives, the forces of trade, religion superiority/ inferiority, and sense of nationalism. One of these European countries whose settlers, for various reasons, were in deteriorating economic, political and religious conditions was England, and people from all walks of life found themselves hard pressed either to keep up their accustomed scale of living or to make any living at all, as Adams distinctively states:

The opportunities of the New World were painted in glowing colors, and those who were sinking in the social and economic scales in England began to look toward it as a land of refuge and of hope. Not only, however, were economic conditions bad, but so also, for great numbers, were the political and religious outlooks. (Adams, 1931, p. 30)

On account of all these stimuli, —impoverishment, fear of religious persecution, a wave of political unrest, and the fervent hope of ameliorating their conditions, — the mass exodus of English people occurred notably to Ireland, to the Atlantic coast of America, and to the west India islands (Adams, 1931). This ulterior motive suited these people down to the ground to take 'American dream' formed in the hearts of them. Adams, as a supportive view, writes:

The economic motive was unquestionably powerful, often dominant, in the minds of those who took part in the great migration, but mixed with this was also frequently present the hope of a better and a freer life, a life in which a man might think as he would and develop as he willed. (Adams, 1931, p. 31)

Indeed, the individual emigrants, composed of disadvantaged, or underprivileged people, in particular prisoners, laborers, tradesmen, artisans and such, were meant to flee from unsatisfactory conditions to overseas, and subsequently, to enhance their future prosperity in a new land. But surprisingly, this turned out to be horrendous for most settlers to be deeply influenced by an omen of American life; "root, hog, or die" for all. To make matters worse, the insistence on work was widespread all through the period, from every colony of America. As the settlements were established, the unending demand for work inadvertently changed the attitude towards labor for gain, which, in essence, the predetermined Utopia was on the road to ruin their dream, 'freer, richer, more independent' (Adams, 1931). Furthermore, with the passing of time, America was confronted with the scarcity of ambitious laborers working for another instead of for themselves, which was evident in Winthrop'sⁱ note in 1633 that, "The scarcity of workmen had caused them to raise their wages to an excessive rate, so as a carpenter would have three shillings the day, a laborer two shillings and sixpence, etc." (Hosmer, 1908, p. 112). And also, James G. Moseley, as an additional information, states in his book *John Winthrop's World: History as a Story, the Story as History* (1992):

the scarcity of money made a great change in all commerce. Merchants would sell no wares but for ready money, men could not pay their debts though they had enough, prices of land and cattle fell soon to one half and less, yea to a third, and after one fourth part. (p. 88)

To shape the 'American dream', there was a feasibility for almost every settler of America to prove one of the most powerful of the forces which worked toward a democracy of spirit and outlook. Nevertheless, the leading men, mainly from Europe; the English, the Spanish, the French, were not meant to lay down schemes for any democratizing of either social or political life, as Reverend John Cottonⁱⁱ and John Winthrop, indeed, bitterly pointed out that, "democracy is the meanest and worst of all forms of government." (Adams, 1931, p. 39). Therefore, the ever-increasing demand for liberty and self-ruling government appeared in Massachusetts as the Puritan settlement began. The puritan leaders, bluntly put, escaped from political and economic conditions in England to seek sanctuary in the wilderness to worship their own constitution, and human free-compact government.

Consequently, by the middle of the eighteenth century, America was considered a fine prospect for the well-off and privileged to have monopolized the 'New World' to grow rapidly, and adversely, the affluent wealth of society had chiefly influenced the impoverished and people alike. If the gap between the rich and the poor were distinctive, the poor would be wealthy, failing that, better off, freer, and more independent than they had been in Europe. Above all, 'they had glimpsed the American dream' (Adams, 1931, p. 68).

But, regardless of the fact that John Adamsⁱⁱⁱ and his working men had realized the bare essential of democratic slogans in the creation of mind. Although the merchants had the hustle and bustle of the market place that new ruling-market system would tarnish their reputation, Adams refused to run the flame of business passion by presenting this surprisingly bold slogan, “miserable state of tributary slave,” which is diametrically opposed to liberty and moral values with the tyranny and moral degradation of England. What Adams believed in his proclamation was to bring the colonies of America to a state of “slavery, poverty and misery,” (Adams, 1931, p. 83). This foundation of free-consent government was deeply embedded in the hopes and aspirations of common people, as an indispensable part of the American dream. As Adams states:

the natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but only to have the law of nature for his rule. (Adams, 1931, p. 83)

However, it is self-evident that how ‘New World’ had given a substantial spur to the spread of democracy and the foundation of free-consent government by allotting wealth among the upper classes whose political power should rest in their hands, rather than the poorer classes, mainly made up of the shiftless, illiterate, and lawless. And this provoked a fierce controversy with the constitutional relations towards Parliament, to base the arguments on the rights of man. Then, the theory of the rights to all mankind — including their own “lower classes”, made Thomas Jefferson^{iv} announce the Declaration as this:

That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it.. (Adams, 1931, p. 89)

Moreover, the well-known Virginia Bill of Rights^v acted much as did the Declaration, with the words, “all men are by nature equally free and independent.” (Adams, 1931), and this has brought radical changes between ecclesiastics and the state in the slave trade prohibition with the exception of Georgia. This, in essence, means that Northern States of America aided newly emancipated slaves, whilst most men in the South placed the discipline of the historical and present slavery above an abstract moralism, although a temporary one. The American Revolutionary War (1775–1783)^{vi}, to make matters worse, brought about a distinct increase in both the political and the economic democracy. The former, in this respect, relieves ownership of certain barriers, and the latter increased the land which could be acquired by the badly-off. This brought an unbridgeable gap between the negotiating positions of the two sides, which ultimately formed the assembled company, and the constitution.

However, the new government was defenseless and unstable, the constitution had been rubber-stamped in many States by the narrowest of margins, which was in favor of an overwhelming majority of the people, and against the opposing minority, whose “parties” were called “Federalists and Anti-Federalists”, (Adams, 1931). The newly-established government was thus saved a party contest and a partisan president, George Washington, to give stability, with the two coordinators, Thomas Jefferson, as Secretary of States, and Alexander Hamilton, as Secretary of the Treasury.

4.2 Thomas Jefferson Vs. Alexander Hamilton

“give all the power to the many and they will oppress the few. Give all the power to the few and they will oppress the many. Both ought, therefore, to have the power, that each may defend itself against the other.” — Alexander Hamilton

Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton were diametrically opposed to each other in terms of their thoughts and practices in influencing on the nation of America. A West Indian boy, Hamilton settled in New York to seek his fortune through practicing law with an extraordinarily brilliant mind and spirit, married into a well-off family, and became an iconic figure in the State. Needless to say, he was entitled to live his life amongst the ‘moneyed class’ in New York, socializing with the prominent politicians, self-respecting congressmen, representatives (the Lower House of Congress in the United States), respected elder statesmen and congressional deputies and senators. Whilst Jefferson, influenced by the French philosophers to certain extent, and spending time among one of finest frontier sections ‘yeomanry’ (the people in Britain in the past who owned and farmed their own land), had not lost faith in the ordinary citizen, their life dependency as an agrarian economy.

Needless to say, Hamilton, from a political point of view, was a realist, and acknowledged leader of the Federalist Party, Jefferson, as an American representative in Paris for some years, was an idealist, self-reliant, and conservative, returning from Paris to take office. For this reason, Hamilton showed a better performance in leading and organizing a party than his arch-rival. The strong centralization of government was of Hamilton’s great strategic importance, in which he was mainly supported by the monied class, but, in contrast, Jefferson believed in the decentralization of government performance and instead in reliance upon the farmers.

Hence, as a result of political conflicts, it is crystal clear how Hamilton crossed the threshold of controlling government body, to characterize himself as being a natural leader than that of Jefferson. As Adams quotes:

At first the two men succeeded in working together in the cabinet in moderate harmony, but their philosophies were too antagonistic and it was not long before the inevitable dislike and mutual lack of confidence began to show itself. Hamilton stood for strength, wealth, and power; Jefferson for the American dream. (Adams, 1931, p. 112)

In a very real sense, Hamilton's policies were wise and essential in industrializing a nation, which provided some new impetus for the present-industrial United States. Even today, these economic and political doctrines derive from the 'Hamiltonian principles', not from the Declaration of Independence, which Jefferson had penned the document before. However, Hamilton had been victorious in different terms; such as refunding assumption, and of a bank, as well as the tariff to the building up of a moneyed interest; but unexpectedly, that interest had become localized in the North, where it was to remain hidebound till the present day. For instance, in the North, new people with cultural illiteracy and interest-free mind were making up new fortunes, and setting a new path for all to follow. In the South, King Cotton^{vii} was spreading riches so lavishly and in such nontraditional directions that the pursuit became absorbing. In the west, life was unbearable and the pioneer qualities 'had to be exalted lest the weary people faint'. This set the ground for the emergence of new America of the eighteenth century. As Adams cites:

The civilization of the eighteenth century had died, and a new America was emerging, whatever it might prove to be. Meanwhile, in spite of the declaration of Independence, America was not yet free, but was still swirling around in the wake of European States. (Adams, 1931, p. 133)

But on the other hand, Jefferson's reputation and image were not tarnished by the French revolution, so long as he remained dependent upon the soil and not upon some capitalist for his living. For this reason, Jeffersonian political and economic life rested on the common people for America's dream and ideal, rather than Hamiltonian special privilege and moneyed class. Indeed, in 1800, America was at the separating its ways, and either of these leaders would run the pure doctrine for the nation. Undoubtedly, stemmed from the Declaration of Independence, Jeffersonianism was synonymized with the American dream; which is the belief in the common man, the insistence upon possession, and equal opportunity in every way with the rich one. This was, in essence, the American philosophy which was based on the economics of agrarianism. As Thomas Jefferson had said, "Are the true representative of the great American interest, and are alone to be relied upon for expressing the proper American sentiments." (Adams, 1931, p. 137)

By this, it can be understood that American dream was under way for the overwhelming majority of American people to cling to the Jeffersonian belief in the common man, and subsequently Jefferson's election was a victory for the American dream, and American farmers were deemed to be the special repository for the American virtues. Elected as the president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson initiated to make a balance of the national credit, and the payment of all debts, both public and private; in which the economic situation of America was absolutely brilliant in founding a world-wide government, a great center of wealth and population. In a broader sense,

Hamiltonianism was breaking down because the powerful were trying to grasp all power. Jeffersonianism was breaking down because the nation was no longer composed of freeman and freeholders, competent to grapple with the problems of their social environment and forces. (Adams, 1931, p. 349)

Thus, by 1820, the country was closely aligning with three sections, the industrial North, the Cotton Kingdom of the South, and the West. Out of these sections, it was solely the West that the old economic democracy of pre-Revolutionary days still stayed afloat and that the Declaration of Independence was an indisputable proof for people from all walks of life. Briefly stated, the New World had attempted to be a complete secessionist from Europe, by that it means, it had embarked on a policy of the Americas for the Americans, strengthened the feeling of Americanism, and the sense of patriotism. The doctrine of Thomas Jefferson became almost as embedded in Americans' minds as the 'Declaration of Independence'.

4.3 The United States Declaration of Independence

"The Declaration of Independence...[is the] declaratory charter of our rights, and of the rights of man." — Thomas Jefferson (1819)

Signed on July 4, 1776, the "Declaration of Independence" stands as the most renowned and symbolic document in the early history of the American nation, marking its official foundation. Between 1773 and 1776, the 13 American colonies grew increasingly disillusioned with the British Empire, facing the strain of unjust taxation, strict oversight, and neglect. As these issues worsened, underlying political differences emerged, further intensifying the conflict. Tensions escalated, and the colonies were prepared to assert their independence from British rule.

It was John Adams who proposed that Thomas Jefferson be given the formidable task of drafting the Declaration of Independence. Both men were destined to serve as Presidents of the United States in following years. However, once Jefferson drew up his first draft of the Declaration, it was then rigorously debated by the Continental Congress^{viii} at the Pennsylvania State House, which resulted in numerous modifications, alterations, deletions, rewordings and rewritings before the final version we have today was agreed upon. Although Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, was the main writer of the document, he showed several drafts to Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, John Adams of Massachusetts, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Robert Livingston of New York, before the final draft was presented by the Founding Fathers (Jefferson, 1776).

Jefferson's original draft is preserved at the Library of Congress, complete with ratification made by John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, as well as Jefferson's notes of changes made by Congress. The most well-known version of the Declaration is a signed copy that is displayed at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and which is popularly deemed as the official document (Figures. 1 & 2). For further information, the Declaration of Independence is composed of six parts: 'Introduction', 'Preamble', 'Indictment', 'Denunciation', 'Conclusion' and 'Signatures'. The first and well-known signature was that of John Hancock^{ix}, then President of the Continental Congress (Lucas, 1990). The six parts are as follows:

- The Introduction is; 'Asserts as a matter of Natural Law the ability of a people to assume political independence; acknowledges that the grounds for such independence must be reasonable, and therefore explicable, and ought to be explained.'
- Preamble 'Outlines a general philosophy of government that justifies revolution when government harms natural rights.'
- Indictment 'A bill of particulars documenting the king's "repeated injuries and usurpations" of the Americans' rights and liberties.'
- Denunciation 'This section essentially finishes the case for independence. The conditions that justified revolution have been shown.'
- Conclusion 'The signers assert that there exist conditions under which people must change their government, that the British have produced such conditions and, by necessity, the colonies must throw off political ties with the British Crown and become independent states. The conclusion contains, at its core, the Lee Resolution that had been passed on July 2.'
- Signatures 'The first and most famous signature on the engrossed copy was that of John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress. Two future presidents (Thomas Jefferson and John Adams) and a father and great-grandfather of two other presidents (Benjamin Harrison V) were among the signatories. Edward Rutledge (age 26) was the youngest signer, and Benjamin Franklin (age 70) was the oldest signer.'

When the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, the quarrel between Britain and the thirteen independent sovereign states had already been raging against the Kingdom of Great Britain for a year, no longer under British rule. It was a statement by the colonists showing how tenacious they were to release themselves from the oppression of their mother country, and to "live free or die."



Figure 1. Original 'Declaration of Independence' as printed on July 4, 1776, top of page 1. This is the original printing sent to the states & Army. It differs from the "engrossed" copy which was made later. (by Continental Congress)

his policies and his rhetoric, as in the 'Gettysburg Address' of 1863. Since then, it has become a prominent statement on human rights, particularly its second sentence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. (Independence, 1979)

This is the perspective from which we must deepen our understanding, how 'American Dream', national ethos of the United States, and the set of ideas and moral attitudes (democracy, rights, liberty, opportunity and equality) emerged through a thoroughgoing deconstructive analysis of James Truslow Adams, in his book *The Epic of America* (1931).

4.4 American Dream

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

—a speech that U.S. President Abraham Lincoln delivered during the American Civil War at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, November 19, 1863.

The American Dream is reflected as a national ethos of the United States, the set of ideas and moral attitudes (democracy, rights, liberty, opportunity and equality) in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success, as well as an upward social mobility, and the pursuit of monetary gain for the households and offspring, achieved through hard work in a society with few regulatory barriers. James Truslow Adams, in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*, first popularized the phrase 'the American dream', which says:

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. It is a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position ... The American dream, that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtlessly counted heavily. It has been much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. (Adams, 1931, p. 415)

Within the whole of the American mind, there lies an eternal optimism that the nation's citizens with poor economic and political backgrounds will be entitled to the opportunity for both monetary growth and social advancement, and become pillars of their own communities. In fact, perseverance and industriousness are concealed within this abstract concept: 'In the traditional American mindset, any man or woman can achieve whatever he or she wants as long as there is the drive and strong will to obtain it'. Indeed, although "the American dream" was not used by Truslow until 1931, the concept has always been an integral part within the public consciousness of Americans. In the '1776 *Declaration of Independence*', Thomas Jefferson laid out what may be the most important and well-known reference to the American dream, standards, and conditions.

Yet it can convincingly be argued that those who feel slighted by the promise of the American dream the most are inferior and underprivileged groups—those who have been constantly called the disenfranchised population, or the minority voters by the American governmental system and who have been compelled to view the hypocrisy they see as inherent within the 'Dream' their entire lives. But American dream was bound to be self-defeating that all Americans should be provided the opportunity to prosper to their fullest potential, but nevertheless, suggesting that minority groups are denied the realization of their dreams in America, and were never given the opportunity to experience the hope the American dream supposedly provides to its nation's citizens. As Adams states:

that, however, was not the case. No man can make a fortune by himself. He has to depend in part either on his neighbors making it for him, — as for example in the unearned increment he derives from the increasing value of land, — or he has to employ the labor of others, reserving for himself, in return for his own capital and services, a portion of the return from the labor of each of his serfs, slaves, or workmen. The fact that an individual is shrewd or

unscrupulous enough to avail himself largely of these means should not blind us to the fact that he has not made his money solely by himself. He owes the greater part of it to his fellows. (Adams, 1931, p. 176)

On the bright side, the American dream remains a fundamental factor in most Americans' lives and spirits. The American Dream has marketed the capitalistic economic system, which is the most desirable system for economic upturn and development. The dream encourages the ideals of 'Capitalism' where each individual is rewarded based on their futile attempts. The fact that opportunity began to surface at least to be open to everybody stayed alive belief in the American Dream. As Andrew Jackson^{xi} believed that "every boy was being told he might be the president of America" (Adams, 1931, p. 185). By that it means, according to ability or achievement, it is a reverie of social order in which each man and each woman shall be capable enough in making a commercially viable alternative to the fullest prestige of which the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position stands. The *New York Sun*, in a long article in 1838, wrote that the universal fascination had spread to the children:

try' is the first word, the meaning of which is thoroughly mastered. Boys are men before they are loosed from their leading strings. They are educated in the belief that every man must be the architect of his fortune... Dreams of ambition or wealth, never the arm which drives the hoop — the foot which gives the ball is impetus. (Adams, 1931, p. 186)

In America, as contrasted with Europe, it was open to every man, theoretically at least, to rise from nothing to eminence, meaning a strong sense of hope and desire that fulfill your ambitions to a better life. In other words, accumulated abilities or talents, made a great many people anxious to elevate their position. They came to this realization that the more advance the country is, the more irresistible the cultivated society will be. Indeed, having no fixed social distinctions, in the American Dream, made competition intense, thanks to an inevitable corollary of equality of opportunity. As Adams states: "In a society without barriers, where there were no established social distinctions, competition would be of unheard-of fierceness, but that was part of the American dream." (Adams, 1931, p. 195)

5. Conclusion

"the voice of the early Americans who had been promised "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" by Thomas Jefferson while the conservatives of his day raised their eyebrows and smiled questionably". — James Truslow Adams

5.1 Overview

The Epic of America (1931) by James Truslow Adams offers a significant critique of the American Dream, challenging its assessment and the societal forces that have molded it. Adams' narrative, published during the Great Depression, shows his grave concern over the disenchantment many American citizens felt with the yawning gap between the ideal of equal opportunity and the reality of economic disparity. His exploration of the American Dream accentuates not just the material aspirations accompanied with it, but also the social and moral dimensions that he believed had been missing over time. Adams emphasized that the American Dream was not merely about wealth but about the pursuit of a better, wealthier, and fuller life for all citizens. By tracing the historical development of this dream, Adams critiques how it has been co-opted by consumerism, materialism and industrialism, shifting away from its founding principles. To this end, Adams' work remains a critical lens through which to scrutinize the social and economic inequalities that continue to challenge the ideals of the American Dream today.

5.2 Study Limitations

While this research paper suggests a detailed analysis of *The Epic of America* (1931) and its treatment of the American Dream, several limitations should be noted. First, the analysis primarily concentrates on James Truslow Adams' viewpoints and socio-historical context in the early 20th century, which may restrict its application to contemporary interpretations of the American Dream. The socio-political situations in which Adams narrated, such as the aftermath of the Great Depression and the evolving industrial domain, differ crucially from today's socio-economic realities, potentially creating growing gaps in the relevance of his insights to modern contexts.

Second, this research relies heavily on a textual analysis of *The Epic of America* without incorporating a broad range of contemporary critiques or responses to Adams' work, which may narrow the scope of understanding. Additionally, while Adams' critique of the American Dream is central to this study, the research does not comprehensively engage with the wider body of literature on the subject, particularly works that address different interpretations of the Dream across racial, ethnic, and gendered lines.

Finally, this study focuses on the American Dream as articulated in *The Epic of America* but does not extend its scope to explore how the concept has been redefined or challenged in later decades. Consequently, further research is needed to address how

Adams' vision of the American Dream compares to more diverse, inclusive, or critical re-interpretations in modern American thought.

5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research on James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America* (1931) could reveal several aspects of the American Dream and its ongoing relevance. First, a comparative analysis could be undertaken between Adams' pessimistic vision of the American Dream and its portrayal in contemporary literature, film, or political rhetoric, analyzing how the abstract concept has completed in response to modern socio-economic conditions. Moreover, further research could lay the foundations for the regional disparities in how the American Dream is understood, concentrating on urban versus rural interpretations, or the influence of race, ethnicity, and immigration status on the accessibility of this ideal.

Another avenue could involve a deeper examination of the intersection between Adams' critique and modern capitalist structures, especially in light of growing income inequality and debates surrounding universal basic income. Lastly, research could extend Adams' ideas into a global context by examining how the American Dream influences or contrasts with national identities in other countries, particularly in relation to globalization and the shifting ideals of success and opportunity. These approaches would offer a richer understanding of the lasting impact of Adams' work on both American and global socio-political landscapes.

5.4 Rights & Access

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ⁱ John Winthrop, (born January 22 [January 12, Old Style], 1588, Edwardstone, Suffolk, England—died April 5 [March 26], 1649, Boston, Massachusetts Bay Colony [U.S.]), first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the chief figure among the Puritan founders of New England.' <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Winthrop-American-colonial-governor>>.

ⁱⁱ 'John Cotton was a clergyman from England who moved to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1633.' <https://historyofmassachusetts.org/reverend-john-cotton/>

ⁱⁱⁱ 'John Adams, a remarkable political philosopher, served as the second President of the United States (1797-1801), after serving as the first Vice President under President George Washington.' <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/john-adams/>

^{iv} 'Thomas Jefferson, a spokesman for democracy, was an American Founding Father, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence (1776), and the third President of the United States (1801–1809).' <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/thomas-jefferson/>

^v The Virginia Declaration of Rights:

'Virginia's Declaration of Rights was drawn upon by Thomas Jefferson for the opening paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence. It was widely copied by the other colonies and became the basis of the Bill of Rights. Written by George Mason, it was adopted by the Virginia Constitutional Convention on June 12, 1776.' <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/virginia-declaration-of-rights>

^{vi} 'American Revolution, also called United States War of Independence or American Revolutionary War, (1775–83), insurrection by which 13 of Great Britain's North American colonies won political independence and went on to form the United States of America.' <https://www.britannica.com/event/American-Revolution>

^{vii} 'King Cotton, phrase frequently used by Southern politicians and authors prior to the American Civil War, indicating the economic and political importance of cotton production. After the invention of the cotton gin (1793), cotton surpassed tobacco as the dominant cash crop in the agricultural economy of the South, soon comprising more than half the total U.S. exports.' <https://www.britannica.com/event/King-Cotton>

^{viii} 'Continental Congress, in the period of the American Revolution, the body of delegates who spoke and acted collectively for the people of the colony-states that later became the United States of America. The term most specifically refers to the bodies that met in 1774 and 1775–81 and respectively designated as the First Continental Congress and the Second Continental Congress.' <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Continental-Congress>

^{ix} 'John Hancock, (born January 12, 1737, Braintree (now in Quincy), Massachusetts—died October 8, 1793, Quincy, Massachusetts, U.S.), American statesman who was a leading figure during the Revolutionary War and the first signer of the U.S. Declaration of Independence.' <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Hancock>

^x Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president of the United States. He preserved the Union during the U.S. Civil War and brought about the emancipation of slaves. <https://www.biography.com/us-president/abraham-lincoln>

^{xi} Andrew Jackson, byname Old Hickory, (born March 15, 1767, Waxhaws region, South Carolina [U.S.]—died June 8, 1845, the Hermitage, near Nashville, Tennessee, U.S.), military hero and seventh president of the United States (1829–37). He was the first U.S. president to come from the area west of the Appalachians and the first to gain office by a direct appeal to the mass of voters. His political movement has since been known as Jacksonian Democracy. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Andrew-Jackson>