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2. Is the myth of the “American dream” destructive or inspirational—or some of both? Explain. As part of your essay, define the dream.

Assessing the Destructive Realities of the “Inspirational” American Dream

Nicole and Robert Feeney have been married for eight years and have two beautiful children, Brayden and Kristi, ages seven and five, respectively. Robert is an auto mechanic at Bernie’s Auto Repair, making little above minimum wage; Nicole, without a college degree, has not been able to hold a steady job since graduating from high school. The couple struggles to provide their children with everything they need to live happily. Unlike wealthy families, the Feeneys do not have much flexibility when it comes to spending money. Most, if not all, of Robert’s paycheck goes to paying their rent and other living expenses, leaving little extra money for luxury items. Since they cannot afford to send their children to a private school like most of the white families in their neighborhood do, their children must attend public school with mostly poor minority children. Both Robert and Nicole came from families who struggled to make ends meet. Perhaps this is why, as adults, they are having similar problems with their own families. Despite the low economic status that seems to run in both families, Robert and Nicole hope to someday achieve the “American dream” and become successful; however, the likelihood of their achieving their goal seems minimal.

By taking a look at American families today, one can observe that those who have excess amounts of money are able to live more comfortably than those who, like the Feeneys, make just enough money to support their families. Gregory Mantsios, author of “Class in America—2006,”

states that “[p]eople do not choose to be poor or working class; instead, they are limited and confined by the opportunities afforded or denied them by a social economic system” (316). The Feeneys seem to be limited by the amount of money that they have to work with. This lack of money forces them to limit their life experiences because they must take care of their main priorities first: food, water, and shelter. The “American dream” advertises that through hard work, perseverance, and dedication, anyone is incapable of achieving happiness, wealth, success and status. People who struggle to make ends meet may never be able to fully improve their current economic status unless their emphasis on material items as well as the economy drastically changes; however, they may still feel that through hard work and fortitude, they will one day live comfortably, just like the wealthy people do. Although meant to inspire people to reach their full potential and achieve success, the “American dream” may actually be destructive by instilling false hope in those who feel capable of achieving success. This sense of false hope may lead the poor to make unwise choices to achieve immediate gratification. With this attitude, the poor will initiate their own demise.

Today “the gap between the rich and poor [. . .] is larger than it has ever been” (Mantsios 309); the poor feel as if they are becoming increasingly inferior to the wealthy. This sense of inferiority should be enough to make the poor realize that their opportunities for success are substantially lower than the opportunities of the wealthy. However, instead of giving up, many poor people turn to the “American dream” for guidance. According to Harlton L. Dalton, author of “Horatio Alger,” “in order to succeed in life, especially when the odds are stacked against you, it is often necessary to first convince yourself that there is a reason to get up in the morning” (267). The poor may view the guidance of the “American dream” as their “reason to get up in the morning”; however, the guidance they are receiving may be better defined as false

hope. Mantsios adds that “[f]ewer than one in five men surpass the economic status of their fathers” (316). It seems like many of the poor people are selectively blind to this startling reality; perhaps the most unfortunate truth is that despite all the hard work and effort they put forth, many of these people will remain poor forever.

The media’s portrayal of the poor seems to add to the poor’s sense of inferiority. The poor are taught that being rich and successful is synonymous with being happy; this lesson leads to their emphasis on material wealth rather than on finding wealth through opportunities. According to Diana Kendall, author of “Framing Class, Vicarious Living, and Conspicuous Consumption,” the media seems to place a high emphasis on the importance of being rich and successful, making those who are of a lower economic status feel left behind (331). Some shows like *American Idol* turn ordinary people into famous musicians and promote the ideal that anyone can be famous (332); this is obviously an untrue concept. People in the lower class who watch television shows like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, or any other show that presents people of wealth, may feel that if they work hard and earn a lot of money, they, too, be happy and successful like the families on TV. This idea leads to what Kendall calls “vicarious living” (332), which can be a dangerous habit for those who are struggling to make ends meet.

Kendal suggests that by “watching how other individuals live rather than experiencing life for [themselves]” the poor have adopted vicarious living as a coping skill to support their struggle to achieve the “American dream” (332). Another example of “vicarious living” is illustrated by celebrity endorsement of name-brand products. These advertisements attract poor consumers with false promises of success and wealth (332). Because the biggest group of name-brand consumers is those who buy “beyond their means and cannot properly use [the items]

anyway” (339), these people often end up worse off than they started. Perhaps the poor see their purchases at the first steps towards achieving the “American dream”; however, it is well-known that purchasing highly priced material items is not a very sensible idea when one can barely afford to take care of your family as it is. Toni Cade Bambara’s example in her story “The Lesson” echoes this concept. Miss Moore says “[i]magine for a minute what kind of society it is in which some people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven”(270). This point is particularly pertinent as the holiday season is rapidly approaching. People of lower economic status may want to provide their children with all of the presents that they have asked for. Although this may be unrealistic, during this time of year, many parents seem to put their economic problems aside and purchase these highly priced items anyway. This habit of purchasing items to achieve immediate gratification may compromise any hope one has of achieving the “American dream.” The problem seems to lie in the gullibility of the poor. Whenever they start making progress towards success, something often seems to distract them with false promises of happiness. Whether it is the enticement of the media, their poor money management skills, or their pure ignorance of possibilities, many poor people lack the strength to “lift themselves up by their own bootstraps” (Dalton 227) and achieve success because they choose immediate gratification by investing in material items rather than in opportunities.

Although in many respects the “American dream” has worked against the poor by providing them with false hope, there are a few “rags to riches” stories that oppose this theory. It is important to remember, however, that successful people like Oprah Winfrey, Barack Obama, and Bill Gates are the exception, not the rule. According to Mantsios, “the difference in class

[between the rich and the poor] determines where they live, who their friends are, how well they are educated, what they do for a living, and what they come to expect from life” (312).

Perhaps the most important component of success is “what [one] come[s] to expect from life” (321). The reason Oprah, Obama, and Gates were so successful is that they had a vision of where they wanted to be, and they did not limit their definition of success to material wealth. They also understood the importance of investing in opportunities to further themselves in the world rather than in just appearing materially successful from the outside.

Unfortunately, the poor seem to have limited opportunities to plan their vision of life because they often have other priorities: being able to put food on the table, clothes on their backs, and a roof over their heads. By having to fulfill these responsibilities, attaining success becomes much more difficult for the poor. Additionally, when the opportunity arises, many poor people spend their time and money on quick-fixes that make them happy at the moment, rather than think about their long-term goals. The “American dream” seems to be destructive to the poor because its sense of false hope often leads to their making unwise choices that derail any hopes of success they may have harbored. Although the poor cannot fully be blamed for their hasty choices, these poor choices, motivated by immediate gratification, may in fact be the main reasons so few poor people ever fulfill the “American dream.”