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Pojetí Amerického snu v díle Kdo chytá v žitě J.D.

Salingera a Americká idyla Philipa Rotha

Representation of the American Dream in Salinger's The

Catcher in the Rye and Philip Roth's American Pastoral

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Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

V obou dílech - Americké idyle i Kdo chytá v žitě - můžeme pozorovat znaky fenoménu zvaný Americký sen. Prostudováním primární a sekundární literatury a následnou analýzou textů bude nejdříve vysvětlen pojem Americký sen. Poté bude srovnáno jeho pojetí ve dvou výše zmíněných dílech.

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Anotace:

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá jedním z nejrozšířenějších světových mýtů – Americkým snem. Skládá se ze dvou částí. První část vysvětluje jeho vznik, vývoj a charakteristické znaky. Pozornost je věnována rozdílnému pojetí ve východní a západní části Států a také jeho kritice. Druhá část pak řeší pojetí Amerického snu v literatuře, konkrétně v dílech *Kdo chytá v žitě* J. D. Salingera a *Americká idyla* Philipa Rotha. Skrz ně je ukázáno, že Americký sen není tak skvělou myšlenkou, jak by se mohlo zdát, nýbrž že selhává v naplňování očekávání těch, kteří v něj věří. Přesvědčí se o tom jak Seymour Levov, hrdina *Americké idyly*, tak Holden Caulfield z *Kdo chytá v žitě*, který na nedostatky snu upozorňuje.

Klíčová slova: Americký sen, Kdo chytá v žitě, Americká idyla, USA, štěstí

Abstract:

This thesis deals with one of the world's most widespread myths – the American dream. The text consists of two parts. The first one describes its origin, development and characteristics. The attention is paid to its different conceptions in the Eastern and Western part of the States and its criticism. The second part focuses on the representation of the American dream in literature, precisely in *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger and *American Pastoral* by Philip Roth. It is proved that in these novels the American dream is not shown as such a splendid idea, since it fails regarding the expectations of those who believe in it. Seymour Levov himself, the protagonist of *American pastoral*, and Holden Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye* who denounces these fails are proved to be such people.

Key words: American dream, The Catcher in the Rye, American Pastoral, USA, happiness

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1. Introduction

The thesis deals with America's most widespread myth and phenomenon – the American dream. Although it is mostly associated with from-rags-to-riches stories, the idea is not limited just to those. Apart from possession and social status, it takes into consideration equality, happiness and fame. I will approach the topic as follows:

The first part of my thesis is focused on the American dream itself. It explains why and how it actually appeared. It examines the forms, aspects and transformations of the dream in various periods and places, as the time and geographical location influence its shape. While the story begins in the East, in New England, in the 17th century, Las Vegas casinos and Hollywood production transfer the dream (and dreamers) westwards in the 20th century. To complete the panorama, I include a chapter about the contemporary situation and highlight main breakdowns of the idea since they are discussed in the second part of the thesis.

As the American dream is an inseparable component of American culture, it has been inevitably reflected in literature (amongst other media, of course). This is why the analysis and comparison of two books in terms of the American dream is the aim of the second part of this thesis.

First, I concentrate on Jerome David Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* with its young protagonist, Holden Caulfield, who considers himself a non-conformist. The story of Holden, a boy expelled from school staying some days in New York before he goes home to face his parents, is well known nowadays. He rejects the American way of life, people's values and, therefore, any signs of the phenomenon of the American dream which, in fact, he sees rather like an American nightmare.

This work is confronted with Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*. The main character, Seymour Levov, is the middle-class owner of a glove factory. With his

wealth, his own house, a beautiful wife, and a seemingly happy family life, he might be called a typical descendant of European immigrants fulfilling the American dream. However, he does not live happily ever after, and through the life stories of the two protagonists it is shown that the American dream has its weak points.

The conception of the myth in these two (at the first sight different) novels is, thus, the same. It does not bring happiness, nor does it meet its promises because not everybody determined to pursue it is actually able to reach it.

2. The American Dream

The American dream is undoubtedly one of the most intriguing concepts in American culture. It has always been omnipresent not only in the United States themselves but it has had a great impact on thousands of immigrants from various corners of the world. Actually, it is hard not to notice the existence of the phenomenon when even such an icon of popular culture as Madonna sings about it. In her song *American Life*, “Do I have to change my name? Will it get me far? Should I lose some weight? Am I gonna be a star?” is followed by the haunting refrain: “American life, I live the American dream” (Madonna 2003).

Although the term was coined by James Truslow Adams in the first half of the 20th century, the idea goes much further back in history. Captain John Smith was thinking in terms of the American dream (although not calling it like this), as well as Thomas Jefferson when contemplating the draft of the Declaration of Independence (see below). As far as Adams’ most widespread conception is considered, he sees the dream as “the dream of land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (Adams 1933, 404). Nevertheless, the interpretation of the dream has been different in various periods and it has got several aspects, though it traditionally involves social status, ownership, freedom, happiness and fame.

2.1. The First Settlers and the First Dream

The origins of the American dream go back to the arrival of the first British colonizers. As early as four hundred years ago, the first reflections about America as the Promised Land, where everyone is successful when he tries to, appeared. Captain

John Smith, an English explorer, gives abundant evidence in his work that, for him, the New World indeed is fuller and richer:

And is it not pretty sport, to pull vp two pence, six pence, and twelue pence, as fast as you can hale and veare a line? He is a very bad fisher, cannot kill in one day with his hooke and line, one, two, or three hundred Cods: which dressed and dried, if they be sould there for ten shillings the hundred, though in *England* they will giue more then twentie; may not both the seruant, the master, and marchant, be well content with this gaine? If a man worke but three dayes in seauen, he may get more then hee can spend, vnlesse he will be excessiue. (Smith 1865, 56)

The point Smith makes here is perfectly compatible with what later becomes the main pillar of the American dream. Whoever can get over the ocean, work, make the effort and will be rewarded with the wherewithal to get by or, even better, to get rich. As Smith concludes:

Thus, though all men be not fishers: yet all men, whatsoever, may in other matters doe as well. For necessity doth in these cases so rule a Commonwealth, and each in their seuerall functions, as their labours in their qualities may be as profitable, because there is a necessary mutuall vse of all. (57)

Apart from “official” British colonizers, there was another group of people heading for America in search of their Promised Land – the Puritans. They managed to escape from their miserable conditions in Britain and by doing so “they accomplished the core task in achievement of any American dream: they became

masters of their own destiny” (Cullen 2003, 21). That implies that the dream of freedom has its roots in the puritan community.

However, it is not only freedom that the Puritans contributed to the formation of the American dream. It is also the traditional American exceptionalism. The awareness of their own uniqueness (whether real or just presumed) may be found already in John Winthrop’s thoughts. His claim that “wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are uppon us” (Lemay 1988, 23) clearly demonstrates it. America is put to a high position and the others are expected to look up to its extraordinary rank. This all, of course, approved by God himself, as the Puritans believed that they were chosen by him. “Thus stands the cause betweene God and us. We are entered into Covenant with him for this worke. Wee have taken out a Commision, the Lord hath given us leave to drawe our own articles” (23). The conjecture that God has a particular relationship with the Americans has not disappeared since then.

2.2. The Declaration of Independence and the Pursuit of Happiness

The Declaration of Independence is a crucial document for the Americans and, in fact, for the American dream, too. “The luminous phrases of the Declaration of Independence put liberty, equality, and opportunity at the core of the American creed. Jefferson’s words have been a standing challenge to each new generation of Americans to do well, to do right, and always to do better” (Jillson 2004, 3). Or, as Cullen claims, “the Declaration actually shapes the way we live our lives – not always well or consciously, mind you, but powerfully nonetheless” (Cullen 2003, 7). It follows that most Americans would highly likely claim their rights to their own American dream as the document incorporates features which are inseparable from

it. The most significant lines supporting this and at the same time the most famous ones are the following:

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. (Lemay 1988, 689)

Whether life and liberty were really accessible to anyone is a matter of another chapter. What needs to be emphasized here is the happiness because its pursuit appears to be a very frequent collocation when cogitating upon the American dream.

At the same time, this is where a problem arises for the reason that there is no exact description of happiness and everyone can approach it in a different way. The question therefore is what it was exactly that Jefferson wanted to promise to the States. “Unfortunately the term belongs to a category of words, the meaning of which everybody knows but the definition of which nobody can give” (Jones 1953, 5). In attempt to bring a solution, Jones presents a list of possible readings which have been formulated by various scholars.

Horace, Disraeli, and Leigh Hunt agree that the basis of happiness is health; Rousseau found it to consist in a good bank account, a good cook, and a good digestion; [...] Stevenson says it is a duty; [...] Longfellow wrote that to be strong is to be happy [...] David Hume said happiness consists of action, pleasure, and indolence; [...] and Swift declared it is the perpetual possession of being well deceived. (6)

Regarding the American dream, all these definitions might be considered important since it may include health, money, pleasure, strength and also deception, which all at times form part of this splendid and complex idea.

2.3. The Dream of Upward Mobility

The dream of upward mobility also has its origins in the colonial era. The well-off Brits probably did not feel the need to abandon their comfortable manors and risk their lives on a long voyage with an uncertain end. Many of the new comers had rather lower social status, primarily amongst those who populated the North. Arrival in America was a great starting position for them, because it allowed them to accomplish their hope for upward mobility or, at least, to dream about it. Throughout the years, many new settlers have reached the goal and inspired others to keep on making efforts and convinced them that they may succeed, too. The assertion that “there must be equality of opportunity for all and a chance for everyone to have his turn at bat” (Warner 1962, 129) just confirms it. Doubtless, not everybody could get ahead but those who managed it became an example for hundreds of others. To borrow a contemporary phrasing of this old idea, “If Abraham Lincoln and Bill Clinton can become president and Andrew Carnegie and Bill Gates can become the world’s richest man, then others can reasonably seek to rise as well” (Jillson 2004, 7).

As Abraham Lincoln is often mentioned as an embodiment of the dream of upward mobility, it is apt to mention his story to illustrate this particular dream. Lincoln came from humble conditions. He did not go to school, his mother was even illiterate and he learned to read and write by himself. He left home quite early and went through several jobs. Meanwhile he continued with his self-education and due

to his determination he became a lawyer, a candidate senator and, eventually, one of the most remarkable presidents of the US. “The American Dream of Upward Mobility seemed to have been realized in its purest form: a poor boy in a log cabin had been elected the president of the United States” (Cullen 2003, 94).

2.4. The Dream of Ownership

The dream of ownership is closely related to the one of upward mobility. “In the United States it is commonly assumed that it is necessary to accumulate money for an individual to increase his own and his family’s status” (Warner 1962, 133). In spite of the fact that the Declaration of Independence guarantees the pursuit of happiness, Jefferson might have well preserved the original Lockean motto. “Life, liberty and pursuit of property” (Locke 2003, 218) also express the ethos of the American dream very pertinently.

As far as possession is concerned, the first object to be mentioned is the house. “*The American dream of owning a home*, we call it. No American Dream has broader appeal, and no American Dream has been quite so widely realized” (Cullen 2003, 136). This is, in fact, so pervasive that “Roughly two-thirds of Americans owned their homes at the start of this [twenty-first] century, and it seems reasonable to believe that many of the remaining third will go on to do so” (136). The approval of the Homestead Act was probably the point when America started to be perceived as a country where everyone has his home and land. This, however, was deceiving. To be given land, the applicants needed to prove they had met the requirements, which was something that not everybody really managed to do. The pretenders were supposed to pay a small fee to get the land and after five years they had to show the improvements they had done, such as cultivation of the land and building.

In addition to having one's land and/or house, "a new element appeared on the scene that would have a transformative effect: the automobile" (149). The invention of the car was a crucial point in the history of mankind, yet, at first, not everybody could afford it. The car happened to be conceived as a symbol of wealth, success and happiness. It was only thanks to Henry Ford that, more and more lucky Americans could buy one. "Like the house, the car became widely celebrated as an emblem of democracy even for those who had not yet acquired one, and for many of the same reasons" (149). Cullen testifies to this in his work with the quite shocking statements of two housewives. The first claims that they would rather do without clothes than give up a car (150). The second one, similarly, would go without food before she would see them give up a car (150). Obviously, thus, ownership plays a key role in American society and helps to keep the American dream alive.

2.5. The Western Dream

As it has been already mentioned, the American dream varies depending on time and place. On the eastern coast (which was, logically, colonized first due to its geographical location), there have been newcomers pursuing their dreams since the seventeenth century. As there were more and more of them, they needed land to settle on. This is, briefly, why the frontier needed to be pushed westwards constantly. This extended territory provided new space where the American dream could get other shapes. As for the features it gains in the West, fame and facile achievements are the novelties. Gold hunters and gamblers appear on the scene and their aims to get rich as quickly as possible leave out hard work. It, obviously, loses the Eastern estimation of diligence and the stress is laid on ease and speed with which a goal is achieved. Not only gold hunters and gamblers, but also many Hollywood stars are a

result of such an overnight process. Before the Western dreams themselves are described, it is apt to mention the significance of the frontier between the Eastern and Western part of the US.

2.5.1. The Frontier

The concept of the frontier has a specific role in American history. The US has been always divided by a frontier. The classic historical divergence between the proslavery agricultural South and the antislavery industrial North is a clear example. Similarly, the East and the West have their particularities.

In accordance with the conviction that they always should try to do better and get more, the Americans have a tendency to overcome obstacles. The Western frontier was one such challenge.

Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development. (Turner 1994, 31)

Once the first frontier – the ocean between Europe and America was surmounted, there was determination and eagerness to get even farther away. “At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American” (34). In fact, the advance further away from the first English settlements caused the reinforcement of American identity. The earlier newcomers were those who used to undertake the exploration of the West. These pioneers set off to places which had never met civilization before, to

modernize them. Their places in the East were then filled with new immigrants who had not yet been familiarized with the American way of life.

The vacuum left in the older States by this vast exodus and by the rapidly increasing demand for industrial labor brought about an inflow of foreigners, but these stayed on the seaboard, so that until past the [nineteenth] mid-century the Mississippi Valley was racially, as well as in its enforced economic democracy, the real home of Americanism. (Adams 1933, 148)

Returning to an extract already quoted, the West is connected with America's development. This is vividly illustrated by John Gast's painting "The American Progress" (illustration 1). In the forefront of the picture, there is Columbia, a beautiful young lady representing the United States heading westward. She is holding a book and a telegraph wire, both denoting the advance which is also backed up by the presence of ships, railways and the telegraphic poles in the background.



Illustration 1: The American Progress by John Gast

Generally, the work represents the idea of Manifest Destiny, “a claim that it was clear (‘manifest’) intention of fate (‘destiny’) that the territory of the United States should stretch across North America from the Atlantic to the Pacific” (O’Callaghan 1997, 42). In spite of the fact that colonizers of the West may have acted with good will, the process was still ambiguous. There was the prosperity of Americans on the one hand, and the repression of native inhabitants on the other. American Indians fleeing from the headway are also portrayed in Gast’s painting.

2.5.2. The Gold Rush

The West, however, was not only a place destined for development. Not everybody came with the intention to refine the area. The West’s natural resources were also meant to be a means of getting rich. The discovery of its gold was a significant occurrence for many avid gold hunters and the gold rush is one of the crucial points that attracted a lot of dreamers to the West. “In 1948, there were twelve thousand émigrés in California; six years later there were three hundred thousand. In the century between 1860 and 1960, the state’s population would double every twenty years” (Cullen 2003, 170). These data should not be surprising because, among all that the West can offer,

The California gold rush is the purest expression of the Dream of the Coast in American history. The notion that the transformative riches were literally at your feet, there for taking, cast a deep and lasting spell on American imagination. (170)

The American dream was necessarily transformed after finding gold. Firstly, intentional hard work disappears from its conception. Seeking the gold nuggets

surely required determination and efforts, but it could not guarantee a regular income like a stable job. There is no need to add that it was just impossible for anyone to find some gold and many of the gold hunters failed. Secondly, the environment of the American dream is completely different. While people in the East were perfectly happy in a suburb with their house and a car, the gold rush brings the Western dreamers to less comfortable conditions, to the mountains. Lastly, it is apt to mention how the gold was actually discovered. A Swiss immigrant called John Sutter “needed lumber and turned to his American partner, James Marshall, to build him a sawmill [...] Marshall was inspecting the construction site when he picked up a yellow nugget: gold” (170). Consequently, “[They] tried to keep the discovery quiet, but it was no use” (170). From Marshall and Sutter’s wish to keep their discovery secret so that just the two of them could take advantage of it we learn that “the frontier is productive of individualism” (Turner 1998, 53).

2.5.3. Gambling and Easy Money

Whilst the gold rush engages people’s interest as early as the nineteenth century, gambling as another seemingly easy way to get rich is the main enticement of the West in the twentieth century. In a similar way to the gold rush, the idea of gambling also omits hard work (or any work at all) in search of welfare for an individual.

This dream does not celebrate the idea of hard work, instead enshrining effortless attainment as the essence of its appeal. Which is not necessarily to say that applied intelligence and effort don’t play a role. Very often they do, sometimes far more than these dreamers would like to acknowledge to themselves, let alone anyone else. But it’s rewards that

are least strenuously earned that are the most savoured, and even those that *are* strenuously earned tend to be discussed in ways that suggest they aren't. (Cullen 2003, 160)

Nonetheless, it does not mean that when hard work is not factored in, then nothing else is, either.

It's not easy to get something for nothing. Even the most highly leveraged speculator usually has to come up with some collateral, and in those cases where there isn't a lot of money at stake, there may be other things that count at least as much: time, energy, reputation, a sense of hope. Gains demand gambles. (161)

These gains started to be looked for mainly in Las Vegas where the gaming business happened to be the most developed. Since its establishment at the beginning of the twentieth century, Las Vegas has always been the place most popular with gamblers and not for no reason it is often nicknamed "Sin City".

2.5.4. Glittering Hollywood

Finally, Hollywood appears to be the venue of the implementation of the Western American dream where an individual might become not only rich and high-ranking, but also famous. "The first decade of the twentieth century was pivotal in the new industry of motion pictures" (172) and it was just Hollywood which became the centre of it. Hundreds of movies have been produced since then and hundreds of its actors have been turned into celebrities known worldwide. Fame starts to be an important aspect of not only American society but also of the

American dream. Considering fame, no one can reach it without their audience and admirers.

The question remains what it is that makes the celebrities and their lives so attractive and that even makes “ordinary” people spend money on magazines about them. In other respects, an actor’s or a singer’s might be just another profession. But again, it is probably money and fame that manages to show them as worthy of attention. “Since the Graphic Revolution¹, however, much of our thinking about human greatness has changed. Two centuries ago when a great man appeared, people looked for God’s purpose in him; today we look for his press agent” (Boorstin 1963, 55). It follows that a celebrity is in fact just an employee doing their work and their greatness is attributed to them artificially.

Within the last century, and especially since about 1900, we seem to have discovered the processes by which fame is manufactured. Now, at least in the United States, a man’s name can become a household word overnight. The Graphic Revolution suddenly gave us, among other things, the means of fabricating well-knownness. [...] Our power to fill our minds with more “big names” has increased our demand for Big Names and our willingness to confuse the Big Names with the Big Man. Again mistaking our powers for our necessities, we have filled our world with artificial fame. (57)

But even if it was artificial, the celebrities and in fact the fulfillers of this Western dream would still enjoy it. The opportunity is there to be seized and as long as there is audience to appreciate them, it will keep on being tempting.

¹ The Graphic Revolution refers to the outset of film industry

2.6. The American Dream in the Present

Even these days, the concept of the American dream is still very appealing and many politicians or advertisers take advantage of it. They know very well that, even through the centuries, it conserves its attraction. The current president of the US, Barack Obama, himself testifies to that by having written a book called *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* and also by having chosen “Yes, We Can” as his slogan in the presidential elections. In addition to this, in the last State of the Union address he declared that “we can restore an economy where everyone gets a fair shot, everyone does their fair share, and everyone plays by the same set of rules” (Obama 2012).

Similarly, the American dream also seems to be a good choice in advertising. To take an example from this area, here is one created in terms of liberty and opportunity. It is, in fact, “a celebration of the right to buy – if you’ve got the cash or credit” (Cullen 2003, 39). The motto “There are some things that money can’t buy [...] For everything else, there’s MasterCard” (39) managed to meet the objectives of good publicity – to attract the customer’s attention and make him remember it. The American dream was, in this case, a handy help.

As far as ordinary American citizens are considered, they seem to not rely so much on the American dream as their leader does.

Recent surveys uniformly find Americans less sanguine about their own prospects and about those of the next generation, their children, than at any point in the last half century. [...] 55 percent of respondents believed the American Dream would be more difficult to realize in the next

generation, compared to only 9 percent that thought it would be easier and 34 percent who thought it would be about the same. (Jillson 2004, 269)

Even though not everybody is overly excited about the dream, it remains born in people's mind and its power will probably remain attractive also for future generations.

2.7. The Deconstruction of the American Dream

So far in this thesis, the American dream has been prevalently portrayed as a splendid idea and a good chance for a better life. However, it has its weak points which make the dream rather naïve than magnificent. This is not to say it is completely meaningless in interpreting American life and culture, but it fails regarding some of its aspects.

As Jillson (2004) claims, "The American Dream has always been more open to some than to others: it has been more open to wealthy white men than to women and people of color" (8). This remark makes it clear that race and gender may put some at disadvantage, and equality and liberty are questionable entities.

To start with the race issue, the work of Crèvecoeur already evinces features of exclusion. His conception of an American tellingly overlooks the possibility that a new American is not a white man.

What then is the American, this new man? He is either an European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose

son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American. (Lemay 1988, 120)

The new American, from the examples given, is highly likely a white descendant of a European. Neither Africans nor Asians are mentioned as participants in the process of the creation of the new American. Amongst the majority of white society, black skin is just too visible and distinctive a characteristics to be overlooked. “Color caste declares that people bearing the stigmata of color and certain other physical characteristics that have become status symbols can have only one status throughout their lives and must not change it” (Warner 1962, 89).

Although the American dream carries the hope of mobility, colour often deprives the African Americans of this opportunity. They were not always treated justly and one of the most curious paradoxes remains the fact that even Thomas Jefferson, author of the lines that “all men are created equal” was a slave owner. The failure of the American dream in terms of race equality, however, is not only evident from the Declaration of Independence. It breaks also the American constitution. The fourteenth amendment states that “[...] nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty or property, without due process of law” (Peltason 1987, 25) which apparently was not always granted.

The most important struggle for race equality takes place in the sixties, when the civil right movements arise. “In the 1960s most American blacks were still worse housed, worse educated, and worse paid than other Americans” (O’Callaghan 1997, 114), which was a state that called for changes. Equality and even brotherhood started to be demanded by African Americans. Martin Luther King became one of

their leaders and it is no wonder (with the American dream in mind) that his most famous speech was entitled “I Have a Dream.”

Yet, in spite of the endeavours of the civil right movements, “In the late 1980s black unemployment was still higher than white unemployment. The average incomes of black Americans were still lower than those of whites. So were their standards of health and education” (115). In addition to that, the American dream, especially the dream of ownership, was not attainable for many African Americans.

In 1993, 42 percent of blacks owned their own home; by 1999 that number had risen to 47 percent, while 73 percent of whites owned their homes by 1999. Much of the difference between white and black home ownership rates is explained by the differences in education and income, but some is the result of continuing discrimination. (Jillson 2004, 262)

Besides these failures, the civil right movements bring certain improvements. “Blacks and whites studied side by side in schools and colleges. They worked side by side in all kinds of occupations. Increasing numbers lived side by side in the same districts” (O’Callaghan 1997, 115). Above all, “people seemed to be learning to judge each other more by the content of their characters than by the color of their skins” (115).

The topic of inequality could also be discussed in relation to women. “Women’s struggle for equality in America, while less overt and less obviously intense than the struggle of blacks, has, in its own way, been just as difficult” (Jillson 2004, 9). With the general conviction that they were not completely independent, it was harder for them to become self-made.

The Christian teaching that wives were to love, honor, and obey their husbands was powerfully reinforced by the common-law principle of “coverture”. Coverture held that women were subsumed, or covered, by the legal personality of their father until marriage and their husband after marriage. (9)

Under such circumstances it would be a difficult task for a woman to reach the same treatment men had. The right to vote for women could be considered a step forward, though it took quite a long time for the US policy to ratify the nineteenth amendment in 1920, according to which “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex” (Peltason 1987, 28). Despite this progress, the position of the sexes was not noticeably balanced till the eighties. The education and wages of women appeared to approximate the men’s ones only by then.

During the 1980s and 1990s the wage gap between men and women narrowed for two reasons. First, while men’s wages fell during the 1980s, women’s fell less rapidly, and, in the case of the well-educated women, actually rose throughout the decade and into the 1990s. Second, women continued their educational gains. As late as 1980, men still received more than half of the bachelor’s and master’s degrees awarded in the United States. Men received more than twice as many doctoral degrees and more than three times as many professional degrees than women. By 1997, however, women had surpassed men at both BA and MA levels and were claiming about 70 percent of the doctoral and professional degrees being claimed by men. (264)

What follows is that the American dream is therefore not attainable to the same extent for everybody and the idea is wrought with exclusions. Unfortunately, African Americans and women are not the only two groups whose fulfilment of the American dream was hindered. So it was in case of other minorities, such as Asians or the native inhabitants. While important, their discussion is not included here because of the fact that they are not directly relevant for the analysis of the two novels in question.

3. Representation of the American Dream in Literature

As it has been already shown, the American dream has had a great impact on various areas of American society. The spirit of such a widespread idea lingers amongst Americans. And since it appears to be an important issue, it is also reflected in various media. The introductory chapter about the American dream, for instance, mentions Madonna's song *American Life*. Hereafter, literature is brought into focus.

As far as the American dream in literature is concerned, it is most commonly related to from-rags-to-riches stories. It is so mainly thanks to Horatio Alger, Jr. who "wrote a series of hugely popular novels describing the course from rags to riches" (Jillson 2003, 127). The American dream occupies a clear position in this kind of stories – they show, in fact, its fulfilment. A child from humble conditions grows up into a successful well-off man. All this due to his tenacity and diligence. *Ragged Dick* by Alger is, for instance, a good example.

However, there are also works which contain components of the phenomenon although they do not show such a straightforward development of an individual. *The Catcher in the Rye* by Jerome David Salinger and *American Pastoral* by Philip Roth are such novels, too. The following part of this thesis shows the American dream in these two novels and demonstrates that the American dream in literature does not need to be necessarily limited just to the aforesaid from-rags-to-riches-stories. Via the life of Seymour Levov and Holden Caulfield's critical attitude to the society which surrounds them, it is shown that the American dream is not, in fact, in all respects, and under all conditions such a splendid idea. It transpires that people should not rely on it uncritically, as it is not destined for everybody, nor can it meet all the prospects of a better future. Last but not least, it cannot guarantee happiness,

no matter how arduously it has been pursued. The books concerned represent the criticism of the American dream for its failure in the aspects mentioned above.

3.1. The Catcher in the Rye

The story of Holden Caulfield, a boy expelled from school staying some days in New York before he goes home to face his parents, is well known nowadays. His irony and strong opinions have already amused many readers, and have also been the subject of various discussions about the book. This thesis omits the typical controversy whether Holden, a sixteen-year-old adolescent, is already a grown up with mature views or still just a petulant child. It rather takes notice of his perception of the world, through which the reader can see the protagonist's critical attitude towards American society. As Whitfield (1997) notices, there is an "increasing dissonance between American ideals and the realities of social experience" (595) which is exactly what Holden criticizes – the surviving American myths in which the society still believes. While this society is liable to succumb to resounding promises of the American dream, Holden, in fact, deconstructs the idea and points out its failures and controversies.

To begin with the personality of the protagonist, Holden Caulfield, the narrator, is a school boy enjoying a few days off in New York, where the fact that he is just a school boy is important. With his age (sixteen) it is impossible to be self-made, considering that he has not finished his education yet and even has not initiated his professional career which could move him forward or bring him its desired rewards. This is to stress that Holden is not meant to be described as an American dream achiever. He is, however, a crucial reflector-character. Through his demeanour and remarks he inconspicuously denounces various aspects of the society of his time and,

of course, of the American dream. Throughout the novel, there are allusions and passages that make reference to the dream, both Eastern and Western.

The Eastern conception is discussed first. Self-made people, education, work, religion, money and materialism are items that Holden takes notice of, and criticizes in relation to his experience. As he is a multiple school dropout and his story in the book begins with him leaving Pencey, it is fitting to start with that.

Pencey is considered to be a prestigious school, raising successful and self-confident graduates. Its motto, trying to attract the attention of potential students and their parents is “Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear thinking men” (Salinger 1994, 2). This transformation and, in fact, upward mobility, shows that the school is prestigious and also appealing for (at least) one reason: it heeds the American dream. The motto reflects its promises and its prospect of a better future as self-made men (men is meant literally here, as Pencey is a boys’ school). In this case, the American dream is used to help with the formation of splendid gentlemen. Throughout the novel, Holden meets various people who ask him about his school. Always when he tells them that he goes to Pencey (he still claims he goes there to avoid explanations about his expelling), he is confronted with an appreciative recognition that it is indeed a great school.

However, no matter how good credit it has, Holden would still claim the very opposite. “I didn’t know anybody there that was splendid and clear-thinking and all. Maybe two guys. If that many. And they probably *came* to Pencey that way” (2). He refuses that Pencey could guarantee such mobility, by which he also rejects that the American dream could either.

Yet, Pencey’s management tries to prove they can fulfil the promises of their auspicious motto. To let everybody learn about it, they stay in touch with former

school graduates. Mr. Ossenburger, after whom a wing of the Pencey dorms was named, is one of them. On one occasion, he is invited to come and share his experience, which is the following: After his studies, he started to run a business and became number one in his branch. He got so rich that he could even donate money, which he did in case of Pencey in order to support the school whose students could grow into self-made guys like himself. Such a story might be a fulfilment of the American dream for many.

However, Holden Caulfield, again, makes a mockery of it.

He made a pot of dough in the undertaking business after he got out of Pencey. What he did, he started these undertaking parlors all over the country that you could get members of your family buried for about five bucks apiece. You should see old Ossenburger. He probably just shoves them in a sack and dumps them in the river. (14)

But it is not only Ossenburger's life that is ridiculed; it is also the speech he gives on his visit to Pencey. This speech also refers to the Eastern dream, specifically to the very first dreamers and their religion. As Ossenburger delivers, God and Christianity are important parts of his successful life. "He told us we should always pray to God – talk to him and all – wherever we were. He told us we ought to think of Jesus as our buddy and all" (14). The assertion that they should think of Jesus as their buddy refers to the special relationship the Americans are presumed to have with God and, apparently, with Jesus as well. The entire world looks up to and prays to them. Americans, in addition to that, are their buddies. This belief in its uniqueness in terms of religion and one's relation to deity is also negated by Holden: "He said *he* talked to Jesus all the time. Even when he was driving his car. That killed me. I can just see the big phony bastard shifting into first gear and asking Jesus to send him a

few more stiffs” (14). Or, as Whitfield (1997) has counted, Holden’s disrespect to religion and its special position in America might be also seen from the fact that he “uses the Lord’s name in vain two hundred times” (597)

Once driving has been mentioned, it should not be neglected, as the car is one of the symbols of a fulfilled American dream and it appears in various parts of the book. Amongst others, it is connected with the aforesaid Ossenburger because “he came up to school in this big goddam Cadillac, and we had to stand up in the grandstand and give him a locomotive – that’s a cheer” (Salinger 1994, 14). The use of the intensifier “goddam” hints at Holden’s attitude to cars and people’s obsession with them. He expresses his disgust with “Guys that always talk about how many miles they get to a gallon in their goddam cars” (111). Similarly, condemning infatuation with materialism, he once describes a boys’ school to Sally, a friend of his. “It’s full of phonies, and all you do is study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam Cadillac some day” (118). The car also figures in the list of things he hates.

Take most people, they’re crazy about cars. They worry if they get a little scratch on them, and they’re always talking about how many miles they get to a gallon, and if they get a brand-new car already they start thinking about trading it in for one that’s even newer. I don’t even like *old* cars. I mean they don’t even interest me. (117)

In the same list he mentions he hates “living in New York” (117), and adds a brief explanation of what specifically annoys him. Later in his story, he asserts that “In New York, boy, money really talks – I’m not kidding” (62). Money talks and Holden needs them, too. He even borrows them from his little sister.

However, “[w]hile Holden is quite fixated on money, he is well aware, on an unconscious level, that money cannot buy him love or higher self-esteem” (Pearlman 1995, 225). He tends to criticize money and possession, as it is likely to be confused with happiness. His thought, “[g]oddam money. It always ends up making you blue as hell” (Salinger 1994, 102) refers to the issue of pursuit and the controversy of what it is that ought to be actually pursued – whether happiness, property or both. Or, there is still the alternative that the two items are, actually, a whole where one cannot exist without the other.

As for Holden and his attitude to money and rich people, it is evident that he sees the American dream as limited just to the pursuit of property, leaving out happiness completely. A part of an earlier quotation about the cars states that “if they get a brand-new car already they start thinking about trading it in for one that’s even newer” (117). It follows from this that material achievements do not make these people happier. It just makes them greedier which prevents them from experiencing real human happiness. This view of Holden’s is further backed up by the fact that *The Great Gatsby* is one of his favourite books (127), as it reflects the decay of the American dream and portrays the shallow life of the American rich, which is likely the reason Holden likes it.

Apart from the Eastern aspects of the dream, there are abundant references to the Western variation in the book, too. One of the most patent ones concerns Holden’s older brother D.B. who moved to the West, to Hollywood. He is a successful story writer and the West promises him a better future through writing movies. Holden’s very first description of him in the book evinces features of the two variations of the dream:

He's in Hollywood. [...] He just got a Jaguar. One of those little English jobs that can do around two hundred miles an hour. It cost him damn near four thousand bucks. He's got a lot of dough, now. He didn't use to. He used to be a regular writer, when he was home. [...] Now he's out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute. (1)

D.B., thus, achieves his Eastern dream (his car) in the West. Why it is so is already a subject of the Western dream: it is easier there. The way to success and money is more effortless there than in the East. This is, obviously, why he left for Hollywood and also why Holden calls him a prostitute. D.B. is just too comfortable to try hard and become gradually self-made in New York when there is an easier way to get rich (and maybe even famous) in the West. But it is not only Holden who thinks his brother misuses his talent there. Mr Antolini, Holden's former teacher, is also sceptical about the West's lure:

When D.B. went to Hollywood, Mr Antolini phoned him up and told him not to go. He went anyway, though. Mr Antolini said that anybody that could write like D.B. had no business going out to Hollywood. That's exactly what I said, practically. (163)

From this deliberation it follows that the West is not considered to be a serious place for quality writers and it is rather viewed as a superficial world where everybody, gifted or not, idle or hard-working, tries to do their best to succeed and get what they want.

Although there are doubts about the West's reputation, many people still believe it is a great destination and find it very thrilling. Lillian Simmons, D.B.'s ex-girlfriend is one of them. Holden meets her by chance in a club in New York. She asks about his brother and when Holden tells her he is in Hollywood, she reacts

astoundingly with “In Hollywood! How marvelous!” (78) and “How exciting” (79) which Holden comments for himself that “You could tell she thought it was a big deal, his being in Hollywood. Almost everybody does. Mostly people who’ve never read any of his stories. It drives me crazy, though” (79).

Holden seems to be disappointed by the fact that his surroundings often appreciate his brother’s stay in Hollywood more than his work itself. As to D.B.’s work, Holden is proud of his brother as a writer of books. However, he disapproves of him writing movies. Later on in the story, Holden thinks of getting away from his problems to a new place and considers the circumstances under which D.B. could visit him.

I’d let D.B. come out and visit me for a while if he wanted a nice, quiet place for his writing, but he couldn’t write any movies in my cabin, only stories and books. I’d have this rule that nobody could do anything phony when they visited me. If anybody tried to do anything phony, they couldn’t stay. (184)

This statement also leads us to another typical subject of the West – movie production. Not surprisingly, Holden does not like it either and cannot help himself to criticize it. On one occasion, he invites her friend Sally to go to see a movie but as he concludes, he watches movies only when there is nothing better to do. Otherwise, they also belong to the category “phony” (104).

In relation to movies, he also does not forget to mention the actors and express his anger with them and their superficiality.

In the first place, I hate actors. They never act like people. They just think they do. Some of the good ones do, in a very slight way, but not in

a way that's fun to watch. And if any actor's really good, you can always tell he *knows* he's good, and that spoils it. (105)

Holden appears to denounce both actors' work and behaviour. He obviously does not think of their profession as demanding or important. In addition to that, when he happens to admit there is somebody performing really well, the effect is damaged by the fact that the actor in question knows about it and acts with awareness of his own greatness. This actor might be then called a Western American dream achiever. His dream was reached, in accordance with Western requirements, as soon as possible. It is, however, natural that he may become a star overnight, as the movies are premièred immediately after they are shot. Certain disdain towards actors might be also noticed in Holden's description of D.B.'s new girlfriend, "this English babe that's in this new picture he's writing. She was pretty affected" (192).

Characteristically, Holden mocks actors at more points in the book. For example, he meets a group of girls in a bar and spends some time of the evening with them. One of them tells him that "I and my girl friends saw Peter Lorre² last night [...] The movie actor. In person. He was buyin' a newspaper. He's *cute*" (64). These words of her just cause Holden to think that "She was really a moron" (64). Later with the same girl in the same bar, as he gets fed up with her and her admiration for actors and fame, he invents that he has just seen another celebrity. "So I told her I just saw Gary Cooper³, the movie star, on the other side of the floor" (66). The girl, infatuated with the fact that she is so close to somebody so famous and successful, does not hesitate to tell her friends about him. "They got all excited and asked if she'd seen him and all. Old Mart said she's only caught a glimpse of him. That killed me" (66).

² Peter Lorre – an Austrian-American actor (1904-1964)

³ Gary Cooper – an American film actor (1901-1961)

This craziness about the stars testifies to truth that the Western American dream is very appealing. Some people are not only excited about the possibility that they could reach it, but also about the mere presence in proximity of somebody who has already become rich and famous, no matter how.

Although Holden tends to be critical about the West, he himself cannot resist its prospects of ease. He knows his parents will be angry with him because of his being expelled so he imagines possible solutions to avoid facing the problem. At last, he finds it in the West.

Finally, what I decided I'd do, I decided I'd go away. I decided I'd never go home again and I'd never go away to another school again. [...] I'd start hitchhiking my way out West. [...] and in a few days I'd be somewhere out West where it was very pretty and sunny and where nobody'd know me and I'd get a job. (178)

Once he is in trouble in the East, he does not hesitate to think of moving to the West. Since life seems to be easier there, it is tempting to leave everything behind and strive for a new, better living there. Even though he does not make his plan come true, the mere fact that even somebody like Holden thinks of that proves that the West is very attractive and so is the American dream. After Holden's trouble with schools in the East, it might be an opportunity to him to stay indeed in the West because according to Whitfield (1997), "[t]he story is, after all, told from a sanitarium in California – a grim terminus given the common belief that the West offers a second chance" (593).

In spite of the momentary, passing weakness in which Holden thinks of the West as a Promised Land, the work, generally, indicates that the American dream cannot keep its promises. It is suggested that it does not guarantee happiness. Any

mobility is shown to be completely unfeasible and what seems to be its fulfilment is, actually, a shallow impression limited to satisfaction with possession.

3.2. American Pastoral

American Pastoral, as it has already been suggested, also belongs to the category of novels in which the American dream is portrayed. Curiously, it shows the ambiguity of the phenomenon only through one character, the protagonist. Seymour Irving Levov, nicknamed the Swede, is an embodiment of both the fulfilment and the collapse of the myth. Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator who used to know the Swede as a school boy, meets him as an old, ill man and “imagines that the Swede has lived the charmed all-American dream” (Stanley 2005, 7). However, he learns about Levov’s bitter destiny and decides to write the story of a successful man’s life which has been damaged by his own daughter, his own offspring, in contradiction to the fact that the next generation was supposed to do better.

The American dream has many aspects and several of them are mentioned in the book. The Swede would not have achieved his position without his ancestors and the Levov saga is discussed first, as the rise of individuals and even of the whole family might be clearly seen through various generations.

As a family they still flew the flight of the immigrant rocket, the upward, unbroken immigrant trajectory from slave-driven great-grandfather to self-driven grandfather to self-confident, accomplished, independent father to the highest high flier of them all, the fourth generation child for whom America was to be heaven itself. (Roth 1998, 122)

This short extract itself communicates the presence of the American dream in more respects. In the first place, it keeps the requirement that every new generation living in America should be more successful than the previous one in attaining the

best possible form of the dream. Secondly, it mentions America as “heaven itself,” which is a comparison which might as well be interpreted as the Promised Land. In case of the Levov it is undoubtedly so, as their first ancestor in the States used to be a manual worker in the tannery of a glove factory, whereas the Swede is already a conscious, wealthy proprietor of such a company, the Newark Maid – a thing that they could not have imagined in Europe, from where they came, to happen. Last but not least, the upward mobility, one of the main pillars of the American dream, appears to be patently achieved. Obviously, the family underwent “the ritual postimmigrant struggle for success” (86).

Nevertheless, the upward mobility and improving financial situation of the family was not just accidental. Hard work also plays a key role here and the Swede’s father, Lou Levov, is very proud to testify to this, highlighting his merits on every occasion possible. “They think somebody gave it to me? Who? Who gave it to me? Who gave me anything, ever? Nobody! What I have I built! With work – w-o-r-k!” (193). Not avoiding the necessary work together with living in a New York suburb, evidently, the story of the Levov happens to count with the Eastern variation of the dream. The Levov are indeed an exemplar of this variation of the American dream, as they work hard and become gradually more successful. They also meet the characteristics that rewards such as a house and a car are inseparable from the success together with the happiness that this all brings them.

Having described the family conditions, it is apt to focus on the protagonist, Seymour Levov. Returning back to the first paragraph of this chapter, it is mentioned that he is both keen on the American dream and consequently devastated by it. To understand this, his life and how it actually met the American dream in various periods of it needs to be explained. The Swede has always been a successful man, in

a way corresponding to his age. The school boy Swede was already worthy of attention. With his handsome look, nice character, and being a star player of various sports, he easily became an object of admiration to the majority of his fellows. “Zuckerman, who worshipped the older Swede during their adolescence, first conjures up an idealistic vision of the Swede from his childhood. The legendary Swede, with his fair complexion and athletic powers, embodies a ‘symbol of hope’ to his Newark neighborhood” (Stanley 2005, 6). By carrying the hope he actually did what the American dream itself is expected to do – to carry hope. As far as the possible abilities of a boy are concerned, he did the best and his school mates, worshipping him just as Zuckerman did, dreamed about being a Swede, too. That is, actually, exactly the same thing that people striving for accomplishment of their own dream do – they look up to the American dream’s achievers, wanting to be like them, having the hope that they can make it, too.

The Swede indeed seems to be a perfect idol because he “had never failed to win whatever he wanted” (Roth 1998, 30). Later as a grown-up he keeps on being as great as before. He inherits the Newark Maid, his father’s factory, trying to run the family business with the same enthusiasm and honour as his father did. Another important event in his life is his marriage with the beautiful Dawn Dwyer, a former winner of the Miss New Jersey pageant.

Dawn, by getting married to Seymour, also arranges an upward shift on the social scale. Daughter of a plumber, now Miss New Jersey, she enters the world of middle-class society. Although her surroundings attribute her rise only to her victory in the beauty competition, she persists in claiming that “she worked like hell, all by herself” (199). She also arduously denies the frequent objections that she is just a superficial pretty face and repeats tenaciously that she “only went after the damned

scholarship so Danny [her younger brother] could go to college and [her] father wouldn't have to pay" (198).

In any case, involvement in such a competition does not represent a stable job and appears to be rather a quick search for easy money. Dawn therefore becomes the exception in the Levov family, having pursued the Western dream. She consciously avoids the continuous hard work that her husband appreciates so much and strives for getting as much as possible in the shortest time period manageable. Infatuated with the quick success, she sees just the coveted results and neglects the means to achieve them.

In spite of this little difference, the young couple enjoys their American life and their little daughter Meredith. The Swede expresses his happiness at this stage of his life ecstatically:

Why shouldn't I be where I want to be? Why shouldn't I be with *who* I want to be? Isn't that what this country's all about? I want to be where I want to be. [...] That's what being an American is - isn't it? I'm with you, I'm with the baby, I'm at the factory during the day, the rest of time I'm out here, and that's everywhere in this world I *ever* want to be. We own a piece of America, Dawn. I couldn't be happier if I tried. (315)

The Swede, still happy so far, sees himself also as an owner. Compatibly with the American dream, they have an amazing house in Old Rimrock, a village close to New York. According to Stanley, "his house represents his own American pastoral" (Stanley 2005, 9), which is really true, considering the previous quotation about his happiness where he asserts that he is exactly where he ever wants to be. Considering his life up to this point, "[h]e believes he has accumulated the visible signs of an American identity: success in business, sports, and home life" (8).

Unfortunately, his delight is not long standing. “Roth pits Swede Levov as a true believer in ‘the benign national myth’ of the American pastoral against his 16-year old daughter Merry, a military radical” (1). When his lovely beloved daughter grows up she starts to sympathize with the Vietnam anti-war movements. Gradually she comes to be against anything that might be called American at all and she “moves outside the system, attacking the basis of middle-class values” (12). She depreciates his father’s efforts and work, his social status and also him being a successful entrepreneur running a business. Quarrels between Merry and her father become a daily routine, yet the Swede still hopes it is a matter of puberty which will fade away with time and he does not take any strict measures to stop Merry from taking part in the anti-war movements. The climax of her revolt is when she blows up the Hamlin’s store to demonstrate her anger and by doing so she accidentally kills a man, Doctor Fred Conlon. Seymour is completely shocked by that and never is really able to understand why this happened. He remains convinced that he has done everything right and cannot find any reason why his daughter has “no interest whatever in being the next successful Levov” (Roth 1998, 86).

In addition to that, the victim, doctor Conlon, is described as “a man who cared about his family and the hospital with the same devotion – a hard worker, a good guy” (216) which suggests that Conlon also achieved (or at least had aspirations to do so) the American dream. Merry, thus, does not kill only a human being but symbolically, the American dream itself, too. Her America-loving father’s life, logically, is never going to be the same again after this terrifying incident.

Merry disappears right after the attack and Swede spends five long years without a message from her. The only news he has is what the mysterious Rita Cohen delivers to him. Nevertheless, she dedicates the time with Swede rather to a

criticism of him and his way of life than to informing him about his only daughter. She neglects or wants to neglect his merits and attainments. To her, he personifies simply an “all-American capitalist criminal” (139).

Seymour, exposed to her diatribe, finds his own answer to the question why she hates him so much that she even bothers to come to tell him personally in spite of the fact that she has never met him before. He is convinced that she envies his success and his American dream, which is something too remote and inaccessible for somebody like Rita. Although he does not dare to say it aloud, what he thinks is the following:

You hate us not because we're reckless but because we're prudent and sane and industrious and agree to abide by law. You hate us because we haven't failed. Because we've worked hard and honestly to become the best in the business and because of that we have prospered, so you envy us and you hate us and want to destroy us. (214)

For five desperate years, Rita tells him nothing meaningful, but rude insults until the day when he receives a letter from her, revealing where his daughter lives at the moment. He does not hesitate to visit her and he finds his angry radical fat Merry transformed into a skinny, now overly peaceful Jain, claiming she knows nobody named Rita Cohen.

Yet, the two of them would have the same strong opinions about the Swede. Rita Cohen, during one of her visits, for instance, calls him “nothing but a shitty little capitalist who exploits the brown and yellow people of the world and lives in luxury behind the nigger-proof security gates of his mansion” (133). Similarly, Merry who was initially determined to defend the rights of the Vietnamese now fights for the equal treatment for minorities. During their meeting, she tries to explain to her father

that “nonviolence is the core of truth that created Martin Luther King. And Martin Luther King is the core of truth that created the civil rights movement” (246).

This admiration of Martin Luther King and the civil right movement might be considered strange or even paradoxical from her side because she disapproves of her father as an American dream achiever whereas she would wish the African Americans to manage it. After all, what King wants to promise them is equality, better life conditions and happiness, aspects which could definitely lead them to dream fulfilment. The sixties, thus, might bring new hopes for some people. Nonetheless, to the Swede they might rather seem that they are nothing but “a rupture, an interrogation of the mythic basis of the American dream” (Stanley 2005, 3).

When the Swede leaves her, he is full of disillusionment. All the values he has ever appreciated are suddenly spoiled. He does not feel like an exploiter. He was just so kind to employ the people, no matter if black or white, and pay them for their work. His industriousness, his business and his paternal love are all rejected by his only child. How is that possible, considering his perfect, impeccable ancestors?

Three generations. All of them growing. The working. The saving. The success. Three generations in raptures over America. Three generations of becoming one with people. And now with the fourth it had all come to nothing. The total vandalization of their world. (Roth 1998, 237)

Contrary to his wife, he is not able to get over this misfortune.

Dawn, however, takes advantage of the fact that America is a country of second chances and new opportunities and tries to forget about her cheerless past with Merry. The fact that she chose the Western dream to pursue enables her to forget about the unpleasant events with the same ease with which she expected to achieve

her goals. She decides to flee from the old house full of bitter memories and move to a new “modern dream house” (192). In addition to the new house, she also decides to get a new face because “why not to give her the opportunity? Why not give this woman *every* opportunity?” (352). Finally, Dawn with a facelift, a new house and even a new lover starts to enjoy American life again.

However, the poor Swede cannot do the same. As his younger brother Jerry remarks, “One day life started laughing at him and it never let up” (74). Seymour cannot stop wondering

How could a child of his be so blind as to revile the “rotten system” that had given her own family every opportunity to succeed? [...] The family that started out in a tannery, at one with, side by side with, the lowest of the low – now to her “capitalist dogs.” (213)

Apparently, the system happens to be really rotten. The Swede’s system – his faith in the American dream – proves to be deceiving and non-functioning. “He learned his worst lesson that life can teach – that it makes no sense” (81). He also learns that myths such as the American dream may help one to get ahead as well as let them down and ruin them. In contrast to his earlier belief, it cannot guarantee happiness because when one’s daughter is a murderer and the Rimrock terrorist, “happiness is never spontaneous again. It is artificial and, even then, bought at the price of an obstinate estrangement from oneself and one’s history” (81).

In other words, he realizes that Rita and Merry did not in fact criticize poor Seymour. Through his person they lambast the American dream with its false promises to bring happiness and rewards for someone’s efforts even when they really try hard as it supposes.

3.3. American Pastoral vs. The Catcher in the Rye

As it has already been proved, both *American Pastoral* and *The Catcher in the Rye* are undoubtedly novels bearing abundant references to the American dream and its criticism. Although the protagonists, a school boy, Holden Caulfield, and a self-made man, Seymour Levov, are two completely different kinds of people, the ways in which the dream is spoiled in their otherwise diverse stories are actually very similar. More specifically, who the person is who actually criticizes the dream shares a deep resemblance: in both cases it is accomplished by teenagers – people who are themselves too young to achieve their dream and possibly enjoy its rewards and who, in these novels, paradoxically as it may seem, come from middle-class families appreciating the American dream.

Holden Caulfield and Mary Levov, both aged sixteen and living (within a decade) in the same time period seem to be completely disillusioned by the American dream, a thing that their parents perhaps would not have been able to imagine or take into consideration. Each of the two youngsters deconstructs the myth in their own way. Holden, the main character of *The Catcher in the Rye* happens to be too comfortable or even lazy to enforce others to pay attention to his beliefs and it is only the reader who finds out his attitudes. In contrast, Mary Levov does not hesitate to show her anger. Although she is not the protagonist of *American Pastoral*, she plays the key role in the deconstruction of the American dream in her father's story.

To begin with Holden Caulfield, his strongly dissenting views on the American dream are seemingly not obvious when compared to the case of Mary Levov. He does not attack anybody directly and he does not dare to express his objections against the American dream or its pursuers aloud. He neither tries to take any action to convince his opponents nor performs in a way that would clearly demonstrate his

stance. He rather observes his surroundings, formulates a criticism, but does not share it with other people and rather keeps his findings for himself. It may seem strange that he disapproves of middle class pro-American dream society as he, as it has been suggested, comes from such an environment. In contrast with Mary's origin, not much is known about his family and its background because he spends only a really short time describing his family members. Nevertheless, from the few references he makes to them it can be learned that his father is a busy lawyer earning quite big money and his mother probably seems to be, similarly to Dawn, a housewife. Bearing in mind the fact that apart from their New York flat the Caulfield own a house in Maryland, it might be easily guessed that they surely belong to upper middle-class American dream defenders. Although they seem to be exactly the sort of people who Holden would highly likely criticize, he shows a neutral attitude to them and when referring to them, he treats them rather matter-of-factly.

However, whereas Holden respects his parents and his mockeries are directed mainly at various actors or wealthy people who tend to show up too often for his taste, Mary extends the list of her pro-American enemies to various politicians and mercilessly offends even those who gave her life. Unlike Holden who just keeps passively criticizing, she is a real woman of action who does not only contemplate her opinions. In contrast, it seems that whilst Holden spends too much time with cogitating upon the state of society, Mary does not make the effort to think over her acts too much. Sometimes it therefore happens to be hard to distinguish what is really her opinion and what is just a parroting of her older New York friends'. Without at least trying to express her views and change the status quo in a socially acceptable way, she chooses a means beyond the law. She becomes a radical, determined to show the world what her points of view are. She does not hesitate to kill five people

to ruin her America-loving father and his lifelong efforts and demonstrate that the American dream is a mere idea, not worthy of attention considering that it cannot actually keep its promises and highlighting that what indeed remained from the dream is just shallow materialism which does not bring happiness, although many people would think so and the American dream would falsely continue offering it.

That conclusion, however, represents exactly the same message that Holden Caulfield managed to deliver in a non-violent way. Still, in spite of this difference in accomplishment, the resulting effect remains the same. The attractiveness of the American dream is completely spoiled and its criticism managed to point out the inefficiency of this so widely believed phenomenon.

4. Conclusion

This thesis outlined the most quintessential characteristics of a widespread myth, the American dream. It showed how it actually emerged and underlined its main aspects – happiness, hard work, wealth, fame, social status and mobility. It also focused on the difference between the two variations of the dream – the Eastern one promising rewards for diligence and supposing a longer time period to be achieved, and the Western one offering quick wealth in exchange for taking a risk. It was demonstrated that both had their advocates and their appeal has been conserved from its outset to the present day. However, it was also shown that the American dream (whether Eastern or Western) failed regarding its accessibility and guarantee of its fulfilment.

The analysis of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *American Pastoral* managed to confirm this collapse. Through Holden Caulfield's criticism it was demonstrated that what remained from the dream was just shallow materialism, without the happiness originally promised by the myth. Similarly, Seymour Levov was a clear example of someone who, in spite of pursuing and even achieving the American dream, did not enjoy its benefits. He overestimated the dream which was then completely spoiled by his own daughter. Although he kept the material benefits he had accumulated, he was left confused about his world view and deprived of real happiness. Levov's story, lacking a happy ending, just as Holden's observations provide a criticism of the myth's worth a source of happiness.

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