



Universidad de Chile

Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades

Departamento de Literatura

**The Concept of the American Dream in Paul Auster's
"Mr. Vertigo"**

Alumno:

José Luis Toro

Profesor Guía:

Enrique Sandoval Gessler

Santiago, 2005

A Dios, por darme la oportunidad de demostrar mis capacidades.

A mis padres,

Lorenzo Toro y Cristina Villavicencio;

y a mi núcleo familiar,

*Quienes me dieron siempre su apoyo incondicional tan importante para
construir mi camino, además de enseñarme a ser perseverante y no bajar
los brazos.*

Muchas gracias, los amo.

Introduction

“People everywhere have hopes, but America is the only nation to claim its own collective dream. Politicians have invoked The American Dream ever since historian James Truslow Adams first coined the phrase in 1931. In his best-selling book, “the epic of America”, he described the dream as the average American’s “star in the west which led him on...in search of a home where toil would reap a sure reward, and no dead hands of custom or exaction would push him back into ‘his place’”. The phrase caught on like wildfire and endures still, though its meaning is often vague. To some the “sure reward” is a luxury car. To others it’s a college degree, a steady job that pays the bills, or a house in the suburbs and a family of four `a la Ozzie and Harriet. But the dream is above all America’s own brand of optimism, which was brought over by the first settlers and which presumes no limits to what anyone can have or achieve.”¹

This quotation seems to approximate more or less to the idea in which Americans rely on when thinking of their goals in life, their hopes and values, their achievements and what they understand by ‘progress`. For some Americans these feelings about their future have a name and boil down to what is known as The American Dream. The origins of this concept may come from different sources related to the American history and culture to social changes and, mainly, their independence issue. All of these have contributed to shape the American mind and that derives into a clearer idea of what constituted the so-called ‘American Dream`. That is why it is important to look at some pieces of the American history and its birth and growth as a nation, so as to be able to discuss this concept as carried out in one of Paul Auster’s works, for we can see in it different situations that we identify as belonging to the American culture, thus making Auster a good representative of American literature.

¹ : *America A to Z ‘people, places, customs, and culture`*, The Reader’s Digest Association, inc. Pleasantville, New York, USA. 1997, page 16.

The present work has two parts: on the one hand, the concept of The American Dream will be hopefully defined by means of different views on the American history and on those events that contributed to the formation of the American thought. For this, we need to consider and define some concepts that have been developed by the mankind along its history, as idea of 'Imperialism' and its expansion to the new continent, as well as another closely related to it as 'Mercantilism' since the latter is one of the engines of the former, and also one of the responsible of the discovery and colonization of the new continent, since 'trade' is one of the reasons that the first explorers and the different empires had to look for alternative routes to buy and sell their products. The early explorers that came into the American continent, the causes and consequences of their incursions, are also important in this work, as Sir Walter Raleigh, the Pilgrims or Forefathers and their importance for the Americans, Sir William Berkeley and the foundation of the Cavalier dynasty in Virginia, which later will settle the ground for slavery.

Slave trade is also considered in this research, its origin as indentured servants and later development into slaves will be taken into account to have a better understanding of the slaves and their living conditions that will be one of the causes of the American civil war.

During the process of colonization and the expansion to the west, the Pioneers also have an important role as well as the Indians and their resistance to the 'Whites'. I will refer to the facts that encouraged the settlers to go westwards and the Indian fights to maintain their lands.

Some of their reasons the immigrants had in the past to come to the American continent -as 'the gold rush'- will be also mentioned. For all this, a contextualization of some facts will be made and cites will be quoted when pertinent to support the research and in this way find or explain the sources towards a clear definition of the American Dream.

The second part of this research deals with an attempt to define what Americans understand as "American Dream" which, as stated previously, has different interpretations related to the American history and thought; this understanding of the concept is what will be taken into account when demonstrating how this ideal is developed through Paul Auster's novel *Mr. Vertigo*, either by means of some views on the American history as seen in this novel

or to the possible realization of the Dream through the characters` experience and their development during the plot who, as it will be seen, illustrate the different expressions of the American Dream in both, its positive and negative aspects.

1. Historical background

It is pertinent to see how the explorers and colonizers came to the American continent and in what conditions, as well as the reasons for them to leave their countries of origin and also their incorporation to the new world. They play an important role in the American history for their courage to go to new lands and their desire to civilize the wilderness and their natural owners, the Indians; and establish themselves. These episodes and the rationale behind them have helped in the formation of the American mentality, thus the creation of the so-called American Dream concept.

1.1. Imperialism and its Projection to the American Colonization

However, this inner impulse of conquest is not exclusive of Americans. Since ancient times the human being has made attempts to conquer and expand his control over others; many wars and empire formations can testify it along the mankind history. This form of human expansion is known nowadays as 'Imperialism` and came to be a new word in the mid-19th century. This concept is understood as

“...a policy of extending control or authority over foreign entities as a means of acquisition and/or maintenance of empires, either through direct territorial conquest or through indirect methods of exerting control on the politics and/or economy of other countries”.²

This term is often used to describe the policy of a country in maintaining colonies and dominance over distant lands, regardless of whether the country calls itself an empire. Many criticisms to the behavior of the different empires along the history are based on the grounds that it is a form of economic exploitation in which the imperialist power makes use of other countries as sources of raw materials and cheap labor, shaping their economies to suit its own interests and keeping their people in poverty.

² taken from: *Imperialism*, from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

1.2. Imperialism and its Feeding from Mercantilism

It is said that what these empires did was to profit from their colonies, and a way of achieving this is by means of the idea of 'Mercantilism', which is:

“An economic theory holding that the prosperity of a nation depends upon its supply of capital and that the global volume of trade is unchangeable. The amount of capital represented by 'bullion' (amount of precious metal held by the state), is best increased through a balance of trade with large exports and low imports”.³

Different visions of it arose along its history but one element mercantilists agreed on was the economic oppression of the working population. Laborers and farmers were to live at the margins of subsistence. The goal was to maximize production, with no concern for consumption. Extra money, free time, or education for the lower classes was seen to inevitably lead to vice, laziness, and harm to the economy, view that later will be reflected in the American colonies in the treatment to the indentured servants and slaves. The nation aggressively sought colonies and once under British control, regulations were imposed that allowed the colony to only produce raw materials and to only trade with Britain. These led to friction with the inhabitants of the colonies and these mercantilist policies were finally one of the major causes of the American Revolution.

It is necessary to establish a relationship here among some facts since the imperialist mind of the Europeans allowed the British, among other empires, to expand to the American continent and also to maintain the control over its colonies by means of different ways, as the mercantilist system which was developed mainly through trade (imports and exports) and also slave trade and the exploitation of those slaves, which later will be determinant in the American history. It is also important to have in mind the rigid control and the imposition of taxes on the colonies which the settlers rejected because, among other reasons, they didn't have representation in the English parliament; question that also will be determinant in the American Revolution.

³ taken from *Mercantilism*, *ibid*.

1.3. The First Explorers

1.3.1. Sir Walter Raleigh

As stated previously, great and powerful empires have existed during the history but for our purposes we need to concentrate on the British Empire and, specifically, its extension to the American continent which was carried out from the 16th century onwards. It owes its spread to the explorers and their incursions and settlements in the different continents. One of those first explorers that came to the American continent was Sir Walter Raleigh, a writer, poet, spy, seafarer, and explorer who belonged to a family with fundamentally Protestant religious orientation and experienced a number of near escapes during the reign of the Catholic queen Mary I of England (‘Bloody Mary’). As he had done with a number of military and naval engagements in France and Ireland, he wanted to run the risk to go to America and put together several voyages to travel, explore, and colonize the new world. The colonists who came with him settled in Roanoke Island, most of the first settlers were not skilled farmers or gardeners and the first attempt didn’t work. There was a second expedition, this time a more diversified group of settlers were sent, some entire families, under the guidance of John White, but the colony suddenly disappeared; it is known as ‘the lost colony’. Raleigh’s plan for colonization in “Virginia” (which included the present-day states of North Carolina and Virginia) in North America ended in failure at Roanoke Island, but he paved the way for subsequent colonies to take hold because of the lessons that were learned from his two attempts. His voyages were funded primarily by himself and his friends, and this never provided the steady stream of revenue necessary for starting a colony in America. Subsequent attempts in the early 17th century were made under the joint stock Virginia Company which was able to pool together the capital necessary to create successful colonies.

1.3.2. The Pilgrims

Within those following colonies that came after Raleigh, the Pilgrims or Forefathers must be mentioned as an important group of people who also settled in America. Even though there were already indigenous and settlers in those lands, the Pilgrims were the ones who brought a new lifestyle and changed the living conditions for both the indigenous and the

new settlers since the early 17th century. These Pilgrims belonged to a group of English Protestants called 'Puritans' (or 'The godly' as they preferred to call themselves). They sought further reforms or even separation from the established church during the reformation because they wanted the Church of England to resemble more closely the protestant churches of Europe, especially Geneva. Persecuted by the monarchy and the religious authority, many Protestants went into exile in Europe; others were barren from any profession that required official religious conformity. A portion of the group –the separatists, Congregationalist Puritans- sailed to Amsterdam in Holland under the guidance of the reverends William Brewster, Richard Clifton, and John Robinson. They settled in Leiden for 12 years, but by 1617 a poor economy and concern about the Dutch influence upon their community convinced many of them to move on, this time to the new world, a place better-suited to them. On September 6, 1620 they departed on the ship 'Mayflower' from Plymouth harbour, bound to the Americas with 102 people aboard. They were in search of a home where they could freely practice their Puritan style of religion, and live according to their own laws. Their intended destination was a section of land in the area called Northern Virginia, granted by one of the Brewster family friends in the London Company. But the weather conditions made the Mayflower arrive at Cape Cod after 65 days at sea and anchor off present-day Truro on November 21, 1620. It would require an additional voyage to reach their goal but 'The Pilgrims' or 'Forefathers' chose to abandon their original plans and organize their community where they had arrived. Having no legal authority to colonize the area, they made arrangements to sign their own Charter, known as 'the Mayflower Compact', in which they agreed to form a "self-governing, Christian community." After this, a group of them sailed across Cape Cod Bay and landed at Plymouth on December 21. As they immigrated and formed individual colonies, their number rose from 17,800 in 1640 to 106,000 in 1700. The Puritan settlement of New England was a major influence on the American Protestantism, like their strict adherence to a moralistic way of life that banned games of chance, maypoles, and drama, for example, all of which were perceived as inconvenient practices. Not only the moral issue stood for Pilgrim life; their willpower and faith are often associated with the protestant work ethic and holds the idea that through hard work, courage, and determination one can achieve prosperity, an early expression of the so called concept of the American Dream.

1.3.3. Sir William Berkeley and the Cavaliers of Virginia

On the other hand, another group of settlers that also produced a great change in the early American society was that of the Cavaliers of Virginia. They established themselves mainly in what is known as Virginia during the 1600`s and through most of the 1700`s. The Virginia settlement was an extremely repressive society, just like the Stuart England that produced it. This was the result of conscious choice, largely the vision of one man, Sir William Berkeley, the royal governor from 1642 to 1652 and from 1660 to 1677. When he assumed authority in Virginia, the colony was a society in unrest in many ways. Sir William's ideal society was authoritarian, like the one he had known at home. It would have a few ruling gentry families, a small class of yeomen farmers, a larger group of white tenant farmers, and at the bottom, numerous indentured servants (and eventually enslaved Africans). Social mobility would be at a minimum, and everyone would know his place. The death rate among the indentured servants was high in Virginia and slaves replaced those more complicated, Berkeley's goal was largely achieved. Thereafter, the colony was run by and for a small governing elite. But he knew that there was nothing yet in Virginia to tempt England's nobility. He looked instead to the younger sons of English gentry who stood to inherit nothing under English law, or royalists fleeing Oliver Cromwell's republican victory in England's civil war. When they arrived, he promoted them to lucrative offices and granted them large estates. These were the 'Cavaliers`, the name given to King Charles I's supporters in the civil war. They founded the dynasties later called "The First Families of Virginia," meaning the leading families, not the first chronologically. This class ruled Virginia until after the American Revolution. Sir William Berkeley's ideal society, however, needed not only a ruling class, but also people to be ruled. Most of Virginia's white immigrants were either voluntary indentured servants or convicts, prostitutes, or prisoners of war who were forcibly "transported" from England to Virginia in large numbers. Although England's unskilled and unemployed laborers had no money to pay the ship's passage, it was paid for them if they signed an indenture or contract to become a servant for four to seven years. They came with few possessions, were examined like livestock, and worked under demanding conditions. In the 1600`s three-quarters of all English colonists experienced a term of servitude. Half of them died before their service was completed. One quarter remained poor afterward. The other quarter achieved a degree

of prosperity. Even so, the raw conditions of society before 1690 permitted a degree of social mobility impossible in England. Only after the supply of European indentured servants declined in the late 1600s did tobacco planters turn increasingly to enslaved Africans and within a few decades, Jamestown in Virginia became a slave society. It is said that the Cavaliers dynasty established the conditions for slavery in the American colonies, because little by little the indentured servants became African slaves.

1.4. Slavery in the American Colonies

The Dutch were the first, apparently, to import black slaves into North America, but slaves had already been employed all over the world, including South and Central America. Many of them were brought to the British North American colonies, specifically Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. Millions of slaves died on ships and of diseases, millions of blacks worked for free to allow the Western economies to prosper, as a consequence, the economic interests in slavery became stronger. But the very first imported Africans were brought as indentured servants, not slaves. After several years the shift from indentured servants to African slaves was prompted by a growing lower class of former servants who had worked through the terms of their indentures and thus became competitors of their former masters. However, the colonies were divided in respect to this issue; the division was between the Northern and the Southern states that wanted the freedom or the legalization of slaves respectively. The human conditions of the black slaves became deplorable; their daily life was reduced to the fields. They didn't received education, but the ecclesiastical authority stipulated the religious instruction of the slaves. The advantage of bringing Negroes within the range of the Gospel teaching was a common argument in favor of the slave trade. In the American states slavery speedily gravitated to the South. The climate of the Southern provinces was eminently favorable to the Negroes; In the Northern provinces the conditions were exactly reversed. The conditions of climate which made the Northern provinces Free states and the Southern provinces slave states established between them an intense social and moral repulsion, encouraging mutual feelings of the bitterest hatred and contempt. This separation of a free North and an enslaved South launched a massive political, cultural, and economic struggle. Refugees from slavery fled the South across the Ohio River to the North via the 'underground railroad', and their presence agitated Northerners. Midwestern state

governments asserted states rights arguments to refuse federal jurisdiction over fugitives. This led to the outbreak of the Civil War which spelled the end for chattel slavery in America. Legally, slaves within the United States remained enslaved until the final ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution on December 6, 1865.

1.5. The Pioneers

The Pioneers were the first people to settle in the western frontiers of North America. Many of them were farmers; others were doctors, shopkeepers, blacksmiths, missionaries, lawyers, and so on. They came from several places to the USA to start their new lives as their ancestors did when they came from European countries such as England, Germany and Scotland who, before leaving their homes, saved money for the trip, sold their land and other possessions, or agreed to work for others on the trip. The new American settlers wanted an opportunity to start new lives and went to different areas of the frontier for the inexpensive or even possibly free land. This land was available for homesteading; other people went to the frontier in order to prospect for gold, to hunt and trade fur pelts. In the 1700s the frontiers were the Appalachian Mountains, later they traveled west across the Mississippi River. But this westward expansion was not easy since they needed to deal with the Indians all over the North American land.

1.6. The Indians

The original inhabitants of America, tribal people knew that the continent and its resources were theirs, while the white immigrants had their labor or their capital, but they had nothing to equal the value of the land. Whatever property the expanding white society wanted or thought it needed, had to come from the native people. To get land and resources from the Indians the Federal Government started dealing with the tribes through formal treaties. But the Indians believed that land cannot be owned, that all people should be able to live on it in peace, without ownership over the land. On the other hand, the settlers believed it should be owned. If people found it or could buy land, it was considered theirs. Having valuable land that pioneers wanted Indians became seen as an impediment to successful western settlement. This tense relations between the tribes and other Americans repeatedly, encouraged officials to develop policies to enable the settlers to get the land. Through these

policies the federal government set Indians aside from all other Americans. Then to pacify the pioneers the government began to reduce Indian landholdings by treaty or threat of force. Planners assumed that as tribal lands shrank and hunting became less successful the native people would turn to a farming process and therefore they would need less land. Officials reasoned that once Indians turned from hunting and trade to full-time agriculture they would need less space and would agree to cede more land to the government. But the treaty makers failed to keep pace with the pioneers and their demands for more land, finally the violence broke out. The Indians began to fight for their rights and took revenge for their losses. Indians attacked the wagon trains now commonly going through their lands; they even attacked and burned newly established settlements. President Andrew Jackson pushed a bill to remove the Eastern Indians west beyond the Mississippi River where they could live at a distance from the pioneers. At the end of the 1840s the U.S. surged west to the Pacific Ocean, annexing Texas, the Oregon Country, and California and the Southwest. This brought the government and pioneers into painful confrontations with the tribal peoples of the West. But Indian actions varied widely along this process. Some chose to join the growing white society. Others accepted those facets of the American economic or social structures that they thought would improve their lives. In some instances they incorporated new religious, cultural, and economic practices unwillingly.

1.7. The immigrants and the American promise of a new life

Apart from the settlers, many early American prospectors headed west of the Rocky Mountains to buy acres of cheap land in hopes of finding deposits of gold. The American dream was a driving factor not only in the Gold Rush of the mid to late 1800s, but also in the waves of immigration throughout that century and the following. Impoverished western Europeans escaping the 'potato famine' in Ireland or the aftermath of Napoleon in the rest of Europe came to America to escape a poor quality of life at home. They wanted to embrace the promise of financial security and constitutional freedom they had heard existed so widely in the United States, also helped by the idea of progress and self-realization that The American Dream promoted at that time. The settlement in the new world provided hope for social equality but problems related to racism and xenophobia became common what represented a threat to the realization of everybody's American Dream. Following

World War I, a nationalistic sentiment led to new restrictions on immigration, which would continue until 1965. On the other hand, black people -many of them descendents of African slaves- were discriminated. This started the Black people's movement pleading equality of rights. One of their leaders, Martin Luther King, invoked the American Dream in what is perhaps his most famous speech:

"Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends. And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream"⁴

In the 20th century, the American dream had its challenges. 'The Depression` caused widespread poverty during the Twenties and Thirties, and was almost a reverse of the dream for those directly affected. Racial instability did not disappear, and in some parts of the country racial violence was almost commonplace and groups of people like the KKK (Ku Klux Klan) appeared claiming the superiority of the white race. There was concern about the undemocratic campaign known as 'McCarthyism` carried on against suspected Communists since some people think that this ideology of social-collective work strongly interferes with the American thought of freedom and also threatens the American Dream where individualism or personal work is fundamental for its purposes of progress.

⁴ King, Martin Luther. *I have a dream speech*. In Merle Curtis, Lewis Paul Todd. *Rise of the American nation, volume II: 1865 to the present*, 3rd edition. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, inc.ed., 1972, USA.

2. The concept of The American Dream in Paul Auster's *Mr. Vertigo*

After the previous view to some facts in the American history it is necessary to have in mind that Americans think of the American Dream from a very personal viewpoint that has to do mainly with their goals in life. That is why the concept needs to be taken from different views to get to a clearer notion of it.

Paul Auster handles the concept of the American Dream through his characters' experience and their dramatic development in his novel. With this purpose, the author connects several episodes of his novel with pertinent passages of the American history on the basis of what the Americans think of the American ideal. In doing this, he inserts in his fiction its positive and negative sides.

In *Mr. Vertigo*, for example, there is something that we could relate to the foundations of Puritan philosophy of hard work, strenuous effort, and strong determination to prosper in life. Master Yehudi seems to stand for it through his arguments to persuade Walt to go along with his idea of teaching him how to fly:

“You’re going to work hard, Walt, harder than you’ve ever worked before, and you’re going to want to quit on me almost everyday, but if you stick with it and trust what I tell you, at the end of a few years you’ll be able to fly. I swear it, you’ll be able to lift yourself off the ground and fly through the air like a bird.” (p.10)

Another example can be provided on the basis of Master Yehudi's decision to bring Walt to live in his house with Mother Sioux and Aesop. They had to cultivate the land just like the Forefathers and the first settlers did to start a new life:

“...I was out in the fields plowing up the ground and planting seeds, breaking my back (...) an unending trial of blisters, bloody fingers, and stubbed toes (...) the four of us worked together...” (p. 37-38)

What is also important about this quotation is that it reflects Master Yehudi's ideal of family and community, and how they all should work together to achieve their goals, idea that is also shared by those who understand by the American Dream as a unified family. Master Yehudi not only taught Walt how to levitate but also played a moralistic role in the novel since he also made Walt appreciate the family and the people who surrounded him as important values an individual must have. From then on, Walt started to consider the importance of the family, idea that will last until the end of the novel.

After this passage Walt started changing his mind from a skeptic attitude towards a positive one, condition that seems to be of paramount importance in the realization of the American Dream. The change in people's attitudes takes an important role since it makes them carry out their lives in better conditions, as a stronger self-confidence or a positive viewpoint; a good instance of change of mind in the novel is when Walt, after being sick, hears a conversation between Aesop and Master Yehudi that would change his mind in relation to Aesop:

“Aesop was out there giving it to the Master, standing up to the big man and telling him not to be so hard on me. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. After all the trouble and unpleasantness I had caused him, I felt mortally ashamed of myself to know what Aesop was on my side.” (P. 36)

The change of mind is also present when Walt realized about Mother Sioux's good intentions with him while she looked after him during his sickness; this will improve their relationship in the house what boils down to a legitimate family. But this idea of changing the view of life is also shared by Master Yehudi, for instance after Mother Sioux and Aesop were killed, he suffers a state of depression, he lives his mourning, and then he comes to life again, he states:

“...I'm not going to apologize for things that need no apology. I did what I had to do, and it took as long as it had to take. Now a new chapter begins. The demons have fled, and the dark night of the soul is over. ” (P. 114)

This change of attitude to face life comes to the characters as if it gives them the right way to follow, this attitude needs to be a positive one in which the character relies on himself to achieve his goal in life as the materialization of the Dream, an American trait where the

notion of self reliance is of paramount importance. Americans also see this concept as a state of change in which they leave their present life back and start a new one. For this, the idea of physical movement is meaningful to achieve that change and, hopefully, prosperity. The physical movement that leads to the realization of the Dream is understood as traveling on the roads and, especially, towards the West, as the first American settlers, the Pilgrims, the immigrants, and the Pioneers did in the past; all of them looked for freedom and self realization for which they needed, necessarily, to move westwards. Thus, we can understand that this image has been present in the American thought from the beginning of the American nation until nowadays as a symbol of making one's own living. It reflects the ideas of the Americans to go west to find freedom by means of independence and self-realization. In *Mr. Vertigo* the main characters did it in this way all over their journeys throughout the USA; for example, at the very beginning, when Master Yehudi took Walt in Saint Louis and started their long journey towards the town of Cibola:

“It was dark when we boarded the train. We rode west into the dawn, traveling across the state of Missouri as the dim November light struggled to crack through the clouds. I hadn't been out of Saint Louis since the day they buried my mother, and it was a gloomy world I discovered that morning: gray and barren, with endless fields of withered cornstalks flanking us on both sides. We chugged into Kansas City a little past noon...” (P. 6-7).

As the realization the American Dream is mainly understood as an image of going westwards to start a new life, we can see a clearer example of it in *Mr. Vertigo*, when Master Yehudi and Walt decided to go to Hollywood:

“We'd pack up our belongings, he [Master Yehudi] said, get into the car, and drive out to Hollywood, I'd start a new career as a movie actor, and He'd be my agent and manager...” (Page 206)

“...by eight o'clock we were on the road, heading west to a new life in the sunny hills of Tinseltown.” (P. 207)

The idea of moving westwards is also present in *Moon Palace* as an important factor for change. This is of great significance during the three plots of this novel (Marco Fogg, Thomas Effing, and Solomon Barber). They all find themselves at the geographic location of the historic frontier at some point of it. We see several passages where the characters

‘move` looking for a change, either in search of their identities or a new life, representing what a common American would do to make his own living. This idea of moving is a symbol that is carried out in the West as implying a period of personal endeavor and development, as the Pioneers did in the American history. The West receives constant allusions along the story as a magnet for that necessary change of life. For example, Marco planned to go west with Solomon Barber, his father, to try to find the places Effing had been talking about. During his search in the West he realized that a new life was beginning for him, he was alone after his father died and Kitty had rejected him, so he needed serenity in his life what also makes the West a shelter for hard periods:

“I walked without interruption, heading toward the Pacific, borne along by a growing sense of happiness. Once I reached the end of the continent, I felt that some important question would be resolved for me. I had no idea what the question was, but the answer had already been formed in my steps, and I has only to keep walking to know that I had left myself behind. That I was no longer the person I had once been. (...) This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins.” (*Moon Palace*, p. 306)

This movement as a factor for change may be interpreted as a way of taking the risk to go into the ‘unknown`, emulating the pioneer spirit. The Pioneers represent the American thought since it means a personal decision to make one’s own living even though that means to run a risk. This is what Sir Water Raleigh did when he came to the American continent since, as stated in the historical background, he founded the first English settlement in the new land; a pioneering spirit that will be also reflected through *Mr. Vertigo* by Walt who, as one of Auster’s coincidences, also has the real explorer’s name; what also implies that it is Walt’s duty to look for his own life:

“I remember how shocked I was when he told me I had a famous name, the name of a real-life adventurer and hero. (...) from that day forth I carried Sir Walter inside me as a second self, an invisible brother to stand me through thick and thin (...)He was the best poet of his day; he was a scholar, a scientist, and a free-thinker; he was the number-one lover of all women in all of England. (...) that’s Sir Walter Raleigh, the most perfect man who ever lived.” (P. 46-47)

The previous quotation can be related to the following one, since Master Yehudi encourages Walt to run the risk and take a decision to go into ‘new territory` as the real

explorer did. This risk had to do with grabbing the public's attention and to learn the two ways to do it (loft and locomotion). Also playing a moral role for Walt's formation of values:

“We're past it. You've gone as far as I did when I was your age, and beyond this point we're entering new territory, continents no one has ever seen before. I can help you with advice and instruction, I can steer you when you've gone off track, but all the essential things you'll have to discover for yourself. We've come to the crossroads, and from now on everything is up to you.” (P. 73)

Another clear instance of a pioneer spirit occurred after Walt dominated the art of levitation and began walking on water, he learn about Lindbergh and his journey from New York to Paris and made a comparison between them as pioneers in each one's field:

“Lindbergh made his solo flight across the Atlantic, traveling nonstop from New York City to Paris in thirty-three hours. (...) the precise moment he was making his way across the ocean, I was traversing my little pond in Kansas – the two of us in the air together, each one accomplishing his feat at the same time. It was as if the sky has suddenly opened itself up to man, and we were the first pioneers, the Columbus and Magellan of human flight.” (P. 91)

The American Dream has also its negative side since the conditions for its realization are not always at hand, or because some people have a more materialistic view of it and do whatever it's necessary to achieve this purpose; what could derive in hurting other people with the fixed idea of materializing the Dream either because these people mean a threat for their goals or because a sense of individualism takes over their lives and they only think about their goals without considering those who surround them. The dark side is also expressed by means of negative behaviors as envy and selfishness which deteriorate the human condition. In *Mr. Vertigo* the characters don't express these aspects so extremely marked. Rather, they show the typical materialistic expression of the Dream which is to make as much money as one can, which will be the engine for economic independence and a supposed freedom. Walt gives us a first impression of his materialistic view of life at the beginning of the story, after Master Yehudi had asked Walt to go with him, he thought of escaping but he dropped the idea because the master offered him to turn him into a millionaire, decision that was mainly taken because of money issues but that will change Walt's life:

“This is my chance to run, I told myself, giving the joint the once-over as I stood up from my stool. (...) But I didn’t do it, and in that choice hung the entire story of my life. I went back to where the master was waiting because he’d promised to turn me into a millionaire. On the strength of those fifty cents, I figured it might be worth it to see if there was any truth to the boast.” (P. 9)

But the character in which we can see this view in a clearer way is Marion Witherspoon, an independent person who wants to make money, which is an important goal in her life. She showed Walt the other side of life since Master Yehudi represented for him the formation of values and self reliance, but Mrs. Witherspoon showed him the practical way to handle life concerning materialistic issues, which is also important in the present-day American life where the capitalist system manages the economy of the country and where money plays an important role. Mrs. Witherspoon represented for him the way how to deal with money and how to make it, which later will be useful to Walt to manage himself in the business world. There are several episodes during the novel in which she shows her interest in getting money, as when she learned about Walt’s ability to levitate and the good possibilities to run a profitable business:

“Mrs. Witherspoon had a definite reason for keeping me happy, (...) she was thinking about the future health of her bank account. (...) She saw me as a business opportunity, a dollar sign in the shape of a boy, and she knew that if my career was handled with the proper care and acumen, it was going to make her the richest woman in thirteen countries.” (P. 102)

In dealing with a materialistic view of this concept, it is also important to have a look at the materialization of the Dream by means of managing a business, what carries economic independence and self sufficiency which some people understand as self realization and one of the goals of the Dream. In *Mr. Vertigo* this materialization is given, for example, after Walt met Bingo who taught him how to manage a night club. He also wanted to have his own business:

“I called it Mr. Vertigo’s. (...) It cost me every cent of the fifty thousand to do it up the way I wanted, but when the place finally opened on December 31, 1937, it was a thing of sumptuous perfection. (...)For the next three and a half years I was there every night...” (P. 253)

Mrs. Marion Witherspoon, as a typical American, is a self-made woman; she never loses courage even if she has lost her money. In dealing with her idea of making money, she is able to run a business on her own and in this way she has achieved a self-realization, a major element of the American Dream: to make one's personal dreams come true. Several attempts to have her own business can be seen in the novel, for example, after Walt decided to come back to Wichita he found her after Mrs. Witherspoon spent four years working as a volunteer nurse during the war:

“...She [Mrs. Witherspoon] went into business again, but this time she stayed in Wichita, and little by little she built it into a nice profitable concern. With Laundromats of all things. (...)She was one of the first to see the commercial possibilities of the washing machine, and she got a jump on her competitors by entering the field early. (...) all those dimes and quarters had turned her into a wealthy woman again.” (P. 286)

These two instances, in which the two characters achieve a materialization of the American Dream -and therefore prosperity-, show the real possibilities for a person to get his/her goals in life if his/her purpose is to get money, economic independence, and freedom by means of running a business. But Auster plays with these supposed real chances of becoming a well-off person and thus getting happiness; every time life seems to improve for any character, tragedy ruins his/her intentions either by money issues or by emotional aspects that are also present in the American Dream; as what happened in Walt's life after he became a businessman, a period of decadence clouded his profitable business since he became a gangster and started dealing with mobster connections and all the concerns related to nightlife in the 1920s in Chicago, the time of the Prohibition Law and the Great Depression, when money had a greater value and where the dark side of the American Dream shows itself up as a consequence of selfishness and individualism. In this period of decadence Walt shows his dark side, he was so immersed in his businesses that he didn't even think with mental clarity about the convenience of carrying out one of his crazy ideas, as when he met Dizzy Dean and later planned to kill him, because he felt envy about him, since Walt was not anymore the hero that Dizzy was:

“I actually thought it was my duty to persuade Dizzy Dean that he didn't want to live anymore.(...) Stated in such bald terms, the whole thing smacks of insanity, but that was precisely how I planned to rescue him: by talking

him into his own murder. If nothing else, it proves how sick my soul had become in the years since Master Yehudi's death. I'd latched onto Dizzy because he reminded me of myself, and as long as his career flourished, I could relive my past glory through him." (P. 265)

After this sad episode Walt lost his business and enlisted in the army, showing once again the raises and falls of the people and that the realization of the Dream seems difficult to handle. When everything seems to be lost, the possibility to start everything again comes to his life, as when Walt returned from the army and met Molly, they got married and everything seemed to be fine for them but happiness with her would end up some years later and, once again, a period of decadence would come to Walt's life:

"I spent twenty-three years with Molly (...) My plan was to grow old with her and die in her arms, but cancer came along and took her from me before I was ready to let go. (...) it was an awful period for me, and I spent the next six or seven months in an alcoholic stupor. It got so bad that I eventually lost my job at the factory, and if two of my brothers-in-law hadn't hauled me off to a drying-out clinic, there's no telling what might have happened to me." (p. 281)

The threat to the realization of the personal achievements is present throughout the novel, as a way of showing that the ideal finds difficulties to its materialization whether by means of personal failures or by external factors that block the goal. For example, a reminiscence of the American Dream can be seen through Master Yehudi who managed to realize, for a short time at least, an ideal community (i.e. a multicultural society). He has founded a farm where an Indian woman (Mother Sioux), a black boy (Aesop), a (white) orphan boy, and a Jewish Hungarian (the master himself) are living together peacefully. They are just like a real family, up to the day when Aesop and Mother Sioux are brutally killed by the Ku Klux Klan and the Dream of the ideal community is thus destroyed. The multicultural society is a representation of the American society that is made up by these different ethnic groups but suffers these problems of racism, hate, envy, selfishness, etc. The case of Aesop and his suddenly shortened life is another case of destruction of the Dream. He was rescued by Master Yehudi from a cotton field, working as many other black people did during slave times. He was brought up as a literate person, with good possibilities to achieve higher goals in life, he even expected a promissory future as a selected student for Yale; but the novel develops during the 1920's, a time when racism was a real problem. In this time the

Ku Klux Klan (KKK) carried out some of its main massacres, as it is reflected when they set the house on fire and kill Aesop and Mother Sioux. A situation that connects the novel to the real facts of the American history and that also questions the real chances for every person to carry out his/her American Dream no matter whether he/she is black or white. But this problem of racism within the American society is also shown by Walt at the beginning of the story, when he refers to Aesop as a 'nigger' and he didn't even want to shake hands with him. The same occurs with Master Yehudi when Walt learned from Aesop that the master was a Hungarian Jew, emulating the problems that many Jewish people and also immigrants usually face in the USA. Walt reacted as follows:

“There you go. That explains everything, don't it? He's worse than a gipsy, old Doctor Dark Brows –he's a kike, there ain't nothing worse than that on the whole miserable planet.” (P. 22)

Walt gives us a justification of his behavior that leads us to relate it to the American society:

“I was a fiery little dunce back then, I'll admit it, but I'm not going to make any apologies for myself. I was who I was, a product of the people and places I'd come from, and there's no point in whining about that now.” (P. 16)

This connection between the novel and real facts of the American history is present now with Mother Sioux; she was an Oglala Sioux, who once was the top bareback rider in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. She remembers what her ancestors lived during the difficult times during the fight against the Pioneers and their imperialist idea of conquering while going westwards and doing whatever it's necessary to achieve their purpose, either fighting or killing the Indians. For instance when Walt tells Mother Sioux's story:

“...those were the bad times, the years of the end of the world, and the red people believed that magic was the only thing that could save them from extinction. The cavalry was closing in from all sides, crowding them off the prairies onto the small reservations, and the Blue-Coats had too many men to make a counterattack feasible.” (P. 78)

The real feelings towards the Indians and the slaves by the white settlers during the colonization period are also mentioned in the novel, as when Walt remembers what Aesop told him:

“...there wouldn't have been no black slaves from Africa if the white folks had been given a free hand with the Indians. He said they wanted to turn the redskins into slaves, but the Catholic boss man in the old country put the nix on it. So the pirates went to Africa instead and rounded up a lot of darkies and hauled them off in chains.” (p. 79)

Even though there are negative aspects of the American Dream during the novel, it seems to be that Auster prefers to state the dualism of the American Dream since many instances of progress and self-realization could be seen during the novel in both the spiritual and material aspects; an example is this progress may be Walt's experiences while living with Master Yehuhi, Aesop helped him to become a literate person by means of teaching Walt the numbers and how to read and write, abilities that later will serve Walt to run his own business and also when he wrote his story to express his feelings to those who he learned to love. But all this was not so easy to handle, Walt had rises and falls, as many people have during their lives, as part of them. The American Dream implies progress that seems to be reachable with determination and also if the necessary conditions are provided. But this progress also have a high price that needs to be paid, or simply the dream is over by means of a tragedy, as Walt stands at the end of the book:

“But I do know that you can't get something for nothing, and the bigger the thing you want, the more you're going to have to pay for it.” (p. 292)

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to study the different historical factors that in the United States of America led to what is known as the American Dream, as an abstraction, a concept, and also, as part of a very pragmatic ideal pervading the American life, which is centered around the leading motivation of every individual citizen of this country, his dream of a successful life. I hope that I have also succeeded in my attempt, first, to characterize the concept of the American Dream and, second, to prove how Paul Auster, the novelist we have been discussing in this seminar, has dealt with it through the characters, circumstances, and plot developed in his fiction.

I have dealt with a variety of sources connected with my topic of research, such as history, literature, and, of course, Auster's novels. The concept of the American Dream has been treated from both, its materialistic nature and its cultural, almost idealistic nature. From this starting point, I handle the individual life goals as followed by the majority of Americans in their ambition to strike it rich, to have a secure, well-paid job which will lead them to the acquisition of material goods, economic independence, and personal freedom as a consequent objective.

From this point of view we could say that this is the dream not only of any American citizen, but also of any person anywhere. So the concept begins to be defined as a negative one when in it there are relating elements and an obsessive search develops in terms of influence, popularity, financial success, exclusiveness and singularity, in one word, power, personal power, as the ultimate need of the individual. It is here where the negative aspect of the Dream is discussed by Paul Auster through his fiction in the form of a depiction of the human condition, which characterizes itself as envy, selfishness, and hate. The landscape drastically changes when we only think of ourselves instead of also thinking of others; when we think of them as a threat to our interests and we try to take them 'out of the road'.

Paul Auster himself talks about the American Dream in an interview:

“There’s no question that the American Dream has a dark side. The American Dream is about several things all at one. It’s about freedom, the idea of everyone being equal under the law. But, the American Dream is also about money and the freedom to make as much money as one can. And I think that any society which is so completely overwhelmed by the notion of dollars is going to run into contradictions...”⁵

However the Dream is not based only on this dark materialistic side. It can also be seen as a way to access education, which will further one’s possibilities of economic independence and self-sufficiency.

Through the development of the American history, from its very beginning the Dream has had a constant, permanent presence. From the early Pilgrims to the US soldiers who have to fight in foreign lands. It also becomes a dream for the first-nation people, the black slaves, and the immigrants, only that it centers around freedom and a sense of belonging.

The Dream is not only a question of material wellbeing but also of normal life projections; in the way Auster develops his understanding of the Dream as evinced through an interview with *The Guardian* newspaper in London:

“The sparseness of his prose and the unhappy outcomes of his plots can make Auster's view of the world seem, to quote two recent reviews, ‘barren’ or ‘isolating’. Auster once described his work as coming ‘out of a very deep nihilism... the fact of our own mortality... And yet, at the same time, I’ve wanted to express the beauty and extraordinary happiness of feeling yourself alive’. Perhaps it is this combination that has so endeared him to New York, a city that prides itself on its cynicism, but has a Santa Claus on every corner at Christmas. ‘New York is not just a place, it’s an idea,’ he says. ‘It’s this idea of an all-welcoming city of immigrants where everyone can be a New Yorker.’ Even a sentimental storyteller from New Jersey.”⁶

⁵ *Questions and Answers*, bluecricket.com. An interview with Paul Auster in “Q&A with Paul Auster”: <http://www.bluecricket.com/auster/articles/qanda.html>

⁶ interview with Paul Auster in “The Guardian Newspaper”: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,819191,00.html>

One has to acknowledge, though, that for good or bad the idea has now involved the American Dream a world-wide citizenship.

After all this, what remains for us to validate are the goals we have set forth regarding our life and strive to attain them within the context of our rights and responsibilities.

Bibliography

Auster, Paul. Mr. Vertigo. New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1995.

Auster, Paul. Moon Palace. New York: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1989.

Horton, Rod Williams and Edwards, Herbert W. Backgrounds of American Literary Thought. New York: Prentice-Hall ed., 1967.

Todd, Lewis Paul and Curti, Merle Eugene. Rise of the American nation, volume II: 1865 to the present. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, inc. ed., 1972.

Parrington, Vernon Louis. Main currents in American thought: an interpretation of American literature from the beginnings to 1920. New York: Harcourt, Brace and co. ed., 1930.

Others:

Acerca de los Estados Unidos. Servicio informativo y cultural de los EUA, 1986. Printed material given by the Embassy of The United States of America.

Internet material:

“American Dreams”. Interview with Paul Auster in “The Guardian Newspaper”:
<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,819191,00.html>

“Q&A with Paul Auster”. Interview with Paul Auster in “Questions and Answers”:
<http://www.bluecricket.com/auster/articles/qanda.html>

“Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia”. Encyclopedia on line:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page