

The Changing American Dream From The Rise of Silas Lapham to McTeague

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ABSTRACT

The connotation of the American dream is constantly evolving with the development of American society. In different historical periods, it has different connotations, such as the dream of independence during the colonial period, the dream of democracy after the founding of the United States, and the dream of prosperity after the Civil War, etc. With the development of American capitalism, the connotation of the American dream has gradually changed from the group consciousness of pursuing national independence to the belief dominated by individualism. Through the analysis of the change in the connotation of the American dream from the novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *McTeague*, this paper aims to illustrate the essence of the American dream manipulated by the capital logic.

KEYWORDS

American dream; *The Rise of Silas Lapham*; *McTeague*; capital logic

The American dream is a recurrent theme in the history of American literature. It has different connotations in different historical periods, which presents the specific era content of Americans' individual struggles and life values. The essential reason for the change in the connotation of the American dream from optimism to pessimism is the infinite deduction of the capital logic.

The American dream first originated from the nationalist consciousness of the American nation that longed to break away from the British Empire and pursued national independence. However, with the independence of the United States and the gradual prosperity of American capitalism, the connotation of the American dream has gradually evolved from the group consciousness of pursuing national independence to the belief dominated by individualism.

The American dream began in the 18th century, when the first New England settlers sailed across the Atlantic to this New Land on the Mayflower. As God's chosen people, they were determined to build the Garden of Eden on this land. Their fighting spirit was never defeated by the hardships of colonial life and the harsh environment. These Puritan immigrants, who adhered to strict religious and moral creeds, brought to Americans a new value and philosophy of life — the optimism of Puritanism. Optimistic Puritanism has a great influence on American literature. However, with the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the reconstruction in the late 19th century, the polarization of American society became serious, and the gap between the rich and the poor widened. The belief of individual struggle advocated by Benjamin Franklin was gradually replaced by speculation and degeneration.

In the case of the widening gap between ideals and reality, American writers put forth literary claims to express and criticize social reality. From the masterpieces of William Dean Howells, who proposes moral realism, to the creation of Frank Norris, the originator of American naturalism, we can see the development of American literature and the change of the connotation of the American dream.

As the representative work of American realism, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* reveals to a large extent the optimistic spirit of Puritanism contained in the American dream. The book recounts the dilemma of Silas Lapham, a newly wealthy, self-made businessman who suffers bankruptcy in competition, but on the other hand, he realizes his moral sublimation.

In the first place, Silas can be seen as a spokesman for the Puritan spirit of entrepreneurship. Silas came from a Puritan peasant family, and he described his parents "they were quiet, unpretentious people, religious, after the fashion of that time, and of sterling morality, and they taught their children the simple virtues of the *Old Testament* and *Poor Richard's Almanac*" (6). Growing up in such a family atmosphere, Silas was diligent and conscientious, and he always worked hard and dedicated his whole life to achieve success in his career, which was in stark contrast to the indulgence and pleasure of the aristocratic Corey family. Silas spent most of time investing in the paint business and scaling up the industry. Therefore, he accumulated a great deal of wealth and his career was in full flourish.

Secondly, Silas has the Puritan entrepreneur's sense of giving back to society. He advocated public welfare activities, and took social responsibilities actively, while making great contributions to social welfare undertakings. Whereas, when Silas achieved great success in his career, his paint business was severely challenged. He suffered setbacks in the competition and he knew that he was going bankruptcy. At this moment, he could have sold his factory to a British company, but he did not benefit himself at the expense of others. Silas at last refused to sell, and bankruptcy results. Having fallen socially, he has risen morally. Therefore, his pursuit of the American dream embodies the optimistic spirit of Puritanism in a certain sense.

In "A Call for Realism", Howells argues that American writers should write "authentic novels with American social

characteristics in order to establish an American cultural identity and distinguish it from European literature, especially English literature" (496-500). The creation of the novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* can be regarded as a specific way for Howells to construct American cultural identity, and the prominent theme of the American dream in it is a concrete manifestation of the uniqueness of American culture. Hence, while reflecting the author's ethical-oriented philosophy of life, this work also highlights the optimistic spiritual connotation of the American dream through the portrayal of Silas Lapham, a middle-class American who is deeply influenced by Puritanism.

If realism can be regarded as the "drama of a broken teacup", naturalism is the "drama of the people working itself out in blood and ordure" (Norris 1901). American naturalism posits that individuals' fates are determined by their environment, heredity, and social conditions. This perspective is shaped by the understanding of evolution and determinism, which presents a rather grim and pessimistic view of life. American naturalists tend to populate their novels with ordinary people, who are trapped by their circumstances and cannot escape their destinies. It is also worth noting that influenced by the idea of "experimental fiction" proposed by Zola, the father of naturalism, naturalistic writers use the novel as a vehicle for experiment. They believe that only with this scientific method can the works objectively present the real state of the American people when they pursue their personal American dream during the rising stage of capitalism.

McTeague stands as Norris' purest experiment in the genre. The author puts the characters in the concrete environment to reveal their emotional changes under the influence of determinism, thus revealing the essence of the American dream controlled by the capital logic. As a representative naturalistic work, this novel highlights the pessimism under the theme of determinism.

The story mainly tells the tragic fate of the characters caused by the lottery prize. Brawny but unresponsive dentist McTeague marries Trine, whose possessiveness is revealed when she wins the lottery. The marriage disintegrates as Trina becomes more and more miserly. Tragically, McTeague kills Trine and escapes. He later strangles his rival Marcus in Death Valley, but not before Marcus handcuffs them together. So death comes to McTeague as well. The tragic fate of the characters in the story and the deterioration of the relationship between the characters are all inevitable under the control of the capital logic, so the extremely tragic ending seems unexpected but reasonable.

First of all, compared with Silas' unremitting struggle in his career to realize his personal value actively, the protagonist McTeague in the novel is completely passive. He either keeps alive without serious ambition, or places his hopes on others. At first, McTeague opened a small dental clinic with money left by his mother. "By and by, gorged with steam beer, and overcome by the heat of the room, the cheap tobacco, and the effects of his heavy meal, he dropped off to sleep" (3). McTeague muddled through his life without any goals. As the story goes, his former friend Marcus reported to the authority that McTeague practiced medicine illegally without a college degree, which put McTeague in a dilemma of unemployment. Since then, McTeague's dream had been completely shattered by a piece of paperwork from the California state government. "It was like a clap of thunder. McTeague was stunned, stupefied. He said nothing" (163). He never understood why the business he had been doing for twelve years suddenly became illegal. According to Foucault, "power-centered knowledge is highly politicized in capitalist society" (150). It follows that discourse and truth are always controlled by those who hold power in such a society. In this case, McTeague failed to find a decent job, and he gradually began to covet the lottery winnings of his wife.

"Like power, resistance is multiple" (Foucault 142). McTeague's resistance is also a progressive result. He becomes violent under the suppression of his wife Trina. Shortly afterwards, McTeague fled with the money and squandered it within days. And at the end of the story, McTeague was so cruel that he killed Trina. As a victim of capitalism, McTeague creates another victim with his violence. From the change in the fate of the protagonist McTeague, we can see that under the suppression of power in the capitalist society, the lower class people have never been able to realize their own value and achieve success, and things always go contrary on their wishes.

Secondly, the novel also reveals the alienation of human relations under the capitalist development. For example, Marcus, who used to be McTeague's best friend, put up with McTeague when he had no money. But when McTeague had a happy family life, he gave him a cold shoulder. In particular, Trina's winning of five thousand dollars made him feel extremely unbalanced. "You fool, Marcus Schouler! If you'd kept Trina you'd have had that money. You might have had it yourself" (81). Marcus regretted that he had given up on Trina, not because he had any affection for her, but simply because he missed the lottery money. The friendship between Marcus and McTeague turned into hostility, and he was determined to plan and carry out his revenge against McTeague.

In addition, as McTeague's wife Trina, she became extremely mean after winning the lottery. Trina was even unwilling to help her parents in distress, and she did everything she could to deceive her husband just for the sake of exploiting more money. The relationship between Trina and her parents, husband, and friends around her has been alienated into the point of indifference, and her desire for money has reached an extremely morbid level.

At the end of the story, all three people lost their lives because of the five thousand dollars. The novel uses the technique of scientific experiment, which represents the characteristics of naturalistic literary creation, and shows that the

characters in the novel are doomed to be unable to change their fate under the influence of heredity and environment, which adds a sense of determinism to its tragic ending. But we know that literary works, as products of culture, can reflect the social reality of the times to a large extent. Therefore, *McTeague* reflects the tragedy of the lower class people in the capitalist society, and it also reveals the cruel consequence of the infinite deduction of the capital logic.

In essence, the deduction of the capital logic will inevitably bring about the overall alienation of people. Karl Marx points out in his economic work *Das Kapital* that under the operation of capital, the functions of the animal take over the whole of man, and the functions of man become subordinate. In his words, "All other human activity and turns them into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal" (45) in the process of capital development. Therefore, the capital logic has gradually evolved into the robber logic of "the survival of the fittest" under social Darwinism, which leads to the misfortune of the weak. Thus, the beautiful American dream has since become the nightmare of the lower class people. The law of animal competition under the capital logic controls the fate of every American, and the humanistic advocacy of morality and tenderness has long been impractical.

All in all, the change of the connotation of the American dream is the infinite expansion of extreme individualism under the deduction of the capital logic, and it is also a concentrated embodiment of private interests. From Jefferson's proposition of the American dream during the American Revolutionary War, to Benjamin Franklin's image of a self-made businessman in his autobiography, the American dream has inspired every generation of Americans to strive for their success. However, with the rapid development of the capitalist economy in American society, the connotation of the American dream is gradually distorted. Driven by the endless dream of making money, some people become millionaires overnight, while others fall into the abyss of tragedy. The American dream fueled by money worship immediately comes to naught, and people lose their faith, thus exposing their animal-like evil nature. Therefore, the connotation of American dream has gradually lost its spiritual core under the development of capital. The American dream that defines success based on materialism and individualism is bound to be distorted and destroyed in the illusion of money worship.

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