

The Seussian American Dream: *Oh, The Places You'll (Not) Go!*

Dr. Seuss's book *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* is hailed as one of the most popular graduation gifts, but despite its colorful illustrations and highly optimistic message, is it really what we want new graduates to enter the world believing? Dr. Seuss's representation of the American Dream is positive and hopeful, but just like any dream, one must ask if it is realistic and practical. What implications are there for those who are encouraged to invest in this dream but are systemically barred from it? The American Dream was created in 1931 by James Truslow Adams in which it refers to the ideology that opportunities in the United States are dependent upon each person's overall merit, that with hard work, ambition, and perseverance, any achievement can be attained. Thomas Clayton Wolfe later attributed material success and wealth to the dream.¹ In this paper, I will argue that while Dr. Seuss's depiction of the American Dream in *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* can be inspiring and intrinsically motivating, it is a distortion of the opportunities and freedoms offered to the majority of Americans, a dream most of America cannot afford to have.

Oh, the Places You'll Go! is a whimsical story that follows an unnamed single white male character maneuvering the endless number of paths down which he has the decision to take his life. This character walks down colorful pastel roads and is uplifted by a hot air balloon, "soar[ing] to high heights" and "seeing great sights." He also goes through "Bang-ups and Hang-ups" and gets stuck in a stagnant spot known as "The Waiting Place." Ultimately, he escapes and finds "the bright places where Boom Bands are playing" and is reassured that he will be "famous as famous can be, with the whole wide world watching you win on TV." He manages to flee

¹ Joslyn Armstrong, et. al. "'A Dream Deferred': How Discrimination Impacts the American Dream Achievement for African Americans" in *Journal of Black Studies* pp. 229-230

from the “Hakken-Kraks” and face his fears and problems to achieve ultimate success that is “98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed.”²

From the start of the book, readers are introduced to a meritocratic and egalitarian society in which an individual’s success depends entirely upon the abilities and choices of the individual. In the beginning, the character is depicted purposefully walking down a road lined with bright yellow houses and hot pink trees: “You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You’re on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go.”³ Readers are placed on an equal playing field as everyone else and are told that their level of success entirely depends upon their intelligence, drive, and life decisions. In other words, the reader’s life is completely in the reader’s hands and is impervious to any external forces that may hinder them. This is especially emphasized by Dr. Seuss’s use of the second person instead of the third person, directly addressing the reader and presupposing that every reader is granted equal abilities and opportunities.

However, in reality, the potential of many Americans is hampered and the direction of their lives is largely controlled by systemic discrimination rather than personal choice. Perhaps the reader is physically disabled and impeded from making a certain life decision such as taking a job that is not accessible to them. Or perhaps the reader is a woman who has experienced multiple accounts of harassment and sexism in the workplace, or who has the same credentials as her male coworkers, but continues to get paid on average 20% less than them. Although the American Dream would like people to believe that each person is allotted the same level of equality and freedom, the systemic values are not aligned with those of the Constitution.

² Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* (New York: Random House, 1990).

³ Ibid.

African Americans are particularly targeted in systemic discrimination, which not only minimizes the number of “paths” open to them, but also undermines their own sense of their ability to achieve the American Dream. 96% of African Americans reported experiencing racial discrimination in the past year, of which there are three types: individual racism, institutional racism, and cultural racism. Individual racism involves person-to-person interactions. Institutional racism involves structural barriers such as policies and economic barriers and cultural racism includes social norms, beliefs, and attitudes that shape and are implemented in institutional discrimination. Thus, African Americans face discrimination from multiple angles, which contributes to lower levels of life satisfaction in terms of health, economic standing, and social problems. One in four African Americans have lived in poverty, doubled that of Whites, and unemployment rates of African Americans are also doubled in comparison.⁴ It has even been noted that Blacks who are wealthier than Whites may be more financially successful, but enjoy it less because they are less satisfied with their achievements and less optimistic about future prospects.⁵ When one faces such discrimination, they are not endowed with many freedoms such as having access to academic resources and good nutrition and health care, all which directly and indirectly affect one’s learning abilities and life direction.

About midway through *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* the character arrives at a dark place in which the dimly-lit landscape maps onto his confused and distraught mental state, but the reality for many Americans is that they must persevere through more than just a negative mindset because much of their lives has already been determined for them. Readers are warned, “Simple it’s not, I’m afraid you will find, for a mind-maker-upper to make up his mind,” as if readers are

⁴ Joslyn Armstrong, et. al. “‘A Dream Deferred’: How Discrimination Impacts the American Dream Achievement for African Americans” in *Journal of Black Studies* p. 230

⁵ Mara A. Cohen-Marks and Christopher Stout, “Can the American Dream Survive the New Multiethnic America? Evidence from Los Angeles” in *Sociological Forum* p. 827

solely independent agents reliant on the strength of their mentality and willpower.⁶ The reality of the fact is that many Americans are not even given the chance to be as mobile as this character and that when they “come to a place where the streets are not marked,” it is often as a result of the conditions they were born into rather than a “wrong turn” they personally made. Only 58% of Americans born into the bottom fifth of income earners ever move out of that category and as little as 6% of those in the bottom fifth move into the top, making economic mobility in the United States lower than in most of Europe and all of Scandinavia. The achievement gap between kids born into affluent families and kids born into poorer families in 2001 was 30-40% larger than it was 25 years earlier. A decision that most Americans face is either not attending college and therefore limiting their job prospects or attending college and drowning in student debt for much of their lives.⁷ The bottom line is that the life prospects of Americans is more dependent on the income and education of their parents than in most other developed countries and that the achievement of the American Dream is not so much an individual venture than it is one that involves the social standing and systemic treatment of one’s family. As Dr. Seuss puts it, “Un-slumping yourself is not easily done,” but he does not acknowledge that it often cannot be done *alone*.⁸

Instead, Dr. Seuss prepares readers to fight their fight alone and perpetuates the underpinning notion of the American Dream that the quality of one’s life depends on and reflects the quality of oneself as a person. When the character is depicted playing a basketball game against himself in an unstable and deteriorating house it is written that “I’m afraid that *some* times you’ll play lonely games too. Games you can’t win ‘cause you’ll play against you.”⁹ Once

⁶ Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* (New York: Random House, 1990).

⁷ Joseph E. Stiglitz, “Equal Opportunity, Our National Myth” in *The New York Times*

⁸ Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* (New York: Random House, 1990).

⁹ *Ibid.*

again, the reader is depicted as being in a battle only against him or herself and the precariousness of the dilapidated house is a reflection of the character's self-destructive mindset. However, just like the ideology of the American Dream is exclusive of the reality of most Americans, Dr. Seuss excludes many external complex factors that contribute to not only the outcome of a person's life, but also the unhealthy state of a person's mind. The prevalence of the American Dream induces Americans to act and think in "system-justifying" ways: "Bourdieu argues that people perpetuate inequalities in society by structuring themselves based on structured class distinctions. The AD [American Dream] is structuring in that individuals' identities and relation to society are structured based on their perceptions of how they fit into the ideology, which then structures society. It is structured in that it objectively creates a hierarchy in society by classifying people."¹⁰ While the American Dream ostensibly wants to escape the notion that people are locked into the realities into which they are born, it counterproductively supports a hierarchy and class distinctions. Rather than act as a source of hope for many Americans, the American Dream is a source of justification for the actuality of their lives; rather than aspire towards the American Dream, many accept and defend their distant positions from it based on the rigidity and discrimination of the capitalist system.

However, this is not to say that the American Dream has no effect upon the psychology of many Americans. The dilution of the American Dream has serious consequences both on the individual and on society as a whole: "If diversity threatens the ideology of the American dream, the society based on the ideology is threatened too. Ideals do matter. Individuals who are pessimistic about their lack of social and political opportunities are more likely to engage in criminal activity, have lower levels of self-esteem and efficacy, are less likely to pursue higher

¹⁰ Betty Stoneman, "Ideological Domination: Deconstructing the Paradox of the American Dream and the Working Class Promise" in *Stance* p. 111

levels of education, and are less likely to plan for the long term.”¹¹ Predetermined social factors largely impact the mindsets of Americans, making their beliefs and self-faith a product of the ideologies in which society is steeped. Rather than acknowledge that one’s life path is not simply determined by a series of self-made choices, *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* has the effect of pinning blame solely on the reader for their own failures and shortcomings. While the idea that people should just “face up to your problems whatever they are,” can be interpreted as a lesson in courage, it is dangerously simplistic and undermining of the psychological and behavioral impacts of systemic inequalities amongst individuals.¹²

An impulse of the American Dream that *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* emphasizes is one of self-reliance. Both Dr. Seuss and the ideology of the American Dream uphold self-reliance as a high moral standard, as if one that bears burdens and accomplishes achievements alone is somehow more moral than one who receives aid or help of some sort. However, practicing self-reliance can also border along the immoral: “The self-reliant individual may turn out to be uncomfortably close to the selfish one... Endless invention may come uncomfortably close to mechanical reproduction. It may involve exploitation that consumes the common world, rather than producing new ones. It may collapse into commercialism, with individual pursuit and conformity difficult to distinguish from one another.”¹³ To emphasize self-reliance to the extent of *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* can be damaging not merely in the sense that it can bleed into conformism, but also in the sense that it seems to normalize and even praise loneliness as if it is virtuous and something to strive towards. Since *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* presupposes egalitarianism, it assumes that everyone has equal opportunities to become “self-made”

¹¹ Mara A. Cohen-Marks and Christopher Stout, “Can the American Dream Survive the New Multiethnic America? Evidence from Los Angeles” in *Sociological Forum* p. 825

¹² Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* (New York: Random House, 1990).

¹³ Shira Wolosky, “Democracy in America: By Dr. Seuss” in *Southwest Review* p. 173

individuals, irrespective of one's background. The fact that readers are told they will succeed "98 and 3/4 percent guaranteed" may induce self-confidence, but it can simultaneously create self-doubt should they not succeed (however they may define success) because they are underprivileged or even prevented from doing so by the capitalist system.

One can certainly make the argument that *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* is set in an imaginary, utopian-like world in which hierarchical rank, social classes, social norms, and discrimination are nonexistent, but it does not mean that its dominant ideology, or the cultural message that the author infuses the medium with, is not in any way harmful. Lichung Yang applauds Dr. Seuss for "liberating" readers from the established order. Yang claims that Dr. Seuss's "nonsensical" language abolishes a sense of reality and therefore forces readers to engage more with their creative selves and see the world differently by activating their imagination: "They [Dr. Seuss books] often offer alternatives or parodies to expose the limits or artificiality of social convention rather than challenge or subvert the established order. The juxtaposition between zany people and wacky creatures is made to provide a clearly-bounded space whereby the reader temporarily experiences the Seussian chronotopes. Seussian nonsense, in Jean-Jacques Lecercle's words, has the same goals (but not the same methods) as school education: to teach children the rules of language and more generally the rules of conduct."¹⁴ Yang believes that Dr. Seuss is concerned with the medium of his teachings, from his made-up, "nonsensical" language to his outlandish characters, that his primary objective is to stimulate creativity and the possibilities of the imagination more than anything else. However, it is not entirely accurate that Dr. Seuss did not seek to challenge the established social order through his own fictive and bizarre worlds, for what about the allusions to Hitler in *Yertle the Turtle*, anti-

¹⁴ Lichung Yang, "Following Reading Primers the Wrong Way: Pedagogical Nonsense in Dr. Seuss" in *Children's Literature in Education* p. 332

Semitism in *The Sneetches*, the Cold War in the *Butter Battle Book*, and the environmental movement in *The Lorax*?¹⁵ Perhaps there is much more to Dr. Seuss's "nonsense" than Yang gives him credit for, and perhaps he seeks to teach children about the state of the world rather than just the malleability of language and the flexibility of our creative selves. Or maybe the different readings and levels of interpretation are meant to indicate that Dr. Seuss books are timeless and meant to grow with us, making them suitable for all ages. All in all, readers can read *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* quite literally by interpreting it as the quest of a white heterosexual male navigating the American Dream, but that is not to say readers should not participate in resistant readings of it.

¹⁵ Fiona Macdonald, "The Surprisingly Radical Politics of Dr. Seuss," <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20190301-the-surprisingly-radical-politics-of-dr-seuss>

Works Cited

Armstrong, Joslyn, Fiorella L. Carlos Chavez, Julia H. Jones, Shar'Dane Harris and Gregory J. Harris. "'A Dream Deferred': How Discrimination Impacts the American Dream Achievement for African Americans." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2019, pp. 227 - 250.

Cohen-Marks, Mara A. and Christopher Stout. "Can the American Dream Survive the New Multiethnic America? Evidence From Los Angeles." *Sociological Forum*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2011, pp. 824 - 845.

Geisel, Theodor. *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* New York: Random House, 1990.

Macdonald, Fiona. "The Surprisingly Radical Politics of Dr. Seuss," BBC, last modified March 2, 2019. <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20190301-the-surprisingly-radical-politics-of-dr-seuss>.

Stiglitz, Joseph E. "Equal Opportunity, Our National Myth." *New York Times*, February 16, 2013. <http://www.teamsters952.org/Equal%20Opportunity,%20Our%20Nationa.PDF>.

Stoneman, Betty. "Ideological Domination: Deconstructing the Paradox of the American Dream and the Working Class Promise." *Stance (1943-1880)*, vol. 7, 2014, pp. 105 - 114.

Wolosky, Shira. "Democracy In America: By Dr. Seuss." *Southwest Review*, vol. 85, no. 2, 2000, p. 167.

Yang, Lichung. "Following Reading Primers the Wrong Way: Pedagogical Nonsense In Dr. Seuss." *Children's Literature In Education: An International Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2017, p. 326.