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“The Self-Made Man: A Literary Analysis of Early American Literature”

From Columbus’ journey to the Americas to the present, the American dream is the ideal in which the inhabitants of this great nation have aimed. Though varying in definition throughout generations, the fundamental premise of this ideal asserts that in America, success can be achieved by anyone through hard work and dedication (Miller “Course T mes”). Essentially, the American dream can be attained by exhibiting characteristics of the self-made man. The importance of the self-made man is evident in the way it was extensively explored and  highlighted in early American literature. Benjamin Franklin, John de Crevecoeur, Frederick Douglass and Ralph Waldo Emerson were all great American writers who had a personal belief system centered on accountability and determination. **Because of their shared belief in self-improvement and personal responsibility, the works of Franklin, Crevecoeur, Douglass, and Emerson consistently embody the theme of the self-made man and the American dream.** 

As one of our country’s founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin has long been regarded as one of the most important contributors to the foundation of America and its ideals. From humble beginnings to staggering success through diligence, self-restraint, prudence and resourcefulness, Franklin set the example for the self-made man (B a 76). Franklin believed the only way to achieve the American dream was to constantly correct his errors in his written work and the way

he lived his life until these errors were eradicated, transforming him into a man of upstanding character or at the very least, learning to never repeat them (Del Guercio, par. 9). In his *Autobiography*, Franklin describes his life as an experience centered on a conscious and deliberate desire for self-improvement to achieve success. In order to attain the American dream he shares a list detailing a strict regimen of daily examination he adheres to by remaining focused and virtuous. Beginning with the question “what good shall I do this day?” and ending with “what good have I done today?”, Franklin’s to-do list makes strict provision for every part of his day so no time is wasted on anything other than the improvement of self (Franklin 7).

This list functions as an outline of sorts, chronicling a day in the life of a self-made man who desires to attain greatness, always asking the question if he has done enough today, so that he can improve tomorrow. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin also speaks of a simple occurrence that represents how being a hard-working, self-made man has changed his life when he tells the story of how he gradually begins to see the fruits of his labor in his home. He says:

My breakfast was a long time bread and milk (no tea), and I ate it out of a twopenny earthen porringer, with a pewter spoon. But mark how luxury will enter families, and make a progress, in spite of principle: being called one morning to breakfast, I found it in a China bowl, with a spoon of silver! ...this was the first appearance of plate and China in our house, which afterward, in a course of years, as our wealth increased, augmented gradually to several hundred pounds in value. (Franklin 3)

Again, Franklin is highlighting how the self-made man will notice an increase in success and progression even in the most basic aspects of life. The constant mentioning of this linear relationship between how hard Franklin worked and the amount of success he achieved, shows


the importance he placed on the theme of the self-made man and solidifies his legacy as an example of how being self-made can bring the American dream to fruition.



Like Franklin, John de Crevecoeur sought to shine a light on the significance of the sedulous man by detailing his definition of the American identity. Although not a natural born American, Crevecoeur immigrated to America from France and found himself in awe of this newly forming nation that presented a platform to observe and test the effects of diligence and sacrifice (Rapping 707). Unlike what he witnessed in Europe, he viewed America as a place where one had unlimited opportunities to overcome any condition, because there “are no aristocratic families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one” (Crevecoeur 14). In his narrative *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crevecoeur provides an imaginative account of what one of the first colonists must have felt like after settling here. He writes, “he must greatly rejoice that he lived at a time to see this fair country discovered and settled; he must necessarily feel a share of national pride, when he views the chain of settlements which embellishes these extended shores. When he says to himself, this is the work of my countrymen” (Crevecoeur 13). Here, Crevecoeur provides an example of what can be accomplished when industrious and determined people take responsibility of their own success and work tirelessly to improve their situation. Describing a prosperous and thriving America in this way lends to the contention that Crevecoeur viewed the assiduous man as a critical part of the foundation of this country.

Another great American writer who has also effectively outlined his belief in and support of personal culpability and attaining success through one’s own painstaking actions is Frederick Douglass. As a slave who bravely obtained his own freedom by escaping to the North, he had first-hand experience of what it took to overcome his situation in order to accomplish the

American Dream. In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass reveals a turning point in his life where he challenges and injures his overseer, Mr. Covey, after he attempts to whip him for several infractions. Douglass writes, “I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (40). Even while living under the oppression of the institution of slavery, it is at this point when Douglass begins to silently add to his mental repertoire the importance of being responsible for the desired outcome of obtaining his freedom (Brewton 708). He understands that this is the only way to mentally and physically realize his definition of the American Dream. Although it would take Douglass four more years after these events to escape to freedom, he uses this realization of the importance of the self-made man, determined, in control of and responsible for his own life, to see his American dream realized.

When quoted and imitated by Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson was also quite famous for his belief in the self-made man. He wrote and spoke frequently of this idea during a time where he began to challenge issues of stagnancy and conformity (Roberson 109). Dedicating an entire section of his *Essays: First Series* to the dogma of self-reliance, Emerson provides several examples of why it is pertinent for one to understand and possess the qualities of an industrious man. He begins by writing, “to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, — that is genius” (Emerson 1). This proclamation is the foundation of Emerson’s belief that admonishing the physical and mental contributions of others, relying solely on one’s own thoughts and thinking them through is the way to achieve intellectual individuality and success (Malachuk, Levine 126). Emerson goes on to say that man

“must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till” (2). Comparing man to nature, Emerson stresses that only through one’s meticulousness and hard work are successful and fruitful harvests reaped. Like Franklin, Crèvecoeur, and Douglass, Emerson’s brilliant stance on the topic of self-reliance and the achievements one can acquire via this mindset supports the idea of the vital role he believed it played in personal success. 

The works of Benjamin Franklin, John de Crèvecoeur, Frederick Douglass and Ralph Waldo Emerson consistently reinforce the theme of the self-made man as the foundation for the American dream, echoing their personal belief in self-betterment and culpability. Franklin’s *Autobiography*, Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, Douglass’ *Narrative*, and Emerson’s *Self-Reliance* are four brilliant examples of the frequency and dominant way these writers proclaim their affinity for and belief in the importance of the self-made man to attain their own definition of the American dream. It is through these analogous and  unwavering ideologies that their work will continue to speak for their own personal truths for many years to come. 

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