

Representation of the American Dream in Damien Chazelle's Film La La Land (2016)

Study of Literature

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Abstract. The film *La La Land* by Damien Chazelle (2016) represents the struggle in pursuing one's dreams. This study aims to analyze how the concept of the American Dream is portrayed in the film through its characters and storyline. The main issue addressed in this research is how the American Dream is represented by Mia and Sebastian in *La La Land*. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a literary sociology approach, as well as the American Dream theory proposed by James Truslow Adams. The primary data source is the film *La La Land*, while secondary data is obtained from literature relevant to the topic. The results show that the characters Sebastian and Mia are depicted as two individuals who persistently pursue their respective dreams. Sebastian aspires to own a jazz club, and Mia to become a famous actress. The film not only presents the ideal side of the American Dream, which suggests that success can be achieved through hard work and determination, but also highlights its realistic side, where achieving dreams often comes with emotional sacrifices, as Mia and Sebastian are portrayed as individualistic characters. Thus, *La La Land* portrays the American Dream as a complex aspiration filled with consequences in its pursuit.

Keywords: La la land, American Dream, Struggle, Work Ethic, Literary Sociology.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States or an idea of freedom that encompasses an individual's opportunity to succeed. As a recurring theme in various literary works and films, the American Dream serves as a depiction of both the idealism and the reality of American society. The term was first popularized by James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America* (1931). This concept represents the belief that every individual has an equal opportunity to achieve a better life through hard work, perseverance, and self-reliance. It is often associated with financial success and upward social mobility. Moreover, the American Dream is closely tied to optimism specifically, the belief that the future can be shaped by one's efforts and faith in their own abilities. In many literary works and films, optimism acts as a driving force that gives characters the hope to overcome great obstacles, while maintaining the belief that they can reach their goals if they work hard and never give up. In this context, optimism is not just a mental attitude but also a deeply valued principle in American culture, fostering strong confidence in the individual's potential to succeed regardless of their social background.

The representation of the American Dream is not only evident in *La La Land*, but also frequently explored in various other Hollywood films through different approaches and perspectives. One well known example is *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), which clearly illustrates how perseverance and optimism are key factors in achieving success, even when facing major challenges such as poverty and social issues. This film portrays the American Dream as a tangible hope that demands extraordinary struggle. It also touches on the concept of workaholicism the tendency to work relentlessly in pursuit of success which is often part of the American Dream narrative. On the other

hand, *Joker* (2019) presents a sharp critique of this concept. Through the character of Arthur Fleck, the film highlights the failure of the system to provide equal opportunities and shows how broken dreams can turn into chaos and identity destruction. This film reveals the darker side of the American Dream, when society fails to fulfill its promise of equality and justice. Meanwhile, *Step Up* (2006) depicts the American Dream in the context of art and talent, where its characters strive to change their lives through dance, showing that dreams can also be achieved through creative expression and the opportunities provided by one's social environment.

The film *La La Land* by Damien Chazelle serves as one of the contemporary visual representations of the American Dream. Through the characters of Mia and Sebastian, the film illustrates how the freedom to dream, the opportunity to pursue a career, and the hope for success become the driving forces in their lives. In *La La Land*, Mia struggles to achieve her dream of becoming an actress amidst the harsh realities of the entertainment industry. After repeatedly failing auditions, she takes the initiative to write and perform her own one-woman play as a form of self-reliance. Although the initial response is disappointing, the play unexpectedly opens a new opportunity when a talent scout sees her performance and offers her a major audition. Mia's journey affirms that chasing dreams requires initiative, courage, and persistence. However, the film also reveals the other side of the American Dream the harsh reality behind the pursuit, including emotional sacrifice and loneliness that often accompany the journey. Thus, *La La Land* not only portrays the idealism of the American Dream but also presents a more realistic and human narrative of what it means to pursue one's dreams in the modern world.

From the three films, which come from different genres drama, thriller, and dance it can be concluded that the representation of the American Dream can be conveyed through various forms of cinematic narrative. In this context, a musical film like *La La Land* also proves itself to be an effective medium for delivering messages about the American Dream. Through a blend of music, dance, and an emotionally driven storyline, *La La Land* not only entertains but also touches on the personal struggles involved in pursuing one's dreams. The musical genre adds a distinctive aesthetic element in expressing hope, failure, and the emotional conflicts of its characters, allowing the message of the American Dream to be conveyed in a more poetic yet still realistic manner.

It is important to discuss the topic of the American Dream in the study of literature and film because this concept not only reflects individuals' hopes for the future, but also mirrors the social and cultural realities of society. The American Dream serves as a lens through which we can observe how individuals navigate their lives amidst high aspirations, social pressures, and sometimes unjust systems. In the context of the film *La La Land*, the depiction of the American Dream through the characters Mia and Sebastian offers deep insight into how dreams are pursued with passion and sacrifice, and how art is used as a medium to convey meaningful life messages. By analyzing this film, viewers are not only treated to beautiful visual and musical entertainment, but are also invited to reflect on the meaning of dreams, struggle, and reality in the modern world. This makes the American Dream a continually relevant subject of study, especially in understanding the dynamic tension between idealism and reality faced by individuals in today's global era.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In literary and film studies, the theme of the American Dream remains a central focus that is widely analyzed from various perspectives. Damien Chazelle's *La La Land* serves as a compelling example

of a modern work worth examining, as it not only illustrates the passion for pursuing dreams but also highlights the darker aspects, such as sacrifice and loss. Although the American Dream has been extensively discussed

in the context of Hollywood films, further analysis is still needed to explore how *La La Land* presents the complexity of this ideal through the emotional and professional journeys of its main characters, Mia and Sebastian.

A previous study by Riska Fitriani, M. Natsir, and Indah Sari Lubis (2019), titled "The Moral Development of the Main Character Sebastian Wilder Portrayed in *La La Land* Movie (2016)," focused on analyzing Sebastian's moral development using Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The study examined the six stages of his moral progression, ranging from obedience to rules, efforts to maintain social relationships, to an awareness of universal ethical principles in the pursuit of his dreams. While this research provides valuable insights into Sebastian's moral growth as an individual, it leaves a notable gap namely, the specific representation of the American Dream in the life journeys of both Sebastian and Mia. The previous study centers primarily on personal (moral) character development, without exploring how their dreams, ambitions, and struggles collectively depict a more nuanced and layered portrayal of the American Dream, both from idealistic and realistic perspectives.

Another previous study by Rayhan Janitra Laksono and Auria F. Yogananti (2023), titled "The Representation of Character Maturity Development through the Use of Setting and Wardrobe Colors in the Film *La La Land*," focused on analyzing changes in color settings and costumes to observe the maturity development of the characters Mia and Sebastian. The study employed Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach to interpret the psychological meanings of colors in supporting the characters' development.

Another study conducted by Eva Triana Sidabutar (2019), titled "The Meaning of Hard Work in the Film *La La Land*," focuses on a semiotic analysis to reveal the meaning of hard work as depicted through the *mise-en-scène* elements in *La La Land*. Using Christian Metz's semiotic approach, this research examines how visual signs such as setting, costume, lighting, and actor movements construct the message about the importance of hard work in achieving dreams.

Based on previous studies, it can be concluded that although the film *La La Land* has been extensively analyzed from various aspects such as moral development of characters, maturity development through visual color elements, and the meaning of hard work through *mise-en-scène*, there has been no research specifically focusing on the representation of the American Dream in this film. These studies primarily concentrate on character analysis, visual aspects, and symbols of hard work, without directly connecting them to the concept of the American Dream as a social and cultural ideology. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how *La La Land* represents the American Dream through the emotional, professional, and sacrificial journeys of Mia and Sebastian, using a literary sociology approach and James Truslow Adams's theory of the American Dream.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive method with a literary sociology approach. This approach is chosen to thoroughly examine how the film *La La Land* reflects the representation of the American Dream through its narrative, character development, and the underlying social and cultural contexts.

Literary sociology is employed because this research focuses on the relationship between literary works (in this case, film as a form of cultural expression) and the social conditions of society, particularly concerning the concept of the American Dream. Through this approach, the researcher can explore how American cultural and social values are depicted in the characters, emerging conflicts, and moral messages conveyed by the film.

The theoretical foundation used in this study is the theory of the American Dream introduced by James Truslow Adams in his work *The Epic of America* (1931). According to this theory, the American Dream is the belief that every individual has an equal opportunity to achieve a better life, provided they are willing to work hard, be persistent, and self-reliant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Damien Chazelle's film *La La Land* presents a complex representation of the American Dream through the life journeys of its two main characters, Mia and Sebastian. In the context of this film, the American Dream is depicted not only as the achievement of success through hard work and perseverance, but also as an emotional journey filled with sacrifice. Through narrative analysis and character portrayal, the film offers a broader understanding of the reality behind the grand dreams pursued by individuals.

Characterization of Mia and Sebastian

Mia is portrayed as a young woman aspiring to become a famous actress amid the harsh realities of the Hollywood film industry. Despite facing numerous failed auditions and disappointments, Mia consistently demonstrates perseverance and courage in pursuing her dream even going as far as writing and performing her own one-woman play at minute 01:28:00. Her determination reflects the essence of the American Dream, which emphasizes the importance of hard work and individual initiative.

Minute 01:26:05

Mia stages her own one-woman play independently.

This moment marks a significant turning point in Mia's journey. It serves as concrete evidence that she takes initiative and agency in pursuing her dream of becoming an actress. Unable to break through via conventional auditions, she creates her own opportunity an act that reflects the core values of the American Dream: self-reliance, creativity, and perseverance in the face of repeated rejection.

Sebastian, on the other hand, is a jazz musician with a strong ambition to open his own jazz club in order to preserve the music he loves. He is portrayed as an idealist who refuses to compromise his artistic values, but is eventually faced with the reality that some compromise is necessary for financial survival. This is evident when he joins a commercial band to support Mia's dream.

Minute 1:42:30

Sebastian : "I will follow my plan and stay here, get my own dream"

Sebastian: "And you're in Paris"

It is portrayed that Sebastian and Mia ultimately choose separate life paths in order to pursue their individual dreams. Sebastian stays in Los Angeles to realize his ambition of owning a jazz club, while Mia continues her acting career in Paris. Both of them succeed in achieving their own versions of the American Dream, but at the cost of their personal relationship. This illustrates that the fulfillment of dreams does not always align with emotional happiness, as it often requires difficult decisions to reach one's life goals.

At 00:45:10

Sebastian : "I made my own club"

This line serves as clear evidence that Sebastian is actively realizing his dream of owning a jazz club. It marks a significant moment of achievement in his personal pursuit of the American Dream, showing that his long-held aspiration is finally materializing through determination and persistence.

At 00:47:02

Although there is no direct quote at this timestamp, the scene visually emphasizes Sebastian's dedication and seriousness in achieving his dream. His actions reflect the values of the American Dream especially the belief that hard work and personal effort can lead to success. His commitment reinforces the idea that ambition must be supported by consistent, tangible action.

These two characters represent the core spirit of the American Dream, determination, independence, and self-belief. However, they also reflect the moral and emotional dilemmas that arise when personal dreams come into conflict with reality and social relationships.

Representation of the American Dream in the Film

In one scene, Laura asks Sebastian:

Minute 00:18:47

Laura: "When you gonna unpack these boxes?"

Sebastian: "When I'm part in my own club."

This dialogue carries symbolic meaning. The unopened boxes represent Sebastian's life that has not yet truly begun, as his dream of owning a jazz club remains unfulfilled. He declares he will only unpack them once his dream is achieved, implying that success marks the beginning of his ideal life. This aligns with James Truslow Adams' concept of the American Dream that success can be attained through hard work.

For Sebastian, his dream is more than just a career it symbolizes freedom and identity. His choice to postpone personal comfort in pursuit of his dream reflects the sacrifice required to reach great goals. This affirms that Sebastian represents an American Dream that is not only idealistic but also filled with struggle.

La La Land portrays both sides of the American Dream: idealism and realism. On one hand, the film suggests that anyone can achieve success through hard work, as seen in Mia's success as an actress and Sebastian's eventual jazz club. On the other hand, it shows that success often comes at a cost namely, the sacrifice of their romantic relationship in favor of their individual dreams.

The film presents an imperfect version of the American Dream. La La Land illustrates that pursuing one's dream frequently demands difficult choices and personal loss. This provides a more realistic view of the American Dream one filled with challenges and sacrifice.

Social and Cultural Values Reflected

Through a literary sociology approach, the film also reflects American cultural values such as individualism, ambition, and belief in meritocracy. Mia and Sebastian choose to follow their dreams even at the expense of their relationship, illustrating the strong value of individualism in American society. Moreover, the film shows that success depends not only on talent but also on perseverance and readiness when opportunity arises.

Throughout the film, both Mia and Sebastian demonstrate their belief that hard work and persistence can create opportunities to realize their dreams. Although there is no specific dialogue at an exact time that directly addresses meritocracy, both characters repeatedly prove they are willing to fight for their dreams, even in the face of numerous obstacles and failures.

For example:

At minute 00:35:30

Mia attends yet another unsuccessful audition, but continues to persevere and try again. Her determination and refusal to give up are clear examples of the belief in meritocracy that success is earned through effort, not merely luck.

In addition, *La La Land* emphasizes the importance of art as part of the American Dream. Unlike materialistic ambitions, the film underscores that dreams can take the form of self-expression, passion for one's craft, and efforts to preserve culture. This makes *La La Land* a representation of the American Dream that focuses not only on economic success, but also on inner fulfillment and personal identity.

CONCLUSION

The film *La La Land* by Damien Chazelle offers a nuanced and multifaceted representation of the American Dream through the personal and professional journeys of its main characters, Mia and Sebastian. This study, employing a literary sociology approach and James Truslow Adams' theory of the American Dream, has shown that the film captures both the idealistic and realistic dimensions of the American Dream.

Mia and Sebastian exemplify core American values such as determination, self-reliance, and perseverance. Their unwavering commitment to their dreams Mia's ambition to become a successful actress and Sebastian's goal to open a jazz club reflects the ideal that success is attainable through

hard work. However, their story also reveals the emotional and relational sacrifices that often accompany the pursuit of individual aspirations. The film thus suggests that while the American Dream promises opportunity and fulfillment, it can also result in personal loss, particularly in the form of broken relationships and emotional compromise.

Furthermore, *La La Land* emphasizes that the American Dream extends beyond material wealth, highlighting the value of artistic passion, cultural preservation, and individual identity. It also reflects social values such as individualism and belief in meritocracy, portraying how success is often the result of persistence and readiness to seize opportunities.

In conclusion, *La La Land* presents the American Dream not as a simple, universally joyful outcome, but as a complex, sometimes bittersweet pursuit. It captures the tension between personal ambition and emotional fulfillment, providing a more realistic and human portrayal of what it means to chase one's dreams in a modern,

competitive society. This makes the film a relevant and thought-provoking text for examining how the American Dream continues to influence both individuals and culture today.

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