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Nightmares Are Dreams Too: the Notion of the American Dream in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*

The USA has been pegged as the land where all dreams come true. However, with the help of Hunter S.Thompson's novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* I will try to tackle the questionable existence of the American Dream. I will also introduce the notion of the American Nightmare later in the essay.

The recipe for the American Dream, according to the novel, is: alcohol (tequila, rum, beer), drugs (grass, cocaine, acid, mescaline, and other), raw ether, amyls, Great Red Shark (i.e. red Chevy convertible), cash, a tape recorder, Acapulco shirts, and, most importantly, Las Vegas. Raoul Duke and Dr Gonzo, the two main characters in Thompson's novel, embark on a journey to Las Vegas in order to find the American Dream, and, marginally, to cover a story. However, already in the first chapter, there is talk of a somewhat ironical outcome of their task: "I want you to have all the background . . . [b]ecause this is a very ominous assignment—with overtones of extreme personal danger . . . Hell, I forgot all about this beer; you want one?" (2). Further into the journey, their blood is filled with drugs and their minds are



completely paranoid. Of course, the American Dream is nowhere to be found. Nevertheless, there is a transcript in the book where Duke and Gonzo ask a waitress whether she knows where the American Dream is, and it turns out it is a place that used to be the Psychiatrist Club, but where drug dealers and users hang out nowadays. Duke and Dr. Gonzo set off to find it: " . . . almost two hours later Dr. Duke and his attorney finally located what was left of the 'Old Psychiatrist's Club' – a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds. The owner of a gas station across the road said the place had 'burned down about three years ago'" (60). This burned-down building can be connected to the ramifications of the riots that happened in 1968, when the rioters burned down several buildings in Washington. The riots were instigated by the assassinations of a number of important people of the time, such as Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr.: "[i]t was the summer the dream died, the hot and impossible months after the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis and the commercial hubs of black Washington melted in the fires of next time" (Tucker n.p.). When this happened in America, not only were the buildings burned down, but also the idea of America—and of the American Dream. The building in the novel represents this.

A question is posed here—what *is* the American Dream? As we shall see later on, there are several definitions of it. In his book *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, Jim Cullen says:

The American Dream would have no drama or mystique if it were a self-evident falsehood or a scientifically demonstrable principle. Those who fail may confront troubling, even unanswerable, questions: Do I blame myself? Bad luck? The unattainability of the objective? Such uncertainty



may be no less haunting for the successful, who may also question the basis of their success – and its price. (7)

In other words, the notion of the American Dream does not imply that this Dream is reachable. Nor does it imply that it exists. The notion makes people turn themselves into misfits by telling them to strive for it. And since there are those who have not reached it yet, they start feeling like a failure, wondering what is wrong with them, thinking how they do not belong in the land of Dream come true. Furthermore, Cullen distinguishes several types of the Dream—the Dream of the good life (concerning the Puritan enterprise, upward mobility (the Dream of the Immigrant as its subset), and the Coast), the Dream concerning the Declaration of Independence, and the Dream of home ownership (11, 35, 59, 103, 133, 159, 188).

Referring back to the title of this essay (and considering Cullen's division above), the notion of the American Dream in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* can be interpreted as the Dream concerning the Declaration of Independence gone wrong. As it is well-known, the Declaration proclaims that all human beings have certain rights, which are "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" (Cullen 38). In a way, through those rights, Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo attempt to find the American Dream. They feel free to do what they are trying to do in the novel—finding the Dream in Las Vegas, with drugs and alcohol flowing in their veins, credit cards burning in their pockets, and cool breeze making the driving through the desert endurable. But the drugs have made them paranoid, turning everything into a nightmare. At the end of the novel, Duke is left disappointed:

The gig is finished... and it proved nothing. At least not to me. And certainly not to my attorney – who also had a badge – but he was back



in Malibu, nursing his paranoid sores. It been a waste of time, a lame fuckaround that was only – in clear retrospect – a cheap excuse for a thousand cops to spend a few days in Las Vegas and lay the bill on the taxpayers. (71)

On the other hand, the Dream concerning the Declaration of Independence is not necessarily the Dream that has gone wrong. It can also be perceived as the Dream that has gone right, or, in other words, the Nightmare that has gone right. An article from the *Economic and Political Weekly* called "An American Nightmare" says that because of the former American president, Richard Nixon, the dream has turned into a nightmare:

Nixon is probably again in a typical school-boyish manner talking big, and, of course, irresponsibly. But that's precisely where the danger lies. It would put god's fear in anybody's heart that the most powerful state in the world is run by people who do not distinguish between reason and unreason, defence and all-round destruction, poser and arrogance.
 (G.P.D. 1293)

It is also important to mention that Raoul Duke is, to put it mildly, not really fond of Nixon. As he himself says: "[i]n indeed. But what is sane? Especially here in 'our own country' - in this doomstruck era of Nixon" (63). Taking both citations into consideration, as well as the riots mentioned previously, the notion of the American Nightmare seems much more plausible than that of the American Dream. As we can see, America was not in a good political, economic, or even social state in the 1970s. It is difficult to imagine that a land such as this one could promise to make people's dreams come true. In his essay "The Un-American Dream" Alfred Hornung distinguishes the Dream and the Nightmare:



The naive belief in the American Dream as an almost automatic movement toward personal success and riches and its negative counterpart of an American nightmare resulting from economic principles of growth expressed in Rockefeller's statement are two sides of a coin and are literally connected to money. (547)

His view of the Dream and the Nightmare is based on money and success—or lack thereof. We can also recognize that Las Vegas, both in Thompson's novel and in real life, represents the capitalistic view of the Dream—spending money on material and immaterial goods, mostly by gambling. Capitalism imposes the need of those goods. Now we go back to one of Jim Cullen's types of the Dream—the Dream of the good life concerning the Coast. In the chapter regarding this type of the Dream, Cullen writes about California and Las Vegas. The latter is portrayed through its history, ending with capitalist takeover:

By the late 1970s the implacable hand of corporate capitalism supplanted mobsters and the union pension funds that had sustained them. Las Vegas became an increasingly well organized and financed business.

To a great degree, Las Vegas was also domesticated. This can be largely attributed to the logic of capitalism, a logic that is also predicated on gambling but that tries to square the circle wherever possible in the name of maximizing profit as efficiently as possible. (166)

By 'domesticated' Cullen means the entertainment for the whole family. This way, the profit increases because people bring more people with them. However, California (the Coast) is the true representative of this type of the Dream; according to Cullen: "[t]he California gold rush is the purest expression of the Dream of the Coast in



American history. The notion that transformative riches were literally at your feet, there for the taking, cast a deep and lasting spell on the American imagination" (170). This type of the Dream promotes shallowness in people—the value of money is the only value that matters.

To conclude, it is irrelevant whether one believes in the American Dream or not; the idea of it persists no matter what. As we can see in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the pursuit of the American Dream turns out to be more relevant than the Dream itself. The main character does not exactly know what the Dream he is searching for is, but, as previously mentioned, he is left disappointed—'Dreamless' even.



Works Cited

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