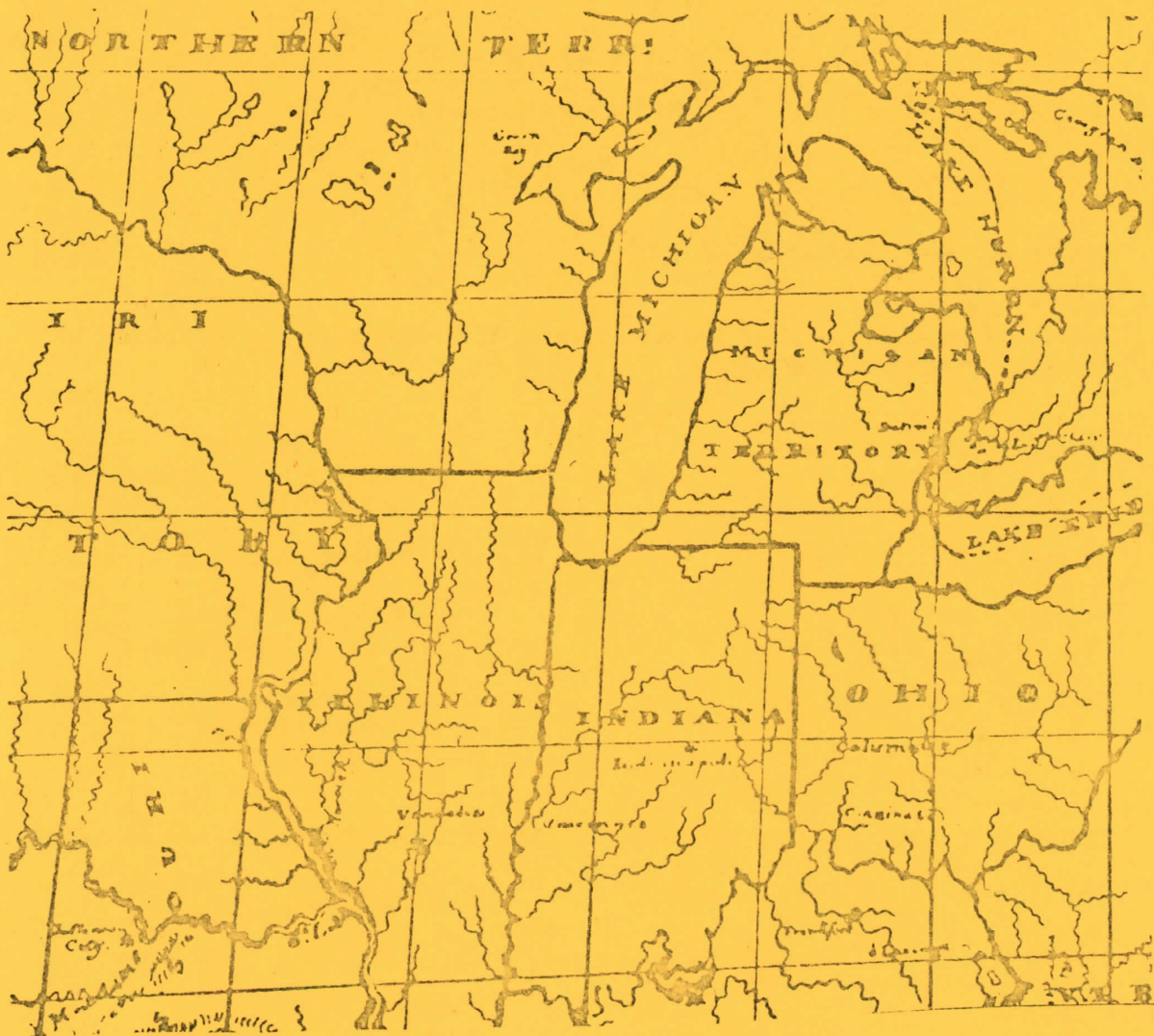


# SML Newsletter



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Editorial Office:

Ernst Bessey Hall  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, MI 48824

Editor:

David D. Anderson

Associate Editors:

Marilyn J. Atlas  
Roger J. Bresnahan

Editorial Assistants:

Joan Brunette  
Barbara Crutcher  
Anita Kelly

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Contents

		Page
A Voice from the Thirties (IV): An Interview with Gilbert Wilson	Philip L. Gerber	1
Three Novels by James Gunn: American Dreams Revised	Thomas P. Linkfield	31
Symbolism of Place in the Literature of the Twenties and Thirties	Joe Mumau	21
The American Dream and the American Nightmare in <u>The Sun Also Rises</u> , <u>The Great Gatsby</u> , and <u>The Disinherited</u>	Kimberly Saunders	26

Editor's Note:

The last two essays are by students in my English 447 class, Modern American Fiction. Members are invited to submit similar essays by advanced undergraduate and graduate students for possible publication in the Newsletter.



A Voice from the Thirties (IV)  
An Interview with Gilbert Wilson

Philip L. Gerber

This is the fourth of six interviews with Gilbert Wilson, painter and writer. In previous interviews he spoke of his experiences with Art Young and Diego Rivera, and reminisced about his boyhood in Terre Haute, Indiana. Other topics of concern have included: his early experiences as a painter, his connections with personalities such as Theodore Dreiser and Rockwell Kent, and his interest in adapting Melville's Moby Dick for the stage as a music-drama. The present interview begins with Wilson's effort to execute a Moby-Dick mural in Frankfort, Kentucky.

Gerber: What can you tell me about your plan for the Moby Dick mural here in Frankfort, Kentucky?

Wilson: I can only get angry over that. It's typical of the frustration of the artist who simply cannot break through the morass of indifference and misunderstanding of what art is. People will stand in awe of a Rembrandt that sells for a million dollars, but when Rembrandt was painting that portrait--that's another thing. He painted one of the Burgomasters, and then the Burgomaster says, "I don't like what you have done, Mr. Rembrandt. I'm not going to pay you for your painting." So the poor guy goes without compensation and practically died in poverty, I understand.

Well, mine is not so much an economic struggle as it is just getting past the attitude of the person who has probably never seen a mural before, who doesn't know what it means to paint a picture on the wall. How do you work through the blockage of trouble that seems to surround a public work of art? Because people don't want it. Art is the last thing in the world people feel they need. As I say, they stand in awe of how much it's worth, but they don't value it when you're trying to create it. This old post office in Frankfort had been converted into a library. It's a famous piece of architecture. On the second floor was a huge hall courtroom about eighty feet long and forty feet wide and about forty feet high. It had a false ceiling in it originally, which was all leaking, and they had to reconstruct the whole roof. When they took out this false ceiling, here were these great vaulted panels.

I saw the thing immediately. It was messed up with the rain and the bird droppings, but I saw the whole idea of repainting all of the woodwork in a kind of an off-white. This might have been my own stupidity in outlining an idea which to me was grand but to them was, "Oh, this is nuts, this is wild, a crazy artist's scheme." But I saw the great framework of this place as the skeleton of the whale, inside the ribs, as Melville describes it. As you walk into this room you would see this mass of color which would deal with the four elements, earth, fire, water, and air. These are all very powerfully expressed in the story of Moby Dick.

In the panels of the side walls would be great masses of picture. You start out with Ishmael coming down the hill toward the water. Then he's in the inn, and finally he's on the ship, way up on the masthead. All around him are clouds and birds: this is the air. He's come from the

earth into the air. And then he goes into the watery world of the whales, and you see this huge whale under the water, like I have in some of those pictures. I could take most any of my paintings and enlarge them. Then you go into the fire, which is the rendering of the blubber of the whale. So I go into the four elements.

And finally, at this end of the room, is the huge panel, almost the same size as Michelangelo's "Last Judgment"; I would have that to express the whale moving, swimming toward the ship. The frightened feeling of the sailors. The ship is silhouetted in the foreground, and you see this mass of powerful whale coming toward the ship.

The whole thing expresses man's predicament today, I'd say. Here we are, in the midst of nuclear power. It's possibly going to destroy us. I pictured this thing out and put it into a form of a letter and their first idea was, "Oh no, a story like this, these little children would be scared to death of this thing. They wouldn't understand it. They would rather see The Three Bears, or The Three Little Pigs, something that is familiar to them." In talking over the phone to this woman, she said, "Oh no, I can't see it, we don't have any money to do anything." I said, "I will get the money from the arts foundation: You don't need to worry about the library money being used for this." I meantime had talked to my friend W. H. Ferry, who was the one that gave me that \$1500, and when he learned I was doing this thing, he gave me \$1500 more. So I was willing to work for nothing, just getting materials. Here was a chance to do a great work of art to finish out my life. This huge panel at the top, where the whale is in the stars. I tell you it came close to breaking my heart.

I've got a friend in the library, retired now, but she is still working



at me to get me to have exhibitions in Frankfort and invite people and get people to know me and let them know that I am not a radical, that I am not subversive, that I'm just a decent human being. I said, "Look, I'm seventy-two. I've got maybe five years yet to work on this thing. Shall I hire a public relations expert? She came out here the other day and talked to my sister Marge and her friend, Betty, and they tried to discourage her. I've said no a half dozen times, but she says, "There's a big store down here that was the bookstore and the stationery store. They've moved out to one of the shopping centers and that store is empty. We can decorate this place and put some of your work on display and let people realize that you are not a terrible person." The whole idea of trying to sell yourself is abominable. You have enough problems in the creative field to cope with without having to work with a public that couldn't care less about what you do.

Gerber: How do you become known as a terrible person around here?

Wilson: That book of William Allen White's<sup>1</sup> probably did it. That was in the library in the Negro college. As I say, someone in the state accused me of being a radical and a card-carrying Communist. When I tried to find out who it was and to try to face this down, they wouldn't tell me. That was at the Negro college here in Frankfort. I was given an artist-in-residence job there, something that I'd wanted for a long, long time. This was about fifteen years ago, just before CORE succeeded in breaking down the segregation--eating in restaurants and attending the theaters.

This President and his wife--ours was the only place out here that they

<sup>1</sup>White, William Allen. Letters of William Allen White and a Young Man. Ed. and arr. by Gil Wilson. New York: John Day Co., 1948.



could come and have a cocktail and sit down and talk with white people.

Gerber: They were black?

Wilson: They were black. This in itself was shocking, that we'd have them at our house. The people here think of Myself and Marge and Betty as Northerners. We come down here and we're interlopers. We've got ideas that are crazy and dangerous. We're just no good. We're Yankees. This man, President of the Negro college, for years was able to come out here and talk to us, and yet he's the one who calls me into his office and says, "I understand that--someone has given me your name--" They've had this trouble on the campus; the gymnasium was burned down. Naturally, being the only white person on the campus, I was suspect. As I told you the other day, as soon as anyone accuses me of anything, I might as well be guilty, because I just cringe and get red in the face. I don't get angry. I just get sick, unable to talk, unable to defend myself. Of course, this looked even worse. "Well," he told me, "I was like you at one time. I believed in organized labor, and I was very interested in the Negro's problem. I was sent to the Soviet Union with a group of other businessmen. I was the President of a Negro college. About twenty of us went over there." This was way back in 1925 or so, and we were just beginning to recognize Russia. So he said, "I got approached by a Negro newspaper and I wrote marvelous articles, but when I got back I got a hell of a raking over the coals for tying in with this newspaper." So he said, "I drew in my horns. I just saw that you can't say these things, and you can't do these things, without getting criticized. And you should learn that too."

At first he didn't even talk to me, he talked to my sister Marge. He says, "Is your brother a Communist?" She was incensed. She said, "Why don't you ask him? Why do you ask me?" So he comes in and asks me. I said, "Who is making this accusation? I would like to know, because I am going to fight it." He said, "I'm sorry, I can't tell you who it is." I was just--oh, so angry, I didn't know what in the world to do. But I lost my job. It had only lasted about six months. At the time, my sister had the garden center here and she had a big order with the state. I wanted to fight this thing. I understand that you can't fight City Hall; you can't take them to task. Is that still true? If you are accused this way? It has been fought, hasn't it?

Gerber: I don't know too much about it, Gilbert, in terms of the technicalities. I imagine it would cost a lot of money to go to court.

Wilson: It's like the old joke that we used to tell about the cop beating this fellow over the head. He says, "Listen, don't hit me, I'm an anti-communist." And the cop says, "I don't give a shit what kind of Communist you are!"

Gerber: "Now that you're admitting it, we're hitting you harder?" Was it easier for an artist during the thirties than it is today?

Wilson: Back in the WPA days, that was the first time we ever had any government support of the arts. A tremendous lot was accomplished in the field of the theater. Many of the paintings that were done during that time, the artist got twenty-five dollars a week, which would certainly not break the government on paying them. But if you were able to qualify, it could be all right. I joined up with this WPA thing. I wanted to

do a mural, but they said, "We don't need a mural, we want portraits of men of science for the classroom." I said, "I'm not interested in doing portraits."

I'd been to Mexico by now and seen Rivera and Orozco and I wanted to do a mural. So I started out doing the mural all by myself, in pastels and chalk. The old janitor would pick up the white chalk off the ledges in the schoolrooms and bring it down to me. A bucket of water on both of those walls would wash those first murals off. And when I was at Antioch, I was working entirely for my room and board, and they gave me a place to live. About every month they'd change me from one professor's house to another. I had no money in my pockets at all. I had free access to the cafeteria, so I had no expenses. And that was the way I was working at my home town of Terre Haute up until the time I did the Whitman mural that the Blumbergs paid for, the decoration of the Community Theater.

All the other murals--about five of them--that I did in Terre Haute were done for nothing. I got accused there, too: "Who's paying for these murals?" They wanted to know if Moscow was paying for them. That was when the American Legionnaires came. That story is all told in the Scribner's piece about me,<sup>2</sup> and in the William Allen White book.

Gerber: Is the Antioch mural still there?

Wilson: So far as I know, as of about a year-and-a-half ago. It's being badly damaged by erratic baseballs and volleyballs. The murals were done in pastel, and I sprayed them, which darkened them slightly, and wherever a ball would hit, it would get down to the color under-

<sup>2</sup>See: Fred J. Ringel, "Gilbert Wilson: Mural Painter," Scribner's, May, 1937, pp. 45-51.



neath and make a spot, so they looked like they were pock-marked or had freckles all over them.

Gerber: Is this in the gymnasium?

Wilson: In the gymnasium, yes. It was supposed to be in the Science Hall.

They had marvelous spaces there, going in the entrance-way. There are two murals: the productive and the destructive aspects of science. The science professor who was head of that department said, "Over my dead body is he going to talk about pure science." He had worked on poison gas during the First World War. He said, "The pure scientist just works and gives his work to society and they use it."

The students at Antioch were the ones who brought me there to do the murals, as their gift to the college, and they said, "We've been taught all our lives here--for five years, you've been drilling it into us--that there's a unity in education. We don't do anything without relating it to why it was done and how it was done and what it is to be used for." The engineering and science students had to take Cultural Studies--Antioch was one of the first well-rounded educations. So the students said, "If you don't accept our gift, we refuse to take our diplomas." Twenty-eight students signed this petition, and so I got to do the mural. But I had to do it, not in the Science Hall, but in the gymnasium. There's a great big structural thing which, to get it into the place, they had to put a hole in the mural, right through the chest of the big figure of Walt Whitman! He looks like he's got a big something-or-other on his chest; it's one of these big linking things that screws in and holds the wall from



collapsing. They'd never used the upper part of the building, they'd only used the gymnasium, but they finally did go into the upper part to put in a big dance hall, a place where they could have more congregation. This made it necessary to strengthen the wall so that it wouldn't collapse.

Gerber: What was the opposition to the mural?

Wilson: I never worked from sketches, so I told them what my theme was, the productive and destructive aspects of science. They didn't want to take a chance. Rivera had just had his science mural destroyed in Rockefeller Center, and there was trouble over Benton's murals in other places. Mural painters were considered trouble-makers, and Antioch was not about to buy, as they put it, a pig in a poke. They were afraid of alienating C. F. Kettering, the millionaire who was supporting the photosynthesis research there, but after the murals were done, he said, "I don't see anything wrong with these or any reason why they couldn't have been in the Science Hall." But this was after the fact.

Gerber: And then you got interested in various writers--Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson? William Allen White?

Wilson: Murals became hard to do. I had such bad experiences getting to do murals. You had to take a year out of your life to get a chance to do a mural, going here, going there, talking to this person, talking to that, and they'd say, "No, you've got to get a committee here and a committee there." Back in the early days of Michelangelo's working, they had this one Duke who was in charge, and he did the thing. Or

the Pope would say, "You're going to do the Sistine Chapel." So they didn't have to put it up to committees.

I'm telling you, democracy may be a glorified way of work but it is the worst and the slowest and an almost impossible way of doing things. Nobody wants to stick their neck out. So I found writing was a compromise; trying to do portraits of these men was the way I got to know them. That's the way I got to know Dreiser; that's the way I got to know Anderson, just asking them to let me do a portrait for the murals before I did the large things, because they were to be mural-portraits.

Gerber: So the writers were connected with the murals?

Wilson: Yes, it was a kind of jumping from this to this.

Gerber: What mural was that?

Wilson: It was a mural which has never been done--The Mural Song of the Midwest. I was going to do Debs, going to do William Allen White, was going to do Dreiser, Art Young, Frank Lloyd Wright--all of the creative people. Sherwood Anderson. All of the people who came from the middle west and who had made themselves a creative person.

Gerber: Did you have a place chosen for this?

Wilson: I tried to do it at Terre Haute when they built the new addition to the school. That was where I destroyed my work that time. I had it about half done, one wall down one side and the main entranceway, and they kept saying to me everyday, "When are you going to finish

with this so we can clean up this place and get rid of these ladders and plans?" The kids would go up and get the color on their fingers and they would go like this to each other. They would come in with the stuff all over them. I was trying to get a Guggenheim Fellowship to get some financial status, and that fell through. I had five outstanding people recommending me for this; William Allen White, Sherwood Anderson. Dreiser was one of the people I put down. I had Pearl Buck and all of these other individuals to try to recommend me for the Guggenheim, but it didn't materialize. So I turned to writing, in a sense, because of Dreiser's encouragement, his saying, "Why don't you write?" And Anderson was the same way--"Sure, send it to me, maybe I'll steal from it."

Gerber: You don't have any of the drawings that were going to go into that mural?

Wilson: The only two big portraits were Dreiser and Anderson. I was going to do Sandburg, too. I had a chance to meet him, through Art Young, when he was having lunch with Young one day. He came to speak at Terre Haute Teachers College one time, and I went to hear him. I was going up afterwards to see him about a portrait. I sat in the front row; I wanted to study his face. I really wanted to ask him if I could make some sketches. But as soon as the program was over with, thousands of these kids run up there with their programs, wanting his autograph, so I just stayed in the background and never really got up to meet him. He was very good at lecturing, almost as



if it were addressed to me personally, because he was pleading for the young, creative individuals in the community who need help and who will make the city proud of them some day. They have to struggle along alone for years and years, he said, and it's wrong.

This is what impressed me down in Mexico, how young kids ten, twelve years of age are allowed to decorate libraries in their small home town. They would do frescoes, they would do sculptures, they were given chances to do things, creative works of art that the public could see. You didn't even have to get permission, it was just the accepted thing. Diego Rivera was responsible for a lot of this, of bringing forward any kid who could show any talent at all. A kid was allowed to devote half of his day, five-six days a week, to his art, and his other half day to conventional academic work. It was a real patronage of the younger generation going into art. But up here! Gad, you have one class a week in art, you're lucky.

Gerber: The city of Terre Haute has never been too receptive to people who came from there has it? Certainly Dreiser never got a second glance from Terre Haute.

Wilson: He told me one time that he passed through Terre Haute on the train, and he said, "I was really afraid, looking out the window, because someone might recognize me." I tried to get him to come and speak at the college, and he said, "I wouldn't undergo the humiliation. They would come out to hear my work, but they really would be thinking



that I was a dirty old man." His books were locked up in a case in the Terre Haute Public library, I remember--"on reserve!" And I remember getting the works of Havelock Ellis, his works on sex, the same way, and I was embarrassed. They would look at you as if you played with yourself or something--one book was on masturbation. I was in correspondence with Ellis for about three letters; he was a grand person, he just seemed to open the doors and let the sunlight into the dark, dingy, dank room.

Gerber: And Eugene Debs had a hard time in Terre Haute, right? It was not the most receptive town.

Wilson: It was a labor town, miners primarily. They had the first general strike there. The town closed down completely, back just before the war. Browder came--they put him in jail. Norman Thomas came--they didn't dare touch him. Thomas was more or less a national figure, but he broke the law by having an outdoor meeting on the steps of the capital building in the city, so martial law was declared. They found that martial law had been in effect in the next county, down near Sullivan, Indiana, for about three years. This is when Governor McNutt was in office.

There was really a fascist potential back in those days. I was doing the murals about that time, and the people who were my patrons, the Blumbergs, camped the Pinkerton men on their private property out on the edge of the city. The Pinkertons came to break the strike, and here they were, my patrons, aiding them. Mr. Blumberg's wife, who was a very liberal-minded sort of person, she used to joke about

the fact. She said, "Come the revolution, Ben's money on one side of the barricades will help him, and on the other side he'll have the help of Gil Wilson."

I remember the first thing she ever said to me, at the murals I was doing at this Lake Wawasee Hotel. She had this big cottage across the lake and her boy brought her over in his sailboat, along with the two little boys from Hitler Germany--they couldn't speak English and she would come over to get her hair done at the hotel. She said, "Would a good Communist like you come over and have dinner with a Capitalist family like us?" She had seen my murals at the hotel and also the murals in Terre Haute; they were very close to her home there, I'd say about half a mile away from where she lived. She was an artist herself. She was one of my best supporters. She gave me the studio over their garage. It had a big skylight in it. She'd had it done for herself. I lived there for about three years before I went to New York, during the thirties. I was doing the murals in Woodrow Wilson High School at the time, and she invited me to use her place after this first meeting up at Wawasee. She said, "I've got a studio at my place and I'm not using it now as much as I used to, and my daughters are gone"--one of the daughters painted too--"so how would you like to come out and live with us?" They had riding horses and I'd ride every day. They lived just outside the city.

Gerber: What business was Blumberg in?

Wilson: Real estate and the loan business. He had a loan business all over the state. His father came over here from Russia before Ben was

born and brought some of the family jewels and started a loan business. He became a millionaire. Ben was the first Jew to be brought into the fraternity at DePauw, and of course his father made a great thing of this. Gave Ben a great big Packard. Ben took the first million which the father had made and ran it up to five or six or eight million. And the son had taken it from there has gone even further. It's all over the state. His wife, who was very liberal-minded, had this marvelous cut-glass window, with beautiful jeweled emerald glasses and ruby glasses. It looked like a stained-glass window. Her collection was worth several thousand dollars. I just about talked her into selling that and sending an ambulance to the people fighting Fascism in Spain, but the next day her Harvard son, who was on the debate team and everything, talked her out of it.

Gerber: She didn't always agree with Ben?

Wilson: She always felt his money was blood money. He had other people to foreclose property and take the old widows away from their homes when they were into debt. He drove an old car. He had two offices; one was a chromium-plated thing with a big swordfish at one end. They had a home in Florida and one in Terre Haute too. But the office where they did the loans to the old farmers was full of worn-out chairs that were coming apart, a crummy old place. The farmers would come in and sit down, but they couldn't feel comfortable in there. The chrome office was his real office; it was air-conditioned. Ben drove the oldest car possible, always a second-hand car, always running into people and wrecking it; he was a lousy driver. He finally



learned to fly an airplane. He used to take me up in the air. It would scare the devil out of me. He'd go like this, and then down like this. The old man was quite a character, but a complete "Nixon" man, the kind that just believed the Republicans were the salt of the earth. And yet he gave a new YMCA to the city. He gave away a lot of property.

When I destroyed my murals at the Indiana State Teachers College in Terre Haute, he got my chance to work the walls back by talking to the President of the college, a man who looked like a mummy out of the Pharoahs. This professor who was the head of the college, he was the one who turned me down on the Dreiser murals, you know. They had a bookstore that was made out of an old church and there were twelve panels, gothic recessed panels, which had held stained-glass windows. They had been bricked-up when it was made into a bookstore. I wanted to take those twelve panels and do a Twelve Men mural. But this professor just felt Dreiser was not very well thought of. He said, "If you can come up with some other ideas, something more suitable--" So in driving around the Blumberg property with Dr. Terry and myself, Ben Blumberg said, "Some day all of this property I'm going to will to the college. I own from this railroad track clear down to here and over to the river." Today all of that is college campus. So, in a sense, the present campus was the result of my contact with the college president over getting the walls back that I had destroyed, wiped off with a mop. Ben really went all out; it probably was in his will anyway, but he verbalized the thing: "All this property belongs to me and I'm going to give it to the college." Ben was always trying to get me to modify my ways. He says, "People



would like you if you'd just paint things that they like. Why do you want to go round painting these social ideas? Debs was just a trouble maker, and Dreiser wrote dirty books, and Art Young is a socialist." His wife loved Art Young. When we'd all go to New York, we'd eat in the best restaurants; Ben would go along, but he would mumble over his meal. He didn't like it; he tolerated it because Fanny liked it.

She goes into this big place one time and asks to see some drawings by the famous Jacques Lipschitz. The gallery man looked at her and saw a dumpy little Jewish woman, and he must have felt, oh, she's really not going to buy anything. So she said to him, "Don't you have anything else?" And he said, "That is all I have, I'm sorry, lady." And she said, "What's that painting worth over there?" and she points to a canvas. "\$7,000." "I'm going to take it." She bought that painting as a pure insult to this guy. And she gave it to the library. The painting was of a woman trying on a corset, looked just like her. Here's all these coutourieres hanging around fitting her, and a man is standing there taking measurements. It's a very modern, sort of distorted, comic picture of a wealthy fat woman being fitted. Lipschitz painted it. It's hanging in the Swope Art Gallery now; she never hung it in her home. Fanny Blumberg bought it just to show this guy in the gallery. She was that kind.

I could never forgive her for this arrogant way of using me; she'd go to the art store and buy four or five hundred dollars worth of art materials, and she'd say to me, "Now you pick out whatever you want, just go round and pick out what you need." So I'd get portfolios, and Ben would grumble, "Why do you want a thing like that?" I was getting

stuff to carry my drawings around in; they cost about twenty dollars apiece. She was always asking me, "Do you need any money?" I would never admit that I needed any; I couldn't bear it. She'd come to New York and we'd go round in cabs and she'd poke a twenty-dollar bill in my pocket so that I could pay the cab. And we'd often go to night clubs, where they were all dressed in fine clothes, but I was in corduroys. Sometimes you had to wear tuxedos to get into those places. And the Blumbergs always had tickets for the best plays. I saw "Medea" one time with them. They'd go to scalpers to buy their tickets, spend a big wad of money to get a ticket for a show.

After Fanny died, Ben wrote a book. It was a collection of her work, her stories and paintings. I organized the book; it was vanity-published, but he did it for her. He was going to get married to this younger woman and wanted to do this to salve his conscience. In fact, he didn't do one book, he did two. A sequel came later. He published five hundred copies. I think the book must have cost \$15,000. I have a copy. Fanny was a damn good painter. I wrote a thing for the book in which I called her a female Van Gogh because she had that gutsy kind of way. She'd take flowers and arrange them and paint them and then scumble it all off and paint them again. She ruined more paintings that I thought were just perfect. She didn't care, she would just dump the whole thing. Her hands were messy, and she'd dump it out and tell the colored boy, the house boy, to clean up. She never had to clean her palette and brushes. She'd have fifty dollars worth of expensive paint out here on this canvas which was to be thrown away. Ben would come and take all that she had shown and paint the ash pit with it. It was made

out of concrete blocks, and he would just cover it. He had this stuff troweled onto the thing. He loved to do crazy stunts; he thought the paint shouldn't be wasted, so he would put it to some use, making a big abstraction on the side of the wall of the dumping grounds.

Their house was just out of this world. Their basement was many times just a big wine cellar. I got very friendly with the colored boy, Carl, who had been with them thirty years or so--a colored man who was, I suppose you'd say, about my own age--and he'd take me down into the basement and say, "Now you just take any of the wines or anything you like, take them over to your place." I had liquor all the time over at the studio. I did the murals at Woodrow Wilson in '35, about the time the Depression was coming along. I was painting what I knew. As Will Rogers would say, all I knew is what I read in the papers, so I was painting what I read about, what was happening in the world.

Gerber: The murals that you wiped off, those were at the Teachers College?

Wilson: Yes, the next ones, after those at Woodrow Wilson, they were at the Teachers College. There was a new building being put up. I wanted to put the murals up the right way, to have them leave ventilators out of the wall or move them over to where they wouldn't cover the spaces. Sometimes they'd put in a ventilator so that it would come right smack in the middle of a marvelous space, when it could have been over to the side just as easily. I never had a chance to work on a building that was architecturally being planned for murals. I remember once that this particular vent was already installed and



they couldn't change it, so I used it right where it was, in the wall. It's in the mural. William Allen White is standing under it and making a speech. The vent is a big thing that looks like it's going to fall on him. I called it "the fallen city," it's a city in ruins after it had been bombed. I never made a sketch of White from life. I never met him personally, and people said I was wise not to meet him because I would have been disillusioned.

Gerber: Too bad that the Twelve Men mural didn't come to pass.

Wilson: I would like to have done a mural of Paul Dresser, for instance; he was one of the twelve men. They had in the Terre Haute House one of his theatrical photographs, life-size, which was cut out in silhouette. I would like to have done a painting of that; he was a striking individual, Dreiser's older brother.

SYMBOLISM OF PLACE IN  
THE LITERATURE OF THE TWENTIES  
AND THIRTIES

Joe Mumau

The American myth that says one can always find happiness or prosperity somewhere else may not be true, but its existence has often been used for thematic purposes by many authors. In the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack Conroy, and Ernest Hemingway, the contrasts between the East and the West, the city and country, and America and Europe, were often used as symbols of personal or societal values or conditions. The fact that some of these areas were seen as "better" only aided these authors' purposes. In every novel looked at here, symbolism of place is used to reveal what the authors saw as the inherent frustration and inadequacy, both socially and/or psychologically, of life, specifically in the America of the 1920's and 30's, as opposed to the optimistic myth which promised fulfillment by packing up and moving someplace else.

In Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, America's Midwest and East Coast represent two distinct moral systems, and it is Nick Carroway's true appraisal of the nature of both these areas that allows him to grow. The Middle West seems to him the "ragged edge of the universe" after the war, as opposed to the East, which seems to promise growth and excitement. As the novel develops, though, Nick gains some insights into the nature of the East--it promises growth, but much of that is done illegally, as in the case of Gatsby, or with the irresponsibility of great wealth, as in the case of Tom Buchanan. And the growth is only economic--none of the characters except Nick see through the values which define success as wealth and social position to develop a greater understanding of their lives.

And the East has no future for the individual except for its material values. Gatsby has his dream, but it was false to begin with. Tom and Daisy

only want security, and are as destructive at the end of the novel as in the beginning. The excitement which seems to fill these peoples' lives is really only "busy work" which makes up for their lack of purpose.

At the end of the novel, the two areas symbolize two very different attitudes. The east represents the "modern" outlook--social atomism, cynicism towards old values, and the myth that "progress" can only take place by rejecting old standards. The Mid-West, on the other hand, is the bastion of those old values and standards.

Yet Nick rejects the East and moves back to the Midwest. He is not in any way convinced that the old ways are better, or that the Midwest is the "warm center of the world." Rather, Nick has grown to the point where he can recognize that his society's values probably cannot fulfill his needs. But because he realizes just how those values are shaping himself and others, he has attained a sense of dignity that others, knocked about and dominated by society, can never achieve.

The symbol of the East, which promises happiness through the values of the Jazz Age, and the symbol of the Midwest, which promises happiness through the old values, both become irrelevant to Nick, who has a sense at the end of the novel that happiness (as his society defines it) is not even a proper goal for him to seek. And even if it were proper to seek "happiness," it would be unattainable in reality (as Gatsby, who is from the Midwest, so pitifully evidences). Rather, Nick realized that what he needs is some sort of emotional and intellectual maturity that will allow him to accept his own and society's limitations without becoming wholly cynical or narcissistic, like those in the East, or being lulled into a false sense of security, with Gatsby and the Midwest as examples.



In Jack Conroy's The Disinherited, geography is not used as symbolically as it is by Fitzgerald. Rather, Conroy portrays all America, both city and country, as a great economic no man's land for the lower classes. But this portrayal is important thematically because the characters cannot grow to the point where they can truthfully see their hopeless predicament until they overcome the myth that prosperity can be found somewhere else. Larry goes to Detroit, supposedly the most prosperous of cities in the twenties, only to find that things are no better for the working man there than in the poorer rural area where he had worked. It is only after Larry realizes that things are not any better anywhere that he can begin to grow and be aware of his true role in society.

In a sense, Larry's odyssey in search of work is really only a physical manifestation of his search for the "truth," of an answer to the problems he sees in the world--an answer which Conroy believes exists in working for the cause. Larry grows by recognizing the falsity of the mythical symbols which promise happiness, such as the idealistic image of the prosperous city, and replacing them with a greater appreciation of the grim life he must really face. Larry's awareness of his position in society is not as great as Nick's at the end of Gatsby, but by recognizing the true nature of the economic system, he does come closer to the truth.

In The Sun Also Rises, Europe is portrayed much as America is in Gatsby--as a spiritual wasteland which offers no promises but false ones to the individual. The attitude of the characters seems to be that Europe is as good a place as any to waste one's life, plus it has the added advantage of being cheap and full of legal alcohol.

In the beginning of the novel, Paris develops as the symbol of the pointlessness of the character's lives--they roam from one cafe to another, and they travel down streets with names that numb the non-French speaking reader after a while.

Indeed, it seems that Hemingway describes these streets as intricately as he does on purpose, to create in the reader's mind the confusion and aimlessness his characters feel.

Pamplona, in a way, represents those values Hemingway admires. It is certainly the place where Hemingway's value system assumes a major role. Pamplona is important because it is the site of the bullfights, which Jake admires because of the bullfighter's attitude toward life. But Jake is not only an aficionado of bullfighters, but of how other people live their lives and interact with others. In Pamplona, his philosophy contrasts with the romantic and naive philosophy of Robert Cohn. Not only does the plot finally work itself out in Pamplona (with Jake's realism emerging as the best attitude to have), but it is in this sequence that Hemingway's narrative is most direct and non-rambling in respect to the plot. Thus, Hemingway uses not only his writing style, but also the symbol of Pamplona to focus and enhance on one of his themes, which is how a man should live in an essentially frustrating world.

After Robert Cohn leaves the novel, and the dramatic tension decreases, Hemingway once again resorts to describing his characters moving over a rambling geography, which, again, symbolizes their aimless lives. When Jake finally ends up in Madrid with Brett, the world is still as frustrating as ever, but by facing up to that frustration, Jake has changed--he recognizes that his dream of a life with Brett is just as false as Cohn's, even if the war had never happened. His realization of the truth, in which the symbol of Pamplona plays a role, is not pleasant, but at least it is honest.

Just like Nick and Larry, Jake attains a sort of dignity by realizing that happiness or satisfaction must come from within, and that it is up to the individual to make the world a better place, and not vice versa. And one certainly cannot improve the world by running to places which symbolize happiness (like the city or Europe), but which in reality offer only different

versions of the same problem. As Jake tells Cohn, "You can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another." This stress on the individual is an attribute of all the authors discussed--places may be symbolic, or they may be "real" with societies and cultures of their own. But, for the purposes of the authors, "places" are useful mainly insofar as they enhance or clarify the development of the individual (symbolically or otherwise). The fact that the individual almost inevitably faces frustration and unhappiness because of his society's inadequacy says more about the nature of the times than any historical study could.

Michigan State University



THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE AMERICAN NIGHTMARE IN:

THE SUN ALSO RISES,

THE GREAT GATSBY, AND

THE DISINHERITED

Kimberly Saunders

It began when the early explorers landed on the promising shores of the New World. There they saw a land of ultimate opportunity. That vision has survived for centuries through the hope, and sometimes the realization, of a dream.

The American Dream can not be defined in a sentence, but it can be described as the traditional hope, either fictional or real, that in America any desire can be fulfilled. Only in America can a poor country boy become President and only in America can the individual reach for a dream and grasp it in his hands.

Is the American Dream still alive in the twentieth century? After reading the three novels, The Sun Also Rises by Ernest Hemingway, The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and The Disinherited by Jack Conroy, all written in the first half of this century, one is inclined to label the Dream a myth. Perhaps the term should be corrected to read "The American Nightmare."

Together Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Conroy put the American ideal into a modern perspective which, in effect, reflects the corrupt values of their era. Credibility is added to their judgement by the fact that each novel is, in part, autobiographical.

In The Great Gatsby, our attention is focused on the fashionable and wealthy communities of East Egg and West Egg. This is where the privileged class of the East resides. Through the eyes of our narrator, Nick Carraway, we are witness to Fitzgerald's feelings about the significance of obtaining material success. He

is able to see the emptiness of the envied life of the upper class.

There is obviously a corrupted idealism throughout the novel. But it is personified in Jay Gatsby. Gatsby is a rare individual borne of nineteenth century ideas. He is, however, living in a twentieth century setting and does not realize the difference.

Gatsby wholly believes in the concept of the American Dream, having built his fortune from the ground up. But his idealism is based in material wealth. He is possessed by the magical fascination of wealth. Monetary success enables one to have anything, Gatsby believes.

What Gatsby wants is to recapture a romantic dream from his boyhood. He is unrealistic in thinking wealth will give his dream girl back to him. Though Gatsby is indeed sincere, his idea of the American Dream is distorted and thus reflects the reality of the American experience. He uses materialism as a means to obtain his goal -- illusory youth and beauty (through his unrealistic image of Daisy).

Since Gatsby's whole life is devoted to the fulfillment of a romantic dream, he does not develop in the course of the novel as does Nick. Nick is an outsider of sorts. His value system is much more moral, and it continues to develop as he encounters the likes of Jordan Baker and Tom and Daisy Buchanan, all lacking in moral values. Nick realizes that an ideal based on materialism alone is a corruption rather than a fulfillment of the American Dream. Yet, the selfless devotion Gatsby displays to even a corrupt ideal is morally superior to the complete selfishness that motivates the other characters in the novel.

Gatsby is a pursuer and a dreamer, but he is always the gentleman determined to do what is right. He does have morals, but his practice of them is misguided. He thinks that the goal is so noble as to justify the means of reaching it.

Fitzgerald uses symbolism to express the false values of those who obtain the American Dream. The various parties reflect a moral and physical chaos.

Gatsby's career (racketeering) transcends the environment of the twenties to become a hint of the fate American idealism in the modern world is destined for. Ironically, Gatsby's luxurious car, a symbol of wealth, is the instrument which leads to his death.

Here the prevalent theme seems to be that the American Dream, once noble, has been corrupted by adopting materialism as its means. This, Gatsby is ultimately destroyed by his illusions about wealth and fulfillment. His destruction shows that those who try to maintain an idealism based totally in materialistic values are doomed in their self-delusion.

Like Fitzgerald, Hemingway portrays America as a moral wasteland. But Hemingway uses different devices in doing so. After World War I, many Americans were forced to change their ideas about patriotism and fighting to preserve the American way. No longer were men fighting for good over evil. The enemy was some invisible force which was only encountered in the form of shelling and air raids. Honor and courage were not so easily defined in battle.

Jake Barnes characterizes the flow of post-World War I writers who flocked to Europe to find a new meaning to their work, having been disillusioned by American and the patriotic dream. Sensitive men like Jake realized after the war that old concepts of right and wrong, and old Christian values, as well as other ethical concepts have not saved society from the catastrophe of the first world war.

Thus, writers searched in Europe for a new set of values. Jake finds that the only value that serves him is self-discipline. Through it, he can assert his personal significance -- the importance of his life. He feels he must find meaning and purpose in a world of shattered things, just as his own life has been shattered by war.

Jake feels he has lost his manhood, but rather than resign himself to the fact, he creates a new sense of truth and honor for himself. He is the only



character in his group of friends who is able to do this. The others have romantic ideals of how life should be, and they try to pretend that it is that ideal life.

Though Brett is English and Mike is a Scotsman, these are technicalities to Hemingway. They all are part of the "lost generation" which is characterized by the disillusionment with the promise of the American Dream. Hemingway values those who act with grace under pressure. Romero, the bull fighter, is one of them. But he is a character to compare with the false cheer and control displayed by the American and English characters. He is of another world which is not caught up in their illusion.

Jake tries to act "well" and succeeds beyond his companions, but even he is human and thus flawed and cannot live up to his own ethical standards. His companions, however, are more than ever desperate to preserve a carefree air to life. They are romanticists, out of touch with reality.

Brett, for example, uses sex as a means to combat boredom and loneliness. But it only leaves her scarred. Cohn uses false romance to perpetuate the Dream, and even Mike and Bill use drink to keep the facade of continuous merrymaking alive. Friendships are bought and sold. These are the devices used to capture the American Dream as well as erase it. Either way, they can not erase the emptiness, Hemingway seems to say. Either way they are accomplishing at best, an imitation of life. This, perhaps, is what the American Dream is -- a farce, an escape from a nightmare which life more often resembles.

Conroy does not focus on the moral wasteland aspect of America but instead he examines the harsh realities that must be dealt with in striving for the American Dream. Here we see how the American Dream often becomes the American Nightmare for these who do not start with the advantages of wealth and social position.

Larry Donovan, the novel's hero, is born into the family of a coal miner, but has the advantage of being encouraged and supported by his parents to become an educated man. This would allow him, in spite of his humble beginnings, to rise to a respectable level in society. Here is displayed the all-American belief that any person can succeed in America if he or she only has the determination.

But Conroy obviously believes this to be a farce. He could not have picked a better era to illustrate the ludicrous reality of this belief. The Great Depression brought disillusionment. Unemployment, strikes, evictions, bank failures and farm foreclosures confronted everyone. The American Dream became an economic nightmare.

Though Larry did eventually get more education, it did not advance him. There were no jobs to be had even for the educated. The reality was that his advanced education did not make him superior to the factory and mill workers he stood beside.

To these people the American Dream was either a far-off hope somewhere in the future (as with Larry), or it was nonexistent. Chronic unemployment and excessive hard labor had the same effect. Both broke men's spirits and caused a loss of self-respect. But above all they both seemed to lead nowhere.

Through their respective novels, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Conroy express their personal feelings about the land of opportunity. It is a negative picture full of false values, misguided intentions, doomed hopes and unrealistic dreams. The American Dream is an illusion perpetuated in the minds of youth by the adolescent "could have beens" of disillusioned generations.

### Three Novels by James Gunn: American Dreams Revised

For several decades American science fiction writers have concerned themselves with grand and fascinating ideas for their stories like time travel, planetary conquests, devastating wars, and environmental disasters. Some science fiction writers have even blended with these spectacular plots criticism, gentle or harsh, of their contemporary American society. They have directed their criticism at times at institutions like churches, governments, and judicial systems, while at other times they have focused on values such as materialism, aggression, and even racism. When this blending occurs, the fiction itself becomes a vehicle for the author's criticism of society at a particular point in time. A science fiction author can achieve this by extrapolating an idea or trend from his contemporary society and then projecting it into the future. He can also accomplish this by beginning with an unusual event like a disaster or a space flight and developing his story from there. Using either technique, or a combination of the two, a science fiction writer can blend his criticism of society into his basic plot.

James Gunn, who was born in Missouri and currently teaches at the University of Kansas, has done precisely this in three of his novels: Station in Space(1958), The Joy Makers(1961), and The Immortals(1962).<sup>1</sup> Apparently disturbed by events or cultural trends of the 1950s, Gunn projected his apprehensions into future settings. He specifically identifies three American dreams of that decade and demonstrates how they degenerate into nightmares of various proportions. Occasionally using his native state as a backdrop, Gunn demonstrates how three American dreams - the conquest of space, the pursuit of happiness, and the quest for immortality - can degenerate into nightmares through human mismanagement or false illusions.

A logical step in man's never-ending dream of conquering his environment is the conquest of outer space. Gunn believes that Americans will be



driven by a restless yearning to leave their native planet and attempt the greatest conquest of all - outer space, the neighboring planets first, then the stars. This dream, which Gunn defines and projects in the novel Station in Space, is actually an extension of the manifest destiny from this nation's frontier heritage.<sup>2</sup> The major problem in fulfilling this dream will not be the construction of machines and spaceships, but rather the selection of psychologically perfect humans who can withstand the strains of living and working in an extremely hostile environment. Gunn believes the greatest of these strains on humans will be the solitude which accompanies long space voyages.

James Gunn utilizes both writing techniques in describing how the first American dream, the conquest of space, becomes a nightmare. Station in Space begins with a modest space flight and the nation's spectacular rescue attempt of the astronaut who is allegedly trapped in his capsule and running out of air. Through a monumental effort, the United States builds a rescue ship in record time, only to have it rendezvous in space too late to save the astronaut, who then becomes the nation's first martyr for space. But the rescue attempt does serve at least two useful purposes: it focuses public attention on the space program and unifies the national will behind a single project. The irony of this unusual event, however, is that the original space shot was a hoax because no astronaut was ever aboard the capsule. A few Air Force officers had masterminded a colossal deception to pressure Congress into allocating more funds for a floundering space program. The deception works perfectly, but America's popular dream, the conquest of space, is founded on a hoax.

After beginning the novel with this very unusual event, Gunn projects these two interrelated ideas - the dream of conquest and the deception of the nation - into the future and the continuing crusade against space. After the original space shot, America shifts its attention to more spectacular projects.

First the nation constructs two space stations, one a thousand miles and the other twenty-two thousand miles in space. Then it marshals its talents and resources for three manned flights to Mars. The dream of conquering space, which began in the 1950s, progresses in stages, with each stage dependent upon the events which preceeded it. Space is the newest frontier for Americans, and even though most cannot journey into space, they can identify with the few astronauts chosen to enact their dreams.

Unfortunately the deception of the nation, which began with the initial hoax, follows Americans into space and becomes more complex in nature. The original space capsule, left deliberately in orbit, becomes a permanent shrine to symbolize man's dream. In part two of the novel, a young astronaut named Amos Danton discovers the hoax and uses that knowledge to blackmail the commander of the first space station (nicknamed the Doughnut) into letting him remain on board, even though he is about to be returned to Earth. When the United States decides to construct a larger station farther in space, the C.I.C. (Capital Investment Corporation) supervises the project. C.I.C. recruits laborers and technicians by appealing to their patriotism and profit motive. But as one recruit eventually discovers, the C.I.C. is primarily America's answer to a complex, uncontrollable economy. The new space station, twenty-two thousand miles from Earth, is actually a massive W.P.A. project in space and another visible symbol for the nation's dreams. In the novel's fourth section, Amos Danton, now the Doughnut's commander, has vandalized his station to build an unauthorized space ship of his own, a ship designed for a Mars flight. He deceives not only the U.S. Air Force, but the entire nation as well.

The process of deception culminates with the third manned attempt to reach the Red Planet. The five crew members are unaware that their activities are being closely monitored and relayed back to the large space station for

psychological analysis. This ambitious venture, like the two preceeding attempts to reach Mars, is a failure. All the crew members die. But the officers in charge conspire to conceal this information from the American public for two years until they can contrive a suitable explanation. As Americans venture farther into space pursuing their dream, deception follows deception until the idea of fraud becomes an intricate component of the dream itself.

Gunn demonstrates how the few Americans in charge of these various projects become resourceful masters at justifying the deceptions they perpetrate. They defend the original hoax, which becomes the basis for all subsequent deceptions, by arguing that it united the nation and provided the funds necessary to continue the space program. It also began a myth that became an integral part of the American experience. What counted was getting into space, regardless of the method used. Amos Danton can justify his using blackmail with the knowledge that to survive in space he must learn to be ruthless. The construction of the second and larger space station is justified on the grounds of immediate profit and long-term scientific research. Colonel Danton justifies his deception involving the first Mars ship by arguing that the masses of humanity need an outlet for their excess energies and frustrated aggressions. He becomes in a sense a prophet for America's dream and provides a visible symbol for Earth-bound people to focus on. In the novel's last section, three officers justify their invasion of the crew's privacy because of their need to study the psychological effects of a long space flight on the individual's behavior. The final deception, the coverup of the flight's tragic disaster, is justifiable because the space program must continue. Besides, after sufficient time and proper manipulation, the American public will accept the disaster while it anticipates yet another stage of the conquest of space.

In Station in Space James Gunn demonstrates how an apparently worthwhile



dream, the conquest of space, can (but not necessarily will) assume nightmarish proportions. Certainly the intricate web of deceptions is part of the nightmare. But space can contain physical problems and dangers for which the unwary explorer or dreamer may be completely unprepared. Workers and explorers in space are subject to deadly ultraviolet radiation, eye cataracts, and premature aging. Because space is a vacuum, man must transport an artificial environment with him if he hopes to survive. One tiny mistake under these conditions can mean a horrible, agonizing death for a careless individual. The possibility of madness is always present. One officer summarizes the problem when he bluntly tells Amos Danton that "we live with death at our elbow."<sup>3</sup> But undoubtedly the greatest problem is the solitude associated with long space flights. Trying to cope with loneliness in space can drive trained experts to the edge of insanity and beyond. This is the tragedy of the ill-fated third expedition to Mars. The five crew members cannot adjust to their two years in space and eventually eliminate each other through murder and suicide. By the novel's end, the glorious and romantic dream of conquering space, of expanding man's dominion across a new frontier, has become a nightmare of sobering and even sickening proportions.

Yet despite this sobering impression of how a dream could or might degenerate into a nightmare, Gunn insists that Americans should pursue their dream - but carefully. Space will present challenges to Americans and to the fulfillment of their dream of conquest. Americans must accept those challenges. A worker named Clary on the large space station expresses Gunn's theme:

Now we have the power and we must accept the challenge - if only because a challenge refused is the beginning of decay. But the challenge accepted is life renewed, life reaffirmed, and the obstacle conquered strengthens Man for the next one, a bigger one.<sup>4</sup>

But in accepting the challenge of space, Americans must also accept the reality of space. In pursuing their dream, Americans may have to discard some of their

illusions and acquire a hard, tough ruthlessness. The Earth-bound public must prepare itself for the tragedies that will occur. But if Americans persist in dreaming, they must be willing to pay the price. Everything has its price, and the price for conquering space will be high.

Gunn utilizes extrapolation in his novel The Joy Makers to demonstrate how another American dream from the 1950s, the pursuit of happiness, can degenerate into a nightmare.<sup>5</sup> Gunn begins with a character named Joshua P. Hunt, who is probably typical of many middle-class Americans from that decade. Hunt is so preoccupied with material success and the almighty dollar that he has forgotten how to enjoy life. He confuses material success with happiness, as many Americans do, and is on the verge of drinking and worrying himself into an early grave. He is also a cold cynic who has forgotten how to love or trust other human beings around him.

Into this American's life and society, the author injects a small business firm with a revolutionary, yet deceptively simple, marketing idea. The company is called Hedonics, Inc., and the product which it is selling is happiness. It guarantees a client like Hunt happiness if he signs an unlimited service contract. The only catch is that the client must first transfer everything he owns to the company. Hedonics, as the company defines the word, is a discipline, a psychological service. Besides solving a client's problems, hedonics will relieve pain, cure his illnesses, and reshape his neurotic personality. Hedonics, Inc. promises not to tamper with the client's personality, but instead to provide him with the techniques of happiness. As one salesman explains to Josh Hunt, these techniques provide "a control not over external events but over our reactions to them."<sup>6</sup> With the unlimited service contract, Hedonics, Inc. will provide everything for the client. The company even envisions a future in which hedonics is a worldwide movement, and legislation will be necessary to protect

a person's right to be happy.

James Gunn projects both the dream of happiness and its vehicle hedonics into a future America. By the year 2054 A.D. America has become a controlled society, and hedonics has matured into a psychomedical science dealing with the nature and pursuit of happiness. Through constitutional amendment, hedonics has become the law of the land, and a citizen's basic freedom is the freedom to be happy. But hedonics seems to be working in this future society because it is a balanced approach incorporating philosophy, psychology, and medical advances. In fact the psychological aspect alone utilizes four methods for the individual's happiness: substitution, devaluation, projection, and suppression. Earth has achieved a rating of 93% on the Hedonic Index of happiness. An individual, however, does not have the right to be unhappy. This future American society considers an unhappy individual insane and reserves the right to subject him to a lobotomy.

Using a master hedonist named Morgan, Gunn postulates that such a system designed to produce happiness could work if it is properly and evenly applied. After ten years of intensive training, Morgan is a combination of medical doctor and therapist. As a hedonist he supervises one thousand Americans and is the guardian of their happiness. His favorite cliché is "Be happy!", which is very similar to that trite American expression of the 1970s, "Have a nice day!" Corny though Morgan may sound at times, he is still a dedicated hedonist who is deeply concerned for the welfare and happiness of his patients. In fact, Morgan is strongly altruistic because he does considerably more for others than he does for himself. But because he believes in hedonics, he is a successful practitioner of it, a little too successful as it turns out.

The wonderful dream of happiness in this future America begins to deteriorate into a nightmare when the ruling Council decides to alter the basic



meaning of hedonism itself. Desiring to standardize happiness and apply a "calculus of pleasure", the Council transforms hedonism into a pure science. It announces the arrival of a new millennium and orders 100% of happiness for all Americans. This grand utopian dream, however, is based on machine-induced sensations of pleasure. Utilizing these "Sensies" as they are called, a person could experience any pleasure or sensation he chose, even danger or pain if that turned him on. The Council would give immediate satisfaction and pleasure to each citizen; it has in fact substituted pleasure for happiness as the basis of hedonism, thereby perverting it.

Gunn is careful to point out that although hedonics itself may not be wrong, the Council's gross distortion of it is. Hedonics, as Morgan and a few other masters practice it, is a complex but balanced discipline. Happiness may be harder to achieve Morgan's way, but at least it works for many people. The Council, however, by emphasizing immediate sensual gratification, is asking people to rely on the "systemized delusions" of the Sensies. True hedonics demands from each devotee self-discipline and reason, two qualities the Council's version discourages. True hedonics is much more than just the pursuit of momentary pleasure, yet this is all that the Council's new approach encourages. Because this sensual approach to happiness focuses on the present, it robs citizens of a meaningful future. Under the Council's direction, people abandon the self-discipline necessary for the proper practice of hedonics. By abandoning a reasonable, balanced approach to happiness, Americans are becoming mindless, self-centered, pleasure seeking fools.

The nightmare continues in the novel's final section when the Council discovers and enforces the ultimate perversion of the pursuit of happiness. Traveling to Earth from Venus to determine the source of a recent invasion of androids there, D'glas M'Gregor discovers Earth's terrible secret, the ex-

treme to which hedonism had taken people. The Council had created the illusion of complete happiness for everyone by constructing a perfect foster womb for each citizen. Each person was suspended in a room in amniotic fluid. Each human had become a grotesque mockery of an embryo in a uterus. Man had created a last refuge against life and then retreated into it. But this condition amounted to slow suicide. Americans were simply obeying the first law of hedonics: happiness is the only good. In obeying this mandate, however, they pursued it to its final, grotesque conclusion where the ultimate happiness was death. Man in his perfect foster womb was completely satisfied, completely happy, and dead. This was the final, monstrous perversion of hedonism.

James Gunn repeats two themes from Station in Space to demonstrate how Americans can pursue happiness without having that pursuit become a nightmare or an extreme perversion. One of his themes is that of accepting a challenge. Humans need to be challenged, to be discontented with their present condition. To refuse a challenge is to lose the spirit essential for man's survival. If humans in the future wish to pursue happiness, they should do so without surrendering their free will or freedom of choice. In The Joy Makers, some humans accept the challenge offered by the planet Venus. To construct a livable home in an extremely hostile environment, humans must divest themselves of all grandiose and foolish illusions about utopian happiness. As M'Gregor explains to the single human he rescues from Earth:

Happiness must come from inside, or it is deadly. The only road for Man is the hard road, up and out - the road of dissatisfaction, the road of anger.<sup>7</sup>

But this does not preclude hedonistic techniques from being an important part of this or any other challenge. Man must learn a balanced approach to the problem, and this is Gunn's second main theme. Thanks to Morgan, who had fled Earth to escape the Council, hedonism flourished in the hostile world of Venus.

Although hedonics had helped the colonists tame and adjust to Venus, its practice did not permit government interference with an individual's life or with his freedoms of action and choice. On Venus, thanks to Morgan's teachings, men created a society carefully balanced between objective reality and subjective attitude.

Man's ultimate dream, however, is not the conquest of space or the pursuit of happiness, but rather the search for physical immortality. Using Kansas and Missouri as the setting for The Immortals, James Gunn demonstrates how this third and greatest dream could degenerate into a harsh nightmare in the future.<sup>8</sup> In The Immortals Gunn utilizes both an unusual event and extrapolation as story techniques, though he makes greater use of the latter device. The dream of immortality for Americans begins in the 1950s with a seemingly inconspicuous event, a blood transfusion in a hospital. But the recipient, a very wealthy man in his seventies named Weaver who is close to death, suddenly and mysteriously becomes thirty years old again, rejuvenated by the blood. The hospital discovers that the blood, donated by a man named Cartwright, contains an immunity from aging in the gamma globulin. Because the immunity factor is natural to Cartwright, he is a walking fountain of youth and will live forever, barring any unforeseen accidents. Weaver's immunity, however, is temporary and must be renewed with fresh blood from Cartwright every thirty or forty days. To complicate matters, Cartwright, aided by a geriatrician named Pearce, disappears from view. But this lone biological miracle, a freak happening actually, fires the imaginations of Weaver and a few doctors and launches the American quest for immortality.

Because the dream depends upon the blood of one American, Cartwright quickly becomes the focus of a nationwide search. He is literally a walking blood bank, his blood the most valuable commodity in the universe. Weaver wants



him found and then protected and preserved in an institution. Protected against any possible accident, Cartwright could be bled regularly so that Weaver and a few selected Americans could perpetuate immortality for themselves. Cartwright would have anything he desired except his freedom. In the novel's second section, the world's wealthiest men establish the National Research Institute to search America for the illusive Mr. Cartwright or any of his heirs. The Institute spends one hundred million dollars a year for fifty years in a vain attempt to locate the Cartwrights. Even though the Cartwrights are extremely difficult to locate, the search for them must continue because American society dreams of a medical utopia consisting of improved health first and immortality second.

Gunn uses the huge Medical Center in Kansas City to symbolize both the positive and negative aspects of this complex American dream - the circumvention of death itself. The Medical Center symbolizes man's search for immortal life because the extensive dragnet for the Cartwrights has acted as an impetus for medical research. As Americans make good health care their main priority, they demand that researchers at hospitals produce more and better medical advances. Researchers respond by making discoveries in geriatrics and hormone injections that lengthen the life spans of many Americans. Dr. Pearce, the geriatrician who aided the original Cartwright, even discovers how to synthesize the single protein responsible for the Cartwright's immunity factor. Only a few very wealthy Americans at this point can ever hope to tap the Cartwrights' fountain of youth. A great many more Americans, however, can hope to derive some benefits from the new medical technology which constant research is producing.

But the hospital at Kansas City also symbolizes a darker side to the American dream of a medical utopia. The other side of life is death, and the

Medical Center does symbolize the American fear of death. Once Americans have committed themselves to improving health care by lavishly funding medical research, they cannot reverse themselves. As America pours more money and resources into medical research at hospitals, the cost of remaining healthy escalates sharply for each American. As a result, only a few wealthy Americans can afford the emerging medical technology. The masses of Americans do not actually benefit that much. In addition, the urban area surrounding the Medical Center in Kansas City is slowly but steadily dying from abandonment and decay. What happens at Kansas City, Missouri is just a microcosm of what happens across the United States. As medical centers thrive and expand to accommodate the incessant demand for greater medical advances, the urban areas surrounding those centers deteriorate. As America blindly pursues health care and immortality through medical technology, it loses its sense of social balance and is willing to sacrifice anything for its dream. Man's greatest dream acquires distinct overtones of a nightmare.

Gunn projects this situation of a dream gone awry further into the future in part three of The Immortals. The effects on society of a people madly pursuing a dream are devastating. The Medical Center has become an island in the midst of decay. Cities like Kansas City have decentralized. The healthy and wealthy citizens have moved to the country, leaving the cities decayed cesspools of pollution and carcinogens. Industry has abandoned the cities to follow the people concerned about pollution. Because hospitals like the Medical Center devour tax exempt land as they expand, cities like Kansas City lose the basis for their existence and economic prosperity. But it is the individual American for whom the evil effects are most pronounced. Because of the high cost of the new medical technology, adequate health care is beyond the reach of 100 million Americans. Only the wealthy citizens can afford the miracle

drugs and spectacular operations that could extend their life spans, but each extra year of life costs them thirty to forty thousand dollars. The nation diverted 52.5% of its national income toward good health, but America was spending itself into bankruptcy pursuing a dream which only a few people could ever afford. In this crumbling American society of the future, medical research has reached a point of diminishing returns and is absorbing a disproportionate amount of society's resources. Man's grandest dream is nowhere near fulfillment.<sup>9</sup>

The sinister effects of this dream turned nightmare, however, are just as devastating, perhaps even more so, upon the ethical standards of the medical profession itself. The practice of medicine has become the monopoly of people who are more interested in expensive technology and grandiose research projects than they are in helping the average American or in assisting society as a whole. When doctors have to choose between helping the prosperous and helping the poor, they choose the former to ensure finances for more medical research. Medical personnel, like Ben Flowers the young medic in the novel's third section, have lost all concern and compassion for the individual patient. The A.M.A. is immovable on one point: "A man had an inalienable right to the doctor of his choice and the medical treatment he could afford."<sup>10</sup> In practice this means that patients purchase medical contracts from hospitals and remain in debt for the rest of their lives. Ben Flowers simply speaks for the entire profession when he asserts:

What the patient needed more than anything else was not an understanding of his condition but implicit faith in his doctor....It is better for medicine to be magic than to be commonplace.<sup>11</sup>

Attitudes like these keep most Americans ignorant and condemn millions to wretched, subnormal lives in cities polluted beyond recovery. Doctors have become callous, indifferent practitioners of technological health care, but for the highest bidders only.



One hundred years in the future medicine has even acquired the characteristics of a religion. The profession has its own traditions, rituals, and wonder drugs. The American public, possessing a pathological fear of death, views doctors as true miracle workers. Americans have even acquired a spiritual chant honoring their new god: "Give us this day our daily vitamins." Their medicine chests are altars to the great god of medicine. At clinics patients recite their bad health habits to medical confessors, as if seeking absolution from their sins. The reward for a good medical confession was free time on the diagnostic machine, the latest medical gadget that scans a patient and reveals his ailments. America has not only made a fetish of good health; it has made good health its new religion.

By the end of Gunn's novel, the nightmare involving health care and the search for immortality has assumed its most frightening proportions. Kansas City as an urban organism is dead. Higher education in America is also dead because society had diverted the necessary funds into medical research. The professionals inside the Medical Center view the masses outside as scum. The Center itself is a besieged fortress in a hostile environment. Bitter citizens conduct periodic military raids against the living symbol of the dream that has deceived them. Life outside the Medical Center is degrading and dehumanizing for nearly all Americans. People are kidnapped and murdered for their organs, which are then sold to an organ bank.<sup>12</sup> People are hunted like animals for their head-bounties or for their organs. A good body could bring \$100 or more. American society has sacrificed everything to the god of medicine. It had depended upon science to fulfill its dream. The search for a way to circumvent death has exacted a terrible price from America - its social, economic, and political life.

James Gunn emphasizes a number of themes in The Immortals. One obvious

theme in the novel is that everything has its price. Biological immortality may be the greatest gift a human could receive, but the quest for it would demand some payment. The price for immortality in this novel is the right to live a natural life, because life must include death. Related to this idea is Gunn's assertion that immunity from natural death would destroy society. Without the immunity factor, humanity had achieved a rough state of equilibrium in which new births counterbalanced deaths. But Americans upset this natural balance when they became obsessed with prolonging life through miraculous technology and by pursuing immunity against death itself. Gunn constantly repeats the warning that a society must never pursue something in excess, whether it is wealth, piety, or health. People certainly have a right to dream, but they must pursue their dreams in a balanced way if their society is to remain healthy. The American society in The Immortals ignored this warning, and the results were nightmarish - an unbalanced and decayed society with a grossly perverted medical standard.

A final point Gunn makes is that society must accept a challenge offered to it. Only one-half of the Cartwrights' immunity from natural death was due to their rare blood; the other half was due to their incredibly strong will to live. They accepted the challenge Nature offered them and learned to cope with their unique characteristic. The rest of the human species should follow their example by combining the proper amount of survival instinct with a faith in scientific research. Normal humans might never duplicate the Cartwrights' unique status, but they can pursue a positive goal like improved health care in a rational, balanced way. Whatever they do, Americans should never surrender their freedom of action, nor should they become obsessed with romantic illusions.

In his three novels Station in Space, The Joy Makers, and The Immortals, James Gunn does not attempt to predict a precise future society for America.

Instead he merely demonstrates what could or might happen in the future if Americans pursue three specific dreams without caution or careful management. Gunn asserts that dreams are essential for a society's survival; the refusal of the challenge inherent in a dream is the beginning of a society's decay. But Americans should pursue their dreams with utmost care. They must remember that Newton's laws of motion have their counterparts in social affairs, and every dream will exact its price from Americans, especially if that dream is improperly managed. The penalty for beginning the conquest of outer space with just romantic illusions could be a maze of deceptions or an unexpected disaster. The penalty for pursuing the dream of happiness to an extreme could be death itself for the entire race. In his fiction Gunn severely criticizes Americans for pursuing their dreams to an excess (a tendency he undoubtedly detected in the 1950s) and for not balancing their romanticism with proper doses of reason and discipline. A balanced, moderate approach is absolutely essential for the fulfillment of a dream. In Gunn's novels, every time Americans recklessly pursue a dream and surrender their freedom of action, they become the victims of a sinister nightmare, not the inheritors of a splendid dream.

Thomas P. Linkfield  
Michigan State University



# NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Each novel is composed of several sections, published separately as short stories between 1954 and 1960 in various SF pulp journals.

<sup>2</sup>James Gunn, Station in Space, New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1958.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>5</sup>James Gunn, The Joy Makers, New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1961.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>8</sup>James Gunn, The Immortals, New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1962.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 73-82.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>12</sup>The last section of The Immortals is a forerunner of Robin Cook's recent novel Coma, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977.