

Lesson #2: Dream Assignment

The Sweet and the Bitter: Dreaming about 'El otro lado' ~ created by Cotrina Robinson - SummerTIME 2007, USC

"Dreams are . . . the fulfilment of wishes." -Sigmund Freud

Key Terms

dreams, , immigration, trauma, loss, "American dream," close reading, personal narrative, coherent, connotation, cultural association, transnational, critique, personal and/or anecdotal evidence, textual evidence

Materials

Grande, Reyna. *The Distance Between Us: A Memoir*

Overview

The image of the dream is central to the history of U.S. race and class relations. For example, the "American dream," which is said to compel those in other countries where work is scarce to migrate to the "land of opportunity," is the frequently cited source of the current "immigration crisis." Many have also used it to describe the motivations of those who came to the U.S. during the great European immigration boom of the early twentieth century, when the rate of immigration rose more than 100% between 1890 and 1900. Closer to home, the American dream is associated with Southern California "boosterism," the hyping of opportunities for home-ownership by real estate developers and others with a vested interest in the development of the region. Lastly, the image of the American dream is commonly used to describe the middle-class aspirations of members of the working class. However, it would constitute a gross oversimplification to call this manifestation of the American dream uniquely American, because economic classes transcend the boundaries of both time and place. Consequently, the class striving captured by the idea of the American dream actually has a countless number of incarnations that spans the globe.

The Scottish novelist Irvine Welsh, for example, criticizes the prevalence of such "dreaming" in Edinburgh in his novel *Trainspotting through* his protagonists' angry rant: "Choose us. Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting on a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin junk food into your mouth" (Welsh 187). Irving's novel therefore complicates the so-called American dream as prototypically American and turns it into a global phenomenon, utterly personal in nature and societal in its scope. Existing both as a figment of the imagination (an ideal), and as a real, verifiable position in economic and social space. Accordingly, any author who employs the image of the dream has access to varied cultural associations.

The American dream is prominent in Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us*, a book which

is concerned in large part with the impact of the desire to live the American dream on individuals and their families. But the image of the dream in Grande's book is hardly simple or straightforward. As you think about the prompt below, consider the following: What role does the American dream play in the story that Grande tells in her memoir? What circumstances cause characters to yearn for the "something better" that El Otro Lado represents? What or who stands in the way of their achieving their version of the American dream at home? Does Grande celebrate the impact of the American dream on her family? Or does she, instead, lament it? Is her representation of the American dream in fact ambiguous rather than uniformly positive or negative?

In addition to asking you to analyze the role of the American dream in the memoir, this assignment asks you to discuss the role of the American dream in your own life. What has been the impact of the "American dream" in your life and in the history of your family? What is your opinion of the particular kind of striving and yearning that this phrase represents? Why do you have this opinion? Do you agree or disagree with Grande's representation of the American dream?

Prompt

Using as your evidence a combination of personal narrative and close reading of the memoir, critique the impact of the American dream on the individual and/or the family in a thesis driven 4-5 pp. essay.

Important Things to Consider in Regard to the Prompt

Use a balanced combination of personal (anecdotal) evidence and textual evidence to support your opinion of the impact of the American Dream on the individual and/or the family. In other words, use an amount of textual evidence drawn from the novel at least equal to the amount of evidence drawn from your life experience. Your close reading of the book should pay special attention to the way both the idea and the reality of the "American dream" affect the protagonists: on the one hand it is simply an idea, a vision of the future that some of the characters have in mind; on the other hand it is arguably something that some of the characters actually realize in their lives. Based on your observations of the effects both the idea and the reality have on the protagonists, decide whether the "American dream" as a myth is useful and/or harmful. It is at this point that you may choose to bring in an example from your own experience to support your argument.

Quote the text as you refer to it in order to support your claims about it. Put the page numbers of the quotations in parentheses following each sentence featuring a quote. Use MLA formatting style for your heading, page numbers, and works cited list (which in this first essay will only be Grande's book unless you decide to quote other sources).