

The Narrative of the American Dream: Evaluating the Impact of Horatio Alger Jr. on America's
Definition of Success

by
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For Zoe

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Abstract

This thesis contributes to the ongoing discussion on the discourse of the “American dream” through the genre of American success narratives. It is a conversation started by James Trunslow Adams in 1932 and has continued through decades of American pop culture, media, and literature. Novels in this genre parabolize economic success, charting the journey of a protagonist from poverty to some level of economic stability. These stories can be fiction or nonfiction, but either way, they represent a central theme in the lives of many Americans.

Horatio Alger Jr., a late 19th century American author, is credited with creating and popularizing this genre with his “rags to riches” stories. The majority of his 135 novels feature an American-born, Anglo-Saxon male imbued with self-reliance, honesty, and perseverance who journeys from the streets to middle-class wealth and comfort. The key to Alger’s fiction is that his protagonist always, without fail, “makes it.” This thesis provides a focused critique of this aspect of Alger’s “American dream,” arguing that his conception of the American success narrative, while powerful in its ability to retain relevance, is exclusive and limiting.

The method of analysis is comparing Alger’s most popular novel, *Ragged Dick* with three other novels that fall under the genre of American success narratives. Like many of Alger’s characters, Dick Hunter works his way up from his position as a lowly bootblack to the comfort of middle-class wealth through hard work and persistence. The problem with this, however, is that Alger portrays Dick as a transparent, unmarked character, who supposedly represents the average American citizen. However, Dick is marked as a white, able-bodied male, and while Alger suggests that Dick’s path to success is accessible to anyone who attempts it, the three other novels in the thesis argue against this accessibility. Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* are examples of upwardly mobile literature that explicitly or implicitly reference Alger’s works. However, these novels feature protagonists who are female, lesbian, and African-American, thus rewriting while challenging Alger’s seemingly applicable formula for success.

The purpose of this comparison is to draw out the gaps in Alger’s narrative in order to discuss its socioeconomic and political implications. While Alger’s mantra, *work hard and you will succeed*, motivates the working class and justifies the wealth of the upper class, it is also largely inapplicable to women, minorities, and the queer community. This project works to dismantle the monopoly Alger has over the American success narrative, advocating for greater representation and inclusion in both American literature and American society.

Keywords: American dream, Horatio Alger, success narrative, upward mobility, equality, character, identity.

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A Symptomatic Reading of “the American Dream”

In 1931, the nadir of the Great Depression, James Trunslow Adams published a book that contained, for the first time, the term “the American Dream.” Adams’s book, *The Epic of America*, recounted the history of America from its origin in European colonization to 1931. In the introduction to the 2012 Edition, Howard Schneiderman describes Adams’s work as more than a factual account of American history; it was “something of a time capsule filled with hope, national pride, and reminders that what Adams called the American dream was still alive and worth aspiring to”(x). The most quoted and discussed part of the book would prove to be Adams’s description of “the American dream.” Adams described the “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (214). To Adams, “the American dream” represented a vision of America as a country rich with opportunity and equality. The phrase signified the opportunity for individuals to better themselves, “regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Adams 215). Not only did Adams’s phrase become a symbol of the nation, it inspired hope in Americans struggling with the worst economic crisis in their nation’s history.

In 2016, we may wonder how well Adams’s hope-inspiring idealism stood the test of time. A simple Google search for “the American Dream” illuminates the variety of sentiments that are influencing the way Americans regard Adams’s phrase. John Ketzenberger from *Business Insider* asks in an article: “Can we awaken the American Dream?” While he answers this question affirmatively, with the qualification that America needs to make some serious public policy adjustments, the article suggests that the optimism and equality of Adams’s “American Dream” is dormant today. A *New York Times* article asks, “American Dream? Or Mirage?” The article addresses the ever-increasing gap between the “haves” and “have not’s,”

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and how a belief in the American dream helps to perpetuate this gap: the rich use the “dream” to justify their disproportionate wealth while the poor use the “dream” as the basis for an often delusional hope.¹ The evidence of America’s disillusionment with Adams’s American dream prompts us to take a closer look at the discourse that has since built up around it.

While Adams defines the American dream, Jim Cullen explores its progression in his book, *A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*. As Cullen’s title suggests, his book cannot begin to capture the complete history of such a massively influential concept. Furthermore, Cullen’s title indicates the phrase and its complex resonance have the power to shape (and continue shaping) the most powerful nation in the world. Cullen demonstrates how the power of the American dream lies in its ambiguity, suggesting that it is a concept as diverse as the people who believe in it. Cullen supports this claim by tracking the permutations of the dream throughout American history, demonstrating its ability to transform and adapt to the changing conditions and values of society. For example, he discusses both the “Dream of the Good Life: Upward Mobility” and “The Dream of Equality.” The former dream takes shape in The Declaration of Independence, a document that embodies the Founding Father’s notions of equality and individual opportunity.² The latter is a plea for equality from African-Americans. Through these differences, Cullen establishes the ability of the American dream to change and adapt to social milieu, thereby managing to stay relevant for almost an entire century.

A central feature of Cullen’s work is concerned with the multiplicity of American dreams, rather than Adams’s vision of a singular American dream. As Cullen’s book

¹ From now on, I will be referring to the concept, “the American dream” without quotes. However, I want to note that, while I recognize that the American dream is a vast and ambiguous concept with a complex history, I also know that the rhetoric of this concept should be approached cautiously and with great care. While I neither subscribe to it nor completely reject it, I want my personal caution toward the American dream to be noted.

² When the Founding Fathers composed and signed this document, its egalitarianism embraced only white, property-owning men.

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demonstrates, the concept of the American dream shifts depending on the individual, the location, or the year. The needs of each group of Americans is unique, causing different manifestations of the same desire for a better life. Furthermore, the two most well-known definitions of the American dream, the Declaration of Independence and Adams's own definition, are already ambiguous. What happens when America progresses and expands the term "men" to include people of color and women? It becomes futile to attempt to define the American dream as a singular, tangible concept. There becomes an undeniable tension between the presentation of the American dream as a singular concept that every American can hypothetically access and the unique histories and characteristics that make up each individual American. However, one of the most widely accepted and internalized concepts of the American dream remains powerful and relevant today, despite promoting a single definition of success.

Horatio Alger Jr. provided one of the first crystallizations of the American dream in his 19th century fiction. His iconic "rags to riches" narratives chart the rise of a young boy from poverty to modest wealthy and success. Alger's works take up the ambiguity of the American dream and present it as a transparent and (seemingly) nationally applicable concept. The repetitive nature of his narrative structure and the flatness and simplicity of his characters leave no room for variation, teaching readers that there is only one guaranteed path to the American dream. However, despite the limits of Alger's formulation, many examples of upward mobility in 20th century American literature reveal the continuing appeal of his plot. While the continuing use of Alger's plot is typically to critique his presentation of the American dream, his presence in modern and progressive novels demonstrates his importance as an American literary figure. For his ability to endure, much like the American dream, Alger will be the thread connecting all of the authors in this project.

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More than simply close reading Alger, this thesis will use the work of Fredric Jameson to analyze the deeper implications of Alger's texts. In *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Jameson describes "symptomatic reading" as a method of analysis that assumes "a latent meaning behind a manifest one" (qtd. in Best and Marcus 6). He advocates plunging below the surface of a text to unearth its repressed ideology, as only "weak, descriptive, empirical, ideologically complicit readers attend to the surface of the text" (Best and Marcus 5). Most significantly, Jameson's symptomatic reading implores readers to interpret a text's "silences, gaps, style, tone and imagery as symptoms" or symbols suggesting a concealed meaning (Best and Marcus 6). With Jameson's theory in mind, this thesis will carry out a symptomatic reading of Alger's *Ragged Dick*, interpreting the silences in the text as symptoms of a problematic portrayal of the American dream.³ But it is not enough to simply call attention to these symptoms of the troubling discourse surrounding the American dream. By comparing *Ragged Dick* to three other texts that create their own narratives out of the silences in Alger's novel, this thesis critiques the limiting and exclusive rhetoric of an otherwise nationally accepted representation of the American dream.

The first chapter focuses on Horatio Alger Jr. and his novel, *Ragged Dick*. It uses Christian Moraru's claim regarding Alger's popularity and impact as an American author to situate him as the link between literature and the American dream. It is also concerned with establishing how Alger has retained power and relevance for so long. Then the chapter shifts focus to Alger's most popular and well-known novel, *Ragged Dick* (1886). It summarizes its plot

³ While Alger wrote around 135 novels, in a quote that will show up again in this thesis, Alex Pitofsky notes that "[e]ven though these later novels (Alger eventually published more than 100 in all) seldom deviated even marginally from the narrative formula introduced in *Ragged Dick*-the destitute but generous young protagonist, the dream of earning a respectable living, the daring rescue, the wealthy benefactor, and so on-nearly every Alger title was an immediate commercial success" (278). Therefore, this project uses *Ragged Dick* as the text that best represents Alger's work.

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and establishes it as the prototypical “rags to riches” formula which serves as the focus of comparison throughout the project. Finally, the chapter closes with a close reading of two particular sections of *Ragged Dick* that portray Dick Hunter as a transparent, unmarked, and therefore easily inhabitable shell of a character. This chapter transitions into the rest of the project by asserting that other authors rewrite Alger’s narrative into their own narratives for the purpose of critiquing it. This method is used by Theodore Dreiser, Rita Mae Brown, and Ralph Ellison and is what concerns the remaining pages of this project.

In the following chapters, the project shifts to a series of close readings and comparisons between *Ragged Dick* and another novel that engages with elements of Alger’s work in its own narrative. Chapter Two features Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900). Because there are no explicit references to Alger in *Sister Carrie*, this chapter draws connections between the lives of Dick Hunter and Dreiser as a way to begin the conversation comparing these two works of fiction. The chapter progresses to emphasize Dick’s deliberate sidestep of the factory system and Carrie’s femininity as the central variances between Dick and Carrie. In order to effectively teach about the rewards of hard work, Alger needed a setting in which his characters could be recognized as exceptional. This chapter unpacks the implications of Alger’s choice, comparing it with the way Dreiser forces Carrie to navigate in and out of the factory system. It also discusses how Carrie’s femininity is not only able to free her from the constraints of the factory, but provide her with a sustainable source of income. This difference reflects the divide between fiction and realism, which is the main difference between Alger and Dreiser’s works. It emphasizes the fairytale-esque qualities of *Ragged Dick* through its comparison to *Sister Carrie*, casting doubt on the feasibility of Alger’s manifestation of the American dream.

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Chapter Three moves to comparing Rita Mae Brown's semi-autobiographical lesbian success narrative, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), with *Ragged Dick*. By focusing on Brown's explicit references to Alger, this chapter reflects the exasperation with the old-fashioned values of Alger's narrative. Throughout the novel, Molly Bolt remains true to a code of morals and ethics that resembles that of the prototypical Alger hero. Molly refuses to violate this code, despite the backlash she receives from her peers. However, while this moral strength results in an unapologetic embrace of her stigmatized lesbian identity, it also complicates the way she is perceived by others. This chapter focuses on the comparison between Dick Hunter's character as a transparent vessel that others can easily see through and Molly's character as clouded by her femininity and her stigmatized lesbian identity.

To conclude this critique of the American dream, Chapter Four explores the enlightenment of the unnamed protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). This chapter compares Dick Hunter's strictly upward narrative with the uncertain path of the unnamed protagonist. Ellison speaks about "the black rite of Horatio Alger," emphasizing the differences between the experiences of black and white Americans on their journey to success. This chapter breaks open the gaps in Alger's narrative, calling attention to the false promises of the American dream. In particular, the protagonist's realization that he lives an "invisible" existence leads to the conclusion that identity does not always align with other's perspective of you. The chapter describes Ellison's analysis of Alger's narrative using the protagonist's nightmare in which he read from a letter. The term "running" then becomes the symbol of Ellison's American dream. This chapter concludes its analysis of Ellison's narrative by suggesting that, like the protagonist, many Americans are kept running toward a promise that may or may not exist.

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As a unit, these last three chapters will specify the particular gaps in Alger's work that reveal problems with his representation of the American dream. By comparing the characters and narratives of these three novels with *Ragged Dick*, this thesis offers a critique of how limiting the dominant version of the American dream can be. The simplicity of Alger's mantra, *work hard and you will succeed*, overlooks the systematic oppression of women, minorities, people of color, and the queer community, to name a just few marginalized groups. It also oversimplifies our definition of success. While Alger tethers success to financial gain and a good work ethic, the characters featured in the rest of this document have other ideas as to what success means to them. Therefore, as Americans, we must critically read Alger's fiction in order to make our way toward a less restricted and exclusive American dream.

Rewriting Horatio Alger

“It is dangerous to ignore a man whose ideas hang on so stubbornly.” – Rychard Fink

The defining national narrative of the United States of America is linked to self-determination and individualism. After Benjamin Franklin wrote and published his autobiography in 1791 with the hope that “his tale of bootstrapping success would be uniquely informative” to the American people, Americans have placed a high value on those who create and determine their own success (Rollert). Prominent public figures such as Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln and John D. Rockefeller, to name a few, are glorified for making their own success. These individuals are known to rise from low, impoverished conditions to a higher degree of wealth. For example, Abraham Lincoln, who was born in a log cabin in Kentucky and made his way to the White House. Real-life stories such as these inspire working class Americans to push themselves to achieve and demand more for themselves. But what is the function of fictional versions of this narrative? To be sure, it is not a question as to *if* these American success stories have become frequently fictionalized and published in the American literary canon. The work of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack London, Ernest Hemmingway, and Robert Coover prove these “rise of” stories have been rewritten and reproduced countless times by American authors.⁴ It is a question of *how* this value has come to define America’s national self and its subsequent impact on the discourse of the American dream. According to Christian Moraru, Horatio Alger Jr., the “most successful American writer ever,” is the key to exploring the American dream.

Horatio Alger Jr. was an American author during the late 19th century. His fiction often followed the journey of a young man as he worked his way up from poverty to the comfort and

⁴ List from Weisenburger (Moraru 59)

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security of middle-class respectability. Alger extolled the values of “personal initiative, enterprise, financial responsibility, thrift, equal opportunity, hard-work ethic, education and self-education” and most importantly, self-determination, to achieve this respectability (Moraru 57). These didactic stories were frequently published in juvenile periodicals such as *Student and Schoolmate*, *The Boys Home Weekly*, or *Gleason’s Monthly Companion*, instilling these values in America’s youth (HAS). Critics have credited Alger with creating and popularizing a national character who embodies “American” values of self-determination, individualism and persistence. The significance of this character is not only that he is able to create his own success and financial stability, but that he too is a symbol of the American Dream. Alger’s “hero” is a role model to whom many impoverished Americans have looked and will continue to look to for inspiration as they work toward a better life for themselves.

Despite publishing around 135 novels, Alger rarely departed from the same narrative structure. With slight variations of his standard protagonists, Alger implemented a narrative of upward mobility that remained consistent. Alex Pitofsky comments on how popular Alger’s repeated narrative structure was amongst his readers while laying out the narrative in question⁵:

“Even though these later novels (Alger eventually published more than 100 in all) seldom deviated even marginally from the narrative formula introduced in *Ragged Dick*—the destitute but generous young protagonist, the dream of earning a respectable living, the daring rescue, the wealthy benefactor, and so on—nearly every Alger title was an immediate commercial success”(Pitofsky 278).

For Alger’s audiences, the repetitive structure did not influence their reaction to the novels in any way. Sociologist Max Weber offers a way to understand the appeal of Alger’s books. His book,

⁵ As his titles reveal, Alger’s novels follow telegraph boys, bootblacks, luggage boys, backwoods boys, and street boys on their journey from poverty to modest wealth.

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The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1930) takes up a fusion between commercialism and religion, a version of which was popularized by Alger's fiction. Weber describes how Protestants believe that, if an individual lives their life according to the Protestant tenets, economic success will follow⁶. While Alger's writing was never overtly religious, the connection between an inherently "good" moral foundation and economic success is the foundation of his fiction. This emphasis on moral soundness and integrity as qualities valuable in different eras and social contexts despite changing definitions, allows Alger to transcend the shifting socioeconomic climate in which he was writing.

More recently, however, Alger and his works have been questioned by contemporary audiences because the repetition upon which he relies lacks imagination. Critics have asserted that Alger's stories are "overly didactic and formulaic, constantly rehashing the 'strive and succeed' premise to inspire his young audience" (HAS). His prose is often simplistic and his characters transparent. Furthermore, many Americans consider the lessons Alger championed to be dead or irrelevant in today's society. Headlines proclaim that we have "lost track" of the traditional values of success, and many theorize that it is impossible to reverse this trend.⁷ So why Alger?

Horatio Alger is the link between American literature and the American dream. His novels have not only given Americans a set of instructions on how to make a better life for themselves, but also hope that a better life is, in fact, possible. Alger's influence the American dream is

⁶ To offer Weber's own, albeit translated, words: "On the other hand, it is a fact that the Protestants (especially certain branches of the movement to be fully discussed later) both as ruling classes and as ruled, both as majority and as minority, have shown a special tendency to develop economic rationalism which cannot be observed to the same extent among Catholics either in the one situation or in the other. Thus the principal explanation of this difference must be sought in the permanent intrinsic character of their religious beliefs, and not only in their temporary external historico-political situations."

⁷ Taken from the headline of an article in *The Atlantic*, "How America Lost Track of Ben Franklin's Definition of Success."

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undeniable. Moraru speaks to Alger's influence, claiming that "Alger is both the most successful American writer ever – reputed to have sold about 300,000,000 copies of his 135 books – *and* the author who has made the most important contribution to the production and circulation of the American narrative of success" (57). The first part of Moraru's comments proves itself.

Quantitatively, Alger's book sales indicate a certain degree of popularity, and, for that reason, Alger may be deemed a "popular" novelist. Evaluating Alger's impact, however, is not as clear-cut. This thesis offers a method for evaluating the limiting effects of Alger's influence on America's success narrative through an analysis of three other novels that rewrite Alger's narrative structure. By finding and analyzing examples of how other novels engage with Alger's framework, this thesis both evaluates Moraru's statement and locates the gaps in Alger's narrative while exploring what they indicate about the relationship between Americans and their American dream. Furthermore, the diversity between these novels allows us to observe how the American dream changes over time. From the factory-system of Chicago to racially charged Harlem, Alger's American dream remains an integral part of our national story.

I want to offer an explanation for the ability of Alger's hero to retain its relevance and power in American fiction today. There is an understated emphasis on morality and ethics that allows the identity of Alger's hero to transcend time and place. Alex Pitofsky discusses how respectability became an afterthought in interpretations of Alger's stories, taking second place to the "rags to riches" paradigm. After Alger's death in 1900, his novels saw a sudden upsurge in sales. It was during this posthumous rise in circulation that the "[m]oral ideology at the center of Alger's fiction became even more garbled" (Pitofsky 280). Publishers edited Alger's novels to accommodate the growing popularity of conflating success with wealth amongst readers. This subtle manipulation of Alger's text illustrates the 20th century interpretation of Alger's fiction.

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Today, those who know the name Alger associate it with the “rags to riches,” rather than “rags to respectability” paradigm (*Fictional Republic*). However, if we take a closer look at a character such as “ragged” Dick Hunter, it is clear that Alger’s goals are largely centered on “not only work[ing hard, but work[ing] in the right way” (Alger 89).

The most remarkable characteristic of Dick Hunter is that he is completely and utterly unremarkable. Consider Mr. Whitney’s initial assessment of Dick: “Still, he looks honest. He has an open face, and I think can be depended upon” (Alger 55). As this is not only one of the only descriptions of Dick Hunter in the book, but also a critical moment in Dick’s upward trajectory, it is a crucial moment to explore. The only defining feature that Mr. Whitney mentions is Dick’s “open” face. In the context of physical features, openness often connotes honesty, sincerity and frankness. To be sure, in the introduction to this book, readers are informed of Dick’s moral strength through explanation and examples. However, Mr. Whitney is not. Thus, when Mr. Whitney is convinced of Dick’s trustworthiness based simply on his appearance, Alger indicates that even though Dick is “ragged and dirty,” this exterior is transparent enough for Mr. Whitney to see through to the honest boy within (Alger 55). Furthermore, Mr. Whitney’s description of Dick is vague and unremarkable, leaving plenty of room for readers to conjure up their own image of Dick as they read. This encourages readers to insert themselves into the story, filling in the gaps in Dick’s physical description with their own physical characteristics. Based on Mr. Whitney’s reaction, Dick’s transparency as a character allows him to act as a vector for integrity, or as a technique to allow readers to see themselves in Dick’s place, advancing the notion that anyone is capable of succeeding if they follow Alger’s formula.

Not only is Dick’s physical appearance unremarkable, so too is his past. Aaron Shaheen argues that elements of *Ragged Dick* indicate Alger’s attempt to transcend temporal and spatial

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constraints within the narrative. To be clear, Shaheen's uses the phrase "ex nihilo" to describe Dick's presence in New York City (21). Literally translated to mean, "out of nothing," this phrase characterizes Dick's presence in the novel as sudden and without any backstory. To be sure, the novel begins on the day when Dick's entire world-view shifts, he appears to have no past familial connections, is woken by a stranger seemingly from "oblivion" at the beginning of the book, and there is no specific date mentioned to provide readers with the historical moment of the novel (Shaheen). One of the ways in which location and time period of the novel are revealed is through the inclusion of details regarding the construction of Central Park, which Shaheen tell us indicate that *Ragged Dick* is set in New York City sometime "slightly before the Civil War" (21). However, these details fail to answer many of the typical questions that readers want to know about a protagonist: Where was Dick born? What happened to his family? What events led up to the moment he is introduced to readers? Dick Hunter, therefore, is a character who is untethered to any particular moment in time. These nonspecific characteristics allow authors to easily reimagine Dick Hunter in alternate settings, filling his gaps with other particular histories.

Despite Alger's portrayal of Dick as unmarked and transparent, it must be noted that this is not necessarily accurate. For example, when Frank and Dick ride the horse-cars to Central Park, a woman seated next to them accuses the pair of stealing her wallet. While the third-person omniscient narrator tells readers that neither boy stole the wallet, the same courtesy is not extended to the passengers in the car. For some reason, however, "the passengers rather sided with the boys" when it came to assessing the validity of this woman's accusation (Alger 94). A man sitting nearby voices his opinion, saying that the woman must be mistaken, for "[t]he lad does not look as if he would steal" (Alger 94). Alger, as the narrator, adds "[a]ppearances go a

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great ways, and Frank did not look like a thief” (94). In this scene, Alger uses Frank’s “looks” as his defense, prompting us to consider what Frank and Dick actually look like. Carol Nackenoff comments that the prototypical Alger hero is a “native-born American boy of Anglo-Saxon heritage” (*Fictional Republic* 238).⁸ This assessment indicates that both Dick and Frank are in fact marked as a young, able-bodied, white boy, despite the lack of detailed descriptions throughout the novel. Furthermore, the scene above suggests that these physical characteristics are an indicator of integrity and honesty, which presents a troubling connection between white, able-bodied males and the potential for success.

One way to determine Alger’s influence on the American success narrative is to evaluate his influence on other authors writing about upward mobility. It is one thing for his repetitive and formulaic stories to be popular amongst readers. It is another for the narrative progression and framework he instituted to be used by other authors in their own commentary on the American dream. Moraru describes Alger’s narrative of upward mobility as a “tiny story” or “micronarrative” that can be rewritten into larger narratives (55-56). He offers Robert Coover’s *Public Burning* as one such example of an effective rewriting of Alger’s works. During his analysis of Coover’s play, Moraru claims that “Alger-centered discourse is both a symptom of, and a political response to, times of change, disorientation, and crisis” (58). I want to both agree with and challenge this claim. As this thesis has already established, Alger’s American success narrative is influential in its simplicity. The power of Alger lies in an entire nation’s willingness to believe that hard work and a good work ethic will produce success. Thus, it behooves Americans to return to this simple mantra of success during national turbulence or crisis. However, I believe Alger’s work is used by authors to critique and challenge it in a constructive

⁸ Nackenoff also notes that in one of the rare instances when Alger’s hero was not American-born, he was “Andy Burke, *Only An Irish Boy*,” and was therefore still a white male.

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way, while still paying homage to its relevance and power. The works of these authors and the conversations and discussions that they incite are evidence of Alger's influence over the entire genre of success narratives. The existences of this project itself proves that Alger had a lasting impact on American literature.

The central tension in this document is the divide between Alger's belief that anyone who works hard and has a good work ethic will succeed and the reality of the American landscape. It must be noted that the definition of success is as diverse and varied as the American people. For example, for Horatio Alger, success is defined as a combination of comfortable wealth and honesty. But for others, it means living a life that is self-determined and driven by their true identities and desires. Alger avoids this complexity by creating a character whose identity and character aligns perfectly with society's expectations and standards. By washing his face, putting on a new suit, and renting a room, Dick is shown becoming the person he was always meant to be. Yet this project is not suggesting that Alger narrative is without value in American society. Alger's mantra, *work hard and you will succeed*, both motivates the working class and justifies the accumulation of wealth in the upper class. However, this project aims to explore some of the problems with Alger's narrative that limit the ability of some Americans to succeed. Theodore Dreiser is the first of three authors in this project to engage Alger's narrative framework in his novel *Sister Carrie*.

From Rags to Rocking Chair

“When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse.” –Theodore Dreiser

Theodore Dreiser’s novel, *Sister Carrie*, explores a version of the American success narrative that moves away from Alger’s fairytale-esque portrayal of upward mobility. It centers on Carrie Meeber’s insatiable need to pursue “material success and its accompanying rewards” as she progresses from a shy, small-town girl to a celebrated New York City actress (Handy 389). More importantly, however, the novel demonstrates Carrie capitalizing on her identity as a young, attractive woman. Turning away from the harsh world of factory labor, Carrie discovers that her “youthful beauty” can provide financial support (Dreiser 85). The financial security Drouet and Hurstwood provide not only allows Carrie to indulge in the type of material life for which she longs, but also fuels her desire for material goods and attention. As the novel progresses, Carrie is no longer satisfied by what she has, constantly yearning for more. Published just one year after Horatio Alger’s death, *Sister Carrie* can be read as Dreiser’s reformulation of Alger’s popularized American success narrative. However, there are two main differences between the narratives suggest that *Sister Carrie* is a more lifelike or realistic version of Alger’s narrative.

Alex Pitofsky articulates a concrete connection between *Sister Carrie* and Horatio Alger that introduces a comparison between Dick Hunter and Carrie Meeber. He notes that many critics read Dreiser’s works as “an attempt to modernize the ‘Horatio Alger Myth’” (Pitofsky 276). Pitofsky’s observation not only echoes Moraru’s theory regarding authors engaging with Alger’s micronarrative, but also sets up a tension between fiction and realism which is one of the

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main focuses of this comparison. While Alger's novels exclusively portray economically *ascending* characters, Dreiser portrays characters not only evolving from "rags to riches," but their "rise, fall, and resurrection" as well (Pitofsky 276). Dreiser simply strips Alger's own novel of its fairytale-like qualities, focusing instead on a more realistic portrayal of upward mobility. As Dreiser unearths the harsh realities of the factory system and female objectification, *Sister Carrie* is both repellant and enthralling.

Born into an impoverished family with a scarcely employed father and a mother tasked with raising nine other children, Dreiser's own early life was not unlike that of the prototypical Alger hero. When he was fifteen, Dreiser moved from Indiana to Chicago where he "found work as a dishwasher and busboy and then as a shipping clerk" (Doctorow v). Similarly, Dick Hunter did "sometimes one thing, and sometimes another," changing his "business accordin' as [he] had to" in order to take care of himself (Alger 85). Dreiser was able to attend Indiana University in Bloomington "financed by a former schoolteacher who believed in his potential" (Doctorow v). Dick Hunter is given opportunities by generous, wealthy men such as Mr. Whitney and Mr. Greyson. E.L. Doctorow's commentary on the way Dreiser's life manifests in his work supports this claim:

It is not difficult to find in *Sister Carrie* the circumstantial details that Dreiser brought to it from his own life: what it means to be in wonder and awe of a great city in which you're looking for work, or to be desperately hungry and down on your luck, a *street person*, as we say now... (Doctorow vi).

Doctorow's comments situates Dreiser as a version of Alger's Dick Hunter. It is helpful to consider, therefore, whether Dreiser's life fulfills Alger's mantra, *work hard and you will succeed*, given the similarity of his early life to that of Dick Hunter.

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The contrast between the popularity and authorial success of Dreiser and Alger points to an interesting contradiction in the Alger myth. As mentioned before, Alger experienced steady success in his authorial career. Dreiser, on the other hand, did not. Harper Brothers turned down *Sister Carrie* and Doubleday, Page, finally “published it with trepidation, and therefore badly” (Doctorow vii). While Alger sold over 2,000,000 copies of each book, *Sister Carrie* sold less than 700.⁹ More significantly, however, the poor reception of his novel “created for Dreiser the reputation of naturalist-barbarian that followed him down the years” (Doctorow vii). Thus, not only did Dreiser’s persistent work ethic and self-reliance yield limited success, the success it did manage to produce was a negative reputation. This example presents a counterargument to Alger’s narrative: hard work does not guarantee success. It emphasizes the “myth” that Pitofsky discusses, a line of thinking that is taken up in how Dreiser’s narrative can be said to be more “realistic” than Alger’s.

The presence of the factory system in *Sister Carrie* best demonstrates how Dreiser’s manifestation of the American dream can be deemed more “realistic.” To preface this discussion, it should be noted that Dreiser himself comments that “the new socialism which involves pleasant working conditions for employees, had not then taken hold upon manufacturing companies” (31). Dreiser’s comment indicates that there is an unpleasantness associated with the factories that repels Carrie, making it hard for her to stay employed there long enough to achieve financial stability. This unpleasantness manifests in the intersection between the physical difficulties of the labor and the way the labor reduces her to a part in an assembly line:

⁹ The number 2,000,000 is taken by dividing 300,000,000 by 135. According to Christian Moraru, Alger sold over 300,000,000 copies of his 135 books. The figure is an estimate based on Moraru’s facts, provided to quantitatively contrast the popularity of Alger versus Dreiser.

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Her hands began to ache at the wrists and then in the fingers, and toward the last she seemed one mass of dull, complaining muscles, fixed in an eternal position and performing a single mechanical movement which became more and more distasteful, until at last it was absolutely nauseating (Dreiser 31).

These women are becoming cogs in the machine at which they are working. Their actions are no more than the very “humdrum, mechanical movements” of the machines they operate (Dreiser 29).

The conflation of the female workers with a machine takes on a greater significance when we consider Nackenoff’s comments on the presence of the factory in Alger’s fiction. She notes that “[t]hough such effects of mechanization were hardly rare in the 1880’s, this was an extremely rare occurrence in Alger’s fiction” (“Of Factories” 68). For Alger, factories are not places where his heroes can prove themselves capable, as the value of humans are reduced to their interactions with the machines. They are often bootblacks because, like Dick, they possess their own tools of production and therefore control over their own actions. Thus, Alger avoids completely or removes his heroes from the factory in order to give them the best possible chance at success. For example, in a serialized story featuring Ben Bruce, another prototypical Alger hero, just before Bruce is about to accept a job in a leather factory, the “dam which provides water power for the factory is blown up” (“Of Factories” 68). This symbolic act of the factory literally blowing up demonstrates the extravagant and almost hyperbolic measures that Alger is willing to take to keep his characters out of the factory. Yet Dreiser uses the historical reality of the oppressive and dehumanizing factory system to force Carrie to rely on her feminine beauty both as a means of escape and financial support.

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Although Carrie also ends up leaving the factory (in a much less extravagant fashion), she must soon find another source of income. Unlike the prototypical Alger hero, Carrie is subjected to pressure by her sister to either settle for a factory job or to move back home to Columbia City. While Dick is constantly supported by figures who give him money, clothes, and opportunity, Carrie is cut-off. As soon as she realizes that Minnie and Hanson “were unwilling to keep her any longer, out of work” she becomes conflicted (Dreiser 53). On one hand, she is unwilling to acquiesce and accept a job that pays little to nothing for such backbreaking labor, on the other, she has a magnetic attraction to the “mysterious city” and all it has to offer (Dreiser 54). If this were Alger’s novel, there would be a wealthy patron just around the corner to offer her a well-paying and respectable job to quickly solve the conflict.¹⁰ But Dreiser presents us with something slightly more complex. Tracey Lemaster says in the most direct and concise manner, that in this novel, we see “Carrie fully recognize how women “sell” themselves in a capitalist economy” (53). And that is precisely what she proceeds to do.

Carrie’s departure from her sister’s apartment serves as the point at which she begins to recognize the value of her femininity. When we are first introduced to Minnie Hanson, Carrie’s older sister, Dreiser makes it clear that she and her family live life according to Alger’s guidelines. Dreiser describes Mr. Hanson as “of a clean, saving disposition, and had already paid a number of monthly installments on two lots far out on the West Side” (9). The one ambition Hanson appears to possess is to build himself and his family a house, an expression of self-reliance. By Alger’s standards, his ambitions are modest, focusing on acquiring and sustaining his middle-class income. However, from Dreiser’s description of the Hanson’s apartment, their lifestyle seems tired and worn down, rather than full of possibility and excitement like that of

¹⁰ i.e. Mr. Whitney or Mr. Greyson

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Dick Hunter. The Hanson's flat has "discordantly papered" walls and the hall is "laid with a thin rag carpet." Furthermore, Mr. Hanson's opinion of work is "[a]nything was good enough so long as it paid" (Dreiser 12). Dreiser portrays these Algeresque values of hard work and ambitions in order to make it clear that this quality of life is tedious, draining, and unglamorous to Carrie.

The initial presumption upon Carrie's arrival at the Hanson's home is that "she was to get work and pay her board" (Dreiser 9). In fact, it is rather progressive for an eighteen-year-old woman in 1889 to be expected to extend herself beyond the realm of domesticity in order to achieve financial independence. However, Carrie's quest for employment is not only a realistically grim portrayal of the life of a working woman in the city, but a connection to *Ragged Dick*. In the first chapter of the book, and he must solicit those passing by for a shoe shine. Thus, both Dick and Carrie are wandering the city streets asking strangers for money. Yet, while Dick happens to polish the shoes of Mr. Greyson, the man who will eventually give him a job, and is "fortunate enough to secure three other customers," Carrie is less fortunate (Alger 45):

With the wane of the afternoon went her hopes, her courage, and her strength. She had been astonishingly persistent. So earnest an effort was well deserving of a better reward. On every hand, to her fatigued senses, the great business portion grew larger, harder, more stolid in its indifference (Dreiser 21).

It is only out of "one of those forlorn impulses which often grow out of a fixed sense of defeat" that Carrie strikes up the courage to ask one more time for a job (Dreiser 21). The result is a position at a shoe factory that pays fifty cents below the amount she had hoped to receive.¹¹

¹¹ A notable connection here being that Dick was a bootblack and Carrie found work in a shoe factory, employing both characters in a similar profession.

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While Dreiser spares readers none of the shame and embarrassment that consumes Carrie as she knocks on door after door, inquiring after a job, Alger leaves out these unseemly emotions when describing Dick's search for shoes to shine.

Not only do Dick and Carrie search for employment in a similar way, but their physical descriptions are strikingly similar as well. Alger emphasizes Dick's "honest" and "open" face, using this description as an indication of Dick's good character. I have interpreted this as characterizing Dick as unmarked, enabling readers to see themselves in his place. However, Dreiser's physical descriptions of Carrie are equally as vague, but evaluate her beauty rather than provide an unbiased description of her appearance. Dreiser offers that Carrie "was really very pretty" and that her figure "was evidently not bad, and her eyes were large and gentle" (49). These descriptions are both from the male point of view: Dreiser as the omniscient narrator, and Drouet as the speaker. Furthermore, when Carrie moves from one store to another in search of a job, Dreiser notes that one man regards her "as one would a package" (Dreiser 20). Thus, through her physical description, Carrie is dehumanized by the male gaze in a way Dick Hunter simply cannot be. However, Carrie uses this knowledge to realize that the tendency of men to value her beauty and appearance can sustain the lifestyle for which she longs.

Unable to provide this lifestyle for herself, Carrie turns first to Drouet, and then to Hurstwood to allow herself the indulgence of a financially stable life. Once she surpasses both of them in her wealth and status by becoming an actress, Carrie continues to cash in on her femininity, allowing "herself to be an object of male fantasies" (Lemaster 53). This concept of trading in her desirability as a female for material things is supported when Dreiser admits that, for Drouet, Carrie's "[f]emininity affected his desire" (Dreiser 52). His generosity is only extended to Carrie because he thinks of her as "a little beauty" and is sexually attracted to her.

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Carrie, on the other hand, is attracted to the comfort his “soft, green, handsome ten-dollar bills” give her (Dreiser 50). In this way, both parties are using the other for their own personal reasons. Toward the end of the novel, however, the reverse is true. Drouet sees the life Carrie has made for herself through capitalizing on her femininity, and to him, she is once again “all desirable” (Dreiser 380). She, however, is no longer attracted to his wealth, for her own wealth far surpasses his.

The question then becomes, is this novel an empowering depiction of female sexuality, or a warning against rampant greed and materialism? In other words, is the life Carrie creates for herself apart from the values and morals of the Alger hero “successful?” The answer, I would argue, depends on how success is defined. In terms of the financial security, fame, and beauty, she “could look about on her gowns and carriage, her furniture and bank account” and assert that her life is better than when she first arrived in Chicago (Dreiser 398). However, Dreiser incorporates a symbol of a rocking-chair as an emblem of the type of success that Carrie has achieved. At the end of the novel, Dreiser exclaims to Carrie, “[i]n your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel (398). A rocking-chair is an object constantly in motion, but never going anywhere. By placing Carrie in this rocking-chair, Dreiser condemns her to a life without happiness as a result of her ruthless pursuit of wealth. Yet Dreiser’s conclusion proves that Alger’s framework is limited. As a woman, Carrie forced to choose between the grim realities of the factory system and the value of her appearance. The option of being seen as a valuable individual and possessing the financial independence that Dick has is simply not available to Carrie. Therefore, Dreiser’s representation of the Alger myth emphasizes its inapplicability to the working female in 20th century America.

Queer Identity in *Rubyfruit Jungle*

“Damn, I wish the world would just let me be myself.” –Rita Mae Brown

In Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle*, Molly Bolt strives to leave her poverty-stricken upbringing in rural Pennsylvania behind to become a film director. However, the arc of her narrative, unlike that of the Alger hero, is influenced by her extreme marginalization as a proudly “out” lesbian woman. Molly’s narrative introduces a central tension between inner character and identity, a conflict that is noticeably absent from Alger’s micronarrative. Dick Hunter’s identity is transparent; when other characters observe his “ragged” exterior, they are able to see through it to his noble character. Molly, however, is not given the same privilege. When she reveals that she is a lesbian, other characters refuse to or are unable to see through the stigma that accompanies this identity. Therefore her character is opaque, as the combination of her femininity and lesbian identity prevent others from accepting or noticing her otherwise strict adherence to traditional characteristics of the prototypical Alger hero. This comparison demonstrates a particular gap in Alger’s success narrative regarding the intersection between identity and inner character.

Unlike Theodore Dreiser, Rita Mae Brown explicitly references Horatio Alger in a particularly poignant scene between Molly and Holly.¹² During a heated exchange one night, Holly comments on squalor of Molly’s apartment, suggesting that she should let an older, wealthier woman “keep” her so she will not have to continue in such impoverished conditions.

But Molly resists:

H: “You can’t do it because you’re a fucking prude and you think it’s immoral...”

¹² Holly is one of Molly’s many lovers. She is the first woman Molly becomes sexually involved with after moving to New York City.

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M: “You don’t understand Holly, I don’t want to live here. I don’t want raggedy clothes. I don’t want to be running on nerves for the next ten years, but I have to do it my way. My way, understand. It has nothing to do with morality, it has to do with me.”¹³”

H: “Oh, come off it, Horatio Alger” (Brown 152).

Holly chastises Molly for being unwilling to involve herself in a sexual relationship for money, citing Molly’s ethics as the reason for denying the offer. However, when Molly defends herself, she not only reveals the high value she places on self-reliance, but also an explicit connection to Horatio Alger. Molly is unwilling to exchange sex for money, not because of the act’s immorality, but because it facilitates a reliance on others. Self-reliance is a central characteristic of the prototypical Alger hero, and Holly’s response to Molly suggests this, but in an exasperated and pejorative way.

The overwhelmingly exasperated tone of Holly’s comment suggest that Brown references Alger to critique him rather than support him. By referencing Alger in this manner, Holly is suggesting that the reasons Molly articulates are unfeasible and unrealistic and even outdated. This attitude pushes against the validity of Alger’s narrative framework, while aligning Molly even more with the archetypal Alger hero. Brown purposely weaves this reference into the narrative to set up a dichotomy between two versions of the American dream: Alger/Molly’s and Holly’s. Essentially, Holly’s comment implies that if she finds freedom sleeping with an older, wealthier woman, Molly’s refusal to do so is somehow regressive. By invoking Alger, Brown is pointing to him and his work as the pinnacle of this regression. However, when Molly pushes

¹³ The morality being discussed in this scene is not the Algeresque morality of his formula, as discussed in Chapter 1, but the sexually deviant immorality of exchanging sex for money.

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back against this, refusing to adopt Holly's liberated and empowered version of the American dream, Brown is suggesting there is something admirable and satisfying about total self-reliance that justifies Molly refusing Holly's proposition. This dichotomy aligns Molly with the prototypical Alger hero, Dick Hunter, and gives readers hope that, by the end of the novel, her self-reliant attitude will help her achieve success.

Despite being female, adopted, and gay, Molly works hard to uphold the same values as Dick Hunter. Although Molly never directly references Alger in the way that Holly does, the connections between Dick and Molly remain strong. Molly Bolt is "a socially mobile, self-made upstart, has great wit, and uses her outsider's perspective to make insightful comments on society" (Saxe 35). This description, while exclusively referring to Molly, can apply just as accurately to young, bootblack Dick Hunter. Molly's self-proclaimed desire to "get out of the boondocks," reflects the words of Dick almost exactly: "I mean to turn over a new leaf, and grow up 'spectable'" (Brown 125; Alger 55). Both characters are outsiders: Molly as a small-town, rural girl in New York City and Dick as a poor bootblack in the home of Mr. Greyson. Both have an indomitable sense of humor that they use as mechanisms to stay optimistic and are both influenced by their outsider status. But most significantly, both Molly and Dick are determined to reverse their fortunes, so to speak, expressing self-induced motivation to improve. In this way, Molly resembles the prototypical Alger hero.

Molly's narrative also resembles the prototypical Alger version. *RFJ* is told in a flashback with "today's" Molly retrospectively telling her story to readers. The opening paragraph begins with Molly asserting that "[n]o one remembers her beginnings," indicating that Molly, like Dick, is untethered to her past (Brown 3). This narrative form in *RFJ* connects with Shaheen's "ex nihilo" theory in *Ragged Dick* and is supported when we first meet eleven-year-old Molly on a

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“crisp September day,” *in medias res* (Brown 4). Both Molly and Dick are characters without early childhood memories, but more importantly, they are not concerned by this missing link to their past. Later in the book, Carrie reveals that Molly’s mother left her and that she is “Ruby Drollinger’s bastard, that’s who you are” (Brown 7). Later, Molly reflects on this and concludes: “I can’t see why it’s such a big deal. Who cares how you get here? I don’t care. I really don’t care” (Brown 9). Molly’s dismissal of her past as irrelevant not only mirrors Dick’s lack of past familial ties, but also describes both as individuals who are not tethered to anyone and therefore must rely on themselves to improve.

More compelling than the way Dick and Holly’s missing pasts create a need for self-reliance is the moral compass by which they navigate their lives. For example, when Carolyn asks Molly not to tell anyone that they slept together, Molly refuses to lie.¹⁴ Secrecy is often implied in same-sex relationships because of the taboo and stigma they carry. This is a particularly strong way of illustrating Molly’s unwillingness to corrupt her moral code, as it forces her to go against societal norms. In a similar way, Dick informs Mr. Greyson that no one taught him to be honest, but that “it’s mean to cheat and steal. I’ve always knowed that” (Alger 132). For Dick, as young boy living on the street, stealing is a viable way to find the money needed to sustain himself. Jim Travis, for example, steals Dick’s bank-book because he was “glad to find some other way of obtaining money enough to pay his expenses” (Alger 181). But Dick’s strict code of ethics prevents him from stealing to support himself. Thus, both Molly and Dick refuse to break the Algeresque code of ethics that condemns lying and stealing, demonstrating their unwillingness to corrupt his morals despite situations that would tempt them to do so.

¹⁴ Carolyn is one of Molly’s two best friends in high school. One night, Carolyn gets drunk and kisses Molly, leading them into a sexual relationship until their mutual friend, Connie, finds out about it.

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This comparison of Molly and Dick's moral compass leads into the concept of character, as described by Carol Nackenoff. Nackenoff reminds us of the importance Alger assigns to the character of his heroes.¹⁵ It is not merely essential for Alger's heroes to be of "[w]ell ordered character," it is "a sacred obligation" (*Fictional Republic* 45). Because Alger's characters are so often bootblacks, match boys, or other lowly professions, it is essential that their character is pristine. Furthermore, character is an obligation that rests in the hands of the individual and no one else: "By exercising self-possession, self-government, and, above all, self-reliance, he [the self-made man] placed himself beyond evil influences and became a law unto himself." (Halttuner qtd. in *Fictional Republic* 45). Therefore, the concept of character, as defined by Nackenoff, equates to an individual's internal values and ethics. This emphasis on self-reliance and taking control of one's own journey is one of the strongest connections between Molly and Dick.

However, while it is easy for others to see and accept Dick's internal character, it is not as simple for Molly to be seen and accepted. Her identity as a lesbian woman detracts from her self-reliant and honest character, a conflict absent from Dick's narrative. At the end of the first chapter of *Ragged Dick*, Alger spends several pages illuminating each one of Dick's "faults and defects, because I want it understood, to begin with, that I don't consider him a model boy" (Alger 43). He plays tricks on people, he is extravagant, he smokes, he occasionally gambles.¹⁶ However, the passage ends with Alger qualifying his previous statements, noting that, despite his faults, Dick "would never do anything mean or dishonorable. He would not steal, cheat... but was frank and straightforward, manly and self-reliant" (Alger 43-44). Here, Alger suggests that,

¹⁵ To define the meaning of character in this particular section, I used Rufus W. Clark's definition: "The primary meaning of the word *character* is a mark made by cutting or engraving on any substance, as wood, stone, or metal. Hence, as applied to man, it signifies the marks of impressions made upon the mind" (28).

¹⁶ When offered a cigarette in *RFJ*, Molly replies "No thank you, I don't smoke" (Brown 126).

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if an individual is truly honest, frank and self-reliant, their minor flaws are inconsequential and can therefore be overlooked. Furthermore, Dick is defined only by those characteristics. As proof, both Mr. Whitney and Mr. Greyson are able to see past Dick's "ragged and dirty" exterior to his true honesty, eliminating any conflict between identity and character (Alger 55).

To Molly, her lesbian identity is a piece of her that has no bearing on her character or integrity. However, due to the social stigma attached to homosexuality, a tension emerges between Molly's character and her identity as a lesbian. To illustrate that tension, the conversation she has with Carolyn the morning after spending the night together not only reinforces Molly's self-reliant and honest character, but also the implications of her lesbian identity:

C: "I hate to lie too, but people will say we're lesbians."

M: "Aren't we?"

C: "No, we just love each other, that's all. Lesbians look like men and are ugly. We're not like that."

M: "We don't look like men, but when women make love it's commonly labeled lesbianism so you'd better learn not to cringe when you hear the word" (Brown 103).

Molly's straightforward and unapologetic way of accepting an identity that carries such negative social implications indicates self-reliance and strength of character. However, this strength is not the type of strength that Alger assigns to Dick Hunter, acting as an impediment rather than an advantage. On its own, the term "lesbian" simply means a woman who is sexually attracted to women. Carolyn, however, voices the stigma and stereotypes that society has attached to this word, creating a harmful label rather than an objective description. Molly counters this by

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reverting back to the untainted definition of “lesbian” effectively “reject[ing] these labels or drain[ing] them of their meaning.” (Saxey 35). Therefore, Molly embraces this identity and stigma that comes with it because she knows it does not negatively affect her character.

However, many people thought otherwise. To clarify some of the stigma attached to the queer community, Stephen Seidman’s book, *The Social Construction of Sexuality*, discusses the evolution of American perspective on homosexuality. Scientists tried to make sense of the “new homosexual visibility” in the early 20th century by applying terms like “invert” to individuals who identified as such (Seidman 59). Society responded to these theories by interpreting homosexuality as “a mental illness or abnormality” (Seidman 59). Diana Frederics, author of an autobiography in which she detailed her personal struggle to come to terms with her sexuality “observed: ‘I was, then, a pervert..., ‘homosexual.’... I was grotesque, alienated and unclean!’” (Frederics qtd. in Seidman 60). Additionally, when Dean Marne questions Molly about her relationship with her roommate, Faye, she assesses their love as resulting from “secrets in [her] unconscious that keep [her] from having a healthy relationship with members of the opposite sex” (Brown 127).¹⁷ This reference to Sigmund Freud’s theory of the unconscious demonstrates that lesbians were seen as simply not normal, or a symptom of poor mental health. These portrayals of homosexuality combined with the stereotypes Carolyn voices, reveal the negative way Molly’s queer identity is perceived.

The most significant example of Molly’s lesbian identity detracting from her character is an interaction with her high school friend, Connie. When Molly reveals that she has been sleeping with Carolyn, their mutual friend, Connie tells her, “I don’t know if I can be your friend anymore. I’ll think about it every time I see you. I’ll be nervous and wonder if you’re going to

¹⁷ Faye is Molly’s college roommate and another one of her lovers. As a result of their relationship, Faye is institutionalized by her parents and Molly is expelled from school.

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rape me or something” (Brown 108). Molly’s honesty about her sexual identity completely dismantles a friendship built on love and trust as Connie’s perspective on Molly’s character shifts. While this pushes against the way Alger aligns identity and character, forcing readers to be critical of Alger’s narrative, it is not the factor that prevents Molly from fulfilling her dream of becoming a film director. After graduating from NYU’s film program and working for every penny of tuition, because Molly is a woman, she is encumbered by her inability to get a job. MGM, Warner Brothers, Young and Rubicam, and Wells, Rich and Green are not aware that Molly identifies as a lesbian, but ask her “to start as a secretary” while a less qualified male student in her class goes “right into CBS as an assistant director for a children’s program (Brown 245). However, the tension between her lesbian identity and her self-reliant character calls attention to a gap in Alger’s narrative framework that is essential to understand in order to better include the entire queer community in the rhetoric of the American dream.

“The Black Rite of Horatio Alger”

I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.” - Ralph Ellison

As he makes his way through a succession of experiences and obstacles throughout Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the famously unnamed protagonist follows a path to success that is much different than any other character’s trajectory thus far.¹⁸ At the beginning of the book, IM is fully committed to adhering to the expectations and behaviors forced upon him by figures of authority who echo Alger’s mantra, *work hard and you will succeed*. Rather than overcoming these figures, IM simply agrees to the demands they place on him without question. IM’s path from ignorance to enlightenment is symbolized by the realization that he is, in his own words, “invisible” as a black man living in 20th century America. Invisibility is defined throughout the novel as the act of men and women ignoring, oppressing, objectifying, and violating IM, a black man who has yet to grasp the social implications of his race. Eventually, he recognizes and embraces his invisibility, understanding that the figures and institutions in his life he believed were helping him realize success, were simply using him to fulfil their own agenda. At the end of the novel, ignorance no longer weighs him down, and he is empowered by accepting his marginalized identity. By comparing IM’s narrative to *Ragged Dick*, this thesis questions both the guarantee and feasibility of Alger’s manifestation of the American dream, especially for African-Americans.

In Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, success is in no way tethered to money, unlike the previously discussed novels. In fact, IM has no clear goal or vision for his own success. For example, while driving Mr. Norton around campus, he is prompted by to share his future goals with the donor.

¹⁸ To unclutter the prose with varied descriptions of this nameless character, I have chosen to refer to him by the initials, IM, for he truly is an invisible man.

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IM responds nervously, “I don’t know now, sir. This is only my junior year” (Ellison 44). He is uncertain, even during what is arguably his most stable period in the narrative. Throughout the rest of the novel, he is constantly trapped by controlling figures or institutions in his life, such as Dr. Bledsoe, Liberty Paint, The Brotherhood, and Ras the Destroyer, which prevents him from establishing his own definition of success. With each new phase of control, his goals adapt to fit their expectations, making it hard to identify which values are truly his. Although IM has no clear direction that would indicate an upwardly mobile trajectory, Ellison portrays success as a psychological liberation from the control of others that is an equally compelling manifestation of the American dream.

In the beginning of the novel when IM attends chapel, Ellison critically references Horatio Alger. As the novel is narrated retrospectively, IM’s tone is often critical of his “pre-invisible” self’s life. Therefore he regards the school’s visiting speakers cynically, as he has since learned that their words are “more sound than sense” (Ellison 113). IM explains that, during chapel services, these visiting speakers would “inform [students] of how fortunate [they] were to be a part of the ‘vast’ and formal ritual” of the university (Ellison 111). IM describes this ritual as “the black rite of Horatio Alger.” This description suggests that these millionaires, who are living examples of the “rags to riches” paradigm, would perform the stories of their own success, urging students to “lift [themselves] up the same way (Ellison 45). Richard Yarborough observes that the instructions IM receives are “essentially the Horatio Alger recipe for bourgeois prosperity” (47). However, the inclusion of “black” as a qualifier to his description suggests Alger’s limited applicability. Despite the ostensibly national appeal of Alger’s narrative, the journey of a black man from “rags to riches” is entirely different than that of a white man, rendering the traditional Alger narrative useless to describe their journey.

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Reverend Barbee, one of the visiting speakers, shares a rendition of the Founder's story both aligns with and diverges from Alger's narrative.¹⁹ He begins the story, "All this... has been told and retold throughout the land, inspiring a humble but fast-rising people" (Ellison 120). Much like the popularity of Alger's novels inspired hope in the working class and established the narrative of the American dream, the story of the Founder is constantly told and retold to the African-American community with the same intent. Barbee continues with a concise summary of the Founder's tale:

And your parents followed this remarkable man across the black sea of prejudice, safely out of the land of ignorance, through the storms of fear and anger, shouting, LET MY PEOPLE GO! when it was necessary, whispering it during those times when whispering was wisest. And he was heard. (Ellison 120)

This story, while still a "rise" to success, in no way resembles Alger's narrative. Barbee describes how the black community had to rise out of the prejudice, ignorance, and pain of slavery, trials absent from Alger's work. Thus, Ellison demonstrates the limited applicability of Alger's narrative, speaking to the notion that our nation is home to many people with many different experiences that cannot fit easily into one recipe for success. Therefore, IM must first establish and describe the "black" version of the Alger myth in order to effectively demonstrate its limitations.

Despite their differences, both IM and Dick Hunter work hard to align themselves with the expectations and guidance of others as a method of success. Ellison admits that "the major flaw in the hero's character is his unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him by others as a way to success" (Ellison qtd. in Yarborough 47). At the beginning of the novel, IM

¹⁹ The Founder is the man who founded the university of which Dr. Bledsoe is the president and IM a junior.

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adheres dutifully and unwaveringly to Dr. Bledsoe's orders, as he sees him as "the epitome of the successful, self-made, black Southerner" (Yarborough 49). Thus, IM's vision of success is tethered to Bledsoe and the university. Similarly, Dick does what Mr. Whitney, Mr. Greyson, and Henry Fosdick ask of him, as he knows their experience and knowledge hold the key to his success. Pitofsky offers a compelling observation that, even though many interpret the story of Dick Hunter as an "apotheosis of individualism...Hunter's ongoing campaign to align himself with a wide range of mentors, employers, and social institutions contradicts this reading" (277). In the same way, IM does what Dr. Bledsoe, Liberty Paint, and the Brotherhood ask of him, because he has not yet learned "what he should do in order to succeed" (Yarborough 49). However, while Dick is rewarded with opportunity, IM is subjected to a painful journey to disillusionment.

For example, after the incident in which IM takes Mr. Norton, a wealthy donor of his university, to the incestuous cabin of Jim Trueblood and the chaos of the Golden Day bar, Bledsoe exiles him to New York to find a job so that he can eventually return to school. Flabbergasted, IM asks himself:

How had I come to this? I had kept unswervingly to the path placed before me, had tried to be exactly what I was expected to be, had done exactly what I was expected to do- yet, instead of winning the expected reward, here I was stumbling along... (Ellison 113).

While the primary emotion IM conveys is disbelief, this is the first step toward his psychological liberation from the control of those around him. During their interaction, Bledsoe reveals that the method he used to obtain the position and prominence that IM regards so highly was not simply hard work and persistence, but "wait[ing] and plan[ning] and lick[ing] around..."

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Yes, I had to act the nigger!” (Ellison 143). This moment reveals that IM’s mentor and idol is not as he appears. The success that he achieved was not only through lying and manipulation, but it is something he is willing to “have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means” keeping (Ellison 143). IM’s decision to trust Bledsoe and carry out his demands after this revelation demonstrates the extent of his ignorance. He is unable to see that Bledsoe is simply using him to keep and protect the status he has earned as the president of the university, still willing to believe Bledsoe’s promises. However, the “black rite of Horatio Alger” that was a source of “awe” and “pleasure” for him as a student has been wiped away by Bledsoe, leaving room for a new perspective on success to be forming (Ellison 111).

First introduced in IM’s nightmare in which his grandfather makes him read “an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold,” the term “running” is an apt way of analyzing IM’s new perspective on the American dream (Ellison 33). While this perspective does not manifest completely until IM accepts his invisibility, his interaction with Bledsoe is the first step toward enlightenment. The mantra of the American dream, as told by Alger, is *work hard and you will succeed*. However, Ellison’s version is blunt and crude: “To Whom It May Concern. Keep This Nigger-Boy Running” (33). This statement implies that the path to success that IM is on, working hard and following orders, promises success but never delivers. For example, consider the letter with which Bledsoe sends IM to New York City:

Thus, while [IM] is no longer a member of our scholastic family, it is highly important that his severance with the college be executed as painlessly as possible. I beg of you, sir, to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler (Ellison 191).

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IM is kept “running” by Bledsoe’s promise that if he goes to New York to earn his fees for the next school year, he will be readmitted. This letter demonstrates Ellison’s perspective on Alger’s success narrative. For Alger, success is as simple as working hard and doing so in the “right” way. But Ellison pushes against this. Even though IM packs up, goes to New York, and does what he is told, he was never going to be readmitted to school. If we attempted to resituate this relationship and interaction into the Algeresque world of Dick Hunter, Bledsoe would have written a stunning letter of recommendation that would land Dick a respectable job, as Mr. Greyson does for Frank in *Ragged Dick*.²⁰ But Ellison’s narrative is governed by race relations, and Bledsoe is too caught up in the “power set-up” that he controls to care about IM’s future (110). Thus, Ellison uses Bledsoe’s letter to demonstrate that Alger’s American dream is simply a way to keep Americans “running” after a promise that may not even exist.

IM’s analysis of his past self supports Ellison’s portrayal of the American dream. The novel is told through IM’s retrospective narration as the first chapter begins: “It goes a long way back, some twenty years” (Ellison 13). This divides IM into both a present self and a past self, or, to use his own words, one who is aware of his “invisibility” and one who is not. In the beginning of the novel, it is clear that he sees his past self as under a sort of spell which prevents him from discovering his invisibility. Not only does this further separate his past and present selves, it provides the opportunity for the spell to be broken. After reminiscing on the landscape of his former university, IM says, “I always comes this far and open my eyes. The spell breaks and I try to re-see the rabbits...It’s so long ago and far away that here in my invisibility I wonder if it

²⁰ When Frank is trying to get a job at a store, Mr. Greyson walks out just as the shopkeeper is interviewing him. Mr. Greyson is then able to provide a stunning recommendation for Frank, telling the shopkeeper that Frank is “a member of my Sunday-school class, of whose good qualities and good abilities I can speak confidently” (Alger 162).

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happened at all” (27-28). This commentary is critical of IM’s past actions, foreshadowing the moment where IM realizes that he is being kept “running” by those around him.

This prompts us to locate the moment in the narrative where IM becomes aware of his invisibility and the implications it carries. James B. Lane discusses IM’s “acquisition of self-respect,” offering his final interaction with Ras the Destroyer as this point of no return (68). However, I want to offer another point in the novel in which IM becomes aware of his invisibility; where the spell is broken. After a fruitless and frustrating meeting with Brother Hambro, a mentor of his, IM begins a long, elaborate musing on the Brotherhood:

Well, I *was* and yet I was invisible, that was the fundamental contradiction. I was and yet I was unseen. It was frightening and as I sat there I sensed another frightening world of possibilities. For now I saw that I could agree with Jack without agreeing. And I could tell Harlem to have hope when there was no hope. Perhaps I could tell them to hope until I found the basis of something real, some firm ground for action that would lead them onto the plane of history. But until then I would have to move them without myself being moved... (Ellison 383).

There is a motif of paradoxes in this reflection that can be connected back to his grandfather’s words, the epigraph of this chapter. In essence, his grandfather is instructing him to do one thing (acquiesce) while trying to accomplish the opposite (undermine). Finally, in this moment of realization, his grandfather’s words are reflected: IM exists, yet he is invisible. This also connects back to Ellison’s reworking of Alger’s success narrative. Through IM’s reflection, Ellison demonstrates that Alger’s narrative is telling Americans to have hope when there is no hope. Dick Hunter’s ostensibly unmarked character and the ease with which he is given

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opportunities for mobility is an empty promise. It tells Americans to keep “running” toward the idea of a better, more financially stable life, but has no way of guaranteeing results.

IM’s own commentary on success provides a succinct summary of the comparison between Ellison and Alger’s narratives. He realizes that “[n]ot only could you travel upward toward success but you could travel downward as well; up *and* down, in retreat and well as in advance” (Ellison 385). This takes the notion of “rags to respectability” and upward mobility and turns it on its head. For IM, he had to travel downward, both literally and figuratively in order to liberate himself from the control of others. Literally, as he falls into a manhole where he begins and ends the novel. Figuratively, in the rejection and oppression that he must experience to learn and understand that, as a black man, his identity is invisible to those around him. He functions merely as mirror that men such as Bledsoe and Brother Jack can look upon and see how they can use him for their own purposes and agendas. While Alger’s strictly adheres to the positive outcomes of hard work, Ellison’s narrative focuses on the consequences of discovering that the promises of the American dream, as popularized by Alger’s fiction, are empty promises simply meant to keep Americans “running.” This is not only a critique on the empty promises of Alger’s American dream, but a way of demonstrating the differences between the journey to success of white and black Americans.

Dismantling the Dominant Dream

It cannot be denied that the American dream is one of the most powerful ideologies in our nation. Whether or not we subscribe to it, many Americans are working toward a version of what Adams described almost a century ago. We are constantly upgrading and improving our lives to make them “richer and fuller.” The narratives of the American dream, both non-fiction and fiction, keep this feeling of hope alive in our nation. With that being said, this thesis is not calling for the elimination of Alger’s works or disregarding the lessons they teach. In fact, its focus on Alger and *Ragged Dick* only acts as another testament to the lasting impact he made on American literature. This thesis is attempting to shed some light on how problematic it is to expect an expansive and diverse population of Americans to fit cozily into the shell of a character that Alger creates. Many media and literary reiterations of the “rags to riches” narrative demand individuals to adjust their values and goals to align with the Algeresque version of success. However, the inherently opaque and diverse nature of the human species is simply not compatible with the straightforward transparency of Alger’s widely accepted American dream. This thesis offers a reading of the most popular version of the American dream that illuminates who is overlooked and excluded when Alger’s dream becomes the ideal version.

Carrie, Molly, and the unnamed protagonist exemplify the consequences of attempting to fit into Dick Hunter’s narrative shell. Like Dick Hunter, these characters are working toward a better life for themselves. Their narratives demonstrate how differences in identity or values indicate that Alger’s American dream does not apply to everyone. But, while the stories of these characters most clearly illustrate the gaps Alger’s American dream, they are not the only stories that illustrate the constraints of a single, dominant American dream narrative. It is negligent to claim that Alger’s narrative cannot be applied to only women, members of the gay community,

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and African-Americans. There are countless other Americans who, for any number of reasons, find that the Algeresque path to success does not apply to them. That is simply because success, however each individual defines it, is not guaranteed. However, this thesis is also concerned with the notion that the inherently opaque and diverse nature of the human species is simply not compatible with the straightforward transparency of Alger's widely accepted American dream.

The significance of this project is that it argues for the expansion of the way Americans view success and how we go about achieving it. Alger advocates for modest wealth achieved through a good work ethic as the "right" kind of success. While there is nothing inherently incorrect or troubling about this definition, the fact that it has become so dominant in American discourse is. This thesis features Theodore Dreiser, Rita Mae Brown, and Ralph Ellison as authors who push back against Alger's dominance in an effort to demonstrate how limiting Alger's notion of success truly is. These authors rewrite and critique the narrative that Alger popularized to emphasize how inapplicable it is for many groups of Americans, especially those who are marginalized or oppressed. Considering the work that these authors have done, this thesis implores readers to rethink the way we define success. Rather than try to embody the characteristics of Dick Hunter and recreate his upward trajectory, we must learn to create our own path to our own American dream, as well as learn to accept the diverse American dreams of other individuals.

It cannot be denied that the promises of the American dream are alluring. Many choose to believe that the path to a better life is as simple as Alger makes it seem. Yet, the continued acceptance of such a massively influential yet limiting concept is irresponsible. Whether you subscribe to it or not, "the American dream" is a phrase that dominates a great deal of rhetoric in the United States. Even something as benign as a white picket fence has become saturated with

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the symbolism of middle-class wealth that Alger promotes in his fiction. The term “American dream” is part of our culture and should not be blindly accepted by anyone. The American dream is more than what Alger says it is and it is more than what I have discussed here. It is both vastly ambiguous and intensely specific. It is empowering and oppressive. It is a problem and a solution. And the more we critique and discuss it, the closer we can come to removing the restraints that we have put on individual achievement in this country.

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