

Revisiting The American (Youth) Dream in Matt Haig’s ‘The Midnight Library’

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving representation of the American Dream in contemporary literature, emphasizing its relevance to youth perspectives in modern society. In The Midnight Library, the American Dream is portrayed as a shifting and negotiated concept, where younger generations move beyond traditional ideals of material success, social status, and externally defined achievements. The present study interprets Nora Seed’s actions as a representation of a negotiated version of the American Dream. The study aims to describe the behaviors and decisions that reflect the pursuit of the American Dream from a youth perspective, as well as to contextualize these actions as part of a broader redefinition of the concept itself. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, focusing on the analysis of non-numeric data derived from the narrative to generate interpretative insights. The findings reveal that contemporary youth redefine success by valuing small achievements, emotional and psychological well-being, and personal passions as meaningful sources of satisfaction, rather than adhering to traditional measures of success. In conclusion, The Midnight Library demonstrates that the concept of the American Dream has significantly evolved in contemporary society, reflecting changing values that emphasize individuality, authenticity, and inner fulfillment.

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1. Introduction

The concept of 'American Dream' appeared in 1931 by James Truslow Adams in his book entitled 'The Epic of America'. The American Dream is a national ethos which reflects people's optimism that all who are willing to work hard can achieve a better life than their parents. Nonetheless, Wolak & Peterson (2020) exclaim that the gap between rich and poor increases, as young people find it harder to achieve a better standard of living than their parents, and as a smaller share of the nation owns their own home, people become more pessimistic about the American Dream. Chetty & Hendren (2022) argue that key interventions during childhood (education, neighborhood, opportunity) lead to substantial lifetime earnings gains. The effort required in early investment, but also youth engaging with educational and neighborhood opportunities are broad beyond just 'hard work'. Somehow, The American Dream is reshaping it to align modern challenges and opportunities. Cisneros (2025) exposed how the young people redefined the American Dream as good mental and physical health, followed by the traditional aspects such as owning a home, getting married, and having kids ranked much lower on the list. These ideas are strengthened by the data from Independent Center (2025) which says it is easier for younger generations to form entrepreneurship and start businesses or make money in nontraditional ways from gig work to remote jobs.

Alao (2020) defines youth as a group of young people who may be regarded as young adults. It refers to a person between the ages of 15 to 25 years old. The concept of youth is influenced by variables, such as peers, lifestyle, gender, and culture. In this case, it is a time for people to decide their choices that will affect their future. Macintosh et.al (2020) state that eleven indicators including reaching one's goals, working hard, obtaining an education, demonstrating skill, overcoming obstacles, believing in one's self or believing in what you do, experiencing positive affect or being happy, achieving through dishonest work, making others proud, acquiring fame, and having money. The widely held belief in today's youth is deficient compared to previous generations, exploring psychological mechanisms behind judgments about traits such as respect, intelligence, and reading habits (Protzko & Schooler, 2019; Rahman, 2018; Tammasse et al., 2025). However, these adolescents are creative but fragile and easily overwhelmed (Aulia, et al., 2022; Mahdori et al., 2025;

Youngsun et al., 2024). These scenes are simultaneously affected by parental attachment, friendship quality, and mental health self-efficiency (Pramudita et al., 2025; Adinda et al., 2025; Rahman & Amir, 2019).

Matt Haig (2020) in 'The Midnight Library', narrates a story of Nora Seed, a young woman who was depressed and decides to end her life. The interesting parts are that she finds herself in a mystical library between life and death, where each book contains a version of the life she might have lived if she had made different decisions. Through her journey across these alternate realities, Nora experiences multiple versions of her life: as an Olympic swimmer, a rock musician, a glaciologist in the Arctic, a wife and mother, and several others. In each alternate reality, she discovers how different choices lead to different outcomes, but also that every life contains its own difficulties and disappointments. Over time, the library begins to collapse as Nora realizes that no version of her life is perfect. In the end, she decides to return to her original life, understanding that she wants to live despite its imperfections.

The novel has drawn considerable scholarly attention, particularly due to the psychological depth and complexity of Nora's character. Many studies focus on her identity analysis (Sihotang & Mubarak, 2024), existential struggles (Dr. Lakshimi & Sobana, 2024), and emotional development (Sabrina, 2022) throughout the narrative. However, the significance of her character extends beyond psychological complexity alone. Nora's decisions and actions in pursuing alternative lives may also be interpreted as a representation of the American Dream reimaged from a young person's perspective.

According to Stuart Hall (1997), representation is the production of meaning in language. From the definition, a language that is written or spoken can produce a different meaning based on the audience's acknowledgement. In representation, signs are used and organized into language of different kinds to communicate meaningfully with others. Language also can use signs as symbols to stand for reference of objects, people, and events in the real world. Sometimes they can also refer to imaginary things and fantasy worlds or abstract ideas which are not in any obvious sense part of our material world. Stuart Hall (1997) added that the representation can be produced depending on two different but related systems of representation. First, the concepts which are formed in the mind function as a system of mental representation which classifies and organizes the world into meaningful categories. The second system of representation, a language. Language consists of signs organized into various relationships and to convey the meaning.

This study aims to analyze the connection between the concept of the American Dream and Nora's action and behavior in Matt Haig's novel, which address two objectives: (1) To describe the actions or behaviors to achieve the American Dream as a youth (2) To contextualize the action as redefining the concept of American Dream.

2. Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. A qualitative method is used to help researchers to deeply understand the meaning, symbols, and representations contained in media. Through this method, the researcher interprets textual evidence and character interactions to revisit the concept of the American Dream in the present. The analysis method used is descriptive analysis, which is the systematic process of summarizing and portraying the essential characteristics of collected data in everyday language without extensive interpretation or theoretical abstraction (Colorafi & Evans, 2016).

According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numeric data to derive interpretations and insights from the underlying meanings embedded within the data. The primary and secondary data are provided to utilize as factual information and theoretical support. The primary data is derived from the novel 'The Midnight Library' by Matt Haig (2020), which serves as the main source of analysis. The secondary data consist of supporting materials, such as Stuart Hall's theory of representation and other scholarly works, such as journal articles, books, and reliable online sources related to the topic. These sources strengthen the theoretical framework and support the interpretation of the American Dream through the novel. The data were collected through several steps. First, the researcher conducted a thorough reading 'The Midnight Library' by Matt Haig (2020) to gain a comprehensive understanding of the narrative and identify issues related to the youth perspective of the American Dream. Second, textual evidence such as words, dialogues, and sentences relevant to the topic was highlighted, identified, and classified.

The study was conducted using Stuart Hall's perspective on representation, focusing on how youth's perspectives are represented through the contrasting meaning of the American Dream then and nowadays. The selected data were interpreted using Hall's concept to examine how these perspectives are reflected in character's interaction in the story. Finally, the findings were summarized to reveal how Matt Haig represents the youth perspective of the American Dream in the novel, leading to the conclusion of the study.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The representation to achieve the conservative concept of the American Dream

The actions and behavioral patterns presented in the text can be interpreted through the conservative concept of the American Dream. This representation is reflected through the characterization of Nora and her surrounding social environment, particularly in expectation in achieving success since youth, encouragement in anticipating an uncertain future, and maintain the competitive aspect

3.1.1. Expectation in achieving success since youth

Within the framework of the American Dream, success is frequently constructed as the achievement of exceptional accomplishment, often symbolized by becoming “the best” or excelling in a particular field. As a result, young individuals are commonly encouraged to pursue ambitious goals from an early age, while parents and surrounding social environments place strong expectations upon them to maximize their talents and opportunities. In the story, Haig (2020) portrays Nora Seed as a young woman whose life is consistently shaped by these expectations. Throughout her youth, Nora is surrounded by people who encourage her to strive relentlessly toward socially recognized forms of success and to fully utilize her perceived potential. Although these expectations initially appear supportive, they also function as normative pressures that define achievement through narrow and competitive standards.

This expectation is deeply connected to broader societal assumptions regarding youth as a critical stage for ambition, productivity, and self-actualization. MacIntosh et.al (2020) stated that indicators of success include reaching goals through hard work while simultaneously making others proud. Therefore, young individuals are often encouraged to measure their worth through visible accomplishments and external validation. In Nora’s case, these social expectations gradually shape her understanding of self-worth, causing her identity to become closely tied to achievement. Haig therefore illustrates how the American Dream, when internalized uncritically, may transform youthful aspiration into a psychological burden rather than a source of empowerment and self-development.

Nora’s father expected her to pursue a career in swimming; however, Nora decided to quit, which instead left her father disappointed ‘Dad thinks I’ve thrown everything away. Now I’ve stopped swimming.’ (Haig, 2020, p. 13). In the story, Nora reflects that her father uneased her decision to withdraw from competitive swimming as a profound waste of her talent and opportunity. His response suggests that he believed quitting the sport was not just a personal choice, but a failure to achieve her full potential, as he defined success through measurable achievements like victory, recognition, and fully using one’s abilities. From a broader analytical perspective, this reveals a value system in which accomplishment is defined through external validation and competitive triumph. This aligns with Nicholls, (1989) that competitive emphasis causes people to “take superiority over others as the definition of success,” especially at a young age. However, for Nora, these expectations function less as encouragement and more as a source of psychological pressure. Rather than empowering her, the demand to actualize her potential intensifies her sense of insecurity and self-doubt. In the end, her father’s conception of success contributes to the internal conflict she experiences, illustrating how socially constructed ideals of achievement can transform parental aspiration into emotional burden.

Nora’s co-worker expected her academic background in Philosophy as an indicator of intellectual capability and educational attainment. ‘You’re a very well qualified person, Nora. Degree in Philosophy’ (Haig, 2020, p. 19) Possessing a degree in Philosophy is socially associated with critical thinking skills and academic achievement, which leads others to assume that she embraces intellectual maturity and scholarly success. Although Nora is described as “well qualified,” she does not perceive herself as successful or accomplished. Wai & Rindermann (2017) emphasized that high educational and occupational achievement is shaped not only by education or cognitive ability but also by multiple external factors, including social networks, opportunities, and structural conditions. This contradiction illustrates a significant tension between socially constructed measures of achievement and an individual’s sense of personal fulfillment and self-worth. Enoma (2006) stated that success measures are “socially constructed” factors beyond individual effort, deeply rooted in American individualism ideology. Nora’s experience reveals how academic qualifications may fail to guarantee well-being, emotion and meaningful sense of accomplishment.

3.1.2. Encouragement in anticipating an uncertain future

Within the framework of the American Dream, the idea of achieving a successful future is closely associated with certainty, stability, and clearly defined goals. Young individuals are commonly encouraged to pursue life paths that promise financial security, professional stability, and social recognition. Therefore, uncertainty is often perceived negatively, as something associated with failure, instability, or the inability to achieve success. Parents therefore play an important role

in directing children toward futures considered socially acceptable and economically secure. This aligns with Irwin & Elley (2013), who explain that parents significantly influence their children's expectations and engagement regarding future occupations. Similarly, Shulman and Nurmi (2010) argue that realistic and clearly structured goals contribute to adaptive and stable developmental outcomes for youth.

In the story, Haig (2020) represents the expectation through Nora Seed's experiences with her family and social environment. Nora is repeatedly encouraged to pursue goals considered stable and promising, such as competitive swimming or secure professional careers. In contrast, interests associated with uncertainty or unpredictability are viewed less favorably. As a result, Nora experiences pressure to align her choices with socially validated definitions of achievement rather than her own personal desires and passions. Through this representation, Haig illustrates how the American Dream encourages youth to prioritize certainty and measurable success over personal exploration and emotional fulfillment.

Nora's father shows his dismissive attitude toward her involvement in music. 'Well – now that she thought about it – he'd never been supportive of her music career, and had advised her that being in The Labyrinths and signing a music deal would be bad for her mental health,...' (Haig, 2020, p. 55) This memory reveals not merely parental concern, but a deeper ideological stance regarding what constitutes a viable and respectable path to success. Her father's lack of support suggests that he perceived a musical career as unstable and unreliable, lacking the certainty traditionally associated with socially sanctioned forms of achievement. In other words, his opposition appears to stem from the belief that pursuing music would not guarantee tangible or secure success. For him, certainty was paramount, and careers perceived as precarious—such as those in the arts—were seen as exposing Nora to potential mental, emotional, and financial vulnerability. This assumption reflects a broader cultural anxiety about unconventional professions that do not promise immediate stability or measurable accomplishment. This aligns with Ohmann & Schrecker (2022), that the majority traditional professions are contingent workers with unstable employment conditions and lacking career stability and security.

3.1.3. Maintain the competitive aspect

Based on the conservative perspective, the American Dream emphasizes competition as an essential mechanism for achieving success, social mobility, and personal advancement. Individuals are encouraged to remain competitive in order to obtain recognition, opportunities, and achievement within society. Jilson (2004) emphasized society's need to "remain open to competition and opportunity," while Lamont (2019) identified "competition and self-reliance" as central features of the modern American Dream. In addition, Chen et.al (2021) explained that the American Dream not only emphasizes material success, but also the expectation that individuals continuously maximize and prove their human potential. Consequently, youth are often raised within environments that encourage constant comparison, achievement-oriented behavior, and performance-based validation.

In the story, Nora is positioned within a social and familial environment that continuously pressures her to remain competitive from a young age. These expectations shape her understanding of success as something that must be earned through achievement, obedience, and the ability to meet external standards. Rather than being encouraged to define success according to her own interests and emotional needs, Nora grows up believing that approval and recognition depend upon her ability to satisfy the expectations imposed by others.

Nora's parents pursue her to fulfill the expectation by supporting Joe's dream more openly rather than her. 'I always had to do what they wanted me to do in order to impress them. Joe had his issues, obviously. And I didn't really understand those issues until I knew he was gay, but they say sibling rivalry isn't about siblings but parents, and I always felt my parents just encouraged his dreams a bit more.' (Haig, 2020, p. 182) Nora also believes that sibling rivalry was not caused by themselves, but by unequal parental attention and encouragement. She grows up believing that her worth depends on achievement and obedience. Instead of living freely, she lived within her parents' standards. These statements align with Hariyanto et.al (2014) that parental expectations are too high on adolescent careers can affect the perception of youth. Differences between siblings may foster competitive dynamics within the family structure, whereby the sibling regarded as superior is more likely to obtain increased recognition and benefits. These statements align with Chen (2021), the American Dream was not about material acquisition or status seeking but a belief that every person could, and should, achieve their human potential.

3.2. The representation to question the conservative concept of the American Dream

The actions and behavioral patterns presented in the text can be interpreted as a challenge towards the traditional ideology. This representation can be seen through the appreciation in achieving small victories, preference in personal

well-being, and prioritization in passion rather than emphasizing conventional standards, such as wealth, status, and big achievement.

3.2.1. Appreciation for achieving small victories

Haig (2020) represents how contemporary youth begin to question the traditional concept of the American Dream. It emphasizes major accomplishments such as wealth, status, professional achievement, and public recognition as indicators of success. Individuals are encouraged to pursue extraordinary achievements in order to gain validation and social mobility. However, through the character of Nora Seed, Haig presents an alternative perspective in which success is not exclusively defined through large-scale accomplishments, but also through the appreciation of small victories, emotional comfort, and ordinary life experiences.

This representation reflects changing perspectives among contemporary youth regarding the meaning of achievement and fulfillment. Rather than pursuing socially constructed standards of success, Nora gradually learns to appreciate modest moments that provide emotional peace and personal meaning. Nicola Atwool (2002) emphasizes the importance of small victories in youth development, particularly experiences that contribute to emotional security, self-understanding, and personal accomplishment. Woodman (2013) also emphasizes that success among young people is increasingly associated with understanding and appreciating ordinary experiences in everyday life. Through Nora's experiences, Haig demonstrates that meaningful achievement does not always emerge from exceptional accomplishments, but may also be found in simple moments that provide psychological comfort and emotional stability.

Nora acknowledges that having such a space gives her comfort and emotional support. She preferred a quiet place like the library rather than a competitive place like the playing field. *I was shy. It was one of the reasons why I preferred the library to the playing field. It seems a small thing, but it really helped, having that space.* (Haig, 2020, p.87) The statement highlights the significance of personal comfort as a form of achievement that can be understood. This aligns with Atwool (2002) that youth always value the opportunities to feel understood and achieve a sense of accomplishment.

3.2.2. Preference in inner well-being over material

Haig (2020) also represents how contemporary youth question the materialistic orientation traditionally associated with the American Dream. Conventionally, the American Dream emphasizes financial prosperity, career advancement, and social status as primary indicators of success and fulfillment. Individuals are encouraged to pursue material achievement in order to obtain happiness, stability, and recognition within society. However, through Nora Seed's experiences, the novel presents a contrasting perspective in which emotional well-being, psychological stability, and personal fulfillment are valued more highly than material accomplishment.

This representation reflects broader cultural changes among younger generations regarding the meaning of success. Cisneros (2025) states that contemporary youth increasingly redefine the American Dream through the prioritization of mental and physical health, while traditional aspects such as wealth and status become secondary considerations. Potter (2019) further explains that American culture has gradually shifted from emphasizing material success toward valuing self-fulfillment, emotional well-being, and meaningful personal relationships. In Nora's context, this shift becomes visible after she experiences multiple alternative lives that outwardly reflect conventional forms of success. Although several of these lives provide fame, achievement, or professional accomplishment, Nora eventually realizes that external success does not necessarily produce happiness or emotional fulfillment.

Nora rediscovers a new awareness and appreciation of ordinary life. *'...Nora looked around at all the terraced houses and all the lampposts and trees under the sky, and she felt her lungs inflate at the wonder of being there, witnessing it all as if for the first time.'* (Haig, 2020, p.264) After experiencing many alternative lives, she becomes conscious of the simple environment around her and grateful for merely being alive. This moment represents Nora's shift in perspective toward valuing personal well-being and the experience of living rather than external success and expectation. It's aligned with Cisneros' (2025) statement that the American Dream is redefined as good mental and physical health by young people. She recognized how that safe psychological space could give her a life without judgement. It shows how youngsters are creative but fragile and easily overwhelmed. (Aulia, et.al., 2021) Therefore, Nora's psychological recovery and acceptance of life highlight a preference for inner well-being over material or achievement-based success.

3.2.3. Prioritization in passion over competitive aspects

Haig (2020) further represents how contemporary youth challenge the competitive values embedded within the traditional American Dream. Traditionally, the American Dream encourages individuals to continuously compete in order

to achieve recognition, social mobility, and success. Competition is often perceived as necessary for proving individual capability and maximizing human potential. However, through Nora Seed's experiences, the novel presents an alternative perspective in which personal passion and emotional fulfillment are prioritized over competition and external expectations.

This representation reflects broader changes in youth values and identity formation. Fredricks et.al (2010) state that young individuals often demonstrate stronger emotional engagement and personal investment in non-academic or passion-driven activities because such activities provide emotional release, enjoyment, and a sense of flow. Similarly, Merieska & Meiyanto (2019) explain that youth development is strongly influenced by personal interests, environmental factors, and behavioral experiences, leading many young individuals to prioritize passion and self-expression over externally imposed expectations. In Nora's context, the existence of multiple alternative life possibilities allows her to reconsider how she wishes to live and what genuinely brings her fulfillment. As a result, she gradually prioritizes personal passion rather than maintaining a competitive identity constructed by others.

Nora decides to stop swimming because she becomes more interested in music as her passion. '*I, um, gave it up. Was more into music . . . at the time.*' (Haig, 2020, p.25) From Nora's perspective as a young person, the statement reflects a shift in personal interest. Marey-Sarwan (2022) states youth prioritize emotional and psychological needs over material aspects reflecting their perceptions of neglect and expectations of parents. During her youth, Nora chooses to move away from swimming which is associated with her parents' expectation and instead pursue music, which represents a passion she personally enjoys. This aligns with Waite, [et.al](#) (1986) about how youth move away from their parents' expectation by choosing their own paths is associated with changes in attitudes and values. These illustrate Nora initially prioritizes her own interests rather than maintaining the competitive aspects.

3.3. Redefining the American Dream in youth perspective

In contemporary society, many young individuals have begun to redefine the meaning of success by prioritizing emotional well-being, personal fulfillment, passion, and the appreciation of ordinary life experiences rather than solely pursuing material wealth, social status, or large-scale achievement. This shift reflects changing perspectives toward the traditional concept of the American Dream, which historically emphasized financial prosperity, upward social mobility, competition, and measurable accomplishment as the primary indicators of success. Instead of viewing success exclusively through external achievement, contemporary youth increasingly value inner satisfaction, mental stability, meaningful relationships, and personal authenticity as important aspects of a fulfilling life. Based on the broader interpretation of the American Dream, the concept has evolved to emphasize personal fulfillment and individual well-being rather than merely material success (Sadiqzade, 2025). This transformation reflects changing social realities in which conventional ideals of achievement are increasingly questioned by younger generations. Lică (2024) explain that contemporary revisions of the American Dream challenge traditional understandings of success that prioritize wealth accumulation and individual accomplishment. Rather than defining achievement through ownership, status, or professional recognition alone, many young individuals now perceive fulfillment through emotional balance, self-acceptance, and meaningful personal experiences.

This redefinition is also influenced by the growing perception that traditional forms of success are becoming increasingly difficult to achieve within contemporary social and economic conditions. Bowman et.al (2014) strengthened this argument by explaining that many people believe the "Dream" based on traditional paradigms has become more difficult to attain today compared to previous generations. Economic inequality, social pressure, and uncertainty regarding career stability contribute to skepticism toward conventional success-oriented ideologies. As the effectiveness of the traditional American Dream declines, alternative narratives centered on well-being, emotional health, and personal fulfillment emerge more strongly within youth perspectives. Lamont (2019) further explains that the decreasing effectiveness of traditional achievement narratives encourages the development of new forms of hope that prioritize well-being and quality of life over material accomplishment.

In *The Midnight Library*, Nora Seed's journey across multiple alternative lives illustrates the transformation of the American Dream from a traditional achievement-oriented concept into a more personal and emotionally centered understanding of success. Although Nora experiences various forms of conventional success associated with the American Dream, such as professional accomplishment, recognition, stability, and social approval, she realizes that these achievements do not necessarily provide happiness or emotional fulfillment. Instead, her experiences lead her to appreciate ordinary moments, emotional connection, peaceful environments, and the simple experience of being alive. Through this realization, Nora redefines success not through external validation or competitive accomplishment, but through emotional well-being, self-acceptance, and meaningful everyday experiences. This perspective aligns with Croft

et.al (2014), who explain that individuals who have experienced adversity often develop a stronger capacity to appreciate small pleasures and ordinary moments in life. Nora's struggles with disappointment, regret, and emotional exhaustion essentially increase her awareness of the importance of small victories and simple experiences. Her journey therefore demonstrates how adversity may transform an individual's perception of success, shifting attention away from material achievement toward emotional appreciation and psychological recovery.

Through Nora's characterization, Haig critiques the limitations of the traditional American Dream while at the same time presenting a contemporary youth perspective that prioritizes well-being, passion, emotional fulfillment, and authenticity. The novel eventually suggests that success should not be narrowly defined through competition, wealth, or social recognition alone, but should also include the ability to live meaningfully, appreciate ordinary life, and maintain emotional and psychological well-being.

4. Conclusion

The novel 'The Midnight Library' represents how the concept of the American Dream has evolved in contemporary society. Through the story of Nora Seed as the main character, the narrative illustrates a contrast between the conservative and contemporary interpretations of the American Dream. Within the traditional discourse, the American Dream emphasizes material success, social status, and the achievement of socially approved milestones. However, Nora's actions, decisions, and personal reflections throughout the story challenge these conventional expectations. Using the representation theory proposed by Stuart Hall, Nora's experiences can be understood as a representation that questions dominant social narratives about success and life goals. Her character reflects how young individuals negotiate societal expectations while seeking their own definitions of happiness and purpose. Therefore, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how contemporary youth redefine the American Dream. Rather than centering solely on external achievements, the modern interpretation increasingly values personal fulfillment and psychological well-being. Conclusively, the novel suggests that success is no longer defined by fixed societal standards, but by an individual's ability to pursue a life aligned with their inner purpose.

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