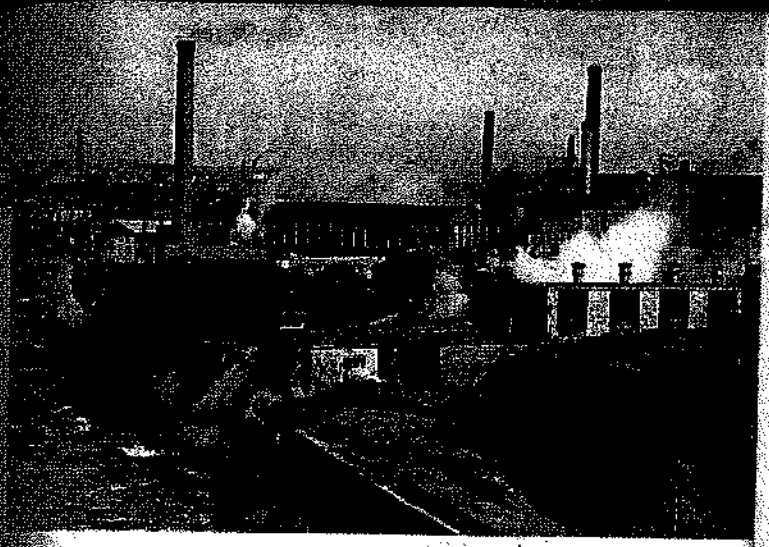
The American Dream

Illusion or Reality?

In the United States, the closing decades of the 19th century were a time of rapid change and sharp contrasts. Great entrepreneurs—such as Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and Cornelius Vanderbilt—amassed vast fortunes by exploiting cheap labor in the cities and creating giant companies that controlled entire industries. Urban manufacturing centers swelled with the influx of immigrants from Europe and people from rural areas in search of work. Almost half of the U.S. population was crowded in about a dozen cities, and the majority of all U.S. workers were industrial laborers sweating in factories.

As the new century dawned, the belief in America as a unique place where work and merit, rather than social privilege, determined one's fate remained a powerful ideal. Everyone knew of Abraham Lincoln's rise from his early life in a simple log cabin in rural Illinois. Many also knew that the millionaire newspaperman Joseph Pulitzer had come to America as a poor young German-speaking immigrant, recruited to fight in the Civil War. Stories of people who had risen, through their own efforts, from humble beginnings to achieve fabulous success were told and retold.

For many writers, however, the underside of this ideal—the flaws hidden beneath its optimistic simplicity—became a preoccupation. In the novel *Sister Carrie,* Theodore Dreiser challenged the notion of self-improvement by depicting a heroine crushed by forces she cannot control. In *The Jungle,*



ton Sinclair exposed the appalling working
nditions of immigrants in the Chicago stockyards.
poet and folksinger Carl Sandburg presented the
ny side of urban industrialization—the poverty,
crime, the corruption—even as he celebrated the
urage and resilience of everyday men and women
the face of these blights.

In their poetry, Edgar Lee Masters and Edwin
lington Robinson turned their gaze away from the
cities to look at the changes surging through rural areas at this time. Each investigated, in a different way, the currents of discontent running beneath the surface stability of small-town life. Paul Laurence Dunbar, the first African American to earn his living solely by his writing, made his own sharp points in America's picturesque veneer by exposing the truth behind popular racial stereotypes of the day.

The American dream of material success was nowhere so minutely explored as in the stories and novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Nearly all of his works concern the tension between the very wealthy and those—like him—who were attracted to them. In following the lives of characters whose fates are determined by their responses to wealth and to those who possess it, he gave us intimate insights into the American preoccupation with money.

For the more than 20 million immigrants who came to America in the years between 1870 and 1920, the American dream was not just a compelling idea but a last chance at survival. Many found work

Voices *from the* TIMES

The republic is a dream
Nothing happens unless first a dream.
Carl Sandburg
from "Washington Monument by Night"

The love of wealth is therefore to be traced, as either a principal or accessory motive, at the bottom of all that the Americans do; this gives to all their passions a sort of family likeness. . . . It may be said that it is the vehemence of their desires that makes the Americans so methodical; it perturbs their minds, but it disciplines their lives.
Alexis de Tocqueville
from *Democracy in America*

God gave me my money. I believe the power to make money is a gift from God . . . to be developed and used to the best of our ability for the good of mankind.
John D. Rockefeller

The business of America is business.
Calvin Coolidge

In your rocking chair by your window shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel.
Theodore Dreiser
from *Sister Carrie*

Voices from the Times

Yuh don't belong, get me! Look at me, why don't youse dare? I belong, dat's me! *(pointing to a skyscraper across the street which is in process of construction—with bravado)* See dat building goin' up dere? See de steel work? Steel, dat's me! Youse guys live on it and tink yuh're somep'n. But I'm in it, see! I'm de hoistin' engine dat makes it go up! I'm it—de inside and bottom of it! Sure! I'm steel and steam and smoke and de rest of it! It moves—speed—twenty-five stories up—and me at de top and bottom—movin'! Youse simps don't move. Yuh're on'y dolls I winds up to see 'm spin.

Eugene O'Neill
from *The Hairy Ape*

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to
breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming
shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-
tossed to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Emma Lazarus
from "The New Colossus,"
inscribed at the base
of the Statue of Liberty

America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming!

Israel Zangwill
from *The Melting Pot*

building skyscrapers, bridges, subways, and tr[illegible] lines in the growing cities. Anzia Yezierska's [illegible] account of disillusion and persistence in her s[illegible] "America and I" provides a glimpse of what [illegible] like for immigrants in the sweatshops of New [illegible] City's garment district.

Traditions Across Time: Dreams Lost and Found

Although the great waves of immigrants from [illegible] subsided during the 1920s—after the passage of [illegible] restrictive quota laws—and during the Great De[illegible] sion of the 1930s, the United States continued to [illegible] "land of opportunity" for those in need. In the [illegible] quotas based on nationality were lifted, and a new wave of immigration began. The immigrants came mainly from Asia and the West Indies rather than from Europe.

These new immigrants came for the same reasons as their predecessors a century before—to make a better life for themselves and their families—but some were also escaping homelands scarred by war and political persecution. Gish Jen's story "In the American Society" and Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "My Father and the Figtree" treat the immigrant experience with humor. Yvonne Sapia's poem "Defining the Grateful Gesture" and Lorna Dee Cervantes' poem "Refugee Ship" look at generational differences in immigrant families.

LaserLinks:
Background for Reading
Historical Literary Connection

Richard Cory

Edwin Arlington Robinson

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

4 clean-favored [klēn'fāvərd] *adj.* clean-cut; imperially [im·pēr'ē·ə·lē] *adv.* majestically; regally

5 arrayed [ə·rād'] *adj.* dressed

10 schooled in every grace: extremely well mannered and polite

11 In fine: in short

Thinking Through the Literature

1. What is your reaction to the ending of "Richard Cory"?
2. How do the townspeople seem to feel about Richard Cory? Support your ideas with details from the poem.
3. ACTIVE READING **EVALUATING CHARACTER** Review the chart in your READER'S NOTEBOOK. What is your opinion of Richard Cory?

THINK ABOUT
- his physical appearance and other traits
- his speech and behavior toward the townspeople
- his apparent outlook on life

4. Why do you think Richard Cory kills himself?
5. What would you say is the theme of this poem?

Thinking LITERATURE

Connect to the Literature

1. **What Do You Think?** What is your impression of Miniver Cheevy? Share your thoughts with a classmate.

Comprehension Check
- What is Miniver Cheevy's position in society?
- What does Miniver Cheevy daydream about?
- How does Miniver Cheevy respond to the disappointments in his life?

Think Critically

2. How would you describe Miniver Cheevy's view of the past? Why do you think he holds this view?

THINK ABOUT
- the content of his daydreams
- why he is disappointed with his own life
- how he deals with his "fate"

3. How do you think the speaker of the poem feels about Miniver Cheevy? Cite lines from poem that suggest the speaker's attitude.

4. How does the final stanza of the poem influence your opinion of Miniver Cheevy?

5. ACTIVE READING **EVALUATING CHARACTER** Review the chart you made in your READER'S NOTEBOOK. Do you think Miniver Cheevy is a sympathetic or an unsympathetic character? Defend your view.

Extend Interpretations

6. **Comparing Texts** How would you relate "Richard Cory" and "Miniver Cheevy" to the idea of the American dream?

7. **What If?** If Miniver Cheevy had lived during medieval times, do you think he would have found happiness? Why or why not?

8. **Connect to Life** Both Miniver Cheevy and Richard Cory solve their problems in self-destructive ways. In your opinion, what are some positive ways of coping with life's disappointments? Think about your discussion with classmates in the Connect to Your Life activity on page 830.

Literary Analysis

CHARACTERIZATION IN NARRATIVE POETRY Like a short story or novel, **narrative poetry,** such as "Richard Cory" and "Miniver Cheevy," relies on literary elements, such as character, setting, plot, and point of view, to tell a story. Robinson adapts techniques of **characterization** to create compelling portraits of imaginary townspeople. For example, the speaker in "Richard Cory" and "Miniver Cheevy" acts as a narrator who reports information about the main character. The speaker in each of these poems provides you with a glimpse of the character's actions, appearance, feelings, and ideas.

Activity Create personality profiles of Richard Cory and Miniver Cheevy based on the specific details revealed about them in the poems. Use a format like the one shown.

Character's Name:
Physical Description
Actions:
Feelings:
Thoughts:

REVIEW **RHYME AND METER**

Rhyme is the occurrence of a similar or identical sound at the ends of words. **Meter** is the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line. How do you think the arrangement of rhyming lines and the meter of "Miniver Cheevy" contribute to the overall effect of the poem?