Introduction
Subjectivity, Psychological Politics, and the American Dream

In his 1970 essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser argues that, in order for any social system to survive, its conditions of production must be reproduced in the individual psyche. This task, he observes, is accomplished by ideology: "Ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as [social] subjects" (171). To choose the simplest example, members of a capitalist society must believe, among other things, that private enterprise, individual ownership of property, and competition for wages and markets is right or natural or in their best interest; members of a communist society must believe the same about collective regulation of these economic entities. Without such ideological collusion on the part of individual members, the society as a whole could not maintain its status quo. How ideology fulfills its purpose—what psychological processes are involved and why they often succeed on such a large scale—has remained, however, an open question.

This question is one that we can begin to answer through literary analysis. Because literature is a repository of both a society’s ideologies and its psychological conflicts, it has the capacity to reveal aspects of a culture’s collective psyche, an apprehension of how ideological investments reveal the nature of individuals’ psychological relationship to their world. While it is reasonable to assume that our national literature can suggest some promising hypotheses concerning the interaction of the psychological and ideological dimensions of American life, critics of American literature—despite the theoretical focus, over the last two decades, on the social origins of subjectivity—have kept these two domains separate. Instead, an archaic notion of the individual in society has remained the dominant model for American literary criticism.
From F. O. Matthiessen's portrait of American Renaissance writers as literary revolutionaries committed to exploring the possibilities of a self-expression inspired by the lack of a specifically American literary tradition, to Donald Pease's provocative reconsideration of the motives of American Renaissance writers in terms of their desire for community and continuity, critics of American literature have treated the individual and the socius as interactive but discrete entities.

Indeed, a good deal of American literary criticism places the two in a polarized opposition in which the individual is seen primarily as the victim of American society, without considering the ways in which psyche and socius are dialectically related. That is, such criticism doesn't consider the ways in which the individual psyche and its cultural milieu inhabit, reflect, and define each other in a dynamically unstable, mutually constitutive symbiosis. In this context, psychology is always cultural psychology and politics are always psychological politics, not because, as poststructuralism would have it, the structures of consciousness are inscribed within the processes of social signification, but because both the structures of consciousness and the processes of social signification are inscribed within the same dialectics of desire. That is, both terms of the dichotomy are constituted by desires that neither originate in nor grant hegemony to either term, but collapse them together within a cultural amnion that makes the separation of psyche and socius an untenable theoretical construct.

While the victim model certainly has value, it is, at best, incomplete and, at worst, reductive. For the large body of American literature that focuses on the relationship between the individual and the socius, the traditional Americanist paradigm of subjectivity has produced a canon of criticism dominated by the question, Who is responsible for the protagonist's problems, the protagonist or society?—a question that precludes our seeing the dialectical connections between psyche and socius that such works reveal. This state of affairs is less surprising, however, when we consider that recent theories of subjectivity have not provided a dialectical paradigm for subjectivity and, therefore, have not offered Americanists a real alternative to the traditional model.

The poststructuralist view of subjectivity as nothing more than a collection of cultural identifications, while it has foregrounded the ways in which the notion of an autonomous subject has been used to veil society's ideological operations, has merely swung the theoretical pendulum away from the modernist emphasis on free will to a postmodern
social determinism, without radically altering the terms of the dichotomy or undermining their influence. And for obvious reasons, theories of subjectivity grounded in social determinism can do little to undermine a victim model of the individual’s relation to the socius. With the growing popularity of so-called ethical criticism—which seeks, among other things, to reestablish the autonomous subject—we are in danger of merely continuing to swing back and forth between these two theoretical poles. The source of our problem, however, is not our inability to choose between two theoretical extremes, but the narrowness of the models of subjectivity offered by each side. My purpose here is, therefore, twofold: (1) to argue for a new model of subjectivity to replace the archaic paradigm that still informs American literary criticism and (2) to demonstrate how the model I offer opens canonized American literature to new readings of American culture. Because literary works are concerned, first and foremost, with human experience, literary interpretation requires a theory of subjectivity adequate to the task of analyzing that experience.

Once we begin to see the ways in which the individual subject is neither wholly an autonomous agent nor merely a social product, the conceptual space thereby opened makes room, not for a return to the autonomous subject the ethical critics want to construct, but for a return to and dialectical reformulation of the existential subject, arguably the most rich and useful notion of subjectivity available, but one that was popularly misunderstood when it was initially disseminated and that has been largely neglected since the advent of poststructuralism.

As Walter Davis argues in Inwardness and Existence: Subjectivity in/and Hegel, Heidegger, Marx, and Freud, existentialism, properly conceived, “transcends the social-individual dichotomy” (375, n12) that informs ongoing debates between deconstruction and traditional humanism and between Marxism and psychoanalysis. For according to an existential model, social factors may largely establish our initial identity, but as we shall see in the following chapters, they do not freeze us at that stage without our daily consent. While our options are certainly limited by the society in which we live and the circumstances of our birth, we are nevertheless responsible for how we respond to those limitations. From an existential perspective, we, alone, are finally responsible for our existence. All of the “guarantees” upon which we hang our well-being—God, human nature, rationalist belief systems, the progressive nature of time—are products of our own creation; they
represent our attempts to deny the reality that we are alone in a universe that has no meaning beyond what we assign to it. There is no higher plan or essence to which human life conforms; rather, existence precedes essence, which is to say that there is no "essence" at all. There is only existence and what we make of it. We are thus "condemned" to freedom: it is up to us what we make of our lives, of our communities, of our planet.

According to Davis, if we fully submit existential subjectivity to the dialectical process implicit in the existential view of human experience, we emerge with a model of the individual as a historically situated (Marxist) subject of (psychoanalytic) desire, condemned to his or her own (existential) freedom to be either in collusion with social forces—consciously or unconsciously—or to resist. And this subjectivity is informed by what I would call a destabilized Hegelianism: the dialectical relationship between the individual and the socius—like that among the Marxist, psychoanalytic, and existential realities that constitute subjectivity—does not issue in some reified Geist, but remains in a state of contingency and flux, anchored in the real world, utterly existentialized. A dialectical model of existential subjectivity thus merges the heretofore opposed categories in which other definitions of subjectivity have been grounded.³

If we apply this model of subjectivity to American literature, the question for literary critics ceases to be, Is the individual a free agent or a social product? and becomes instead, How are the individual and the socius cut from the fabric of the same desire? In other words, what are the dialectics of desire that constitute our psychological politics? What psychological payoffs, conscious or unconscious, do we seek through our acceptance of any given ideology, whether articulated or not? This theoretical perspective might be termed an existential dialectics—though Davis doesn't refer to it as such—and the following chapters will attempt to illustrate its efficacy as a framework for interpreting American literature.

Through close readings of representative works of twentieth-century American literature generally considered to portray the individual in opposition to society—Edith Wharton's House of Mirth (1905), F. Scott Fitzgerald's Great Gatsby (1925), Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman (1949), Thomas Pynchon's Crying of Lot 49 (1966), and Joseph Heller's Something Happened (1974)—I examine the ways in which these texts reveal instead how psyche and socius intersect in terms of the most per-
vasive ideological site upon which the American psyche has projected itself: the American dream. Although, in ideal terms, the American dream is a social vision in which, as James Truslow Adams put it in 1931, "each man and each woman shall be able to attain . . . the fullest stature of which they are innately capable" (374), most writers who use the phrase recognize that one’s “stature” in America is usually judged as a function of one’s socioeconomic status. The American dream is thus a dream of the commodity, and the implied premise is that one’s spiritual worth and well-being are directly proportional to the value of the commodities one owns. As Marius Bewley observes, “Essentially, this phrase [American dream] represents the romantic enlargement of the possibilities of life on a level at which the material and the spiritual have become inextricably confused” (11). And as is especially clear in the case of Death of a Salesman’s Willy Loman, the relationship between the material and spiritual domains is seen as causal: socioeconomic status, or upward mobility, is valorized as the source of spiritual worth and well-being. The underlying assumption is, as Edwin Fussell notes, “that all the magic of the world can be had for money” (44), and as we see in The Great Gatsby, it is the impossible “meeting” of these two terms—money and magic—that defines the American dream. Furthermore, because the dream is, as Milton R. Stern puts it, “a dream of self rather than community” (166), it is especially suited to reproduce in the individual the ideology necessary for the survival of a free-enterprise, capitalist system like ours.

As these statements by Bewley, Fussell, and Stern illustrate, there is a general awareness that the American dream is an ideological structure in which material and spiritual domains are yoked in a way that promotes an unrealistic reliance on the former to the detriment of the latter. Nevertheless, many Americans believe that the American dream is not inherently corrupt but has become so over time. For example, in a dictionary of “picturesque expressions” published in 1985, American dream is defined as consisting originally of “the vision of attaining maximum security and fulfillment of opportunity as an individual without concern for social distinctions.” This definition is then contrasted with what the dream has become: “Today the term is often heard cynically with an implication of distrust or as a way of characterizing an affluent way of life that often tends toward money madness” (Urdang, Hunsinger, and LaRoche 340). Similarly, Rose Adrienne Gallo, in her discussion of The Great Gatsby, describes an original American dream
“based on ambition, industry, and well-defined rules of conduct” that "produced men of strength and character whose success contributed to the prosperity and greatness of the nation,” and she contrasts it with a “vitiating American dream” that “spawned a new generation of strong men, represented by the undisciplined brute force of the Tom Buchanans, and, worse, by the unscrupulous machinations of the Meyer Wolfsheims” (54). In fact, in the criticism of such works as The Great Gatsby and Death of a Salesman, references to “the withering of the American dream” (Bewley 11) or “the deterioration of the ‘American Dream’” (D. Parker 31) are too numerous to mention. Clearly, a dream can’t “wither” or “deteriorate” if it wasn’t, at one time, well and whole.

Ideology, however, isn’t present only when we perceive it. In fact, the less we are aware of it the freer it is to operate. This is why members of both major political parties in this country can get elected to office by promising us a return to something that never existed: the American dream in its pristine form. Americans who believe that the American dream has become corrupt perhaps assume that the dream’s corruption is as recent as their awareness of it. The irony revealed by the literature of the American dream is that, inherent in the ideological structure of the dream’s equation of material and spiritual fulfillment, are the “seductive and corrupting motivations” (Fussell 46) that we have finally come to associate with it. In other words, the American dream is, inherently, a commodified dream, and it promotes commodification as a psychological stance. Indeed, as the following chapters will illustrate, the terms American dream and commodity are virtually interchangeable, for the American dream is the ideological apparatus of the commodity.

A commodity, by Karl Marx’s definition, has value not in terms of what it can do (use value) but in terms of the money or other commodities for which it can be traded (exchange value) or, as the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard notes, in terms of the prestige and social status its ownership confers (sign-exchange value). An object becomes a commodity only when it has exchange value or sign-exchange value, and neither form of value is inherent in any object. Both are forms of social value: they are values assigned to objects by human beings in a given social context. Commodification, then, is the act or condition of relating to persons or things in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value to the exclusion of other considerations. The term commodification—unlike such related terms as objectification or social status—thus carries with it the spiritual devaluation of self and other inherent in the
American dream’s marketplace psychology. While there are a number of ideological vehicles that carry among their baggage the cult of the commodity—commercial advertisements, religious beliefs, political partisanship—the American dream is the overarching myth to which such ideological vehicles refer. The American dream is itself a consumer product, which Americans “buy into” as the primary myth by means of which they mold their interpersonal relations to resemble relations of capitalist production, which are relations among commodities. Furthermore, because the dream is a dream of status, sign-exchange value becomes preeminent: exchange value and sign-exchange value are collapsed—exchange value becomes a form of sign-exchange value—and use value is disenfranchised, obliterated.

Anything can be commodified. Art can be commodified when a work is purchased solely for the price it will bring a few years hence or for the prestige of owning it. A woman’s youth and beauty can be commodified, just like the jewels she is wearing. And human relationships can be commodified as well, as we can see in the following dialogue from Woody Allen’s *Play It Again, Sam*, in which Dick and Linda Christie are talking with Allan Felix about the recent breakup of Allan’s marriage.

**Linda**: Oh, he really loved her. I feel like crying.

**Dick**: Why do you feel like crying? A man makes an investment; it doesn’t pay off. . . . Allan, you’ve invested your emotions in a losing stock. It was wiped out. It dropped off the board. Now, what do you do, Allan? You reinvest—maybe in a more stable stock—something with long-term growth possibilities.

**Allan**: Who you gonna fix me up with, General Motors?

One obvious way in which Dick’s discourse is commodified in this excerpt is that it reveals what is, in his opinion, really at stake: profit and loss—in this case, profit and loss in terms of time, emotional energy, and social status. However, another, more powerful effect of such language, and the real payoff for the speaker, is that it distances him from the objects of his discourse. Dick’s real project in convincing Allan to “reinvest” is to distance himself emotionally from Allan’s feelings, and to get Allan to do the same. Dick wants to increase the exchange and sign-exchange value of his friend without “investing” any of his own emotional energy. The psychology informing Dick’s behavior might be termed commodity psychology, and it is not merely a theme in
the literary works I will discuss but a structural principle that organizes
the progression of narrative and dramatic events.

For most of us, Dick's attitude is familiar because commodity psy-
chology has become a common way of being in the world and relating
to others. It's the psychology one adopts whenever one relates to per-
sons or things as commodities, that is, in terms of their relative worth on
a market, such as the "job market" or the "marriage market." People
commodify themselves and others when, for example—like Jack Green
in Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*—they try to be seen at parties
talking with someone whose social status is higher than theirs in order
to increase their own sign-exchange value. Part of the payoff of this
kind of commodity psychology is the same kind of avoidance of feeling
Dick Christie achieves: one doesn't have to deal with the needs and feel-
ings of others or with needs and feelings of one's own that one would
rather not face. While the concept of commodity psychology is certainly
simple enough, its manifestations are, as we shall see, subtle, complex,
and diverse.

Obviously, the American socius—in terms of its socioeconomic sta-
tus quo—has long benefited from an American dream in which socio-
economic advancement is linked with spiritual worth and well-being:
one can hardly imagine a vision better equipped to promote the con-
sumption of commodities on which our culture depends or, in Althusserian terms, better suited to reproduce the ideology necessary
for the survival of a capitalist system like ours. But what is the benefit to
the individual, who, as Wharton, Fitzgerald, Miller, Pynchon, and
Heller suggest, is spiritually withered by his or her own emotional in-
vestment in socioeconomic status? The victim model suggests that indi-
viduals subscribe to the American dream because they are manipulated
or ideologically programmed to do so. This explanation, however, like
the Althusserian formulation, sidesteps the question of how such ma-
nipulation occurs. As Wolfgang Haug observes, manipulation can be
effective only if it has "latched on to the 'objective interests' of those be-
ing manipulated" (6). What, then, are the "objective interests" served
by the American dream?

As we shall see, the American dream, through its inherent relation to
commodity psychology, responds to the desire to escape existential in-
wardness, that anxious awareness of oneself as a creature "whose very
being is at issue" (Heidegger 67) in an uncertain world. Financial wor-
ries, the inevitability of aging and death, the possibility of accident or ill-
ness, and the fear of emotional pain all number among the kinds of unforeseeable events—historical contingencies—that increase and complicate the anxieties inherent in being human, in having a consciousness that is aware of itself in a context of unanswerable questions: Why was I born? What is the purpose of life? What should I believe and how should I behave? What will happen to me after I die? When we take full responsibility for our actions and sustain existential inwardness as the guiding principle of our behavior, we have undertaken the existential project to live an authentic existence. In contrast, to escape existential inwardness is to escape the awareness of historical contingency and the responsibility to respond to it conscientiously. This escape is accomplished through what Jean-Paul Sartre calls bad faith (mauvaise foi), the various lies we tell ourselves in order to shift the responsibility for our own actions onto persons or forces outside ourselves.

While I’m not arguing that the flight from existential inwardness is an essential, or timeless, quality of human nature—an existential framework does not permit essentialism and, therefore, doesn’t recognize human “nature”—neither am I suggesting that the desire to escape existential inwardness is socially produced, at least not in the way a doctrinaire Marxist would use the phrase. Instead, I’m trying to demonstrate the need for a whole new way of understanding what it means for phenomena to be socially produced that does not posit an abstract social formation independent of individual desire. Therefore, the flight from existential inwardness—and indeed, all the theoretical concepts employed here—are treated phenomenologically: my attempt is to describe the ways in which psychological and ideological phenomena merge, rather than to posit an essentialist or constructionist final cause. Indeed, my paradigm of subjectivity is based on the collapse of this dichotomy. Thus, for example, the psychoanalytic concepts used in this study do not assume the essentialist status some psychoanalytic theorists accord them; neither do the Marxist concepts I employ assume the constructionist status some Marxist theorists accord them. I operate, instead, from the assumption that there is no such thing as purely psychological or purely ideological phenomena: all psychological phenomena are ideological as well, just as all ideological phenomena are also psychological, because both domains issue from the merger of individual and institutionalized desire. This does not mean that there is no such thing as an individual victim of institutionalized oppression. It means, instead, that sustained, “successful” institutionalized oppression bespeaks a cul-
tural psychology that (consciously or unconsciously) supports it, even among those who are (knowingly or unknowingly) victimized. The sources and characteristics of such a cultural psychology are often difficult to see precisely because psychological politics do not rest upon and cannot be explained by structural principles that compartmentalize human experience in an effort to explain it. Attempts to place the final cause of human behavior in either the essentialist or the constructionist domain have failed to articulate an adequate model of subjectivity because they rely, by definition, on such compartmentalization.

In the chapters that follow, we will see how individual and institutionalized desire, in twentieth-century America, merge in the commodity. The desire to escape existential inwardness is inextricably linked to the commodity through displacement and mystification: one displaces all one’s anxieties onto the commodity in the belief that the commodity will somehow magically make one “happy,” that is, provide the illusion that one has transcended historical contingency. In other words, each purchase is an emblem not merely of one’s sign-exchange value but of one’s self-reification as substance, as that which is, paradoxically, both nonexistent and immortal. At most, of course, one’s purchases (of commodities, of social status, of human relationships) merely provide a fleeting illusion of transcendence that therefore requires continual reinforcement (one must always buy a bigger house or acquire membership in a more exclusive social set) and bad faith (one must find specious reasons for one’s purchases and social climbing) to avoid facing the real motivation behind the obsessive desire to accumulate wealth and status. This is the transcendental project—the desire to escape existential inwardness—informing the psychological events that structure the five works I examine. My intention is not to investigate the sociohistorical circumstances of the texts’ production—a worthwhile project, but one beyond the scope and purpose of this one—but to examine the psychosocial operations implicit in their representations of human behavior.

While the victim model lets subjectivity off the hook of existential responsibility, a dialectical model permits me to put it back on. Thus, Edith Wharton’s House of Mirth is read in terms of what it reveals about the psychological payoffs for both genders for their investment in a principal avatar of the American dream: woman as aesthetic commodity fetish. I argue that the protagonist attempts to escape existential inwardness through self-reification as an aesthetic object and that her
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problematical death at the novel’s close is, for both her and her male
counterpart, the consummation of their delusional transcendental
project. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby* is analyzed in terms of the
commodification of identity promoted by the American dream. Here
the flight from existential inwardness is manifest both in the
protagonist’s attempt to cancel his identity by escaping into a fictional-
ized past and in the “subject-object” model of interpersonal relations
that is the novel’s dominant value and the “object-object” model that is
its emergent value.⁴

Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* is used to show how the Ameri-
can dream provides the “ore” from which individuals can fashion an
ideological armor to disguise and deny their true psychological state. In
this case, the flight from existential inwardness is revealed in what I ar-
gue are the five regressive episodes that structure the play, as well as in
the Loman family’s sexuality, which is an important, though critically
neglected, aspect of this work. In Thomas Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49*, we
find an American dream that blatantly invites psychological invest-
ment in an ideological surface the purpose of which is to cancel all in-
teriority. This novel is examined in terms of the question, Can existential
subjectivity still constitute itself once the individual and the socius are
symbiotically dissolved in the self-emptying commodity signs that con-
stitute the contemporary American dream? Here the flight from exis-
tential inwardness is a cultural fait accompli, and the possibilities of its
reconstruction in contemporary America are put on trial.

Finally, Joseph Heller’s *Something Happened* is analyzed to suggest
the ways in which contemporary American subjectivity uses the Ameri-
can dream, in this case, the ideology of the corporate commodity, to
move beyond the existential problematic. In this novel, the flight from
existential inwardness is not merely attempted but accomplished: the
protagonist deliberately and consciously—without bad faith as a psy-
chological crutch—commodifies his own consciousness on the corpo-
rate model, reducing his psychological experience to the kinds of
abstract relations that obtain among commodities in late capitalist cul-
ture.⁵ Taken together, these works outline a psychology of the commod-
ity that is a psychology of repression, regression, and death. Viewed
chronologically, the texts point to a growing collusion of psyche and
socius: the desire to escape existential inwardness becomes an increas-
ingly “viable” project with the increasing commodification of our na-
tional culture.
In addition to the thematic focus outlined above, the American dream’s ideological power is examined in terms of its ability to seduce authors and critics. For example, I argue that The Great Gatsby’s critique of commodity psychology is inadvertently undercut by the seductive appeal with which Fitzgerald portrays the commodity. This appeal, I suggest, helps to seduce the many critics who rally to Gatsby’s cause because of a desire to protect their ideological investment in an American dream of their own. Similarly, I maintain that Miller unconsciously tries to sabotage the rich psychological subtexts that make his work the masterpiece it is by manipulating the play’s formal elements to foreground an overly sympathetic reading of his protagonist. The play’s critics, I argue, have responded to Miller’s desire, and to their own identification with the protagonist’s project, by finding Willy Loman both the victim and the tragic hero that Miller wants him to be.

The collapse of the psychological and ideological dimensions of these five works implies a psychological politics grounded in a thoroughly existentialized dialectic of psyche and socius, for as I suggested earlier, it shows that the structures of consciousness and the processes of social signification are inscribed within the same dialectics of desire and that this inscription does not fit the victim model of the relationship between the individual and the socius that, explicitly or implicitly, still informs American literary criticism. If Americans are manipulated by the ideology of the American dream, it is because that ideology is so easily manipulated to serve our own psychological ends. And surely it is here—in the nature of the psychological payoffs offered by the adherence to a belief system—that the seductive power of ideology in general, and of the American dream in particular, really lies. If we want to continue to examine the ways in which American literature places the individual in opposition to society, we must interrogate this dichotomization of psyche and socius by analyzing the ways in which our literature reveals the dialectical complexities of their inexorable existential symbiosis.

In keeping with the dialectical notion of subjectivity that informs this investigation, I analyze the literary texts I have chosen using Marxist, psychoanalytic, existentialist, feminist, and poststructuralist critical tools in dialectical conjunction. Unlike interpretation that occurs within a Kantian set of assumptions, wherein the final goal is to sift the literary text through a series of totalizing categories, a dialectical approach
privileges a totalizing *process* in which categories remain fluid and, themselves, in process. Thus, theoretical categories can be used together, as different-color threads are woven to make a fabric that cannot be named for any single color used in its composition. Indeed, as the following chapters illustrate, a dialectical paradigm of subjectivity encourages dialectical interplay among critical theories. For example, a dialectical approach, as we shall see, illustrates how critical tools from a number of different nonformalist schools can be used together to produce what New Critics would consider unified, close readings. In fact, this method makes it possible to account for many textual elements that are inadequately addressed or overlooked entirely in other readings of these same works.

Of course, not every theory is used equally to solve every interpretive problem. In fact, the dialectical approach will be best understood if we think of it not in terms of full-blown theoretical frameworks, such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, existentialism, feminism, and deconstruction, but in terms of individual theoretical concepts—such as commodification, regression, existential inwardness, the fetishization of women, and our epistemological reliance on binary oppositions—that may have originated within one theoretical framework but that can be put in service of another or combined with concepts from several other frameworks to perform the interpretive task at hand, however large or small that task may be. What concepts are used and in what combination will depend on both the individual reader’s purpose and personal preference. There is no set formula: what may work best in one given interpretive context, or for one particular reader, may not work best in another context or for another reader. The process is very much akin to *bricolage*, a concept Derrida adapted from Claude Lévi-Strauss: the use of the best tools available to perform the task at hand, regardless of the original purpose for which any given tool was constructed.

In the following chapters, existentialism provides the grounding concepts in service of which all other theoretical concepts perform because the overarching theme of this study is the flight from existential inwardness, which, I argue, forms the foundation of the American dream’s psychological politics, in other words, the fundamental psychological attraction of the American dream’s ideological program. Thus, concepts such as commodification, regression, and the fetishization of women are all examined in terms of how they facilitate the flight from existential inwardness. And each concept was chosen—often by
trial and error—to perform a particular interpretive task because the textual meaning it produced deepened my understanding of some relevant psychosocial phenomenon explicit or implicit in a given literary representation of human behavior.

Of course, from the standpoint of my paradigm of subjectivity, one could argue that deconstruction provides the grounding concepts for this study, in that my reading of mainstream American literature, and of the critical canon that has interpreted it, is based upon the deconstruction of the traditional binary opposition between social determinism and free will. There are a number of theoretical vantage points within a dialectical reading from which to view the act of interpretation because a dialectical approach is kaleidoscopic rather than linear: it is very fluid, interactive, open-ended, nonformulaic. Thus, although such an approach has the capacity to be rather anxiety producing, it also has the capacity to be very fertile, rearranging old assumptions within startling new configurations.

A dialectical approach, moreover, encourages an interplay between critical theories and literary texts that can help us see the limitations of literary and philosophical concepts too often employed uncritically. For example, in my chapter on The Great Gatsby I attempt to problematize the notion of the reliable narrator by suggesting that this concept is grounded in an untenable concept of the reliable author. And my reading of Something Happened points out the limitations of a Sartrean notion of subjectivity for contemporary experience: the existential framework implicit in the common assumption of Slocum's bad faith is, in fact, unable to contain the protagonist's experience. (Thus, a dialectical approach can call into question even those concepts associated with the theoretical framework one is employing.) In addition, I use this novel's understanding of human behavior to extend Jean Baudrillard's theory of sign-exchange value, a theory central to the concept of commodification that informs all five chapters. Such an interplay of theoretical and literary texts demonstrates how these works can "read" one another, thereby problematizing the privileged use of any one theoretical framework to understand literature and obviating the debate among academicians concerning the primacy of either critical theory or literature for understanding the human condition.

This collapse of some of the distinctions between literary and theoretical texts is a corollary of my working definition of literature, which is related both to poststructuralism and to reader-response theory. For
me, a literary text is a site of cultural/psychological events—both in its original composition and in the act of reading. As Stanley Fish notes, the boundaries of the physical pages mislead us into thinking that the text itself is bounded (82) when, in fact, it's a piece of living history, an anthropological artifact, that reads not only the individuals who produce and interpret it—authors and critics—but also the cultures in which it is produced and interpreted. Thus, any given text contains the possibility of any number of different readings—some compatible, some not—at any given moment as well as over time. My interest lies not in which reading/reads is/are "correct," even if such a conclusion could be drawn, but in how different readings use the text to teach us something about human experience and how one reading can be used to arrest or limit the insights of another.

Of course, any attempt to outline a critical methodology requires that attention be given to the problem of author and authorial intention. Certainly, the intentionalist notion of the author as an artist who manipulates the text exclusively in a deliberate, conscious, and rational manner—the author with whom the reliable narrator is in accord—is a very limited and limiting, if not untenable, concept. While any given intentionalist reading may be as useful as any other given reading, the intentionalist desire is one that seeks a kind of textual closure that often works against interpretive possibility. A more useful and, I think, accurate formulation is the notion of the author as a conflicted, ideologically saturated artist driven by motives, both conscious and unconscious, too numerous and complicated to be a factor in her or his conscious creation of the text. Even when authors comment on their own work, as they so often do, their statements of intention provide us merely with one additional interpretation of their work, an interpretation that should be submitted to the same criteria by which we evaluate any other critical reading. For while an author's intentions certainly play an important role—for example, in the stylistic and thematic choices that structure the work—the narrative is often constituted in a much more powerful way by what the author might not want to tell us or might not know. Thus the reliable narrator, when this function can be established, has but a limited story to tell.

The literature of the American dream, however, tells a story without limits, a story of excess and of excesses, in which "limit and deprivation are [the] blackest devils" (Bewley 12). Of course, the five literary works examined in the following chapters represent rather than exhaust the
works of twentieth-century American literature that illuminate the psychological politics of the American dream. The texts I've chosen are offered as test cases, so to speak: mainstream literary works, spanning the century, that, like most mainstream literature, have engendered a canon of criticism almost as useful as the literary texts themselves in providing material for analysis. Most important, however, these five works illustrate the diversity and complexity of the psychosocial realities American literature can reveal, given a model of subjectivity adequate to the task.