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The American Dream as a Tragic Quest in Clint Eastwood's Million Dollar Baby

Le rêve américain comme une quête tragique dans Million Dollar Baby de Clint Eastwood.

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Abstract: American cinema, ever since its inception, has long perpetuated myths that color the American dream. These include concepts such as self-making, self-determination, and new beginnings. Ideals such as these have become so prevalent in American thinking, that that it has become a delicate task finding any cultural medium that is not imbued by these beliefs. Contemporary directors such as Clint Eastwood have shown a keen interest in revisiting this American dream. To this regard, Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) presents the dream as a ghost in disguise. His vision of the American dream is indeed one that is hollow and bereft of the lofty ideals that one usually attributes to this concept. This paper thus aims to probe the bleakness and the hollowness that might result out of the so called "pursuit of Happiness."

Keywords: Clint Eastwood; Million Dollar Baby; American Dream; Tragedy

Résumé : Le cinéma américain, depuis ses débuts, a longtemps promu des mythes qui favorisent le rêve américain. Ceux-ci incluent des concepts tels que l'autodétermination, l'autonomie et les nouveaux départs. Des idéaux comme ceux-ci sont devenus si répandus dans la pensée américaine qu'il est devenu une tâche délicate de trouver un espace culturel qui ne soit pas imprégné de ces croyances. Des réalisateurs contemporains comme Clint Eastwood ont montré un vif intérêt à revisiter ce rêve américain. À cet égard, Million Dollar Baby (2004) d'Eastwood présente le rêve comme une illusion déguisée. Sa vision du rêve américain est en effet une vision creuse et dépourvue des idéaux élevés que l'on attribue habituellement à ce concept. Cet article vise donc à sonder la noirceur et le vide qui peuvent résulter de ce qu'on appelle la « poursuite du bonheur».

Mots clés : Clint Eastwood ; Million Dollar Baby; Rêve américain; tragédie.

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Introduction: Americans have long been nursed by potent myths of self-invention and self-making. These ideals have made their way to the umbrella term of the 'American dream'. Popularized by Trustlow in his *The Epic of America (1931)*, the American dream has fueled the imagination of scholars and non-scholars alike. Could this dream, with its luring prospects, truly hold its promises? Or is it destined to remain just a dream? This article examines the tragic dimensions of the American dream. In so doing, it analyzes Clint Eastwood's critically acclaimed *Million Dollar Baby* (2004). When asked in one interview what the movie was about, Eastwood replied "the American dream" (qtd in Rubinstein, 2017, p1). If so, then the ramifications are quite concerning. Indeed, the film narrates the story of Maggie Fitzgerald, a thirty-year-old woman who aspires to become a boxing world champion one day. She does, but at a very consequential price.

I shall thus be examining the essence of the American dream as depicted in *Million Dollar Baby*. In so doing, this paper relies on Arnold Weinstein's and John K. Roth's conceptualizations of the American dream. Indeed, both scholar focus on self-making elements of this concept which befit Maggie's aspirations of re-shaping herself. Additionally, this paper also utilizes Aristotle's theories on tragedy. His view of the tragic, as enunciated in his *Poetics* (330 BCE), complements the nature of the present study. Ultimately, these theoretical toolkits help grasp the tragic delusions behind the American dream as present in *Million Dollar Baby.*

1. *Self-Making: A Credo of American Thinking*

The ability to transcend one's limitations, whatever their nature may be, is a belief that underwrites much of American thinking and culture. It is part of the American fabric to up-bring their children on the belief that they have an infinite set of possibilities in which they can accomplish whatever they would like to. American freedom, so it is often told, is what makes Americans special. To be sure, this is one of the most enduring and potent myths that American tradition carries. It endorses their history, literature, and popular culture as well. To this

regard, self-making stands as one of the strongest characteristics of the so called “American dream,” a term popularized by James Truslow Adams in his *The Epic of America*. The term itself encompasses a number of myths and beliefs rather than singling out one in particular. It is thus important clarifying the conceptualization surrounding this term, and how the present study aims at using it.

“The American dream,” Arnold Weinstein argues, “is precisely a dream of self invention” (1996, p1). There is a sense in which one can set themselves free not only from their origins, but their social and cultural constraints as well. This belief has been nursing American opinion ever since the arrival of the Pilgrims in the Northern American shores. Why did these people leave their land to reach the New World, and why are still millions of people currently dreaming that they could one day settle in America? Evidently, it is because America has for a long period of time preserved a myth of representing a land of new beginnings and a land of new hopes. When one leaves their natal land to reach America, one is essentially leaving a determinist society in hopes of making it to the land of the possible. Factors such as gender, race, and class are thus minimized because the dream itself stipulates that one can mold their life however they wish it to be. Indeed, the American dream firmly holds that “nothing is to be coerced or deformed” (Weinstein, 1996, p1). Instead, individuals can construct their own lives by entirely denying the hold or the grip of their past.

Self-conception and auto-genesis are thus important pillars of the American dream. There is indeed an incessant belief in American culture that one could, as if literally, produce and re-produce oneself. The idea that an individual can initiate his/her own spring is a credo of American thinking that can be noted in an endless number of works. One of the greatest figures of auto-genesis, for instance, would be Fitzgerald’s Gatsby character. Indeed, the latter typifies the self-shaping beliefs of the American dream. In him, Fitzgerald creates a sheer willpower that becomes a driving force in making one’s life. In turn, this symbolizes the American myth that theirs is a land of equality

whose merit is measured not by inheritance, but rather through will. In denying his past, Gatsby shows how one would go about in creating one's identity and what it means to become someone. In this sense, the dream is about a world that is made in front of an individual's eyes whereby nothing is fixed.

The American belief that one could transcend the givens of their external world is a point that requires much scrutiny. American identity, after all, has much to do with the sanctity of the self and the sanctity of the individual in general. This, too, has been part of an old tradition that goes back as far as Benjmain Franklin's *Autobiography (1791)* and later carried on by the American Transcendentalists of the nineteenth century. In their work, one notices that the self "is absolutely free and unencumbered" (Weinstein, 2000, p4). Indeed, authors such as Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman have all spelled out the dimensions of this empowered sense of self. Whitman's poetry, for instance, deifies the self. "Divine am I inside out, and I make holy whatever I touch" (qtd in Loving, 200, p30). This is one of the American testaments to the empowered self. There is a sense in which there is a certain amount of power and energy in the self, and Whitman's poetry brings into expression these currents of vitality. "I extract," he continues to write in his Song of Myself, "strength from the beef I eat"(qtd in Loving, 2000, p31). What is the measure of the world? For Whitman, it is clearly the individual, because "I contain multitudes" (qtd in Loving, 2000, p31). Nevertheless, one must question the validity of such aspirations. To this regard, John K. Roth nicely sums up the "delusions" behind the dream itself.

> To many Americans, the dream is part of an ideology that sneers and deludes. It deceits the have-nots with hope and legitimizes the haves. This characterization of the American dream calls for chauvinistic and jingoistic clichés that perpetuates E.E. Cummins's "God America I love you Land of the Pilgrims." This iteration further signifies

> self-determined success, wealth, and acquired fame (2002, Roth, p2).

Roth is pointing out to even more clichés that are often linked to the American dream. In particular, America as a land of the plenty has gained much popularity over the centuries. There is indeed a rampant belief that every American individual could in fact reverse their fortune so long they wish it. The reality, however, could be more humbling. As Roth writes, it "deceits the have nots" with aspirations that may not be reached. In other words, the line between the real and the construct is being erased. Instead, the American dream is about the potency of imagination, and how belief can make things happen. Is the power of belief enough, however? Further, could one truly place his/her blind faith in America as the land that will move worlds for them? The reality is that America has its own dark spots, and has its own cultural and social shortcomings. It cannot be as utopic as the American dream makes it seem to be. In fact, having blind faith may lead to tragic outcomes. In this light, this paper utilizes the American dream's self-making concept, and explores its reaches and its limits. To further explore *Million Dollar Baby's* tragic ramifications, I shall now turn to Aristotle's theoretical views on tragedy.

2. Aristotle On Tragedy: In his *Poetics* (330 BCE), Aristotle advances a number of views on various literary genres. These include the epic, tragedy, and comedy. He narrows his focus, however, to the dominant tragic plays of his time. In so doing, he lists a range of elements that construct what he considers to be a good tragedy. These elements shall be dealt with careful examination, but one must first define and contextualize the term tragedy itself. Indeed, modern and contemporary notions of the tragic slightly differ from Aristotle's conceptualization of the same term. Britannica, for instance, defines tragedy as "a drama of serious and dignified character that typically describes the development of a conflict between the protagonist and a superior force (such as destiny, circumstance, or society) and reaches a sorrowful or disastrous conclusion" (2010, p1). Along with other modern definitions of tragedy, Britannica's is mostly interested with its thematic dimensions. Likewise, we use term tragic in our everyday

speech with similar intent. Indeed, the term often refers to a sad, upsetting or disastrous occurrence. A loved one's death, for example, may be considered as tragic. Tragedy, in other words, refers to an unfortunate set of events. Aristotle, on the other hand, uses the term a bit differently.

> Now let us discuss tragedy, taking up the definition of its essence. Tragedy is a representation of serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements used separately in the various parts of the play; represented by people acting and not by narration, accomplishing by means of pithy and fear a catharsis of such emotions (1987, p7).

Aristotle views tragedy not only in relation to its subject matter, but in in relation to its form as well. He thus expands the repertory of the tragic by articulating that tragedy is done in a particular setting with a number of structural elements. Tragedy is thus as much formal as it is thematic. He first describes it as a "representation". The Greek word for representation is *mimesis*, which could also mean imitation. A key concept of Western critical thinking, *mimesis* had first been discussed by Plato. The latter had argued before Aristotle that life imitates art. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle proposes an opposite view in which he argues that art imitates and represents life and its people. Furthermore, Aristotle considers a good tragic imitation to be one that is plausible and coherent in its structure.

Good tragedies, Aristotle contends, are ones whose plots are "about a single whole action that is complete, with a beginning, middle and end, so that it will produce the pleasure particular to it, as a single whole animal does" (1987, p17). Indeed, Aristotle's paramount concern is that a tragedy's plot should have plausibility and coherence. "There should be," he continues to argue, "nothing improbable in the incidents" (1987, p17). The plot, in other words, should have a rational and logical unity throughout the development of its story. In its focus,

the story should also limit itself to what is most essential in regards to the protagonist's development. In narrating the events, the tragedian should thus confine his story to the absolute necessary, and avoid unnecessary fillers and details. Likewise, the events of the story should move with "accordance and probability" (Markos, 200, p3). One must examine, in other words, if the elements of the plot do tie together in piecing a cohesive story. As a systematic and logical thinker, Aristotle is evidently deeply concerned with the unity of the plot. A tragedy, he believes, should contain a beginning, a middle, and an end. This further reflects his emphasis on the necessity of causation and effect. There must be, in other words, a causal relationship between each scene. In turn, this causal element tragedy propels the audience towards an "inevitable conclusion" (2000, Markos, p3). An "inevitable conclusion" does not infer a pre-determined force acting out in the plot. Instead, Aristotle makes the case that a strong plot would lead to a coherent and rational end.

Insofar, only the formal elements of tragedy have been discussed. Aristotle, however, is also interested in the thematic ramifications of tragedy. These pertain to the characterization of the protagonist, and the impactful events that unfold in the story. First, Aristotle spends a good amount of time laying out the qualities a tragic hero should have. In so doing, he lists four main qualities that he asserts are perquisites. The first quality is that the tragic hero "must be good" (Aristotle, 1987, p18). A tragic hero, according to Aristotle, can be neither immoral nor vicious. The hero must possess innocent and virtuous qualities that would distinguish him or her apart from the less virtuous individuals. Secondly, the hero must be "appropriate" to his or her "station in life" (Aristotle, 1987, p18). In other words, the protagonist must be befitting of his position. If the hero is a king, for instance, he must show qualities such as leadership that are associated to this position. Thirdly, the protagonist "must be true to life" (Aristotle, 1987, p18). The tragic hero, in different terms, must show a likeness to human nature. Though heroic, the hero must remain human and grounded. He or she cannot, expressed differently, be larger than life. Lastly, the tragic hero "must be consistent" (Aristotle, 1987, p18). This once more sheds light on

Aristotle's concern with cohesiveness. The tragic hero, he argues, must never show elements of contradiction. Instead, his actions, language, and deeds must be consistent from start to finish.

In addition to these preliminary requirements, Aristotle lists some other thematic factors that he believes would make up for a good tragic hero. First, he asserts that the hero must possess a "*hamartia*" (1987, p20). This represent a fatal flaw or mistake that occurs during the course of the plot. This can either be a sentiment or emotion such as pride or it can represent a mistake that the hero commits at some point in the story. Secondly, and in account of this fatal flaw, the hero's fate must experience a "*peripeteia*" (1987, p20). Essentially, this signals the hero's reversal of fortune or a recognition of sorts. In other words, the tragic hero's fate can move from good to bad or he/she may learn some important knowledge that might have been concealed to them previously. Either which, these elements should lead to what Aristotle labels "*catharsis*." (1987, p20). Just as Aristotle argues that there is a correct way of framing a story, he equally argues that there is a correct response from the audience. Aristotle himself does not expand on the concept of catharsis and leaves it up to the reader's interpretation to hypothesize over its meaning. Nevertheless, there are three main hypotheses that are today popular in theatrical and literary studies. These contend catharsis as: purgation, purification, and clarification. For matters of relevance, I shall only be using and relying on the third hypothesis. "According to the clarification theory of catharsis," Louis Markos writes, "tragedy sparks in us an intellectual response, a searing moment of perfect clarity" (Markos, 2000, P6). In other words, the audience reaches a moment of epiphany which enlightens them over particular moments and situations. In the case of *Million Dollar Baby*, I shall be arguing that the clarifying catharsis involves both Maggie's and the audience's realizations that the American dream is in fact only but a dream, one that not only does not match up the expectations but could also prove to be fatal.

3. Tragic Self-Making in Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby*

Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* has a lot to inform its viewers about the nature of the American dream. It tells the story of a thirty-one-year-old amateur boxer, Maggie Fitzgerald. Maggie's dream is that she one day becomes a boxing world champion in her respective weight class. Coming out of a poor background, she has aspirations for wealth and fame. To do so, however, she must first find a trainer willing to coach her. She quickly realizes that this is not an easy task, her being not only a woman, but one that is past thirty years old. She one day shows up at a gym owned by someone named Frankie, a reputed boxing coach. The initial exchange between Maggie is brief and rough. "I don't train girls," Frankie tells her. "I'm tough," she replies. Frankie then shuts her down with, "tough ain't enough" (Eastwood, 2004, 00:12:05). Maggie, although disappointed, does not give up in the least. Instead, she keeps showing up at his gym and insists that he gives her a chance. Eventually, Frankie does agree to coach her. Slowly but gradually, Maggie turns into quite the athlete. Indeed, she not only becomes a competent boxer, but she starts achieving bit by bit the level of wealth and fame that she has dreamed for. Having had a glimpse of what her dream entails, Maggie then meets a brutal turn of fortune. Boxing, which has made her bread and butter so far, would also lead her to a heavy injury. In her last professional boxing match, Maggie comes out of it paralyzed. Entirely indisposed to walking, and barely able to talk, she decides that she wants to end her life. For this matter, she asks the help of Frankie in assisting her suicide. Repulsed by the thought, he first declines her request. Ultimately, however, he grants her wish and pulls the rug. What is left of Maggie's dream? Only the specter of death and her fall from grace. Maggie's trajectory first reminds us of the self-making concept that imbues the American dream. Indeed, Maggie typifies the poor American commoner who has not much in her disposition but hopes and dreams for a better life. The narrator, named Scrap, informs the viewers about Maggie's background.

> She came from South Western Missouri, the hills outside the scratch-ass Ozark town of Theodosia… set in the cedars and oak trees between nowhere and goodbye. She grew up

> knowing one thing: she was trash (Eastwood, 2004, 00:12:17)

Originally from a little town called Ozark, a place described in the movie as somewhere "between nowhere and goodbye," Maggie decides to leave her natal land for Los Angeles to pursue her dream. This can already be juxtaposed with Roth's and Weinstein's conceptualizations of the American dream in the sense that one's background and one's past burdens matter very little in the pursuance of the dream. It matters not that she grew up knowing "she was trash," for this is only one of the obstacles that can be met and transcended. Paralleling this notion of transcending oneself, Scrap asserts that "the most important thing a fighter can have is heart" (Eastwood, 2004, 00:06:35). This informs us not only about boxing as a sport, but also about the perseverance that the American dream tries to radiate. In this sense, Maggie can transcend and outfight her background and her "trash" status if she is perseverant enough.

Maggie's ascension, however, would not be easy. She barely makes ends' meet while working as a waitress. We see her, in one particular scene, eating the clients' leftovers as her primary way of feeding herself. This elicits a number of responses from the viewers, mainly pity and compassion. This is indeed a miserable situation that no one wishes to themselves. Yet, this same scene cultivates other kinds of sentiments. As Weinstein further suggests about the American dream, it is a "dream of being free from one's origins." (2000, p3). There is a sense in which Maggie's current predicament as a waitress who feeds herself with clients' leftovers is as much of an endearing and noble prospect than her "trash" status when she was in Ozark. "If there's magic in boxing," tells us the narrator, "it's the magic of fighting battles beyond endurance, beyond cracked ribs, ruptured kidneys and detached retinas. It's the magic of risking everything for a dream that nobody sees but you" (Eastwood, 2004, 00:17:32). In this light, Maggie cares very little about her current situation and how it may look to others. Instead, she only cares about what is ahead. Presumably, the American dream does not discriminate against class, gender, or the

markings of race. In so believing, Maggie sees her waitress predicament as a motivation, and not something that she should feel outraged against. Maggie can hence be argued to belong in what Roth has named the “have nots” (Roth, 2002, p2). In other words, her background mirrors the state of millions of other Americans who have grown in deplorable situations, but nevertheless keep bearing burning hopes for new beginnings. Now that *Million Dollar Baby’s* general outline of the American dream has been laid out, the present study shall now explore the tragic elements of Maggie’s dream.

Let us first examine the tragic characterization of Maggie herself. As a tragic hero, her character must be first looked at in terms of her morals. As pointed out earlier, Aristotle argues that the tragic hero must be good. To this regard, Maggie is a character that elicits a lot of sympathy in the viewers. She is down to earth, and remains polite at all times. When mocked by others, she remains steadfast and keeps minding her own business. She never does bad deeds, nor does she say ill of others. Her good character is further exemplified when she spends all of her first win’s salary on the house she has bought for her mother “who throws the gift back in her stunned daughter’s face” (Foote, 2009, p155). Even though the latter shows Maggie some signs of ungratefulness, her daughter offers her the house nonetheless. All of these indicate that Maggie is a good-hearted character that meets Aristotle’s first criterion.

Secondly, Aristotle’s tragic character must be appropriate to his or her station in life. As far as her station in life is concerned, Maggie certainly befits the role. As seen earlier, her background is extremely modest, and so it makes the most sense for her to aspire for a better life. In one sarcastic but heartbreaking remark, she exclaims “I’m celebrating that I spent another year scraping dishes and waitressing… which is what I been doing since thirteen” (Eastwood, 2004, 00:32:16). All in all, Maggie is a single, thirty-one-year old waitress who has not much in her life, but her persistence. As such, the aspirations she carries are certainly reasonable and befit her station in life. In other words, the viewers are not surprised not are they in disproval of her dreams. In

fact, Maggie elicits support and compassion; both of which shall be looked in the subsequent parts of the analysis.

Closely linked to the previous principle of station in life, the tragic hero must also "be true to life" (Aristotle, 1987, p18). In other words, one must examine if Maggie does indeed possess a likeness to human nature. Usually, Aristotle's worry is that the hero is a larger than life type of figure. In popular culture, one might think of figures such as Superman. Endowed with a number of supernatural powers, Superman simply exceeds the humanlike. Maggie, on the other hand, is a figure that is much grounded and is perfectly humane in her characterization. Though heroic, Eastwood makes sure that she remains human. This can be noted in a number her emotional traits. Though she remains virtuous for the most part, for example, she is not entirely innocuous. Indeed, Maggie is also prone to more aggressive or less gentle emotions such as frustration and anger. This has already been made evident in the sarcastic remark she has made Frankie about her pathetic state as a waitress. Further, her humanity is also crystalized in the reaction she gives when her own mother tries to force her to give up all of her assets. To this matter, Maggie breaks down in tears and exchanges rough words with her. All of these elements do support the assessment that Maggie does indeed possess a likeness to human nature.

The fourth and final quality for the tragic hero that Aristotle lists in his *Poetics* concerns the character's consistency. Out of Aristotle's four preliminary qualities for the tragic hero, consistency is the one that Maggie displays the most in *Million Dollar Baby*. Her stubbornness and resilience are traits that can be easily singled out in the movie. In one of Scrap's opening narrating lines, he exclaims "sometimes best way to deliver a punch is to step back. But step back too far, and you ain't fighting at all" (Eastwood, 2004, 00:05:10). Allegorically, this perfectly mirrors Maggie's characterization. Maggie, throughout the course of the movie, never steps back. No matter the hurdle or the obstacle, she always keeps moving ahead and never loses sight of the goal ahead. This is first signaled when Frankie tells her that he does not coach girls,

but she has kept insisting regardless. Her resilience is also made evident when she decides to pay a six-month worth amount of dues to the gym instead of prioritizing food or a better renting place. As further proof of her consistency, she is completely carefree about the opinion and mockery of others. Her own mother belittles her and asks her to “find a man” so she could “live proper” (Eastwood, 2004, 01:15:15). In another occurrence, one client from the restaurant spots her taking some leftover food and hands her a condescending gaze. Despite these hurtful and belittling attitudes, Maggie meets them with nonchalance and hard-spirit. She does not waste her time dwelling on such attitudes; she prefers instead to fuel her willpower with whatever may bring her down.

Having demonstrated how Maggie meets Aristotle’s four qualities of the tragic hero, one must now examine the additional tragic elements listed in *Poetics*. To this regard, let us first assess whether Maggie displays a *hamartia*. While she has shown a great deal of resilience and valor, Maggie equally displays some shortcoming as well. As pointed out earlier, Maggie sees a meteoric rise as a boxer. Many people were skeptical when she has first expressed her goals as an amateur boxer. To make it in the rough professional world of boxing as a relatively old woman sounds like a fairy tale to many other characters. Nevertheless, Maggie makes it happen with flying colors. One boxing fight after another, Maggie turns more and more famous and successful. Her ascension is so spectacular that her own reputed coach Frankie finds deep difficulties in acquiring a suitable matchup. She has become, in other words, undefeatable. In turn, this has made her careless and overconfident. Consequently, Maggie displays her *hamartia* in her last fateful fight. Having landed a major blow to her opponent, Maggie turns her back and faces her coach celebrating her win a little bit too early. In turn, her opponent hits her by the neck which leads Maggie to drop by the floor. In this, the viewer notes Maggie’s *hamartia*: her carelessness. Her fatal flaw is that she did not keep her guard up at all times. What makes this even more tragic is that Maggie knew this all too well. Over the course of the film, Frankie always reminds her of the first rule of boxing which is to always “protect

yourself" (Eastwood, 2004, 01:03:05). Consequently, Eastwood foreshadows Maggie's fate and thus implements two other Aristotelian tragic elements – inevitability and causality.

Maggie's brutal fight hence leads us to discuss another causation and effect woven by *Million Dollar Baby*. Indeed, it is only with the tragic outcome of the fight that Maggie's *peripeteia* is brought to life. As discussed earlier, Aristotle argues that the tragic hero must experience a reverse of fortune. The one that often comes to mind would be a fortune that goes from good to bad or vice versa. Equally true, however, it can be both. From this perspective, Maggie experiences *peripeteia* twice in the film. First, she succeeds in transcending her predicament of being "trash." Until late in her career, she could not even afford buying food to feed herself. To this respect, she has overcome her situation. The success of her boxing career under Frankie not only brought her material wealth, but also fame. Many boxing aficionados around the world chanted her name, immortalizing her presence in the boxing world. Her second *peripeteia* would be signaled by her fateful loss in her last boxing match. Her fatal flaw, carelessness, would essentially and brutally reverse her fortune. Her "Spinal cord is so broken they'll never be able to fix it". Eastwood, 2004, 01:50:05). This has now become her reality. All the wealth and success she has amassed has turned into dust. Neither her dream nor the actualization of that dream could now save her. Her *peripeteia* is thus completed.

Conclusion: As a tragic hero, Maggie ultimately elicits what Aristotle has labeled as a cathartic response. Indeed, the response elicited by Maggie's *peripetia* is that of clarity and realization. The epiphany that both viewers and characters experience is one that concerns the limits of the American dream. If Maggie's doom reveals one thing, it is that although the dream's actualization may be achieved, it can also prove to be fatal. It thus raises some important concerns over the reachability and the worthiness of this pursuit. The endearing myths of the godlike self and the ability to shape oneself see a brutal reckoning in Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby*. It addresses head on the dream's

promises. Like many other figures nursed by this dream, Maggie too has put a lot of effort in getting clear of cultural constraints and has attempted bringing her 'self' into plenitude and fulfillment. *Million Dollar Baby* thus explores, though with a tragic twist, the same themes and same myths that the American dream offers to its dreamers. There is in Maggie this bursting desire for transcendence, for moving from rags to riches. Yet, desires such as these do not come without consequences. In one of the ending scenes of the film, Scrap reflects on Frankie's efforts to save Maggie. "Frankie must have called every hospital in America… looking for somebody who'd tell him they could fix her. There was nothing to be done" (Eastwood, 2004, 01:38:05). Frank's efforts and Scrap's ultimate assertion displays his catharsis as well as ours as viewers. "There was nothing to be done." It is as simple and as brutal as that. The same America that has fed Maggie the alluring dream for success is now unable to save her. "I can't be like this," Maggie tells Frankie, "not after what I had done. People chanted my name. They were chanting for me. I was in magazines. I got it all. Don't let me lie here till I can't hear those people chanting no more. (Eastwood, 2004, 01:52:50). Despite her predicament, she still thinks about the success that she had reached prior her injury. *Million Dollar Baby* essentially shows the grip and the hold that the American dream has on those that entertain it. "The story," as Howard Hughes writes in his *Aim for the Heart: The Films of Clint Eastwood* (2009), "uses boxing as a metaphor for life's lost opportunities and failures" (2009, p58). It is almost visceral in its potency. Even in her deathbed, Maggie still thinks about the success, freedom, and fame that her success has brought to her. It mirrors the dream's potency and its impetus towards a better life. Million Dollar Baby, however, deflates this dream as corrosive and illusory. It is a harrowing tale which takes the dream's magic, and reveals its gimmick.

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