

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

The concept of the "*American Dream*" has long been a foundational ideology in the United States, representing the belief that anyone, regardless of their background, can achieve success through hard work and determination. The term was introduced into contemporary social analysis in 1931 by historian James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America*. Adams described his vision of a society where individuals have the opportunity to attain prosperity and upward mobility based on their own merits rather than inherited privilege. Over time, this ideal evolved into a cultural and economic aspiration characterized by material wealth, personal success, and stability.

Throughout the 20th century, the *American Dream* became synonymous with middle-class prosperity. It was often depicted through the ownership of a home, a car, access to quality education for one's children, and a secure retirement. This vision was reinforced by the post-World War II economic boom, which saw the rise of suburban living and the expansion of corporate America. However, as economic and social realities shifted, the *American Dream* became more complex and, in some cases, unattainable for certain groups. The pursuit of this dream has also been closely tied to crime and corruption, particularly in cases where individuals sought success through illicit means, as seen in the world of organized crime.

The Irish-American immigrant experience in *The Irishman* (2019) reflects themes of ambition, loyalty, and survival in a rapidly changing America. Many Irish immigrants sought economic opportunity, but for some, like Frank Sheeran, the path to success led through organized crime. The film portrays how Irish-Americans navigated the complexities of identity and belonging, often working alongside or within the Italian-American mafia. Through Sheeran's rise and fall, *The Irishman* (2019) explores the cost of assimilation, the pursuit of power, and the moral compromises made in the name of the *American Dream*.

The Irishman, a 2019 epic gangster film directed by Martin Scorsese, provides a compelling exploration of the darker aspects of the *American Dream*. The film, based on Charles Brandt's book *I Heard You Paint Houses*, is a biographical account of Frank Sheeran, a former hitman for the Bufalino crime family. Sheeran's story offers a unique perspective on the *American Dream*, particularly within the context of the Italian-American mafia. His career path illustrates how the pursuit of success and financial security can lead individuals down morally ambiguous or criminal paths, challenging the conventional notion of the *American Dream* as an entirely virtuous pursuit.

Moreover, *The Irishman* (2019) highlights the consequences of choosing such a path. While Frank Sheeran gains financial success and influence, he ultimately faces isolation, regret, and a loss of personal relationships. This tragic arc serves as a critique of the *American Dream*, questioning whether the promise of success is worth the sacrifices it often demands. Through Frank Sheeran's story, the audience witnesses the slow decay of ambition, loyalty, and identity, all of

which were once part of the traditional dream of success in America. By examining Sheeran's life and choices, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how the *American Dream* is depicted in historical and cultural contexts, particularly within the framework of organized crime and the moral dilemmas it presents.

1.2. Research Question

1. What are the causes behind Frank Sheeran's pursuit of *American Dream* in *The Irishman* (2019)?
2. What are the consequences behind Frank Sheeran's pursuit of the *American Dream* in *The Irishman* (2019)?
3. How does *The Irishman* (2019) criticize the *American Dream* concept in 20th-century America?

1.3. Aims of the Study

The writer has three aims of the study, which are:

1. To identify the causes behind Frank Sheeran's pursuit *American Dream* in *The Irishman* (2019).
2. To analyse the consequences of Frank Sheeran's pursuit of the *American Dream* in *The Irishman* (2019).
3. To identify *The Irishman* (2019) criticize the *American Dream* concept in 20th-century America.

1.4. Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the *American Dream* stereotype as depicted on *The Irishman* (2019). *The Irishman* is a 2019 American crime drama film directed by Martin Scorsese and written by Steven Zaillian. The film is based on Charles Brandt's 2004 nonfiction book *I Heard You Paint Houses*, which recounts the life of Frank Sheeran, a labour union official with alleged ties to the Bufalino crime family. In connection with this thesis, the intrinsic aspects will be focused on character, characterisation, conflict, and setting of the film. The extrinsic aspect will be focused on the *American Dream* concept depicted in the film, consequences, and its critique. The source of the main data is from the movie *The Irishman* (2019).

1.5. Previous Studies

Some writers have conducted the research about *American Dream* ideology or the implementation of *American Dream*. Therefore, five research journals are chosen based on topic or theory similarity.

First, the research paper titled "*An American Dream Theory of Corporate Executive Fraud*" by Freddie Choo and Kim Tan written in 2007 builds on the "Broken Trust" theory by Albrecht et al. It introduces a sociological perspective, the "*American Dream*" theory, as a way to explain corporate executive fraud. This theory correlates with the "Fraud Triangle" concept, which identifies three components of Fraud: pressure, opportunity, and rationalization. The paper suggests that the relentless pursuit of the *American Dream* can lead corporate executives to engage in fraudulent activities, especially when personal ambition and

the drive for success outweigh ethical considerations. By integrating both psychological and sociological frameworks, the paper explores how societal expectations and individual pressures contribute to high-profile corporate fraud cases. Their research highlights how individuals may resort to unethical practices under pressure to meet societal expectations of success. However, unlike this thesis, their work is grounded in financial and corporate analysis, not in cultural or filmic representation.

Furthermore, "*The American Dream: A Cultural History*" by Lawrence R. Samuel written in 2012 explores how the concept of the *American Dream* has evolved across different eras in U.S. history. Samuel traces the dream's origins back to the Great Depression, when James Truslow Adams coined the term, and continues through to the early 21st century. He identifies key periods, such as the post-World War II materialism of "The Status Seekers," the counterculture movements of "The Anti-Paradise," and the economic optimism of the Reagan era in "Born in the U.S.A." While Samuel provides valuable cultural insights, his work is a broad overview of American society and not focused on any specific media form like film.

The book focuses on how media, particularly print journalism, has shaped public perceptions of the *American Dream* over time. Samuel examines how different generations have interpreted the dream, whether as financial success, racial equality, or personal freedom.

Moreover, the article "*The Polls: Trends—Attitudes About the American Dream*" by Sandra L. Hanson and John Zogby written in 2010 examines the evolution of public opinion on the *American Dream* over several decades, focusing on three key questions: the definition of the *American Dream*, whether it is achievable, and the role of government in making it accessible. Based on public opinion polls from 1988 to 2004, the study found that while many Americans continue to support the concept of the *American Dream*, there is growing scepticism about whether it can still be achieved by most people.

In addition, "*Immigrants and Ethnicity: The State of Italian-American Historiography*" by George E. Pozzetta written in 2016 examines the scholarly work surrounding the history and experiences of Italian Americans. Pozzetta discusses how the historiography has evolved over time, highlighting key themes, such as the social, cultural, and political integration of Italian immigrants in the United States. The work serves as a comprehensive overview of how Italian-American history has been studied and understood, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the diverse experiences within the Italian-American community.

Besides, "*Pop Culture and the Dark Side of the American Dream: Con Men, Gangsters, Drug Lords, and Zombies*" by Paul A. Cantor written in 2019 explores the portrayal of the *American Dream* in popular culture, focusing on its darker aspects. Cantor analyses various cultural artifacts—such as films, television shows, and literature—that depict figures like con artists, gangsters, drug lords, and even zombies, illustrating how these characters reflect societal anxieties and moral ambiguities. While Cantor's work aligns more closely with the thematic concerns

of *The Irishman* (2019) it surveys multiple films and characters, whereas this thesis conducts an in-depth analysis of a single narrative.

The book argues that these representations serve as a critique of the *American Dream*, highlighting themes of greed, corruption, and the potential for moral decay. Cantor examines how these narratives challenge conventional notions of success and fulfilment, revealing the often-destructive consequences of the pursuit of the *American Dream*.

Another study to support the research is “*A Reflection of American Dream in Carroll Shelby’s Character of Ford vs Ferrari*” by Mochammad Adit Sulistyabudi written in 2023. He analyses the *American Dream* as depicted in the *Ford vs. Ferrari*, with focusing on Carroll Shelby experience in order to achieve his version of *American Dream*. His goals are conducting research mainly about Carroll Shelby conflict in the film and see what is the point of *American Dream* value in *Ford vs. Ferrari*. Not only intrinsic elements like theme, character and characterisation, setting, and conflict used in the research, he also uses extrinsic elements as a reference to reach the conclusion. He investigates on Carroll Shelby’s version of *American Dream* which is outperforming the Ferrari team in the 24 Hours Le Mans Race. The previous studies provide valuable discussions about the *American Dream*, none of them explore the theme through the specific context of *The Irishman* (2019) nor do they analyse the intersection of organized crime, Irish-American identity, and moral consequences within one comprehensive cinematic narrative. This thesis fills that gap.

1.6. Methods of Study

1.6.1. Data and the Sources of Data

Data sources are often classified as main or secondary whereas conducting research. Primary data is original material obtained directly by the researcher for the study's unique aim, and it frequently provides firsthand proof (Walliman, 2011:72). In this research, the primary data is the film *The Irishman* (2019), directed by Martin Scorsese, which serves as the main object of analysis.

Secondary data, on the other hand, is material that has already been gathered and published for purposes other than the present study but might still give useful insights (Kumar, 2019:184). This study's secondary data consists of scholarly references and supporting resources such as books, journal articles, scientific essays, and trustworthy web sources on the film's setting, topics, and theoretical framework.

These materials were carefully chosen to provide the theoretical foundation, contextual backdrop, and critical views required to support the examination of *The Irishman* and its relationship to Irish-American identity and the *American Dream*.

1.6.2. Research Method

In conducting this research, the data were collected using a qualitative method by utilizing *The Irishman* (2019), directed by Martin Scorsese, as the primary source. The process began with a thorough viewing of the film to gain a comprehensive understanding of its narrative, character development, and thematic elements, particularly those related to the concept of the *American Dream*. During

the viewing, the researcher took detailed notes and captured screenshots of specific scenes and dialogues that were relevant to the topic.

These selected pieces of data; both visual and textual were then carefully reviewed and clarified to ensure their relevance and accuracy in the context of the study. Dialogues were transcribed, and the situational context of each scene was examined to verify its connection to the theme being explored. Once the relevant data were confirmed, they were analysed using the structuralist approach, which allows for the examination of binary oppositions, character roles, and narrative structures that shape the film's portrayal of the *American Dream*. The results of this analysis were then organized and presented to demonstrate how *The Irishman* (2019) reflects, challenges, or redefines the traditional ideals associated with the *American Dream*.

1.6.3. Research Approach

Based on the background of the study, the writer uses American studies approach. analysing complex cultural, thematic, and symbolic dimensions within a film. The American Studies approach is a dynamic and interdisciplinary method of inquiry that seeks to understand the complexities of the United States—its culture, politics, history, literature, and global influence. Emerging in the early 20th century, American Studies developed as an academic field in response to a growing desire to examine what makes the United States distinct, not only in terms of its institutions but also in terms of its ideas, myths, and cultural expressions.

The research adopts a structuralist approach, which focuses on the internal structure of the narrative and how meaning is constructed through character roles, and recurring patterns. This research employs the American Dream theory as the primary analytical framework to examine the representation of socio-cultural values, aspirations, and contradictions within the selected object of study. The American Dream, as a cultural myth and ideological construct, provides a critical lens through which the dynamics of success, class mobility, and identity are understood in the American context. Rooted in the idea that anyone—regardless of social background—can attain upward mobility through hard work and determination, the American Dream functions both as a national ethos and a symbolic narrative deeply embedded in American literature, film, and public discourse.

By combining American studies approach with American Dream theory, this research thesis offers a comprehensive and rigorous way to examine how *The Irishman* (2019) critiques the *American Dream*. .

1.7. Organization of Writing

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter accommodates the background of the study, research problems, objective of the study, previous study, scope of the study, method of research, method of research, and writing organization.

CHAPTER 2: INTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This chapter describes the intrinsic theoretical framework used for this study. The intrinsic theoretical framework is the explanation of the theory used for analysing the research problems which is the prejudice stages.

CHAPTER 3: EXTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This chapter describes the extrinsic theoretical framework used for this study. The extrinsic theoretical framework is the explanation of the theory used for analysing the research problems which is the prejudice stages.

CHAPTER 4: RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter consists of the result of the discussion and the answer from the research problem. The writer analysed the American Dream stereotype depicted in the film through Frank Sheeran's point of view.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This chapter contains the conclusion of the analysis result based on the research.