

# Cracking Dreams: An Analysis of the Three Stages of Symbolism of the Egg in Sherford Anderson's 'The Egg'

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the symbolism of the egg in Sherwood Anderson's short story 'The Egg'. By analysing the recurring presence of the egg in three symbolic stages - hope and opportunity, challenge and endeavour, and failure and humiliation - this study explores how the meaning of the egg shifts throughout the narrative. The paper discusses the literary and practical significance of these symbolic stages, highlighting the story's critique of the American Dream and its wider social context. By delving into the inner lives of the characters and the symbolism of the egg, this analysis provides a nuanced understanding of Anderson's commentary on the pursuit and ultimate disillusionment of the American Dream.

**Keywords:** Sherwood Anderson, The Egg, Symbolism, American Dream, Literary Analysis

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## 1. Introduction

The American Dream is the American ideal and belief that a better life can be achieved through hard work and relentless struggle, that is, people must succeed through their own hard work, courage, creativity and determination, rather than relying on a particular social class and the assistance of others<sup>[1]</sup>. In American

literature, the American Dream has been an enduring theme. In "The Egg", Sherwood Anderson describes a family in the social context of the time, carrying the so-called American dream, but always in a state of oppression: "They dreamed of making a beautiful fortune, relying on the so-called American spirit to support themselves, but they were unable to adapt to the new industrialised society, and eventually only dreamed of disillusionment." [2]. It masterfully explores the pursuit and eventual disillusionment of the American Dream through its rich use of symbolism. The egg, recurring throughout the narrative, transforms in symbolic meaning as the story unfolds. This paper explores the evolving symbolism of the egg in "The Egg", analyzing how its meaning shifts throughout the plot and discussing its literary and practical implications.

In "The Egg", the egg motif appears 47 times.[3] Through careful analysis, these occurrences can be categorized into three symbolic stages(as shown in Figure 1): hope and opportunity, challenge and effort, and failure and humiliation, culminating in despair and realization.

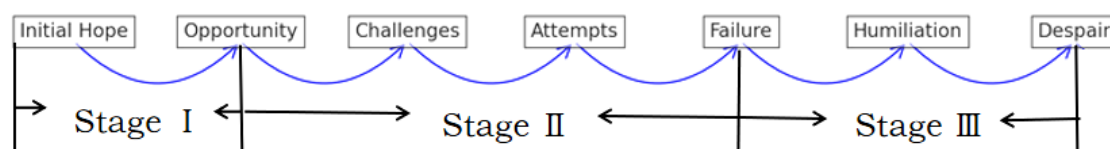


Figure 1: Stages of Symbolism in "The Egg"

These stages not only represent the protagonist's journey, but also reflect the broader themes of aspiration and disillusionment inherent in the American dream. The story progresses from hope to despair, reflecting the cyclical nature of ambition and failure and highlighting the fine line between success and failure. This layered symbolism allows Anderson to delve into the human condition, depicting the universal struggle for meaning and fulfilment in the face of societal pressures and personal limitations. The recurring "egg" motif thus becomes a powerful literary device that encapsulates the complexity of the American experience and the bleak reality of pursuing one's dreams.

## **2. Stage One: Hope and Opportunity**

Building on the initial exploration of the symbolism of the egg in the first stage (as shown in Table 1), it is crucial to delve into the socio-cultural context that shapes the views of the father and the son. The early twentieth century, the period in which *The Egg* is set, was a time of significant socio-economic change in the United States. This era witnessed the rise of industrialisation and urbanisation, which profoundly affected the American dream. For many families, including the protagonist, the quest for prosperity was marked by optimism, but also by uncertainty.

The father's idealistic view of the egg as a symbol of economic hope and potential is deeply rooted in the cultural narrative of the American Dream. This period promised that hard work and perseverance would lead to success and upward mobility. However, this dream often overlooked the structural challenges and economic realities faced by many. The father's investment in the chicken farm symbolizes his belief in this dream, representing not just a personal ambition but a broader societal aspiration. His hope is not merely for financial stability but for validation and a sense of accomplishment within the American socio-economic landscape.

For the son, the egg represents a simpler, more innocent view of life. His curiosity about natural processes, such as the hatching of an egg into a chick, reflects his innocent fascination with the life cycle. This view is unaffected by the socio-economic pressures that dominated his father's view. The son's understanding of the symbolism of the egg stems from curiosity and innate wonder, in contrast to his father's economically driven aspirations. This innocence is crucial to understanding the progression of the story as it emphasises the thematic transition from hope to disillusionment.

Table 1: Symbolism in Stage One

Text Location	Excerpt	Father's Perspective	Son's Perspective	Symbolic Meaning of the Egg
Paragraph 13, Sentences 1-2	<i>"It is born out of an egg..."</i>	Represents new life and economic	Represents the cycle of life and natural curiosity	Birth and Hope
Paragraph 13, Sentences 4-6	<i>"The hens lay eggs out of which come other chickens..."</i>	hope		

In these excerpts, the father's idealism and the son's innocence create a narrative interplay that enriches the story's thematic depth. This contrast is evident in their different reactions to the egg, which serves as a literary device to explore broader themes of aspiration, innocence, and the harsh realities of life.

### 3. Stage Two: Challenge and Effort

As the story progresses, the egg's symbolism shifts to represent the father's efforts and challenges in trying to achieve success(as shown in Table 2). The father tries unconventional methods, such as making the egg stand on its end, to draw customers, symbolizing his desire for success and his pursuit of the American Dream. He hopes that these efforts will prove his worth and demonstrate his determination to find a way out of their financial difficulties. However, these attempts often appear futile and absurd, highlighting the significant challenges and obstacles he faces in his pursuit of his dreams.

Table 2:Symbolism in Stage Two

Text Location	Excerpt	Father's Perspective	Son's Perspective	Symbolic Meaning of the Egg
Paragraph 40, Sentences 1-4	<i>"He talked of making an egg stand on its end..."</i>			
Paragraph 40, Sentences 5-6	<i>"Still grumbling at Columbus father took an egg from the basket..."</i>	Persistent pursuit of success	The father's struggle and anxiety	Challenge Attempt Hope Effort
Paragraph 43, Sentences 2-4	<i>"Father made a last desperate effort to conquer the egg..."</i>			

From the son's viewpoint, witnessing his father's struggles and failures fosters a complex emotional response. The son's initial confusion and helplessness gradually transform into a deeper understanding of the harsh realities his father faces. The son's observations are tinged with a mix of pity and admiration, reflecting his growing awareness of the significant gap between dreams and reality. This phase marks the beginning of the son's loss of innocence as he starts to comprehend the futile efforts and the relentless nature of his father's struggles. The egg, therefore, symbolizes not only the father's persistence but also the son's emerging recognition of life's inherent difficulties. The father's relentless efforts and attempts reflect his determination to fight against reality and pursue his dreams. However, as each attempt ends in failure,

the efforts increasingly seem desperate, ultimately leading to a further transformation in the egg’s symbolism.

In these stage, the egg serves as a potent symbol of challenge and effort, reflecting the father's desperate attempts to achieve success and the son's evolving understanding of these struggles. The egg's symbolism encapsulates the broader themes of the American Dream, highlighting the tension between aspiration and reality and the psychological impact of relentless effort in the face of societal and economic barriers. This stage sets the stage for the eventual shift to failure and humiliation, deepening the narrative's exploration of human perseverance and disillusionment.

**4. Stage Three: Failure and Humiliation**

To extend the analysis of Stage Three, it is crucial to delve deeper into the psychological and existential dimensions of the father's ultimate failure and its impact on both him and his son. This stage marks the climax of the narrative, where the egg's symbolism reaches its peak, encapsulating the themes of disillusionment and existential despair (as shown in Table 3).

Table 3: Symbolism in Stage Three

Text Location	Excerpt	Father’s Perspective	Son’s Perspective	Symbolic Meaning of the Egg
Paragraph 43, Sentences 5-8	<i>"The egg broke under his hand."</i>	Public humiliation and failure	Witnessing the pain of failure	Failure Humiliation Despair
Paragraph 45,	<i>"Father came upstairs to mother</i>	Despair and helplessness	Understanding the father’s	Reflection

Text Location	Excerpt	Father's Perspective	Son's Perspective	Symbolic Meaning of the Egg
Sentences 1-2	<i>and me with an egg in his hand..."</i>		despair	
Paragraph 45, Last 3 sentences	<i>"I wondered why eggs had to be and why from the egg came the hen who again laid the egg."</i>	Reflection on the cycle of failure	Deep reflection on life's cycles	

In this climactic phase, the father's repeated failures culminate in a moment of public humiliation when the egg breaks under his hand. This breaking of the egg is not just a physical act but a symbolic representation of the shattering of his dreams and aspirations. The father's sense of despair and helplessness is profoundly conveyed through his inability to control even the simplest of tasks. This moment underscores the futility of his relentless pursuit of the American Dream, reflecting a deep existential crisis. The egg, which once symbolized hope and potential, now represents the harsh reality of his unattainable ambitions and the inevitable failure that follows. The father's despair is compounded by his awareness of the public nature of his humiliation. The breaking of the egg in front of others symbolizes the complete exposure of his vulnerabilities and the destruction of his self-worth. This public failure is a critical turning point, emphasizing the societal pressures and the personal cost of his unfulfilled dreams.

For the son, witnessing his father's ultimate failure and public humiliation is a transformative experience. This event marks a significant shift in his understanding of life and its inherent challenges. The son's deep reflection on the cycle of life,

prompted by his father's despair, signifies his transition from innocence to a more mature, albeit disillusioned, perspective. The son's contemplation on why eggs must exist and the cycle of life they represent mirrors his internal struggle to make sense of the failure and suffering he observes. This reflection leads him to a more profound understanding of the complexities and harshness of reality. The egg, in this context, becomes a symbol of life's inevitable cycles of hope, effort, and failure. Through this realization, the son begins to see the futility of his father's relentless pursuit and the broader implications of the American Dream's elusive nature.

### **5. Literary and Practical Significance**

Anderson lived through the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, witnessing rapid industrial development, the collapse of traditional values, and the First World War. In his view, modern industrial society was "degrading, demeaning, and dehumanizing." <sup>[4]</sup> In "The Egg", Anderson's use of the egg as a recurring symbol allows for a nuanced exploration of the characters' inner worlds and the broader societal context. The egg's evolution from a symbol of hope to one of despair mirrors the characters' journeys and underscores the central theme of the elusive American Dream. By employing symbolism, Anderson effectively conveys the profound disillusionment experienced by individuals striving to achieve their ideals in a society that often thwarts their efforts.

The American Dream, deeply embedded in American culture, symbolizes the ideal that hard work and determination can lead to economic success and upward social mobility. However, in reality, this dream often clashes with structural and social barriers that prevent its realization. In "The Egg", the father's pursuit of the American Dream through his chicken farm and various entrepreneurial efforts reflects this aspiration. Yet, his repeated failures underscore the inherent challenges and societal constraints faced by many individuals in their quest for success.

The father's failure is not merely a result of personal shortcomings but also reflects broader social and economic issues. During the early 20th century, America was



undergoing rapid industrialization and urbanization, intensifying competition and reducing opportunities for small-scale farmers and entrepreneurs. The father's struggles highlight the difficulties faced by those trying to achieve the American Dream amidst these changing economic conditions.

Additionally, the mention of Abraham Lincoln in the story serves as a poignant contrast. Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) was born in a humble log cabin. Through his personal efforts, he became a lawyer, a senator, and eventually the 16th President of the United States.<sup>[5]</sup> Lincoln's success story, often emblematic of the American Dream, is held up as an ideal. However, for ordinary individuals like the father, Lincoln's success is an unattainable myth, exacerbating their sense of failure and despair. This contrast underscores the disparity between the idealized American Dream and the harsh realities faced by many.

In the exploration of the American Dream, symbolism in literature serves as a profound tool for critiquing societal norms and exposing the discrepancies between society's promises and their fulfillment(as shown in Table 3). This literary device enriches the narrative, allowing authors to discuss broad socio-cultural issues subtly and compellingly. In addition to Sherford Anderson, there are many other writers who employ similar tactics to achieve a similar effect. By embedding symbols such as the green light in *The Great Gatsby*, the rabbits and the farm in *Of Mice and Men*, the boat in *An American Tragedy*, and the egg in *The Egg*, writers offer not just a story but a powerful reflection on the complexities of personal and societal aspirations. Considering the word count, the details are presented here in the form of a table.

Table 4: Some Symbolic Imageries in American Literature

Literary Work	Symbolic Imagery	Initial Stages	Intermediate Stages	Final States
<i>The Great</i>	Green	Hope and	Unattainable Ideals	Disillusionment

Literary Work	Symbolic Imagery	Initial Stages	Intermediate Stages	Final States
<i>Gatsby</i>	Light	Dreams		
<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	Rabbits and Farm	Idealized Good Life	Harsh Reality	Shattered Dreams
<i>An American Tragedy</i>	Boat	Hope for a New Life	Signs of Instability	Tragedy Occurs
<i>American Pastoral</i>	Glove Factory	Prosperity of U.S. Industry	Symbol of Economic Decline	Social and Economic Changes
<i>The Road</i>	Road	Hope for Survival	Loneliness and Despair	Deep Test of Humanity
<i>The Egg</i>	Egg	Hope and Opportunity	Challenges and Attempts → Failure and Humiliation	Despair and Reflection

These symbols provide deep layers of meaning, showcasing how unattainable dreams, the fragility of hope, the dangers of unchecked ambition, and the cycle of effort and failure mirror the broader American experience. They reflect the illusions and disillusionments inherent in chasing the American Dream, illustrating the narrative’s relevance and resonance with readers. Through such symbolism, literature does not merely entertain but also engages in a cultural dialogue, critiquing and challenging the

perceptions of its audience, thus enhancing its educational and real-world significance.

## **6. Conclusion**

An analysis of the symbolism in Sherwood Anderson's "The Egg" reveals the multifaceted nature of the egg motif across different stages, from hope and opportunity to challenge and effort, and finally to failure and despair. This symbolism enriches the narrative, allowing for a deeper exploration of the characters' inner lives and the broader societal context. Anderson's use of the egg as a recurring symbol effectively conveys the complexities of the American Dream and the disillusionment experienced by individuals striving to achieve it.

To further underscore the significance of the egg's symbolism, it is essential to recognize its role in illustrating the cyclical nature of hope and disillusionment. The narrative journey from optimistic beginnings to crushing defeat serves as a microcosm of the broader human experience. The egg, in its transformation through the stages of the story, mirrors the protagonists' internal and external struggles, making it a powerful emblem of their aspirations and the stark realities they face.

In summary, Anderson's "The Egg" not only critiques the myth of the American Dream but also delves into the universal themes of human aspiration, resilience, and the inevitable confrontation with failure. The egg's evolving symbolism—from a beacon of hope to a testament of relentless effort, and ultimately, to a symbol of poignant failure—provides a rich, layered narrative that captures the essence of the characters' journeys. This literary device allows Anderson to craft a profound commentary on the nature of ambition and the often harsh realities of life, making "The Egg" a timeless reflection on the human condition. By highlighting the stark contrast between dreams and reality, Anderson invites readers to reflect on their own aspirations and the societal constructs that shape their pursuit of success.

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