

Night Journey 66: Star Spangled Banner: Land of the Free

In the *Star Spangled Banner*, the national anthem of the United States of America, our nation is heralded as the land of the free. This seems like a rather incongruous moniker, given that American society comprises a mere 4 percent of the world's population while housing 22 percent of its prison population. The U.S. claims to be the land of opportunity and plenty, yet it is also a land of inequality, divided by the extremes of wealth and poverty, and a seemingly unbridgeable ethnic divide.

The U.S. has evolved into a consumer nation. Possessions have become status symbols, which indicate wealth, prosperity, and power. Americans strive for the Dream: expensive cars and houses, as much money as can be garnered, and any objects that convey a high social class standing. All are prisoners of a seemingly inescapable mindset, where self-worth is based upon comparative measurements. Too many suffer humiliation because they lack opportunities that enable them to achieve the personal valuation and living status deemed respectable in our society.

All social classes are held captive by wants, rather than by needs. The external social and economic forces enacting on individuals determine how they react and relate to their circumstances. People create themselves or accept themselves as others believe them to be, and are imprisoned by who they have become. The world people create in their minds constructs the world they experience. Americans are, first and foremost, prisoners of a predatory values system, which ultimately renders them hostages of their own minds, long before physical incarceration occurs.

In the painting, the flag is used as a structure of containment to suggest that individuals are symbolically held captive by the Americanism described above. All elements in the painting are transparent and impalpable, except for the heads of the five figures, which are opaque, suggesting that the mind is the only true and real prison. It is the mind that holds us back from finding the land of the free.