

American Dream

What is the American Dream?

The “American Dream” is a sort of ethos or set of beliefs that drive many U.S. citizens as they work toward creating a life for themselves. This set of ideals – which includes notions of individual rights, freedom, democracy, and equality – is arguably centered around the belief that each individual has the right and freedom to seek prosperity and happiness, regardless of where or under what circumstances they were born.

A key element of the American dream is the belief that through hard work and perseverance, anyone can rise “from rags to riches”.

The Origin of the American Dream

The American Dream is rooted in the U.S. Declaration of Independence. That document, created by America’s founding fathers, says two key things that are largely responsible for shaping what the classic American Dream is. The declaration says that “all men are created equal” and that each man/woman has the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

The Many Versions of the American Dream

Throughout the history of the U.S. – both before and after it became an independent nation – the American Dream has changed, going through a variety of forms and meanings while maintaining as its essence the core beliefs of freedom and happiness in place.

In its earliest years, the dream was centered around the lure of westward expansion and frontier life within the U.S. In 1774, Virginia’s Governor, John Murray, said that most Americans were constantly imagining that “the Lands further off are still better than those upon which they are already settled.” He also noted the constant dissatisfaction and desire for even more and even better when he said, “If they attained Paradise, they would move on if they heard of a better place farther west.”

19th Century America

In the 19th century, the beginnings of mass emigration were affected by and affected the American Dream. A perfect example of this is the emigration of many highly-educated Germans who ran to the U.S. after the failure of the 1848 German revolution and the attempt to break down hierarchical standards. They were drawn by the political and economic freedoms embraced in the New World, and the fact that America did not operate on the same class system, nor did it subscribe to the notion that a person could only achieve as much as their class dictated.

The American Dream was also significantly shaped and perpetuated by the discovery of gold in the 19th century. The 1849 discovery in California drew in hundreds of thousands of men believing that they, too, could pan a fortune overnight. While most did not, and in fact, many men spent their families’ entire savings to find nothing, several men did become rich in a matter of days. While it has changed through many years and different political and economic

circumstances within the country, the belief that personal success is possible for anyone to attain is a dream that still motivates Americans today.

The 20th Century American Dream

The term “American Dream” became even more popular in the 20th century, partly on the back of James Truslow Adams’ 1931 book, “Epic of America.” Adams believed the American Dream was a “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.” (214) He did not see it as a dream of riches or material goods, but of being able to reach one’s full potential and to be acknowledged for one’s efforts “regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” (Adams 215) This idea of equal opportunity for all to reach their potentials and to be recognized for their achievements is clearly appealing and immigrants have poured into the United States of America from all over the world chasing this dream. After Christopher Columbus first landed in America, many Caucasian Europeans followed suit and, quickly outnumbering the Native Americans, became the majority race in America. Even with the immigration of millions of Africans, Asians, and Central and South Americans to the U.S., the Caucasians’ status as the majority race has not changed.

The American historian also stressed that, despite the growth of the country, the explosion of the rich and successful, and how such families established a sort of social order where those coming from a position of wealth tended to succeed and have greater opportunities, that the belief was that, regardless of this, anyone could find success and happiness. He noted that the American Dream is and has been “... much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class.”

Since Adams’ vision of the American Dream was that it applied to everyone, it should not matter if a person is a part of a racial minority or not. However, race has always been an issue, no matter where a person may be in the world, and this brings up a pertinent question: while the American Dream is meant to apply to everyone, has it ever really been accessible to everyone, racial minorities included?

The term for the American Dream may only have been coined in the 1930s but the ideals behind it have been around much longer than that. Great writers in American literature have been talking about the dream for years.

Contrasting the lives and works of four racial minority writers from different time periods against the life and works of a majority race writer significantly related to the American Dream will unveil truths about whether writers from racial minority groups really have less access to the American Dream, or if it might be the other way around altogether.

An early example of a writer who had the American Dream is Booker T. Washington. He was born in 1856 as a slave but was freed at a young age and worked in a salt mine. Washington was determined to become educated and made time around his work schedule to go to school and learn to read. Washington wrote in *Up From Slavery*, “In later years, I confess that I do not envy the white boy as I once did. I have learned that success is to be measured not

so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.” At the 1895 Cotton States Exposition, Washington made a speech that would come to be known as the “Atlanta Compromise”. In this speech, Washington’s main idea was to “cast down your bucket where you are.” Washington believed that people should make the most of what they had. He felt it was more important to work hard in one’s industry right at that moment, be it agriculture, mechanics, or commerce, than to long for high-powered jobs usually occupied by Caucasian Americans. In addition, Washington asked Caucasian Americans to be willing to cast their buckets down in the African American population, asking them to give African Americans the opportunities to work and prosper in America.

Washington’s vision lines up with certain aspects of Adams’ definition of the American Dream. Washington believes that the lives of the African American population would be improved if they took any opportunity they could to work hard and do their best, which is a belief in agreement with Adams’ that the American Dream fulfilled would be for people to be given opportunities according to their achievements. However, Washington’s vision did not seem to encapsulate a life that would be “better,” “richer,” and “fuller” for the African Americans. His vision was of a stable life for the people of America, whether Caucasian or African American, but it was more practical and realistic without the ideal of reaching one’s full potential. In fact, it leaves out the part of the American Dream about reaching the dream regardless of one’s birth because Washington’s vision seemed to accept that African Americans would have to work more labor-intensive, menial jobs under the supervision of the Caucasian Americans. It is not a dream of fulfilling potential but of getting by as well as one can considering the circumstances. Even back in the 1800s, before many new laws on equality of human beings were passed, chasing a dream of living to one’s fullest potential seemed unrealistic to Washington.

While Washington seemed satisfied with improving the present, W.E.B. Du Bois, an African American civil rights activist in Washington’s time, believed that people needed to change the future in order to achieve the American Dream. Du Bois had a stronger sense of the American Dream than Washington did. Du Bois’ belief that African Americans deserved to be treated better than they were indicated his hope for a better future for them, where they could have better opportunities and reach their potentials. DuBois’ civil rights activism embodied the American Dream.

Close to the time of Du Bois’ prominence as an activist, towards the early 1900s, was F. Scott Fitzgerald. To Fitzgerald, the American Dream was not a better life with more opportunities; it was an enticing and superficial ideal of wealth and glamor – and yet, even once this idealized status was reached, it was never as fulfilling as one might have hoped. The excitement of the American Dream to him was more in the journey towards attaining it, hoping for a better future and going about it in the wrong ways, and attaining the dream only really resulted in disillusionment.

One modern writer who addresses this dream in a similarly cynical way is Indian American author Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri’s parents moved from India to London before Lahiri was born: Lahiri was born in the United Kingdom in 1967. When Lahiri was a child, her family moved to Rhode Island in the U.S. for her father’s job and Lahiri grew up in Rhode Island. However, despite having American citizenship and having spent most of her life in the U.S., Lahiri has had difficulty feeling as if she belongs in America. Despite the fact that Lahiri grew

up in America, the color of her skin and the assumptions that come with it still cause her to feel like an outsider and make the people around her treat her differently from her Caucasian American counterparts.

Through writing about ethnically Indian characters who immigrate to the U.S., Lahiri has found a way to face her own reality. While she spent much of her growing years “denying or fretting or evading,” she has come to accept that her family is connected to two distinct parts of the world, and she finds freedom and peace in acknowledging this fact.

Lahiri seems to be close to achieving the American Dream: she has taken opportunities to work to her full potential and has received impressive recognition for her talents. However, as an immigrant to America who has struggled between identifying as Indian and as an American, there is a question of whether having to leave one’s home country to a place where one might never truly feel one belongs really allows for a fuller, richer, better life.

What does this suggest about the American Dream’s accessibility to racial minorities?

For each of the writers discussed in this essay, certain parts of the American Dream were attainable, but there was always at least one aspect out of reach. For Washington, the idea of having a brighter future had to take a backseat to the more realistic importance of having a stable job to support oneself in the present. Du Bois saw the American Dream as a whole and worked hard to make this dream a reality for future generations of African Americans; however, he did not anticipate that his struggle with the “twoness” of the African American self was one that would live on to other racial minority writers in America, such as Lahiri. Lahiri has achieved great things in her lifetime but her “warring ideals,” as Du Bois might have described them, between being Indian and also being American makes achieving the American Dream in its fullness seem impossible. The fulfillment of potential and recognition of efforts might lead to a more comfortable, more successful life, but the success finds its origins in the pain of being an outsider because of the color of one’s skin.

Harlem

BY LANGSTON HUGHES

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?