

*“The future belongs to those who believe
in the beauty of their dreams.”*

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HANDBOOK ON AMERICAN CULTURE AND LITERATURE

AMERICAN DREAM - CIVIL RIGHTS' MOVEMENT - NATIVE AMERICANS - WOMEN'S RIGHTS

DORIS LIEDERER

Contents:

MODULE I

The American Dream	7
The Origins of the American Dream	8
A Movie: The Great Gatsby	16
A Movie: The Pursuit of Happiness (2006)	17
Ellis Island - Hot Spot of the American Dream	19
Arnold Schwarzenegger	21
A Movie: Seven Lives starring Will Smith.....	23

MODULE II

Civil Rights' Movement	25
Jim Crow Laws (1896 - 1964)	26
Speaking Activity	29
A story by Joseph Holloway/Jim Crow Laws	30
The story of Jesse Owens	34
Segregation	35
Martin Luther King.....	36
A Song: One Day.....	38
Martin Luther King Quiz.....	39
A Novel: To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee	40
A Movie: Mississippi Burning.....	42
A Song: We shall be free	44
About Langston Hughes	50

MODULE III

Native Americans	53
A Novel: Flight by Sherman Alexie	54
A Movie: Dances with Wolves	56
A Novel: Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko	58
Native American Culture.....	62

MODULE IV

Women's Rights.....	65
The History of Women's Rights	66
Women's Poetry in the 19th Century.....	71
Because I could not stop for death (479) by Emily Dickinson.....	72
Equal rights?	76
Article on a 15-year-old shooting survivor	77
A Movie: Erin Brockovich	79

MODULE V

War and Peace: The Vietnam War and the Peace Movement.....	81
Timeline of the Vietnam War.....	82
Vietnam in the Movies.....	85
The Peace Movement	88

KEY FOR HANDBOOK.....	92
BIBLIOGRAPHY	101
WEBLIOGRAPHY.....	102



MODULE I

The American Dream



The term 'The American Dream' is known around the world, but what exactly does it mean? For many people, both inside and outside of America, against the backdrop of deprived inner cities, environmental degradation and inane mass-produced culture, it seems incomprehensible. Yet many Americans still believe strongly in 'The American Dream'; why? Clearly, 'The American Dream' is not a new idea, so it must somehow be bound up with the history of America itself. It must also be bound up with the people, who from the 1500s onwards, decided to leave the land of their birth and travel thousands of miles to a new land; one that offered some kind of hope in a world struggling with poverty and injustice.

THE ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

In the middle of the Depression (1931), a time when America was struggling with high unemployment rates and even starvation, author James Truslow Adams sat down to write a book with the title *The Epic of America*. In his opinion, America still was a place that differed significantly from Europe and the rest of the world. He wrote, "The American Dream is that 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." Furthermore, Truslow believed that only in America everyone, no matter where they came from, what social status that they had or family history, could achieve this dream of a better life through dedication and hard work. Nowadays we still talk about the American Dream, and the phrase „from rags to riches“ also indicates that wealth can be achieved by people who want to achieve it.

The Puritans

Truslow was not the first to have an American Dream. In fact, America was built on the dreams of several people. While mainly known for their strict religious views and their beliefs in witches and magic, the Puritans (an evangelical group that had to leave England in the 17th century because of prosecution) came to America with the dream of religious freedom.

Also referred to as the Pilgrims, they established colonies in New England and believed that they could set an example for a better society based on religious principles that would encourage others to follow in their footsteps. They dreamed of a „city upon the hill“, where life would be better and more fulfilling, if not for themselves, then at least for the generations to come. Thus, their dream was a spiritual one.



Founding Fathers from left to right: Patrick Henry, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Nathan Hale, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, John Adams & James Madison.

The Founding Fathers and the Idea of Upward Mobility

In 1775 America fought for another dream, the dream of being an independent country that was not going to be controlled by Great Britain anymore.

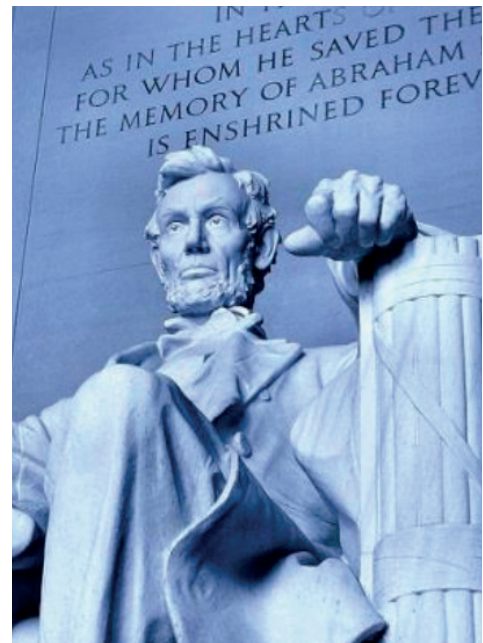
The conflict is referred to as the American Revolution (1775-1783). In 1776 the Declaration of Independence, the official document that gave America its political freedom, was signed and in 1783, the newly formed United States of America agreed on a constitution. However, the Declaration of Independence also talks about a new American Dream, namely the dream that every person living in the United States has the right to „life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness“. In other words, Thomas Jefferson, the main author of the document, officially gave Americans the „right“ to live happy and fulfilling lives. In 1783, another document, the constitution, also states that the US government is not allowed to choose one official religion. On the contrary, it clearly says that everyone must be allowed to hold on to their individual beliefs.

Besides Thomas Jefferson, another founding father, Benjamin Franklin, further contributed to the idea of the American Dream. Although he was heavily involved in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence and the establishment of America as a new nation, he started his life as a middle class American and managed to work his way up through dedication and discipline. More than any other founding father, Franklin coined the term „upward mobility“ which expresses the idea that even the poorest person can become successful through hard work and the will to study and improve. Later, in the 19th century, Abraham Lincoln, once a poor boy who lived in the woods of Kentucky, became the president of the United States of America which further exemplified how origin and birth should not be obstacles to becoming someone in America. In addition, America also started to expand as more and more western states were explored and included in the United States. It was during that time that the term „manifest destiny“ appeared. Jim O’Sullivan, first used the term in a newspaper article in 1845 and expressed the idea that the United States had the responsibility to expand and spread their understanding of freedom across the continent.



Founding Father Benjamin Franklin.

„Those who deny freedom to others, deserve it not for themselves.“ Abraham Lincoln.



Dreaming of Equality

While the *Declaration of Independence* declares that „all men are created equal“, equality remained a highly ambiguous term in the United States until the late 1960s. In fact, black and mixed race people were not considered to be equal to the rest of Americans. Brought to America on slave ships as early as the 15th century, many were the property of white people and had to work and live under terrible circumstances throughout the country, but particularly in the South. When slavery was officially abolished in the course of the Civil War, life did not automatically change for the black population. The idea of „white supremacy“ remained in the heads of many people and as a result, blacks were forced to use separate facilities, for example, their own restaurants, waiting rooms and schools. Also, they did not have the right to vote and were often the victims of violence, even lynchings. It was common practice not to charge white people for injuring or killing a black person. It was not until the 1960's that things began to change. Eventually, the Civil Rights' Movement with its most significant representative Martin Luther King Jr. was born. Born as the son of a black pastor, MLK followed in his father's footsteps and his methods of protesting against injustice through peaceful resistance became famous. King created his own „American Dream“ which he described in his most famous speech „I have a dream“ in Washington DC on August 28th, 1963. His dream was a dream of equal rights for all Americans regardless of their race. Eventually, with the passing of the Civil Rights' Act in 1964 which made any form of discrimination against black people illegal, King's dream of equality was realized.



Consumerism in American society.

Home Ownership and Dreaming of the Good Life

Owning a home, preferably a house, was also part of the American Dream. Gathering material possessions was a means to express that somebody had ‘made it’ through hard work and effort. In other words, this dream was linked to the dream of upward mobility. Even before owning a house, owning a car became a typical example of the American Dream. Mobility meant that people could leave the cities and settle in the suburbs, where they could ideally buy their own house and start their own family. For some, America even became the country where they could go from „rags to riches“, meaning that they could work themselves up the social ranks and become millionaires.



WORDS: **depression** (political): a period of severe economic problems with high unemployment and little to no economic growth. 1929-1941 in the US / **unemployment**: having no work and no income / **starvation**: not having enough food / **achievement**: to successfully reach a goal / **from rags to riches**: vom Tellerwäscher zum Millionär / **to indicate**: formal for: to show / **wealth**: formal for: riches / **prosecution**: to go after someone because of criminal charges / **to establish**: formal for: to set up / **to encourage**: to support someone, to give them confidence / **thus**: formal for: so, in this way / **constitution**: fundamental principles of a state/country / **pursuit**: the process of going after your goals, dreams / **to contribute**: to give something, to support / **to draft**: trying to write something, e.g. the first version of a document / **establishment**: hier: Gründung / **dedication**: to focus on something / **to coin**: to invent, to come up with / **to improve**: to make something better / **obstacle**: something that is in your way and needs to be overcome / **to expand**: formal for: to make bigger / **destiny**: something that will happen to a person / **to declare**: formal for: to say, to state / **ambiguous**: not clear, has more than one meaning / **property**: something that you own e.g. land / **circumstance**: the situation you find yourself in / **to abolish**: formal for: to stop, to make illegal / **supremacy**: something that is in power and in control / **facility**: a place or some equipment / **victim**: a person that is hurt, or killed / **injustice**: lack of fairness / **regardless**: despite / **to pass**: here: to make something happen, to make something official / **effort**: to try hard / **social ranks**: your place in society

RESEARCH THE LIVES OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS LISTED BELOW:

- Thomas Jefferson
- Benjamin Franklin

by watching the videos on the following websites:

<http://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/benjamin-franklin>

<http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/thomas-jefferson>

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION SECTION:

1. Find out more about the Puritans/Pilgrims on the websites mentioned below and answer the following questions

- State the reasons why they decided to come to America
- Provide details about their journey to America (name of the ship, where did they go ashore, name of first settlement etc.)
- Describe the relationship between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans

Websites:

<https://www.plymouth.org/learn/just-kids/homework-help/who-were-pilgrims>

<http://www.history.com/topics/pilgrims>

2. Investigate the American Revolution in more detail using the website provided below and answer the following questions:

- State two reasons for the American Revolution and explain what we understand by The Stamp Act and the Tea Act.

Website:

<http://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/american-revolution-history>

COMPREHENSION CHECK:

Decide whether the following statements are **True or False** and underline the **first four words** of the sentence that provides the answer in the text:

1. J.T. Adams believed that the United States did not share a lot of similarities with Europe.
2. A person's social background and family history could play a role in achieving a better life.
3. The Puritans wanted to make other people aware of their newly formed society.
4. Having the right to choose an individual belief and religion is not stated in the United States Declaration of Independence.
5. The term equality mainly evoked the same ideas in people across the US.
6. Non-violent ways of gaining equality was the key idea of Martin Luther King Jr.
7. Owning a car and a house were long considered a necessity for living the American Dream.

EXERCISES:

1. Analyze and interpret the chart "Is the dream still alive?" and discuss the results with your partner.
2. Interpret the chart "What Americans think of the American Dream" by writing one paragraph.
3. Make a personal list of four things you dream about and discuss your list with your partner.

Is the American Dream still alive?

America remains the land of possibility: A majority of Americans still believe the country is a place that enables its citizens to reach for the stars, although fewer than in 2008.

52%

believe the U.S. is a place where anyone can
achieve fame and fortune
down from 58% in 2008

61%

believe people around the world aspire to come
to the U.S. to achieve their dreams
down from 75% in 2008



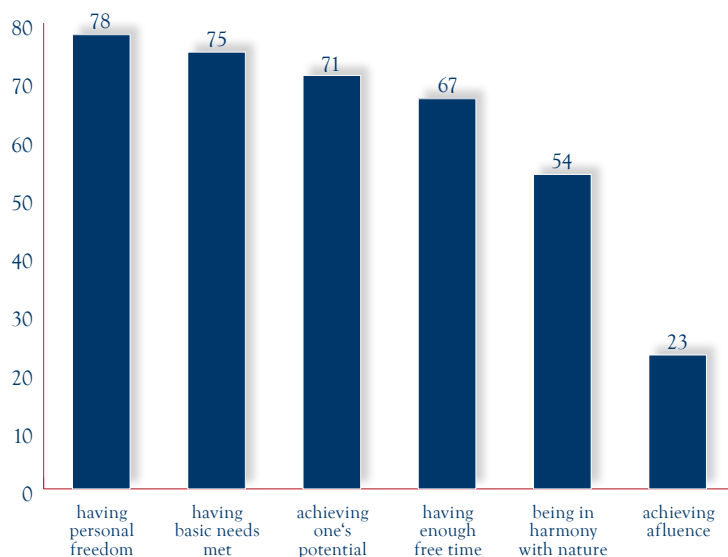
AMERICA IS THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY,
ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE HERE
IF YOU WORK HARD
AND FOLLOW YOUR DREAM



In 2014 the Center for a new American Dream conducted a national survey to determine American attitudes on wealth, sharing, materialism and more.

WHAT AMERICANS THINK OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Percentage of Americans who consider the following very or extremely important in their vision of the American Dream:



Sources:

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/who-lives-the-american-dream/>

<http://www.newdream.org/resources/poll-2014>



HOMEWORK - ARTICLE WRITING

CRITICAL ARTICLES WANTED!

What do **YOU** think about the American Dream?

„Some say, that the American Dream has become the pursuit of material prosperity - that people work more hours to get bigger cars, fancier homes, the fruits of prosperity for their families - but have less time to enjoy their prosperity. Others say that the American Dream is beyond the grasp of the working poor who must work two jobs to insure their family's survival. Yet others look toward a new American Dream with less focus on financial gain and more emphasis on living a simple, fulfilling life.“

Source: <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/american-dream/students/thedream.html>

What do **YOU** think about the American Dream?

Is the American Dream only about money, and have people forgotten the true meaning of the American Dream?

Send us **YOUR** article of 220 words and **win a trip to the United States**.



BRAINSTORM YOUR THOUGHTS AND IDEAS ON HOW TO TACKLE THE TASK ABOVE:

My personal thoughts on
the American Dream

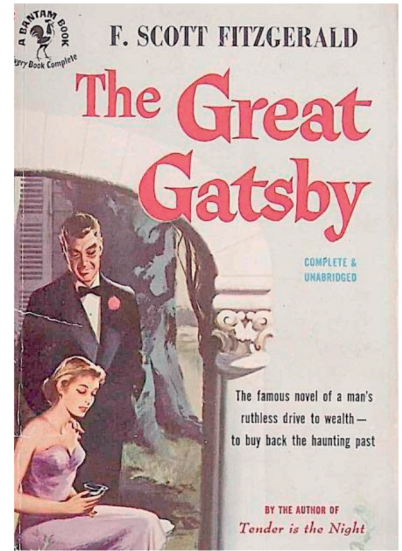
A MOVIE: THE GREAT GATSBY

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY AND HOMEWORK: REPORT WRITING

Youtube Video Activity:

While watching the Party Scene from the movie The Great Gatsby on Youtube.com, fill in the following grid by transferring it to your exercise book.

Youtube Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgcuBOVMGsg>



The column "Why" refers to your personal view of things and is open to free interpretation.

Scene	WHO	WHERE	WHEN	HOW	WHY
PARTYSCENE					

HOMEWORK - REPORT WRITING

You are a showbiz reporter for a major newspaper. Write a report for your editor in chief about the party at Gatsby's mansion.

In your report you should:

- Describe who was present at the party, the general mood and atmosphere.
- Briefly refer to some of the rumors that are circulating about Gatsby.
- Suggest why Gatsby throws these parties and make assumptions about the state of American „high society“ (Gatsby's motive(s) - suggestions)

Write 240 words. Divide your report into sections and give them individual subheadings.

A MOVIE: THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS (2006)

The Pursuit of Happiness is a movie based on the life of Christopher Gardner, who managed to go from rags to riches in 1981.

In the movie, Christopher Gardner, played by Will Smith, tries to make a living selling new bone density scanners to doctors. However, selling these devices turns out to be very difficult as most doctors do not want to pay such a high price for a product that is not absolutely necessary. Soon, Gardner finds himself struggling with severe financial problems and the question how he

should provide for his wife and son. After having been evicted from his flat and having been left by his wife, Gardner and his son barely manage to survive and eventually end up sleeping on the street.

The only way out seems to be a change of career and when Gardner is offered a six month internship in a stock brokerage firm he seizes his chance and decides to do it. In the end, Gardner is the most successful candidate in the program and is offered a position in the company.

Watch the trailer for the movie on www.youtube.com and answer the following questions:

1. What can be said about Chris Gardner's childhood and his father?

2. Why does Gardner have a problem with his landlord?

3. Does completing an internship guarantee you a job? Why/Why not?

4. Mention ONE piece of advice Gardner gives to his son.

taken from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89Kq8SDyvfq>

DISCUSS:

- In your own words, explain why *The Pursuit of Happiness* is such a good example of living the American Dream.
- Come up with some ideas originally established by the American Dream by drawing parallels to the movie.
- Discuss the quote below with a partner and decide whether you agree with the statement or not.



*“Don’t ever let someone tell you that you can’t do something.
Not even me. You got a dream, you gotta protect it.
When people can’t do something themselves,
they’re gonna tell you that you can’t do it.
You want something, go get it”*



ELLIS ISLAND – HOT SPOT OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Ellis Island is a small island in the Hudson River in the waterfront of New York. In 1770 Samuel Ellis bought it to make a picnic area. After his death, New York City bought it and sold it ten years later to the US government. Then, Ellis Island was used as a prison and as a store for ammunition. During World War I and II parts of the island were a detention center too, but now it is a museum island.

From 1892 to 1954, Ellis Island was the entry for immigrants to the USA. Many Europeans had heard about the American Dream - first they passed (in those days by ship of course) the Statue of Liberty, and then they landed on Ellis Island. Americans expected about 500,000 immigrants per year, mostly it was double that figure. In 1907 more than 1.25 million immigrants were seen on Ellis Island. Immigrants called this island „Isle of Tears“ – a two minute questioning and a medical examination decided their future. Sick people were marked by chalk mark. The key points for their immigration were their state of health and their economic independence. When they could pass the door „Push to New York“, they were affiliated.



Procedures on Ellis Island.

— THE AMERICAN DREAM —



COMPARE:

Look at the pictures of the immigration procedures on Ellis Island. Compare the situation back then to the situation in your country nowadays. Take some brief notes and discuss them with a partner.

	THEN - ELLIS ISLAND	TODAY - AUSTRIA
Immigrants where from		
Reasons for immigration		
Amount of people		
Risks for both - society & immigrants		