

Uncovering the American Dream: Using Historical Thinking in the Literature Class

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In *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, Jim Cullen examines and considers the important and often contradictory versions of prevalent ideologies known as "The American Dream." Starting with the Puritans in the seventeenth century and finishing with immigrants in the twentieth, Cullen traces how Americans have adopted and adapted, defined and redefined sets of values and beliefs as promises for self identity and society. As a consequence, the phrase "the American dream" has always had different connotations for Americans as interpretations of it have changed as America itself changed; in fact, Cullen argues, "Ambiguity is the very source of its mythic power" (7).

After reading Cullen's book, we noted that the conflict in many of the literary works routinely taught in US literature courses arises from that ambiguity, the clash of versions of the American dream. Approaching literature by analyzing characters as struggling with different versions of the American dream has worked well in both a sophomore-level US Latino literature survey and an upper-level American drama elective. (About the latter, see "Which American Dream? A Constructivist Approach to teaching American Drama," *Teaching American Literature*. 3.2: 1-22.) We maintain that having students in US literature courses study the ideologies known as the American Dream is the type of context-based approach associated with historical thinking; what we have in mind here is the application of what historian Samuel Wineberg calls the "sourcing heuristic." (See his *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*.) Appropriating that historical approach contextualizes the literature as uniquely US literature by uncovering then

considering the probable connections among literary works and American history and culture.

What follows are the definitions and questions that we extracted from Cullen's book for those courses. We cannot overemphasize how much Cullen's work might inform literature classes and approaches to US literature, and without question, we strongly recommend that all teachers of US literature read and use it. Not intending to be prescriptive, we offer what we prepared for literature classes to suggest that discussions of these American ideologies help students read and interpret literature by analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, those higher levels of questioning in Bloom's taxonomy. Teachers interested in constructivist methods to develop classes might find our work helpful, especially as a method of what providing students with what Gabler and Schroeder consider "prompts" or "tools to cultivate critical thinking" (21) and thereby encourage active learning. Two further consequences may be that this approach helps more students relate personally to the works and helps students reevaluate works that they have studied in previous classes.

We begin with our summaries and explications of each version of the American dream. Then we offer questions for directed analysis and interpretation, specifically the conflicts that arise as characters accept or reject various versions of the ideologies. We conclude with a list of overarching questions that might serve as a framework for the course. Discussion of these larger questions requires students to consider the ambiguity that Cullen notices in American ideology not only in individual works but as an important conflict in American literature and culture.

VERSIONS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Promise of Change

One of the fundamental tenets of most versions of the American dream, the promise of change holds that things can be different. The consequence is that if anything is possible, individuals should and therefore must work to make their situations better. At play here is the Puritan faith that Americans are masters of their own destinies. Americans place faith in the future, discounting the past. And so time is a commodity not to be wasted as individuals must work to improve themselves—in all things yet especially so that they are virtuous and happy. Often the promise becomes necessity; in other words, the measure of one's life is making things better; anything less is a failure, something for which an individual must accept the blame. If one can be happy, then one must be.

1. Does a character seem to refute, reject, or overlook that change is possible and thus better?
2. Does a character seem to feel trapped, limited, or restricted—and as a result to feel passive or powerless?
3. Does "the past" seem to hinder, encumber, or debilitate a character? Does any chance to be happy seem lost forever?
4. Does a character seem to "waste time?"
5. Does a character blame unhappiness on others or on circumstances beyond one's control?

Promise of Moving Up

One of the most prevalent renderings of the American dream, the promise of moving up (or upward mobility) arises from Americans' conception of class based on money. Because America allows for opportunity, the American dream for many is to rise into some higher level, however they

might define it. It does not matter where one starts, but where one finishes. The goals and measures become what one achieves. In most cases, success is at least economic self-sufficiency and/or a profession or career that others respect. Parents want better lives for their children; children want better lives than their parents'. The keys to upward mobility are often hard work and education. A consequence of this version is materialism—the use of things acquired to symbolize one's ability to buy "nice things," such as large homes, automobiles, or clothing.

1. Does a character embrace that hard work and education are the keys to upward mobility?
2. Does a character seem to lack the ambition to "move up?"
3. Does a character seem to reject economic self-sufficiency and a respected profession as measures of success?
4. Does a character who is a parent work for his or her children?

Promise of Hard Work

The promise of hard work underscores the puritan value of discipline. It asserts that diligent, patient self-sacrifice is a true method to achieve—comfort and security if not happiness and success. In a society that is just and fair, in which "anyone can get ahead," hard work best provides for opportunity, for one's self and one's children. Knowing one's talent or skill becomes important. The focus is often on the future, such as providing for one's retirement, paying off a home, or allowing for children's education. Americans' classification of individuals with their jobs connects with this continuing emphasis on work as a means to succeed.

1. Does a character value disciplined and diligent work?
2. Does a character willingly accept that self-sacrifice is necessary?
3. Does a character see society as just and fair?

4. Does a character hold an honest view of his or her talents or skills?
5. Does a character look toward future rewards?

Promise of home ownership

The promise of owning a home incorporates many of the versions of the American dream in tangible way. For most American it remains the American dream. It invokes the "frontier spirit," the American value of acquiring property to signify "getting one's own." It symbolizes security and ease, especially as a safe place for one's children, and means, the ability to afford and maintain a house and a lawn. For many a home is a long-term investment, a disciplined and patient achievement that will "pay off" when one retires. It can induce, however, social conformity, as individuals feel forced to compromise to be good neighbors and citizens.

1. Does a character consider owning a home a measure of success or the means for security?
2. Does a character conform to the social norms of a "good neighbor?"

Promise of freedom

The promise of freedom is at the core of America's political ideals, a notion that results in the argument for "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It embodies the individualism so central to the American character: that individual fulfillment is possible through talent, ambition, strength, courage, and honesty. The gap between the ideology—what should be—and the reality—what is actually—remains, a tension that confuses and distracts some characters. Often the value of freedom is misappropriated as an absolute "right" of individuals.

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1. Does a character embody American individualism by being ambitious, strong, brave, and honest?
2. Does a character seem sensitive to the "gap" between ideology and reality?
3. Does a character misappropriate the promise of freedom as a "right?"

Promise of Equality

The promise of equality suggests the American value of opportunity for all. Unlike freedom, which promotes the right of individuals, equality involves the relationships of Americans with their government and their society. Like freedom, the reality differs from the principle, yet Americans believe in the ideals of equality: For other versions of the American dream to be realized as possible, everyone must be eligible to strive for life, liberty, and happiness. Political tensions arise as some argue that a government and a society insuring equality limit individual freedoms—by trying to make things fair for all, they make things unfair.

1. Does a character embrace the ideals of equality?
2. Does a character feel that all are equal? In America, is everyone eligible?
3. Does a character seem sensitive to the gap between the reality and the ideology?
4. Does a character hold society "unfair?"

Promise of gambling

The promise of gambling springs from the sense that America affords everyone the opportunity to succeed. It is usually associated with both the frontier and the entrepreneurial spirit. Assured of one's talent and drive,

one "gambles" all, risking security for the chance for greater rewards and thus esteem. A key part is the individual's confidence in eventual success, with little or no fear of failure. It touches upon individualism, for if one is the master of his or her destiny, then one must courageously do so.

1. Is a character willing to take a risk? Does a character fear failing?
2. Is a character critical of others who are willing to take a risk?
3. Does a character embody the entrepreneurial spirit?
4. Does a character see a "risk" as a goal or plan?

Promise of the good life

Emerging in the latter part of the twentieth century, the promise of the good life contradicts other versions of the American dream. It celebrates enjoying rewards, not earning them. A life of leisure comes not only through hard work and effort. One finds happiness and success through exciting work, not jobs but careers or a highly regarded profession. Reward then comes without drudgery or at best without any effort: from wise investments that pay off big or from charisma that allows someone to achieve success. In reality the promise of the good life is probable for very few yet its appeal comes from the possibility for all.

1. Does a character seem to desire the "good life?" Does a character focus an imagined future in which all is easy?
2. Does a character value hard work?
3. Does a character desire "income without effort?"
4. Does a character value charisma over talent and work as the key to success, especially success without having to try very hard?
5. Does a character desire "exciting work?"

OVERARCHING QUESTIONS FOR GENERAL DISCUSSION

Here is a list of the questions that ask students to consider larger implications of analyzing US literature by considering the American Dream. We find that these questions help students compare and contrast characters and literary works and help students formulate theses for their essays. As before, we mean this list to suggest possible topics.

1. What characters or authors seem to embrace or celebrate one of the versions of the ideology? Or prefer one to another?
2. What characters or authors seem to question some facet of one or more of the versions of the ideology?
3. Do any characters or authors seem to reject one version of the ideology to embrace another by the end of the narrative?
4. What characters or authors seem to find conflict between some promises of the American dream and class, race, ethnic identity, religion, and/or gender?
5. What characters progress to some "moment of recognition" in which the characters realize the "truth" about themselves and their situations? What characters do not come to realize the "truth"?
6. What characters reflecting on his or her situation come to fear or regret that they have compromised some earlier goal, value, talent, etc?
7. Do any characters or authors appropriate some interpretation of one of the versions to justify actions or beliefs?

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8. Do any works feature conflict arising between two characters because they hold different views on some facet of one or more of the versions of the ideology?

9. Do any works seem to have a "hero" who embodies, embraces, celebrates, or defends one of the versions of the ideology? Is this "hero" ironic (not a character one might consider "heroic")?

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Works Cited

Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2004.

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