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American Studies English

**Course Introduction: The American Dream**



Welcome to American Studies English! Today is the first day of your journey into American Literature. Not only will you be studying American Literature this year, but you will also be examining specific literary movements and works of literary criticism. You will be working to develop your own style and voice as a writer, and to hone your ability to provide meaningful analysis on works of literature in your writing. We will be using the texts we read in this course to answer the following essential questions:

1. What does it mean to be an American? How can we define the American character?
2. What is the American Dream?
3. How have Early American periods shaped the perception of the American Dream?
4. How has the American Dream evolved over time?

In order to begin to have an understanding of these essential questions, it is important to have a working knowledge of the historical development of the concept of the American Dream. Actively read the following article, which is an excerpt from “A Better Life: Creating the American Dream” by Kate Ellis and Ellen Guettler, and answer the discussion questions that follow.

Ellis, Kate and Ellen Guettler. “A Better Life: Creating the American Dream”. *American Public Media.* Web. 6 July 2013.

The American dream is like a familiar old tune that we can all hum, but when we get to the lyrics no one can agree on all the words. We sing this national anthem in fragments. Ask 10 people about the American dream and you get 10 variations on a theme.

Nonetheless, the theme is fundamental. It's the belief that in the United States, people are free to pursue opportunity, and that through hard work, they can make a better life for themselves and their children.

This dream has powered the hopes and aspirations of Americans for generations. It's a dream that began as a plain but revolutionary notion: each person has the right to pursue happiness - not as self-indulgence, but as fair ambition and creative drive.

Over time however, that deceptively simple notion has yielded something else: a powerful set of consumer expectations. When Americans today talk about the American dream, they're often referring to a lifestyle that includes owning a house and a car, sending kids to college, and enjoying a comfortable retirement.

Centuries before the "American dream" became a standard phrase, immigrants and observers knew what it was. The ideals that undergird the American dream were formed early in the nation's history. Jim Cullen, author of [The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0195173252), writes:

The Pilgrims may not have actually talked about the American dream, but they would have understood the idea: after all, they lived it as people who imagined a destiny for themselves. So did the Founding Fathers. So did illiterate immigrants who could not speak English but who intuitively expressed rhythms of the Dream with their hands and their hearts. What Alexis de Tocqueville called 'the charm of anticipated success' in his classic *Democracy in America* seemed palpable to him not only in the 1830s, but in his understanding of American history for two hundred years before that.

This expansive belief in possibility - "the charm of anticipated success" - is deeply embedded in the nation's psyche. It's a compelling message political leaders call on when the nation is in crisis, reminding Americans of their can-do spirit, that individuals have the power to bring about change.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that historian James Truslow Adams coined the phrase "American dream" during the depths of the Great Depression. A popular writer at the time, Adams wanted to write a history of the United States for the general reader, one that underscored what he saw as the nation's central historic theme: the American dream. In his book, [The Epic of America](http://www.amazon.com/Epic-America-James-Truslow-Adams/dp/1931541337/), which was published in 1931, Adams describes that dream:

[It] is a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement … It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

Adams was careful to say the American dream was not just a desire for affluence, but historian David Farber says the term quickly came to include it. The American dream "became closely linked to material comfort, to the consumer abundance America was producing. 'A better life' started to connote not just an economically secure life, but an abundant life. So there's a kind of linkage between mobility, a better life, and the good stuff that would make it so."

The seeds of the modern expectations about the American dream were planted during the nation's biggest 20th century bust: the Great Depression. Early in his administration President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated a series of programs, the New Deal, to jumpstart the economy. Among the programs was the 1934 National Housing Act, designed to spur home construction and home ownership.

Home ownership was not common at the turn of the 20th century. Lizabeth Cohen, author of [A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America](http://www.amazon.com/Consumers-Republic-Politics-Consumption-Postwar/dp/0375407502), says even upper middle-class people rented: "They didn't think they needed to buy a home to establish themselves." To own a house back then, people normally had to save up virtually all the money they needed to buy it. If they got a mortgage it was for a short period of time and usually required at least half the purchase price. If a family did buy a home, it was often later in life. It was not a rite of passage into adulthood.

The New Deal began to change all that. "The Roosevelt administration saw home construction, and home ownership, and the buying of appliances and furniture for those homes as an important part of generating economic recovery," says Claude Fischer, co-author of [Century of Difference: How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years](http://www.amazon.com/Century-Difference-America-Changed-Hundred/dp/0871543524). So the government started to insure mortgages and encouraged stretching them over a longer period so the payments were more affordable. Likewise, the government expanded sewer systems, paved roads and in other ways created the infrastructure to support new housing.

According to Fischer, the National Housing Act worked. By 1940, home-ownership was on the rise. When President Roosevelt delivered his State of the Union address, on January 11, 1944, the United States had been at war for two full years. It would be another year before World War II finally ended, but the government was already concerned about what to do about all the G.I.s who would be coming home. During World War II, companies ran ads promising American consumers a better life after the war.

The U.S. offered little support to its returning vets after World War I, creating massive discontent. The government didn't want to repeat the same mistake. "Congress was falling all over itself to find ways to treat vets well after its shameful past performance," says Edward Humes, who wrote [Over Here: How the G.I. Bill Transformed the American Dream](http://www.amazon.com/Over-Here-Transformed-American-Dream/dp/0151007101/).

This time, the number of returning vets was staggering. One in eight Americans was involved in the war in some way. Roosevelt submitted a G.I. Bill of Rights to Congress; he assured the nation the veterans would be taken care of. But Humes says FDR was troubled by the prospect of creating a separate class of Americans who got "all these guarantees of medical care and education by virtue of their military service." FDR and his advisors began to think a second "bill of rights" was necessary to guarantee these kinds of opportunities for all Americans.

"Basically," Humes told ARW, "it boiled down to the right to decent housing, to a job that was sufficient to support one's family and oneself, to educational opportunities for all and to universal health care." As [Roosevelt told the nation](http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3955), "We have come to a clear realization of the fact … that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. 'Necessitous men are not free men.' People who are hungry, people who are out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made."

Roosevelt died before he could implement his economic "bill of rights" for all Americans. But with his 1944 State of the Union address, Roosevelt laid out a modern vision of the American dream, what some scholars call the "post-war social contract." "To put it in today's language," says sociologist and urban policy expert Matt Lassiter, "if you worked hard and played by the rules, you deserved certain things. You deserved security and decent shelter and to not have to worry all the time that you might lose your house to bankruptcy."

**Discussion Questions**

1. Even though definitions of the American Dream may vary, what does this article assert is a common fundamental element that exists between these definitions?
2. According to the article, how have associations with the American Dream changed over time?
3. What groups of people contributed to the development of values and ideals that shaped the American Dream?
4. When was the term “The American Dream” officially coined and why was it coined?
5. Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared in a speech, “true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence”. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
6. Claude Fisher states, “The Roosevelt administration saw home construction, and home ownership, and the buying of appliances and furniture for those homes as an important part of generating economic recovery”. How might the importance the Roosevelt administration placed on home ownership have caused the American Dream to become associated with material wealth?
7. Given what you know about Franklin Delano Roosevelt, how do you think he would have defined the “ideal American”? How do you define the “ideal American”?
8. How do you think today’s modern society defines the American Dream? In your opinion, is the American Dream strongly associated with material wealth?
9. Is the American Dream attainable? Why or why not?