

# Teaching American History Grant: Learning Experience 2006-2007

Jennifer Nilsen (Arlington Central Schools)

**Topic Title: The American Dream**

**DATE: July 2006**

**Grade Level: 12**

## **Overview of the Learning Experience:**

- Both Resource Room and AIS teachers may use this module to support both the US History and the NYS English Regents curriculum. It addresses standards in both subject areas, while reinforcing ideas of the Civil Rights Movement.
- Goals and Objectives:
  - Students will gain an understanding of the meaning of the American Dream espoused by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
  - Students will gain an understanding of what the American Dream meant to blacks in the South during the Civil Rights period.
  - Students will be able to make comparisons of their views of the American Dream and discuss their similarities/differences to that of the Civil Rights period.
  - Students will demonstrate the ability to write a multi-paragraph essay of the American Dream of today in comparison to that of the Civil Rights period.
- The students will perform the following New York State Social Studies Learning Standards:
  - Standard 1: History of the United States and New York
    - Performance Indicator 1: The study of New York State and the United States history requires an analysis of the development of American culture, its diversity and multicultural context, and the ways people are unified by many values, practices, and traditions.
    - Performance Indicator 3: Study about the major social, political, economic, cultural, and religious developments in New York State and the United States history involves learning about important roles and contributions of individuals and groups.
  - Standard 5: Civics, Citizenship, and Government
    - Performance Indicator 3: Central to civics and citizenship is an understanding of the roles of the citizen within American constitutional democracy and the scope of a citizen's rights and responsibilities.

## **Essential Question(s):**

What is the American Dream and how has it impacted society?

How has the concept of the American Dream cause changes in society?

What impact have leaders had on motivating change in society?

**Time Allotment (classroom time):** 3-45 minute class periods

**Vocabulary Terms:** unequivocal, antithesis, paradox, emancipation, dogma, social stagnation, urban dislocation, syllogism, freedom

**Materials/Resources: (Please include all documents containing directions for students)**

**What materials/resources are needed by students?**

1. Poster Board, markers, colored pencils, magazines, glue sticks
2. Activities for challenged learners will include graphic organizers to assist with their ability to write a compare and contrast essay. (Venn Diagram, Outline)
3. Challenging activities for the most able learners will include a research paper analyzing what parts of the American Dream remain unfilled.
4. Primary and secondary source documents.
  - o Hughes, Langston. "Let America Be America Again". The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes. Knopf, Inc. 1994.
  - o King, Martin Luther. "The American Dream". A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. ED. James Melvin Washington. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991. 208-216.
  - o Reuben, Paul C. "PAL: Perspectives in American Literature-A Research and Reference Guide-An Ongoing Project".  
<http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/append/axs.html>.

**What materials/resources are needed by teachers?**

- o Guided Discussion Questions
- o Compact Disc of recorded poem, "Let America Be America Again"  
<<http://www.mosaicvoices.org/sound/America.mp3>>
- o Compact Disc player

**Procedure**

**Day One:**

- Teacher will begin class posing the following question: What are your dreams? How do you plan to achieve these dreams? What is the American Dream? How does it affect us as citizens?
- Teacher will define SYMBOLISM prior to distributing materials to complete a collage on "The American Dream". Students will create collage using pictures from magazines or draw pictures to represent "What the American Dream means to you?"
- Students will share their "American Dream" collages explaining what each symbol represents and the reason why they chose to include it.

**Day Two:**

- Teacher provides background knowledge on the origins of the American Dream.
- Students read and listen to the poem, "Let America Be America Again" Langston Hughes. Audio and visual can be found at <http://www.mosaicvoices.org/sound/America.mp3>
- Teacher leads class discussion on poem (See attached handout) and writes notes on the board of key points in discussion.
- Class reads the speech "The American Dream" by Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Teacher leads class discussion (see attached handout) and writes notes on the board of key points in the discussion.
- Wrap-up discussion on the views of the "American Dream" presented in both works of literature and whether they are still relevant today?

**Assessment:**

Students will write a 2-3 page essay comparing their views of the "American Dream" to the views expressed in the literature. (See handout). This is a take home assessment.

## **Background Information on the History of the “American Dream”**

Reuben, Paul C. “PAL: Perspectives in American Literature-A Research and Reference Guide-An Ongoing Project”. <http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/append/axs.html>.

- In 1931 a historian named, James Truslow Adams coined the term.
- It is an ethical doctrine that resulted from a crisis in national identity during the ‘30s.
- The “American Dream” called for a supplement to the outmoded narrative of individual uplift, which lost capacity to guide nation during the Depression.
- Many believe that the American Dream consists of individual freedom, social justice, financial freedom, and a better place for offspring.

## **Discussion Questions**

### **Let America Be America Again**

1. Who is the speaker of the poem? What is stated in the poem that makes you come to this conclusion?
2. Who is the audience of the poem? Explain.
3. What is the author’s purpose in writing this poem? What did he want his readers to learn by reading this poem?
4. What is the theme? Explain using lines from the poem to support.
5. Who is the speaker referring to in line 6 when he states, “Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed...”? What dream is he referring to?
6. How does he tie the Declaration of Independence to the idea of the “American Dream”? Was the dream of the founding fathers similar to the dream described by Hughes?
7. Why do you think he titled this poem, “Let America Be America Again”? Why do you think he used the word “again”?

### **The American Dream**

1. What is Martin Luther King Jr.’s concept of the American Dream?
2. “America is essentially a dream, a dream as yet unfilled.” Is this statement still relevant today? Explain reasoning.
3. To whom was King referring to when he said, “It says that each individual has certain basic rights that are neither conferred by nor derived from the state”?
4. What was King’s purpose for mentioning his visit to Calcutta? What is the correlation he was making to America through this account?
5. List the allusions King used in the speech. What is the relevance of each allusion to the concept of the “Dream”?

What similarities exist between the two accounts on the concept of the American Dream?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
African-American Literature

Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Nilsen

## The American Dream

### **Writing Task:**

Use the poem “Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes, the speech “The American Dream” by Martin Luther King, Jr., and your knowledge on modern society’s interpretation of the American Dream to write a 2-3 page comparison paper.

### **Areas of focus should include:**

1. What was that society’s definition of the “American Dream”?
2. What impact has the American Dream had on society?
3. What impact has the American Dream had in motivating change in that society?
4. What impact have leaders had on motivating change in that society?

### **Guidelines:**

- Your essay must consist of an introduction paragraph, several body paragraphs, and a conclusion paragraph.
- Use specific, accurate, and relevant information from the accounts to support your discussion.
- Use a tone and level of language appropriate for school.
- Organize your ideas in a logical and coherent manner.
- Indicate any words taken directly from the account by using quotation marks or referring to the speaker.
- Follow the conventions of standard written English.

This essay is due: \_\_\_\_\_.

It will be counted as an examination grade.

\*\*Guidelines follow the NYS English Assessment

## Let America be America again

The American Dream has also been a topic for many poets, who have dealt with the positive and the negative aspects of it. In the following poem the author describes what America should be and what it is like for him whereas he mentions many aspects which are included in the American Dream.

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free.  
(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers  
dreamed  
Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never kings connive nor tyrants  
scheme  
That any man be crushed by one above.  
(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic  
wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.  
(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the  
free.")

Say, who are you that mumbles in the  
dark?  
And who are you that draws your veil  
across the stars?  
I am the poor white, fooled and pushed  
apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I  
seek  
And finding only the same old stupid  
plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the  
weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and

hope,  
Tangled in that ancient endless chain  
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!  
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of  
satisfying need!  
Of work the men! Of take the pay!  
Of owning everything for one's own  
greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.  
I am the worker sold to the machine.  
I am the Negro, servant to you all.  
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean  
Hungry yet today despite the dream.  
Beaten yet today--O, Pioneers!  
I am the man who never got ahead,  
The poorest worker bartered through the  
years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic  
dream  
In the Old World while still a serf of  
kings,  
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave,  
so true,  
That even yet its mighty daring sings  
In every brick and stone, in every furrow  
turned  
That's made America the land it has  
become.  
O, I'm the man who sailed those early  
seas  
In search of what I meant to be my hom  
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's  
shore,  
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy  
lea,  
And torn from Black Africa's strand I  
came

To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?

Surely not me? The millions on relief  
today?

The millions shot down when we strike?

The millions who have nothing for our  
pay?

For all the dreams we've dreamed

And all the songs we've sung

And all the hopes we've held

And all the flags we've hung,

The millions who have nothing for our  
pay

Except the dream that's almost dead  
today.

O, let America be America again

The land that never has been yet

And yet must be--the land where every  
man is free.

The land that's mine--the poor man's,

Indian's, Negro's, ME

Who made America,

Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and  
pain,

Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow  
in the rain,

Must bring back our mighty dream  
again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose

The steel of freedom does not stain.

From those who live like leeches on the  
people's lives,

We must take back our land again,  
America!

O, yes,

I say it plain,

America never was America to me,

And yet I swear this oath

America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster  
death,

The rape and rot of graft, and stealth,  
and lies,

We, the people, must redeem

The land, the mines, the plants, the  
rivers.

The mountains and the endless plain

All, all the stretch of these great green  
states

And make America again!

Langston Hughes

# On "Let America Be America Again"

James Presley

"Let America Be America Again," published in *Esquire* and in the International Worker Order pamphlet *A New Song* (1938), pleads for fulfillment of the Dream that never was. It speaks of the freedom and equality which America boasts, but never had. It looks forward to a day when "Liberty is crowned with no false patriotic wreath" and America is "that great strong land of love." Hughes, though, is not limiting his plea to the downtrodden Negro; he includes, as well, the poor white, the Indian, the immigrant--farmer, worker, "the people" share the Dream that has not been. The Dream still beckons. In "Freedom's Plow" he points out that "America is a dream" and the product of the seed of freedom is not only for all Americans but for all the world. The American Dream of brotherhood, freedom, and democracy must come to all peoples and all races of the world, he insists.

[ . . . ]

Throughout Hughes's life--and his literary expression--the American Dream has appeared as a ragged, uneven, splotched, and often unattainable goal which often became a nightmare, but there is always hope of the fulfilled dream even in the darkest moments. During World War II Hughes, commenting on the American Negroes' role in the war, recognized this. ". . . we know," he said in a 1943 speech reprinted in *The Langston Hughes Reader* (1958),

that America is a land of transition. And we know it is within our power to help in its further change toward a finer and better democracy than any citizen has known before. The American Negro believes in democracy. We want to make it real, complete, workable, not only for ourselves--the fifteen million dark ones--but for all Americans all over the land.

The American Dream is bruised and often made a travesty for Negroes and other underdogs, Hughes keeps saying, but the American Dream does exist. And the Dream *must* be fulfilled. In one of his verses he put it more plainly. He might have been speaking to his harshest political critics or to the white youths who beat him up on that long-ago summer day in Chicago.

*Listen, America--  
I live here, too.  
I want freedom  
Just as you.*

From "The American Dream of Langston Hughes." *Southwest Review* (1963).

This is a poem where the author talks about how America should be what it is supposed to be; everybody should be equal because everybody contributed to make it what it is now and what it will be. The author of this poem talks about how America was never America to him and how there has never been equality and then he goes ahead to say that whoever made America must bring back again, What exactly do you think the author wants America to be like?