

America over europe:  
persuasion, optimism,  
and nationality in  
letters from an ame...



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Letters from an American Farmer by French-American author J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur can be considered one of the first propaganda pieces for the service of the newly formed United States of America, the purpose of which being to attract skilled Europeans to the young country in order to help strengthen it. The letters cover a wide range, but this essay will focus on Letter III, "What Is an American?" Crèvecoeur uses a fictional stand-in Englishman to represent his views that answer the question proposed in the letter's title. This stand-in is a new American settler who sees America with a fresh lens and comparing it to his familiar English home. He remarks that there are no class distinction titles such as King or Lord in America and that most everyone he sees are modest farmers where the line between rich and poor is drastically reduced compared to Great Britain. People from across Europe come to America struggling to make ends meet in their home country and, feeling ostracized from Europe, leave for America with the hope of being regarded as a true productive citizen when they may not be able to in their hometowns, and this feeling of detachment to their home is what makes them truly American. After this, Crèvecoeur defines what exactly he believes Americans are, and he says they are people who came from Europe leaving their past behind to forge their own future in a land of great opportunity. Crèvecoeur's letter is so persuasive due to his optimistic tone conveyed through his self-insert character's perspective who opens grounds for a compare and contrast for making America look better than Europe in every way, which would motivate Europeans to make the jump over to the States, thinking they'll be like Crèvecoeur's narrator, even if what he says may not be the whole truth.

One reason why Crèvecoeur may have such an optimistic view of the United States is that of his own experiences, and by expressing these experiences through the creation of an immigrant narrator, he is employing an ethos to build credibility in making his tone feel genuine. He was born in France and came to America to settle on a French colony, even participating in the French and Indian War. However, after France's defeat by Britain, he joined the British colonies, changing his name from Michel Guillaume Jean to John Hector St. John. He assimilated very well into the colonies, even marrying an American woman and owning his own farming land. Thus, when Crèvecoeur describes the homeland of the American settler as providing "no bread for him, whose fields procured him no harvest, who met with nothing but the frowns of the rich, the severity of the laws, with jails and punishments; who owned not a single foot of the extensive surface of this planet," it is easy to see that he has developed this view from his own personal experience. He chose to stay in the British colonies even though other Frenchmen retreated back to France, possibly because he realized their weakness, and him marrying an American woman and having children of his own is echoed in his description of America as a melting pot of different people and cultures, he's describing his own children, the generation of Americans born in America. Had he come to France with nothing, he would be unable to own his own land, but in the Americas, even a defeated foreigner as he was is able to own his own farm.

This letter is one which is blissfully sure of regarding the validity of these statements, and Crèvecoeur devises scenarios to illuminate the pathos of his tone to ensure the absolute sincerity of his words and promise of wellbeing

to anyone who chooses to follow. Crèvecoeur narrates that he loves watching the archetypal “ poor European” when they first arrive in the country, watching him closely as he steps out of his initial confusion and builds up his self-confidence in his vision. He declares that once the European pitches his tent for the first time on his own land, he “ realizes that energetic wish which has made him quit his native land” and got him started on his journey to the Americas. Crèvecoeur is telling any potential European who is afraid of making the big jump to not worry as he ensures that even if you’re lost and confused when you arrive, once you begin building your own life, you will realize that you made the right choice. In this same paragraph, he creates a motto of sorts for every European-turned-American: “This is our own grain, raised from American soil—on it we shall feed and grow fat, and convert the rest into gold and silver.” How could any European facing hardship in their own country say no to this, as Crèvecoeur is not only promising self-fulfillment but also physical riches as well as a stable and comfortable lifestyle, which to a European would be most tempting as the long histories of all those country so close together have sparked many tensions and wars, and here is a fresh new country away from all others, a sort of new Eden.

Crèvecoeur, in keeping with his belief in the practical values of the United States, builds his logos backing his tone by imbuing his seemingly fantastical views and over the top tone with a realism in order to market it better to any skeptics. He closes his letter with a matter-of-fact summary of his friend’s account of property, listing the quantity of his assets as well as the qualities of dollars they are worth, leading to \$240, which would have been worth thousands in his time. Furthermore, he says that this wealth and property

was amassed by “ his own hands and those of his son, in four years” which reinstates the values that he sees accompany the United States, those of family, legacy, and value in the fruit of one’s hard labor in the fertile (literally and metaphorically) land of America. Crèvecoeur informs his European audience that in the United States there are “ no princes, for whom we toil, starve, and bleed” ensuring that in America, “ man is free as he ought to be.” So not only will European settlers make all of this wealth in America, it will be all theirs. The society of the United States is not one based on the blood of one’s family but of the sweat of one’s brow.

However, despite how much effort Crèvecoeur puts into describing how ideally perfect the United States is, what he describes is at times far from the case. To Crèvecoeur, there “ are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury” which, while very ideal and tempting, does not accurately portray the United States in this time at all, as it was still an aristocratically heavy society and would only become more and more one as time went on. In the time of his writing, the only group that could vote were White land-owning males, which in a way is an invisible power giving visible power to a selected few. The largest contradiction in his letter may be his idealization of farming and other tactile works in the United States, how he described “ the meanest of our log-houses is a dry and comfortable habitation” yet when these letters were being published in 1782, the Industrial Revolution had been happening for nearly two decades, so Europeans who would get around to reading this letter and, feeling

motivated by his endlessly persuasive tone, pack up and head to the United States would probably find that the industrialized impersonal work does not match Crèvecoeur's fruit-of-your-spoils attitude at all. Since this letter was a work of propaganda encouraging immigration of skilled Europeans, it's understandable that the reality of the country is not brought up in the letter, as Crèvecoeur is trying to build his tone to be optimistic and assuring in order to entice people to follow his words.

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur molded the definition of an American in his time, which would serve as a backbone for how American identity is described even to this day. To Crèvecoeur, the United States was an idealized land where anyone could make their own living, where no one's background mattered because of the country's focus on practicality. His work was propaganda to get other Europeans to settle in the newly formed country and because of that, it has an endlessly optimistic and passionate tone, as it is attempting to sell the reader into an ideology. This ideology is one that applies to Crèvecoeur's own life and he cements his idealistic words in a practical reality by describing small life and offering numbers to show the value that a life in the United States would give to a settler. Crèvecoeur makes a deeply compelling argument for encouraging European migration to the United States as he panders to ethos by showing off a narrative voice expressing Crèvecoeur's own history as a European settler, pathos by making a deeply personal outreach to any struggling Europeans promising them endless pleasures and prosperity in the new world, and logos in demonstrating the practical numbers that could be working towards the benefit of new Americans. Even if what he says may not have been wholly

true, he nevertheless makes a compelling argument for immigration to the young country due to how much he emphasizes the validity and practicality of his success story in immigration.