

Historical development the american dream history essay



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The idea of the American dream was evident long before its coinage.

However, the idea of the American dream could be traced chronologically, from the discovery of America, especially the Northern part or the “ Promised Land” 4 to the modern age. According to Robert E. Spiller, in *Literary History of the United States*, the idea of the American dream was associated with “ America”. As a “ state of mind, America has existed long before its discovery”. 5 Europeans began to come up with all sorts of hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the new and largely unexplored continent.

Many of these dreams focused on owning lands and establishing prosperous business and religious freedom. For them, the American dream was the dream of an “ Earthly Paradise”. The Earthly Paradise was strongly believed to be the land of great opportunities. It was a great dream that dominated Europeans’ imaginations:

...from the time of the first settlement, America was seen from European eyes as a land of boundless opportunities, a place where man, after centuries of poverty, misery, and corruption could have a second chance to fulfill, in reality, his mythic yearnings for a return to paradise. 6

The idea of the American dream was as old as the American continent. Europeans were influenced by the Greeks’ and Classics’ writings. During the sixteenth century, an English saint and humanist, Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) identified “ America” with Plato’s “ Utopia”. In his book *Utopia* (1516),

More represented the idea of the “ heavenly paradise” to an “ attainable paradise”. In the nineteenth century, the idea of Utopia changed into an “ actual paradise”. Because of the influence of the French and Industrial Revolutions, the earthly paradise was attainable. 7

With the possibility of such a land, the American dream was an attitude of hope and spiritual faith erected to fulfill human wishes, desires, and dreams in the “ New World”. Thousands of European immigrants had moved to the New World to fulfill the versions of the American dream. The New World was a hope of a new life away from frustration and the sense of inferiority. 8

The American dream dealt with the idea of “ bettering one self’s economy” by which one hoped the New World would provide abundant opportunities for one’s prosperity and success. The dream was of “ rising from poverty to fame and fortune” i. e. “ from rags-to-riches”. 9 Furthermore, it was the dream of a “ perfect government” that would provide immigrants full and equal opportunities. They would go to the New World to set up new religious and political communities, hopefully, based on their ideas. 10

The idea of the American dream had developed. It represented the dream of individual success of that of the “ American Adam” whose labors and posterity that one day would cause great change in the New World. 11

According to R. W. B. Lewis, the American Adam was:

...a radically new personality, the hero of the new

adventure: an individual emancipated from history,

happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled

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by the usual inheritance of family and race, an individual

standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready

to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his

own unique and inherent resource. 12

This signified the secular dimension of the American dream, which was associated with social success. With the rise of industrialism and the growth of the economic environment and the rapid advance of science and technology in the nineteenth century, America changed from an agricultural into an industrial and a capitalistic country. The idea of the American dream was to achieve economic independence, especially to have a vocation and own a home in order to be happy. This economic development led to class distinctions and created special privileges for certain classes. It was the pursuit of money rather than of happiness. With the development of new knowledge of Darwinian Theory, American people believed in the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. To become wealthy, one needed to fulfill his or her dreams by all means, even if the fulfillment was by illegal ways. This dilemma corrupted the principles of freedom and equality of opportunity, and caused great doubt toward the American dream as a whole, and engaged more severely against other human beings. 13

A concept often brought into connection with the American dream was the symbol of "Melting Pot". The idea of Melting Pot was used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the metaphor of a "Crucible" was used to describe the fusion of different nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures. 14

It was used together with the concepts of the United States as an ideal republic and a “city upon a Hill”. It was a metaphor for the idealized process of immigration and colonization by which different nationalities and races were to blend into a new, virtuous community, and it was connected to Utopian vision of the emergence of an American “new man”. 15

It was first used in American Literature, as a concept of immigrants “melting” into the receiving culture, was found in the writings of J. Hector John de Crevecoeur. In his Letters from an American Farmer (1782), Crevecoeur referred to the problem of the American Nationality that appeared after the Revolutionary Era and the Declaration of Independence. He wrote:

...a man whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose

wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman,

and whose present four sons have now four wives of different

nations...individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of

men, [new in part, because of that] strange mixture of blood,

which you will find in no other country.

He is an American who, leaving behind him all his ancient

prejudice and manners, receives new ones from the new mode

of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and

the new rank he holds...The Americans were once scattered

all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared. 16

In 1908, a play by Israel Zangwill named *Melting Pot*, was first performed in Washington, D. C., where the immigrant protagonist declared:

Understanding that America is God's Crucible, the great

Melting-Pot, where all the races of Europe are melting and

re-forming! [into a new identity] Here you stand, good folk, think

I, when I see them at Ellis Island, here you stand in your fifty grounds,

your fifty languages, and histories, and your fifties blood

hatred and rivalries. But you won't be long like that, brothers,

for these are the fires of God you've come to-these are fires of

God. A fig for your feuds, and Vendettas! German and French

man... into the crucible with you all! God is making the

American. 17

However, the play was soon criticized as unrealistic; because "melting" and reforming into new American Adam appeared to be heresy that implied that all sides had to give up their culture completely to create a new one. The conflict was that many social classes and groups were excluded from the participation in the earthly life. 18

Nevertheless, since the whites (Anglo-Saxon Protestants) were the predominant group in the “ British Colonies”, other cultures and identities were perceived as inferior or even unwanted. African-Americans and Native American Indians were enslaved; Catholic Irish and Southern European immigrants were discriminated against for centuries. 19

People from different cultural backgrounds often wrongly interpreted the concept of melting pot as the peaceful living together with people from other ethnic groups. But in reality, ethnic groups or minorities in America were not equal to the white people. African- Americans and Native American Indians were denied civil rights. 20

Gradually, the meaning of the melting pot had changed. In response to the criticism of the concept of melting pot, Horace Kallen developed the concept of “ cultural pluralism” in 1915. This concept incorporated that different ethnic groups could keep their cultures and that people would mutually enrich their culture. 21

Multiculturalists asserted that cultural differences within society were valuable, and should be preserved. They proposed the alternative metaphor of the mosaic or salad bowl-different cultures mixed, but remained distinct. 22

The question was “ what, then, is the American, this new man? He is neither European nor the descendant of a European”. 23 The conflict was between the dreams of the white European Americans, who came to the New World to fulfill their dreams as new men, and the dreams of the other minorities, especially, the black African, who came by force. Like many other minorities,
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Africans were obliged to abandon their rights of sharing or participating in the American life.

According to the assumption that “ Man” was “ part of the universe”, man had the power to improve his own nature by improving his environment through science and education. 24 Merle Curti in his *The Growth of American Thought* affirmed man’s “ natural rights” of life, liberty, and prosperity, which were accessible to everyone without discrimination. In order to be a normal American citizen, one should naturally practice these rights. These natural rights could not be alienated from the state, and if the state did violate the natural law of the universe by alienating these rights, then “ man could and should resort to revolution”. 25 This basic fact encouraged many people in the United States of America, especially African-Americans to take action and revolt against the injustice.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the American dream was described as a nightmare. In the Two World Wars, the dream had begun to lose its glitter. Americans, whites and blacks became disillusioned by the idea of making “ the world safe for democracy [which] had proved to be blasphemy”. 26 They believed that they were fighting for a better world, for a world of peace and corporation, for a real and immediate Utopia. Americans had suffered psychological and mental pressures, and the image of death made men lose stability and lose faith in the American dream of establishing a perfect world. Instead, they became neurotic, frustrated, and disappointed; Gertrude Stein described the new youth as a “ lost generation”, because their lives became meaningless, pointless, and agonizing ones. 27

The reason behind the confrontation of dreams, was the misery and suffering caused by the crisis that happened in the first half of the twentieth century.

One of the most eventual and memorable decades in American history was, the Great Depression of the 1930s that changed American life, and prepared the country for a post-war era, characterized by pessimism and despair. 28

Thus, the American dream of the modern age had been shrouded by doubt and pessimism, as “ economics faltered and opportunities diminished. The

dream became a record of unfulfilled promises and dashed hopes”. 29 Yet,

Americans had consistently, flavored their dreams with dashed “

skepticism”. From the very beginning, this was true, Sir Thomas More was “

as skeptical as any other man about the promises he entitled in Utopia.

When he wrote it, “ he was playing with an idea”. 30 This showed that the

American dream was first an idea.

Then, it was said that the American dream had served as a justification for

those who had exploited a virgin country, and it had been the chief

argument of those who had tried to equalize all men before the law. 31

Consequently, people came to anticipate “ a generous and friendly New

World rather than a lavish heaven”. 32 The American dream was not the

product of a solitary thinker, but evolved from the hearts and burdened souls of millions who came to this nation. To make their dreams come true, James

Truslow Adams insisted on the principle of working together, no longer

merely to build bigger, but to build better. And that referred to all citizens of

the United States whether they were black or white. 33

After World War II, the American dream was portrayed as a “ military power”.

34 The United States of America became the most powerful nation. The 1950s was the period of American preeminence as a military and economic power that revived the dream after the “ Great Depression” of the 1930s. America was marked by “ a self-conscious” sense of its place in the world. The twentieth century was the “ American Century”, the post-war era was certainly the time when citizens of the United States began to believe that it was, in fact, their century, and that theirs was the greatest country in the world. With the Americans’ belief of their responsibility for ‘ winning’ World War II, it provided them with self-confidence about the world. 35 Frederick R. Karl characterized the period:

as a time of growth, development, progress, enlightenment,

and achievement of goals; as a renaissance of sort

and essential to what helped turn the country into

a superpower under a benign, grinning, ex-hero of a

persistence. The general argument is that man and woman

who experienced the depression returned from World War

II to rebuild the country. This generation accordingly, is a

treasure, for not only did it , revitalize the country domestically,

it helped make the United States the beacon of the World,

offering financial aid, food, and military muscle wherever

required. 36

Americans had always had a faith in the “new”. Critics saw the American dream as a clever political and economic marketing strategy. They wanted people to get away from selfishness, individualism, and materialism, and to return to community spirit and social responsibility. 37 The meaning of the American dream had changed over the course of history. The American dream simply indicated the ability, the practice, and the participation in the society and economy, for everyone to achieve prosperity. According to the American dream, this included the opportunity for one’s children to grow up and receive a good education and career without artificial barriers. It was the opportunity to make individual choice without the prior restrictions that limited people, according to their class, caste, religion, race, or ethnicity. 38

1: 2The African-American Experience

In the United States of America, the African-Americans’ experience was unique. It was marked by slavery, segregation, and injustice. It made the quest for the American dream; that was of freedom, equality, and happiness, an essential pursuit. 39 It is important to shed light on the African-American struggle in the United States of America. Unlike most of other minorities, the African- Americans were captured in Africa, taken from their homes and lands by force and sent to a strange new land. They were brought chained and enslaved as a result of colonialism. 40

In the early colonial days, Black Africans had many opportunities to secure their freedom by escaping or buying themselves out of slavery, and once
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free, they had a good chance to make their success in the New World. The life of Anthony Johnson⁴¹ illustrated the possibility of the blacks' early dreams, in the early period of European colonization in American North. He was known as "Antonio, a Negro". Johnson was enslaved in 1621, when he was sold to the English Jamestown; he worked with Bennett family (a white family) ... who commended him for his "hard labor and known services"... He secured his freedom, got married to a freed-slave named Mary and baptized his children. As a freeman, Johnson dreamed of establishing his own farm in Virginia, of 250 acres raising tobacco and corn... Eventually, his farm was burned, and he was killed, because the colonial legal system had begun to preserve the rights of the whites and deprive "blacks' of theirs. This period illustrated the fact "the era of chattel Slavery had begun".

Many Black Africans came to this land having dreams to fulfill. But, many forces spoiled these dreams. The dream of owning a land and successful business for the blacks was limited or weakened by the time and by the force of the law of the "Black Codes" ⁴² that was enacted by Virginia, in 1667. Black people had been enslaved with the change of economic conditions. The blacks were denied the opportunity to own land, because they were Negroes and by consequences aliens. ⁴³

These Codes made slavery a permanent condition inherited through the mother and defined slaves as property. Such slave Codes robbed the African-American slaves of their freedom and the power of their will. Nevertheless, freedom was always in the mind of the enslaved and how to gain that freedom was the essential question. ⁴⁴

In the New World; African-American slaves were forced to give up their African past and cultivated themselves to being slaves under the white master domination. They were prevented from bringing over their social relations and institutions. These slaves ate what was given to them, not what they wanted, and dressed the clothes that were given to them. In addition, these slaves were treated without any regard or consideration to physical welfare and human dignity. 45

In the American South, African-American slaves were described as property. Masters learned to treat their slaves as property. Frederick Douglass, one of the most eloquent speakers against slavery in America, captured the essence of slavery in 1846:

Slavery in the United States is the granting of the power by which one man exercises and enforces a right of property in the body and soul of another. The condition of slave is simply that of a brute beast. He is a piece of the master; who claims him[her] to be his property. He is spoken of, thought of, and threaten as property. His own good, his conscience, his intellect, his affection, are all set aside by the master. The will and the wishes of the master are the law of the slave. He is as much a piece of property as a horse. If he is fed,

he is fed, because he is property. If he is clothed, it is with a

view to the increase of his values as property. 46

According to this definition of slavery, an African-American slave was the individual whose movement and activities were under the control of the Whites. Thus, he/she could not leave the controller or the employer without an explicit permission; otherwise, he/she could be punished. 47

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the use of slave labor was cheaper than indentured labor. Slavery was different from one colony to another. On the Eastern Coast and American North, the climate was not supporting extensive farming, slavery, there, tended to be farming slavery, with a few slaves living and working side by side with small farmers or craftsmen. Whereas in the South, the fertile land and warm climates made large-scale cultivation possible, plantation slavery developed. Large numbers of slaves lived and worked on far distances from their owners. 48 Another reason for slavery spread was the “ shortage of indentured servants”, which led to resort and to enslave “ African Americans”. 49

This meant slavery was essentially an economic institution from which the American nation benefited. More slave labor meant a large measure of prosperity. Many American historians believed that the growth of American economy was not because of slavery. But, Eric Williams, a Caribbean Scholar, charged that black slavery was the engine of that propelled American rise to global economic dominance. In his *Capitalism and Slavery*, Eric Williams maintained that early Europeans' conquest and settlement of the New World depended upon the enslavement of millions of black slaves, <https://assignbuster.com/historical-development-the-american-dream-history-essay/>

who helped amass the capital that financed the industrial revolution.

America's economic progress, he insisted, came at the expense of the black slave, whose labor built the foundation of capitalism. 50

In spite of the African-Americans' participation in constructing the foundation of this nation, slavery was identified with "dark skin". 51 By late seventeenth century; slavery and servitude were closely identified with race. White indentured services were limited, voluntary, and had no racial components, whereas, slavery was involuntary, perpetual, and racially defined. 52 Hence, indentured servants could be free and had the right to purchase their own freedom or buy completing their period of indenture. At the time of obtaining their freedom, they would pursue their dreams of property and prosperity. While the African-American slaves did not enjoy these rights and protections. 53 Instead, African-American slaves were controlled by the laws of "Black Codes".

On one hand, race was one of the obstacles that prevented African-Americans from achieving their dreams. On the other hand, the worst condition that African-American slaves had to live under, was the constant threat of sale. 54 The African-American slaves' family stability and security faced severe challenges. Masters, rather than parents, had legal authority over African-American slaves' children and the possibility of forcible separation through sale hung over every family. The Southern plantation owners did not care, whether a slave to be sold off had family members, he/she had to leave behind or not. All mattered was that masters encouraged slavery. As masters questioned the humanity of such slaves,

they argued that African- American slaves did not mind being sold since they lacked the ability to form stable family life. 55

As for African-American women, they were included in the horrible system of slavery. They were persecuted, subjected to the worse kinds of oppression and exploitation. Not only, because being black women had to endure the horror of slavery and living in a racial and sick society. But as women, they witnessed their physical image being defamed and became the object of the white master's lust. As Black African-American, women had to endure the threat and practice of sexual exploitation, and as mothers, they witnessed their children torn from their breasts and sold into slavery. 56 One of the ex-slaves, Jennie Hill explained the outlook of the Black African-Americans' humanity according to the whites' view point:

[White] people think that slaves had no feelings, that they bore their children as animals, bear their young and that there were no heart-breaks when the children were torn from their parents or the mother taken from her brood to toil for a master in another state. But, that isn't so. 57

For a white woman, providing home was an essential thing to possess. But, for an African-American woman, it was a dream. Black African-American woman had scantily the opportunity to regain her freedom and her own children. 58 During slavery, Black African-American women were exploited in two main sectors of economy: in the fields (with full employment), and in the

household. Black African-American women were stretched physically, emotionally, and spiritually to the utmost in the slave plantation, as they were forced to labor “ like men” in the fields. Also they had substantial domestic roles. They raised whites’ children and created a decent and warm home environment for the white American family, while their dream of family unit was uncertain. 59

The Black African-American slaves had no right to live proper family unit. They had no rights which the master was obliged to respect. The master “ found it cheaper to overwork a slave and to replace him [or her] when died, rather take care of him [or her] when lived”. 60 The Black African-American slaves were deprived of living their own lives, denied the right of literacy, education, and could not retract, in inevitably distorted ways, the values, morals, and attitudes of the new civilization of which they gradually became a part. 61 White Americans believed that the Black African-American slaves were “ brutal, barbaric, savage, who would present a real danger to the safety, prosperity, and security of the United States”. 62 Thus, it was in the system of slavery that the genesis of racism was to be found. According to Eric Williams, “ slavery was not born of racism, rather, racism was the consequence of slavery”. 63 White Americans fastened onto differences in physical appearance to develop the “ myth”, that African-American slaves were subhuman and deserved to be enslaved. To enhance the Black African-American slaves’ “ inferiority”, white Americans deliberately used religion to reinforce slavery as well. To support their institutions, the whites relied heavily on the Biblical story, in which Noah’s curse of his son Ham (especially, the fourth son, Canaan), who said in the ninth chapter of

Genesis: “ a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren”. 64 This story justified the color of the Black African-American slaves. By the Nineteenth century, many historians agreed to the belief that the Black African-American slaves were the descendants of Ham was a primary justification for slavery among Southern Christians. In other words, the Bible was used to teach the Black African-American slaves “ a divine, God-given” justification for their condition as slaves. 65 Hence, white Americans became convinced of “ white superiority” and “ black inferiority”. It was the beginning of hatred and racial discrimination. 66

White Americans taught the Black African-American slaves how to despise their “ African” heritage, identity, and culture. They strove to include their own value system into the African-American’s outlook. They believed in African’s inferiority that paralleled self-hatred. 67 In general, there were five steps in molding the character of “ strict discipline, a sense of his [her] inferiority, belief in the whites’ superiority power, acceptance of the whites’ standers, and finally, a deep sense of his [her] own helplessness and dependence”. 68 These facts emphasized the flourishing of the white American culture and completely ignoring of the Black African-American slaves culture. The Euro-Americans were the first who immigrated to the New World by their own free will in search of individual opportunity; their European culture was superior. However, the ignorance diminished the real fact of the importance of the African heritage, not only for the Black African-American slaves, but to mankind. 69

For centuries, the Black African-American slaves were ignorant about their own culture and identity. They lacked knowledge, they were illiterates. They <https://assignbuster.com/historical-development-the-american-dream-history-essay/>

were described as “ people [, who] were no more capable of learning than were animals”. 70 This indicated that Black African-American slaves were victims and white Americans were victimizers. They were oppressed by the power of the whites. So, they were unable to find a hope to transform their life from slavery into freedom. 71

1: 3The Declaration of Independence

“ We hold these truths to be self-evidence,

that all men are created equal, that

they are endowed by their Creator

with certain unalienable rights, that

among these are Life, Liberty, and

the pursuit of Happiness”. 72

With the setting of the Declaration of Independence on July 4th, 1776, the most important document in the American history and self-perception, slavery as a moral, human, and economic system challenged the basic principles of “ Life”, “ Liberty”, and “ the pursuit of Happiness”, and proved to be the first great institution that tested the equality doctrine. 73 The Declaration of Independence marked not only the independence of the thirteen colonies from “ Great Britain”, it also laid the foundation of women’s rights and of struggles for ending slavery:

After the American colonies secured their independence from

Great Britain, [the] black[s] hoped that the same leaders who had yearned for their own freedom would end slavery. 74

The Declaration of Independence rested “ not upon particular grievances, but upon a broad base of individual liberty that could command general support throughout America”. 75 It served a purpose far beyond that of a public notice of separation. Its ideas inspired mass fervor for the American cause, for it instilled among ordinary folk a sense of their importance, inspiring them to struggle for personal freedom, self-government, and a dignified place in society. 76

The United States of America started to shape itself as the “ Empire of Liberty and Prosperity”, as a new entity, Black African-American slaves continued to play a significant role. Despite the continuation of violence against Black African-American slaves, who challenged the long standing tradition of racial discrimination and oppression in the South, the “ ex-slave” and “ free-black” people stepped forward into a new identity, a new reality, and a new sense of agency in public life. Many Black African-American slaves fought in the war of Independence, and “ they took to the heart assertion of the right of individual freedom that was so a part of the American Colonial and Revolutionary eras”. 77 Hence, the Declaration of Independence, as Jim Cullen, a historical critic thought it was not only an important document that shaped the way of Americans’ lives, but it “...was born and lived the character of the American dream”. 78 This dream was profound, eloquent, and unequivocal expression of the dignity and worth of all human personality.

In his *A Struggle for Power*, Theodore Draper, a historian summarized the revolutionary era as "... a struggle for power -between the power the British wanted to exercise over the Americans and the power the American wished to exercise over themselves". 79 This fact suggested the most important question of " Slavery". The Declaration of Independence made Americans want nothing more than " freedom" and to assume " a separate and equal station" among the " power of the earth, Great Britain". 80 The problem was, however, that the founding fathers (Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and George Washington, etc.,) of the nation defined " freedom" in terms of its opposite: " Slavery". When they used the term " Slavery", however, they were not referring to a peculiar institution, whereby many of the founding fathers themselves brought and sold Black African-American slaves as property. They referred to what they felt Great Britain was doing to their lives and livelihood. 81

The unself-conscious comparison between freedom and slavery made other people in the United States call for their freedom as well. A British essayist, Samuel Johnson in 1775, asked, but " How we [white people] hear the loudest yelp for liberty among drivers of Negroes?" 82 This paradoxical state made the founding fathers fear that "...the attainment of their dream could encourage others to pursue theirs". 83 And this was true, because the success of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, gave Americans the opportunity to give legal form to their political ideals as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and to remedy some of their grievance through state constitution.

Americans were accustomed to live under written constitutions that they took them for granted. 84 Therefore, the Black African-Americans' experience with the American dream in the United States started with the announcement of the Declaration of Independence. Yet, the founding fathers never thought about women, slaves, and Natives as having equal rights like white Americans (Anglo-Saxon American descents), or did not even recognize them as human beings. Thus, the Declaration of Independence was not " the subject to change disagreement", because its content never changed. 85