

**Q 4, W 2 (6 April 2025 - 10 April 2025)**

- Prompt response
  - What do you think the American Dream is? Is it still alive today? Are you/we living it?

- Notes on The American Dream

## The Illusion of the American Dream By Amber Zinno -

<https://engagedsociology.wordpress.com/2018/04/30/the-illusion-of-the-american-dream-how-the-american-dream-fails-to-acknowledge-inequality/>

The American Dream is an ideology of sorts that is deeply rooted in American history yet still a relevant concept of today. The American Dream is a social issue because it over-emphasizes the role of the individual in their pursuit towards success without acknowledging social constraints; such as socioeconomic, racial or gender inequality, which can inhibit certain groups of people from achieving that same dream ...

So, what exactly is the American Dream?

(1) The American Dream I am referring to is the idea, or rather the belief, that individuals can achieve “success” (financially or otherwise) and happiness through emphasis on the individual’s own efforts; often through means such as hard work, sheer motivation, desire to succeed, perseverance through times of strife, adroitness, etc. I am going to analyze this social issue ... as I will be reflecting on not only how the ideas propagated by the American Dream affect American society overall, but also how it can influence individuals who fall under certain subgroups of the population (e.g. women, racial minorities, the working/lower class).

(2) To begin, I would like to first use the concept of the sociological imagination to reiterate why the American Dream is representative of a social issue and not a personal issue reflective of the downfalls and failure of the individual. Coined by C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination is best defined as “the complex interactive relationship between individual experiences and public issues” (Ballantine, 2016). Put differently, the sociological imagination emphasizes looking at the “big picture” when analyzing social issues.

(3) Firstly, the American Dream is a social issue because it is a value and belief held and maintained by American society. It is an idea so pervasive that it has become embedded in American societal and cultural ideology, as it is not just one idea but rather a set of ideas. This set of ideas is meant to influence and impact each member of American society, as it focuses on endowing the individual with ideas on what exactly constitutes being a fruitful and productive member of society. While typically meant to motivate and inspire the individual through anecdotal stories of people who started out with nothing and attained insurmountable success through working hard despite all adversity, it also implies this message, that being: “If I am a failure, if I cannot attain success, or financial stability, or happiness; then it is 100% my fault. I, as the individual did not work hard enough to achieve my dreams. It is because of me and some sort of character flaw that I have that I have failed”. This underlying message inarguably fixed in the concept of the American Dream functions as a means so that society will not be held responsible for the “failures” of its citizens. After all, if people are taught that their lack of success is directly linked to their personal efforts, then they will not feel ‘right’ or validated in blaming their problems onto society and thus, society is off-the-hook and free from any sort of liability.

(4) With that in mind, we might then proceed to question, “What are the specific social forces at play here, which emphasize and propagate the set of ideas we have come to identify collectively as the ‘American Dream’”?

(5) Let us first start by examining the cultural values and beliefs held by the American people at large. American values place significant importance on individualism, which in turn feeds into other values such as hard work, achievement, and materialism. American children are raised on the principles of individualism and inundated

with the idea that they are autonomous individuals who are “responsible for their own situations in life and their own destinies” (“Key American Values”, 2013). If we can understand that value and the degree of significance placed on it, it then becomes easier to piece together why the American Dream is still commonly referenced to today. If American individuals believe they are completely responsible for the fate of their future, then they have become psychologically primed to accept the undertaking of personal development and growth as a part of reaching their desired potential. They become more likely to see obstacles to their success as personal hurdles they must overcome, versus seeing it as faults in a political or social system meant to intentionally thwart their efforts to achieve their goal.

(6)As I stated earlier, I mentioned that the underlying message of the American Dream is to enforce the idea that failure should be seen as a personal fault and not to be blamed on the innerworkings of the society itself. **This is the point at which the American Dream becomes toxic, as it refuses to acknowledge the presence of inequality in our society.** Obviously, inequality at all levels and across all groups of people continues to exist and play a significant role in society today. Inequality, prejudice and discrimination can still be seen enacted on and used against women; racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; those low in socioeconomic status; those with any sort of disabilities; and the LGBTQ community. **The idea that everyone in America is born on a “level playing-field” is both absurd, invalidating, and comical.** While Americans may be fighting for equality, we are still far from equal. Every person born in the United States comes into society with varying degrees of social, cultural, and economical capital; and these factors will largely dictate their course in life and the opportunities that will be available to them. While some might attempt to argue that American society does not function around any sort of structure of social stratification, the class system is very much present and powerful in the everyday lives of people, whether they can consciously recognize this or not.

(7)Social mobility is not as easily achieved as some would make it seem to be. Imagine you are Beth, an impoverished, African-American woman who is sitting across the table being told an anecdotal story of how a poor white man managed to go to college and work his way up the corporate ladder to eventually become very wealthy and successful. This ‘success story’ may be very much invalidating to the experiences of Beth, who has been working relentlessly to advance at her current job to no avail. In this example, she might think to herself, “Why am I struggling so much in my attempt to work my way out of the lower class? I finally managed to graduate from college, yet I have been working the same position at my place of work for the past five years. How could the man in the story progress his way onwards to upper-level positions so quickly? Yet here I am, stuck. I must be doing something wrong. Perhaps I have become lazy in my monotonous routine at work. Perhaps if I perform every aspect of my job to the best of my abilities and work harder than I already am then I will be recognized by my managers and given a promotion with greater responsibilities”.

(8)This example clearly illustrates how easy it can be to attribute societal barriers as personal failures. While this may not necessarily be a case of inequality, think of all the factors at-play here which demonstrate how subtly inequality can creep in and influence how successful we allow some individuals to be. Perhaps the impoverished white man referenced in the story had more social and cultural capital than Beth. **Perhaps because of his gender, he was seen as a leader and a go-getter capable of handling greater responsibilities, whereas Beth was thought of as “overaggressive” when she possessed those same qualities.** Perhaps a glass ceiling exists at Beth’s place of employment, and because she is both African-American and a woman she will never be given a fair chance at a promotion. The point is, Beth can work just as hard as the man did yet never reach even half of the success he achieved. This comes to illustrate how wrong and misleading it can be to believe that society is not responsible for the success of some and the inhibition of others.

So, what might be a solution to challenging the ideas set forth by the so-called ‘American Dream’?

**Respond to the following questions based on the passages above**

1. What underlying message is the author talking about in paragraph 3? Summarise and explain this message in the context of the American dream (20%)
2. In paragraph 5, what values does the author talk about and why? (20%)
3. “The idea that everyone in America is born on a “level playing-field” is both absurd, invalidating, and comical” (paragraph 6) – explain this statement in light of Beth’s story and the American Dream. (20%)
4. What might be a solution to challenging the ideas set forth by the so-called ‘American Dream’? Is there any solution? Why or why not? (20%)
5. Think of the people around you. How do they live the American Dream? Do they live it at all? (20%)

- Notes on Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and his America

## Walt Whitman's Vision for America by Nick Kleinheksel -

<https://medium.com/a-cup-of-coffee-and-critique/walt-whitmans-vision-for-america-e398d1cfcde0>

(1) America today feels lost; a nation divided down the middle in virtually every respect. Politically, the country could not be more polarized. Racially, tensions are the highest they have been in a generation. Culturally, the whirlwinds of change are active. Nevertheless, what makes the United States of America so great is that no matter how messed up it gets, no matter how far gone the country feels, there is always hope of a better future.

Walt Whitman clung to that hope, and he believed in that future. His poems echo his love for America as well as his determination to hold this great nation to the highest standards and his candor when she failed to live up to them.

(2) ... Born in 1819, while the nation was still young and struggling to discover its identity, Whitman grew up as the nation transformed. He witnessed the abolition movement, the Civil War, and the disastrous attempt to rebuild the South. When he finally passed away in 1892, right on the cusp of the new century, America was firmly entrenched in the Industrial Revolution. Considering the tumultuous history through which Whitman lived makes his words that much more profound today, as his perspective is applicable to the current world.

(3) Whitman viewed America to be synonymous with equality, but living during the early to mid-19th century, he was not blind to the fact that half of the country was fueled by rampant inequality. When, at long last, slavery was finally abolished, Whitman rejoiced in America's big step toward fulfilling its vision of being the "Centre of equal daughters, equal sons, / All, all alike endear'd, grown, ungrown, young or old" (Lines 1–2). His words are reminiscent of Jefferson's in the Declaration of Independence; everyone is inherently equal no matter what race, age, or gender they are. This poem is short (totaling only six lines), and because the message is simple and straightforward, Whitman has no need to surround it with fluff or fancy language. The message stands on its own and remains relevant today in light of current racial tensions.

(4) Of course, Whitman is a poet, so creative eloquence and use of imagery are often abundant in his works ... his love for America, along with his deep desire for harmony and unity are unmistakable. The descriptive analogies of forests of companionship and brotherly cities fill the poem with hope for an almost utopian future which Whitman believes is possible, almost inevitable.

(5) This bright future Whitman so strongly believes in is constantly present in his poems. Despite the hardships and atrocities he witnessed, he seemed to be able to see past the present. He saw the country and the American people differently than most would have, holding to his belief that people are good and, in the end, will make right their wrongs.

**Respond to the following questions based on the passages above**

1. In light of what we know about Whitman and his vision for America, what hope did he hold on to and what future did he envision for America as mentioned in paragraph 1? (20%)
2. Whitman viewed America to be synonymous with equality (paragraph 3) - explain this statement in light of Whitman's vision and how that vision may not be a reality today. (40%)
3. We haven't looked at any of Whitman's poems yet, but from what you've read, what do you think his poems will talk about and how? (20%)
4. Whitman was born in 1819. He hoped for a better future for America. In what ways do you think Whitman could have never imagined progress in the American society? Would he be disappointed or happy? Feel free to use Google to do some research on this. (20%)