

What is the American Dream?

Overview

In this lesson, students will discuss the concept of “The American Dream” and develop their own definition of this concept. The students will then examine two poems that explore this concept and highlight groups of people who historically have not had access to “The American Dream.” They will discuss the possible reasons for and price of this historical disillusionment. Finally, students will create a visual illustration of their “American Dream” to share with the class.

Grade

8

North Carolina Essential Standards

- 8.C&G.1.4 -Analyze access to democratic rights and freedoms among various groups in North Carolina and the United States (e.g. enslaved people, women, wage earners, landless farmers, American Indians, African Americans and other ethnic groups).
- 8.C&G.2.3- Explain the impact of human and civil rights issues throughout North Carolina and United States history.
- 8.C.1.3 -Summarize the contributions of particular groups to the development of North Carolina and the United States (e.g. women, religious groups, and ethnic minorities such as American Indians, African Americans, and European immigrants).

Essential Questions

- What are the social, educational, economic, political and religious freedoms associated with “The American Dream?”
- Historically (and currently), what groups of people have had limited access to “The American Dream?”
- What are some of the obstacles to achieving “The American Dream?”
- Despite these obstacles, what makes “The American Dream” appealing?
- What is your dream for the future?

Materials:

- Questions about “The American Dream” (attached)
- Two Langston Hughes poems, “A Dream Deferred,” and “Let America be America Again” (attached)
- Figurative Language Chart
- “My American Dream” homework assignment (attached)

Duration

One period + homework

Procedure

“The American Dream”

1. Write the phrase “American Dream” on the board and ask students to brainstorm what comes to mind, recording thoughts in a list. After responses have waned, categorize them according to social, educational, economical, political, and religious reasons.
2. Next, either individually or in partners, instruct students to complete #1-5 of the attached worksheet, “What is the American Dream?” After approximately 10 minutes, discuss students responses as a class. If you have students from other countries in the class, allow them to share their stories of immigration if they choose. (Teachers should privately ask students if they are interested in doing this, prior to the start of class.)
3. Next, divide students into small groups of 3-4 and provide them with one of the attached quotes regarding the “American Dream” to further the discussion. Write or project the following questions for the groups to discuss regarding their quote:
 - What does your quote say about the American Dream?
 - Do you agree or disagree with the author and why?
 - What values are implicit in the concept of an “American Dream” according to this author?
4. Once students have discussed, have them read their quote to the class and share their thoughts. Following the discussion, have each student return to the worksheet and write his/her own definition of “The American Dream” for question #6. They should save this definition for use in a later activity.

Langston Hughes and “The American Dream”

5. Next, the students will examine two poems by Langston Hughes that explore “The American Dream.” First, they should read “A Dream Deferred.” You may also play a recording of Langston Hughes reading the poem here: <http://www.learner.org/catalog/extras/vvspot/video/hughes.html> . After students have read through and/or listened to the poem once, ask students to consider what central question the poet is asking. (Discuss with students that rather than presenting his audience with the answer to the central question, Hughes develops the poem using a series of questions.)
6. Have the students again read/listen to the poem and record the poem’s images on the attached Figurative Language Chart to aid in analysis and discussion. After working through the images, you can explain to students that although the poem is a list of questions, Hughes is making a statement. Discuss:
 - What is Hughes’ message about dreams deferred? How do “dreams deferred” relate to “The American Dream?”
7. To better understand Hughes’ message about dreams deferred, have students work in groups analyzing a second poem, “Let American Be America Again” (attached). Instruct students to discuss:
 - According to stanza 1, what does the poet want?

- What do stanza's 2, 4, 6, 12, and 16 have in common?
 - Who are the dreamers in this poem?
 - What is the dream?
 - What specific things have interfered with the dream?
 - Which historical struggles of various people are referred to in the poem?
 - Which lines in the poem, "Let America Be America Again" compare to the poem "A Dream Deferred?"
8. After groups finish, discuss as a class and conclude by asking the following:
- How does this poem help us to understand "A Dream Deferred?"
 - According to the poems, what major obstacle/s has interfered with the quest for "the American Dream?"
9. As a culminating activity, students will create a visual display illustrating their "American Dream." The assignment is attached.

Name: _____

Date: _____

What is the American Dream?

1. What comes to mind when you consider the “American Dream?”

2. Why do people from other countries immigrate to America?

3. What are some of the obstacles to achieving the American Dream?

4. Which groups of people have had trouble attaining “The American Dream”? Why do you think this is?

5. Given the obstacles that some people have to overcome, what makes the American Dream appealing?

6. What does “The American Dream” mean for you personally?

American Dream Quotes

There are those who will say that the liberation of humanity, the freedom of man and mind is nothing but a dream. They are right. It is the American Dream.

~Archibald MacLeish

I look forward confidently to the day when all who work for a living will be one with no thought to their separateness as Negroes, Jews, Italians or any other distinctions. This will be the day when we bring into full realization the American dream -- a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men will not argue that the color of a man's skin determines

~Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

We believe that what matters most is not narrow appeals masquerading as values, but the shared values that show the true face of America; not narrow values that divide us, but the shared values that unite us: family, faith, hard work, opportunity and responsibility for all, so that every child, every adult, every parent, every worker in America has an equal shot at living up to their God-given potential. That is the American dream and the American value.

~Senator John Kerry

America is the sum of our dreams. And what binds us together, what makes us one American family, is that we stand up and fight for each other's dreams, that we reaffirm that fundamental belief - I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper - through our politics, our policies, and in our daily lives.

~President Barack Obama

Being an American is so much more than just having citizenship. It's that beat in your heart to be free, to be your own man, to have control over your own destiny. America has always been an idea. It has nothing to do with papers, documents, or immigration laws. It has a lot to do with ideals and dreams.

~Paul Cuadros

The American Dream is "that dream of 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 a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. 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."

~James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America*, 1931.

Name: _____

Date: _____

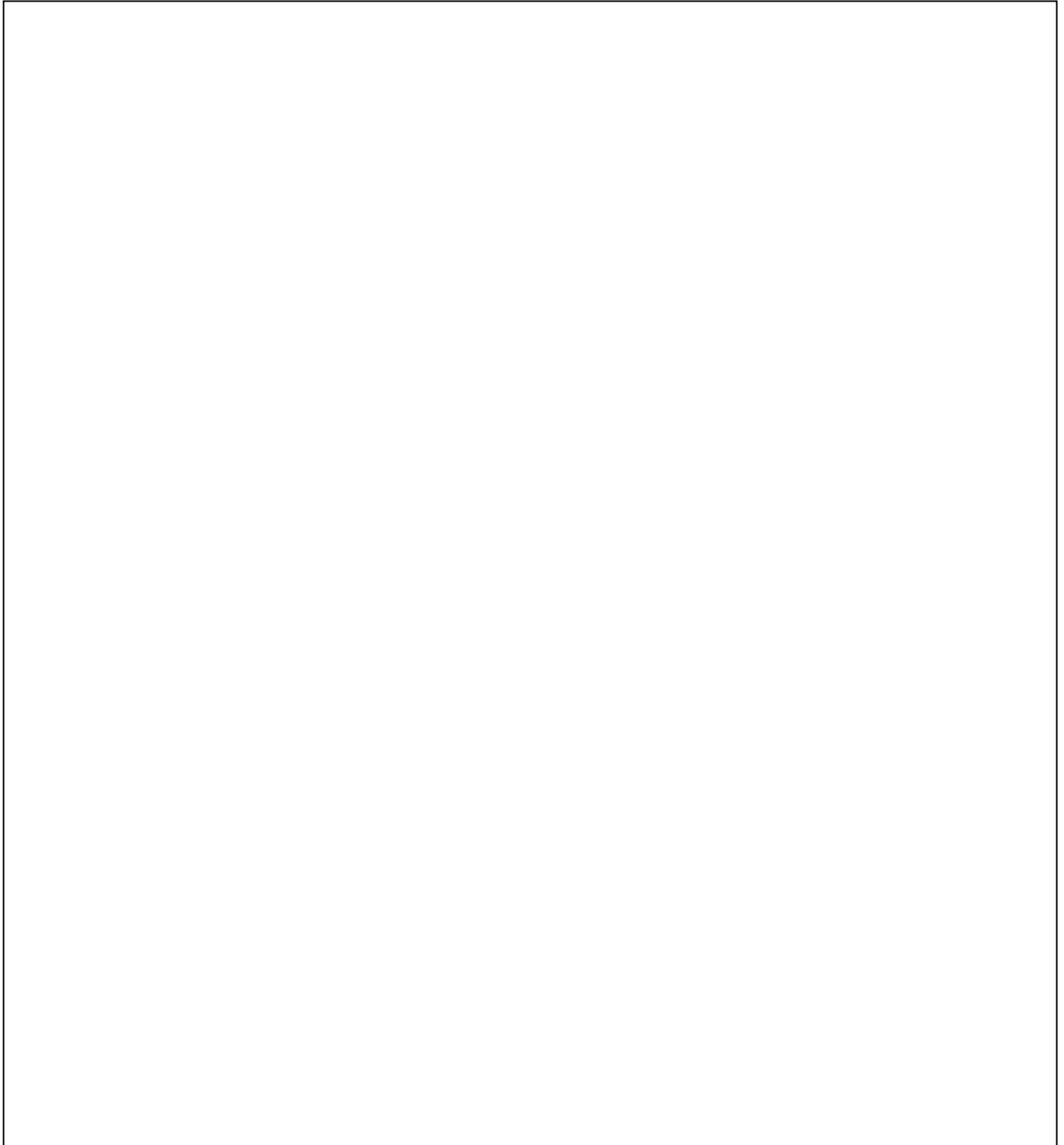
Figurative Language Chart

| Line # | Quote | Type of Figurative Language | Possible Meaning |
|--------|-------|-----------------------------|------------------|
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My “American Dream”

Name: _____

Directions: Using the definition of “The American Dream” you created earlier in class and your thoughts on how you see yourself as an adult, fill the space below with images representing your dream for the future. You can also draw inspiration from our class discussion and our study of Langston Hughes’ poems. Feel free to include images representing obstacles that you might encounter and images that represent overcoming those obstacles, too. We will post everyone’s dreams on our class bulletin board.



Let America be America Again

by Langston Hughes

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 home--
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!

From *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*,
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A Dream Deferred

by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?