

# The American Dream

Is it attainable or relevant for everyone?

## Mini-Unit

Suggested for  
Grades 11-12

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**Driving Question(s):** What is the American Dream? Is it attainable or relevant for everyone?

Standards (OH English)	Objectives
<p><b>RL.11-12.2</b> Analyze literary text development. a. Determine two or more themes of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another. b. Produce a thorough analysis of the text.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Comprehend the symbolic importance of the American Dream through the 20th and 21st centuries</li> <li>● Comprehend and summarize the importance of the Harlem Renaissance</li> <li>● Illustrate thorough understanding of 1-2 poems written by Harlem Renaissance writers</li> <li>● Interpret the American Dream through the lens of two poems</li> <li>● Design or create a deliverable that illustrates analysis of the attainability of the American Dream</li> </ul>
<p><b>RL.11-12.4</b> Determine the connotative, denotative, and figurative meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text; analyze the impact of author’s diction, including multiple-meaning words or language that is particularly evocative to the tone and mood of the text.</p>	
<p><b>RL.11-12.9</b> Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more diverse texts from the same period treat similar themes and/or topics.</p>	
<p><b>W.11-12.9</b> Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.</p>	
<p><b>W.11-12.10</b> Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.</p>	

## Learning Activities

### Procedures (At least 4-5 classes; 45 minutes each)

1. **Introduction:** Begin with a class discussion in which you introduce the concept of the American Dream; use Padlet to develop a collaborative board or phrases or ideas that your students associate with the American Dream.
2. **Compare / Contrast:** Ask the students to compare it to a series of quotes or images prepared by you and, in whole group discussion, ask if there are similarities or differences. (First pointing out a few, yourself.)
3. **Context:** Introduce the Harlem Renaissance as the foundation for an African-American artistic and cultural heritage. Two voices emerge which begin to criticize the attainability of the white American Dream of the 20th century: Langston Hughes and Priscilla Jane Thompson.
4. **Execute:** The class will read both poems aloud and complete a quick “anticipation journal” that lets each student write down what they think the poem is about
5. **Activity:** Split students into groups of 5 and assign them either poet. There should be an overall even number of small groups. Each student will have a TPCASTT graphic organizer and each student should self-select one piece of the graphic organizer.
  - a. Small groups will annotate the poem together with previously agreed-upon class annotations
  - b. Each student will complete their portion of the graphic organizer (Title should have both pieces) and then teach it to one another
  - c. Groups will be given different colors of white board markers, then will add their TPCASTT findings to a projected graphic organizer
  - d. Groups will elect a speaker who will share their findings with the class and provide that speaker with three sentences to summarize their TPCASTT findings
  - e. Speakers will be called up per poet to share their three sentence summary
6. **Revisit:** Return to the initial word cloud and anticipation journal. Together, as a whole class, write an effective and definable thesis / topic sentence that answers the driving question.
7. **Wrap Up:** Students complete a culminating activity which asks them to describe the American Dream as illustrated by Thompson or Hughes (choosing the author opposite the author they analyzed) in word or image
  - a. Depending on the size or the time spent on the mini-unit, the culminating assessment could include a gallery walk of the final product

## Materials

Priscilla Jane Thompson "To A Little Colored Boy"	<a href="https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/amverse/BAD5735.0001.001/1:34?rgn=div1;view=fulltext">https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/amverse/BAD5735.0001.001/1:34?rgn=div1;view=fulltext</a>
Langston Hughes "Let America Be America Again"	<a href="https://poets.org/poem/let-america-be-america-again">https://poets.org/poem/let-america-be-america-again</a>
Various authors such as Malcolm X, Barack Obama, Maya Lin, FDR (suggestions below)	Text (pictures, quotes, drawings) to explicate the American Dream
TPCASTT Graphic Organizer	Title, Paraphrase, Connotation, Attitude, Shifts, Title, Theme

## LET'S HEAR FROM SOME VOICES

“.. is perfect houses with nice lawns. .... The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies.”  
- Ta Nehisi Coates

“ In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear—which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.”  
-FDR

“And when I speak, I don't speak as a Democrat. Or a Republican. Nor an American. I speak as a victim of America's so-called democracy. You and I have never seen democracy - all we've seen is hypocrisy. When we open our eyes today and look around America, we see America not through the eyes of someone who has enjoyed the fruits of Americanism. We see America through the eyes of someone who has been the victim of Americanism. We don't see any American dream. We've experienced only the American nightmare.”  
- Malcolm X

“America is big enough to accommodate all their dreams.”

- Barack Obama

“To me, the American Dream is being able to follow your own personal calling. To be able to do what you want to do is incredible freedom.”

- Maya Lin

## TIME TO TALK ABOUT OUR AUTHORS



PRISCILLA JANE THOMPSON

Priscilla Jane Thompson

- Cincinnati
- Publishing in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century
- Influenced the Harlem Renaissance
- “If in any of these humble and simple rhymes, a passage or thought may chance prove a medium, through which the race may be elevated, or benefited, if only in the private mind of some reader, the writer feels, that her efforts is fully repaid.”



Langston Hughes

- Claims Paul Laurence Dunbar, Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg as primary influences
- Shaped many artistic contribution of the Harlem Renaissance
- “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.”