

Inquiry into the Ideal of the American Dream

The “American Dream” is a central concept in American culture, yet it is paradoxically the site of our most hopeful vision of equality and our most tragic divisions. We will begin by looking at early writings about America that construct the idea of the American Dream and reveal its paradoxes. Then, using literary works and historical documents from the late 19th and early 20th century, we will explore a diverse array of responses— including those by immigrants, minorities, and the working class—to the concept of the American Dream. Finally, we will focus on contemporary literature and films, such as American Beauty, explore and often critique conceptions of the American Dream that associate it with material success and suburban life.