

QUESTIONING THE AMERICAN DREAM

How can pieces of art question the American way of life and the ideal of the American Dream?

I- What is the American Dream?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTpBDmcZchU>

➤ Take notes while watching the video and explain:

- How has the definition of the American Dream evolved over time?
- How do young Americans now feel about the American Dream?

Art and protest



II- Analyse the documents below:

➤ DOCUMENT A



There's no way like the American Way, Margaret Bourke-White (1937)

Original title of the photograph: "At the Time of the Louisville Flood" (Kentucky)

Issued in the *Life* magazine on February 15, 1937

Flood victims are lined up to get food and clothing from Red Cross relief station.

- 1- Introduce the document (title, source, subject, context of publication).
- 2- Describe it in detail.
- 3- What strikes you or catches your attention?
- 4- What does Margaret Bourke denounce about the American Dream through this photograph?

➤ **DOCUMENT B**

My father was, I am sure, intended by nature to be a cheerful, kindly man. Until he was thirty-four years old he worked as a farmhand for a man named Thomas Butterworth whose place lay near the town of Bidwell, Ohio. He had then a horse of his own and on Saturday evenings drove into town to spend a few hours in social intercourse with other farmhands. [...] At ten o'clock father drove home along a lonely country road, made his horse comfortable for the night and himself went to bed, quite happy in his position in life. He had at that time no notion of trying to rise in the world.

It was in the spring of his thirty-fifth year that father married my mother, then a country schoolteacher, and in the following spring I came wriggling and crying into the world. Something happened to the two people. They became ambitious. The American passion for getting up in the world took possession of them.

It may have been that mother was responsible. Being a schoolteacher she had no doubt read books and magazines. She had, I presume, read of how Garfield, Lincoln, and other Americans rose from poverty to fame and greatness and as I lay beside her – in the days of her lying-in – she may have dreamed that I would someday rule men and cities. At any rate she induced father to give up his place as a farmhand, sell his horse and embark on an independent enterprise of his own. She was a tall silent woman with a long nose and troubled grey eyes. For herself she wanted nothing. For father and myself she was incurably ambitious.

The first venture into which the two people went turned out badly. They rented ten acres of poor stony land on Griggs's Road, eight miles from Bidwell, and launched into chicken raising. I grew into boyhood on the place and got my first impressions of life there. From the beginning they were impressions of disaster and if, in my turn, I am a gloomy man inclined to see the darker side of life, I attribute it to the fact that what should have been for me the happy joyous days of childhood were spent on a chicken farm.

Sherwood ANDERSON, *The Egg*, 1921

- 1- List all the information you have about the narrator and his family.
- 2- Explain this sentence: "It may have been that mother was responsible" (l.12). What does the narrator blame her for?
- 3- Why can this extract be read as a criticism of the American Dream?

➤ **DOCUMENT 3**

The Bluest Eye tells the tragic story of a young African-American girl, Pecola Breedlove, who grows up in Ohio in the 1940's and longs to have blue eyes (which she equates with "whiteness") because she sees herself as ugly and is not loved by her family and community. The following extract is the prologue of the novel.

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bow wow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play.

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[...]

School has started, and Frieda and I get new brown stockings and cod-liver oil. Grown-ups talk in tired, edgy voices about Zick's Coal Company and take us along in the evening to the railroad tracks where we fill burlap sacks with the tiny pieces of coal lying about. Later we walk home, glancing back to see the great carloads of slag being dumped, red hot and smoking, into the ravine that skirts the steel mill. The dying fire lights the sky with a dull orange glow. Frieda and I lag behind, staring at the patch of color surrounded by black. It is impossible not to feel a shiver when our feet leave the gravel path and sink into the dead grass in the field.

Our house is old, cold, and green. At night a kerosene lamp lights one large room. The others are braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice. Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy. When we catch colds, they shake their heads in disgust at our lack of consideration. How, they ask us, do you expect anybody to get anything done if you all are sick? We cannot answer them. Our illness is treated with contempt, foul Black Draught, and castor oil that blunts our minds.

The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison, 1970

- 1- Read the first paragraph. What are Dick and Jane's house like?
- 2- Explain why the vocabulary used is very simple and repetitive. What kind of books are Dick and Jane's stories? How do they represent the typical American family?
- 3- Read paragraphs 2 & 3. What has happened to the text? What could it mean?
- 4- Read paragraphs 4 & 5. What do we understand about the narrator? How does her life differ from Dick and Jane's? How could she feel after reading Dick and Jane's stories?
- 5- Conclude: what does Toni Morrison imply about the American Dream?

III- Write a commentary.

- ➔ Taking into account the specificities of each document, analyse how artists use their work to denounce the fallacy of the American Dream.