QUESTIONING THE AMERICAN DREAM

1- **Read and analyse each document separately.**
(Title? Source? Context? Subject? Narrator? Setting? Main themes? Goal of the artist? Stylistic devices? Symbols? Striking elements? …)

GROUP WORK

Document A

= a photograph by Margaret Bourke-White taken in 1937 during the **Great Depression** (which started in 1929)

The picture was taken just after a natural disaster → In January 1937 the Ohio river flooded a large part of Louisville in Kentucky → hence the original title: "At the Time of the Louisville Flood"

However, we now refer to the photograph using the phrase that is displayed on the billboard: *"There's no way like the American Way"* because the picture has become a symbol of the fallacy of the American Dream.

DESCRIPTION

In the foreground = black people are lining up / waiting for their turn in front of a red cross relief station

They are holding baskets or buckets (probably to be filled with food)

Facial expressions → desperate / hopeless / grim faces / empty gazes

Clothes → although they have decent clothes (coats / hats) they look miserable and dirty

In the background: there's a billboard portraying an ideal American family (two parents, two children and a dog in a brand new car)

(At the time, there were billboards like this everywhere in America to convey hope to people and promote the American ideal)

Unlike the people queuing they seem to be rejoicing / they're looking in the distance as if to suggest they had hope and faith in the future. Moreover, the kids are staring into the distance yet not in the same direction as their parents: they somehow remind us of the Westward expansion, they symbolize the generation that will keep the American Dream a reality, they are the generation that will improve what their parents before them had built.

The contrast between the advert and the reality → **ironical / striking**

Opposition between the superlative "highest standard of living" and the low standard of living of the people in the photograph. Moreover, they are all racialized people. People of colour in the United States at that time didn't have the same access to education and employment as it is the case now. In spite of their clothes which might suggest their desire to climb the social ladder, they represent a socially disrupted society. Those people might be the victims of the flood, looking for shelter or waiting in line to get the bare necessities to survive. As no white people appears on the photograph, it might also suggest that those who had the luxury to leave the place were all white Americans.

Point of the photograph: show that the AD is a lie / contrasting the notion of progress going forward / westward and reality that is going backwards.

DOCUMENT B

An extract from the short story *The Egg* by Sherwood Anderson, published in 1921, the "Roaring Twenties", a time of prosperity in the US.

WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT THE NARRATOR AND HIS FAMILY

- The narrator = now an adult but he remembers when he lived with his parents on a farm in Bidwell, Ohio
  →describes himself as "gloomy" → pessimistic, the lexical field of despair conveys an impression of aimless circularity, "poor stony land", "disaster", "poverty".
- His father was a farmer / was 35 when he married his mother / was "a cheerful and kindly man" / great expectations of the American dream l.6-7 + l.10-11
- but then he became an entrepreneur → he started dreaming big and built his own enterprise which consisted into raising chickens and he lost a lot of money. In the structure of the extract, we clearly see how success and despair are intermingled.
- The mother = a schoolteacher / a reader / ambitious (for her husband and her son) / a dreamer

The narrator blames his mother for having had too much ambition and for being too naïve → he believes she destroyed his childhood and ruined their future

- This extract criticizes many aspects of the AD:

1- The fact that hard work doesn't always lead to success (the good old Protestant work ethic doesn't have bright days before him anymore, reality strikes harder).
2- The fact that dreaming big prevents people from being satisfied with what they have → The AD makes them "incurably ambitious" and endlessly dissatisfied / it creates frustrations
3- The fact that it's only accessible to a happy few (cf: self-made men like Garfield, Lincoln) + the US not developing at the same pace = rural areas left behind

DOCUMENT C

= An extract from *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison published in 1970 but set in the 1940s (a time of heavy contestations when it comes to racial issues)

1- The first paragraph describes the daily life of an ideal American family composed of two parents, two children and pets living in a big and beautiful house = American ideal of the family
2- The <u>vocabulary = very simple, almost childish and repetitive</u> (there are <u>basic words</u> like "nice", "happy", "pretty", "big" + <u>onomatopoeias</u> like "bow wow") → we imagine that Pecola is reading <u>a children's book</u> (indeed, Dick and Jane stories are famous stories used in America to teach children how to read)
3- Paragraph 1 is then repeated verbatim in paragraphs 2 and 3 but we notice that <u>the punctuation and the spaces between the words have disappeared</u>
   → maybe Toni Morrison repeats the story 3 times to denounce the fact that <u>children are constantly told the same stories filled with the same stereotypes</u> (// "The Danger of a single story" → Chimamanda Adichie)
   → maybe she has suppressed all punctuation to suggest that <u>the AD has become devoid of meaning</u>
   → maybe <u>Pecola doesn't understand what she is reading</u> because it doesn't match her reality / it is incompatible with what she lives

4- In comparison, Pecola's house = miserable ("old, cold and green" + has no electricity → lit with a "kerosene lamp") / dirty ("peopled by roaches and mice")
The neighborhood where she lives = dark and dull
Contrary to the characters of her children's books, Pecola has no time to play. Even on her way back from school, she has to carry coal in huge burlap sacks.
She doesn't seem to receive any love or affection from her family. They are only worried that she gets sick because they don't want to pay for medicine (few social programs, many families living under the poverty line, stammering welfare system…), and they need her to work.

5- Through this extract Toni Morrison shows that life in the US isn't as people think → only the bright sides are usually represented
TM also highlights the fact that some people (in that case African Americans) are excluded from the Dream.
She also denounces the fact that the AD can have terrible consequences on children and / or vulnerable people
→ Pecola feels "ugly" because she has integrated that beauty can only be white
→ she also feels rejected because she cannot identify with the characters in the stories she reads

2- Make a list of the similarities and differences between the documents:

➢ COMMON POINTS

- Stories set in the USA in the first half of the 20th century (Doc A, B and C)
- People bombarded with images of success and happiness (Doc A, B and C)
- People in financial difficulties (Doc A, B, C)
- People who look sad / gloomy / unhappy / pessimistic (Doc A, B, C)
- A child's perspective (Doc B + C) → even though the narrator is an adult in Doc B
- Irony (Doc A + C)
- Sharp contrasts (Doc A + C)
  →between fiction and reality
  →between different standards of living
- Message → Denunciation of the American Dream (Doc A, B, C)
  → hard work doesn't necessarily lead to success (Doc B + C)
  → that it's a lie / an illusion / a dream that rarely comes true (Doc A, B, C)
  → it makes people frustrated or unhappy (Doc B, C)

➢ DIFFERENCES

- Nature of the documents (photograph / short story / novel)
- Methods used to denounce the fallacy of the dream
  → Doc A: irony / hyperboles
  → Doc B: a first-person narrative / no precision whether they are people of colour but they live in rural areas: also prevented from accessing the American Dream (Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*)
  → Doc C: TM experiments with new writing techniques and deconstructs traditional syntax (as if to mirror the fact that the AD is crumbling) / idealization of white beauty

3- Organise your ideas so as to answer your investigative question.

QUESTION: What do the documents denounce about the American Dream and how do artists voice their protest?

I- They denounce the fact that the AD creates more frustrations than hopes.

➔ <u>People are constantly bombarded with images and stories of success and happiness → it gives them a distorted vision of reality</u>
Doc A: the billboard
DOC B: the books read by the mother→ about people "who rose from poverty to fame" (self-made men)
DOC C: Dick and Jane stories

➔ <u>People end up being sad / gloomy / dissatisfied if they do not achieve the AD</u>
DOC A: grim faces of the characters
DOC B: the narrator describes himself as " a gloomy man inclined to see the darker side of life"
DOC C: Pecola finds herself "ugly" + describes her house as "old, cold and green"

II- They reveal that the dream is a lie / an illusion.

Definition of the A.D = the belief in upward mobility / that anyone can become successful in America thanks to hard work and perseverance → the artists show it's a lie because:

➔ <u>Hard work doesn't necessarily lead to success.</u>
DOC B: the narrator's father has worked all his life and yet he has failed → "the first venture turned out badly"
DOC C: Pecola doesn't play like the children of her age: in the evening she "fills we fill burlap sacks with the tiny pieces of coal lying about" → she has learnt hard work from an early age and yet isn't happy

➔ <u>Your life is determined by elements you do not choose (it is almost impossible to climb the social ladder):</u>
DOC C: Pecola's life = determined by the place where she was born + where she lives
DOC A: People's lives = determined by the socio-economic context (→ the Great Depression) + external factors → in that case, a natural catastrophe has destroyed their lives
DOC B: the father was a farmer and failed to become an entrepreneur

III- The methods used by the artists to protest are different.

➔ <u>In Doc A and C, the artists use irony and contrasts to reveal the inadequacy of the dream</u>
DOC A: sharp contrast between the smilling family in the car at the top, and the somber-looking people with their empty baskets and buckets at the bottom / The superlative "WORLD'S HIGHEST STANDARD OF LIVING" is ironical given the situation
DOC C: sharp contrast too between Dick and Jane's house depicted as "nice", "big", "pretty" and the narrator's house

➔ <u>In Doc B and C, the writers make us see things through children's perspectives to denounce the fact that children are the first victims of the AD and communicate with us their feelings and suffering</u>
DOC B: the narrator is an adult but explains how his parents' ambitions have affected him as a kid → "what should have been for me the happy joyous days of childhood were spent on a farm"

DOC C: the first text is an indication that the whole story will be seen through a child's perspective (vocabulary = very simple and repetitive) / in the second text, we know that the narrator is a child since she writes about school

➔ <u>In doc C Toni Morrison experiments with new writing techniques</u>
DOC C: no punctuation in paragraphs 2 & 3 to suggest that the American Dream has become devoid of meaning + to mirror the fact that it is crumbling (like the text which is disintegrating)

4- Write your introduction.

5- Write your conclusion.