

Analyzing Central Ideas in *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* by Jim Cullen

Chapter	Central Idea	Development	Evidence (Use quotations. Include page numbers.)
1	<p>A cornerstone of the American Dream is the belief that life can be better for one’s children or future generations.</p>	<p>The author discusses that the main motivating factor for the Puritan’s move to the New World was to create a better (and to them, more moral) life for their children. This idea of improving the lives of subsequent generations is one that is part of almost all versions of the American Dream.</p>	<p>“Stoddard added that they ‘would not have left England merely for their own quietness; but they were afraid that their children would be corrupted there,’ From the very beginning, then, a notion that one’s children might have a better life has been a core component of the American Dream”(16).</p> <p>“Their confidence--in themselves, in their sense of mission for their children, and in a God they believed was on their side--impelled them with ruthless zeal to gamble everything for the sake of a vision. In the process they accomplished the core task in the achievement of any American Dream; the became masters of their own destiny”(18).</p>
1	<p>The belief in reform is very important to the concept of the American Dream.</p>	<p>The author uses the story of the Puritans and their hope for change to illustrate the importance of a belief in reform within the belief in the American Dream. A person must believe in the ability to change a situation for the better in order to believe in the American Dream.</p>	<p>““The irreducible foundation of all varieties of Protestantism was this: a belief that the world was a corrupt place, but one that could be reformed. . . .This faith in reform became the central legacy of American Protestantism and the cornerstone of what became the American Dream”(15).</p> <p>“Stoddard added that they ‘would not have left England merely for their own quietness; but they were afraid that their children would be corrupted there,’ From the very beginning, then, a notion that one’s children might have a better life has been a</p>

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How do these central ideas build and interact with one another?

The central idea of the belief in reform being a cornerstone of all American Dreams is built upon with the second central idea involving the desire for a better life for oneself and one’s family. The author establishes the necessity of a belief in reform for the American Dream to exist and then builds upon that central idea through his second central idea. The second central idea of the desire for a better life for oneself and one’s family is directly dependent on someone’s belief in reform.

<p>3</p>	<p>Upward Mobility is necessary for most American Dreams because it enables people to improve their station in life. Improving one's life is a cornerstone of the American Dream.</p>	<p>Cullen presents general and specific examples of how a person can start in one station in life and elevate himself to one much higher. The author uses Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln to prove this version of the American Dream.</p>	<p>“But there are other forms of mobility, too; tales of transformation through education. . . or people with modest resources who triumphed. . .or other realms of human aspiration. And like other American Dreams, the power of this one lay in a sense of collective ownership; anyone can get ahead” (60).</p> <p>“Lincoln’s entire public persona--his homely looks and unkempt appearance, his celebrated sense of humor, the self-effacing modesty he repeatedly deployed while running for and holding office. . .was leveraged on his modest beginnings and what he had made of them. . . it was made, and heard, as a testament to how democracy could elevate Everyman” (76)</p>
<p>3</p>	<p>Slavery had a negative effect on both black and white Americans’ ability to be Upwardly Mobile. Therefore, slavery was preventing many Americans from bettering their lives.</p>	<p>Cullen uses information about America prior to the Civil War to illustrate the way in which black Americans and white Americans were prevented from being upwardly mobile because of slavery.</p>	<p>“Slavery. . .was increasingly considered a threat to the Dream of Upward Mobility by a small but growing number of people. These people did not necessarily have any direct economic interest in slavery--nor, for that matter, did they always care whether it was wrong. What concerned them most was the way the peculiar institution compromised their view of themselves and their country”(74).</p> <p>“How did slavery corrode Lincoln’s American Dream. . .the first was economic. The presence of slavery impeded upward mobility not only of African Americans but also of European Americans, because the slave economy narrowed the prospects of men without the ever-greater amounts of capital necessary to invest in slaves”(84).</p>

3	<p>The American Dream of Upward Mobility requires one to better his/her own life, but also to help others improve their lives, as well.</p>	<p>Cullen presents Lincoln’s plight to help more Americans have the opportunity to achieve their dreams.</p>	<p>“The American Dream of Upward Mobility as both a beautiful promise and a moral imperative. ‘I hold that while man exists, it is his duty to improve not only his own condition, but to assist in ameliorating mankind’” (94)</p> <p>“If there was one redemptive element in all of this, it lay in something that Lincoln cared very deeply about: that the purview of the Dream be expanded as widely as possible. By the end of the twentieth century, it wasn’t just Hans, Baptiste, and Patrick who were pursuing--and occasionally achieving--upward mobility, but Elizabeth,, Elena, and Kaneesha, too” (101)</p>
3	<p>Even in a free society, Upward Mobility can be hampered by factors (such as war) that are out of the control of an individual. Therefore, it is not always as easy to advance in life through hard work or ambition.</p>	<p>The reader should agree because the author uses the Civil War as an example of how uncontrollable circumstances can inhibit a person’s ability to be upwardly mobile</p>	<p>“The impact of the Civil War on Lincoln: it revised. . . his notion of the American Dream. The principal form this chastening was a growing skepticism over one of the key premises of the American Dream of Upward Mobility. . .the ability to shape one’s destiny. Perhaps, Lincoln was increasingly inclined to speculate, there was an invisible hand with objectives far removed from things like success in the marketplace”(97).</p> <p>“In this brief address [Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address]. . .Lincoln repeated some of the ideas he had been mulling over for the past three years: that the course of the war had not been desired or expected, that its course had been unpredictable, and that both sides had invoked God’s aid against the</p>

			<p>other. But, he said, God had his own idea about what this war was really about, and it seemed to be punishment for the sins of <i>both sides</i>” (100).</p>
<p>How do these central ideas interact and build on one another?</p> <p>Most of the central ideas in this chapter focus on Upward Mobility, the ability for a person to improve his or her station in life. However, as the chapter progresses, the reader also notices central ideas involving the limitations of Upward Mobility. Once the author has established that Upward Mobility is part of the American Dream, he then discusses how slavery prevented freedom and, thus, prevented Upward Mobility. He then uses the discussion of Lincoln and the abolition of slavery to reveal that Upward Mobility also involves bettering one’s community. Finally, he again discusses limitations outside of slavery that could prohibit a person from having the freedom to advance in society. Therefore, the central idea of Upward Mobility being a cornerstone of the American Dream is developed into more detail by the subsequent central ideas which acknowledge the limitations of Upward Mobility.</p>			
4	<p>Equality is necessary for the American Dream to truly exist because it allows all Americans the same opportunities for success.</p>	<p>The author uses historical examples to establish equality as a fundamental part to the American Dream. He shows that without equality, the American Dream only existed for some Americans.</p>	<p>“That’s because the American Dream depends on it. At some visceral level, virtually all of us need to believe that equality is one of the core values of everyday American life, that its promises extend to everyone. If they don’t then not everybody is eligible for the American Dream” (108).</p> <p>“What these and other parents yearned for above all</p>

			<p>was a part of the American Dream: equal opportunities for their children. That is why schools. . .became some of the fiercest battlegrounds in conflicts between the races in postwar America”(118).</p>
4	<p>The Civil Rights Movement was necessary to establish the Dream of Equality for all Americans.</p>	<p>The author uses the story of Martin Luther King, Jr. to illustrate the way in which the Civil Rights movement was integral in creating more equality in American society which, in turn, would allow more Americans the opportunities to achieve their dreams.</p>	<p>“[King stated] segregation and discrimination are strange paradoxes in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal (125).</p> <p>“[King stated] It’s all right to tell a man to lift himself up by his bootstraps, but it is a cruel jest to tell a bootless man that he ought to lift himself up by his own bootstraps”(128).</p>
<p>How do these central ideas interact and build on one another?</p> <p>In this chapter, the author establishes the need for equality in order for the American Dream to be a reality for all members of society. He builds upon this central idea through his analysis of the Civil Rights movement and its contribution to spreading the possibility of the American Dream. The author discusses at length the interaction of the central ideas of equality and the necessity of the Civil Rights Movement and plants the seed that perhaps not all Americans are able to truly obtain the American Dream.</p>			

5	<p>The American Dream of owning a home is the most widespread and realized American Dream</p>	<p>The author proves this claim by explaining how advances in building technology made houses cheaper. He also discusses the car industry and the affordability of mortgages to illustrate the way in which owning a house was possible for many people.</p>	<p>“The American Dream of owning a home,’ we call it. No American Dream has broader appeal, and no American Dream has been quite so widely realized. Roughly two-thirds of Americans owned their homes at the start of this century, and it seems reasonable to believe that many of the remaining third will go on to do so”(136).</p> <p>“As little as 10 percent was all that was necessary for a down payment, and because the mortgage, interest, principal, and taxes were often less than rent, virtually all were owner-occupied”(151)</p>
5	<p>The American Dream of Homeownership is supported by the value that land has always had in American society.</p>	<p>The author proves the value of land by comparing it to less consistently valuable items such as currency. He also emphasizes the importance of the physicality of land as opposed to more abstract items of value.</p>	<p>“For much of American history, in fact, land was a more practical and accessible financial instrument than cash, which was rare, and, given the lack of a national currency, difficult to use. While other goods could function as a medium of exchange. . .land was of particular importance very early in American history” (137).</p> <p>“From the beginning, then, in America not only was an abstraction such as money important, but so too was the development of a particular place where a variety of people could transform, acquire, or lose lives (137).</p>

How do these central ideas interact and build on one another?

In order for the author to prove the central idea that home ownership is the most widespread American Dream, he must first prove WHY home ownership is important to Americans. Thus, proving that land has always had value in America establishes a reason why home ownership is such a valued commodity in America and such a huge part of the idea of the American Dream. The central idea of the value of land aids the author in establishing the other central idea of the breadth of the dream of home ownership.

6	<p>The American Dream of the Coast was a dream of an easy life of easy wealth.</p>	<p>The author uses reactions of people to the Gold Rush and early Hollywood celebrities to establish the way people felt toward California.</p>	<p>“Yet even when the promise of the gold rush proved illusory. . . it continued to have enormous metaphorical power for generations of Americans, for whom California (a.k.a “the Golden State”) offered the potential for riches of many kinds” (170).</p> <p>“The California gold rush is the purest expression of the Dream of the Coast in American history. The notion that transformative riches were literally at your feet, there for the taking, cast a deep and lasting spell on the American imagination” (170).</p>
6	<p>The American Dream of the Coast was one that was founded on illusion.</p>	<p>The author includes stories about the gold rush, the Sunkist orange advertising campaign, and Hollywood couple Fairbanks and Pickford, to prove that the image people had of California was not realistic.</p>	<p>“Millions of Americans became devotees of a fruit most had never seen a few years earlier. . .in a sense, they became even more devoted to the <i>image</i> that Sunkist promoted . Crates containing the oranges were illustrated with vivid, idyllic lithographs of Southern California landscapes” (171).</p> <p>“The values embodied in Pickfair are a fraud, and we all know it. Fairbanks and Pickford did not live happily ever after in a storybook romance. . . Franklin</p>

			<p>and Carnegie left behind libraries that remain with us; the principal legacy of Pickford and Fairbanks is made of deteriorating celluloid, fading pictures of a world that never was" (178)).</p>
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How do these central ideas interact and build on one another?

These two central ideas show opposing viewpoints of the Dream of the Coast. The author establishes what the Dream of the Coast looked like--ease of life and ease of wealth--in his first central idea. However, as the chapter progresses, the author also proves his second central idea--that this dream was based on illusion. The interaction of these two central ideas reveals the hope that the Coast bred in Americans, as well as the emptiness that lay in its reality.