

# The Evolution and Significance of American Culture and Its Impact on the Cultures of the World

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni diplomski studij mađarskoga jezika i književnosti i  
engleskoga jezika i književnosti nastavničkog usmjerenja

Izabela Tomakić

## **Razvoj i važnost američke kulture i njen utjecaj na kulture svijeta**

Diplomski rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

Osijek, 2021.

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Double Major MA Programme in Hungarian Language and Literature  
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Master's Thesis

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the development of the United States from the colonial period to the present, with a particular emphasis on its reputation as the land of opportunity and global superpower. The bright side of America based on the promises of the founding principles and basic traditional values has been the source of unsurpassed national pride and admiration by much of the world. However, the dark side of America has dimmed the beacon of democracy which has been overshadowed by instances of inequality of opportunity based on race, gender and other backgrounds, displacement, exclusion, discrimination, segregation, systemic racism, and mistreatment of its workers. The paper highlights particular events that belong to the tragic side of American history that have devalued the American creed in order to raise awareness to the fact that if America is to be truly great, it needs to rebuild its founding principles and honor its constitutional rights and responsibilities. This is illustrated in the poems “Let America be America Again” by Langston Hughes and the Inaugural Poem “The Hill We Climb” by Amanda Gorman. The selected works focus on America as a work in progress, a country that needs to rebuild and heal in order to achieve the American Dream and live up to its creed. Only then will America be a country of which its citizens can be proud and a role model for other cultures. Thus, to achieve the aspiration of a City upon a Hill, the United States needs to restore and reconstruct itself using the same founding principles to right the wrongs and eliminate anti-American sentiment.

**Keywords:** The United States, founding principles, liberty, equality, pursuit of happiness, a City upon a Hill

# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
1. The Founding Principles of the United States: Historical Events and Documents that Shaped the American Nation.....	3
1.1. The Declaration of Independence .....	3
1.2 The Constitution of the United States .....	4
1.3 The Bill of Rights.....	5
1.4 The Six Basic American Values: The Path to the American Dream .....	6
1.5. A City upon a Hill: The Concept and Culture of American Exceptionalism.....	7
2. The Dark Side of American History – Historical Events that Devalued America and American Ideals.....	9
2.1. Systemic Inequality of Native Americans: Displacement, Exclusion, and Segregation ..	9
2.2. Legacy of American Slavery: Systemic Racism in the United States.....	12
2.3. The American Worker as the Backbone for the American Economy.....	14
2.3.1. Irreparable Harm to the American Worker.....	15
2.3.2. Exploitation of Foreign Workers .....	16
2. 4. Immigrants’ Disillusioned View of America .....	17
3. Literary Representations of America: America as a Work in Progress.....	20
3.1 “Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes.....	20
3.2 Amanda Gorman’s Inaugural Poem “The Hill We Climb” .....	24
4. America and the World: The Need to Rebuild the City Upon a Hill .....	30
Conclusion .....	32
Works Cited.....	34



## **Introduction**

The United States of America was founded in 1776. On July 4, 1776, two days after declaring their independence from Britain, the new country adopted the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Independence (1776) along with the Constitution of the United States (1789) and the Bill of Rights (1789) established the new country's social, political, economic, and cultural foundations. Besides establishing the modern democracy in America, the Declaration of Independence instituted the founding principles, which include liberty, equality and the pursuit of happiness. Throughout history, these founding principles were strengthened due to the establishment of American values, the American Dream and the concept of a City upon a Hill. However, a systematic and detailed examination of American history reveals occurrences of the perpetual infringement of the founding principles in the form of instances of inequality of opportunity based on race, gender and other individual differences, displacement, exclusion, systemic racism, segregation, discrimination and mistreatment of workers. The perpetual violation of the founding principles has devalued the basic American values and beliefs as well as its ideals. Therefore, to achieve the venerable aspiration of being a City upon a Hill, a role model for its own citizens and the rest of the world, the United States needs to restore and reconstruct itself using the same founding principles to right the wrongs and eliminate anti-American sentiment.

The first section introduces the principal historical documents that express the ideals on which the United States was founded. It explains the critical role of these documents in the establishment of American principles and values as well as their impact on American citizens as individuals and America as a whole. Further in the section, the six basic American values and the American Dream are discussed. The section is concluded by exploring the concepts of a City upon a Hill and American Exceptionalism.

The second section discusses historical events which devalued America and American values. The first sub-section explores the systemic inequality of Native Americans. The second sub-section investigates the history of African Americans including slavery and systemic racism. The third sub-section establishes the American worker as the backbone of the American economy and continues by discussing the injustices done against the workers and the exploitation of foreign workers. The final subsection focuses on the discrimination of immigrants in United States and their disillusioned view of America.

The third section presents two poems, “Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes and the Inaugural Poem “The Hill We Climb” by Amanda Gorman, which express the poets’ thoughts about the challenges America needs to address in order to make the American Dream achievable for everyone, especially for the marginalized oppressed groups mentioned in the poems. It is interesting to note that the issues facing America in 1935, when Hughes’s poem was written, reverberate in Gorman’s poem written in 2021. Both poems are analyzed from a cultural critical perspective with a particular focus on the discrepancy between the American ideals and the reality of what actually was and is still happening in America.

The fourth section examines the concept of American Exceptionalism in relation to the rest of the world. The section continues by reestablishing the idea to rebuild the United States in order for it to become an adequate role model. The section is concluded by focusing on the obstacles as well as the opinions and suggestions of US citizens on making America great again.

# **1. The Founding Principles of the United States: Historical Events and Documents that Shaped the American Nation**

## **1.1. The Declaration of Independence**

The Declaration of Independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson was ratified by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776. It is considered one of the most influential American historical documents because it announces the separation of thirteen North American British colonies from Great Britain and gives the reasons for the separation (“The Declaration of Independence”). In addition, it announces American economic, political and cultural independence by establishing the basic American values and their democratic system of government. The most influential quote from the Declaration of Independence, which remained extremely relevant centuries after and which was instrumental to the establishment of the United States as a beacon of liberty, progress and opportunity is: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (“The Declaration of Independence”). Thereby, the Declaration of Independence was the first official document that acknowledged and entrenched American values as the working principles of the United States. The American values, which took their first shape in the Declaration of Independence, are Freedom, Equality of Opportunity, and the Pursuit of Happiness. Thenceforward, American founding principles were only revised and amended. The Declaration of Independence is equally important for the establishment of the first modern democracy, which was the United States. Initially, the Declaration of Independence states that the authority to govern should belong to the citizens, rather than to the kings: “That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness” (“The Declaration of Independence”). The document continues by invoking Americans to fight and resist the abuse of the British monarchy: “But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security” (“The Declaration of Independence”).

Furthermore, there is the listing of numerous grievances against the actions of the British monarch:

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them. (“The Declaration of Independence”)

The document continues by stating the American attempts to resist the “tyranny over these States” and by claiming that America was out of options and would not continue to endure further injustices: “They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends” (“The Declaration of Independence”). The document is concluded by establishing the fundamentals of modern democracy, highlighting the importance and the influence of its citizens and putting the power in the hands of their own citizens by allowing them to rebel against the oppressors and to overthrow them, which is precisely what the Founding Fathers did to establish America.

## **1.2 The Constitution of the United States**

Another significant historical American document that shaped the foundations of the nation is the Constitution of the United States. According to the National Archives, the Constitution was written in 1787, ratified in 1788, and was finally put in operation in 1789 (“The Constitution of the United States”). It established the American national government with its fundamental laws, which include certain basic rights for all its citizens (“The Constitution of the United States”). The United States Constitution opens by defining the purpose of the Constitution and reestablishing the central value of freedom:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America. (“The Constitution of the United States”)

The Constitution continues by establishing the American federal government, which consists of three branches: Legislative, Executive and Judicial (“The Constitution of the United States”). With the establishment of the federal government, the Constitution united 13 colonies under one flag with communal interests. In addition, the Constitution clearly outlines the relationship between the citizens and the government, which states that the government serves the citizens and that they can directly vote for preferable candidates. In order to protect freedom, the Constitution limited the federal government to prevent dictatorial rule: “No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States: And no Person holding any Office of Profit or Trust under them, shall, without the Consent of the Congress, accept of any present, Emolument, Office, or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State” (“The Constitution of the United States,” art. 1, sec. 9). The Constitution follows by defining and establishing fundamental laws of the United States, which consist of obligations of government branches, prohibitions which in any manner endanger freedom of either states or individuals, and the judicial laws intended for all citizens. The basic human rights which were introduced with the Constitution are voting and the right to a proper trial before being sentenced. However, the section on the basic human rights was amended and updated with the Bill of Rights, which was necessary to safeguard individual liberty.

### **1.3 The Bill of Rights**

The United States Constitution formed government bodies, fundamental laws and addressed some basic human rights but amendments were considered necessary to precisely define the freedoms of the individual. Therefore, James Madison was given the task to draft the document named The Bill of Rights, which was added to the United States Constitution in 1791 after being ratified by a majority of the States (“The Bill of Rights”). The Bill of Rights guarantees individual civil rights and liberties that include freedoms of speech, religion, press, assembly, and the right to petition the government (“The Constitution of the United States”). Even though many members of Congress considered that these rights already naturally belonged to each citizen, others found it extremely important to define the individual freedoms and to protect these previously established amendments from the government’s influence and further modification (“The Constitution of the United States”): “The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people” (“The Bill of Rights”). With constructing and publishing the Bill of Rights, Congress

accentuated the importance of freedom and officially acknowledged freedom as one of the fundamental values of the United States.

#### **1.4 The Six Basic American Values: The Path to the American Dream**

The basic American values are the pillars of American culture. According to Datesman et al., the system of American values is constructed in pairs of three benefits – individual freedom, self-reliance, and equality of opportunity – and the corresponding requirements – competition, material wealth and hard work – needed to obtain them. These American values have helped to determine and construct the American identity, which, even today, remains loyal to the mentioned American basic values (28-34). Even though these values were first introduced to the public by the mentioned authors in 1997 in the first edition of the book *American Ways: An Introduction to American Culture* we can trace the American values back to traditional Puritan tenets:

Puritanism is not only a religious belief, but a philosophy, a combination of life styles with living values. It has exerted great influence on American culture, and shaped the national characters of American people. Many of the mainstream values in the U.S. such as individualism, egalitarianism, optimism, can find their origin in Puritanism of colonial periods. (Kang 149)

Afterwards, American values were further shaped by historical documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, which encompassed values such as freedom and equality of opportunity. However, the previously mentioned documents shaped not only American values but also the American Dream, which is a set of beliefs consisting of these essential American values. The term American Dream was only later coined and defined in 1931 by James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America*:

That American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world. That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming it. (qtd. in Cullen 4)

Since the American Dream and American values adhere to the same set of values, by following and fulfilling American values one can attempt to achieve the American Dream.

### **1.5. A City upon a Hill: The Concept and Culture of American Exceptionalism**

One of the most prominent and defining American phrases was a part of a sermon titled “A Model of Christian Charity,” delivered in 1630 by John Winthrop before a group of colonists who embarked on their journey to settle in Boston: “We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us” (Winthrop 31). Winthrop’s sermon was inspired by the verses from Matthew 5.14: “Ye are the light of the world. / A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid” (*King James Bible*, Matthew 5.14.). The sermon was initially meant to evoke feelings of fear from failure among the Puritans since both God and the world would be watching them. Although the sermon was forgotten for a while, it was revived along with the concept of American Exceptionalism during the Cold War (1947-1991) when Ronald Reagan held a speech during the First Annual Conservative Political Action Conference:

Tracing the story of America from John Winthrop forward, Reagan built a powerful articulation of American exceptionalism—the idea, as he explained, “that there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage.” (Van Engen)

American Exceptionalism is the belief that the United States is inherently different from every other country in the world (Lipset 18-19). Furthermore, the United States is considered to be exceptional due to its written history, size, geography, political institutions and culture (Rose 92). Many other American presidents maintained the concept of American Exceptionalism alive by following Reagan’s example and quoting Winthrop’s sermon: “After Miller, Winthrop’s text has been quoted by almost every president to hold office: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama” (Van Engen). Therefore, the concept of American Exceptionalism is extremely relevant to American culture and politics, and it represents the celebration of everything the United States stands for such as individual freedom, equality and progress:

We are, as Lincoln said, “the last, best hope of earth.” We are not just one more nation, one more same entity on the world stage. We have been essential to the preservation and progress of freedom, and those who lead us in the years ahead must remind us, as

Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Reagan did, of the unique role we play. Neither they nor we should ever forget that we are, in fact, exceptional. (Cheney and Cheney 259)

Another prominent and traditional American concept that has been repeatedly used in American history and supports the concept of American Exceptionalism is Manifest Destiny. The concept first appeared in an editorial published in the 1845 in the July-August issue of *The Democratic View*. The phrase was used to express disapproval of the annexation of Texas. However, the phrase lingered in American history in a completely different context. Heidler and Heidler define the term: “Manifest Destiny, in U.S. history, the supposed inevitability of the continued territorial expansion of the boundaries of the United States westward to the Pacific and beyond” (“Manifest Destiny”). According to Miller in his book *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and Manifest Destiny* historians have agreed on three basic themes to Manifest Destiny:

1. The special virtues of the American people and their institutions
2. The mission of the United States to redeem and remake the West in the image of the agrarian East
3. An irresistible destiny to accomplish this essential duty. (120)



## **2. The Dark Side of American History – Historical Events that Devalued America and American Ideals**

The previous section presented the principles on which the United States was founded. However, even though freedom, equality of opportunity and pursuit of happiness belong to all, there are many examples in American history that depict systemic discrimination – the fundamental contradiction of these very values. The American infringement of its basic values begins early in the nation's history with the displacement and exclusion of Native Americans. The violation of their values was followed by the enslavement of African Americans who were used and abused as slaves and discriminated and segregated even when they were freed. Since the United States Constitution refers to its citizens who comprise the majority of the American population as “We the People of the United States,” it has been expected from its beginnings that the United States would uphold its values for all its citizens (“The Constitution of the United States”). However, even the American worker, who has been the backbone of the American economy for centuries, has also been mistreated and for the sake of the profit of a select few has had to work in terrible working conditions for low wages. In addition, another prominent example of the not carrying out its principles are the immigrants who had surged to the United States, the land of opportunity, to rebuild their lives but were soon disillusioned by the harsh reality. Larson sums up the development of modern America and the oppression of many:

In truth, the development of modern America with its drive for exploitation was neither natural nor inevitable. Purposeful historical actions drove the embrace of African slavery, the violent disruption of indigenous communities, the reckless assault on natural resources and our embrace of unrestrained material self-interest. (“The Big Problem with the American Dream”)

The following subsections present in greater detail the inequality experienced by the above-mentioned oppressed groups.

### **2.1. Systemic Inequality of Native Americans: Displacement, Exclusion, and Segregation**

Across the country, systemic inequality of Native Americans has been a prominent and long-term problem. Historically looking, Native Americans were discriminated against for the better

part of American history starting in 1830 with the Great American expansion. According to Solomon et al., the Great American expansion was justified by Manifest Destiny, which not only supported the idea of expansion but also claimed that American expansion was blessed by God (“Systemic Inequality”). In 1830, American president Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act (118), which resulted in the migration of approximately 74,000 Native Americans west of the river Mississippi (Abel 21). This migration is otherwise known in history as the Trail of Tears due to its devastating effects such as hunger, disease, exhaustion, and deaths of more than ten thousand Native Americans (1830-1850) (Solomon et al.). Also, another agreement was breached in 1874 as the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty was violated when gold was discovered in the Black Hills in South Dakota (Dunbar-Ortiz 187-88). The United States troops ignored the Treaty and violently invaded the territory. This displacement continued in 1871 with the Indian Appropriation Act, which declared that Native Americans were no longer considered members of the sovereign nation resulting in the creation of Indian reservations and the confinement of Native Americans to these reservations (Dunbar-Ortiz 148). Further discrimination followed with the Dawes Act (1887), which allowed the American government to break up tribe and reservation land into small allotments (Dunbar-Ortiz 163). The National Park Service explains that this resulted in the government stripping over 90 million acres of tribal land from Native Americans, then selling that land to non-native US citizens. Initially, this Act did not extend to the territory of indigenous tribes such as the Cherokees and Creeks but subsequently, it was extended to their territory as well. The objective of the Act was to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream US society by annihilating their traditions and encouraging them towards farming and agriculture. However, the acclimatization to a settler lifestyle was extremely difficult and often resulted in starvation, violence and illness and death (Pauls).

Accustomed to the tribal way of life, many Native Americans either refused to take up agriculture or had insufficient capital to afford the tools. Additionally, the land allotted to Native Americans included soil unsuitable for farming. It was not till the Snyder Act (1924) or rather, the Indian Citizenship Act (Dunbar-Ortiz 175), that all Native Americans received American citizenship. Previously American citizenship was limited to Native Americans with less indigenous blood. However, this Act did not grant Native Americans voting privileges. This was followed by the Indian Reorganization Act (1934) that reversed the goal of assimilation and encouraged Native Americans to practice their culture within the American borders (Dunbar-Ortiz 176).

Everyday life on the reservations was extremely hard since many tribes were disenfranchised of their lands and it was extremely hard to practice their own culture as they were often obliged to live in a community with feuding tribes. In addition to all these struggles, they were obligated to learn English, wear modern clothes, and were often visited by Christian missionaries with the goal of converting them to Christianity (Pauls).

Finally, in 1968, with the Indian Civil Rights Act, Native Americans received the same constitutional rights as other American citizens (“American Indian Movement”). Even though Native Americans received self-governance and the same constitutional rights as every other American citizen, the legacy of displacement, exclusion and segregation continues to persist even today. However, in an effort to improve the quality of life and promote economic opportunities for Native Americans, the Bureau of Indian Affairs supports the modern Native American Indian reservations that exist today across the United States. Even though some reservations manage to earn a living from tourism and gambling, many still depend on government funding. Unfortunately, the living conditions on reservations are extremely disastrous since Native Americans still struggle with poverty and the overcrowded and atrocious living conditions in general. The Native American organization the Red Road supports these claims:

As a result, First People have the highest poverty rate (one-in-four) and among the lowest labor force rate (61.1%) of any major racial group in the United States. Of the top 100 poorest counties in the United States, four of the top five and ten of the top 20 are on reservations. Most tribal members cope with food insecurity and its associated health problems, unemployment rates as high as 85%, and major housing shortages. (“Native American Poverty”)

Many Native Americans leave their reservations in search of employment and better living conditions. However, in many cases they encounter the following obstacles when trying to rent or buy housing or find a job:

A majority of Natives have left these locales for metropolitan centers, but the broader labor market opportunities in these places have not fundamentally altered the extent of Native deprivation. In cities across the United States, American Indians continue to face significant labor market hardship (Davis 2015) and struggle to climb out of poverty due to competition with higher skilled workers and discrimination in hiring

(EEOC 2014), promotion (James et al. 1994), and small business ownership (BBC Research and Consulting 2013). (Davis et al. 23-24)

## **2.2. Legacy of American Slavery: Systemic Racism in the United States**

The slavery of African Americans began in the early seventeenth century when Africans were kidnapped from their homelands or sold into slavery and brought to America to be exploited as a free workforce of servants and laborers on tobacco, cotton and indigo plantations (Lynch). Although slavery is usually associated with the American South, the American North has also played a crucial role in slavery since northerners traded enslaved people to the Southerners. Laws that were known as the slave codes regulated the slave system. According to Lynch, some of the many rules according to which the slaves had to behave included:

Laws known as the slave codes regulated the slave system to promote absolute control by the master and complete submission by the slave. Under these laws the slave was chattel—a piece of property and a source of labor that could be bought and sold like an animal. The slave was allowed no stable family life and little privacy. Slaves were prohibited by law from learning to read or write. The meek slave received tokens of favor from the master, and the rebellious slave provoked brutal punishment. A social hierarchy among the plantation slaves also helped keep them divided. At the top were the house slaves; next in rank were the skilled artisans; at the bottom were the vast majority of field hands, who bore the brunt of the harsh plantation life. (Lynch)

The slavery of African Americans was extremely tragic and a traumatizing experience for every person who had to endure cruelty and violent punishment, long working hours, poor quality food, degradation, sleeping in kitchens or outbuildings and having none or limited leisure hours. However, some slaves were chosen to be domestic slaves, which allowed them to sleep in the house, eat better food and sometimes travel with the family.

The first step towards the independence of African Americans was taken by President Thomas Jefferson in 1807 with the signing of legislation, which officially concluded the trade of enslaved people (Lynch). After the ratification and publication of the Declaration of Independence, many Northern colonists pondered on the issue of slavery comparing it to British oppression. This gave rise to the Abolitionist Movement (1783-1888) (“Abolitionism”), which aimed to eradicate slavery in the United States. However, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave

Act in 1850 (Lynch), which obliged fugitive enslaved people to return to their owners. The struggle to end slavery proceeded and took its final turn when Abraham Lincoln was elected president since his anti-slavery opinions were already publicly known. Three months after his election seven southern states formed the Confederate States of America, which sparked the American Civil War (1861-1865) (Weber and Hassler). Initially, the war was fought against the Confederacy; however, the central focus of the war shifted to the abolition of slavery, which was successfully abolished with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 (Lynch). Even though African Americans were freed during the Reconstruction Era (1865-1877), a period after the American Civil War, many still disagreed with the abolition of slavery (Lynch). Therefore, the Reconstruction Era also gave rise to the Ku Klux Klan, which is the white supremacist terrorist group whose primary targets were African Americans but also Jews, immigrants and homosexuals (“Ku Klux Klan”). The Klan collapsed as an organization in 1872 however, it received two more official iterations and has remained active to the present in one form or another (“Ku Klux Klan”).

The discrimination and segregation of African Americans continued forcing them to live in separate communities, as well as attend separate schools and churches. They were segregated when using public transportation, and had their actions conditioned by signs, which indicated zones in which African Americans were legally allowed to walk or talk. This racial segregation lasted until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and the 1960s (Lynch), which promoted efforts to gain equal rights for African Americans under the law in the United States. The movement leaders such as Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and many others risked their lives by publicly speaking and acting against discrimination, segregation and voter suppression. One of the many victories of the Civil Rights Movement was the granting of the right to vote with the Voting Rights Act of 1965 the abolishing of racial segregation with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the preventing of housing discrimination based on race, sex, national origin, and religion with the Fair Housing Act of 1968 (Lynch).

Even though African Americans have been constitutionally accepted as equal citizens of the United States, the reality has been far different. Systemic inequality, racism and discrimination has produced persistent inequalities which remain relevant even today in different aspects of lives of African Americans in the United States such as perpetual employment discrimination, voting suppression, police brutality, racially motivated violence and even housing discrimination. As Bleich et al. observe: “The experience of discrimination for blacks in the United States is prevalent across many areas of their lives, including health care, and black

adults do not receive treatment equal to whites, which other research shows carries severe economic, social, and health consequences” (1406).

### **2.3. The American Worker as the Backbone for the American Economy**

The American Industrial Revolution (1820-1870) and urbanization, which were happening simultaneously transformed the United States from an agricultural economy to a manufacturing economy. With the rise of the manufacturing economy, the middle class, otherwise known as the working man, came to rise since more and more businesses were producing goods and were growing rapidly. During this period, America had a highly efficient and expanding economy. The healthy and self-sufficient economy was based on the hardworking workers who produced and consumed the goods.

The first phase of the American industrial revolution took place in Massachusetts (1814) with the arrival of Samuel Slater, a British-born merchant, who built the first successful cotton spinning mill in America, and afterwards with several partners, formed the Boston Manufacturing Company (“Samuel Slater”). The company was so successful that it continued to expand in other areas of New England. Having seen the success of the Boston Manufacturing Company, other regions started increasingly developing their own practices. As more and more businesses were producing goods, quick and cheap transportation became a priority and the development of railroads a necessity. The Intracontinental network of railroads and canals helped in America’s transformation from an agricultural economy to a manufacturing economy. At that time, the American big manufacturing companies, industries and numerous railroads attracted a large number of immigrants with their almost infinite number of opportunities. Some of the incoming immigrants, who were at first mainly perceived solely as manpower, quickly assimilated into the mainstream American culture while others preserved the cultural identity and values from their home country. With time, these diverse identities and values became essential components of the American multicultural society that we know today under the metaphor of a salad bowl. Additionally, the increasing numbers of incoming immigrants raised the demand for produced goods, which resulted in the need for the opening of more factories, businesses and companies, and consequently jobs. With the growing number of immigrants and industries, especially in urban areas, began the process which we know today as urbanization. According to *Britannica*, it is defined as: “the process by which large numbers of people become permanently concentrated in relatively small areas, forming cities” (“Urbanization”).

However, neither the urbanization nor the previously established standards of production were able to satisfy the needs of the growing workforce and overall increasing population. Not until the second half of the nineteenth century, when the second wave of the American Industrial Revolution came to life, did the new inventions, including lightbulbs and electricity, reignite the spark of the industrial revolution and bring about an increased production of goods. Electricity in particular, as one of the most important and influential inventions of humankind, undoubtedly drastically reshaped both personal lives and business policies. In an industrial sense, electricity not only propelled industrialization with the invention of machines to increase production and maximize profits but also, along with Henry Ford's assembly line (1913) and other life-changing machines, was one of the essentials of mass production that paved the way for the United States to become the world's leading manufacturing nation. Dominant American brands such as Coca Cola, Ford and Levi's jeans were prospering not only in America but also worldwide and resulted in America surpassing Britain in manufacturing goods for the first time.

### 2.3.1. Irreparable Harm to the American Worker

The positive side of the growing American economy also had its dark side. The American worker, who had been the backbone of the American economy for centuries and who helped to build the country, received rather poor treatment, which began with the large influx of immigrants during the American Industrial Revolution (1820-1870). The increasing numbers of incoming immigrants raised the demand for produced goods, which resulted in the need for the opening of more factories, businesses and companies, and consequently jobs. However, with such a high supply of workers, the average wage of an American worker along with their quality of life declined. In addition, due to the skyrocketing population, there was an overwhelming demand for goods, which resulted in the invention of progressive technology such as production lines and machine tools, which initiated the massive production of goods. Since the machines could perform the same tasks as American workers and immigrants, maybe even better, many people lost their jobs. Additionally, those workers who were lucky to keep their jobs were forced to work in worse working conditions with longer hours and lower wages just to make ends meet. Consequently, low wages, lack of available jobs and life in poverty contributed to discontent and frustration with the American bureaucracy:

Workers see themselves as the victims of a process in which hard-won wage hikes do not translate into real gains in living standards.

The reason is a combination of taxes, inflation, and an ever-growing package of fringe benefits. Frustration is compounded because the power to allocate an individual's income is being lost to the bureaucracies of the federal government and the trade unions. As Kristol says, the American worker “resents this whole process, which bureaucratically insists upon improving his long-term prospects at the expense of his shorter-term ones on improving his general welfare at the expense of his specific well-being.” (Peterson 978)

The frustration and discontent coupled with stressful and difficult environments, as well as the lack of free time for social life and leisure to further develop hobbies or desired capabilities also contributed to wide dissatisfaction among the workers. This dissatisfaction often manifested itself among the individuals in mental illness, suppression of emotions, lower productivity and motivation, and/or substance abuse, which is further elaborated by Shafer and Wendt paraphrasing Rich Furman: “Although men are advantaged and privileged in many ways, they have their own unique challenges and difficulties—including poor mental health—that can lead to a lack of self-determination, self-worth, and dignity” (105). Today, these issues remain current; however, work has started to take up more and more free time: “The study polled just over 1,000 working professionals and found that 65% are expected to be available outside of work both by email and by phone. As a result, 45% of workers feel they don't have enough free time; their job is colonizing their entire day, not just 9 through 5” (Saccaro).

### 2.3.2. Exploitation of Foreign Workers

Massive immigration and the development of mass production technology resulted in the dwindling of the value of an average worker, their working standards, pay and their ability to remain competitive. In addition to a greater supply than actual demand for workers, the workers have been hit hard by the introduction of outsourcing. Companies began to focus on lowering the costs of production. When they discovered that labor costs, which consist of low wage requirements, tax benefits and reduced costs of operations, were far cheaper in other countries, many quickly moved their operations to foreign countries. *Merriam Webster* defines outsource as: “to procure (something, such as some goods or services needed by a business or organization) from outside sources and especially from foreign or nonunion suppliers: to contract for work, jobs, etc., to be done by outside or foreign workers” (“Outsource”). Outsourcing caused the global formation of the first sweatshops that Rosen defines as follows:



A “sweatshop,” as understood here, is not merely a firm that offers poorly paid jobs or an authoritarian system of industrial relations. The wages such companies pay are below the federally mandated minimum, or the conditions of employment they provide are substandard in terms of the criteria first set in 1938 by the U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act. (Rosen 2)

As anticipated, the work conditions in sweatshops are dreadful and include working in run-down buildings where workers do not have proper lighting, the buildings are structurally in danger of collapsing, the work spaces are small and tight, the wages small and the hours are long. In addition, there is much abuse from bosses and the workforce is frequently based on child labor.

It is important to note that the global rise of sweatshops as well as outsourcing have had significant negative consequences for American workers. They have been left with even fewer jobs at their disposal so that, many companies have worsened their work conditions to save money counting on the desperation of workers to take what they can get. Worst of all, seeing that these sweatshops have brought them prosperity, some companies have gotten away with opening up sweatshop-like businesses just because they satisfy the federal laws at the bare minimum. Therefore, some American workers, most commonly garment workers, work in similar work conditions as foreign outsourced employees. These issues are very relevant today because of the expansion of outsourcing:

Some of my observations on the future of outsourcing as a pioneer in this field include: The outsourcing industry will continue to grow at an accelerated rate; outsourcing will permeate the tier-2 and tier-3 regions worldwide; and SMEs will outsource more as compared to large enterprises and explore strategic activities with varying degrees of interdependence and risk-sharing, focusing on quality and customers. (William)

#### **2. 4. Immigrants’ Disillusioned View of America**

Many foreigners enchanted by the idea of the United States as the land of opportunity and the American Dream surged into the United States. Since the 1850s over 45 million foreigners migrated to the United States to achieve their American Dream. However, the reality which awaited them was far different from the tales they heard in their homeland and on their journey to the United States. The primary obstacle upon which many immigrants stumbled is the

language since many did not speak English at all. Commonly, the individuals who immigrated to the United States were considered to be a cheap workforce as low rank employees, which limited their educational and employment options as well as opportunities to progress: “Finding employment presents a difficult challenge for the immigrant who, most likely, will enter into the employment system at a low level, and face disadvantages of language and receive fewer opportunities for attaining added education which will guarantee upward employment mobility” (Dail 444). Since many immigrants struggled to find not only a proper job, but any job, many battled with poverty: “Because of the inherent character of immigration and migration as either a life event or a life style, there seems to be a higher than normal probability of these families falling below the poverty line and, because of other social disadvantages, staying there” (Dail 442).

Similarly, many immigrants were struggling to find proper housing since it is almost impossible to obtain housing without a job and vice versa. Therefore, many immigrant families resorted to living in temporary small housing quarters, which immensely influenced their quality of life: “These families are highly mobile, and living quarters are always temporary, which necessarily impacts upon their quality of life” (Dail 444). Since many immigrants struggled to find a job and housing, many utilized the social welfare system which helped them financially but made them dependent on the government. Therefore, the immigrants are not contributing to the social system but are rather depleting it. According to Dail: “In general, marginal social functionality, which accompanies poverty, appears endemic to both the immigrant and migrant lifestyles, at least in the short run” (445).

And lastly, many immigrant families struggled with acculturation, which is a long-lasting and complex process of adopting to the new socio-cultural environment and their values: “Accordingly, these families are faced with having to discard certain aspects of their culture and adopt new cultural traits which may be needed in order to function within a new environment” (Dail 442). While some immigrants continued to practice their own culture and religion, others, in order to fit in, discarded their original culture since they were either ashamed or ridiculed due to their cultural background. Therefore, although the American founding principles such as equality of opportunity and the pursuit of happiness were not unachievable for the incoming immigrants, they were far harder to obtain. Besides these aforementioned types of discrimination, the immigrants often encountered issues such as xenophobia, targeted violence, abuse and over-policing of the immigrant populated areas. Consequently, many immigrants who were unable to achieve the promises of the American Dream were left

disappointed, hopeless and on the verge of poverty. With little to no options left, many returned to their homelands.

It is worth noting that America is known as the nation of immigrants because with the exception of the Native American population and the African Americans who were forced to come to the United States, for the most part, its citizens are either immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Thus, it is hard to comprehend that in a nation of immigrants, there are still numerous unresolved issues regarding immigrants and they are still being subjected to the same or similar obstacles as former generations of immigrants. The housing and employment discrimination still exist in addition to the verbal and physical abuse due to xenophobia. As Waters and Kasinitz observe, “numerous recent studies make clear that discrimination continues to be a fact of American life, particularly for African Americans, but also for immigrants as well as other groups” (104).

### **3. Literary Representations of America: America as a Work in Progress**

The political and social climate in the United States from its inception to the present day, with all the crises past and contemporary, are presented in Langston Hughes's "Let America Be America Again" and Amanda Gorman's "The Hill We Climb." The selected poems place a particular emphasis on the fundamental principles and values that have not yet been realized with respect to equality and human rights of particular marginalized and oppressed groups. The works focus on America as a work in progress, a country that needs to be rebuilt and healed in order to achieve the American Dream and fulfill the promises of its founding creed.

#### **3.1 "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes**

"Let America Be America Again" is a poem written by Langston Hughes in 1935. He wrote the poem while riding on a train from New York to Ohio to visit his sick mother. Reflecting on his struggles and the futile attempts of his beloved country to surmount the Great Depression, Langston Hughes felt the urge to write this poem.

The Great Depression was a global economic depression, which began in the United States in the 1930s when the stock market crashed on October 29, 1929. The poem mirrors numerous eminent influences such as the works of the most renowned American poet Walt Whitman and his poem "I Hear America Singing." The poem also replicates the street language, jazzy rhythm and even the steady iambic lines of the early Harlem Renaissance poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. Initially, the poem is strictly controlled and follows traditional rhyme structure. However, as Hughes begins to discuss more serious issues, he is overwhelmed with emotions, which results in the poem assuming the free verse form. The most pronounced themes in the poem are the nostalgia for the previous times, the deterioration of American values and the American Dream through inequality of opportunity, discrimination and the oppression of minorities, as well as the urgency and aspiration to rebuild the United States.

Firstly, the poet opens the poem with nostalgia for the American frontier when the American values were at their purest and the initial version of America was, according to Hughes, greater than the current one:

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free.  
(Hughes 1-4)

The poem continues by appealing to historical documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, which promised equality, freedom and pursuit of happiness for everyone. In addition, both documents assured its citizens that there would not be any kind of totalitarian rule in the United States:

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—  
Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme  
That any man be crushed by one above.  
(Hughes 6-9)

Secondly, the poem deals with the deterioration of American values and the American Dream, which have been devalued due to systemic inequality of opportunity, discrimination and the oppression of minorities: “I am the people, humble, hungry, mean—/Hungry yet today despite the dream” (Hughes 34-35).

The first mentioned oppressed group are the workers who were working for low wages, in poor working conditions, and were losing their jobs to either the immigrants, foreign outsourced workers or machines: “I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart” (Hughes 19). This poor treatment of workers shows that workers were recognized not as the backbone of the American economy, but rather servants to this economy which they had helped to build: “I am the worker sold to the machine” (Hughes 32). The poem follows by referring to the Labor Movement in the United States, which was ongoing during the Great Depression, and which eventually managed to improve wages, working hours, working conditions, vacation pay and protection from discrimination. However, since the Labor Movement was only beneficial for workers, it gave rise to many acts of violence by imperiled companies and police during the strikes to intimidate the workers:

Who said the free? Not me?  
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?  
The millions shot down when we strike?  
The millions who have nothing for our pay?  
For all the dreams we've dreamed  
And all the songs we've sung  
And all the hopes we've held  
And all the flags we've hung,  
The millions who have nothing for our pay—  
Except the dream that's almost dead today.  
(Hughes 52-61)

The second mentioned oppressed group are the African Americans, who were brought to America from their African homelands to be slaves, used and abused on the plantations and stripped of their identity: "I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars" . . . "I am the Negro, servant to you all" (Hughes 20, 33).

Thereafter, Hughes focuses his attention on the Native Americans as another oppressed group in the United States. Initially they inhabited their land until they were confined to the reservations through the Indian Appropriation Act (1871): "I am the red man driven from the land" (Hughes 21).

Both African Americans and the Native Americans have had similar treatment in the United States including systemic segregation, discrimination and maltreatment in general. The final group which Hughes mentioned are the immigrants who were enchanted by the United States and rushed there to experience the American Dream themselves. They left their homelands to live in the United States and contributed immensely to its development:

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream  
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,  
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,  
That even yet its mighty daring sings  
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned  
That's made America the land it has become.

O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas  
In search of what I meant to be my home—  
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,  
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,  
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came  
To build a "homeland of the free."  
(Hughes 39-50)

Hughes continues by grouping these marginalized groups who are the ones who built America. He expresses his demands for the realization of their fundamental rights such as equality, freedom, and the opportunity to achieve the American Dream:

The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—  
Who made America,  
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  
Must bring back our mighty dream again.  
(Hughes 65-69)

Lastly, Hughes, even though angered and disappointed by America, remains hopeful and optimistic that the nation will fix its previous mistakes and injustices committed against the mentioned marginalized groups. He calls for a rebuilding of America using the same values which were used to build it in the first place: "I say it plain, /America never was America to me, / And yet I swear this oath—/ America will be!" (Hughes 76-79). Moreover, using the same words which were used in the opening section of the United States Constitution, Hughes calls each and every citizen of the United States to action to revitalize and redeem the current version of America, which will be a better place for everyone:

We, the people, must redeem  
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.  
The mountains and the endless plain—  
All, all the stretch of these great green states—  
And make America again!  
(Hughes 82-86)

### 3.2 Amanda Gorman's Inaugural Poem "The Hill We Climb"

Amanda Gorman is an American activist and poet who became a memorable persona in the public with her inaugural poem recited at the inauguration of President Joe Biden in 2021. Afterwards, Gorman as well as her previously published poetry book *The One for Whom Food Is Not Enough*, achieved international recognition and popularity. Similarly to Hughes, Gorman mentions the issues that have plagued the nation throughout its history and calls for Americans to help to heal and rebuild their country. The following excerpt from an interview in the *New York Times* clearly states the idea behind the poem:

In my poem, I'm not going to in any way gloss over what we've seen over the past few weeks and, dare I say, the past few years. But what I really aspire to do in the poem is to be able to use my words to envision a way in which our country can still come together and can still heal. It's doing that in a way that is not erasing or neglecting the harsh truths I think America needs to reconcile with. (Gorman qtd. in Alter)

The main themes represented in Gorman's poem are the visions of American dark history together with the essence of an American legacy, hope along with progress, and diversity as well as unity.

Firstly, Gorman revisits American ideals and values as well as American historical documents upon which the United States was founded. She refers to the oppression and tyranny of the British monarchy, which was consuming and degrading America, rather than building and expanding it: "We've seen a force that would shatter our nation rather than share it. / Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy" (Gorman 57-58). Gorman continues by paraphrasing the words of the Founding Fathers which lay at the very foundation of the United States: "We are striving to forge a union with purpose, / to compose a country committed to all cultures, / colors, characters and / conditions of man" (Gorman 25-28). The poet continues by disclosing the concept "Vine and Fig Tree," taken from the Hebrew Scriptures, which was commonly used by George Washington to refer to the freedom of individuals: "Scripture tells us to envision / that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig / tree / and no one shall make them afraid" (Gorman 43-45). The poet then reignites the idea of the United States as the beacon of light to the world, which was inspired by the sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" by John Winthrop: "For while we have our eyes on the future, / history has its eyes on us" (Gorman 63-64). However, pondering on these words, Gorman recognizes that the United



States did not fulfill the prophecy, but rather has to put a lot of effort to live up to it: “But in all the bridges we've made, / that is the promise to glade, / the hill we climb” (Gorman 48-50). Since the United States did not fulfill the promise of a City upon a Hill, Gorman acknowledges and accepts the dark side of American history, which includes persistent issues such as racism, segregation and discrimination:

The loss we carry,  
a sea we must wade.  
We've braved the belly of the beast,  
We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,  
and the norms and notions  
of what just is  
isn't always just-ice.  
(Gorman 3-9)

Initially, US citizens were not prepared to resolve these difficult issues such as racism and segregation, but by recognizing the mistakes and learning from them, they have managed to put forth an effort to untangle and solve these issues: “We did not feel prepared to be the heirs / of such a terrifying hour / but within it we found the power / to author a new chapter” (Gorman 68-71). Referring to the resilience of the American spirit, Gorman declares that the United States and its citizens cannot remain living in the past but rather have to focus on their legacy:

So while once we asked,  
how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?  
Now we assert,  
How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?  
We will not march back to what was,  
but move to what shall be.  
 (“The Hill We Climb” 73-78)

By revisiting the fundamental principles of America and acknowledging the issues of the past, Gorman realizes that the United States is a work in progress and provides the design for the future maturation and development of the United States which will be enrooted upon hope and progress:

And yes we are far from polished.

Far from pristine.

But that doesn't mean we are  
striving to form a union that is perfect.

We are striving to forge a union with purpose,  
to compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and  
conditions of man.

(Gorman 22-28)

Secondly, Gorman imagines a better America which, besides effectuating its previously established values, will adopt values such as hope and progress as their basic values. Despite the fact that Gorman is hesitant and suspicious as she begins her poem by questioning if hope can be still found today, she reminds Americans that the United States has already persevered in trying times: “When day comes we ask ourselves, / where can we find light in this never-ending shade?” . . . “Somehow we do it. / Somehow we've weathered and witnessed / a nation that isn't broken, / but simply unfinished” (Gorman 104-110, 12-16). Bearing in mind the previous accomplishments of the United States, Gorman hopes that the United States can easily once again achieve similar goals:

We the successors of a country and a time  
where a skinny Black girl  
descended from slaves and raised by a single mother  
can dream of becoming president  
only to find herself reciting for one.

(Gorman 16-20)

Later, Gorman asserts that hope for a better and rebuilt America is not merely an empty statement, but that America will truly live up to its potential and previously established ideals to rebuild and grow once more:

Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest,  
we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.  
We will rise from the gold-limbed hills of the west.  
We will rise from the windswept northeast,  
where our forefathers first realized revolution.

We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the midwestern states.  
We will rise from the sunbaked south.  
We will rebuild, reconcile and recover.  
(Gorman 92-99)

Demonstrating that the process of learning from one's own mistakes and correcting the same is a sign of progress, Gorman proposes to focus on the progress and future to leave the United States in a better shape for the descendants:

We will not march back to what was,  
but move to what shall be.  
A country that is bruised but whole,  
benevolent but bold,  
fierce and free.  
We will not be turned around  
or interrupted by intimidation,  
because we know our inaction and inertia  
will be the inheritance of the next generation.  
Our blunders become their burdens.  
But one thing is certain,  
If we merge mercy with might,  
and might with right,  
then love becomes our legacy,  
and change our children's birthright.  
So let us leave behind a country  
better than the one we were left with.  
(Gorman 80-96)

Referring to the United States as the beacon of light to the world, Gorman establishes that the United States is rather a work in progress and over the years has significantly changed into a nation in which race, the color of your skin and even your ancestry do not matter anymore:

And yet the dawn is ours  
before we knew it.  
Somehow we do it.

Somehow we've weathered and witnessed  
a nation that isn't broken,  
but simply unfinished.  
We the successors of a country and a time  
where a skinny Black girl  
descended from slaves and raised by a single mother  
can dream of becoming president  
only to find herself reciting for one.  
(Gorman 10-21)

Gorman emphasizes that these hopeful ideas of progress and development cannot be attained without unity and diversity, which will propel the United States once again to its deserved place in the spotlight. Therefore, Gorman invites everyone to lay their differences aside since progress is unattainable without unity, which cannot be achieved if citizens are divided:

And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us,  
but what stands before us.  
We close the divide because we know, to put our future first,  
we must first put our differences aside.  
We lay down our arms  
so we can reach out our arms  
to one another. (Gorman 29-35)

Gorman acknowledges the continuously inflicted wounds but reminds each and every citizen that the United States is still a union of distinct people and as a union, it has lingered no matter how difficult or trying the times were:

Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true,  
that even as we grieved, we grew,  
that even as we hurt, we hoped,  
that even as we tired, we tried,  
that we'll forever be tied together, victorious.  
(Gorman 37-41)

Celebrating the diversity and the unity of the United States, Gorman invites every citizen to participate in the reconstruction and rejuvenation era of America which will place America in its rightful place as the beacon of light and a role model for the rest of the world:

We will rebuild, reconcile and recover.  
And every known nook of our nation and  
every corner called our country,  
our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,  
battered and beautiful.  
When day comes we step out of the shade,  
afire and unafraid,  
the new dawn blooms as we free it.  
(Gorman 99-107)

Gorman further states that during the period of reconstruction of America, both the citizens and the United States generally will surely encounter obstacles and disagreements, but she claims that these obstacles can be more easily traversed with unity: “Not because we will never again know defeat, / but because we will never again sow division” (Gorman 41-42).

In the end, Gorman establishes that the development of the United States has been a challenging and arduous process filled with mistakes and miscalculations. Furthermore, the United States ideals were never false or wrong but simply defective and misunderstood. Therefore, the ultimate goal is to rebuild and create a diverse unity in which freedom and progress will lead to all men’s happiness: “We are striving to forge a union with purpose, / to compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and / conditions of man” (Gorman 25-28).

#### **4. America and the World: The Need to Rebuild the City Upon a Hill**

The central ubiquitous narrative of the United States commonly presented via media and the Internet has been that the United States is a beacon of light to the world and a “City Upon a Hill” supporting the claims of American Exceptionalism. Moreover, the ideas of American Exceptionalism entail that the United States is both destined and entitled to play a distinct and positive role in the further establishment and progress of the world (Walt et al.). Unquestionably, the narrative has affected the presidential and public rhetoric as well as foreign policies. This outward expansion, focused on spreading American culture across the world, began in 1898, which marks the beginning of American imperialism. However, many American citizens, before the 1890s and even after, complied with the belief that America should abstain from international affairs. This disagreement over foreign policies continued even though there was an indispensable agreement that the United States should have a leading role in both the world and global institutions. After World War II, American foreign policy implied that the world needs leadership and therefore, engaging the United States in the preservation of world peace and promotion of democracy. Thenceforward, the United States has participated in every global and even many local affairs attaining the role of the leading superpower. Internationally, American Exceptionalism was used to establish the purpose and superiority of the United States:

In foreign policy, the narrative of American exceptionalism has been used by presidents to communicate the purpose of U.S. foreign policy and therein garner support for their preferred policies, because what “America” means conditions what it can and should do in the world. In fact, argue Gilmore and Rowling, “The concept of American exceptionalism has become one of the most common features in U.S. political discourse.” (Restad 72)

Despite American Exceptionalism and its role as a superpower, the United States has been constantly criticized both internally and externally due to its numerous flaws such as the infringement of its founding principles, including the systemic racism, segregation and discrimination of minorities and mistreatment of its workers, resulting in a prevailing belief that the United States is a rather unfinished country which yet needs to realize its founding principles before it can be a proper role model for the rest of the world. This constructive criticism began early with Langston Hughes and has endured even today with Trump’s ambitions to “Make America Great Again” and Amanda Gorman’s ideas to form a union with a purpose committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of a man. According to United States citizens,

rebuilding and reconstructing the United States upon its founding principles as well as unity is extremely important:

Pollster Scott Rasmussen, who also polls in partnership for the Deseret News and the Hinckley Institute of Politics at the University of Utah, recently conducted a survey that found 93% of Americans agree it is important for political leaders to focus on bringing people together. When asked about a starting point for that togetherness, 73% pointed to those founding principles. (“In Our Opinion”)

However, since the restoration and healing of the United States presuppose a considerable involvement of its citizens the problem that arises is that many citizens do not understand the founding principles of the United States:

Of course, Americans can’t adequately strive for these ideals without fully understanding them. On that point, the record has not always been good. Every year, the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania surveys Americans on their knowledge of the Constitution and the nation’s system of government.

Last year, the results showed a slight improvement. Still, only 39% could correctly name the three branches of government (executive, legislative and judicial).

On the other hand, 83% correctly knew the U.S. Supreme Court had upheld the constitutionality of owning a handgun, and 55% correctly knew that people who are in the United States illegally still have rights under the Constitution. (“In Our Opinion”)

Therefore, many US citizens have different approaches and suggestions on how to repair America: “Rasmussen’s survey found that Republicans tend to believe in giving people more individual freedom to pursue their own ideas, while a plurality of Democrats felt it was better to let governments establish the rules for bringing people together fairly” (“In Our Opinion”).

## Conclusion

The United States was founded in 1776 by the Declaration of Independence, which was followed by two more founding documents, the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights. Together the documents established a modern democracy with its basic principles, which include liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness for everyone. These founding principles were later used as the groundwork for the establishment of American values and concepts such as a City upon a Hill, Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism. However, throughout American history, we can observe the misapplication of its founding principles, basic values, and concepts. The most striking instances of desecration of these principles and values are systemic racial segregation, racism, degradation, discrimination, and oppression of individuals belonging to frequently marginalized groups such as the Native Americans, the African Americans, and immigrants. Equally important are the wrongdoings committed against American workers who have for centuries been the backbone of the American economy. Some of these wrongdoings include limited job opportunities, low wages and outsourcing to foreign countries. However, by acknowledging these incessant issues in their poems, both Hughes and Gorman establish that the American founding principles and values were neither detrimental nor erroneous but were rather mishandled in the past. Hughes and Gorman continue by proposing the restoration and renewal of the founding principles and values for the United States to live up to the idea of a City Upon a Hill. While Hughes's poem primarily places an emphasis on inequality of opportunity, discrimination, oppression of minorities, and the urgency and aspiration to rebuild the United States, Gorman invites American citizens to embrace the diversity of the United States and unite despite their past differences to form a union which will welcome and integrate each citizen regardless of their color, background or ethnicity. Furthermore, Gorman underlines the importance of healing and rebuilding America.

In addition, presenting the idea of American Exceptionalism and the vision of America as a City upon a Hill brings to the fore the commonly used rhetoric typically employed by American politicians and presidents in both federal and foreign affairs to remind both the world and America that America was chosen to spread American values and democracy across the continent and the world. However, these political figures regularly ignored and disregarded the need for restoration of America before it can be an adequate example firstly for its citizens, and only then for the rest of the world. For restoration and renewal to be achieved, all American citizens must be exercising their duty by upholding the founding principles.



To sum up, the founding principles of the United States are essentially benevolent and advantageous but in the past were misused leading to the devaluation of their national creed. Only when the United States truly lives up to its creed can it rightfully become a role model and a City upon a Hill.

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