

## Abstract

The MA thesis will focus on the representations of the concept of the American dream in Black<sup>1</sup> American poetry. From its origins in the Declaration of Independence (in the “pursuit of happiness”) the concept of the American dream has been seen as problematic, with the idea of an “unalienable right” clashing with its being mutable and fleeting and potentially out of reach.

The main goal of the thesis is to demonstrate that the American dream has been present in the works of Black American poets as a potent, yet schizophrenic concept (with reference to Martin Luther King’s idea of “American schizophrenic personality) for decades, and possibly centuries, and its central ambiguity and the clash of principles has remained essentially the same, only the representations vary. Analyzing poems by Black poets from the 20th century, the thesis will explore the concept of the Black American dream as a myth to which, as James Baldwin put it, “we are clinging [and] which has nothing to do with the lives we lead.”

The thesis is divided into two parts, incorporating not only the poetic perspective on the matter, but also the ideas on the topic by key African American thinkers from different historical periods (such as Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, or Martin Luther King Jr.). That way the ground for the close readings of the poems is set. Additionally, using the Declaration of Independence as the defining document of the American dream, the Founding Fathers’ perspective on slavery will be included at the beginning of this section as well.

A selection of poems by Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, Amiri Baraka, and Lucille Clifton will be discussed.

Key words: American dream, Black American dream, African American poetry, African American thinkers, Declaration of Independence

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<sup>1</sup> In Nancy Coleman’s article on why *The New York Times* decided to capitalize the letter ‘b’ in the words ‘Black’, it is stated that “for many people the capitalization of that one letter is the difference between a color and a culture.” And briefly put, I personally agree. Hence my decision to use the capitalized version throughout my thesis. More via <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html>.