

# ***Dominant American Values in American Literature***

## **1. Achievement and Success**

In our competitive society, stress is placed on personal achievement. This is measured in accomplishments, such as economic ones. Success lays emphasis on rewards. Success is involved with activity; failure is often assigned to character defects. Success is often equated with bigness and newness.

## **2. Activity and Work**

Americans also value busyness, speed, bustle, action. The frontier idea of work for survival is still with us, as is the Puritan ethic of work before play. Work becomes an end in itself. A person's worth is measured by his performances.

## **3. Moral Orientation**

Americans think in terms of good and bad, right and wrong - not just in practical terms. Early Puritan ideas of working hard, leading an orderly life, having a reputation for integrity and fair dealing, avoiding reckless display, and carrying out one's purposes still holds weight.

## **4. Humanitarianism**

Much emphasis is placed on disinterested concern, helpfulness, personal kindness, aid and comfort, spontaneous aid in mass disasters, as well as impersonal philanthropy. This emphasis is related to equalitarian democracy, but often it clashes with our value of rugged individualism.

## **5. Efficiency and Practicality**

Americans refer to our *Fordismus*, or belief in standardization, mass production, and streamlined industrialism. We like innovation, modernity, expediency, getting things done. We value technique and discipline in science. We enjoy short-range adjustments in immediate situations. Practicality again means active interest in workability.

## **6. Progress**

Americans look forward more than backward. We resent the old fashioned, the outmoded. We seek the best yet through change. Progress is often identified with the Darwinian idea of survival of the fittest and with the free private enterprise system.

## **7. Material Comfort**

Americans enjoy passive gratification - drink this, chew that, take a vacation. We prefer happy endings in movies. We enjoy consumption, and our heroes before 1920 were more from social, commercial, and cultural worlds of production; but after 1920 the heroes came more from the leisure-time activities of sports and entertainment. Yet, Americans also enjoy culture and "work" at do-it-yourself hobbies and vacations.

#### 8. **Equality**

Our history has stressed the equality of opportunity, especially economic opportunity. We feel guilt, shame, or ego deflation when inequalitarianism appears. While discrimination exists, there is much lip service to formal rights, legal rights. Equality is not a pure concept but largely two-sided: social rights and equality of opportunity.

#### 9. **Freedom**

Americans also seek freedom from some restraint, having confidence in the individual. Freedom enters into free enterprise, progress, individual choice, and equality. It has not meant the absence of social control.

#### 10. **External Conformity**

Americans also believe in adherence to group patterns, especially for success. Economic, political, and social dependence and interdependence call for some conformity. If all men are equal, each has a right to judge the other and regulate conduct to accepted standards.

#### 11. **Science**

Americans have faith in science and its tools. Science is rational, functional, and active. Science is morally neutral. It adds to our material comfort and progress.

#### 12. **Nationalism & Patriotism**

Americans feel some sense of loyalty to their country, its national symbols, and its history. Foreigners observe how we value our flag and our national anthem, how we believe that America is the greatest country in the world.

#### 13. **Democracy**

Americans have grown to accept majority rule, representative institutions, and to reject monarchies and aristocracies. We accept law, equality, freedom.

#### 14. **Individual Personality**

We protect our individualism by law and by the belief in one's own worth.

#### 15. **Racism and Group Superiority**

This is a deviant theme, not central, but still widespread.

Adapted from American Society: A Sociological Interpretation, by Robin M. Williams, Jr. Third Edition. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), pp. 396-470