

Abstract

This thesis explores the American notion of freedom and its interpretations within individual periods of American history. In the thesis, freedom is described upon the basis of historical context, and its importance is demonstrated through specific examples of the periods' literary works and documents. The work analyzes periods from 1776; the year of the U.S. establishment, and continues up to the first half of the twentieth century. For the purpose of the thesis, six particular periods characteristic of significant historical events, or, of social, literary, and philosophical movements, were chosen. Chronologically, the thesis begins with the 17th century's arrival of the first European settlers to the North American continent, followed by the founding of the United States more than a century later. The thesis then gradually focuses on movements and philosophies emerging during the 18th and 19th century, namely, transcendentalism and abolitionism, and further continues with introducing the freedom-related ideals of American anarchists and pragmatists. The work then closes with the 20th century's Beat generation.

The objective of the thesis is to prove, that during American history, freedom had always been the most important value; a value which shaped the American mentality into how we know it today. The aim is to demonstrate that this mentality largely derives from the very first American notion of freedom which regarded freedom as a gift from the Creator, and, as an unalienable right. In American history, the core of such a notion seems to be deeply rooted, although the interpretations of freedom had often varied according to the changing circumstances of individual periods. The thesis thus further aims to describe the differences between these interpretations, and focuses on the particular beliefs and impulses from which these interpretations originated. Last but foremost, the thesis stresses that even though freedom had been considered a natural human right, for many people it remained beyond reach.