

Defining an American

WORD CONNECTIONS

Multiple Meanings

The word *asylum*, used in the first paragraph, means a safe haven or a sanctuary. It also can refer to an institution offering shelter and support to people who are mentally ill. The protection granted by a nation to someone who has left his or her native country as a political refugee is also asylum.

My Notes

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735–1813) published his fictional “Letters from an American Farmer” to provide people in England and Europe a glimpse of life in the American colonies. His affection for Americans is clear as he compares them to Europeans.

Letter

WHAT IS an American?

from *Letters from an American Farmer* (1781)
by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur

In this great American asylum, the poor of Europe have by some means met together, and in consequence of various causes; to what purpose, should they ask one another, what countrymen they are? Alas, two thirds of them had no country. Can a wretch who wanders about, who works and starves, whose life is a continual scene of sore affliction or pinching penury¹; can that man call England or any other kingdom his country? A country that had no bread for him, whose fields procured him no harvest, who met with nothing but the frowns of the rich, the severity of the laws, with jails and punishments; who owned not a single foot of the extensive surface of this planet? No! urged by a variety of motives, here they came. Every thing has tended to regenerate them; new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system; here they are become men: in Europe they were as so many useless plants, wanting vegetative mould, and refreshing showers; they withered, and were mowed down by want, hunger, and war: but now, by the power of transplantation, like all other plants, they have taken root and flourished! Formerly they were not numbered in any civil list of their country, except in those of the poor; here they rank as citizens. By what invisible power has this surprising metamorphosis been performed? By that of the laws, and that of their industry. The laws, the indulgent laws, protect them as they arrive, stamping on them the symbol of adoption; they receive ample rewards for their labours; these accumulated rewards procure them lands; those lands confer on them the title of freemen; and to that title every benefit is affixed which men can possibly require. This is the great operation daily performed by our laws. From whence proceed these laws? From our government. Whence that government? It is derived from the original genius and strong desire of the people ratified and confirmed by government. This is the great chain which links us all, this is the picture which every province exhibits, Nova Scotia excepted. There the crown has done all; either there were no people who had genius, or it was not much attended to: the consequence is, that the province is very thinly inhabited indeed; the power of the crown, in conjunction with the musketos, has prevented men from settling there. Yet some part of it flourished once, and it contained a mild harmless set of people. But for the fault of a few leaders the whole were banished. The greatest political error the crown ever committed in America, was to cut off men from a country which wanted nothing but men!

¹ penury (*n.*): poverty

