36.8: Live Long and Industrialize… Unless You’re a Slave, Then It’s Highly Improbable That Will Happen.

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer works to sell you on one major point, America is not a land of milk and honey where good things are handed out at the doorstep, but rather a place where if you pull your weight and fall in line, you will be rewarded justly. It’s a land of opportunities so to speak – as long as you’re not a slave of course.

Crèvecoeur’s Farmer James, in the voice of our “great parent,” relays the message given to those arriving in America after becoming citizens, saying “if thou wilt work, I have bread for thee; if thou wilt be honest, sober, and industrious, I have greater rewards to confer on thee – ease and independence” and later adds “go thou and work and till; thou shalt prosper, provided thou be just, grateful, and industrious” (614). And so, America is a place where you can have all that you could desire and can be successful. You need to be industrious, and considering the repetition of that word’s use, I’d say it’s the paramount quality Crèvecoeur applies to the American identity. It’s about working, it’s about doing your part, it’s about taking a place where there isn’t anything or anyone and “working and tilling” to produce success for yourself. Crèvecoeur paints America as a land of equal possibility and success where if you’re willing to put the effort in, you’ll be rewarded for your efforts.

Yet, there’s a lot of hypocrisy there that undermines that whole “help comes to those that help themselves” motif when you consider all the slavery. Crèvecoeur notes Charles-town, where “while all is joy, festivity, and happiness in Charles-Town… they neither hear, see, nor feel for the woes of their poor slaves, from whose painful labors all their wealth proceeds” (615-616). So, while yes, you are encouraged to be industrious, the slave industry is unquestionably bad and shouldn’t be allowed to happen, though it is. Also, bear in mind, it’s wealth from the labors of others, completely opposite Crèvecoeur’s whole bit about self-reliance and rewards being given for your own labors. So, America is at once a country that values independence and self-reliance up front, but also allows people to profit from exploiting the labor of Africans. That’s pretty counter-intuitive when you think about it and deflates the first message.
Taking Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* into account and weighing what it says about the tradition of American Literature, it seems that in-and-of-itself there’s a struggle to define what being an American means. Crèvecoeur’s depiction is splendid and upliftingly industrial in places, but this identity falters with the evils of savagery and slavery he describes as existing in parallel with it. Suffice it to say, if we’re struggling to define what American Literature is, that’s okay; it seems like foundational American Literature was itself struggling to define what America was exactly.