

“Rise Up!”:

The Myth of the Self-Made Man in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*

Amanda Castro Thijssen

6252257

English Language and Culture BA Thesis

Supervisor: Prof. dr. David Pascoe

Second Reader: Dr. Anna Poletti

MLA 8 Referencing System

8 February 2021

5734 Words

## Abstract

The aim of the thesis has been to prove how Alexander Hamilton, the main character in Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton*, represents the American myth of the self-made man.

This has been analysed through a close reading of the musical lyrics, focusing on some of Hamilton's character traits — hard work, ambition and awareness of his legacy — and seen from different thematical perspectives: his life story, his connection to the United States, his antagonists and his family.

Miranda uses the myth of the self-made man to craft a success story while at the same time subverting it by showing the negative consequences it can have. Furthermore, the musical offers a chance to reflect on current issues in the United States such as the importance of diversity in representation or the sacred view on foundational texts and myths.

## Contents

<b>1. Introduction: “Work!”</b> .....	4
<b>2. Being “In the Room Where it Happens”: The Myth of the Self-Made Man</b> .....	5
<b>3. “The Man is Non-Stop”: Hamilton as a Self-Made Man</b> .....	7
3.1. “How Does a Bastard... Rise Up” .....	7
3.2. “Just Like My Country ... Young, Scrappy and Hungry” .....	10
3.3. “The Sinners and The Saints” .....	13
3.4. “Have I Done Enough?” .....	15
<b>4. Conclusion: “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells your Story?”</b> .....	18

## 1. Introduction: “Work!”

The musical *Hamilton*, written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, premiered on Broadway in 2015. It follows the life of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton (1757-1804) and is based on Ron Chernow’s biography of Hamilton’s life (2004). Because of the show’s popularity, it has become a tool to engage younger generations with the history of the United States. As historian Thomas Bender argues, “histories are taught in schools and brought into the public discourse to forge and sustain national identities” (3). In this case, main character Alexander Hamilton can be seen as a representation of the American dream. Born in the Caribbean, Hamilton moves to New York, where he meets different historical characters, such as Marquis de Lafayette, a French officer who participates in the American Revolution, Aaron Burr, a Democratic-Republican, or George Washington, the first president of the United States. Due to Hamilton’s associations and non-stop work ethic, he quickly rises in status and ultimately becomes the first Secretary of the Treasury of State, in charge of managing the economy. Hamilton can be identified as a self-made man, a term that Frederick Douglass set out in 1859 in one of his most famous lectures, “Self-Made Men”.

Douglass, one of the first black American writers, started his life as a slave. At age 51, he accomplished to escape and flee to New York, which had already outlawed slavery by 1838. In the years that followed, next to his writing, Douglass also became a well-known abolitionist and preacher. He defined self-made men as

men who, under peculiar difficulties and without the ordinary helps of favoring circumstances, have attained knowledge, usefulness, power and position and have learned from themselves the best uses to which life can be put in this world, and in the exercises of these uses to build up worthy character. They are the men who ... amidst unfavorable conditions ... hew out for themselves a way to success, and thus ... become the architects of their own good fortunes

... If they have travelled far, they have made the road on which they have travelled. If they have ascended high, they have built their own ladder. (4)

Douglass, “who taught himself to read, then taught himself the principles of political philosophy, and then rose through his own efforts to become one of the nation’s foremost intellectuals,” (Sandefeur xxi) was an example of a self-made man himself. With this definition in mind, this thesis will analyse Hamilton’s character through the musical lyrics to answer the following research question: In what way does Alexander Hamilton embody the myth of the self-made man in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s musical *Hamilton*?

In order to answer the research question, the thesis first introduces the concept of the self-made man. Second, the characteristics that lead Hamilton to become a self-made man — hard work, ambition and awareness of his legacy — are analysed, including how they develop throughout the musical. These characteristics are approached thematically, focusing on Hamilton’s life story, his connection to the United States, his antagonists and his family. In the conclusion, *Hamilton*’s current relevance is discussed.

## **2. Being “In the Room Where it Happens”: The Myth of the Self-Made Man**

The myth of the self-made man appeared along with the traditions of American exceptionalism and the American dream. The former has scholarly been defined as emphasising the political and moral uniqueness of the United States. This is based on their idealisation of values as freedom and liberty, the perceived amount of resources and opportunities that are granted to an American citizen and their political success across history (Hodgson 11). The latter is described in James Truslow Adams’ commentary on the history of the United States in *Epic of America* as “a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be

recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (404). These ideas were kept up by the Declaration of Independence, which stated that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (US). One idea that emerges from these narratives is that the United States is a land of opportunity, where one can rise to the top through hard work.

In 2014, John Swansburg identified the concept of the self-made man as “America’s most pliable, pernicious, irrepressible myth” (“Self-Made”). The term was first used in the nineteenth century at the US Senate, when politician Henry Clay argued for a tariff which would benefit “enterprising self-made men, who have acquired whatever wealth they possess by patient and diligent labor” (Clay 100). The notion has been used since to refer to success narratives with a spectacular rise from poverty to wealth. During the first years it was used, it referred to those men who, like Benjamin Franklin or Abraham Lincoln, worked consistently and possessed certain moral virtues such as temperance, frugality or a constant desire for self-improvement, which eventually led them to success (“Self-Made”). However, in the later part of the nineteenth century, accompanied by rapid economic growth, the myth of the self-made man was diverted to a model which emphasized the “drive, confidence and single-mindedness to pursue wealth, no holds barred” as important traits for success, along with the ability to “[find] an opportunity and [seize] it” (“Self-Made”). As a consequence of transport developments, towards the beginning of the twentieth century a great immigration wave took place, which eventually also led immigrant success stories. The account that anyone, “even a new arrival with no money, no home and no command of the English language,” (“Self-Made”) could rise to the top helped to reinforce the greatness of the myth of the self-made man in the United States.

Even during its conception, the notion of the self-made man was more of a myth than a reality. As Swansburg argues, Franklin became identified with the self-made man because “Americans were primed to hear it ... So eager was the first generation of Americans to believe in this idea ... that they manipulated Franklin’s story to accentuate his self-making” (“Self-Made”). The mythical aspect of it became even clearer by the end of the nineteenth century, when “massive amounts of capital had been concentrated in the hands of a few industrial titans” (“Self-Made”). The gap between rich and poor widened, showing the difficulty of rising to the top through hard work only. Nowadays, testimonies such as political analyst Yuval Levin’s show that “[t]here is a divergence between what many Americans want to believe about our country ... and what we know to be true about the circumstances and pressures too many Americans now face” (Levin 2). As historian Niall Ferguson points out, nowadays “an American’s chance of getting from the bottom fifth [of the income distribution] to the top fifth is 1 in 13” (Ferguson). Even though the chances of becoming a self-made man are slim, the idea of its attainability is still very much alive in American culture, as seen in its use in *Hamilton*.

### **3. “The Man is Non-Stop”: Hamilton as a Self-Made Man**

#### 3.1. “How Does a Bastard... Rise Up”

Hamilton’s story sets off with an account of his childhood and youth in the song “Alexander Hamilton”. Besides introducing the main characters and events that will take place in the musical, its first verse presents the theme of upward mobility, one of Hamilton’s main concerns throughout his life:

How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a  
 Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten  
 Spot in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor,  
 Grow up to be a hero and a scholar? (Miranda 16)

In other words, how does Hamilton rise from rags to riches? This question is immediately answered in the following verse:

The ten-dollar Founding Father without a father  
 Got a lot farther by working a lot harder  
 By being a lot smarter  
 By being a self-starter (16)

Aaron Burr, the narrator and antagonist, explains how Hamilton rose up both because of his brains and hard work, a competency also mentioned by Douglass as a key factor to success: “When we find a man who has ascended heights beyond ourselves ... we may know that he has worked harder, better and more wisely than we” (8).

In similar fashion to Douglass, Hamilton’s arrival to New York is the first step in his path to become a self-made man. “Alexander Hamilton,” the song that describes it, presents some echoes of Douglass’ lecture. Miranda’s lyrics “[t]he brother was ready to beg, steal, borrow, or barter,” (6) greatly resemble Douglass’ “[w]e have all either begged, borrowed or stolen” (3). Douglass also uses a hurricane as a metaphor for those who start at the bottom of society and then proceed to rise up: “Flung overboard in the midnight storm on the broad and tempest-tossed ocean of life ... they have bravely buffeted the frowning billows and have risen in safety and life” (4). One of the major events in Hamilton’s childhood is a hurricane. It both literally and metaphorically turns his world upside down, as, after its appearance, Hamilton has to start working hard, which eventually leads him to become a self-made man. Significantly, the theme of the hurricane comes back towards the end of the story in the song



“Hurricane,” in which Hamilton reflects on the events that have led to his downfall. In “The Schuyler Sisters,” Angelica, Eliza and Peggy Schuyler are introduced to the spectator while they are searching for those taking part in the Revolution. In an echo of Douglass’ plea “WORK! WORK!! WORK!!! WORK!!!!,” (Douglass 9) the chorus of the number repeatedly sings “Work!” or “Work, work!” (Miranda 42), motivating the revolutionaries. Allusions to Douglass also shed light on the racial subtext of the story. While slavery is barely addressed, a multi-racial cast has consciously been chosen to play the white Founding Fathers, reappropriating history. Furthermore, by echoing Douglass’ work in the first songs of the musical, his success story foreshadows that of Hamilton, while at the same time acknowledging the cultural and historical importance of voices from different races.

Hamilton’s rise is especially important when taking into account his immigrant origins. During the first part of “Alexander Hamilton,” he is described in pejorative terms such as “orphan,” “son of a whore” and someone who longs “for something to be a part of” (Miranda 16). After encountering the hurricane, his father leaves and both his mother and his cousin die, leaving him with “ruined pride” (16). Despite these tragic events, Hamilton is, from a very young age, ready to find solutions to the obstacles in his way. Before he was even ten years old, he “[p]ut a pencil to his temple, connected it to his brain/And he wrote his first refrain,” (16) showing his ability to reflect on what happens around him. When he is left alone, he realises he has to fend for himself (16), thus he starts reading and working hard, “[p]lannin’ for the future” (17). The textures of the lyrics also describe the characters. Hamilton, along with other ambitious politicians such as Burr, Jefferson or Maddison, uses elaborate rhymes in his lyrics, showing his wit and the degree of attention he puts into the words he utters. As the song progresses, the melody becomes more victorious, with the climax coinciding with Hamilton’s arrival to New York, where he can “be a new man,” (17) echoing the hope of other immigrants that arrived to the United States to start a new life.

In the musical, the word ‘immigrant’ is mainly used in a derogatory way by Burr, especially at moments at where Hamilton succeeds and he does not. Nevertheless, in one of the musical’s most famous lines, at the beginning of “Yorktown,” Hamilton and his friend Lafayette reclaim the word. About to become two of the heroes that will help to achieve independence for the colonies, they motivate themselves by saying “Immigrants:/We get the job done” (Miranda 121). The line has an invigorating effect on the public, as Miranda states “I never anticipated that the audience response would drown out the next few lines every night,” (121) showing the importance of the representation of successful immigrants on Broadway. Due to their involvement in the Revolution, Hamilton and Lafayette rise in status and become national heroes.

### 3.2. “Just Like My Country ... Young, Scraggy and Hungry”

Throughout the musical, Hamilton’s rise is often compared that of the United States. The story follows both of them developing, Hamilton growing along with the nation. Still being subjected to King George III’s rule, the colonies could not take total command, as the coloniser was a barrier to power. In “My Shot,” Hamilton compares himself to the colonies, claiming that he is not throwing away his shot, although he is “just like my country,/ ... young, scraggy and hungry” (26). The word ‘shot’ refers here both to the action of shooting and to Hamilton’s opportunities, referring both to the Revolution and his endless motivation. He asks those listening to him to “[r]ise up,” (28) backed up by a chorus that represents those who agree with him and are willing to accompany him in the rise. Rising up also has a double meaning, as citizens are encouraged to rise up in terms of upward mobility, but also politically, to achieve independence for the colonies. Later in the musical, the double meaning of rising comes back when Hamilton is summoned to George Washington’s office, where he is asked to become the commander’s right-hand man. When presented with this opportunity,

in “Right Hand Man” Hamilton raps “I’ll rise above my station, organize your information ‘til we rise to the occasion of our new nation” (65). In this case, while he rises in station, the colonies start the Revolution that will eventually lead to their independence.

The connection between parents and their offspring, whether biological or metaphorical, repeatedly appears as a theme in the story. Along with being compared to Hamilton’s growth, the United States is also compared to the offspring of the heroes of the Revolution. In “Yorktown,” Hamilton motivates himself to fight in battle by singing “[g]otta start a new nation, gotta meet my son!” (Miranda 121) where the word ‘son’ could refer both to his real son and the United States. In “Dear Theodosia,” both Hamilton and Burr sing to their children, but, at the same time, they are also singing to the nation they are creating along with the rest of the Americans. They proclaim they are “dedicating every day” to their children and that they will “bleed and fight” for them (128), as they do in fighting for independence. They also show hope for their offspring, stating it will “blow us all away,” (128) a sentence that is also used in describing Hamilton’s son Philip.

Washington reinforces the father/son theme, as he acts as Hamilton’s role-model and the parent he always longed for. He repeatedly calls Hamilton ‘son’, teaches him about manners in politics and aids him in rising through political opportunities. They also share awareness of their legacies, another of Hamilton’s primary concerns throughout his life. Swansburg has written on the link between the self-made man and the father/son relationship, stating that “[a]nxiety has always been woven into the self-made story, though more often it’s been the fathers worrying about their sons” (“Backbone”). Before Hamilton joins the battle of Yorktown, he is warned by Washington that history has its eyes on him, and that “[y]ou have no control/Who lives, who dies, who tells your story” (120). While Washington warns him due to his own negative experiences in commanding, Hamilton perceives the comment as a matter of protecting his legacy, which motivates him in working harder.

Legacy is also connected to offspring, as in “The Story of Tonight,” where Hamilton and his friends declare that even though they “may not live to see our glory,” (35) they will fight and eventually their children will tell their story. The connection reappears in “Dear Theodosia,” where Hamilton and Burr sing “[i]f we lay a strong enough foundation/We’ll pass it on to you, we’ll give the world to you,” (128) hoping that their work will be useful for the next generation. After Hamilton’s affair is made public, in “Blow Us All Away,” Philip decides to partake in a duel with George Eacker, who “disparaged my father’s legacy in front of a crowd/I can’t have that, I’m making my father proud” (245). ‘Crowd’ and ‘proud’ are words that are also rhymed in “My Shot” as Hamilton talks about his independence dream for the colonies, reinforcing the connections between father, son and nation. Furthermore, in the duel that takes place between Burr and him, described in “The World Was Wide Enough,” Burr is quick to shoot, since he does not want to “make an orphan of my daughter” (273). Being of opposed political parties, this comment can also be considered politically, as the United States regulated by Hamilton’s ideas would be an orphaned USA.

In Hamilton’s last moments, while seeing a bullet coming his way, he thinks about legacy and the nation:

If I throw away my shot, is this how you remember me?

What if this bullet is my legacy?

Legacy. What is a legacy?

It’s planting seeds in a garden you never get to see.

I wrote some notes at the beginning of a song someone will sing for me. (273)

He describes America as “[a] place where even orphan immigrants can leave their fingerprints and rise up,” alluding to the myth of the self-made man, and names the country a “great unfinished symphony” (273). His life, the “notes at the beginning of a song that someone will

sing for me”, is connected to the greater “symphony” (273) of America through his legacy, reinforcing the parallels between himself and the nation. Moreover, the contemporary spectator is able to see Hamilton’s murder as a presage of the many other political murders that have taken place in the United States since, including those of John F. Kennedy or Malcolm X.

### 3.3. “The Sinners and The Saints”

Although Hamilton’s ambition is often productive, it also leads to animosity between himself and those around him. This becomes clear in his relationship with Burr, who is always falling a step behind Hamilton, as he himself acknowledges in “Non-Stop”: “Even though we started at the very same time,/Alexander Hamilton began to climb” (137). Coming from a rich family, Burr does not have to rise from poverty, but he does want to achieve a high status in politics. Both of them are in constant disagreement about the correct way of doing so. While Hamilton is opinionated and talks loudly, Burr prefers to stand aside and wait. This is interpreted by Hamilton as a lack of ideals in “Aaron Burr, Sir,” where he asks: “If you stand for nothing, Burr, what’ll you fall for?” (25). This sentence is repeated frequently throughout the musical, angering Burr every time. Burr constantly incorporates subtle menaces in his sentences, such as reminding Hamilton that assuming he is the smartest in the room might soon become his doom (137) in “Non-Stop”, or commenting in “Schuyler Defeated”: “I swear, your pride will be the death to us all!/Beware it goeth before the fall...” (191), referencing the Bible to mention that pride is followed by destruction (*King James Bible*, Prov. 16.18). These menaces foreshadow both Hamilton’s downfall and the duel that will take place later on between them. In “Washington on Your Side,” Jefferson and Madison — two Democratic-Republicans who will later become the second and fourth presidents of the United States — join Burr in using ‘immigrant’ in a derogative way by singing “[t]his

immigrant isn't somebody we chose" (200). However, when acknowledging that "[i]t must be nice ... to have Washington on your side," (199) they show that they are jealous of him and what he has accomplished as someone who started off with few resources.

Hamilton's ego also gets him in trouble, as shown in the song "Meet me Inside". Annoyed by criticism about Washington, Hamilton organises a duel, disrespecting his commander's orders. When Washington reprimands him, he feels belittled and yells back irritated "Call me son one more time-" (105). Because of his disrespect towards his commander, Hamilton is sent home, surrounded by a feeling of shame. In the Cabinet battles, he repeatedly clashes with Jefferson, continuously losing his temper and attacking his adversary rather than giving good arguments for the issues that are being discussed. In the first Cabinet battle, "Cabinet Battle #1," Hamilton mentions Jefferson's slaves and boasts that "[w]e almost died in a trench/While you were off getting high with the French" (161). Furthermore, he claims that both Jefferson and Madison are "[s]ittin' there useless as two shits" (162). In "Cabinet Battle #2," the United States' involvement with France in their war against England is discussed. Jefferson claims that they have to keep their promise and aid France, something that Hamilton disagrees with. Jefferson mentions Hamilton is "[d]esperate to rise above his station," (192) attacking his motivation, and reminds him of his promise to Lafayette, stating "[y]ou accumulate debt, you accumulate power,/Yet in their hour of need, you forget" (193). The rhymes of 'debt'/'forget' and 'power'/'hour' reinforce Jefferson's statement about Hamilton choosing the indicate moment to forget the promises he made to Lafayette. Hamilton yells "[y]ou must be out of your goddamn mind" (192) instead of giving solid arguments and in the end convinces Washington not to help France, prioritising the benefits for the nation over friendship.

Eventually, his feud with other politicians, combined with his pride, lead Hamilton to the duel where he is shot. After Philip is murdered, Hamilton stops being active in politics but

is nonetheless asked who he supports in the new candidature for the Democratic-Republicans, where Burr and Jefferson run against each other. Hamilton chooses Jefferson in “The Election of 1800,” as “Jefferson has beliefs. Burr has none.” (261) This exasperates Burr, because it leads him to lose the elections, for which he has been working hard “chasing what [he] want[s]” for the first time by “openly campaigning” and “going door to door” (259). The extremity of his anger can be heard in his intonation and the menacing tune at the beginning of “Your Obedient Servant,” where he calls Hamilton “[a]n arrogant,/Immigrant, orphan,/Bastard, whoreson”. The direct rhyme between ‘arrogant’ and ‘immigrant’ that starts the list of insults implies the inherent connection of both for Burr. He concludes Hamilton has kept him from success “[f]or the last time” (266) and starts an exchange of letters with him, which eventually leads to their final duel.

### 3.4. “Have I Done Enough?”

Hamilton marries Eliza, one of the Schuyler sisters, at the beginning of the story. Eliza’s sweet and patient personality contrasts with Hamilton’s ambitious and reckless temperament. This can also be seen in their lyrics, as in contrast to Hamilton, Eliza’s lyrics are sincere and without ambiguity. When they marry, he is in love, but in a flashback provided by Eliza’s sister Angelica in “Satisfied,” the public hears him revealing that he is never satisfied (80). Hamilton refers to an intellectual dissatisfaction which always compels him to work harder, but in including it in the same song as his marriage, it also foreshadows the affair that will take place later on. Moreover, Hamilton rises in station by marrying Eliza, something Angelica is well aware of (83). When, despite his lack of money, Eliza’s father gives them his blessing, the chorus of “Helpless” echoes “[i]n New York, you can be a new man,” (77) as Hamilton realises how he is quickly becoming the man he aspired to be when he left the Caribbean.

While Eliza is initially in awe of Hamilton's intellect and non-stop work ethic, later on it becomes a source of conflict, as it opposes her own values. While she believes that they "don't need a legacy," (110) since being a family is enough for her, Hamilton aspires to more than that. As a consequence, he continuously chooses to work harder and to leave his family in benefit of his political career. When Hamilton is asked by Washington to become Secretary of the Treasury in "Non-Stop," Eliza begs him to stay, wondering why she is not enough for him (144). Physically, Hamilton's hands are being held both by Angelica and Eliza, but he detaches himself violently from both of them and walks up the stairs, ready to participate in the new government, as the chorus remarks that "[h]e will never be satisfied" (144). The visual rise in the scene is also a reference to his rise in station by becoming a part of the Cabinet. Years later, in "Take a Break," Eliza asks him to go along with Philip and her to her father's house (169). Hamilton again refuses and prefers to stay home and work. However, in the next song, "Say No to This," he indeed shows he is never satisfied, since, having a wife and "[l]onging for Angelica," (176) as it is implied during the musical that they are attracted to each other, he also starts an affair with Maria Reynolds.

Hamilton's affair is the first step that leads to his downfall. Besides complicating his relationship with Eliza, it also leads to America's first sex scandal, which leaves a stain on his legacy. Faced with the gravity of the situation, confronting Maria, he states "I am helpless — how could I do this? ... the situation's/ Helpless," (178) egoistically claiming the word 'helpless', which Eliza always uses in talking about her love for him, to talk about his affair. When Jefferson, Madison and Burr confront Hamilton in "We Know" because they believe he has "engaged in speculation" with governmental money (229), Hamilton is more worried about being a politician with a stained legacy than an unfaithful husband, as he confesses "[y]es, I have reasons to shame/But I have not committed treason and sullied my good name" (230). The possibility that the rumours may spread provokes desperation in Hamilton,



reflected in “Hurricane”. Hamilton thinks about how he rose up from the moment a hurricane arrived in his childhood. From there, he concludes “I wrote my way out ... I looked up and the town had its eyes on me” (232). With the chorus reminding him “[h]istory has its eyes on you” (233), he concludes that honesty is the only thing that could save him and his legacy and decides to make the affair public, not thinking about the consequences it will have for his family. Instead of making the situation better, he loses Eliza’s love and his son Philip, who is shot in a duel defending his father’s honour. Before passing away, in “Stay Alive,” Philip asks forgiveness from Eliza “for forgetting what you taught me,” (249) referring to her ideals, which oppose Hamilton’s pride and his obsession with legacy.

After Philip’s death, Hamilton starts to understand the consequences of his ambition. In “It’s Quiet Uptown,” Hamilton appears significantly silent, especially in contrast to his life before Philip’s murder. Instead of talking loudly and making ambitious plans, he engages in calm activities such as walking in the garden or praying. Eliza is still hurt by the affair, so Hamilton has to grieve on his own during the first weeks. He realises he would “trade his life” (253) for Philip’s and that if Philip were there and Eliza were happy, that “would be enough” (253). This shows a change in his views on life, also noticeable in his use of Eliza’s words and ideals instead of his own. Hamilton also shows a change in his values in his final duel with Burr. Since his youth, he has been claiming that he is not throwing away his shot, but after so much loss and the realisation that goes with it, Hamilton abstains from shooting and raises his pistol to the sky instead, thinking that Burr will do the same, keeping the duel symbolic. Nevertheless, Burr shoots and kills him. The fact that Hamilton does not recklessly shoot his antagonist, but thinks of the consequences, shows how the events in his life, especially the murder of his son, have affected him and changed his behaviour.

The musical ends with Eliza taking control of the narrative. After the affair, she is angry, which is shown in “Burn,” in which she addresses Hamilton. Disappointed, she states

“[i]n clearing your name, you have ruined our lives” and blames him for being obsessed with his legacy, “paranoid in every paragraph” (238) about how he is perceived by others. Even though she is hurt by the affair itself, Eliza mainly sings about Hamilton’s ambition, which led him to make the affair public instead of thinking of his family. She refuses to partake in his political plans and decides to erase herself from the narrative by burning Hamilton’s letters, which could have redeemed him (238). However, in the last song of the musical, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?,” instead of disappearing, Eliza puts herself “back in the narrative” (280). Even though she did not agree with Hamilton’s ideals when he was still alive, after his murder, she takes the narration over from Burr and tells Hamilton’s story. In her last years she asks herself “have I done enough?,” (281) showing that she is never satisfied. Furthermore, Eliza talks about “what I am proudest of,” (281) the orphanage she establishes in New York. This is the only moment in the musical where Eliza talks about her personal achievements, showing that she also has ambition and followed her dreams. In this sense, she takes on some of Hamilton’s traits, in the same way he did towards the end of his life when he realised that having a family was enough and that he should let Burr live. In the children Eliza takes care of in the orphanage, she claims that she sees Hamilton (281), which shows that, just as he wanted, he has left a permanent mark.

#### **4. Conclusion: “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells your Story?”**

In addition to offering almost three hours of entertainment, *Hamilton* gives the spectator a chance to reflect on the United States by exploring its historical past, the myths that have come forth since its foundation, and their relevance nowadays. Having a multitude of complex layers and hidden themes, some ideas for further research include analysing its

parallelisms with Greek tragedy or a study of the differences between real events and fiction in terms of historical accuracy, focusing on what these changes do to the meaning of the text.

Hamilton possesses most of the traits that can be identified with the myth of the self-made man. He becomes a self-made man in the economic sense, and fits into the immigrant success narrative, as starting off without anything, he eventually creates a fruitful life for himself in New York. Furthermore, he also possesses the frugality and ambition that were identified with Franklin and Lincoln in the nineteenth century, but he lacks their temperance. It is not until the end of the story that he realizes that his endless ambition also has negative effects on himself and the people he loves. Further than being indebted to those who help him throughout his life, the musical continuously references cultural products as literary works or rap songs, raising a paradox. Being a self-made man, Hamilton is, nevertheless, also indebted in a moral, historical and artistic way to many other persons, documents and events that existed before his character. When analysing the morale of the musical in relation to the myth of the self-made man, *Hamilton* contains several messages. On the one hand, it offers an inspirational story, as the spectator sees Hamilton working hard and rising to the top. On the other hand, it also shows how recklessness and ambition should not be the only values driving one's life. Furthermore, it shows that even though someone is 'self-made', he is still helped by many on the way.

While the story is inspired by past events, it resonates powerfully nowadays. The musical gives an important position to people of colour, presenting them as powerful drivers of change. By having them perform historical white characters, who for the most part were slave owners, people of colour reclaim history. Moreover, it shows a success story that is inspired by black culture and where people of colour occupy the highest social positions. While this kind of representation has always been crucial, the great need for equality between

races has again been reiterated in the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. Furthermore, the musical reflects on American myths and the foundational documents. By subverting the myth of the self-made man, also revealing the misery that can follow from it, Miranda proves that historical narratives are neither sacred nor unquestionable. After the results of the 2020 American elections were confirmed, Donald Trump repeatedly declared that the election had been stolen and that his followers should do their best to defend America. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2021, one of his speeches led to the storming of the United States Capitol (U.S. News). As is stated in the Declaration of Independence, “whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive ... it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it ... and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness” (US). Taking the foundational texts too literal can be dangerous when considering that the texts were written in the eighteenth century, in another historical moment and more importantly, in a different cultural context. However, as Miranda states,

The most important affinity that *Hamilton* will carry into the future isn't a specific message, though, political or otherwise: It's an underlying belief in stories, and their power to change the world ... In the years to come ... many kids ... will be newly inspired to tell *their* stories too ... “I can do that,” they'll say. And if they're like Alexander Hamilton, they'll add “And I can do it *better.*” (285)

As Hamilton realises throughout his life, it is important to transform yourself into what you dream of. However, the most important thing is bettering yourself while you grow.

Works Cited

“Declaration of Independence: A Transcription.” *National Archives*, archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript. Accessed on 10 Jan. 2021.

“Transcript of Trump's Speech at Rally Before US Capitol Riot” *U.S. News*, 13 Jan. 2021, usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2021-01-13/transcript-of-trumps-speech-at-rally-before-us-capitol-riot. Accessed on 07 Feb. 2021.

Adams, James Truslow. *Epic of America*. Little, Brown & Company, 1931.

Bender, Thomas. Introduction. *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History*, Hill and Wang, 2006, pp. 3-14.

Clay, Henry. “The American System.” *The Senate 1789-1989: Classic Speeches 1830-1993*, ed. by Wendy Wolff, U.S. Government Printing Office, pp. 83-116. PDF.

Douglass, Frederick. "Self-Made Men." *Monadnock Valley Press*, monadnock.net/douglass/self-made-men.html. Accessed on 28 Nov. 2020.

Ferguson, Niall. “The End of the American Dream.” *Niall Ferguson*, 28 June 2013, niallferguson.com/journalism/journalism/the-end-of-the-american-dream. Accessed on 6 Feb. 2020.

*Hamilton*. Directed by Thomas Kail, written by Lin-Manuel Miranda. Walt Disney Studio Motion Pictures, 2020.

Hodgson, Godfrey. *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*. Yale UP, 2009.

Miranda, Lin-Manuel and McCarter, Jeremy. *Hamilton: The Revolution*. Little, Brown Book Group, 2016.

Original Broadway Cast of Hamilton. *Hamilton*, Atlantic Records, 2015. *Spotify*,

[open.spotify.com/album/1kCHru7uhxBUdzkm4gzRQc?si=X1uhUnwgTHCwaIgA8-r59g](https://open.spotify.com/album/1kCHru7uhxBUdzkm4gzRQc?si=X1uhUnwgTHCwaIgA8-r59g).

Sandefur, Timothy. *Frederick Douglass: Self-Made Man*. Cato Institute, 2018.

Swansburg, John. "The Self-Made Man: The Story of America's Most Pliable, Pernicious, Irrepressible Myth." *Slate*, 29 Sept. 2014,

[slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/history/2014/09/the\\_self\\_made\\_man\\_history\\_of\\_a\\_myth\\_from\\_ben\\_franklin\\_to\\_andrew\\_carnegie.html?via=gdpr-consent&via=gdpr-consent](https://slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2014/09/the_self_made_man_history_of_a_myth_from_ben_franklin_to_andrew_carnegie.html?via=gdpr-consent&via=gdpr-consent). Accessed on 27 Nov. 2020.

---. "They Can't Buy Backbone." *Slate*, 29 Sept. 2014, [slate.com/news-and-politics/2014/09/the-self-made-man-in-america-the-tension-between-fathers-and-sons.html](https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2014/09/the-self-made-man-in-america-the-tension-between-fathers-and-sons.html). Accessed on 8 Jan. 2021.

*The King James Bible*. *Bible Gateway*, [biblegateway.com/versions/King-James-Version-KJV-Bible/#booklist](https://biblegateway.com/versions/King-James-Version-KJV-Bible/#booklist). Accessed on 29 Jan. 2021.

Yuval, Levin. "Economic Mobility: Is the American Dream in Crisis?" Hearing on Economic Mobility, American Enterprise Institute, 17 July 2019. PDF.