“American Progress” by John Gast

**Historical Context**

During the 19th century, a belief arose in America that it was destiny to stretch across the entire continent. This was known as Manifest Destiny. Followers of Manifest Destiny thought that it was their duty to control the land from the Atlantic to the Pacific. They also believed that God has destined them to undertake this mission.

**Details about the Author**

John Gast, the artist who created “American Progress,” was born in Prussia on December 21, 1842. He lived and worked most of his life in Brooklyn, New York. He was a painter and lithographer (Before there were copying machines, artist would use a stamp made out of a metal plate to make a print of a painting). Surprisingly, not much else is known about Gast.

**Reasons for the Painting**

Gast uses his painting to tell the message that the United States is destined to expand West. Technology, such as railroads and telegraph wires, is moving west as well as many people. Gast is trying to encourage interest in moving west. The painting illustrates that the West is a dark and savage land, populated by Indians and wild beasts. By entering these barbaric lands, America will civilize and tame the territory.

**Methods**

One of the most striking methods in the painting is the lighting. Where Columbia, the angel-like figure who is a personification of the American Dream, has traveled, the land is bright and sunny; however, where she has yet to “bring her light” is dark and stormy. Gast also painted a large number of people and technology moving west. There are farmers, wagons, trains and telegraph wires. The painting depicts Columbia as a goddess or an angel, which allows Gast to show people that they have
both government and religious support in their move west. Lastly, the painting shows war-like Indians and ferocious beasts being driven back by arriving settlers making citizens think it was okay to get rid of the Indians.

**Audience**

Gast is obviously trying to get viewers of “American Progress” to understand that America’s destiny is in the West. He appeals to the adventurous by portraying the West as a dark and mysterious land, as well as showing Indians and animals that would need to be driven out if America were to settle there. Trendsetters are another source that Gast sought with his painting. He made the West look new and exciting, as well as showing all the new technology moving toward the West. American Progress was painted for was those who were unsure if it was right to migrate west. By using the heavenly lady leading the settlers into an uncivilized land, Gast hoped to share his idea that it was morally just to migrate West.

**Hidden Agendas**

This is a very interesting painting, and there might be two hidden agendas within the work. Firstly, there are oceans on both sides of the painting. On the left, it is harder to see, but it is past what might be the Mississippi River. Gast might have been using this hidden message to show that the country was getting “smaller”.

Secondly, everything seems to be moving west. Masses of people, transportation, and technology are all making the journey. The painting might be showing that soon the power of the country could reside in the West.