

## The “Deferred” American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*

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### **Abstract:**

*Death of a Salesman* relies heavily on Alger’s theory; the theory of the success myth, although in the opposite direction. It seems that Miller is unconsciously affected, as all the Americans, by the Depression. Thus his intention is not to focus on the rags-to-rich formula, but on the subverted success/myth theory, the disillusionment of the hero who never saw his dream of success materialized. Miller’s centre of attention is on an ordinary American salesman, an antihero, a representative of the average lower-middle-class American to reverse the formula and to present the reader with a story of failure after the success myth formula. Willy Lowman’s history begins at a particular age of his life, he is not young anymore, the signs of disillusionment are clear to the reader/audience from the very beginning of the play, but not to Willy. This paper aims to analyse the transformation of the American dream in one of the most well-known plays of Arthur Miller. The paper will focus on the misconception of the American dream and how this confusion led its main protagonist to tragedy. Another important element that contributes to the tragical ending of the drama is the clash between idealizing the American dream and the reality.

**Key words:** American dream, illusion, reality, fantasy, spiritual fulfilment

*“But what happens to a dream deferred?*

*Does it dry up*

*Like a raisin in the sun?*

*Or fester like a sore*

*And then run?”* (Langston Hughes)

## I. INTRODUCTION

Different studies of *Death of a Salesman* almost always spotlight the confusion deriving from the transformation of once promising agrarian American dream into an urban nightmare and the high hopes or false values that the American society had imposed. Miller’s indictment of this venal society and American dream brings through the main character Willy Lowman who on the verge of death tries to justify his past and present choices, the life and dreams he had chosen for his sons and wife, his values and moral, calls the attention of the readers and audience even after sixty-two years from its first performance (1949). At this point one cannot help questioning: “Why did this personal drama have such an influential power and survive through generations and different cultures?!” It could not be only for the self-delusions and failure of achieving the American dream, or for the death of a salesman. The play’s success in virtually all societies shows that it is something more than just a dramatization of the American dream, its corruption and coercions. This human drama powerfully portrays the human dilemma and discrepancy between who we really are and what we think we are, between what we deserve and what we achieve, between what we dream and what the reality offers us, but above all, it “presents the anxieties of a culture which had exchanged an existential world of physical and moral possibility for the determinisms of modern commercial and industrial life [...] The dislocations of Willy’s private life – discontinuities which open up spaces in familial relationships no less than in memory and experience – are equally those of a society chasing the chimera of material success as a substitute for spiritual fulfilment” (Biggsby 1984; 174). This personal

drama takes enormous dimensions when we try to impose on the people close to us our own vision of things, our own dreams and ambitions without ever questioning if what we have chosen for them really fits with their own dreams and their own world and involuntarily they become the victims, like Biff and Happy.

According to Centola (1993; 24) the most powerful element that grips the play’s audiences around the world, not just people who are culturally or ideologically predisposed to embrace the American Dream, is the facility to understand the anguish that derives from “being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world.” *The image of failure, isolation and “being torn away”* is encompassed throughout the play in two dimensions- the dream world of the success myth with its merging of the past triumphs, indications of glory to come, glimmering possibilities contrasted with family dreams in the actual world of a small, and brick-enclosed house in Brooklyn. To achieve this amalgamation, Miller uses an expressionistic setting, a skeletonised house which symbolizes the encroachment of urban economics on the family, “one-dimensional” roof surrounded on all sides by a “solid vault of apartment houses.” The walls of the house are cut away to permit free passage to the personae in dream and reminiscence sequences. This device, along with changes in lighting, allow for a condensation of time so that the life of the family can be encompassed by the action. This expressionistic technique – the use of typical personae, a symbolic setting, and mobility in time- allows the playwright to express the salesman’s dream and experience in the context of the dream. (Martine 1979; 28)

## II. A DREAM WITHIN A DREAM

But what is Willy’s dream? What does American dream itself mean? In an influential early review of Miller’s play, Harold Clurman staked out this critical position:

Death of a Salesman is a challenge to the American dream. Lest this be misunderstood, I hasten to add that there are two version of the American dream. The historical American dream is the promise of a land of freedom with opportunity and equality for all. This dream needs no challenge but only fulfilment. But since the Civil War, [ . . . ], the American dream has become distorted to the dream of business success. (1958: 212-213)

Thus, Willy desperately chases ‘the American dream’ of business success, economic stability, respectable social status, happiness, beautiful family etc., but the harder he fights the more desperate and senseless this fight seems. Miller is careful in presenting the hollowness of this dream, the pointless efforts of becoming someone you are not and the impossibility of attaining something that is a mere illusion. Willy’s American dream resembles the green light that Gatsby sees at the end of Daisy’s dock, a light that revives his hopes, whereas the imaginary conversations of Willy with Dave Singleman and Ben help him to keep alive his hopes. However, what Willy seems not to understand and is even confused about is how to get his dreams materialized. Willy as a product of the American society and the Alger success myth theory, is convinced that what is essential in achieving his dream are personality traits, acquaintances and “the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead” (Salesman, 146). So badly obsessed was Willy with personal appearance that he tries to inflict his confusing ideas to his sons and even to Ben:

It’s not what you do Ben. It’s who you know and the smile on your face! It’s contacts, Ben, contacts! The whole wealth of Alaska passes over the lunch table at the Commodore Hotel, and that’s the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being well-liked. (86)

‘... personality always wins the day...’ (151)

Willy, like many others in his society, fails to understand the banality in such clichés. It seems that by passionately repeating these phrases he is trying to assure himself that what he has done was the right thing, he has made the right decisions and not wasted his life in vain. The disparity between the hollowness of his words and the passion with which he utters them also expresses his inadequate understanding of *fatherhood, salesmanship and success*.

The product of his confusion is conceived in his relationship with the people that surround him. He is a confused salesman who tries to follow his idols of success Ben, Dave Singleman and Biff, all of them had talents that he could not possess. Biff was surrounded by admiring classmates, at The Ebbets Field game; Dave Singleman, at the end of his life, was surrounded by the affection of the customers and the salesmen, whereas Ben was surrounded by the mystery of his enterprise and wealth. Ben embodies more than just the image of success in Willy’s mind, he represents the road not taken, the lost chance and in many ways, Willy’s alter ego. Both Ben and Dave are undeniably embodiment of the American dream to Willy, although each of them represents a different type of this dream and diametrically opposed value systems (Porter 1969; Centola 1993). Willy considers these figures (Ben, Dave, Biff) mythological projects of his own needs and his social values. This has two consequences in Willy’s personality and life: first the way to achieve success remains a mystery to him. He was unable to understand how to attain success and wealth. Anytime he asks Ben, the only response he gets is the formula: “When I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich” (157). The second consequence that derives from this mythological projection affects Willy’s relationships with down to earth people like his wife Linda and his friend Charlie. None of them can deeply influence Willy’s beliefs. The only thing they can offer Willy is support, friendship, advice and even economical sustain as Charlie usually does. But these are not enough to

help Willy make his American dream come true, thus the consequences are loneliness, frustration and ultimately despair. (Centola 1993; Porter 1969; Jacobson 1975)

Willy’s confusion is even more evident in his profession as a salesman. His attempts to confluence the personal with the professional seal his doom. Instead of acting like one who understands business and the demands of the business world, he often exchanges family love with business success, or material success as a sign of blessing and family rewarding. This attitude is evident in Willy’s conversations with Howard Wagner when he tells him about a time when a salesman could earn a living and enjoy “respect,” “comradeship,” “gratitude,” “friendship,” (180-181). Willy’s wrong attitude is also obvious in his conversations with Ben. Unlike Willy, Ben is successful in the modern business world. He is realistic and has no illusions about personality winning traits or friendship, or the right contacts or values. His motto is: “Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You’ll never get out of the jungle that way” (158). Ben’s attitude to business and his indifference towards others confirms Howard Wagner’s theory that “business is business” (180). Although Willy respects Ben for his achievements, he rarely does what he advises. In his eyes Ben is the ruthless capitalist who repudiates any kind of values that Willy treasures and associates with his romanticised view of family and success. Instead he can easily find the family values and success in the idealized figure of Dave Singleman who according to Willy embodies the successful formula that business transaction can be made by people who love and respect each-other. The legend of Dave Singleman so strongly impresses Willy that till the end he is stubborn on the idea that success results from “who you know and the smile on your face! It’s contacts . . . being liked” (184) that guarantee a profitable business. Willy clings to the illusion that he can become another Dave Singleman- in itself an impossible task since no can become another person, a fact underscored by the name

*Singleman*, which (implies) individual uniqueness” (Centola 1993; 32).

The third affiliation and the most important to reveal the transforming American dream is Willy’s relationship with his family members. Willy’s assumption that prominence can help to achieve the American dream led all of the Loman family to lie and live a lie. Willy returns home from a business trip exclaiming, “I’m tellin’, you, I was sellin’ thousands and thousands, but I had to come home” (147). Happy’s need to be number one and resemble the merchandise manager led him to envy the position of those above him and achieve a deceitful sort of celebrity by taking bribes and seducing “gorgeous creatures” but these pseudo-forms of prominence do not help him to attain his American dream. Biff does not follow his father’s model; he rebuffs it, by rejecting even the illusion of the American dream. He surrenders his opportunities for a prominent adulthood by refusing to repeat a mathematics course after he has found his father with a woman in a hotel room. The intense pressure applied by the father, and his experience of failure and theft settles him in a final sense to his life of simple work, food and leisure without expectations of fame and illusions about who he was.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

Miller challenges the myth of success formula, the rags to rich dream, and presents the audience with a history of failure in the long line of successes. Willy’s dreams are mainly nourished by the distorted American dream that compelled people to change personal success with material success. In addition, Miller examines the fall of Alger’s success myth in modern society through Willy’s restless and uneasy psychological aspect. Furthermore, he criticizes the modern society as well through the emptiness and vainness of the twentieth-century view on success by presenting a satire on the American dream

of success through the sufferings and disintegration of an American middle-class family.

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