

Willie Loman's Perception of the American Dream in Arthur Miller's Play *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract

The current trend of the famous American Dream has been literalised to imply a character's relentless spirit in earnest desire to achieve their total imaginings. Miller is among the outstanding 20th century American literary dramatists who seems to suggest that though the American Dream is core to American human existence, the achievement of this dream is not assured. This is despite a character's soldiering on, to enact the action of the play in the context of societal experiences that present them with either obstacles or channels of achieving the dream. Therefore this article has focused on Willie Loman's perception of the American Dream as portrayed in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*. Miller presents the world audience with the 20th Century literary drama worthy not just for reading and watching but for empirical investigation. The query at the heart of objectives is, one, to find out Willie Loman's dream. Two, to examine whether he achieves it and three to examine the aftermath of his having or having not achieved his dream in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*. The case study design has been adopted to give a comprehensive representative view on Willie Loman's perception of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*. This design compared to others was preferred in order to give an extensive and qualitative analysis in this study. The basic instrument to be used will be content analysis guides. Using this instrument, the researcher is able to intensively delve into the American Dream as portrayed in the selected text.

Keywords: American Dream, Drama, Perception, Character, Playwright, Aftermath

1. Introduction

The term "The American Dream" is a great epic in the American history. It was first used by James Truslow Adams in 1931 in his popular book *The Epic of America* where he defined this dream as

"A dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely but 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." (p.214-215)

The ideals of the American Dream are also enclosed in the *Declaration of Independence* in 1776 which announces and explains America's separation from its colonizer The Great Britain and forming thirteen united states. It states:

"All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"(p.123)

In Jennifer Hochschild's book *Facing up to the American Dream* (1995), she looks at the four tenets of the American Dream. They are:

One, who? Everyone can achieve it regardless of origin, status and station.

Two, what? An individual's dream and his/her hope in its achievement.

Three, how? Through individual's hard work and determination.

Four, why? True success is associated with virtue.

Therefore, Hochschild argues that anyone can succeed if guided by the right motives. However, Hochschild's views are contrary to those of Ladd and Bowman (1998) who argue that motives are not enough as long as there are external factors that influence the achievement of this dream out there.

These external factors are:

One, it takes money to make money. (Income)

Two, it is not what you know but who you know.(Connections)

Three, what matters is being in the right place at the right time.(Luck)

Four, there is no even playing field. (Discrimination)

From the scholars contests, we deduce that the American Dream is basically connected with the ability, that inner urge deep within a human being to achieve everything satiating if one could only work hard enough for it. However, to achieve the American Dream is not as easy as it sounds. Consequently, there are many barriers surrounding the achievements of one's dream to the large extent the American Dream.

2. Theoretical Framework

The psychoanalytic theory founded by Sigmund Freud will be used in interpreting the repercussions experienced by Willie Loman after his having not achieved the dream. The tenets of psychoanalysis are;

First, a person's development is determined by often forgotten events in early childhood rather than by inherited traits alone. Forgotten memories are not lost. They are in possession of a patient ready to emerge and form associations with his other mental content but hindered from becoming conscious and forced to remain in the unconscious by some resistance.

Second, it is necessary to deal with psychological resistance in the form of defense mechanisms such as displacement, sublimation, regression among others. A defense mechanism is a mental process that enables the mind to reach compromise solutions to conflicts that it is unable to resolve. They include; one, repression where one buries the memory in the subconscious mind thereby preventing painful, disturbing or dangerous thoughts. Two, reaction formation is behaving in the opposite way to which you feel in order to conform to societal expectations. Three, displacement which is transferring one's emotions from the person who is the target of your frustration to someone or something else entirely. Four, regression which involves reverting back to an earlier level of development to avoid dealing with the current frustration. Five, sublimation which is diversion or deflection of instinctual drives usually sexual ones into more acceptable behaviours. Lastly, denial involves the outright refusal to accept a given reality. Defense mechanisms are a normal part of personality function but when excessive they become psychological disorders.

Third, the defense mechanisms result to certain human attitude, mannerisms, experiences and thoughts which are largely influenced by irrational drives that are rooted in the unconscious part of the mind.

Fourth, conflicts between the conscious and the unconscious or with repressed materials can materialize in the form of mental or emotional disturbances. For example, neurosis, anxiety and depression.

Lastly, liberating the elements of the unconscious is achieved through bringing this material into the conscious mind through skilled guidance.

This theory is best suited for the proposed study as it will help in understanding the psychological experiences Willie Loman goes through in his pursuit of the American Dream. A dream is something inherent in the human mind which compels each of us to set out the story of life. This means that a dream is first conceptualized in the mind then it is brought to reality.

The aftermath of having achieved or having not achieved the American Dream affects the psyche. This can be both positive and negative.

3. Conceptualizing the Study

This study intends to look at the literature related to this study. It will be guided by the research objectives which will form sub headings that will delve into the specifics. That is, what other scholars have done with reference to Willie Loman and his perception of the American Dream.

3.1 Willie Loman's American Dream in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*

From its adoption in 1931, the meaning of the term the American Dream has been defined and redefined by many Americans to fit their own experiences in its achievements.

Metzger (2009) submitted a dissertation to the University of California on the *Critical Fortunes of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman* where she analyzes the tragic experience of Willy Loman in his quest for riches, wealth and the Garden of Eden in America. However, she says nothing about Willy Loman's interpretation of the American Dream

Donald Trump is the very definition of American Dream. He was born in a middle class family in 1946 in Queens, New York. He went through schooling and despite their wealth, he and his siblings were forced to make their own money through paper rounds and summer jobs. Trump inherited his family business after his MBA in finance. He has increased it in size and profits. He is a proud owner of iconic features in Manhattan such as Trump Tower, Trump Plaza, Trump International Plaza among others. Donald Trump is currently the most powerful person in the world.

The Declaration of Independence in 1776 was an act of courage as it declared Americans as a free people. It was their first dream achieved. The American Dream is the promise of freedom and opportunity. Pilgrims found their dream of a 'City upon a Hill' fulfilled in the new land.

In a nutshell, the American dream is all about social, economic and political stability for all Americans regardless of skin colour, social and economic status. The American Dream is a roadmap of the life of the nation. During adversities, this dream provided a die hard optimism which enabled them to overcome challenges.

3.2 Willie Loman's Achievement of his American Dream in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*

All human beings are driven by the desires to succeed in their lives. These dreams can be individual or communal.

Rather wrote his book *The American Dream* in 2013 where he focused on the facets of the American Dream. The facets include:

One, freedom in other words the absence of bonds whereby for America the old world order had to be remade to ensure all men are liberated from government oppression, from the bondage of debt, from the hierarchies of church, state and society that had defined life in Europe. There were amendments in the constitution to promote the idea the government is of us, by us and for us. Some of the amendments include; the 1st amendment states one is free to follow the dictates of their conscience. That is one has the freedom of worship and freedom to report the truth. The 2nd amendment is the right to bear arms and the 3rd amendment is the rights of a defendant. Home is not simply where one lives but where one is free. For one to achieve the American Dream, they must have liberty.

Two, work and wealth, the American Dream advocates for integrity. That is, hardwork for acquisition of wealth. A story is told of a ditch-digger who worked hard and wore his end-of-day exhaustion with pride. He dug ditches during the day and he studied electricity and electric motors during the night. With time, he became a lineman. This was a better paying job and it was done above the ground. He later began a business of repairing electric motors that way he got his shot at the American Dream. This means that one's achievement is not measured by the size of his or her bank account but by the distance travelled.

Three, the pursuit of happiness, the main aim of pursuing dreams is to be happy. However, happiness lies not in the mere possession of money it lays in the joy of achievement and in the thrill of creative effort.

Four, nurturing the dream in the family. The family is considered central in the achievement of the American Dream. Parents are expected to nurture this dream in their children so that the success can remain in the family. The Kennedy family moved from Ireland where there was famine to wealth and the American presidency in the span of three generations. The Jackson family is famous for music. This is a family based in America. Music began with the parents Joe and Debbie Jackson. The two had nine children five of whom became legends in the music industry in America and beyond. Micheal Jackson died leaving behind great music such as *heal the world* and *America*. He is called '*the King of Pop*'.

Five, making a name by being in the spotlight. Fame is accomplished by people whose name and image have been spread farther and wider than they would have imagined. Fame also provides a useful platform from which to promote deeply felt causes. Oprah Winfrey is a renowned media personality in America. She had a TV talk show called The Oprah Winfrey Show from 1986 to 2011. She formed the Oprah Winfrey Foundation where she established educational initiatives which promotes girl education. In Soweto, a slum in South Africa, girls from disadvantaged homes have had a chance to go to school due to Oprah's foundation. Oprah said,

" *the school will teach girls to be the best human beings they can ever be.*" (2006)

Six, learning to dream whereby the American Dream promotes education. Education is a tool that alleviates poverty and ignorance. Seven, giving back to the society. They say to whom a lot is given a lot is expected. Those that fulfill their American Dream make the dreams of others come true by giving back to society. Having moved from grass to grace, they identify others who have similar dreams and by acting as their guardian angels, they create a platform for more dreams to be achieved. Tyra Banks is a retired super model. She began her career at age 15. She was the first African American to be featured on Cover Girl Magazine in the late 90s. She also worked for Vogue Italia, Elite Model and Victoria Secret. These are the world's best model industries. Tyra Banks produced a reality television programme called America's Next Top Model where she provides an opportunity for other girls who aspire modeling get a chance to showcase their talent.

3.3 Willie Loman's Repercussions After Having or Having not Achieved his American Dream in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*

Professor Sibbit (2011) carried out a research on *Willie Loman and his Mistaken View of the American Dream*. His study examines the disappointment Willie faces in his quest to achieve the American Dream of being wealthy. Sibbit further states that Willie's suicide in the end portrays tragedy brought about by disillusionment.

Aarit (2015) carries out a study on *Manipulation of Emotions Arising out of the Family in the play Death of a Salesman* where he depicts how the characters' emotions are manipulated at various contexts.

Kavita (2013) carries out a study on *the Father-Son Relationship in Death of a Salesman*. She divides her study into four stages to show the relationship between Willie Loman and his sons Biff and Happy. The stages are childhood stage, youth stage, mature stage and adulthood stage.

Armengial (2014) did a study entitled '*Attention, Attention Must Be Finally Paid To Such A Person': A Men's Studies Rereading of Arthur Miller's play Death of a Salesman* where he focuses on Willie as a tragic hero.

3.4 Literary Gap

It is clear that the concept of the American Dream has been researched widely. Scholars have looked at this concept in both the contemporary and literary aspects. This article will go a step further by focusing on Willie Loman's perception of American Dream in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*.

4. Background to the Playwright

Arthur Miller was born on 17th October 1915 in Manhattan, New York. He was the second son of Isidore and Augustar Miller who were both Jewish immigrants from Poland. His father had a clothing company called S Miller and Sons- it was prosperous enough that the family could afford a comfortable apartment overlooking Central Park and a chauffeured car that carried him to work.

In 1929, the stock market crashed. Having invested nearly all his money in the market, Isidore Miller was wiped out. The family packed up and moved to a simple home in Brooklyn. Miller graduated from Abraham Lincoln High School in 1932. He worked in an Auto-Part Warehouse saving 13 of 15 dollars paid for his future college tuition. He was rejected by University of Michigan after applying twice. He was more of a playwright than a student. In his autobiography-*Timeband* he wrote,

"With the possible exception of a doctor saving a life, writing a worthy play was the most important thing a human being could do" (p.23)

He was enrolled at Ann Harbor College to study writing in 1934. While at the university, he wrote a play called *No Villain* which won a Hopwood Award. A revised version earned him \$1,250. After graduating in 1938, Miller got a job writing radio plays for the Federal Theater Project. He wrote many works such as *No Villain*, *The Golden Years*, *The Half Bridge*, *The Man who Had All the Luck*, *The Story of G.I Joe*, *The Misfits* among others. He married thrice. Miller died of bladder cancer and a congestive heart failure on 10th February 2005 in his home in Roxbury Connecticut. Arthur Miller outlined in his works a form of tragedy applicable to modern times and contemporary characters. He challenged the notion that only kings, queens, princes and princesses could be tragic hero. As in Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Miller argued that a tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life for others. As Willy Loman does in *Death of a Salesman*.

Miller also outlined family relations in his works. Particularly, the relationship between fathers and sons. This is evident in *Death of a Salesman* in Willy and his sons Biff and Happy. He also focused on the failure of the American Dream.

4.1 Short Synopsis

Death of a Salesman was written in 1949. Willy Loman is the main character. He is a salesman. He has sold merchandise for a company for 36 years. He believes that one can be prosperous if they are known and are 'well liked.' In his former years, he is liked by all the people he sells items to across the country but as he grows older, most people forget him. He has a loving wife Linda who is his support and foundation. He also has two sons Biff and Happy who are not set up in life. The Loman's family is a middle class family and they aspire success in their lives. The hardships in life in their quest to achieve their dreams lead to downfall and tragedy.

4.2 Willie Loman's Achievement of his American Dream in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*.

Willy Loman dreams of being prosperous. He is a salesman. He gets a chance to interact with many people across the country. He believes that he is known and liked not just liked but 'well liked' and that is a guarantee for success.

WILLY: *You and Hap and I, and I'll show you all the towns.
America is full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people.
And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New*

England. The finest people. And when I bring you fellas up, there'll be open sesame for all of us, 'cause one thing, boys: I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own. This summer, heh?(p.19)

4.3 Willie Loman's Achievement of his American Dream in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*

Arthur Miller presents modern day tragedy where the protagonist Willy Loman is laid off after having worked for Wagner as a salesman for 34 years. This means that he doesn't become the rich salesman he envisioned being. His dreams are shattered. The audience pity his predicament.

HOWARD: *I don't want you to represent us. I've been meaning to tell you for a long time now.*

WILLY: *Howard, are you firing me?*

HOWARD: *I think you need a good long rest, Willy.*

WILLY: *Howard...*

HOWARD: *And when you feel better, come back, and we'll see if we can work something out.(p.59)*

4.4 The Aftermath of Willie's Having or Having not achieved the American Dream as has been portrayed in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*

Right from the beginning of the play, Willie Loman is disillusioned and emotional. Arthur Miller uses flashback to show the past in *Death of a Salesman*. Willie adopts certain defense mechanisms as protective strategies to provide solutions for his problem. If a person fails in satisfying these drives and urges, he/she will generate feelings of anger or depression.

Willy lives in the past. His sons were so fond of him. When he comes from work, they were always excited. Biff tells his father that when he takes off the helmet during the game he will be doing so for his father.

BIFF: *I got it, Pop. And remember, pap, when I take off my helmet, that touchdown is for you. (p.63)*

However, in the present life, there is conflict between Biff and his father. It is revealed by Bernard (a neighbour's kid) that back in high school when Biff flunked Math, he got into a train and went to Boston. He went to see Willy so as to request him to speak to Mr Binbaum (the Math teacher) about the same. On arrival, Biff found a woman in his father's hotel room meaning Willy had an affair. Also, Willy had given her Linda's stockings. Biff got angry and stormed out of the hotel. He told his father not to see the teacher about the score and he refused to go to summer school for extra classes.

Biff went back home and burnt his favourite sneakers that were inscribed University of Virginia. Freud argues that forgotten childhood experiences influences one's character. These forgotten memories are not lost. They are stored in the unconscious mind. Biff resents his father for having an affair. That incidence led to the strained relationship between father and son.

Biff tells Happy, *"Why does he mock me?" (p.12)*

The two have a heated argument which makes Biff decide to leave never to return.

BIFF: *Dad, you're never going to see what I am, so what's the use of arguing? If I strike oil I'll send you a check. Meantime forget I'm alive. (p.96)*

Willie adopts regression as a defence mechanism. This involves reverting back to an earlier level of development to avoid dealing with the current frustration. He glows when he remembers what a great footballer Biff had been back in high school and what a bright future he would have had. Willy is to blame for Biff's misfortune in life. Biff took a train to Boston hoping his father would help him but that wasn't the case. He found him with a woman. This shattered Biff who looked up to his father. Also, Willy never took time to shun Biff's bad habit of stealing. Biff stole a ball from the locker room while in high school. Willy said the coach likes him so there would be no problem. Biff and Happy steal lumber from an old building. Bernard warns them that the watchman would catch them but Willy calls them fearless characters.

When Biff got employed in Oliver's firm, he stole a carton of basketballs. When Biff goes back home, he decides to go to Bill Oliver for a soft loan to begin a business. However, at his firm, he keeps sending his name through the secretary but isn't allowed in. When Oliver leaves his office, he ignores Biff. Biff goes into his office and steals a fountain pen.

At the end of the play, Willy tells Biff not to blame him for his failure but Biff tells the family that the reason why he did not have an address for three months is that he stole a suit in Kansas and was jailed.

BIFF: *And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is(p.98)*

Willie transfers his emotions particularly anger to Linda his wife. He takes out all his anger on her. This according to Freud is displacement. It is a defense mechanism in which a person transfers their target of frustration to someone or something else entirely. Linda absorbs all of Willie's frustrations. His anger due to failing in life is all taken out on Linda. When Biff explains to his father about this intention to see Bill Oliver, Willie quarrels Linda.

LINDA: *Maybe things are beginning to...*

WILLY (*wildly enthused, to Linda*): *Stop interrupting! (To Biff)*

But don't wear sport jacket and slacks when you see Oliver. (p. 45)

Willy leaves a regretful life. The flashbacks also reveal his brother Ben who is said to have walked into the jungle at 17 and came out at 21 very rich. Ben had asked Willy many times to join him but Willy brushed it off.

WILLY: *Oh, Ben, how did you do it? What is the answer? Did you wind up the Alaska deal already?*

BEN: *Doesn't take much time if you know what you're doing. Just a short business trip. Boarding ship in an hour. Wanted to say good-bye.*

WILLY: *Ben, I've got to talk to you.*

BEN (*glancing at his watch*): *Haven't the time, William.*

WILLY (*crossing the apron to Ben*): *Ben, nothing's working out. I don't know what to do.*

BEN: *Now, look here, William. I've bought timberland in Alaska and I need a man to look after things for me. (p.60)*

Also, Willy belittled his neighbour's son Bernard who during their childhood would caution Biff about the studies. Willy called him anemic and that he couldn't hammer a nail. Bernard ends up becoming a successful lawyer and married with two sons. Bernard's father Charley is also a successful businessman. He has been trying to offer Willy a job at his firm but Willy refused to take it. Willy is jealous of Charley. It is ironical that on a weekly basis, Willy goes to borrow money from him saying he would pay him back. Willy's depression has led to his talking to himself. This is disillusionment and anxiety. This has led to worry in his family.

In act one, Willy speaks to himself

WILLY (*below*): *You gonna wash the engine, Biff?*

HAPPY: *Shh!*

(*Biff looks at Happy, who is gazing down, listening. Willy is mumbling in the parlor.*)

HAPPY: *You hear that? (They listen. Willy laughs warmly.)*

BIFF (*growing angry*): *Doesn't he know Mom can hear that?*

WILLY: *Don't get your sweater dirty, Biff! (A look of pain crosses Biff's face (p.16)*

When Charley comes to play cards. Willy is in his own world. He addresses Ben hence confusing Charley and leading to an argument.

In the hotel, when Biff explains to him that he was unable to see Oliver about the business deal, Willy drifts into the past making Biff give up.

BIFF (*at the table, now audible, holding up a gold fountain pen*):...
so I'm washed up with Oliver, you understand? Are you listening to me?

WILLY (*at a loss*): *Yeah, sure. If you hadn't flunked...*

BIFF: *Flunked what? What're you talking about?*

WILLY: *Don't blame everything on me! I didn't flunk math—you did! What pen? (p.81)*

According to Freud, defense mechanisms are part of personality function but when excessive they become psychological disorders. He would go talking to himself. Hallucinating and the depression and anxiety led to his suicide. Willie Loman was psychologically disturbed. Willy has suicide tendencies. He crashes the car and the insurance people say that a passer-by who witnessed the accident said that Willy came to the bridge and smashed into the railing deliberately.

Linda finds a gas pipe in the cellar which Willy had planned to use to commit suicide. The play has a tragic end

in that Willy commits suicide. He gets into his car and smashes it. Willie couldn't take in all his disappointments and regrets so he commits suicide. Willie's suicide is both cowardly and heroic. Cowardly because he refuses to face facts and heroic because his son Biff would get the insurance benefits hence have a chance of achieving this dream.

5. Conclusion

A characters' achievement of the American Dream is their only hope to happiness and prosperity. Willie Loman wished to be a rich salesman. He thought his being 'well liked' would assist him to achieve this dream. The failure to achieve the American dream lead to downfall in the family. In that, there is a strained relationship between Willie and Biff. Willie lives a life full of regrets and he takes his own life in the end. Willie Loman takes his life to show disillusionment. He got to a point where life had no meaning so he was better off dead. Infact, Miller picks a title for his play that is allegorical to the happenings in the play. The title *Death of a Salesman* refers to the physical death of Willie Loman who is a salesman and to the death of his dreams. Biff comments during his father's requiem mass which ironically no one apart from his family, Charley and Bernard attend that his father had wrong dreams. Biff is cautioned by Charley not to blame Willie as he was a salesman. "Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman has got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory." (p.105)

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