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Death of a Salesman and the American Dream

In his 2009 article about the American Dream, contributing editor to *Vanity Fair* David Kamp observes, “As the safe routines of our lives have come undone, so has our characteristic optimism—not only our belief that the future is full of limitless possibility, but our faith that things will eventually return to normal.” Kamp writes that “There is even worry that the dream may be over—that we…shall bear witness to that deflating moment in history when the promise of this country began to wither.” Reading *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, one might be inclined to see in the life and death of protagonist Willy Loman the “deflating moment” when the American Dream withers (Kamp). After all, by the end of the play Willy’s dream of achieving wealth through charisma and business has fallen to pieces, leaving him destitute and unemployed, and at the play’s conclusion, Willy commits suicide. The death of Willy’s dream seems to precede his own death, leading one to wonder whether Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman* could have also been called “Death of the American Dream.” Nevertheless, *Death of a Salesman* does not demonstrate any such demise, for Willy’s vision of success does not represent a true American ideal, several characters successfully live the actual American Dream, and the play indicates that once Biff is honest about his identity he will be able to fulfill his own authentic version of this dream.

Willy’s vision of success is, as his son Happy states at the end of the play, “to come out number-one-man,” whether in wealth, family, possessions, or job (Miller 2099). Though at first

Willy's dream seems simple, closer examination reveals that it has many elements. Author Irving Jacobson in his essay "Family Dreams in *Death of a Salesman*" expands Willy Loman's meaning of success, writing that Willy's dream "extends beyond the accumulation of wealth, security, goods, and status" (106). Willy Loman's family and business acquaintances powerfully impact his dream, yet his dream is more than a mere reflection of one person's ideas. Further, Willy's dream is evident in his sons' characters and intersects with versions of the American Dream.

Three characters have a profound impact on Willy's vision of success. The successes of Willy's older brother Ben, role model Dave Singleman, and eldest son Biff are all different, yet they each affect Willy and his dreams. Ben shapes Willy's vision by convincing him that he can accrue wealth easily with a little enterprise and no hard work. During one of Willy's flashbacks, Ben claims, "[W]hen I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out…And by God I was rich" (Miller 2053). This success story becomes Willy's mantra, and he is always telling Biff and Happy about how Ben found diamonds. Another part of Willy's vision of success is to be like Singleman, who made a living at eighty-four "without ever leaving his room" (Miller 2069). As Willy elaborates on Singleman's funeral and how "In those days there was personality in [salesmanship]…There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it," Miller shows the profound impact Singleman has had on Willy's life, career, and dreams (Miller 2069). Singleman's success story is very important to Willy, for it inspires Willy to become a salesman and plants in Willy the concept that being popular and having a big funeral are marks of success. Yet, in a twist of irony, Singleman's "successful" career and death actually initiate the events leading to Willy's death, and neither Willy's career nor his funeral plays out like he has always envisioned. Because Singleman sells Willy on the career of

salesmanship, Willy misses his opportunity of winning wealth in Africa with Ben and becomes stuck in a job that leaves him dissatisfied and unsuccessful. Finally, while Ben and Dave Singleman shape Willy's vision of success, young Biff confirms Willy's ideals with his athletic success in high school, his "initiative" when practicing with a stolen football (Miller 2043), and his scholarship offers from three universities (Miller 2045). In fact, Biff does more than confirm Willy's dream, for part of Willy's dream seems to be that Biff will be successful and popular through personality and business.

In Willy's mind, America promises success to those who are physically attractive and personable, or as Willy teaches his sons Biff and Happy, those who are "liked…will never want" (Miller 2045). Though Willy Loman's dream is similar to the vision of success many Americans have possessed from the mid-1900s to the present day, it contradicts the traditional core of the American Dream. While modern Americans value charisma, America's founders valued character. Willy Loman has achieved success through cheating, adultery, and lies, yet hard work and integrity formed the core of the American Dream in the 18th century. Since then, many alternate versions of the American Dream have emerged, and some, like Willy Loman's dream, have contradicted the values that defined the original dream. During the 19th century, a Wild West variation of the American Dream emerged, promoting ambition, manual labor, and self-reliance (Kamp). Then, in the 20th century, Americans began to value security, prosperity, and freedom; especially during the 1950s, Americans began to see happy families, working fathers, homemaking mothers, and moderate wealth as the visual realization of the American Dream (Kamp). Lastly, according to Matthew Warshauer in his article about the modern American Dream, from the late 20th century to the present day, people's perception of the American

Dream has morphed into a vision that promises instant wealth in the form of lotteries, gambling, and lawsuits.

Arthur Miller himself indicates that Willy Loman's dream is not the true version of the American ideal. According to authors Brenda Murphy and Susan C. W. Abbotson in their book *Understanding* Death of a Salesman, "Miller makes it clear by his assortment of characters that being well liked has little to do with success" (5). Murphy and Abbotson claim that characters are successful through hard work, inheritance, or sheer luck, offering Charley and Bernard, Howard Wagner, and Ben as examples of each of these situations (5). Further, Miller shows that although Biff and Happy accept their father's dream as the vision for success, Biff questions the authenticity of Willy's dream as the play draws to a close. When Biff argues with Willy at the end of the play, Biff desperately cries to his father to "take that phony dream and burn it before something happens" (Miller 2096). Then in the "Requiem," Biff admits about his father, "He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong" (Miller 2099).

In place of Willy's vision of success, Miller appears to promote an American Dream that corresponds to the Founding Fathers' ideal for America, which the Declaration of Independence best articulates. Drama critic Howard Clurman sums up this dream in his book *Lies Like Truth* as "the promise of a land of freedom with opportunity and equality for all" (69). Miller's version of the American Dream seems more complex, however, for positive characters such as Charley, Bernard, and later Biff create connotative meaning for the dream. Charley and Bernard promote a vision of material wealth, independence, and career success, and they earn this success by hard work, integrity, honesty, and humility. As Biff chooses a new path at the end of the play, he is finally achieving the latter character qualities, partly because his goals are gradually becoming

focused more on finding contentment through realizing his strengths and talents than on becoming wealthy.

Far from showing the death of the American Dream, Miller actually shows evidence of it flourishing, for several characters who embody the American Dream achieve their vision of success. Though Charley is not "well liked," he is successful in the business world and owns his own business, just like Willy has always wanted (Miller 2044). Charley's accomplishments stem from hard work, not from personality or taking shortcuts. Talking with his wife Linda, Willy observes, "People don't seem to take to me…They seem to laugh at me" (Miller 2047). Willy rambles, "I don't know why—I can't stop myself—I talk too much. A man oughta come in with a few words. One thing about Charley. He's a man of few words, and they respect him" (Miller 2047). In this way, Willy admits that his own charm is failing, while Charley earns respect and liking, not by personal appearance or charisma, but through his reserve and his kindness. Charley's son Bernard also demonstrates fulfillment of the American Dream, for Bernard seems to have achieved even greater success than his father. The adolescent Bernard in Willy's flashbacks appears several times as studious and hard working. Encountering grownup Bernard in Charley's office in the present, Willy learns of Bernard's most recent achievement: Bernard is now a lawyer with rich friends who is going to Washington to argue a case before the Supreme Court (Miller 2076). Interestingly, Willy and his sons boast about their achievements and even lie about their jobs to make themselves appear better off than they are, yet Bernard is humble and protests when Charley brags about the case in Washington.

Unlike Bernard and Charley, Biff does not fulfill his dream during the play, yet Biff's changing character and evolving vision of success indicate that once he is honest about who he is he will be able to fulfill his version of the American Dream. During most of the play, Biff is

searching for his identity and trying to decide what defines his vision of success. The play's flashbacks reveal that Willy has raised his sons to follow in his own footsteps and has taught Biff and Happy that true success means wealth and a career in the business world. Though Willy's version of the American Dream influences both his sons and causes Happy to imitate his father's path in business, Biff is torn. Biff wants to please his father but is neither satisfied nor successful when he tries to work in business. Biff's dissatisfaction is evident when he tells Happy, "Whenever spring comes [in Texas]…I suddenly get the feeling…I'm not gettin' anywhere!...I'm thirty-four years old. I oughta be makin' my future…That's when I come running home" (Miller 2040). Coming home gives Biff no answers, though, for he admits, "I get there, and I don't know what to do with myself…I've always made a point of not wasting my life, and everytime I come back here I know that all I've done is to waste my life" (Miller 2040). For years, Biff cannot decide whether or not to pursue his own dream, but as the play concludes, Biff's newfound honesty about his past and his humbled attitude indicate that he is planning to begin a new chapter in his life. Biff has at last discovered what his American Dream is, and he is ready to begin achieving this vision, using his muscles and "working out in the open" (Miller 2040).

Every film version of *Death of a Salesman* has different interpretations and emphases, but the theme of the American Dream is evident in both the 1951 and the 1985 movie versions of the play. Because the 1951 version with Fredric March as Willy and directed by Laslo Benedek emphasizes the "diamonds" that Willy sees as he is driving and about to commit suicide, his dream seems very materialistic. He is gazing happily, with an open mouth and a big smile, at the sparkling car lights that look like the diamonds he has always dreamed of. The diamonds appear to represent the money he has always wanted and the wealth with which he is planning to

provide Biff by killing himself. While Fredric March and the 1951 version of *Death of a Salesman* portray Willy as a confused dreamer, which seems closer to the Willy in the play than the weak and despicable 1985 representation of Willy, Kevin McCarthy as Biff is a stunted character. Because of McCarthy's unconvincing acting and the camera shots, the 1951 film transforms Biff into a weak character. *New York Times* writer Bosley Crowther has little to say about McCarthy as Biff in his review of the '51 film; Crowther's only comment is that "Cameron Mitchell [as Happy] and Kevin McCarthy are disturbingly shifty as the sons." According to another reviewer, Emanuel Levy, "McCarthy and Cameron Mitchell are decent but not great as [Willy's] two sons." Yet Biff's role in the play is much more important than merely being "disturbingly shifty" (Crowley) or "decent" (Levy). By reducing Biff's character and position as a possible tragic hero, the 1951 film keeps Biff from exemplifying that the American Dream can be fulfilled, leaving only Charley and Bernard to support Miller's suggestion that the American Dream lives on. In contrast, in the 1985 film John Malkovich portrays Biff as a strong, even heroic character who poses the possibility of true success and provides the audience with hope that the American Dream has a future.

Showing that the American Dream lives on is important, because as Harold Clurman states, "*Death of a Salesman* is a challenge to the American dream," not a condemnation of it or a death sentence (69). Instead of demonstrating the demise of the American ideal, *Death of a Salesman* actually contests what Clurman labels the "the dream of business success" and calls for the fulfillment of the genuine American Dream (69). Miller was clearly concerned about "the drive for personal success" in America, for he comments about this in an interview with *The Paris Review*, "I think it's far more powerful today [1966] than when I wrote *Death of a Salesman*. I think it's closer to a madness today than it was then. Now there's no perspective on

it at all" (Carlisle). Miller's words reveal that he was well aware of the issue of personal success when he wrote *Death of a Salesman*, indicating that one purpose of his play is to warn Americans with Willy's failures and point them in a better direction through Charley, Bernard, and Biff.

At the end of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy resigns his pursuit of his own dream and kills himself to give Biff twenty thousand dollars in life insurance. As the conclusion nears, Willy muses about how Biff will "worship me for it!...Can you imagine that magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket…Imagine? When the mail comes he'll be ahead of Bernard again!" (Miller 2097). Willy hopes that Biff can achieve the dream Willy is giving up, for Willy seems to still believe that Biff's and his dreams are the same. In a twist of irony, though, Willy's act of perceived self-sacrifice only comes after Biff has relinquished his father's dream and decided to find his own vision for success and happiness. Only Happy obstinately pursues Willy's dream, and his lack of character change suggests that he will fail like Willy (Miller 2099). *Death of Salesman* indicates the death of Willy's dream, yet as the curtain falls, the American Dream which Charley and Bernard embody is flourishing, and Biff's American Dream is just beginning to grow. Like Kamp states in his *Vanity Fair* article, "What needs to change is our expectation of what the dream promises—and our understanding of what…'the American Dream,' is really supposed to mean." Far from heralding the demise of the American Dream, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* clarifies what the dream really is, returning Americans to the core values on which the United States is founded and reminding them that with hard work, honesty, humility, and integrity, they can realize the "limitless possibility" America promises (Kamp). Those who grasp this dream can make it a reality and can earn respect, prosperity, fulfilling jobs, and the satisfaction of a good day's work.

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