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Chasing the Dream

The Representation of Major American Values in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman

There are several reasons why North America, and the United States in particular, became such a popular destination for young Europeans trying to find their fortune in the nineteenth century. Better job opportunities, more suitable living conditions and wages awaited them, but most of all, an overarching positive mindset which seemed to rise above the apathetic, hopeless mentality of Europeans afflicted by war and poverty. This ambitious attitude pulsating across the whole of America promised success, abundance, and enjoyment to those arriving to the New World, and it encompassed the basic values necessary for American life. The three pairs of major American values can be regarded as the benefits one receives when entering American society and what they must perform in return for these benefits; they are individual freedom and self-reliance, equality of opportunity and competition, material wealth and hard work.¹

On fairly generalized grounds, these six short phrases drive Americans in their everyday lives from childhood to retirement and beyond. They strive to make a living without external help in order to live free from authority and boundaries; they compete with each other as they enjoy their equal chances of success; and they work long hours to afford the luxury available at their fingertips. Their ancestors and heroes are praised for living by these ideological guidelines, and they are promised unquestionable prosperity and recognition for the same devotion. Americanness and, in a way, the “American Dream” is predominantly characterized by these values.² In Arthur Miller’s 1949 drama, *Death of a Salesman*, most, if not all, of the six values are present, as the utterances of main characters echo their undying faith in the possibility of achieving success by these means, or even merely by the imitation of these means. This paper attempts to show the representation of each pair of values and their faults evident from the lack of advancement of characters despite their near-religiously abiding by these principles.

“We’ve got quite a little streak of self-reliance in our family,”³ proclaims Willy proudly when talking about his father. This is true of both him and Willy’s brother Ben, who might be considered entrepreneurs of their time. The father made a living selling his

1 Maryanne Kearny Datesman et al., *American Ways: An Introduction to American Culture*, 4th ed. (White Plains, NY: Pearson, 2014), p. 32.

2 Datesman et al., p. 36.

3 Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 57.

handmade flutes on the road, while Ben found his fortune in Africa in the form of diamond mines. Both of them are undeniably self-made and adventurous, one aspiring to follow the other both physically and figuratively. They used their freedom to travel and discover new ways of life, which allowed them to be self-sufficient and not rely on the help of others. Willy, on the other hand, seems to be lacking this streak of self-reliance and only has the ambition to acquire it in his fear of depending on others. Nevertheless, he is perpetually reliant on monetary support and emotional validation from his sons, his colleagues, and the Woman, because otherwise, he would sink into self-hatred and embarrassment.⁴ He refuses to take the job Charley offers him (a chance at partial self-reliance) but keeps borrowing from him to maintain the appearance of weekly wages.

Society's scrutiny of those who do not rely on themselves shows itself most in the case of Biff. He is thirty-four years old, expected to "be makin' [his] future,"⁵ and yet he continues to live a life of uncertainty, working on farms in the West. Willy finds his behaviour disgraceful and calls him a "lazy bum,"⁶ and his opinion might even seem justified until the moment Biff starts explaining his stubbornness. His realization of who he really is and what he wants shows him as the epitomized "free man" working outside in the West with no dress code or boss to order him around. He recognizes that he cannot deal with authority, thus he chooses a path that will allow him to work more freely. His decision to pursue this dream instead of Happy's Florida idea is proof of his self-awareness as a man who has the potential to provide for himself. He knows that he will not be able to get ahead in life as a farmhand, but he appears content with this. Biff represents a more traditional figure of individual freedom in America, the rugged frontiersman, although his advances to herd cattle fall short of those who kept moving westward fighting the forces of nature in hopes of making more money and becoming more independent.⁷

Perhaps the least explicitly opportunistic of all business-related characters, Charley and his son Bernard seem to have found success in their own right.⁸ Not only is Charley self-reliant, he also provides financial support for Willy despite their somewhat hostile relationship. Furthermore, he is in a position where he can offer Willy a job, even

4 Jessica L. Tracy and Richard W. Robins, "'Death of a (Narcissistic) Salesman': An Integrative Model of Fragile Self-Esteem," *Psychological Inquiry* 14:1 (2003) 57-62, p. 57.

5 Miller, p. 13.

6 Miller, p. 8.

7 Datesman et al., p. 82.

8 Stephen A. Lawrence, "The Right Dream in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*," *College English* 25:7 (1964) 547-549, p. 548.

though he probably cannot expect much of a performance from him. He understands that Willy is jealous of him, yet he does not flaunt his wealth nearly as much as Howard does, for example. Bernard is even more reserved and modest than his father. He seems reluctant to admit to his undeniable success as a lawyer, and plays it off with a pun on the word court until his father reveals the truth. Opposite to Happy and Biff's hyperbolic self-appraise and incredible lies, Bernard seems a sincere and humble man who found his way in the competitive corporate world without having to leave behind his true self. The two men express their freedom in their unusual ways of going about business, by not conforming to the behaviour everybody expects from them, and, despite their refusal to corrupt their personalities, are able to live without external help, and even become helpers themselves.

The most obvious appearance of competition in the play is Biff's high school football career. As a competitive sport, it is quite a visible way of getting ahead of one's peers. Biff, therefore, is widely popular among his fellow students, because as the captain of the football team, he must clearly be the best at the game. Willy is immensely proud of his son for his success at sports while disregarding Biff's otherwise poor performance in school, because he refuses to believe that "[w]ith scholarships to three universities they're gonna flunk him."⁹ Bernard, on the other hand, is believed to be "anemic"¹⁰ and a "pest"¹¹ due to his studious nature and begging of Biff to study with him. Willy, therefore, believes that athleticism is of more importance than intellect, and that people who are good at sports (and are more recognized and praised for it) will be "five times ahead of" those who are less popular but more learned – proof of his anti-intellectualist view that personality and connections are far more important than intelligence.¹² Despite Bernard's insistence and eventual help with the answers, Biff cannot graduate and ends up not going to university. He had the same (or even more advantageous) opportunities as Bernard, but did not take them out of self-assurance. When he finds out about his father's affair, the last chances of him graduating are lost along with his admiration of his father, as he abandons the idea of going to summer school. Therefore, Bernard turns out to be the more successful one out of the two of them, despite his lack of competitiveness and his intellect, because he knew that the importance of graduation could not be overshadowed by a game of football.

9 Miller, p. 21.

10 Miller, p. 20–21.

11 Miller, p. 21.

12 Irving Jacobson, "Family Dreams in Death of a Salesman," *American Literature* 47:2 (1975) 247–258, p. 247.

Happy's approach to competition is shallower than that of his brother. Contrary to what he tells his family, he seems unable to move up the corporate ladder any higher than the "assistant's assistant." Both this inability, and his reluctance to settle down and get married, drive him to seek other ways of competing with his co-workers. The one way he finds adequate is seducing and "ruining" their wives and fiancées, and then attending their weddings. This can be regarded as a petty way of revenge for being in a higher position. Happy has the opportunity to marry any girl in the city and raise a family, but instead he dwells in his one-man life, surrounded by the lies he tells every day. Even he can feel that this is not a happy or fulfilling way of life, but he simply cannot seem to let go of the easy, the temporary. In a way, he is competing with himself over how long he can hold on to a life of lies and one-night affairs.

Several job opportunities find Willy throughout his life, the most promising of them being Ben's offer to take him to Alaska, where he is promised to make a fortune. Willy hesitates but ultimately decides to stay because he believes in his future as a salesman. The image of Dave Singleman is before him, as the final goal in his career: well-liked and successful, praised by customers and colleagues both. To Willy, this dream is worth more than any diamond mine in Alaska, however improbable it might be. By picking the longer and more stagnant way to success, he essentially chooses competition over his opportunities, with no realistically successful outcomes awaiting him. This is a determined, though self-defeating view of these values, the exact opposite of Bernard's approach to achieving his goals.

One thing that appears to be an illusion in the play, apart from Willy's daydreams, is the family's material wealth. The last mortgage payment frames the play, as Willy bitterly jokes in the beginning that after paying for the house their whole lives, "there's nobody to live in it."¹³ Linda repeats his words in the Requiem, after the last payment has been made. Another recurring expense is the refrigerator that keeps breaking, and several other yet-to-be-paid belongings are mentioned in the house. Barely any of the Lomans' possessions are completely paid for, therefore, technically nothing is really theirs. Their ownership of these belongings is the "modern illusion" of material wealth, one that could be accurately represented by a bouquet of credit cards in the twenty-first century. Willy's small wages barely cover their monthly expenses; therefore, they are always slightly behind and worrying about their debt. The final payment of the mortgage after Willy's death is tragically ironic in that even though he worked all his life to pay it all, he just fell short of owning his house before he died.

¹³ Miller, p. 7.

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Most hard workers in the play appear to take the wrong direction. Young Biff concentrates all of his energies into football but neglects his studies and therefore cannot go to college, no matter how much work he put into practicing sports. Happy is too busy trying to impress his father to come up with his own dreams and goals and thus becomes a distorted, hedonistic version of his father, unhappy with what he has but still forcing himself to enjoy his lifestyle. All her life, Linda has worked hard to be a perfect wife to Willy, always obeying and idolizing him, supporting and believing in his incredible dreams, only to end up as a doormat to her husband, whom he can scold and mock at his pleasure. And Willy's stubbornness to become a well-liked salesman has cost him a lifetime of success. As Charley states, "[t]he only thing you got in this world is what you can sell,"¹⁴ and Willy is unable to distinguish between things he can sell and those that he cannot, which is a most unfortunate deficit for a salesman. He clings to emotional ties and reasons with emotional arguments out of pride instead of trying to show his potential to Howard, thus failing to convince him.¹⁵ He believes he is a hard worker and was once popular among buyers, and this is the only way he is willing to accept himself. As mentioned several times by other characters, he would have been much happier and more successful working with his hands, but he refused to let go of his dream as a hard-working, beloved salesman.¹⁶

As seen above, the appearance of core American values in Miller's play is not in a particularly positive light. At first glance, we might think that it is Willy who has ruined his success with his decisions, but if we look at the basic guidelines drawn up for him, he seems to follow most of them, maybe even a bit too literally. We might ask, then, whether it is society and its expectations that crushed the salesman's career, and not the salesman himself.¹⁷ Whether it is the rules that are faulty, and not those who follow them. *Death of a Salesman* could hardly have been a success story with any main character who decides to live only by the basic values of their country's business world, and is finally consumed by them. Characters who reach a level of success (Ben, the father, Charley, Bernard) are able to use these guidelines to their advantage, or in a unique way so that they are not taken over by their sought-after dreams. The Lomans, on the other hand, regard the aforementioned six values as their commandments, and build their lives around them, only to pay the cost of desired but not fought-for success, for as long as they live.

¹⁴ Miller, p. 70.

¹⁵ Tracy & Robins, p. 61.

¹⁶ Lawrence, p. 548.

¹⁷ Lawrence, p. 548.

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