

Original Paper

Study on the Changing Connotation of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*

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Received: January 20, 2021 Accepted: February 1, 2021 Online Published: February 9, 2021

doi:10.22158/jetss.v3n1p56

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jetss.v3n1p56>

Abstract

Arthur Miller is considered one of the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century. His masterpiece—Death of a Salesman—tells a tragic story about an ordinary American and chronicles the changing connotation of the American dream. The American dream originates from the puritan spirit, develops in the Revolutionary war and distorts as society changed. The essay attempts to reveal the changing connotation of the American dream reflected in this play by analyzing the representative character portrayed by Miller. On the basis of a better understanding of the play, the great influence of values in different time, such as the American dream, on ordinary people are expected to be learned.

Keywords

the American dream, Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller

1. Introduction

Arthur Miller, one of the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century, was born in New York City on October 17, 1915. Shaped by the Great Depression, Arthur Miller whose family was hit by the great financial crisis learned the insecurity of modern life. Having graduated from high school, he worked in a warehouse. With the money he earned, he attended the University of Michigan, and it is in the University of Michigan that Miller began to write plays.

In 1944, Miller's first major play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, was performed on Broadway but didn't achieve a great success. With great resolution, Miller wrote his second Broadway play in the 1947, *All My Sons*, focusing on the father-son relationship and examining man's responsibility to family and community, which immediately got a major success and won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. When Miller was thirty-three years old in 1949, his great play *Death of a Salesman* was performed and became a hit on Broadway. Also concerning the relationship between fathers and sons,

Death of a Salesman explores the influence of American dream that man can be successful by his effort on average man in the era of consumerism.

It was in 1953 that *the Crucible* was produced, when the extreme fear of Communism permeated through the whole United States. The drama probes into the tragic results of uncontrolled suspicion and fear and won the 1953 Tony Award for Best Play. In 1955, Miller's play *A View from the Bridge* had another success. After marrying the famous star Marilyn Monroe, Miller wrote a cinema-novel *the Misfits* in 1961 for her. There followed his drama *After the Fall* in 1964, a semi-autobiographical play mainly concerning his marriage with Marilyn Monroe. No long after, Miller published *Incident at Vichy* but it just ran for 32 performances.

In 1967, Miller published a collection of short stories entitled *I Don't Need You Any More*. It is followed by the play called *The Price*, concerning the two brothers who made different choice has paid for their choices. In the 1980s Miller was regard as the greatest living playwright in the America after the death of Tennessee Williams, while *The American Clock*, based on the Great Depression, was produced in 1980. Seven years later, *Timebends: A Life*, Miller's own autobiography, was produced to share his life with the world.

Among all the works Arthur Miller created, *Death of a Salesman* is the most popular and successful one not only in America but over the whole world, because the public can recognize their own dream in the play and have empathy for Willy Loman, the protagonist in the *Death of a Salesman*.

A preliminary literature review shows that past research in China are primarily focused on the disillusionment of the American dream, tragedy and expression. Research in China on *Death of a Salesman* began roughly in the 1980s, attributed to the fact that in 1983, *Death of a Salesman* was introduced to China by Ying Rocheng, and was brought to the Chinese stage. But at that time, studies were mainly introductory. The study of Arthur Miller and his famous works became mature in the 1990s, involving study of American dream, its tragedy and expression. The 21st century has seen the culmination of research into the play and study of this field become wider, such as the beauty of tragedy in the play, Horneyan interpretation of characters. While worldwide studies mainly focus on the American dream, work and family, American leadership, and its comparative studies with other dramas.

2. The American Dream in Different Ages

American dream has always been a major literary theme in American literature. Many writers, famous as Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Mark Twain, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, have explored the meaning of American dream. Though they were aware of this darkness and ironies, they are still willing to believe it's possible for ordinary people to become successful in self-development. On the other hand, in the works of other writers like Poe, Hawthorne, T.S. Eliot, Faulk and Arthur Miller, the American dream might be more appropriate to be called American nightmare. Year after year, the clear definition of American dream, though, has never become fixed. In such an immigrant country without a long history, American Dream works as glue and becomes a kind of lingua franca,

inspiring and unifying the whole nation. As times have changed, the meaning of the American Dream has been constantly changing.

2.1 The Origin and Development of the American Dream

It's James Truslow Adams who first introduces the term "American dream" to the public, explaining that the American dream is a "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man" (Cullen, 2003, p. 18). As time goes on, the meaning of "better, richer and fuller", however, is also hard to define. In contemporary America, it's frequently related to the money and property while it should comprise other evaluation standards, such as personal achievement and educational attainment. The connotation should change and is changing along with the course of history.

The idea of the American dream can date back to the 1600s. Four centuries ago, in December 1620, since a ship named Mayflower took 102 passengers, traversing an ocean, from Plymouth, England to the new continent, American dream has spawned on this land. In the hope of founding a country without repression, the puritans in Mayflower, who escaped from the religious persecution, made The Mayflower Compact. Hence, the democracy, freedom and equality started to root in the United States and became the core spirit of American dream.

Facing the cruel and unfamiliar circumstance and, on the other side, holding the belief of pursuing spiritual freedom, those puritans who believed original sins and that man can only be saved by God through his hard work made efforts to found a new nation. The puritan spirit has continuously inspired American people to conquer any difficulties during the course of pioneering as well as shape their positive attitude towards life.

During the late 18th century when American Revolutionary War broke out and the Civil War in the 19th century, the American dream matured. The Declaration of Independence claimed freedom on the colony of Britain. On the other hand, this political manifesto that advocates liberty and equality resonated far beyond its original purpose and virtually has profound influence on the American dream, and thus shapes the country and people. Until today, people would like to use the phrase "the pursuit of happiness" to define the American dream. Because of the Gold Rush and prosperous economy, the growth of the population forced a number of pioneers to flood westward, which is called "The westward movement". The movement not only expanded the territory of the United States, but structured values of American people—bravery and persistence.

The Civil War that ended with the triumph of capitalism industrialized the South in a short time and thus the country entered a period of rapid development. Though laid a foundation of the nation's prosperity, the booming economy triggered nevertheless plenty of social issues such as serious economic inequality. The idea of equality and liberty that had been advocated by the American dream was severely challenged. Under the changing context, American dream has become distorted into the dream of business success.

The American dream that originates from the puritan spirit, develops in the Revolutionary war and distorts with the changing society has lured American people of all generations to explore.

2.2 American Dream in the 20th Century

Death of a Salesman is believed to set in the 20th century. On the other hand, to study the great change and loss of American dream, people need to understand social background in the 20th century first.

Since the Civil War ended with the triumph of North, the United States made a rapid transition from an agricultural country to an industrial one. Entering the 20th century, after a period of industrialization, the nation had gone through the booming development and dramatic changes that it never had before while the people of the nation, whether they realized it or not, were facing a crucial trial that they never encountered before. The biggest trial came silently in 1929, that is, the Great Depression.

At the same time, what the rapid industrialization brought is not only the economic prosperity, but the wealth gap between classes. The wealthy splurged the money while a great number of slums occupied the corners of cities and the poor cannot even afford their own basic living expense. With the emergence of monopoly, major industries and fields were occupied by large enterprises, and small and medium-sized enterprises only struggled for survival.

With the time changes, American dream that originates from the pioneering era and develops in the period of independent war is no longer completely suitable to the age of industrialization. American dream, developed under such a circumstance, is like a mirage or a bubble that is unable to bear even a touch. The Darwinian concepts about “the survival of the fittest” and the idea that only the strong survive became popular among the nation that used to hold “every man is equal”.

In that period, the American dream became the dream of business success. The fascination with money and extreme obsession with business success permeated through the whole society, and people even started to doubt the traditional belief that they used to hold as their aims of pursuit. Intellectuals and writers, who witnessed the struggle of ordinary people under the dramatic changes of time, were disillusioned with their culture’s myths and the wonderful future that some politicians portray. Yet it is inaccurate to assume that they are totally disappointed at their dreams, most of which are still hopeful about the American dream they believed in. For example, though Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* ends with the suicide of salesman Willy Loman, the dream Willy holds to death reveals author’s hope for the dream.

2.3 The Creation of *Death of a Salesman* under the Context of American Nightmare

Arthur Miller produced *Death of a Salesman* based on both personal experience and social circumstance that were just discussed in the previous section. The author’s personal experience which is one of the play’s sources, to some extent, is closely related to the social context of the 20th century, in which the American dream deteriorates into “American nightmare”.

At the age of 17, Miller wrote a short story about a salesman when he worked in his father’s factory. At that time, the Great Depression in 1930s hit his father’s business and also changed the young Miller’s understanding of the faith held by his father and even his grandfather. Growing up in a hard time, Miller learned the hardship and insecurity of modern life and discovered that many people believe that the truth hidden beneath the American dream is the pursuit of wealth.

Miller's grandfather landed in America to pursue his dream and left Miller's father behind, because he couldn't afford another ticket to America, as Willy's father and brother left Willy for pioneering in the play.

But Miller's uncle Manny Newman, also a salesman, is widely believed to be the prototype of Willy Loman. The chance meeting with his uncle reminded Miller of the short story he wrote ten years ago. Even if it's been years, Miller still can recall that encounter in his autobiography *Timebends*. In Miller's eyes, Newman who also had two sons named Buddy and Abby was a competitor through all his life and never stopped competing with Miller's family.

Willy's death in the play is also considered to derive from what happened to Newman. "Newman had died with none of the ordinary reasons given" (Miller, 1987, p. 129). Miller recalled. Later, when Newman's younger son, Miller's cousin Abby provided an ambiguous explanation--Newman died of an opportunity for starting a business for his sons, Miller really started to understand him. Absurd he might be, but he is a poor father in family and a wretched everyman in America in the 20th century.

Newman is a man who lives to fulfill a dream. All efforts he made, all lies he ever told and all crazy and absurd actions he took were just aimed at getting what he paid, but contrary to what he expected, the dream of surviving respectably in the cruel society had been shattered, thus leading the death of Newman.

Death of a Salesman is a tragedy, and the protagonist of the tragedy is actually an ordinary man who might live around the people, like Newman. But, it's not just the tragedy of a man, but a tragedy of the time. Through the play, Miller seems to show us the distorted values and the darkness under the guise of American dream.

3. Three Pairs of Characters and Their Relation to the American Dream

3.1 Ben and His Father—The Conventional American Dream

Ben, Willy's semi-legendary older brother, often appears in Willy's imagination and recollection in the play while their father is only mentioned in their conversation. Their experience and achievement represent the conventional dream of success that Willy pursues through all his life. Their accomplishments continuously remind Willy to regard himself as a big failure, leading to the death of Willy.

The experience of Ben and his father is a rags-to-riches story. No idiom is more appropriate than the expression "from rags to riches" to explain the conventional American dream. It means that, anyone, especially the poor, can climb to the top with their own efforts, diligence and luck. People have been fascinated by the theme after the Horatio Alger tale popularized it in some 130 best-selling novels which portray the boy's rising from poverty to success and fame. The true story of Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln seems to made people trust the idea. At that time, America is a nation full of seemingly unbounded opportunities.

As a theme attracting enormous citizens, it also appeals to a great number of writers to create numerous characters, classical as Gatsby in the *Great Gatsby*. Among them, Ben and his father portrayed by Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman* are typical examples.

Ben and their father are the men who become successful through their diligence and efforts. Willy and Ben's father, an ordinary man earns his living by making and selling flutes, earns a large fortune that Willy will never make in his whole lifetime. Ben walked in the dark jungle in which he must make great efforts to survive otherwise he will never get out. Only with his great courage and endeavors, can he walk out the jungle and become rich.

According to Willy, his brother Ben is also a man with all luck, because he found diamond mines in Africa while he was intended to find his father in Alaska. It's completely accidental for Ben to find the fortune. The lucky Ben seems to be the boys who only live in the Horatio Alger tale, overcoming all of the difficulties by good luck.

Their experience which embodies the typical concept of "from rags to riches" convinces Willy to believe that every man, even the one at the lowest rank, has the potential and possibility to climb high through his endeavors.

Ben and his father are also the incarnation of the brave pioneer. The dream of pioneer and personal fulfillment can be traced back to the origin of American life, from the early small group of British religious dissenters who seek a new life to the speculators who seek fortunes in the westward movement. The pioneering spirit has become predominant among the American people. Until the highly developed period of industrial civilization, many a writer still bears a kind of nostalgia on the spirit of a pioneer.

Their father is a courageous adventurer and pioneer. From Ben's description, their father, an ambitious man, tosses the whole family into the wagon and travel across the country to sell the flute he makes. Never satisfied with the comfortable life, he eventually decides to leave the whole families to search for a brighter future in Alaska. Similar to pioneering puritans who entered a new continent and then founded a new nation, Ben walked into the jungle at his seventeen and then came out and became rich. He made his fortune in the process of pioneering, so he was fascinated by it. The obsession not only drives him to keep exploring but has great influence on Willy. In the end of the play, as Willy, who was fired by his boss Howard like an orange peel, hesitated to suicide, Ben encouraged him by telling the appealing view of the jungle, in which there is darkness but full of diamonds.

As typical successful capitalists, Ben and his father bear the same characteristic—ruthlessness. Willy and Ben's father abandoned them in the very early age and Ben deserted Willy to find their father in Alaska in his seventeen. The play has no more descriptions about young Willy's miserable life after being abandoned by two families in succession, but nevertheless it virtually did a lot of harms to Willy both in personality or psychology. Having few memories about father, Willy regards Ben as his father and longs for his love and encouragement. In Willy's imagination, Ben always appeared in hurry and left all of a sudden even if he begged him to stay a little longer, leaving Willy indulged in the past.

Every time Ben appears, he always dresses in decent suit, carrying a valise and an umbrella. Contrary to Willy's exhaustion, he is confident and filled with energy. Ben, as most of the successful businessman, is busy all the time. When talking to Willy, he checks the watch frequently and can't wait to leave. From the perspective of Willy, his brother and father are the betrayers, for they deserted him in his young age.

Additionally, Ben's philosophy of success reflects his grimness and ruthlessness. Being asked to impart knowledge to the boys, Ben described his secret of success as "never fight fair with a stranger" in his words and deeds. In the other act, when Charley persuaded Willy to stop Biff from stealing, warning that jails never lack fearless characters, Ben, obviously disagreed with the idea, defended his nephew for replying that the stock exchange also full of fearless characters.

Cruel and ruthless Ben and their father might be, but they are successful. Ben walks out of the jungle and become rich while the money their father can earn in a week is much more than the money Willy earns in a life time. It is ironical that it might be their radical approaches that assist them to realize their American dream.

3.2 Willy Loman and Biff, Happy—The Distorted American Dream

Willy's understanding of the American dream was shaped by, at least, two men—his brother Ben and the legendary salesman Dave Singleman. He admires his brother and regards him as the prototype of everyman's success, treating him as a model of business success and asking his sons to learn from him. On the other hand, it's Dave Singleman who convinces Willy that the key to success lies in one's personality, to be more specific, "be well-liked". As young Willy was ready to go to Alaska to locate his father, he met Dave Singleman, a salesman who was already eighty-four years old, but still can make his living just by making phone calls. The portrait of a man wearing decent suit and being respected after his death impressed Willy a lot. From then on, Willy decided to try his best to become a well-liked salesman as Singleman and the dream of business success which is based on the idea of being "well-liked" began to root in his mind, thus changing rest of his life.

Greatly influenced by his brother, Willy passes his ideology on to his two sons Biff and Happy. Biff, the older brother, believes in his father's philosophy of success in youth but comes to realize the truth after thousands of failure. Happy, who isn't actually happy in his life, loafs around and does nothing. To some extent, Happy is more like the young Willy, living in the shadow of his brother and struggling hard to get his share of his father's attention. At the end of the play, Happy's choice to continue his father dream may imply the same tragic future as well.

However, their dreams have been misunderstood and distorted. As Charley remarks in the Willy's funeral—a salesman got to have a dream, Willy does have dream of business success, but the problem is that he didn't realize that the meaning of that dream must extend beyond the accumulation of wealth. A man who just needs to be nice is never going to become successful.

For example, Howard, Willy's present boss, is so merciless that he fires Willy just in the way as he throws orange peels. Obviously, he who has no time to maintain his personal relationships and is not

kind to the people who was friend of his father isn't supposed to be called a nice man. Another example is Bernard, Charley's son, Biff's friend. He was unknown when Biff became a pop sport star in the school, and becomes a successful lawyer when he grows up. Instead, Biff who was considered to be five times ahead of Bernard gets nowhere in his grown-up.

What Willy doesn't realize is that having a pleasing personality which he regards as the secret of success is virtually one of the results of being successful. Ironically, he holds the faith to be well liked even at the cost of his life, but his funeral only has five attendants.

In addition, Willy never stops lying to himself and people around him. He is reluctant to acknowledge his failure and lives in dozens of delusions. For instance, he assumes that he won't be fired because he works for his friend's son Howard who was even named by him. Even when his neighbor Charley tells him that personality means nothing, Willy still fails to recognize that, as a salesman, the only thing he can rely on is not the relationship with his boss, but the thing he can really sell.

He is eager to be successful, even at the expense of not telling the truth. No matter what kind of lies he tells, his wrong way cannot lead him to success, nor can it lead his sons to success. Under the instruction from his father that the only way to achieve their goal is to be well-liked, Biff aims to be a popular athletic star at the expense of academic performance. The two brother shares the same dream: to be well-liked, respectable and successful, like their father Willy Loman. However, Biff's illusion collapses when he finds his father's love affair and failure. He then realizes the problem lying in his dream, while Happy adheres to his dream. Well, for Happy, if he pursues his dream in the wrong direction, it's hard to tell that there may not be another death of a salesman.

Willy's tragedy is partly caused by, as it's mentioned before, his wrong dream and wrong way to actualize them, and partly caused by American society in the 20th century which overrated the economic success.

Willy dreams to be another Dave Singleman, but the name itself implies that the single man's success is hard to replicate, but what he didn't realize is that with the time changes and rapid development of consumerism and industrialism, the old value system is rapidly substituted by the new cruel one. Money, instead of one's personality, dominates the society. When Willy goes to Howard's office to demand not to travel, Howard pays no more attention to Willy's plea, but concentrates on the new recorder machine that makes a sharp contrast with the old and outdated Willy.

Contrary to the American dream that emphasizes the freedom, opportunity and equality for all, the dream in the 20th century becomes more pragmatic, which is related to the ability to sell a commodity regardless of its intrinsic usefulness. Willy didn't recognize the reality, but Charley did. He warns Willy of the fact that his faith is useless in the current times. When Willy describes his faith and complains his boss's ruthlessness, Charley reveals the truth imperturbably, pointing out that selling things defines how to be a salesman.

3.3 Charley and Bernard—The Realistic American Dream

Compared with Willy, Charley, Willy's kind neighbor and sincere friend and father of Bernard, yields

good returns in the very same system. The reason might be that Charley and his son Bernard, unlike the Lomans, being diligent, realistic and sympathetic, have another version of American dream.

They are diligent, which is a trait inherited from the traditional American dream. Charley, as a typical Jewish businessman, runs a family business through his own diligence. He doesn't lose himself in the fantasy but believes what the conventional American dream praises—only by hard work can a man change one's fate.

Charley passes his values on to his son Bernard. Being not as popular and athletic as young Ben in the school, the young Bernard concentrates on academic study to get a great grade for he knows that hard working can lead him to his dream. When Bernard meets Willy many years later, instead of showing off his achievements just as Willy once did, he respects Willy and tries his best to comfort Willy. From Charley, Willy knows that Bernard, who he once regarded as a bookworm and loser, is going to argue in a case in the Supreme Court. A bright future is waiting for him. Obviously, one of the necessary reasons why Charley and Bernard are able to lead their way to success is that they never stop working hard to realize their dreams.

At the same time, they don't indulge in self-delusion, and they make compromises to the current time. As Arthur Miller once remarked, the great difference between Willy and Charley is that Charley is not fanatic. (Miller, 1987, p. 33) However, pitifully, Willy didn't face up to the truth until his death, or in other words, he refuses to accept the truth. In contrast to Willy, Charley spends no time in pursuing the so-called philosophy of success and dreaming, but achieves his success by doing. He admires the Biff's popularity and athletic traits, but never daydreams that there could be any relation between success and sports. In the meantime, he intends to help Willy get rid of the false value. For example, when Willy indulges in self-delusion that his boss won't fire him because of their relationship, Charley exposes the truth that the only thing he should rely on is not personality but the thing he can sell. He warns Willy, who is obsessed with illusion and neglects Biff's criminal act, of the serious consequence of the stealing.

Being not indulging in the American dream of immediate business success which popularizes in the 20th century, he makes a compromise to the existing system. At the 20th century, people in the United States were enjoying the benefits brought by the rapid development of industrialism when the booming financial sector encouraged them to believe that fortunes can be made overnight. American dream was simplified as a dream of economic success. Under such background, what invaluable traits Charley and Bernard own are that they are able to keep realistic in the trends of frenzy chased by almost the whole country, leading to a success not by speculating, but by their hard working. "Uncle Charley" is not estranged from the Lomans though he knows they are prejudiced against him, and besides, Bernard strives to help Biff improve his grade. He also reminds Biff to be polite to Willy even in their argument. In this age that money dominates in social life, they have always had a sincere heart for their friends.

They are not as ruthless as typical capitalists. Although Charley and Bernard have thrived in the current system, they don't lose their morality for winning the success. As a representative character in the 20th

century, Howard represents a group of ruthless capitalists, regarding money as everything and squeezing the unprivileged populations. Even when an old man who works for him and his family in half of his life stands in the front of him, begging an opportunity not to travel, the capitalist Howard eats the orange and throws the peel away, ignoring the great contribution the old man has made and showing no compassion. In contrast, every week Charley is willing to lend money to Willy, who has lost his job and has no income, to help him to support his family. He even plans to offer Willy a job. Influenced by his father, Bernard also shows great kindness and compassion to the Lomans. In his youth, overshadowed by Biff's popularity, he would like to be an attendant at his side, urging Biff to attach more attention to his math grades and asking Biff to study with him. After meeting Willy who was just fired at Charley's office and was demanded his secret to success, Bernard emphasizes the necessity of academic study again.

Willy might be the victim of the time or his unrealistic dream, but fortunately, he has Charley as his friend who never gives him up, even when he gives up himself. Sharing no similar philosophy of dream, Charley, otherwise, can understand Willy's dreaming. At the funeral, when Biff shouts at his brother, remarking the reason of their father's failure is that he has the wrong dream, Charley explains for Willy that "a salesman is got to dream" (Miller, 1998, p. 111). Though he doesn't agree with Willy, he virtually can feel what Willy feels.

4. Conclusion

Death of a Salesman tells a tragic story about an ordinary American—Willy Loman. Unlike most of his previous literary works, Miller's portrayal of an everyman as the protagonist of his work is more resonant with the reader.

The American dream, which has been one of the important themes in American literature and also in the work *Death of a Salesman*, has become a symbol of American culture. Originating from puritan spirit, the spirit represents freedom and equality and encourages Americans generation from generation to pursue a better life. The meaning of the American Dream changes with the changing times, working as a double-edged sword.

As an excellent literary work, the play is highly rewarded and attracts many scholars both home and abroad to explore, discussing numerous themes of the play. It indicates that the American dream, during the 20th century, has become a dream of business success. The American dream was not the only topic of *Death of a Salesman*, but can be regarded as the focus of the story. The Lomans, the main characters in the play, exposes the distorted American dream in the age of rapid industrialization, while the other characters, from which people can find the different types of American spirit, play the role of highlighting the theme. From different characters Miller portrays in the play, people can attain better understanding of the meaning of the American dream in different ages.

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