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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

The Role of the Supporting Characters in The Deconstruction of The American Dream in Arthur Miller's Death of A Salesman

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Article History: Submitted-12/12/2017, Revised-15/12/2017, Accepted-23/12/2017, Published-31/12/2017.

Abstract:

This article is a detailed analysis of the role of secondary characters in Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman*, in Willy Loman's failure to realize the Dream, and eventually end up pointing out the inconsistencies in the realization of the American Dream.

After criticizing the play through the aforementioned perspectives, this article will identify the primary role of the secondary characters. They are representations of various aspects of the American Dream. Through Willy Loman's interactions with them, Arthur Miller is able to identify and address the fragile construction of the American Dream, and how easily it can be influenced by social vices. Through characterizations, the exclusive nature of the Dream is explained – it is achievable only by a select few. While Arthur Miller does not aim to falsify, or disprove the concept of the American Dream, he points out the glaring inconsistencies within the Dream, urging common men to abandon their Panglossian view of the American Dream.

Keywords: The American Dream, Deconstruction, Inconsistencies.

In Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman*, the supporting characters play a role beyond catalyzing the progression of the storyline. Each supporting character represents an angle by which to view the American Dream. Some of them represent the quick realization of the said dream, such as Uncle Ben, whereas others represent the dream realized through hard work – characters like Bernard exemplify this. Whenever the protagonist, Willy Loman, interacts with the supporting characters (be it in reality, or delusional flashbacks to a less grim time), the conversations and subsequent actions point out certain inconsistencies in the concept of The American Dream itself.

Miller, infamous for being under investigation by the *HUAC* (*The House Un-American Activities Committee*, created in 1938, to investigate subversive activity on the part of citizens of the United States), for supporting the Communist Party, always introduced to his readers the issues regarding the American Dream. In plays like *All My Sons*, and *Death of A Salesman*, the playwright himself deconstructed the American Dream, through a subversion of its effects. A common motif in his works is death, which always occurs after a series of arguments within the deceased's family, each more explosive than before. Every argument happens to involve money, or success, which are the major ingredients of the American Dream, which is "the ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved." By using family and friends as triggers, Miller

points out the protagonists' true nature, and inadvertently, pinpoints the not-optimistic aspects of the American Dream.

In *Death of A Salesman*, the protagonist, Willy Loman, is a common man. He is the salesman, who sells the unspecified. His mundane existence is decorated with delusions of self-grandeur, which derive from a multitude of reasons, some of which will be explained at a further point in the essay. However, whenever Willy interacts with the supporting characters, such as his son, Biff, or his neighbor Charley, we see situations in which Willy expresses rage, guilt, or even envy. They all contribute to the overall image that the reader perceives – that Willy Loman may think he's a 'big shot' (Page 43), but really, he is unable to earn money, or success, or even respect. Miller uses Willy as a conduit, as a personification of the fallacies of the American Dream. Looking beyond the traditional means, and through sociopolitical, or even, Marxist lenses, this play made a statement in the era of the common man, where Miller alienates the working man from the successful man, reminding the reader of the 1940s that working hard will only go so far. Your hard work may lead to success for anybody **but** you – your self-worth minimized to your contribution to the successful. Like Willy Loman, you may also end up being an "orange peel" (Page 58), being thrown away after doing your job, for the bigger man to get the flesh.

However, this perception only arrives from the interactions between the protagonist and the supporting characters. This is where the supporting characters are constructed to further the impact of Willy Loman's inability to succeed. Some characters' success threatens Willy, whereas others remind him of the mistakes he made, almost acting as an antithesis - where one character succeeded, the other failed, in realizing the American Dream.

Since its conception, the American Dream has evolved in terms of its ideals and meanings. Initially constructed by James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America*, it suggested "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement"ⁱ something, which early emigrants believed while entering the New World. However, after the Californian Gold Rush of the 1840s, the Dream took on a new meaning, being labeled as the Californian Dream, which represents a more instant form of success, "won in a twinkling by audacity and good luck." as said by H.W Brandsⁱⁱ. While the meanings have since evolved, there is always a common thread in them, which is, "people inherently possessed the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"ⁱⁱⁱ. Since Miller used secondary characters as representations of the above definitions of the Dream, this essay will focus only on them.

Miller's usage of the American Dream has less of a positive connotation – while he does retain that the Dream is achievable, he points out its fruitlessness for the everyday man. Willy Loman is Miller's representation of the common man – trying to pursue the American Dream, selling something so mundane, that Miller himself didn't bother to specify it in the narration. Willy Loman is the common man – dying a death unknown, where nobody bothered to show up for his funeral. Thus, by showing nobody beyond those close to Willy attending his funeral, the playwright exploits the absence of other supporting characters in order to reveal the deceptive nature of American Dream. The motif of delusion is also used through Willy Loman, whose delusions of grandeur and hallucinations point not only to mental degeneration, but

also to Miller's deconstruction of the American Dream. Willy Loman deludes himself to believe that he may obtain happiness and success, through himself, and through his sons, even though they work insignificant jobs to survive through the month. If the reader is to consider Willy Loman as the common man, then it is believable that Miller's portrayal of Willy's delusion suggests that the American Dream is a delusion to a common man – that throughout his life, a common man will work to pursue unbelievable levels of fortune and success, only to realize that this pursuit is fruitless, as he is nothing more than an ordinary man in the multitude.

This delusion makes more of an impact if the time of production is considered. 1949 was the era of the common man, working in the decadent capitalism of post-war America. When Miller published the play, he was already notorious for supporting the Communist Party. *Death of A Salesman* reminded the public of the fallacies surrounding the American Dream – the foundation of the Capitalism that the fortunate benefitted from. Not only did Miller point out the fact that the Dream was highly materialistic - Loman killed himself so his insurance money could be given to his wife to pay off the mortgage on their house, but he also questioned the dependency of the Dream on the said materialism – from a financial perspective, as Willy puts it, almost addressing the reader themselves,

Funny, y'know? After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive (Page 71).

Loman's delusions of optimism also informed the reader of their own panglossian (characterized by or given to extreme optimism, especially in the face of unrelieved hardship or adversity.) existence, believing that if they pursued the American Dream by putting in the effort, they themselves could succeed to a respectable standing in life, while in reality, this would ideally work for the fewest in the population. Willy's brother, Ben, is one of the few in the population. For the everyday man like Willy Loman, there was no rise to success, or fall from grace. There was birth, life, and death, each internalized to close family and friends. Willy Loman wanted to be Dave Singleman, a successful salesman, but as the latter's name suggests, Dave was a 'Single Man' – one of a kind, in terms of luck and success. Again, this reminds the reader that the American Dream is a contradiction in itself – if everybody is allowed to achieve it, why is it that there is only a single man who really does achieve it? All these rhetorical questions and fallacies are only brought forward by Miller's treatment of the secondary characters, and their interactions with Willy Loman.

There are three major supporting characters that further the deconstruction of the American Dream – Ben, Charley, and Biff. While others also play a vital role, the play explores Willy Loman's relationship with these three men, who blend and contrast with Loman's character to indicate the realistic, social, and hierarchal shortcomings of the American Dream.

Benjamin is Willy Loman's older brother, who is referred to as Uncle Ben. He represents the Californian Dream – as he himself puts it,

Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich! (Page 33)

He is an idealistic representation of the dream – fortune favors the bold, luck by chance - he is the personification of such proverbs. Willy Loman idolizes Ben, as he became a rich magnate without a formal education, or a job. This idolization is metaphorical of the common man's idolization of those who have achieved the American Dream. The former works and hopes to achieve the level of influence enjoyed by the upper class. Through Willy and Ben's interactions, Miller indicates that the false idolization of the 'higher-ups' deludes the common man from the reality. Willy's obsession with Ben's instant fortune changes from fantasy to reality, where he almost harasses his son Biff into applying for a job at Bill Oliver's – a man who Biff worked for, and stole from, over ten years ago. Since Biff's educational circumstances resemble Ben's (Biff has not completed a single course since failing mathematics), Willy deludes himself to believe that Biff may also have a chance at success, something that is reflected in reality, where the common man deludes himself to believe that, just because the American Dream provides equal opportunity to all, he may also gain a comparatively successful standing in life. Willy also deludes himself to believe that due to Benjamin's influence, the former himself has some social dominance over his peers. He considers Charley to be an 'ignoramus' (Page 32, 70), and looks down upon him and his son. This nepotistic conviction of Willy Loman is also mirrored in reality by many people who use other people's success as conduits for their own delusion of grandeur. This is a legitimate concern with any societal construct of success. Islamic sociologist, ibn-Khaldun, in his book *Al-Muqaddimah*^{iv}, states that,

People of noble descent, whose forebears include a ruler or a famous scholar, or a person perfect in some position.... are arrogant because of the position their forebears held in their town... They assume that they deserve a similar position because of their relationship to such men and the fact that they are their heirs. In fact, they cling to something that is a matter of the past, since perfection is not passed on by inheritance.^{vii}

Charley is Willy's neighbor. Through hard work, he has achieved a respectable amount of success. Willy Loman is envious of the success that Charley enjoys, despite the fact that, according to Willy, "Charley is not — liked. He's liked, but he's not — well liked." (Page 19) Willy says this in response to his children suggesting that their father may enjoy success like Charley in the future. Willy consistently berates Charley, not only due to jealousy, but (as previously discussed) because Willy believes that he has a certain level of social dominance because of the 'Loman' lineage – he wants his sons "to know the kind of stock they spring from." (Page 33) Charley's success connotes the failure of Willy Loman's ideals. Willy believes that in order to be successful, you have to be well liked. Yet Charley, who is not 'well liked' is a lot more successful than Willy. Charley's character is vital in pointing out not only the toxicity of jealousy as a driving force of the capitalist society, but also in pointing out an inconsistency in American Dream. The American Dream claims to be realizable by anybody regardless of background or social standing. However, without looking up to others and wanting a materialistically better life, capitalism would collapse. Even from a more personal perspective, Miller uses Charley to demonstrate the differences in the definition of success for each individual, pointing out that the American Dream (at least the modern Dream) is not as inclusive as it is meant to be,

since it does not consider the uniqueness of success and happiness to each person. The conflict between Willy's ideals and Charley's success exemplifies this demonstration.

Bernard, Charley's son and Biff's best friend, is also a representation of the American Dream. He has worked very hard to reach the level of success he enjoys as a lawyer. Bernard is also a classic example of an underdog – throughout his childhood, he was scorned and looked down upon for his educational orientation and meager size. Again, Biff and Willy, because of the Loman's grandiose perception of their lineage, also reprimanded Bernard, calling him a 'pest' (Page 21), or saying that he was 'liked, but not well liked' (Page 21). However, Bernard persevered, worked hard, and became a successful lawyer, while Biff, who was destined for greatness in his father's view, (self admittedly) became a bum. Willy Loman is unable to comprehend where Biff went wrong, and why Bernard succeeded, even though the answer is quite obvious to him. Not only does this situation support the claim that each person uniquely constructs happiness and success, but also, Miller is able to point out the distortion of the American Dream, where the common man has forgotten that success isn't achieved necessarily by being born into greatness, or luck, but also through hard work. However, Bernard is a rare representation (in Miller's case) of a positive side to the American Dream, where he has realized the Dream. However, this only furthers the deconstruction, as Willy Loman is unable to comprehend his shortcomings as a father, and their negative impact on Biff.

Biff Loman is Willy Loman's son, and is a key character in pointing out that the American Dream is not for the masses. He believes that "Men built like we are should be working out in the open" (Page 14), and that he wasn't "brought up to grub for money." (Page 14) Biff Loman is a simple man. He is satisfied by the simpler pleasures in life, and ever since catching his father with another woman, has lost whatever drive he had. As Willy tells him, "Spite, spite, is the word of your undoing!" (Page 96) However, where does this spite originate? The spite lies beyond the circumstances of Willy's affair. As a salesman, Willy Loman has a habit of hyping ordinary things to sell them. Willy, according to Biff, "blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody!" (Page 98). Here, Miller could be pointing out that due to the hyperbolic nature of the American Dream – where anybody can be **successful** and **happy**, the common man has deluded himself to believe that his self worth should be valued beyond his contribution.

The capitalist society has built itself so heavily on its own laurels, that flattery and obsequiousness is the only way to get somewhere in life. Biff Loman, who happens to be the third mentioned generation of the Loman Family, is unable to 'grub', or, 'flatter others' for money. Miller raises another inconsistency through this personality trait - the American Dream is unprotected, and heavily susceptible to change. With each generation, the Dream has taken on a new meaning, changing the very foundation the Dream was built on. This indicates that the Dream each generation is trying to realize is not the original American Dream, and hence addresses the fact that the majority is guided to follow a deviated form of the original Dream. However, another view on this claim is that the American Dream is so personalized, that no two people can truly achieve the same definition of it. While the original meaning is generalized for the masses in a society where, as discussed earlier, jealousy and comparison is a major motivator, people will try to coerce their family and peers to follow the same dream they are chasing, not considering that each individual

perceives happiness or success differently. This is evident in Willy and Biff's interactions. Biff is satisfied living a simple, almost lackluster life, while Willy wants greatness, respect, and fame. The climactic scene of the play addresses this issue, where Biff ends up telling Willy,

Pop, I'm nothing! I'm nothing, Pop. Can't you understand that?
There's no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all. (Page 99)

The intergenerational pressure has coerced the younger generation to follow a Dream that is not truly their own, and therefore, is far from the idolized American Dream. Through tense interactions between father and son, Miller substantiates his inference.

Linda Loman, Willy's wife, is Arthur Miller's way of addressing not only gender disparity, but also the exclusive nature of the American Dream. Where is Linda's American Dream? She is reliant on her husband, who kills himself to help her, albeit in an entirely selfish manner. Willy also makes it a point to shut her up while he's talking. It is important to note that Miller focuses more on the social interaction through the American Dream, rather than the concept itself. Miller addresses the fact that while the American Dream may be perceived as all encompassing, social discrimination is an effective barrier for many to realize it. In the play's case, gender discrimination and financial dependency affects the relationship between Willy and Linda. The American Dream is susceptible to corruption by the majority, who has molded the American Dream to match their perspective. As Philip M. Deutsch, in his article titled *The American Dream is Still JUST A DREAM FOR MOST MINORITIES*, claims that

The American dream seems a little more difficult to attain when the American dreaming is a member of a minority group living in poverty. This is not to say that the dream of success and money is unattainable for certain people. It is just incredibly more difficult to achieve when one is faced with certain obstacles that others do not have to overcome.^{vii}

Howard is Willy Loman's boss. He represents the inherited success of the American Dream – the man who is born into the Dream. His father was Willy's original boss, and Howard took over once his father died. While Howard's father, Wagner, promised Willy a comfortable job in his old age, Howard chose to allow Willy to continue working as a travelling salesman – eventually firing him due to his liability as an employee. Howard represents the rich – those who already live the dream. Through Howard, Miller reminds the common man of his actual worth - as a business asset to the successful. Willy Loman's efforts were not measured by how much business he did or how likeable he was, but by how much he contributed to the business. Miller also reminds the reader that no matter how 'equal-opportunity' the American Dream is, it will always be biased towards the fortunate, because of the fortunate. The common man like Willy will work all his life to become a successful man like Howard, yet, he (unless he has tremendous luck) will end up only serving Howard for his own benefit. Loman's contribution to Howard's success implies the control of the rich over the American Dream, where it seems to benefit them, by all means possible. As Biff put it,

I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! (Page 98)

The usage of ‘rest of them’ is a surprisingly direct reminder to the common man, that, unless he has tremendous luck or is born into the Dream, he will always be the rest of them - that he will remain a statistic – just a number.

While *Death of A Salesman* was written in 1949, Arthur Miller’s deconstruction of the American Dream applies to the modern day society as well. In today’s extremely tense political climate, Miller’s characters remind the common man of the fallacies in following the Dream – be it from a social perspective, or from a materialistic perspective. Miller believes that the American Dream is achievable, however, it is highly exclusive, and the common man should not be deluded to be optimistic about his own realization. Through Willy’s interactions with the secondary characters, the reader is reminded of the fragile nature of social constructs, especially those that are susceptible to generational change. This is not to say that the common man shouldn’t dream, but to try and realize society’s construction of the Dream will not necessarily lead to personal success, or happiness. The American Dream is a concept that has been constructed by the rich and for the rich. As Biff Loman said, “Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?” (Page 99)^{viii}

Notes:

ⁱAdams, James Truslow. *The Epic of America*. Boston, Little, Brown, and Co., 1931.

ⁱⁱBrands, H. W. *The Age of Gold: the California Gold Rush and the New American Dream*. New York, Doubleday, 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ"How the American Dream Has Changed Over Time." *Gale Student Resources in Context*, Gale, 2016. *Student Resources in Context*, link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/EJ2181500191/SUIC?u=ndk12a_58504zbiz&xid=b55d2b9e. Accessed 5 Jan. 2017.

^{iv} Also known as *ibn Khaldun’s Prolegomena* in Western societies.

^v Edited for clarity

^{vi}Khaldun, Ibn -. 1377, asadullahali.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/ibn_khaldun-al_muqaddimah.pdf.

^{vii}Deutsch, Philip M. “The American Dream Is Still.” *The American Dream Is Still : Just a Dream for Most Minorities - The Tech, The Tech - Online Edition*, 11 Feb. 2003, tech.mit.edu/V123/N3/pro_affirmative.3f.html.

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