



MYTH OF AMERICAN DREAM AND THE SHATTERED LIVES OF WILLY AND BIFF IN ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

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Abstract

Over time, the phrase “American dream” has come to be linked with upward mobility and enough economic success to lead a comfortable life. Historically, the phrase represented the optimism of the great American experiment. No matter how often we talk about the American dream as a socioeconomic promise of material success, the truth is that most people around the world understand it as something more thoughtful and inspirational than simple material comfort. The phrase “American dream” was coined by James Truslow Adams in his book titled, *Epic of America*, which came out in 1931. Arthur Miller was one of the famous playwrights of twentieth century American Drama who popularized the concept of American Dream in his dramas and his *Death of a Salesman* has gained popularity all over the world. The play throws light on the life of a salesman who runs after to achieve American Dream but ends his life realizing its grave truth.

Keywords

American Dream, Myth, Money, Illusion, Reality, conflict, Success, and Family

If we ask the people around the world what they mean by the concept of “American Dream,” almost all will come up with their version of understanding that – some sort of upward social mobility or the success story of an American. There may be a chance that few may link the phrase with the land of opportunity for immigrants. According to *Oxford Learners Dictionary*, “the belief that America offers the opportunity to everyone of a good and successful life achieved through hard work.”¹

In general sense, the ‘American Dream’ is a belief that any human being, regardless of where he has born or in which class he has born, can achieve his own version of success in which he can experience an upward mobility in the society. It is also clear that one has to achieve it through sacrificing many things in his or her life, taking the risks and hard work and where chance has no role at all. In the modern scenario, the sense of American Dream has become narrower that it is often understood as: As long as you have the guts to work hard and don't give up, then only you will realize your significance in the society and achieve success. Many Americans held their belief regarding the American Dream in their own respective way. It is James Truslow Adams, a writer cum historian who is credited with coining the term in his best-selling book titled, *Epic of America*, which came out in 1931. He described it as a dream of a land in which life should be better, richer and fuller for everyone irrespective of their class and place, with opportunity for each according to their abilities. He believed that American Dream is a kind of difficult dream for the upper classes of the European society to interpret it effectively. According to him, in understanding it properly many have grown exhausted and distrustful of it. He elaborated his view by saying that it is not only a dream of motorcars and high wages but a dream of social order in the society where every human being shall be able to achieve his or her goal of which they are inherently competent;

and they should be recognized by their fellow beings for what they are, in spite of the unexpected circumstances of their birth or place.

Along with Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller was one of the best-known American playwrights after the World War II who popularized the concept of American Dream. The drama *Death of a Salesman* is a ground breaking work of Arthur Miller. When it premiered on Broadway in February 1949, it created a sensation by running over 742 performances. No doubt to say that this drama secured a reputation to Miller and framed him as one of the nation's foremost playwrights. The play put stress on a variety of themes like American Dream, the examination of truth, and unfaithfulness. For its excellent storyline and presentation, the drama was also blessed with Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award for best play in 1949. Partly set in New York and in Boston in the late 1940s, the play portrays the tragic life of play's protagonist Willy Loman, a middling salesman in his sixties. He never makes acquainted himself with "American Dream" nor could he comprehend the evil world. Though he blessed with two sons, his erroneous advances ruined the lives of his children. He leads his life dreaming the unrealistic future for his two sons. But his sacrifice for his family at the end of the play is remarkable as it bring tears in the audience. His grave flaw of life is that he fails to convey his love what he carries in his heart for his family members. But with the intention of proving himself how much he loves his family and for their prosperous lives he commits suicide at the end of the play hoping his insurance amount after his death may kick away the financial strains of his family. The well-known editor, Enoch Brater comments,

"When Willy Loman, suitcase in hand, walks slowly on to the set of *Death of a Salesman* in one of the famous stage entrances in twentieth-century drama, he begins the long requiem that finally announces itself as such in the play's closing moments."²

As the play begins Arthur Miller introduces three major ideas of the play – disagreement, inconsistency, and order against disorder. The play starts with Willy Loman who returns home tired from his latest sales tour and worries remembering the things due to age factor. Willy's wife, Linda consoles him and suggests him to request his boss to arrange a position in New York than travelling each week. Willy replies that his boss never respects the hard work he had done for the company. Casually, Linda then asks Willy if he wrecked his car. Willy does not make any excuses and straight forwardly admits that now a days he is unable to concentrate on his driving. He further adds by saying that several times he forgot that he was driving the car. This simple conversation looks like that this is not for the first time the incident has happened, but happened earlier also. When Willy returns home early from a sales trip, Linda casually asks if he wrecked the car. Linda's question and Willy's annoyed response suggest that this conversation has happened before. He does not make excuses for himself but openly admits that he could not concentrate on his driving. In fact, several times, he forgot that he was driving. Willy realizes something is wrong with him, and he is exhausted both physically and mentally.

Linda : (*hearing Willy outside the bedroom, calls with some trepidation*). Willy!

Willy : It's all right. I came back.

Linda : Why? What happened? (*Slight pause*) Did something happen, Willy?

Willy : No, nothing happened.

Linda : You didn't smash the car, did you?

Willy : (*with casual irritation*). I said nothing happened. Didn't you hear me? (2) *

The opening conversation initiates the nature of the relationship between Willy and Linda shares as an aged couple. Whenever Willy feels guilty of his behaviour and worries about it, Linda tries to defend him from seeing his own infirmities. She tries to bring the other reasons like the faulty steering of the car or poor glasses of Willy as the possible reasons of his poor driving.

- Willy : (after a pause) I suddenly couldn't drive any more. The car kept going off on to the shoulder, y'know?
- Linda : (helpfully) Oh. Maybe it was the steering again. I don't think Angelo knows the Studebaker.
- Willy : No. It's me, it's me. Suddenly I realize I'm goin' sixty miles an hour and I don't remember the last five minutes. I'm – I can't seem to – keep my mind to it.
- Linda : Maybe it's your glasses. You never went for your new glasses.
- Willy : No, I see everything. I came back ten miles an hour. It took me nearly four hours from Yonkers. (3)

When Willy recollects his past days, he submits that the days were glorious than the present days which are pale enough to give any sort of happiness to him. He considers himself as the backbone of his company's success and he wishes he should be recognised and respected for this. He believes that he is the one who well established the company through his hard work and brought an identity to the company throughout the region of New England and made his boss an iconic figure in the world of sales market. He fails to accept the reality that he no more carry the same zeal that he once possessed in past when he was young enough. He adapts information, facts and memories to fit his ideal perception of the world. When anyone not agrees with Willy, he takes it as an insult and soon becomes angry. Throughout the play, he appears to be tired of always being contradicted whether dealing with the family members or the people of the society.

Biff Loman is the elder son of Willy Loman who counters his father the most throughout the play. Willy too holds contradictory understanding regarding his elder son. Sometimes, for Willy, Biff appears to be a "lazy bum" (5) but in the play he also describes his son Biff as "hardworker" (5). There is a conversation between Willy and Linda in the play where Willy denounces his elder son Biff for wasting his life working on a farm in Texas, but Linda takes the side of her elder son and defends Biff by portraying him as someone who is struggling to find his identity in the world full of struggles.

- Willy : The trouble is he's lazy, goddammit!
- Linda : Willy, please!
- Willy : Biff is a lazy bum!
- ...
- Willy : Why did he come home? I would like to know what brought him home.
- Linda : I don't know. I think he's still lost, Willy. I think he's very lost.
- Willy : Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world a young man with such – personal attractiveness gets lost. And such a hard worker. There's one thing about Biff – he's not lazy. (5)

Biff is the only character to be observed who is working towards any actual self development in the play. He is of thirty four years old and nothing has to say any great thing about himself. He feels dissatisfied with his life as he finds himself unsettled in the competitive world. In the play we come to know the feelings of Willy towards Biff in his past life. Willy praised him and held a great hopes and aspirations for his elder son. In the similar sense Biff too held his father Willy as his perfect role model. Biff developed a sort of self-confidence and pride during his school days due to the admiration and support he received from his father. There is an incident that took place in the life of Biff during his school days which is worth mentioning as it throws light on the affectionate relationship once this father and son had maintained; Willy takes the side of Biff when he comes to know that Biff has stolen a basketball from the school locker room.

Not only he laughs at the theft that Biff has committed but further encourages him by saying, “Coach’ll probably congratulate you on your initiative.” (17) Biff’s sound trust in his father undergoes a great blow when he discovers that his father has been having an affair with a woman. Not only his ideal world gets crashed, but also his confidence in himself goes down effectively. The incident makes Biff to come out from the illusionary world and at that juncture he considers his father is nothing but a “phony little fake”. Thus, his relations with his father are tense, partly due to his knowledge of illegal extra-marital affair of his father with a woman, and partly due to Willy’s discontent and disapproval with Biff’s life choices.

In the play, it is only Biff who seems to understand himself and his family better than the other characters in the play. He decides to meet his former employer Bill Oliver to seek some financial support to start a sports goods business in collaboration with his younger brother Happy Loman. When Bill Oliver denies aiding Biff any financial support, Biff realizes that he only a clerk to him and never a salesman. Though he tells the truth to his father regarding his failure to secure the financial support from his former employer, Bill Oliver, Willy refuses to accept this reality. Biff attempts to show the reality of the world to his father but Willy is seen adamant and is far too pretentious to accept the reality. Biff soon burst into tears and with a frustrated mind request his father:

Biff : (crying, broken) Will you let me go, for Christ’s sake? Will you take the phony dream and burn it before something happens?.... (100)

To conclude, American Dream of every American that anyone can achieve financial success and material comfort lies in the centre of the play. Arthur Miller portrays the secondary characters in the play who had achieved the American Dream in their own respective ways. For example, Ben Loman, the personification of the most old-fashioned aspect of the American Dream, who abandons the family in past goes off into the wild lands of Alaska and Africa only to come back as a wealthy man after discovering a diamond mine. In the case of Howard Wagner, the boss and the son of Frank Wagner, who founded the company for which Willy works, inherits his American Dream through his father's company. While coming to Bernard, who appears as a book worm and hard worker becomes a successful lawyer in his adulthood. According to Willy’s capacity of understanding of American Dream, he believes that a man who looks smart, manly, convincing, and familiar among his fellow salesmen deserves success. The tragedy of Willy’s life is that he fails to achieve the financial success though running after to achieve American Dream for a long time. In the intoxication of achieving American Dream, he ignores the true love of his family. In order to secure his family financially from his life insurance policy, he sacrifices his life at the end of the play by committing suicide. The play continues to affect spectators vitally because it allows them to hold a mirror up to themselves. James Phelan remarks,

“The American Dream is itself a consumer product, which Americans “buy into” as the primary myth by means of which they mold their interpersonal relations to resemble relations of capitalist production, which are relations among commodities.”³

References

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