

**DEFAMILIARIZING THE AMERICAN DREAM IN ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN***

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**Abstract**

The United States of America is known as the land of opportunities and the country where all dreams are possible. However, against the profusion of opportunities many Americans grab to succeed, others pain to fulfill their dreams. What might be incumbering the realization of their dreams? Through the lenses of Karl Marx's dialectical materialism and Viktor Shklovsky's defamiliarization technique, this paper aims at analyzing Arthur Miller's conception of the American Dream as portrayed in *Death of a Salesman*. In the process, this paper infers on the one hand that the American Dream is delusive and, on the other hand that in the absence of a winner mindset, hard work is vain.

**Keywords:** opportunity, hard work, American Dream, delusion.

**Résumé**

Les États-Unis d'Amérique sont connus comme la terre des opportunités et le pays où tous les rêves sont possibles. Cependant, face à la profusion des opportunités de réussite que de nombreux Américains saisissent pour réussir, d'autres peinent à réaliser leurs rêves. Qu'est-ce qui pourrait entraver la réalisation de leurs rêves ? À travers le prisme de la théorie du matérialisme dialectique de Karl Marx et la technique de la défamiliarisation de Viktor Shklovsky, cet article vise à analyser la conception d'Arthur Miller du rêve américain telle que représentée dans *Death of a Salesman*. Dans le même processus, cet article déduit d'une part que le rêve américain est illusoire et d'autre part qu'en l'absence d'un état d'esprit gagnant, le dur labeur est vain.

**Mots clés :** opportunité, dur labeur, rêve américain, illusion.

**Introduction**

Different people have meant different things, often multiple things by "the American Dream" (Cullen, 2003, cover page). In her study of economic and social opportunity for Blacks and Whites, and the expectations Blacks and Whites have for the pursuit of happiness, the political scientist J. Hochschild highlights that the American Dream constitutes a set of "tenets about achieving success" (qtd. in Shudson M., 2004: 566). For Hochschild, the substance of the American Dream is best stated in President Bill Clinton's words. The former President maintained that "if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you" (Hochschild J., 1995: 18). All the people are therefore free to pursue the dream, regardless of background, with a "reasonable anticipation of success" through actions under their own control and doing so is worthy of deep commitment because "true success is associated with virtue." Morone J. (2003: 34) on his side,

believes that the American Dream represents “the great national suggestion” that anyone, with hard work according to the rules, has a reasonable prospect of succeeding in life.

In fact, these concurrent viewpoints open a sounding perspective about the American Dream. The American Dream as portrayed in Arthur Miller’s *Death of Salesman* encompasses a uniqueness that can be revealed through the substantial efforts and the hard work, the protagonist Willy Loman invests for his success but unfortunately finds himself at the bottom line. Against the protagonist’s death in the process of realizing his dream, Miller’s portrayal of the American Dream becomes worth of deep questioning. This fictitious reality of Loman’s death even provokes uneasy reviews by *The Hudson* and *The Nation Reviewers*, who find the play to be “trite, and devoid of merit, [...] unpoetic and unmemorable” (Bigsby C., 2006: 10). Are such disavowing reviews about Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* consistent? This article probes the failure of many hard-working people in the world in general and particularly in America. Is Miller disavowing capitalism and the fulfillment of the American Dream? In other words, does success depend on some capitalist principles yet unknown or accepted by Willy Loman? In regard to these queries, the objective of this study falls under a review of the perception of the American Dream. This study also analyzes the paradox between this expected good life with the capitalist system. Two methodological approaches are engaged in the present article. Firstly, with Karl Marx’s dialectical materialism, the paper aims to identify the “human beings by their ability to produce within the context of the economic forces that have enormous influence upon them” (Iglesias E., 2014: 2). Secondly, by means of Viktor Shklovsky’s defamiliarization technique, this article scrutinizes the only success-related beliefs underpinning the American Dream. This work is structured around three parts including a critical literary review of the American Dream, the efforts of Willy Loman to realize the American Dream, and Capitalism and the American Dream Default Mindset as Willy’s Pitfall Symbols.

### 1. Critical Literary Review on the American Dream

Generically, the term –American Dream first appeared in James Truslow Adams’ history book *The Epic of America* (1931) where it is defined as that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (Adams J. T., 1931: 415). This definition encapsulates what has generally been regarded theoretically as the traditional meaning of the dream in the American context. This also emphasizes the idea of a vision, an ambition, or a set goals that individuals, groups, families, and corporate organizations such as government individuals and, to some extent, collective approaches to gain wealth, financial stability, fame and stardom in sport, music, cultural and religious liberty while transcending racial, political, ideological or religious boundaries, as dramatized in the texts were explored and juxtaposed with the American Dream template for success, prosperity, and the good life. However, Benziman G.

(2005: 22) holds a parallel stance admitting that the American Dream used to mean freedom, happiness, and spiritual wealth. Yet, for most black Americans, Presley J. (1963: 380) believes that the “American Dream may have come dramatically true for many” as they have been undergoing racism, physical and psychological tortures. Other critics of the American Dream, more religiously-driven, including Bill D’Antonio (qtd in Hanson S. L. and White J. K., 2011: 146) explore the meaning and experience of the American Dream as it was perceived and lived out during the twentieth century and admit the prevalence of self-centered actions on community-centered ones in their perspectives about the Dream as this status does not allow the realization of the Dream. Most of these viewpoints, in the framework of this paper, comfort the idea of ample opportunities for the realization of the American Dream.

Moreover, as capitalism hits America during the colonial seventeenth century and broadly persists until the Civil War through 1861 to 1865, it is summed up in financial success. He who possesses money has achieved the Dream. Then achieving the dream becomes the result of enterprise, courage and hard work under the economic substructure base including the means of production, distribution, consumption, exchange, division of labor, and property ownership. He who works hard is likely to achieve his or her dreams.

## **2. The Efforts of Willy Loman to Construct his Dream in *Death of a Salesman***

In life, every individual strives to achieve something. And precisely, we are all driven by dreams because, after all, dreams sustain life and keep people moving. If there is no dream, there is no motivation. As Hughes L. (2002) writes in his poem “Dreams”, “Hold fast to dreams / for if dreams die / Life is a broken-winged bird / that cannot fly,” Willy Loman manages to have dreams which he earnestly strives to achieve. For example, Willy strongly dreams to own a nice house to live in. Actually, this dream he has can be casted into the human basic need of shelter. Finding a wonderful shelter animates almost everyone on the planet that they tooth and nail struggle to achieve. And owning a house speaks volume of the individual’s freedom and blossoming. In Miller’s work, not only has Willy dreamt rightfully, but he has equally and wholeheartedly struggled to accomplish his dream. Like any common American, Willy is dedicated into achieving the so-called American Dream. He wholly pursues this elusive dream that constitutes a strong motivation of most American people. For this miserable character, achieving the dream translates in having a refrigerator, a car, and a house.

Indeed, there is nothing wrong in searching for material comfort as it helps overcome the human basic needs. It is worth noting here that Willy has not dreamt for a private jet, nor for a castle. He simply wants his family to have a place they could call home. Unfortunately, “He struggles to keep up with the payments, borrowing money at times. His wife, Linda, informs us during the requiem that she has made the final payment on the house on the same day that Willy Loman is buried” (Walton J. E., 2003: 57). Actually, as a salesman, Willy Loman counts on his job to achieve his dream. Walton rightly posits that “Willy Loman was a salesman; we never learn exactly what he sold, but he sold something. He did enjoy a professional career traveling up and down the eastern sea- board states,

often ending up in Boston or New York. A salesman, said Willy, is ‘the greatest career a man could want’” (Ibid, p. 60). Unlike many people in the world who dream of big things and never strive to work them out, Willy symbolizes a very dedicated and committed American who seeks ways to succeed. That is the reason behind his travelling from places to places either to market his company’s products or to convince customers to buy their products.

In addition, Willy’s dream singles out the strong desire to have a secured job. Having a stable and good job is, after all, what everyone desires. Willy has, in fact, longed for this security in order to flee from temptation. It must be borne in mind that a person who does not get a good and lasting job likely gives in to evil thoughts. A person whose professional life does not allow them to make ends meet can steal. Nevertheless, Willy does not want to be seen in the shoes of a gangster that is why he is constantly fighting for his survival. His love for his son and the entire family equally entails this driving force to achieving the dream. Therefore, he makes his mind to seriously find a securing job that can alleviate and ameliorate the condition of his beloved family.

To realize a dream in the American setting depends on one of the major American characters, notably, hard work. In fact, this core American character is the embodiment of Willy who has never stopped working. Even at his old age, he appeared always ready to do something as job. The narrator discloses that: “He is past sixty years of age, dressed quietly. Even as he crosses the stage to the doorway of the house, his exhaustion is apparent. He unlocks the door, comes into the kitchen, and thankfully lets his burden down, feeling the soreness of his palms” (Miller A., 1949: 30). In fact, we should appreciate Willy’s unflinching courage which denotes his character of a hardworking person. Willy, the main actor in the play is not of his only kind. Certainly, there are many other people like him around the world and in the US in particular who struggle at a very old age to catch up on their dreams deferred. The matter of fact is that he exhausts himself expecting success because he believes that success comes through hard work. The narrator who holds a witness’s position in the event hears him complain “I’m tired to the death” (Ibid. p. 30). The question that arises is what brings about his exhaustion. To work and be exhausted and stay home and get tired to death are options the playwright offers Willy. But the choice of his is to work hard and keep his dream fresh in the mind. It can be argued that the choice of Willy aligns with his dreams which he can only achieve by hard-working. His choice is expected to reward him for his never-ending works.

Being a man, vision is also one other criterion Willy is able to prove in front of the audience. In fact, his vision, as written by the playwright is “Someday I’ll have my own business, and I’ll never have to leave home anymore” (Ibid. p. 46). In fact, Willy has gotten a good idea noting the fact that to be an employed salesman does not leave enough room for proper initiatives of success. Thus, he develops his own vision of becoming his own boss and then having the leeway to decide everything by himself. Obviously, that is Willy’s way of developing himself. Wattles W. D. (1910: 6) concurs that “the object of life is development” which is an undeniable truth. It is a certainty that Willy would like to rise in position and become more rich and able to fulfill his dream through business. He even knows that business demands good relationships and many connections when he says:

You and Hap and I, and I'll show you all the towns. America is full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people. And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring you fellas up, there'll be open sesame for all of us, 'cause one thing, boys: I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own. This summer, heh? (Miller A., op. cit. p. 47)

Good relations, hard work are key factors in business development. Nevertheless, they do not represent the only requirements in business. The wellbeing of business relationships depends on the wellbeing of one's relations with spouse and children. It should not be taken for granted that success has nothing in common with peace at home.

Any business success depends on the peace of the mind as far as household management is concerned. Willy struggles to put all his people in good living conditions. His wife and children then become part of the dream he wants to accomplish. In a defamiliarized perspective, Willy's dream does not entail only wanting a beautiful house, car and money. Above all, his dream also entails seeing the success of his siblings whom he asks to be committed, undertaking and creative, as their involvement will guarantee the wellbeing of the whole household. He tells them where to go and what to do for success as well:

Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me, for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. "Willy Loman is here!" That's all they have to know, and I go right through. (Ibid. p. 49)

The forgoing shows Willy's undertaken actions to explain his relations to his children as a way of assurance. Befriending people requires a good appearance which is often needful in this world. In the matters of business, when selling, for example, goods or products, the seller has to market him/herself and the product so highly to attract customers. This marks Miller's determination to tell his audience how a smart salesman Willy is in his field. He proves him a character who knows his job and is even ready to take initiatives to get through to his customers and sell his products. Obviously, Willy is well steady in the world of business. But paradoxically, he is unable to soar and realize his dream. Certainly, his endeavors are not rewarding because he seems not to be aware of other critical success factors for his accomplishment.

### **3. Capitalism and the American Dream Default Mindset as Willy's Pitfall Symbols**

Many people in the world strive to achieve their dreams and be counted among the successful people. Willy Loman has also worked hard to make his success possible, yet, there have been other external factors that impede this expected success. The social and economic organization of the society wherein he lives has a great deal of negative impact on his downfall.

The responsibility of the American capitalism is engaged in Miller's play. Admittedly, "Capitalism, business success, upward social mobility, all these are not necessarily such unforgivable

social vices in Miller's eyes" (Benziman G., op. cit. p. 21). In fact, many suffer people because the society is so corrupted and excludes them. According to Lawrence S. A. (1964: 547), we should blame the society for Willy's failure. This critic claims that "If Willy is responsible for his own downfall, what are we to make of all the suggestions of a sick and distorted society". Lawrence mentions an undeniable truth about the society in general and the American society in particular. It is a reality that the capitalist system has been prevailing for many decades and also impeding and ejecting many strata of the society. Essentially, capitalism is an economic system originated during the 16th century. It is a system "in which most means of production are privately owned and production is guided and income distributed largely through the operation of markets" (Qtd. from Britannica online page). This definition correlates the absence of means by Willy who could only serve as an employee. For Akins A. (2009: 5), *Death of Salesman* has fervently criticized "the effects that virulent capitalism has on human interaction" and found them atypical. She considers that "We need to blame capitalism that crashes on the feeble to sustain its legitimacy." In fact, Willy does neither own any means of production nor the capital. He is merely representing a hunk of the system belonging to its bottom line. Ironically, he contents himself with the front line of a good salesman who has strongly believed that position is supposed to make him rich. He declares that "I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. Willy Loman is here! That's all they have to know" (Miller A., op. cit, p. 33). It is a fact that Willy has no clear idea about his dream, he simply tends to exaggerate his winning position without realizing that he is down falling. The case in point is where he readily says: "I'm vital in New England" (Ibid. p. 14). In the same vein, he continues saying "I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own" (Ibid. p. 31). This reflects Willy's self-consolation as the capitalist system leaves him unreasonably rewarded. All the above shows that Willy pretends to be what and who he is not. For him, being pompous and showy, could gain him some respect. Another flaw that is typical to Willy is that he is over-confident. Let us consider the following passage relating to him:

Oh, I'll knock 'em dead next week. I'll go to Hartford. You know, the trouble is, Linda, People don't seem to take to me. ... I know it when I walk in. They seem to laugh at me. [...] Other men - I don't know - they do it easier. I don't know why - I can't stop myself - I talk too much. [...] I'm fat. I'm very - foolish to look at, Linda. ... Christmas time I happened to be calling on F. H. Stewarts, and a salesman I know, as I was going in to see the buyer I heard him say something about walrus. And I—I cracked him right across the face. (Ibid. p. 36-37)

A close scrutiny of Willy's profession predicts his failure when it is taken for granted that a salesman stands for someone who does not produce anything but is only able to crack right across the face of people and persuades them to buy. Truly, a salesman compels people to buy his goods even when they are unwilling. Besides, it should not be undermined that during the mid-twentieth century, advertising industries boomed and salesmen stood as the force behind the wheel to support the market system. The market system is organized to hold a line of hierarchy where Willy belongs as a salesman, a non-enviable routinely position characterized by a weak winner mindset. Arguably, Willy cannot find his way through his dream holding the bottom line in the system. Only those in the top



line win it generally because their daily attitudes lead them to winning stages. A case in point is his own father whom he remembers disposed his mind to welcome success: “WILLY [...] please tell about Dad. I want my boys to hear. I want them to know the kind of stock they spring from. All I remember is a man with a big beard, and I was in Mamma’s lap, sitting around a fire, and some kind of high music” (Ibid. p. 48).

Against the idea of capitalism seen as a negative impactful force on Willy’s pitfall, Wattles W. D. (1910: 9) believes that “there is a science of getting rich”. Yet, to be rich does not depend on the environment. It rather depends on what Wattles frames as “thinking in the Certain Way” [sic] (Ibid. p. 36). Wattles enlightens the audience about some hidden factors that could have hindered Willy’s accomplishment. As a matter of fact, Willy is not able to think in the way which consists in making “a clear and definite mental picture” of the thing wanted. Presumably, Willy has a gloomy and unclear picture of the dream he wants to fulfill. Despite his hard work conditioned by the capitalist system, and also his strong will to bring up his children toward the great idea of the American Dream, he appears unable to work things out.

In fact, the winner mindset, as a key character in realizing a dream has failed Willy throughout the play. To reveal Willy’s failure to adopt such mindset, the playwright contrasts Willy and Charley. Specifically, their capacity to manifest the pictures of what they want is congruent with the professional and financial achievements of both of them (Miller A., 1op. cit. p. 24). Because they – Willy and sons – wanted to make it the way most Americans do, by ignoring this mental dimension of becoming rich, they failed as all. Certainly, the American Dream is one of the kinds. Yet it is arguable that it does not depend on the environment, it entails an extraordinary mindset preceding the action. In Willy’s case, the actions have taken the preponderant position in the whole winning conditions. Willy is not mindful about that. It had better adopt this fundamental principle of reordering his mind to go high.

Willy has never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper of reward because of his recklessness. But as a human character who undergoes a terrible misfortune, it can be said that the playwright makes use of a catharsis technique to ignite a mass healing process of a great number of people. Definitely a great number of American who are lost in their considerations of the American Dream need a winning mindset to attain success and transform their lives.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study, conducted around Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman*, has consisted in analyzing the American Dream as delusion in a society where hard work is key for success. Two methodological approaches including Karl Marx’s dialectical materialism and Viktor Shklovsky’s defamiliarization technique have permitted, firstly, to infer that capitalism influences the realization of the American Dream and, secondly, to criticize the death of the protagonist as a symbolic ultimate sacrifice for success. The three parts that have structured this study include a critical literary review of the American Dream, the efforts of Willy Loman to realize the American Dream, and

Capitalism and the absence of a winner mindset as Willy's pitfall symbols. Whereas the first part has gone into reviewing a few researchers' knowledge about the American Dream, the second has shown the struggles and big efforts consented by Willy Loman to realize his dreams. The last part of this article has viewed the capitalist system as a false system which could never help Willy achieve his dreams. However, this part has also been able to show that in spite of the inadequate environment wherein he evolves, many are those who win because of their winning mindset. Indeed, it has been found out that people can work hard and yet be unable to accomplish their Dream. Further, it has been realized that the American Dream measures people's success on the basis of wealth and whoever comes short does not belong there. Most importantly, this paper has found that the capitalism system confines its subjects into hard work by leaving knowledge gaps considered secret in getting rich. The secret goes through the preparation of a winning mindset. Therefore, as Willy has not given up, the American society has to reach the understanding that the realization of the American Dream begins with the mind, and the dispositions necessary for the materialization of the dream through action. It must be recalled that not all our woes result from the society. We are what we think and the external environment only cannot be held responsible for our failures.

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