

## **The American Dream in the Play**

Some may argue that the appeal of Arthur Miller's play "Death of a Salesman" is the struggle each character encounters as they try to pursue and define their American Dream.

The "rags to riches" idea—where hard work and persistence, coupled with high hopes and inner and outer struggles that often accompany it, should lead to success—seems timelessly relatable and represents one of the central themes of the story.

Miller fabricated the character of a salesman without an identified product, and the audience connects with him that much more.

Creating a worker broken by a vague, unfeeling industry stems from the playwright's socialist leanings, and it has often been said that "Death of a Salesman" is a harsh criticism of the American Dream. However, according to Miller, the play is not necessarily a critique of the American Dream as our forefathers thought of it.

Rather, what it condemns is the confusion that enters when people take the material success for the end-all-be-all and elevate it above spirituality, connection with nature, and, most importantly, relationships with others.

### **Willy Loman's American Dream**

To the protagonist of "Death of a Salesman," the American Dream is the ability to become prosperous by mere charisma.

Willy believes that charming personality, and not necessarily hard work and innovation, is the key to success. Time and again, he wants to make sure his boys are well-liked and popular. For example, when his son Biff confesses to making fun of his math teacher's lisp, Willy is more concerned with how Biff's classmates react than with the morality of Biff's action:

BIFF: I Crossed my eyes and talked with a lithp.

WILLY [laughing]: You did? The kids like it?

BIFF: They nearly died laughing!

Of course, Willy's version of the American Dream never pans out:

- Despite his son's popularity in high school, Biff grows up to be a drifter and a ranch-hand.
- Willy's own career falters as his sales ability flat-lines.
- When he tries to use "personality" to ask his boss for a raise, he gets fired instead.

Willy is very much concerned with being somebody and paying off his mortgage, which in themselves aren't necessarily bad goals. His tragic flaw is that he fails to recognize the love and devotion that surround him and elevates the goals prescribed by society above all else.

### **Ben's American Dream**

One person Willy really admires and wishes he was more like is his older brother Ben. In a way, Ben embodies the original American Dream—the ability to start with nothing and somehow make a fortune:

BEN [*giving great weight to each word, and with a certain vicious audacity*]: William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!

Willy is envious of his brother's success and machismo. But Willy's wife Linda, one of the characters who can actually distinguish from true and superficial values, is frightened and concerned when Ben stops by for a brief visit. To her, he represents wildness and danger.

This is displayed when Ben horseshoes around with his nephew Biff. Just as Biff starts to win their sparring match, Ben trips the boy and stands over him with the "point of his umbrella poised at Biff's eye."

Ben's character signifies that a few people can achieve the "rags to riches" version of the American Dream. Yet, Miller's play also suggests that one must be ruthless (or at least a bit wild) in order to achieve it.

### **Happy's American Dream**

When it comes to Willy's sons, they each appear to have inherited a different side of Willy. Happy, despite being a more static and one-sided character, is following in Willy's footsteps of self-delusion and pretenses. He is a shallow character who is content with going from job to job, as long as he has some income and can devote himself to his female interests.

### **Charley's and Bernard's American Dream**

Willy's neighbor Charley and his son Bernard stand in opposition to Loman's family's ideals. The protagonist frequently puts both of them down, promising his sons that they will do better in life than their neighbors, because they look better and are more liked.

Willy: That's just what I mean, 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.

Yet, it is Charley who has his own business and not Willy. And it is Bernard's seriousness about school that ensured his future success, which is in stark contrast with the paths of the Loman brothers. Instead, Charley and Bernard are both honest, caring, and hard-working without the unnecessary bravado. They demonstrate that with the right attitude, the American Dream is indeed achievable.

## Biff's American Dream

Biff is one of the most complex characters in this play. Although he has felt confused and angry since discovering his father's infidelity, Biff Loman does have the potential to pursue the "right" dream—if only he could resolve his inner conflict.

Biff is pulled by two different dreams. One is that of his father's world of business, sales, and capitalism. Biff is captured by his love and admiration for his father and struggles to decide what is the right way to live. On the other hand, he also inherited his father's sense of poetry and love for the natural life that Willy didn't allow to fully develop. And so Biff dreams of nature, the great outdoors, and working with his hands.

Biff explains this tension to his brother when he talks about both the appeal and the angst of working on a ranch:

BIFF: There's nothing more inspiring or—beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt. And it's cool there now, see? Texas is cool now, and it's spring. And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my God, I'm not getting anywhere! What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I'm thirty-four years old. I oughta be makin' my future. That's when I come running home.

By the end of the play, Biff realizes that his father had the "wrong" dream. He knows that Willy was great with his hands (he built their garage and put up a new ceiling), and Biff believes that Willy should have been a carpenter or should have lived in another, more rustic part of the country.

But instead, Willy pursued an empty life. He sold nameless, unidentified products, and watched his American Dream fall apart.

During the funeral of his father, Biff decides that he will not allow the same thing to happen to himself. He turns away from Willy's dream and, presumably, returns to the countryside, where good, old-fashioned manual labor will ultimately make his restless soul content.

## Sources

- *Matthew C. Roudane, Conversations with Arthur Miller. Jackson, Mississippi, 1987, p. 15.*
- *Bigsby, Christopher. Introduction. Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem by Arthur Miller, Penguin Books, 1999, pp. vii-xxvii.*

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