

Popular culture (paraphrase)



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Analysis of a Modern Myth Myths came from the earliest recordings of sophisticated culture, and have developed alongside human civilization since. Myths from the ancient times, stories of fickle-minded gods and humans of supernatural ability, have spawned modern myths, which discuss everything from horror ('urban myths') to ambition (the 'American dream'). Debating the reality of myth is not exactly a legitimate debate in itself – it is generally not accepted that Gilgamesh could have been two-thirds god, one-third human – but it is undeniable that myths can tell historians much about the culture from which they came. Myths can be generally categorized dualistically: myths of history, which represent the accumulated knowledge and superstition of generations and tend to be from more ancient cultures, and myths of example, which speculate about the future and are usually more recent. The first of these is intended to teach certain behaviors, the second to encourage, reassure, or warn. This essay will analyze the modern oral tradition of the American dream, expressed through drama and pop culture, to discern its status as 'myth' and show some responses to it. The 'American dream' is the somewhat fanciful idea that in the US (and only in the US) a person can achieve wealth and success through hard work, regardless of their other qualities. It suggests that the US socio-economic system is scrupulously fair and completely devoid of corruption or favoritism, and (more disturbingly) that those who do not succeed are personally to blame for their failures. It comes across as a little dated to the cynics of the twenty-first century, and it is true that the dream was not as solid as it may have seemed to its contemporaries. The playwright Arthur Miller recognized this, and made it the topic of his 1949 play *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman, the protagonist of *Death of a Salesman*, is one of the victims of the

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American dream. As a salesman, Loman must deal with people, who are unlikely to be as painfully fair-minded as 'the system', and his lifetime of hard work does not make up for his lack of charisma. Miller's character followed the teachings of the American dream, but they failed him: this is why the dream is a 'dream', a myth, and not a reality. The American dream is a myth of example. Despite the ideals of the 'American dream' myth, honesty and hard work do not guarantee success, or even safeguard its believers from outright failure. The Cosby Show, a sitcom first aired thirty-five years after Death of a Salesman was written, focuses on a different failure and outcome of the American dream: namely overcoming the concept of racism. The show, which had a primarily African-American cast, was praised for its non-stereotypical portrayal of black people, but it was also not afraid to depict examples of social, political and economic discrimination against the Huxtable family on the basis of race. Its very existence can be interpreted as a confirmation of the dream: it is a "reinstatement of black dignity and culture in a racist society" (Smitherman and van Dijk, 67). Bill Cosby was able to create one of the most successful sitcoms of the 1980s even though his race was an issue for many American people at the time. It is often thought that myths are inherently conservative, simply due to the fact that they grow over time with the gathered opinions of history. The myth of the American dream shows this to be at least partially untrue: the concept of breaking beyond prejudice is far from a conservative one. Like other myths, it can be only dubiously applied to reality; it centres on the dichotomies of good and bad, equality and discrimination. It promotes a progressive view of social development, but sadly without providing any support system for this development – hence why the American dream has

sadly fallen by the wayside in more recent times, and remains a myth rather than reality. Works Cited Doty, W. G. *Myth: A Handbook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Leeming, D. *Myth: A Biography of Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Miller, A. *Death of a Salesman*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998. Smitherman, G. and T. A. Van Dijk (Eds). *Discourse and Discrimination*. Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1988.