

The american nightmare the pitfalls of materialism literature review sample

[Psychology](#), [Success](#)



The American Dream lured wave after wave of immigration, primarily from Europe, in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. This dream taught that if you came to America and worked hard enough, you would succeed. There was enough room, enough of a market, enough hope, and enough freedom for everyone who came to the United States to do well. This dream enticed so many people to come to the country from overseas that the government decided to put quotas in place to limit the number of immigrants from each country in the years before World War I and World War II. However, too many people came to America and ended up being swindled; too many people bought into the dream of success and found that it focused only on material gain; too many people followed the individualistic ethics that competitive gain creates and lost their sense of morals and ethics. Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* both illustrate ways in which men lose their moral compass while chasing this American dream - and end up facing a tragic end. While the American Dream may have worked for many people who found prosperity in the United States, for too many other people it caused them to feel stress and self-doubt if they did not succeed - and it caused them to violate the laws of ethics and morality to feel successful.

In *Death of a Salesman*, the main character is an aging salesman named Willy Loman. He has reached the point in sales where he no longer knows the important people to make deals, as his contemporaries have all retired. However, he has no savings and cannot meet his obligations on a monthly basis without help from his neighbor. His neighbor has offered him a job, but he won't take it - he doesn't want to work for anyone. He prefers to be his

own man, in sales, without a boss. However, when he finds out that he is being phased out by his company, he spirals into depression - ending in his suicide, because his life insurance policy is the only way that he feels he can provide financial security for his wife. In *The Great Gatsby*, James Gatz has used profits from selling liquor out the back doors of "pharmacies" during the Prohibition era in the United States to build the wealth that he needed to win the love of Daisy Buchanan. However, he tragically does not realize that she will never leave her old-money husband for his new money, and he ends up being shot in a case of mistaken identity, while Daisy Buchanan, who actually committed the crime for which Gatz (who takes on the name Jay Gatsby) is shot, disappears with her husband behind their money.

Using the events in these two novels, this paper will display the superficiality and ultimate failure of the American Dream using three main points. First, the American Dream causes people to think that their actual worth depends on the opinions of others. Second, the American Dream fosters the idea that you have to create your own wealth to be a success. Finally, the American Dream is more about short-term gratification than long-term commitment. While the American Dream may work for some, the majority of the major successes in the history of the American economy have been connected with corruption.

One of the primary flaws in the American Dream is that it connects an individual's value with the opinions that others have about him or her. It is not enough for someone to build a successful career as a teacher, writer, doctor or lawyer; in addition, to be considered successful, one must secure

the approval of others in order to feel confident. In *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator, Nick Carraway, is invited to his cousin's house for dinner. Daisy, his cousin, married the wealthy Tom Buchanan, and they have a beautiful estate not too far from where Nick lives. When he walks up, he sees Tom on the front porch of his house, waiting in riding clothes. It is interesting that such a masculine, powerful figure as Tom is dressed in androgynous clothing in this scene, as riding clothes are quite similar for men and women. This may suggest that Tom has not yet completely accepted himself as a man, as a provider, since his money has been inherited instead of the result of his own hard work. This possible lack of confidence appears again in his initial remark to Nick: he says, "I've got a nice place around here," his eyes flashing about restlessly" (Fitzgerald). Rather than wait for the compliment, he issues it himself. This statement is unnecessary; based on the description that the narrator gives of the house, it is picturesque and grand on its own merits, without this compliment. The fact that Tom compliments his own house shows his own doubts about his self-worth – despite the considerable wealth that he and his wife possess.

The American Dream also fosters the idea that you have to create your own wealth to be a success. It is not enough to work for a company your entire life and build a successful career before retirement; for too many career workers, giving one's life to a corporation is seen as a surrender, or a manner of settling for less. To truly have succeeded in life, according to the terms of the American Dream, one must achieve success on one's own – with as little assistance as possible. In *Death of a Salesman*, the main character,

Willy Loman, lives his life in the shadow of his older brother Ben, who became wealthy in his twenties in the tropical diamond mines. Willy wants to do the same, but he's spent his whole life selling stockings and other sundries instead of living a life of glory and adventure. He wants his sons to go out and live that sort of life, and he often regales them with tales of their uncle Ben: " The man knew what he wanted and went out and got it. Walked into a jungle, and comes out, the age of twenty-one, and he's rich! The world is an oyster, but you don't crack it open on a mattress!" (Miller 32) While this quotation seems to emphasize the importance of hard work, by suggesting that you don't get ahead by sleeping in, the fact is that Ben benefited from timing more than from hard work. Even though Willy has raised a family, nourished a long-lasting marriage, and is now reaching the end of his career, he never made his own wealth. As a result, he feels insufficient - he doesn't even realize that his mortgage was a month away from being paid, at which time he would not have needed nearly as much money each month to pay his bills.

Finally, the American Dream is more about short-term gratification than long-term commitment. Jay Gatsby doesn't spend any time thinking about growing old with Daisy; instead, he focuses on the injury that happened when she would not marry a poor soldier, years ago. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy has not taught his sons to view long-term morals as more important than short-term success, as his emphasis on his son's football career as being more important than his grades in school indicates. This lesson about short-term success is passed to his son Happy, who has let a desire for

pleasure trump his integrity: “ Manufacturers offer me a hundred-dollar bill now and then to throw an order their way. You know how honest I am, but it's like this girl, see. I hate myself for it. Because I don't want the girl, and, still, I take it - and I love it!” (Miller 44) The chance to ravish a young girl without the burden of commitment is something that Happy enjoys - just like the chance to take a bribe. Happy cuts corners with ethics - just as his father did.

There are those who say that the American Dream works for ethical people as well as unethical ones, and that material success is compatible with integrity. I would agree with this - but I would also say that these cases are in the minority. Far too many people who came to the United States to seek their fortune found themselves swindled by Americans - and even by immigrants who are already wise to the ways of America. Far too many people choose materialism over morals. Capitalism is too corrupt to serve as a defining paradigm for a nation.

The American Dream corrupts those who believe in it, and presents ideals that are far too difficult - and too unnecessary - to attain. It forces people to seek the approval of others to feel good about themselves. It creates the idea that you have to build up your own riches to be a success. It also rewards short-term gratification instead of commitment over the long haul. While the capitalist system does allow for the creation of a high standard of living, it penalizes those who refuse to believe in that standard, and it makes simplicity of life virtually impossible.

Works Cited.

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