

Death of a salesman: shifting of the american dream

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From its very infancy, the American continent was often equated with boundless opportunity. In *A Description of New England* John Smith characterized the early colonies of 1616 as a land of economic potential, declaring that “ If a man work but three days in seven, he may get more than he can spend. (51)” In America, it was possible for a man from even the most modest of origins to ascend to great wealth through diligence and the sweat of his brow, unrestrained by any social hierarchy or intellectual qualifications. As the nation grew, however, the composition of the American Dream began to shift accordingly. By 1949, when *Death of a Salesman* debuted, the United States had endured the Civil War, two World Wars, the prosperity of the roaring twenties and ensuing collapse of the Great Depression, and was again in the midst of an economic boom. The economic and social change transformed forever the very definition of the American Dream. Once a philosophical ideal, the concept had essentially come under the brand ownership of corporate America. Rather than inspiring men to greatness, the American Dream instead was used as a marketing tool, urging a nation’s eager consumers to partake of tract housing, new cars, and processed food. Bundled up and sold along with the dream was a pervasive conformity, guarding against the threat of economic instability which had afflicted previous decades (Schwartz 111). Suddenly, the greatness promised by the dream was the greatneses of middle class suburbia embodied in the sprawling acreage of Levittown, the ideal of unlimited wealth gained through hard work having been gradually relegated to the rapidly vanishing frontiers. As the definition of the dream changed, however, it left as casualties in its passing the lifeless bodies of those unable to adapt with it—people who

bought wholeheartedly into one dream only to see that dream evaporate and be replaced by a new dream they perceived as the intangible compromise of those afraid to aspire for something more. One of those bodies scattered along the abandoned highway of the American Dream was that of Willy Loman. In many ways, Willy represented the last of the agrarian frontiersman, forced into the uncomfortable fit of a corporate world. For Willy, success was something you attained by how hard you worked and how well liked you were. This doctrine of how to achieve success consumed Willy's life and sealed his fate. No matter what he achieved, Willy was constantly forced, by the conflict with his own aspirations, to view himself as a failure. For Willy success meant achieving the sudden wealth of the frontier. That frontier, however, was gone. Consequently, all Willy could do was suffer, comparing himself with an ideal which never really was attainable for him and, in his waning years, desperately trying to live the same unattainable dream vicariously through his sons in whom he'd instilled the same antiquated idealism which afflicted him. In Biff and Happy's inability to live their father's dream, however, they too were viewed as failures. The only real success depicted in *Death of a Salesman* is represented by three characters, one representing the extinct agrarian definition of the American Dream, another the acceptance of the corporate ideal which replaced it, and finally, one representing the intellectual potential capable of transcending that corporate ideal and its accompanying conformity—thus affirming that along with its vast capacity for failure, America still holds the potential for achieving greatness. It is through the analysis of Arthur Miller's treatment of the characters of Ben, Charley, and

Bernard that the transformation of the American Dream can be comprehensively evaluated. Ben is the only member of the Loman family to ever achieve any actual success. Consequently, and despite being somewhat of an enigma, he is virtually mythologized in the mind of Willy. Few details are known as to what real success he ever achieved but for Willy it is what Ben represents that is important. The very personification of the American Dream for the Loman family, Ben went off to make his fortune early in life and did exactly that. Not incidentally, however, he achieved that American Dream not in America but rather, in Africa. Suggesting that perhaps Willy's concept of success in America had already been supplanted by the corporate ideal, Ben attained his fortune not in the nearby fields and byways of Willy's world but rather, thousands of miles from the culture that imprisoned Willy. Nevertheless, the memory of Ben serves to provide Willy with a blueprint, albeit a vague one at best, of what it takes to achieve extraordinary success. Ben was a man's man—rugged and optimistic. Even his description of his own success is stripped down to its barest essentials, summed up by declaring, “ When I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich.”(What exactly Ben did in the jungle is a mystery. The only certainties relative to him are his role as the manifestation of all that Willy aspires to and, as such, his validation of Willy's unattainable dreams. Had Willy gone with Ben to Alaska, when afforded the opportunity, would he too have achieved extraordinary wealth? The answer is unknown but in Willy's mind, there is little doubt. Also of note is that Ben is the only character in the entire play that refers to Willy as William, perhaps suggesting a higher level of respect afforded to a successful

man. Willy is the common man, relegated to the confines of economic weakness, whereas William was in many ways the potential for greatness that went unfulfilled. It's a large part of Willy's dream to attain the respect and admiration of his peers, to be revered; yet he is ultimately only a pathetic remnant of his failed dreams, unable to rise above the juvenile moniker of Willy. Just as Ben represents the American Dream of Willy's consciousness, Charley represents the realization of the dream as formulated in the boardrooms of corporate America. Willy's foil, Charley lives his life devoid of lofty aspirations. All he wants is a happy, stable life free of debt and that is exactly what he attains. Though by no means a rich man, Charley is nevertheless several rungs up the economic ladder from the bottom step Willy occupies. For Charley, there is no equivalent to Ben, no dreams of achieving wealth in the frontier of the past, no archetype to be compared to. Instead, Charley is a willing participant in the corporate culture and the suburban life it entails. Unlike Willy, Charley is content with his Chevrolet, his whipped cheese, and all the other trappings that lead Willy to view himself as a failure. Most importantly, Charley recognizes the shifting taking place, realizing that being well liked and athletic is no longer sufficient to achieve success in the modern America. Instead of encouraging his son to be a man's man—like Willy does—Charley sees the importance of education. In the reformulated America, a man is able to set himself apart not by the strength of his muscles or appeal of his smile but rather, by the capacity of his mind and breadth of knowledge. Late in the play, when Willy refuses Charley's offers of help and employment, the sharp philosophical differences of the two characters are underscored. Willy cannot accept the help, not as a

by-product of his eroding sanity but rather, on principle. Acceptance would be tantamount to acknowledging Charley's unambitious philosophy to be the correct one, best suited for the era the two men occupy, and that is an admission Willy's pride would never allow him to make. Having failed to achieve his own dreams, Willy turns to Biff and Happy in the desperate hope that they can attain that which he could not. Unfortunately, Willy was so adamant in his beliefs that he indoctrinated his sons in the same idealistic, agrarian attitudes that condemned him. Consequently, Willy cannot achieve success even vicariously, the destructive idealism self-perpetuating across generations. In contrast, Charley's son Bernard—long the subject of Willy and Biff's ridicule—represents the intellectual qualities required by the new America to attain success. Despite being physically weak and not "well liked," Bernard, through the persistent application of his intelligence, becomes an eminent lawyer who, the very day Biff and Willy are forced to confront the falsehood of their lives, embarks for Washington to plead a case before the Supreme Court. The single most significant feat of the entire play, Bernard's great success serves to demonstrate that America does indeed still hold the potential of attaining greatness. However, that greatness is based upon markedly different terms than the success that preceded it in the annals of American history. Ultimately, the America that serves as the canvas for *Death of a Salesman* is a vastly different America from the land of boundless opportunity described by John Smith. Though the prospect of greatness still exists, the previous definition of the American Dream—personified by rustic settlers and courageous frontiersmen—was supplanted by the corporate dream of millions of Americans eating the same food,

driving the same cars, and living in the same, identical tract homes. That new definition of the American Dream is a conformist one; interspersed only occasional by a small minority who through superior intellect are able to transcend the mediocrity for which most happily aspire. It is when the American Dream of the past collides violently with the American Dream of post-WWII America that tragedy occurs. In the words of Arthur Miller in his essay *On Biff and Willy Loman*, "It is the tragedy of a man who did believe that he alone was not meeting the qualifications laid down for mankind by those clean-shaven frontiersmen who inhabit the peaks of broadcasting and advertising offices...he heard the thundering command to succeed as it ricocheted down the newspaper-lined canyons of his city, heard not a human voice, but a wind of a voice to which no human can reply in kind, except to stare into the mirror at a failure. (Miller 1892)"

WORKS CITED
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