

Death of the american – great gatsby and death of a salesman



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"I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" Inscribed in the base of the Statue of Liberty, this poem by Emma Lazarus defines the glorified, insatiable drive for wealth that is the American Dream. This dream, based in the belief that every person possesses the capacity to work hard and subsequently achieve fiscal success, has been a part of the American experience since its beginning. From the time of the discovery of the New World, millions of individuals have flocked to the United States in the hopes of capitalizing on the opportunities that accompany the freedom available to American citizens.

Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman are two such individuals; people whose lives revolve around the belief that accumulating friends and material possessions will bring them happiness. The nobility and viability of the modern version of this quest, historically lauded as an American ideal, is examined in both Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and in Miller's "Death of a Salesman."

Through the characters of Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman, the authors portray the American Dream as an unattainable, misguided quest for monetary success that never brings satisfaction or fulfillment to its pursuers. Due to erroneous motivations and beliefs surrounding their goal of attaining financial success, Willy and Gatsby are both doomed to fail in their pursuits. Willy Loman steadfastly emphasizes the importance of being well-liked by others. He believes that one can only be truly self-satisfied when one is respected and admired by their peers, and because of this veneration one acquires more friends and more opportunity, and so forth.

As Willy says to Biff, "the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead"

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(21). Willy believes that a person attains wealth not through hard work but instead through his popularity. The success of Bernard, a hard-working man who achieves his accomplishments through his own calculated efforts, exposes this misconception. Willy looks down upon Bernard as a socially inept boy whose supposed lack of people skills should, by Willy's logic, prevent him from rising in the business world. " 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" (20).

Willy simply can not understand that personality only provides an individual with a limited amount of opportunity. Willy doesn't achieve his goals because he doesn't realize that he can not rely on his social skills for advancement, but rather he must work hard in order to attain his dreams. Because Willy doesn't make this realization, he spends his life futilely floundering above the poverty line and eventually kills himself. Similarly, Jay Gatsby's pursuit of the American Dream is also flawed, but for different reasons.

Gatsby's intense work ethic does cumulate in great financial wealth, but his means are questionable. Fitzgerald never makes it clear where Gatsby's money comes from, but even these possibly illegal tactics do not completely pervert Gatsby's pursuit of the American Dream. Gatsby loves Daisy, but she refused to marry him earlier in his life because he was not wealthy enough. As Gatsby comments, " her voice is full of money" (127). Instead of spurning Daisy for the exploitative, materialistic woman she is, Gatsby instead works tirelessly in an attempt to get her to love him. Therein lies the distortion: he believes his work can buy Daisy's love, which is an impossible dream.

Neither Gatsby nor Willy work because they enjoy it, or even keep a reasonable goal in mind. They work only for the money and for the approval of others, hoping all the while that happiness will result. The attainment of their versions of the American Dream is impossible, and their inability to acknowledge this leaves both in a state of emotional ruin. Denial prevents both Willy and Gatsby from seeing the futility of their pursuits, thus leaving them frustrated and eventually dead. In Willy Loman's case, he always believes that he can achieve a wealthy status. He remains loyal to his company and works relatively hard, but he never realizes that his limitations, placed on him by his attitude, prevent any upward social mobilization.

He states over and over again that he is "well-liked" and an invaluable member of his firm, when that is, in fact, a lie. Without a strong work ethic, being popular alone won't enable Willy to become wealthy. Pathetically, Willy isn't even well-liked, a characteristic he glorifies and also professes himself to be. He constantly tries to build up his reputation as a renowned salesman.

I'm telling you, I was selling thousands and thousands, but I had to come home... Three of the stores were half closed for inventory in Boston.

Otherwise I woulda broke records" (22). A few lines later, Miller reveals that Willy has hardly enough money to pay off his bills.

This denial of his relative failures also prevents Willy from accepting a job from Charley. Instead of realizing that he will never become a rich and powerful man, Willy's denial ultimately turns into delusion. When Willy is offered a position, he responds "I've got a job." Charley responds, "Without pay? What kind of job is a job without pay?" (74). Willy's pride blinds his

ability to see himself for what he truly is: a mediocre salesman who has just been fired.

Willy sees himself only as a failure and eventually kills himself because of his inadequate feelings. Although not financially strapped, Gatsby is also destroyed by his denial. Gatsby loves Daisy almost religiously throughout the entire novel, but she does not reciprocate the feeling. He stares ceaselessly at the “single green light, minute and far away,” but no matter how desperately Gatsby tries to get Daisy to love him, but her selfish motivations prevent her from leaving her husband (26).

She has a wealthy, handsome husband and small child; to her that is all that matters. In one last attempt to win back Daisy's love, Gatsby sacrifices himself for her when he covers up her crime. Gatsby's death is a result of his refusal to see that his goal, the thing he literally worked five years for, is not possible. He becomes so immersed in his quest that it envelopes his whole life. Nick describes, “It had gone beyond her, beyond everything.

He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion... ” (92). For Gatsby, work covered up any doubts he may have had regarding Daisy's love. Like Willy, Gatsby's denial blinds him to the fact that his dream is unfeasible, and both men die because of their dedication to a false hope.

Ultimately, despite their efforts, neither man is satisfied with his life, although both spent a good portion of them pursuing the ideals that epitomize the American Dream. Another factor contributing to the demise of Willy and Gatsby is their attachment to previous experiences. Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman find themselves bound to their pasts, and their inability to

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escape from these memories prevents them from realizing the vainness of their quests. Gatsby's entire existence revolves around his time with Daisy in St. Louis.

He remembers that period of his life and longs to replicate it; his obsession extends to the point where that is his sole motivation for working. When Nick points out that you can not duplicate something that has happened, Gatsby says, "Can't repeat the past?... Why of course you can!" (126). Gatsby truly believes that if he works hard and attains everything the American Dream entails: starting from humble beginnings and gradually progressing to a small fortune, then Daisy will love him as she did then.

As noted earlier, it is this incapability to realize the absurdness of his goal that prevents him from changing his habits and possibly saving his life. Willy likewise lives much of his life through past events. Miller constantly incorporates flashbacks into the play, and the sheer volume of them depicts the extent to which Willy thinks about things he has and has not done. Also, Willy's obsession with his personal history is revealed in his meeting with Howard. "In those days, there was personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it.

Today, it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear- or personality" (61). Willy's belief in the importance of relationships in the business world is shown here as being horribly outdated. Again, Willy can not escape his long-held principles regarding the best methods for achieving wealth. This inability, very similar to that of Gatsby's, prevents both characters from seeing the futility in their dreams. In Gatsby's case, he

doesn't realize that money can't buy love, whereas Willy doesn't understand that camaraderie can't secure capital. In the end, both die believing in the viability of their dreams, even though both authors make it very clear that neither the dream nor the quest are well-founded.

Arthur Miller and F. Scott Fitzgerald use the characters of Willy Loman and Jay Gatsby to expose the motivations and ultimate goals of the American Dream as being unachievable and utterly erroneous. Both characters are tied to their dreams by the unshakable ties of denial, the past, and the means by which they choose to pursue their objectives. Willy Loman desperately clings to the notion that hard work is not as important as being "well-liked."

Unfortunately, Willy's priorities contradict the more effective means of attaining success, and thus he is prevented from becoming the man he would like to be only because of his misguided beliefs. Jay Gatsby is also misled by his principles. He thinks that by acquiring the 'wealth' aspect of the American Dream, that the relationship with Daisy will follow. He fails to see that she is a shallow person and that money does not buy love, and he dies, like Willy, in disappointment. Both novels expose the fact that the American Dream is often a misguided pursuit, skewed by inaccurate beliefs and exorbitant expectations