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Descending from Dream to Despair: Myth and Reality in Arthur  
Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract

Myths are the complex narratives that symbolically convey deeper truths about human nature, society, and the universe. These culturally significant narratives illuminate mysteries, transmit values, and inspire individuals to strive beyond mere survival. Myths act as foundational principles or ideals that shape both collective consciousness and personal aspirations. They bridge the gap between the conscious and the unconscious, the known and the unknown, and often reflect greater wisdom about the human condition. On the contrary reality is based on observable facts that are often shaped by outside factors and constraints. It can be validated through direct observation and supporting evidence. Reality is dynamic and ever-changing, requiring individuals to adopt, adapt and evolve in response to new circumstances and information. The contrast between myth and reality highlights the relationship between the glorified, timeless tales and the actual experiences of individuals and societies. This paper tries to explore how Miller highlights the broader social repercussions of this disparity by juxtaposing the Loman family's challenging circumstances with the prevailing narrative of the American Dream. This paper is a humble attempt to integrate myth and reality, self and society, success and failure, and ideal and actual by appreciating their respective worths through Arthur Miller's iconic play *Death of a Salesman*.

Keywords: American Dream, Consumerism, Disillusionment, Myth, Reconciliation.

Life and literature are replete with the duel between myth and reality, dream and despair, and idealism and realism. They meet and collide in a timeless cycle within art and human heart. Myths are there to give solace to heart and significance to art, hope to society and healing to the individual. In religion, folklore, and cultural narratives, they often provide a sense of purpose and direction.

American Dream has also been a powerful myth. It is a deeply ingrained cultural belief in the United States that suggests anyone, irrespective of class and origin, can attain success, wealth, and social status through discipline, determination, dedication and diligence. In this framework, hard work and talent are seen as the true measures of success, shaping both opportunity and achievement. Nevertheless, actual experiences frequently do not measure up to this aspiration, as obstacles such as structural inequalities, economic changes, and individual situations can hinder people from achieving this dream. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* captures this conflict at its best and offers a moving examination of the American Dream. It offers a rich matrix of enabling fables that define the myth of the American dream. (Roudane 1987). Through the story of Willy Loman and his family, Miller reveals how reckless pursuit of this dream results into deep despair.

As coined by the famous historian James Truslow Adams, the term American dream "is not a dream of motorcars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." (Adams, 2017, p. 404) In short, it is rooted in the ideas of individual autonomy, freedom, democracy, and opportunity. In its early stages, the American Dream was closely tied to the concept of westward movement and manifest destiny. The allure of vast, untapped territories inspired individuals to believe that determination and bravery could pave the way to prosperity. Gradually, the American Dream began to revolve around financial achievement and social advancement. The country's swift industrial growth opened up numerous economic possibilities, drawing countless immigrants in search of improved livelihoods. Following World War II, the dream transformed to highlight owning a house, securing steady employment, and enjoying a comfortable life in the suburbs. This era witnessed a surge in consumer culture and the celebration of the nuclear family ideal. Initiatives such as the GI Bill and other governmental efforts made property ownership and access to higher education more attainable, strengthening the belief that success was within everyone's reach.

Willy Loman the protagonist of the play blindly believes in the personality cult of Dale Carnegie. He is convinced that success can only be tasted by a person who is impressive, persuasive, self-confident and has the knack of making friends. He tells his sons, "...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." (Miller, 2007, p. 25-26) His highly fanatic allegiance to the American dream of success is the alpha and omega of the play. Success keeps eluding him like a mirage. Throughout the drama, Willy admires Dave Singleman, the renowned salesman and his own brother Ben who "walked into a jungle, and comes out, at the age of twenty-one, and he's rich!" (Miller, 2007, p. 32) Both the figures are embodiments of American Dream to Willy, yet in his mind they represent diametrically opposed value systems. (Centola, 1993, p. 30) This is where the confusion arises, and Willy becomes a hybrid failure. In early days of salesmanship, he used to dream "Someday I'll have my own business, and I'll never have to leave home anymore." (Miller, 2007, p. 23) In the later days he feels 'tired to death'. In stark contrast to his dreams, Willy's real life is defined by constant struggles, frustrations and regrets. Willy is old, tired and exhausted and has not much with for a rainy day. He has failed as a salesman because he is unable to accommodate the evolving demands of his industry. His marriage, too, is fractured beyond repair. As a father also he has been a tremendous failure. He hardly commands any respect from his sons. To them he is a 'phony fake'. His unattainable ambitions and unrealistic hopes ruin Willy's professional and personal life. Things gradually start breaking down in Willy's heart and household: the car, the refrigerator, the leaking roof, the belief in charismatic personality and above all Willy Loman himself. Amid this mess, Willy uses the illusion of achievement as a shield to conceal the hideous reality of his life. He fabricates stories about his popularity, esteem and success. He brags "And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people...I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own." (Miller,

2007, p. 24) This self-deception serves as a way for Willy to cling to his faith in the American Dream, despite the reality proving otherwise.

The pressure to achieve the American Dream has tremendous psychological impact on Willy. Once a charismatic, confident salesman now bleeds to death. Willy develops ambivalent personality disorder. He carries no fixed views or conception of things. He states something and refutes it in the same breath. About his car Chevy he says "Chevrolet, Linda, is the greatest car ever built". (Miller, 2007, p. 26) A few minutes later when he is reminded of the money he owes on its repair, he bursts out "That goddam Chevrolet they ought to prohibit the manufacture of the car!" (Miller, 2007, p. 28) At one place he boasts to his sons "I never have to wait in line to see a buyer" (Miller, 2007, p. 26) at another place he admits to his wife "You know the trouble is Linda, people don't seem to take to me." (Miller, 2007, p. 28) He is haunted by a sense of inadequacy, inferiority and self-doubt. The sense of economic and social insecurity gnaws Willy from within. He opens his heart to Linda saying "I get the feeling that I'll never sell anything again, that I won't make a living for you, or a business, a business for the boys.... There's so much I want to make for." (Miller, 2007, p. 29) His sporadic moments of insight, contrasted with his persistent illusions, reveal the conflict raging within him. He lives from moment to moment fearing that the edifice of his dream might collapse any moment in the gale of reality.

Not only he himself but Willy feeds his sons also on the same illusions and false assumptions. He always makes them believe that they are on the top of the world. Because of Willy's dreamy idealism, they constantly oscillate between idealism and realism. Biff blames his father for his failure. He tells Willy to his face "And I never get anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air, I could never stand taking orders from anybody!" (Miller, 2007, p. 104) To right the wrong, Willy resorts to suicide thinking that the insurance money will give security to his family. He lays down his life in a desperate bid to redeem its ruin. As a true family man Willy lives for his family and dies for it. As a true salesman he sells commodities throughout his life and finally sells his life. Jacobson rightly comments at Willy's suicide saying, 'he is the salesman caught in his milieu who cannot relinquish his ideals without destroying his identity.' (Jacobson 1975, p. 248).

The collapse of the American Dream is vividly depicted in *Death of a Salesman*. While the play explores the American dream with almost legendary grandeur, it simultaneously serves as a critical examination of how this ideal falters when confronted with the everyday realities of post-war industrial America. Through the experiences of the Loman family, Miller masterfully depicts how the American Dream, once symbolising a spirit of hope, adventure, and accomplishment has gradually transformed into unreachable fantasy and a bleak urban reality. What can be more wistful than to find that Willy who has reached the ebb tide years, has nothing to fall back on. He has worked for thirty-four years for a firm, when he needs job security the most the proprietor of the firm finds him useless and shunts him away. Willy's statement "I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away- a man is not a piece of fruit!" (Miller, 2007, p. 64) hits hard on the face of capitalism. His plight serves as a powerful commentary on capitalist society, where a person's value is largely determined by their economic output. This capitalist mindset reduces individuals to mere economic entities, overlooking the importance of human relationships. When Willy started his career as salesman there was a respect, comradeship and gratitude in selling. But now there is only cut-throat competition.

This play lashes hard upon consumerism in the post-war America where customers are lured into buying things through advertisements, and EMIs and society is made heavily reliant on borrowing. Willy sarcastically comments, "Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it's broken! I am always in a race with the junkyard! I just finished paying for the car and it's on its last legs. The refrigerator consumes belts like a goddam maniac. They time those things. They time them so when you finally paid for them, they're used up." (Miller, 2007, p. 56-57)

Willy's inner turmoil has been symbolically conveyed in the play. The opening scene of the play depicts a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile seeming home. This solid vault symbolizes the harsh realities of capitalist society that overshadow the delicate dreams and idealized vision of an individual like Willy. The tiny seeds that Willy buys signify his little hopes and dreams. But to his dismay, the backyard is not fertile anymore to grow anything. The infertile backyard stands for the hostile forces of society that resist the materialization of dreams. Willy's car is a metaphor for life. In Act I he loses control over it, then he repairs it and finally he smashes it up. Thus, in his quest to align dreams with reality, poor Willy remains chagrined.

Willy is a countryman of roots who takes the wrong route in mercantile world. His tragedy is universally relatable and poignant because he is not merely an individual but a philosophy, a belief, and a psychology. In his hopes, aspirations, expectations, mistakes, catastrophes and reconciliations, Willy is just like any common man. His tragedy is rooted in every man's struggle who wants to secure the future of his family. Willy is everyman whose illusions have made him incapable of dealing realistically with the problems of everyday life. (Fuller, 1977) He represents what urbanization, artificiality, modernity, consumerism and the blind chase of success is doing to every soul. His pang find echo in the bosom of every man who lives in a society where failure is a crime.

According to Miller, the individual and society are intrinsically interconnected, collectively constituting an integrated whole. Both the individual happiness and strong society depend on balancing myth and reality. Reality gives us experiences, factual knowledge, and teaches us practical lessons. Myth provides stories that encourage us to aim higher, adopt moral values, and find shared meaning within a group. Reality keeps individuals connected to the society and helps them deal with everyday problems sensibly. Myths help individual imagine new possibilities and inspire them to work towards common goals. Both reality and myth are important to understand life completely. Ignoring either can rob life of its charm. If we focus only on reality, life may seem dull, harsh, and monotonous. If we rely only on myths, we might lose touch with what is real. In order to effectively navigate the complexities of contemporary society, it is essential to recognise both the inspirational ideals and the concrete realities that underpin the American Dream. Karen Armstrong rightly observes that a myth is valid if it forces us to change our minds and hearts, gives us new hope, and compels us to live more fully. (Armstrong, 2008, p. 8)

Willy Loman a salesman by vocation, is a dreamer by volition. He is fond of daydreaming to such an extent that once driving, he suddenly started dreaming about the countryside. He forgot he was driving and lost control of the car. The world of dreams, illusions and false beliefs appears real to him. Willy is an incorrigible dreamer who pays the price of his dreams with his life. His death is a strong metaphor. It suggests not only Willy's death in corporeal sense but also the death of a dreamer within. Everyone around Willy interprets his dreams differently. Biff calls them "the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong." (Miller, 2007, p. 110) To Charley "A salesman is got to dream, boy It comes with the territory." (Miller, 2007, p. 111) Willy is dead but the legacy of his dreams has been passed on to his son Happy who affirms, "He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have-to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him." (Miller, 2007, p. 111) Willy's death compels the society to re-examine its norms, redefine the meaning of success and re-evaluate the worth of an individual. On the other hand, it exhorts the individual to reconsider his choices, review his limitations and reconcile his dreams with his reality.

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