

American Dream: A Marathon to Success

Amber Hasan*

ABSTRACT

American dream focuses on the post world war era that shows the human rat race; indulging on false perceptions to get the way in order to become rich overnight irrespective of attaining it through fair and ethical means. The author shows characters through Willy who wishes to become rich and enjoy the comfort of lives through short-cuts, a character opposite to his brother Ben who struggles to become one through hard work. The story also highlights the failures that one achieves not by good looks but due to false dreams and illusions; a myth braced during the post world war era.

Keywords: American dream, Disintegrations, Illusion, Existentialism

Introduction:

It is a natural desire for one to be better off than the other person. For this one has to be economically sound having good looks and being well liked. In this quest human beings are indulging in rat race, depending on false perceptions of being filthy rich overnight.

There are different implications of this concept for different individuals. Some people think that illusions will help them reach their goals. In order to achieve their motive they seize every opportunity irrespective of the fact that they achieve success through fair means or not. In the high noon of American World War people focused their energies towards upgrading their social and financial status. A study has been made by examining the works of Francis Scott Fitzgerald, in the 'The Great Gatsby', Arthur Miller in 'Death of a Salesman', John Steinbeck in 'The Grapes of Wrath' and 'Breakfast', Eugene O'Neill in 'Long Day's Journey into Night'. The study is an attempt to justify the false American Dream.

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller:

Death of a Sales Man is a modern play written by an American dramatist Arthur Miller. He was the contemporary of Eugene O Neill. He too was awarded with the Pulitzer Prize in appreciation for his works. We can say that he can be considered to be the experimental dramatist who created a novel genre in America. He discussed the social, psychological and materialistic issues of American Society in the post war period. He used to have correspondence with the famous writer of the era Eugene O'Neill and both of them were believers of the philosophy of Existentialism. According to this philosophy there is no purpose of human existence. A human being has to create his objective of life if he or she has to survive in this world full of sorrows. One has to stand on his own feet and choose his way of life just as we see in the poem of Robert Frost in 'The Road Not Taken', where correct decisions matter a lot to attain success in life

* Dr. HoD, Dept. of English, Benazir Bhutto Shaheed University, Karachi

Email: dr.amberhasan@gmail.com

Date of Receipt:15-02-2016

which lead you to your destination. Furthermore, in the poem 'Making a Fist', Naomi Shihab Nye the poet says that only that person can be successful in life who has the courage of facing difficulties and can make a fist. If you stop making a fist means you have given up struggle and cannot face the world.

In the play 'Death of a Salesman', Arthur Miller talks about his concept of American Dream and highlights the factors involved in achieving it. Through his character Willy Lowman who is ambitious for a meteoric rise Arthur shows that Willy is all the time thinking to become rich, possessing every comfort of life but by doing nothing, unlike his brother Ben who left him and went to Alaska and later on to Africa at the age of seventeen and came out from the jungle when he was twenty one and had become rich. He must have worked hard which is a positive way to earn money.

On the other hand, Willy Lowman only does daydreaming and never mentions about his products nor does he guide his sons Bill and Happy. After Willy's son Bill caught his father red handed involved with a women, he developed hatred towards his father as he does not consider him to be a loyal husband because of his relationship with a woman other than his wife. Charlie his neighbour a realistic person is also included in this marathon of becoming rich overnight.

Death of a Salesman basically presents that good luck and success depends on an attractive personality. The shattered beliefs of a common man in America were explicitly shown in this tragic drama. Eric Bentley a renowned critic has termed this play as the tragedy of a common man. He thinks that common man cannot be an epic hero of a traditional tragedy. He says:

“Willy Lowman is not a tragic hero of a traditional tragedy. Neither the feelings of pity and fear are aroused.”¹

In his opinion for a tragedy an epic hero is required but essentially the discerning reader feels that tragic irony lies in the fact that common man is caught in the mesh of success myth. It has been noticed that all characters are utterly defeated in the play. Willy Lowman A Salesman feels that he is very successful but actually he is not. When the play begins it is depicted that Willy is carrying the “two sample cases”. These two cases are like a burden of two sons of Willy Lowman. Biff Lowman with all his attractive and good looks is not successful in his life. He is well out of his 'boyhood'. He is thirty four years old. Willy can never make out what is wrong with him.

“A man with such personal attractiveness is lost? Biff Lowman is lost?”²

He feels that two of his sons are sturdy and have good personalities so working hard in studies is a futile effort. Willy's neighbour Charlie works hard and makes his way through, but Willy and Biff both think that this hard work is of no use. The reason as Willy puts it.

“He is liked but he is not well liked.”³

Charlie's son is considered as "anaemic" and "a pest" by Biff Lowman. He feels that his speeches with the words "University of Virginia" are a symbol of successful life ahead. The theme of "Personality Myth" has been highlighted and this theme has shattered the lives of the common men in America. Another important theme is the theme of defeatism. When the characters are analysed one by one, it is noticed that all of them live in their own world and all of them are utter failures. Linda has been introduced as caring and gentle figure who takes our sympathy. She tells Willy the basic problem.

"The problem is your mind is overactive Willy."⁴

Throughout the play it is seen that there are pronounced reverberations from the past. The play switches over from present to past and past to present. Willy indulges himself in reverie and recalls his red car which is significant as a symbol of good old days.

"The red chvvyI remember the way Biff used to Simonize that car."⁵

The red Chevrolet which took eighty thousand miles or eighty two thousand miles was a symbol of pride for Willy but the mortgages have broken down the common man. He worked and works till the time of death. The rich and hypocritical society around makes him a pauper. Willy has pointed it out very aptly.

"You pay and pay the installments and by the time you get it, theres nobody to live in it."⁶

The good looks and personal attractiveness fails and merit remains the order of that time. When Willy is fired from the firm after serving for so many years; it is the fall of a common man who never succeeds. The failure is due to his own false dreams and illusions. The myth of success is inflated and later on defeated by the Miller. He aptly remarks:

"This play is the play of a common man who suffers by getting disillusioned by the American dream of success."⁷

There is another theme that is the disintegration of values. The modern life has killed the values. Life has become mechanical and almost robotic. His warmth of feelings have been forgotten. The family is disintegrated because Willy got a shock from Biff because he could not realize his dream. Happy Lowman was ruined because of the company of ladies because he was manly and strong. But even Happy was unsuccessful in his life. In order to give money to Biff, Willy would get from the insurance company, Willy kills himself at the end. In the Requiem the whole family is dejected and their dreams are shattered and thought of tragic irony in the life of Willy Lowman. The theme of alienation is also pronounced. Biff retaliates, but he is stopped by Linda. The lady is desperate as a housewife and as a supporter. The myth has taken so many lives in America because people used to think that only good personality and personal contacts are everything. The people tried and tried but they could never achieve the status of 'a successful man'. Success at that time meant more and more money.

The modern life has separated the man from nature. Willy thinks that over population is the cause of the whole problem.

“Look at the lines of cars in the streets. Look at the houses. They simply stink.”⁸

He as a protagonist insists on having a natural life. He further says:

“you cannot raise a cannot in the backyard.”⁹

He recalls that his son Biff and he used to enjoy the swing in the tree but the atmosphere at present is polluted. It is unclear and seems junk cluttered which is so similar to the fog. Fog may be a symbol to hide the reality as we see in the character of Mary in Eugene O’Neill’s ‘novel Long Day’s Journey Into Night’.

The public has all the facilities but their lives are so mechanical that they cannot take time to look at the Nature’s beautiful forms. The artificiality of the urban life has been brought to light.

The dreamy world which allures every single American does not promise success. It is just like empty vessel makes much noise. The whole life they cater and nurture their ideals but in this hypocritical society they cannot make their way through. Critics have said,

“The tragedy shown in ‘Death of a Salesman’ is remediable. It is based on the true story of every common man.”¹⁰

So in the traditional sense of tragedy the Death of a Salesman does present all the characteristics. Yet in the fall of Willy Lowman the audiences do sympathize and empathize. According to Aristotle’s ‘Poetics’, tragedy in ancient Greece means that a hero should not be a common person and the cause of his fall is due to some flaw in his character and his death is due to error of judgment or ‘Hamartia’. As indicated by him there are two sorts of verse, epic and tragic which is in a general sense creative, becoming out of an inclination among individuals to emulate. Tragedy endeavors to stir pity and dread in the people who see the life of a gallant personality, feel sorry for his at various times shortcomings and are worried about his future enduring. Its main thought process is to impact a purgation of these feelings.

Arthur Miller has not mentioned anything directly against the capitalism. But in the way events and characters are portrayed, there is a hint that the tragic irony lies in the very fact the fact that Capitalism has made man crazy about making money. Common man is crazy about worldly comforts and superficial values. Money is like a camouflage everybody seems to be approaching regardless of the merit and means to get it. Only rich are considered successful. When Linda asks Willy to change the place from one city to another, he says:

“I am a new England man. They do not want me at New York.”¹¹

He also points out the fact that most probably he has grown old and fat that is why he is unsuccessful. The growing age has brought a negative change in his personality.

“I am old. I am fat. They laugh at me Linda.”¹²

The paranoia of attractive and strong personality does not vanish from his mind. He thinks that he would be successful eventually. Biff shatters all the hopes. Biff is a representative of youth of that time. ‘The lost man’ of America is shown in his figure. Linda thinks that it is because of his disinterest in studies that he is never able to cope up. The theme of a lost man is very significant as Willy says:

“Biff is well liked. He can never be lost.”¹³

The person who is well liked according to him is a successful man. The hint of music from the flute has been introduced right at the beginning and it is keeping with the themes of the play. The music of flute signifies the dreams of a common man. Throughout their lives the common men live in a façade and at the end they never achieve success. It is said, “Common man’s dream is never realized.”¹⁴

All the themes of the play refer to a single major problem. “The problem of entering too high hopes and lack of action”. The lack of action leaves the common man just like a machine which is a futile effort. He can never get rich this way.

William Bachman clearly brings out the negative elements in ‘Death of a Salesman’. He compares and analyses its presence in a common American. The common man is a hero.

Meteoric rise of a person is subject to consistent hard work. Nothing great has ever been achieved without hard work. Willy Loman wanted to achieve his goals of rising in the society but practically he did nothing substantial to realize his dreams. The social effect of ‘Death of a Salesman’, far surpasses the showy and abstract understanding, notwithstanding, Willy Loman and his disappointment and death have a status as characterizing social marvels both inside and outside of American fringe that started to be built up in the principal year of the play's life.¹⁵

Willy has maintained the wrong dreams all along: he dreamed of being well liked without hard work. Society has caused Willy to believe that the only way to be successful is to be well liked; he cares about perceptions rather than substance. Lomans live on charm and well liked rather than hard working to get success. Charley, his neighbour, serves as foil to Willy because he has achieved the American Dream. In Act 2 Charley points out to Willy whatever he has put so much focus on is worth nothing.

Arthur Miller paints a vivid picture of demands in society and the way in which one can succumb to them. Willy failed to realize his dreams because he had wrong dreams and because he does not know who he is. Biff was told from an early age, “As long as you are well liked you will be successful.”

He still is able to uncover his own version of the American Dream and discover who he truly is. Will Loman will remain an icon for generations to come and always hold a spot in the heart of many people. When considering the cultural context, the play is the reflection of the impact that society had on Willy, it addresses the dilemmas and questions why he had made the choices and how he tried to fulfill the American Dream, The character of Linda Lowman has been portrayed as a weak character which cannot be called faithful but absurd as she does not have the strength to point out that Willy's dreams were not real. Had she corrected him in the beginning, it would have saved Willy from the tragic end of committing a suicide. The following remark of Linda proves that she accepts Willy with all his faults.

“My husband, right or wrong.”¹⁶

She further says: “Not the finest character that ever lived. But he is a human being...he's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog.”

The play raises two questions for its audience. The questions are how much of Willy's fall is due to his own flaw of personality? And how much is his tragedy caused by the influence of a capitalist society?

Long Day's Journey into Night by Eugene O'Neill:

'Long Day's Journey into Night' is a play based on the story of James Tyrone who was not a king or prince. However, the meaning of tragedy in Greek drama made sense to O'Neill. He saw humanity tortured, tormented and in anguish, like in the tragedies of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides. In Greek dramatization, the battle is amongst man and divine beings. In O'Neill's play there is battle between the all three time periods of man (i.e. past, present and future). O'Neill's appalling heroes are on the thoughts of Freud and Jung, in which cognizant conscience is, as it were, in charge of their tragedies. O'Neill thought about disaster as something that praises life. He says that in itself life is nothing. It is a fantasy that keeps us battling, willing and living. In his play O'Neill has attempted to highlight this event of life. There are frequent use of symbols for e.g. the fog, which is O'Neill's most important symbol of a human being's inability to know himself or other men, or his destiny. In Act I of this drama, the sun was shining. In Act II the haze gathers; in Act III a wall of fog stands thick against the window panes. Through the fog, a foghorn moans at intervals, followed by a warning chorus of ship's bells__ symbolising the dismal future of the family. The image of the haze has been communicated essentially through redundant sound impact; there are discussions which render an extra layer of meaning. Discussion, in a way, is another method for concealing one's considerations. By presenting a poem it is probable for the character to express emotions not generally uncovered. The play covers a day in the life of a family; in which things happen and which uncovers the entire past of the family and exposes each part of their relationship. It is profoundly awful however with no vicious emotional activity. At the last drap they are still attached. Each of them

is liable but then pure. They hatred, love and pity others. They comprehend but then don't see each other's feelings. They excuse however are obviously bound never to have the capacity to overlook the hurt they have dispensed on each other. All the Tyrones are doomed to destroy and be victimized not only by each other but by their dead. For the dead have willed their legacy of infection, liquor abuse and medication compulsion and have reviled them with more profound ills of estrangement, strife and self obliteration. At the point when Jamie whines about his dad's parsimony, Mary shields her significant other and reminds her child that his dad had worked all his life so such Jamie's reality may get to be better. She acknowledges that Tyrone had a few flaws, yet says that there is no individual on the planet who could be faultless. "Remember your father is getting old, Jamie. You really ought to show more consideration."¹⁷

James Tyrone is accused for having enough money and being a miser. Here material and wants are again given importance. The play is a mind-set piece which places one into a specific mood. The force of agony gets to be distinctly excruciating towards the end, since it is the torment of the living. As death I the sign of all of the afflictions, yet in this play, there is no demise. Dissimilar to 'Death of a Salesman', O'Neill's idea of tragedy is a blend of cutting edge mental determinism and the resignation of antiquated Irish or Greek dramatization and myths.

The Great Gatsby by Francis Scott Fitzgerald:

The character of Gatsby in the novel The Great Gatsby has a dream to become an equal of the Buchanans and their peers who belong to a higher status. He began his aspiration towards higher social class before he met Daisy but she came to symbolize his goal and by winning her he would have achieved his ambitions. Even green colour is an important symbol of Gatsby's dream which characterize money and hope. After getting the glimpses into Daisy's glamorous life his dreams moved towards the aspirations to become a member of upper class and to have a large fortune.

The Great Gatsby brings into the lime light the time period of 1920s and it discusses the circumstances of America Post World War 1 and Gatsby's pursuance of American Dream and its failure. In The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald portrayed the American dream as a brutal reality of people's life and shows the condition of the society where people were lost because of the influences of the Great War.

The American dream was also laid down in the Declaration of Thomas Jefferson which professed that life, freedom and the search of joyfulness are the primary rights of the individuals.

Jefferson expressed this in the following words:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."¹⁸

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck:

There are defiled dreams of Gatsby spoke to the time of the Post War in America and the western world, in the Great Gatsby. The novel infiltrated the soul of the period; through it he gave a loyal depiction of the truth of the period. The Post-War period was recognized by the otherworldly misery. The picture of the waste land was usual in the 20's, particularly after T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. It was based on the Christian Tradition, the Indian, Chinese and Oriental Myths, an assortment of pictures of dry land stones and indiscreet characters to make a noteworthy photo of the anguish of isolation and inability to love. The bewildered picture of the western human progress appeared in the poem mirrored the picture drawn about a country, a place where material ownership has been supplanted by other arrangement of standards and goals. A large portion of the commentators of Fitzgerald's works have seen that the significant topic of the Great Gatsby was the defiled dream of Gatsby that was wrecked by riches with its inadequacies on the murmur soul.

The Valley of Ashes in the novel gives a picture of the urban society with its ugliness and despair. Indeed it is; a large deserted land for the wastes of the modern city and industry, the symbol of a society that worships materialism, we can associate it with Eliot's symbolism of the waste land in its sterility and death.

The character of Gatsby in the novel Gatsby also has a dream. His dream is to become an equal of the Buchanans and their peers who belong to a higher social class. He began his aspiration towards higher social class before he met Daisy but she came to symbolize his goal and by winning her he would have achieved his ambitions. Even green colour is an important symbol of Gatsby's dream which characterize money and hope. After getting the glimpses into Daisy's glamorous life his dreams moved towards the aspirations to become a member of upper class and to have a large fortune. The Great Gatsby brings into the lime light the time period of 1920s and it discusses the circumstances of America post World War 1 and Gatsby's pursuance of American Dream and its failure. In The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald portrayed the American dream as a brutal reality of peoples' lives and shows the condition of the society where people were lost because of the influences of the Great War.

The Californian thoughts towards the 'Okies' is generally pessimistic in the novel "The Grapes of Wrath". For instance, Tom is blamed for eagerness by a work place guard and Ma and Rose of Sharon are dealt in an irrespective manner by a policeman. However, there are Californians who are friendlier towards the "Okies, as an employer that Tom experiences. Besides, it is this characteristic into various classes that powers the "Okies" to sort out themselves and keep up government camps with a specific end goal to test this structure. The "Okies" likewise look upon themselves as a social class not quite the same as the Californians. The social arrangement of California depended on station framework since the Joads have no chance to outperform from others in the public eye. Therefore social versatility was precluded.

There are different groups in Loomba's book which often differ in skin colour. The Californians and the 'Okies' are white. In this novel John Steinbeck describes various characteristics like settlements on ditch banks and speaking with a slightly nasal drawl that was considered as "touchstones for a stereotype of the Okie as a naturally slovenly, degraded, primitive subspecies of white American. According to Loomba, characteristics that are ascribed to the "other" are often negative such as laziness, violence, greed, primitivism and irrationality. It is note worthy that the different roles that the "other" can be assigned depends on the surrounding circumstances. Therefore the division between "self" and "other" justifies the prejudices and suspicion the Joads are met with in California.

The early settlers fled from Europe to America because of the monarchy which was still suppressing the middle classes. Being fed up with the old obsolete system and wanted to leave their past behind. Goethe has emphasized the opinions about peoples past which was determined by the monarchs in the line "You don't have decayed castles" embodied their hope and showed that the old system was out dated. They preferred to make a new start looking optimistically into the future which is very significant for Americans today.

There are several examples of real happiness and contentment just as we read in the short story of John Steinbeck's 'Breakfast'. In this story the writer has narrated a short and common event. He has related his personal experience to prove that things do not bring happiness; it is our attitude towards life and God that ensures it. In the story the characters who were poor cotton pickers, showed their gratefulness by saying 'W've been having good food since twelve days", as they were lucky to enjoy good food for twelve days and the rest of the days they remained malnourished or even hungry, yet they were happy. But they did not complain, moreover they offered breakfast to the visitors on a cold morning although they did not have enough for themselves. Here we also get the theme of sharing and deriving joy out of it.

CONCLUSION:

Arthur Miller has not mentioned anything directly against capitalism. But in the way events and the manner in which characters are portrayed, there is a hint that the tragic irony lies in the very fact, the fact that Capitalism has made man crazy about making money. Common man is crazy about materialistic gains, luxuries, worldly comforts and superficial values. Money is like a camouflage everybody seems to be running after regardless of the merit and means to get it.

Arthur Miller has not mentioned anything directly against capitalism. But in the way events and characters are depicted, there is a hint that the tragic irony lies in the very fact, the fact that Capitalism has made man crazy about making money. Common man is crazy about worldly comforts and superficial values. Money is like a camouflage everybody seems to be approaching regardless of the merit and means to get it.

The financial, moral and social decline of characters makes it a modern version of Aristotelian tragedy. According to Aristotle man is a social being who is supposed to communicate with other people in the society. He is supposed to fulfill his responsibilities by carrying out his duties consciously and thereafter enjoy the benefits to be called an honourable member of the family. Family being the first school where an individual learns discipline and further develops as a good human being is the basic aim of education. When an individual does not conform to ethical behavior and follow a political system that would administer the welfare of human beings as a single unit then there is a total disorder in the society. Aristotle was in favour of social unity as he considered man as a social animal who would not only enjoy being member of society but is reminded that he also had some obligations. Can we say that the suicide of Willy Lowman for the sake of his sons was a tragedy, in 'Death of a Salesman'? Are Willy's perceptions of being well liked for a meteoric rise and success without any arduous effort violating the ethical behavior in a society raises many questions? Willy could not succeed as he was a hypocrite.

Ultimate success is achieved when you are what you are and with all your shortcomings you are accepted. The denial of reality means you are surrendering your satisfaction of being what you really are. It is aptly quoted by William Shakespeare "Life is a dream full of sound and fury signifying nothing". Without acceptance of regulation, ethical values and the power of law there is no freedom. The society in its present form has been a time-consuming journey and excruciating process which does not require further evolution, but priority should be given to the stability of the existing institutions.

REFERENCES

1. Bloom, H. (1991). Willy Loman. New York: Chelsea House Publishers. p.2
2. Miller, A. (1972). Death of a Salesman. New York: Viking Publishers. p.5
3. Bloom, H. (1988). Boom's Modern Critical Interpretations. New York: Chelsea House Publishers
4. Miller, A. (1994). Death of a Salesman. Boston: Twayne Publishers. p.4
5. Ibid. p.8
6. Ibid. p.52
7. Brater, E. (2013). A Student's Handbook to the Plays of Arthur Miller. Boston. p.84
8. Miller, A. (1994). Death of a Salesman. Boston: Heinemann Library. p.10
9. Miller, A. (1994). Death of a Salesman. Boston: Penguin Publishing Group. p.6
10. Ibid.
11. The New Encyclopaedia Britannica. (1992). Vol.23. p.167
12. Miller, A. (1972). Death of a Salesman. New York: Viking Publishers. p.5
13. Miller, A. (1994). Death of a Salesman. Boston: Penguin Publishing Group. p.23
14. Ibid. p.5
15. Murphy, B. (Fall 1998). "Willy Loman: Icon of Business Culture". Michigan Quarterly Review 37(4). New York: Michigan Publishing. pp.755-766
16. Lazarus, E. (1903). The New Colossus. New York: Kessing Publishers
17. Steinbeck, J. (1938). Breakfast. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group
18. Avey, A. E. (1874). A Handbook in the History of Philosophy. New York: Barnes & Noble Inc. p.36
19. O'Neill, E. (1956). Long Day's Journey into Night. New Heaven & London: Yale University Press. p.60