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### **Which Way to the Dream?**

In *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller illustrates various ways to achieve the American dream, a happy and successful life: Willy projects a good image of himself to others; Ben represents luck and exploitation; Bernard strives to get ahead through hard work. Using Willy's multifaceted failure and Bernard's prosperity, Miller devastatingly condemns the attempt to achieve "quick and easy" success by popularity, and praises the honest results of hard work.

Some see the play as a direct attack on the American Dream. It is, only if "the Dream" is taken in a very narrow sense. Harold Clurman explains:

[T]here are two versions of the American dream. The historical American dream is the promise of a land of freedom with opportunity and equality for all.... But...since 1900, the American dream has become distorted to the dream of business success. A distinction must be made even in this. The original premise of our dream of success...was that enterprise, courage and hard work were the keys to success. Since the end of the First World War this too has changed. Instead of the[se] ideals...we have salesmanship. Salesmanship implies a certain element of fraud: the ability to put over or sell a commodity regardless of its intrinsic usefulness. The goal of salesmanship is to...earn a profit—the accumulation of profit being an unquestioned end in itself (212-3).

More intuitively, the theme of the play attacks a certain method of achieving the American Dream, not the Dream itself. Conventionally, the "American Dream" is thought of as "an American ideal of a happy and successful life to which all may aspire" (American Heritage Dictionary). In the play, those who succeed and those who fail all seek this definition of the American Dream. What differentiates them is how they attempt to make the Dream reality.

Willy tries what looks like an easy way to the top: popularity. As Charlie says in the Requiem, he floats along "way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine" (Death 865). Willy incessantly tries to manipulate others' perceptions of him. He tries to deceive his

wife, pretending the fifty dollars he brings home is his pay; it is really loaned from Charley (818). He tries to deceive Charley by repeatedly claiming he has a job; in fact, he was just fired (840). Willy makes it plain that he is not after mere respect. Predicting he will eventually start a business, he confidently asserts he will become “Bigger than Uncle Charley! Because Charley is not – liked. He’s liked, but he’s not – well liked” (802). Willy’s craved popularity and business success always seem to be just one step away. All Willy needs is that magical moment when his personality makes him “well liked.” Early in his career, he says, “I’m very well liked in Hartford. You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don’t seem to take to me.... I don’t know the reason for it, but they just pass me by. I’m not noticed” (805). This moment is typical for Willy. He vacillates between fantasy and reality, confusedly trying to determine what separates them. “I talk too much.... I joke too much! ... I’m fat. I’m very foolish to look at, Linda.... I’m not dressing to advantage, maybe” (805-6). Christopher Bigby characterizes him well: “He is a man, blindly aware of some insufficiency, who searches for the key to his sense of incompleteness and failure; he is a failed actor, trying to get by on a smile and a shoe shine, playing out a drama whose text he can neither clearly see nor understand” (Portable xxx).

Willy fails in several respects. The most obvious is that he never achieves the financial status which he so envies. Willy’s earning power decreases with age; his seniority does not advance him, and the fame of which he dreams eludes him. His wife Linda tells their sons Biff and Hap, “He works for a company thirty-six years this March, opens up unheard-of-territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his salary away.... For five weeks he’s been on straight commission, like a beginner, an unknown” (Death 817). In fact, the boss fires him the day he asks for a more palatable position in the company (832). His pride broken, Willy continues to battle mortgage and appliance payments until the day he dies (805, 865-6). Even

Willy's attempts to hide his financial weakness fail. His wife knows that he borrows money from Charley (818). Biff and Happy find this out through their mother (818). Charley himself knows that Willy makes no money in his sales job (840). No one else cares. Only Willy is keeping up a pretense of extraordinary earning power.

Even in suicide, Willy fails to enrich the rest of the family. Probably his twenty thousand dollar life insurance policy applies only to accidental death. Linda already confided to Biff and Hap, "The insurance inspector came. He said that they have evidence. That all these accidents in the last year – weren't...accidents...." (818). Linda related that someone had seen him deliberately smash through the railing of a bridge, and that she herself had found a rubber pipe with which Willy intended to gas himself (819). As a dead corpse, Willy remains poor.

Willy not only fails to achieve wealth, but also plods through life unfulfilled and unhappy. First, he loses his peace of mind. Early in his career, he commits adultery with a prostitute in Boston, in part to make him "feel that he is an important salesman and a powerful man" (Ribkoff 50). The woman tells Willy that she picked him because he is "so sweet. And such a kidder" (Death 807). She tells him just what he wants to hear: "I'll put you right through to the buyers" (807). The memory of these events, however, repeatedly returns to pain his memory (806-7, 838-9, 849-54). Willy sees Linda struggle to make the payments, and even mend her stockings to save money (807). Her mending is a sharp prick at Willy's conscience, a constant reminder of the fact that he used her new stockings to pay the prostitute (827).

Contributing to Willy's unhappiness is the fact that his family is steadily deteriorating. In Linda's words, Hap is a "philandering bum" and Biff wanders out West aimlessly, coming home only to fight with Willy (793, 818). In many ways, Hap resembles his father. Attempting to achieve wealth and prominence overnight, Hap deflowers his bosses' fiancés, takes bribes from

manufacturers, and awaits the death of the company's merchandise manager so he can take his position (797). Meanwhile, wanting instant happiness, he rents his own New York City apartment, buys his own car, and surrounds himself with "plenty of women" (798). He uses sex as a means to get ahead, just like Willy did. He tells Biff, "Sure, the guy's in line for the vice-presidency of the store. I don't know what gets into me, maybe I just have an overdeveloped sense of competition or something, but I went and ruined her.... And he's the third executive I've done that to" (799). This sentiment is very much like Willy's satisfaction when the whore promised to get him "right through to the buyers" (807). Hap is a disgrace to his parents. He does not give his father enough money to support him throughout his failing mental condition (817). Hap's hedonistic lifestyle disgusts Linda (818). What pains her much more is that he is willing abandon his father in a restaurant to destroy another girl's virginity (856-7).

It is Biff's failure that breaks Willy's heart, however. Biff had such promise in high school that three large universities wanted him (834). His success seemed so sure. "Bernard can get the best marks in school...but...you are going to be five times ahead of him," Willy predicted (803). There was just one small glitch: Biff failed math. In itself, that was no big deal – he would make it up in the summer (838). Nonetheless, it was a time of insecurity for Biff; feeling like he failed his father, he traveled to Boston to get Dad's help and reassurance (848, 852). But when Biff saw Willy give Linda's stockings to a prostitute and lie to cover up his adultery, Biff "[gave] up his life," seemingly just to spite his father (839). Now Biff seems bent on destroying Willy's big plans for him. He wanders out West, stealing and taking odd jobs which hardly support him (796-7). He even spends three years in prison for his repeated theft (861).

Willy's dissatisfaction stems from more than a broken family and broken dreams. He loves working with his hands, being outdoors, and tending a good-sized garden, but he lives most of his life in the middle of Brooklyn. He displays his natural abilities best when remodeling his own house. Biff comments, "There were a lot of nice days. When he'd come home from a trip; or on Sundays, making the stoop; finishing the cellar; putting on the new porch; when he built the extra bathroom; and put up the garage. You know something, Charley, there's more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made" (865). Charley agrees, "Yeah. He was a happy man with a batch of cement" (865). Linda chimes in: "He was so wonderful with his hands" (865). But Willy refuses to select a career in which he could use his natural gift, because he sees carpentry to be beneath his blood. "Even your grandfather was better than a carpenter," he retorts when Biff suggests they were meant to work outdoors with their hands (820). Willy first wants to prove he can be a success in the cut-throat business world of New York City. The sad reality is that, at over sixty years old, Willy still looks forward to moving out into the country and running a small farm. "You wait, kid, before it's all over we're gonna get a little place out in the country, and I'll raise some vegetables, a couple of chickens..." (Death 825). Meanwhile, he makes insistent but vain attempts to plant a garden between his little house and the towering apartments around it (827, 855, 857). He even tries to convince Ben (and himself, perhaps) that he can still hunt in his backyard. "It's Brooklyn, I know, but we hunt too.... [T]here's snakes and rabbits and – that's why I moved out here" (813). His battle with city life is just one more disheartening result of pursuing success by popularity. For, in order to become popular, one needs to be surrounded by people; but not many people live in the countryside. Besides, there is not much money in farming or carpentry. Therefore, in order to gain wealth and popularity, Willy sacrifices his desire to work with his hands and to live on a peaceful farm.

As mentioned earlier, Willy commits suicide. Willy originally tried to prove his success and to right his family's poor condition by bringing home more money (807). Realizing that will not happen, he tries to give his family a fresh start by committing suicide and leaving them twenty thousand dollars; it is his final attempt to prove his hitherto unseen personal success. He reasons that the twenty thousand will reimburse Linda for her years of mending stockings and pinching pennies to make up for his failure as a husband and breadwinner (857-8). He thinks it will also reestablish his dysfunctional family: it will give Biff the boost he needs to start a successful business and thereby exalt the family name (863). Surely it will prove to Biff Willy is no phony, no fake – that he is popular! “Because [Biff] thinks I’m nothing, see, and so he spites me. But the funeral...will be massive! All the old-timers with the strange license plates – that boy will be thunder-struck, Ben, because he never realized – I am known! ... I am known,...and he’ll see it with his eyes once and for all. He’ll see what I am, Ben!” (858).

Willy's suicide, intended to prove his success, simply drives a nail in the coffin of his fantasy; only Charley and Bernard join the small family to puzzle over his final erratic plunge (864). Even in death, Willy attempted to buy the kinds of success that do not come with money. In the end, the family splinters. Biff moves away, utterly rejecting the dream of starting his own business (865). Hap, instead of recognizing his father's errors, resolves to repeat them. “I’m not licked that easily. I’m staying right in this city, and I’m gonna beat this racket! ... All right, boy. I’m gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. 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” (865). Willy meets God having chased “the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong” (865). Bigsby comments, “It is not that Willy Loman has no values. It

is just that he believes that his spiritual needs can be satisfied with material goods” (Portable xxx).

Ben, Willy’s older brother, represents another way to achieve the American Dream, violence and luck. Ben’s disdain for morals is obvious when he visits Willy’s young family. Willy exclaims to his sons, “Listen to this. This is your Uncle Ben, a great man! Tell my boys, Ben!” (812). Ben responds, “Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And...I was rich” (812). His remark is extremely cryptic; he gives no details about what he did in the jungle. He simply walked out rich. Clearly, the details are scandalous or even criminal. When Willy begs him to explain how he became rich so quickly, Ben more than hints that his methods were cruel. Ben illustrates his philosophy powerfully. As young Biff boxes Ben, Ben trips him, which is against the rules of boxing, and threateningly places the point of his umbrella directly above his eye. His brief explanation reinforces his poignant lesson: “Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You’ll never get out of the jungle that way” (Death 813). Ben coldly exploits others to achieve wealth.

Willy tries to mimic his brother’s callousness, but exploits others on a smaller scale. In Ben’s presence, Willy commands Biff and Hap to steal from the nearby construction site: “Go right over to where they’re building the apartment house and get some sand” (813). He boasts that this is not an isolated case of theft. “You shoulda seen the lumber they brought home last week. At least a dozen six-by-tens worth all kinds a money” (813-4). Willy wants his sons to exploit others just like Ben, if that is what it takes to acquire wealth quickly and easily. The important difference is that Ben puts no limits on his exploitation, even using violence when it suits his purpose, whereas Willy does not commit crimes worse than petty theft. Unlike Willy, Ben does not worry about earning respect, much less popularity.

Ben's trip to Africa illustrates his reliance on luck as well as violence to achieve wealth. He gambled with the risk of disease and the danger of retaliation by those he exploited, enduring the discomfort of a swelteringly hot foreign land. Ben's willingness to take risks distinguishes his method of attaining wealth from Willy's. Toward the end of his life, Willy imagines or remembers Ben saying, "[It] does take a great kind of a man to crack a jungle.... The jungle is dark but full of diamonds, Willy.... One must go in to fetch a diamond out" (862-3). Although Ben's quick acquisition of wealth motivates Willy to seek out his own shortcuts to success, Willy's are more comfortable and less risky: popularity and strategic adultery. While Willy works as a salesman in New York City, Ben chases diamonds in Africa.

No one can dispute Ben's financial success. He was already rich at twenty one years of age (812). However, whether or not Ben achieves the happiness so central to the American Dream is not as firmly established in the play. He has much to hide; hence his frequent attempts to appear rushed when Willy or Linda express interest in how he became rich. For example, when Linda exclaims with fascination, "Diamond mines!", Ben quickly responds, "Yes, my dear. But I've only a few minutes..." (812). Later, he glances at his watch and says, "I have an appointment in Ketchikan Tuesday week [sic]" (812). One can only speculate whether or not he really does have such an appointment. But in either case, his is not an enviable position. Either he really is always rushed, always driven to catch the next train and get the next diamond, or in shame he needs to hide who he really is and what he has really done.

Bernard's path to success is quite different than both Willy's and Ben's. Bernard works hard in school to prepare for the business world. As a young man in high school, he is "earnest and loyal, a worried boy" (803). A hardworking, high-strung academic type, Bernard is not particularly popular. In Biff's words, "He's liked, but he's not well liked" (803). He is a thorn

in Willy's side; Bernard constantly reminds him of the hard, cold facts. When he comes to remind Biff he needs to do his math homework to avoid flunking the course, he tells Willy, "Just because he printed University of Virginia on his sneakers doesn't mean they've got to graduate him, Uncle Willy!" (803). This comment attacks Willy's philosophy: "Be liked and you will never want" (804). Bernard's blunt realism sticks a pin in Willy's bubble of dreams. Willy growls, "What're you talking about? With scholarships to three universities they're gonna flunk him? ... Don't be a pest, Bernard. (*To his boys.*) What an anemic!" (803). Although he appears pesky, Bernard "[thinks] well of Biff" and admires his popular, athletic cousin (838). "I loved him," Bernard tells Willy much later. It is out of concern that Bernard warns Willy Biff is flunking math (803, 807-8), driving without a license (808), and being chased by a watchman for stealing (814). Bernard is a picture of honesty, scholastic industry, and legality.

Bernard achieves the American Dream. He becomes a prominent lawyer, even arguing a case before the Supreme Court (839). He has free time to stop by his father's office, have a bottle of bourbon, and play tennis with a rich friend (837, 839). Without plaguing guilt and a disintegrating family, Bernard has the peace of mind to relax and enjoy himself. When Willy comes into Charley's office to ask for money, babbling as he relives the past, Bernard "sits whistling to himself," with his feet up on the table (836). Willy would never allow himself to be seen whistling; it might negatively impact his image (820)! Bernard, though, is a "self-assured young man" who does not need to project a positive image of himself (836). Therefore, he does not even mention to Willy that he is about to argue before the Supreme Court (839).

Not only does Bernard achieve wealth and happiness, but he also retains his compassion for the Lomans. Just as his father Charley so often does, Bernard speaks candidly with Willy, trying to make him face life realistically. When Willy asks him why Biff "didn't...ever catch

on,” Bernard replies, “He never trained himself for anything” (837). Later in the conversation, he presses Willy to recount his meeting with Biff in Boston after Biff flunked math, correctly pinpointing that meeting as the turning point in Biff’s life (838-9). Bernard does not cavalierly dismiss Willy’s worries and send him out of his office like Willy’s employer Howard did earlier. Rather, he frankly addresses Willy’s questions until Willy himself ends the conversation when he can no longer bear the truth Bernard presses him to consider, i.e., that Biff’s failure was a result of their encounter in Boston (839). Bernard is compassionate even when Willy commits suicide. He and his father Charley are the only two to attend Willy’s funeral besides Linda, Biff, and Hap (864). Bernard is not only interested in himself. By grieving with Willy’s family, he shows his love despite the fact that when he was young Willy often yelled at him (803, 807-8, 839) and Biff cheated off of his papers (807), taking advantage of him (838). Bernard’s compassion outlives the man who forfeited it long ago. The abuses of Willy and Biff did not impede Bernard’s success.

Willy, Ben, and Bernard illustrate different pathways to the American Dream. Relying on personality to gain popularity, Willy achieves neither popularity nor the wealth he imagined would attend it. Success retreats like a grand mirage on the horizon. As he chases it, he loses his peace of mind and Biff’s admiration. His family falls apart. But the troubles in his family serve only to fixate his attention and bank his hopes more and more on future fulfillment of his dreams. As Bigsby describes, “For Willy Loman, meaning always lay in the future. His life was ‘kind of temporary’ as...he projected a dream of tomorrow that would redeem his empty and troubling present” (“Poet” 4).

Many authors assert that society or the capitalist system destroyed Willy. For example, Helge Nilsen declares, “In *Death of a Salesman* the jobless Willy Loman has become mentally

disturbed, his suicide for the sake of money an eloquent testimony to the corrosive effects of the tyrannical success ideal extolled by his society. Willy is a victim...of the logic of a capitalism which says that human worth is proportional to economic development” (155). Bernard proves otherwise. A member of the same capitalist system as Willy, Bernard not only succeeds financially, but also retains his peace of mind and compassion for others. Willy does represent a segment of the population, whose success ideal is limited to the accumulation of money. Many others, however, as represented by Bernard and his father Charley, have a broader, more balanced view of success. Bernard represents a real part of American society.

Bernard is a picture of the American Dream achieved through academic diligence and hard work. Ben achieves financial success through criminal exploitation of others and gambling with his future, but he is constantly watching his clock and catching trains in his restless chase for wealth. He dies in Africa, the place where he became wealthy as a young man. Willy's quick and easy route of popularity reveals itself to be a long, thorny, dead-end path. He loses his reputation, his family, his peace of mind, and his dream of comfortable country living in pursuit of wealth he never attains.

By these three characters, Miller praises honest success gained by hard work. He reveals the personal and familial sacrifices one makes by attempting shortcuts to success. Willy's willingness to betray his wife's trust by committing adultery and paying the prostitute with Linda's clothing destroys Willy's peace of mind. His fixation on quick and easy financial success drives him to live an unnatural, phony life of pretended popularity and wealth – leaving his family, his natural abilities, and his instinctive desires to rot. As Miller says it, “[Willy] has taken on a new—a social—personality which is calculated to ensure his material success. In so doing he has lost his essential—his real—nature, which is contradictory to his assumed one, until

he is no longer able to know what *he* truly wants, what *he* truly stands for. In that sense he has sold himself... [He] is Everyman who finds he must create another personality in order to make his way in the world, and therefore has sold himself' (qtd. in Fuller 242-3). Bernard is the successful child of a hard-working, honest entrepreneur. He is compassionate, mature, assured, and self-controlled – free from guilt and the need for others' admiration. He achieves wealth and prominence, not through abandoning everything else to attain them, but through doing each day's work diligently and forgetting about how others perceive him.

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