

# Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman in the Context of the American Dream

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i  
pedagogije

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**Drama „Smrt trgovačkog putnika“ Arthura Millera u kontekstu  
američkog sna**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

Osijek, 2019.

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Dream**

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Jadranka Zlomislić, Assistant Professor

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the impact of the corrupted American Dream on Willy Loman's family, with a particular emphasis on Willy Loman's disillusionment about the meaning of the American Dream and its attainment. By analysing the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*, the aim of this paper is to show how Willy's misconception of achieving the American Dream led to a miserable and unsatisfying life for not only Willy, but the whole Loman family. The cause of Willy Loman's demise was brought about by his obsession with the American Dream and his delusion that being well-liked, popular and physically attractive would lead to success and material wealth. Willy's delusions of the American Dream caused not only his failure, but also the failure of his sons. The different ways to achieve the American Dream in the play will be crucial for understanding how Willy's dream was a misconception. On the one hand, the characters of Willy, Happy and Biff will be introduced as the characters whose misconceptions of the Dream caused negative consequences and even the death of the dreamer. In contrast, Charley and Bernard will be the main examples of characters who show that the American Dream is possible if one recognizes its true values and what it takes to achieve it. Finally, in *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller calls attention to reasons for the downfall of the American Dream and hints at ways to reestablish the true values and the future of the American Dream.

**Keywords:** American Dream, *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller, values



## Introduction

This paper explores the different views of the American Dream presented in *Death of a Salesman* and highlights Willy Loman's disillusionment about the meaning of the American Dream and its attainment. The aim of this paper is to show how Willy's misconception of achieving the American Dream led to a miserable and unsatisfying life for Willy and his whole family. The cause of Willy Loman's demise was brought about by his obsession with the American Dream and his delusion that being well-liked, popular and physically attractive would lead to success and material wealth.

The first chapter explains the history of the Dream: its origin, evolution, and decline with a focus on both the positive values of the American Dream and the devaluing of these values that led to the corruption of the Dream. The second chapter represents the life of Arthur Miller and his view of the American Dream in general. The third chapter explores the meaning of the concept of the American Dream for the characters in *Death of a Salesman*. The different views of the American Dream of Willy, Biff, Happy, Linda, Charley, Bernard, Ben, Willy's father and Howard are analysed, as well as the consequences of their beliefs. There is a particular emphasis on Willy Loman as the protagonist of the play. After the characterization of Willy, his delusion regarding the American Dream is highlighted, especially the harmful effect on his sons. This chapter also looks at some of the symbols in the play that are related to the American Dream. These symbols are seeds, diamonds, the rubber pipe and Dave Singleman. The symbols are crucial for understanding the concept of the American Dream in the play. Furthermore, the end of the chapter is an attempt to distinguish the positive values of the American Dream from the negative values. Finally, the conclusion underlines the devaluing of the true values of the American Dream and suggests how to restore the positive values in order to make the American Dream achievable for everyone.

## 1. The History and the Decline of the American Dream

The American Dream has many definitions. According to Collins English Dictionary, the American Dream is “the U.S. ideal according to which equality of opportunity permits any American to aspire to high attainment and material success” (“American Dream”). It is believed to be coined by the Puritans, i.e. Calvinists that came to America. Calvinists believed that “mankind is doomed to eternal damnation,” except for a group called “The Elect,” who were elected by God (Pidgeon 178). Pidgeon stated that the Puritans wanted to find out who the chosen ones were, and they came to believe that “the possession of material things might be an indication” (Pidgeon 178). It was not long before they started to relate wealth to God’s mercy, and that hard work and prayer was the way to achieve wealth. The Puritans also believed that everyone had an equal chance of success and that if they work hard enough, all their sins would be forgiven. Consequently, the pursuit of wealth became a goal and the concept of the American Dream was created.

Some other factors contributed to the making of the American Dream. One of them is the Declaration of Independence where it is stated that “all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” (Cullen 38). Transcendentalism also coined the American Dream because it included individualism in the Dream and it softened the Puritan idea that success only depends on God. It showed men “that they, as individuals, were to lead the way” (Pidgeon 179). Therefore, “out of the combination of puritanism, democracy and transcendentalism emerged the term ‘rugged individualism’ that describes an inner-directed, individualistic approach to the acquisition of material wealth, an approach which every man is free to take” (Pidgeon 179). The American Dream became a dream that every individual can achieve because every individual has an equal chance to succeed.

With individualism as a part of the American Dream there was an emphasis on competition which became a way of life in a world where there is no working together and where the chance to succeed depends solely on the individual. Now, it was obvious that not every individual can succeed, only the better one. The Dream started to decline and corrupt as soon as wealth, and not salvation from God, became the goal. On the one hand, the rich were getting richer, while on the other, many of the less fortunate found it almost impossible to achieve the American Dream by starting at the very bottom. Thus, the people who already had the wealth and success that came with the Dream started to run the society while the less fortunate were left disillusioned. The Dream and its values were now corrupted and had lost their significance.

## 2. Arthur Miller's Life and His View on the American Dream

Many writers criticized the American Dream in their works. One of them was the screenwriter and playwright Arthur Miller. He was born in Harlem, New York, in 1915 to an immigrant family of Polish and Jewish descent. He attended the University of Michigan before he started to write plays. Miller had three wives, of which the most famous was Marilyn Monroe. He is considered one of the greatest American playwrights and his greatest plays are *All My Sons*, *A View from the Bridge*, *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman*. *Death of a Salesman* brought Miller many outstanding awards such as: the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critic's Circle Award and the Tony for Best Play. Miller died on February 10, 2005 of heart failure; he was 89 years old ("Arthur Miller Biography").

Miller derived his inspiration to write plays from his large family, and that is how *Death of a Salesman* came to be written. According to Bigsby, though Miller would explain the play's origin by saying that it is connected to a family member who had big plans for his sons that did not happen, "there is a more personal genesis for this play about a believer in the American Dream who struggles with a knowledge of his failure" (100). Miller was born into a wealthy family and his father owned a successful clothing business. As a result of the Great Depression their business was financially ruined as was the American Dream of this immigrant family. The play is not about his father, but it is about a certain incident "that had brought home to him what it was to be a believer confronted with daily evidence of his own incapacities" (Bigsby 100). Bigsby stated that the moment when Isadore Miller was forced to borrow money for the subway from his son was "a critical moment in their relationship as it was also a sudden reminder of where America had failed so many of those who believed in the inevitability of success in a country which presented itself as specially blessed" (100). Miller had a complicated relationship with his father and he "was annoyed at his father's incapacity to recuperate fully, both economically and emotionally, from the Depression, yet he was able to recognize the man's inner goodness" (Abbotson 3). Abbotson stated that Miller realized, in hindsight, "that it was the system that failed rather than his father, but at the time, it was difficult to lay the blame elsewhere as he watched his father become increasingly useless as a provider" (3). Miller recognized "that the dream of America is more than just an American Dream" (Centola 37). Miller was aware of the belief in hope and freedom that was so important for the future and this is something he was conveying through his works. Moreover, Miller was referring to the future of not only America but of the entire world, which is why Centola noted that Miller can "examine the whole of society –and the world– through his focus on a particular family's, or a single individual's, conflict in his plays" (38).

### 3. The Concept of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*

The American Dream is an important theme in *Death of a Salesman*. Even at the beginning of act one, it is stated that “an air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality” (Miller 11). *Death of a Salesman* is an interesting play because Willy’s journey from the past to the present explains the change of the Dream throughout the years. According to Abbotson, *Death of a Salesman* “can be read as an illustration of the historical economic interests and forces operating on U.S. society from the turn of the century to when the play was written” (136). Willy was a small boy when his father and brother left to pursue the possibilities of the American Dream, and he witnessed the changes that occurred along with the “pioneers’ sense of hope and possibility at the beginning of the new millennium” (Abbotson 136). Willy also enjoyed the 1920s, which were times of prosperity, and he went into sales to seek his fortune. This was the time when a man could earn a good living in sales. Unfortunately for Willy, the Great Depression changed everything. Abbotson states that “Willy evidently found his products hard to sell in a period when nobody had money to buy anything but necessities” (137). A change happened after World War II, but it became “a young man’s world, and Willy, in his sixties, is swiftly becoming outmoded, his sales style also being out of date” (Abbotson 137). Willy could not adapt himself to this new world, because his American Dream was a dream of success, and he did not understand that this dream does not happen for everybody. He couldn’t come to terms with the fact that it is impossible for everyone to achieve this dream “to come out number-one man” (Miller 139). What Willy could not accept is that he and Biff are “a dime a dozen” (Miller 132), and that “while his ancestors may have been giants, the present-day American is intellectually and spiritually a very little man – like Willy Loman” (Spalding 37). According to Spalding, Willy’s job as a salesman “in the United States during the 1940s was an occupation as typical of its time and place as that of a priest would be in medieval Europe” (41) and Willy “can therefore be seen as a representative American accepting the current American beliefs, especially that success is open equally to all citizens” (41). Abbotson stated that “people like the Lomans are doomed to try for success but fail, with all the resulting guilt that such failure brings” (137) but there are people, like Charlie and Bernard, that “are successful, but they do not allow their desire for wealth to run their lives” (137). Charlie and Bernard’s success comes from hard work and determination. They did not rely on personality and being liked; they worked hard to get where they are—Charlie is a businessman and Bernard is a lawyer. On the other hand, although Willy Loman dreamed about success all his life, his misconception of how to achieve the Dream is visible throughout *Death of a Salesman*. Miller

interpreted this dream of success in *Death of a Salesman* and it is evident that Willy's life as well as that of his family has been destroyed by his delusions and obsessive desire for success.

### 3.1. The Character of Willy Loman and His Dream

Willy Loman has worked for one company for thirty-six years and he is exhausted. He chose the career of a salesman because he strongly believes that personal attractiveness is a way to achieve the American Dream, and the extraordinary success of the salesman Dave Singleman convinced Willy that this is true. Despite his belief, as he reaches his sixties he suffers greatly because he hasn't been able to achieve the dream of being successful. His misconception of himself as someone who is respectable, successful and knows many people, is painfully evident as "he drives seven hundred miles, and when he gets there no one knows him any more, no one welcomes him" (Miller 57).

Willy suffers of lack of importance. He even had an affair with another woman to make himself feel better about his lack of success: "You picked me, heh?" (Miller 38). He buys stockings for his mistress to show his wealth and importance, while his wife is at home mending her stockings. The guilt of cheating is tearing Willy apart and a few years later he cannot even look at Linda mending stockings: "Will you stop mending stockings? At least while I'm in the house. It gets me nervous. I can't tell you. Please" (Miller 75). The cheating also caused a conflict between Biff and Willy, and the result of it was emotional distance.

Willy could not achieve the American Dream, but because he never lost hope he passed on the wish to achieve it to his sons. According to Bigsby, "Willy Loman is a man who wishes his reality to come into line with his hopes, a man desperate to leave his mark on the world through his own endeavours and through those of his children" (Bigsby 101). Willy is not aware that he is ruining not only his own life but also the lives of his sons with his wrong perception of the values of the American Dream. Biff blames his failure on Willy as he confronts him by saying: "I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody!" (Miller 131). On the other hand, it is possible that Willy never passed on the right values to his sons because he had no one to teach them to him. He was just a little child when his father and brother left him in order to pursue their own opportunities of getting rich. Therefore, he had inherited the strong desire to achieve something like his father and brother. Unfortunately, all Willy had was Dave Singleman as a role model for easy success and it was this desire that ruined him. As the result of anguish and worry, Willy loses his mind and is comforted by imaginary conversations and memories of past success. As his mental state deteriorates, he contemplates

committing suicide to achieve financial gain for his family and give them the chance to achieve the Dream. A part of the Dream was that his sons become successful too, and with twenty thousand dollars of insurance money, Biff could make something of himself: “Can you imagine that magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket?” (Miller 135). Even in his death, Willy could not escape the Dream.

### 3.1.1. The Failure of Willy’s Dream

Willy’s American Dream failed because there is no guarantee that it could be achieved by everyone, not even by those who work hard, and especially not by those who rely on the wrong values. There appear to be new values that are crucial for achieving the Dream in the capitalist world. Success seems to be all about how much you can handle and how much you are ready to give up. It is about sacrifice, and still there is no guarantee that the Dream will be achieved. Willy never had the opportunity to achieve the Dream because his way proved to be completely wrong. In fact, he never stood a chance at achieving it. On the other hand, it is possible for certain people to achieve the American Dream without making it the sole purpose of their existence. Charley could be taken as an example. The society and the American Dream did not ruin Charlie because he never expected much from either. According to Guijarro-González and Espejo, “Charlie’s most distinctive feature is that he operates within the hegemonic economic system, while, paradoxically, not being obsessed either with capitalism or with the myth of the American Dream” (63). Charlie adapted himself to the capitalist world and he managed to accomplish something in this system, but Willy never realized that in capitalism, even the American Dream became different.

### 3.2. The Character of Biff Loman and His Dream

Aside from Willy Loman, Biff Loman is also an essential character in *Death of a Salesman*. Biff Loman is Willy’s firstborn son. At the beginning of the play, Miller describes Biff as follows: “Biff is two years older than his brother Happy, well built, but in these days bears a worn air and seems less self-assured. He has succeeded less, and his dreams are stronger and less acceptable than Happy’s” (19). Biff is thirty-four years old, and for Willy “not finding yourself at the age of thirty-four is a disgrace!” (Miller 16). From what is said it is possible to sense not only that Biff is still finding himself and that he is lost but also that Willy is disappointed and there is some conflict brewing between the father and son. On the one hand, we are reminded of Willy’s belief that being well-liked would justify any wrongdoings. Even when Biff stole something, Willy would find an

excuse for the wrongful deed: “Coach’ll probably congratulate you on your initiative!” (Miller 30). With this feeling of importance, Biff did some contemptible things. He did not study math, as he knew that Bernard would give him the answers, and instead of scolding Biff, Willy overlooked Biff’s wrongdoing saying: “What’re you talking about? With scholarships to three universities they’re gonna flunk him?” (Miller 33). Thus, Biff did not see any reason for hard work and study but trusted his father’s belief that “the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead” (Miller 33).

Even in their childhood, Biff and Happy’s conversations were about “lotta dreams and plans” (Miller 20). But the dreaming stopped for Biff when he caught his father cheating on his mother. At that moment he realized that his father is a “phony little fake” (Miller 121). Before all of this, Biff considered his father to be a well-respected man and he was convinced that his father could reason with the teacher who flunked him in math and kept him from graduating: “Because if he saw the kind of man you are, and you just talked to him in your way, I’m sure he’d come through for me” (Miller 118). However, the betrayal of their mother caused Biff to lose respect for his father as well as his belief in his father and in himself. He is disheartened and gives up on the hopes and the dreams they shared.

After the above-mentioned incident in Boston, Biff’s life was shattered. He gave up on his future because the man whom he always admired turned out to be a disappointment. Biff had lived for so long according to his father’s instruction, and now he is confused and lost: “I tell ya, Hap. I don’t know what the future is. I don’t know—what I’m supposed to want” (Miller 22). Biff is in a conflict with himself; deep down in his consciousness he knows that all he wants to do in life is to be outdoors and work with his hands, but he cannot admit this to himself because of the fear that he is going to let Willy down. Biff also feels that working on a farm is not a good-enough job:

And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my God, I’m not getting anywhere! What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I’m thirty-four years old, I oughta be makin’ my future. That’s when I come running home. And now, I get here, and I don’t know what to do with myself.” (Miller 22)

According to Carson, the central conflict of the play could be seen as a conflict “between Willy’s determination to make Biff into a success in capitalist terms, and his son’s search for a more valid life as a man who works with his hands” (47). Biff cannot admit to himself what he wants because of this pressure to succeed. Biff even shared Willy’s illusions: “Dad, I don’t know who said it first, but I was never a salesman for Bill Oliver” (Miller 106).

After the humiliating experience with Bill Oliver, Biff saw what he really wanted: “Why am I trying to become what I don’t want to be? What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous,

begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am!” (Miller 132). Finally, Biff is coming to terms with his own life and “intent on revealing the simple and humble truth behind Willy’s fantasy, Biff longs for the territory (the symbolically free West) obscured by his father’s blind faith in a skewed, materialist version of the American Dream” (Unnati 25). It is interesting that by coming to the realization of who he really is, Biff achieved his American Dream.

### 3.3. The Character of Happy Loman and His Dream

Happy Loman is Biff’s younger brother and he is in many ways different than Biff. Miller described Happy at the beginning of the play:

Happy is tall, powerfully made. Sexuality is like a visible color on him, or a scent that many women have discovered. He, like his brother, is lost, but in a different way, for he has never allowed himself to turn his face toward defeat and is thus more confused and hard-skinned, although seemingly more content. (Miller 19)

Throughout the play, Happy is concerned with his father, but he leaves all the responsibility to Biff. Happy knows that something is wrong with his father, but embarrassment keeps him from helping Willy: “It got so embarrassing I sent him to Florida” (Miller 21). Happy’s name can also be considered as an illusion because he is not happy, but lonely and lost: “I don’t know what the hell I’m workin’ for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment—all alone. And I think of the rent I’m paying. And it’s crazy. But then, it’s what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I’m lonely” (Miller 23).

Happy cannot escape the Dream, Willy’s Dream. He lives in an illusion that he is better than anybody else: “I can outbox, outrun, and outlift anybody in that store, and I have to take orders from those common, petty sons-of-bitches till I can’t stand it any more” (Miller 24). In reality, Happy is “one of the two assistants to the assistant” (Miller 131). Happy is not satisfied with his life and competition is deeply present in him. As a womanizer, Happy shows this competitiveness in seducing his bosses’ wives and girlfriends: “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 furthermore I can’t get rid of her. And he’s the third executive I’ve done that to” (Miller 25).

Happy is constantly lying to himself. He is convinced that he is going to retire Willy for life, and not even Willy believes in it: “You’ll retire me for life on seventy goddam dollars a week? And your women and your car and your apartment, and you’ll retire me for life!” (Miller 41).



Even when his father committed suicide because of his false dream, Happy continued to chase Willy's delusions: "He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him" (Miller 139). According to Khodambashi Emami, "Happy who is a follower of his father's way of life is most probably going to have a tragic ending, an ending similar to that of Willy" (354).

### 3.4. The Other Characters and Their Dreams

Linda is Willy's loyal, supportive wife. She would never leave Willy or say what is on her mind because "she more than loves him, she admires him" (Miller 12). Linda is not a victim of Willy; he treats her badly, but she is a strong woman and is always devoted to Willy: "You're my foundation and my support, Linda" (Miller 18). Linda's dream is somewhat different from Willy's. Linda's dream is to be financially secure; to be free from financial obligations. Therefore, Linda cannot understand why Willy committed suicide when they were finally free from house payments: "I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. We're free and clear" (Miller 139). Ribkoff claims that "Linda's words at the end of the play, and especially the words, 'We're free and clear' (139), reveal the degree to which she and her husband lived in denial, in fear of exposing the man who hid in shame behind the idea of being a successful salesman and father" (127).

Like Linda, Charley also supports Willy. As a businessman of some means, and a good friend of the Loman family, Charley helps Willy financially even though he does not have to. Charley and Willy always had a competitive friendship, but in this corporate world, Charley won. Charley is aware that Willy does not like him, but he is ready to give him a job so Willy would not have to borrow money from him anymore: "Now listen, Willy, I know you don't like me, and nobody can say I'm in love with you, but I'll give you a job because—just for the hell of it, put it that way" (Miller 97). Charley is realistic, he does not live in a dreamworld like Willy. He is a responsible man and he knows that Willy is rejecting the job because of his pride which he finds to be childish: "When the hell are you going to grow up?" (Miller 97). According to Hadomi, "Charlie comes the closest of everyone Willy knows to the attainable ideal he has set himself but failed to achieve, he treats him with a mixture of respect and envy" (Hadomi 19) and "this is what prevents Willy from accepting Charlie's offer of a job, because doing so would be tantamount to an admission of failure" (Hadomi 19).

Charlie succeeded in the business world because he worked hard and is satisfied with what life has given him. He achieved his Dream because he worked to achieve it, but at the same time the Dream did not control his life. Charlie is a good businessman, and this has helped him to survive in the business world and achieve the Dream. Charlie's "business accomplishments are not based on worrying about being liked but on knowing his business and how to treat others" (Uranga 85) and because of this, he succeeds.

Charlie's son Bernard also succeeds, and this surprises Willy. He is unable to grasp the that a young man like Bernard could achieve such success without ever being well-liked or instructed by his father on how to succeed. It is interesting that Willy's false advice resulted in his sons' failure, while Charlie's detachment regarding his son's failure or success led to Bernard becoming his own man and achieving his dream. When Willy addresses Charley's lack of interest in Bernard's aspirations, Charlie responds: "My salvation is that I never took any interest in anything" (Miller 96).

Of interest to note is that Bernard was a good and loyal friend to Biff, but was always underestimated because "he's liked, but he's not well liked" (Miller 33). Biff did not respect Bernard, because in the teenage years being smart and hard-working is not popular. Despite the humiliation that Bernard went through in his childhood, he proved them all wrong and now he is "a quiet, earnest, but self-assured young man" (Miller 90). Bernard achieved his American Dream; he worked hard to get where he is, and now he is a lawyer arguing a case in front of the Supreme Court and a father of two boys, while Biff and Happy never got anywhere.

In addition to Charlie and Bernard, it is also important to mention Willy's brother Ben and their father, since they represent the Dream in the old, pioneer days when people had the chance to achieve the Dream by starting from scratch. These were the men that left everything behind to achieve the Dream, and the Dream for them was wealth. They are not honourable men because they left Willy on his own; without ever turning back. Willy suffered on his own; he never realized who he really was because of the idolized images of his father and brother: "You're just what I need, Ben, because I-I have a fine position here, but I-well, Dad left when I was such a baby and I never had a chance to talk to him and I still feel-kind of temporary about myself" (Miller 51). Willy even parented his sons in a way that his father would approve, because it was based on his image: "That's just the way I'm bringing them up, Ben-rugged, well liked, all-around" (Miller 49). It is unknown how the father's life turned out, but Ben died a rich man with a wife and seven sons and for Willy, this is something he also desired, but never achieved. Nonetheless, Ben achieved the Dream by taking a risk and practicing questionable morals as expressed by his advice: "never fight fair with a stranger" (Miller 34).

Finally, it is noteworthy to mention Howard Wagner, a typical cold-hearted businessman, who achieved the dream of success through inheritance. He inherited the company from his late father, Willy's first boss. Howard knows the business; he is aware that Willy does not contribute to the company and that is why he fires him in the end. Howard is a corporate man, and, in his world, money is more important than a worker's future. This is painfully obvious when Willy comes to Howard's office and tries to talk to him. Howard belittles Willy by focusing on the wire recorder completely disregarding Willy's plight: "Sh, for God's sake!" (Miller 77).

To conclude, these characters had different views of the American dream and different ways to realize their dream; some proved to be right and some wrong. However, Abbotson claims that "it is clear that Miller would prefer us to follow the example of Charlie rather than Howard or Ben" (138). Charlie "seems to have found a way to survive in business with his morality intact; he is able to do this largely by limiting his expectations and refusing to ignore the plight of others" (Abbotson 138).

### 3.5. The Symbolism of Seeds, Diamonds and the Rubber Pipe

There are three symbols in the play which are connected to the American Dream. The first are the seeds as a symbol of Willy's labour. For seeds to grow, you need to plant and nurture them until they are ready to grow, but for Willy this is impossible because "nothing will grow any more" (Miller 72). His desire for planting seeds could be considered as an act of a desperate man who can barely put food on the table for his wife and sons. He has failed as a provider for the family, but at times he still has hope and that is why he wants to plant those seeds. According to Abbotson, Willy "plants seeds just as he plants false hopes" (136). Moreover, it is interesting that Willy wants to make up for being a lousy salesman by working with his hands while at the same time condemning Biff for working on a farm. Willy doesn't understand "how can he find himself on a farm" (Miller 15). Seeds can also represent legacy, and Willy is frightened that he could not help his sons as he has nothing to leave them because "nothing is planted" (Miller 122). On the other hand, seeds can also symbolize Willy's sense of failure, especially with Biff. Willy is stricken with guilt as he thinks that he is the reason why Biff never achieved anything in life. Biff caught his father cheating on his mother and it seems like since then his life has taken a turn for the worse, and Willy feels responsible. In his mind there was always this thought "maybe I did something to him" (Miller 93). Willy thinks that he was not a capable father, that he did not nurture Biff correctly and this is the reason why his son has failed in life. Willy does not understand that his family loves him and that despite his failure to recognize this "Willy makes the most extreme sacrifice in his

attempt to leave an inheritance that will allow Biff to fulfil the American Dream, which is his Obsession” (Unnati 25).

The symbolism of diamonds is also widely present in *Death of a Salesman*. Diamonds represent financial security and wealth that is easily achieved. This is an embodiment of the American Dream. Throughout the play, Willy often regrets that he did not go with his brother Ben to Alaska because “there was a man started with the clothes on his back and ended up with diamond mines” (Miller 41). Later in the play, while Willy is in a state where he imagines Ben, Ben says that “instead of Alaska, I ended up in Africa” (Miller 48). So instead of the gold mines, Ben ended up in the diamond mines and “walked into a jungle, and comes out, the age of twenty-one, and he’s rich” (Miller 41). The American Dream is present in these words that “the man knew what he wanted and went out and got it” (Miller 41). Ben knew what he wanted, he was adventurous and went for it. This is something that Willy did not have the courage to do: “If I’d gone with him to Alaska that time, everything would’ve been totally different” (Miller 45). Diamonds represent something that Willy could have had, if only he had been courageous enough to go for it. According to Spindler, Willy “remains one of the exploited, a victim, while Ben is one of the exploiters” (204). Diamonds also represent Willy’s regret for not being able to secure his family financially. “The jungle is dark but full of diamonds” (Miller 134) implies that only by doing such an awful thing as killing himself, Willy could leave something to Biff to help him achieve his American Dream.

The last symbol connected to the American Dream is a rubber pipe. The rubber pipe represents Willy’s attempts of killing himself, but what is ironic about it is that he tried to kill himself by inhaling gas, and it is something that provides his family with heat. Willy struggles with providing for his family; he is not successful and did not achieve this American Dream, and by killing himself with something that he can barely afford is the irony of this symbol. While arguing with Willy, Biff said that Willy knows “goddam well what that is” (Miller 130). By taking his life in such a way, Miller emphasizes Willy’s suffering to provide the basic means for his family.

### 3.6. The Symbolism of Dave Singleman

Dave Singleman is an important symbol in the play. He was Willy’s reason to stay in the city and pursue the career of a salesman. The idea of a comfortable life and security that Singleman presented, convinced Willy to forget about Alaska and achieve his American Dream with a career

in which “was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude” (Miller 81). Singleman’s job became Willy’s desire:

And I was almost decided to go, when I met a salesman in the Parker House. His name was Dave Singleman. And he was eighty-four years old, and he’d drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, he’d go up to his room, y’understand, put on his green velvet slippers—I’ll never forget—and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. (Miller 81)

According to Spindler, there are two images of success that governed Willy’s life: “that of Dave Singleman which has governed its direction, and that of Ben which returns at crucial moments to highlight Willy’s sense of inadequacy and insecurity” (204). By choosing the profession of a salesman, Willy naively believes that a man can accumulate wealth in terms of personality because “personality always wins the day” (Miller 65). Spindler states that “Willy counters Ben’s competitive individualism with a naive faith in the power of personal attractiveness as the new Way to Wealth in the highly personalized consumer economy” (205). Willy’s belief in the job of a salesman came from Dave Singleman because when he thinks about Singleman, he has the right to say, “what is there to worry about” (Miller 86). Willy believed in the power of personality and being liked: “It’s who you know and the smile on your face! It’s contacts, Ben, contacts! The whole wealth of Alaska passes over the lunch table at the Commodore Hotel, and that’s the wonder, . . . that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked” (Miller 86). Willy later realizes that this is not true, that “today, it’s all cut and dried, and there’s no chance for bringing friendship to bear—or personality” (Miller 81). The idea of living like Singleman has failed Willy because “a salesman is got to dream” (Miller 138) but “he had the wrong dreams” (Miller 138). According to Roudané, “Willy Loman can only cling to idyllic fables that baffle as they elude him” (61).

### 3.7. The Right Values of the American Dream

*Death of a Salesman* showed us the wrong values of the American Dream. Willy Loman believed in all the wrong values; he believed in personal attractiveness and not in hard work, competition or individualism. Miller implied the right values of the American Dream while showing us the terrible fate of a salesman who could not accept that the American Dream has changed.

Miller criticizes America and the American society, implying that America has changed. It is no longer a country where everyone succeeds because with time its values have changed. It is hard to believe that in such a great country people get lost, especially young people. The irony is present at the beginning of the play when Miller implies the greatness of America: “In the greatest country in the world a young man with such—personal attractiveness, gets lost. And such a hard worker” (16). Maybe America was the greatest country in the world, but now the Dream is corrupted, and its values are no longer the same.

Willy believed in loyalty, he is a man who worked all his working life in one company, and he thought that this must count for something. Willy lives in the past; he is not aware that sentimental things do not matter anymore in the business world and that loyalty is no longer appreciated. Willy is a small man in the business world, but “a small man can be just as exhausted as a great man” (Miller 56). Now, Willy is not an important man because he does not contribute to the business:

When he brought them business, when he was young, they were glad to see him. But now his old friends, the old buyers that loved him so and always found some order to hand him in a pinch—they’re all dead, retired. He used to be able to make six, seven calls a day in Boston. Now he takes his valises out of the car and puts them back and takes them out again and he’s exhausted. (Miller 57)

Willy is naive because as a salesman that works in a capitalist world, he does not realize that “the only thing you got in this world is what you can sell” (Miller 97). Profit is the new value and “business is business” (Miller 80).

Competition is also a value that is ruining society. America’s population is increasing and all of them want to achieve the Dream. There is no unity because each person must fight for himself/herself in order to succeed. Individualism and competition run the society now and this can lead to the end of society: “There’s more people! That’s what’s ruining this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening!” (Miller 17). Miller highlights that competition and individualism are here to stay, but if the people start to work together more to restore the values that make us human, the Dream could become more available.

## Conclusion

The American Dream is one of the oldest ideals upon which America, as a nation, was created. In the beginning, the American Dream was pure. It was created from religion, and its values were related to God, but the Dream has declined. The Dream became corrupted when people started to strive solely for material wealth and success. Consequently, the Dream that was created from the belief that all men are equal and have the same chance to succeed started to be privileged. Thus the Dream is not possible for everyone to achieve and some people can spend their whole lives striving to achieve it, but they are destined to fail.

Arthur Miller criticized the corrupt American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*. He focused on the negative aspects of the Dream and how the Dream can destroy not only a man like Willy Loman, but also his whole family. He misled his sons by passing on his delusion that being well liked, popular and physically attractive is the path to success and material wealth. Willy believed in all the wrong values, but these are the values that he inherited from society. He believed more in personal attractiveness than in hard work and determination as a way to success. Miller implies that the Dream has consequences and he shows on Willy's example that a man can become so obsessed with the Dream that it can drive him to the edge. He conveys the message that not everyone can survive ruthless competition and not everyone is capable of achieving the Dream, especially when one has the wrong perception of it. Miller also implies that there is more than one version of the Dream and it is important to realize this. To conclude, Miller suggests that the Dream could become pure again if people restore its true values and start to work together for mutual benefit.

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