



“A Literary Take on the American Dream”

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Literature is often studied hand in hand with history because authors provide a unique perspective, as they are witnesses of the time they are writing about and can be of use to historians who want to study the reasoning behind the facts. Literary critic Charles Glicksberg sees literature as a form of “social protest,” which he defines to be a call for change. This is seen through Arthur Miller’s play, *Death of a Salesman*, where he argues that the concept of the American Dream was tainted due to the consumerist nature of the country in the 1940s. The consumerist nature Miller writes about was a result of the economic growth following the Second World War (Mercatus Center), which allowed society to indulge in luxuries. The concept of the American Dream has changed in response to the sentiments of the time and literary critics analyze the shift of this historical time period with the utilization of literature and the literary conflict: the individual versus society. Professor Lois Tyson writes “ “Literature is a repository of both a society’s ideologies and its psychological conflicts, it has the capacity to reveal aspects of a culture’s collective psyche, an apprehension of how ideological investments reveal the nature of individuals’ psychological relationship to their world.” Literature is a “repository” because the author culminates the sentiments of society and their own feelings within their stories. Literary critics need to use literature to study the American Dream because the “individuals’ psychological relationship to the world” is of utmost importance in understanding the concept, as it was created to culminate hope in not just the country, but the individual

citizens. Individuals felt the consequences of the American Dream shifting into a dream for wealth, which is explored throughout the various literature written in the mid-twentieth century. This brings about the question, “What does an author see that makes them unique from different critics and how do they relay their message through storytelling?” and “Are authors credible sources when it comes to studying history?” Authors saw firsthand the shift that occurred in the country following the war and placing themselves apart from society in their literature allows historians and literary analysts to gain an understanding of the reasoning behind abstract concepts like society and the American Dream.

The concept of the American Dream was introduced early during the Progressive Era following the Gilded Age. Professor Sarah Churchwell states it was “a dream of equality, justice and democracy for the nation” (Churchwell). The country was polarized by monopolies and trusts consolidating power, causing an obvious inequality between robber barons and the working class. When the country entered the Great Depression, the American Dream became a national catchphrase. Historian James Truslow Adams stated the American Dream is a

“dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Adams 404.)

Adams argues that the American Dream is a dream for “everyone” regardless of the “fortuitous circumstances of birth or position,” which emphasizes his acknowledgement that some people

are born into wealth by chance. That wealth, however, should not define the American Dream as it is “not a dream of motor cars and high wages,” which speaks down upon the consumerist nature during the Gilded Age that evolved and led to the Great Depression. Americans, then, become “weary” of the Dream because the imbalance of wealth caused a divide among the upper class and each man and woman who were striving for opportunities. This devolvement of the American Dream, from Adams’s perspective, represents how the economic boom in a post-war society creates classicism among the people and destroys the “equality” the American Dream calls for. In analyzing Adams’s words, Professor Churchwell asserts that Adams argued “that America had gone wrong in becoming too concerned with material well-being and forgetting the higher dreams and the higher aspiration that the country had been founded on” (Churchwell 91). Churchwell uses Adams’s words to argue that the concept of the Dream epitomizes the foundation of the country. Churchwell states that the American Dream hoped for equal opportunities, which paved the way for Americans to be defined as free citizens, however it failed once people forgot “the higher dreams” of equality and became concerned with consumerism. The American Dream began as a concept to instill hope for equality; however, materialism caused its meaning to dissipate and shift into a dream for luxury.

Churchwell argues that the American Dream went wrong once consumerism took hold on society, which then caused Americans to be persuaded into thinking that a facade of wealth would translate to their reality. Tyson states that “The American dream is itself a consumer product, which Americans ‘buy into’ as the primary myth by means of which they mold their interpersonal relations to resemble relations of capitalist production, which are relations among commodities” (Tyson 7). She argues that the American Dream has become an object of one’s desires, determining that there is a proportional relationship between someone’s commodities

and their worth. Tyson utilizes commodity psychology, which she defined as a structural principle that gives value to objects in a social context, which causes people to relate people or things to their relative worth on the market. As people were immersed in mass consumption, a sense of uniformity began to permeate among American citizens because they hoped to “resemble relations of capitalist production.” Uniformity emerges when many individuals begin to resemble the same things; in this case, a tendency to buy commodities. Robert Witkin, then, asserts the problems that come out of society’s obsession with commodities when he writes “the commodification, fetishization and standardization of its products, together with the authoritarian submissiveness, irrationality, conformity, ego-weakness and dependency behavior of its recipients- are developed by [Adorno]” (Witkin 3). Adorno criticizes the modern culture of obsessing with consumer products and would support Tyson’s claim that becoming immersed in commodities caused people to link their worth to what they owned, when he suggests that the “commodification, fetishization, and standardization” of products lead to “ego-weakness,” which is an inflated sense of self, often associated with grandiosity and a superiority complex (Britannica). The more commodities a person immersed themselves in, the higher sense of superiority they believed they exhibited. Witkin also proposes that it creates consumers to exhibit a “dependency behavior.” This is when a person appears to be clingy to whatever they believe sustains them and cannot live without it, usually in reference to another person. For instance, in Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Happy Loman cries out "But then, it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I'm lonely," (Miller). Witkin’s words of “commodifying, fetishizing, and standardizing” these products echoes in Happy’s beliefs, as he grew up with the idea that material goods would be his pathway to happiness. He then “standardized” commodities like nice cars and apartments to fabricate happiness in his own

life. However, Miller rejects this ideology by emphasizing the current state of distress Happy is experiencing, for his submissiveness and conformity to society did nothing to advance him, as he states, “And still, goddammit, I’m lonely.” Happy Loman represents the average American who blindly believed material wealth would help him attain the American Dream yet were left disappointed because that could not sustain their happiness. The American Dream turned into a dream of material gains, however, that resulted in people connecting their worth to what they owned, causing them to become dependent on those commodities for their happiness.

The confusion individuals like Happy Loman exhibited in defining what the American Dream meant in their lives is due to the influence of what society promotes, in this case, consumerism. A common conflict in literature is the individual against society archetype, “where man stands against a man-made institution” (Lamb 80). Characters are often portrayed as a separate entity from the world around them, and authors usually write this through their perspective. In Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman is a character that is seen both conforming to society in hopes of achieving the status he desires and rejecting society once he realizes that it has used him up without a payoff. The “man-made institution” Willy Loman inevitably stands against is capitalism. In the conflict of individual versus society, Cheever argues that the individual is strongly influenced by society when she states, “the epithet ‘phony’ was... an easy appellation for individuals who appeared cynically to conform to codes of behavior for social approbation or advancement and appeared as a common label for a certain type of person in writing, literature, and film” (Cheever 2). Cheever states that the word “phony” was frequently used by social critics, such as authors and filmmakers, in a negative light to denote those who conformed to society for status or approval. Cheever analyzes J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* and the protagonist's frequent usage of the word “phony” to argue that

there was a lack of “authenticity” among the people in his school. There was little separation between the individual and the social world, as the country went through a period of “self-reconstruction” to embody the culture of the times. Tyson, however, argues “such criticism doesn’t consider the ways in which the individual psyche and its cultural milieu inhabit, reflect, and define each other in a dynamically unstable, *mutually constitutive* symbiosis” (Tyson 2). Tyson argues that an individual is influenced by society, however, society is formed by the characteristics of the individuals that comprise it. The relationship is thus “mutually constitutive,” as they both take part in shaping one another. She exemplifies her claim through the character Jay Gatsby, stating that the American Dream “allows each individual the opportunity to escape from history into the commodity. Thus, for Gatsby, the commodity- not just his material possessions but Daisy as well- becomes the site of displacement, the sign he needs to feel insulated from the existential inwardness that accompanies his psychological connection to his own past” (Tyson 55). Tyson demonstrates the entwining of America’s exploitation of vulnerable people and the people’s exploitation of commodities to attain what they desire. Gatsby was in a vulnerable mindset following his participation in the war, for he hoped to relive his past with his first love, Daisy. He threw elaborate parties hoping to gain her attention, and this exploitation of consumer goods to attain one’s goals shows that people believe they can buy their way into happiness. He attempted to “escape” his loneliness through the use of commodities, thus depicting a “symbiotic” relationship between society and Jay Gatsby. In contrast to Cheever and Tyson, Glicksberg claims that there is a diverging relationship between the individual and society, as he claims that an author “struggle[s] to redefine his function and to reappraise the true value of his contribution to the world. His social conscience smarted as he wondered at times if he were not sacrificing the precious stuff of life itself for the sake of

producing inutile works of art” (Glicksberg 77). Glicksberg highlights that criticizing aspects of society that the majority of individuals are either indifferent to or in support of can cause a person to feel alienated, similar to the protagonists of asocial literature. Asocial literature is defined as literature that criticizes society and causes the protagonist to be withdrawn and alienated in their community. They feel as if their unique voice is “inutile” in reference to the large scale that is society. An instance Miller exemplifies rejection of society is when Willy states “The street is lined with cars. There’s not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don’t grow anymore, you can’t raise a carrot in the backyard. They should’ve had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there?” (Miller 6). Willy condemns what his neighborhood has become, by creating a contrast between the factory-like apartments that exist now and the beauty of nature that existed before. This contrast shows a decline of societal values, as more attention is placed on making money rather than simple pleasures like preserving nature. Miller shows a glimpse of Loman coming into realization with this rejection of society, which causes him to feel miserable and hopeless. This hopelessness in Loman is similar to Glicksberg’s words of “inutile,” as Loman can only remember the past rather than recreate it. Analyzing the protagonist in relation to society gives a greater understanding of an author’s intention when writing their literature, for Salinger, Fitzgerald, and Miller had unique messages about society and the individual.

Authors put an immense amount of thought into the stories they create and the messages they hope to relay, however the reasoning behind why they write can be varied and dependent on the topic they choose to write about. American literary critic Charles Glicksberg states, “It is accordingly impossible as well as irresponsible, in the judgement of some critics, to stand apart from or above the battle. To remain non-political in a world that is full of conflict is to accept the

world as it is; it is to renounce the idea that one is an active member of his society, who much bear the guilt for failure to do his part in shaping the world. Looking at in this light, all literature... is animated by a profound social concern” (Glicksberg 73).” Glicksberg states that an author’s motivation to write is rooted in their concern for the world around them. Social critics, such as authors, believe to remain quiet is to subdue to the conflicts of the world, however, even a small form of objection plays a role in shaping the world around them. Glicksberg uses Miller’s *The Crucible* as an example of being “politically ‘committed’ or ‘revolutionary literature” (Glicksberg), as Miller calls attention to the “battle” that was the hysteria behind McCarthyism in the 1950s. Arthur Miller, himself, wrote “*The Crucible* was an act of desperation. Much of my desperation branched out, I suppose, from a typical Depression-era trauma... But by 1950, when I began to think of writing about the hunt for Reds in America, I was motivated in some great part by the paralysis that had set in among many liberals who, despite their discomfort with the inquisitors’ violations of civil rights, were fearful, and with good reason, of being identified as covert Communists if they should protest too strongly” (Miller). Miller’s intentions behind *The Crucible* echoes Glicksberg’s words, as they both clearly argue writing’s relation to activism. He saw the fear that was casted on society and how it prevented people from speaking out against the “hunt for Reds.” Miller also has a political motivation in his play *Death of a Salesman* as he seeks to expose the corruption of capitalism (Rose). Miller condemns capitalism in the scene between Willy and his boss Howard:

“HOWARD: No, but it’s a business, kid, and everybody’s gotta pull his own weight. / WILLY (desperately): Just let me tell you a story. Howard... / HOWARD: ‘Cause you gotta admit, business is business” (Miller). Howard is characterized as a cold person who values the profits of his company more than the wellbeing of his employees when he says “business is business,”

which is a statement that removes all emotion from the conversation. This essentially causes readers to empathize with Willy, as Howard gives little attention to Willy's pleas. Miller exemplifies the cold nature of corporations and the deteriorating effect it has on people.

Outside of just the concept of the American Dream, literature can be examined to gain information about society in various time periods. Glicksberg writes "the literature of social criticism does not reject society. It holds up a magnifying mirror to the abuses and abominations of the age; it is a spirited cry of protest against specific miscarriages of justice; it is an attempt to expose by imaginative means and, by exposing, denounce the inhumanity of man to man" (Glicksberg 74). Literature is not only a means of social criticism, but of social protest as well. Authors reveal the injustices that are carried out by society as a whole, as well as the problems that occur between people. Through his protagonist in *Death of a Salesman*, Miller denounced the increasing corruption of capitalism and amplified his protests by dramatically killing off Willy Loman in the end. Miller believes *Death of a Salesman* succeeded because of the intense amount of empathy he brings about the audience for Willy (Rose). Willy's failed cry for help represents Miller's warnings of the "abuses and abominations" of corporations and businesses during the 1940s on consumers. Literature also played an immense role regarding abolitionism in the mid-1800s, especially with Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. While it was fictional, it gave a deep insight into the destruction of slave families and the emotional and physical trauma that they experienced, which caused a wave of empathy from readers and gave motion to the abolitionist movement. Abraham Lincoln is believed to have called Stowe the "little woman who wrote the book that started this great war," (USHistory.org) in reference to the American civil war. Her novel is one of the many actions that led to the civil war because of literature's power to instill a flame in its audience. Another example of literature being used to

call attention to the injustices of society would be Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, focusing on the life of an immigrant family working in poor-conditioned jobs to make a living during the Progressive Era. The novel exposed unsanitary details about the meatpacking industry, which led to the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 to enhance food safety. Sinclair's focal argument, however, was to raise attention towards the unsafe working conditions in order to fight for enhanced labor conditions. All of the novels mentioned continue to be studied in classes to raise awareness to what once was and how words on a page led to change. Literature played a key role in bringing about change because stories are vivid in crude details, which leads people to express concern.

While critics like Glicksberg and Tyson emphasize the importance of literature in studying the societal context of a certain historical period, people like Professor Emami argue that literature can be a form of "pseudo-criticism." He uses Adorno's definition of pseudo-criticism, stating that "works of the culture industry that claim to be critical of society," to argue that *Death of a Salesman* feeds into that culture industry. While Witkin references Adorno to criticize society's obsession with consumer products and its relation to conformity, Emami cites Adorno to argue that critical works like literature "heighten[ed] the lie of individuality" (Emami 357). The "individuality" they claim to support in society is in actuality a facade. While Emami and Miller both use Adorno's Theory on Popular Culture, their usage of Adorno is used to support contrasting claims. In his analysis of the individual versus society, Emami argues that society cannot be blamed. He quotes and analyzes Arthur Miller to strengthen his argument:

"Man is more than the sum of his stimuli and is unpredictable beyond a certain point. A drama, like a history, which stops at this point, the point of conditioning, is not reflecting a reality.... If there is one unseen goal toward which every play in this book strives, it is

that... we are made and yet more than what made us" (Miller 54). As it is clear Miller believes that man is able to pull his weight in life. This is much quoted by some critics who try to prove that what happens to Willy in his life and his final death are mostly direct outcome of his own choice and society doesn't play much role here" (Emami 354).

Literary critics, like Glicksberg, have previously claimed that Miller put blame onto society and capitalism, however, it can be argued that Miller believes part of the blame is also due to the individual and the decisions they make. Emami writes "Willy doesn't want to accept that the outcome of all the ideas proposed by society is this and by killing himself he tries to prove that he can still have individuality, be loved and remembered" (Emami 354). Emami references Willy's suicide to argue that his decision was his own rather than society playing a part.

Emami's argument of the individual being the dominant when it comes to a person making their own decisions is in contrast to Tyson and Cheever, who both lean more towards society influencing the decisions people make. In the case of Willy's suicide, Cheever and Tyson would argue that society played a part in influencing Willy's mindset that killing himself was the only way he can escape the distress he was feeling. There are various ways to interpret written texts, as exemplified by Emami's contrasting conclusions to Witkin, Glicksberg, Tyson, and Cheever. However, Emami acknowledges his own shortcomings, as he concludes that Miller's true intentions cannot be configured using one play, as it is not "satisfactory enough" and multiple plays would have to be considered. While there may be different interpretations, what an author wrote is immovable and must be interpreted with support from the text. Different interpretations themselves depict the complexity authors write about as situations are rarely black and white. With this reasoning, Tyson and Cheever's arguments prove to be more persuasive because they explore the relationship between the individual and society that shows both sides, which is

important because a complex concept like the American Dream needs to be evaluated from the society and the individual's point of view.

The American Dream is a concept that came about to help a "nation find its way" (Churchwell). It was an ideal to foster hope into every American citizen that they had the opportunities to reach their personal potential. However, the economic boom following World War II led to an influx of consumerism and caused society to treat the commodities they owned as the defining factor for their status and happiness. While the American Dream is a significant part of U.S. history, there is no concrete or physical information that can encompass its meaning. To gain information on it, critics must look to literature because authors are social critics who write about abstract concepts. This is why they are thought to have a unique perspective on the time period they live in. Their perspective is reflective and critical, as they use their literature to "protest" against the injustices they see, in hopes of creating change through their audience. The art of storytelling also helps their mission, as they develop conflicts within their work that show varying perspectives to a certain situation. However, it can be argued that literature relies heavily on interpretation which can question its credibility. Literary critics and historians can analyze the same play and come to two different perspectives; however, those different perspectives reflect the existent complexities within society. There has been vast research that reflect the importance of using literature to study the American Dream, as shown by Cheever, Tyson, and Glicksberg. The culmination of this research was used to analyze Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and its ability to depict the adverse effect American capitalism had on the American Dream in the 1940s. Arthur Miller wrote from the perspective of businessman Willy Loman who works hard to achieve his American Dream, however, has misinterpreted the dream to stand for status and wealth. He is worn out by a capitalistic system that leads to his untimely death. Miller develops a

conflict between Willy Loman and society, similar to the archetypal conflict “society versus individual.” This conflict allows him to show the perspective of an average American working 9-5 and the perspective of a business company interested in profit. It is evident that Miller utilized his play to be a “social protest” to a capitalistic system that has overshadowed the true intent behind the American Dream. A subtopic that would be interesting and thoughtful to study would be the meaning of the American Dream to Americans from various ethnicities, genders, and age groups coincided with the literature that displays this. For example, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, argued that the American Dream was coincided with homeownership and equality for African American citizens. The American Dream had different meanings to people and authors from the mid-twentieth century depict these meanings through their diverse stories and characters in hopes of instilling empathy in their audience to bring about change.

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