

Title: The American Dream in Literature: From The Great Gatsby to Death of a Salesman

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Abstract

This paper throws light on the American Dream through two of America's most celebrated pieces of literature: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Both works have a reductiveness to an old-fashioned American Dream: the idealistic thinking that hard work and resolve guarantee all the success you can want. In pointing toward the darker, more elusive nature of the American Dream through the experiences of their protagonists—that is, Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman—the authors head toward a disillusionment with helpings of moral decay and personal destruction. From this view, based on dominant themes such as materialism and social mobility, the pursuit of happiness has defined the intricacy and limitations of American Dream in a modern capitalist nation.

Keywords

American Dream, F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Materialism, Disillusionment, Social Mobility, Capitalism, Tragedy

1. Introduction

The very heart of American cultural and literary history, by most accounts, appears to be the American Dream. After all, the promise of prosperity, upward mobility, or personal fulfillment seems to be the promise. In other words, it's every man's dream to succeed from his origin and circumstances through hard work, perseverance, and hard-driving ambition. But then this ideal has never been on the safe side and was subject to much criticism as the 20th century progressed with many authors coming to question the very tenability of the idea of the American Dream, exposing its contradictions and limitations inherent within it.

In literature, American Dream finds an especial significance in the shape of both inspiration and a deep disillusionment. Two of the most poignant literary critiques of the American Dream belong to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Both protagonists of these works are defined by the very success they pursue, only

to get destroyed by it. While Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* holds the position of the self-made man who believes in the power of money to buy happiness, it is Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* who makes one come back to reality with the story of the ordinary man succumbing to the pressures of society, where personal worth is equated with professional success.

This article explores the transference of the American Dream into these two iconic works and indicates how Fitzgerald and Miller display the hollowness of materialism and the psychological pressure of an unattainable ideal, through a comparison which can better explain how the American Dream, once it initially represented hope, is now a tragic illusion that finds its moral and societal dilemmas in those who run after it.

2. The Literary Definition of American Dream

The American Dream represents the idea of America as a place of opportunity for a poor man to become rich. He could do so through the exertion of efforts, determinism, and moral principles. Derived from democracy, freedom, and equality as founding principles, the American Dream has been the main cultural ideal since its inception. However, where the dream promises success and fulfillment, it often dismisses the structural and societal barriers that prevent even many from achieving it. Such a chasm between the ideal and reality has formed a broad and central theme in American literature.

Early literary depiction of the American Dream as posited by writers like Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography* besides Horatio Alger found success in the exploration of the possibility of self-made success. These works framed the perception that through work and good morals, anybody would overcome obstacles and succeed in order to move out of a poorer class into something better. But by the turn of the 20th century, this idealized American Dream began to be criticized as writers responded to growing social inequity, materialism, and immorality which came with industrialization and economic growth in full force.

Two of the greatest works that have ever questioned the attainability and validity of the American Dream are F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Both authors unveil ways through which the promised wealth and happiness by the dream can result in moral decay, personal disillusionment, and eventually tragedy. As the economic affluence of America kept growing, these literary critiques pointed out that the promise of the dream lies thousands of miles away from the lived reality of many in society.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald seems to be writing about an American Dream as something impossible, unattainable. And the book sends the opposite message through its main character Jay Gatsby in that it questions the idea of ultimate success lying in status and wealth, showing an emptiness underlying the dream. Similarly, in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman is portrayed as a man trapped in the relentless pursuit of a dream which has eluded him from a long time. He fails to achieve the success promised him because of his eventual collapse caused by his emotional and psychological exhaustion.

The two works result in this change in the literature depiction of the American Dream—an element changed from being the emblem of hope and possibility to one of disillusionment and failure. Such a result makes these texts criticisms on the greater social values that favor material fortune over character integrity and human good, thus showing how the pursuit of such a dream could lead to personal ruin.

This gives the impression of reading out of the same narrative of American literature where American Dream picks out which ambiguity marks the connection among personal aspirations and social pressures. Always a dormant spirit that recommends their characters to make something better, but at the same time a deep cause of depression in most cases, especially when class, social mobility, and economic inequality become realities. Through works such as *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman*, the authors push the reader to reflect on a darker meaning in the concept of the American Dream, exposing how a society that establishes that success is only materialism and fame affects the personal pursuit of fulfillment.

3. The Great Gatsby: The Illusion of Success

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is arguably an exemplary satire of the American Dream and how the illusions created by Jay Gatsby, to attain his American Dream, ultimately turn hollow. Taking place in the Roaring Twenties, an era of great prosperity as well as cultural flourishing, the novel chronicles materialism and moral decay which characterized American culture during this period following World War I. Gatsby is the tragic hero in the novel, who seeks to amass wealth, prove success, and, most importantly, win the heart of Daisy Buchanan. But his all-time pursuit of this dream certainly proves fatal as he becomes a victim of the illusory approach of the American Dream.

❖ Gatsby's Pursuit of Wealth and Status

Jay Gatsby's dramatic rise from squalid destitution to enormous wealth becomes the traditional rags-to-riches legend often associated with the American Dream. Born of illiterate farmers, he sets his eyes on transcending his impoverished childhood and re-creating himself as an intellectual with enormous wealth. His craving pushes him into illegal things such as bootlegging in order to acquire the wealth that enables him to buy a lavish mansion in West Egg and host fabulous parties.

But Gatsby's pursuit of wealth is not merely for selfish reasons but through his own need to win back Daisy Buchanan—the woman he loved before going off to war. For Gatsby, wealth was a means to the end: it would be a practical tool by which he could prove himself to Daisy, thereby winning a place in old-money aristocracy. His faith that he can "repeat the past" and recreate the idealized romance he had with Daisy proves how deep in naivety he is and how illusory his dream is.

❖ The Green Light Symbol

The green light at the end of Daisy's dock, which Gatsby stares at from his mansion across the bay, is perhaps one of the most powerful symbols in *The Great Gatsby*. The green light is the symbolism of Gatsby's hopes and dreams for the future—to be with Daisy. It is something that beckons promise, a representation of the elusive nature of the American Dream, always in sight yet perpetually out of reach. For Fitzgerald, it signifies only this truth: that the American Dream is impossible, a dream which recedes every time approached by Gatsby.

In fact, all this gathered wealth and status notwithstanding, something is noticeably absent from Gatsby's world that he so strongly yearns to join. His parties are elaborate events attended by the rich and the celebrated, but they are form with little substance; none of Gatsby's partygoers know him and care little beyond the carnival attraction he represents. It is this social exclusion that is his failure to achieve his ultimate objective: acceptance on Daisy's and her old-money class's terms. Gatsby's tragic flaw lies in his failure to realize that his dream is founded on a faulty premise: that material success cannot attain love, respect, or true happiness.

❖ The Moral Degradation of the American Dream

Fitzgerald is much more cynical than what seems at first. The American Dream, which in the novel appears rather tragic and degrading, is a cliché for wealth, position, and beauty—the proudest clichés invented by humans. Idealised by those around him, Fitzgerald did not spare Gatsby of his guilty means through which he acquired his wealth. The characters, especially Tom and Daisy Buchanan, were driven by greed, not even by anything so noble as self-interest, but by it all, so careless of the human wreckage left along their highroads of pleasure.

Daisy, the object of Gatsby's obsessions, embodies the corrosive power of money. She is lovely and brilliant but vacuous and reckless, giving up the potential of deep emotional connection with Gatsby to the safety of her marriage to Tom. In the end, she scapegoats Gatsby for the death in the car accident, which he dies to redeem her for. The character of Daisy embodies the moral desolation in the lives of the rich as envisioned in the novel.

Fitzgerald explores the criticism toward the American Dream by putting materialism and social status above integrity and human connection. Gatsby's downfall is the means of exhibiting how the wealth and ambition pursued perhaps by Gatsby himself, did not give him the love and acceptance he was

looking for; rather it isolated him more and clearly showed the destructive power of a dream based on bad values.

4. Death of a Salesman: The Tragedy of the Common Man

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is a deeply critical work in its portrayal of the 'common man' as embodied in Willy Loman, an aging unsuccessful salesman. Also, while Jay Gatsby chases after social mobility and that idealized American Dream, his efforts are based on the humble hopes of a middle-class man who seeks respectability, security, and perhaps even a smoother road to success through his two sons. And so, like Gatsby, he runs into the fatal pitfalls of the "dream" and bounces into his emotional ground.

❖ Willy Loman's Pursuit of the American Dream

Willy Loman's vision of the American Dream has its basis in his belief that one succeeds by being popular rather than through hard work or ingenuity. Much of Willy Loman's career focuses on superficial qualities, with the belief that popularity and personality will lead him towards success. He measures his worth and the worth of others in material achievements and outward signs of success, a home, a car, and a high salary. He, though, during growing age and the decline of his sales career, comes to realize that he never fulfilled what he had intended for himself or his family.

Willy's compulsive need for external validation and social acceptance makes him look past reality in his life. He strains his past accomplishments and clings to the fantasy of his son, Biff turning out eventually to realize the dreams that the family had envisioned for him upon growing rich and successful. Even though it is outright evident that Biff has no desire to emulate his father, Willy continues to project his denied dreams into his son who never allows himself to consider maybe that his view of success was defective.

❖ The Illusion and the Crash of the Dream

Throughout the play, it is clear that Willy's faith in the American Dream is misplaced and very destructive. His reasoning that success can only come through being liked makes him look away from essential things like the development of skill and realistic expectations and more important, hard work. This has a historical context in which Willy idealises versions of success but the realities of modern capitalism are clearly depicted in the play. It is his inability to adjust to changes in the world of business, where personal charm would no longer be enough, that pushes him into worsening his feelings about inadequacy and failure.

It weighs heavily on Willy's psyche a terribly great psychological toll to maintain this illusion of success. He is constantly tormented by hallucinations and flashbacks, stepping out to periods when life was better or daydreaming about a time when he would be a successful salesman with all the recognition that it would bring. These mental breaks expose the depth of Willy's disillusionment with the American Dream and his desperate attempts to escape the pain of an unfulfilled life.

Miller paints a dismal picture of the potential emotional aftermath the pursuit of an American Dream can entail relative to common people. Willy clings to the faith in the dream, but it does not bring him any true fulfillment but instead anxiety, frustration, and a feeling of worthless character. In the final desperate and tragic act, he kills himself at the end of the play. He intends to ensure that his family will be financially secure after his death since, according to him, they will collect a large sum from his life insurance policy. Like all other sacrifices he had made in life, it was pointless since this last sacrifice captures the point that the dream is hollow. When dead, Willy is still a victim of the idea that material riches equal self-worth and love.

❖ The Failure of the American Dream

Willy's life remains a strong assertion of the failure of the American Dream for the common man. His hard work, loyalty to his job, and belief in personal charm as a guarantee to success have been unable to earn him the desired wealth and happiness he craves. Miller is critiquing the high expectations placed on the individual that is left seemingly unprepared, especially the working class, by an uncaring society.

❖ The social expectations

Social pressures of his era dictate what constitutes success for Willy, where a man's value is equated with professional success. The real damage that these forces inflict on the psyche finds full expression as Willy retreats further and further from reality and cannot somehow reconcile his desires with reality. The more he falls into the ill-fated trap of American culture idealized expectations of success, which makes him incapable of accepting a life that is more moderate or realistic.

❖ Family and Personal Relationships

The pursuit of Willy Loman's American Dream has far-reaching consequences that reflect not only his life, but also his family relationships. His unrealistic expectations for his sons, especially Biff, cause tension and resentment as Biff rebels against the life path Willy envisions for him. Despite his love for his family, the obsession with success prevents Willy from seeing or valuing them for who they are; therefore, the pressure and alienation start to wear down his emotional wellbeing. This way, Miller criticizes the manner in which the American Dream can degrade personal relationships by assigning importance over material success instead of true emotional bonding.

❖ The Modern Tragic Hero: Willy Loman

Willy Loman is the modern tragic hero—one whose fall comes both from personal flaws and from societal forces. Like a classical tragic hero, Willy's misguided belief propels him to some action. In this play, the mistaken belief focuses on material gain and social recognition as measures of success and worth. His tragedy actually results from his inability to accept the reality around him: he clings long after the distortion of the American Dream fails him.

But unlike the noble figures of ancient tragedy, Willy is a common man struggling to make ends meet in a society that seems to celebrate profits ahead of people. In making Willy an everyman character is quite an important decision taken by Miller in the play, as this wrenches the common man's struggles to the plane of high tragedy. It's not just his personal failure but also speaks of the larger capitalist system and eventually how it has touched the individual.

Miller's play says something very deep: the American Dream does not apply to Willys or those like him. In other words, a drama like *Death of a Salesman* is not just about how Willy lost out but also about how the system that surrounds him has failed.

5. A Comparative Analysis

The *Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller represent two contrasting yet curiously complementary works of critique on the American Dream, which develops tension between aspiration and reality. Despite the social backgrounds from which the protagonists, Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman, come, both characters suffer from the same profound disillusion created for the pursuer of a dream that cannot be achieved. Through such tragic tales, Fitzgerald and Miller unfold the vacuity and destructive energy of an ideal that equates success with material wealth and social approval.

❖ Wealth and Social Class

Both *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman* mirror how wealth and social class become strong elements that condition the lives of the protagonists in pursuit of the American Dream. Yet, how they relate to these themes depends completely on who they are. Jay Gatsby's story is a world of high society because he wants to earn entry and acceptance into the upper class. The movement of Gatsby from poverty to unprecedented wealth through unconventional means implies that wealth can acquire both social mobility and happiness. Yet, despite his material prosperity, Gatsby remains an outsider to the old-money class exemplified by the likes of Tom and Daisy Buchanan. He is trapped in a tragedy: that of believing material wealth can scrub away the past, then buying love for himself in the shape of Daisy's emotional infatuation-illusions that shut his fate up.

A middle-class salesman, Willy Loman is unable to attain the wealth and social status he so desperately craves. Unlike Gatsby, Willy never attains the dream of opulence but receives such profound personal and psychological crises as a result of his lack of success. His is not a dream of wealth but of modest financial stability and social recognition. Still, like Gatsby, Willy is confused by the materialistic marks of success. He favors popularity and personal charm over work and competence.

Gatsby and Willy never understand what the American Dream really is; wealth can never buy love or social inclusion to Gatsby, and, on the other hand, being well-liked never guarantees financial

prosperity or self-fulfillment to Willy. Through their tragic downfalls, the danger of success equated with wealth and status and rigid class structures that thwart actual social mobility are illustrated.

❖ Illusion and Its Role in the American Dream

Illusion is a very common theme for both works, with Gatsby and Willy being stuck with the unrealistic and impossible vision of success. Jay Gatsby, whose whole identity is a reinvention and new creation of person, believes that money made can provide everything for everyone in life, including the love of Daisy. He constructs an idealized past for himself and comes to believe he can "repeat the past" through winning Daisy back, but she is married and part of old-money society—one who could never accept him. Gatsby's dream is, after all, an illusion—a fantasy of a life that was never available, a life made of materialism and nostalgia.

So too is Willy Loman caught up in his illusions of success. Through most of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy idolizes not only his own talent as a salesman but also the future success of his son Biff. He constantly rewrites history, romanticizing moments in which he triumphs over himself and telling himself that he was once a great salesman. Inability to confront reality—the downward curve of his career, bad relations with his sons, and failure in terms of security—forces Willy into mental collapse. His dream is based on a misapprehension that popularity and personality will bring a man professional success, a view swiftly being rendered an anachronism in the modern capitalist world.

Both Fitzgerald and Miller employ the concept of illusion to reflect upon the American Dream. The green light at the end of Daisy's dock in *The Great Gatsby* symbolizes how that dream will never be attainable, and it eludes him one step further. For Willy, his hallucinations and fantasies prove just how imbedded in illusions he is, through which he cannot see the stark truth that there is to his situation. In both works, the American Dream is revealed as a false promise that sets people chasing after impossible goals, all too often with tragic consequences.

❖ The Psychological Cost of the American Dream

The pursuit of the American Dream comes at a great psychological cost to both Gatsby and Willy; single-minded focus on success drives them into deep personal suffering. Gatsby's all-consuming desire for Daisy and drive to prove himself to the upper class leaves him abandoned by those in whose lives he had invested so much. For all the expense and glitter of his parties, Gatsby is alone and isolated; such is the man who, though he may have everything earthly riches have to offer, cannot become a part of things. That he dies in tragedy, shot by George Wilson through a misunderstanding, is the final collapse of his dream. A dream which once inspired him in a bygone era becomes the cause of his own demise, having himself killed, deserted by those whom he had strove so hard to win over.

His psychological decline is more pronounced, for he is overcome by a sense of inadequacy and defeat. His inability to achieve success as he perceives his family life and lifestyle should be operates into and out of frequent hallucination, suicidal thoughts, and emotional breakdowns. Willy's last act—a vain suicide in the hope that his life insurance will provide security for his family—is a tragic attempt at

reconciling his failure with the ideal that he so desperately pursued. His death, like Gatsby's, then proves to exhibit the destructive nature of the American Dream, exemplifying the degree to which such false promises may prompt the victims of that dream to the point of utter desperation.

Both the protagonists demonstrate the emotional and psychological stress of achieving an impossible ideal. Gatsby's love for the past and Willy's for his own perceived success renders them unable to engage in the present or connect with others on any profound or meaningful level. Their final isolation is the fulfillment of what was ultimately a shallow dream based on materialism and the desire for social acceptance.

❖ Critique of Capitalism and The American Dream

Finally, both *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman* can be said to be critiques of the capitalist values that lie within American Dream; for in Gatsby's world, wealth and status have been assumed to be measures of success without leading to happiness or fulfillment. Gatsby's illegal schemes in amassing his fortune underscore the moral decay often attendant upon the desire for material achievement, while his failure to gain the acceptance of East Egg's old money underscores the fixed class divisions that preclude genuine social mobility.

In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller blasts the dehumanizing powers of capitalism over the individual. The worth of Willy, both to his employer and to himself, is measured strictly on the basis of economic productivity. As he grows older and his sales decline, the capitalist system casts aside Willy, leaving him neither work nor financial security or self-respect. It opens a window to the cruel reality of a system that values profit at the cost of people, whereby ordinary mortals like Willy Loman were left to grapple under the weight of expectations that nobody seems able to actualize.

It is through this process that the American Dream is evident to be utterly dysfunctional, still holding promises of false hopes to all those who believed that success and happiness were to be achieved by and because of wealth and high social standing. Thus, Fitzgerald and Miller was able to speak for the disillusionment of their protagonists as a way of showing what such a society would really bring about, the costs of such a society-to human values and personal fulfillment wherein people had success over the cost of it.

6. Conclusion

In *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman*, the further probing of the American Dream creates deep, strong aspects against its elusive nature and often destructive contents. Both F. Scott Fitzgerald and Arthur Miller have characters who are utterly driven towards success, wealth, and social status but, as these tendencies carry them into their tragic downfall, they present the highly desired concept of the American Dream in an ambiguous manner. The authors underline that, with Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman, the unseen weakness is in the idea

of the American Dream, especially focusing on material possession, social climb, and external repute, which comes at the expense of getting personal fulfillment and emotional well-being.

The great dream is, in this case, The Great Gatsby because Gatsby's dream is founded on an unrealistic assumption: that wealth and status can buy love and happiness, but his romanticized view of success happens to be an unattainable fantasy. His tragic death depicts the hollowness of an existence motivated by the 'materialization' of a person and finding acceptance within the framework of society. Similarly, through the character of Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman, the preoccupation of being "liked" and of actually accumulating some measure of financial security from a capitalistic society reveals the additional burden pushed onto one's shoulders at the hands of that society, along with the dramatic cost of failure in such a system. His final act of self-destruction means that the unacted dream which remained unfulfilled can prove fatal for a common man.

Both works reflect the classic criticism of the American Dream, explaining how the promises it offers become illusions that will actually ensnare and annihilate whomsoever pursues them. A comparison between Gatsby and Willy Loman shows how, although each character has a life of very different sorts and goals, there is much in common-both are victims of the system which makes a show of wealth, status, and material success being the ultimate definition of self-worth. Fitzgerald and Miller challenge the reader to wonder whether the American Dream could possibly be a realistic component for anybody to achieve and if the promise of fulfillment it claims is any more real than just a prescription for eventual disillusionment.

Ultimately, then, The Great Gatsby and Death of a Salesman lay bare the contradictions of this American Dream-posing it, really, as perilous myth rather than as universal road to success. Both reminders come through the poignant portrayals of human struggle left in their accounts: both remind us of the cost of the dream that, for so many, will forever be out of reach.

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