

The Comprehension of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*

Student Name

University

Course

Professor Name

Date

Outline

- I. Introduction
- II. The American dream as the keystone in *Death of a Salesman*
 - A. The concept of the American Dream in the play
 - B. Willy Loman, pursuing his American Dream
 - C. The American Dream of the salesman's sons
- III. Conclusion

The Comprehension of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*

The phenomenon of the American Dream appears vague and indeterminate in the American literature. In a broad sense, this term indicates both material and spiritual values of the American citizens. It is a complex of various ideals, inherent for the Americans since their childhood. The American Dream is a common topic in literary works, including novels, poems, plays. A playwright Arthur Miller had concerns on that subject and created a play called *Death of a Salesman*, narrating a story about Willy Loman, a salesman with a low salary and many debts. This play is a perfect example of a typical story of people attempting to define their American Dream and follow it through the struggling, yet those attempts are not successful.

The American Dream as the keystone in *Death of a Salesman*

The protagonist of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman, lives in two worlds. The real one oppresses him with his inability to change things for better tomorrow, whereas in his visionary world Willy still sees chances for him and his sons to turn things around. He looks up to his brother Ben, who made a fortune working in Africa. Remembering him, Willy says “The man knew what he wanted and went out and got it! Walked into a jungle, and comes out, the age of twenty-one, and he’s rich!” (Miller, 1980, p. 28). The protagonist is permanently preoccupied with his American Dream - the brighter future not only for him, but for his family as well.

The concept of the American Dream in the play

The American Dream represented in the play does not appear extremely sophisticated, yet it seems unreachable for the characters. Willy Loman simply wants his sons to succeed in life like his brother did. Ben, Willy’s brother, appears to be a person who started with nothing and acquired everything, but he had to live a relentless life to succeed. Miller mentions in his introduction that “His brother, Ben, by the same token, is less a substantial fact than an embodiment of that ruthless

drive and achievement...” (Miller, 1980, p. 16). Biff and Happy, sons of the salesman, inherited his hopes and dreams, however they both see different ways of receiving what they want to achieve.

The lives of the salesman and his sons are not as joyful as they would want them to be.

At first sight, the American Dream in the play is represented in the way the author sees it. Though after deeper exploration it starts to look more like criticism of the American Dream itself. According to Roudane (2020), the central force of Miller’s work is not the American Dream, but the myth of it. However, Miller does not actually criticize the American Dream as it was conceived in XX century – as an opportunity for any citizen to get what they want. The author censures the idea of the American dream as an endless chase for recognition and money. That is the main reason the characters of the play could never really achieve their American Dream – they do not understand what it is.

Willy Loman, pursuing his American Dream

Willy Loman, the salesman himself, is probably the most ambivalent character in the entire play due to the divergence between the reach of his American Dream and his current life conditions. He is “seeking for a kind of ecstasy in life” (Sudha, 2018, 62). His salary is not enough for him and his family to live a prosperous life and settle his numerous debts. Willy struggles to mentor his sons properly, hoping they, or at least one them, could one day repeat the glorious success of his wealthy brother. Yet none of his sons can please him and make him proud.

Willy’s younger son named Happy always magnifies his own achievements. Although in fact he is just “one of the two assistants to the assistant” (Miller, 1980, p. 104). Happy truly believes that being optimistic along with a snow-white smile will lead him to richness. Biff, the elder son, does not have much to boast as well. He fails his studies, cannot get himself a job and, moreover, he is afraid to disappoint his father.

At some point, Willy starts to realize the true state of affairs, which leads him to sinister thoughts. The insurance payment for his death should be enough for his family to start a new life and finally achieve their notorious American Dream. Those are his thoughts before committing suicide, but in very deed, he is simply tired of “a life of hopeless chasing of a dream of a triumph” (Devi, 2019, p. 99). Willy Loman loses all his hope and at last realizes, that his American Dream was only a fantasy.

The characters of the play and their own American Dream

Willy Loman is not the only one to miss his American Dream – the other characters are not successful either. Willy’s elder son Biff has built his life around the ideals of his father, trying to follow them whatever it takes. But his illusionary dreams are crushed the very moment he finds his father in a bed with another woman. As Biff says, “I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been. We’ve been talking in a dream for fifteen years” (Miller, 1980, 81). Biff cannot neither forgive his father for his betrayal nor build himself a new life. His ideals are completely broken, and his chances for new ones are most improbable.

Willy’s younger son Happy lives an idle life, believing that one day he will become wealthy. He knows for sure what his American Dream is supposed to be, but he does not know what to do to achieve it. He does not even want to know it, as well as make any considerable efforts. He is “not so much baffled by the erosion of affliction” (Devi, 2019, 100). Happy is wholly satisfied with his immense optimism, and his American Dream is most likely to remain just a dream for the rest of his life.

Conclusion

The story of the salesman Willy Loman and his family depicts futile endeavor to achieve the goals which are yet undefined. Willy and his sons likewise sincerely believe in their American

Dream, but they do not understand the true purpose of it. They try not to get what they want, but to get what other people have. Lack of awareness of their own personal desires is what makes the characters of this play unsatisfied. Willy Loman, exhausted by his unending worthless struggle, lays hands on himself in his last attempt to push his family closer to the American Dream of which he had always fantasized. Biff cannot handle the fact that his entire life was a huge lie, and has miserable chances to ever recover. Happy is stuck in a stasis, created by his own beliefs and dreams of a better life that comes on its own. The American Dream only seems a clear goal, but in fact it is obscured. It is necessary for anyone to find their own dream before they could understand what to do to achieve it.

References

- Devi, B. (2019). Willy Loman as the paragon of American Dream in the play 'Death of a Salesman'. *Seshadripuram Journal of Social Sciences*, 1(4), 99-106.
- Miller, A. A. (1980). *Death of a salesman*. Dramatists Play Service.
- Roudane, M. (2020). Arthur Miller, essayist. In S. Marino et al. (Eds.), *Arthur Miller for the twenty-first century: Contemporary views of his writings and ideas* (pp. 211-218). Springer International Publishing.
- Sudha, T. B. (2018). The individual and the American Dream in Death of the Salesman. *Research Journal of English*, 3(1), 61-64.