Death Of Salesman: The Idea Of American Dream In A Novel

The American Dream is defined as “the ideal that every U.S. citizen has an equal opportunity to achieve prosperity and success” through means of “hard work, determination, and initiative.” Most people share this common idea of The American Dream, but differ on how to achieve it. In Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller, the unusual ideas of Willy Loman prevent him from reaching his goal.

Through Biff and his failure to achieve his dream of owning a ranch indicates his money problems, and his mental state from free to a capitalistic mentality. Biff and Happy are laying in bed, thinking about what failures they are in the eyes of their father when Biff says “...with a ranch I could do the work I like and still be something” (16). This later turns into “...I don’t fit in business. Not that I won’t try. I’ll try and I’ll make good” (42). Biff changes his dreams to satisfy his mother and father, because a ranch owner is looked down upon in society, a businessman is admirable.

A major belief of Willy’s is that popularity and physical appearance is what makes people successful. While Willy is reminiscing about telling his sons Biff and Happy about having his own business, Happy asks “Like Uncle Charley, heh?” (19). Willy counters “Bigger than Uncle Charley!” that “Charley is liked, but he’s not… well liked.” (19). The boys mimic Willy when referring to Bernard, Biff saying “He’s liked, but he’s not well liked” (21). It is evident that Willy believes being well liked will make you successful. Biff is the core of popularity at high school, women want him and men want to be him. In the eyes of Willy, Biff is the favorite and is destined for riches unlike Bernard who studies, is unathletic, and is honest. Ironically, those not well liked according to Willy are the ones who end up being more successful than him and his family. Again Willy is having a flashback, speaking to Biff and Happy about what it takes to be successful. Willy rambles to himself “....the man who makes an appearance in the business world” (21) is the man “who gets ahead” (21). That “Be liked and you will never want” (21). Willy brags about his fictitious success saying “You take me… I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. ‘Willy Loman is here!’ That’s all they have to know, and I go right through.” Willy’s belief is that he is well liked and takes interest in his business. In reality, fellow salesman laugh at him behind his back, he is rejected by customers, and can barely afford to take care of his family. Being well liked and monetary success is more important than being happy according to Willy.

With Willy’s pride, there comes disgrace, and those who are humble become wise. While playing cards with Charley, Willy brings back to mind a memory of his brother Ben offering him the opportunity to work outdoors and possibly become rich in Alaska. However, Willy declines as he wishes to prove to his brother that he could do just as well in Brooklyn. Willy tells Ben “I know it’s Brooklyn but we hunt too” (34) and “We’re gonna rebuild the entire front stoop right now!” (34). Willy tries selling his brother on the reasons why he is staying, while Ben says “And good luck with… what do you do?” (34). The love Willy has for Ben is not mutual, and his flashbacks with Ben show how much Willy admired him and how little Ben cared for him and the family.

Arthur Miller criticizes society's corrupt capitalist dream. Miller raises the question that material wealth is what determines one's value. Willy is a direct representation of a "regular guy" in the 1950's, the "Age of Affluence." During the 1950's the economy is booming, materialism and consumerism is what society feeds on, and it is all about "Keeping up with the Joneses." If success if defined only in monetary terms, most people will suffer like Willy Loman. Miller illustrates this with Willy appearing in Howard's office to ask to not travel anymore. To Howard, Willy is not an asset in his eyes, he feels like he owes him nothing and ignores him. Willy pleads "Like to ask a little favor if you…" (54) and Howard shuts him up with "Sh! Get this now this is my son" (54). This scene represents capitalist America as being ruthless, no matter how long Willy has been with the company and his evident helpless state, Howard gives all his attention to the recording machine. Howard is only concerned with personal fulfillment.

The meeting with Howard ends up with Willy being fired, which leads into a parallel of the earlier scene of Willy playing cards with Charley, going in and out of a flashback with his brother Ben. Willy is heading to Charley's office to beg for money when he runs into Bernard. Willy realizes how successful Bernard is, but all Bernard does is ask Willy about himself and Biff. Charley ruins this humble moment when he exclaims "How you like this kid? Gonna argue a case in front of The Supreme Court!" (69). Bernard protests his father with "Pop!" (69). Willy is shocked with Bernard's actions as he says "The Supreme Court! And he didn't even mention it!" (69). Bernard does not feel the need to boast, as Charley says "He don't have to… he's going to do it" (69). Charley's phrase is a reaction to Willy's constant behavior of talking and not doing. Bernard is different since he is a "doer" and not a talker like the Lomans, there is no need for him to brag about his future. Bernard counters Willy's ideal of success is solely based on a "cult of personality."

During Willy's meeting with Charley, Willy tells him he has been fired from his job. Charley offers Willy his last chance to put his life back together, to start his life over and end the charade he is living. Willy fiercely responds with "I don't want your goddam job!" (70). He turns Charley down because he has always been jealous of the fact that Charley owns his own business. In the past, Willy ridiculed Charley, just as he used to ridicule Bernard, so he feels that working for Charley now would be a humiliation. Pride causes Willy to lose both his chances with Charley and Ben.

Charley succeeds at the American Dream because he realizes that superficial beliefs have no value. Charley tries to get Willy to realize that one's character and qualities does equate to success. Charley fights with Willy as he says "...when you gonna realize that things didn't mean anything?" (70) and "Why must everybody like you? Who liked J.P. Morgan?" Despite Miller"s criticism of the American Dream, through Charley he demonstrates that hard work and innovation is the key to success and being happy.

The failed dreams and visions of Willy and Biff connects to modern society as Miller says about the 1950's, the insecurity of the American society that associates success with material possessions. He makes it clear that in American culture it is extremely hard to separate the identity and the material in one's life.