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The Death of the American Dream

by Steve Braun

(Honors English 1102)

The Assignment: Craft an organized, focused, and clearly argued essay in response to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

Willy Loman, the main character in Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman*, wants to live the American dream. He is consumed with his own misguided beliefs regarding success. In Lois Tyson's article, "The Psychological Politics of the American Dream," she contends, "For him, [Willy], the road to the American Dream is paved with a winning personality" (n. pag). Willy's conclusion regarding success, popularity, and happiness, relies on a superficial and immature view of what it means to be well liked. Being well liked, he concludes, must lead to success and happiness. Willy mistakes the image of popularity for the reality of success, ignoring the obvious fact that for some rich men being well liked is not the source of their wealth but its reward. Willy's next door neighbor, Charley, says of financial scoundrel J. P. Morgan, "with his pockets on he was very well liked" (1589). Willy tries to project the image of success by exaggerating his sales prowess, and it's the image of success and the appearance of being well liked that Willy teaches his sons. This image is necessary to secure their success in the world, a world that will open its doors for men who are admired. Willy's obsession with the American Dream, believing that being well liked equates with success, keeps both he and his sons in a state of emotional immaturity. The Loman family's American Dream becomes their prison, constructed of deceit and false pride. They cannot escape their immature behavior of manipulating, lying, and bragging, never realizing that this behavior prevents them from success.

Willy, the patriarch of the family, will do anything to give the illusion that he is living the American Dream of being popular, successful, and a dedicated family man. To create a false impression of prosperity, Willy lives beyond his means. He buys items on credit such as his car, washing machine, vacuum cleaner, and refrigerator. Willy complains, "Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it's broken! I'm always in a race with the junkyard" (1576). Even though entangled in lies, Willy has moments where the reality of his own self image conflicts with his illusion of popularity. For example, he states, "I'll knock'em dead next week, I'll go to Hartford. I'm very well liked in Hartford" (1557). Yet in the same conversation he admits reality by saying, "You know, the trouble is people don't seem to take to me" (1557). This statement indicates that Willy has moments when he acknowledges himself as an average salesman at best. This reality is so unacceptable, however, that he must lie in order to live with himself and meet his expectations of the American Dream.

One possible reason for Willy's obsession with being liked is the abandonment of the family by his father and brother. As a young child Willy did not have the capacity to understand the logic of his family's break up, and may have felt he was to blame. This could have caused Willy's immature attitude regarding popularity and success. Young Willy may have thought, "If only my father and brother liked me, they wouldn't have left." This same thought is reiterated by the adult Willy, "If only people liked me I would sell more and be successful." Tyson refers to Willy's abandonment by his father and brother as leaving him "narcissistically wounded" (n. pag). This wound fills Willy with self doubt and explains his preoccupation with wanting to be well liked.

Willy's brother, Ben, is a pompous braggart who fills Willy's head with amazing stories of wealth, success, and the American Dream. For example, Willy states, "That's the wonder of this

country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked” (1583). Because of his obsession with achieving the American Dream and the need for Ben’s approval, Willy doesn’t comprehend that Ben may not be as successful as he claims.

Another role model that a young Willy had when beginning his sales career was Dave Singleman. Willy viewed Dave as a father figure and believed he was a great man because he was well liked and a proficient salesman. Willy believed Dave’s ability to sell was based solely on the admiration of his clients. While being personable does help to sell products, there are other contributing factors such as the economy and supply and demand. In Willy’s state of emotional immaturity, he never questions these factors when he isn’t successful. Instead he blames himself for not being well liked or makes up excuses and lies about his lack of success. When Willy returns from a business trip he exaggerates his earnings, and only when confronted by his wife does he offer a reason for his failure. Willy proclaims, “The trouble was that three of the stores were half closed for inventory in Boston. Otherwise I woulda broke records” (1556). Willy makes these types of statements to cover up the real reason for his failure which he believes is not being liked.

Willy’s anger toward his own lack of success keeps him on the verge of violence, and fuels his hostility towards Charley, his next door neighbor. Even though Charlie has achieved success, Willy does not respect or admire Charley because he is not well liked. When Willy desperately needs a job and Charley offers one, he refuses to accept the job out of immature pride. Charley asks, “When are you going to grow up?” (1589). Willy responds more like a child than a mature man, “You big ignoramus, if you say that to me again I’ll rap you one!” (1589). His relationship with Charley and Charley’s son, Bernard, develops into a relationship of resentment, envy, yet dependency. Willy resents the success of Charley and his son because Willy does not see them as being well liked, and yet they are more successful than both he and his sons. Willy says of Charley, “He’s liked, but he’s not-well liked” (1554). When Willy asks Biff if Bernard is well liked, Biff replies, “He’s liked, but he’s not well liked” (1555). This statement illustrates that Willy’s legacy regarding popularity and success is being passed on to his son. The fact that they are successful even though not well liked contradicts Willy’s belief of the American Dream.

The reality that the success of Charley and his son is not due to being well liked causes Willy to hold deep resentment for Charley. This resentment is evident by the way Willy treats him. Willy states, “A man who can’t handle tools is not a man. You’re disgusting” (1561), and “Who the hell do you think you are, better than everybody else? You don’t know everything, you big, ignorant, stupid... (1585). For all his indignation, in the end Willy relies upon Charley’s success to help him pay his own bills. Willy is also confused by the fact that Charley’s son, Bernard, doesn’t feel the need to brag about his success as Willy and his sons do. When Charley informs Willy that Bernard is going to argue a case in front of the Supreme Court, Willy inquires, somewhat confused, as to why Bernard didn’t mention it. Charley replies, “He don’t have to - he’s gonna do it” (1588). This statement contradicts Willy’s belief that part of the American Dream is to brag about possessions and success earned.

Willy passes his belief that being well liked will lead to success to his sons, Biff and Happy. In B. S. Field’s *Criticism of Death of a Salesman*, he states, “Willy’s efforts to mold his boys in his own image have not been a failure but a success” (n. pag). Even their names, Willy, Biff, and Happy, are names of boys not mature men. They share Willy’s view that unacceptable behavior will be overlooked if you are well liked. Like Willy, Biff and Happy are trapped in a state of immaturity, wanting so badly to be liked that they are constantly testing the world with their lies, failures, and sexual conquests to see if they can still obtain society’s approval. Throughout his life Biff exhibits inappropriate behavior by stealing mundane objects. When an adolescent Biff steals a football he is not admonished, but instead praised by his father. Willy states, “Coach’ll probably congratulate you on your initiative! That’s because he likes you. If somebody else took that ball there’d be an uproar” (1554). Willy, as Biff’s role model, promotes the belief that because he is well liked his improper

behavior will be overlooked. As an adult he continues this pattern by stealing a carton of basketballs, a sports jacket, and a pen. Even time in jail does not deter Biff's antisocial behavior. Happy tests his acceptance by society through his conquests of women. He lies to seduce women and uses them for sex, which is a potentially dangerous behavior indicative of his immaturity. Happy states, "but it's like this girl, see. I hate myself for it [seducing her]. Because I don't want the girl, and still, I take it and - I love it!" (1551). Happy is trapped in an addictive cycle, and cannot escape because he misinterprets the attention he receives as a sign that he is well liked.

For all the time and energy Willy and his sons expend to achieve the American Dream, they have not attained happiness. Both Willy and Happy admit to their own loneliness. Willy declares, "I'm so lonely," (1599) while Happy states, "It's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I'm lonely" (1550). Biff declares his own unhappiness, "I'm mixed up very bad. I'm like a boy. I'm not married. I'm not in business, I just - I'm like a boy" (1550). The men of the Loman family are not unique. Many people spend their lives trying to achieve the elusive American Dream. In his criticism of *Death of Salesman*, Stephen Lawrence states, "If Willy is responsible for his own downfall, what are we to make of all the suggestions of a sick and distorted society?" (547). Believing in the American Dream that popularity equates to success and happiness is not only a pitfall of the Loman family, but of society as well.

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