

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

**PRESENCE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM OF SUCCESS IN MILLER'S  
DEATH OF A SALESMAN AND HANSBERRY'S A RAISIN IN THE SUN**

**SUMIT BISWAS**

M.A in English, Tezpur University.



**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this paper is to examine the presence of the great 'American Dream' in the writings of American literature in general and Miller and Hansberry in particular. We can see the height of its symbolic implication in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Both these plays greatly reflect the great American dream through not only the characters but also through certain incidents. This paper will look into that aspect and will try to draw out certain instances to justify that. Through this paper an attempt has also been made to look into the characters in both their socio-economic as well as their psychological status, in order to establish a more comprehensive analysis of the presence of the great American dream of success in these two plays.

Key-words: dream, success, psyche, Americanness

**Introduction**

One of the major myths that is widely present in American literature is the American Dream of Success. The American Dream of Success is a national ethos or belief of the United States of America. It is a set of ideals (democracy, rights, liberty, opportunity and equality) in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility for the family and children, achieved through hard work in a society with few barriers. Historian James Truslow Adams popularized the phrase "American Dream" in his 1931 book *Epic of America*. To quote from his book,

"But there has been also the American Dream that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret not a dream of motorcars 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 recognised by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."

Thus, in Truslow's definition, "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement." Regardless of social class or circumstances of birth. In fine, the American Dream is rooted in the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that "all men are created equal" with the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Usage in American Literature:

The concept of the American Dream is used in popular discourse, and scholars have traced its use in American Literature ranging from the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, F. Scott

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977). Other writers who used the American Dream theme include Hunter S. Thompson, Edward Albee, John Steinbeck, Langston Hughes etc.

The theme of American Dream in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*:

The American Dream is also discussed in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*; the play's protagonist, Willy, is on a quest for the American Dream. The play which greatly highlights the subject of the American Dream of success. The play, in fact, is centered on that. The central appeal of the play can be argued to be the struggle of each character's pursuit of the American Dream. This is a valid point because we see each of the Loman men following their own versions of that dream. Willy has a completely different definition than his brother Ben. By the end of the play, Willy's son Ben has dropped his father's viewpoint and redefined his version of the dream.

Willy Loman, the protagonist of the play believes in the American Dream as the ability to become prosperous by mere charisma or charm as well as by popularity. He believes that personality, not hard work and innovation, can lead a man to success. In the play, we find a number of occasions where Willy is trying his best to make sure that his boys are well-liked and popular. For example, when his son Biff confesses to making fun of his math teacher's lisp, Willy is more concerned about the reaction of his classmates.

Biff: I crossed my eyes and talked with a lithp.

Willy: (Laughing.) You did? The kids like it?

Biff: They nearly died laughing!

Of course, Willy's version of the Dream of Success is never successful as Biff grows up to become a drifter and a ranch-hand. Willy's own career as a salesman also falters and failing to influence his boss by his 'personality', he ultimately gets fired from the job.

To Willy's older brother Ben, the American Dream is the ability to start with nothing and somehow make a fortune. This is evident from his

dialogues in the play. For example,

Ben: William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!

Ben's character signifies that a few people can achieve the "rags to riches" version of the American Dream. Yet, Miller's play suggests that one must be ruthless (or at least a bit wild) in order to achieve it. Biff Loman, the elder son of Willy, does have the potential to pursue the "right" dream – if only he could resolve his inner conflict. Biff is pulled by two different dreams. One dream is his father's world of business, sales, and capitalism. But another dream involves nature, the great outdoors, and working with his hands. The inner conflict is evident from this conversation with his brother, Happy:

Biff: There's nothing more inspiring or – beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt. And it's cool there now, see? Texas is cool now, and it's spring. And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my God, I'm not getting anywhere! What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I'm thirty-four years old. I oughta be makin' my future. That's when I come running home.

However, by the end of the play, Biff realizes that his father had the "wrong" dream. Biff understands that his father was great with his hands; Willy built their garage and put up a new ceiling. Biff believes that his father should have been a carpenter, or should have lived in a more rustic part of the country. Biff understands the reasons behind the failure of his father. During the funeral of his father, Biff decides that he will not allow that to happen to himself. He turns away from Willy's dream and, presumably, returns to the countryside, where good, old-fashioned manual labor will ultimately content his restless soul.

In fine, *Death of a Salesman* is a remarkable play which highlights the American Dream most perfectly. The true wonder in *Death of a Salesman* is that we can relate and that we can feel what the characters are experiencing because we have all been there in one form or another.

The theme of American Dream in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*:

Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is about a black family in 1959 Chicago and its aspirations. It focuses on the different dreams of each member of the Younger family. This theme of aspiration makes a tempting match with the concept of the American dream - the idea that anyone can do well for themselves if they work hard. The family consists of Mama, the devout Christian; her son Walter, his wife Ruth and son Travis; and Beneatha, her daughter. All have their own plans which could be called the American dream. Mama, with Ruth's support, wants to move out of their apartment and into a house in a better area. Walter wants to become wealthy and plans to do so by investing in a business with his friend Willie (who never actually appears in the play). Beneatha wants to go to medical school.

All of these are typical aspirations, but because the Youngers are black, there are also racial aspirations involved. Walter admires Beneatha's suitor George, who is fully Americanized and denies his African origins; he believes that to be successful he must also assimilate. Beneatha on the other hand rejects the idea of integrating with the white Americans and attempts to find her identity in Africa. Despite this she straightens her hair, until persuaded not to by her Nigerian boyfriend, Joseph Asagai.

The Youngers have aspirations, but there are obstacles to fulfilling them. When Mama buys the house the local residents' association tries to pay them to live elsewhere because they don't want black neighbors. Walter is poorly educated and his dreams of becoming wealthy through investment fail miserably. In fact, Walter's desires are complex to the point of becoming a hazard to him. This is evident from his conversation with his mother:

Walter: I want so many things that they are driving me kind of crazy...Mama – look at me.

In fact, Mama also realizes the condition of Walter. Mama knows the ambitious nature of her son and what it has caused to the family. The foolish

business dealing of Walter with a friend named Willy has resulted in a possible destruction of their dreams and Mama contemplates over the same:

Mama: Yes, a fine man – just couldn't never catch up with his dreams, that's all.

Beneatha, on the other hand, is torn between the culture she lives in and the one she identifies with. Ruth, Walter's wife, is also disappointed at the failure of their dreams. This is reflected through her conversations with both Walter as well as with Mama. One such example is:

Ruth: Honey...life don't have to be like this. I mean sometimes people can do things so that things are better...You remember how we used to talk when Travis was born...about the way we were going to live...the kind of house... (*She is stroking his head*) Well, it's all starting to slip away from us...

For all these reasons, *A Raisin in the Sun* is an ideal work to discuss in terms of the American dream. It shows how the admirable idea that everyone can achieve their ambitions if they work hard doesn't always stand up in the face of real life. The play can be said to be a critique of the concept of the American Dream of Success.

#### Conclusion

The American Dream of success is one major myth which constitutes the theme of many great American literary texts, irrespective of the genre. Though novels like Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is often considered as the best specimen of the Dream of Success, plays like *Death of a Salesman* and *A Raisin in the Sun* are also notable literary works when it comes to drama. However, the intention of both Miller and Hansberry was not only to showcase the presence of the myth through their characters but also to highlight the ill-effects of the myth or belief.

In fine, both Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* bears traces of the great American Dream of Success.

#### References

<https://www.thoughtco.com/the-american-dream-in-death-of-a-salesman-2713536>

<https://daily.jstor.org/james-truslow-adams-dreaming-american-dream/>