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# Success, Law, and the Law of Success: Reevaluating *Death of a Salesman's* Treatment of the American Dream

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In its emphasis on subjectivity, the title *The Inside of His Head* – the working name of the play known to us as *Death of a Salesman* – underlines the importance of one particular mind and its internal dynamics for the wider thematic frame of Arthur Miller's play. This wider frame, however, extends far beyond the individual level; it concerns largely impersonal issues that have to do with the nature of American society and its ethos of success. As many critics are aware, the play, first produced in 1949, was written at the height of the consumer boom that had followed the recession of the 1930s and the war years. By this time the American economy had become consumption-oriented rather than production-oriented, and society was turning more and more materialistic.[1] By positioning the figure of a salesman at the center of his drama, then, Miller explores some of the effects of these changing socioeconomic conditions. Through the representation of this salesman's emotional collapse, the drama voices the playwright's resentment against the damaging and demeaning power of the American ethos of consumption and private economic success on the individuals who uphold and nourish it.

Indeed, a survey of the critical evaluations of *Death of a Salesman* reveals that the play has been mostly construed as a powerful, impassioned attack on this national ethos, often designated as the 'American dream.' My claim, on the other hand, is that despite Miller's unmistakable criticism of the competition, materialism, and selfishness that characterize the society represented in the play, *Death of a Salesman* is

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far from renouncing the American dream. Quite the contrary: it should be read as an appeal to reestablish the American dream as it should be dreamt, and as it had been dreamt once, before its deterioration into an exclusively self-centered ambition for personal profit. Capitalism, business success, upward social mobility – all these are not necessarily such unforgivable social vices in Miller's eyes as many critics have argued. Miller's treatment of these issues oscillates between the critical and the favorable, and is far more dialectical, and consequently contains many more conservative elements, than is usually believed.

The major ideological question that the play evokes has to do with the values of American society as reflected by the salesman's drama. Why does Willy Loman's attempt to fit himself into the ethos of professional and financial success fail? Is it Willy's personality that makes it impossible for him to succeed, or is there something that is inherently wrong – socially, morally, psychologically – about the ethos of success? Indeed, as many critics have argued, Miller represents American society satirically, and condemns its callous materialism and engulfing capitalism; and yet, at the same time he does not deny the idea that material success is vital for an individual's well-being. His play – as this essay will show – even nurtures the idea that the ambition to acquire money may be morally commendable. There is no contradiction here: the play constructs the American dream as harmful and unethical as long as it is based on selfish greed with no consideration for the good of the larger community. However, the dream is presented as attainable, vital, and commendable when it is founded on values that are broader than just individual gain: social responsibility, moral sensitivity, generosity, fairness, and integrity.

Before proceeding to examine *Death of a Salesman*'s treatment of the American dream it is necessary to establish the major components of this phrase or concept, especially as not all critics who claim that Miller renounces it supply a definition to this over-determined phrase. Neither do they suggest how Miller construes it. Accounts of the history of the concept usually refer to its early idealistic signification and to what is often described as its later deterioration into a mere materialistic craving for financial and social upward mobility. In the spirit of

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the Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed every human being's right for freedom and for the pursuit of happiness – a right supposedly lying as the cornerstone of American culture and politics – the historian James Truslow Adams, writing in 1931, defines the American dream as an ideal social vision in which "each man and each woman shall be able to attain … the fullest stature of which they are innately capable." According to Adams, who was probably the first to coin the phrase in his book *The Epic of America*,[2] the American dream of "a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank" is "the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world." In a similar note, John M. Gill, trying to explain what the American dream is in 1975, emphasizes non-materialistic and non-selfish values such as brotherhood, freedom, and democracy, and says very little about personal ambition for economic success (p. x).

However, most historians and cultural critics do draw attention to this latter aspect. In the spirit of William James's remark that the "exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS … is our national disease,"[3] the great majority of analyses of the American dream agree that its initial idealistic, society-oriented and democracy-oriented values have not been preserved as central features of American identity and aspirations, if they had ever been so central to begin with. Kenneth S. Lynn, in his 1955 *The Dream of Success*, claims that the top value of American society since the middle of the nineteenth century has been personal success, and that life in America is "a wide-open race" (3), where the pursuit of money is equated with the pursuit of happiness, and business success is equated with spiritual grace (7). Similarly, in *The Psychological Politics of the American Dream* (1994) Lois Tyson claims also that the ideal early vision of the American dream was infused with the materialistic desires of American commodity culture, where the pursuit of happiness or of one's "fullest stature" was translated into the language of financial success. Socioeconomic status or upward mobility, according to Tyson, have been "valorized as the *source* of spiritual worth" (5), and the essence of this later version of the dream thus became, succinctly, the fantasy of "rag-to-riches metamorphosis" (66). And as Jim Cullen argues in his recently published *The American Dream* (2003), although the dream may signify various objectives – such as religious transformation, political reform, educa-

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tional attainment, sexual expression – it is more often defined in terms of money. In the contemporary United States, says Cullen, "one could almost believe this is the *only* definition" (7).

Miller's critics have tended to follow these descriptions of the American dream, seeing it as a social and political idealism turned to personal craving for profit. The best example is probably Harold Clurman's 1958 essay "The Success Dream on the American Stage," where he discusses what he sees as the "original" American dream, the one that has envisioned "a land of freedom with opportunity and equality for all," and its later distortion into the dream of business success. The latter, too, has deteriorated: instead of the original premise that success is the fruit of "enterprise, courage and hard work," in the reality of *Death of A Salesman*, says Clurman, we have salesmanship instead, and salesmanship is "implied on some element of fraud" (213). In other words, the materialism of American society has led to the development of a problematically selfish, materialistic, and success-oriented ethics. Matthew C. Roudané's 1997 essay on Miller's play states, on the other hand, that private financial success – a central theme in this text – was an organic feature of the American dream from its outset, side by side with more spiritual ideals.[4]

The bottom line of all these analyses is that by the middle of the twentieth century, when Miller was writing *Death of a Salesman*, the American dream has become a deeply dualistic concept, an intersection of sociopolitical idealism and personal materialism. As J. Derek Harrison and Alan Barker Shaw point out, these two sides of the dream were contradictory: there was a conflict between the profit motive and the desire for individual enhancement on the one hand, and the idealistic concern for the nature of American society and its democratic values on the other.[5] My claim is that this conflict, so powerful in shaping American social and private identity, lies at the heart of Miller's play; and that the text suggests a way of fusing the two supposedly contrasted systems of value together. Side by side with his denunciation of the selfish ethics of individuals and society under capitalism, Miller does construct a model of material and professional success that manages to uphold ethical and social values. This positive potential of the American dream is embodied in the seemingly minor

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characters of Charley and his son, who function as analogical contrasts for Willy and his sons. The unselfish, generous, socially responsible stance that the former father and son manifest is congruent with the professional and financial achievements of both of them. As much as Willy's occupation denotes the American loss of values and society's submersion in a flawed ethics of consumerism, salesmanship, and fraud (because a salesman does not produce anything but merely persuades people to buy),[6] so does the profession of Charley's son Bernard – being a man of law – supply a contrast that epitomizes the other side of American identity, that which upholds the liberal values of human rights, equality, democracy. That such values may still be preserved in American society, despite the harmful impact of capitalism, is what the presence of Charley and Bernard in the play seems to suggest. The success of Charley, and even more so, that of his son, is envisioned by the playwright as no less American than Willy's failure.

In my analysis I will follow Lois Tyson's suggestion to read the personal and the social in Miller's play as intrinsically intertwined. Unlike the majority of critics of *Death of A Salesman*, who focus either on the personal and psychological dimension of the play or on its social, anticapitalist theme, Tyson argues – on the basis of the Althusserian notion of ideology – for the inseparateness of the political and the psychological in Miller's play.[7] According to Tyson's reading, it is through an examination of the interaction between Miller's construction of individual psychology and his representation of American social ideology that we may realize his complex treatment of the dream of success.

Despite Miller's own later assertions regarding the representativeness of his protagonist, to whom he refers as an embodiment of the conflicts of American society,[8] I suggest that Willy Loman's subjectivity is accentuated and elaborated in the play to a degree that makes such assertions too reductive. It is only through an analysis of Miller's particular characters – Willy being the chief but not the only one of them – that we may sense the potentially diverse effects that the conditions, values, and aspirations of American society may have. Such an analysis reveals that there is more than one model of American suc-

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cess delineated in this play, and that there is a possibility to regard the American dream here as moral, legitimate, and even worthy. The model that Willy tries to follow (and that most critics discuss as exclusive) tends to be based on self-centered ambition and on deficient moral codes, whereas the second model retains ethical values, generosity, and personal integrity side by side with its capitalist orientation.

Only through an examination of the individual traits of Miller's characters can we realize that Willy's failure is not merely the result of his surrender to the materialism and consumerism of his society. His self-destruction originates, to no lesser degree, in certain mental mechanisms that characterize him, the dominant among them being his delusory mode of thinking, whose inevitable clash with the environment is detrimental. Operating upon a different set of personality traits, the same social conditions may produce different effects. A link is drawn, in *Death of A Salesman*, between a realistic, practical, rational way of thinking, typified as moral and generous, and the kind of success achieved by Charley and Bernard, shown to be legitimate and worthy. On the other hand, a delusory, myth-seeking pattern of thinking is associated with a vision of success that is selfish and unethical, the kind of success that Willy admires and that his big brother, Ben, embodies. Since the focalizer in Miller's play, that is, the agent whose perspective and interpretation of events filters the main events for us, is the protagonist, an examination of his way of perceiving himself and his environment must precede our interpretation of the success models offered in this play.

Willy is a man who loses his grip on reality, hopelessly trapped and entangled in his own delusion. "What the hell is goin' on in your head?," a question addressed to him by Charley (96), might have been raised by any other character in the play at any given moment, although it is significant that it is repeatedly the practical-minded, reasonable Charley who asks. The disintegration of Willy's mind is articulated via the constantly increasing gap between the "inside of his head" and what is represented as objective reality. Not to think realistically, in this play, is a personal failure, no less grave than bankruptcy. The two failures that Willy experiences – the mental and the econom-

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ic – are staged by Miller as intrinsically related to each other on the ideological and psychological level: it is partly due to his economic breakdown that Willy becomes increasingly irrational, and partly due to his irrationality that he fails in business. Both failures make his life worthless, painful, and unjustifiable in his own eyes. That an American failure such as himself is not fit to survive is not only a truism in the protagonist's own eyes; it is suggested to the reader or spectator from the start, as the title informs us that the salesman-protagonist must die. This is why, as John Gassner aptly puts it, the paramount question that we are forced to ask, when we watch the play or read it, is not the usual "What is going to happen next?" but rather "'What is really the matter and why?' – a question that points to basic realities" (237).

*Death of a Salesman* portrays in detail the final stages of Willy's collapse. When we meet him he is already mentally broken down and is contemplating suicide. At the root of this collapse lies his self-delusion. However, this private drama is intermingled with broad social forces. Willy's stream of consciousness, presented as reality on stage, indicates the extent to which he has been brainwashed by the materialistic and competitive values of his social and professional environment, as well as by his own choice of the particular role model that he admires, his brother Ben. The disintegration of Willy's mind, as private as this process may seem, is represented as the result not only of his own mental constitution, but also of his embracing of some of the dominant values, aspirations, and dreams of his society. It is the interaction between Willy's personal traits and the social forces which act upon him that complicates his attempt to attain the American dream.

Willy's entrapment in his own subjectivity, shown in the refusal to look reality in the face and see himself and others for what they are, is not only a sign of mental instability but also an indication of moral deterioration. Miller shows us that as a result of his being immersed in his own denials, projections, and fantasies, his protagonist has become blind and deaf to the needs of his wife, children, and friends. His bent for delusion is portrayed as harmful not only for him as an individual but for his family and community at large.

As early in the play as the stage directions of Act One, even before

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the characters make their first appearance, we encounter two conflicting modes of referring to the world. The scene described offers a clash between what is shown to be fantasy and what is represented as belonging to reality. "A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon" (11). But as we simultaneously watch Willy's house, "[w]e are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. ... [T]he surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange. ... [W]e see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home" (ibid). The visual outdoes the auditory: the tension between the romantic, distant, dreamy tale told by the flute, and the grim one told by the urban scenery, will be fully developed throughout the play. Only when the protagonist and his internalization of the American dream become familiar to us, will it also become clearer why Miller adds here, in his stage directions, that "[a]n air of dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality" (ibid).

Willy's growing delusion, disintegration, perhaps insanity, involve an increasing adherence to inner voices and selective deafness to external ones. He manifests a rejection of reality as perceived by the senses and comprehended by reason in favor of inner fixations, beliefs and fantasies. As several critics have maintained, the psychological function of the delusion, for Willy, is to avoid pain, to "repair the frustrations and humiliations of everyday life with which the common man is so familiar, and of which he is so frightened that he tries to glide over them" (Schneider 251). But not only the refuge from pain involves a negation of reality; pain itself, as Miller puts it in "Tragedy and the Common Man," originates in such negation, which leads to the "disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world." In other words, the escape from reality regarding "who we are," when confronted with the reality that we try to deny, is the pain that we want to glide over (145). The wish to avoid fear and pain is central to Willy's character, but these disturbing feelings are caused by his trying to believe that he is not who he is. It is easy to feel empathy towards him, and yet it is evident that the extent to which he sticks to his inner story is destructive. It is ironic that Willy's attempt

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to "glide over" reality does not help him in avoiding pain, but rather succeeds in driving him out of his mind.

One way in which Miller shows us that Willy favors his own subjectivity over what is constructed in the text as 'objective reality,' is by characterizing him as repeatedly contradicting himself. Here we can also see how his immersion in delusion is connected both to his denial of his failure to fulfill the dream of professional and material success, and to another failure, of which he is unaware but which is far more destructive: his inability to be genuinely interested in other people. "The trouble is he's lazy, goddammit!," Willy says about his son Biff, who does not stand up to his expectations, and adds, for emphasis, "Biff is a lazy bum." That does not prevent him from voicing, four sentences later, the following notion: "Biff Loman is lost. [...] And such a hard worker. There's one thing about Biff – he's not lazy" (16). This direct (and typical) inconsistency can be explained thus: first, Willy feels annoyed and disappointed with Biff's unemployment and general lack of direction, mirroring to him his own malfunction as a breadwinner and a father. He therefore accuses him of being lazy – one of the greatest vices of the American ideal of hard work. Soon enough, however, the clash between this accusation and Willy's need to see himself (and his son, subsumed in the father's own self-image) as a success story makes him switch to an attitude of admiring sentimentality. The 'facts' change accordingly. Biff can be either a "lazy bum" or a "hard worker," regardless of the facts. His qualities depend solely on the inner story that goes on inside the father's head at the moment. This reveals Willy's way of denying facts in favor of self-deceit; but it also shows us his failure in seeing other people, primarily members of his own family, as they really are, to observe their own point of view, their needs, shortcomings, and difficulties, and to realize his own part in their predicament. Biff, who is the favored son, is paradoxically the most neglected by his father just because of the crucial part that he happens to play in the latter's internal, subjective, self-deceiving drama.

Another example of Willy's inconsistency is the way in which he tries to hold back from his wife – but primarily from himself – the

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grim truth about his small earnings. "I did five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston," he declares. But immediately he goes on to say that he did only "about a hundred and eight gross in Providence. Well, no – it came to – roughly two hundred gross on the whole trip" (35). Changing his mind so rapidly about concrete data such as a trip's earnings does not cause him any unease. It is evident that Linda is already used to such inconsistent, hence unreliable, reports. The excuse that he gives for the miserable results – that three of the stores were half closed for inventory – is followed by the retrospectively optimistic and evidently groundless assertion: "Otherwise I woulda broke records" (ibid 35).

Willy's inconsistency is repeatedly demonstrated by his reaction (or, rather, lack of reaction) to what other people say to him. Whenever he wishes to avoid unpleasant facts he just denies, disregards, or distorts them. Again, this practice results in a complete loss of the ability to relate to other people. The most striking example is the scene at the restaurant, in which Willy manages to avoid the painful, humiliating (because true) story that Biff has to tell him about the meeting with Bill Oliver. Willy does not listen, changes the subject whenever Biff is about to come to the point, and even says explicitly, in response to Biff's "Let's hold on to facts tonight" (107), "don't give me a lecture about facts and aspects. I am not interested. Now what've you got to say to me?" (107). Eventually, he is under the false impression that Oliver embraced Biff and that the two are about to have another meeting the next day – a story far more agreeable and flattering to Willy, as Biff's father, than the facts: namely, that Biff's petition for employment was insultingly denied.

As much as he fails to hear what is said to him, Willy also hears many things that are not really said, coming from characters who are not really there. The climax of this mechanism is, of course, Willy's visions: his reliving scenes from his past and his entering into dialogues with people who are no longer there. The form of the play – that is, the fact that Willy's past is presented on stage – emphasizes the extent to which memories have become palpably real for him. And even before figures from the past are presented, Willy is seen

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"smil[ing] broadly at a kitchen chair" (28), or "addressing – physically – a point offstage" (ibid). In other words, for him imaginary dialogues are not imaginary at all.

But what is the function of Willy's distortions of reality? Besides the need to glide over the fear and pain involved in the encounter with the grim facts, there is also another side to Willy's delusions. His delusory mode of thinking goes, generally speaking, in two opposite directions: one is the attempt to beautify reality and create a gratifying self-image that will be compatible with his dream of success as a father, a businessman, a breadwinner. The other and opposing dynamics is the paranoid exaggeration of reality's unpleasant aspects, which exposes Willy's fundamental sense of inferiority. As in the example quoted above, where Biff turns from being labeled a "lazy bum" to being respectfully referred to by his father as a "hard worker," Willy's unbalanced perception of reality wavers between impulses of megalomania on the one hand and a sense of personal inadequacy on the other. Again, as much as Biff in his father's eyes may be either a miserable failure or a tremendous success, so there is no middle state for Willy himself, no gray area between these two black and white regions of failure or success. This dichotomy has to do with the tremendous pressure to live up to the demands of what Willy construes as the American dream: if you are not a "great success," you are worth nothing.

And so, we can see that Willy's distorted, exaggerated, overwrought perception of reality leads towards two distinct self-perceptions, which, although opposed, are strongly linked. "I'm vital in New England," he brags (14) just when we learn that he hardly manages to sell anything and is about to lose his job. "I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own" (31), he tells his admiring young sons in a recalled scene from the past, and adds: "I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. 'Willy Loman is here!' That's all they have to know" (33). He also reports that he has "knocked 'em cold in Providence, slaughtered 'em in Boston" (ibid). The list of his pompous declarations ends with his pathetically megalomaniac fantasy about his own funeral. "Ben, that funeral will be

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massive! They'll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire! ... [T]hat boy [Biff] will be thunder-struck, Ben, because he never realized – I am known! ... He's in for a shock, that boy!" (126). Willy's aspiration to prove his great professional and social standing is exposed as utterly deluded time and again, and more than ever at his funeral, with the complete absence of any customers or business associates whatsoever. In between these instances of self-aggrandizing bragging, Willy's sense of worthlessness is exposed whenever the gap between fantasy and reality is too great to be disregarded. In such cases, his inferiority complex comes to the fore, with some touches of paranoia:

> Oh, I'll knock 'em dead next week. I'll go to Hartford. You know, the trouble is, Linda, People don't seem to take to me. ... I know it when I walk in. They seem to laugh at me. [...] Other men – I don't know – they do it easier. I don't know why – I can't stop myself – I talk too much. [...] I'm fat. I'm very – foolish to look at, Linda. ... Christmas time I happened to be calling on F. H. Stewarts, and a salesman I know, as I was going in to see the buyer I heard him say something about walrus. And I – I cracked him right across the face (36-37).

Willy's over-confidence originates in delusion, whereas his lack of confidence marks his moments of awareness to external reality. Gerald Weales talks about Willy's "continuing self-delusion and ... occasional self-awareness," the latter being, according to Weales, those passages in which Willy feels vulnerable, inferior, and mocked (357). And yet, both states of mind reflect a subjective, internal dynamics independent of the way Willy's society actually treats him. His megalomania and sense of inferiority both expose his egocentricity and absorption in himself. He is certain that he is at the center of attention, either as everybody's favorite or as everybody's laughingstock. My claim is that even at such moments when he feels inferior, Willy's self-image is distorted and involves no self-awareness. This reading goes along with Weales' own observation in the same essay that Willy's occasional self-

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awareness, i.e. his unflattering self-observations, serves the same purpose as his delusion – the purpose of saving him the trouble of dealing with reality on a serious level.

But what is it that lies at the core of all these fictions? What is the content of the dèlusion that underlies Willy's life? First and foremost, Willy's self-deception has to do with success – economical and material, but also social and emotional. As much as he wants to make money he wishes to be appreciated, well-liked, admired. These aspirations involve both himself and Biff (and to a lesser extent also the younger son Happy, although Biff is clearly Willy's favorite). These hopes are as far from the truth as can be imagined: Willy is unsuccessful to the extent that he cannot make a living and has to be supported by others, and eventually loses his job; he is unpopular to the extent that almost nobody attends his funeral; and as a father he witnesses his young sons turn into dropouts, good-for-nothing failures, who are full of hostility against him.

In Miller's introduction to his *Collected Plays* he defines the "law" that killed Willy as the law of success. It is the

> law which says that a failure in society and in business has no right to live. Unlike the law against incest, the law of success is not administered by statute or church, but is very nearly as powerful in its grip upon men. ... [W]hile it is a law, it is by no means a wholly agreeable one even as it is slavishly obeyed, for to fail is no longer to belong to society (169).

The social law of success, involuntarily broken but ever admired by Willy, is the major factor of his self-delusion, because he cannot afford to admit that he and his children can "no longer belong to society." He therefore invests immense energies in the attempt to deny this disappointment. The dream of success is exposed in its darker side, the side of failure, through Willy's story. Willy's preoccupation with American sports and gadgets, which George Ross links to the character's Jewishness, exposes an ongoing effort on Willy's part to become something that he is not. Whether or not this desire has anything to

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do with his being Jewish, it does seem to originate in his lack of confidence about his identity as an American. To apply this to what Miller says in his introduction about the law of success, Willy aspires to be American in the social sense, i.e., to become an emblematic part of his society.

The play associates Willy and his exceedingly subjective, delusory, and self-centered mode of thinking – which, as I have shown, prevents him from seeing or hearing other people – with the selfish and corrupted formation of the American dream. The other formation of the dream, on the other hand – grounded on responsibility and unselfishness – is associated in the text with a realistic, sober mode of thinking, of which Willy is incapable. And if indeed it is possible, in *Death of A Salesman*, to fulfill the American dream and still retain one's humanity and social values, then to Willy's failures we should add his inability to manifest moral sensibility.

Miller's dialectical attitude to the American dream is exposed most clearly in his treatment of two successful characters who represent the two opposing sides of the American dream: Ben and Charley (Bernard being, as shown later, a derivative of his father). Both Ben and Charley are financially successful, and both invite Willy to enter their businesses. Charley belongs to the "real" world of the play; Ben – being dead for years – exists only in memory and fantasy. Both serve to expose Willy's delusion and shortcomings. As members of a slightly older generation, the two may serve as father figures or mental guides for Willy. However, he feels admiration for Ben and contempt for Charley. The two are represented as contrasted at almost every level. The fact that Ben is dead, and that his appearance in the play is staged only as a hallucination, goes along with his characterization as an elusive, distant, and intangible figure. His presence in Willy's life is defined by absence. The two brief visits remembered and enacted by Willy, the younger brother, are rare occasions in an ongoing absence of many years. In Willy's life it is rather Charley, his neighbor, who is always there. He lives next door, pops in for a game of cards, and on his first appearance is wearing "a robe over pajamas, slippers on his feet" (42). His presence is felt to the extent that Willy asks him, in a burst of hos-

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tility, "What do you keep comin' in here for?" (43). Charley's outfit is juxtaposed with Ben's, the latter described "carrying a valise and an umbrella, ... [with] an aura of far places about him" (44). Ben's valise and umbrella, unlike Charley's pajamas and slippers, indicate that the former belongs elsewhere; that he is a man of travel; that he is not here to stay. As soon as he arrives he says, "I only have a few minutes" (45), and does not respond to Willy's request, uttered "longingly," "Can't you stay a few days? You're just what I need" (51).

The visible, physical presence of Charley as opposed to Ben's absence has to do with their other features: Ben is a fantastic figure not only because he is presented as existing mainly in Willy's memories, but because his life experience (or rhetoric) shows him to be a romantic, almost mythical hero: "[W]hen I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. *He laughs.* And by God I was rich" (48). From Willy's point of view, his older brother has always had legendary characteristics. His last childhood memory of Ben envisions him "walking away down some open road," and Ben augments the mythic aura suggested by the description by saying "I was going to find father in Alaska" (ibid). As befits a legendary figure, Ben associates himself with exotic places, places that are also conquerable and exploitable – Africa, Alaska, the jungle. And the jungle, Ben tells Willy, "is dark but full of diamonds" (134).

Charley's part in the play, on the other hand, is that of a practical, rational friend. His business is successful; his son is a thriving lawyer on his way to the Supreme Court. Charley's material, capitalist success is underlined, but is rendered in different terms than those applied to Ben. We see Charley counting money and are told elsewhere that he sits with his accountant, but we never hear him talk about diamonds. Unlike Ben, he is not a big talker and does not try to tell tall tales about himself. When Willy, surprised by Bernard's impressive professional and financial success, exclaims: "The Supreme Court! And he didn't even mention it!," Charley replies plainly: "He don't have to – he's gonna do it" (95). The contrast in style and in ways of thinking between Charley and Ben is shown again when Willy expresses his regret at not having followed Ben to Alaska years ago, because had he done so, he states, "everything would've been totally different." To this

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dreamy wishful-thinking Charley laconically, and unromantically, comments : "Go on, you'd froze to death up there" (45).

Both Charley and Ben offer Willy a job, and yet there is a difference in the feeling behind the offer. Ben, although a brother, does not seem genuinely willing to give Willy anything. The model of success that he represents – heroic, manly, colonialistic – is also extremely self-seeking, and is removed from society not only geographically, but emotionally as well. He is represented throughout as cold and insensitive to other people, inattentive to his brother's plight, showing very little interest in him ("And good luck with your – what do you do?" [50]), and responding impatiently to Willy's hesitations whether or not to accept his offer and move to Alaska. Ben seems almost devoid of feeling: when Willy lets him know about their mother's death, he says: "That's too bad. Fine specimen of a lady, Mother" (46). Before he leaves he manages to bestow on Biff the essence of his moral principles: "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way" (49). His ethics, then, is based on the laws of the jungle, echoing Miller's definition of the law of success: only the strong survive, and no protection is offered to the weak.

Unlike Ben, Charley, the down-to-earth realist whose success is measured in materialist, capitalist terms ("The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell," he says typically [97]), consistently shows humaneness, compassion, responsibility, and friendliness towards Willy. Whereas Ben does not give Willy anything but dreams to feed on, and does not even mention him in his will, Charley keeps supporting the failing salesman financially without even being thanked. As much as Willy is attentive to the presence of the absent brother, so is he blind to the proximity of the reliable neighbor, and fails to see him as a possible model to follow, far more feasible and valuable than the one he adopts. In the stage directions it is stated that in everything that Charley says, despite what he says, "there is pity" (42). He seems to care genuinely about Willy and his predicament, and despite the latter's repeated refusals keeps offering him a job – "fifty dollars a week. And I won't send you on the road" (96) – and keeps giving him money. It should be stressed that Charley is no socialist, no leftist – quite the contrary. In terms of his views and way of life he is

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an ordinary American capitalist who never questions the system as a whole, and is yet presented by the playwright as humane, moral, and generous.

Charley's son follows in his father's footsteps and behaves very generously towards young Biff ever since their school days: he gives him the answers in math, helps him with his studies, and, like his father, is consistent in doing so despite the fact that he is never thanked. However, when his generosity toward his friend clashes with the law, he adheres to the latter: in a state exam, Bernard tells the concerned Willy, he will not cheat. Bernard, even as a young boy and before he has become a man of law, is shown to be attentive to and respectful of the moral codes that underlie what he perceives as a just, civilized society. This is sharply contrasted to Willy's sons: not only are Biff and Happy incapable of sharing what is theirs with others, but they are busy taking – literally stealing – from others: a suit, a fountain pen, an executive's fiancée (for Happy, at least, a woman is just a piece of property), and fabricated pieces of autobiography intended to impress. All these "articles" are emblems of the world of business of which they are no part. Biff and Happy are vainly trying to become, or pretend to have become, what their father desperately wishes them to be, and so they steal the identity of others. An early scene – one of Willy's recollections – illustrates sharply the distinction between the moral legacy that Willy and Charley pass on to their children as far as the law is concerned. The young Biff and Happy have been stealing some building materials from a construction site. Charley, and then Bernard, tell Willy to stop this; but Willy is proud, laughing it off with "I got a couple of fearless characters there." To be fearless, after all, is to be adventurous and heroic like Ben. Charley, appalled, responds: "Willy, the jails are full of fearless characters" (50). The importance of keeping the law, for characters such as Charley and Bernard, is a sign of their recognition that each member of society should strive to keep it in order for the best interest of the community and the individual. The Lomans' disparagement of the law, on the other hand, goes in the direction of Ben's romantically individualistic jungle ethics, which disregards any democratic state law. It is a selfish drive for self-indulgence that ignores any higher principles and any social responsibility. In the

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case of Willy, the play shows us, the chief harm is inflicted upon the individual himself.

As an adult, Bernard's professional success is not capitalistic or materialistic but rather ethical, social, and ideological, being a man of justice arguing a case in front of the Supreme Court of the United States. We remain ignorant as to the content of this "case," in the same way that we are never told what kind of merchandise it is that Willy is selling. These two occupations operate in the play symbolically, signifying two opposing ways of fulfilling one's ideals. Both occupations are inherently American, one being concerned with justice and human rights, the other with consumerism, merchandise, selling (which implies fraud), and profit; one supplying social and economic standing while preserving ethical values, the other, when successful, affording economic and social triumph but implying a moral failure. This is also why another role model adopted by Willy, the one of the elder and successful salesman Dave Singleman, is not a commendable one within this play.

Willy's attitude to Ben on the one hand and Charley on the other is in line with his inclination for delusion and escape. He follows dreams, and therefore his admiration for Ben is enormous. He is afraid of reality, and that is why he rejects Charley and despises him. Thus, he thinks of Ben as of "the only man ... who [knows] the answers" (45), while Charley, in Willy's mouth, receives the unflattering appellation "ignoramus" (47). The fact that Willy does not accept his brother's offer to move to Alaska can be accounted for by his need to preserve the dream as such, and not jeopardize it by too close a contact with reality. His rejection of Charley's job offer, on the other hand, is a result of a refusal to admit that he has failed. Accepting this offer would mean to acknowledge that the fantasy that he can "make it" will never be realized. Willy rejects the model that Charley and Bernard represent and chooses to cling to the impractical, delusory, and selfish one offered by his brother. This is what ruins him.

Willy tries to have a garden where there can be no garden; he tries to bring up sons that are supposed to be "magnificent," but poisons their lives with his grand expectations on the one hand, and his

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degrading sense of inferiority on the other. Their fate will be determined by their response to the road paved by their father, the road that leads to fantasy, delusion and self-destruction. The ending of the play shows the ironically named Happy as the true heir of his father's romantic fables and self-deception: "I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have – to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him" (138-9). Biff, on the other hand, gradually seems to break free from the suffocating delusions on which he has been raised. He denounces his father as "a fake" (58), realizes "what a ridiculous lie" his own life has been (104), exclaims that no one has ever "told the truth for ten minutes in this house" (131), and, finally, in an extremely truthful, straightforward, unflattering eulogy, declares upon his father's grave: "He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong. ... He never knew who he was." And he adds: "I know who I am" (138). Unlike his father, who traded his individuality for an unfulfilled mirage of selfish success, Biff's search for selfhood gives him an opening for a better life founded on integrity rather than on self-deceit. Willy's dreams were, perhaps, wrong; but a different kind of a dream for success still remains, for Miller and his characters, a key to a meaningful American life.

## Notes

[1]See, for example, Michael Spindler (6) and Thomas Greenfield (7), who describe these changes. Greenfield also talks about the growing alienation from work in the United States at this period, and connects this to the transition from self-employment to hired work. Such changes were instrumental in turning salesmanship into a very popular profession, and one that was emblematic of the period.

[2]For more on the origin of the phrase see Cullen, p. 4.

[3]In a letter to H. G. Wells, September 11, 1906.

[4]To establish this claim Roudané cites Benjamin Franklin's 1757 essay on how to achieve salvation, "The Way to Wealth," which combines economic and spiritual achievements into one harmonious ideal and, he says, has attracted the common working man for that very rea-

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son (60). On "The Way to Wealth" see also Harrison and Shaw, p. 57.

[5]See Harrison and Shaw, p. 57.

[6]For the association of salesmanship with fraud and the debilitating effect of the ideology of salesmanship, see, for instance, Clurman (213) and Spindler (205-206). This flawed ethics renders inappropriate the success model represented by the old salesman, Dave Singleman, whom Willy admires.

[7]For more on the theoretical inseparateness of the individual and the social, the psychological and the political, and on the inclination of Miller's critics to deal with only one side of these dual, intertwined concepts, see Tyson pp. 1-3 and 63.

[8]In the introduction to his *Collected Plays* Miller underlines Willy's representativeness and states that "the assumption was that everyone knew Willy Loman." In "*Death of a Salesman – A* Symposium" (quoted in Spindler, p. 211) he maintains that Willy is an embodiment of some of the "most terrible conflicts running through the streets of America today."

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