



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

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<p>Received: June, 13th 2022 Accepted: July, 13th 2022 Published: August, 20th 2022</p>	<p>New tendencies have been emerged in the American drama which dominates the first half of the twentieth century. Themes that were tackled in these new tendencies are focusing mainly on American incidents. Nevertheless, realism comes to be the main inclination in the 20th century. Many American playwrights were able to reach the profound level of the psychological realism by tackling the psyche of each individual character and shed light on their new living conditions to give a general notion about the American society at a given period of time. With the progress of time, new themes and topics were emerged to be the point of discussion in the American drama like sexuality, race, gender and death. In fact, a lot of American playwrights use the concept of the American Dream as a central theme in their plays like Susan Glaspell in <i>Trifles</i> (1916), Arthur Miller in <i>Death of a Salesman</i> (1949), Lorraine Hansberry in <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> (1959) and Edward Albee in his plays <i>The Sandbox</i> (1959) as well as <i>The American Dream</i> (1960). Inconceivably, Miller and Hansberry succeeded in blending realistic characters with the social schema while the American dream hovers in the horizon of their stories.</p>

Keywords: The American Dream, Arthur Miller, Willy Loman, Lorraine Hansberry, Walter Lee

The Dynamism of the American Dream in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

The term "the American Dream" comes into the surface in the twentieth century. The notions that stand behind this term were still indefinite. Therefore, clarifying this term comes to be a prerequisite need. In fact, this term cannot be defined precisely in the sense that different opinions are trying to determine the bases of this concept. Some authors define simply the meaning of this concept. Other writers may go further by assuming that the American dream is a new image to the 'Utopian society' where people live on the way the Earth should be. Nevertheless, the most outstanding ideas about this concept are how to be rich and how many possessions do you have. Many changes come over this notion. The new world has polished many notions related to this concept which reflects "the dream of freedom and wealth" as Benjamin Franklin believed (Cullen, 2003).

Launched into the universality, the concept of 'the American Dream' became a well-known concept and people may relate it to happiness, good living, being beautiful, youth and most importantly the materialistic comfort. Consequently, the American Dream cannot be limited with fixed words or phrases anymore. *The Penguin Encyclopedia of American History* defines this concept as "a nebulous term, much abused by politicians, that seems to have evolved from the early immigrants' and pioneers' hopes for lives of political and religious and personal independence in the New World to a largely materialistic expectation of upward social mobility and ever-increasing affluence" (Rosenbaum, 2005). Similarly, Jim Cullen describes the ideas behind this concept as

A better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world. That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming it (Cullen, 2003).

Putting in mind these notions that stand behind this concept, most Americans want to achieve a quick financial success. This is possible, in fact, since they live in a capitalistic world. This wish may go excessive to be greed which is a human instinct and the most powerful desire to the extent it was listed in the Seven Deadly Sins. Thus, it becomes the main feature that colors the lives of many people in the capitalist world. The pursuit of the American dream is a long journey and it is not easy to achieve it.

In fact, these notions had been employed in literature as reflections of real life. Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* brings to light the question of the American Dream and how it was difficult for the main character, Willy Loman, to pursue the American dream, and how they were 'proud white Americans'. Similarly, Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*

in the Sun sheds lights on a poor African-American family and how this family struggled to escape the poverty that prevents the family from reaching the state of being financial secured. Hansberry's play focuses on Walter's endeavors to achieve it. The writer gives some hints on the issues of racial discrimination and financial insecurity that seize and limit the black man's role and activity in the society as well as his family by being unable to provide a clear identity for himself. Hansberry tries to shed more light on the question of identity and how a black man is suffering in the process of achieving his goals in the new along with the pursuit of the American Dream.

Miller's play is focusing mainly on the misfortunes of Willy Loman, an old salesman who aspires to be a wealthy and respected man. According to the American capitalist system, it is possible, but Willy's dreams are scattered by his miserable reality. Willy believes wholly heart in the American dream which is according to his way of thinking is an immediate material success via hard working. Therefore, the term "American Dream" stands for the belief that the person is capable of creating his or her fortune regardless what the past was. Willy Loman tries hard to create this success by working hard and he was thinking that working hard alone can guarantee this success. In reality, this tragic hero was seduced by the illusion of the American Dream to the extent that he has lost the muse of the real world. What is more is that he tries to pass his belief and views to his sons, Biff and Happy who suffer the emptiness of their lives and being jobless. Not sure of what he is supposed to like or to do, Biff is thinking of going "out west" with Happy and they may buy a ranch and live "out in the open" (Miller, 1973). Yet, Happy is in need to prove his position and try his luck with the capital system before going "out west" with Biff.

From the author's point of view, the American dream is only fulfilled when people have the suitable place to live a decent life, a well payment in the work field, and social acceptance and recognition. But, the hero is an insecure and self-deluded traveling salesman who constantly fails to achieve his goals throughout the story. He comes short from achieving the promises of the 'American Dream'. The play ends as Willy's sons are away from accomplishing his hope. Willy's distressed quest for achieving the false promises of the American dream effects even his rational evaluation of his life and eventually leads to his inconvenient death.

Willy's problem is that he goes too far in believing all heartedly in the promise of the American dream which, according to his view, is any attractive man or woman with a liked personality working in business will definitely gain material comforts and success. However, his fascination goes too far about the external qualities of "attractiveness" and "likeability" and this is unmatching with the perceptives of the American Dream in terms of hard-working without complaint which is the only route to success. In fact, this kind of understanding about the likeability and success is shallow and superficial in the sense that he unfairly hates Bernard, his neighbor, simply because he sees Bernard as a boring person. The fact is Willy's blindness and his trust in the American Dream leads him to a severe psychological collapse at the end (Saddik, 2007).

The author believes that every American writer is (to some extent) indulged in dealing with the question of the American dream. In relation to this fact, the notion of the American Dream works as a motivator and stimulator in American literature. It is the dynamic force that keeps the stories flowing. In the case of Willy Loman, he possesses only a "fractured vision" of this concept in the sense that he believes only in whatever the social statue is, man can achieve success through working hard and this will guarantee the materialistic comforts. He thinks that success (particularly money) goes to those who are good looking and liked by the society. Ironically, this type of people do a lot of money with little efforts. It is "a white collar dream". Being successful means being better than your neighbors and friends (Saddik, 2007).

Due to his pride, Willy obtains some money from his neighbor, Charley, but he does not accept to take a job from him. Willy overstates what he gains from his job on the road as well as the number of friends he has. He chases the state of being liked so that he starts telling lies about his business. He is ready to kill himself just to assure that his son Biff will keep chasing the dream instead of changing his course of living. He believes that the insurance money that Biff may obtain after being passed away will make Biff better than Charley's son, Bernard. This idea is developed later in the play to the extent it crossed the boundary of life. Willy is thinking to achieve his dream even after his death, but this time through his son Biff. He is fantasizing that a huge number of people will arrive to his funeral and this crowd of people will enhance his picture to his sons and finally showing them his success. As far as his wife Linda is concerned, she sympathizes with his condition. In the past, while Ben was offering Willy an opportunity to go for business in Alaska, but Linda persistently refused it: "Why must everybody conquer the world? You're well-liked and the boys love you" (Act: II). In the light of these attitudes, Linda preferred her husband over her sons and she decided to help Willy and stand behind him to achieve his goal: "He's the dearest man in the world to me, and I won't have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue. You've got to make up your mind now ..., there's no leeway anymore. Either he's your father and you pay him that respect, or else you're not to come here" (Act: I).

In fact, reality and illusion undermines the story of this play, the structure, the characters and even the setting of this play. Willy created a world of illusion around him just to make himself and his family believed in his dream. He always says that he is good in his job and he has financial balance. He believes that he is being liked and has numerous friends. Moreover, he believes that his sons, specially Biff, are marching to something big. The reality is something else that moved away from his world of illusion to the extent the gap between his reality and his illusionist world cannot be bridged. The point that is pressing here is that Linda was capable of perceiving the reality of his condition, but she rejected the idea of facing Willy's illusion. She simply want to see Willy's mentality in peace because she cannot push him further. On the opposite way to Linda, Charley has no excuses for Willy and persistently facing Willy by trying to wake him up from this illusion: "Willy, when're you gonna realize that them things don't mean anything? You named

him Howard, but you can't sell that. The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that" (Act, II).

For the case of Willy, his quest of the American dream gives the play the dynamism that delivered the story to the end, but tragically. Of course, ill thinking leads to ill results. Willy's thinking about the American dream is similar to a small box that has specific values and rules and a person who is in chase for the American dream needs to fit with that box. What adds calamity to the story is that Willy's family was affected by his thinking and they spent a large portion of their lives waiting to be achieved. Out of being illogical notion and random thinking, Willy's surname is "Lowman" that signifies two things: the first, Willy is really a "lowman" and fated to be marginalized in the society that is colored mainly with the capitalistic view. Secondly, being a "lowman" is not preventing the argument of being a tragic hero in a modern sense of the term. It is possible for an ordinary man from a low social position to be a tragic hero (Saddik, 2007).

Indeed, Willy is always described as a modern tragic hero. In mythology and old types of literature, the tragic hero was supposed to be from a high rank of his society. On the opposite here, Willy is a normal man suffers the pressure of modern life, namely the economic problems, that leads to illusion and fantasy something out of reality. Moreover, Willy as a tragic hero, doesn't learn anything from his faults, on the contrary to the traditional tragic hero who realizes his faults at the end and his downfall affect his society severely. Happiness can not be ensured by the materialistic success only or what a person may possess. This is the blind-spot that Willy missed. Accordingly, chasing the American dream (through believing in the idea that being liked and possessing a lot of materialistic goods is the only solution for Willy) provides the dynamic tool for the story to be moving beyond the text.

A Raisin in the Sun is Lorraine Hansberry's masterpiece play. It depicts the life of an African-American family named the Youngers that lived in the 1950s in Chicago. This family was expecting the insurance check which is about ten thousand dollars due to death of their father, Mr. Younger, who had life insurance. The insurance check is similar to that of *Death of a Sales Man* since both of them are to compensate the death of the father, but the goal is different. Willy Loman thinks that the money will show how much he was great, while the Youngers family thinks that the money will save them from being slaves. However, the members of the Youngers family think differently about the best ways to spend this money. The mother, Mama, was excited and thinking of buying a new house to accomplish the wish that she shares with her late husband. Her son, Walter Lee, has a different idea. He was thinking of using this sum of money in opening a new liquor store with a friend. He thinks that the business can put an end to the financial problems that his family suffers from. Ruth, Walter's wife, has the same opinion of Mama's. She desires for more space as well as prospects for their son, Travis. Beneatha, the younger daughter in this family, has a different plan. She is thinking of using this sum of money to complete her study and join the medical school.

In fact, the main theme of Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is located in Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" from "Montage of a Dream Deferred," in which he wonders "What happens to a dream deferred?" He lists in this poem all the possibilities that may happen to a person who has dreams "on hold". The emphasis is directed to the issue that it is depressing when a person postpones his dreams. And the question that Hansberry implanted in this play is "What happens to a person whose dreams grow more and more passionate, while his hopes of ever achieving those dreams grow dimmer each day?" (Hughes, 1990)

Hansberry provides a lot of hints to Hughes's poem even in the title of her play so as to draw attention to the importance of the dream. Accordingly, the word "dream" is mentioned many times in the play. The Hansberry brought the name of the play from Hughes's poem "Harlem: A Dream Deferred". It is noteworthy to mention that Hughes was a legendary black poet in the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s in America. At that period, black artists ensure an esteemed position in the realm of art by their novel voices. It was a glamorous period for the African-American artists who present their art and music in a brilliant way. Thus, their art and music were observed and approved all over the country. Likewise, when Hansberry decided to shed the lights on the poor's deferred dreams, she brings into the discussion the ironic contradiction of the cultural psychology of the Youngers' society and the deprived people who have dreams like the affluent bourgeoisie who consider the materialistic triumph as self-justifying goals (Brown, 1974).

Hansberry's play is basically about the significance of the dream in the sense that all the main characters are fighting with the repressive circumstances that govern their lives. Langston Hughes wonders in his poem about the dream that deferred; is it going to shrivel up like "a raisin in the sun" or just faded away. Everyone in this family, the Youngers, has a detached and personal dream and they are trying hard to achieve their dreams before they fade away. They struggle to attain these dreams all through the play. The dreams come to be the dynamic force in their lives. The main issue that needs to be highlighted here is that how much their contentment is directly related to the achievement of their dreams and how much their misery is directly related to the failure to achieve these dreams. Walter's dream is to have a liquor store to get enough money so that he would be able to have a better life with his family. In fact, Walter's dream comes from the need as well as his sense of being neglected in this world. His deep feeling of frustration is caused by being just an out-casted member of the elite society. By working as a chauffeur to a wealthy white family, the sense of belonging to the lower class of society is affirmed. Moreover, his mother along with his wife are house-workers in a rich white house. Therefore, he has nothing to give his son except "stories about how rich white people live" (Act I: scene I). But, Ruth gives no attention to her husband and dismisses his dream as a castle in the air. "WALTER: Man say to his woman: I got me a dream. His woman say: Eat your eggs" (Act I: scene I). She tries to be realistic. Nevertheless, she supports his dream, although she cannot apprehend him fully, because after some setbacks

"he needs this chance" (Act I: scene I). In doing so, she is similar to Linda, Willy's wife, who didn't understand her husband fully, but supported him most since the wife refuses to see her husband neglected and out of the family bond.

For Walter, the liquor store is a chance to lead his family since his Mama seems to control them all. This idea of establishing his own business gives him hope for having a better future which seems promising. "WALTER: Sometimes it's like I can see the future stretched out in front of me—just plain as day. The future, Mama. Hanging over there at the edge of my days. Just waiting for me—a big, looming blank space—full of nothing. Just waiting for me. But it don't have to be" (Act I: scene II). Walter was stuck in the underclass community simply because he has no skills or education. His attempts were focusing on how to get out of this spot so that he adopted the American Dream as a way of thinking. He longs for "the socioeconomic advantages of the affluent people and assimilates to their ideas" (Huntington Theatre Company, 1995) and this is what has misshapen Walter. He realizes that his life and his dreams of having a liquor store are vanishing so rapidly and even his wife does not seem to comprehend him. Gerald Weales believes that "Walter Lee's difficulty ... is that he has accepted the American myth of success at its face value, that he is trapped, as Willy Loman was trapped, by a false dream" (Weales, 1959).

As far as Mama's dream is concerned, she was thinking of having a big house with a backyard. "MAMA: But Lord, child, you should know all the dreams I had 'bout buying that house and fixing it up and making me a little garden in the back—(She waits and stops smiling) And didn't none of it happen" (Act I: scene I). This dream is shared with her husband who died before achieving it. The father was a good man who loves his children so darling and even his death was for the benefit of his family. The sense of fatherhood here is similar to Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* who loves his sons most, but goal is different in the sense that Willy's death will show them how much he was important. The death of the father in *Raisin in the Sun* comes with beneficial effect on the family and this fact is revealed in many times in the conversation between Mama and Walter's wife. "MAMA: Yes, a fine man—just couldn't never catch up with his dreams, that's all" (Act I: scene I). when Mama bought that big house with the insurance check for her late husband, her son Walter exploded in anger because there would be no enough money left to achieve his dream, the liquor store. "WALTER: So you butchered up a dream of mine—you—who always talking 'bout your children's dreams ..." (Act II: scene I). However, Mama has saved some money to his project and asked him to spend the rest of the money wisely. Mama asked Walter also to save some money for his sister Beneatha who wants to study medicine. However, Walter gave all the money to his friend Harris who fled away with the money and leaving Walter in a distress. "BENEATHA: Well—we are dead now. All the talk about dreams and sunlight that goes on in this house. It's all dead now" (Act II).

The struggle to attain the dream within the events in this play is a reflection of Hansberry's satirical views about the social class distinction as well as the psychological state of the underclass people. Thus, it is very necessary to "reevaluate her themes is especially strong with respect to two interwoven themes: first; the ambiguity of the American dream itself, and second; the integration as the Black American's means of realizing the dream" (Brown, 1974).

In the past, the promise of a good life was the main dream of every American from African origins. In this play, Hansberry opens the door for the discussion over this issue by presenting a sample from the society at that time. She questions the possibilities that lead to the life which is afforded to the whites all the opportunities. She states, "The intimacy of knowledge which the Negro may culturally have of white Americans, does not exist in the reverse" (qtd in Cullen, 2003). The play brings into sunlight some issues and demands of the modern life such as lifestyles and domestic situations which may feel uncomfortable on the surface level, but do not come with any guarantee for happiness as what Willy Loman believes in *Death of a Salesman*. Life is neither appealing at all times, nor fair.

The main focus of Hansberry's play is the role of dream. The dream here is the motive and the stimulator of the characters' moves and actions. Like Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*, the dream in *A Raisin in the Sun* works as a dynamic force. As a matter of fact, the dream can have two powerful effects on the characters; first, the positive effect in terms of lifting their aspiration and hopes to have a better life; and secondly the negative effect when they feel dissatisfied with their present condition and this will make them lost the focus and neglect the main part of their lives. Another touch of the negative effect is that the dream makes the characters concentrate mainly on materialistic goods and neglecting the familial relationship. Unlike Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, the Youngers eventually accomplished one of their dreams by moving from the old and small apartment into a new house. Despite the fact that future seems vague and to some extent risky, but they stepped into the new life that provides optimistic value to their lives. They think that they have succeeded and they need to keep joint as one family and "resolve to defer their dreams no longer" (Hansberry, 1958).

CONCLUSION

In both plays, the family financial and economical problems are still the main difficulties to the stability of the characters and the effect of these problems on the characters is the vital piece of the playwrights' messages. The playwrights trying their best to portrait realistic pictures on the modern life and its hard situations. These pictures have been shaped as families with all their idiosyncrasies in terms of morality, thoughts, actions, struggles, and the most important side is the economic crisis. The question may arise here is that how certain features like pride or dissatisfaction may corrupt a family; and how the ordinary man defines a family.

Both families, the Youngers and the Lomans, are loaded with the financial burden. Hansberry uses stage directions to show all the ambiguities in the life except the sense of life itself. The atmosphere is troublesome. Likewise in *Death of a Salesman*, the main character, Willy Loman, is portrayed as being tired from driving hundreds of miles and at the end of the week he can not pay the bills. Strangely, both families managed to survive by insufficient jobs,

the Younger in particular, because they lived in an intolerance society. The financial depression provides excessive dissatisfaction. In Hansberry's play, Mama criticizes Walter's frustration with his life. Ruth, on the other hand, explicitly condemns Walter's pursuit of money. Although, Ruth discusses in secret with Mama the chance of giving Walter a share of money to start his liquor store.

The enslavement to economic power is clear in both of these plays. Set around different times and locations, the motive behind achieving the American dream possess most of the characters in these two plays. Willy and Walter, as being the key characters, struggle to have social stands as well as materialistic comfort through their chasing behind the American dream. Their chasing was on the expense of the familial relationships which were neglected due to the ongoing obsession with dreams. Thus, problems and discords appeared on the both of the families. Suffering, dissatisfaction, fake hopes, and sacrifice for the sake of the family's comfort are the main themes that are discussed in these plays in relation to the American capital system.

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