

The Falsity of American Dream in *Death of a Salesman* and *The Old Man and the Sea*: A Comparative Study

Rifat Jahan¹

ABSTRACT: *The research aims to analyze the falsity of the American Dream from a comparative perspective between "Death of a Salesman" by Arthur Miller and "The Old Man and the Sea" by Ernest Hemingway. This study is inspired by the different actions and decisions of the central characters in their lives. It pays special attention to how eminent scholars have viewed these American literary pieces from various angles. The discussion section examines how the central characters were completely different and opposite in nature, yet both were American Dreamers. Through an in-depth qualitative analysis, the indirect criticism of the American Dream in the writings of contemporary American authors have been observed. However, my anticipation of the results is that the American Dream is a desire shared by people from all social classes for upward financial mobility, but in reality, this dream is nothing more than a mirage in the desert.*

Keywords: *American Dream, Falsity, Capitalism, Optimism, Pessimism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The American Dream is the belief that anyone, no matter where they were born or what social class they belong to, can achieve their own version of success in a society that allows upward mobility for all. This idea gained popularity after World War II, aiming to promote equality for everyone in the United States. Many people from Britain also migrated to America in search of this dream, as they faced discrimination under the law of primogeniture. The main vision of this dream was to elevate every individual to the highest level of the economy through hard work. However, despite the American dream being dedicated to establishing equality, the opposite occurred in reality. Instead of equality, more discrimination was incorporated into society for the sake of capitalism. The American Dream is the belief that anyone, no matter where they were born or what social class they belong to, can achieve their own version of success in a society that allows upward mobility for all. This idea gained popularity after World War II, aiming to promote equality for everyone in the United States.

¹ Research Fellow, Department of English,
Bangladesh University of Professionals, Mirpur Cantonment, Dhaka.
Email: rifatjahan1310@gmail.com

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Many people from Britain also migrated to America in search of this dream, as they faced discrimination under the law of primogeniture. The main vision of this dream was to elevate every individual to the highest level of the economy through hard work. However, despite the American dream being dedicated to establishing equality, the opposite occurred in reality. Instead of equality, more discrimination was incorporated into society for the sake of capitalism. He wanted to be a businessman for capitalist purposes, when in fact he could have been a skilled carpenter, builder, or worker. However, just to conform to consumerist society, he set his expectations so high that in the end, he paid for it with his life to fit into this capitalist society. As an American, his dream led him to do so. This pressure made him so pessimistic and nihilistic that he lost his hope to survive. On the other hand, in another American literary text, Ernest Hemingway's novella "The Old Man and the Sea" portrays the struggles of a man for his American dream, but in a positive way. The story is permeated with extreme optimism towards life. However, it cannot be denied that this dream was an extra burden on him, as he needed to prove himself to society to gain validation. Thus, the American dream has always worked as an influence in both positive and negative ways. It can make people both optimistic and pessimistic. Through these texts, contemporary American writers indirectly criticize the falsehood of the American Dream. They depict how, although it is a dream, it can destroy people, even leading to their death.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Originality of the Writing

Burgard investigates the question of originality in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, focusing on how the play draws upon Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*. His analysis finds out that Miller's work depends heavily on Ibsen in both theme and dramatic structure, which ultimately weakens its claim to originality. Thematically, *Death of a Salesman* mirrors Ibsen's plays in several ways. The tension between illusion and reality, the act of lying about the past, the complex link between the family and society, the concealment of private matters, and the merging of heroic and flawed traits within a single character. Structurally, Miller adopts Ibsen's innovative shift from the 19th-century "well-made play" to what George Bernard Shaw described as a "discussion play." Although *Death of a Salesman* is often hailed as one of America's most original contributions to modern theatre, Burgard's study unfolds that its foundations are deeply rooted in Ibsen's dramaturgy. (158) By tracing the strong connections between Miller's and Ibsen's works, Burgard emphasizes that Miller's play operates on less innovative dramatic principles than generally assumed.

The use of stage directions in *Death of a Salesman* also reflects this dependence and offers further insight into its ties with contemporary drama. Because of its clear thematic and structural borrowings from Ibsen, Miller's play can be seen as derivative rather than pioneering. Moreover, Miller reverses Ibsen's innovations, such as-replacing conventional resolutions with open discussion and challenging the authority of the narrators, by reinstating the dominant voice of authority. This restoration diminishes the audience's intellectual engagement, effectively returning the play to an earlier stage in modern drama's evolution and reinstating the traditional divide between the performers and the spectators.

2.2. *The Psychoanalysis*

Becker explores the role of psychoanalysis in *Death of a Salesman*, focusing on how it helps to interpret the psychological depth of the play. He points out that most readers and critics are drawn to understanding the mental workings of Willy Loman and the deeper layers of his personality (209). According to Becker, it is important to trace how Willy's character has developed neurotic traits over the course of his life. Psychoanalysis, which relies on the idea of cause and effect in human behavior, suggests that every thought and action stems from an underlying reason or motive. To understand these motives, one must look into the unconscious mind, which often remains hidden even from the individual. Becker examines the mental states of each character and how their emotions shape their behavior. He observes that Linda, through her admiration and optimism toward Willy, unconsciously projects the confidence and energy she herself lacks. This emotional projection mirrors Willy's tendency to belittle himself, something he refuses to confront directly, creating constant inner conflict. (211) In the case of Biff, Becker notes that he struggles with inner turmoil caused by an inflated sense of self. His unrealistic self-image makes him extremely vulnerable to disappointment when faced with the truth. Whenever he fails to live up to this idealized version of himself, he is overcome with feelings of shame and self-loathing. Becker also explains that Willy's suicide has two psychological dimensions. On one hand, it offers him an escape from the painful reality that exposes his failures. On the other, it allows him to reclaim a sense of dignity by leaving behind insurance money for Biff, which he believes will finally prove his worth. Ultimately, Becker views Willy's downfall as a result of his neurotic pride, a destructive force that distances him from his authentic self until self-destruction becomes the only way out.

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2.3. Political Viewpoint

Shockley examined *Death of a Salesman* through the lens of America's political climate, drawing a parallel between Willy Loman and Ronald Reagan. He observed that both figures shared several key traits. To begin with, each was, in essence, a salesman. They both understood that success in selling required faith in oneself and in what one was offering. For both men, what they were really selling was not just a product, but the idea of the American dream itself. Shockley pointed out that this belief required them to overlook uncomfortable truths. Willy refused to accept that his career had failed and that his sons had not lived up to his hopes. (49) Similarly, Reagan, who grew up as the son of an alcoholic shoe salesman, learned early in life to suppress the pain and shame of his family's struggles. Despite this, his father's gift for storytelling and his mother's encouragement of his performance skills helped Reagan transform personal rejection into a source of creativity and confidence—something Willy was unable to do. Both men also used fantasy as a way to escape the difficulties of real life. For them, imagination became a tool to cope with insecurity and maintain their belief in a brighter vision of themselves. (51) Shockley argued that, for people like Willy, achieving the American dream is not easier but far more difficult. (52) He suggested that criticizing Reagan means confronting uncomfortable truths about the collective American identity—about the shared desire for success and the illusions tied to it. In this way, both Willy Loman and Ronald Reagan represent an ongoing national conversation about what America stands for and where it is headed. (56)

2.4. Writing Technique

Xie discussed Hemingway's distinctive use of language and his approach to writing. Among the major American authors, Hemingway is well known for his concise and objective prose. His novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, like his other works, clearly demonstrates this recognizable style. At first glance, his language appears simple and natural, yet it is carefully constructed and intentional. This precision can be traced back to Hemingway's background in journalism, which shaped his preference for clear and factual expression. His stylistic influence has spread widely across the world. (311) In *The Old Man and the Sea*, much of the content is drawn from Hemingway's own experiences. At the start of the story, he uses these details to portray the realities of Santiago's daily life, presenting them in a plain and straightforward way. As the narrative progresses, however, these same details are seen through Santiago's inner thoughts, becoming an essential part of the novel's overall structure.

Hemingway's language remains outwardly plain and unemotional, but beneath that simplicity lies deep control over feeling and meaning. His writing restrains emotion rather than expressing it openly. Over time, the term "Hemingway style" has come to describe prose that is clear, direct, vivid, and seemingly natural in its expression.

2.5. Heroic Impulse

According to Gurko's research, most of Hemingway's novels highlight human limitations and the harshness or cruelty inherent in the world. (377) *The Old Man and the Sea*, however, is different because it focuses on what people are capable of and presents the world as a place where heroic acts can occur. Santiago, an elderly Cuban fisherman, lives in a universe that, while not free from suffering or tragedy, allows him to rise above these challenges. This optimistic perspective contrasts sharply with the more pessimistic tones found in novels such as *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*. (379) Gurko notes that a defining feature of Hemingway's universe is its constancy. Nature, including human nature, is depicted as eternal and consistent. (379) The sun rises and sets in an unchanging rhythm, and the patterns of human interaction with the natural world remain largely the same. Even though Hemingway's stories are full of action, that activity unfolds within a fundamentally stable environment. In shifting the focus from societal constraints to the trials imposed by nature, Hemingway echoes the approach of Joseph Conrad, who placed European characters in the demanding landscapes of the Malay Archipelago and Africa to test them beyond the comforts of civilization. It is emphasized that Santiago stands out among Hemingway's protagonists as a true hero because he is largely unscathed and not disillusioned by his experiences.

3. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Death of a Salesman depicts the final day in the life of Willy Loman, a 63-year-old salesman facing the collapse of his career. At home, Willy drifts between reality and memories that reveal the reasons for his current situation, including his relationships with his brother Ben and a former lover. He struggles constantly with his eldest son, Biff, who has been living a troubled life as a drifter and occasional thief after leaving high school. The play reaches its peak when Willy and Biff engage in a heated confrontation, and the resolution comes as Biff confronts the failure of his father's vision of the American Dream. In response, Willy chooses to take his own life, hoping to secure financial stability for his family. By contrast, *The Old Man and the Sea* tells the story of Santiago, an aging fisherman who has gone eighty-four days without catching anything.

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His loyal young friend cares for him, offering support and companionship. Determined to end his unlucky streak, Santiago ventures farther than ever before and engages in a three-day struggle with a massive marlin. Despite the physical and emotional strain, he never gives up and sees himself as victorious when he returns with the marlin's carcass. Unlike the tragic tone of *Death of a Salesman*, the novella maintains a persistent sense of hope and resilience.

3.1. RESEARCH GAP

Undoubtedly, the preceding research works are much appreciated and praiseworthy. Multiple authors and researchers have worked on this novella and the drama. They have all interpreted it from different perspectives. There is a stylistic view on the usage of language and writing technique, originality of the writing, heroic impulse, political viewpoint, psychoanalysis, and so many other perspectives that have been analyzed through the mirror of these two American literary texts. My research aims to uphold the falsity of the American dream, the indirect criticism of the authors, and mainly to show the contrast between the two central characters according to their sense of hope, whereas they are both American dreamers. This paper aspires to fill the gap with the contrastive study of two American literary texts and looks forward to creating a new dimension in the research area.

4. RESEARCH STATEMENTS

This paper contains a comparative analysis of the American Dream as portrayed in "*Death of a Salesman*" and "*Old Man and the Sea*." The main objective of this paper is to identify how this dream functioned differently, in fact, completely opposite, in the lives of Willy and Santiago.

5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to uncover the authentic and real situation of the American Dream and how people perceive this propaganda in their lives. No critic or author has considered the topic of the falsity of the American Dream to include in their study. This paper has been given the great opportunity to work on this uncommon topic and aspires to analyze the characters through their strong ambition to make their dreams come true.

6. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 6.1.** What proved Santiago as an American Dreamer?
- 6.2.** How was American falsity prevalent in Willy Loman's life?
- 6.3.** What are the key contrasting factors between two American dreamers, Willy and Santiago?

7. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

7.1. *General Objective*

This paper aims to examine the contrasting and comparative views between Death of a Salesman and Old Man and the Sea in relation to the state of the American Dream.

7.2. *Specific Objectives*

7.2.1. To identify the events in Santiago's life that prove him to be an American Dreamer.

7.2.2. To discuss the false nature of the American Dream in Willy Loman's life.

7.2.3. To explore the key contrasting aspects between two American dreamers, Willy and Santiago.

8. METHODOLOGY

The study has followed a qualitative approach, which included qualitative data. It takes a descriptive typology of research. The documentation method has been used to collect primary data. This research is more of a thematic analysis. Primary data were collected from two 19th century American literary works, Death of a Salesman and Old Man and the Sea. Additionally, relevant books, journals, research articles, and other internet resources were utilized as secondary sources.

9. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

9.1. *Optimism in Santiago with the Influence of the American Dream*

The Old Man and the Sea is undoubtedly an optimistic book. The central character, Santiago, is evidently an American dreamer who is a hard-working person and aims to achieve his goal. The novella was written in 1952, after WWII. Economic boom was vehemently spreading through the American dream. The American dream is a propaganda for the establishment of a capitalist society. The American dream itself is very contradictory. It suggests people work hard and gain success. The more one works hard, the more successful he will be. This idea was sewn into every American's mind, and they always used to chase success, no matter how hard it was. In Ernest Hemingway's novella, The Old Man and the Sea, Santiago, a Cuban fisherman, cherished this ideology of working hard, and he needed to prove himself to the villagers as a successful man. His venture was against nature, and he claimed human beings as the superior creature among all.

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He was determined to show his power to everyone and delivered his famous line, "A man can be destroyed but not defeated." (90) This line is quite adequate to portray his inner willpower to win success and his hope to establish himself as a standard and successful human among all the rising Americans. The American Dream carried the sense of not being defeated at any cost. Santiago exploited nature, killing fish and eggs of turtles, and yet he survived. He was a man of extreme optimism, not losing his hope even after 84 days of his fruitless fishing journey. The story of his survival shows what type of amalgamation of different opposite things it actually carried out. There exists a Chinese philosophy of Yin Yang, which refers to the unity of contradictory things. Santiago's enthusiasm is reflected in this story in such a way that the audience gets perplexed whether he was succeeded or failed, defeated or undefeated. The circle of life and death also implies the zeal of struggle in Santiago's life. He was in extreme need of recognition and validation from his neighbors to be in a successful and authoritative position. This is why he struggled with his heart and soul. He was completely indomitable. He had a conquest with sharks and, after a long dreadful fight with them, he could carry out his prey, a big Marlin, but that was only the carcass of it. It is hard to decide whether he was defeated or undefeated. He proved that manhood is connected with heroism and struggle. He set up the remark that a man should never give up in any situation. He states, "I will show him what a man can do and what a man can endure." (94) The American dream was actually like an extra pressure on the people, creating a concrete idea that a man should not surrender at any cost. They must work hard to be established in a better placement in society. But in a real scenario, it is problematic to keep pace with this fixed bar, which is sometimes out of our capacity. In the case of Santiago, this same matter occurred. His American dream was creating extra pressure on him that no matter what he must struggle hard to survive. Materialistic achievement was preferred by the American dream, where Santiago was a failure. He proved his worthiness to fulfill his dream as an American. Pride and dignity worked to the utmost level, and he intended to prove himself to be very manly and successful. Actually, Ernest Hemingway tactfully criticized the theme of the American dream, that it is nothing but a propaganda to be succeeded in an easy way, which makes people's lives more miserable. such as Santiago's. He tried to uphold the drawbacks of the American dream, that humans suffer to reach their dream, bringing misery to their lives. Throughout all of these matters, one single point must be noted: Santiago was a man of optimism who did not know what defeat is.

9.2. Pessimism in Willy Loman under the Influence of American Dream

Arthur Miller also implicates the American dream in his play Death of a Salesman. The American dream was a way of life that caused more suffering for middle-class people. Miller presents a social commentary through this drama that not only condemns capitalist society but also aims to challenge the American dream. The American Dream calls for equal opportunities for success for those who work hard. However, instead of promoting equality, capitalism has created a discriminatory system in society, leading people to lives that are even more miserable. To provide some historical context, when this drama was first staged in 1949, there was a conflict between Russia and America. Russia supported socialism while America chose to follow capitalism as a way to address this political issue. Miller was criticizing capitalism and indirectly supporting socialism. His specific ideology is reflected in his play, where he shows how capitalist society destroys families and individuals. Miller was primarily a moral reformer, rather than a political propagandist.

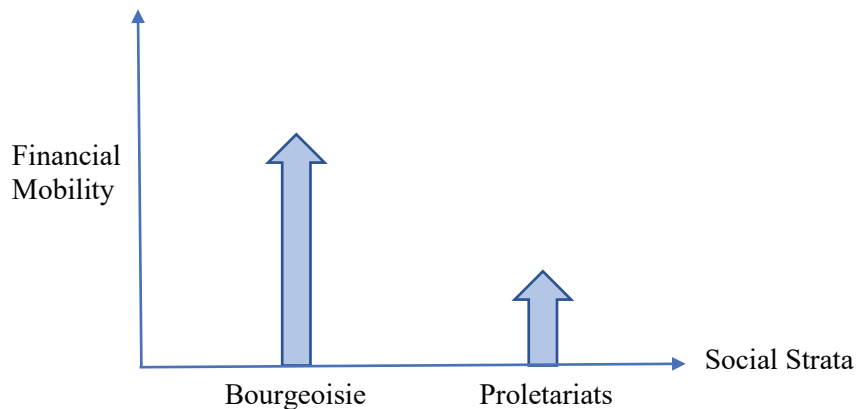


Figure 01: Capitalism in the Reality of American Dream

This drama is a critique of American capitalism, portraying how an individual can lose all hope and gradually descend into destruction. In Death of a Salesman, the central character Willy Loman falls victim to the American dream, gradually losing hope and sinking into nihilism and emptiness. While real estate provides opportunities, excessive mortgages remain. As Willy belonged to the middle class, it was unbearable to keep up with these mortgage payments. He spent his entire life without enjoyment, success, or accomplishment. Willy wanted a job in New York City that was convenient for him, but he was a handyman and could have been self-sufficient with his skills.

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However, he pursued a bourgeois lifestyle that was out of reach. His American dream deluded him into thinking that if he worked as hard as his brother Ben, he could achieve much more in life, and quickly. Willy was so influenced by the American dream that he put his heart and soul into succeeding, but did not know how to work hard effectively. He used to borrow money from his neighbor Charley but was unwilling to accept a job offer from him. He maintained his pride among higher-ranking people, even though he struggled to afford the basic necessities of daily life. The American dream suggests equality, and as a dreamer, Willy aspired to keep up with those of higher social status. For example, Howard Wagner had a tape recorder for his family, and Willy also began to desire one, even though it was unnecessary. Wagner rejected Willy's request for a job in New York City, considering him useless. In capitalism, if there is no profit, there is no place for something. The American dream exaggerates things beyond reality. Willy became mentally unstable and started talking to his deceased brother Ben, who had worked hard for three years and became unimaginably wealthy. Willy's desire to be on par with the rich made him an insane individual. He lost touch with reality, much like Blanche from "A Streetcar Named Desire," unable to distinguish between illusion and reality. Willy and his family suffered in a consumerist society, where they felt the need to buy a house, car, and refrigerator. All these materialistic desires became burdens for him, and he gradually became pessimistic about life. At the end of the drama, Willy lost all hope and committed suicide, hoping that his family would receive insurance money after his death. Otherwise, they would not be able to survive a miserable life like those in the lower social class. Throughout the play, Willy was immersed in illusions, revealing the falsehood of the American dream. He was so pessimistic that he contemplated suicide multiple times, and finally succeeded in his attempt towards the end of the play, hoping to achieve his dream of financial stability and elevate his family to a higher social class. Miller provided a strong social commentary through this drama, criticizing the false hope of the American dream which leaves people feeling more hopeless in life.

9.3. Contrast between two American Dreamers Santiago and Willy Loman

The preceding discussion adequately portrays the massive influence of the American Dream in the lives of both Santiago and Willy Loman. The falsity of the American Dream is so prevalent in every aspect of their lives. Santiago was almost on the verge of destroying his whole life in order to achieve his goal of success, while on the other hand, Willy was so tired of chasing success that he ultimately gave up and committed suicide - the only way he felt he could reach his version of success.

Although they were both influenced by the American Dream, they exhibited starkly contradictory traits based on this dream. This refers to the pessimism of Willy and the optimism of Santiago. Throughout their stories, they displayed noticeable contrasts, which are depicted below:

Table 1: Differences between Santiago and Willy Loman

Willy Loman		Santiago	
i.	Used to take loan and help from Charley.	i.	Received no help from anybody, not even from the boy, Manolin.
ii.	He had no hope. He was pessimistic and nihilistic.	ii.	He was so optimistic that he continued fighting till the last breath.
iii.	He committed Suicide.	iii.	He survived with his enthusiasm
iv.	He could not accept the reality	iv.	He could accept the reality and kept pace with it.
v.	He did not know the way of surviving	v.	He knew how to survive in a critical situation
vi.	He lost his mental stability by balancing consumerist society.	vi.	He kept his nerves strong to fight back.
vii.	Noticeable statement: "I am tired to the death." – sense of pessimism.	vii.	Noticeable statement: "A man can be destroyed but not defeated."- sense of optimism.

The sharp contrastive view has been located in their lives based on the existence of the American Dream. Santiago was so strong that he did not seek any help from anyone, fought alone on the sea, whereas Willy used to take loans from Charley. Santiago never gave up on his life. He battled with the marlin for three long days with such optimism that he could return home by achieving something. On the other hand, Willy Loman was so pessimistic that he needed constant support from his wife, Linda. He was chasing success but was failing and becoming pessimistic. Moreover, he lost his mental stability to the point where he constantly hallucinated the voices of dead people who were not even alive or around him. The excessive pressure of consumerist society made him this way. Contrarily, Santiago held his strong nerves even in the most critical moment of his life when he was teetering between life and death, even though he was also an old man like Willy Loman. In the end of their stories, since Willy Loman could not accept his reality due to his extreme sense of pessimism, he committed suicide in order to take the insurance money.

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In contrast, Santiago struggled until the end of his sea journey and he literally came back from the brink of death. Both of them cherished the essence of the American Dream within themselves, but one was so perplexed in achieving success while the other never took a single step back from the objective he wanted to attain.

10. CONCLUSION

The American dream reminds us of the Cold War between America and Russia right after World War II. Since Miller was a Jew, he was somewhat inclined towards Russia, which embraced socialism wholeheartedly. There was a sense of strategic alliance for America in that since Russia supported socialism, they must embrace capitalism, which is the opposite. From this idea, the American dream emerged to its fullest extent, which Arthur Miller tactfully criticized through his character Willy Loman. Miller worked as a moral reformist rather than a political propagandist. The contemporary writer Ernest Hemingway also published his novella "The Old Man and the Sea," where he depicted the American dream through the lens of an old fisherman named Santiago. His writing also reflected the essence of the American dream. Santiago and Willy Loman were both elderly men and dreamers of the American dream. However, they had contrasting views on life. Willy was not ready to accept reality and while he had a slight hope of survival, this hope was portrayed as his pride. In the end, his hope did not last long. His pessimism sharply contrasted with the optimism of Santiago, who continued fighting until his last bit of strength remained. Although these two texts are from different genres, the writers were from the same region and experienced the same political issues. Their writings reflected the real scenarios of the contemporary period. The American dream was so popular during that time that people were desperate to pursue it, even at the cost of their own lives. In America, people like Santiago and Willy held either optimism or pessimism in their lives and continued to dream of reaching their desired higher destination in terms of social strata and the economy.

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