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American Dream Research Paper

American Dreams and Self-Reflection:

The Shared Flaws of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* and Sal Paradise in *On the Road*

Literature is not created within a vacuum. Instead it is both a reflection of and a commentary on the culture in which it was created. Culture, of course, changes over time according to the needs and values of the period. It would be expected then, that literature would reflect these changes and offer readers a glimpse into the pitfalls and follies of their given culture, as well as offering optimal models of behavior that would best aid the reader in their own life. This is the didactic purpose of literature: to teach while it entertains. In this way, both Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, both have revealing lessons for the reader in regards to an important, and often overlooked component of the American Dream. Whereas it is often widely accepted that the protagonist, Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, is used as a critique of the consumer-driven value system of the 1950's, and that Sal Paradise, the protagonist in *On the Road*, is a character who resists those values, what is often overlooked is that both characters share a common value system and don't realize that self-reflection is a necessary component to achieve their personal definition of the American Dream.

To show how both Willy Loman and Sal Paradise exhibit aspects of the American Dream, it is important to show how this concept has been constructed in the American narrative and how that construction has changed over time. The term "American Dream" was first introduced by historian James Truslow Adams in 1931 in his book *The Epic of America* (Effing 127). Yet, as Mercé Mur Effing points out, "The concept of the American Dream can be traced back... to the late sixteenth century... [when] English promoters were attempting to persuade Englishmen to move to the colonies" (Effing 127). It was a message of hope and promise, that America was the land of opportunity. As Puritans travelled to America to escape religious prosecution, their value system, "with its emphasis on hard work, education,

the need for self examination, discipline and frugality,” permeated the foundational values of American culture (Effing 127). As Effing points out, there were “distinct phases [that were] marked by a shift from a culture of ‘industry and effort’ - beginning with Benjamin Franklin until the mid-twentieth century- to a culture of ‘leisure and ease’ - especially after World War II” (Effing 125). Benjamin Franklin embraced the values of hard work in his day and continues to be held up as one of the most “emblematic” rags-to-riches characters of American history (Nuechterlein11). It is believed that through his *Autobiography*, Franklin “told Americans how to achieve prosperity” (Nuechterlein 11). The economic phrases used in association with Franklin, denote the connection of his memory in the American consciousness to material wealth and success.

The American Dream, and the values associated with it, however, experienced a dramatic shift during the 1950’s. Primarily, this was marked by a shift from a production based society to a consumption based one (Benziman 20). More and more, the American Dream was being equated with wealth and, “since most Americans labored tirelessly hard in mines, factories and stockyards but advanced not at all, a new formula for success had to be improvised;... the decisive balance had shifted away from ‘traditional moral virtues’ to the ‘qualities of personality’ necessary to acquire riches” (Effing 130). As the narrative surrounding the American Dream shifted away from moral values, the explosion of mass-consumer culture of the 1950’s “produced less happiness than [was] expected,” and led to an “age of anxiety” (Effing 131). This period of cultural transition is the setting of both the novels.

The shift in economic practices, and subsequently in cultural values, plays a major role in the plots of both *Death of a Salesman* and *On the Road*. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman represents a character who had bought into the dominant cultural values of his time. Like other American’s in the 1950’s, Willy bought into the formula for success that held “Happiness equals success, and success equals wealth and achievement” (Vega 101). He had worked himself to obvious exhaustion, trying to win the “race with the junkyard” (Miller 2:73). This attitude makes clear he is part of the mass-consumption society. Furthermore, Willy Loman embodies the shifting ideals of his generation that the ‘qualities of personality’ were the real assets a person could acquire. This mentality is explicitly expressed as part of

his formula for success: “personality always wins the day” (Miller 1:65). Willy Loman represents the shift away from the values of hard work and the development of moral character, towards the myth that being well-liked is what leads to success, as success was being more and more defined in economic terms.

This shift in dominant the values of the culture, was not met without resistance. As Cresswell points out, “Although there is a dominant culture which represses and manipulates ideas, it is not all powerful. There is room for a variable process of dominance and resistance.” (Cresswell 250). Basically, Cresswell is saying that although there was a definite dominant culture of mass consumerism in the 1950’s, there were also other counter-cultures which existed simultaneously and were in resistance to it. For example, “expressions like *rat race* and *treadmill*, which were coined during this decade, ‘brought attention to the dehumanizing costs of maintaining middle class lifestyles,’” as was so tragically represented in *Death of a Salesman* (Effing 131). The beat generation emerged as one counter-cultural group that resisted the dominant ideals. There was “a romantic notion of the free hobo, unencumbered by possessions -- a free spirit roaming the road -- [which] lay behind the ‘beat’ movement of the 1950’s” (McDowell 413). As the younger generation watched many Americans trapped in the “rat race,” the seemingly free-spirited life of the drifting hobo seemed more appealing to them. The beat generation was a self-declared group of mostly men who travelled across the United States (and sometimes other countries as well), reading, writing, using drugs, drinking, and “search[ing] for something permanent and transcendent” (Cresswell 260). This is the generation in which Jack Kerouac belongs and the circumstances that the plot of *On the Road* is loosely based. It was the values of the beat generation that Sal used to formulate his own version of the American Dream, a vision of freedom. As one critic stated, *On the Road* describes the “quest of Sal Paradise, who sets out to test the American dream by trying to pin down its promise of unlimited freedom” (Qtd. In McDowell 414). Upon examination, it would seem that these are also the values claimed by Biff Loman in *Death of a Salesman*.

Like the beatniks, Biff Loman finds himself in the predicament of being disillusioned to the myth of the dominant culture, the one his father readily embraces. Biff had been indoctrinated to his dad’s ideology of life and it is clear that he is expected to fulfill his father’s dreams. Yet, it is immediately

revealed to the audience that their relationship is strained due to Biff's having disappointed those dreams. In the opening scene, Willy and Linda are having a conversation, where Linda is clearly the buffer between them and she is encouraging Willy to go easy on Biff. "I think if he finds himself, then you'll both be happier and not fight any more" (Miller 1:15). It is clear that the family knows Biff is lost and that he doesn't know who he is. Rather than giving Biff space to find out, however, Willy does not stop demanding that Biff buy into his version of the American Dream: "How can he find himself on a farm? Is that a life? A farmhand" (Miller 1:15). Willy does not care that working outdoors makes Biff happy, he is more concerned that Biff fit into the dominant culture's definition of success in which the "best measure of success w[as] tangible improvement in economic condition... if not rags to riches, at least from rags to respectability" (Nuechterlein 11). The life that Biff seems to envision for himself goes against everything that Willy believes in.

Like the beatniks, Biff had gone on the road to find a new dream to believe in. He had travelled to Nebraska, the Dakotas, Arizona, Texas, and even been jailed in Kansas City, but as soon as he started getting the feeling that "[he was] not getting anywhere" and that he was "wasting [his] life," he came back home (Miller 1:22-3). As Tyson so aptly put it, "Biff, unable to wholly reject the paternal belief that business success is the only success, has remained vaguely dissatisfied with the outdoor ranch life he loves" (Tyson 77). Throughout the play, the audience is witness to Biff's struggle to be true to himself and his desire to work in the outdoors and his conflicting desire to live up to his father's expectations. This struggle is clearly paralleled by Sal when he says, "Isn't it true that you start your life a sweet child believing in everything under your father's roof? Then comes the day of the Laodiceans, when you know you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, and with the visage of a gruesome grieving ghost you go shuddering through nightmare life" (Kerouac 1:105). The resemblance this comment has to Biff when he yells at his father: "I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!" is uncanny (Miller 2:132). Both men have become disillusioned by the dreams of their fathers and the cultural dreams that tell them they are amazing and can be anything they want to be if they decide to do it. They don't believe this. They are beat.

It is not only Biff's desire to reject the dominant culture's view of success that makes him resemble member of the beat generation. Like the beatniks, Biff is disillusioned by the seeming success of the business world. The conversation between Happy and him clearly demonstrates this: "HAPPY: What can you make out there? BIFF: But look at your friend. Builds an estate and then hasn't the peace of mind to live in it." (Miller 1:24). Biff knows that the business world and its version of success does not offer satisfaction or fulfillment, which as stated, is a major motivation for his travels. Similarly, Sal is also disillusioned by the business world. He narrates that "seeing with my innocent road-eyes the absolute madness and fantastic hoorair of New York with its millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream-- grabbing taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities" (Kerouac 1:106). The business life seems pointless to him. So, both Biff and Sal seem certain that the answers they are looking for will be found in the West. Both characters find hope in the dreams they have of going West. Biff tries to convince Happy to join him, sure that they will both find happiness there (Miller 1:23). Sal, on the other hand, joins Dean, and initially interprets anything that seems joyful as "the West": "listen to that man laugh. That's the West, here I am in the West" (Kerouac 1:21). He associated the West with positivity because the West is where he hoped to find what he describes as "IT" (Kerouac 2:127). As Cresswell points out, "there is a repeated pattern of excitement with the prospect of a new city, a period of exploration then dejection and sadness followed by continued travel" (Cresswell 254). I would argue that Biff follows a similar pattern. He has clearly left hopeful that he would find the answer while traveling, become discouraged at not becoming the "boss big shot in two weeks" (as his dad had taught him he had to be), and then come home, empty handed (Miller 2:132). There is a pattern in both men's lives of excitement of the prospect of what is "out there," then the letdown that it isn't everything they thought it would be, and then the inevitable return to their roots. A life of traveling, intermittent work, criminal mentalities, and a lack of commitment to female partnership characterize the lives of both characters. Through this lens, Biff clearly represents some of the cultural values of the beat generation.

It would seem, then, that Willy represents a more standard, economic version of the American Dream and that Sal and Biff represent the counter-cultural resistance to it, embracing instead the American Dream of mobility and limitless freedom. That reading would align the values of Biff and Sal in opposition to Willy's. However, a closer reading reveals that Sal, although definitely a member of the counter-culture which is rebelling against the dominant values that Willy has embraced, is, in fact, more similar to Willy than he is to Biff, at least as it relates to the success of their psychological and social ideologies. Ultimately, Willy and Sal both find hope in a dream that leads to disappointment; both choose their version of the American Dream over their families, despite their desire to settle instead; choose role models that help define their version of the American Dream, and who ultimately abandon them; and both use a variety of techniques to avoid the reality of their dissatisfaction, continuing to make the same insane choices over and over again, expecting different results.

What unites Willy and Sal as similar character, more than any other characteristic, is their attachment to their dreams despite all evidence that their dreams won't bring them happiness. The both experience the pattern of hope prior to attaining their dreams and the subsequent letdown when it isn't what they wanted. Willy maintains a belief that business success will bring him happiness, despite all evidence to the contrary. Often, the only happiness Willy experiences is the happiness he has when he is hoping for something. As Happy informs the audience, "Dad is never so happy as when he's looking forward to something" (Miller 2:105). Willy dreams of promotions, of not having to travel anymore, and gaining popularity. Yet, instead he is fired, kills himself, and no one comes to his funeral outside his family and Charley. Biff articulates what the audience knows, his dad "had the wrong dreams" (Miller 2:138). Willy's hope never leads him to a fulfilling life. It is always a letdown.

Similarly, against all the odds, Sal also remains committed to his dreams, despite the repeated pattern of hope and letdown. Before leaving out west the first time, "[Sal had] been poring over maps of the United States in Paterson for months, even reading books about the pioneers...Filled with dreams of what [he would] do in Chicago, in Denver, and then finally in San Fran" (Kerouac 1:12). Thus began Sal's pursuing his anywhere but here mentality. Sal had become disenchanted, believing there "Ain't

nothin in New York,” and thinks the West is the answer (Kerouac 1:35). When he arrives in the West, he has a brief period of excitement, but then quickly becomes disenchanted there too. After this letdown, he began to shift from thinking that the West was the place for all his dreams, and perhaps, instead it was actually the East: “There is something brown and holy about the East; and California is white like washlines and emptyheaded -- at least that’s what I thought then” (Kerouac 1:79). Sal thinks anywhere but this time and place will make him happy: “Everything’ll be all right tomorrow, don’t you think, Sal-honey, man?” ‘ Sure, baby, mañana.’ It was always mañana... a lovely word and one that probably means heaven” (Kerouac 1:94). Despite all the evidence of his experience, Sal is convinced it would all come together eventually. “It made me think that everything was about to arrive -- the moment when you know all and everything is decided forever” (Kerouac 2:129). He doesn’t realize he is doing the same thing, expecting different results. The first time he went West, it ended with him feeling desolate, lonely, and empty, yet this time he thinks he will “arrive.” He just wants “one more magnificent trip to the West Coast” (Kerouac 2:129). He forgets that his previous trip wasn’t magnificent. The only magnificent part of the trip was his joyful anticipation, which led to let down. He is delusional, as delusional as Willy. Ed tries to convince him of this when he tells him, “The balloon won’t sustain you much longer. And not only that, but it’s an abstract balloon. You’ll all go flying to the West Coast and come staggering back in search of your stone” (Kerouac 2:130). He is chasing an empty dream, when what he really wants is a dream with substance, with weight. Sal ignores the prophecy of his friend and instead decides to “[leave] confusion and nonsense behind and perform our one and noble function of the time, *move*” (Kerouac 2:133). Like Willy, no matter how disappointing his ideology proves to be for him, he is committed to it.

Both Willy and Sal choose a dream that ultimately drew them away from their true desires. In the case of Willy, his focus on achieving success as a salesman conflicted with the time he spent with his family, as well as any opportunity to pursue a career that might have brought more satisfaction. As Tyson describes, the question as to “why the protagonist chose... his dream of business success when his ability and his pleasure clearly lie in working with his hands... [can] be found in the American dream’s promise to remediate Willy’s ontological insecurity, his lack of ‘any unquestionable self-validating certainties’”

(Tyson 65). According to Tyson, Willy chose Ben's definition of success because it was validated by the narrative of the American Dream, which allowed him to not have to experience any insecurity in having to figure it out for himself. Willy reveals what he's working for when talking to Linda: "You wait, kid, before it's all over we're gonna get a little place out in the country, and I'll raise some vegetables, a couple of chickens... they'll get married, and come for a weekend. I'd build a little guest house.... all I'd need would be a little lumber and some peace of mind" (Miller 2:72). This is Willy's true dream. He wants to live in the country, build a life and home for his family, and then visit with them. Yet, all his actions in the play run contrary to this desire. Instead of living the life he wants, he works hard in a job that doesn't seem to suit him, hoping it will eventually lead him to the life he really seems to want. He doesn't seem to realize he can have that life without business success. That is because Willy defines success in business terms, and seems to believe that "if you are not a 'great success,' you are worth nothing" (Benzima 30). So instead, he singularly focuses on achieving business success, and neglects his true dreams and desires

Interestingly, despite his obvious rebellion towards certain consumeristic values of the dominant culture, Sal's shows a deep desire for familial attachment and roots. Like Willy, Sal also abandons this dream in favor of finding freedom in his version of the American Dream. This is clearly demonstrated when he meets a woman he seems to love, Terry. They go to her family's community and pick cotton as a form of employment. This is one period of the novel that Sal seems truly happy. "My back began to ache. But it was beautiful kneeling and hiding in that earth... Birds sang an accompaniment. I thought I had found my life's work" (Kerouac 1:96). But then both Terry and her young son are able to pick more cotton than he can and he feels discouraged. The dominant culture's ideas about manhood break the spell. "What kind of old man was I that I couldn't support his own ass, let alone theirs... I looked up at the dark sky and prayed to God for a better break in life and a better chance to do something for the little people I loved" (Kerouac 1:96). Sal feels a sense of responsibility for his family, one that he can't follow through on. They are only able to make enough money to buy food, and nothing more. They cannot pay rent, but still, he is happy there. "The days rolled by. I forgot all about the East and all about Dean and Carlo and



the bloody road... I was a man of the earth, precisely as I had dreamed I would be” (Kerouac 1:97). Their financial restraints caused them to have to move in with Terry’s family, and this is when he decides he must leave her. As he says, “I could feel the pull of my own life calling me back” (Kerouac 1:98). Terry said she would meet him in New York, but they “both knew she wouldn’t make it” (Kerouac 1:101). Though clearly Sal was happy with Terry, he never returns. He blames his not returning on his “white ambitions... All my life I’d had white ambitions; that was why I’d abandoned a good woman like Terry in the San Joaquin Valley” (Kerouac 3:180). It seems if he hadn’t bought into masculine values of the dominant culture which demanded that men be making progress and provide for their families, Sal may have settled there and found happiness. In this way, Sal’s mobility may be a form of rebellion towards some dominant cultural values, but in other ways he lives a life which reinforces them.

The conflict between Sal’s dream of complete freedom on the road and his dream of a home is repeated throughout the novel. Sal repeatedly describes his desire to settle down and get married: “I had been attending school and romancing around with a girl called Lucille, a beautiful Italian honey-haired darling that I actually wanted to marry. All these years I was looking for the woman I wanted to marry” (Kerouac 2:116). Sal knew that his life on the road got in the way of that dream: “I want to marry a girl... so I can rest my soul with her till we both get old. This can’t go on all the time -- all this franticness and jumping around. We’ve got to go someplace, find something” (Kerouac 2:116). Yet, Sal doesn’t listen to this call. Instead, he goes off again, on another trip back and forth across the United States. “It was a completely meaningless set of circumstances that made Dean come, and similarly I went off with him for no reason” (Kerouac 2:116). The ease at which Sal abandons what seems deeply important to him doesn’t characterize him as an inspirationally free protagonist, but as a sad narrator and a trapped man. Due to Sal’s transitory nature, it would be easy to assume this is just another passing phase for him, but Dean confirms it isn’t when he says he has been “digging [Sal] for years about the home and marriage and all those fine wonderful things about [his] soul” (Kerouac 2:116). Still, Dean encourages Sal to leave, and he does. Lucille recognizes how sad this was and “sensed the madness [his friends] put in [him]” (Kerouac 2:125). She told him, ‘I don’t like you when you’re with them.’ ‘Ah, it’s all right, it’s just kicks. We only

live once. We're having a good time.' No, it's sad and I don't like it'" (Kerouac 2:125). Lucille speaks a deep truth here. It is sad. Sal lies to himself, but she sees the truth. Finally, instead of doing some true soul searching and looking to see what would really make him happy, he convinces himself that "Lucille would never understand me because I like too many things and get all confused and hung-up runnin from one falling star to another till I drop... I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion" (Kerouac 2:126). Convinced, he leaves again, and once gone, gets excited about the prospect of being on the road again. For the second time, he's abandoned his desire for family. Contrary to experiencing freedom, Sal is trapped in a cycle that he is unable to be honest enough with himself to break.

All these patterns of pain could have been avoided, had the two protagonists chosen a different role model. Willy Loman clearly idolized his brother, Ben, and looked up to his work ethic and his formula for success. Galia Benziman makes clear in her essay, "Success, Law, and the Law of Success: Reevaluating *Death of a Salesman's* treatment of the American Dream," that Willy's choice in role models was one major factor which led to his downfall. She outlines the way that Willy's brother, Ben, and his neighbor, Charley, "represent the two opposing sides of the American dream" (Benziman 33). Both characters are "financially successful, and both invite Willy to enter their businesses" (Benziman 33). Otherwise, the two characters are nearly complete opposites of each other. Ben clearly exhibits a law of the jungle mentality: "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way" (Miller 1:49); whereas Charley displays characteristics of generosity and loyalty towards Willy, for no personal gain. Also, Ben exists as an aspect of Willy's delusional flashbacks, whereas Charley belongs in reality. Ben's presence "in Willy's life is defined by absence," whereas Charley remains as a steady presence throughout the play. Ben is presented in Willy's memory as a "mythical hero," whereas Charley represents reality. Benziman concludes it is this last fact that causes Willy to choose Ben as a role model, rather than Charley (Benziman 33-4). Willy, who wishes "to avoid fear and pain" at all costs, regularly chooses the false delusion over the reality (Benziman 27). This is one reason that Benziman concludes Willy "feels admiration for Ben and contempt for Charley" (Benziman 33). In this way, Willy's choice in role model leads to a reinforcement of his delusional thinking which keeps him trapped on the tragic path

which leads to his death. Had he chosen Charley as a role model instead, it is possible he might have been more concerned with his moral development, rather than his winning personality, and perhaps would have achieved the success that was so important to him.

Like Willy, Sal chose a role model who encouraged him to make poor decisions that weren't in line with his true values, while periodically being abandoned by him. In the opening chapter of Kerouac's book, Sal reveals, "With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. Before that I'd often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off" (Kerouac 1:3). Dean is introduced as the catalyst for Sal's intermittent trips across the country. Initially, Dean might have been interpreted as an inspiration for Sal, but the overall pattern of Sal's hope and excitement at the prospect of traveling and the inevitable suffering and letdown that followed in the wake of reality of life on the road, reveals Sal did not find satisfaction in this mode of living. Yet, repeatedly, Dean shows up, influencing Sal to take another trip. Sal describes it like this: "the bug was on me again, and the bug's name was Dean Moriarty and I was off" (Kerouac 2:115). A bug doesn't seem like a positive term. It carries the connotation of illness and discomfort. Yet, despite this, Sal allows himself to be influenced by Dean. Even though on each of their excursions, Dean abandons Sal, just like Ben is always leaving Willy. After already having been abandoned by Dean once in San Francisco, Sal follows him all the way to California again and is left a second time. "'You see what a bastard he is?' said Marylou. 'Dean will leave you out in the cold any time it's in his interest.' 'I know,' I said, and I looked back east and sighed... I lost faith in him that year" (Kerouac 2:170-1). Yet, despite his loss of faith, the next time Dean comes around Sal follows him again.

Despite Dean's obvious inability to remain loyal to Sal, Sal continues to look up to him. In fact, although Sal is the narrator of the book, much of the beatnik ideology is presented through the dialogue he has with Dean. First, Dean describes a desire to be unencumbered by responsibility: "Rollo Greb is the greatest... that's what I want to be... He's never hung-up, he goes every direction, he lets it all out, he knows time, he has nothing to do but rock back and forth... if you go like him all the time you'll finally get it.' 'Get what?' 'IT! IT!'" (Kerouac 2:127). Dean works from this mistaken belief system. He tells Sal,

“Everything takes care of itself. I could close my eyes and this old car would take care of itself” (Kerouac 2:157). He is wrong, of course. Cars do not drive themselves. A driver must direct the wheel, or it will go off the road, and cause massive destruction. Yet, this is how Dean drives, and ultimately, lives. Dean adopts this mentality because he doesn’t want to worry. Dean reveals this when talking to Dean and describing the other passengers, “They have worries, they’re counting the miles, they’re thinking about where to sleep tonight, how much money for gas, the weather, how they’ll get there -- and all the time they’ll get there anyway, you see.” (Kerouac 3:208-9). It is as if Dean doesn’t want to worry about anything. This is an unrealistic worldview. Still, Sal follows his every word, as though he has the answer. Sal doesn’t want to have to be responsible for himself or his own decisions.

Dean preaches a manner of living which may feel good at the time, and even may seem legitimate when described in the language of spiritual transcendence, but it ultimately reveals itself to be false and leads only to destruction. This is what the plot of the novel suggests. Bull, the wise man in New Orleans whom Sal idolizes, prophesies that Dean is “headed for his ideal fate, which is compulsive psychosis dashed with a jigger of psychopathic irresponsibility and violence,” and tells Sal, “If you go to California with this madman you’ll never make it” (Kerouac 2:147). This is exactly what happens. Dean becomes more and more crazy, having a full breakdown by the end of the book. Yet, still, Sal idolizes him. In the same way Willy idolizes his brother Ben. They both choose the wrong role models.

Both Willy and Sal reveal that there is a contrast between their lived values and their deeper desires. Both have chosen role models that formulate a recipe for happiness, which they follow as their personal dream. Due to the contrasts between their desires and their lived experiences, both Willy and Sal have to develop a variety of methods to remain blind to their true selves. This is the root of their delusion. Willy constructs a series of lies to protect himself from the truth. He “attempt[s] to beautify reality and create a gratifying self-image that will be compatible with his dream of success as a father, a business man, a breadwinner” (Benziman 30). Willy enlists his family to validate the lies he tells. Linda seems to do this willingly and in a show of support for Willy. When he comes home from work, and changes his story several times about the amount of money he made, Linda calmly encourages his future efforts,

without ever questioning the obvious lies he's told (Miller 1:35-7). When Biff, on the other hand, tries to "hold on to the facts," Willy uses a combination of dominating the conversation through interrupting and emotional manipulation to stop Biff from going any further with the truth. He tells Biff, "I'm looking for a little good news to tell your mother... The gist of it is that I haven't got a story left in my head, Biff. So don't give me a lecture about facts. I am not interested" (Miller 2:106-7). Willy will avoid the truth about the consequence of his choices at all costs, never realizing that the truth could potentially place him on the path to happiness.

Similarly, Sal also uses a variety of methods to avoid having to see the truth about himself and the dissatisfaction he is experiencing with his choices. Unlike Willy, Sal uses drugs, alcohol, a constant distraction of companions, and travel, to avoid having to face or consider the consequences of his actions. There is a constant escape element in the story whereas the traveling and the drugs and the alcohol all take a part. When he has conflict with his friends, he doesn't try to address the issue, instead "[he] forgave everybody, [he] gave up, [he] got drunk" (Kerouac 1:77). Sal goes to Denver, thinking he'll settle down, but "[he] was lonesome. Nobody was there" (Kerouac 3:179). Sal was dependent on the people around him, like Willy was dependent on his delusions. With his friends, Sal is hopeful, but without them he was lonely and confronted by self-reflection: "He and I suddenly saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there," but only a few short sentences later, when Sal is "all alone in the night", the doubts crept in, "What was I doing? Where was I going?" (Kerouac 2:138). It is clear that Sal required constant companionship to avoid having to answer these deeper questions. Ultimately, Sal didn't know who he was and he wanted to avoid that knowledge at all costs.

Although critics agree that Willy Loman's delusions are the cause of his downfall, there is less agreement regarding Sal in *On the Road*. Some critics suggest that Kerouac's novel displays a high level of spirituality and self-reflection. Kerouac himself claims that *On the Road* was a novel about self-reflection and realization "a central theme of *On the road* which Kerouac had always argued was consistently misunderstood -- that the quest was a spiritual one, that their journey really was an inward one" (McDowell 415). I respectfully disagree. Despite Sal's references to various spiritual themes and

ideas, the bliss he experiences reminds him of his drug use, it doesn't seem to help him, nor does it lead to happiness, peace, or resolution. Sal admits, "Everything fell apart in me" and then goes back to lost Dean for guidance (Kerouac 3:182). Although there are brief interludes in the plot that describe Sal's attempt to reach for a higher understanding, which may give the impression to critics and some readers, that this is a story of spirituality and self-revelation, the plot and characters reveal that it is instead the story of a man who has rejected aspects of the dominant culture, but has replaced them with new actions that don't serve him. If he were truly self-reflective, he would have recognized the failure in his own actions and taken different ones. Sal never spends enough time assessing himself and the decisions he makes in a meaningful enough way that shows him what he needs to be happy. He has brief revelations, but never assesses well enough that he changes his behavior. Instead, he stays on the road. Back and forth between the East and the West, and then ultimately to Mexico, sure that somewhere out there he will find IT. He uses the road the same way Willy uses his dream of a salesman. He thinks he is different. He thinks he is self-reflective, but he's not.

So, although Sal seems to have rejected dominant American culture through mobility and detachment, he is actually very similar to characters like Willy, who whole-heartedly embrace it. Sal would be surprised to know how much like Willy he really is. It is clear he doesn't see himself to be like the Willy's of the world. In fact, Sal thinks being a salesman is "the most ridiculous thing" (Kerouac 2:175). Yet, he himself admits he isn't much different: "I realized I was beginning to cross and recross towns in America as though I were a traveling salesman-- raggedy travelings, bad stock, rotten beans in the bottom of my bag of tricks, nobody buying" (Kerouac 3:245). When Sal referenced the "mad dream" of "grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, [and] dying," he is referring to Willy's dream. He recognizes this as the pointless rat race it is, and wants to reject it. But his new dream that he chooses leads him to the same beaten path of Willy.

So despite the similarities between the dreams of Biff and Sal, dreams expressed through the ideology of the beat generation of the 1950's, there was an important difference between them that instead made Sal more like Willy. Willy and Sal share similar patterns of hopeful dreams and the despair

of letdown. They both reject the deeper desires in favor of their hopeful dreams. They both justify their belief in their dreams through their choice in role models. Finally, they both use a variety of methods to avoid self-reflection to see the truth about themselves and the consequences of their choices. By the end of the respective texts, neither Willy nor Sal seem to have had a meaningful revelation. For Willy, this leads to his tragic suicide. Convinced that financial success is the only form of success, Willy takes his life so Biff will have the insurance money, but only after consulting with his hallucinatory and idolized brother, Ben, who confirms it's a good choice. For Sal, although he ultimately doesn't leave the last time with Dean, also doesn't seem to have made much progress. This is due to the fact that he is still avoiding self-reflection and allowing others to make decisions for him. His choice to not leave with Dean is not because he has finally realized it isn't what he wants, but because his friend, Remi, makes the decision for him. In this way, he proves he is still not reflecting on his desires and making decisions based on them. Therefore, he ultimately seems more like Willy than Biff, and therefore just as doomed. Perhaps it is telling that the life of the author of this autobiographical account ended in an alcoholic death. It is as though he never did learn.

Biff, in contrast, does not follow this same pattern. Although he does experience a conflict between the dreams he has for freedom and the dreams his father has for him, by the end of the play, the audience witnesses Biff's willingness to be honest with himself. He sees that his father had "the wrong dreams," and seems willing to try to do something different. Ultimately, the play ends on this realization, so there is no way to know for sure, but for Biff at least, there is hope that he has learned.

Earlier, Benjamin Franklin's formula was articulated as having a profound influence on the formulation of the American Dream. It was suggested that his dream was often defined in economic terms and associated with material wealth. It seems prudent and relevant to now show that this assessment of his formula is incomplete. Benjamin Franklin was not just an innovator, a hard worker, and a diplomat focused on his public image. He was also a man dedicated to self-reflection. He dedicated at least two hours daily in solitude, reflecting on his successes and failures (Qtd in Effing). He created a system to track his progress in establishing virtues and character. This he did, not because he was seeking his

fortune, but because he believed it would lead to his happiness and success. Because frugality was on his list of practiced virtues, I don't believe "riches" would be how he defined success. Riches weren't his goal, but a by-product of character-building. It is important to note that

"there is a vast difference between the self-help literature produced from Franklin's time until the mid-twentieth century and the literature produced in the second half of the twentieth century. In the first, authors were more concerned with what he, and others before him, call the ethics of character, that is with the teaching of the basic puritan principles of virtue and integrity which, in the long run, he says, give real success and permanent happiness" (Effing 132)

This proves that self-reflection, is, in fact, a vital component of finding success in the American Dream, despite the ways in which one chooses to define it.

This analysis of the characters in *Death of a Salesman* and *On the Road*, reveals exactly what great literature should reveal: a truth worth living by. More important than the definition a person uses to define the American Dream, is the means by which they determine if their dream is personally fulfilling. As this paper has suggested, society provides a plethora of suggestions for a person who wants to achieve success, in all its various definitions. What seems far more vital is that a person be engaged in a kind of self-reflection which helps them to determine whether their chosen path and definition truly reflects their desires. It is only through true self-reflection and a willingness to be honest with oneself, that a person is able to make different choices.



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