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In search of Willy Loman and the American dream

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In Search of Willy Loman and the American Dream



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Spring 2014

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Essay
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Spring 2014

Acknowledgements

They say that the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. It is taking that one step that often is a leap of faith. By taking that step you are leaving the world of “what if” and “what about” and move into the world of making it happen. When you sit and talk about what could be you do not face the prospect of failing. But without risk there is little reward.

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Introduction

I was first introduced to Willy Loman in the fall of 2011. I was finishing up my last year at community college and one of my classes was English 102: Freshman composition. I had heard of the play by Arthur Miller but I had no idea what it was about. In popular culture I'd seen a few references here and there. In fact one of the best known nods I remember was from Joel and Ethan Coen's movie *Barton Fink*. However it wouldn't be until my professor, Dr. Kappen, began to help me unpack the meaning behind it.

There was a quote that always struck me from the play. Willy is hallucinating about his brother Ben. Ben is the "American Success" as we see played out in the media today. He is someone that by sheer luck and happenstance made it big in a nation that everyone is struggling in. Ben is always just leaving each time we see him. Willy hurriedly tries to get any advice from his brother whom he has always looked up to.

Willy: No! Boys! Boys! *Young Biff and Happy appear.* Listen to this. This is your Uncle Ben, a great man! Tell my boys, Ben!

Ben: Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. *He laughs.* And by God I was rich. (Miller 189)

This is all we know of how Ben became wealthy. He walked into a jungle and then four years later walked out rich. Wealth and becoming wealthy in America can seem to be just as easy but also just as mysterious. There is no rhyme or reason in how one ascends the ranks of America's ladders of success. If you have a talent in sports or acting you could increase your fortunes. There are those that through business have increased wealth and prestige. The idea is that we live in a meritocracy that allows anyone the ability if they work hard to achieve the same success. This idea is flawed though.

W.E.B. DuBois states “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (DuBois 1903:9). Here we see a paradox stated elegantly. Though DuBois was speaking of African-Americans specifically in the United States his double-consciousness theory can be applied to the plight of Americans seeking to better their lives but at the same time choosing policies as well as politicians that work against them. We constantly are in search of identity in the United States pursuing the ever elusive American Dream as the media has portrayed it to us. However there is no actual hope for many of us to achieve that dream. There is only failure and heartache waiting.

Aristotle spoke of the idea of the “tragic hero.” Aristotle contends that the tragic hero has to be a man “who is not eminently good and just, whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty”. He is not making the hero entirely good in which he can do no wrong but rather has the hero committing an injury or a great wrong leading to his misfortune. Aristotle is not contradicting himself saying that the hero has to be virtuous and yet not eminently good. Being eminently good is a moral specification to the fact that he is virtuous. (Reeves)

However Miller counters this idea stating that Willy Loman is a tragic hero. He is someone that we all can relate to because we may walk every day in his shoes. We are shown a life that we could not possibly live up to and yet we strive every day to get there. This sets the stage in which we ultimately fail to live up to the standards that are set before us. We cannot hope to achieve success when that success is completely out of our reach.

Death of a Salesman

Death of a Salesman opened to audiences at the Morosco Theatre on February 10, 1949. It would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1949 and several Tony's including Best Play. The play follows the last days of Willy Loman. He is a man that is trying to prove his worth in a world that largely does not see him. Willy seeks to have a legacy. He wants his sons to have successful lives even though they are following in the path of their father. Willy's wife Linda stands by him even though he has not made much in his life but she still believes in him.

As the play takes us on the journey of these last days of Willy we meet several characters that are of great importance to Willy. First is his next door Charley who often bails him out with loans and asks Willy to come work for him. Charley's son Bernard is a successful lawyer for who, when he encounters Willy, often has pity for him. Willy asks Bernard what the secret is to success. Bernard does not have an answer for Willy. This is something that Willy is searching for his entire life but eludes him, success. His most prevalent hallucination is that of his older brother, Ben. Ben represents success in Willy's mind. However we never actually learn of this success. Just that Ben went into the jungle at the age of seventeen and walked out at twenty-one rich. Several times during the play this is repeated yet Willy is no closer to success than he ever was in life.

Arthur Miller talked about the inspiration for Willy Loman in an interview by John Lahr of *The New Yorker*. Lahr asks about a family friend of Miller's family, Manny Newman.

Well, Willy Loman was based on him.... I was standing in the lobby of the Colonial Theatre in Boston in '47—a matinee of “All My Sons,” I guess that would have been, and I hadn't seen him in, oh, fifteen years maybe. I saw him coming out of the theatre at the end of the show, and I was delighted to see him, because I always loved to see him. And

he had tears in his eyes at the end of the play. He saw me. We confronted one another. And he said, referring to his eldest son—out of the blue, now mind you I haven't seen this man in all those years—he said, “Bobby is doing very well.” That was the name of his son. Manny was living in two places at the same time. And I thought, wouldn't it be marvelous to be able to do a play where somebody is in two or three different place concurrently. That's when the penny dropped. (Lahr)

Miller had stated that the Great Depression had left a deep imprint on the psyches of many people. This idea, that to get ahead and not be left behind in the great meritocracy of United States would be a driving force in many people. Miller would go on to talk about Manny Newman when asked about wanting to dramatize this suffering.

Failure in the face of surrounding success. He was the ultimate climber up the ladder who was constantly being stepped on. His fingers were being stepped on by those climbing past him. My empathy for him was immense. And I mean, how could he possibly have succeeded? There was no way. Excepting that he'd been a pretty decent salesman in his young years. You know, he brought home enough money to raise a family of several boys. He had two daughters as well. And they lived reasonably well.... He committed suicide. That helped confirm my feeling that this man was always half in darkness. The darkness split him in half. The play was basically looking from the edge of the grave at life. (Lahr)

So we see Willy Loman brought to life before us. A man who has no identity he can call his own other than being a salesman. When the play first begins we see him walk in the door carrying two suitcases. It could be said that it is his own self that he carries in these suitcases. The image of Willy carrying the suitcases that are heavy and draining his energy are clearly the symbols of

him carrying his search for identity and his need to be well liked. These pursuits are weighing him down and would eventually lead him to suicide. It was his hope that in his death his family would not only see his worth by the insurance policy but also by the hundreds who would pay respects to him at his funeral. Sadly the only ones to come are his family, Charley, and Bernard.

Willy is constantly fighting for the American Dream but as we see has largely failed. This failure is not the result of some great sin that Willy has committed. There has been no character flaw within him that has caused him to never move past where he was. He worked hard and tried his best. The truth though is that others would trample over Willy to get ahead. His work would largely go unnoticed by his superiors. He would be seen as a relic of a bygone era. However this would fuel a feeling of shame and inadequacy in Willy that transfers to his sons.

The father's bravado is the son's shame. At the root of Biff's wrongdoing and feelings of guilt lie shame and feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. But, unlike his father, he faces, and learns from, his shame. Consequently, the play suggests that he can rebuild his sense of self-worth and reestablish his relation to others on healthier grounds. He makes sense of his guilt by confronting the shame buried deep in his sense of identity. Ultimately, the ability to do so enables him to empathize with his father. (Ribkoff 48)

Aristotle states that for someone to be a tragic hero there must be an epiphany; one that causes the audience to experience catharsis. It is an important belief of drama for Aristotle. Though Willy Loman never experiences this epiphany several characters do at the end. Most importantly is his son Biff. Though Happy picks up the delusions that his father carried Biff sees the truth for what it is and comes to peace with it. He realizes that the American Dream is not attainable. One must be happy where they are at.

Driven by shame, he kills himself in order to preserve his dream of being "well liked" and a successful father and salesman. Of course, the irony is that because of his suicide the odds are very good that neither of his sons will benefit from his sacrifice, and nobody from his world of sales comes to his funeral. Linda's words at the end of the play, and especially the words, "We're free and clear" (139), reveal the degree to which she and her husband lived in denial, in fear of exposing the man who hid in shame behind the idea of being a successful salesman and father. To be "free and clear" is, ultimately, an impossibility for Willy Loman. His vision of success perpetuates crippling feelings of inferiority and inadequacy that drive him to destroy himself. (Ribkoff 48)

It is this vision of success that Miller presents to us that has haunted the American pantheon. It has risen to the heights of being mythological and yet at the same time thought of as practical. Willy Loman missed all this. He was too caught up in the idea that he could do it. He could succeed. However that success was elusive and mysterious. As his brother Ben's words echoed: "Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. *He laughs.* And by God I was rich" (Miller 189). No actual direction on how to become a success. Just that it is possible.

The American Dream

Children are taught that the American Dream is alive and well. That if you work hard and play by the rules you will succeed. If you do not there is some sort of moral failing within you that caused you to fail. The Puritan work ethic is ingrained into our nation's social fabric. In the preamble to the Declaration of Independence it states: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. With

Manifest Destiny men and women sought to improve their fortunes by shaping this nation into what it is today.

Your success is not dependent on any idea other than the fact of your own hard work to which will lead to your success. There is no nobility in the United States. There is no special class of people that will always forever be at the top. The roles of society are interchangeable. The lowest of the low could very well be the next billionaire with the right idea. The man or woman who leads Wall Street could very well be broke the next day with nothing. The only thing that really matters is the idea of the American Dream and what it can offer.

Hard work and determination can lead you to great riches. There is no monopoly on any race, creed, or religion to this. You can be of any nationality and aspire to this. At least that is the idea that we sell. This idea is what brings people to our shores along with the freedoms we offer. It is a wonderful paradox of American society. We respect and admire those that make it. Yet we despise those that do not and place the fault on their inabilities in whatever fashion to make their own way.

Zhao Juan writes about the corruption of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*. His thesis claims:

The origins of the American Dream seem to have been rooted in the pioneering mentality of the 18th and 19th century immigrants, most of them came to America because of a new and better life, in particular, the opportunity to own one's land. But land rented out and so cities developed and massive variations arose in wealth, which meant that this "American Dream" changed from being a potential reality, into being a dream, like the name implies. Most of Miller's plays are directly or indirectly about the American Dream,

because ultimately this dream wasn't going to succeed as lots of people wished. Death of a Salesman, written in 1949, is a moving destruction of the whole myth. (Juan)

But somewhere along the course of our history there was disconnection in our values.

Zhoua Juan writes "To be hardworking, honest and have ambition were the ways of the American Dream. This leads to success, wealth and in due time-power. But this dream for everyone develops, and encourages greed, selfish behavior, pride and rivalry between one another." We applauded those who could make great wealth. We aspired to emulate them. However we could not possibly keep up with them. Juliet Schor writes in her book *The Overspent American* that the post-World War Two economy had Americans trying to keep up with their neighbors. People who lived in the same neighborhoods and made relatively the same wages Schor contends would often try to keep up with each other. However there was a shift in late seventies going into the eighties. The expansion of the media into our everyday lives has fundamentally changed this,

This aspect of our spending is not new--competitive acquisition has long been an American institution. At the turn of the century, the rich consumed conspicuously. In the early post-World War II decades, Americans spent to keep up with the Joneses, using their possessions to make the statement that they were not failing in their careers. But in recent decades, the culture of spending has changed and intensified. In the old days, our neighbors set the standard for what we had to have. They may have earned a little more, or a little less, but their incomes and ours were in the same ballpark. Their house down the block, worth roughly the same as ours, confirmed this. Today the neighbors are no longer the focus of comparison. How could they be? We may not even know them, much less which restaurants they patronize, where they vacation, and how much they spent for their living room couch. (Schor)

With the changes in society came vast changes in our spending. The 1980's saw a massive increase in spending with credit. Americans were flocking to malls and using their plastic to cover the goods they would be purchasing to keep up with what they saw on television.

Not surprisingly, as upscale competitive consumption intensified, family finances deteriorated. One indicator is the rise of consumer borrowing and credit card spending: through the 1990s, households have been taking on debt at record levels. And the largest increases have been not among low-income households, but among those earning \$50,000 to \$100,000 a year. (Sixty-three percent of these households are now in credit card debt.) Debt service as a percentage of disposable income now stands at 18 percent, even higher than during the early 1990s recession. Another indicator is the rise in worktime: average hours of work have risen about 10 percent in the last twenty-five years. To finance their lifestyles, millions of families also sent a second earner into the workplace, but this created a squeeze on household work and family time. Despite working all these hours, somewhere between a quarter and 30 percent of households live paycheck to paycheck. With the margin of error so thin, it is not surprising that personal bankruptcies are at historic levels. (Schor)

The American Dream was shifting and changing. What was once the idea of owning your own piece of land and being master of your domain had changed drastically. We were trying to compete with people that are vastly outside our income levels. Television would present shows like *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* which would be the start of the reality television craze that would overtake our nation's pop culture.

Today I can turn on the television and find any number of reality television shows to watch. There is *American Idol* and *Dancing with the Stars*. MTV has had the market for a long

time on reality television. *The Real World, Road Rules, Laguna Beach, The Hills, Sixteen and Pregnant*, etc. The list is vast just for this one network. I used to be a member of a gym that had flat screen televisions all over so you could watch television and work out. I actually watched an episode of *Laguna Beach* and thought it was a really bad drama. I was informed it was reality television and I was shocked. Even networks that would be deemed educational such as Discovery Channel, History Channel, and the Cooking Channels have gotten into this realm. We are a society that loves to watch others. The more wealth involved or the more bizarre a situation the higher ratings it gets. It does not matter who is exploited as long as money is being made.

With this new subclass of celebrity, the reality television star, we have created a new paradigm to the lore of the American Dream. Now it just wasn't if you worked hard enough you would get the American Dream. If you could parade yourself in some manner that would gain the attention of people you could try to ride that as far as it would take you. However this created a problem of loss of identity in the United States. Those that strove to reach this dream often tried to emulate those they felt had succeeded (Think of *Jon and Kate plus 8* and the notorious Octomom, Nadya Suleman). But our national landscaped had not changed for the better since the 1980's and 1990's. The U.S. poverty rate was essentially unchanged at 15 percent in 2012, as roughly 46.5 million people were stuck living at or below the poverty line according to the U.S. Census bureau. But 45 percent (141 Million) of Americans are living just above the poverty line. (Berman) Many of these are families with children who are just one emergency away from crossing over that line.

With these staggering numbers how is it possible to say that the American Dream is attainable? There is something broken in the system and who do we blame for it? Surprisingly

we blame those who are affected the most by it. We state that they are not trying hard enough. They don't work hard enough. They did something wrong in life so those choices are affecting them now. This double-consciousness starts to play out. It is because of this that we end up like Willy Loman. Willy has been a failure in life. But he feels even more so because of the fact that success in the American Dream is supposed to be available to anyone. (Juan)

Identity and the American Dream

Americans are defined by many different aspects. We are defined by our social class, our ethnic backgrounds, our status as American (i.e. recent immigrant, second generation and so on), and our religious affiliations. All of these play a role in who we are and how we view the world around us. However another facet in the American experience is of course the pursuit of the American Dream. This also shapes an identity that is often defined by the media conglomerates that control the streams of information that get to us.

John Steinbeck was quoted as saying "Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires." I think this best defines poverty and how we view it in the United States. With poverty rates climbing and the prospects of finding work that will help facilitate attaining the American Dream declining steadily one would think that there would be a push for change in our nation. On the contrary though; we see a population that wants to distance itself as far as possible from being considered poor. This distance often can be an illusion but it is enough for those putting on the charade. It is a hegemonic practice that to outsiders would be quite the paradox.

In the late 1960's President Johnson embarked on what was called "The Great Society" domestic initiatives. This created programs such as Medi-care, food stamps (now known as SNAP), public housing programs, and other measure to reduce poverty in this nation and to try to

create a more level playing field. Less than three decades later however a Republican congress restricted, changed, and cut down many of these programs. The battle cry was that the poor were living on the hard working. They were using the system for their benefit. The term “Welfare Queen” was used a great deal. In truth fraud and misuse was a small percentage in the entire system but Republicans upheld the idea of the lazy welfare mother who kept having children in order to benefit from the system.

Welfare reform in the 1990’s was aimed to help people leave public assistance and move towards self-reliance. Though at first successful over the years we have seen an increase in those who are at the poverty line and below it.

But while welfare reform may have initially reduced poverty, it left those still living at that income level worse off than they were before, reaching fewer of them and giving those it did reach less. And our poverty rates didn’t stay low. When they began to rise again, the program couldn’t offer them the support it used to. The recession has been a crystal clear, and incredibly painful, demonstration of this fact. (Covert)

The idea was to reduce government programs that were a drain on the taxpayers and use what support the government did offer for a little help and transition people to work. This model does work in boom times such as the economic growth of the late 90’s and even into the early 2000’s. However when the recession hit many people lost jobs and the system could not adequately support the need.

Steven Greenhouse of *The New York Times* writes:

Climbing above the poverty line has become more daunting in recent years, as the composition of the nation’s low-wage work force has been transformed by the Great Recession, shifting demographics and other factors. More than half of those who make \$9

or less an hour are 25 or older, while the proportion who are teenagers has declined to just 17 percent from 28 percent in 2000, after adjusting for inflation, according to Janelle Jones and John Schmitt of the Center for Economic Policy Research. (Greenhouse)

How is it possible for anyone to attain the American Dream when wages cannot meet the requirements for adequate shelter, food, and other costs? Today Americans are struggling to meet their most basic needs yet the media continually blasts them with messages of buy more, get more, and use any means necessary to do so. The message of saving and investment is out of reach for most of these people. Recently even McDonalds were criticized for a web tool for its employees about saving money. Most McDonald's employees by the websites calculator could not even afford basic necessities and the wages the website proposed for decent living were out of reach. You would have to work two or more jobs in order to do so.

To add on to the issues surrounding this you have a nation that has a great deal of sympathy but often little empathy or understanding of how to remedy it. Representative Paul Ryan (R-WI) has been trying to pass numerous budgets that cut more funding to these programs that are often life lines to many people across the nation. The people who make the decisions of funding are often those who embody the American Dream. They have made it or are the beneficiaries of those before them. They cannot understand why others are not as "hard working" as they are or their parents or grandparents who came before them. They do not understand that often luck as well as opportunity was the good fortune they have. Not everyone has that same good fortune. As the band Everclear sings in their song "I will buy you a new life": I hate those people who love to tell you, money is the root of all that kills, they have never been poor, they never had the joy of a welfare Christmas.

In her open letter to *Salon*, Karen Weese states it succinctly:

Most middle-income Americans have no idea how many of the people around them every day are living in poverty. We think of “the poor” as only elsewhere, in inner cities or far-off trailer parks, anywhere but here. We tell ourselves that the poor are simply slackers who don’t want to work ... or that the only folks earning wages you can’t live on are teenagers working summers at McDonald’s, who will of course go to college in the fall.

(Weese)

We are surrounded by the poor yet we do not even know it more often than not. People go to great lengths to put on a show to make sure no one realizes they are poor. They don’t want to be seen as failures. They don’t want to be labeled as lazy or using the system. Many times people will not even inquire about what benefits are offered to help them until they are at the end of their ropes. Our idea of the poor is very far from the truth.

Fifty-seven percent of the families below the poverty line in the U.S. are working families, working at jobs that just don’t pay enough. They’re not teenagers, they’re not lazy, and they’re not somewhere else. (After all, if every McDonald’s employee is a high school student, how can I buy a Big Mac at noon on a school day?) These folks are childcare workers, janitors, house cleaners, lawn-service workers, bus drivers, hospital aides, waitresses, nursing home employees, security guards, cafeteria workers and cashiers — and they’re the people who keep the rest of society humming along for everybody else. (Weese)

The idea of poverty in our nation is skewed to the point we can’t recognize what poverty is. We know what extreme poverty and homelessness is. But those who ride the line blend in well with society. Most of the kids when you first seem them do not look like they come from

homes that experience poverty or live in areas are unequal to places like Pacific Grove or Monterey. The New York Times did a piece on child poverty in New York City. Andrea Elliott, investigating wrote:

On the subway, Dasani can blend in with children who are better off. It is an ironic fact of being poor in a rich city that the donated garments Dasani and her siblings wear lend them the veneer of affluence, at least from a distance. Used purple Uggs and Patagonia fleeces cover thinning socks and fraying jeans. A Phil & Teds rain cover, fished from a garbage bin, protects Baby Lele's rickety stroller. (Elliott)

We are more worried about appearances than actually looking at the problem and trying to understand it. Poverty is not because of lack of desire to succeed. It is often lack of resources or opportunities. Yet we continually look down on those that we feel in our own estimation have not tried hard enough.

Unfortunately, the emotional toll of poverty is not limited to the food bank. Low-wage families often get dirty looks for using food stamps in the checkout line (which is especially galling if — like many food stamp recipients — you're employed and just need a small supplement to make ends meet). (Weese)

We also place a higher emphasis on careers that we deem more desirable. Those who work in professional fields often are treated with more respect than those who work entry level positions. I worked many years in call centers fielding customer service calls. The abuse you received at the hands of people at the other end of the phone would often surprise people if it was their first time working in a call center. We had many who quit because the daily abuse was too much to bear. The fact of the matter is that we were not real people to those on the other side of the phone. They could not see our faces they did not know our lives. We did not exist for them.

Think about it. Right now, you could easily name your doctor, your kid's teacher and a prominent local business owner. But, quick: Can you name the lady who cleans your office? The school janitor? Any nurse's aide in your grandmother's nursing home? Any waitress or cashier, anywhere?

If you held one of the latter jobs, what would that mean for your sense of yourself, of how much you were worth? Sure, we all have days where we feel unappreciated at work. But most white-collar workers get at least the occasional nice performance review, bonus, or thanks. (Weese)

As I stated before we live in a society that is a paradox. We respect those that have made it in our eyes. Often times those that have succeeded in capturing the American Dream did so at great cost to others. We want the best for our children and to give them every opportunity but we criticize those that do the same if they are not responsible by our standards. We want higher education but abhor the costs to pay. We are glad that people graduate from college but criticize the loans they took out to pay for it or the majors they choose that cannot help them pay the bills.

Home ownership is often the pinnacle of the American Dream for the lower class and middle class. This is reflected in *Death of a Salesman*:

LINDA: Forgive me, dear. I can't cry. I don't know what it is, I can't cry. I don't understand it. Why did you ever do that? Help me Willy, I can't cry. It seems to me that you're just on another trip. I keep expecting you. Willy, dear, I can't cry. Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. (A sob rises in her throat.)

We're free and clear. (Sobbing more fully, released.) We're free.

(Biff comes slowly toward her.) We're free... We're free... (Miller 256)

As Linda keeps repeating at the end, they're free. Freedom is entwined with the idea of owning your own space. It is reflected in our nation's history time and again. Manifest destiny saw a westward expansion by people who had nothing of their own where they currently lived. They hacked out of the wilderness their own homestead and became king of their respected castles. This is a critical part of the American Dream. This was a single measurable sign of success that everyone could see. At the beginning of the great recession foreclosures shot up by 81 percent in 2008 and increased by 225 percent since 2006, according to RealtyTrac, a real estate organization specializing in home foreclosures and bank repossessions. In all, 3.1 million households submitted foreclosure filings in 2008, or one in every 54 households. Of these, 861,664 were foreclosed upon during the year. (Eley)

Regardless of the reasons that the great recession happened a great deal of blame was placed on people who were foreclosed on. It was not uncommon to hear such sentiments as "they should have known better", "if they didn't have the money why did they buy a house", and "it is what they deserve. Such irresponsibility should be punished." Each of these statements I have personally heard. Most were about people none of those who were criticizing knew or would every come into contact with.

They did not understand the reasons behind the motivations of others nor do they have the sympathy or empathy to try to understand. But in the end often it was the desire to own a piece of the American Dream that drove people to take on obligations they could not afford. They wanted to not be seen as failures but seen as successful. If they were seen as successful they would be respected. However it often ends up with people suffering. The Federal Reserve

said the median net worth of families plunged by 39 percent in just three years, from \$126,400 in 2007 to \$77,300 in 2010. That puts middle class Americans roughly on par with where they were in 1992.

Conclusion

This is the paradox of Identity and the American Dream. We live our lives trying to attain it even though it is always somehow just out of reach. People struggle day to day working in jobs that barely pay. This struggle is not just for minimally educated workers but also for the college educated.

Today's low-wage workers are also more educated, with 41 percent having at least some college, up from 29 percent in 2000. "Minimum-wage and low-wage workers are older and more educated than 10 or 20 years ago, yet they're making wages below where they were 10 or 20 years ago after inflation," said Mr. Schmitt, senior economist at the research center. "If you look back several decades, workers near the minimum wage were more likely to be teenagers — that's the stereotype people had. It's definitely not accurate anymore." (Greenhouse)

Yet Americans still struggle and fight to achieve that dream. It has been sewn into the fabric of the American Identity. One in which many people long to conform with. Yet at the end of the day they still are left with the same unanswered questions that Willy Loman had. How to achieve it? Are we too calling out to Ben?

Willy, hanging on to his words: Oh, Ben, that's good to hear! Because sometimes I'm afraid that I'm not teaching the right kind of – Ben, how should I teach them?

Ben, giving great weight to each word, and with certain vivacious audacity: William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich! (Miller 189)

Until we address the root causes of the poverty and lack of opportunities in our nation we will forever be caught in the cycle that Willy Loman was caught in. We need to separate the idea that if we work hard in due time we will be rewarded. As a society we must come together to realize that in order for our nation to grow and succeed we must realize the least among us is a reflection of our nation as a whole. When so many people struggle to put food on the table or to make a rent payment how can we say with pride that anyone can make it in America? We are lying to ourselves if we keep on this course of action.

Willy Loman is the every man of America. He was not so much a cautionary tale of one man but of a society. One that celebrates the wealth and ingenuity of those that successfully capture the American Dream yet scolds those that cannot reach to the incredible heights to pull themselves up to be lauded. Quite like Orff's "O Fortuna", man is at the fate of destiny. This is something that Willy Loman never fully grasps. He just thinks that there is some magic secret that can get him to that place.

He keeps climbing higher and higher like Daedalus and Icarus yet he will suffer the fate of Icarus. By never understanding that he does not have to keep reaching so high that the American Dream can be what you make of it he falls to the fallacy that is the dream. This is what makes Willy Loman a tragic figure in American drama. He continually reaches for the stars in a vain attempt to grab glory and riches for himself as well as his family and ends up dying deluded, broken. The only question is will we as Americans share the same fate as Willy Loman or will we reach those dizzying heights in which the fall is often fatal.

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Final Synthesis Essay

When I first decided to return to school to earn my bachelor's degree I was in a different place than most students. I was a re-entry student over the age of thirty. I was married with two young sons. I knew that I wanted to be done with school in four years total time because I had another three years of law school to do on top of it. I knew that I wanted to transfer to California State University Monterey Bay from my community college. I knew that Human Communication was the major I wanted to declare. I had a passion for what the Human Communication department represented and I hoped to get all I could from it.

My capstone's theme is the search for identity. When we first discussed this I knew that I wanted to talk about poverty in the United States. There are so many viewpoints we see played out in the media today about poverty in the United States. Often we see images of inner cities and other urban environments that are home to mostly minorities. However poverty affects more than just minorities in the United States. The fact of poverty in the United States is largely families with children. Poverty does not discriminate on the color of a person's skin. However we are lead to believe because all we see are minorities in the media as poor in inner cities that is where poverty is.

I also wanted to explore why we treat poverty the way we do. In the United States no one wants to be seen as poor. People often forgo getting the aid that they need from social services or other organizations because they don't want to be looked down upon by society. The idea of the American Dream comes into play here. We are taught from a very young age that as long as we work hard we will succeed. But it is harder to measure that success when there is no one success for all people.

Death of a Salesman to me is about the American identity. It is about the everyday lives of people trying to make it but ultimately failing. The worst part about this is the self-blame and loathing that we have for ourselves. If we cannot make it big and successful as the American Dream dictates then there is a moral failing in us. We see the poor as morally bankrupt because of their status and so if we are poor we too must have something wrong with us. But in truth poverty is not from lack of desire to succeed or hard work but lack of access to opportunities to better your life.

I wanted to explore the interconnectedness of the American Dream and poverty in the United States. *Death of a Salesman* was the perfect vehicle to connect the two. Arthur Miller had gotten the inspiration for the play from an old family friend he had not seen in many years. Willy Loman is the every person of the United States. We see him and can see ourselves in him. It is that fear of failure that makes us wonder what the American Dream is all about.

When I started the research on connecting *Death of Salesman* with poverty and the American Dream I had no idea how many others have written on it. There were several pieces of information I did not use that were exploring the same issues that I was. I didn't expect it to be as easy as it came to be. I thought I would be looking through esoteric texts and journals to find any linking information. However with the great recession of 2008 that we are still experiencing the after effects of there are many parallels to be drawn.

When we think of the identity and the poor they largely do not have one. They are made invisible to us by the power of the media showcasing only minorities as living in poverty and we also see the effects of being viewed as poor. Living in poverty shapes people to hide the truth and in turn we get an inaccurate picture of poverty in the United States. This raises critical

questions of hegemony and the affect it has on the poor. As we see this hegemony played out people question and judge those that in all truth need our help.

I have stated in my essay that to determine how great of a nation we are we must see how the least among us lives and is treated. We certainly have a very long way to go but in order to make this possible we must accept the reality that poverty affects more people in the United States than we'd like to believe. I think of all the things I have taken away from my experience in the Human Communication major is that in order to make right what is wrong we must recognize it and bear witness to it.

By not recognizing and addressing the causes of poverty in the United States and acknowledging that it affects only a small demographic we are not giving justice to those affected by it. We must bear witness to the struggle of Americans in their everyday lives. We must let them know that we do not blame them for this struggle and give them the tools to help them overcome it. This to me is the path of true justice that I have come to learn about in the spirit of the Human Communication major.

By bringing light to these practices and the situation of many Americans I hope to challenge the notions that we have come to accept as the status quo. Poverty is not a product of moral failing. The poor in the United States are not just inner city minorities. Children are now becoming the biggest faces of poverty. By exposing and examining these facts we can make better policy decisions at all levels of government. We can demand that our representatives that we elected to government can better take care of the needs of the people. We can fight for a better tomorrow for all people.

I take great pride in my capstone project. I take even more pride to be graduating from California State University Monterey Bay as a Human Communication major. I believe it has

given me the tools to help me succeed as I move on to law school. I hope to continue to my fight against poverty in the United States by using my law degree to help those that are not empowered. To give them a voice in a nation that largely wants to pretend they do not exist. I want to carry forward the idea of true justice and equality. This is what I've taken away from my experience in capstone and at California State University Monterey Bay.

Annotated Bibliography

Berman, Jillian. *Millions Living Above The Poverty Line Also Struggle To Get By*. New York City, 17 September 2013. Web Article.

Jillian Berman explores the problem of poverty in the United States as it relates to many millions of Americans who live just above the poverty line. As the media often skews the perception of the poor and poverty it is hard to tell who is riding the line and who is under it. More importantly it shows that just because you are barely above the number that Federal government says is the poverty line does not mean you are doing well at all. It helps to change the perceptions of what poverty is and who it affects.

Covert, Bryce. "Clinton Touts Welfare Reform. Here's How It Failed." *The Nation* 6 September 2012. Web.

This article talks about the failure of the Clinton-era welfare reform. Though initially it reduced the welfare rolls considerably over the long run poverty has increased and not decreased. Moreover because of the drastic cuts to welfare programs when the great recession occurred in 2008 the need for these services rose considerably yet were unable to meet those needs. It showcases that even today many in government still want to reduce the already fragile social welfare network in place in our nation.

DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Barnes and Nobles Books, 1903. book.

DuBois book talks in great length about African Americans in the United States and of the "Double Consciousness Theory." Though in the context he writes about it only applies to African Americans we can take the theory itself and apply it to many different groups and social strata. I have used it to explain the hegemonic practices of those living in poverty in the United States.

Eley, Tim. *World Socialist Web Site*. 17 January 2009. Web. 14 April 2014.

This article gave me statistics on foreclosures and repossession of homes before and during the great recession.

Elliott, Andrea. "Invisible Child." *New York Times* 10 December 2013. Web .

Though I only used a small part of this article it had a lot of great information about poor and homeless families living in New York City. As with most of the country New York city cut its services to the poor and homeless even though that is illegal per the City's Charter and the State of New York's Constitution. This article follows the lives of one family and one particular little girl in the family.

Greenhouse, Steven. "Low-Wage Workers Are Finding It Harder To Escape Poverty." *The New York Times* 16 March 2014. Web.

The common misconception of the poor in the United States is that they are lazy and want to take advantage of the system. This article exposes that myth by showing that because the cost of living has greatly outpaced the minimum wage people cannot afford even the most basic necessities of food and shelter. Often there is a great struggle between medical needs, shelter needs, and nutritional needs. The issue is not that people are lazy or taking advantage of the system but that people just are not paid enough despite all the work they do.

Juan, Zhao. "Corruption of the "American Dream" in *Death of a Salesman*: A Thematic Analysis of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*." *Cross-Cultural Communication* (2010): 122-126. PDF.

This was an excellent essay on *Death of a Salesman*. It covered many different aspects of the play and American life but the section about the corruption of the American Dream was

one that worked well with my thesis. Zhao Juan did an excellent job of describing the corruption as portrayed in the play and I was able to connect it succinctly to my research.

Lahr, John. *Walking with Arthur Miller*. New York, 1 March 2012. Web Page.

Miller, Arthur. *Collected Plays 1944-1961*. New York City: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2006. Book.

This is the centerpiece of my capstone. The play itself is a wonderful piece of American drama and an important look at how we view success in America. I was first introduced to this play while in community college and it has haunted me ever since. Though the play was published in 1948 its themes are still relevant today. When Willy frantically implores the hallucination of his older brother Ben to share with him the secret of his success we see the same presented to us every day. There is no one secret or way to success. What works for one does not work for another.

Reeves, Charles H. *The Aristotelian Concept of The Tragic Hero*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1952. Book.

There has been a large debate in the literary world about the tragic hero. As it is defined by Aristotle and held by the British that a tragic hero must be noble or have a noble background. Arthur Miller fought against that with Willy Loman. I believe that there is a solid foundation with what Aristotle had stated that goes exceptionally well with Arthur Miller's play. This gives us a solid background to the idea of what the tragic hero is.

Ribkoff, Fred. "Shame, Guilt, Empathy, and the Search for Identity in Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman*." *Modern Drama* Spring 2000: 48. PDF.

This journal article fit well with the idea of how self-hate, shame, and guilt play a huge part in how poverty is viewed and often hidden from view. The author explores Willy Loman as he deals with his own inadequacies and that of his sons. He sees that he has made nothing of

value in his life as far as what success is deemed and it ultimately leads to his death. However after he dies we see the divergence of his two sons. His oldest son Biff realizes that the American Dream is a lie and that in order to be happy you have to be content with what you are doing. Happy on the other hand and quite ironically falls into the same trap that Willy did and vows to continue to fight on in his father's name. However of the two, Happy, is the one that represents most Americans.

Schor, Juliet B. *The Overspent American*. New York City, 1998. Web Site.

This article discusses the change in the American lifestyle that has led to the current expectations of the American Dream and success. After the Second World War all segments of society grew in the following thirty years of prosperity. When people were looking to measure success they looked at their neighbors who had similar incomes and lifestyles. It was a game of "keeping up with the Jones's" but one that was deemed as healthy. However after the 1970's that changed dramatically with the media. Now people were using credit and spending vastly outside their means to keep up with those that were not in the same income bracket. The measure of success had gotten so far out of reach that it would bankrupt people for trying to achieve it.

Weese, Karen. "'Hi, I'm Right Here': An open letter to Paul Ryan about poverty and empathy."

Salon 10 March 2014. Web.

The Republican led House of Representatives have been trying to pass a budget that firmly cuts social services in order to save money. However the face of poverty is not what we've been led to believe. We have great respect and admiration for those that have succeeded. Doctors, lawyers, business leaders are all people we can name off the top of our heads. But when it comes to those that serve us in the fast food industry, janitorial staff at our jobs, and the people who take care of our children. We view them as nameless and faceless so they do not

exist to us. The issue of poverty remains one that Americans care about but want to do little to alleviate because it does not affect anyone they know. But in truth the issue does affect more people than they do know only that these people are either largely invisible to them as many of the low paid workers in our economy or are friends and family members who hid it from us.

HCOM 475: Senior Capstone Project Proposal

1. Ryan Thomason Concentration: Pre-Law
2. The concept of the “American Dream” and how it is not attainable. I will be using *Death of a Salesman* with Willy Loman with his obsession concerning his brother Ben’s rise to wealth. Much focus has been centered on the idea that if you work hard you will succeed. This is the main tenet of the “American Dream”. However we have seen throughout our history that only few succeed to achieve the meritocratic idea of the “American Dream”. This usually happens by exploiting others or the environment to do so. My concept itself will be framed as “Why is the American Dream unattainable and why do we punish ourselves for failure?” This focus is important to me because as we move forward we hold on to ideas that vastly outdated. We have this idea that people should pull themselves up by their own boot straps. However the middle class and lower class of this nation have suffered the most in the past six years of the financial recession we have experienced. Since the 1980’s only the very wealthy have increased their wealth while the rest of the nation has seen only stagnation of their wealth if not a decrease.
3. In the study of self and society I believe that *Death of a Salesman* presents a unique picture of the Double Consciousness theory by W.E.B. DuBois in how Americans view poverty, themselves, and attaining the American Dream. The School of New Criticism posits that "the complexity of literature lies in its use irony and paradox." I believe that Arthur Miller did use irony and paradox to examine an issue alive in his day and still alive in our own.
4. The purpose of my capstone is to enlighten on a very common issue in the United States. The idea that wealth and attaining it has something to do with the tenets of the American Dream. We as a collective society are taught to believe that with hard work and dedication you can succeed. However this is a blind format. Though for some this could lead to success. However for many it leads nowhere. Aside from these issues what is a measure of success? Each person is different and may define success in very different terms. The society as a whole believes success can be measured in career and in monetary value. However for some it may be surrounded by friends and family. For others it is in service to others. There is no one defining key to success.
5. In Search of Willy Loman and the American Dream
6. My project will be exploring the ideas of the double consciousness as seen through Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Willy is constantly searching for the idea of success as he sees his brother Ben and applying it to his own life and that of his son’s. In this we see a reflection of many people in the United States struggling with the same issues as

Willy Loman. This idea is taught as a collective societal value in which is further reinforced by the media.

7. My expectations for the project are to show a clear link between how societal messages influence how those of the middle and lower class view themselves in the spectrum of the American experience. I hope to show how the media uses influence, wealth, and fame to showcase a “keeping up with the Jones” mentality that forever keeps people from their true potential. I hope to show that by hamstringing people with the ideas of how to attain the American Dream it further keeps them from it.

8. I plan to use *Death of a Salesman* as a source as well as search for various peer reviewed articles as well as news and/or journal articles. My primary source will be *Death of a Salesman*.

9. I will need to do research at the CSUMB library as well as use the internet.

10. Project Title and Abstract or Summary to be completed by 03/12/14
1st Draft and all initial research completed by 03/26/14
2nd Draft and all research completed by 04/16/14
All work completed by 05/09/14