MAGNA

Literary Theory

Dreams vs. Reality: A Psychoanalysis of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract

This scholarly exploration examines the nuanced portrayal of the American Dream in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, employing a comprehensive analysis rooted in Freud's psychoanalytic theories. The research investigates the characters of Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman, unraveling their intricate use of defense mechanisms, including denial and repression, as psychological shields against the realities inherent in their pursuit of the American Dream. Delving into Gatsby's world, the study elucidates the symbolism of the green light as a representation of unattainable aspirations. Concurrently, it examines Loman's illusions of success, exploring his contradictions and the societal influences that shape his distorted perception. The comparative analysis draws parallels between the characters, offering insights into the complexities of their quests. The research contextualizes these literary works within the societal backdrop, emphasizing the broader implications of the American Dream on individuals, particularly in the distraction it provides from socioeconomic disparities. The study concludes with a thought-provoking reflection on the psychological toll incurred by the relentless pursuit of distorted ideals, urging scholars and readers to critically examine societal expectations and values that perpetuate these illusions. This research is expected to contribute to the academic discourse by offering a nuanced psychoanalytic perspective on two seminal works of American literature, enriching the understanding of the psychological complexities involved in the elusive American Dream.

Introduction

Examining the multifaceted portrayal of the American Dream in two works of American literature, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, serves as a reminder for readers of the troubles associated with working in the mid-twentieth century. Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman's stories expose the perils and pitfalls inherent in pursuing the American Dream. Deeply ingrained in the ethos of the United States, the American Dream promises prosperity, upward mobility, and the pursuit of happiness irrespective of social standing. Since its rise in popularity during the Industrial Revolution, the concept of the American Dream has promised success to all, regardless of social stature and available resources.[1] This dream is often unattainable yet irresistible, leaving many, including Gatsby and Loman, eager to buy into illusions as protection from their failures in achieving it.

Gatsby and Loman employ theories of the unconscious, posited by the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, in the face of the harsh realities associated with their desperate pursuit of the American dream. To protect their self-esteem, people unconsciously repress feelings of failure and lack of control.[2] According to Sigmund Freud, the unconscious mind includes repressed feelings, hidden memories, habits, desires, and reactions. Painful, embarrassing, shameful, and distressing memories and emotions are also stored in the unconscious. Psychologically, the unconscious can create a state of denial – a distortion of negative experiences so complete that it can block out reality altogether.[3] Denial, when coupled with repression – a companion defense that involves inhibiting the emotional responses that result from conflict – may give the appearance of a successful psychological shelter from reality. However, it distracts a person from real anxieties rather than making them disappear. Repression can also eliminate the distinction between what one believes one should feel and what one actually feels. As an unconscious defense mechanism, repression enables people to maintain self-esteem and control in the face of events beyond their influence, enabling the denial of threatening situations of reality.[4] Ultimately, using these defense mechanisms highlights the psychological

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[1] Vanneman, Reeve, and Lynn Weber Cannon. "The American Dream." *The American Perception of Class*, 257–82. Temple University Press, 1987. JSTOR.
[2] Rand, Nicholas, and Maria Torok. "Questions to Freudian Psychoanalysis: Dream Interpretation, Reality, Fantasy." *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (1993): 567–94. JSTOR.
[3] Taylor, S.E., Collins, R.L., Skokan, L.A., & Aspinwall, L.G. 1989. "Maintaining positive illusions in the face of negative information: Getting the facts without letting them get to you." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 8: 114-129. PDF.
[4] Beeley, Arthur L. "Freud and Psychoanalysis." *Social Service Review* 5, no. 1 (1931): 10–27. JSTOR.

toll of the quest for the American Dream and the lengths individuals go to shield themselves from its harsh truths.

Freud's theory of repression offers a compelling framework to understand why individuals cling to the illusion of the American Dream, which does not always align with reality. In its establishment and convoluted history, the American Dream has emerged as a complex narrative that influences the perceptions and aspirations of millions of individuals, particularly those in the proletariat class.[5] As millions of immigrants arrived on the shores of America in the hope of better lives, they were convinced of the (false) openness and classlessness of the country. A powerful narrative for millions of immigrants joining the working class, the American Dream served to distract the working class from the struggles they faced as disadvantaged members of society, further inspiring people to endure dangerous working conditions and tolerate inequality, hoping their children would not have to go through similar experiences. Gatsby and Loman's use of defense mechanisms looks different in their respective circumstances, but their responses are both triggered by illusions of the American Dream.

The Great Gatsby

Discussion of the American Dream: The Tragedies of Gatsby's American Dream

In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald delves into the intricacies between illusion and reality, moral decay in pursuit of wealth, and the societal impact of the unabated quest for the American Dream. In the opulent world of West Egg, Jay Gatsby is an enigmatic figure, epitomizing the luxuries of the Roaring Twenties. Gatsby's character is shaped by a passionate pursuit of the American Dream; his extravagant parties, luxurious mansion, and self-made wealth project an outward image of success that misrepresents his underlying loneliness.[6] While he seemingly possesses everything, Gatsby remains unsatisfied. Gatsby struggles to distinguish between reality and illusion, shielded by the lavish parties he throws that mask his true feelings.[7] His inability to differentiate between reality and illusion stems from his pursuit of material wealth, fueled by illicit activities during the prohibition era that are primarily kept a mystery. Gatsby's illusions are intricately tied to his love for Daisy Buchanan, a woman he courted before being drafted in

[5] Vanneman and Cannon. "The American Dream." *The American Perception of Class*.
[6] Bewley, "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America." *The Sewanee Review* 62, no. 2 (1954): 223–46. JSTOR.
[7] Finkelstein, David H. "On the Distinction between Conscious and Unconscious States of Mind." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1999): 79–100. JSTOR.

World War I. Across the bay from his extravagant mansion, Gatsby can see a green light attached to Daisy Buchanan's dock. Since their teenage romance, Daisy has wedded Tom Buchanan and effectively left Gatsby in her past. The green light hanging from her dock becomes an omnipresent symbol of what once was for Gatsby. As the book's narrator, Nick Carraway, observes,

> [H]e stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward – and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been at the end of a dock.[8]

The "single green light," a powerful symbol of unattainable dreams, becomes a metaphorical beacon of hope and aspiration for Gatsby. It represents his persistent quest for an idealized version of the American Dream, where he can return to happier times with Daisy.[9] Its "minute and far away" description symbolizes its elusive and distant nature, becoming a haunting reminder of the unreachable dream perpetuating his internal conflicts. The stretching out of his arms reflects his yearning for what he cannot have, encapsulating his relentless pursuit of a dream that seems just beyond his grasp but is, in reality, forever out of reach.[10] Despite his wealth and luxury, Gatsby's ultimate goal – winning back Daisy's love and realizing the American Dream – is depicted as remote and unattainable. The green light becomes a recurring symbol that highlights the disparity between Gatsby's dreams and the harsh realities of the world he inhabits.

Studying Gatbsy's background and the mysteries surrounding him reveals the bleakness of the American Dream. Gatsby, a young man with no family, relentlessly pursues wealth and influence by moving to West Egg to win over Daisy, whom he sees as the embodiment of the American Dream. Gatsby believes that accumulating wealth and achieving a high social status will make him more desirable to Daisy and enable him to fit into the elite society to which she belongs. This reflects the notion that material prosperity leads to happiness and popularity. Gatsby's failure to win Daisy despite having obtained that wealth suggests that the American Dream, as portrayed through Gatsby's aspirations, can remain hollow and elusive. Furthermore, Gatsby's

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[8] Fitzgerald, F. S. 1999. *The Great Gatsby* (US import ed.). Scribner., 55.
[9] Bewley, "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America."
[10] Samuels, Charles Thomas. "The Greatness of 'Gatsby.'" *The Massachusetts Review* 7, no. 4 (1966): 783–94. JSTOR.

wealth is built on illegal activities during the prohibition era, highlighting the moral compromises often associated with the pursuit of success. Despite his efforts, Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy ultimately ends in his death as George Wilson, believing Gatsby is responsible for the death of his wife Myrtle Wilson, shoots Gatsby in his backyard. In reality, it was Daisy, driving Gatsby's car, who struck Myrtle and killed her. The tragic demise of Gatsby, caused by his aspirations of winning over Daisy, underscores the disillusionment and tragedy that can accompany the relentless pursuit of the American Dream.

Without any known past, Gatsby can reinvent himself and fabricate a past in which he has a rich family history and a legacy of greatness. Gatsby exclaims, "I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition."[11] Gatsby creates an entirely new sense of self in his fabricated background, shielding himself from reality. Though he shares details of his past and family, Gatsby's background is shrouded in mystery and speculation. Gatsby's creation of a facade regarding his background is a crucial aspect of his attempts to achieve the American Dream.[12] By fabricating a glamorous persona and crafting an elaborate narrative about his past, Gatsby seeks to present himself as someone who epitomizes the ideals of success and wealth associated with the American Dream. Creating a facade allows Gatsby to reinvent himself and escape the limitations of his humble beginnings, as one's background and social status play a significant role in the society Gatsby wishes to join. He believes that by projecting an image of affluence and sophistication, he can fabricate a lifestyle associated with the American Dream. Gatsby's mysterious wealth and the extravagant parties he hosts contribute to the illusion of his success, attracting attention and admiration from others. The facade serves as a means for Gatsby to gain entry into the elite circles of New York society, mainly to find Daisy, but he remains an outsider. His tragic love story with Daisy and subsequent disillusionment serves as a commentary on the broken nature of the American Dream, emphasizing that prosperity does not equate to happiness.

Psychoanalysis: Gatsby's Repressed Realities and the Valley of Ashes

Gatsby's attempt to recreate the past and win back Daisy aligns with Freud's concept of the unconscious defense mechanism, where one engages in behaviors to protect one's self-esteem in the face of unhappy

[11] Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 127.
[12] Bewley, "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America."

realities. Freud's concept of repression, specifically the distortion of negative experiences to block out the memory of something altogether, is evident in Gatsby's attempt to recreate a romanticized past with Daisy. The illusion of control over time and his emotions becomes a defense mechanism for Gatsby, shielding him from the painful reality that Daisy is not the idealized figure he imagines, and they can no longer be together.[13] Nick Carraway, the novel's narrator, cautiously advises Jay Gatsby against expecting too much from Daisy Buchanan, emphasizing the impossibility of reliving the past. Gatsby's assertive response reflects his desperate refusal to accept the limitations of reality. "'I wouldn't ask too much of her,' I ventured. 'You can't repeat the past.' 'Can't repeat the past?' he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!' He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand."[14] Gatsby's refusal to accept the restraints of time aligns with his broader pursuit of the elusive American Dream.

Gatsby's reinvention of himself after returning from the war is another embodiment of Freudian notions. The unconscious need to protect his self-esteem and maintain control over the narrative of his life compels Gatsby to create a persona that aligns with his aspirational vision of the American Dream.[15] However, this illusion of control ultimately crumbles, as Gatsby cannot repeat the past, and his attempt to do so leads to his demise. Gatsby dies alone, with few people attending his funeral. He is abandoned by those who attend his lavish parties every weekend, emphasizing the loneliness that accompanies a life built on illusions. Gatsby's death is a consequence of his illusions conflicting with the harsh realities of the world he inhabits. Despite Gatsby's intense and genuine feelings for Daisy, she ultimately betrays him. When faced with the choice between Gatsby and Tom, Daisy opts for the safety and social standing Tom can give her. This betrayal shatters Gatsby's fantasy of a future with Daisy. Her betrayal also highlights the fleeting nature of the American Dream as Gatsby is seemingly close to winning Daisy back, but ultimately, she does not choose him. Gatsby's perception of Daisy as an idealized figure worthy of idolization aligns with Freud's concept of the individual pushing emotions into the unconscious to eliminate the discrepancy between what one believes one should feel and what one actually feels. Gatsby's emotional investment in Daisy becomes a mask

[13] Bargh and Morsella. "The Unconscious Mind."
[14] Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 204.
[15] Welsh, Talia. "The Retentional and the Repressed: Does Freud's Concept of the Unconscious Threaten Husserlian Phenomenology?" *Human Studies* 25, no. 2 (2002): 165–83.

for the reality that she is not the perfect embodiment of his dreams and is, in fact, a very flawed person.

The Valley of Ashes, a landfill for industrial waste separating West Egg from Manhattan, unveils another layer of Freudian symbolism.[16] The desolation and decay of the Valley of Ashes represent a collective repression of societal issues and the lack of social mobility despite the promises of the American Dream. The unconscious denial of the harsh socioeconomic realities of the 1920s becomes a defense mechanism for the characters in the novel, shielding them from the uncomfortable truths associated with the pursuit of the American Dream.[17] The ashes symbolize the remnants of shattered dreams, unfulfilled desires, and the psychological and moral decay of individuals caught in pursuing material success. In Nick's words: "A valley of ashes – a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air."[18] The imagery of grotesque gardens, houses, and chimneys emerging from the ashes suggests a distorted and corrupted representation of the unconscious.[19] The "transcendent effort" indicates an attempt to rise above the ashes, surpassing the limitations of twentieth-century society. However, the men in the valley are also described as "already crumbling," emphasizing the futility of this effort. Freud's theory asserts that the filling of the unconscious mind with repressed desires and unresolved conflicts can lead to psychological decline and dysfunction. With its crumbling men and distorted forms, the Valley of Ashes reflects a society's collective unconscious grappling with the consequences of unfulfilled and unattainable dreams. The ashes can be interpreted as the repressed desires and aspirations of individuals who, unable to achieve their dreams, experience a form of denial and debilitating mental states. The valley becomes a repository for the discarded remnants of unfulfilled wishes, symbolizing the consequences of believing in the American Dream or clinging to its ideology.

Dr. T.J. Eckleburg's billboard in the Valley of Ashes stands as a powerful symbol of the illusion inherent in the American Dream, serving as a visual metaphor for the distorted promises and disillusionment faced by many characters in *The Great Gatsby*. The billboard, originally intended

[16] Samuels, "The Greatness of 'Gatsby.'"
[17] Bewley, "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America."
[18] Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 57.
[19] Samuels, "The Greatness of 'Gatsby."

as an advertisement for optical services, features the faded and detached eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg. As Fitzgerald vividly describes,

> Above the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic – their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently some wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away.[20]

Once associated with vision and clarity, these eyes become a haunting representation of the obscured dreams within the narrative. This description enhances the symbolism of the advertisement by portraying the eyes as an omnipresent and judgmental force, detached from human emotion or expression and serving as a silent commentary on the decay of this dream. The American Dream, as seen through Dr. T.J. Eckleburg, is no longer a symbol of clarity but a reminder of the hollowness of material success. Moreover, the deterioration of the billboard emphasizes the fleeting nature of the American Dream. The illusion of prosperity, embodied by Gatsby's lavish parties and extravagant lifestyle, is similar to the fading eyes on the billboard. Like the advertisement, the dream loses its initial clarity and purpose, becoming a distorted vision that fails to deliver the fulfillment and happiness promised. The faded and unyielding eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg scrutinize the valley, silently witnessing the consequences of unrestrained ambition. As characters engage in questionable and often illicit activities to achieve their dreams, the eyes on the billboard become symbolic witnesses to the moral compromises made in the pursuit of wealth and success. The faded eyes observe Gatsby's illicit wealth accumulation during Prohibition, Tom Buchanan's extramarital relationship, and Daisy's careless actions. In this way, Dr. T.J. Eckleburg's advertisement encapsulates the disillusionment and moral decay underlying the quest for the elusive American Dream.

Death of a Salesman

Discussion of the American Dream: Willy Loman's Dreams and Contradictions

In Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, an unsuccessful traveling salesman, Willy Loman, dreams of success and being well-liked. These

[20] Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 58.

dreams mask the harsh realities of his life – that Willy is neither well-known nor successful. Influenced by the idealized image of successful salesman Dave Singleman, Willy perpetuates the illusion that being well-liked equals success. Willy's emotional state and the events leading to his downfall reveal the broader implications of the American Dream on the working-class mentality.[21] His inability to distinguish between reality and fantasy becomes a central theme, manifested in encouraging his sons, Biff and Happy, to prioritize popularity over academic success and hard work. His outlook on success and how to become well-liked leads to his downfall and influences his children by encouraging them to buy into his fantasies and believe that they, too, are better off than they really are. Pieces of reality show through in Willy's many contradictions revolving around his self-perception and societal role. They expose his deep insecurities and skewed sense of self-worth. Willy yells, "Biff is a lazy bum!" but on the very next page, he says, "There's one thing about Biff - he's not lazy."[22] By simultaneously celebrating and dismissing Biff's character, Willy reveals his inability to confront the reality that contradicts his deeply ingrained sense of the American Dream and his struggle to validate his sons' worth and, by extension, his own worth as their father.[23] This contradiction underlines Willy's escalating identity crisis while reflecting his desperate attempt to reconcile his idealized version of himself with reality.

Willy's contradictions also highlight his persistent denial of reality, projecting an illusion of success and happiness while grappling with the harsh truths of his life.[24] Willy's many contradictory statements also represent his need for external affirmation to conceal his feelings of inadequacy and failure. In comparing himself to his friend, Willy tells his children, "Charley is not - liked. He's liked, but he's not - well-liked."[25] Shortly after, he says to his wife, "You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me," and, "One thing about Charley. He's a man of few words, and they respect him."[26] Emphasizing his struggle to distinguish between reality and illusion, this contradiction sheds light on the American Dream's profound impact on Willy's thoughts of self. He

[21] Benziman, Galia. "Success, Law, and the Law of Success: Reevaluating 'Death of a Salesman's' Treatment of the American Dream." South Atlantic Review 70, no. 2 (2005): 20–40. JSTOR.
[22] Miller, A. 1981. Death of a Salesman: Certain private conversations in two acts and a requiem. Penguin Books., 21
[23] Martin, Robert A. "The Nature of Tragedy in Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Salesman.'" South Atlantic Review 61, no. 4 (1996): 97–106. JSTOR.
[24] Benziman, "Success, Law, and the Law of Success: Reevaluating 'Death of a Salesman's' Treatment of the American Dream."
[25] Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, 32
[26] Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, 38,39

feels jealousy toward Uncle Charley for being more popular than himself but also uses Uncle Charley as an example of someone he believes he is better than. His belief that being well-liked is the key to success, as demonstrated by his words, "Be liked and you will never want," exemplifies the contradictions inherent in the American Dream itself.[27] Willy's skewed sense of the American Dream greatly emphasizes social status and popularity, often forgetting that success also takes hard work. His contradictions reflect the internal conflict between the illusions he desperately clings to and the reality that eludes him. As the play progresses, Willy's contradictions become more pronounced, signaling the unraveling of his mental state caused by his continued need for validation. His contradictions become a poignant commentary on the consequences of living in a self-constructed world of illusions. They ultimately contribute to his tragic ending, rooted in his lack of understanding of what it takes to be successful and happy. Willy's contradictions serve as a cautionary tale of the inability to reconcile the discordance between dreams and reality, underscoring the internal conflicts that drive Willy to his end.

Additionally, the society in which Willy lives contributes to his outlook on success and his inability to reconcile with the harsh realities surrounding him. Willy epitomizes the embodiment of the American Dream gone awry. His tragic narrative unfolds against the backdrop of a society where the American Dream is both an aspiration for success and a pervasive force shaping perceptions and attitudes. Reeve Vanneman and Lynn Weber Cannon's analysis in "The American Perception of Class" sheds light on how the American Dream serves as an aspiration for success and a means to distract the working class from extreme socioeconomic disparities.

> The American Dream seemed the perfect immunization against the dangers of a militant class consciousness. It promised a shared vision to all Americans—workers and bosses, the poor and the rich. In an open America, class struggle would be unnecessary. Discontent with one's position would inspire workers to change their positions within the system rather than trying to change the system itself.[28]

For the millions of Americans in the working class, the American Dream becomes a compelling narrative that assures them they can achieve

[27] Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, 35.
[28] Vanneman and Cannon. "The American Dream." In The American Perception of Class.

success, financial freedom, and happiness. Instead of inciting rebellion against an ostensibly flawed system, the American Dream encourages individuals like Willy Loman to believe in their capacity to rise within the established framework. Newcomers and home-grown Americans alike believe in the American Dream and cling to its illusions.

Willy, a symbol of the typical American man, internalizes the materialistic ideals of the American Dream despite lacking concrete evidence or logical reasoning. In chasing the American Dream, Willy grapples with societal expectations that reduce human worth to a materialistic measure, as exemplified by the stark assertion: "The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell."[29] This pervasive societal belief encapsulates the play's exploration of the materialistic and competitive ideals that dominate the characters' lives, serving as a pitiful commentary on the dehumanizing effects of a society that places excessive emphasis on external markers of success. Willy's steadfast belief in becoming successful drives his life, compelling him to pursue success as defined by societal norms of popularity. However, as Willy's story unfolds, it becomes evident that the American Dream has led him into a spiral of disillusionment and dismay. After being fired, Willy tells his friend Charley, "Funny, y'know? After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive."[30] Willy Loman's poignant reflection suggests a society that fails the working class, particularly in its unrealistic expectations and diminishment of individuals who tirelessly try to contribute to the country's economy.

Willy's observation encapsulates the struggles of the working class in a society that often measures success solely in financial terms, disregarding all other values. The metaphorical "highways" and "trains" symbolize the taxing journey and sacrifices made in pursuit of the elusive American Dream. Despite the persistent determination for success, represented by the countless "appointments" and the "years" passing by, Willy laments that the working class finds themselves worth more dead than alive, suggesting a systemic failure where individuals are only recognized and valued when they can no longer actively contribute to the workforce. Essentially, Willy is suddenly seeing the exploitative nature of American society that disregards the well-being of the working class. The emphasis on financial worth after death in the form of life insurance implies a societal structure that commodifies individuals, extracting their labor and dedication during their productive years but failing to provide sufficient recognition or support for their struggles. The irony lies in the

[29] Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, 100.
[30] Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, 101.

materialistic system that demands such unwavering dedication but fails to reward and acknowledge the working class's contributions during their lifetimes. Willy Loman's perspective becomes a critique of a society that perpetuates the cycle of exploitation and marginalization of the working class. His words highlight the systemic flaws that make individuals like him feel trapped in a relentless pursuit of success, ultimately leaving them disillusioned and questioning the societal values prioritizing financial achievements over the well-being and dignity of the working class. As the gap between Willy's dreams and reality widens, it exposes the inherent flaws in a society that endorses pining for the American Dream by all means necessary while disregarding the systemic issues that hinder its realization for individuals in the working class, like Willy. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman's character becomes a poignant reflection of the impact of societal expectations and the American Dream on individuals striving for success.

Psychoanalysis: Willy's Illusions of Success

Looking at Willy's contradictions through a psychoanalytical lens reveals the devastating consequences of clinging to the distorted ideals of the American Dream. For Willy, the unconscious desire to protect his self-esteem and maintain control over his perceived reality leads to the creation of elaborate illusions.[31] The image of Dave Singleman, a successful and well-liked salesman, becomes a powerful symbol representing Willy's idealized version of success.[32] This unconscious defense mechanism shields Willy from the painful realities of his failures, allowing him to construct a facade of success that aligns with American ideals of the family unit – with Willy being the breadwinner for his family.[33] The blurred lines between Willy's reality and fantasies reflect Freud's concept of repression. However, this defense mechanism does not shield him from the actual consequences of his illusions.[34] As his facade of illusions fades away, Willy is left defenseless and defeated, leading him to the brink of suicide numerous times and, eventually, his actual death in an intentional car wreck. Furthermore, long-term denial, considered a defensive pattern by Freud, is evident in Willy's persistent belief in his sons' potential for success despite contradictory evidence.[35] In conversation, his wife Linda says about Biff, "'He's too rough with the girls, Willy. All the mothers are afraid of him!' 'I'll whip him!'" Willy

[31] Bargh, John A., and Ezequiel Morsella. "The Unconscious Mind." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 1 (2008): 73–79. JSTOR.
[32] Benziman, "Success, Law, and the Law of Success: Reevaluating 'Death of a Salesman's' Treatment of the American Dream."
[33] Beeley, "Freud and Psychoanalysis."
[34] Bargh and Morsella. "The Unconscious Mind."
[35]Beeley, "Freud and Psychoanalysis."

responds. "'All the mothers – '" Linda tries again. "'Shut up!'" Willy coldly replies.[36] Willy's reaction to Linda's concerns reflects his broader struggle with accepting reality. In dismissing Linda's attempts to address Biff's behavioral issues, Willy demonstrates his inclination to avoid confronting unpleasant truths. His repeated efforts to avoid real problems, like Biff's, echo his tendency to live in a world of illusions, where acknowledging imperfect circumstances becomes an unwelcome intrusion weighing him down.

The Parallel Dreams and Demises of Gatsby and Loman in the American Dream

A comparison of Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman reveals intriguing parallels and contrasts in their pursuit of the American Dream. Though Gatsby obtains material wealth that Willy Loman does not, they share common threads of deep insecurity and tragic consequences, with both characters meeting unfortunate endings – funerals in which no guests attend for deaths caused by their shared tragic ending, an inability to distinguish between reality and illusion. The illusion of control over their destinies is both a source of comfort and a tragic flaw, leading to their demise. However, the roots of their illusions and the consequences they face diverge, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of the American Dream. Gatsby's illusions stem from a desire to recreate the past and attain an idealized version of the American Dream in his pursuit of happiness. The green light, symbolic of his dreams, becomes a powerful representation of such aspirations. On the other hand, Willy's illusions, deeply rooted in his desire to be well-liked and successful, align with Freud's notion of the unconscious as a protective mechanism. The image of Dave Singleman becomes an idealization that protects Willy from the reality of his own failures. Willy Loman's contradictions and the faded eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg symbolize the moral compromises and internal conflicts inherent in the quest for success. The lives of Gatsby and Willy illustrate the nuanced challenges and inherent contradictions within the American Dream, portraying a compelling narrative of aspirations, illusions, and tragic consequences.

Conclusion

The portrayal of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman* probes the complexities of illusion, reality, and the psychological toll of the relentless and empty pursuit of wealth and happiness. Both Willy and Gatsby employ the Freudian defense mechanisms of denial and repression to construct elaborate facades to

[36] Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, 42.

shield themselves from the truths of their lives and pasts, highlighting the disconnect between aspirations and harsh realities. The psychoanalytical lens, rooted in Freudian concepts of repression and denial, becomes a driving force in their narratives and provides valuable insights into the defense mechanisms employed by Gatsby and Loman to shield themselves from the harsh truths of their quests for happiness and fulfillment. Both Willy and Gatsby, driven by insecurity, seek validation through external markers of success, approval from others, and status symbols. The societies in which Gatsby and Loman exist contribute to the characters' outlook on success and the consequences of their beliefs. The American Dream serves as both an aspiration for success and a means to distract the working class from socioeconomic disparities. However, it also perpetuates a materialistic and competitive culture, as seen in Willy Loman's emphasis on being well-liked and Gatsby's pursuit of material wealth through illicit means. Despite their differences, Willy and Gatsby resonate as representative figures in the broader narrative of the American Dream. These works caution against the dangers of clinging to distorted ideals and emphasize the importance of acknowledging reality and rejecting American Dream ideals. Their stories prompt introspection into the societal expectations and values that drive individuals to construct elaborate illusions, often at the expense of authenticity and genuine fulfillment, and shed light upon the dangers of buying so entirely into the American Dream.

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