

**The Failure of the American Dream:
A Comparative Study between John Steinbeck's
Of Mice and Men and Arthur Miller's *Death of A
Salesman***

A reader of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman* (1949) would notice a number of striking similarities. The two works deal with the American dream, and both of them portray the endless striving of their heroes to achieve that dream and live it. Moreover, both books resemble each other concerning their attitudes towards the validity of American dream.

This paper focuses on the concept and meaning of the term, its birth and growth, the Great American Depression of the 1930s and its impact on the lives of people in America especially the lower and middle classes, then it moves to the world of literature to look at Steinbeck and Miller's treatment of the subject through the portrayal Willy Loman and Lennie Small, tragic end to which both come, and the death of their hopes.

What is the American Dream:

The American Dream with unrestricted opportunities. Therefore many Europeans turned their backs to their home countries and set sails towards the "New World" or is a dream that glorifies fame, the pursuit of success, and evokes the impression of America as an ideal world and the great country of opportunity. To the early immigrants, America conjured up the impression of a country "New Found land" in the hope for in the hope for a new beginning and a better life. One of the most famous examples are certainly the pilgrims who crossed the Atlantic aboard the "Mayflower" to escape religious prosecution hoping to be able to practise their religion freely in the "New World"¹.

Apart from those with religious motives, there was a great number of people migrating to America for more secularized reasons. They were lured to begin a new life in the hope of finding the riches that fate had denied them in the past. Although the individual dreams connected to the expectations concerning life in America may differ, nearly all contain one fundamental common aspiration: the pursuit of happiness--whether achieved by material success or by personal freedom and liberty. This aspect is also embodied in Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence of 1776, which postulates equal rights for everybody regardless of birth, wealth or social status.

"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, which among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Though these words constitute the foundation of the American Dream, historically, the phrase was originally coined by James Truslow Adams in his book *Epic of America* which was published in 1931. The term is used in the book's polemical epilogue "the American dream itself opens all sorts of questions as to values. It is easy to say a better and richer life for all men".

So, the American Dream is the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to achieve the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by

others for “what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position”.²

The Great Depression:

The great depression of the 1930s had a profoundly damaging effect upon the welfare and morale of the people of the United States, depriving many of jobs, homes, homes and savings, creating widespread poverty, and destroying a previous mood of optimism. Businesses and banks closed and money was worthless. Many people became unemployed and suffered poverty; they were hungry with the lack of food, and homeless. It was only the rich, who were able to survive the Depression.

In many American cities, hundred of thousands of farmers were roaming the country in search of jobs, and many families were experiencing hunger and malnutrition. Victims of the depression needed something larger to turn to for inspiration. Many of these Americans turned their hopes and faith towards The American Dream, and thus Dream survived. In *Of Mice and Men*, George and Lennie dream of their “little house and a couple of acres”⁴ and tour the country in pursuit of fortune and wealth.

A Glimpse into Reality:

Both *Death of A Salesman* and *Of Mice and Men* give us a glimpse into the reality of the time in which they were set. Arthur Miller experienced the whole process of the Great Depression when he was young. It influenced him and his work greatly.

Miller’s father was a prosperous businessman until the crash of 1929, after which the family suffered a lot and it wrought a significant influence on his life and works. If we make a parallel between the story of Willy Loman’s life and Miller’s life, we will see that Willy Loman has two

different realities. There is a Willy Loman, the financially burdened, broken and exhausted man in his sixties, near the end of his life, and there is the more confident, vigorous Willy Loman of some fifteen years before, who appears in flashbacks in the play. These two realities are the before and after of the great depression that Miller's fathers suffered through when Miller was a child. His life served as the inspiration to create the character of the story. Miller drove trucks, waited on tables, and worked as a clerk in a warehouse⁴. Similarly, Stienbeck worked on ranches and farms to earn money. He was well acquainted with the adversities that agricultural immigrants and ranch hands faced during the migration to the Salinas Valley area, and in *Of Mice and Men*, he explained the harsh reality of the severe hardships the poor immigrants and ranch hands faced to accomplish the American Dream.

Optimistic Dreamers:

The pursuit of the American Dream is present in every element of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Each character has their own version of their dream. For George and Lennie, the American Dream is to live on a farm without a boss and to have rabbits to play with. Lennie always asks George to tell him how it will be one day. George tells him:

"O.K. Someday - we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and -"⁵

Throughout the novel, Lennie continuously asks George to tell him about their dream, and every time George enlightens him with what they hope to come true, the dream improves:

"Well, it's ten acres," said George. "Got a little win'mill. Got a little shack on it, an' a chicken run.

Got a kitchen, orchard, cherries, apples, peaches, 'cots, nuts, got a few berries. They's a place for alfalfa and plenty water to flood it. They's a pig pen—"

"An' rabbits, George."

"No place for rabbits now, but I could easy build a few hutches and you could feed alfalfa to the rabbits." (p. 53).

George and Lennie's dream is so appealing that Candy and Crooks want to join. Candy wants to become part of it by offering his saved money to fund the purchase of the piece of land and be able to work and live on it with George and Lennie "it'll be our own place" (p. 60).

Crooks, the negro outcast, reveals that it is the favourite dream of the itinerant ranch hands, and he hopes for a share in it "If you . . . guys would want a hand to work for nothing-just his keep, why I'd come an' lend a hand" (p.71).

Curley's wife has a dream that, although different in details from the dreams of the others, is still very similar in its general desires. She is dissatisfied with her life and she dreams of becoming an actress in Hollywood. She imagines how great it would be to stay in nice hotels, own lots of beautiful clothes, and have people want to have her photographs. Like the men, she dreams of material comforts and a life of luxury.

Similarly, Willy Loman in *Death of A Salesman*, is obsessed with the American Dream of fame and fortune. He displays an equation of the pursuit of money with the pursuit happiness.

Willy lives in a society in which the American Dream dominates people's minds and his purpose in life is to achieve the American Dream and to treat his family with

valour. When his son Happy tells him about the possibility of realizing the dream of success with his “one-million dollar idea”⁶, Willy becomes wildly enthused” (p.46). He educates his sons, Happy and Biff, in a way that would teach them to respect and follow the success ideology and to achieve wealth and power.

Like him, his son Happy wants to live the American Dream and end up with a family, a house, a car and a well-paying job⁷, while Biff, like George and Lennie, dreams of owning his own beautiful ranch:

If I could get ten thousand even seven or eight thousand dollars, I could buy a beautiful ranch With a ranch I could do the work I like and still be something (p.16)

The Death of Hope

The end of both books shows that the American dream is unattainable. None of the characters does achieve his or her dream. The dreams of George, Lennie together with that of Candy and Crooks to own a ranch, which would enable them to sustain themselves, and most important, offer them protection from an inhospitable world, is destroyed. Curley’s wife’s dream to be a famous Hollywood star is also destroyed.

By deciding to kill Lennie to save him from being lynched, George abandons every hope as to Lennie survival and by this way also he accepts the death of their dream. Lennie is the one who keeps the dream alive by urging him to repeat it over and over again. By killing him, George has actually killed their shared dream and has become similar to the other ranch hands. He loses the enthusiasm and energy the dream has generated in him, and in the end he consequently relinquishes the thought of being different

from the other farmhands, and accepts his own mediocrity.

George and Lennie's journey, which awakens George to the impossibility of this dream, sadly proves that the bitter Crooks is right when he says:

I seen hundreds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an' that same damn thing in their heads. Hundreds of them. They come, an' they quit an' go on; an' every damn one of 'em's got a little piece of land in his head. An' never a God damn one of 'em ever gets it. Just like heaven. Ever'body wants a little piece of lan'. I read plenty of books out here. Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land. It's just in their head. They're all the time talkin' about it, but it's jus' in their head. (67-8).

On a parallel line, Willy Loman who wants nothing more than to reach the American dream fails. He is no longer a good salesman. He does not earn enough money. He does not manage to communicate with his family. His sons' lives are a disappointment to him and he suffers an emotional breakdown. His lack of success in achieving his dream, along with his turmoil and personal collapse result in suicide which destroys the lives and hopes of his family as well.

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