Financial Success and the American Dream

A Marxist Reading of Arthur Miller’s
Death of a Salesman

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Abstract

This paper analyses Arthur Miller’s play, Death of a Salesman. The main focus is on the theme American Dream and its influences on the characters. Classical Marxism and Althusser’s Marxist theory have been used as the theoretical framework for this paper to answer the questions: In which ways has the American dream as a concept of happiness and financial success affected the characters? Can the American dream and capitalism be blamed for the Loman family’s situation? The conclusion drawn after studying Miller’s play is that the material side of the American dream can be identified as the dominant in the play and it has more negative effects than positive ones on the Lomans, the effects are both mental and physical. Despite the negative effects of the American dream and capitalism on the characters in Miller’s Death of a Salesman, one cannot blame them for the Loman family’s situation. It is the individuals (characters) that must be blamed because everyone can independently in a democratic and free society make their own choices. For that reason, people have to stand up for their actions and take responsibility for the consequences of their choices and actions whether the consequences are good or bad. Hence, the problem in Miller’s play is not so much about ideological influences as it is about self-awareness.

Keywords: Althusser, self-awareness, capitalism, American dream, Miller, financial success, ideology, Marxism, communism, socialism, freedom of choice
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1. Introduction

*Death of a Salesman*, by Arthur Miller, is a play about a typical American family. The play is considered one of the most influential stories in American literature. “It was a hit right away and has remained one of the most popular plays of all time. Miller focuses *Death of a Salesman* on “the American ideal of business success” and “its conclusions were challenged to standard American business values” (Amiro 1).

The play has been studied and analyzed from a variety of different views and might be one of the most studied ones in English-language literature. The play begins with Willy Loman’s (the protagonist) struggle with his work and his longing for financial success and ends with Willy’s death as a tragic, unsuccessful and failed salesman. Everything he does, wishes and wants is gathered in a big false dream; a dream of being like Howard Wagner, the company owner, being successful as Ben Loman, the jungle man and a good family provider, a dream of being remembered as a successful salesman.

Some have said that *Death of a Salesman* is a capitalistic portrayal of the 1940s American society and that Miller challenges the capitalistic structure that dominates American society and the American dream through Willy’s hard work and failure to achieve material goods. Willy is not Miller’s only representative of the American dream and capitalism. Happy Loman’s materialistic life is a similar example and Ben Loman’s adorned success story is another one. Miller’s play can be seen as a criticism of the American dream and its capitalistic features through Willy and his pursuit of financial success. Some have argued that Miller criticizes the American dream and US capitalism inductively, that is, proceeding from the particular to the general, by looking at the particular case of one family as a ‘‘victim’’ of capitalism (Randall xi).

To sum up, the play is about a family with a hardworking father, a mother who is lost between her sons and husband, two sons where one lives a materialistic life and the other, a more spiritual life, trying to find his role and meaning in life. The Lomans look happy on the outside but have fallen apart inside. This family represents the fate of countless American working-class families: a strong work ethic that only leads to misery and failure. In his mind, Willy Loman, sees himself as a successful salesman but this imagination of success is not compatible with his reality. His lack of self-
awareness makes him to a pretender, a performer, a dreamer and a contradiction of his reality.

Willy’s contradiction is that he does not realize his situation and psychological condition, he thinks he is something big, a member of a higher class but in reality he is nothing more than a regular working class man trying to achieve happiness and economic independence. As a Marxist would say, he is the result of the capitalist system, always trying to climb higher on the hierarchy but staying at the same level, a true proletarian, but also a failure stuck in an imaginary world.

Karl Marx is one of the most famous philosophers who tried to explain how society functions as a result of capitalism. In order to best describe the behavior of human beings and motivations behind their actions, Marx believed that society is always divided into two groups, the rich who are the bourgeoisie and the poor who are the proletarians. Karl Marx and Frederich Engels looked at these groups (proletarians and bourgeoisies) and concluded that they will always be in conflict, as long as economic equality does not exist between them. By having such beliefs and views, Marx established a school of thought together with Frederich Engels, known as communism. Their main idea was that a truly human existence is impossible until the capitalist system is done away with (Bertsen 93).

Meanwhile, classical Marxists focus on ‘’the political and economic contradictions inherent in Capitalism (for example, the fact that while people co-operate to produce goods, a Capitalist class appropriates these goods for its private profit)” (Marxism 1). Louis Althusser believed that it was important to consider the influence that society has on an individual, that in a way society makes the people and how they behave in a particular way as a result of various factors.

Althusser's theory also differs from traditional Marxism in that economy is not the only factor when it comes to people’s situation and how they behave and think in a certain way. Althusser kept economy as one of the main factors in his theories but extended it and argued that ideology, politics and culture have a major influence on society and the individuals in it. Therefore according to Althusser, humans’ everyday struggle, their situation and social status are not only a result of material resources or the number of possessions they have; rather it is based on which ideology dominates a certain society, how humans are tricked to believe that they are free and the way ideology and politics deceive them to follow unrealistic dreams.
Marxists in general have pointed out the drawbacks of having a capitalistic society. They claim that capitalism and the power that comes with it breaks a society into different social classes depending on the individual’s wealth, which is determined by their power. The entrepreneurial class, being owners of the means of production, is the most powerful group. This particular class has often a strong influence over different institutions within a state. Therefore, Althusser argued that the state functions as an indirect servant of the capitalist class.

1.1 Question and purpose (Aim)

The purpose with this study is to understand and see how the 1940s American society functioned and the typical working class families were influenced by the American dream. For that reason focus will be on Miller’s Death of a Salesman because it covers the themes this study has as a goal to examine. This paper will also analyze classical Marxism and its view on how economy is related to the American dream. It is important to know that this essay pays more attention to Althusser's Marxist theory than classical Marxism.

The main questions are:

In which ways has the American dream, as a concept or “ideology” of happiness and financial success, affected the characters in Miller’s play? Can capitalism and the American dream be blamed for the Loman family’s situation?

In this paper focus will be on the apparent and hidden aspects and messages of Miller’s play in order to relate them to basic Marxist themes. But this is not enough to answer the main questions of this essay. In order to answer the questions in the best possible way, the author’s social status, political beliefs and values have been studied. Literary Marxist critics assume that the author’s own political beliefs and social class have a major influence on their literary works. This paper takes the examination and discussion of the play to a higher level of analysis, where focus will be on the play’s historical and political context. In general, Marxist critics pay much attention to history but they also argue that “literary forms are themselves determined by political circumstances” (Barry 161).
2. Theoretical framework

Two Marxist theories have been used in this paper. This choice of theory is suitable for Miller’s play since the play pays much attention to economic, social and ideological aspects which the characters in Miller’s play are affected by. The first section will discuss and explain the basics of classical Marxism in order to understand how economic factors make divisions between social classes and which solutions classical Marxism offers to solve the conflicts between the proletariat and bourgeoisie. The second section will discuss Louis Althusser’s Marxist theory. Althusser slips away from the classical Marxist explanations and extends them to a higher degree, where he conflates class struggle with socio-economic, cultural, ideological and political factors.

2.1 Marxism

The aim of Marxism is to remove the so-called class society and make it classless. To do this, the founders of this school of thought, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, argue that if the state were the owner of industries, companies and other economic institutions then the differences between the rich and poor would decrease to the level, where everyone could equally benefit from economic resources (Marxism 1-2).

Marxism consists of a variety of thoughts based on the works of Karl Marx and his understanding of the capitalist system. As a normative ideological orientation, Marxism is a strong egalitarian ideology, whose main goal is to change society to a more equal place, where economic resources, profits and political influence are shared equally among the citizens and not among a minority of actors and individuals. Marxism describes present-day society as a society with large power and class differences, which is a result of differences in ownership. And whenever there are differences in ownership in a society, there are strong class barriers. Therefore, Marxism is a

*materialist* philosophy: that is, it tries to explain things without assuming the existence of a world, or of forces, beyond the natural world around us, and the society we live in. It looks for concrete, scientific, logical explanations of the world of observable fact […] whereas other
philosophies merely seek to understand the world, Marxism (as Marx famously said) seeks to change it. (Barry 150)

To make change possible, Marxists claim that change comes only when the proletarians from the working and lower classes release themselves from the capitalist structure (Barry 151). This is tied to another central problem Marxists want to solve, and that is the exploitation of other social classes by the upper class. They see exploitation as a key element in capitalism. The profits accruing to the capitalists and the reward of the effort that is done by the workers to manufacture a product is one of the main factors that leads to the creation of class differences. Consequently, the product’s final value does not match the actual salary that the worker gets in return. In other words, according to Marxists, the basis of capitalism is to pay workers less than the full value of their own work, in order to generate profits for the capitalist class: ‘’No capitalist hires somebody to work for him unless that worker gets paid less than the value of what he produces’’ (Manicas 3).

Marxists criticize another key aspect of capitalism, which they call alienation. It is applied in four different senses, where the worker is alienated from her/himself, the work he/she is doing, from the product and his/her colleagues (Heywood 119). Marx argues that capitalism alienates workers from the product they produce, since they do not produce or sale what they need or what they believe is beneficial, but are used by capitalists to produce what benefits them.

Workers ‘’are also alienated from the process of labour’’ (119). This is because workers are supervised by others and therefore they cannot fully enjoy and utilize the job they are doing. Marx also states that work is not social, because employees are encouraged to be self-interested and are therefore alienated from their colleagues. To finish, Marx also argues that workers are alienated from themselves, because capitalists have managed to use them as tools creating other tools, instead of encouraging them to like the work they are doing, use their creativity and talents; they (capitalists) have depersonalized work (119).

To mention it once again, Marxists believe that workers are exploited and alienated in their everyday lives and that they are nothing more than things and tools used by the capitalists. For that reason they argue that the working class is tricked by the capitalists and other influential actors to believe and follow the ideologies around
them. Marxists see ideologies as created illusions, and this includes all kinds of ideologies from religious ideologies to secular ones.

In Marxist usage, ideology is what causes us to misrepresent the world to ourselves […] For Marxists, ideology is not so much a set of beliefs or assumptions that we are aware of, but it is that which makes us experience our life in a certain way and makes us believe that way of seeing ourselves and the world is natural. (Bertsen 84-85)

Much of Marx’s work seems to be inspired by the socialist way of thinking and the ideas that the French revolution were based on (Barry 151). Some parts of the discussion of classical Marxism above can be perceived as farfetched but they will make the analysis more clear for the reader and help them better understand the interpretation of the play. More about ideology will be discussed and analyzed in the section below, where focus will be on Althusser’s view on ideology and other central aspects of Althusserian Marxism.

2.2 Althusser’s Marxist theory

In Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller addresses a number of problems created by the changing social economic aspects of the American society. Among these are wealth, financial success, family values, and gender roles. In the 1940s, the American society faced a myriad of challenges, as Arthur Miller reveals in the characterization of the play through the characters.

Louis Althusser (1918-1990) is one of the most influential characters, when it comes to recent Marxist thinking on literature. While traditional or classical Marxism pays much of its attention to economy as a factor of class-struggle, Althusser’s view and his examination of society and individuals is that problems do not arise from only one reason. Contrariwise, problems are caused by a number of causes. Therefore, Althusser talks about over-determinism, ‘which designates an effect which arises from a variety of causes, that is, from several causes acting together, rather than from a single (in this case, economic) factor’” (Barry 156-157). In other words, the struggle of the working class is not only based on economic factors and Althusser connects economic struggle with political and social factors as well.
In his structural Marxism, Althusser argues that the state acts in a capitalistic manner by assuming a capitalistic form. This phenomenon however, does not arise from having certain individuals in powerful positions, but because the various institutions of the state, including the legal, economic and political, all reproduce the logic of capitalism. Like all other Marxists, Althusser pays much of his attention to the base (modes of production and economic relations) and superstructure (cultural products and ideologies) model of society.

Unlike traditional Marxists, Althusser thought of art as a more independent institution from economic forces. This way of thinking was “‘a way of attacking simplistic views of a superstructure entirely determined by the nature of the economic base’” (Barry 157). Althusser’s view on ideology also differs from other Marxist critics and scholars. His definition of ideology is that “‘Ideology is a system of representations endowed with an existence and an historical role at the heart of a given society’” (Goldstein 23).

Through his different definitions of various concepts and notions, Althusser separates state power from state control. He identifies these as repressive structures and ideological structures or state ideological apparatuses. Repressive structures are institutions like law courts, police, and legal armed forces. Ideological structures or state ideological apparatuses are groupings such as political parties, media, religion, art, literature, family: “‘Which foster an ideology – a set of ideas and attitudes – which is sympathetic to the aims of the state and the political status quo. Thus each of us feels we are freely choosing what is fact being imposed upon us’” (Barry 158).

This means that even if literature has a degree of autonomy, it can still be used as a tool by the state to impose its world-view and goals upon us. But through analysis and examination of literary works we can reveal the underlying ideology and the repressed historical, social and political truths (160).

In his book on ideology, Althusser states that one of the reasons why the state assumes a capitalistic form is because the state itself is indirectly ruled by “‘the ruling class’” (20). He argues that the ruling class are the ones who control the repressive structures, therefore it is likely that they also have great influences on the ideological structures. By controlling different official institutions within the state, the ruling class have a lot of space to indirectly impose their ideology on society, therefore the perceptions of independent free thinking and freedom of choice is only an imaginary thought (40-42).
Therefore, Althusser argues that humans have a tendency to believe that they are free, undisturbed by material circumstances and that even if they believe they are not free in real life, they think they are free in their minds. But Althusser rejects this kind of reasoning and goes on saying ‘minds aren’t free at all, they only think they are’ (Bertens 83). This way of thinking can be closely related to Antonio Gramsci’s view on rule and hegemony.

Rule is ‘direct political control, which uses force when necessary, and hegemony, which is (as defined by Raymond Williams) ‘the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings, values and beliefs of a kind which can be abstracted as a ‘world view’ or ‘class outlook’’. (Barry 158)

To conclude, hegemony is a form of social control and can be related to both culture and ideology. It makes ideas and views (which according to Althusser are imposed upon people) to be understood as natural. For example, the American dream might be an illusion created by American leaders and it is used by politicians as a tool to portray the US as the greatest country in the world where everyone can be successful based on their talents and capacity. Or they can use it to justify war in order to protect this dream. And for regular people this kind of view seems to be acceptable and natural, though in reality it might be harmful for them (Barry 158; Lears 568-570).

As mentioned above, according to Althusser people are not free in their choices and minds, but instead tricked and have no authority over their choices. Althusser calls it interpellation. Willy Loman always emphasizes that he will be successful one day, but based on the circumstances and his economic situation this does not happen. Biff has this problem too: he wants to be free and do what he loves, but is eventually forced to borrow capital from an earlier employer and plans to start a business he never wanted. Biff thinks he is free and wants to work at a ranch but he is not free to do it, as he is forced to do something else beyond his wishes.

Althusser says capitalism ‘thrive on this trick: it makes us feel like free agents’’ (Barry 158) while we are not. For example in a democratic society people have the choice to vote for different political parties, but when it comes to governance they do not differ in methodology (Althusser 48). To sum up, Althusser combines different
ideas to see how society works rather than only considering economic factors as traditional Marxists do. For Althusser, literature has an enormous importance, and he sees it as a more independent institution which through analysis, enables us to reveal truths about history, politics and ideologies dominating a certain literary work (Barry 159-160).

3. Historical Background and Arthur Miller

Arthur Miller is considered one of the most influential American playwrights in the 20th century. He was born in 1915 in New York and had Polish Jewish parents. Miller’s father was a clothing manufacturer and until 1929 everything seemed to be normal for the Millers. But when the Wall Street crash took place, many Americans were affected by it and resulted a long-term poverty worldwide. The Millers were not an exception and they had to move to Brooklyn due to their new economic situation. The following ten years in world history are known as The Great Depression.

The depression did not only affect people’s economic situation, it also had a psychological impact. The American society started to question the American dream and the financial success it advocates. ‘’The Depression changed people’s values and beliefs in those days to a great extent, and thus provided Americans with an opportunity to examine their way of life and attitudes to the American dream’’ (Oikawa 117-118). Arthur Miller seems to be affected by this period in his life, and Miller’s different description of the American dream might be traced back to this very specific event, which changed his life from a comfortable one to a hard one.

At the end of the 1930s the depression eventually decreased, but the recovery from the economic crisis was short lived, World War II started in 1939 and lasted to 1945. The following years after the war, were a complex period for the American people, due to a mass production of goods from the war time which had resulted in a surplus of goods, it was the start of a new economic boom but also the beginning of a complex socioeconomic process (Stone 10).

For the first time in nearly thirty years there was a surplus of goods, from foodstuffs to electronics to cars, and a good deal of money going around with which to buy them. Large-scale housing (especially construction of
urban apartment blocks) and inner-city businesses experienced a boom (Sinclair 6).

The economic growth did not lead to the wellbeing of everyone. The surplus of goods had caused a changed lifestyle in the American society. People had suddenly assumed a new form and a kind of upper class lifestyle, and they started buying products and goods they never had access to earlier. But people were not aware of that the increased consumption had started an inflation which had led to the rise of prices and the fall of the American dollar’s value. Those who were most affected and took the first hit were unskilled and uneducated workers, small-scale farmers, small businesses, janitors, cleaners, shop clerks and salesmen. On the other hand, the new economic situation benefited a minority of people and corporations. It was a period when the big business started to flourish ‘at the expense of the individual operator […] The rich started getting richer while the poor started getting poorer – a trend that has continued in America to this day.’ (Sinclair 6).

The inflation triggered another trend within the American society, that is, the use of credit (living on credit). Sinclair claims that the ‘‘Cash-rich corporations encouraged customers to use credit to buy products at inflated prices that they could not normally afford. People used credit to buy commodity items like cars and houses’’ (7). Miller’s Death of a Salesman centralizes this aspect where one can see that Willy had to work hard to pay off different items like a refrigerator, his house and other items, this use of credit restricted the Lomans’ ability to have enough money to spend on other basic needs.

After the war, international politics was dominated by two sides, the Western bloc (sometimes called the capitalist bloc) led by the US and the Eastern bloc (so-called the communist bloc) led by the Soviet Union. This ideological conflict lead to the start of the Cold War (1946-1990), and in support for their government, the majority of the American citizens felt obliged to be a part of the government’s agenda. The Cold War initially strengthened people's adherence to materialism and capitalist values. Central themes of the American dream and liberalism such as liberty, individualism and freedom were seen as superior to socialistic themes like collectiveness and social equality. Moreover, the embracement of capitalism justified the general perception of the American dream and was seen as an act of patriotism.
Hence, the Americans saw communism as an obstacle for financial success, progress and the use of their democratic rights to act freely (Sinclair 7).

Another interesting aspect of Death of a Salesman is that, Miller took many parts from his own life and surrounding, and adapted them in the play. For example Willy Loman is based on his uncle Manny Newman, Biff and Happy is based on his cousin Buddy, and Linda Loman’s character is based on Newman’s wife. ‘‘Miller based Willy’s character on his own uncle, Manny Newman. Miller said, that homely, ridiculous little man had after all never ceased to struggle for a certain victory (Zhao 124).

The characters of Biff and Happy are based on Newman’s son Buddy, who was a sports hero, failed with his studies like Biff and popular with the girls like Happy. Linda Loman is also based on Newman’s wife who, like Linda, she was a loyal and good mother ‘‘supporting her husband, keeping up her calm enthusiastic smile lest he feel he was not being appreciated.” (Falls 9).

Miller pays much of his attention to themes like family relations, the American dream, materialism, self-awareness and responsibility. Therefore, some have called him a left winged writer, influenced by Marxist thoughts and an opponent of capitalism (Sterling 61). This can be seen and recognized in Death of a Salesman. However, Miller openly supported neither capitalism nor communism; but one cannot avoid noticing his flirtation with Marxist thoughts in the play. On the other hand, Mattias Åberg states that ‘‘Miller did not write Death of a Salesman to promote socialist, or communist, way of life’’ (11). Åberg further claims that Death of a Salesman is not a critique of capitalism, but a manifestation of showing the benefits of living within a capitalistic society where the individual’s abilities are not restricted by an ideology that promotes total social equality. By having individualism as an ideological base, the individual might have an opportunity to fulfill its dreams.
4. Analysis

The best way to answer the main questions of this essay is to start with an examination of the American dream and a character analysis. It is important to identify the individual dreams in order to best understand how much the material side of the American dream dominates the individual dreams and how it can be explained based on the theories but also to see if it is possible to blame the American dream and capitalism for the Loman family’s sufferings and misery. In this part of the essay the main focus will be on the question: In which ways has the American dream, as a concept or “ideology” of happiness and financial success, affected the characters in Miller’s play? In the coming section (see section 5.), focus will be on question number two: Can capitalism and the American dream be blamed for the Loman family's situation? It is important to know that, the discussion and answer of the second question will be discussed and answered based on the analysis and the answer of the first question. Therefore, the answer and discussion of the second question will not entirely be based on Althusser’s theory, the author of this paper will comment the question based on his own interpretation and then discuss why he has arrived to this conclusion.

4.1 The American Dream

“‘Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world a young man […] gets lost. And such a hard worker’” (Miller 5).

The American dream is the dream of success, wealth and happiness. According to Lendol Calder in Financing the American Dream, one has to go through a hard process of hard work and suffering to achieve the American dream, which consists of happiness, wealth and success (4). The coiner of this concept, or, better formulated, this ideology, is James Truslow Adams who defines the American dream in Epic of America as the ”dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, according to his ability or achievement” (215).

This means, that one has to use all of one’s abilities and ambitiously work hard to achieve a better and richer life. It is possible to state that the American dream is the
dream of a country where life is better for everyone, where everyone has the chance to use their talents optimally. It is not just a dream about cars or high salary but also a dream of social order that allows everyone, regardless of origin and position to grow fully in their own innate capacity.

The American dream is also a dream of ownership. The more you own things (materially), the closer you are to achieving the dream of financial success, because the achievement of financial success is characterized by having material assets. This idea of ownership starts with being owner of your own home. Home ownership in this sense means to have a place where you can live your life free from landlords and paying rent to a person who owns the building (Cullen 134-135). This pursuit of ownership is very obvious in Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Till the day Willy Loman is buried, the Lomans are not owners of their own house. Willy dies with the dream of being owner of his own house. At the end of the play Linda (his wife) states the following in her memorial speech ‘‘[…] Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there’ll be nobody home. We’re and clear. We’re free (108). In the coming paragraphs focus will be on pros and cons of the American dream in order to see what Marxists have to say about it.

Some say that the American dream is a fiction created by the American leaders in order to trigger their citizens and make them work hard to build a nation based on competition, in order to withdraw taxes and finance the country’s greatness (Hind 1). Better formulated, the American dream appears to be realistic and offers the individual a hope of success, but in reality this dream only exists in stories and only one in a million seems to achieve this kind of dream. Consider, for example the stories about Bill Gates, Arnold Schwarzenegger or Willy’s successful brother Ben Loman.

Others have argued that the American dream is not so much about happiness as it is about financial success and desire for money. They argue that such desire for financial success has serious effects on an individual’s psychological condition, especially if the dream is not fulfilled. Tim Kasser and Richard Ryan’s study suggests that “the desire for money does not necessarily bring happiness; instead too much emphasis on this aspect of the American dream may be an organismic nightmare” (421).

The American dream may come true if you work hard. But at the same time your hard work might lead to someone else’s success and not yours, e. g. Willy’s work and
others like him made the owners of Wagner Company successful. And thereby from a Marxist perspective, one could say that Willy was exploited and his hard work only benefited a minority of people.

The American dream describes society as a classless one, which means one's social background does not decide how much you can achieve or have. But others have argued that in reality, this is not true. How many Americans can achieve or have as much as the Rockefellers, Lauders or Bushes? Or how much will it take for the Lomans to become like the Wagners? Here again there is a big difference between the proletariat and bourgeoisie.

The American dream is also a dream of being free and do what you want to do, so one could say that the American dream pays much attention to individualism as an important key to happiness and success. The American society has almost always been portrayed as a society, where the individual is at the center. One is free to do what he/she wishes, but what happens if you do not find a job you are comfortable with? For that reason, Biff Loman can be perceived as an outsider.

The American dream is also about taking care of elders and people in need, but what happens to Willy when all his energy and working skills are exploited? Neither the state nor the Wagners company take care of him, his sons seems to be nonchalant about his physical and psychological condition and he ends up dying with a psychological disorder.

The American leaders never gave communism or socialism an opportunity to be experienced in the US. The support for liberalism in America is great, and here individualism is an essential aspect of this ideology. This individual-centered view of society is in an ideological clash with leftist ideologies (communism and socialism), which stress the importance of equality and collectiveness in society. The American leaders have always claimed that the American dream is what you want it to be; it can be a search for happiness or wealth. But based on the theories it is possible to claim that Marxists reject this kind of view and call it capitalism. Both Marx and Althusser would argue that the American dream is a dream created by capitalists. It only serves a minority of people and not an entire community. By creating a dream of hard work and success, the capitalists have managed to silence people’s voice for a better collective economic condition. Hence, the capitalist class becomes richer, which leads to a degeneration of the poor and the working class.
The American dream is also about one’s legacy and greatness. The result of your hard work is meant to serve your family and others you care about. Your legacy is what you will be remembered for, but Willy’s legacy consisted of a disappointed wife, an unemployed son and finally an empty house, therefore based on the theories it is possible to claim that Willy did not leave anything behind that he had dreamt for in his life. His American dream drove him to madness and the consequences were a shattered family and a suicide.

4.2 Individual dreams

Willy Loman is a man with many desires, ideals and dreams. His narcissistic personality is something that one cannot avoid to notice. All his life, he has been driven by the idea of how to become rich and successful. Willy wants to have a comfortable life, a nice looking car and successful children. Even if he has been cheating on his wife, he loves Linda, but Willy sees himself as a bad provider, his inability to provide for his family (materially) makes him even try harder to satisfy his family. His desire for being economically independent is enormous to the extent that everything Willy does is related to how it can benefit him from a material perspective. He is stuck in a dream where everything circulates around ‘‘the one-million-dollar’’ idea (Miller 50).

Willy’s main dream is to be successful materially and to be ‘‘well liked’’ (35). His formula for being successful and well liked is that a man should always be creative, a good speaker, confident, serious, masculine, charismatic and able to make an appearance in the business world; a man must always stand firm with his dreams and ideals in order to be remembered and respected. This can be found in Willy’s advice to his son, Biff.

Willy: A business suit, and talk as little as possible, and don’t crack any jokes. […] Walk in very serious. You are not applying for a boy’s job. Money is to pass. Be quiet, fine and serious. Everybody likes a kidder, but nobody lends him money. […] How much you gonna ask for? Biff: Gee, I don’t know- Willy: And don’t say ‘Gee’. ‘Gee’ is a boy’s word. A man walking in for fifteen thousand dollars don’t say ‘Gee’! […] Walk in with a
big laugh. Don’t look worried. Start off with a couple of your good stories
to lighten things up. It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it (51-52).

Something else that has affected Willy’s dreams is his role models. Willy dreams
of being like his brother Ben Loman and the old successful salesman Dave
Singleman. The interesting thing here is that both Ben Loman and Dave Singleman
have many features in common that Willy desires to have. They both are charismatic
in the sense that they can capture the attention of their surroundings. Both of them are
serious and able to make an appearance in the business world. They are well-liked,
remembered and finally they are successful persons who have fulfilled their American
dream.

Willy: His name was Dave Singleman. And he was eighty-four years old,
and he’d drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, he’d go
up to his room […] I’ll never forget – and pick up his phone and call the
buyers, and without leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four he made his
living […] Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the
age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a
phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different
people? […] When he died—and by the way he died the death of a
salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of New York, New
Haven and Hartford, going into Boston—when he died, hundreds of
salesman and buyers were at his funeral. Things were sad on a lotta trains
for months after that (58-59).

Even if Dave did not become financially independent, he still died the death of a
salesman and he was remembered for his success. For Willy, Dave Singleman
symbolizes strength, struggle, dedication, hard work, happiness, energy and
independence. It is for that reason Willy has setup high goals, because if an eighty-
four years old man can make it and be successful, then a younger Willy can also make
it.

I discovered after a few days that I was heading due south, so instead of
Alaska, I ended up in Africa […] Willy: The Gold Coast. […] Boys! Boys!
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. And by God I was rich (32).

On the other hand, there is Ben Loman, the man that walked into the jungle and became rich at a young age, something that Willy never did. Ben is Willy’s symbol for power, money, adventure and success, Ben Loman is Willy’s proof that big dreams can become real. One interesting aspect here is that Ben did not become successful and rich just like that. When Biff and Ben take a boxing fight for fun, Miller allows his readers to see that Ben wins, but it is not an honest and fair victory ‘‘Ben: Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You’ll never get out of the jungle that way’’ (Miller 33). This has a much deeper meaning than it sounds, for a man can fulfill his dreams and win but only if he cheats, a similar expression occurs when Ben states: ‘‘Yes, outstanding, with twenty thousand behind him […] And it does take a great man to crack the jungle […] The jungle is dark but full of diamonds […] One must go in to fetch a diamond out […] A diamond is rough and hard to touch’’ (103).

Ben states that a man should never fight fair and that it does take a great man to crack the jungle because the jungle is dark but full of diamonds. It is here one can notice the darker sides of Willy’s dreams. For both Willy and Ben it does not matter how a man becomes rich, but this idea does not originate from Willy; it is Ben’s, and everything Ben says is holy for Willy.

A valid understanding of these expressions is that for both Willy and Ben, a man cannot let anything stand in his way to achieve his dreams; therefore a man must not fight fair all the way to the end. The darkness of the jungle does not refer to the nature of the jungle. It is about a man’s ability to deceive and trick others in order to get material goods, be remembered and well liked. There is nothing wrong with Willy’s dreams, but the affection of Ben and Willy’s methodology to achieve his dreams and financial success is devastating for his end. Willy does somehow achieve his American dream, but not in the way as Howard Wagner, Dave, Bernard or Charley have managed to. Willy ends up taking his life for insurance money, and this is the darkness of Willy Loman, since all his life he has tried to have a good amount of capital. Miller shows that Willy does achieve his dream but not in a fair way, but through a dark trick that costs him his life.

Unlike Willy, Biff Loman, Willy’s oldest son is a completely different character from his father. At a young age, Biff and his father have a close relationship and he
admired Willy for his personality. Biff was a sports hero, a top student and a talented football player, his father loved him for it, but at the same time Willy never directed him to the ‘right’ path. This led to Biff’s failure with a math course and eventually with his life. But the critical moment that changed his life was when he found his father with another woman. For this reason, Biff starts to hate his father.

Biff is Miller’s description of how the American dream and the financial success it advocates is not every individual’s dream. At the age of thirty four, Biff has neither a stable job nor a family. As Willy refuses to recognize his own failure he also refuses to believe that the once young talented Biff has according to himself failed with his life. Biff does not dream of living a materialistic life with the desire of having material goods, instead his dream is, having a free life undisturbed by material thoughts. As his family presses him to live in accordance with their way of live, Biff deviates from that structure, by having the dream of living beyond urban areas.

Biff’s wish to settle down at the west side of the country is an older version of the American dream. Whereas the East (for example, Brooklyn and New York) represents activity and opportunities, the western and southern parts of the country represent stagnation and passiveness (Sinclair 6-7). This choice of not living in industrialized and urban areas makes Willy furious.

How can he find himself on a farm? Is that a life? A farmhand? In the beginning, when he was young, I thought, well, a young man, it’s good for him to tramp around, take a lot of different jobs. But it’s more than ten years ago now and he has yet to make thirty-five dollars a week (Miller 5).

Biff’s American dream is living in rural areas and working at a ranch and this makes him to an outsider and a failure in the eyes of his family ‘’Why am I trying to become what I don’t want to be […] when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am’’ (101).

At the same time there is Happy Loman, Biff’s younger brother. Happy is more like his father with the same dreams and desires. At the same time, Happy is more complex than Biff. Although Happy is more successful than his brother and makes a good living, he wants somehow to follow his brother and be like him. Happy’s contradiction is that he desires a peaceful and unmaterialistic life like Biff, but, at the same time, he dreams of being like his uncle and his father. Even if he is ambitious
and follows the rules of capitalism, which is built upon competition and performance, Happy fails with his dreams.

Biff: Sure, maybe we could buy a ranch. Raise cattle, use our muscles. Men built like we are should be working in the open […] Happy: That’s what I dream about Biff. Sometimes I wanna just rip my clothes off in the middle of the store and outbox that goddamned merchandise manager. I mean I can outbox, outlift and outrun anybody in that store, and I have to take orders from those petty, common sons of bitches till I can’t stand it anymore (12)

Happy’s problem is that he is unable to be self-aware just like Willy. This lack of self-awareness makes him blind and defiant. When Willy dies, Biff realizes that it is not worth trying to settle down in the city and follow his father’s path. But, Happy chooses to follow in his father’s footsteps and makes an attempt in the hope to continue and achieve his father’s American dream. What Happy does not realize is that history repeats itself. By having the same ideals, dreams and desires it is more likely that Happy will end as his father and not as his uncle, manager and Howard Wagner (Randall xiv)

I am not licked that easily. I’m staying right in this city, and I’m gonna beat this racket […] I am gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It’s the only dream you can have – to come out number-one man. He fought it out here and this is where I’m gonna win it for him (Miller 107).

Linda Loman, Willy’s wife, is a completely different character. Linda is an obedient, loyal and good wife and she has one big dream, which is happiness for her family. Linda struggles with making peace between Biff and Willy, but at the same time she is loyal to her husband and often takes his side. The Loman family is also a male dominated family and we see repeatedly that Willy undermines his wife’s role and does not let her have a say. Linda’s role is limited, her duty is to obey and satisfy her husband by encouraging him to do what he thinks is best. Additionally, Miller portrays Linda as the number one victim of Willy’s American dream. Although she is the shield of Willy’s dreams and falsehood, Linda suffers from Willy’s physiological ‘disorder’ and unrealistic dreams. Willy’s inability to provide for Linda is a big
problem and it is worth mentioning that Willy’s collapse leads to Linda’s freedom (Stanton 152-153). But Linda’s loyalty remains for her husband even after Willy’s dead and one cannot blame Linda for his death. Although women have constantly been degraded and seen as the scapegoat for failures in American male dominated societies, Linda Loman must be praised for her loyalty, compassion and her love for her family. Her American dream is different, she accepts the liberal and capitalistic values and other materialistic ideals that come with that dream, but Linda’s American dream is dominated by the pursuit of happiness (153).

What Miller has done is that he has assigned the characters with two different sides of the American dream, the material and spiritual side. The spiritual side of the American dream in Death of a Salesman is about happiness and peace in life and the material side is about wealth and money. Through the dreams of the Lomans’ one can clearly identify the material side of the American as the dominant one, but why it is the dominant one can be related to a number of factors. For the first, it is important to consider the historical context and background as a factor. The Wall Street crash and the Great Depression that came with it caused a long term poverty, according to Rachway, ‘‘As the Depression lasted, it put the middle class more and more into the circumstances of the poor and encouraged empathy across class lines’’ (38).

As mentioned in the previous section (see section 3) there is a connection between Miller’s own life during the depression, the war, the economic situation of the Lomans and the real historical background of this specific period. Even if Miller does not mention the effects of the depression and war in the play, still the historical facts show that the depression and the war forced people to strive and work harder than ever to live a comfortable life and Miller does indirectly demonstrate this through his description of the Loman family that nobody where an exception from the influences of the depression and war. Another important factor is the post-war era. When World War II ended people could eventually recover themselves from their sufferings both mentally and materially. It was a time people started to get better and had an opportunity to change their lifestyles to better ones. The consumerism and materialism of the post-war era are the most obvious elements of historical context in Miller's play. But it is important to consider that in comparison to other countries, the Americans experienced the war in a much less traumatic way than most other nations involved. With the exception of Pearl Harbor, all of the fighting took place abroad;
the US was the only country that got out of the war on profit. It was truly the most affluent nation in the world, while the rest of the world was in ruins.

However, it is worth mentioning that people’s changed lifestyle and the recovery did not lead to a complete economic progress for the American society. Instead there are conflicting effects and one of them is the use of credit. Since people could not afford buying the ‘‘luxurious’’ products, Sinclair informs us that the ‘‘Cash-rich corporations encouraged customers to use credit to buy products at inflated prices that they could not normally afford. People used credit to buy commodity items like cars and houses’’ (7). The surplus of goods from the war led eventually to a changed lifestyle which is based on the concept of ‘‘living on credit’’. Related to Death of a Salesman, Miller shows that the Loman family is also taking part of the use of credit.

For the Loman family and especially Willy, it does not matter how you own something, the important thing is that it is yours. As a result of such thinking, till his last day Willy is forced to pay off different items such as a refrigerator, washing machine, vacuum cleaner, his house etc. And all these items have one thing in common and that is that they all are ‘‘modern’’ items. Even if the Lomans lived without these, they would still survive. Still, the ownership of material goods in Death of a Salesman illustrates a symbolic aspect and that is wealth. For Willy, Ben and Happy, owning things is something extremely important, because it is a manifestation of your success and hard work. Hence, two effects of the material side of the American dream in Miller’s play is the use of credit and how wealth comes before a safe and good life.

Hereby, one can identify a big problem with the use of credit and that is that as soon as one owes the big companies and banks money, one is bound to them until the debt has been paid off. This made life difficult for the Loman family and Willy but also limited their ability to afford other basic needs. Althusser would blame Willy’s American dream and desire for wealth and see it as the main factor that has caused his situation. Based on Althusser’s theory it is possible to claim that the big companies’ and banks’ encouragement to their customers/clients to take loans and credit was something that gave regular Americans false hopes and expectations to think that they could establish an upper class life. Willy notices this but his strong belief in his materialist-orientated American dream does not allow him to realize that he has put all his energy and worked ‘‘a lifetime to pay off a house’’ (4) or if his business is not
profitable he will likely be bankrupt: “My God if business don’t pick up I don’t know what I’m gonna do” (22).

The material studied in this essay regarding the US and the main idea around the American dream have partly clarified America as a land of opportunities (Cardullo 30). On one occasion, Willy puts emphasis on this point in a conversation with Ben. “It’s not what you do, Ben. It’s who you know and the smile on your face! [...] That’s the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked!” (63). However, if one takes a closer look at this statement and the idea of borrowing capital and the concept of ‘‘living on credit’’ in accordance with Althusser’s theory, you will discover a different side of the American dream in Death of a Salesman. If the US is a country full of opportunities where everyone can based on their capacity and talent be financially successful and happy, then how can living on credit, borrowing capital and ‘‘be liked’’ be a way to financial success and happiness? Based on the theoretical framework, the answer here is that there is no American dream or a concept of happiness and financial success. Instead this ‘‘ideology’’ is only something that is created by a higher elite to control and trick regular Americans to believe that they can be successful and happy.

The American dream and the financial success it advocates in Death of a Salesman, is something that we hereby can say only exists in Willy’s, Ben’s and partly in Happy’s imagination. Willy refuses to consider himself a member of the working class or as the proletariat. In the past Willy was somehow an important figure and had a big role in the success of Wagner Company. When Willy gets older and his energy and value have been exploited, Willy expects that someone (likely, the government or the Wagner Company) will take care of him. But his lack of self-awareness, inability to realize his reality and his strong belief in his values and ideals lead to the truth at least according to Althusser that nobody ever planned to come and take care of him. This supports Althusser’s argument, that ideology in a way is something that only will let you down, because it is created to only ensure that those who follow it, do so blindly, which will benefit a specific group (the rulers of the state and owners of the production) and will take your talent and use your work, skills and abilities to their own benefits.

Linda: ‘‘I don’t say he’s a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He’s not the finest character that
ever lived. But he’s a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He’s not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person […] the man is exhausted” (Miller 38-39).

This quote by Linda, reveals the truth about Willy and his life. He is not a great man, was never named in the papers and never made a lot of money, and, besides, Linda’s statement does not verify Willy’s own description of himself as a well-liked, successful and important salesman. By having so much pressure on him, both his own pressure, desiring to live an upper class life, to make a lot of money and a living for his family and the pressure that the Wagner company and his business put on him, Willy was forced to spend a lot of time alone on the roads and constantly travel to different cities in order to live up to the expectations. This is a one of the factors for Willy’s alienation from other things in life.

But again, one can discover material effects of Willy’s dreams and the expectations from his surroundings. All the pressure that is put on Willy has material sides; his own is that he must become rich and successful as Ben Loman, while his environment pressures him into contributing to the economic growth of the Wagner Company and establish financial security for his family. The following quote is an example of how Willy actually feels and what his reality looks like, ‘’Cause I get so lonely – especially when business is bad and there’s nobody to talk to. I get the feeling that I’ll never sell anything, that I won’t make a living for you [Linda], or a business, a business for the boys. There’s so much I want to make for’’ (24). Another piece of evidence that Willy is a failure and that nobody ever cared about him (except Linda) is the following statement by Linda: ‘’A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man. He works for a company thirty-six years this March, opens up unheard-of territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his salary away’’ (Miller 44).

The material side of the American dream is clearly the dominant side of this dream in Death of a Salesman, however in the coming section focus will be on the question: Can the American dream and capitalism be blamed for the Loman family’s situation? The answer of this question will be given in advance, and that is, the American dream and capitalism cannot be blamed for the Loman family’s situation, rather it is the individuals (characters) that must be blamed.
5. Result and Conclusion

Charley: “The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you’re a salesman and don’t know that. Willy: I’ve always tried to think otherwise, I guess.’” (Miller 72).

It has been argued that Death of a Salesman is a criticism of the American dream and US capitalism and there is evidence for such statements but it would not be fair to completely blame the American dream and capitalism for the Loman family’s situation (Sterling 61). Based on Althusser’s theory it is possible to claim that the ideology that dominates the society the Loman family is in, is actually what we as readers should blame. Unlike traditional Marxists, Althusser argues that the world is not controlled by any specific individuals or actors (i.e. agents); instead it is the structure and the idea behind it that actually controls a certain society. Therefore, based on the material studied from the discussion of the American dream and the historical background (See section 3 and 4.1) it is possible to claim that capitalism is the cause of the Loman family’s suffering and misery. However, it is important to not forget that the idea or ideology behind this capitalistic structure, which (in this case, the American dream) is what has made capitalism to the cause of people’s sufferings and the Loman family’s misery. As it can be seen, first comes the structure and then the idea behind it. But still it is not fair to blame the American dream and also capitalism as the cause of the Lomans’ misfortune.

As mentioned earlier (see section 2.2), Althusser talks about over-determinism, meaning that things do not happen only because of one single reason. Instead one has to consider several factors such as the operating environment, class position, culture, values, the way one perceives the world and etc. to understand and know why things happen. Despite this, Althusser claims that the reason why there is interpellation (meaning that we only believe that we are free, but we are not) is because of capitalism ensures that people are misled. Here, we can see conflicting ideas by Althusser, the purpose here is not attacking Althusser rather it is to see the issue from another perspective.

To answer the second question of this essay, the following question must be asked. If capitalism and the idea/concept of the American dream are only beneficial to a certain group and harmful to regular people like Willy, Biff, Happy and Linda then
how could other characters like Bernard, Ben, Dave Singleman and Charley be successful and make it? They all grew up in the same place and society, had the same prerequisites and opportunities. This indicates that even if the American dream and capitalism might have affected the characters in different ways, still they cannot be blamed for the Loman family’s ‘sufferings and misery’, rather those who must be blamed here are the individuals themselves. For example, it was Willy himself who chose to not follow Ben or it was Biff himself who did not finish his studies, but Bernard did. Dave Singleman worked hard even when he was old, but Willy chose to take his life, in order to become ‘rich’. It would not be valid for anyone to claim that the Loman family was only damaged by capitalism and the American dream because the American dream and capitalism have been beneficial to regular people just like Willy as well.

Miller was certainly inspired by socialist thoughts and that is something that one notices in the play, but claiming that *Death of a Salesman* is a socialist criticism of the American dream and capitalism is a bit exaggerated. Like Mattias Åberg, I would state that Miller’s intention with his play is not supporting capitalism, communism or socialistic thoughts. Instead through his characters and especially Willy, Miller shows that it is your choice of action (freedom of choice) and the consequences of it that make you and the world around you. For example, Ben Loman chose to travel to Africa and the consequences were that he became financially successful, Bernard chose to fulfill his studies and he became a lawyer while Biff chose to not continue with his studies and he became ‘nobody’. Therefore, Miller criticizes neither capitalism nor the American dream, instead he criticizes and centralizes the lack of self-awareness and the choices people make.

Miller did not write *Death of a Salesman* to promote socialist, or communist, way of life. In fact, Miller is recognizing the benefits of living in a capitalistic society since people in these societies indeed have freedom of choice. The main problem with freedom of choice is that you have to know what your choice is. This problem of personal awareness is universal. Miller is thus criticizing the universal human situation; you cannot allow yourself to be controlled by goals set by someone else or your life will lack in meaning (Åberg 11)
The first question of this essay was in which ways has the American dream, as a concept or ideology of happiness and financial success, affected the characters in Miller’s play? Based on the material studied, the answer is that the American dream has functioned as a guideline for the majority of the characters in *Death of a Salesman* and it seems that it has worked for many of them and made things possible for them to achieve their goals. The material side of the American dream can hereby be identified as the dominant in the play and it has affected the characters both mentally and physically. For Willy and his family we discover that the material side of the American dream has negative effects. First, it makes Willy obsessed to money and material goods which finally turn him into a psychologically unstable man who commits suicide to achieve his American dream. Secondly, the material side of the American dream makes Biff to an outsider and a failure both spiritually and materially in the eyes of his family. Happy can be included here too, but in Happy’s case the mental effects are most problematic, were he tends to become more like his father. Thirdly, it does not bring happiness to the Loman family, instead Willy’s American dream shatters the family and separates its member from each other.

Based on the Marxist theories both Althusser’s and classical, it is possible to state that the American dream in *Death of a Salesman* is nothing more than an illusion created by an elite of people to mislead regular Americans such as Willy. In addition, creating a concept of happiness and financial success is the key for this elite to deceive the working class and give them false hopes that they one day can become rich and establish an upper class lifestyle which in itself will make them happy. By making them (the working and lower class) to feel as free agents operating the way they wish and choose, the upper class (capitalists) can through a deep rooted structure and an ideology indirectly control the lower and working class the way they want. According to Althusser but also classical Marxists it is capitalism and the American dream that must be blamed for the way people are tricked and have a bad quality of life.

However, it is wrong to completely blame capitalism and the American dream as the cause of the Loman family’s sufferings and misery. Of course there are negative effects of capitalism and the American dream, such as economic inequality, social inequality and unrealistic dreams for example dreams about endless happiness, but even communism, liberalism, feminism, Confucianism, and other ideologies and views of life have positive and negative effects on people. Therefore, one cannot
claim that the financial success that the American dream advocates in *Death of a Salesman* is something negative. I do not believe that the Loman family is ‘‘tricked’’ by the American dream and capitalism and see them as a reason for their situation and their bad quality of life. We find out that other characters in the play who had the same perquisites as the Loman family managed to achieve their American dream. One could also agree with Ryan and Kasser, who state that too much emphasis on the material side of the American dream may lead to an organismic nightmare for the individual.

To sum up, despite the negative effects of the American dream and capitalism on the characters in Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, one cannot blame them for the Loman family’s situation. It is the individuals (characters) that must be blamed because everyone can independently in a democratic and free society make their own choices. Therefore people have to stand up for their actions and take responsibility for the consequences of their choices and actions whether the consequences are good or bad. One might ask does this mean that Miller actually promotes American classical liberal values? I believe that Miller is not directly promoting any ideological world-view or values, rather Miller has a hidden message in his play, and that is to make his readers simply ask themselves, how self-conscious and independent are we in our choices, actions and way of thinking.
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