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International Journal of Economic Perspectives, 11(1), 207-210

Retrieved from: <https://ijeponline.org/index.php/journal/article>

A STUDY OF THE AMERICAN DREAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *THE GREAT GATSBY* AND *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a marxist psychoanalytic critique of the American dream with special reference to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Aurther Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. This paper is inspired from Sarah Marie Horning's analysis. The close contest between spiritual happiness and material wealth as analysed by various critics, it becomes important to understand the cyclical nature of the American Dream. The desire for wealth and social mobility, an essential part of the Dream, has been a constant driving force in American political culture.

KEYWORDS

Marxism, ideology, capitalism, nostalgia, freedom, equality, growth.

The American Dream has a long history as an economic and literary concept. Many people view the Dream primarily in terms of securing wealth and financial security. In attempting to define or analyze the the American dream, a clear definition is particularly difficult as the concept does not fit neatly with any one discipline. One approach is, therefore, to explore the areas of overlap between literature, economics and politics. By exploring the meeting places of literary, economic and political expression, traces of national identity or ideology can be found at the intersection of the these disciplines, as Jason Dittmer observes:

[I]nstitutionalized regions, states are best understood as an ongoing process of creating and maintaining territorial practices and ideologies. . . . One way in which the symbolic meaning associated with these boundaries materializes is through the production and consumption of popular culture, which leads to the internationalization of the mythic and symbolic of national identities. (626)

Louis Tyson also makes a case for the significance of literature to understanding this economic and political phenomena, particularly from a Marxist perspective, as she applies Louis Althusser's theory that "in order for any social system to survive, its conditions of production must be reproduced in the individual psyche" (1). Althusser's theory was, "[i]n short, [that] literature and art can affect society, even lead it to revolution (Dobie 88). Tyson argues the case for literature as an important tool for the analysis of the psychology of the American Dream since "literature is a repository of both a society's ideologies and its psychological conflicts, it has the capacity to reveal aspects of a culture's collective psyche, an apprehension of how ideological investments reveal the nature of individuals' psychological relationship to their world" (1).

Perhaps more than any other novel, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald is the work of fiction most closely associated with the American Dream. With the American Dream as a central theme of his work, Fitzgerald "has come to be associated with this concept of the American dream more so than any other writer of the twentieth century" (Pearson 638). In the novel, the story of Jay Gatsby is told in retrospect by a the narrator, Nick Carraway. Gatsby, in the ultimate display of the self-made man, "invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was always faithful to the end" (99). He, too, is on a sacred mission, believing, according to Nick, himself to be "a son of God . . . he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" which we come to identify as the American Dream, aka Daisy (99).

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Gatsby is particularly pertinent to understanding the American Dream in that it places particular emphasis on class warfare and, especially, the nostalgic facet of the Dream: "F. Scott Fitzgerald's best-known novel has elicited a critical response that reveals Americans' desire to sustain their nostalgia for an idealized America—and an idealized American ideology—as an absolute positive value of pristine origin" (Tyson 40). *Gatsby* articulates this concept of nostalgia as a "continuous undercurrent of American life, as compelling perhaps for the masses of people as any visionary glimpses of progress" (Dudden 517).

The story chronicles *Gatsby's* pursuit of his lost love, Daisy Buchanan. *Gatsby* believes that by re-inventing himself and becoming a man of wealth and status, he can win her back. We find that Daisy is the motive for *Gatsby's* success and his metaphor for the Dream: "he was consumed with wonder at her presence. He had been full of the idea so long, dreamed of it right through to the end, waited with his teeth set, so to speak, at an inconceivable pitch of intensity" and too, for his failure to capture her/it: "Now, in the reaction, he was running down like an over-wound clock" (93).

While it is true that those last, oft quoted lines of *The Great Gatsby* suggest that there is hope for continued progress encapsulated in the Dream, "borne back ceaselessly into the past;" it is also true that the novel presents the dark side of the American Dream. After all, the fact that the book takes a nostalgic perspective suggests that then, as perhaps now, the Dream is fundamentally flawed as it has grown away from the more fundamental ideals which those first dreamers first imbued in it. Tyson writes that "The Great *Gatsby* does not portray the American dream as an absolute positive value of pristine origin that somehow gets corrupted. Rather, because it is a commodity—in this case, a sign invested with the desire for consumption as the principle mode of production—the American dream itself is a source of corruption" (41).

The bitter view of the American Dream as Fitzgerald writes it is not unfounded. As Stewart writes, in the 1930s "Capitalists shivered; the more cold-blooded Marxist rubbed their hands" (9). In the novel, Fitzgerald structures a society based upon the Marxist scheme of class warfare and commodification—holding that elusive symbol of status as its core. However, *The Great Gatsby* is not entirely critical of the Dream, in fact, it supports it in many ways. Tyson points out that

[o]perating the against *The Great Gatsby's* powerful critique of commodity psychology is the novel's subtle reinforcement of the commodity's seductive appeal. This countermovement operates on two levels. First, because Nick is seduced by the dream *Gatsby* represents for him, his narrative seduces 34 many readers into collusion with *Gatsby's* desire. Second, the language used to describe the physical setting of this world of wealth makes it attractive despite people like the Buchanans who populate it. (66-7)

In keeping with the coming-to-terms soul searching of American values that occurred during the Depression, Fitzgerald set out, in *Gatsby*, "to explore America's past, to recover some idea of ourselves as a people, to look to the starting place and 'find out what the thing was' that was America" (Rohrkemper 153). Those infamous closing lines suggest that Fitzgerald had made his determination: he reframes the dream in terms of the early ideals brought over by those early "Dutch sailors" rather than as the Meyer Wolfesheim-esque version, commodified and corrupted. Tyson writes that "while *The Great Gatsby* offers a significant critique of the American dream's commodified ideology, it also repackages and markets the dream anew" (62).

Renato Rosaldo would refer to this repackaging of the American Dream as "Imperialist Nostalgia." This work, like the closing lines of Fitzgerald's novel, is a sociological study that links the colonial and early periods of American politics and literature to the modern. Rosaldo supports the notion that where Americans find fault or failure in the American Dream, psychological phenomena such as imperialist nostalgia, which Rosaldo defines as "nostalgia for the colonized culture as it was 'traditionally' . . . a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves

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transformed. Imperialist nostalgia thus revolves around a paradox . . ." (107-08).

That paradox is, in terms of the American Dream, the cyclical nature of the Dream in which we criticize it (as Fitzgerald and Miller do, for example) in times of economic crisis, while longing for the same "tradition," in this case consumerism and capitalism, which created the situation in the first place. The repackaging of the American Dream is the key to its importance as it causes Americans to question, evaluate, and reshape our fundamental values.

Another text, which operates as an evaluation of American values, in a more unforgiving critique of the American Dream, is Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Like Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, Miller's play also focuses on the American Dream, as Miller writes in the opening lines that "[a]n air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality" (11). The play provides fodder for analysis of the psychological underpinnings of the Dream as expressed through Willy's psychological deterioration. It is Willy's pursuit of the commodified ideal as articulated by Ben, for example, in his rags to riches story that Willy frequently revisits:

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

Willy, to the boys: "You see what I been talking about? The greatest things can happen!" (48).

One might complete Willy's interjection with ". . . if only you believe in the Dream." As Lois Tyson points out, "it is in the American dream--specifically, in its relation to commodity psychology--that the play's psychological and political strands are inextricably entwined" (64). Like Meyer Wolfesheim, and even *Gatsby* himself in *The Great Gatsby*, we get the feeling that Ben's untold exploits in the jungle are less than honest. Even so, inspired by Ben's success, Willy believes that through his ingenuity and entrepreneurship as a salesman, he will be able to achieve the American Dream. *Death of a Salesman*, though set in 1949, is reminiscent of the boom and crash of the Great Depression, as Willy remembers his own success in the late 1920s

Willy: "I was thinking of the Chevy. Slight pause. Nineteen twenty-eight . . . when I had that red Chevy— Breaks off. That funny? I coulda sworn I was driving that Chevy today." (19)

The criticism of values, though, occurs in Willy's tragic failure. He laments the failure of his sons, who, uneducated and unambitious, fail to find their own wealth and prosperity, and the loss of natural beauty

LINDA: "We should've bought the land next door.

WILLY: "The Street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the back yard. . . . Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them?" (17).

There is also the incident of the refrigerator, a telling sign that Willy is also caught up in an endless pursuit of commodity as he argues with his wife, Linda, that they would not be paying repairs, if only they had "bought a welladvertised machine" like a General Electric refrigerator, lamenting "Whoever heard of a Hastings refrigerator?" (73). Of course, Willy is caught up in the ultimate capitalist system of planned obsolescence.

However, the play is not entirely a criticism of the American Dream. Rather, it is a criticism of the commodity or material side of the Dream, while advocating the spiritual. Arthur Miller writes of his own play that while he is criticizing the consumerism of the Dream, the health of American society depends upon a renewal of the spiritual system which also structures it:

Equally, the fact that Willy's law—the belief, in other words, which administers guilt to him—is not a civilizing statute whose destruction menaces us all; it is rather, a deeply believed and deeply suspect "good" which, when questioned as to its value, as it is in this play, serves more to raise our

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anxieties than to reassure us of the existence of an unseen but humane metaphysical system in the world. My attempt in the play was to counter this anxiety with an opposing system which, so to speak, is in a race for Willy's faith, and it is the system of love which is opposite the law of success. (169)

Miller also notes that his construction is not entirely a Marxist one: "I do not believe that any work of art can help but be diminished by its adherence at any cost to a political program . . . there is no political program . . . which can encompass the complexities of real life. The most decent man in *Death of a Salesman* is a capitalist (Charley), whose aims are not different from Willy Loman's (170).

To underscore the spiritual emphasis, Miller writes that what it was that he saw as opposite the law of success was "love" (170). Willy does not enjoy the love of his sons, as their mother constantly reminds them how repugnant she finds it that they have turned their backs on him (60). In his Marxist (though he denies Marxism as a motivator for the play) critique of the Dream Miller, too, is "repackaging" the American Dream to emphasize the values of family, love, nature, hard work, education—all the values which undergird the Dream, but sometimes become obscured by the fervent pursuit of commodity. Thus, again, where the Marxist progression fails, a restructuring of the Dream which looks back with nostalgia to those earlier, better days, as Willy constantly does, revives the "race for faith," as Miller calls it.

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