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‘I Realized What a Ridiculous Lie My Whole Life Has Been’: Distortions of the American Dream in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust.*

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Abstract:

James Truslow Adams first defined the American Dream as one that would allow everyone, regardless of their origin or social status, to prosper in a place of free and equal opportunity. However, the very idea of the self-made man and the accessibility of a collective dream that anybody who works hard can achieve became intrinsically unattainable following the Great Depression. Afterwards, as capitalist consumerism progressively morphed the idyllic values of the American Dream, the Dream itself developed in ways which were far from the conventional vision of it. This paper argues that Arthur Miller’s most renowned play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and Nathanael West’s novel *The Day of the Locust* (1939) offer the opportunity to explore different distortions stemming from the concept of the ‘original’ American Dream. In this paper, I show how Miller and West’s texts can be examined as articulating the disorientation caused by the inevitable corruption of the original idea of the American Dream. In order to do so, I analyse several narrative elements common to the two texts, achieving an overview of the distortions of the American Dream present in *Salesman* and *Locust*. Namely, I examine the values of the ‘original’ American Dream, the conception of right and wrong within the texts, the representation of obsessions in Miller’s play, and the distortion of time and space in both works. As a result, this paper presents how, through the employment of these distortions, Miller and West’s texts highlight the truth of a profoundly fragmented and contradictory America.

‘I am interested in making a good case for distortion, as I am coming to believe that it is the only way to make people see’

–Flannery O’ Connor, *The Habit of Being*

James Truslow Adams first defined the American Dream as one that would allow everyone, regardless of their origin or social status, to prosper in a place of free and equal opportunity (Erdheim 53). However, the very idea of the self-made man and the accessibility of a collective dream that anybody who works hard can achieve becomes intrinsically unattainable as capitalist consumerism progressively morphs the idyllic values of the American Dream. Accordingly, Arthur Miller’s most renowned play *Death of a Salesman* (*Salesman*) presents the skewed reality of a family slowly falling to pieces within the context of 1940s America. Focusing on Willy Loman’s last day alive, Miller’s play presents the opportunity to analyse a variety of distortions surrounding Willy’s vision of the American Dream, as well as those which constitute the very reality the Loman family lives in. Within his novel, *The Day of the Locust* (*Locust*) Nathanael West has been defined as the ‘sharply sad-eyed documentor’ (Widmer 180) of the circumscribed and peculiar reality of 1930s Hollywood. West’s interpretation of the Hollywood Novel genre presents the degradation of a corrupted environment, where all the characters inevitably become victims of its inconsistencies. As a result, both *Salesman* and *Locust* offer the opportunity to explore the different distortions stemming from the concept of the ‘original’ American Dream. Through the employment of these distortions, Miller and West highlight the truth of a profoundly fragmented and contradictory America.

For Cara Erdheim, discussing the literary embodiment of the American Dream without mentioning Miller’s Willy Loman proves as complicated as reflecting on Willy without invoking the American Dream (65). The protagonist of *Salesman* has been described as a ‘failed dreamer’ (62); nonetheless, it would be diminishing to simply reduce Willy to the failed pursuer of a unified dream. The illusion of Willy’s own American myth appears to follow the traditional ‘self-made man’ path: ‘I’d like to buy some seeds. […] You wait kid, before it’s all over we’re gonna get a little place out in the country […]’ (Miller, “Death” 55–56). The distortion of Willy’s dreams of achievement lies in the nature of the American Dream itself, and the morphed conception of it that arose after the Great Depression. Miller makes it clear that any idealisation of the American Dream is doomed to collapse onto itself; as the original idea of the American Dream was damaged by America’s ever-changing

economic situation, Willy's firm faith in his crystallised idea of the American Dream similarly deteriorates. Indeed, Miller prompts his protagonist towards the realisation that 'Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground' (96), finally uncovering the contradictions of a collective American dream.

Moreover, each Loman family member embodies a value contained within the traditional American Dream. To begin with, Willy becomes a 'pathetic archetype of the American dream of success' (Wilson 46). Willy undoubtedly represents the hard work promoted by the American Dream, the resolute though intangible conviction that 'The world is an oyster, but you don't crack it open on a mattress!' (Miller, "Death" 32). Furthermore, Happy embodies the relentless optimism of the American Dream, unreasonably persistent even when confronted with the brute truth: 'HAPPY: He's always had respect for—BIFF: What the hell do you know about it?' (40), '*(deeply moved)*: Always did, Pop' (106). Happy mostly provides empty one-liners throughout the whole play, as he always only sees the positive sides of things, resulting in a naivety that comes across almost as toxic. Happy's childish one-dimensionality thus brings to mind the American Dream's – now corrupted – romanticisation of life in America, highlighting the very *happiness* the Dream inculcated in and promised to American citizens (Erdheim 55). On the other hand, Happy's brother Biff represents the individualism encouraged by the American Dream, as every citizen was prompted to work for and on themselves. However, in *Salesman*, it is an individualism which becomes opportunistic when in need, leading Biff to commit actual crimes: 'I stole a suit in Kansas City and I was in jail' (104). As Biff's confrontation with his parents reaches a climax, he seems to take responsibility for his own actions, 'I stole myself out of every good job since high school!' (104), explaining that he has had an epiphany regarding his own purpose in life (104). Still, as Biff simultaneously blames his father for instilling too much confidence in his capacities, it appears evident that the American Dream's value of individual and autonomous self-fulfilment has converted into pure, bleak egoism. Ultimately, Linda arguably represents the most innocent feature of the American Dream – namely, the nurturing aspect of a motherly nation. Accordingly, Linda's 'self-sacrificing wisdom' (Dolan 12) propels her towards assuming the role of a selfless carer who lives in denial of the adverse circumstances she is immersed in:

> LINDA: When you write you're coming, he's all smiles, and talks about the future, and—he's just wonderful. I think it's just that maybe he can't bring himself

> to—to open up to you. Why are you so hateful to each other? Why is that? (Miller, "Death" 38)

Linda mistakenly attempts to protect the values both her family and her nation should stand for, rejoicing in every minute detail that sustains the illusion of a joyful, united family. Similarly, whilst the American economic boom apparently promised widespread capitalist fortune, the ideals of the American Dream became more and more distorted following the Great Depression. Therefore, Linda and the American nation seem to perpetuate the very delusions the Loman family and American citizens as a whole are ruined by; they share a willingness to motherly protect its citizens and her family respectively.

On the other hand, within West's rendition of 1930s Hollywood, the American Dream appears corrupted to begin with. Despite the repercussions of the Depression, Hollywood's Golden Age was still in full bloom (Rattray 402). In *Locust,* West uncovers the false perfection perpetuated by the world of the movies; as John Springer remarks, the subject of Hollywood often recalls the end of a journey towards a kind of national identity, which then translates in either the fulfilment or the betrayal of the American Dream (439). In *Locust,* West explores a true, outright betrayal of the American Dream, which is at once material and spiritual. The former occurs through the very corruption of Hollywood itself, the material confusion of acting with reality, as exemplified by Harry and Faye Greener. Nevertheless, it is the spiritual betrayal that becomes more relevant when analysing West's interpretation of the Hollywoodian American Dream. In contrast to *Salesman,* American Dream values are not introduced to then be distorted: the distortion in place is one on a bigger scale, represented by the existence of Hollywood itself. The essence of Hollywood's spiritual betrayal is best condensed by Tod's articulate reflection as he stands at the studio back lot:

> In the center of the field was a gigantic pile of sets, flats and props. […] This was the final dumping ground. He thought of Janvier's "Sargasso Sea". […] Many boats sink and never reach the Sargasso, but no dream ever entirely disappears. Somewhere it troubles some unfortunate person and some day, when that person has been sufficiently troubled, it will be reproduced on the lot. (West, "Locust" 99)

As Tod links dreams with acting, reflecting on somebody's dreams being reproduced as movies, the American Dream itself appears piled in the final dumping ground Tod describes. As the American Dream cannot effectively persist within this reality, West merges

the material and spiritual betrayal. The Dream is now abandoned, lost in the superficiality of Hollywood, and discarded of all its values and principles. Its myth is now inevitably reduced to a vague, distant torment that can only be left to be mimicked and artificially reproduced in the movie industry. Even if 'no dream ever entirely disappears', the sense of a national, collective identity ultimately does, in the face of the ruthless artificial individuality perpetuated by Hollywood itself. The aspiration of superficial success has already replaced genuine values, as exemplified by Faye confidently affirming '"I'm going to be a star some day. […] If I'm not, I'll commit suicide"' (West, "Locust" 54). As a result, the Hollywoodian American Dream is inherently corrupt, as people drawn to it have already been affected by its distortions.

The alteration of traditional American Dream values leads to the analysis of the distortion of right and wrong within the two texts. *Locust*'s protagonist, Tod, finds himself at a party thrown by Claude Estee, and he is invited by Alice Estee's friend to notice the 'dead horse' lying in the Estees' pool. Curiously enough, as Tod asks his interlocutor what material the fake horse is made of, her reaction comes across as simply nonsensical: '"Then you weren't fooled? How impolite!"' (West, "Locust" 18). Within Hollywood, everything is reversed: it is wrong to assume the phoniness of things that are very much artificial. Thus, the right thing to do appears just to '"cherish [one's] illusion"' (19), to continue living within an easier 'fantastic tale of make-believe' (Rogers 229), as wrong and right switch places in the coveted but morally empty microsphere of Hollywood. Accordingly, West presents the same distortion in the treatment of his own characters: wrong replaces what should be morally right, and as a consequence there is a complete absence of morality. Most strikingly, Tod, who has been considered the only character 'capable of growth and change as a painter and as a human' in the novel (Edenbaum 205), progressively matures a horrendously perverted rape fantasy towards Faye, the persisting object of his desire. In fact, Tod's pursuit of Faye turns into a nightmarish obsession, as he suddenly states that 'Nothing less violent than rape would do' (West, "Locust" 65). It is then evident that West undertakes a harsh, mordent moral evaluation of the micro-universe he scrupulously depicts. An early reviewer of West's poignantly remarked that West possessed a 'Swiftian mordancy and a poet's eye coupled with a real moral passion' (Boroff 230). The result of West's attitude is that every character is blameful and cannot distinguish right from wrong, just like Hollywood expects its spectators to not distinguish real from fake. There is no room

for doing 'the right thing' in Hollywood, as West creates a fictional universe where the only permissible perception is outright wrong, both objectively and morally.

On the other hand, Miller seems to remove both objective rights and wrongs from the framework of *Salesman*, especially for what concerns Willy's aspirations. Willy's idea of 'right' appears to coincide with the idealisation of his brother Ben who, to Willy's eyes, is the actual personification of the traditional American Dream. In fact, the only instance where Willy expresses a judgment regarding his own decisions and actions is inevitably tied to Ben's life experience: 'I was right! I was right! I was right!' (Miller, "Death" 41). Willy leaves no space for any other kind of visions about life, not even a potential vision of his own, as he aspires to blindly imitate those who he deems have found the utter right way to live, such as Ben and famous salesman Dave Singleman. Thomas P. Adler comments that Miller's characters 'imagine themselves wrongly, so that the dream and actuality never coalesce' (xi). As a matter of fact, given that Ben represents the utter 'right' way to live for Willy, as he is described as being '*utterly certain of his destiny'* (Miller, "Death" 34) the first time he appears in the play, Biff's exchange with Willy as he reminds him who he eventually is, 'I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!' (105), further reinforces the distortion of Willy's conception of right and wrong. Accordingly, Willy's deluded response 'I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman' (105) confirms that Willy actually has no idea of how to define himself, as he dreams of a version of himself which is ultimately the second-hand version of somebody else. Drama critic Harold Clurman deemed that 'Arthur Miller is a moralist. His talent is for a kind of humanistic jurisprudence: he sticks to the facts of the case' (339). Although it seems daring to consider Miller a moralist, for, unlike *Locust,* there is arguably no explicit moral judgment about the characters' actions, there is indeed a sort of 'humanistic jurisprudence' in Miller's treatment of right and wrong in *Salesman*. Indeed, Miller effectively perpetuates a factual rendering of the evidence of reality: it becomes complicated to be biased towards Willy and his unfortunate situation, as Linda does, or to side with Biff in remarking that his father 'had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong' (Miller, "Death" 110). Then, there arises the question of whether there can exist a right dream at all within the skewed yet authentic reality of *Salesman.* Miller therefore invites the reader to re-evaluate Happy's reflection after his father's suicide, as he insists that Willy 'had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have' (111).

Furthermore, a concept Miller overturns within *Salesman* is that of obsessions: namely, totally normal attributes, such as Willy's hopes for the future, become actual obsessions for those who pursue them. In fact, Willy's obsessive ideas turn into delusions of grandeur and further his pathetic hope which, in turn, drives him into either depressive episodes or manic optimism (Miller, "Death" 40–41, 50), without a middle ground. Willy's faith in the future thus transforms into deep anxiety; at the end of Act One, Willy is significantly once again anticipating the day that is about to come, when he will ask his boss to be relocated in New York. Whilst he hopefully '*star*[es] *through the window into the moonlight*' (54), Miller lets us know, through stage directions, that Biff has just got the confirmation of his father's suicide attempts. Accordingly, Miller himself explained that, in *Salesman,* he '[…] sought the relatedness of all things by isolating their unrelatedness, a man superbly alone with his sense of not having touched' (Miller, "Collected Plays" 29–30). Willy bases his love for his family and his very connection to them in his distorted faith, rooted in the comforting thought of what is yet to come. His relentless hope is the only attribute that drives him forward, so pervasive that is noticed even by the oblivious Happy: 'Dad is never so happy as when he's looking forward to something!' (Miller, "Death" 83). There is a direct link between Willy's states of mind and his distorted hopes: the latter are never actually based on anything concrete, for they can only exist in the meantime, as Willy is constantly waiting for a comforting future that does not arrive.

Moreover, distortions of time and space affect the structure of the two texts. Within *Salesman*, the perception of time is so altered that there is no delineated alternation between past and present. As Miller himself remarked, the play's temporal confusion highlights a 'mobile concurrency of past and present' (Miller, "Collected Plays"26). This fluid distortion of time translates into the dislocated conversations Willy has with past and present characters. As Willy merges the two, he confuses his interlocutors through juxtapositions of time slices:

> BEN: Opportunity is tremendous in Alaska, William. Surprised you're not up there.
>
> WILLY: Sure, tremendous.
>
> CHARLEY: Heh? (Miller, "Death" 35)

In fact, Willy's past itself becomes significantly distorted as well. Even positive memories cannot exist unaltered, as they morph into reminders of Willy's failure as a

husband, father, and altogether as a human being: '*(THE WOMAN bursts out laughing, and LINDA's laughter blends in)*' (30). Miller furthermore explained that 'there is no past to be "brought forward" in a human being […] he is his past at every moment […]' (Miller, "Collected Plays" 23). As a result, there is no real moment being in the whole of *Salesman*. Neal Dolan argued that Willy effectively loses contact with the present, as he dives into the past and sporadically re-emerges (20). Although Willy definitely does lose contact with the present, he does not really leave the present and then return to it, as he is relentlessly chasing his (or better, Ben's) ideal of the American Dream. What takes place within *Salesman* is not an actual shift between times: rather, it seems as if Willy is at once in the past, and at once in a present that is never actually happening at the time being. In fact, this is arguably the only space where Willy's vision of the American Dream can exist. The temporal distortion goes even further, contaminating Willy's own perception towards time: 'I'm not interested in stories about the past' (Miller, "Death" 84). As Willy expresses his indifference about past events, it becomes clear how Miller's time distortion emphasises Willy's confusion regarding his identity, as he continuously shows how, effectively, he is different versions of his past.

In *Locust*, there is a dynamic distortion of space and structures in place. West presents the collapsing of material structures, as sets literally blow up, 'When the front rank of Milhaud's heavy division started up the slope of Mont-St-Jean, the hill collapsed' ("Locust" 02), and fictional mobs appear and take over the scene: 'An army of cavalry and foot was passing. It moved like a mob' (3). Concerning West's earlier novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, M. A. Klug reflected that the text constituted 'a kind of artificial madness' (Klug 20). The same applies indeed for *Locust*, although this artificiality ends up being too very real within the frame of the twisted Hollywoodian Dream of fame and success. The escalation of mobs and sets blowing up in fact foreshadows the full-scale riot that explodes at the end of the novel: 'The crowd in front of the theatre had charged. He was surrounded by churning legs and feet' (West, "Locust" 156). Even in this case, though, space is distorted, and confusion arises as to whether the riot is an actual one or if it is just a consequence of the Hollywood stars stepping onto the red carpet (165). This reading thus further emphasises West's criticism of the American Dream, as he presents a situation where the crowd is so concerned with the stars' arrival that, at first, they do not even notice the actual uprising they are being caught up in: '"Yeah. Somebody hollered, 'Here comes Gary Cooper,' and then wham!"' (166). As James F. Light considers, 'the world in which West proclaimed his interest was the world of insecurity, instability – not the world of order, of

normality' (Light 47). Accordingly, within the riot, Tod tries to find a landmark to orientate himself with: 'Not being able to touch was an even more dreadful sensation […]' (West, "Locust" 163), and as he loses contact with the ground, he finds himself utterly lost amidst the delirious crowd. The type of spatial insecurity and instability explored in *Locust* is then another result of the distortion of the Hollywoodian American Dream, as West critically blends the frenzy caused by the film stars' parade with the crude reality of the novel's closing riot.

Ultimately, the reality of the American Dream in post-war America is documented through the distortions shown by Miller and West. Accordingly, both authors present an array of characters and situations which encourage spectators and readers to reflect on the circumstances they exist in, as they offer the evaluation of two different realities which are both inevitably and irremediably distorted. Both *Salesman* and *Locust* provide a nuanced critical insight into the America of the 1930s and the late 1940s, depicting several distortions concerning intrinsic elements of the stories they recount. As a result, the two works open questions on America's authenticity and superficiality, interrogating the very values America *should* stand for, and examining their corruption. Thus, through these distortions, Miller and West successfully portray the common strive for an inevitably twisted and anachronistic American Dream.

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