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The American Dream is an elusive term that signifies something a little different to each person. In Arthur Miller's *"Death of a Salesman"* and Allen Ginsberg's *"Howl,"* the traditional American Dream and its role in modern society is called into question.

Generally, the American Dream symbolizes overcoming adversity to rise to success and prosperity. It is often a materialistic type of success, rather than true fulfillment or content. For Willy, this establishes expectations and standards that are unattainable, and the struggle for it leads to his eventual downfall. Willy's brother Ben is an embodiment in the play of the absurd American capitalist dream. He walked into the jungle at 17, and walked out a rich man at 22 (Miller 1253). He is also the embodiment of Willy's failure to escape this American Dream. Ben earned his riches in the African jungle, away from the concrete and pressures of American society. Willy continues trying to earn his success and happiness in the way he has been taught he must, through hard work in an unrewarding job, but he is unable to attain what his brother has. Biff understands this in a way that Willy cannot or will not. He says:

"I spent six or seven years after high school trying to work myself up. Shipping clerk, salesmen, business of one kind or another. And it's a measly manner of existence. To get on that subway on the hot mornings in summer. To devote your whole life to keeping stock, or making phone calls, or selling or buying. To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when all you

really desire is to be outdoors, with your shirt off. And always to have to get ahead of the next fella. And still – that’s how you build a future” (Miller 1240).

In this play, acting out the American Dream is synonymous with denying your true self. Everyone seeks the same fulfillment, yet no one ever feels fulfilled.

Ginsberg also sees the restraints of traditional society. He asks, “What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?” (1361). *Howl* is literally a cry against capitalism, repression, social inequality and the expectations produced by mainstream American culture. Even Willy, as he strives for his illusion of the dream, resents the materialism of the society in which he lives. He complains to Linda, “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. They should’ve had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there?” (Miller 1238). Despite his urge for his children to be successful in this world, he longs for another, where man can be with nature and work with his hands. The “sphinx of cement and aluminum” constrains Willy and his sons.

The treatment of the American Dream is different in both works. Willy holds on to the American Dream until it becomes his destruction. The harsh contrast between this dream and his reality proves to be too much for his fragile mental state. Ginsberg’s personas, on the other hand, throw this traditional American idealism to the wind. They “followed the brilliant Spaniard to converse about America and Eternity, a hopeless task” (1358). Talking about America is a “hopeless task”, and so it is abandoned. This is the difference between a character like Willy,

who hangs despairingly to the mainstream, and the counter-cultural personas in *Howl* who remain intentionally beyond traditional society.

The structure of these works helps to construct the plot. *Death of a Salesman* contains elements of magic realism. It integrates unreal events and magic, or insanity, into the rational world. The play is intentionally chaotic and confusing to reflect the chaos of life in modern society. The format also contributes to the sense of unreal, and the mental degradation in the plot. It is often difficult to tell who is actually present with Willy and who is a figment of his imagination, and this depicts his failing mental stability.

In *Howl*, the structure is similarly chaotic. As if to reflect the drugged masses he is describing, Ginsberg's poem seems to be a series of hallucinations. He replaces formal structure and rhythm with enjambment and diatribe. *Howl* shows perceived insanity as a kind of elevated state, and the mainstream society as those with "brains all drained of brilliance" (1357). He sees poetic beauty in the counter culture, the insane and unstable, the impoverished and the sinners.

Linda says, "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" (1257). She uses passive construction and ends with "such a person" rather than Willy's name. This suggests that Willy is a representation of a number of such individuals who cannot live up to the standards they set themselves, and see death as a solution. This is because, as we see in *Howl*, death is better than

working a meaningless job as Willy does. Ginsberg talks about those “who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully, gave up and were forced to open antique stores where they thought they were growing old and cried” (1359). Willy cares only about the success of his children, and tries multiple times, and finally succeeds at committing suicide to somehow get them closer to what he could not attain.

These works urge us to reconsider disability and insanity. When Willy begins talking to the kitchen chair and believing it is Biff, the audience considers him crazy. To Ginsberg, however, Willy may be called a “platonic conversationalist” (1357). This romanticizes the notion of insanity and the plight of the common man. Further, Ginsberg suggests equality between the characters in his poem that is not present in *Death of a Salesman*. He says:

“The world is holy ! The soul is holy ! The skin is holy ! The nose is holy ! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy ! / Everything is holy ! everybody’s holy ! everywhere is holy ! every day is in eternity ! Everyman’s an angel !” (Ginsberg 1363).

Ginsberg ends his poem with an optimistic assessment of the human condition. Each person is holy, and will break the constraints of traditional society.

It is only through denial of the American Dream and consumer society that an individual can be truly free. Ginsberg and Miller both use insanity as a way to explain the chaos and absurdity of modern America. It is through these “crazy” people that we understand the insanity of our society.

Works Cited

Miller, Arthur. "Death of a Salesman." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. N. pag. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen. "Howl." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. N. pag. Print.