

Shattered Ideals: A Marxist Analysis of the American Dream as Ideology and False Consciousness in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman

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Abstract

Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman (1949) offers a penetrating critique of American capitalist ideology and its psychological consequences for the individual. This paper implies a qualitative thematic textual analysis, guided by Marxist literary theory, to examine how the American dream functions as a hegemonic ideology and how false consciousness shapes Willy Loman's self-perception, family relationships, and ultimate destruction. Textual evidence is drawn from key dialogues, character interactions, and recurring motifs, including the pursuit of material prosperity, nostalgia, self-delusion, and the collision of illusion with reality. The analysis proceeds in three stages: (1) identifying ideological structures embedded in the text, (2) tracing how these structures are internalized by characters, and (3) examining the psychological and relational consequences of that internalization. The findings demonstrate that Willy equates personal worth with economic success and social status, generating a destructive cycle of self-deception, family estrangement, and psychological disintegration. His inability to perceive the structural forces that govern his life exemplifies the operation of false consciousness as theorized in the Marxist tradition. This paper argues that Miller stages the American Dream not merely as private aspiration but as a mass ideology with profound psychological and relational costs that remain urgently relevant to contemporary debates on inequality and consumerism.

Keywords: American Dream, Marxist criticism, false consciousness, capitalist ideology, Death of Salesman

Introduction

Death of a Salesman (1949), by Arthur Miller, is a uniquely double-edged sword, both a domestic tragedy and a sustained critique of ideology, in the American literary canon. The play follows the final days of Willy Loman, an aging traveling salesman whose self-concept is built on the tenets of the American Dream, which is the promise that personal charisma, effort, and social popularity are enough to ensure material wealth and social acceptance. Those promises do not come true, and Willy does not give up on the ideology; he takes failure to himself as a

personal failing, which is the main tragedy of the play.

It is not just about Willy's situation, from a Marxist point of view. The ideology of capitalism actively constructs individual and social identity and makes historically specific values such as competition, accumulation, and upward mobility seem normal and natural. As Tyson (2015) points out, Marxist criticism is focused specifically on cracking the ideological shell that masks structural inequalities because of individual merit or failure. Willy Loman is the ultimate example of this mystification: a man who is so thoroughly

interpellated by the capitalist ideology that he can't tell the difference between what he wants and what the capitalist system has produced in him.

In this study, the two interlocked Marxist concepts of the American Dream as a hegemonic ideology and false consciousness as the process of its internalization are analyzed in the context of *Death of a Salesman*. The paper suggests that in Miller's play, there is not only an economic logic of capitalism but a psychological one, a way in which dominant values invade the subjectivity and distort perception and finally kill those who most faithfully conform to them.

This study aims to examine how *Death of a Salesman* constructs the American Dream as a manufactured ideology formation within a capitalist social order and to investigate how false consciousness determines Willy Loman's self-understanding, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships. The study answers (i) how *Death of a Salesman* represents the American Dream as an ideological construct that sustains and reproduces capitalist social relations? (ii) In what ways does false consciousness shape Willy Loman's perception of personal success and failure, and with what psychological and relational consequences?

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on Marxist literary theory, which is a theory that studies the works of literature in connection with the social, economic, and ideological systems in which they exist and in which they are created. As Tyson (2015) explains in *Critical Theory Today*, the primary focus of Marxist criticism is class conflict and exploitation, ideology, and how dominant social formations affect human consciousness. In this sense, literature is not a reflection of the individual experience, but a space where ideology is performed, where dominant ideologies are naturalized, reproduced, or, in the case of the play by Miller, made visible and questioned.

According to Marx, ideology is a set of ideas, values, and images that are constructed to make the

interests of a dominant class look universal, natural, and inevitable. This is where the concept of ideology as 'the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' is especially apt: ideology is not simply an external deception of individuals, but the very way they relate to themselves as subjects in a social order. In the case of *Death of a Salesman*, this approach allows one to read Willy Loman as less a man of misguided beliefs and more a subject who has been produced by capitalist ideology, whose desires, self-assessments, and relational patterns are the imprints of a social order he is unable to see from within.

The Marxist term false consciousness was developed out of Engels' letters and later in the writings of other Marxist thinkers: it describes a situation in which people internalize and perpetuate perspectives and values that benefit the interests of a ruling class rather than their own. False consciousness is not only ignorance, but also a false perception of social reality, produced by the material and symbolic institutions of the dominant order. For *Death of a Salesman*, it serves as the analytical lens through which to explore the ways that Willy internalizes the American Dream, thus failing to recognize the structural forces at play in his life and attributing his shortcomings to his own personal inadequacy.

Research Methodology

The method used in this study is Qualitative thematic textual analysis of *Death of a Salesman*. The goals of the research are well suited to qualitative thematic analysis, which allows for systematic and interpretatively rigorous examination of meaning-patterns present in a literary text, attending to the specific language, imagery, and structural features by which the patterns are constructed and communicated (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis was done in three steps. The first phase involved a preliminary reading of the entire text and the identification of passages and exchanges

that were relevant to the two main concepts of the American Dream as an ideology and false consciousness. Selection criteria included: (a) explicit statements by characters about success and failure, value and aspiration, or (b) scenes in which the contrast between the ideological and the material is dramatized, or (c) scenes that cause interpersonal conflict to arise from the interplay of ideologically conditioned expectations. In the second phase, the chosen passages were analyzed in detail, focusing on the language used, the rhetorical devices used, and the context of each exchange as part of the whole play.

In the third stage, the findings were thermalized and organized into three analytical categories corresponding to the play's main ideological operations: the construction of the American Dream as an ideology, the internalization of false consciousness, and the relational and psychological effects of the internalization of false consciousness.

All quotations from the text are from the Penguin Books edition of Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (Miller, 1998). Secondary sources include peer-reviewed scholarly articles, book-length studies in Marxist literary theory and Miller criticism, as found in the databases and used to provide context for and theory about textual findings.

Literature Review

The play has been the subject of significant scholarly discussion from a Marxist point of view, and critics have been consistently interested in the nature of the play as a criticism of American capitalism. This review explores the main themes of this scholarship prior to the identification of the gap that the current study seeks to address.

One of the most explored aspects of Marxism in the play is alienation. Both Ahmad and Malik (2025) and Kareem (2024) show that Willy's role in the economy is purely instrumental; he is needed when he is productive and not needed when he is not. This analysis is directly related to Marx's description

of the alienated worker under capitalism, who becomes just a commodity in the labor market. Willy's job loss is therefore not just his professional downfall, but his socially recognized selfhood is being annihilated.

The theme of false consciousness has been addressed as a separate but related theme. Even though the Dream is an illusion and not a reality of society, Willy is an ardent believer in the American Dream (Shah, 2020). For Shah, the idea of a system that is systematically exploiting him is an example of the power of capitalist ideology to shape people's thoughts and stop them from realizing that they are being exploited. Ahmad and Pervaiz (2020) take this analysis further and demonstrate how false consciousness is a psychological mechanism that leads Willy to believe that systemic failure is due to personal failure.

A third aspect of the scholarship is consumerism and materialism. Rahman and Iqbal (2023) show how Willy's dreams are expressed in his pursuit of commodities and in his enactment of middle-class respectability. In the play, material objects are the symbol for the value of society, and Malik et al. (2023) have provided an eco-Marxist reading; the market's logic is the one that determines Willy's own value, even at the end of his life.

Yilmaz (2025) and Mızrak (2025) place the play in a larger context to critique the American Dream as a cultural myth, which hides the reality of social and economic limitations that shape people's lives. Mızrak's comparison to *The Great Gatsby* is useful in revealing how both works demonstrate the structural impossibility of the Dream to those who have not been granted the material conditions of the Dream.

But not all scholarships are simply "directly Marxist". Anwar (2018) does a psychoanalytical counter-reading, arguing that Willy's tragedy is significantly due to narcissistic pathology: his obsessive self-aggrandizement, his refusal of practical help from Charley, and his compulsive fantasizing, all of which cannot be reduced to systemic oppression alone. A Marxist critique does

not have to reject individual psychology, but rather, as Tyson (2015) explains, it shows how structural inequalities and ideological mystifications make it seem as though outcomes are due to individual effort or lack of effort, when in fact they are often, if not largely, outside of the individual's control.

Another criticism is that the internal logic of the play does not hold up because the relative success of Charley and Bernard (who gains social mobility through hard work) seems to imply that the capitalist system does work when it is done right. But this reading is wrong in interpreting the Marxist analytical statement. Marxist criticism is not that capitalism is necessarily a bad system for everyone, but that it is an unequal system; that success in capitalism is dependent on certain factors, including class position, social capital, and resources, which are systematically ignored by the ideology of individual meritocracy. Exceptions do not refute structural inequality but reveal the selectivity of the processes through which structural inequality is reproduced and legitimized.

Despite the breadth of scholarship that has been developed, there is a unique gap in analysis. The existing literature has focused on false consciousness as operating in the text but has not paid sufficient attention to the textual mechanisms by which it is operating. Most studies assume that Willy's misrecognition of his own ideology is a fact, rather than examining how it is formed and reinforced in dialogues, memories, and interactions between people. What is missing is a close analysis, from an abstract concept of false consciousness to its concrete manifestation, in language and behavior. The present study fills this gap by systematically analyzing selected scenes to reveal not only the presence of false consciousness in the play but also how it works in influencing Willy's perception of himself, his relationships, and his final act of self-destruction.

Discussion

1. Authentic Americans and the "Rough and Ready" People

In *Death of a Salesman*, the American Dream is not a personal dream but a system of values that has been naturalized in a specific social order that those who live within it perceive as a self-evident truth rather than as a historically constructed one, as Tyson (2015) would call it a hegemonic ideology. Miller sets up the play from the outset as a man who wants more than just success from the Dream; he has built his whole life around it.

This is most clearly seen in Willy's story of salesmanship as an ideal vocation. In the early part of Act I, he sets forth his philosophy of success to his sons: "Be liked and you will never want" (Miller, 1998, Act I). From a Marxist point of view, its ideological role is to replace the structural factors that make a person successful economically (capital, class position, market conditions) with a personal factor that seems accessible to everyone (likability). This way, the ideology of the American Dream does what it does in the center, according to Tyson (2015): "It renders structural inequality as a personal matter, so that when things go wrong, it is a personal failure, as opposed to a structural issue".

Willy's investment in this ideology is not only cognitive, but affective and constitutive. He praises his sons, "I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonizes" (Miller, 1998, Act I), suggesting that beauty is a means of capitalist success. Physical change becomes a form of human capital, a product that may be exchanged in the market of social recognition. This is a demonstration of the level of the ideological formation: not only economic activity, but embodied existence has been commercialized in Willy's worldview. The personnel have become totally colonized by the economy. It is a moment that is important because it is one that ideology does not rely on overt economic argument, but rather on the affective language of parental pride. Willy doesn't have this kind of

experience as ideology: he has it as love. That's a sign of an effective ideology internalization.

What is important to note here, and what Miller seems to represent in the American Dream, is that it is not just about having a prosperous life, but about having a life worth living. In this formation of ideology, economic failure equals failure as a person. The ideological operation that links both economic and personal value is what creates the setting for Willy's tragedy.

2. False Consciousness and the Mechanisms of Self-Deception

The American Dream is the ideology in which Willy functions, and false consciousness is the psychological process through which he internalizes it and reproduces it despite the growing evidence of its dismal failure. According to Ahmad and Pervaiz (2020), false consciousness is a situation that occurs when people internalize and perpetuate values that are contrary to their own interests without awareness of the trap they have fallen into. In *Death of a Salesman*, these mechanisms are manifested in three ways: attributing failure to one's personal inadequacy, reconstructing the past in a nostalgic way, and denying critical self-knowledge.

The easy dismissal of failure due to personal shortcomings is most clearly seen in Willy's repeated failure to look at structural explanations for his situation. When he's out of work, when his sons don't have the success he dreams of for them, when his own money situation becomes untenable, Willy doesn't question the system; he questions himself or those around him. His attitude is that it is not what you do, Ben. It is who you know and the smile on your face" (Miller, 1998, Act II) is a good example of the personalization of failure that Tyson (2015) pinpoints as the ideological logic of the ideology: the structural is rendered invisible because failure is blamed on "whom you know" and the "smile on your face." Individual failure and success become the norm and the logic of the market, which is indifferent

towards the person once he or she stops being economically productive, is systematically denied.

Willy's connection to memory is the second way of false consciousness in the play. His efforts to escape into his idealized memories of the past, when he was admired, when Biff was a promising athlete, when the future was open, are not an exercise in nostalgia, but in ideology. These recollections serve to maintain his faith in the system and his conviction that he can get what it promises, and that he has not succeeded is only temporary and reversible. This temporal displacement is, in part, an aspect of Willy's alienation, as Kareem (2024) notes; the incompleteness of his inhabiting of the present is a symptom of the discrepancy between ideology and reality. The past is the realm where ideology can be saved from the distorting facts of the here and now. The pathos of the displacement is seen in his asking his employer, Howard, "I've got to get on the road. I'm vital in New England" (Miller, 1998, Act II), a man who is no longer productive in the system, but is still seeking the identity that it can no longer give him.

The third is the refusal to acknowledge a vital lack of self-awareness, as so clearly illustrated in the scene when Willy confronts Biff in Act II. Willy refuses and rages when Biff tells him outright, "I'm not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you" (Miller, 1998, Act II). This moment is analytically significant as it opens the extent of the internalization of ideology. If Willy were to accept Biff's evaluation, he would have to admit not only to his own failure but to the failure of the ideology itself, and he is an integral part of that ideology, so that would be a failure of self. The error of reasoning is not enough; false consciousness is a state where a specific reality is psychologically needed for survival. This is why Willy can't hear what Biff is saying: The ideology protects itself by making its critique unthinkable.

All three of these mechanisms illustrate that false consciousness in the play is not a passive state but a process, being actively produced by memory, rationalization, and a lack of critical perception.

Miller's great accomplishment is to make this process visible without making Willy a one-dimensional ideological pawn, a tragedy also, and irreducibly, Willy's.

3. Capitalist Ideology and the Distortion of Family Relations

An important aspect of false consciousness in the play, which is not sufficiently analyzed, is its impact on intimate relationships. The ideology of capitalism does not stay only in the economic arena; it permeates the family, transforming love and care relations based on market logic. This is most noticeable in Willy's relationship with his son, Biff. Willy's emotional attachment to Biff is genuine and intense, but it is a form of ideology that sets up a lack of recognition. His pressure on Biff to go into business: "Get a job, you bum of a fool!" When the father's impatience is expressed by Miller in Act II, this is not a sign of parental impatience; it is a sign of a father who is so completely identified with economic productivity that he cannot distinguish between love and ideological demand. The parents' care is transformed into an ideology, and the relationship is broken because Willy is unable to love Biff outside of the terms of the Dream.

The same logic of alienation that devalues Willy on the marketplace is reproduced in his family; the logic of disposability, of valuing Willy according to his output and performance, is present even in the most intimate affective relations, says Almaarof and Jubair (2024). This awareness goes beyond the economy to the realm of subjectivity and relationship, a realm that is addressed by the Marxist analysis. In this reading, false consciousness does not just misrepresent the individual's experience of the social world; it also misrepresents the individual's capacity for relationship, as in making persons into instruments of the reproduction of ideology.

The Biff-Willy feud also poses the prospect of ideological critique. Unlike his father, Biff comes to understand that the Dream is not his, and that he must

reject the values imposed by the ideology if he is to know himself truly. The demand for authenticity over performance is a possible point of ideological fracture in his insistence, in the logic of the play. The tragedy is that Willy can't follow him there; ideology has made for his selfhood what he is and cannot live past its dissolution.

4. The Psychological Consequences of Ideological Internalization

Willy's false consciousness grows throughout the play but is finally realized when he kills himself. Miller tracks this loss of ability to tell the difference between past and present, fantasy and reality, in the progressive breakdown of Willy's ability. Willy's past intrusions into the present, his talks with Ben, who is dead, and the re-enactments of scenes from Biff's youth, are symptoms of a psychology that is no longer able to live with the contradiction between ideology and reality. The ideology has completely shaped his wishes that even reality becomes intolerable. The anguish of a man whose psychological system has been structured on an entitlement that the system cannot meet is expressed in his plea to Howard: "I only want what I'm owed" (Miller, 1998, Act II). The tragedy of this scene is that Willy's claim is entirely sincere: If the ideology he has internalized is the logic that he is entitled to what he thinks he deserves. Not recognizing this debt is not proof, for Willy, that the ideology is incorrect; it is another proof of his personal failing.

Willy's last act of false consciousness is his suicide, which he imagines as a gesture of provision for his family: "The insurance will see you, boys, through" (Miller, 1998, Requiem). Material objects and financial instruments in the play serve as the symbolic currency for capitalist ideology that measures human value, as Malik et al. (2023) point out. Willy's death is the final act of love that is exchanged for a commodity. Willy is killed; he is in the ideological formation that has killed him and has turned his life into capital, his death into a financial transaction, his final act of love into a commodity

exchange. This is a complete example of false consciousness: a man fully subjected to the logic of the market, even his own death is said in its language.

In the end, Miller's psychological picture of the man created by these scenes is not of a crazy man, but of a man who has lived through a certain era. Willy is not an idiot or just a self-deceived one; he is the product of an ideology that has structured his life at all levels: his goals, his relationships, his memories, and his death. The play invites viewers to understand his story, not the exception, but the rule: the price paid by his people, in private and without their awareness, for a social order that requires so much of them.

Conclusion

This paper analyzes 'Death of a Salesman' using Marxist ideas of ideology and false consciousness. It examines key scenes, dialogues, and character interactions to show how capitalist ideology internalizes in Willy Loman and leads to psychological, relational, and ultimately fatal effects. The analysis reveals that the American Dream functions as a hegemonic ideological construct, replacing structural success factors with individual ones, thus framing structural failure as personal failure. False consciousness here isn't ignorance but an active process where Willy attributes failures to personal weakness, romanticizes memory to uphold his beliefs, and resists critical self-awareness that could undermine his identity. It also shows that false consciousness operates not only individually but within intimate relationships.

Market logic, valuing productivity and performance, infiltrates the Loman family, turning love into demand and preventing sons from truly acknowledging their fathers. The conflict between Willy and Biff symbolizes a struggle between the Dream and a desire to reject it. The originality of this study lies in shifting focus from the existence of false consciousness to how it functions—how it's created, maintained, and revealed through language and dramatic devices. It explores the link between

Miller's literary form and ideological content, emphasizing Miller's specific language to provide a detailed analysis beyond existing scholarship. This has broader implications, questioning the American Dream as a harmful ideology relevant to ongoing debates on meritocracy, consumerism, and social inequality worldwide.

'Death of a Salesman' critiques a culture that attributes success to individual effort while ignoring structural factors, with Willy's tragedy illustrating a persistent social logic that continues today. Future research could explore the play's ideological critique in its postwar American context or incorporate feminist or postcolonial perspectives to examine gendered and racial exclusions. Comparing it with works like Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby' could further contextualize Miller's critique within American literature.

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