The Unattainable American Dream In Miller’s Death Of A Salesman

Sometimes you have to let go of what you thought life would be like and learn to find joy in the story you’re living (Rachel Marie Martin). Identity is how the world perceives an individual through their morals, values, and beliefs. But what if this identity is overdrawn by the fantasies of success made solely of societies views? It is undeniable that an obvious over obsession in consumerism can lead to a loss of identity and a life of discontentment. According to Neliti, ‘40% of respondents today believe that they are living a life that is the requirement of society’. The guilt these individuals receive from everyday society results in their fixation with wealth even though it doesn’t bring them true happiness. In Death of a Salesman Miller portrays how when the Loman family are under the influence of others, they feel pressured into believing that chasing false dreams will bring them continuous contentment.

In the 1940s as well as today, an immoderate passion in materialism leads to a loss of identity and life of discontentment. This is definitely evident through the scene of Willy and Ben discussing how Alaska could bring them countless success. If you think about it, have you ever been so caught up on what society thinks that you start to lose sight of who you are? Well, Willy Loman has. In Willy’s eyes what’s most important in life is ‘who you know and the smile on your face!’ (Miller, 67) indicating how the concept of the American dream has consumed his life. This substantiates Willy’s strong fixation with affluence, as he essentially believes that if he is liked, he will achieve opulence throughout life. Willy’s obsession is clearly based on societal beliefs because he recognises that he ‘can end with diamonds […] on the basis of being liked’ (Miller, 68). The verbal irony present is that diamonds symbolises wealth, money, and fundamentally Willy’s American dream. Willy primarily believes that if he works hard on his image to society, his family will be blessed with success. Willy’s unhappiness becomes prominent after his son’s abandonment. His son’s abandonment leaves Willy dissatisfied that he doesn’t ‘have a thing in the ground’ (Miller, 122) which worries him to ‘get some seeds, right away’ (Miller, 122). The seed symbolises a new success he needs to attain in order to leave a legacy behind for his family and ensure his life was worth it. The imagery and symbolism are used in conjunction to convey the idea that following consumerism as well as working a lifetime doesn’t guarantee satisfaction in the long run, but instead leads you to a life of displeasure. Many today, prioritise money and wealth over the things that should have real value to them. Some spend weeks on end working but can’t spend 3 minutes of quality time with their family. Willy realises that when you work ‘a lifetime to pay off a house. You finally own it and’ (Miller, 1) have ‘nobody to live in it’ (Miller, 1). He recognizes that affluence takes a lifetime to achieve and when you finally do, you are either too old or not alive to enjoy it. He is so caught up on achieving success for the sake of materialism, that he doesn’t realise its everlasting effects on those around him. The over fixation in wealth guided by society caused Willy to lose his identity and live a life of unhappiness.

In the 1940s as well as today, fascinations in consumerism can lead to a loss of identity and life of discontentment. This is certainly evident through Happy as he realizes his father’s downfall while he too follows societies American dream. The vision Happy follows is similar to Willy’s as it's based on societal beliefs and living up to social expectations. Happy explains to Biff how because he is ‘Well liked’ (Miller, 20) that they would ‘both have the apartment’ (Miller, 20)

and have ‘any babe’ (Miller, 20) they want. This imagery is used to clearly demonstrate the impression societies dream has left on Happy. He displays a direct link between popularity and success which is exactly what Willy does. Happy’s idea of materialism becomes unattainable after believing that when he works hard on his image to society, he will receive all the money and girls he ever wanted. Happy tries to convince himself that Willy ‘had a good dream’ (Miller, III) and that ‘it’s the only dream you can have—to come out number one man’ (Miller, III). This dialogue represents Happy devoting himself to Willy’s conviction of prosperity in order to prove that his imaginings were real and attainable. He does this to keep his father’s memory alive as he is too set in his ways to believe that consumerism lead Willy to his death. Happy is so caught up trying to obtain girls, money and ultimately success, that he is oblivious to the effects of materialism. When he metaphorically ‘beats this racket’ (Miller, 138) he provides insight into his deteriorating condition. The metaphor is used to represent the revenge he wants to take for his father’s death which was caused by materialism. Happy understands Willy’s misconceptions of prosperity and how there is no escape from the dream’s indoctrinating lies. The notion of greed leads Happy to have an unrealistic self-confidence and grand visions about getting rich quick. While talking about Willy’s dreams, Happy mentions that Willy’s ‘never as happy as when he holds onto something’. Happy recognizes Willy’s downfall and how what ‘he holds onto’ is the unattainable American dream. Nowadays social media causes the same affects the dream does as societies pressure causes an individual’s self-confidence to plummet. The unduly fixation with consumerism leads Happy to a loss of identity which makes him realise the cause of Willy’s dissatisfaction.

The personal morals, values and beliefs of an individual shape their identity. But when these personal morals are mixed with societal values, their theory of materialism becomes blurred. This blurred notion is evident through the characters of Willy and Happy. Willy becomes unsatisfied after realizing consumerism results in the destruction of his life. Happy ignores Willy’s downfall because he is too set in his ways to realise the effects’ society has on him. It is absolutely verified that when one has an excessive fixation with an unreachable American dream it leads to a loss of identity and life of disappointment. Even though 70 years have passed since the play was written, the effects societies values have on an individual are still prominent today through social media, peer pressure and materialism.