



Ambition, Illusion, and Social Constraint: Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman in the Context of the American Dream

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Abstract

*This paper presents a comparative study of Jay Gatsby from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Willy Loman from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, analyzing their pursuit of the American Dream and the factors contributing to their ultimate failure. Both characters embody the complexities of this national ideal, demonstrating how ambition, personal delusion, and societal pressures intersect to shape individual lives. Gatsby's pursuit is marked by wealth accumulation, social reinvention, and the idealization of a romanticized past, reflecting the consumer-driven and class-conscious culture of the 1920s. Loman, by contrast, clings to traditional notions of likability, personal charm, and hard work, representing postwar America's corporate and capitalist values. Despite their differing methods and historical contexts, both men confront structural limitations, class barriers, and the dissonance between aspiration and reality. Their respective downfalls, Gatsby's violent and solitary death and Willy's tragic suicide, highlight the destructive potential of an ideal that encourages relentless striving while obscuring social and economic constraints. Through an examination of character ambition, methods, illusions, and the societal forces at play, this study illustrates the enduring tension between the promise and the reality of the American Dream. Ultimately, the analysis reveals that the American Dream, while culturally celebrated as accessible and achievable, often results in disillusionment and tragedy when pursued without critical awareness of its limitations.*

Keywords: Historical Contexts, Jay Gatsby, Willy Loman, Ambition, Social Inequality.



1. Introduction

The American Dream has long served as one of the most powerful and contested ideals in United States culture, promising prosperity, self-determination, and upward mobility to anyone willing to work hard enough to achieve it. Yet, throughout American literature, this dream is often portrayed not as a pathway to fulfillment but as a source of illusion, disillusionment, and tragedy. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) stand among the most influential works to critique this ideal, each presenting a protagonist whose life is shaped, and ultimately undone, by the pursuit of the American Dream. Jay Gatsby, a mysterious self-made millionaire of the Jazz Age, and Willy Loman, an aging salesman in postwar America, embody two distinct yet strikingly similar versions of this national myth.

Although separated by time, class, and social context, Gatsby and Loman share an unwavering belief in an idealized future that never fully exists. Both characters are driven by ambition, rely on illusion to sustain their hopes, and struggle against social forces that constrain their aspirations. Their stories reveal how the American Dream's promises of reinvention and success can become destructive when tied to materialism, unrealistic expectations, or rigid societal pressures. By comparing these two iconic figures, this study reexamines the shifting meaning of the American Dream and exposes the profound personal and cultural consequences of its failure.

This paper argues that, although Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman pursue distinct visions of success, Gatsby through wealth, social reinvention, and the pursuit of romanticized ideals, and Loman through personal charm, hard work, and the cultivation of likability, their parallel descents into disillusionment illuminate the inherent contradictions of the American Dream. Both characters' struggles demonstrate how cultural myths of limitless opportunity, when combined with rigid social hierarchies, economic pressures, and personal illusions, can transform ambition into self-destruction. By examining their ambitions, methods, illusions, societal constraints, and ultimate downfalls, this study reveals that the American Dream is not universally attainable, but rather a complex and often deceptive ideal whose pursuit can lead to tragedy, disillusionment, and moral compromise.

2. Historical and Cultural Context

The concept of the American Dream has evolved significantly across the twentieth century, shaping and being shaped by the historical moments that produced Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman. Jay Gatsby's world emerges from the 1920s, an era defined by rapid economic expansion, mass consumerism, and intense social stratification. Following World War I, the United States experienced unprecedented industrial growth and a widespread belief that success was attainable through ambition and reinvention (Cullen, 2003). This climate encouraged the pursuit of wealth as a marker of personal worth, creating a culture in which material success appeared synonymous with the fulfillment of the American Dream.



Fitzgerald situates *Gatsby* within this atmosphere of excess and social aspiration, using the character to expose the moral emptiness beneath the era's glittering façade (Fitzgerald, 1925/2004). In contrast, Willy Loman's story unfolds in the late 1940s, a period marked by post-World War II optimism alongside growing pressures of corporate capitalism. Tyson (2014) provided that although the United States enjoyed economic prosperity during this period, the rise of large business structures and the shift toward white-collar labor altered traditional understandings of success (Miller, 1949/1996).. This new environment emphasized business loyalty, interpersonal charm, and consumer identity over individual craftsmanship or entrepreneurial risk (Biggsby, 1984). Arthur Miller's portrayal of Willy Loman reflects the tension between older American values and the postwar corporate system that prized appearance over achievement. Loman's belief in personal charisma as the key to financial security reveals how outdated ideals could no longer guarantee success within the modern economic order.

Viewed together, these two historical contexts illuminate significant shifts in the American Dream, from *Gatsby*'s Jazz Age pursuit of reinvention through wealth to Loman's postwar struggle within a bureaucratic, competitive economy (Tanner, 2008). Despite their differences, both periods reveal the persistent gap between the ideal of American opportunity and the social realities that restrict upward mobility (Fowler, 2000). Fitzgerald and Miller thus frame their protagonists as products of their historical moments while also critiquing the broader national myth that continues to shape American identity.

3. Character Ambition and the Pursuit of Success

Ambition lies at the core of both Jay Gatsby's and Willy Loman's identities, shaping not only their actions but also their understanding of what it means to succeed in America. Jay Gatsby's ambition is fueled by a deep desire for self-transformation, rooted in his determination to escape his impoverished past. As Fitzgerald (1925/2004) illustrates, Gatsby constructs an entirely new persona, one built on wealth, charm, and spectacle, to claim a place within the elite world he idealizes. His pursuit of success is inseparable from his pursuit of Daisy Buchanan, whose social status represents the ultimate validation of his self-made identity. Scholars note that Gatsby's ambition reflects a distinctly American belief in reinvention, even as it exposes the class barriers that undermine such aspirations (Brucoli, 2002). Thus, Gatsby's dream is not simply personal but emblematic of a national ideology that equates success with material achievement and social recognition.

Willy Loman's ambition, by contrast, centers on achieving success through popularity, likability, and traditional salesmanship. Miller (1949/1996) portrays Willy as a man who wholeheartedly believes that being well-liked is the key to financial prosperity and personal fulfillment. This belief, inherited from earlier American ideals of individual charisma and frontier confidence, becomes increasingly incompatible with the corporate landscape of the late 1940s. As Biggsby (1984) argues, Willy's ambition reflects an outdated understanding of success that fails to align with the economic realities of his era.



His inability to adapt to changing business structures renders his aspirations unrealistic, revealing a form of ambition sustained more by delusion than by opportunity. Willy's fixation on an idealized version of success ultimately blinds him to the genuine skills and values that might have given his life stability and meaning.

Though distinct in form, the ambitions of Gatsby and Loman expose the fragility of the American Dream. Gatsby's meticulously crafted persona and Willy's unwavering faith in personal charm both express a belief that success is accessible to anyone who desires it strongly enough. Yet both men discover that ambition alone is insufficient in the face of entrenched social structures, economic pressures, and personal limitations. Their pursuits reveal that the American Dream, while promising limitless possibility, often demands conforming to rigid and unattainable ideals. Through their characters, Fitzgerald and Miller critique a culture that celebrates ambition but provides little support for those who chase it to their own destruction.

4. Methods and Means of Achieving the American Dream

Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman pursue the American Dream through fundamentally different methods, each shaped by the social and economic structures of their respective eras. Gatsby's approach centers on radical self-reinvention, wealth accumulation, and strategic social mobility. As Fitzgerald (1925/2004) depicts, Gatsby transforms himself from James Gatz, the son of poor farmers, into a glamorous figure whose mansion, lavish parties, and expensive possessions signal success within the elite culture of the 1920s. His wealth, obtained through questionable business ventures, serves as a tool to buy legitimacy and acceptance into a world from which he was originally excluded. Scholars note that Gatsby's reliance on spectacle and material display reflects a Jazz Age culture where consumerism and outward status became the primary markers of achievement (Cullen, 2003). Thus, Gatsby's method for attaining the dream highlights both the possibilities and moral ambiguities inherent in an era that rewarded ambition but obscured the boundaries between lawful and illicit success.

Willy Loman, by contrast, seeks the American Dream through interpersonal charisma and adherence to traditional business values. Miller (1949/1996) presents Willy as a salesman who believes that professional success depends not on skill or productivity but on being "well liked." He attempts to cultivate relationships, maintain surface-level charm, and project confidence in order to secure financial stability. However, as Bigsby (1984) explains, this method reflects an outdated model of salesmanship that no longer aligns with the corporate systems and competitive pressures of the postwar economy. Willy's failure stems partly from his inability to adapt to a modern business world that values efficiency and measurable results over personality alone. Instead of reinventing himself, Willy clings to nostalgic ideals, leaving him increasingly disconnected from the economic realities around him.



Comparing these approaches reveals a significant shift in how the American Dream could be pursued across different historical periods. Gatsby's method depends on reinvention and material accumulation, emphasizing outward displays of success, while Willy relies on personal charm and a belief in traditional notions of respect and reputation. Despite their differences, both men are ultimately undermined by systems that define success in rigid, exclusionary ways. Savage (2007) provided that Gatsby cannot buy his way into the old-money aristocracy he idolizes, and Willy cannot thrive within a corporate structure that has no place for his outdated methods. In this way, the American Dream, though theoretically accessible, is shaped by social structures that limit the effectiveness of the very methods their protagonists rely upon.

5. Illusion vs. Reality

Both Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman demonstrate the tension between illusion and reality, revealing how their visions of the American Dream are built on fragile, often self-deceptive foundations. Gatsby constructs a carefully curated identity, one that erases his humble origins and elevates him to a level of sophistication and wealth he believes is necessary to win Daisy Buchanan's love. Fitzgerald (1925/2004) portrays Gatsby's devotion to this idealized vision as both heroic and tragic; he is relentless in his pursuit of a dream that exists only in his imagination. Scholars argue that Gatsby's illusion represents the broader cultural tendency of the 1920s to equate material accumulation with personal fulfillment, while obscuring the social and ethical barriers that make true attainment impossible (Brucoli, 2002). The persistent gap between Gatsby's dreams and the reality of his social limitations underscores the tragic consequences of conflating aspiration with delusion.

Similarly, Willy Loman's grasp on reality is compromised by persistent self-deception. He clings to the belief that personal charm and likability are sufficient to secure professional and familial success, ignoring the structural and economic forces that render this belief unrealistic (Miller, 1949/1996). Willy idealizes both his own life and the potential of his sons, particularly Biff, projecting hopes that fail to align with their actual abilities and circumstances. Bigsby (1984) notes that Willy's illusions reflect the broader postwar American society's emphasis on optimism, consumerism, and the moral significance of individual effort, even when structural conditions undermine such ideals. This disjunction between Willy's perception and the tangible reality of his life drives him toward despair and ultimately tragedy.

By juxtaposing Gatsby and Loman, it becomes evident that the pursuit of the American Dream often relies on sustaining illusions that distort reality. Cowley (1990) concluded that in both cases, the characters' inability to reconcile their aspirations with the real-world constraints they face leads to disillusionment and personal destruction. Fitzgerald and Miller thus use their protagonists to critique the seductive but deceptive nature of the American Dream, illustrating how the pursuit of idealized success can blind individuals to the limitations imposed by society, class, and human imperfection.

6. Social Critique: Capitalism, Class, and Inequality

Fitzgerald and Miller not only explore individual ambition but also critically examine the social and economic structures that shape, and often limit, the pursuit of the American Dream. Bloom (2010) stated that both *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman* highlight how class divisions, capitalist pressures, and societal expectations restrict personal mobility, demonstrating that the American Dream is as much a product of systemic forces as of individual effort. This section analyzes the authors' critiques through three key dimensions: the impact of wealth and class, the constraints of capitalism, and the illusion of equal opportunity.

6.1 Wealth and Class Barriers

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald portrays a rigid social hierarchy in which inherited wealth confers privileges that even extraordinary ambition cannot easily overcome. Gatsby's considerable fortune allows him to acquire luxurious possessions and host extravagant parties, yet it cannot bridge the gap between old money, represented by Tom and Daisy Buchanan, and new money, which he embodies (Fitzgerald, 1925/2004). As Bruccoli (2002) observes, the novel critiques the assumption that wealth alone guarantees social acceptance, highlighting the entrenched class boundaries of 1920s America that resist individual effort and self-invention. Gatsby's ultimate failure underscores the persistence of these barriers, illustrating that the American Dream's promise of social mobility is more aspirational than attainable. His struggle reveals the tension between personal ambition and systemic social constraints, showing that material success cannot always overcome the deep-seated structures of privilege and exclusion.

In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman faces class barriers in a subtler but equally tragic form. Operating within a mid-20th-century capitalist system, Willy's worth is measured by his productivity, profitability, and marketable skills rather than personal charm, loyalty, or ethical integrity (Bigsby, 1984). The societal narrative that anyone can succeed through hard work alone obscures the structural realities limiting upward mobility for ordinary workers. Willy's repeated failures illustrate that postwar economic expansion did not guarantee equitable opportunity, exposing the ways corporate structures and social expectations constrain individual ambition (Cullen, 2003; Tredell, 2007). Both narratives demonstrate that the American Dream, while culturally celebrated, often collides with social and economic realities, producing frustration, disillusionment, and tragedy for those who pursue it blindly.

6.2 The Pressures of Capitalism

Both authors critique the dehumanizing effects of capitalist society, highlighting how economic systems can distort human values and relationships. In Fitzgerald's portrayal, the relentless pursuit of material success dominates both social interactions and moral choices, with characters such as Tom and Daisy exemplifying the moral corruption and emotional detachment fostered by wealth (Cullen, 2003).



Gatsby's obsessive focus on financial accumulation, extravagant parties, and outward appearances reflects a culture in which status and image are prioritized over genuine ethical or emotional fulfillment. His wealth, rather than granting him personal satisfaction or meaningful connections, reinforces social hierarchies and underscores the emptiness of a materialistic vision of success (Brucoli, 2002; Tredell, 2007).

Miller's critique, while aligned in theme, adapts to the mid-20th-century corporate context, where personal value is quantified through productivity and marketability. Willy Loman's labor is undervalued, and his self-worth is inseparably tied to his ability to perform and be perceived as successful by others, revealing the pressures of a system that commodifies human effort (Bigsby, 1984). Both Fitzgerald and Miller demonstrate that capitalism encourages artificial measures of success, fostering social competition and personal anxiety (Fitzgerald, 1925/2004; Miller, 1949/1996).. In pursuing financial and social recognition, individuals risk sacrificing ethical integrity, emotional well-being, and authentic relationships, revealing the profound human costs of a society that equates material achievement with personal value.

6.3 The Illusion of Equal Opportunity

A central element of both critiques is the illusion that the American Dream is equally attainable for all. Gatsby believes that ambition, wealth, and careful self-reinvention can overcome entrenched social hierarchies, allowing him to gain acceptance into the elite circles he idolizes. Similarly, Willy Loman assumes that personal charisma, hard work, and likability are sufficient to guarantee financial success and social recognition (Mizener, 1972). However, Fitzgerald and Miller illustrate that these assumptions are deeply flawed, as opportunities are often limited by structural inequalities that cannot be overcome by individual effort alone. Social class, inherited wealth, and systemic economic barriers continue to restrict access to resources, prestige, and power, rendering the dream inaccessible for many despite their determination (Fitzgerald, 1925/2004; Miller, 1949/1996). Gatsby's lavish displays of wealth and Willy's desperate attempts to secure professional validation underscore how personal ambition is constrained by societal realities. Through these narratives, both authors critique the idea that the American Dream is universally achievable, revealing it as a cultural myth that can create false hope (Brucoli, 2002; Tredell, 2007).. The persistence of this myth encourages individuals to pursue unrealistic goals, often leading to disillusionment, frustration, and, ultimately, tragedy when reality fails to align with their aspirations.

7. A Comparative Analysis

Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman, though products of different historical periods and social contexts, share striking similarities in their pursuit of the American Dream, while also highlighting the distinct ways in which societal structures and personal flaws shape outcomes (Smith, 2001). Both characters embody ambition and idealism, yet their methods, motivations, and ultimate fates differ in ways that illuminate broader cultural critiques.

Gatsby's pursuit of the dream is rooted in self-reinvention and material accumulation. He transforms from James Gatz, a poor Midwestern boy, into a wealthy socialite in the hope of attaining Daisy Buchanan and achieving social recognition (Fitzgerald, 1925/2004). His method emphasizes outward appearances, lavish parties, and displays of wealth, reflecting the consumerist ethos of the 1920s (Cullen, 2003). In contrast, Willy Loman's pursuit relies on personal charm, hard work, and the belief that being well-liked ensures success (Miller, 1949/1996). Unlike Gatsby, Willy does not seek to reinvent himself through wealth or social positioning; instead, he clings to nostalgic ideals and outdated business values that increasingly fail in a competitive corporate environment (Bigsby, 1984).

Both characters are ultimately undone by their illusions and societal constraints. Gatsby cannot penetrate the old-money social hierarchy, while Willy cannot thrive within the corporate structure that devalues his skillset and personal ideology. Their downfalls underscore the limits of the American Dream, revealing that ambition alone is insufficient when social, economic, and psychological factors are misaligned with reality (Brucoli, 2002).

In comparing Gatsby and Loman, it becomes evident that while the American Dream motivates and shapes individual action, it can also be deceptive and destructive. Their lives illustrate that historical context, social class, and personal delusion interact to produce contrasting yet equally tragic outcomes, offering a nuanced critique of a pervasive cultural ideal.

8. Tragic Downfall and the Failure of the Dream

The ultimate consequence of pursuing the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman* is the tragic downfall of both protagonists. Fitzgerald and Miller depict Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman as victims of personal delusion, societal pressures, and structural limitations, revealing that the American Dream can be both alluring and destructive (Bloom, 2007). This section examines their downfalls through three interconnected dimensions: personal obsession, societal constraints, and the culmination of tragedy.

8.1 Personal Obsession and Delusion

Jay Gatsby's downfall is intricately tied to his obsessive pursuit of an idealized vision of life, wealth, and love. His fixation on recreating the past with Daisy Buchanan blinds him not only to the realities of their social divide but also to Daisy's moral ambivalence and the limitations of the world he aspires to join (Fitzgerald, 1925/2004). As Brucoli (2002) observes, Gatsby's relentless devotion to this unattainable dream transforms him into a tragic figure whose identity is inseparable from his illusions, highlighting the dangerous interplay between personal desire and societal constraints. Similarly, Willy Loman's demise is rooted in his persistent inability to confront the realities of his own capabilities and those of his sons (Miller, 1949/1996). Willy clings to a flawed belief system that equates personal charm and likability with success, ignoring the structural and economic forces that undermine his efforts (Bigsby, 1984).



In both cases, the characters' personal delusions magnify the pressures imposed by societal expectations, economic systems, and rigid class structures, ultimately steering them toward tragedy. Gatsby's violent and solitary death and Willy's suicide reflect not only the collapse of individual dreams but also the profound human costs of pursuing the American Dream within environments that reward illusion over substance. Their stories underscore the inherent tension between aspiration and reality, revealing how idealism, when detached from societal truths, can become self-destructive.

8.2 Societal and Structural Constraints

Beyond personal flaws, both Gatsby's and Willy Loman's downfalls are profoundly shaped and exacerbated by external social and economic forces. Gatsby, despite amassing immense wealth and meticulously constructing a glamorous persona, remains an outsider to the old-money elite, highlighting the rigidity of social hierarchies that wealth alone cannot penetrate (Cullen, 2003). His failure illustrates how entrenched class structures and inherited privilege continue to govern access to social recognition and acceptance, reinforcing the limitations of the American Dream. Similarly, Willy operates within a postwar corporate environment that privileges measurable productivity, efficiency, and marketable skills over personal charm, loyalty, or effort, leaving him increasingly marginalized and unappreciated despite his hard work (Bigsby, 1984). The structural and systemic pressures in both contexts reveal that the American Dream is far from universally attainable; ambition, talent, and desire are frequently insufficient when confronted with institutionalized barriers (Tredell, 2007; Bruccoli, 2002). By portraying these social and economic constraints, Fitzgerald and Miller critique the myth of meritocracy, demonstrating that individual effort is often undermined by societal norms, corporate hierarchies, and entrenched class distinctions. Their narratives underscore the reality that the pursuit of the American Dream is not only a personal struggle but also a negotiation with broader societal forces that can dictate success or failure, regardless of one's ambition or moral integrity.

8.3 The Culmination of Tragedy

The tragic conclusions of both narratives emphasize the ultimate failure of the American Dream and reveal the profound human cost of pursuing an ideal divorced from reality. Gatsby dies violently and alone, his dream of reuniting with Daisy unfulfilled, and his lifelong efforts to reconcile the past with the present rendered meaningless (Fitzgerald, 1925/2004). His death symbolizes the impossibility of attaining a dream built on illusion and social aspiration, highlighting the limits imposed by entrenched class structures and the moral emptiness of a society obsessed with wealth and status (Bruccoli, 2002). Willy Loman's suicide, by contrast, represents both a personal surrender and a desperate, misguided attempt to provide financial security for his family through life insurance, reflecting the psychological and material pressures of an unforgiving corporate system (Miller, 1949/1996).



In both cases, the protagonists' deaths serve as a pointed critique of a cultural ideology that glorifies limitless aspiration while neglecting the ethical, social, and structural realities that shape human possibility (Tredell, 2007; Cullen, 2003). The tragedies of Gatsby and Loman illustrate that the American Dream, when pursued without critical reflection or awareness of systemic limitations, can transform ambition into self-destruction. Their stories underscore that personal desire and societal myths, when untempered by realism, may result not in fulfillment, but in disillusionment, despair, and ultimate failure.

9. Conclusion

Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman exemplify the allure, complexity, and ultimate fragility of the American Dream. While separated by time, social context, and personal approach, both characters share a profound belief in the promise of success and self-fulfillment, a belief that drives their ambition and shapes their identities. Gatsby's pursuit of wealth and reinvention in the 1920s and Willy's reliance on charm and personal likability in the postwar period reveal the enduring cultural ideal that anyone can achieve prosperity and social recognition through effort and determination.

However, as this comparative study demonstrates, both Fitzgerald and Miller portray the American Dream as inherently constrained by social, economic, and psychological realities. Gatsby's failure underscores the rigidity of class structures and the limits of material success as a path to fulfillment, while Willy's tragedy exposes the inadequacy of outdated notions of personal worth in a competitive corporate society. Their illusions, delusions, and eventual downfalls highlight how the American Dream can be both motivating and destructive, promising opportunity while masking systemic barriers and moral compromises.

Ultimately, the stories of Gatsby and Loman serve as timeless critiques of an ideal that is deeply embedded in American consciousness. By examining their ambition, methods, illusions, and tragedies, readers gain insight into the persistent tension between aspiration and reality, and the ways in which cultural myths can shape, and sometimes shatter, individual lives. The American Dream, as depicted in these works, is revealed not as a guaranteed path to success, but as a compelling yet perilous vision that demands critical reflection and self-awareness.

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