

On *Death of a Salesman* from the Perspective of Cultural Genes Interpretation of "American Dream"

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Abstract: Arthur Miller (1915-2005), as the most outstanding master of drama in the United States and known as the "conscience of American drama", accurately depicted the post-war real society in the United States and the changes in social values. In 1949, Miller wrote the *Death of a Salesman*, which became the peak of his drama creation and won the Pulitzer prize and the New York theatre critics circle award. The play tells the story of the United States in the turbulent social background of the 1940s, the protagonist Willy Loman's dream and the collapse of the whole family. By means of the combination of realism and expressionism, the drama reproduces the changes of social values and the sadness of the little people. In previous studies, most scholars focused on the disillusionment of the "American dream" of the minor characters in the drama, and took the deterioration of the "American dream" and the change of values in American society as the starting point. However, it may be difficult to understand Arthur Miller's interpretation of the "American dream" in the play without tracing the root of the "American dream" and exploring the deep cultural genes of the United States. This paper aims to analyse Arthur Miller's contradictory writings on the American dream in *Death of a Salesman* from the perspective of meme.

Keywords: Death of salesman, Cultural genes, American dream, Arthur Miller.

1. Introduction

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is the most outstanding drama master in the United States, and is known as "the conscience of American drama", which faithfully depicts the real post-war American society and the changes in American social values. In 1949, Arthur Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman*, which became the pinnacle of his drama creation and won the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Award. The play tells the story of the collapse of the hero Willy Loman's dream and the disintegration of the whole family in the turbulent social background of the 1940s in the United States. With the combination of realism and expressionism, the drama creation technique truly reproduces the changes of values and the sadness of small people under the ups and downs of society. *Death of a Salesman* seems to have been closely labelled as "American Dream". Searching on CNKI with the key word "*death of a salesman*", there are 180 research papers about this drama, of which about 86 contain the key word "American dream" and 14 contain the key word "nobody". It can be seen that the main tone of *Death of a Salesman* has basically been laid, that is, under the background of the times, the little people eventually went to tragedy because of their blind pursuit of the American dream. In previous studies, scholars mostly focused on the disillusionment of the "American dream" of the little people in the play, starting with the deterioration of the "American dream" and the change of values in American society. In fact, a close look at the whole play reveals that Arthur Miller's description of the American Dream in the play is always contradictory. Willy Loman, who is addicted to the "American Dream", is unwilling to be ordinary and ups and downs in the sea of people all his life, but he has never enjoyed the joy of success all his life. Finally, life seems to have reached a desperate situation. He gladly died, but he had high hopes for his own death, and some hope seemed to rise from his death.

In fact, what the "American Dream" is, after hundreds of years of accumulation, may not be accurately defined by most people, but what is certain is that the cultural genes contained in the "American Dream" are thoughts that take root in the hearts of the American people, which will certainly affect generation after generation and will not be easily washed away by the torrent of the times. The author thinks that if we only analyse the American dream from the surface of drama, I'm afraid it is difficult to understand Arthur Miller's real creative intention. This paper attempts to explore Arthur Miller's interpretation of "American Dream" in *Death of a Salesman* from the perspective of cultural genes, with the intention of deepening the connotation of the work. Understand the American dream in Arthur Miller's mind.

2. What Is A "Cultural Gene"

In the book "Cultural Genes of Western Civilization", "cultural genes" are defined as abiotic genes for biological genes, which mainly refer to the smallest information unit and the smallest information link that are inherited and acquired, consciously or unconsciously put into the human body, mainly manifested in beliefs, habits and values. French historian and sociologist Tocqueville pointed out in his book "Democracy in America"(1840): "To examine the growth of a nation, we should trace back to its past, examine its infancy in the arms of its mother, observe the initial shadow cast by the outside world on the mirror of its mind, consider what he witnessed at first, listen to the initial words that awakened him to start his sleeping thinking ability, and finally, look at the initial struggle that showed his tenacity. Only in this way. Professor Qian Mansu, an American civilization scholar in China, also mentioned in the book "Ladder of Freedom-Notes on American Civilization" (2014) that "the deep-seated national tradition and mentality may be called cultural genes, which have many historical reasons, and once formed, it can influence the development trend of a culture."

3. The Source and Typical Features of "American Dream"

3.1. The Source of "American Dream"

In 1931, American writer James Adams first put forward the term "American Dream" in his historical work "The Epic of America". Gave a general name to the American spirit. Throughout the ages, there have been different opinions on the connotation of the "American Dream", but the core elements remain unchanged. In a broad sense, "American Dream" refers to the national ideals and values of freedom, equality and democracy. The narrow sense of "American Dream" refers to the achievement and happiness achieved through personal pursuit. The spirit of democracy, equality, freedom and enterprising behind the "American Dream" attracts immigrants from all over the world to come to this vast young country to find their own values and realize their ideals in life. Today, with the development of globalization, we can't understand the United States without talking about the "American Dream", and when we talk about the "American Dream", we must trace back to its source-the may flower Convention. The spirit contained in it laid the foundation for the founding of the United States and influenced the future development direction of the United States.

3.2. Typical characteristics of "American Dream"

A typical feature of the "American Dream" is democracy and equality under the influence of Puritanism. "To understand American tradition, we have to start with Puritanism, just like the pre-Qin Dynasty was to China, and Puritanism contains important genes of American culture." As Professor Qian Mansu said, the may flower Convention embodies the important influence of religion everywhere. "In the name of God, amen." The convention starting with this is less than 300 words in a few words, and the word "God" appears four times. Christianity advocates that God is God and created man. Before God, all beings are equal and everyone is guilty. This idea makes it possible for everyone to be equal. After Martin Luther's religious reform, people can talk to God directly without church organization, which makes everyone's status as an independent individual more improved, and faith becomes one-on-one communication instead of relying on other forces, and respect for individual rights becomes a conventional rule and evolves into a tradition. Therefore, the formation of a stable republic in the United States is not accidental, but the result of long-term effects of history, religious thoughts and national traditions, that is, cultural genes. This point is always reflected in *Death of a Salesman*, that is, to some extent, it is precisely because of the consciousness of democracy and equality that a little guy like Willy Loman never gave up his dream of getting rich from beginning to end, because subconsciously he believed that he could succeed through struggle.

The second feature can be summarized as enterprising creation after breaking the order, that is, the courage to break the rules. This is often summarized as enterprising and creative. The "American Dream" has never been a dream that strives for stability. It is intense, encourages challenges and appreciates the rest of life after the robbery. In 1620, a group of devout adventurers set sail for a completely unknown continent to escape religious persecution. The unknown fear

transcends all known pains, and they resolutely leave the land where they have lived for generations to open up a new world. This courage to break the existing order promoted the signing of the may flower Convention and laid the foundation for the birth of the world power, the United States. In order to pursue an ideal life, it is necessary to establish a social system different from the old continent to ensure that everyone's rights can be realized. The original spirit of breaking and creating is also a part of the American spirit. Willy's "American Dream" is a successful model-his brother Ben Loman is the representative who dares to break the order. At the age of 17, he went to Africa alone. With unscrupulous competition, he became a millionaire with diamond mines at the age of 21. Ben Loman's courage to fight for the unknown world is exactly the same as may flower's original spirit of exploring the new continent of America.

4. Interpretation of "American Dream" in *Death of a Salesman*

4.1. "Daydream" and "American Dream"

In the past, most studies focused on the American dream of Willy Loman, the hero, but in fact, in *Death of a Salesman*, the author created more than one American dream.

The American Civil War abolished backward slavery, made political and economic progress, and safeguarded everyone's equal rights and interests. Since the industrial revolution, the United States has realized the transformation to an industrial power. In this social background, everyone dreams of grabbing money and getting rich, and regards the possession of wealth and the promotion of social status as the standard to measure whether the American dream is realized. In fact, in my opinion, this is not a distortion of the "American Dream", but a manifestation of the "American Dream" in different times.

The dream of making money in pursuit of commercial success is Willy's lifelong dream. This in itself will not be a factor in his tragedy. Under Arthur Miller's interpretation, Willie's dream is not an opportunity to succeed through equal competition and bold challenges, which is believed in American cultural genes, but a "daydream" of waiting for something for nothing and not being able to recognize the situation. Willy's life has been focused on being likable and respected, and he even hopes that hundreds of people will pay tribute to him after his death, thus gaining spiritual satisfaction. Willy had this belief all his life, and when he was finally fired from the company he had worked for 36 years, he still couldn't figure out what went wrong. He said to Charlie, "I always think that if a person is impressive and popular, it's nothing ..." Charlie tried to remind him, "Why does everyone have to like you? Who likes John Morgan? Did he make an impression? He looks like a butcher in a Turkish bathhouse. But with those wallets, he will be very popular ..." Charlie's words shocked Willie, but he didn't want to admit that his lifelong pursuit was a mistake, so he could only hold on to his original dream to comfort himself. Willy's misunderstanding of the "American Dream" also lies in that it always emphasizes opportunism but ignores his unremitting efforts. In Willy's mind, successful people are speculators. This in itself is a typical manifestation of "daydreaming". When Willy can no longer sell products and borrow living expenses from Charlie for a living, he always regrets and feels sad that he didn't accept his brother Ben's help to develop in Alaska at the beginning, but he doesn't think about how to

change his work style and change his life with practical actions. Therefore, Willy Loman's "American Dream" is actually just the opposite of the "American Dream" that the author wants to interpret. Even in the materialistic era, the equality in American cultural genes and the spirit of breaking rules have not deteriorated with the changes of the times. Charlie, as the opposite of Willy Loman, has long proved this.

What about Biff? In his thirties, he still achieved nothing. He fantasized about achieving something in sports without any realistic planning. He just got carried away and became a habit of stealing with his father's connivance. He was self-indulgent and achieved nothing in his studies. The second son, Happy, followed in Willy Loman's footsteps and became a clerk in the company. But he didn't realize his dream in a down-to-earth way, but satisfied his competitive desire by some improper means, taking bribes, seducing his boss's finance and so on.

In this play, Loman's family members—he and his two sons—all have an unwillingness and pursuit in their hearts, but they have never put them into action in a down-to-earth way. The author thinks that rather than explaining the deterioration of the "American Dream" to varying degrees, it can be more accurately said that Arthur shows the unrealistic "daydreams" of small people in the era of industrial civilization.

4.2. Weakness of human nature

On the surface, it seems undoubtful that *Death of a Salesman* is regarded as the disillusionment of the American Dream. However, if we ignore the complexity of the work and classify it as a social realism genre across the board, we will ignore the writer's subtle depiction of the characters, thus greatly weakening the rich connotation of the work itself.

If we return to the text, in fact, the tragedy of the characters in the play can be attributed to the weakness of human nature and the wrong self-cognition. The primary cause of the life tragedies of Willy, Biff and Happy is their misunderstanding of self-worth. The reality has been far away from the idealistic era. The pressure of survival and the understanding of value are determined by the living conditions of modern people. Willy's living dilemma is a symbol of the living environment of modern people. Fatigue and loneliness, and the wrong orientation of self lead to life always being confused. Willie's greed for something for nothing has always made him unwilling to leave his comfort zone to open up a new world and create wealth, but he is full of powerlessness about everything he can't change at present. Returning to the text, we can find that Arthur Miller has brought us into Willy Loman's life from the beginning. The word "exhausted" appears six times in the text, five of which are used to describe Willie. In addition to exhaustion, another word "tired" appeared ten times, six of which were related to Willy. In addition to these two words, Willy's words and deeds also left a tired impression on readers. For example, when Willy came home, "he looked exhausted." He opened the door with a key, went into the kitchen, put down the heavy burden and stroked his aching arm. " Obviously, Willy is physically and mentally exhausted. Although he heard the flute, he didn't realize its existence. At the beginning of the first act, Willy told Linda, "I'm so tired." Next, "he sat beside her next to the edge of the bed, feeling a little paralyzed." Willy is now sixty years old and still has to work hard to support his family, but his two sons don't realize this. Linda, who has always been forbearing, finally blamed her son and told them their father's current situation. After learning about his father's situation, Biff

intends to borrow some money from Oliver to do business, which makes Willy feel that life is beginning to improve. That night, Willy slept like a dead man. It's the first time in months. I can't believe it. I spit until ten o'clock on Tuesday morning ... "Obviously, Willy's brain hasn't had a good rest for a long time, and he really needs to relax and spit.

Another source of his own exhaustion is his failed education of two children, which is also the embodiment of Willy's misplaced values from the side. In the process of educating children, Willy always instilled utilitarian values and unrealistic dreams into his two children, especially his eldest son Biff. Willy regards it as the embodiment of the American dream and thinks Biff is the only person to inherit his American dream. In Willy's eyes, popularity and personal charm are the most important conditions for realizing the American dream. It was this indulgence and improper education that made Biff refuse to take responsibility for his actions. Until his thirties, he still achieved nothing, and even couldn't help stealing a golden pen in an interview and lost a good job opportunity. He didn't see that Biff's failure to keep his feet on the ground was the failure of his education. Instead, he attributed the reason to lack of funds, so he hoped to exchange his life for the start-up fund of Biff's career.

All of the above, despite the increasing emphasis on material enjoyment and profit under the capitalist background, the cruel phenomenon of survival of the fittest has aggravated Willie's tragedy. However, the source of all tragedies is inseparable from the weakness of his human nature.

4.3. Immortal cultural genes

In fact, *Death of a Salesman* is not the only work by Arthur Miller that touches the American dream. In *All My Sons*, the author also interprets the American dream. The abstract concept of "American Dream" has never been defined accurately and uniquely. However, through the analysis of American cultural genes in the above article, we can get a glimpse of Arthur Miller's affirmation of American spirit. The reason why *Death of a Salesman* is highly sought after can be attributed to the author's successful portrayal of the little guy Willy. "No matter where the play is staged, I always receive letters from audiences in that country, thinking that the play seems to be just written yesterday," Miller said in an interview with Newsweek magazine. "I have been wondering why this drama has such a strong response. After all these years, I suddenly realized that the reason probably lies in a deeply hidden love. Everyone in the play loves Willy. The only person who doesn't love being Willy is Willy himself. Perhaps this is the reason, the kind of deep love that is revealed. " Willy's countless human weaknesses are the important reasons for his tragedy and the refraction of countless ordinary people. Miller seems to tell us through Willy's tragedy that in a highly competitive commercial society, individual rationality still has immortal value, and American cultural genes and American spirit will not lose value with the development of the times. On the contrary, in a modern society where human nature is shaken, traditional values and ideals still remain immortal. In the face of materialistic reality, the ancient law of survival of the fittest may be an unavoidable choice for life, seeking a traditional value ideal again or a posture of survival. Although Arthur Miller wrote tragedy in *Death of a Salesman*, I can still read the inheritance and affirmation of American spirit and American cultural genes from his heart.

5. Conclusion

This paper is divided into three parts, and from the perspective of "cultural genes", it refutes the previous view of "disillusionment of the American dream" in *Death of a Salesman*. Firstly, it demonstrates what "cultural gene" is, then briefly summarizes the development process of "American Dream" and its distinctive features, and finally makes multiple interpretations of Arthur Miller's interpretation of "American Dream" in the play. This paper analyses the unrealistic fantasy "daydream" of Willy Loman and his two sons, and the root of Willy's tragedy—the weakness of human nature, and finally draws the conclusion that the immortal cultural genes are transmitted in the play. That is, in the fiercely competitive commercial society, individual rationality still has immortal value. American cultural genes and American spirit will not lose value with the development of the times. On the contrary, in the modern society where human nature is shaken, traditional values and ideals remain immortal. In the face of materialistic reality, the ancient law of survival of the fittest may be an unavoidable choice for life, seeking a traditional value ideal again or a posture of survival.

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