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A Deterioration in the Values of the Original *American Dream*

Although the term *American dream* was coined only in 1931, the values that it would later on incorporate were more than present since the day the founding fathers landed on the American soil, determined to start a colony there. One can say that it was actually a dream, the one of a better life and of a better world that guided them on their harrowing journey and that helped them endure all the hardships. This dream, since the year 1931, got to be known as the *American dream*, a spiritual pillar of a country, a set of cultural values that states that each individual, despite his/her origin and the class they have been born into, can attain their own version of success and happiness. The best definition of the term itself was given by James Truslow Adams, the man who coined the term and who was the first to use it in his book *The Epic of America*: “[t]he *American dream*, it is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (404). The dream, as defined here, could be seen as a means of bringing about a more just system oriented towards the individual and the fulfillment of his/her needs, as well as the acknowledgement of his/her own abilities. The

emphasis of the *Dream* is not on attaining more material goods, but on creating a society in which each individual will be given a chance to succeed due to his/her capabilities and the hard work they put in it. The purity of this vision is something that one is struck with from the beginning. However, there is another striking aspect as well and this is the recent (and the not-so-recent) history of the country, which shows that this *Dream* has got corrupted and that the values that used to be its essence have been turned upside-down. Cindy Dermo, in her essay “The American Dream: A theoretical approach to understanding Consumer Capitalism,” would go so far as to claim that the main purpose of the *Dream* was “to keep the worker producing and consuming” (1). She cites Max Horkheimer, a German philosopher, and his claim that “[t]he machine has dropped the driver; it is racing blindly into space,” and goes on to say that “Horkheimer was saying that a man had lost his ability to choose his economic pursuits and that he had become merely a tool in the economic structure” (3). She concludes “that advances in technology were such that society was preoccupied with what it could accomplish rather than with whether it should” (3). Literature has tried hard to capture the moment when this corruption took place and to interpret its causes and its consequences. Moreover, in American literature, there are three pieces of writing that best tackle this theme. These are F. S. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and Edward Albee’s *The American Dream* (1961). All written in different decades, and covering together a period forty years long, these literary pieces show how the spiritual, family and even material values themselves, the most important aspects of the *Dream*—according to Benjamin Franklin, the man who invented the *American Dream* (Powell n.p.) and who described the importance of these in his autobiography, and practiced them in life—got corrupted the moment the *Dream* became excessively

money-oriented. Before going into details of these literary pieces, the details that would exemplify the deterioration of the material, spiritual and family values of the *American dream*, and a brief account of each of these books should be given.

The Great Gatsby by F. S. Fitzgerald is centered around Jay Gatsby, a man who is, only on the surface, the perfect specimen of a successful American. He is extremely rich, famous and well-respected. However, his wealth is of obscure origin, inherited from a man who got him into the bootlegging business. The novel's plot shows the discrepancy between the shallowness of the people that surround him, utterly uninterested in who he really is, and the depth of his dream, where money was only the means for Gatsby to get reunited with his youth sweetheart Daisy, now living in an unhappy marriage with a brutal racist called Tom. The book shows one's struggle to stay honest and just, the way the narrator Nick does, in a consumerist society in which the non-material dreams are the most difficult ones, and the least possible ones, to attain.

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller is a play about Willy Loman, a salesman already old enough for retirement, and his family. Willy has internalized the capitalist values of the society he lives in, and despite his most intimate urges to leave that kind of society and choose a life that would be more suitable to his inner needs, he is unable to do so. He commits suicide, not brave enough to stick to his own vision of living, too trapped to try and break his iron cage.

The third literary piece we will focus on is *The American Dream* by Edward Albee. Albee named his play after the concept that shapes the lives of the main protagonists of the play—Mommy, Daddy and Grandma. Namely, Mommy and Daddy, representatives of the new *Dream* whose sole purpose is accumulating more goods, fail as parents and as spouses. They do not listen to Grandma, the

representative of the old *Dream*, a woman who still manages to live according to her own vision. Albee shows the discrepancy between these two dreams, the first one being too shallow, too money-oriented, and the second one being too abstract, too non-material, for the modern man in search of material wellbeing.

The main theme in these books is the *American dream* and its deterioration in the modern, capitalist society. By going into details of the descriptions given by the authors one would be able to see how they represented the deterioration of the spiritual, material and family values that constituted the original dream and that once gave it life.

Firstly, spiritual value is a broad term that usually refers to the importance an individual gives to the non-material aspects of his/her life (Jimenez n.p.). These aspects are the inner attitudes and beliefs that guide one's life. When taking a more general view on the American history, one is confronted with the fact that the history of the country started when a group of people went on a quest for a place where they would be allowed to practice their beliefs. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the spiritual values have been very important from the beginning of the American history. However, in the three literary pieces mentioned above, a deep moral corruption that took place somewhere along the way is illustrated and that is especially reflected in their characters' attitude towards love, fidelity, and respectability.

These three books focus on loveless married couples and their families. One is struck with a complete absence of love, with the rigidity of their married life and of their incapacity to experience and show deep affections. In *The Great Gatsby*, apart from Gatsby himself, nobody seems to be capable of taking love and care on as their priority. In fact, they all go for superficial and shallow emotions while using other

human beings for building up a façade that they would later on call a good and nice life. Gatsby's "incorruptible dream" (Fitzgerald 665) is a dream of love. His fixation is a moment in his past about which he says: "I cannot describe to you how surprised I was to find out I loved her, old sport. I even hoped for a while that she'd throw me over, but she didn't, because she was in love with me too. . . Well, there I was, 'way off my ambitions, getting deeper in love every minute, and all of a sudden I didn't care" (Fitzgerald 662). Gatsby, who once experienced this deep feeling, is incapable of seeing the material aspects of his life as the sole purpose of living. For him, money is a way of getting back to Daisy, a simple means, but what he encounters when he finally gets reunited with her, is her "voice full of money" (Fitzgerald 642).

Futhermore, in *Death of a Salesman*, the point to which Willy Loman, the main protagonist, returns is the moment when he cheated on his wife Linda on a business trip, while she is trying to save him all the time. She loves him, but he, burdened with what he wanted to achieve, is incapable of loving her back. As their son Biff points out, all he did was "he always, always, wiped the floor with you!" (Miller 55). The same can be said for Albee's minimalist play in which Mummy's and Daddy's married life was reduced to a mechanical sexual activity—Mommy describing it as "getting on top of me and bumping your uglies" (Albee 67). Their *American dream* is a dream of having a respectable family, without a second wasted on child rearing and experiencing all the complexities of human, emotional interaction.

The lack of love in these marriages brings along the partners' inability to remain faithful to each other. When it comes to unfaithfulness, *The Great Gatsby* can be seen as the best example, being packed with unfaithful couples. Firstly, there is Tom Buchanan, a rigid racist who cheats on his wife while preaching puritan values. He firmly states that "the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr Nobody from Nowhere

make love to your wife. Well, if that's the idea you can count me out... Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white" (Fitzgerald 648). But, this is what he does. He cheats on his wife with Wilson's wife, indifferent towards his wife's presence in his life and even more indifferent towards his lover's death. These characters live a charade. They easily give up on their true love, or on what seemed so, just to pursue someone who is better-off. This is what Jordan, another female protagonist in *The Great Gatsby*, a girl who "was too wise ever to carry well-forgotten dreams from age to age" (Fitzgerald 653), does for herself. In one of the last scenes in the book she coldly informs Nick that she is engaged to be married, although throughout the book she seemed to be romantically involved with Nick himself. In addition, Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* would find the cause of his infidelity in the fact that he was "lonely, terribly lonely" (Miller 120). And this is true, his loneliness was an outcome of his constant business trips, being separated from his family in order to earn some money and become a respectable employee. Moreover, in *The American Dream* Albee's characters do not seem to possess any inner, emotional restraint that would prevent their being unfaithful. Therefore, Daddy engages in verbal games with sexual implications with a completely unknown woman, a guest to their house, just to feel more secure and more masculine.

Respectability was another component of the original *American dream*. It was supposed to go hand in hand with one's actions, being an outcome of one's ways of achieving spiritual and material well-being. However, what we encounter in these three books are completely wrong and immoral ways of getting respect. For example, Gatsby is a bootlegger who illegally sells alcohol during the Prohibition and thus gets rich. There are no characters who work hard and achieve something in an honest way.

We do not see any character who strives and who, eventually, thrives. The only honest character seems to be Wilson, the mechanic, who lives his little life without wanting to be involved with those high-class people. But even he manages to lose his respectability, not due to his own fault, but due to the inability to evade the influence of the rich and powerful. In the post Second World War America, the vision of respectability seems to be utterly pervaded and corrupted. It is, as Biff called it, "a phony dream" (Miller 133). The character of Willy Loman illustrates this the best. He is incapable of letting go of his widely accepted vision of a smiling businessman, who does not crack jokes and who earns his respectability by not being himself, but by behaving uniformly and in a reserved way. What is more, Willy internalized the way of becoming respectable and rich that is smooth and easy. The man he admires most "would go up to his room, put on his green velvet slippers, and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living" (Miller 81). The way his son Biff lives is incompatible with this vision of his and he does not think much before he calls him *lost*. What he says is "Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world a young man with such personal attractiveness, gets lost" (Miller 16). But for Biff the price one has to pay for this type of respectability is too high. He calls it "a measly manner of existing. 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 22). This is the life of appearances, but Willy cannot shake it off. His death is just the final outcome of the incompatibility between his real, deepest dream and the one

that he internalized as his own. As Biff puts it towards the end of the play, “he had wrong dreams. All, all, wrong” (Miller 138).

The purity of one's feelings and his/her moral attitudes can be said to have been the spiritual core of the original *American dream*. On the path towards freedom, wealth and happiness, one was not supposed to lose his/her morality or to contaminate the purity of their dream and emotions. But, as we have seen above, the attitudes towards love, fidelity and respectability got corrupted and buried deep under the superficial pursuit of money.

Secondly, material values refer to the fundamental needs that human beings have. They include things such as food, clothing, and protection from the environment. However, a simple definition of material values usually includes a note saying “[i]f exaggerated, material values can be in contradiction with spiritual values” (Jimenez n.p.). And this is exactly what happened to the material aspect of the *Dream*. Once supposed to be a natural outcome of one's hard work, money, power and commodities, it has now become the sole purpose of one's living and working. The danger of the *Dream* becoming solely oriented towards material values seems to have been present since its beginning.

In *The Great Gatsby*, money is empty, because it brings no happiness and no love. With his money, Gatsby can afford expensive cars, lavish parties and pink suits, but he gets no real satisfaction from it. Daisy, Tom, Jordan, they all regard money as a sanctuary, Daisy's house having “a ripe mystery about it, a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors” (Fitzgerald 661). Even their decisions are influenced “by some force—of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality—that was close at hand” (Fitzgerald 663). Furthermore, in *Death of a Salesman*, money

does not bring any kind of security. The moment it is earned it has to be spent on paying the debts back. Willy is trapped in endless calculations, pondering if the money earned would be enough to pay everything back. At one point he says “a hundred and twenty dollars! My God, if business doesn't pick up I don't know what I'm going to do” (36). His fears and existential anxieties are brought about by the society in which a person without money counts for nothing. Even the author himself once described the plot of the play as focusing on “what happens when everyone owns a car and a refrigerator” (256). This money-oriented dream is overpowering and omnipresent. Willy's son Biff wants to find an alternative to this by working on a farm and by leaving the urban settings where it is impossible even to breathe. However, the *Dream* of easy money is enchanting and it is impossible not to pay any heed to uncle Ben's words “when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich” (Miller 52). In this play everything, even the lumber, is regarded through the value it possibly has. Albee even went a step further. In his play, what one can buy with money is not only a hat or a TV set, but children as well.

These characters' perverted attitude towards money is closely connected to their attitude towards different objects. The images of loneliness and despair, despite huge wealth and powers, is something that is present in *The Great Gatsby*. In the book, there are many scenes that show Gatsby's attitude towards the things that he possesses. For example, there is a scene in which he takes all of his shirts and throws them around just to show to Daisy how rich he is. What is more, Fitzgerald took great care to depict all the preparations for Gatsby's parties, scenes where “every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York—every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless

halves. There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb" (Fitzgerald 588). Arthur Miller, in *Death of a Salesman*, tackled this problem as well, and he managed to show the absurdities of the existence of countless commodities in our everyday lives by making them the center of the plot in certain scenes, including a scene in which the main protagonist is a wire recorder, a pastime utility that everybody focuses on. Willy's household is packed with devices still to be paid for, but there are tiny things such as the stockings that he gives to his mistress, or the punching bag that he gives to his sons, or the wire recorder mentioned above, whose sole purpose is to mask the lack of deep, human affection. Happy, his father's son, best described this: "[s]ometimes I sit in my apartment—all alone. And I think of the rent I am paying. And it's crazy. But then, it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I'm lonely" (Miller 23). In Albee's *The American Dream* one encounters scenes in which the only satisfaction Mommy gets is having the right hat. However, this comes as no great surprise when compared to the fact that to Mommy and Daddy even a child is an object, to be bought and treated as such. They want the child they bought in an agency that sells children to be like a thing, still and silent all the time. They treat their adopted son the way they treat a hat or any other household device. It is something used for showing off, like a material good, with no second wasted on their son's inner needs and desires.

Having a lot of power is something that goes hand in hand with having a lot of money. But this power is not the power that an individual would use to change something in his/her environment, or in the political system. Power, like money, is empty, and serves no purpose apart from bringing even more wealth to a certain

individual. People who are materially powerful, at high positions, do not actually deserve the respect they are given, but they get it just due to the position that they hold. This is best exemplified in the character of Meyer Wolfsheim in *The Great Gatsby*, a Jew who “fixed the 1919 World series,” a bootlegger who was the first one to help Gatsby make his fortune. This is a man who has connections and who uses them to get what he wants. He uses his money to buy things such as cuff-buttons made from human molars, but who refuses to appear at Gatsby’s funeral. His excuse is that he is tied up in some important business, while, as a matter of fact, he would like to avoid being connected to Gatsby in any possible way. In *Death of a Salesman*, there is a similar character—Howard, the man who runs the company that Willy works for. This man pays no heed to Willy’s problems; he attaches no importance to the fact that it was Willy who gave him his name. He is a powerful man, having other men’s fate in his hands, but he does not regard this as a responsible and an important task. The message that he has for Willy is that “it’s a business, kid, and everybody’s gotta to pull his own weight” (Miller 80). Another example of this kind of attitude is given in *The American Dream* when Mommy describes the chairman of her women’s club saying that “she is a dreadful woman, but she chairman of our woman’s club, so naturally I am terribly fond of her” (Albee 60). Fitzgerald and Miller did not make Meyer Wolfsheim or Howard the protagonists, but they included them in the plot and this is very important since, even with their minor roles, they manage to have a great influence on Gatsby’s and Willy’s life. Their corporations and their fortunes are created by people who earn their living by working for them, but who are not protected in any possible way. Power seems to be in the hands of a few people who use it to become more wealthy and who use it for their own ends, not caring about the destinies of those people who made them.

Money, power and commodities had a completely different purpose in the original *American dream*. They mattered as long as they were well-earned and as long as they were used for the improvement of an individual, and of the society in general. Miller, Albee, and Fitzgerald described the extent to which this material aspect of the *Dream* got corrupted, getting oriented solely towards hoarding of money and goods.

Thirdly, besides spiritual and the material values, another aspect of the cultural and social values has also suffered due to the extreme focus of the American society upon money and material goods. These are the family values that derive from the fundamental beliefs of the parents who use them to educate their children (Jimenez n.p.). In these three books one perceives a deterioration in family relationships. In them, there is a failure in communication between parents and their children, between elders and their children, and between spouses.

First things first, it may be important to notice that in *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy's and Tom's daughter appears only once, followed by her nanny and spending only a couple of seconds with her mother. This may be an important fact since it points out the superficiality of the relations within a family, taking into consideration all other couples, in search of cheap, non-consequential entertainment, that appear in the book. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy spends so much time on his business trips that he has no time to devote to his family. He tries to attain respectability and money, by following somebody else's dream, not his own. Although his wife does not seem to understand this, his sons Biff and Happy do. Biff argues with his father all the time, being aware of the fact that he cheated on his mother, and of how corrupted Willy's vision is, despite what he preached. Biff is not allowed to create his own way of living, although it haunts him, making him steal pens at business meetings. His father

regards him as a failure, being disappointed by the fact that “he is not settled, still kind of up in the air” (Miller 21). On the other hand, his son Happy, who is not happy at all, follows his father's vision which makes him lonely and dejected despite having all the commodities of modern life. The only moment in the play when there is a kind of successful communication between Willy and his sons is when they follow his advice and try to enter the business world, the idea that they would soon give up, or at least Biff would; otherwise, it is only arguing and cursing that characterizes their communication—Biff calling his father “selfish and stupid” (Miller 27) and Willy calling him “a disgrace” and “a lazy bum” (Miller 16). However, the most striking example of the failure in communication between parents and children is given in *The American Dream*. Mommy and Daddy, after adopting a baby boy, referring to it as the bundle, are unable to answer any of his inner needs. Whenever a child develops an interest in a certain part of his body, they cut it off. Finally, “it died; and you can imagine how that made them feel, they having paid for it, and all” (Albee 101). This is the failure in communication on the basic level; baby communicates its needs, but the parents want a ready-made human being, someone on whose upbringing not a single second should be spent.

This superficiality is also reflected in the communication between elders and their children. For example, *The Great Gatsby* captures this disruption, but also represents the elders as sources of great wisdom and of a deeper understanding of life than that possessed by their children. The sentence that opens the first chapter comes from Nick's father and it nicely summarizes Nick's attitude towards the actions of others. It says, “[w]henver you feel like criticizing anyone, just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had” (Fitzgerald 563). In addition to this, the moment Gatsby's father appears, and this is in order to attend

his son's funeral, one realizes that this man's way of living is in stark contrast with that of the people that surrounded his son. He is "a solemn, old man very helpless and dismayed, bundled up in a long cheap ulster against the warm September day" (Fitzgerald 673). In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy's father also appears, and he is also treated as the person who was still connected to the original *American dream*. He used to make flutes and sell them. Although he left for Alaska in pursuit of a better life, he was an artist, and Willy regrets not having gone there with him. In this play, as in the *American dream*, the elders still had some substance about them, a quality which got lost in their children while on their way of becoming more rich and prosperous. This is what happens to Grandma in *The American Dream* as well. She lives under the constant threat of being taken away by the van people. Nobody takes care of her, Daddy mocking her and having no understanding for her. In one of these scenes she replies, "When you get old, you can't talk to people because people snap at you. That's why you become deaf, so you won't be able to hear people talking to you that way. That's why old people die, eventually. People talk to them that way" (Albee 64). The play is packed with verbal plays in which Grandma is mocked, while being the only one who is capable of deeply understanding and perceiving whatever happens around her. While her daughter and son-in-law are satisfied with their superficial communication, one sees that there is some substance about Grandma: she bakes cakes, nicely wraps the boxes and seems to be the only one who puts some meaning into her life.

The married couples, in their pursuit of material well-being, also fail to communicate. Therefore, it comes as no wonder that they argue all the time and can reach no decision together. In each of these literary pieces, the characters' communication is marred by misunderstandings and impatience. Daisy and Tom are

accomplices who choose to remain silent, and thus solve all their problems. This is why they stay together in the end. They watch each other's back without trying to understand the other, and without trying to establish a more profound communication. Tom goes even a step further. He beats his mistress when unable to communicate in a civilized way. In their lavishly decorated hotel room, having previously bought her a dog as an amalgam of his affection, he slaps her and breaks her nose when she keeps repeating Daisy's name. In *The Great Gatsby*, Jordan and Nick are also examples of failed communication. They do not really like each other; the sole purpose of Jordan's life is a pursuit of a wealthy husband, she herself being a dishonest golf-player, satisfied with a meager portion of life. The second married couple are Linda and Willy, a couple incapable of showing genuine feelings, being preoccupied with various calculations. And it is not only about Willy cheating on his wife, it is about the shallowness of their communication. Linda tries to save his life by reassuring him that what he does is all right, while her son Biff is the one whose attitudes should be acknowledged. In order to save her husband's already disturbed peace, she does not listen to her son's words and keeps the rigidity of her thought. This kind of shallow communication is something that Albee's *Mommy and Daddy* also share. Throughout the play, they try to realize who the person they are expecting is, but they keep interrupting each other, craving for assurance and understanding, but not the understanding of some of their inner needs and desires, but for that superficial part of their beings that keeps them together. There is a scene with a symbolic meaning in which Mommy and Daddy remain in the same room, without being able to see each other. Their snapping and sneering is what characterizes their communication from the beginning, and they seem to be too rigid ever to change it.

These three books tackled the family values and their deterioration by showing miscommunication existing between spouses themselves, between themselves and their children, and between themselves and their own parents. Every attempt of communication in the families in the world in which the pursuit of material well-being matters the most seems to be futile and all in vain.

To conclude, in this paper we wanted to analyze three great literary pieces of the American literature and show how they tackle the theme of deterioration in the values of the original *American dream*. Our starting point was the definition of the *Dream*, as coined by James Truslow Adams, and we wanted to give the examples from the books that show a discrepancy between the original idea that shaped the *Dream* and what it would become later on. The original dream was the dream of freedom, the dream which was supposed to bring spiritual and material well-being to any individual who worked hard and who was in search of constant improvement. Moreover, this dream was supposed to be the pillar of the nation, the core of a political system that would be just and caring towards its citizens. However, what Fitzgerald, Miller and Albee tried hard to reveal in their literary pieces dealing with the *American dream*, Albee even naming his play after the term, was that at a certain point the *Dream* got too money-oriented, and people became obsessed with achieving a higher social position despite the means at their disposal, and that this reflected on the spiritual, material and the family values not only of the particular individuals, but of society in general.

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