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## The Failure of “The American Dream” and its Dysfunctional Families

Drama is mimetic, an imitation of life. We read plays and watch TV shows and movies to learn and find things we like, relate to, and/or utterly scare us. The theater in modern America has a fascination with the failed idea of “The American Dream,” as well as dysfunctionality within families; two elements that are present in real life. The failure of this “American Dream” is a theme for quite a few modern American playwrights, with particular interest in Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, and Tracy Letts. This failed notion will be examined in *All My Sons*, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and *August: Osage County*, along with an analysis of each work’s dysfunctional family and the relationship between the two.

The “American Dream” does not have an exact definition or depiction within modern drama, except maybe overall happiness. However, as defined by the Random House Dictionary, it is “the ideals of freedom, equality, and opportunity traditionally held to be available to every American,” and is also described as “a life of personal happiness and material comfort as traditionally sought by individuals in the U.S. (“American Dream”).” Collins English Dictionary delves further to define the “American Dream” as “the notion that the American social, economic, and political system makes success possible for every individual (“American Dream”).”

Within Arthur Miller's, *All My Sons*, the "American Dream" depicted falls into a category Nadja Klopsch refers to as the "dream of upward mobility," one of the levels included in the overall idea of the "American Dream" (9). The "dream of upward mobility" is described as a "desire to achieve beyond one's parents' economic status or ensure a child's greater success in life (9)." It is essentially the wish to improve one's standard of living and to, hopefully, pass a higher standard of living onto his or her offspring. Joe Keller, the father in *All My Sons*, was a manufacturer of airplane parts during WWII, and was created to represent every man facing a responsibility to his country at that time (Popkin, 39). Though, not only did Joe have a responsibility to his country, he also had a responsibility to his family. Joe knowingly sold a batch of cracked airplane propellers, fully aware that many lives were at risk as the result of that decision. When confronted by his son Chris about his guilt, Joe defends himself by saying he had a duty to his family, especially to him:

CHRIS. Then why didn't you tell them?

KELLER. .... They came with handcuffs into the shop, what could I do? Chris...Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you. I'm sixty-one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you? Sixty-one years old you don't get another chance do ya? (*Sons* act 2)

The response that Joe gives to his son is a clear statement relating to the “dream of upward mobility” that he is striving for within his “American Dream” ideals. Joe believes that if he would have made any other decision than the one that he had, his family would have fallen apart; that “dream of upward mobility” would be destroyed.

Unfortunately for him, that dream was destroyed regardless, and the end result was worse than he could have imagined. His sons of course cannot stand the guilt they feel as a result of their father’s decision, and both express these emotions to him in their own way. Overcome with guilt by his father’s decision, Joe’s oldest son Larry, a pilot in the Air Force, learns of the scandal through the paper. In return, he writes a letter to his fiancée, Ann, telling her of his guilt and his wish to die. He shortly commits suicide as a public acknowledgement of the guilt he feels (Popkin, 39). Chris expresses his guilt to his father by confronting him, and further laments later by reading Larry’s letter out loud to him.

Guilt is a central element present in this piece, both in regards to its symbolic features and the additive of dysfunction within the family. As far as symbols of guilt within *All My Sons*, the apple tree referenced is a representation of Larry, since he is absent throughout the piece. The cracking of the tree can be viewed as the breaking of the American family and that failed notion of upholding the “dream of upward mobility”. The tree stands broken, a constant

reminder of the shame Joe Keller has brought upon his family. Once he understands what he has truly done, Joe sees the tree as the crimes he has committed against his nation and his family; Joe's younger son Chris, views the tree as a reminder of the destruction his father has caused and the need for his father to be punished. The letter that Larry sent to his fiancé was further proof of guilt represented:

CHRIS. [*reads*] . . . "My dear Ann: It is impossible to put down the things I feel. But I've got to tell you something. Yesterday they flew in a load of papers from the States and I read about Dad and your father being convicted. I can't express myself. I can't tell you how I feel- I can't bear to live anymore." (*Sons* act 2)

Larry's suicide was a result of not being able to live with the fact that his father killed twenty-one of his fellow pilots (Mahfouz, 401).

Joe Keller does not feel guilt from his actions because he feels that he was doing the right thing for his family. He is also slightly delusional in thinking that, because he was acquitted in court, his neighbors don't disapprove of him and still holds him in high regard. They, in fact, express their disapproval of the man that sold faulty equipment and ultimately, ended many lives (Popkin, 46). Joe has avoided surveying his guilt and has evaded the consequences of his actions by justifying them as providing for his family (40). Yet, Arthur Miller's purpose of *All My Sons* was "to bring a man into the direct path of the consequences he had wrought," and that's

exactly what happens (40). Once Joe Keller understands that he cannot live for his family alone, the ideal “American Dream” he had struggled to provide his family with, crashes, along with the realization that his reputation is no longer a good one (43). Once Joe realizes the severity of his failure, the guilt he feels for not only leading his son to commit suicide, but for betraying his country and failing his family, consumes him and ultimately, leads Joe to commit suicide as well (Mahfouz, p. 401).

Edward Albee’s, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has a slightly different take on the “American Dream”, and another variation of a dysfunctional family. While the idea of the “American Dream” is mostly ridiculed in this play through the question of women’s roles within the family, the “American Dream” seems to be strived for between George and Martha in the way of the “dream of equality”. The “dream of equality” refers to both political and social connotations, ultimately focusing on the equal rights of citizens in relation to public spheres and personal dealings within social groups (Klopsch, 21). While this would seem to be a contradiction, it applies to today’s version of the “American Dream.” Fifty years ago, American ideals were very traditional, especially concerning women. After the war years, men expected women whom had taken over the labor force “temporarily,” to return to their positions as a housewife and a mother (Hoorvash, 12). This shift of course, created tension and the resulting struggle between gender roles is precisely what *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* embodies.

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a play that is largely focused on the give-and-take interaction between Martha and her husband George. In an article titled "Martha the *Mimos*: Femininity, Mimesis, and Theatricality in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*," the jokes that George and Martha make, as well as the many games they play, are seen as a bond between the couple, a way for them to communicate and connect (Hoorvash, 13). The games and jokes between the two can also be seen as hostile, but in a successful way (Luere, 51). In other words, the couple "seek meaning and continuity within a declining world whose moral and ethic values George holds increasingly suspect (53)," as well as a "shared attempt to demonstrate the inadequacy of the gender roles they are supposed to embody (Hoorvash, 13)."

Many of the things that are said and done throughout *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is an illusion. The marriage between George and Martha is highly theatrical, but they are consciously aware of the role-playing games that they participate in. The gender roles that they embody change throughout the acts, sometimes depicting the expected roles of each gender, and at other times, are completely opposite. Martha embodies the traditional feminine roles within the play as an obedient, dispassionate daughter who is only pleased by her clever husband, and even goes so far as to create an imaginary child to fulfill the role as an American housewife. Of course, we also see the not-so-feminine side of Martha; one full of vulgar

language, sexuality, spitefulness and crude humor. The representation of gender roles is also seen in George's character. George alternates between the humiliated husband that loves his wife despite her flaws/torture of him, and the violent man and cruel host (Hoorvash, 19). The depiction of "normal" and "not-so-normal" gender roles throughout the play is a representation of the roles society places on genders and the struggle of equality within those genders. George and Martha use the games that they play as a coping mechanism, not only for the sake of their marriage, but also to reach that "dream of equality", even if it is just between the two of them. Martha is a being that cannot be restricted by the rules and regulations that society has placed upon her, so she constantly has to play games, and to change the rules to keep it fluid (22).

A large failure of the "American Dream" in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is the notion that Martha is not able to have children. The fantasy child that Martha encourages George to play along with is not only partially an idea of the appropriate gender role, but it is also a way for the couple to hold their marriage together, their idea of sane dysfunction. The inability to have a child directly correlates with the notion of the failure of the "American Dream," the type of family that it represents, and the ideal ratio of 2.5 children. Martha and George live most of their lives with this illusion of their fantasy child, with constant role-playing and games. But, at the end of the play, the illusion is almost too much to bear for either, and George kills the

illusion to save them. By killing the child, George does two things: he reminds Martha that they are still in the real world and they cannot reject all principles of society without destroying themselves (Hoorvash, 22). George has also potentially given him and Martha a chance for a better marriage in the future, one devoid of illusions and based on truth (Hays, 441).

The failed idea of the “American Dream” and dysfunctional families in modern American drama continue in Tracy Letts’ *August: Osage County*. The component of the “American Dream” that this play focuses on is what Nadja Klopsch explains as the “frontier myth” (Klopsch, 28). The “frontier myth” embodies the opportunity for a better life among common man, stemming from the idea that the West, or the frontier, held promise and opportunity for American men. The setting of *August: Osage County* reinforces this idea of the “frontier dream”, with the location of the play being set in Oklahoma, an area where the promise of the American Dream was once present. However, the destruction of a family in a place that is supposed to represent that ideal of the American Dream, a location that was believed to symbolize the success of the United States, clearly depicts the ruination and failure of the American Dream within society (Mohler, 134).

Tracy Letts is much like Edward Albee and his criticism of a patriarchal society and gender roles. The Weston family was created to depict the Western family and culture within America. However, the patriarchal figure, Beverly, commits suicide. As a result, the mother,



Violet, assumes the role of “head of the household”, though her family quickly strips that away from her. In an article titled, “How to Get from Here to There: Poetic Connections in Tracy Letts’s *Man from Nebraska*, *August: Osage County*, and *Superior Donuts*,” author Deborah Kochman explains Violet: “rejecting the feminine characteristics of compassion, benevolence, and mercy, Violet bombards her company with vicious verbal remarks directed at family members and guests about their respective flaws or secrets (32).” Not only does Violet completely disregard her maternal qualities, she proceeds to embody the violent and ruling qualities associated with raw masculinity when assuming her “role”. The resulting violence that ensues is yet another failure of the “American dream.”

Beverly, however, is a clear representation of a patriarchal American man. Kochman explains that he “bemoans the upkeep required to maintain the “traditional American routine” of “paying bills, purchase of goods, cleaning of our clothes or carpets or crappers” and reinforces the challenge to the ritualistic American consumer culture in which Beverly participates (25).” Kochman goes on to say that the prologue of the play, opening with Beverly interview Johanna, a Native American housekeeper, foreshadows Beverly’s suicide and the end of an era, but also of the family’s effort to “define their existence, insulated within their “Weston World” (26-27).” Therefore, even though there are elements of that ideal “American

Dream” present within Beverly, the fact that he commits suicide shows that the “Dream” isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be and ultimately, depicts its failure.

Overall, the failed idea of the “American Dream” and its dysfunctional families within society are themes that hold particular interest in drama. Playwright Arthur Miller depicts the two in *All My Sons*, expressing the failed attempt at reaching for the “dream of upward mobility” and the ruin of his already dysfunctional family. Edward Albee’s, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* depicts that failure of the “dream of equality” within gender roles and the inability to have a marriage and family without illusions. Lastly, *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts is a play that centers on the “frontier myth” of the “American Dream” and ultimately, brings to light the secrets, betrayal, and dysfunctionality that is present within American families.

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