

Which American Dreams? A Constructive Approach to Teaching

American Drama

Timothy J. Viator, Professor of English, Rowan University

One of the challenges often of teaching upper-level electives is students deciding they have "already done" works they read in high school classes and sophomore surveys, something that I face when I teach my senior-level "American Drama." As we review the reading list on our first day, many students announce that they have "already done" in particular *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller and *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, plays that I feel we must include. I realized that too many of my students believed that plays have one and only one interpretation—usually the interpretation that their former teachers present as the "right" way of reading the play.

For this reason I came to consider how to structure my drama courses by using constructivist approaches. As I understand constructivism, instead of settling on one right interpretation, the class determines how many valid interpretations are possible. The teacher provides structure and guidance by providing a context and by asking questions, but allows the students to choose and then support their interpretations from the options the class develops. As Brooks and Brooks articulate in *In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms*, "Constructivist teachers often offer academic problems that challenge students to grapple first with the big ideas and to discern for themselves" (ix). For those "big ideas" I turned to a book that I required for a seminar on cultural studies, *The American Dream* by Jim Cullen. In his history, Cullen details the various and often contradictory interpretations and versions of ideologies that we name "the American Dream." As I

began preparing for my next section of American Drama, I thought how using Cullen's book might help students with Miller's and Hansberry's plays, works that essentially dramatize clashing ideologies. I soon recognized how I might rely on this approach for the fourteen plays on my syllabus.

In this essay I review how my students and I use many of the ideas Cullen explores in his history to examine American drama and encapsulate many of our interpretations. Organizing a course with a "theme" is hardly a new approach of course, but I feel that using this particular one for American drama is profitable and worthwhile. It allows for the meaningful discussion that several interpretations fuel. Having that deeper understanding of American ideologies translates to other courses. Finally as many of my students also major in education, the approach helps them once they prepare to teach American literature. I begin by discussing the ideas that my students extract from Cullen's history that seem to us the most important. (My section does not pretend to thoroughness, and I enthusiastically recommend any one who teaches American literature read Cullen's text.) I then detail many of the reactions to the characters from *Death of a Salesman* and *A Raisin in the Sun* and summarize some from the other plays on our reading list.

The American Dream(s)

The versions of the American dream from Cullen's book that students mention most often is: **The future matters**; the past does not. These versions of the American dream emphasize the hope for reform, that is, things can get better. Americans can trust that reform is possible because **one is the master of one's destiny**. Anyone can get ahead; if the past does not matter, where we start, our "beginnings" do not matter, but it is where we are going and where we "arrive" that do. We are free

and able to earn economic self-sufficiency and self-realization. And because we are free and able, we should achieve both and consequently the goal becomes happiness, for if things can be better, then we should always pursue then achieve happiness. As Cullen shrewdly points out, an important consequence of the American Dream is that opportunity, that mastery of one's destiny, "serve[s] as a powerful vehicle for blaming those who [do] succeed" as failing to seize that opportunity (101). The measure becomes "what have you done to make things better?"

What makes reform possible, the pursuit of happiness, one version holds, is **hard work**. However one may determine what it is, happiness is something Americans can achieve through sacrifice, patience, confidence, and diligence. Americans valuing entrepreneurial spirit arise from this ideology, with its promise of freedom of enterprise, the rags-to-riches stories best rendered by Horatio Alger. Hard work pays off, and here the American faith in and celebration of **upward mobility** emerge. As Cullen argues, "the American Dream was never meant to be a zero-sum solution: the goal has always been to end up with more than you started with" (159). For most Americans the sign of that upper mobility is **home ownership**, a tie to the frontier spirit of getting and owning one's own land. Moving up and owning a home go hand-in-hand with yet another consequence of hard work: achieving success by providing **a better life for one's children**. Finally, moving up for some means getting ahead, and as a result, the pursuit of happiness and upper mobility translate to being happier and higher up, and so **competition** becomes for many a way to do that. At the same, especially in the 1950s fears about losing one's place and thus having to start over or losing it all lead to social conformity, an anxiety that goes against mastery of one's destiny.

Recent versions of the American Dream accentuate and celebrate the "having" more than the "earning," **the good life** that one enjoys

without that hard work. Investing wisely or gambling (in all senses but mostly from entrepreneurial risks) creates wealth and the lifestyle that wealth affords without much effort, patience, and time. Cullen considers one important thread of these versions of the American Dream that arose on the West Coast, especially in Hollywood and Las Vegas, in that "A charismatic personality makes and breaks his own rules, succeeding in business without really trying" (177). The Dream of the Coast or **the California Dream**, always looking toward the future, confidently awaits good things to come, for good things happen to good people.

The other important conflict in versions of the America Dream that Cullen examines is the gap between the American values of **freedom** and of **equality**, particularly so for African Americans in the Twentieth Century. If one can and in some ways must master one's own destiny, then one must be free to do so. Furthermore, if America affords opportunity, through hard work or "a charismatic personality," then one must be equal and free to take advantage of that opportunity. Free and equal underscore then entrepreneurial spirit and frontier spirit.

I ask my students to read Cullen's book before class starts, and we devote at least the first week of our survey to it. During that time we discuss how we might "use" the versions of the American Dream and all the implications, connotations and denotations, and measures of those ideologies. The three times that I have utilized the American Dream in my drama survey the students from each section have emphasized two aspects in our examination of all the plays: the future matters and one masters one's destiny—not surprisingly I guess for college students only twenty-one or -two years old and for older students trying to change their situations. Each time I am struck how these two ideas emerge in our analysis—and how often they do to interesting and worthwhile insights. My students tend also to admire the characters who act in the best interests of

family and home ownership—not surprisingly, I know, for the overwhelmingly middle-class students who come to my institution mostly with defined professional goals. Understanding the difference between freedom and liberty takes some work, but once we do, the students find those values in interesting ways.

What my students question warily is what we come to call the California Dream. They are especially uneasy with characters taking risks or gambling (even those nontraditional students who see a college degree as an investment and not as a gamble); perhaps most English majors and minor cannot identify with that entrepreneurial spirit. They appreciate characters with what Cullen calls "a charismatic personality," those characters who are attractive or talented, and thus who achieve success without much effort, yet they hesitate to accept that version of the American Dream as it goes against the promise of hard work.

Death of a Saleman

Reading *Death of a Salesman* as a play that exemplifies how versions (and misconceptions) of the American Dream lead to conflict yields new and interesting interpretations. Biff is correct about his father Willy when he argues at the funeral, "He had the wrong dreams" (207). For Willy the measure of a salesman's success (and as well the death of a salesman) remained David Singleman, who at eighty-four, wearing green slippers, phoning customers from his hotel room, earned a living without much effort, back when "In those days there was personality in it" (156). Willy holds on with resolute faith to what my students and I call the California Dream. He seems to see in Biff the personality he noticed in Singleman when he complains very early in the play, for example, that a young man with the "personal attractiveness" Biff has thus should not be

"lost" in America, "the greatest country in the world" (99). Musing that he will get his son a job selling, Willy assuredly argues that Biff "could be big in no time" (99). Willy cannot understand why and how Biff has not achieved so much more.

Willy's reason for adultery arises from his anxious need to be liked. The Woman assures him that she picked him out of "all the salesmen [who] go by, day in and day out" (118). Because he can make her laugh, she will "put [him] right through to the buyers" (119). He worries to Linda that he appears foolish and fat, so much so that others laugh at him and "don't seem to take to" him (116). He complains that unlike other salesmen, he has to "be at it ten, twelve hours a day" (117).

The one time Willy seems to waver occurs when his brother Ben invites him to Alaska, where one can "Screw on your fists and you can fight for a fortune" (159). Yet Linda reminds her husband of David Singleman, and he counters his brother's temptation of riches in the "new continent at your doorstep," that he and his boys will "do it here!" (161). My students decide that in some significant ways Willy needs Biff to "be big" and big without much effort yet through personal attractiveness to prove his faith in that version of the American dream to himself and perhaps too to his brother Ben.

Some of my students feel as Willy does that Biff spites his father for adultery, yet at the same time, reading the play as a clash of dreams points to how Willy's faith in the California Dream hampers and confuses Biff for the seventeen years since Biff discovered his father's infidelity. In the very first scene, Biff equates being mature with working in business, having a wife, and paying off a mortgage—or what he calls "getting somewhere." Biff understands in ways his brother cannot that Willy reared them not "to grub for money" (106). Fired from many jobs, Biff refuses his entire adult life to "build a future" by stealing, by taking the day to swim,

and whistling in an elevator. He understands that he is only happy working out West as farmhand, yet to try to please his father and especially his mother he returns to "find himself," that is, to build something in business. Yet he expects that success to come without any effort. He and his father believe that the "personal attractiveness" Biff relied on in high school translates to business as it once did for David Singleman. It is, for example, the reason Willy is certain that Bill Oliver will save his sons' business of a sporting goods line as they play ball to advertise it.

Nonetheless, Biff is a hero. Doing the right thing he embodies the versions of the American Drama that most of my students hold as the most appropriate ones. Talking with Willy, Bernard (who achieves great success through hard work even though he is liked but not well liked) advises Willy that "sometimes. . .it's better for a man just to walk away" (168). Willy cannot, but Biff does. At the play approaches its end, clearly Biff demands that his family be honest. Most of my students decide that by trying to be honest, about himself, his relationship with his family, especially with his father, Biff comes to understand himself. In the climax of the play, in which Biff confronts Willy, Biff initially lashes out at his father, blaming Willy for his inability to follow "orders from anybody" (200). Realizing earlier in the day that he is "a dime a dozen," who is "not a leader of men," Biff struggles to explain to his father what he has realized about himself, and "at the peak of his fury," he exclaims "There's no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all" (201). Then, his breakthrough, that moment of clarity, comes when he breaks down and cries, after as the stage directions make clear his "fury has spent itself." Biff pleads with his father, "Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?" (202). Most of my students are quick to consider that "phony dream" as the California dream, the version that Willy understands as "personal attractiveness." Since high school, Biff wanted it seems to hold

on to that dream, but the Bill Olivers of the business worlds do not adhere to it. In the very last moments of the play, at his father's funeral, Biff tries to explain himself to Charley and to Happy, stating that his father "had the wrong dreams" and "didn't know who he was" (206, 207), yet they disagree, offering other versions of the American dream. Biff knows what he must do, and the majority of my students conclude that while he will not enjoy one measure of success, say in business, by knowing himself he has some chance to be happy, something his brother will not achieve trying to prove their father "had a good dream. . .to come out number-one man" (207). They find some comfort in Biff's "hopeless glance" at Happy, arguing that Biff knows what to do and knows when to walk away.

Many students feel that the real tragedy of the play is that Willy does not achieve the American dream; distracted by story of David Singleman, he does not appreciate what he has accomplished. They point to Biff's defense of his father in the bar:

Miss Forsythe, you've just seen a prince walk by. A fine, troubled prince. A hardworking, unappreciated prince. A pal, you understand? A good companion. Always for his boys. (185).

While he may not have the easy rewards of Dave Singleman, Willy worked hard, for his wife, and his sons. Despite the fact he has to be at it for hours Willy nonetheless diligently works, and he is able to buy his home. Some students consider that the saddest aspect of the play: the day his wife makes the final house payment, the moment he and she are "free and clear," is the day of his funeral. For these reasons, some students are not sympathetic: frustrated that Willy cannot understand what Biff was trying to explain to him about the phony dream they point out that Willy's suicide comes from his confused hope that by investing the twenty thousands from the insurance policy, Biff will beat Bernard again by enjoying success without effort—a mangled mixture of competition and the California dream.

Working hard at his job, working for his children, and paying off his home mortgage make Willy a success by many measures of the American Dream. Not being Dave Singleman and his son not being "big" quickly and easily only mean that the Lomans' have not enjoyed the California dream, something that Willy fails to appreciate.

A Raisin in the Sun

Students are quick to read *A Raisin in the Sun* as the example of the American dream of equality as black characters in the 1950s try to buy a home in a good neighborhood. I work to get them to see that important version in other plays, especially *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Lost in Yonkers*, and *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, as not just a "black issue." Nonetheless, starting with the equality with the Younger family is useful. Pressed, the students decide that the version of equality connects to the dream of home ownership and of a better future for one's children.

Students come to see how all three play in Walter Lee's decision to reject Lindner's offer to buy the house from the Youngers, and accordingly, they argue that Walter Lee is a hero. At least by play's end he is. Walter Lee seems to be distracted for much of the play by the lure of the California dream, the notion using the insurance money to invest in a liquor store is not a gamble or a risk as much as it is a shrewd move to assure the lifestyle of wealth. Some students agree with George Murchison's insult that Walter Lee is over-reaching as Prometheus had. Walter Lee never seems to promise to work hard; he dreams instead about being able to provide his wife a car for shopping and his son the choice of all universities. Some students decide that Walter Lee is

unsophisticated or naïve, quoting Beneatha's angry and somewhat sarcastic criticism of him as "*Monsieur le petit bourgeois noir*" (138).

Walter Lee losing most of the inheritance upsets the students, yet for many Walter Lee redeems himself by play's end for doing the right thing after that loss. As Lena suggests to Beneatha, "measure a man right" (145). He does what most feel seems consistent to his character after he loses the money: finding some way of replacing it without effort. Some students go as far as arguing that Walter Lee should take Lindner's offer (as Catherine Gunther Kodat noted in her classes). I think they feel this way because throughout the play Walter Lee seems to embrace the California dream with its lifestyle that comes from easy money. After all, if he were to take the money, he and his family would still buy a house yet without working so hard. Some students hold on to this position, yet most change their minds. Walter Lee demands equality, evoking the pride of his family, their strength to survive. Most students are quick to combine that with the family's willingness to work hard to "earn" the house (and not buy it with "easy" money), and to do so for his children, Travis and his unborn child. Ultimately, Walter Lee learns that his argument that life is money is wrong.

Walter Lee is a hero (mostly for white audiences, an issue that I examine in a forthcoming essay), embodying for most readers the versions of the American dream that they deem important. He particularly does the right thing by realizing a different dream, a simpler dream without wealth and power, yet one that affords him self-respect and pride. He tries to explain to Lindner that his decision to move the family into the house honors his father, saying "because my father—my father—he earned it for us brick by brick" (148). The house will signify his father's sacrifice and hard work, and now Walter Lee seems to acknowledge that he must too must sacrifice and work hard—all for *his* family's benefit. He will live up to

the legacy of the four generations before him by assuring the comfort of the sixth.

Beneatha annoys most of the students as selfish and shallow. First, she seems a most unfocused college student, for the most part, an exasperating, flippanant young woman who flits from hobby to hobby, squandering her education. Her relationship with George strengthens those impressions. That he has a nice car and takes her to nice places suggests that she enjoys the "lifestyle" of a college student, at least for one with a rich boyfriend. She merely dates him for those reasons. Her sarcasm irritates as well. She comes across as a college student who is not working toward something. Walter Lee points out persuasively "the line between asking and just accepting when the time comes is big and wide" (37). In comparison to the rest of the family, she does not appear to be working.

Beneatha redeems herself after her brother loses the insurance money. She listens to Asagai, who my students decide is the right boyfriend for her, taking an honest look at her situation. Remembering why she wanted to become a doctor, she renews her dedication to wanting to help others. And to do so she knows will take hard work, and her willingness to do what it takes to achieve her goals is a key to mastering one's destiny by working hard. She faces the truth when he demands she be honest: "Then stop moaning and groaning and tell me what you plan to do" (136). The African Asagai voices that dominant consequence of the American dream: that no what happens one must work to make things better.

Lena is also a hero, and for most students she is one of the very few heroes of the course. They understand why they feel that way. Faced with a family she describes "falling to pieces in front of [her] eyes," and "going backwards 'stead of forwards" Lena acts quickly, using the money

to buy her family a house, the most obvious, prevalent version of the American Dream. The students understand her, and they point out the main reason for her purchase: trying to help her child, yet another reason they come to admire her. She feels that owing his own house will give Walter Lee that sense of control he seems to lack as she explains to him, "it makes a difference in a man when he can walk on floors that belong to him" (92). Later fearing her son has given up when he misses work to drink and drive aimlessly, Lena sacrifices the money she has left, stating in passage many students quote to exemplify how many American parents feel about their children "There ain't nothing worth holding on to, money, dreams, nothing else—if it means—if it means it's going to destroy my boy" (106). She never relinquishes that love for Walter Lee. Understandably angry when she learns he has lost all the money, Lena reacts by striking him and praying for strength. True to her character and her vow, she initially suggests to Ruth that they spruce up the apartment, something students see as her attempt to try to make things better, and she pleads with Walter Lee not to take Lindner's offer, something the students consider as her pride and strength. In an oft-quoted passage she later scolds Beneatha on familial love and "measuring" a loved one for "There is always something left to love" (145).

In the climax of the play, Lena remains true to her vow, something most students mention, that Walter Lee is the head of the family. Yet, at the same time, she uses the meeting between her son and Lindner to teach Walter Lee a lesson by demanding that Travis be present to watch. When Lindner tries to appeal to her as someone "older and wiser," she refuses because Walter Lee finally does what she has always believed is right. For the students Lena embodies so many of the versions of the American Dream, but especially the hope and faith that things will get

better, as the plant she grabs before she can leave the apartment for good symbolizes.

Other Plays

Reading the plays with the issues that arise from a study of American ideologies, some students tend to be quick to blame any character who appear to hold on to the past, instead of mastering their own destinies as they can and should. Blanche DuBois is an obvious example. Haunted, trapped, and disabled by the past, she is helpless and delusional, reliant upon the kindness of stranger, and alcohol. For the same reason, students react harshly to Mary Tyrone from *A Long Day's Journey into Night* for abusing morphine purposely to swoop away into a fog where "the past when you were happy is real" (107). Her husband James might be caught in the past as well; fearing that he will lose the money his wise investment made, he fails to enjoy the benefits of that success. He blames his insecurity for playing it safe instead of taking a risk by concentrating on being a great Shakespearean actor.

Students eager for happy endings in a survey that affords very few tend to praise characters who seem to take control, in even the slightest manner, for if reform is possible and the future matters, then characters who change to at least attempt to change are seen as successful. Albee ends *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* with George realizing "It will be dawn soon. I think the party's over" and assuring Martha "It will be better" but adding "maybe" (238, 240). Boy Willie from August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* fails to defeat Sutter's ghost, suggesting that he cannot defeat the past. Yet some students feel that his ambition to stand as an equal landowner to his white neighbors will push him on to get the money he still needs to buy Sutter's land. The saxophone playing at the end of Beth

Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* symbolizes how Babe and her sisters are better off by the end of the play after doing something to change their situations at the start of the play.

The California dream emerges especially in recent plays. *Six Degrees of Separation* dramatizes two hustlers in action, Flan and Paul, two characters who rely on their charisma to influence others. As an art dealer, Flan seems legitimate, but students are quick to point that he does not work hard for his success. He gambles surely, and before the Cezanne deal he and Ouisa are in some serious financial peril. Students also note that he deals on the edges, with sellers looking to avoid "Taxes. Publicity" (40). He and Ouisa play roles, and the money they earn affords them a Manhattan life style. All in all, they embody the California dream, getting rich, sending their children to the best schools, living in impressive apartments, yet doing so without genuine hard work or talent. Paul seems a young version of Flan, and Ouisa confronts her husband by arguing they were both "attracted by youth and his talent and the embarrassing prospect of being in the movie version of *Cats*" (117). Talking his way into the lives of the parents of the students at an exclusive prep school, Paul has the charisma to persuade, as all the characters he dupes acknowledge. Yet his ardent desire for family, for the quiet moments of their lives in their upscale apartments, distracts him. He has the talents that a Flan has, but he wants the lifestyle that those talents afford the children. He winds up in jail mostly for not directing that charisma as Flan and the others had.

In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Mamet satirizes the California Dream. The salesmen competing to be number one of the board work hard, and no one better exemplifies the drive to win than Ricky Roma. He is "always closing" while others are plotting how to steal leads or wasting time with buyers with no money. Roma works, yet he and his fellows are selling a

version of the California Dream: buying land in Florida with the promise of easy returns. Mamet makes his point with situational irony: the only characters benefiting from the California Dream are the ones working hard to sell it as real.

Conclusion

I want my overview of the plays we read and analyze to suggest the possibilities of using constructivist approaches in any literature class; in other words, I do not intend this short essay to argue how one should "read" these plays but instead how we read these. In *Understanding by Design*, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2006) argue:

When we say that students must make their own meaning, we mean that it is futile to hand students prepackaged interpretations or statements of significance without letting them work through the issues Didactic teaching of *the* interpretation will mislead students about the truly arguable nature of all interpretation. (91-92)

By "didactic teaching of the interpretation" Wiggins and McTighe mean teaching that presents one interpretation as the only interpretation, the one interpretation that is "right." I wanted my students to determine and articulate different interpretations of the plays that they had "already done," and the course works in that way. What I failed to foresee was how my students would teach me by offering fascinating, clever, and often striking insights into plays that I thought that I know. Having my students "make their own meaning" by using the different American dream works well for my and my students. At the very least, however, I hope that my essay suggests that considering ways to make literature classes constructive classes makes sense.

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Timothy J. Viator teaches a wide range of courses at Rowan University (in New Jersey), including British literature surveys, Shakespeare, and American drama. He has published in those areas, especially theatre history and the teaching of drama.