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BETWEEN HOPES AND DELUSIONS:
THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE TRAGIC IN *OF MICE AND MEN*, *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*, AND *'NIGHT, MOTHER*

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Pontifícia Universidade Católica
do Rio Grande do Sul

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Área de concentração: Teoria da Literatura.

Orientador: Prof. Dr. Pedro Theobald

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ABSTRACT

The American Dream has been a theme widely explored in US literature. In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* (1982), the playwrights depict the vicissitudes of characters who strive to achieve their versions of the Dream. Although numerous studies in recent decades have been done on the portrayal of the theme in those works, there has been relatively little investigation into the relationship between the American Dream and the theory of the tragic in those plays. Considering this, the aim of this PhD dissertation is to examine the influence of the American Dream and the tragic on *Of Mice and Men*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *'night, Mother*. More specifically, this research was designed to determine to what extent and in what ways the American Dream central tropes would contribute to influence characters' behavior and be responsible for their tragic flaw. It was hypothesized that the values embedded in the Dream set the tragic into motion in the literary productions. It was also hypothesized that the concept of "tragic American illusion" springs out of the movement of entwining the controversies over the American Dream and tragic features. The main theoretical framework comes from the studies of Peter Szondi (2002), Gerd Bornheim (2007), Sandra Luna (2008; 2012), and Albin Lesky (2015). The findings of this research point out that the American Dream values play a crucial role in determining the way the characters think and behave. Furthermore, the results suggest that the process of reification of social relations, the clash between great expectations and the harsh reality of characters' surroundings, along with a desperate attempt to fit into a materialistic and highly competitive American society cause them to be continually tortured or destroyed throughout the plays. Finally, the study also highlights that the interplay between the dichotomies of the Dream and the tragic constitute the concept of "tragic American illusion", that is, those literary productions which explore the promises of the American ideology at odds with the vicissitudes of characters that cling to trying to achieve unattainable dreams.

Keywords: The American Dream; the tragic; *Of Mice and Men* (1937); *Death of a Salesman* (1949); *'night, Mother* (1982).

RESUMO

O Sonho Americano tem sido um tema amplamente explorado na literatura estadunidense. Em *Ratos e Homens* (1937), de John Steinbeck, *A Morte de um Caixeiro Viajante* (1949), de Arthur Miller, e *Boa noite, Mãe* (1982), de Marsha Norman, os dramaturgos representam as vicissitudes de personagens que se esforçam para alcançar as suas versões do Sonho Americano. No entanto, embora vários estudos realizados nas últimas décadas já tenham verificado a presença da temática nessas produções literárias, ainda há pouca investigação focalizando a inter-relação entre o Sonho Americano e a teoria do trágico na peça de John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller, e Marsha Norman. Considerando isso, o objetivo da presente tese é o de examinar a influência do Sonho Americano e do trágico em *Ratos e Homens*, *A Morte de um Caixeiro Viajante*, e *Boa noite, Mãe*. Mais especificamente, esta pesquisa se propõe a determinar em que medida e de que forma as principais características do Sonho contribuem para influenciar o comportamento das personagens e se tais características são responsáveis pelos seus erros trágicos. Lançou-se a hipótese de que os valores associados ao Sonho acionam o conflito trágico nas produções literárias. Também se cogitou a hipótese de que o conceito de “engano trágico americano” surge do entrelaçamento entre as controvérsias da crença estadunidense e as características do trágico. Para tanto, o embasamento teórico do estudo se baseia nas reflexões de Albin Lesky (2015), Peter Szondi (2002), Gerd Bornheim (2007) e Sandra Luna (2008; 2012). Os resultados desta pesquisa assinalam que os valores que sustentam o Sonho Americano exercem uma função crucial no modo como as personagens pensam e agem. Além disso, a pesquisa sugere que o processo de reificação das relações sociais, o embate entre grandes aspirações e a dura realidade em torno dos indivíduos, bem como a tentativa desesperada de fazer parte de uma sociedade americana materialista e altamente competitiva fazem com que as personagens sejam continuamente torturadas ou se autodestruam ao longo das peças. Por fim, o estudo também destaca que a interação entre as dicotomias do Sonho e as características do trágico constituem o conceito de “ilusão trágica americana”, isto é, produções literárias que exploram as promessas da ideologia americana em desacordo com as vicissitudes enfrentadas por personagens que não medem esforços para tentar realizar sonhos impossíveis.

Palavras-chave: Sonho Americano; trágico; *Ratos e Homens* (1937), *A Morte de um Caixeiro Viajante* (1949); *Boa noite, Mãe* (1982).

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*I'm through with standing in line to clubs I'll never get in
It's like the bottom of the ninth, and I'm never gonna win
This life hasn't turned out quite the way I want it to be
(Tell me what you want)
I want a brand new house on an episode of Cribs
And a bathroom I can play baseball in
And a king-size tub, big enough for ten plus me
(Uh, so what you need?)
I'll need a credit card that's got no limit
And a big black jet with a bedroom in it
Gonna join the mile high club at 37, 000 feet
(Been there, done that)
I want a new tour bus full of old guitars
My own star on Hollywood Boulevard
Somewhere between Cher and James Dean is fine for me
(So how you gonna do it?)
I'm gonna trade this life for fortune and fame
I'd even cut my hair and changed my name
'Cause we all just wanna be big rockstars
And live in hilltop houses, driving 15 cars
The girls come easy, and the drugs come cheap
We'll all stay skinny, 'cause we just won't eat
And we'll hang out in the coolest bars
In the V.I.P. with the movie stars
Every good gold digger's gonna wind up there
Every Playboy Bunny with her bleached blond hair and, well
Hey, hey, I wanna be a Rockstar*

Nickelback - Rockstar

*I work all night, I work all day to pay the bills I have to pay
Ain't it sad?
And still there never seems to be a single penny left for me
That's too bad
In my dreams I have a plan
If I got me a wealthy man
I wouldn't have to work at all, I'd fool around and have a ball
Money, money, money
Must be funny
In the rich man's world
Money, money, money
Always sunny
In the rich man's world
All the things I could do
If I had a little money*

ABBA – Money, Money, Money

1 INTRODUCTION

SCENE – The curtain rises. The scenery. The reader (audience), arriving, sees the interior of a student’s bedroom in half-light. At the right side of the room, there is a single bed next to a wall draped with pictures of famous US and UK tourist attractions. At the left side, there is a desk with a laptop on it, a printer beside the laptop, a gaming chair in front of the desk, and a pile of books. There is also a shelf fairly littered with grammar books and literary fiction. At the back of the bedroom, there is a window and above it an air conditioner. There are lots of crumpled papers scattered all over the floor. Presently, lights come up on THE STAGE MANAGER, a 32-year-old Brazilian male literature student, medium height, well proportioned, wears glasses and looks tired out, comes out of the inner stage, switches his laptop on and sits down on his chair. As the bedroom lights go down, he has finished sending his advisor important messages and casts a quick glance at his social media accounts. Then, he turns his laptop off, faces his reader and watches the late arrivals in the audience. When the stage is almost in complete darkness, light rises on the student. He stands up and starts speaking.

THE STAGE MANAGER. Thank you very much for coming by, my reader. I warmly welcome you who are here today to see what I have to say about my PhD research odyssey. In the current presentation, I am going to dwell, not only on the obstacles I went through and had to overcome over the last four years of intense scrutiny of American literature, but also on my findings and suggestions for future studies. So, get some coffee and fasten your seatbelt, because it is going to be a bumpy ride!

To begin with, I would like to ask you a few questions, my reader. Ones that maybe you have not been asked in a while, if at all. What image comes to your mind when you think of the United States of America? In your opinion, what is it about living in the US that attracts many immigrants around the world to flee their home countries and enter America through dangerous or unauthorized ways? And finally, what is the major feature that pervades the recent award-winning movies *Minari* (2020), *Hillbilly Elegy* (2020), and *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006)? A short time after reading these questions, you most probably thought of the US as the richest, the most powerful country in the world, or even the country with great movie productions, from my first inquiry. Nonetheless, you might also have pictured in your mind scenes of mindless

consumption, white supremacists marching¹, or even people protesting against the harsh economic reality, racism, violence, discrimination, and inequality² on American ground.

In order to answer the second question, you might have considered the significant surge in the number of individuals seeking to enter the United States legally or illegally as a way, not only to escape danger and dire conditions from their troubled countries, but also as a relief from the miseries they had been facing³. Moreover, in spite of the economic slump the country went through years ago, most immigrants are still lured by the possibility of a bright future, personal upward-mobility ambition and better opportunities to find work and improved living conditions, not to mention the chance to enter some of the best, highest ranked universities in the world. However, the increasing number of immigrants has brought about consequences and negative attitudes towards “new Americans”. Some native-born citizens claim that foreign people are mainly responsible for the rising unemployment and crime rates in the country. Moreover, Americans also believe that newcomers not only reduce labor market opportunities of less skilled natives, but also impact on the wages of competing American workers. Such issues are widely thought to contribute to the emergence of ultra-nationalist, xenophobic and racist groups, as well as to the electoral success of the Right-wing movement in the US; for instance, the former president Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, which called for a force to deport all immigrants living in the US without legal status and also promised to build a great wall along the U.S.–Mexico border⁴.

As for the third question, apart from the movies’ specific characteristics, they revolve around characters who are looking to fulfill their dreams and are willing to do anything to achieve them. In their hardscrabble journey through success, we keep up with the lives of people who overcome frustrations and financial difficulties through personal effort and dedication. In this sense, although they clash with harsh reality, the characters do not give in and keep their aspirations alive. As a consequence, they wind

¹ Available at <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/12/06/white-supremacist-dc-march-patriot-front/>>. Access on December 10, 2021.

² Available at <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html?auth=login-google1tap&login=google1tap>>. Access on January 10, 2022.

³ Available at <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/us/migrants-texas-border-scenes.html>> and <<https://www.npr.org/2021/09/21/1039230310/u-s-border-agents-haiti-migrants-horses-photographer-del-rio>>. Access on November 15, 2021.

⁴ Available at <<https://time.com/5928808/trump-border-wall-what-to-know/>>. Access on January 24, 2022.

up bringing to the fore issues that have to do with the construction of America as the “land of opportunity” and the (utopian) promise of great material success that comes from hard work and perseverance. In other words, there is a sense among all three movies that America is a place which presents second chances both to immigrants and to native-born citizens. Nevertheless, when critically reading *Minari*, *Hillbilly Elegy*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness*, we perceive that the characters are plagued with uncertainties and internal conflicts. They are afraid of, and worried about, not being able to improve their lives in the land of countless opportunities on account of some tenets which lie at the core of American society and culture, such as an intense and increased competition, the harsh inequalities brought out by the capitalist system⁵, consumerism, and the portrayal of a country divided into haves and have-nots, winners and losers. Therefore, the characters do encounter obstacles to realizing their aspirations, but there are few discussions about the real sources that impede or put off their strife for a place in the sun in those movies. They do not problematize the negative effects of bad working conditions that end up brutalizing and exploiting the population for the benefit of a favored few.

By analyzing the answers to the aforementioned questions as a whole, together with their contradictions, you most probably have noted that examining America is a complex task, since perceptions of the country vary from one individual to another and, consequently, this generates an interesting conflict between the different and often contrasting versions of the USA. Even though each inquiry tackles the issue under distinctive viewpoints and acts as a catalyst for our understanding of how the country is seen and interpreted overseas and by its own citizens, those questions account for the complexities of a term tied directly to the national culture and ethos: *The American Dream*⁶. And now you may ask me: What is it about? What does it stand for?

In order to fully understand the concept of the Dream, though defining it can be a difficult and tricky process, I am going to divide the term into two parts: the first takes

⁵ According to Octavio Ianni (1980), capitalism is “a universal mercantilist system which produces relative surplus value. It trades relations, people and commodities. At the same time, this economic system trades labor, the human energy that produces value. Consequently, capitalism turns individuals into commodities, they end up being adjectives of their own labor” (IANNI, 1980, p. 8, my translation). Original source: “o capitalismo é um Sistema de mercantilização universal e de produção de mais-valia. Ele mercantiliza as relações, as pessoas e as coisas. Ao mesmo tempo, pois, mercantiliza a força do trabalho, a energia humana que produz valor. Por isso mesmo, transforma as próprias pessoas em mercadorias, tornando-as adjetivas de sua força de trabalho”.

⁶ From now on, to avoid long repetitions, I will also refer to the American Dream as just the Dream.

into consideration its ideological traits, and the second addresses its historical features. As for the first trait, the fact that the Dream is regarded as an ideology and not as a myth is of primary importance in this research. Recent studies on the subject have attempted to characterize it as a myth (MAYFIELD, 2020; DUNCAN, 2015; PAUL, 2014; IZAGUIRRE, 2014), that means, narratives which portray a primitive rendering of the world, as well as its origins, and may help us understand a culture due to its representation of essential elements of a given civilization⁷. According to Aaron Duncan (2015), myths are stories that are believed to be true by a certain society, and work as a means for the formation of a unified group identity. As he puts it:

Myths are thus constitutive of the collective. They are the building blocks for the formation of group identity and creators of their own audiences [...]. Myths may be factually erroneous or used to bad ends, but they are nonetheless essential tools of social cohesion [...] and allow for members of groups to work together (DUNCAN, 2015, p. 65-66).

Inasmuch as I make a case for the legitimacy of considering the American Dream as an ideology rather than a myth, my next step is to define what such a term stands for. In so doing, the insights provided by Marilena Chauí (2008) and Michael Löwy (2010) lay the groundwork for my study. Chauí (2008) points out that ideology is a concept which helps to critically understand the reality around us, owing to its social, historical, and political features. Basically, the term attempts to unveil what is behind social relations and how they are established. One of the main issues the concept aims at analyzing is why one thinks and acts in a certain way. In this sense, the term is intended as a set of ideas which show, but at the same time, hide the reality of social relations. To put it in another way, ideology contends that society is divided into social classes and, in such a division, a group (the dominant – superior) survives through the exploration and domination of the other group (the dominated – inferior). What makes the presence of an ideology possible is the domination and exploitation between classes – the dominant *versus* the dominated. For Chauí, “ideology is a tool for class domination” in addition to “one of the most effective ways used by the dominant group

⁷ For more information, I recommend reading SCHÜLER, Donaldo; GOETTEMES, Míriam Barcelos. (Orgs). *Mito ontem e hoje*. Porto ALEGRE: Ed. da Universidade UFRGS, 1990.

to rule, causing the domination not to be perceived as such by the dominated group⁸ (CHAUÍ, 2008, p. 79).

At this moment you may be wondering: but how does the ruling class keep its power? For what reason is the dominated class unable to realize such a power relation? Chauí singles out that, since our way of thinking is constructed and shared by the dominant group over the years, we cannot track down the historical roots of its ideas and we wind up absorbing the belief that some kinds of acting and thinking are right and others are wrong. In order to make its ideas acceptable and keep its social, political and economic power, the ruling class makes use of social institutions, that is, family, school, church and political parties, as well as means of communication (internet, TV programs, radio, magazines, movies) to gain control over the dominated group. In this regard, the dominant class's ideas become a collective consciousness which dictates what one ought to or ought not to believe in. According to Chauí, "ideology consists precisely of changing dominant ideas into common sense"⁹ (CHAUÍ, 2008, p. 85). Thus, the dominated group internalizes the dominant consciousness in such a way that the dominated one does not recognize or reflect upon its own way of thinking.

Finally, Chauí highlights the homogeneity and misleading traits of the concept. The implementation of a collectively accepted homogeneity belief causes the members of a given society not to see themselves as a people divided into classes, but rather as a group with a great deal of common characteristics. Consequently, social differences turn out to be a relatively unimportant issue. Following this line of thought, ideology expresses only a social appearance, never the true reality, for it deals with mechanisms that try to hide economic exploitation, social inequalities, and cultural exclusion.

Just like Chauí, Michael Löwy (2010) points out that the concept of ideology is meant as a social vision of the world. This term encompasses a set of ideas which spring from our life in society. In other words, ideology (or social vision of the world) is the manifestation of a coherent vision of the world of a given social class which lives in a certain reality. For Löwy, it is possible to identify the coexistence of two social

⁸ My translation. Original source: "a ideologia é um instrumento da dominação de classe" (CHAUÍ, 2008, p. 79) and "um dos meios mais usados pelos dominantes para exercer a dominação, fazendo com que esta não seja percebida como tal pelos dominados" (CHAUÍ, 2008, p. 79).

⁹ My translation. Original source: "A ideologia consiste precisamente na transformação das ideias dominantes em ideias para a sociedade como um todo" (CHAUÍ, 2008, p. 85).

visions of the world. The first, the ideologic vision (the conservative mode), attempts to keep the world the way it is. Conversely, the second, the social utopian view (the transformative mode), seeks to change or provide new arrangements for the world. In the author's words, "ideologies are forms of representation and values that aim at keeping up or strengthening an established order"¹⁰ (LÖWY, 2010, p. 32).

The fact that the American Dream can be labeled ideology or social vision of the world (the ideologic one) becomes clear from our reading of Marilena Chauí's and Michel Löwy's studies for two reasons. The first reason is that the concept has created a powerful narrative that is believed to be true by a group of people. If you remember the second and third questions I asked you to reflect on, you will perceive that both mainstream Americans and immigrants demonstrate an enduring belief in the possibility of making their dreams of achieving success from hard work and acquiring wealth and social position as something taken for granted. Such ideas, as Ramón Guerra (2013) points out, produce "a heavy sense of cultural hegemony" (p. 231), which means that if you want to reach a favorable outcome or reap the benefits of the American Dream, you must assimilate the dominant American culture and embrace Americanness. As one can notice, the concept creates social cohesion and is not open to cultural hybridity. Consequently, the Dream turns out to be a term which depicts the dominant idea and the ideologic vision of the nation. That is why it comes as no surprise that the concept fully identifies with the presidential campaign slogans of many politicians who act as broadcasters of such a patriotic faith – Donald Trump's "Make America great again" and Barack Obama's motto "Yes, we can" convey images of a prosperous nation, as well as the implicit promise of opportunity for everyone willing to take chances in the present moment or in the near future.

The second reason has to do with the development of different class hierarchical structures. If on the one hand the term helps create identity, on the other, the journey to reach progressive social change divides the nation into two social classes: the dominant group (winners) and the dominated (losers). In the pursuit of the Dream, there is no room for making mistakes. The ideology demands Americans to have meaningful lives, but its ideals relegate responsibility only to the individual, and not to the harsh realities brought by progress and the potential pitfalls of savage capitalism. In this sense, the Dream leads those who fail to feel they are falling into a sense of

¹⁰ My translation. Original source: "as ideologias são formas de representação e de valores que visam manter ou fortalecer uma ordem estabelecida" (LÖWY, 2010, p. 32).

failure or dislocation. Here lies one of the greatest American dichotomies: whereas the country is constantly flooded with awe-inspiring stories of immigrants and inhabitants who have thrived owing to their persistence and hard work, many citizens who try to live up to the ideology's promises only barely make a living. What is to be noted here is that the US is a culture comprised of and divided into accomplished winners at odds with laidback losers.

Given the complex properties of such a national creed, I label it an ideology and not a myth. While the former makes explicit the multi-layered aspects of power relations attuned to the many varieties of domination hiding in plain sight in America, the latter seems only to focus on explaining cultural, historical, religious, and scientific phenomena with no critical approach. Now that you, my reader, already have information regarding the ideological trait of the American Dream, we are about to discover its historical features.

Currently, a quick research on the internet under the entry "American Dream" is very likely to yield key phrases such as "equal opportunity", "rise from rags to riches", "to work and to deserve", "individualism", "freedom", and "self-reliance", just to mention a few. Why these sets of words are part of the lexical-semantic field that underpin the proudest boast of Americans is our next task to answer. To begin with, it is important to know that although the term received a formal definition and really came into vogue when historian James Truslow Adams wrote his book *The Epic of America* in 1931, its origins can be traced back to the formation of the nation.

Donna Packer-Kinlaw (2013) devotes a chapter to the study of Americans' shifting response to the Dream from the nation's beginning to the twentieth century. Packer-Kinlaw divides the historical background of the formation of the overall notion of the term into four stages. The first stage, the seventeenth-century Dream, is characterized by strong religious principles. With the arrival of the first Puritan settlers, the country was regarded as a stronghold for persecuted religious groups which came to the New World to set up a society based upon Christian beliefs, as well as to find a place to live by their religious principles and escape from the political and religious unrest in England. Having been forced to leave their home country, the Puritans regarded themselves as modern-day Hebrews responding to God's call to flee England and set up God's covenant in America – the "Promised Land" of the Bible.

Furthermore, they also believed that they were the "chosen people". The doctrine of election stresses that God chooses a few people to save and others to

damn. In this sense, the fact that one succeeds was a holy sign that he/she belonged to the “elected group” for salvation. However, as Kinlaw (2013) states, success did not mean material acquisition at that time, for “in the seventeenth century, Americans dreamed about obtaining a better life through *faith, hard work, and perseverance*” (KINLAW, 2013, p. 3, my emphasis). As you can see, my reader, the idea that the United States is a prosperous country and Americans are seen as an exemplary people, is something rooted in its history.

In the Dream’s following stages, primarily in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (the second and third stages), despite the remaining religious legacy of the Puritans, as researcher Ricardo Miguez (2007) singles out, the arrival of new immigrants from European countries, and their indirect associations with the trends of the European Enlightenment, changed American consciousness. According to the author, new renderings of work and success appeared due to: “a reappraisal of long accepted institutions and sociocultural values in the light of reason, scientific research and a more tolerant view of religion itself” (MIGUEZ, 2007, p. 13). The inspirational discourse, expressed in the US Declaration of Independence on July 4th 1776, is worth mentioning because it contends that Americans have unconditional rights to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness”. Besides helping to bolster the hopes of people from all walks of life that the nation would become prosperous, the document identifies some assumptions that underpin the Dream: possibility to be happy, liberty to be yourself, and finally, the right to live.

In the same vein, by analyzing those centuries, Kinlaw (2013) says that wealth, work, community partnership, and morality became the main tropes related to the American Dream. As the author states:

For eighteenth century Americans, success was inextricably tied to religion and morality; thus, success was measured, not only by the accumulation of material wealth, but also by one’s moral code, one’s standing in the community, and the contribution that an individual made to the community. By the nineteenth century, though religion and morality were still important, material success and work itself became the two most important aspects of the American Dream. Americans continued their practice of working hard, but they wanted money in the bank, large houses, and other symbols of wealth [...] one’s worth was measured, in large part, by one’s profession and income (KINLAW, 2013, p. 3).

It was not until the twentieth century, however, that the connection between work and moral standard began to fragment. The acquisition of money is now

perceived as a virtue. Historian James Adams did not agree with this idea when he coined the term “American Dream”. Drawing on the nation’s history, he defined the United States as “a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (ADAMS, 1931, p. 404) and denied the Dream’s materialist tenet by describing it as in the following passage:

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a 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 (ADAMS, 1931, p. 404).

The denial of the obsession with making money can be explained by the historical context in which Adams wrote his book. If you remember, my reader, the US was going through a severe economic downturn that lasted from 1929 to 1939. Hence the need to strengthen or awaken the hope in the country’s old promises that anyone can climb the social ladder by their own means, and the focus on the moral aspects of the Dream. Such situation, however, only changed when the country won World War II and entered a period of great prosperity. Since then, new interpretations of the American Dream have begun to emerge and to problematize both the exchange of moral values for goods and the inconsistencies of the American ideology.

Unlike Adam’s interpretation regarding the twentieth-century American Dream, Kinlaw highlights that the concept is woven together with aspirations toward better living conditions and pursuing material goods. Despite disagreeing on the Dream’s money-oriented version, both Adam and Kinlaw agree on the power the ideology has over American culture. In fact, even in the dark years of the Great Depression which the country went through, the national belief survived and continued to permeate American political and social discourse.

By the early twentieth century, many Americans dreamed about large bank accounts, even larger houses, and cars. By the mid-twentieth century, some began to question whether or not it was even possible to attain the American Dream, while others challenged notions of the dream itself. Yet, even in these moments, Americans in general remained optimistic and continued to believe that the United States was a place where if one worked hard, success would surely follow (KINLAW, 2013, p. 3-4).

As mentioned above, from the twentieth century onwards the Dream has become the subject matter of many discussions and controversies. Whereas authors such as Noam Chomsky (2017), Andrew Vogel (2013), Lee Schweninger (2013) and Jennifer Hochschild (1995) cast doubt on the promises of the ideology, due to the country's capitalist economic system, high income inequalities, and the political and social conflicts between blacks, whites, immigrants and natives over jobs; others, such as Jonathan Gruber and Simon Johnson (2019), Steven Frye (2013), and David Platt (2010), reflect an optimistic viewpoint on the term and state that the Dream will always guide and sustain the hopes of the majority of Americans. Thus, the American Dream presents itself as a double-edge sword: its meaning may be used either to celebrate the essence of the nation's ideals, or to describe the country's hypocritical sham.

Given all these observations, you, my reader, already know that the national creed is an ideology and has its roots in the history of the United States. Nonetheless, it seems likely that you may be wondering whether there is a definition for the term. In an attempt to explore and describe the concept, historian Jim Cullen (2003) highlights six components on which the Dream is based: good life; the pursuit of happiness; upward mobility; equality for everyone; home ownership; and moving to the Coast. According to the author: "the term seems like the most lofty as well as the most immediate component of an American identity, a birthright far more meaningful and compelling than terms like 'democracy,' 'Constitution,' or even 'the United States'" (CULLEN, 2003, p. 5). Like Cullen, Keith Newlin (2013) also helps define the national belief. He identifies the assumptions that underpin the Dream as follows:

[...] all Americans have a natural right to pursue happiness in whatever form it might take, from pursuing a meaningful occupation, to attaining a comfortable home, to enjoy the freedom to do as one pleases [...] and especially to amassing enough wealth to buy the material objects that make a comfortable life (NEWLIN, 2013, p. vii).

By the same token, Jonathan Charteris-Black (2011) observes that the term is a narrative that brings together personal ambition and social aspiration. For him:

The American Dream is the belief that life can be better than it has been previously and is now; it is the belief that much human suffering is inflicted by other humans and can be eliminated through struggling to achieve ambitions.

Above all, the American Dream relates personal and social identity because the dream implies that any motivated individual can reach any social position, irrespective of their personal, ethnic or social background (CHARTERIS-BLACK, 2011, p. 281).

To sum up the discussion so far, my reader, I have shown that the concept of the American Dream goes beyond the often-used definition of “the belief that everyone in the US has the chance to be successful, rich, and happy if they work hard¹¹”. In the current research, it is understood as an ideology associated with the social, economic, political and cultural values of the United States, and its origins date back to the nation’s founding. Additionally, the concept relies upon the idea that effort and talent breed success and the sacrifices one might entail are worthwhile, not to mention the faith in the presence of equal opportunities for all citizens of every rank. Initially, the promises of the ideology fascinate due to the possibility that anyone, regardless of background, may reasonably achieve positive results in the country. A closer look, however, yields a more complex portrait of the frailties regarding the ideology. Although the American Dream may be seen as a host of ideas which convey the belief of a culture obsessed with success, not everyone has the chance of having his or her version of the dream fulfilled. That is why the American ideology can be seen either as a hope or as a dangerous delusion.

In American literature, more precisely from the twentieth century onwards¹², it is possible to perceive that such dichotomy has served as an inspiration for a set of dramatists who have resorted to American Dream tropes as a core aspect in the development of their body of works. By using literature as a site for fostering critical reflection, playwrights have brought multiple existential struggles that befall their characters to center stage or onto book pages. They address the conflicts between characters and the price paid for doing whatever it takes to achieve their goals. Taking this into account, I believe that undertaking a thorough study on the body of modern

¹¹ *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s dictionary*, 4th edition, CD-ROM.

¹² Although portrayals of the American Dream in US literature can be found in the seventeenth, the eighteenth, and in the nineteenth century, for instance, in John Winthrop’s “A model of Christian Charity” (1630), Jonathan Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741), Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* (1791), and Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick* (1868), I will only focus my attention on the twentieth- and twenty-first century literary productions because of the limited scope of this PhD research.

and contemporary works¹³ which delve into the Dream is crucial for the understanding of the textual fabric of those plays, not to mention the American literature as a whole.

Although previous studies have already identified the portrayal and the dichotomy of the American Dream pervading US drama (RANA, 2020; WHITE, HANSON, 2011; SADDIK, 2007; FORSYTH, 2007), most existing research on the topic tends to neglect the presence and the role of the tragic as an important element in the construction of those productions. In undertaking an analysis regarding the American ideology as an updated representation of the tragic in US literature, studies may provide useful insights into how characters problematize the clash between their hopes and the progressive deterioration of their ideals in a wide range of contexts. Hence the need to assess the complexity interwoven relationship between the tragic and the Dream.

Furthermore, though researchers have drawn considerable attention to the depiction of tragic elements pervading the American literary system (HARTMANN, RÖSSLER, 2019; PALMER, 2018; ANDREACH, 2014; LEME, 2007), they do not account for the fact that the American Dream may act as a trigger which moves the characters into action and gives them the ideal opportunity to make the tragic flaw. Given that a comprehensive understanding of the tragic in US drama is still far from complete, it remains unclear whether the ideology is either an external force that impels the characters to make decisions, or a force which “activates” their tragic flaw and sets the tragic conflict in motion. Therefore, there is indeed a need for more studies that attempt to reveal the underlying mechanisms and default conditions for the establishment of the tragic and its relation with the American Dream in literature.

Having all that in mind, the main objective of the current PhD dissertation is to analyze the influence of the American Dream and the tragic on modern and contemporary US drama. In order to do so, the central thread of this research may be summed up in the following research questions: Is the Dream an external force responsible for the characters’ tragic flaw? If so, how does it work? Who are the major authors that resort to the tragic and to the Dream in the fabric of their theatrical texts? How is the tragic character depicted in North American drama? What constitutes the

¹³ For the sake of organization and proper understanding, modern drama, as stated by David Krasner (2012), encompasses dramas and dramatists from 1880 to 1960. On the other hand, contemporary American drama, according to Annette J. Saddik (2007) and David Krasner (2016) covers the period from 1960 to the present.

tragic conflict in the plays? What kind of American Dream is described in those literary productions: that of countless opportunities and happiness or that of suffering and mounting despair? And finally: What does it take to succeed in America according to the plays? These are the pledges to be fulfilled in the current study.

In order to accomplish the task I put forward to myself, I set up five steps to follow as part of the data collection process. In the first stage, I opted for centering around performing a close reading of theatrical plays in written form. Even though I agree that theatrical art is not only meant to be read, but also to be performed, demanding, then, two distinctive procedures that complement each other, the relation between the study of the dramatic genre, be it on the page or on the stage, has raised disparate views. Some scholars such as Anne Ubersfeld (2005) and Rubem Rocha Filho (2010) have pointed out that “theatrical art is an indissoluble whole, in which one can neither examine a text independently of its performance, nor analyze characters detached from other elements related to the composition of a play¹⁴” (ROCHA FILHO, 2010, p. 17), however, my research does not follow this line of reasoning. The investigation is committed to the analysis of singularities of the theatrical text. Therefore, I do not deal with scenic devices, such as make-up, music, actors, costumes, director, technicians, scenography, producers, lighting, and space to explain or justify the text. Instead, my intention here is to examine the influence of the American Dream and the tragic upon US drama as a literary text¹⁵.

In this regard, I justify my choice to focus on the textual potentialities of the dramatic text based upon the reflections provided by Jean-Pierre Ryngaert (1996) and João Roberto Faria (1998). The former states that the main characteristic of the theatrical text is its intention to be performed, but such feature does not exempt the play from its literary scrutiny. According to the critic, “reading a theatrical text is good enough, and no sort of performance is necessary¹⁶” (RYNGAERT, 1995, p. 25). Similarly, the latter corroborates with Ryngaert’s reflection by stressing that there are no factors to hinder the understanding of a theatrical art in its written form. Faria (1998)

¹⁴ My translation. Original source: “o teatro é um todo indissolúvel, em que não se pode examinar o texto independente do espetáculo, nem muito menos a personagem separada dos outros elementos da composição da peça” (FILHO, 2010, p. 17).

¹⁵ Just because I do not focus on the stage productions does not mean that I ignore all extra material available. Along this research, I show pictures of contemporary performances or movie productions of the plays selected.

¹⁶ My translation. Original source: “Ler o texto de teatro é uma operação que se basta a si mesma, fora de qualquer representação efetiva” (RYNGAERT, 1995, p. 25).

singles out that a play on the page helps to enforce and perpetuate playwright recognition, as well as allowing multiple readings and interpretations. As he puts it: “they [the readings of dramatic texts] perpetuate a playwright’s glory, open up new interpretations, whether or not of a common reader, which is done through virtual performances in an imaginative place, or that of the critic and theater historians, whose renderings are expressed in specialized studies”¹⁷ (ROCHA FILHO, 2010, p. 17).

After choosing to work with the text of a play, the second stage towards this dissertation involves the decision to analyze plays from the twentieth century onwards. Given the impossibility to cover all dramatic productions, my survey focuses on works published from the last century, because such period has been widely described as a turning point in American drama (RICHARDS, 2014; HELIODORA, 2013, 2008; BRYER & HARTIG, 2010; COSTA, 2001). The development of the dramatic genre throughout this period may be seen as a result of, at least, three characteristics.

The first feature to be noted is the emergence of theater groups of actors, dramatists, and directors. They encouraged experimentation in their theatrical productions by pioneering structural and stylistic innovations on the printed page and on the stage. Such companies, such as The Provincetown Players, The Living Theatre, The Theatre Guild, The Group Theatre, The Theatre Union, The Federal Theatre, the Negro Theatre, and The Playwright’s Theatre, just to name a few, were responsible for improving the quality and increasing the complexities of the plays, in addition to showing a keen awareness of American realities. Apart from the company groups, it is important to highlight that since the mid-20th century, the United States has become a reference for theatre in the world. The commercially oriented and high production costs of Broadway shows, together with off- and off-off Broadway plays, which are usually produced on low budgets, still attract the attention of people from all over the world and make theatre accessible to a wide audience.

The third and last feature to consider is the emergence of great American dramatists, among them a Nobel Prize and many Pulitzer winners who made distinguished contributions to national and world literature. Names such as Eugene O’Neill, William Inge, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Lillian Hellman, and Elmer

¹⁷ My translation. Original source: “São elas [as leituras das peças teatrais] que perpetuam a glória do escritor dramático, abrindo-se a novas interpretações, sejam as de encenadores e artistas, que ganharam uma forma concreta sobre o tablado, sejam as de leitores comuns, que se realizam enquanto espetáculos virtuais no espaço da imaginação, sejam as de críticos e historiadores do teatro, expressas em estudos especializados” (FARIA, 1998, p. 9).

Rice, for instance, bring to the fore dramas that delve more deeply into the psyches of their characters, as well as portrayals of a kaleidoscopic picture of American society. Therefore, considering the aforementioned characteristics as a whole, it is possible to perceive why American drama went through a significant stage of growth and maturity in the last century.

Soon afterwards, I conducted a research to map out representative dramatists to be included in the sample for this study. In order to do so, six books were chosen as main sources of information: *Visions of tragedy in modern American drama* (2018), *The Oxford handbook of American drama* (2014), *The facts on file: companion to American drama* (2010), *Contemporary American drama* (2007), *A companion to twentieth-century American drama* (2005), and *The history of Southern drama* (1997). Then, I took into consideration the possibility of finding materials, more specifically plays available in book form as a feasible tool for selection, inasmuch as this doctoral dissertation centers on the analysis of dramatic texts and does not cover the performance of plays on the stage, nor their adaptations to movie form. Finally, the survey included Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize winners. They are prestigious awards which honor the best literary contribution worldwide (Nobel Prize), and in the U.S. context, the Pulitzer Prize has awarded the best productions in the fields of journalism, literature and music since 1917. More than demonstrating the popularity and the success of a literary work, these awards evaluate the literariness, the aesthetic quality of the works of art.

Thereafter, I selected 3 authors to comprise my textual analysis. John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller, and Marsha Norman. These are playwrights who excel at providing ground for the study of the interrelation between the American dream and the tragic within US drama. The relation between author and play can be observed in the table below:

Table 1 - The database of the current research

PLAYWRIGHT	PLAY
John Steinbeck (1902 – 1968)	<i>Of Mice and Men</i> (1937)
Arthur Miller (1915 – 2005)	<i>Death of a Salesman</i> (1949)

Marsha Norman (1947-)	<i>'night, Mother</i> (1982)
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Source: SILVA (2020).

John Steinbeck's dramatic adaptation of his novel *Of Mice and Men* (1937) centers on two wandering ranch laborers, George Milton and Lennie Small, who are contracted to work on a ranch in the Salinas Valley during the Great Depression. In the play, George and Lennie are guided by their America Dream of owning a farm, being independent, having material possessions, and pursuing happiness. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) revolves around the Loman family, more specifically its patriarch Willy Loman's obsession with success for himself and his family through business. Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* (1982) follows the story of a mother-daughter bond between an aging mother, Thelma Cates, who lives with her daughter, Jessie. At the daughter's announcement that she is going to kill herself, long-ignored feelings, old family secrets and, above all, the pressures to succeed in America are revealed. Each of these plays allows us to dig deeper into US literature and its relation with the American dream. In this regard, these fictional works create versions to (re)assess the effects of that ideology from different perspectives. In the current research, I focus my attention on the tragic portrayal of the following characters: John Steinbeck's George Milton, Arthur Miller's Willy Loman, and Marsha Norman's Jessie Cates.

In light of the above literary productions, the secondary objectives that support this survey are the following: to investigate critical studies which focus upon the analysis of literary productions that problematize the American Dream; to explore and discuss the main issues addressed by previous researchers regarding the Dream and literature; to examine what characterizes the tragic concept; and ultimately, to examine the construction and the development of the plays so as to observe the portrayal of the tragic and to verify the formal elements that help to produce, intensify or to ease the tragic.

The current study proceeds from the premise that the Dream plays a prominent role in the works. It is believed that its values not only set the tragic into motion in those literary productions, but also influence the way the characters think and behave. It was also hypothesized that the movement of entwining the controversies over the national creed and the tragic features articulates what I want to call "Tragic American illusion".

By this I mean those literary productions which explore the dichotomies, or the clash between the promises of the American Dream, which suggest an underlying belief that success can be achieved through working hard and making sacrifices, and the vicissitudes of characters sustained by pipe dreams. What the tragic American illusion explicitly does, then, is to call the very possibility of achieving the promises of the Dream into question. In this regard, the concept points out the inherent contradictions of the ideology and its consequences.

This research, which is laid out as a theatrical text, is divided into four acts. In the first, called “Rambling around the Dream in literature: an inquiry into its echoes and possibilities in literary discourse”, I take former and current US presidents’ public speeches as a point of departure to discuss previous studies whose focus of attention relies on literature and the American Dream. I attempt to verify the ways in which previous researchers have addressed the theme, and point out how fictional works have dealt with that relation. Vincent van Gogh’s painting *Sorrowing Old Man* (1890) prefaces the next section. In the second act, entitled: “Quarrelling over the tragic”, I present and discuss the theoretical framework for the analysis of the plays. In the first scene, “Toward a definition of the tragic”, I dwell on the studies provided by Peter Szondi (2002), Gerd Bornheim (2007), Sandra Luna (2008; 2012), and Albin Lesky (2015) so as to define the term. In the second scene, “What we talk about when we talk about Tragic American illusion”, I set the foundation for my coining of the term “tragic American illusion”.

In the third act of this dissertation, named “The Dream and its tragic portrayals in modern and contemporary American drama”, I present my critical readings of the plays. By using Jenny Holzer’s installation *Protect me from what I want* (1985) as a starting point, I aim to analyze the influence of the Dream and the tragic in those fictional works. Moreover, I put the concept of “tragic American illusion” into practice and prove that the tenets which lie at the core of the ideology influence the way characters think and behave in the plays. Finally, the last act presents my findings, and suggestions for future research on the theme.

Although reading all fictional works, primarily drama, which deal with the portrayal of the American creed is virtually impossible, I do hope my study may offer a window into the interrelationship between the American Dream and the theory of the tragic within the literary productions selected in this research. Moreover, I hope to contribute somehow to the development of American drama literary criticism, as well

as to stimulate further scholarship in this field of study that has long been fascinating many researchers on American Cultural Studies.

[The Stage Manager stops talking, takes a deep breath and has some water. While getting his smartphone out of his pocket and taking some photos of his reader (audience) to post in his social media accounts, he decides to have a cup of black coffee and a ham and cheese sandwich. The delicious aroma of freshly brewed coffee pervades the stage. Right after that, the student prepares himself to explain the content of the next chapter of his research. As he does this, lights fade very slowly to back].

“What I want to see above all is that this country remains a country where someone can always get rich. That’s the one thing we have and that must be preserved”.

Ronald Reagan - The 40th President of The United States.

“America, not just the nation but an idea, alive in the minds of people everywhere. As this new world takes shape, America stands at the center of a widening circle of freedom -- today, tomorrow, and into the next century. Our nation is the enduring dream of every immigrant who ever set foot on these shores, and the millions still struggling to be free. This nation, this idea called America, was and always will be a new world -- our new world [...] where there's a job for everyone who wants one; where women working outside the home can be confident their children are in safe and loving care [...] where we reconcile the needs of a clean environment and a strong economy; where "Made in the USA" is recognized around the world as the symbol of quality and progress; where every one of us enjoys the same opportunities to live, to work, and to contribute to society and where, for the first time, the American mainstream includes all of our disabled citizens; where everyone has a roof over his head and where the homeless get the help they need to live in dignity”.

George H. W. Bush - The 41st President of The United States.

“No matter who you are or where you’re from, if you work hard and play by the rules, you’ll have the freedom and opportunity to pursue your own dreams and leave your kids a country where they can chase theirs”.

William J. Clinton - The 42nd President of The United States.

“Through hard work and sacrifice each of us can pursue our individual dreams, but still come together as one American family, to ensure that the next generation can pursue their dreams, as well. That’s why I stand here tonight [...] at each moment when that promise was in jeopardy, ordinary men and women, students and soldiers, farmers and teachers, nurses and janitors, found the courage to keep it alive”.

Barack Obama - The 44th President of The United States.

“I can report to the nation: America is on the move again — turning peril into possibility, crisis to opportunity, setbacks into strength. We all know life can knock us down. But in America, we never, ever, ever stay down. Americans always get up. Today, that’s what we’re doing: America is rising anew, choosing hope over fear, truth over lies, and light over darkness. After 100 days of rescue and renewal, America is ready for takeoff, in my view. We’re working again, dreaming again, discovering again, and leading the world again. We have shown each other and the world that there’s no quit in America — none”.

Joseph R. Biden Jr. - The 46th President of The United States.

2 RAMBLING AROUND THE DREAM IN LITERATURE: AN INQUIRY INTO ITS ECHOES AND POSSIBILITIES IN LITERARY DISCOURSE

SCENE – The same set as in the introduction. Lights come up slowly on THE STAGE MANAGER preparing himself to talk about the second chapter of his PhD research. He is in front of his laptop and seems a little nervous. He checks his email account, sends a message to his advisor and verifies the battery level of his laptop. Then, he stands up, takes a cup of black coffee, takes a deep breath, goes to the center of the stage, looks at his audience and starts speaking.

THE STAGE MANAGER. On the previous page, my reader, you had the privilege to read former and current US presidents' public speeches. In their messages, they embrace and perpetuate certain shibboleths of the hegemonic ideals of the American Dream not only by affirming the exceptional status of US democracy and describing the country as the land of equal opportunities and great fulfillments, but also as a tool for evoking the bootstrap narrative of upward mobility and sharing the idea that anyone can achieve great heights through hard work and dedication. So, their discourses serve both to give or reinforce hope and faith to those who still believe in the Dream, and to change the minds of those who would be skeptical of the promises of the national creed.

A great deal of US literary production has been engaged in analyzing the impact on, and the consequences of, the Dream in the fabric of their plots. By using the Dream as a backdrop for the elaboration of their narratives, writers give birth to a set of fictional characters who do whatever it takes to reach their goals, albeit most of them end up paying a high price for their actions and for making wrong decisions. For quite a long time, scholars have contributed greatly to gain a finer understanding of the attitudes characters have towards the American Dream and to provide a continuous account of the underlying patterns of the narratives which convey such a theme.

In this sense, understanding how some critical evaluations have attempted to examine such literary productions may contribute, not only to the identification of major features regarding American literature, but also to the discussion of the ways in which its body of works has been addressed by literary criticism. Additionally, examining the content expressed by different scholars enables us to reassess and re-examine a set

of American productions, inasmuch as issues raised or even disregarded by some critics may be taken into consideration to the development of a deep critical questioning of narratives which have a solid thread based on the multi-faceted American Dream.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to offer some critical evaluation of previous studies which undertook research into the relation between US literature and the Dream. More specifically, I wish to outline the main developments that have been done concerning the approach to that interrelation. The question of whether or not the outcomes of these studies echo the content of those US presidents' public speeches is something we are about to discover together, my reader.

Recent decades have seen an increasing interest and a growing output of publications expressing concern over the complex relationship of the American Dream and literature. As many scholars have already pointed out, such interaction has been acknowledged as a set of fiction whose main objective is to tease out the complexities of US society. In order to express their critical perspectives on the country, a great deal of writers display the literary art as a tool for denouncing, revealing and calling social issues into question. In this sense, the body of literary criticism and scholarship presented seeks to identify trends, interests, and characteristic features expressed in productions which deal with the portrayal of the Dream.

Bakri Assia (2019) tackles the American hegemonic ideology through Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. The aim of Assia's thesis is to analyze the characters' and the author's psychological, social and cultural experiences of the Dream. He also attempts to answer to what extent the novel reflects disillusionment of the ideology, as well as in what way the Dream is presented in that text. Assia states that Fitzgerald's novel depicts the nightmarish side of the dream, since it not only requires the characters to lose their morality, but also focuses on material possessions and individual pleasure. In this regard, he says that the novel is populated by individuals madly driven by their desires for money, luxury and greed for sexual fulfillment. Furthermore, Assia claims that the ambition to succeed, to accumulate wealth and to reach a higher social class makes plain the moral degradation of American society. Such characteristics reinforce Fitzgerald's reasoning that the national ideology became corrupted, because the "values that were firstly connected to hard work and God gradually began to be connected to material wealth as a sign of power" (ASSIA, 2019, p. 34).

An interesting point Assia brings to the fore is the presence of the tragic in the novel. Even though he does not dwell on the concept, the author says that the desire most of the characters have to pursue the American Dream is responsible for their making unconscious decisions. In this sense, the tragic, according to Bakri, seems to be the wrong decisions individuals make while fantasizing about achieving out of reach goals. As we shall see in the next chapter, what Assia regards as “tragic”, we are going to name tragic flaw or *hamartia*. Coming back to the author’s research, he states that the lower-class characters are sacrificed for the moral flaws of the upper-class individuals. As Assia puts it:

the novel is full of tragic characters who do not get what they want. In fact, their dreams for wealth, love, social class cause them troubles and tragedies. It is quintessentially the corruption of the American Dream with materialism and thus its ultimate collapse and the personalities’ downfall (ASSIA, 2019, p. 33).

All in all, his research suggests that the American Dream described by Fitzgerald is no more than an illusion. Apart from that, Assia states the novel sheds light on the hypocrisy in the American society, inasmuch as only hard work and persistence, according to the novel, become insufficient means to reach one’s goal. Thus, Fitzgerald’s characters symbolize the destruction and hollowness of the Dream.

In a similar vein, Diana Sution Lee (2017) aims at analyzing the American creed in *Pins and Needles*. In her thesis, she attempts to study the ways in which that dramaturgical text, which is a blend of agitprop and musical revue, questions whether there is any chance of achieving the Dream, as a result of hard work, for the workers depicted throughout the play. According to Lee, what characterizes the American nation is the fact that almost all inhabitants share a widely held belief in the Dream. In this regard, she states the ideology is the main element that characterizes US identity.

Her thesis, however, stresses the fallacy of the tenets that underpin the ideology. In other words, *Pins and Needles* portrays characters who struggle with frustrations and no social ascension or possibility of success, as well as individuals described as victims of the oppressive capitalism, which blames the “losers” and praises the “winners”. Diana Lee, like Bakri Assia, states that the dominant American ideology is a lie. Firstly, the play conveys the idea that working hard is not enough to become successful. So much so that, according to Lee, *Pins and Needles* presents a

biting satire on this idea. Secondly, the text displays a highly competitive society which does not offer equal opportunities for all. Nevertheless, despite all these negative points, Lee highlights that the final message the play wants to convey is optimistic. She reads the whole content of the play as an attempt to share the belief Americans have to foster collective effort toward building a real place of equal and limitless opportunities.

Antonius Poppelaars (2015) presents an interesting reading of the classic American play *Death of a salesman* by Arthur Miller. The scholar aims at examining if a common man such as Willy Loman can be considered a tragic hero; if tragedy still exists in modern drama; and if the American Dream is an external flaw that causes Loman's fall. By drawing upon authors who defend the lingering presence and evolution of tragedy as a literary genre in our days, Poppelaars states the protagonist of Miller's text can be regarded as a tragic character and the play is a modern tragedy. For the scholar, "the fall of common heroes represents the fears related to modern life issues, such as living in an intolerable and greedy society"¹⁸ (POPPELAARS, 2015, p. 45-46).

He goes on to explain that the play critically presents an account of America's loss of moral integrity. To put it in another way, money-making has become an important, if not the most important, value in that society. According to the author, Willy Loman's inability to achieve financial success is one of the main reasons for his tragic fall. Consequently, the American Dream depicted in the text stands for a ruthless capitalism, which turns people into slaves to money, as well as an ideology in which moral scruples do not apply.

By reading Arthur Miller's productions, Poppelaars points out that they provide the reader with a remarkable portrayal of the shifts the concept went through over the years. He suggests that Miller's plays can be seen as a "library" which always comes back and functions as a place for the memory of the Dream. The scholar holds: "the fact that the American Dream does not mean a gold mine for everyone is made clear. Miller's productions leave the failures of the Dream as marks on our memory, avoiding, then, silence, forgetfulness and oblivion of its victims"¹⁹ (POPPELAARS, 2015, p. 130),

¹⁸ My translation. Original source.: "A queda dos heróis comuns representa os medos intrínsecos da vida moderna, como uma sociedade intolerante e gananciosa" (POPPELAARS, 2015, p. 45-46).

¹⁹ My translation. Original source: "De geração em geração, pode-se apreender que o sonho americano não significa uma mina de ouro para todos. As peças de Miller deixam os fracassos do sonho americano

not to mention the portrayal of a national creed: “betraying its fellow citizens and corrupted by the greed for personal financial gain, political intolerance, and selfishness²⁰” (POPPELAARS, 2015, p. 135).

Similarly, Carly Janette Norman Osborn (2015) draws on the mimetic theory of René Girard to prove that Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The virgin suicides*, Rick Moody’s *The ice storm*, and Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary road* are tragic texts. She makes a case that these novels deploy tragedy as a discourse about the American Dream. It is worth mentioning that Osborn’s research, despite not focusing on the concept of tragic as my study does, stresses the energy and relevance of tragedy as an evolving literary genre, as well as the influence of the Dream tropes in the development of those narratives. According to her, the novels use the techniques associated to tragedy to achieve what she calls “anti-tragedy” or “anti-tragic texts”, that is, narratives which display “all the characteristic features of tragedy but deploy them in ways that problematize the sacrifice of the scapegoat” (OSBORN, 2015, p. 232).

Analyzing the influence of the American Dream on the novels, the scholar stresses that the national belief is responsible for promoting competition and individual progress by instituting a mass of rivals. On the relation of the Dream with American society and its literature, she says the USA is characterized by:

[...] a culture which builds a mythology of itself based on competitive acquisition of objects of desire, pursuing ontological fullness via the sacrificial mechanisms of this acquisitory system, is a culture that will produce narratives that engage with this mythology and the crises it engenders (OSBORN, 2015, p. 233).

Consequently, the protagonists of the three novels follow Girard’s pattern of tragic narrative. The literary productions present characters firstly frustrated by their desires (here the effects of the materialist version of the Dream on the development of those novels are clear); secondly, such frustrations lead to rivalry and crisis; and finally, this crisis is interrupted by a violent demise of an eligible scapegoat. Therefore, besides presenting a critical view on American society and culture, Osborn not only stresses

em nossa memória, evitando o silenciamento e o esquecimento das suas vítimas” (POPPELAARS, 2015, p. 130).

²⁰ My translation. Original source: “um sonho americano que foi traído e corrompido pela ganância do mundo dos homens de negócios, intolerância política e egoísmo impiedoso” (POPPELAARS, 2015, p. 135).

the presence of modern tragedies in contemporary times, but also identifies the characteristics of that literary genre in productions that do not belong to drama form.

Diana L. Christensen (2014) sheds some light on the destructive side of the American Dream as portrayed in literature about the Hollywood film industry. In so doing, she analyses Joan Didion's *Play it as it lays*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The last Tycoon*, and Nathanael West's *The day of the locust*. For Christensen, even though each novel approaches the theme in a different way, all three draw the same conclusion. Joan Didion's, F. Scott Fitzgerald's and Nathanael West's literary productions problematize a society focused chiefly upon material gain, present characters who are on the fringes of Hollywood, unable to achieve success, not to mention that the reading of those novels suggests that no one is exempt from the Dream's deceptive allure.

In her final remarks, Diana says that the Hollywood portrayal in the novels is anything but glorious. Her thesis highlights the corruption of the Dream, and also alludes to the lack of moral ethics within American culture. Furthermore, she states that: "the dream is focused on unrealistic expectations of wealth and the pleasures of popular culture. The result is a self-destructive culture of unmediated desire and discontent" (CHRISTENSEN, 2014, p. 81).

Taking Ernest Hemingway's *To have and have not*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their eyes were watching God*, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' *Cross Greek Cookery* as *corpus*, Jason M. Gibson (2013) seeks to explore the interaction between liberty and democracy that lies at the core of the Dream. He also verifies the way in which it is invoked and called into question in those works. Just as I have mentioned in my introduction, Gibson says that literature may offer the greatest lens to view the shifts of the national belief as a socio-cultural framework for understanding American culture as a whole and more specifically American literature.

Gibson states that these authors celebrate the Dream and, at the same time, question its efficacy. In this sense, the literary works demonstrate a failure of approach in a social order meant to guarantee individual success. Although dealing with the tragic concept is outside Gibson's scope of enquiry, he singles out that there is a conflict or a clash between the will of the individual and the community in these works. As will be demonstrated in due course, the tragic is characterized by the act of breaking some rules, which leads to a political, moral or social conflict. Such a clash usually

takes place between the individual and the world around him or between the individual and his community. According to the author:

At the heart of their criticism lies the conflict caused between the will of the individual and the community's views of acceptance paths for achieving the Dream. The end result is a Dream that either collapses altogether, or is remade beyond societal norms leaving the individual isolated from the imagined community (GIBSON, 2013, p. 127).

The result of the clash presented in those narratives, as the author states, is a mix of the Dream's promises with social exclusion. Gibson concludes his research stating that Hemingway's, Hurston's, and Rawlings' works provide the reader with the questioning of the shared values of the Dream.

Just like Gibson, Cleo Beth Theron's (2013) thesis aims at studying the interrelation between spatial and social mobility in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Thomas Wolfe's *You can't go home again*. According to Theron, these novels depict characters who attempt to attain the American Dream by moving to the West for social progression. However, none of them reach the position of social improvement even by moving to that region. In this regard, the inability to obtain a satisfactory end suggests the authors renderings that the American Dream is an endlessly deferred goal. The characters, according to Theron, represent the irony of the continual search for fulfillment in US society. In the scholar's words: "the desired ends remain out of reach at the close of each novel [...] thereby, preventing final, totalizing meaning and rendering the American Dream forever elusive" (THERON, 2013, p. 89).

In a similar way, James E. Ayers' (2011) dissertation sets out to locate common features across myriad versions of the American Dream in representative modern American novels. Besides F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as a case study for the Dream in fiction, Ayers analyses nine other narratives in his research: Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, Frank Norris' *The Pit*, Edith Wharton's *The novel of Mirth*, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*, Chris Bachelder's *Bear v. Shark*, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

As I pointed out in my introduction, the scholar states that the Dream is a compelling term to understand American culture. Though he says that no definition on the subject can be perfect, Ayers defines the national belief as the following:

[...] it clearly outlines the material paradigm of the American Dream as one of effort-based reward (those rewards being socio-economic). In guaranteeing opportunity, this definition at once describes America as a space of abundance (where opportunity literally does exist) and it describes the American ideal of equality that must exist in order for universal pursuit to be possible (AYERS, 2011, p, 11).

The outcome of his research shows that these novels address the tension or discrepancy between ideal and reality in America, since the characters' realistic circumstances often challenge the Dream's promises. The author also singles out that the novels rest largely on the national belief of persistent reliance on hope, be it the belief in socio-economic prosperity, opportunities that exist in abundance, or in the social ideals of liberty and equality for all individuals. Finally, Ayers stresses that mass consumerism and materialism characterize US society. In a nutshell, despite the novels' distinguished features, all of them shed light on the clash between the American Dream and the American reality, as well as on the Dream's emphasis on human progress.

In his dissertation "The American dream and the margins in twentieth century fiction", Jeremy Reed aims at exploring the relationship between economic success, and self-making in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the upward mobility in Horatio Alger's *Risen from the Ranks* and Howard Hawk's *Scarface*, in addition to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and the self-awareness position of marginality depicted in Amy Tan's *The joy luck club*. Reed hypothesizes that disentangling these narrative threads helps to reveal the role the Dream plays in mediating the relationship between the center and the margins in US context.

As the author states, the national belief in those works is described as two poles. It features characters who have achieved what they consider to be the Dream; however, those who experience it suffer a relative lack of selfhood, energy, and legitimacy. Reed also highlights that those literary productions create narrative doubles, that is, "figures whose ability to radically re-create themselves fulfill the demands of energy and innovation imposed by a progressive American ideology" (REED, 2009, p. 210), and further says that "despite their ability to re-create

themselves, those on the margins always remain visibly different, and so safely recognizable and containable” (REED, 2009, p. 211).

The “double characters”, as described by Jeremy Reed, are presented in the plays I analyze below. As we shall see in my critical reading, the plays explore the double logic of the American ideology: characters try to re-create themselves and abandon their identity either to “fit in” the standards of US society, or to reach their goals; but, at the same time, they end up destroying themselves while attempting to do so.

The fact that the ideology may be seen as a narrative of doubling is stated by the scholar in his final remarks. The set of fiction brings to the fore the constant need to change or abandon one’s identity as a way to achieve goals and, above all, embrace Americanness. According to the author:

The American Dream is a narrative of doubling that functions to mediate and discipline citizenship [...] as a narrative of Americanness, the American Dream is always simultaneously an attempt to describe and create the American instance, a way of coming to grips with an intellectual and ideological tradition that demands constant re-creation and merging it with the natural indication towards a stable sense of identity (REED, 2009, p. 212).

Kouider Merbah’s (2013) work purports to tackle the failure of the American Dream symbolized through the theme of sterility in Tennessee Williams’ *Cat on a hot tin roof*, Edward Albee’s *Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and Sam Shepard’s *Buried child*. The author suggests that the realization of the Dream’s promises constitute a far-reaching goal. Having looked at the roots of the term, Merbah states that the ideology has moved from a triumphant ideal to a fake promise, as well as the destabilizing effect of materialism and capitalism on individuals and, more specifically, on the US family.

Furthermore, the scholar suggests that sterility is closely associated with childlessness in these plays. In this way, Merbah says the image of the child can be linked with materialism or the portrayal of a secured future. Additionally, biological sterility represents, according to the author, the result of external factors such as aging, homosexuality, and alcoholism. Finally, he states that the biological problem is also linked to the characters’ lack of emotions which, in a way, tear the families apart. As Merbah puts it:

[...] much stress on alcoholism, homosexuality, and aging as being determinant factors that led to sterility and on family members who perceive themselves and others as 'things' in America's capitalistic society [...] Thus the conclusion leads us to confirm that the realization of the American dream is impossible (MERBAH, 2013, p. II).

The last research in my inquiry into the relationship between the Dream and literature is Valdemar dos Passos Apolinário's (2001) master's thesis "*Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman: politics, social conscience, and the American dream*". Apolinário sets out to investigate how political and social issues affected the playwright's construction of the characters in this literary production. To that end, he draws upon Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*, *The Autobiography*, and *The way to wealth* to analyze the principles underlying the American Dream of success which, according to Apolinário, shape the characters' personality and determine their fate. The scholar builds the hypothesis that most of the characters in *Death of a Salesman* try to follow Benjamin's advice on how to do business.

He states that Benjamin's books provide the readers with suggestions for achieving a good life and urge them to follow his precepts of industry, frugality and prudence. Apolinário's findings suggest that Franklin's production influences the writing of Miller's play and the characters may be divided into three distinct groups: Charley, Ben, Howard and Bernard represent the first group (the pro-Franklin), that is, they were almost completely committed to Franklin's teaching; Willy and Happy belong to the second group (the pseudo-Franklin), characters partially committed to Franklin's ideas; and finally, the anti-Franklin group, comprised of only one character, Biff, who does not fit into either of the other two labels. Apart from that, Apolinário stresses that the play depicts a contradictory feature: on the one hand it attempts to relate personal success to the development of some moral values, on the other, the play contains a strong criticism of capitalism.

Taking all the scholarly perspectives on the relationship between literature and the Dream into consideration, a few concerns can be raised. The body of criticism and scholarship presents a tendency to highlight recurrent features which spring out of the juxtaposition of the national creed and literary art. By developing such an approach, researchers refer to the Dream and its promises as an illusion. Except for *Pins and Needles*, in which Diana Sution Lee suggests that, although the play presents

problems associated to the ideology, it depicts an optimistic view and the majority of productions do not follow this line of reasoning. As a matter of fact, they focus upon the nightmarish vision of US culture, in other words, the writers reveal the worst aspects of the nation: a highly competitive society divided into winners and losers, in addition to being characterized by the fragility of interpersonal relations and imbued with capitalist ideas. In this sense, most of the narratives present a variety of forays into American society by strengthening the claim that the American Dream condemns its citizens for the pressure it inflicts upon individuals to accomplish social standards.

Even though these studies do indeed provide a critical reading among the narratives, highlighting, then, the high aesthetic quality of the literary productions or the lack thereof, critics tend to provide new insights into common features within the texts. Such a way of approaching fiction suggests that authors whose works focus upon the interplay between that ideology and literature attempt to problematize, to cast doubt on, to elicit critical responses from the reader, or even to tease out new perspectives on the subject matter.

Among the many literary productions that allow for a reassessment or a revision of the current critical approach to the Dream, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* (1982) offer remarkable instances of literary productions filled with the dichotomies, hypocrisies, or controversies of the American ideology. From a critical reading of those plays, it is possible to prompt a fierce debate over the relation between the national belief and the studies related to the tragic, inasmuch as the role of that interaction in literature remains largely unstudied. So, by undertaking this research, one can verify not only new readings of those texts, but also new trends in literary criticism regarding the American Dream in literature.

In this specific vein, in order to put into practice such discussions which may open a window into studies on the compelling interaction among literature, the Dream, and the tragic, it is necessary to offer an in-depth analysis of the concept of tragic, to verify what it means and then to present a critical approach to the plays selected in this research. In the next chapter, my reader, you are going to discover what the tragic is and how it is portrayed in literature.

By the way, do you happen to know the difference between the tragedy and the tragic? What is *hamartia* or tragic flaw? What defines a tragic hero? What causes

characters to come to the tragic situation? These and other issues we are going to discuss in the following pages.

[After presenting all that information, THE STAGE MANAGER finishes his coffee, puts the cup on his desk and leaves the stage. While leaving, the lights slowly dim out].

Figure 1 - Vincent van Gogh (1853 – 1890), *Sorrowing Old Man (At Eternity's Gate)*, 1890, oil on canvas, 81 cm x 65 cm, The Netherlands, Kröller-Müller Museum.



3 QUARRELLING OVER THE TRAGIC

SCENE – The lights come up. The scene is the same as that of the introduction – the student’s bedroom. The audience sees THE STAGE MANAGER coming back to the stage. While walking, he is holding a portable standing whiteboard on wheels and positions it at the center of the bedroom. Then, he sets up his projector and reflects Vincent van Gogh’s painting *Sorrowing Old Man (At Eternity Gate)* on the wall. He takes a deep breath, drinks some water, and positions himself beside the whiteboard. At this moment, THE STAGE MANAGER looks like a professor about to give a lecture on literature. He starts speaking.

THE STAGE MANAGER. After giving a brief overview of several canonical plays of Western literary tradition, one may clearly perceive issues regarding the tragic²¹, a notable element derived from tragedy – a dramatic genre that flourished in ancient Greece in the fifth century B.C. The approach to the tragic has been cultivated in many modern and contemporary works by a great deal of authors who draw on questions related to the concept to provide their readers with up-to-date renderings of the term and to express social problems. In fact, writers seem to use literature as a means to overemphasize the portrayal of human conflicts and their characters’ internal struggles, not to mention the fact that they address a string of individuals doomed to live a cloistered existence and a meaningless life. As a result, the presence of literary productions engaging with and responding to quite diverse perspectives on the tragic has brought about relevant discussions around the reinvention of the concept and attracted much scholarly attention (FERRAZ, 2019, BILLINGS, 2014; YOUNG, 2013, NEWTON, 2008, WALLACE, 2007, BUSHNELL, 2005; MAFFESOLI, 2003; SANTOS, 2002; BAUMGARTEN, 1999).

In light of this, in the next scene, my reader, you will follow me in an account of the idea of the tragic used to analyze John Steinbeck’s, Arthur Miller’s, and Marsha Norman’s plays. More specifically, I attempt to examine what characterizes such a compelling concept. The main theoretical tools come from the studies of Peter Szondi (2002), Gerd Bornheim (2007), Sandra Luna (2008; 2012), and Albin Lesky (2015). This discussion lays the groundwork for my coining of the term “tragic American

²¹ It is important to stress that there is no difference in the use of the following terms: “the tragic”, “the sense of tragic”, and “the idea of tragic”. In this research, these expressions are synonymous.

illusion". In so doing, Vincent van Gogh's painting *Sorrowing Old Man*, which prefaces this chapter, will serve as a starting point for our study. What does tragic mean after all? How do we characterize a tragic hero? What does *hamartia* mean? These are specific questions which are answered in the next section.

3.1 TOWARD A DEFINITION OF THE TRAGIC

A remarkable painting is hanging in the Kröller-Müller Museum in the village of Otterlo in the Netherlands. In the Van Gogh gallery, there is a painting which was completed two months prior to the artist's suicide, namely *Sorrowing Old Man (At Eternity's Gate)* (1890). Though it is not large, the painting is captivating. The canvas depicts an old man, dressed in blue overalls, seated on his chair beside a fireplace and bent over with his fists clenched against his face. Although Van Gogh's work may be simple or self-evident at first glance, new perspectives on the painting arise as the observer pauses a while.

First of all, the aging, probably ill, man is by himself, and a fire is lit in the background. Though it is not possible to see if it is increasing or decreasing, the burning fire may be interpreted as indicative of the agony or the desires that are "burning" inside the man. Following this line of reasoning, the painting seems to heighten the sense that the old man has two possible ways to face reality: either he decides to put out the flames of his desires or dreams and embrace the sorrow that surrounds him, or he can release his fists of anger, free his emotions, and fight for his life.

Secondly, the wall and the wooden floor of the scene help create the somber atmosphere of the painting; both are worn and about to fall apart in the same way as the lonely old man. Furthermore, his boots, old and in a bad condition, also capture the inner torment of the subject in the painting. In this sense, not only the wall and the wooden floor strengthen the mental and physical collapse of the man in the scene, but also his old worn-out walking boots.

Finally, the painting captures the emotion felt by the man. If, on the one hand the wall, the wooden floor and the flames convey an image of emotional instability, on the other, his fists clenched against his face depict a person engulfed in sorrow and pain. The fact that he hides his face suggests two possible interpretations. The first is

that, owing to shame and utter frustration, he is most likely reflecting upon all the pain, struggles, and wrong decisions made during his life to end up alone in that place. The second rendering takes into consideration his desperate attempt to cover his identity. Such image poses a compelling interpretation: the faceless man indicates not only his injured pride or shame to be seen as weak or as a loser, but also, he allows any observer to identify or see themselves in the future in that terrible situation.

Taken together, my reading of the painting reveals the image of an individual who suffers the consequences of his actions and sheds light on the fragility of our ideals. Moreover, the portrait also gives the impression of focusing on the instability of human life and the deadlock between personal desires and social duties. That is to say Vincent van Gogh's *Sorrowing Old Man (At Eternity's Gate)* invites the observer to reflect upon life and its ambivalences and contradictions. Therefore, the desperate old man, with his face covered and probably ruminating on his great misfortunes, creates the perfect imagery related to the tension, conflict and contradiction which characterize the concept of the tragic.

Before we begin studying the specificities of that concept, it is important to differentiate two terms that are usually used as synonyms in our daily lives, but express different meanings in this research: tragedy and tragic. As Terry Eagleton (2003) points out on the current use of the word "tragedy":

For most people today, tragedy means an actual occurrence, not a work of art. Indeed, some of those who nowadays use the word of actual events are probably unaware that it has an artistic sense at all [...] citizens [...] freely use the word of famines and drug overdoses might be puzzled to hear it used of a film or novel [...] tragedy is a technical affair, quite different from run-of-the-mill calamity (EAGLETON, 2003, p. 14-15).

In this regard, the noun "tragedy" does not mean the same as the adjective "tragic". The former refers to a literary genre which dates back to the fifth century B.C. and encompasses the works of the great Greek playwrights – Aeschylus (525 – 465 B.C.), Sophocles (496 – 406 B.C.), and Euripides (480 – 406 B.C.). The latter deals with a set of features derived from the tragedy, but the term began to be an independent philosophic concept from the eighteenth century onwards. In brief, tragedy comes from the Greek word *tragōidia*, in which "tragos", means "goat" and "oide", 'ode'. It literally means "goat song". Tragedies were performed at Athens' annual festival of Dionysus, the god of fertility and wine, and Greeks used to dedicate their

plays to the deity. It is believed that goats may have been sacrificed during the performances of tragedies or the animals might have been the prize playwrights received for writing a winning tragedy during that festival. The content of this literary genre depicts the progression from happy times to the downfall of elevated characters (kings, queens, princes and princesses) due to common human flaws or unfortunate events. As for the tragic, despite the differences in meaning proposed by many philosophers and scholars, the hallmark feature of the term relies on the conflict between two opposing and incompatible forces.

Peter Szondi's (2002) renderings on the subject help us understand the basic aspects of this philosophic concept which embraces a lot of meanings. He stresses that there are two ways to analyze tragedy: by means of the philosophy of the tragic or the poetics of tragedy. According to the author: "Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic" (SZONDI, 2002, p. 1). Therefore, while the former springs from Schelling's theories in the eighteenth century and has the objective to present an in-depth reflection among man and his social, historical and cultural context, the latter centers around the aesthetic analysis of tragedy, which began with Aristotle's *Poetics*.

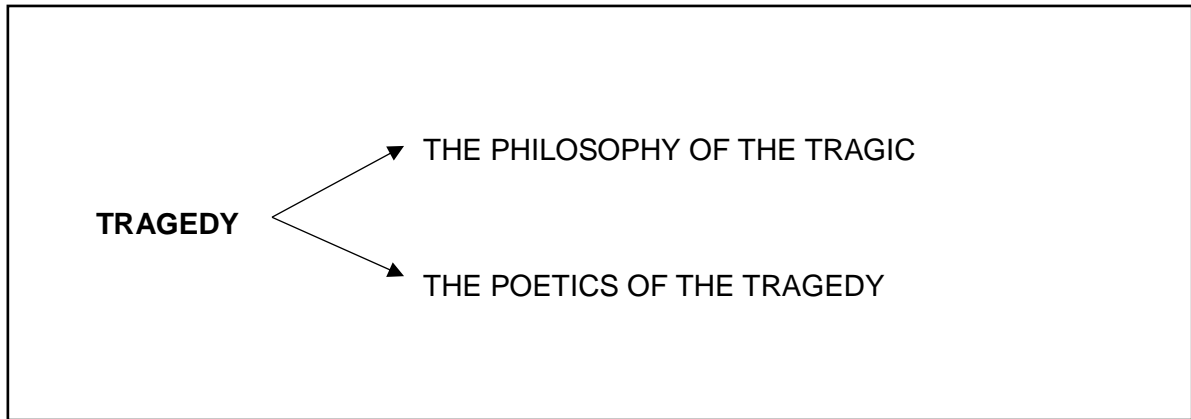
Szondi investigates the historical constitution of the philosophy of the tragic and does not dwell on the poetics of tragedy. By selecting a *corpus* of twelve German poets and philosophers who engaged in studying the formation of the tragic sense, those being Schelling, Hölderlin, Hegel, Solger, Goethe, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Hebbel, Nietzsche, Simmel, and Scheler, the critic states that, although the poets interpreted the concept in their own way, one feature remains constant. There is an explicit counter position of forces that engender certain tension. Thus, it is the study of this "tension" and what triggers it that characterizes the tragic.

By the same token, the researcher Roberto Machado (2006) also attempts to analyze the evolution of the philosophy of the tragic by drawing upon a *corpus* akin to that of Szondi. Nevertheless, Machado highlights that, despite being derived from tragedy, the tragic has gradually become an idea or concept separate from that literary genre. In this sense, the scholar states that the concept of the tragic may be understood as: "a category able to depict the human situation in the world, the essence of human condition, the fundamental dimension of existence"²² (MACHADO, 2006, p.

²² My translation. Original source: "uma categoria capaz de apresentar a situação do homem no mundo, a essência da condição humana, a dimensão fundamental da existência" (MACHADO, 2006, p. 42-43).

42-43). All in all, we can organize the studies on the tragedy and the tragic as in the table below:

Table 2 - Schematic representation of the studies on tragedy according to Peter Szondi (2002).



Source: Silva (2020).

From the studies proposed by Peter Szondi (2002) and Roberto Machado (2006), one can notice the presence of a number of critics and philosophers who have already attempted to develop different accounts of both terms. Whereas some scholars seek to verify the characteristics of the tragic embedded in the plot of tragedies, or to examine the term as an independent concept, others focus their attention on the quality or the lack thereof in the construction of tragedies. Considering the aims of this research, I side with the philosophy of the tragic as conceived by Peter Szondi. In other words, I will verify the development of the tragic and its formal esthetic properties within the plot of modern and contemporary American plays. On the following pages, my reader, I shall delve into the definition of the tragic. To do so, Aristotle's *Poetics*, Albin Lesky (2015), Gerd Bornheim's (2007), and Sandra Luna's (2008, 2012), reflections provide a good ground for understanding not only the particularities, but also the elements commonly found in the "tragic machinery".

Any research aiming at analyzing the tragic concept must begin with Aristotle's classical theory of dramatic representation. In this work, which laid the foundation for Western dramaturgy and is regarded as a founding text of Western literary theory, Aristotle (384-322 BC) dwells on what poetic art (literary production) is, how one defines it, and how one identifies different forms of artistic expression. Throughout Aristotle's discussion about literary discourse, he mentions different sorts of poetic art, such as epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, as well as flute- and lyre-

playing. Nonetheless, over the twenty-six chapters of the text, the Greek philosopher focuses his attention predominantly upon the singularities and treatment of tragedy – which, according to Aristotle, is a kind of art that stands out from the other forms – as well as on his definition of tragic hero.

At first, Aristotle's notion of *mimesis* is of paramount significance for his conception of the function of theatre and, by extension, literature as a whole. He stresses that poetic art must be seen not as a genuine copy of our reality, but as an imitation or mirroring of human actions. This means that all forms of representation, above all, dramatic action, are in a special place where society may look, identify, and reflect upon itself by means of a writer's ability to mirror/imagine or recreate a social reality through art. With regards to the outcome of a poetic imitation, Aristotle proposes that it provides us with learning and knowledge; presenting, then, a different view of his former master, the Greek philosopher Plato. According to Plato, imitated actions or images may be tainted as something fake and capable of disclosing the true proportions of things and, ultimately, harmful to people. Plato's negative attitude towards the theory of *mimesis* is based on the premise that, as the imitation or mirroring of things are imitations of the imitation from a genuine nature of objects, in other words, a double copy, art, thus, would be prejudicial to all citizens. Contrary to Plato, Aristotle points out that imitating is a common feature of all human beings. According to him:

Imitating is co-natural with human beings from childhood, and in this they differ from the other animals because they are the most imitative and produce their first act of understanding by means of imitation; also all human beings take delight in imitation (*Poetics*, 1448b, 7 - 11, p. 22).

In the same vein, Aristotle asserts that the aesthetic pleasure which stems from the imitation is nothing but the result of the identification between the imitated and the object being imitated. In this line of thought, the pleasure that comes from the *mimesis* lies directly on the concept of recognition. Such feature outlined in *Poetics* shines light on the pedagogical, moralizing, and, above all, conservative feature of artistic expression. As Augusto Boal (1974) argues, when Aristotle suggests that: "it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen" (*Poetics*, 1451a, 10-11, p. 51), copying nature or human behavior implies the act of re-creating it from the imperfect towards the ideal representation. To put it another way, Boal

singles out that the Aristotelian theory of representation is involved in, and has the purpose of, re-establishing a dominant social order, that is, things “as they should be” and not “as they really are”.

To recreate that internal movement of things toward their perfection. Nature was for him this movement itself and not things already made, finished, visible. Thus, ‘to imitate’ has nothing to do with improvisation or ‘realism,’ and for this reason Aristotle could say that the artist must imitate men ‘as they should be’ and not as they are (BOAL, 1985, p. 8).

Such conservative feature of the theory of *mimesis* becomes clear when Aristotle analyzes the goals and the structure of tragedy, as well as the achievement of its function through *catharsis* and the kind of character depicted in this literary genre. *Poetics* describes tragedy as an imitation of an action which depicts characters of noble or aristocratic birth. Furthermore, he explains that the tragic flaw of the character leads to a reversal of fortune in the story, followed by a recognition of a truth that turns out to marking the character’s downfall. In this sense, the tragic flaw can be understood as a socially discouraged behavior that ends up involving a transgression of the social order and, consequently, the punishment for his transgressions. In the fragments below, Aristotle sets forth his definition of classical tragedy, the effects it aims to convey, and the establishment of the tragic.

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action of serious stature and complete, having magnitude, in language made pleasing in distinct forms in its separate parts, imitating people acting [...] accomplishing by means of pity and fear the cleansing of these states of feelings (*Poetics*, 1449b, 24-28, p. 26).

[...] tragedy is an imitation not of people but of actions and life. Both happiness and wretchedness consist in action, and the end is a certain sort of action, not a quality; while people are of certain sorts as a result of their characters, it is a result of their actions that they are happy or the opposite (*Poetics*, 1450a, 16-20, p. 27).

[...] the sort of person who is not surpassing in virtue and justice, but does not change into misfortune through bad character and vice, but on account of some missing of the mark, if he is among those who are in great repute and good fortune [...] It is therefore necessary for the story [...] changing not into good fortune from bad but the opposite way, from good fortune to bad, not through badness of character but on account of a great missing of the mark,

either by the sort of person described or by someone better than that rather than worse (*Poetics*, 1453a, 10-20, p. 37).

Taking the fragments above into account, one may verify important elements regarding the configuration of the tragic action. First of all, the tragic flaw stems from a person's action and not from his or her traits, values or beliefs. For Aristotle, it does not matter if the tragic hero (the protagonist of a tragedy and the one who suffers the consequences of his actions) is tightfisted, selfish or greedy (those unique features represent his *hybris*), but what really matters is what he does with his traits. The tragic flaw only happens when the character sets himself into motion. However, despite saying that, Aristotle did not explain what causes the character to commit voluntary or involuntary transgressions. He only describes three possible ways the tragic hero may act: the first, he knows and recognizes what he is doing (*Medea*, *Antigone*); in the second case, he acts, but, at the same time, does not know that his deeds are terrible (*Oedipus the King*); and finally, the third way presents figures committed to do some irreparable harm, but give up the act in the heat of the moment. Therefore, as I shall demonstrate in due time, many scholars have attempted to fill this gap Aristotle left behind while trying to explain the "tragic machinery". I do believe that not only the tragic character's *hybris*, but also the pressures of supernatural forces (gods, fate, or hegemonic ideologies) exerted upon the character lead him to make mistakes, break social rules and, ultimately, lead to his tragic downfall.

Secondly, in spite of the fact that tragedy depicts characters of a high social position, they are not flawless and have an intermediate *ethos* – they fall not because of their evil traits, but because of a serious mistake. In this sense, the spectator can identify him or herself with the vicissitudes of the protagonist. In witnessing the progression of the character on the stage or on the page of a book, the audience/reader experiences *terror* at his fate, together with *pity*, a relief that the spectator has escaped the character's victimizing destiny. This, according to the Greek philosopher, constitutes the *kathartic* effect. In other terms, *katharsis* means the act of getting rid of emotions that come from the feeling of terror and pity and provide the reader or spectator with the possibility of learning without the need of suffering the physical pain. In this sense, Aristotle claims that when the audience members identify with the suffering of a character, they indirectly experience his pain and humiliation throughout

a play or any work of art. Meanwhile, the audience can learn a lesson of the tragic hero's transgressive behavior.

Finally, the Aristotelian *katharsis* hides political interests. When tragedy achieves its goal, the audience or the reader, as stated above, experience both *terror* and *pity*, leaving the stage or finishing a book "purged" of any negative emotions or impulses responsible for the character's tragic fall. Nonetheless, in this line of reasoning, art may act either as a warning or as a threat. The Greek lesson conveys the idea that even superior individuals can suffer a change of fortune, owing to their going against the gods' desires, the government or political life as a whole, or for casting doubt on the ancient knowledge of that time. Just like the tragic hero, who finishes the plays regretting his attitudes and reaffirming the ancient Greek mythical view of the world, both the audience and the reader are also invited to purge their revolutionary impulses that "would question or threaten the dominant social order" (SADDIK, 2007, p. 4). Therefore, the portrayal of the tragic hero in classical tragedy, along with Aristotle's theory of *mimesis*, serves as a powerful tool for maintaining the dominant social order and the hegemonic ideology of that time.

In my discussion so far, my reader, you may be asking yourself: if Aristotle used his plays as a way of heightening the dominant ideology of his social context, would it be possible to affirm that modern and contemporary dramatists follow the same path as the Greek philosopher? Or rather, do US playwrights, more specifically John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller, and Marsha Norman, use their tragic characters as a means to reinforce the hegemonic ideology of the American Dream? The answer to this question we are going to discover soon.

In light of the above analysis of Aristotle's renderings, the fact that he did not engage in describing the tragic flaw phenomenon in his *Poetics* is clear. When describing the tragic in ancient tragedy, he only stated that *hamartia* or tragic flaw is not the result of a character's trait, but a direct result of their actions, which result in a social transgression, which leads to the change of his fortune. However, what causes, what is behind or what enables protagonists to act and trigger the tragic flaw remains unclear. Is it the influence of Greek gods upon human behavior? Is it the inherited family curse that leads characters to their destruction? Due to the importance of the term for the studies of the tragic, many philosophers and scholars have attempted to approach the concept throughout the years and to offer multiple perspectives from different angles regarding the content of the term.

As mentioned earlier, the philosophy of the tragic emerged in the late eighteenth century, a period in which many philosophers sought to propose new interpretations of the tragic. Another aspect to be noted from that century onwards is that the history of the concept engages only with the description of the tragic phenomenon and no longer considers its effects on the tragedy plot. In other words, from the eighteenth century onwards the tragic has become an independent field of study. In order to understand such a complex term, it is important to verify how the first philosophers approached the concept. For Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854), the term deals with the *conflict* between freedom and necessity that befalls and challenges the will of the tragic hero. On the other hand, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) states that the tragic rests on an *irreconcilable conflict or opposition*. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), in turn, proposes that based upon the premise that the world only exists as the representation of the will and that the will is not only a power which moves the world, but also an irrational and instinctive trait, the tragic would be a *process of self-suppression* of what constitutes the world. In other terms, *the negation of the will* would reveal the superiority of human beings, but it does not happen because people usually do not abdicate their personal interests in favor of humanity or in favor of their community. According to Schopenhauer, the world is littered with selfish people. The tragic, then, is triggered by the *contradictions* related to an individual's insatiable desire. As is possible to see, although the authors present different perspectives on the concept, the idea of tension, conflict and contradiction, as already pointed out in my critical reading of Vincent van Gogh's *Sorrowing Old Man*, lies at the heart of the tragic.

In order to comprehend contemporary renderings of the term, the theoretical background of the concept of the tragic used in this research derives from Albin Lesky's (2015), Gerd Bornheim's (2007), and Sandra Luna's (2008, 2012) studies. Their reflections on the theme help us understand the phenomenon, and also fill the gaps of Aristotle's *Poetics*.

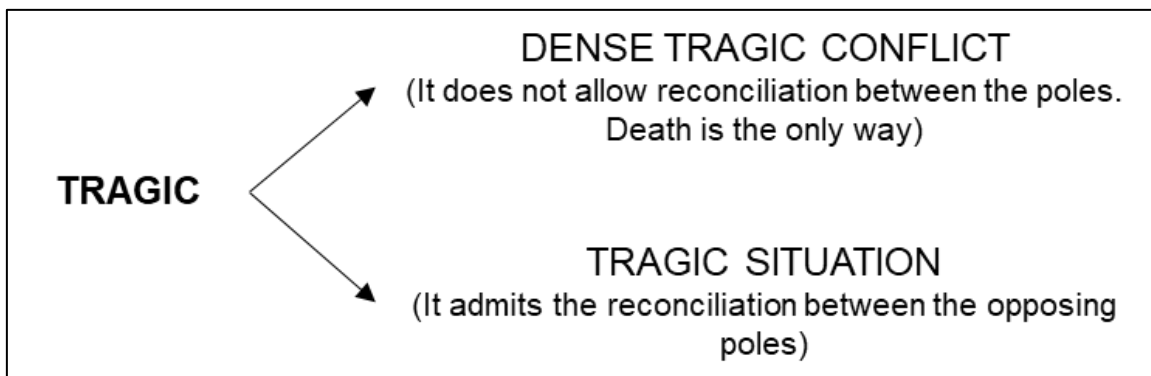
In his analysis of the tragic, Albin Lesky (2015) examines the concept as an aesthetic category or a philosophic term which aims at expressing a specific perspective of the world. According to the author, although the issues regarding the subject date back to Attic tragedy, the seeds of the concept can be found in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In both epic poems, there is a description of a tension between the characters and the passing of time, as well as a conflict in the relation between human

beings (mortals) and the gods (immortals). Furthermore, it is possible to identify in these epic poems characters guided by wrath and love (Achilles), pride (Hector), and arrogance (Patroclus) who, by their own actions, face their tragic downfall. Nonetheless, as I pointed out earlier in this research, Lesky also argues that Aristotle did not develop the philosophic term.

In this regard, the author singles out that the adjective “tragic” is not related to the mood of a person, but to “the destruction of an illusory world endowed with security and happiness and its changing into the abyss of an inescapable disgrace²³” (LESKY, 2015, p. 33).

Lesky, then, asserts that the philosophic term sheds light on a tragic contradiction. According to the scholar, it portrays the clash between two opposite situations or poles: God *versus* man; man *versus* society; and man *versus* man. By affirming the importance of the tragic contradiction to trigger the “tragic machinery”, Lesky proposes two ways tragic can be depicted in a literary production, as we can see in the table below:

Table 3 - The tragic according to Albin Lesky (2015)



Source: SILVA (2022).

The first category is called “Dense tragic conflict”. This portrays a pessimistic view of human destiny by stressing the impossibility of reconciliation between the opposing poles. In fact, it also describes protagonists who end up being punished for rebelling against a social order. The second category is named “Tragic situation”. Unlike the first, this category admits a reconciliation between the contrary poles without

²³ My translation. Original source: “o que temos que sentir como trágico deve significar a queda de um mundo ilusório de segurança e felicidade para o abismo da desgraça ineludível” (LESKY, 2015, p. 33).

the need to sacrifice the protagonist. In this line of reasoning, Albin Lesky's renderings offer us compelling tools to understand how literature may use the tragic as a means to describe man in his multiple relations within society, as well as the presence of supernatural forces that may influence his behavior. Whether John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* (1982) present a "dense tragic conflict" or a "tragic situation" we are going to discover in the next chapter.

In an attempt to define key components of the tragic in contemporary dramatic literature, Bornheim (2007) stresses two essential tenets to its formation: man and the order responsible for his existential horizon. Such order, according to the author, includes notions of fairness, goodness, and moral values. In this sense, Bornheim says that:

The tragic would be meaningless by taking into consideration only man's subjectivity, as if he, all of a sudden, found himself in a tragic situation, as though man were the only element that allows for the tragic [...] if man is one of the most important tools for the development of the tragic, another tool worth pointing out is the order or man's existential horizon [...] Being in a tragic situation refers to these tools, the tragic conflict is set up and possible only because of the bipolarity of the situation²⁴ (BORNHEIM, 2007, p. 73-74).

As stated in this excerpt, the researcher presents his first definition of the philosophical concept. Just like Albin Lesky's study, he also states that the tragic is triggered when there is a conflict between two different orders. In addition to the apposition between man *versus* world, Bornheim mentions the clash between justice and injustice, measured and unmeasured (*hybris*), being and appearance, harmony and chaos. Furthermore, the author goes on to verify what sort of element would trigger the conflict. For the author, an unknown motivation causes man to lose his balance and such a motivation allows for the development of the tragic conflict. According to the author, due to the consequences of that unknown motivation that makes characters

²⁴ My translation. Original source: "O trágico seria inexplicável a partir apenas da subjetividade do homem, como este, de repente, ou por si só, se encontrasse em situação trágica, como se o homem fosse a única perspectiva possibilitadora do trágico [...] se o homem é um dos pressupostos fundamentais do trágico, outro pressuposto não menos importante é constituído pela ordem ou pelo sentido que forma o horizonte existencial do homem [...] Estar em situação trágica remete àqueles dois pressupostos, e a partir da bipolaridade da situação faz-se possível o conflito" (BORNHEIM, 2007, p. 73-74).

act, there is a violation or breaking of established social orders. This breaking, then, is what sets the tragic into motion.

The person, then, turns out to be a victim of appearance or measure [...] he incurs in *hybris*, or excess, the opposite situation that is found in 'divine laws', which are, by the way, endowed with fairness and measurement. The hero adopts himself, in a conscious or unconscious way, a sort of *faux semblant*. He acts as though all measure that transcends him had been lost. He is tragic precisely because his current position is a fake one. We come across, then, an unjust situation which requires the reestablishment of a fair one²⁵ (BORNHEIM, 2007, p. 79-80).

Considering the quotation above, some points need to be analyzed. The first one is that man lives under the appearance of an ordinary person. Furthermore, as stated by Bornheim, man attempts to hide his intimate desires and manages to do so by wearing a fragile and fake identity. In this regard, one can perceive that a person lives in a constant struggle with his existential horizon, because he has been denied access to his "true self". The second point worth highlighting refers to man's tragic flaw. He makes mistakes due to a weakness in his character. Nevertheless, as Bornheim puts it:

it is not the character that determines the tragic, but the action; the nature belongs to man himself and belongs to him; the action, on the other hand, must be understood [...] taking into consideration that polarity [...]: man and the world ²⁶ (BORNHEIM, 2007, p. 74).

Therefore, the scholar does not clearly present clearly what drives man to act and to promote a disequilibrium or the break of a social order. If it is only through acting that the tragic can operate, one might infer that man makes mistakes because he dared to challenge the standards or rules which control his delicate appearance. The last point to discuss regards the consequences of man's wrong choices. According to the

²⁵My translation. Original source: "O indivíduo passa a ser, assim, presa da aparência ou de uma medida [...] ele incide em *hybris*, ou desmedida, o oposto da existência que encontra a sua medida na 'lei divina', e que por isso é justa. O herói adota, de um modo consciente ou não, uma espécie de *faux semblant*; ele age como se toda medida que o transcende tivesse perdido sentido. E ele é trágico precisamente porque esta sua posição se revela mentira. Topamos, pois, com uma injustiça que obriga ao reconhecimento da justiça" (BORNHEIM, 2007, p. 79-80).

²⁶ My translation. Original source: "não é o caráter que determina o trágico, e sim a ação; o caráter é próprio do homem e restringe-se a ele; a ação, pelo contrário, deve ser compreendida [...] a partir daquela polaridade [...]: o homem e o mundo" (BORNHEIM, 2007, p. 74).

author, characters' mistakes should be repaired. In order to do so, man must be punished so as to reestablish the harmony between him and the world.

Like Albin Lesky and Gerd Bornheim, Sandra Luna's (2008, 2012) studies also help us understand "the tragic machinery". Just like Bornheim, she characterizes the philosophical concept as the breaking of rules and as the conflict between two opposing forces. In this sense, the tragic portrays the struggle between the human will and the divine, as well as the struggle between man and social forces. To demonstrate how the "tragic machinery" works, Luna analyses the aesthetic construction of Greek tragedies and verifies how the tragic is embedded in those productions. Concepts such as *hybris*, *hamartia*, and *ate* are of utmost importance to the comprehension of the tragic action.

In a fashion very similar to Bornheim, Luna also points out that the tragic is triggered by the character's action, which provokes disorder or a breaking of human limits. Unlike Bornheim, she shows, in detail, all factors that lead characters to make mistakes. The first one is *hybris*. According to Sandra Luna, such a term may be understood as a "mark on the hero, a disproportionate behavior [...] which blurs the boundaries of licit practices"²⁷ (LUNA, 2005, p. 314). In this regard, tragic characters are endowed with obsessive passion, lust, courage, arrogance, and self-confidence. There is a "mark" in their nature that urges them to act. Put more simply, a character's self-affirmation acts are one of the most important elements which drives him to cross boundaries.

The second point is *hamartia* or tragic flaw. It is an element that triggers the catastrophe that hits tragic characters. As Sandra Luna states, *hamartia* is "an action that turns against its perpetrator in order to make him suffer, it is a dramatic tool that changes the situation, it prompts the tragic"²⁸ (LUNA, 2005, p. 59). In this line of reasoning, *hamartia* comprises a voluntary or involuntary transgression committed by characters on account of their impulses and obsessive behavior. Due to their *hybris*, they only worry about gaining satisfaction from their personal desires. They act and do not care about what may happen to them or to the ones around them. Owing to their challenging the balance of social order and making wrong choices, characters highlight

²⁷ My translation. Original source: "uma marca do herói, um comportamento excessivo [...] que ultrapassa os limites do lícito" (LUNA, 2005, p. 314).

²⁸ My translation. Original source: "uma ação que se volta contra o seu agente para a sua própria perda, artifício dramático inversor da situação, instigador do trágico" (LUNA, 2005, p. 59).

the dichotomy between person *versus* environment, personal *versus* social. Thus, the tragic action is set in motion due to a character's flaw.

The third and last element is called *ate*. For Sandra Luna, this can be seen as "one fatalistic intervention of the gods, fate, and supernatural forces"²⁹ (LUNA, 2005, p. 394), as well as "a supernatural force that urges people to act in a wrong way"³⁰ (LUNA, 2005, p. 394). In this sense, supernatural powers may act in two possible ways. The first one is to seal man's fate. The character, then, presents himself in a passive way in relation to supernatural or social forces. The tragic flaw, thus, springs out of the man's struggle for liberty and his attempt to be the author of his own fate. He goes against what the gods have chosen for him. The individual makes wrong choices due to his refusing to obey superior orders and his breaking of established social rules. The characters make mistakes because they believe that they are the "masters" of their own history and wind up challenging divine laws. Consequently, they are punished in order to reestablish balance and harmony in society. To sum up, it is possible to perceive that the conflict between man *versus* supernatural or social order turns out to be a powerful and invisible force that impedes man from gaining control over his own actions.

The second way *ate* works reveals its influence over a character's actions. As stated by Sandra Luna, supernatural powers increase character's *hubris* and make him commit errors. He turns out to be a "puppet" of mysterious forces. Therefore, in both ways *ate* is portrayed in the "tragic machinery", one may clearly observe that man has his self-affirmation barred from superior orders, not to mention that he is strongly influenced by them. In this regard, it is important to underscore what Sandra Luna says, which is that *ate* has lost its influence on the tragic action along the centuries. The presence of metaphysical forces that urge the characters to make wrong decisions is no longer necessary. Unlike the tragic Greek hero, modern characters usually convey the idea that they are fully responsible for their own actions. They are the masters of their own conscience and will.

For Sandra Luna, the modern tragic hero dramatizes:

²⁹ My translation. Original source: "uma intervenção fatalística dos deuses, do destino, de forças ocultas" (LUNA, 2005, p. 394).

³⁰ My translation. Original source: "uma força sobre-humana que compele as pessoas a agir erroneamente" (LUNA, 2005, p. 394).

[...] man as his own architect, master of his own desires and consciousness. Without limits to express his rational subjectivity, the hero starts to perform on stage a lost innocence, and, because of that, evil, crime, offence, injustice come to the fore due to the power modern man has to make his own decisions³¹ (LUNA, 2012, p. 65).

As can be seen, modern characters have become responsible for their own fate. They are no longer “a toy” in the God’s hands. Now, it is their own nature which defines their lives. In the first moment, one may think that the tragic would fade out, since the conflict between opposing forces, that is, man *versus* the divine world, two opposing poles that engender the tragic conflict, disappears. Nevertheless, currently the tragic action has been centered on the clash between the individual’s singularities and his companions, as well as the individual and the society to which he belongs. As stated by Carlos Alexandre Baumgarten (1999), the modern tragic character “portrays man victimized not only by a tragic flaw, but by his own social condition”³² (BAUMGARTEN, 1999, p. 36).

In the same vein of Baumgarten’s reckonings, Sandra Luna believes that the concept of *ate* has undergone great changes and has assumed assorted forms. As she puts it: “due to the lack of [...] the gods or superior orders taking control of fate [...] other factors started to be used as standards to establish the meaning of the tragic experience” (LUNA, 2008, p. 236). Modern characters, then, begin to suffer the influence of social pressure. Such pressure plays an important role in the way they behave. It is a force that takes over their decision making. Considering this, Luna emphasizes that the tragic indeed remains in the present time, because it is through a character’s actions and reactions that the polarity man *versus* world/society is revealed. In the author’s words:

The hero, whether a toy of fate which leads him to unwittingly make mistakes; whether a rational figure determined to fulfill his objectives, or [...] a split human being shattered by social forces and guided by his unconscious

³¹ My translation. Original source: [...] o homem enquanto arquiteto de si mesmo, senhor de sua consciência e de sua vontade. Sem limites para o exercício dessa subjetividade racionalista, o herói passa a representar no palco a inocência perdida e, com ela, a maldade, o crime, a ofensa, a injustiça, a danação e outros excessos consentidos pela liberdade outorgada ao homem moderno (LUNA, 2012, p. 65).

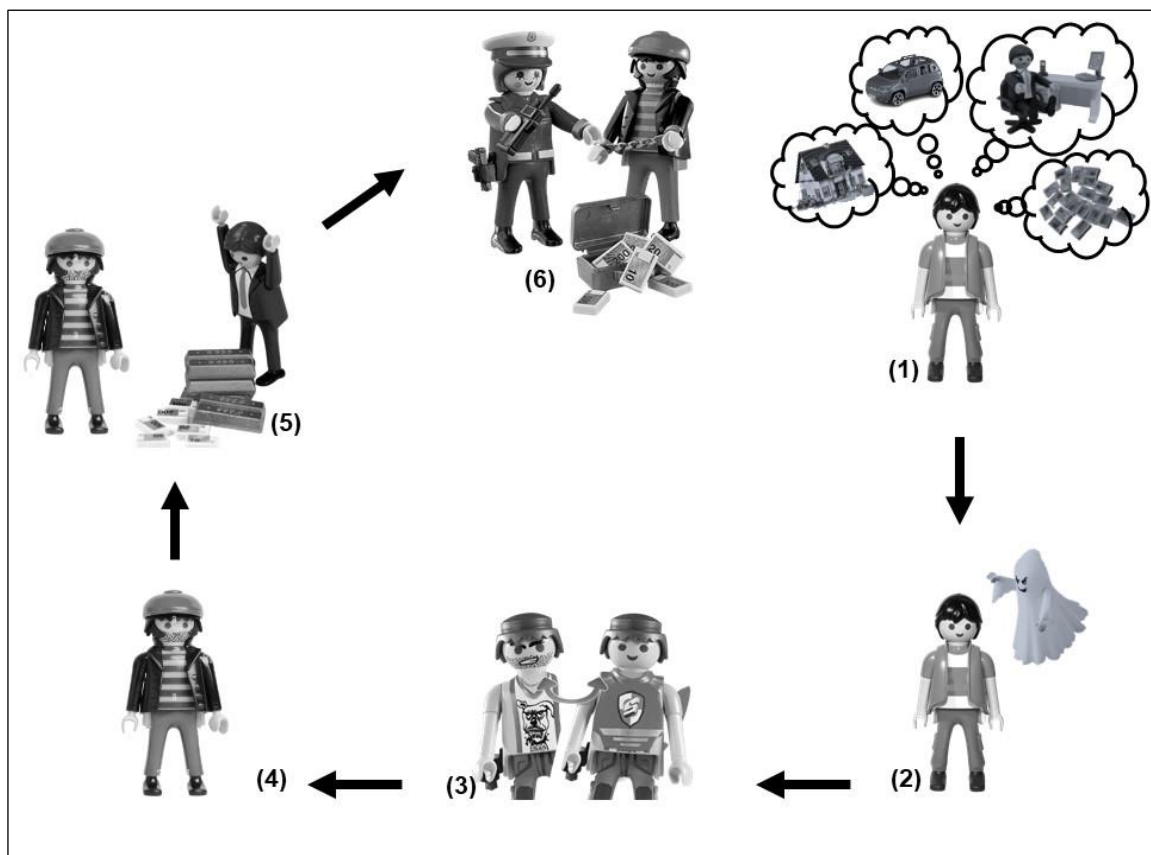
³² My translation. Original source: “representa aquele homem que é vítima não de um erro trágico, mas de sua própria condição social” (BAUMGARTEN, 1999, p. 36).

desires, the fact is that his journey continues to offer a source for the construction of the tragic action ³³ (LUNA, 2008, p. 232).

In light of our discussion so far, it is possible to see that fictional works whose plots dwell upon tragic issues bring to the fore ethical concerns. Characters find themselves in a moment of doubt, not only in relation to their decisions to stick to social rules which dictate how they must act, but also in relation to their own values. In addition, those literary productions that use the tragic in their textual fabric also show the implications for breaking established social norms.

Taken together, Albin Lesky's, Gerd Bornheim's and Sandra Luna's conceptions of the tragic enable us to verify how and in what ways the "tragic machinery operates upon literary works. Thus, the schematic representation for the "tragic machinery" can be shown as follows:

Figure 2 - Schematic representation of the tragic machinery



Source: SILVA (2022).

³³My translation. Original source: "O herói, seja ele uma peça do destino que o impele a cometer um erro por ignorância, um sujeito racional decidido a atingir seus objetivos, ou [...] um ser estilhado por forças sociais e movido pelas pulsões do seu inconsciente, o fato é que a sua trajetória continua a fornecer o eixo em torno do qual se constrói a ação trágica" (LUNA, 2008, p. 232).

In the representation above, it is possible to analyze all elements responsible for the establishment of the tragic. The tragic machinery comprises six steps: (1) the character is endowed with personality traits that impact how he tends to think, feel and behave (*hybris*); (2) supernatural forces (social pressures, ideologies, political, religious and family powers) influence the character's behavior. They heighten his *hybris* and drive him to break through moral and social imperatives. (3) the character faces not only a conflict that reveals the instability of human beings in face of the fragility of his beliefs, but also a conflict between his ethical and moral values; (4) he decides to transgress social norms and challenge dominant power relations. His decision ends up establishing a social, moral, and political conflict usually between the individual and society, personal desires and social obligations; (5) the character acts and makes a mistake (*hamartia* or tragic flaw); (6) finally, he is punished by his wrong actions, sealing, then, his tragic downfall. In a nutshell, what I call tragic, in this dissertation, means the breaking of some rule that causes a moral, social, or political conflict usually between man versus society, individual desires versus social and moral obligations. In the analysis of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* (1982), I will attempt to demonstrate that the American Dream principles have a significant role in the characters' intersubjective relations. The questions that arise at this moment are what characterizes their tragic flaw? And what sort of punishment do the characters face?

3.2 WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT "TRAGIC AMERICAN ILLUSION"

In the preceding scene, my reader, I drew upon the theoretical considerations of the tragic to offer you the basic tenets of the concept in order to lay the foundation for my coining of the term "tragic American illusion". I made clear that we can use the term "tragic" when referring to a transgression against some social rule or moral principle which results in a political, moral, or social conflict usually established between man *versus* society and between individual desires *versus* social obligations.

The concept I wish to develop in this research comes from the juxtaposition of three words: "tragic" (the philosophical concept), "American" (to refer to American culture, especially to the tenets which lie at the core of the American Dream), and

“illusion” (something that seems to be different from the way it really is). Taken together, they form the term “tragic American illusion”, a concept that springs out of the movement of entwining the controversies over the American Dream and the tragic features. With this term, I mean those literary productions which set up in their central conflicts the dichotomies or the clash between the promises of the American Dream and the vicissitudes of characters who attempt to pursue it. What the tragic American illusion explicitly does then, is to call the very possibility of achieving the American Dream into question. In the textual fabric of those narratives, characters come across the conflict between the American *dream* and the American *reality*.

The term is based upon the premise that such ideology is an up-to-date version of the Greek *ate*. If, on the one hand, the Greek term was responsible for heightening the character’s *hybris* in ancient tragedy, on the other, the American Dream works in a similar way. It means that the national creed has the power not only to shape characters’ personalities and to move them into action, but also to give them the ideal opportunity to trigger their tragic flaw (*hamartia*).

Additionally, the tragic American illusion also sheds light on the means by which characters attempt to pursue their dreams. Having been influenced by the American *ate*, they resort to at least two mechanisms to achieve their goals: through their self-consciousness and necessity to take part in a dominant social group; and through the reification of interpersonal relations. In order to understand how these two mechanisms operate, I dwell on Eric Landowski (2012) and Axel Honneth (2008) as a theoretical support.

In his book *Presenças do outro* (2012), French semiotician Eric Landowski discusses the different ways in which individuals interact with each other, and attempts to verify in what way such interactions would contribute to the individual self-recognition, since identity constructs are developed through the union between the way we see ourselves and the way we observe other individuals. He addresses, then, the relationship between one-on-one relations (“self” and “the other” – an individual different than the self), as well as collective interactions (“us” and “the others”). According to the author, it is possible to verify the presence of a dominant group and a minority one in situations of social interactions.

When Landowski analyzes aspects regarding the organization of the dominant group, he points out four strategies this group uses to interact with the minority group: by means of assimilation, exclusion, admission, and segregation. Each of these

strategies is followed by distinct discourses related to “the other”: assimilation – conjunction (union), exclusion – non-disjunction (non-aggregation), admission – aggregation, and finally segregation – non-conjunction (elimination).

The moment he turns his attention to the way the minority group interacts with the dominant category, the author brings about a compelling identity dynamic based upon a “zoo social metaphor” division. As Landowski puts it:

Every medium effectively produces its own ideal type of “fulfilled” man, an accepted image in relation to which each individual, current or potential member of the group, can be classified at the same time positionally, according to the greater or lesser distance that seems to separate him from the reference model, but also, and above all, tendentially, taking into account the orientation of the behaviors, intentional or not, that he adopts in a situation and that have the effect at all times either to bring him closer or to distance him even more of the locally received “ideal” type³⁴ (LANDOWSKI, 2012, p. 39).

In light of the above excerpt, Landowski creates a sort of “alternative world” in which he positions different members of the minority group in distinct positions. He takes as a point of reference the so-called “ideal type of man” or *gentleman*, who is hailed as a paragon, or like a “sun”, in this alternative universe. Depending on the objective of “the other”, he may serve as a model to be followed or to be avoided. Below the gentleman, there is the *stuck-up individual*, who always looks up to the gentleman in his desperate attempt to mimic him. In other words, he tries to be like everyone else. Above the gentleman, we find the *dandy*, who wants to pull himself apart from the central position or does not want to be like everybody else. He looks down on the gentleman and aims at keeping his essence. Beside the gentleman, in a position of approximation of the center, we locate the *chameleon*. He is an individual who acts like everybody, but keeps his essence because of his ability to change color so as to match the colors around him. To put it another way, the chameleon interacts and changes to fit into different situations, but does not change its nature. Finally,

³⁴ My translation. Original source: “Todo meio produz efetivamente seu próprio tipo ideal de homem “realizado”, imagem aceita em relação à qual cada indivíduo, membro atual ou potencial do grupo, pode ser classificado ao mesmo tempo posicionalmente, conforme a distância maior ou menor que parece separá-lo do modelo de referência, mas também, e sobretudo, tendencialmente, levando-se em conta a orientação dos comportamentos, propositais ou não, que ele adota em situação e que têm a todo instante por efeito seja aproximá-lo, seja afastá-lo mais ainda do tipo “ideal” localmente recebido” (LANDOWSKI, 2012, p. 39).

backing away from the gentleman, we find *the bear*. He embodies the figure of a lonely man whose intention is to get away from the central position. He does not want to be like the gentleman.

The study provided by Landowski regarding the many possibilities of social interaction between individuals is of utmost importance in my analysis. As we shall see in due time, some tragic characters in the plays embody the characteristics of the “stuck-up individual”. Take for example the portrayals of Willy Loman and Jesse Cates. Throughout the plays, they attempt to mirror gentlemanly behavior (successful and happy people in US society) and take part in his social context. However, while doing so, they end up paying a high price. In such a competitive American context, it is almost impossible not to deal with comparisons. As members of the minority group, Willy Loman and Jesse Cates see in the figure of the gentleman a possible way to achieve their versions of the Dream.

After verifying the first mechanism that characters resort to in order to fulfill their personal desires, the second strategy deals with the concept of reification. Axel Honneth (2008) in his book *Reification: a new look at an old idea*, attempts to reformulate the concept through his theory of recognition. By dwelling upon the studies of the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács, the first generation of the Frankfurt School, and the Marxist theory, the author suggests that the term still finds its way into contemporary times and depicts the pervasive pathology of social relations.

The concept of reification has its origins in the process of commodity exchange. In this process, a human being is perceived and treated as a “thing” by others. Subjects perceive his/her business partner solely as a way to potentially make a profitable transaction in the mechanized structure of the commodity exchange. In this sense, persons are treated as objects that only serve as a tool for economic interests. Consequently, Honneth points out that reification is human being’s second nature in the capitalist system. In other terms, the second nature is the act of perceiving himself and his companion as mere “things” or “objects” in economic transactions. As the author puts it:

Subjects in commodity exchange are mutually urged (a) to perceive given objects solely as “things” that one can potentially make a profit on, (b) to regard each other solely as “objects” of a profitable transaction, and finally (c) to regard their own abilities as nothing but supplemental “resources” in the calculation of profit opportunities (HONNETH, 2008, p. 22)

Whereas previous studies on reification focused their attention only on commodity exchange dynamics, Honneth expands the concept and analyzes its portrayal in the world of social relations. In so doing, the author states that social reification is based upon the sense of “forgetfulness of recognition” (HONNETH, 2008, p. 59). In this vein, subjects end up forgetting they are interacting with other human beings. In reifying relations, people transform the others into objects, in other words, a “human commodity”. For him, “we only reify other persons if we lose sight of our antecedent recognition of their existence as persons” (HONNETH, 2008, p. 75).

The author, then, describes two patterns of the concept in human social behavior: (1) the reifications of other persons, and (2) the reification of one’s own self. The first category is divided into two distinctive parts: (1.1) the intersubjective and (1.2) the objective reification. The former describes the moment in which the subject sees the other not as a person, but as a human object used by him/her to pursue a given goal or motive. As Honneth singles out, this is a social practice:

[...] in which the mere observation of the other has become so much an end in itself that any consciousness of an antecedent social relationship disappears, or they have allowed their actions to be guided by a set of convictions that leads them subsequently to deny this original act of recognition (HONNETH, 2008, p. 79).

To put it another way, the intersubjective reification sheds light on the social interaction between a person using another one in order to achieve his/her needs and desires in a particular *praxis*. Consequently, this form of reification, which focuses on what people are capable of to achieve personal goals comes to the fore. On the other hand, the objective reification is characterized by a powerful denial of the recognition of the other as a human being. This category, thus, deals with the presence of a great deal of social prejudice and stereotypes in society as a result of people’s adopting a specific worldview or ideology that dehumanizes the other.

Moving on to the second pattern, the reification of one-self, or self-reification, refers to the way in which humans relate to their self-image. In this sense, the subject’s own desires and intentions assume the form of thing-like objects. In addition to that, this pattern also highlights to what extent institutions or social pressures attempt to

eliminate the individual's previous self-affirmation for the sake of a self-contained character or for the establishment of a unified sense of identity.

All in all, Honneth's concept of reification helps us to understand the economic forces that lead to a denial of human traits, to verify the use of individuals as commodities in social relations, and finally to reflect on what capitalism does to its victims. In the plays I am about to analyze, my reader, the intersubjective and the self-reification are widely explored by the authors. Characters do whatever it takes to succeed. Not only do they treat others as commodities to reach their dreams, but also change their personalities to fit into American standards.

Taking Eric Landowski's and Axel Honneth's studies together, both provide useful insights to look below the surface of literary productions that resort to the concept of tragic American illusion. Their reflections allow us to unveil the means by which characters search for their aspirations, as well as to explore human relationships torn between self-interest and responsibility to others.

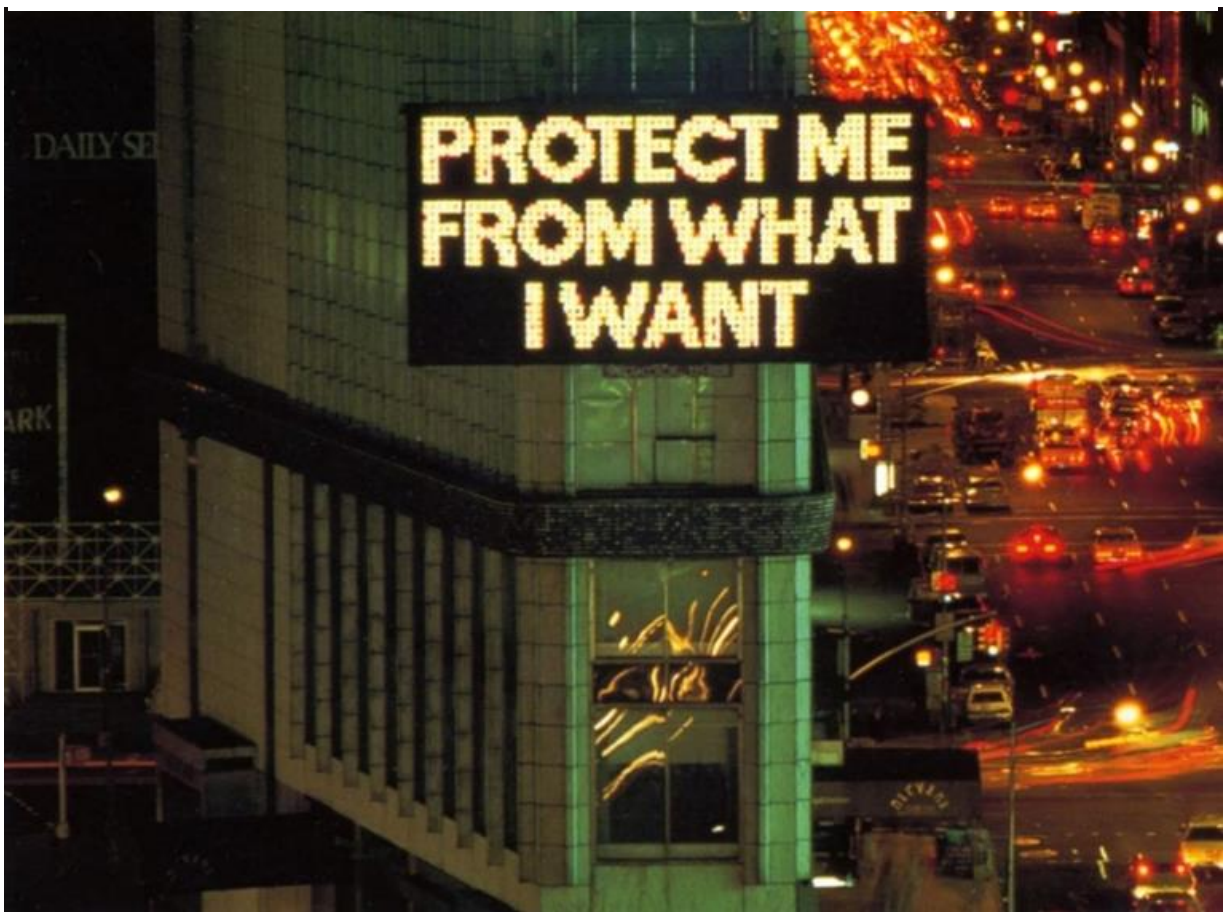
In light of the above discussion, it becomes clear what my coining of the term tragic American illusion means. As previously stated, it refers to fictional works that portray as their central conflict the clash between characters' reality and the promises of the American Dream. Furthermore, the concept regards such ideology as an overwhelming force that heightens characters' *hybris* and triggers their *hamartia* (tragic flaw). By focusing on the many ways in which characters pursue their desires, the tragic American illusion also intends to raise questions about the existence of, and access to, the path to success and fulfillment, a sense of thriving.

In the next chapter, I shall put my concept into practice. In my critical reading of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and Marsha Norman's *'night, mother*, it will be possible to see the plight of individuals who are willing to bend their lives around in their quest for success, as well as the high price they pay for doing so.

[THE STAGE MANAGER stops talking, takes a deep breath, wanders around his bedroom, and has some water. He takes a look at his wristwatch and figures out that it is getting late. Right after that, the student prepares himself to explain the content of

the next chapter of his research. As he leaves the stage to go to the bathroom, the lights go to black].

Figure 3 - Jenny Holzer, *Protect me from what I want*, from *Survival* (1983-1985), Times Square, New York City, The U.S.A, 1985.



4 THE DREAM AND ITS TRAGIC PORTRAYALS IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DRAMA

SCENE – The same set. Lights up full. The audience sees THE STAGE MANAGER. returning to the stage and carrying with him three books – John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and Marsha Norman’s *‘night, Mother*. He places the three dramaturgical texts on his desk. Then, he projects Jenny Holzer’s “Protect me from what I want” installation on the wall of his bedroom. He goes to the center of the stage, takes a deep breath, and starts his presentation.

THE STAGE MANAGER. In the last act, my reader, I focused upon the studies regarding the concept of the tragic in order to ground my analysis and establish an understanding of the term tragic American illusion. As I pointed out earlier, this concept sheds light on literary works that problematize the conflict between characters’ realities and the promises of the American dream in their textual fabric. In addition, the concept is based on the premise that the ideology of the American dream acts as a powerful force that magnifies characters’ *hybris* and triggers their *hamartia* or tragic flaw. Finally, the concept of tragic American illusion also has the objective of calling into question the very possibility of and access to the prosperity that such an ideology claims to offer.

In the present act, I will put the concept into practice and will demonstrate how it operates in different literary productions. Before I begin, let us take a look at the Jenny Holzer art piece that precedes the current chapter. The American artist is known for her text-based works and thought-provoking installations. By aiming at capturing the attention of passersby and using large projections onto buildings, Holzer’s productions attempt to share poignant truths about contemporary times and to bring to the fore a wide range of questions. In the 1980s’, she mounted a large-scale LED sign in New York’s Times Square. The following message, “Protect me from what I want”, projected right in the middle of one of the world’s leading financial centers, can be interpreted as the artist’s criticism towards American consumer society and its capitalist economic system. Apart from that, Holzer’s message can also be interpreted as a warning to those who seek to fulfill their aspirations in the idealized land of equal opportunities and financial success.

In the next three subchapters, my reader, I will attempt to understand George Milton's, Willy Loman's and Jessie Cates' motives, the struggles they go through, as well as the desires and fears they feel. This analysis, thus, allows us to better understand others and the complex world around us. As we shall see, they most likely ignored Holzer's message and opted to plunge into the American way of life. The consequences of their actions and whether or not they reach their goals are issues we are about to discover.

4.1 PROFIT EARNING AND MONETARY LOSS: GEORGE MILTON AND THE INDIVIDUALISTIC RUTHLESSNESS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Originally published in 1937, John Steinbeck's play *Of Mice and Men* explores the harsh reality faced by American society in the 1930s, especially that of agricultural workers. At the time Steinbeck wrote his play, the country was going through a period of economic hardship, shuttered factories, joblessness and poverty. The story has its seeds in the author's own experience working alongside wandering ranch laborers in California. It is a three-act play which follows three days, from Thursday night to Sunday evening, in the lives of two itinerant ranch hands, Lennie Small, a mentally handicapped worker, and George Milton, caretaker for Lennie. The story takes place at a ranch in an agricultural valley in Southern California, located a few miles from the fictional town of Soledad. Both ranch hands share the American Dream of owning land, having material success and pursuing happiness. However, throughout the play, the characters encounter many obstacles in attaining the promises of the principles upheld by the US ideology and wind up with many doubts as to the possibility of achieving it.

The play is an adaptation of the homonymous novel also published in 1937. After the publication of *Of Mice and Men* in its narrative form, Steinbeck and the playwright George F. Kaufman worked together on the adaptation of the novel. According to Harold Bloom (2006), the dramatic text "contains more than 80 percent of the lines from the novel" (BLOOM, 2006, p. 14). Even though the first official stage performance of the play took place at The Music Box Theatre, in New York on November 23, 1937, and ran for 207 performances, as Anne Loftis (2011, p. 143) points out, The Theatre Union of San Francisco created its own script from the author's

novel and first performed the play in the summer of 1937. Be that as it may, the play was short-listed for the Pulitzer Prize in 1937 and won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for its Broadway version in 1938. In 1962, Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize for literature for the body of his literary productions. Since then, many screen adaptations and television versions of *Of Mice and Men* have been produced and the play is still routinely staged around the world. Therefore, this demonstrates not only the popular and critical success of George and Lennie's search for the promises of the American Dream, but also the reasons why Steinbeck's play has become part of the American canon.

The analysis of the title as a compelling paratextual device³⁵ helps us to enrich our interpretation of the work and critically assess its inner meanings. The title *Of Mice and Men* recalls a poem by Robert Burns' "To a Mouse on turning her up in the Nest with the Plough" (1785). In the context of the poem, the speaker accidentally turns up a mouse's chest with his plough and holds the quivering animal in his own hands. He, then, reflects upon the vicissitudes of the mouse, whose chest was destroyed, and, at the same time, extends the animal's experience to include that of mankind. In the following stanza, "But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,/ In proving foresight may be vain:/ The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men/ Gang aft a-gley,/ An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,/ For promis'd joy!" (BURNS, [1785] 2008, p. 60), just like the animal, the speaker says human beings also struggle against unexpected or overwhelming forces that befall their existence. The poem, thus, highlights the harshness of life and the haplessness of efforts and hopes.

In the play's plot, like in the poem from which it takes its title, the plight of the mouse, whose chest fell apart, parallels the struggles of George and Lennie, whose dream of having a little farm is constantly at the mercy of the capitalist system. In other words, they react against the exploitation and injustices that spring from capitalism which attempt to "smash" them like rats. Hence, this paratextual device foreshadows the events that unfold in the text by describing the journey of two men who rebel against forces beyond their control in order to reach their goals.

³⁵ In his book *Paratext: thresholds of interpretation* (2001), Gérard Genette presents an account of what a paratext is. The concept deals with analysis that not only considers the relation between a text and its structure, but also its organization. The assessment of authorship, book cover, titles, forewords, epigraphs, footnotes, among others, according to the French critic, can enrich the rendering of a literary work, for paratextual devices aim at "the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (GENETTE, 2001, p. 2).

In this line of thought, among the eight characters depicted in the play, George Milton is the one that best expresses the dichotomy dream *versus* reality, and the tensions between individualism and community, and self-interest and responsibility to others. He is the embodiment both of the influence of the American Dream and the tragic in the work. He is also the tragic character that best describes the concept of the tragic American illusion. With this in mind, the current subchapter aims at analyzing the ways in which George tries to reach his American Dream and verifies the possibility of his accomplishment.

As the play opens, the dynamics of the relationship between George and his partner, Lennie, is established. On their way to the ranch, they decide to spend the night on a sandy bank of the Salinas River. Their physical portrayal and their attitude towards approaching the water to test its quality reveal both their similarities and differences. As the stage direction describes:

Two figures are seen entering the stage in single file, with GEORGE, the short man, coming in ahead of LENNIE. Both men are carrying blanket rolls. They approach the water. The small man throws down his blanket roll, the man follows and then falls down and drinks from the river, snorting as he drinks (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 577)

The passage above shows us the dual positions of the characters. Although they both carry blanket rolls and travel together as companions, the way they act and interact with each other highlights their individuality. George Milton is characterized by the adjective “short”, while Lennie Small is described by its opposite, “large”. In addition, the way George analyzes the water, along with his concern about its quality, as seen in the following passage: “I ain’t sure it’s good water. Looks kinda scummy to me” (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 577), are instances that reveal his rationality, which, in fact, stands in stark contrast to Lennie’s impulsive and reckless action of snorting while drinking water.

The characters’ surnames are also highly symbolic in understanding their relationship. Lennie “Small” stresses his affection for petting soft, little things, as well as his childlike enthusiasm and innocence. On the other hand, George “Milton” echoes the name of the English writer John Milton, author of the epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667). The poem narrates man’s fall and the rebellion of fallen angels. Lucifer, after

being expelled by God from heaven, joins other demons in hell, inspiring them to take revenge on God. Then, he himself decides to go to Eden to destroy God's new creation, humans. Lucifer, in serpent form, finds Eve and persuades her to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Soon after, Adam also eats the forbidden fruit. Both end up overcome with lust, shame and guilt. As a consequence, God expels Adam and Eve from Eden and condemns them to wander the Earth in solitude. In this sense, akin to Lucifer in *Paradise Lost*, which inspired his followers in hell, George also has the ability to encourage people to do what he aspires to. In addition, like Adam and Eve, George can be read as the cursed man who walks the Earth longing to return to the perfect Eden, that is, his American Dream of buying a ranch.

In light of the above, some considerations can be drawn. Firstly, the characters are marked by opposing poles. While Lennie is strong, reckless and mentally handicapped, George is small, rational and thoughtful. Secondly, the scene by the river reveals George's real nature. Like the mysterious quality of the water of the Salinas River, which has an unpleasant dirty substance on its surface, and can either be contaminated or safe to drink, he is a dubious person. Throughout the play, George complains constantly that, if he did not have the burden of caring for his mentally handicapped companion, he would be better off and free from this responsibility. Yet, his friendship with Lennie actually veils his dependence on him. Finally, like Lucifer, who encouraged the fallen angels to help him in his plan to punish God, George not only inspires Lennie to follow and help him in the quest for his dream, but also persuades others to provide additional help in order to make this dream place a reality. Therefore, right from the beginning of the play, George's Machiavellian manipulations are revealed.

In this regard, he befriends and takes care of Lennie for at least three reasons. The first has to do with Lennie's strength. Knowing that working on any ranch requires a great deal of physical effort, and he is a man of only average build, it is easier for George to get a job if he is accompanied by his friend. This need is highlighted in the play when Lennie threatens to leave George due to his constant complaints about Lennie's behavior. On hearing Lennie's charge, George immediately softens his manner towards his partner and tries to change his mind. In the dialogue below, the two ranch hands are discussing the problem Lennie has regarding touching soft living creatures and accidentally killing them because of his uncontrollable strength. Here,

George is complaining about Lennie's stubborn insistence on keeping the body of a dead mouse with him:

LENNIE [presses his triumph]. If you don't want me, I can go right in them hills, and find a cave. I can go away any time.

GEORGE. No. Look! I was just foolin' ya. 'Course I want you to stay with me. Trouble with mice is you always kill' em. [He pauses] Tell you what I'll do, Lennie. First chance I get I'll find you a pup. Maybe you wouldn't kill it. That would be better than mice. You could pet it harder (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 583)

Three aspects are notable in the passage above. To begin with, the exclamation mark in "Look!" highlights George's fear of losing his companion. Then, the indication that he "pauses" to speak with Lennie stresses his ability to cautiously select the correct vocabulary so as to not only spoil Lennie, but also change his friend's mind about abandoning him. At the end, when he lies to Lennie by saying perhaps they can get him a "pup", it is clear that George knows his friend's weaknesses and uses them in his favor. Nonetheless, it is important to underscore the fact that the same strategy is also adopted by Lennie. In the fragment, it is stated that he "presses his triumph"; in other words, Lennie's "triumph" lies in his knowledge that, in disobeying George's rules, he can get whatever he wants by saying he may go away and leave him by himself. Thus, their friendship is depicted as double-edged sword. At the same time George thinks he is cleverer than Lennie, by taking advantage of his physical strength to get jobs on farms, he is also used by Lennie when he manipulates George's emotional weakness and fear of being alone.

The second reason George befriends Lennie is related to the opportunity his friend offers him in easing his loneliness and, in a way, being different from the rest of the other ranch hands. Akin to a song, George knows by heart what differentiates them from other workers. While they do not have friends, family, a place to live, a clear objective in their lives and perspectives for the future, Lennie and George have everything they need to reach their dream: a sense of companionship, ambition, focus, and optimism:

GEORGE. Guys like us that work on ranches is the loneliest guys in the world. They ain't got no family. They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch and work up a stake and then they go in to town and blow their stake. And then the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to.

LENNIE [delightedly]. That's it, that's it! Now tell how it is with us.

GEORGE [still almost chanting]. With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no barroom blowing' in our jack, just because we got no place else to go. If them other guys get in jail, they can rot for all anybody gives a damn.

LENNIE [who cannot restrain himself any longer. Bursts into speech] But not us! And why? Because...because I got you to look after me ...and you got me to look after you...and that's why! (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 583-584).

The quotation above carries a number of meanings and allows us to draw a set of interesting interpretations. Firstly, the “enchanted song” George usually “sings”, and which is taken up in different moments in the play, has at least four important roles in the play. It serves both as a reminder of their desire to buy a ranch, as an indication of their close relationship, and as encouragement to strive for a better life and rekindle their hope for the American Dream. They believe in the value of work and in the premise that working hard is the most powerful means of success. Secondly, George points out that other workers do not save their money and “blow their stake” on superficial trappings. His emphasis on the importance of keeping track of one’s goals ends up mirroring his manipulative behavior. Lastly, Lennie makes George feel superior and not an outcast like the other migrant farm workers. In sum, at the same time Lennie alleviates George’s loneliness, he catalyzes his sense of purpose and uniqueness.

Considering this, Eric Landowski’s (2012) renderings about how individuals interact with each other help us analyze George’s social relations. Taking the Landowski account of how minority groups interact with a dominant one, it is possible to point out that George embodies the representation of the “stuck-up individual”. With the picture of a landowner as an “ideal type of man” in mind, he looks up to him and attempts to copy his behavior. Conversely, since George does not identify as an outsider in American society, he ends up looking down on the other ranch laborers by stating that they do not have what it takes to succeed in America: courage to change and a purpose to achieve their dreams. Ironically, if, on the one hand, Lennie offers

George an opportunity to be different, on the other, he provides him with a powerful sense of superiority when George bosses Lennie around. Therefore, the third reason George befriends his companion has to do with his sense of superiority whilst in his company.

Throughout the text, George is depicted as a real leader. He treats his friend as though he were his employee or an animal which needs training. George frequently states that he orders his companion to do whatever he wants. For example, in the passage, "GEORGE (proudly). You just tell Lennie what to do and he'll do it if it don't take no figuring" (STEINBECK, Act II, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 599), as well as in "made me seem goddamn smart alongside of him" (STEINBECK, Act II, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 600), the use of the modifier "proudly", along with the adverb "goddamn", used to intensify the adjective "smart" in George's speech, are clues that underscore his arrogance in thinking he is better than his friend. In the same vein, these examples also serve as a tool to express how Lennie's inferiority boosts George's ego.

Indeed, Lennie's lack of mental abilities, seen in his speech patterns, is also highlighted. Not only does it function to overemphasize George's role as the person who thinks everything through and considers how his dream of owning his own ranch can be achieved, it also points to the animal imagery associated to Lennie that pervades the text. He is usually compared to a "bear" or a "bull", that is, the former a wild animal, the latter a farm animal, but both endowed with immense size and strength, albeit lacking in intelligence. Aware of his companion's mental problem, George attempts to "train" Lennie just like a pet, teaching him how he must act and what he must say on their arrival at the ranch, especially in the job interview with the landowner. In George's dialogue with Lennie below, one can identify how George's training and manipulation operates:

GEORGE [still with exaggerated patience]. That ranch we're going to is right down there about a quarter mile. We're gonna go and see the boss.

LENNIE [repeats as a lesson]. And see the boss!

GEORGE. Now, look! I'll give him the work tickets, but you ain't gonna say a word. You're just gonna stand there and not say nothing.

LENNIE. Not say nothin!

GEORGE. If he finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won't get no job. But if he sees you work before he hears you talk, we're set. You got that?

LENNIE. Sure, George...sure, I got that.

GEORGE. Okay. Now when we go in to see the boss, what you gonna do?

LENNIE [concentrating]. I...I...I ain't gonna say nothing... jus' gonna stand there.

GEORGE [greatly relieved]. Good boy, that's swell! Now say that over two or three times so you sure won't forget it. (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 579).

The conversation above adds a new dimension to the two ranch hands' friendship. If, on the one hand, the play portrays Lennie through animal imagery, on the other, George is depicted as his trainer. The way George speaks, "with "exaggerated patience", and reacts "greatly relieved" when Lennie remembers what he must say in front of the boss, is striking evidence that show how George, like a trainer, attempts to change Lennie's behavior by reinforcing a desirable attitude. In the same manner, the expression "good boy" which is often used in the semantic field of dog training to praise animals for obeying, and is used by George to congratulate Lennie, and the constant repetition of the advice George gives Lennie to stay quiet during the interview, are instances that reinforce the power relation established between the men: George is the employer, or trainer, and Lennie his employee, or pet. In this sense, Lennie ends up being a catalyst in boosting George's sense of superiority in the play

Another factor that reinforces George's power over Lennie is the set of adjectives and adverbs used in the play to indicate the tone of his speech and the way he behaves in the first act. In the first dialogues, George reveals his growing discontent with Lennie regarding the trouble they had faced in their previous job. The latter was wrongly accused of raping a woman and both had to flee the ranch to avoid Lennie's lynching. George, then, constantly complains about his companion's mental issues and destroys any possibility of his friend building up his self-esteem. This emotional abuse is noted in George's description by words such as "irritably" (STEINBECK, Act II, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 577), "growing angry" (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 578), "furiously" (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 578), "looking sharply" (STEINBECK, Act II, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 578), and "sternly" (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 579). Here, the play stresses the difference between George and Lennie once more. While the former is endowed with aggressiveness, the latter, despite his brutal physical trait, is described as a laid-back person. His actions and

way of talking are portrayed in terms such as “timidly” (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 578), “softly” (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 578), “delightedly” (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 578) and “happily” (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 580).

The differences between the workers have an important role in the text, emphasizing that George does not care about Lennie’s feelings, but only about what he can gain from the friendship. As stated before, George only softens his aggressiveness when his companion suggests the possibility of abandoning him. Indeed, they are seen as an antithesis in the play: while George depicts a world of economic interest, selfishness and struggle for survival, Lennie, conversely, portrays innocence, compassion, and fantasy. In this sense, unlike the studies of Anne Loftis (2011), Louis Owens (2011) and Jeffrey Schults & Luchen Li (2005), whose readings of the play only emphasize the establishment of a true relationship between the ranch hands, my critical reading of Steinbeck’s work sheds light on George’s *hybris*, that is, his arrogance, greed for money, selfishness and calculating behavior.

By taking the three reasons George journeys with Lennie together, seeing George as a wary, self-centered, and manipulative character in the play becomes even more feasible. He is not interested in other people, except in using them for his final aim, to unwillingly have them participate in his plan of buying a ranch, which is the case with Lennie. He befriends Lennie only on account of the many advantages he offers him. In the harsh and lonely reality of the ranch hands, George has protection and someone to talk to. In a context in which there is no place to dream, he finds the possibility of winning in the US through his friend’s physical strength. Hence, *Of Mice and Men* uncovers the moral ambiguity with respect to America’s relationship with the American Dream’s values and promises. The fact that George attempts to achieve material success and to pursue happiness is clear. However, the means which he uses to realize his dream are highly problematic.

George is described as corrupted by economic motives and lacking ethical values. He uses Lennie as a “puppet” to acquire more money and bridge the gap between his dream and its accomplishment. In the context of the play, people are seen as mere objects and there is no place for affection or true friendship. For George, the lust for money-making turns out to be his virtue. In this sense, he stands for an American Dream without scruples, immoral. Therefore, the message the play tries to

convey is that it is important to succeed in America, no matter what means one uses to achieve it.

When George and Lennie leave the Salinas River and arrive at the ranch, new sorts of social interactions are portrayed. To begin with, the description of the bunkhouse is highly important inasmuch as it sets the tone in which the dramaturgical text should be read. In the following passage, George is impressed by the poor living conditions of the place. His words suggest that the bunkhouse has been infested with “lice”, “rats”, “gray-backs”, “pigeons”, and “bugs”. He states: “GEORGE. Say ‘positively kills lice, roaches and other scourges’. What the hell kinda beds you givin’ us anyway? We don’t want no pants rabbits” (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene II, [1937] 1988, p. 586).

Figure 4 - Ricardo Monastero (George Milton) and Ando Camargo (Lennie Small) in the 2016 Teatro FAAP production of *Of Mice and Men* in São Paulo, Brazil. Directed by Kiko Marques. Photo: Luciano Alves.



Source: http://pombocorreio.art.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/SReH_3154Luciano-Alves.jpg. Accessed on April, 22, 2022.

The place functions as a metonymy in the text, that is, the area where the workers stay characterizes who they are. In this respect, the allusion to parasitic

insects that feed on human blood, along with animals that pass on diseases, suggest the kind of interpersonal relationship established at the ranch: that of self-serving interests. For instance, when the boss, a businessman, is interviewing George and Lennie, he immediately finds out George's devious plan to take Lennie's payment. In the conversation, which seems like George is auctioning Lennie, George tries to "sell" his companion by stressing his physical strength and working skills. Even though George denies robbing his friend, his attitudes throughout the play, and sheer astonishment at the boss's presupposition, show the opposite:

BOSS [sharply]. You are, huh? What can you do?

GEORGE. He can do anything.

BOSS [addressing LENNIE] What can you do?

[LENNIE, looking at GEORGE, gives a high nervous chuckle]

GEORGE [quickly] Anything you tell him. He's a good skinner. He can wrestle grain bags, drive a cultivator. He can do anything. Just give him a try.

[...]

GEORGE [loudly]. But he's a goddamn good worker. I ain't saying he's bright, because he ain't. But he can put up a four hundred pound bale.

BOSS [hooking his thumbs in his belt]. Say, what you sellin'?

GEORGE. Huh?

BOSS. I said what stake you got in this guy? You takin' his pay away from him?

GEORGE. No. Of course I ain't!

BOSS. Hell, I never seen one guy take so much trouble for another guy. I just like to know what you percentage is. (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene II, [1937] 1988, p. 589).

The excerpt above is paramount for two reasons. Firstly, the high tension throughout the conversation is noticeable. The use of the adverb "sharply" to describe the boss' question, together with George's insecurity and anxious behavior, expressed by the adverbs "quickly", "loudly", and the interjection "huh" - showing his surprise when the boss says he was robbing Lennie - are instances that reinforce the dramatic atmosphere of the scene and, above all, the revelation of George's manipulative skills. Secondly, the passage provides a clear example of the reified perception George has of his friend. As I have already discussed in the previous chapter regarding the concept

of reification proposed by Alex Honnet (2008), in *Of Mice and Men*, the denial in recognizing people as human beings in their social interactions within capitalist society is made clear. George embodies the intersubjective reification, focusing on the use of another person as an object to achieve a desirable outcome. He sees Lennie only as an important “commodity” to acquire money so as to bridge the gap between his dream and its attainment. When he meets other ranch hands, George always points out his companion’s skills as a strategy for expanding or building up his network of professional contacts. In his interaction with Slim, a permanent ranch employee, respected by his peers and superiors, George describes Lennie as farm machinery that turns out a profit. In the following quotations: “[...] that big guy there can put up more grain alone than most pairs can” (STEINBECK, Act I, Scene II, [1937] 1988, p. 597), as well as in “You just tell Lennie what to do and he’ll do it” (STEINBECK, Act II, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 599), George not only dehumanizes Lennie by disregarding his human qualities, but also objectifies him. As the conversation between him and Slim progresses, George’s discourse portrays Lennie as a disposable object as well. Nevertheless, because of his plan to use him to achieve his American dream, he states that he “can’t get rid of him” (STEINBECK, Act II, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 601).

Not only does George have a toxic friendship with Lennie, but all the farm dwellers mirror social relationships based on economic, sexual and personal interests. Everyone in the play is treated as a disposable living commodity. The boss sees his employees only as tools to gain money, Curley’s wife is used to satisfy her husband’s sexual desires; Candy, the oldest ranch hand, worries about ending up like his old, ill and stinky dog, disposable, put to death; and the women who work at Suzy’s whorehouse are seen by men as only sexual objects. In brief, all the characters in *Of Mice and Men* are described as reified objects.

In addition to that, illness, death and disablement are recurring motives in the play. Besides referring to the sort of relation between the characters, Lennie’s mental disorder and the small animals he accidentally kills, including the smashing of Candy’s right hand and the destruction of his ill dog, in addition to Curley’s broken arm, are all examples presented in the text. Taken together, they metaphorically shed light on the poisonous and dangerous environment the story takes place in, alluding to the character’s emotional disturbance, and, finally, foreshadowing events in the text. The microcosm of the ranch, thus, serves as a metonymy to refer to the social relationships established in the capitalist system. Within a society strewn with competitiveness and

individualism, the presence of lifelong bonds of friendship and kindness seem almost impossible.

Throughout the play, George constantly repeats the description of his American dream. Just like in his training with Lennie before arriving on the farm, the oft-repeated portrayal of the small piece of land sounds like a curse in George's voice. In a fashion very similar to that of Lucifer in *Paradise Lost*, who influenced Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, George bewitches Lennie, who knows the words of the dream by heart, as well as Candy and Crooks, the African American ranch hand. Both see the possibility of changing their lives through the accomplishment of George's dream. His version of the American dream is described as follows:

LENNIE. Tell about that place, George.

GEORGE. I jus' tole you. Jus' last night.

LENNIE. Go on, tell again.

GEORGE. Well, it's ten acres. Got a windmill. Got a little shack on it and a chicken run. Got a kitchen orchard. Cherries, apples, peaches, 'cots and nuts. Got a few berries. There's a place for alfalfa and plenty water to flood it. There's a pig pen...

[...]

GEORGE. I could easy build a few hutches. And you could feed alfalfa to them rabbits.

LENNIE. Damn right I could. [Excitedly] You goddamn right I could.

GEORGE [his voice growing warmer] And we could have a few pigs. I'd build a smokehouse. And when we kill a pig we could smoke the hams. When the salmon run up the river we can catch a hundred of 'em. Every Sunday we'd kill a chicken or rabbit. Mebbe we'll have a cow or a goat. And the cream is so goddamn thick you got to cut it off the pan with a knife

[...]

GEORGE. [...] [seems entranced] And it'd be our own. And nobody could can us. If we don't like a guy we can say: 'Get to hell out', and by God he's got to do it. And if a friend come along, why, we'd have an extra bunk. Know what we'd say? We'd say, 'Why don't you spen' the night?' And by God he would. We'd have a settler dog and a couple of stripped cats (STEINBECK, Act II, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 609-610).

The overwhelming influence of the American dream of land ownership upon George and Lennie is clearly seen. Firstly, the repetition of the dream, which is pointed

out by George's words, "jus' tole you", suggest that it is used to soften their reality at the ranch and to revive their hope in a bright future. Secondly, the selection of words such as "excitedly", "growing warmer", "inspiration" and "seem entranced" help define the importance of land to them and how focused they are in making their wish come true. Indeed, it is worth mentioning that when George refers to his ranch, he uses the object pronoun "she", instead of "it", as in "I'm goin' write to them ole people that owns the place that we'll take 'er" (STEINBECK, Act II, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 611). In other words, he anthropomorphizes his dream land, attributing a human characteristic to an inanimate object. Thirdly, George sees the imaginary farm as a possibility to reinforce his superiority and to be his own boss. As he states, no one could fire him on his own land. Lastly, the place is also a symbol of happiness. The soothing scenario of their farm alludes to the perfection of the Garden of Eden created by God and serves as a reaction against the men's loneliness and the lack of commitment that pervades the text.

As the play progresses, George is still fully committed to his dream. He repeatedly states that he and Lennie are saving up and attempts to stay away from distractions that could put his American dream in jeopardy. When the ranch hand Candy offers him the amount of three hundred and forty dollars to take part in his ranch, George sees a real possibility of buying land. If, on the one hand, George shows admiration and surprise at Candy's offer, on the other, in buying land, Candy sees his only chance of not ending up like his old dog, useless, displaced and killed:

CANDY [scratches the stump of his wrist nervously] I got hurt four years ago. They'll can me pretty soon. Jest as soon as I can't swamp out no bunkhouses they'll put me on the county [...] But hell, I'll be on our own place. I'll be let to work on our own place [...] But when I'm that way nobody'll shoot me. I wish somebody would. They won't do nothing like that. I won't have no place to go and I can't get no more jobs.

GEORGE [stands up]. We'll do 'er! God damn, we'll fix up that little ole place and we'll go live there (STEINBECK, Act II, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 611).

Nonetheless, George's dream disintegrates when Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife, and he realizes his companion will be lynched by the other farm workers. This is the point in which the concept of tragic American illusion is depicted in *Of Mice and Men*. As explained in the previous chapter, the term refers to the clash between

the promises of the American dream and the challenges fictional characters face to pursue their desires. Thus, it unveils the conflicts between the character's dream versus reality. Completely shocked, George undergoes a radical transformation in the play. If, on the one hand, throughout the play he is always described as a determined person, on the other, after the demise of Curley's wife, George states that his life will be just like that of the other wandering ranch laborers, that is, living for today with no future plans and no concern for saving money:

GEORGE [shakes his head slowly]. It was somethin' me and him had. [Softly] I think I knowed it from the very first. I think I knowed we'd never do her. He used to like to hear about it so much. I got fooled to thinkin' maybe we would.

[...]

GEORGE [as though repeating a lesson] I'll work my month and then I'll take my fifty bucks. I'll stay all night in some sousy cat-house or I'll set in a pool room until everybody goes home. An' then – I'll come back an' work another month. And then I'll have fifty bucks more (STEINBECK, Act III, Scene I, [1937] 1988, p. 629).

George's epiphany in the excerpt above reveals the failure of all his Machiavellian plans and, by extension, the consequences of his tragic flaw. Firstly, by affirming his dream of buying a ranch was something between him and Lennie, he unveils the importance of his companion to heighten his self-esteem and differentiate him from the others. Secondly, the fact that he needs Lennie's money and, above all, his physical strength and ability to work, is of paramount importance. His friend's imminent demise represents not only the destruction of his "living commodity", but also the impossibility of making his American dream come true. It is important to point out that George needs Lennie's skills to work even if Candy's money is part of the equation. Thirdly, without his companion, George knows that he will be just an outsider, irrelevant and alone.

In this sense, George ends up being punished by his tragic flaw (*hamartia*). As pointed out earlier, what characterizes the character's *hybris* in the play is his arrogance, greed for money, selfishness and calculating behavior. George's desire to reach his American dream maximizes his *hybris* and makes him act. The means by which he pursues his dream is problematic. His tragic flaw is depicted when George decides to use people to achieve what he aspires to do. As demonstrated in my

analysis, he has reified all his interpersonal relations. For George, in a world which praises individualism and self-interest, there is no place for community or emotional responsibility to others. The main objective is to succeed, no matter how immoral, illegal or unpleasant the means may be. That is George's tragic flaw.

At the end of the play, George controls Lennie for the last time. After killing Curley's wife, Lennie follows George's instructions to go to the sandy bank of the Salinas River in case of any problem at the ranch. Even though the story presents a cyclical movement, that is, it ends in the same setting where it began, George is not the same person he was at the outset of the play. When he finds Lennie, he retells him once more the narrative of their American dream, of buying a ranch. Lennie innocently believes he can see the small farm which George is pointing out. In the passage below, one can see that George has his moment of redemption in the play. In the illusory farm he is attempting to show to his friend, he states that there is no trouble, pain and theft. Ironically, these are the three elements that help characterize George's tragic flaw: he tried to dictate how Lennie should behave, but ended up causing more problems; he used his companion to boost his self-esteem and humiliate him, causing Lennie to feel inferior; and finally, he befriends and takes care of him with the purpose of taking his money:

GEORGE. [...] Look over there, Lennie. Like you can really see it.

LENNIE. Where?

GEORGE. Right across that river there. Can't you almost see it?

LENNIE [moving]. Where, George?

GEORGE. It's over there. You keep lookin', Lennie. Just keep lookin'.

LENNIE. I'm lookin', George. I'm lookin'.

GEORGE. That's right. It's gonna be nice there. Ain't gonna be no trouble, no fights. Nobody ever gonna hurt nobody, or steal from 'em. It's gonna be-nice.

LENNIE. I can see it, George. I can see it! Right over there! I can see it! (STEINBECK, Act III, Scene II, [1937] 1988, p. 634).

After lying to Lennie one more time, and realizing the other ranch hands are approaching them to kill his friend, George concludes that Lennie's death is the only possible outcome. While his friend is hallucinating, George takes a pistol and shoots Lennie with a single bullet in the back of the head. This last scene carries a number of

meanings. To begin with, although George saves his companion from a lynch mob, because of the way he acts throughout the play, his shot suggests that George is so controlling that he wants to be in charge of Lennie's death. Then, without his mentally handicapped companion, George lets go of the burden of that "friendship" and affirms his freedom from the toxic relationship. In addition, the name of the county in which the story takes place, Soledad, a Spanish word which means "loneliness" or "solitude" in English, reflects the fact that George has become as alone as everybody else. Last of all, the cyclical feature of the play sheds light on the everlasting circle of human endeavor. Besides referring to the routine of the ranch hands (earn money – spend it on whorehouses, gambling, and alcoholic beverages – earn money), the cyclical feature suggests the never-ending belief that anyone can rise above his/her socioeconomic class and have access to the promises of the American dream. Just like in the play, which ended where it started, the opportunity to pursue and achieve the dream seems forever out of reach.

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* portrays George Milton's journey through his quest for his illusive American dream of owning a small piece of land and searching for a better life. As demonstrated in my analysis, the values upon which the ideology is based exert a strong influence over George's attitudes. They heighten his *hybris* and trigger his tragic flaw. In his pursuit of self-interest, he uses people and reifies them to achieve his aspirations. In this line of reasoning, Lennie's death at the end of the play can also be interpreted as George's failure in investing heavily in a human commodity to buy his ranch. George's portrayal throughout the text explores his temporary status of profit earning and the consequences of his monetary loss, in addition to bringing to the fore the exchange of moral values for material goods. So, by exploring the effects of the promises of the American dream in this literary production, Steinbeck not only unveils the fallacy of the ideology and criticizes the individualism and competitiveness that lie at the core of the capitalist system, but he also raises questions about the dichotomy between the Dream and its reality in US society.

4.2 WILLY LOMAN AND THE DEATH OF A TRAGIC FATHER: HIGH HOPES AND SHATTERED DREAMS IN ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

Published in 1949, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is considered his most important literary production and has become one of the best-known American dramas worldwide. The play brought Miller professional recognition as a playwright and put his name alongside the great American dramatists like Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and William Inge. It is a two-act and a Requiem play that centers on the plight of the Lomans and the cost of their blind faith in the American Dream. More specifically, at the center of action, the text places the final twenty-four hours of the family patriarch, Willy Loman, a sixty-three-year-old, hard-working traveling salesman who attempts to reach his dreams of wealth, respect, and success for himself and his family through business. The story is set in the late 1940s and takes place in Willy Loman's residence, as well as in places he visits in New York and Boston. The events are not set in a chronological order. The past and the present coexist, and the actions flow with the speed of Willy's troubled mental state. Although this aesthetic feature may complicate the understanding of some passages of the story at times, the reader/audience is able to have access to the salesman's inner thoughts and to understand his worries and frustrations.

The play premiered on February 10, 1949, at the Morosco Theatre in New York City and ran for 742 performances. Since its first production, as Matthew Roudané (2005) states, Miller's drama "was playing in every major city in the United States. As early as 1951 it was viewed by appreciative audiences in at least eleven countries abroad" (ROUDANÉ, 2005, p. 62). *Death of a Salesman* was received with praise by critics and garnered nearly every award available in the USA. It won the 1949 Tony Award for best play and the 1949 New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best American play. In the same year, Miller was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Death of a Salesman*. In addition, the drama was revived five times on Broadway, winning three Tony Awards for best revival in 1984, 1999, and 2012. The play was also adapted for screen version six times.

Even though Miller's literary production was published seventy-three years ago, its relevance to the American and to the global literary circuit can be assessed by the growing number of scholarly publications expressing interest about the Lomans' struggles and Miller's tendency to criticize the values of American capitalist society, as well as about the playwright's message about the American Dream. In the same vein, the play continues to be performed across the USA, worldwide, even during the

COVID-19 pandemic³⁶. Hence, as Harold Bloom (2007) singles out, “the continued vitality of the play cannot be questioned” (BLOOM, 2007, p. 5).

Besides exploring family relationships in its plot, which is one of Miller’s key themes, the play also throws light on the impact of success, failure, competitiveness, and materialism on the characters’ lives. All these elements are associated to the dramatist’s understanding of the American Dream. In an interview with Matthew Roudané in 1983, Arthur Miller himself stressed that the ideology is regarded as a misleading belief. According to him, the Dream is:

[...] the largely acknowledgement screen in front of which all American writing plays itself out – the screen of a perfectibility of man. Whoever is writing in the United States is using the American Dream as an ironical pole of his story. It’s a failure in relation to that screen (MILLER; ROUDANÉ, [1983] 1987, p. 361).

Needless to say, in *Death of a Salesman*, Miller explores the failure representation of the “perfectibility of man” through the protagonist Willy Loman. In the same line of reasoning, Harold Bloom (2004) also stresses the importance of the national creed to the development of the play. For him, “the American Dream functions almost like a character in *Salesman*” (BLOOM, 2004, p. 16). In light of this, the present subsection aims at analyzing Willy Loman’s portrayal in the play. More specifically, I shall examine Willy Loman’s version of the American Dream and verify the means by which he pursues his dreams.

At the beginning of the play, the description of the Lomans’ home sets the tone of the entire play and foreshadows many of the text major motifs. The stage directions describe the house as the family’s crypt. It is dwarfed by many apartment buildings, a clear reference to the population growth in New York City in the late 1940s. The big encroaching constructions wind up choking the Lomans’ home. As a result, the natural beauty that once surrounded their residence disappears and nothing grows on their ground, because there is not enough sunlight in the area. The heat and the claustrophobic atmosphere of the residence help in picturing the image of a somber, tight, and lifeless space. As shown in the stage directions’ description below:

³⁶ Directed by Paige Rattray, *Death of a Salesman* was performed at the Roslyn Packer Theatre in Walsh Bay, Australia. The performance ran from December 3rd to December 22nd, 2021.

Before us is the SALESMAN's house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides [...] We see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home. An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 29).

Three aspects are notable in the passage above. Firstly, besides the information that the house is surrounded by big constructions, the description of the “solid vault of apartment houses” suggests two possible renderings. The first regards the “vault” allusion as a reference to banking, investing, and finance. The second considers the noun as a clear reference to entrapment, a place of no exit. Taking the two interpretations together, the “solid vault” draws attention to the family’s financial difficulties, and to the inhabitants’ impossibility of escaping the family problems explored in the work. Secondly, the fragility of the Lomans’ home, depicted by the adjective “small” and its “fragile-seeming” state not only inform us about the constant social pressures exerted upon the members of the family, which make them feel “small” in relation to others, but its bad condition also alludes to the family’s conflicts in the play. Just like the home that is crumbling, the Loman family will also fall apart as the play unfolds. Thirdly, when the stage directions highlight that “an air of the dream clings to the place”, it serves as a clear reference to Willy Loman’s and his sons’ aspirations. Moreover, the description that such dreams rise out of reality informs us that there is a constant clash between dreaming and accomplishing the dream. Therefore, when the description of the Lomans’ home is taken as a whole, it is fair to say that it acts as a metonymy to describe its inhabitants. In other words, the place mirrors the fragility of their hopes and dreams and reinforces it. Like the residence, which does not have space around it for any expansion, the family also does not have the possibility of acquiring personal or professional growth, inasmuch as they have been “blocked in” by reality. Willy Loman and his family seem to have been buried alive in their crypt house by American capitalist society’s lust for making progress and advancing.

If the imagery of the Lomans’ house suggests its inhabitants’ mental and physical fragility, the way in which the patriarch, Willy Loman, is depicted in the play emphasizes his split and damaged personality. At the beginning of the text, he arrives home late at night, feeling exhausted after work and carrying two large sample cases. As shown in the stage direction description, “his exhaustion is apparent. He unlocks the door, comes into the kitchen, and thankfully lets his burden down, feeling the

soreness of his palms” (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 29). If, on the one hand, there is a description of the protagonist as a hard-working salesman in this passage, on the other, when he engages in a conversation with his wife, Linda, one can see that Willy is a defeated elderly man. He is upset because he has sold nothing all day long. Interestingly, as the action progresses, he tries to recall his glorious days in the past, in which he was one of the best sellers of the Wagner company, in order to cheer himself up.

At this point of *Death of a Salesman*, it is possible to see that Willy is split into two opposing realities: the one in his past, endowed with dreams, idealism, and happiness, and the one in his present, marked by his failures, frustrations, and deceptions. This is made plain in his speech at the moment he first admits his failure as a salesman: “I’m tired to death [...] I couldn’t make it. I just couldn’t make it, Linda” (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 32), and then he goes back to his reminiscences and says that “I’m vital in New England” and “Goddammit I could sell” (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 32). In addition to that, the two case samples he carries when the play opens serve as a metaphor for Willy’s two heavy burdens in life: his past and his present; his dreams and his reality. Furthermore, the allusion to the soreness of Willy’s hands also suggests that the clash between past and present, dreams and reality, affects the protagonist not only mentally, but also physically. In this regard, the character uses his past experiences as a good and profitable salesman as a shield to protect him from his failings.

In the same line of reasoning, the entire play seems to revolve around the struggle within Willy’s delusion between his version of himself and his vision of reality. This is evident in, at least, three moments in the play. Firstly, the relationship with his sons, Biff and Happy, throws light on Willy’s desire to be a model to them. He chiefly relies on Biff’s admiration for him when his son was a child and a young adult, a fact that winds up strengthening Willy’s fantasy of himself as a perfect father figure and a successful businessman. In fact, when Willy says that “I’ll put my money on Biff” (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 36), it is suggested that his son’s promising career as a football player is his only chance to achieve the status that he himself could not achieve throughout his life, that is, to be a successful and famous person. In this vein, it is worth pointing out that Willy convinced himself that the secret to achieving the American Dream’s promises of socially ascending and achieving fame is to be well liked. He then attempts to pass this belief on to his sons, especially Biff. For instance,

in the quotation below Willy shares with Linda his reminiscences of Biff's championship game. He compares his son to Hercules, the Greek god of strength and endurance, and highlights the popularity his son used to have in high school.

WILLY: Like a young god. Hercules – something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him. Remember how he waved to me? Right up from the field, with the representatives of three colleges standing by? And the buyers I brought, and the cheers when he come out – Loman, Loman, Loman! God Almighty, he'll be great yet. A star like that, magnificent, can never really fade away! (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 91).

As one can notice, Willy's son is endowed with a god-like aura that represents Willy's strong belief that in the future things can change for the better. In addition, his son's success seems to energize him. Biff's victory both seems to elevate the protagonist's ego and works as a means through which Willy can brag about and show his peers that he is capable of raising a champion. In this sense, according to Alex Honneth's (2012) study, the protagonist embodies intersubjective reification. As expressed in the fragment, Willy uses his own son as a living commodity to achieve what he aspires to – popularity, respect, and self-esteem. This transgression against moral principles highlights Willy's manipulative and calculated personality.

However, in the course of the play Biff fails in math class, loses his opportunity to get a scholarship in universities, and finally discovers his father's sexual infidelity. Biff ends up giving up on his father's obsessive dream of success and turns out to be a lazy man who lacks moral underpinning. Ironically, instead of strength and endurance, features that characterize the Greek god Hercules, Biff is a symbol of powerlessness and apathy in the play. However, despite being constantly haunted by his adultery, which Willy believes misled Biff about his American Dream of success and being well liked, the father never ceases to believe that his "star" and "magnificent" son will someday come out on top, even when he calls him "a lazy bum!" (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 34). Therefore, Willy's relationship with his son underscores the clash between his dreams and his reality.

The second moment in which the play portrays the protagonist's difficulty to absorb the reality that did not fit the unrealistic view he aims to have of himself and his life is described when Willy reflects upon his failure in business. Although he often states that he is "very well liked" and popular among his clients, his fake reality is

destroyed when he compares himself with other salesmen and perceives that there is something wrong with him. In his talks with Linda, at the same time Willy attempts to overemphasize his ability to win friends and influence people, he is overshadowed by the demands and changes of the capitalist system. In the fragment below, the protagonist unveils his worries about the future and his idea of getting ahead only by means of a system of connections, appearance, and charm.

WILLY: [...] My God, if business don't pick up I don't know what I'm gonna do!

LINDA: Well, next week you'll do better.

WILLY: Oh, I'll knock 'em dead next week. I'll go to Hartford. I'm very well liked in Hartford. You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me.

[...]

LINDA: Oh, don't be foolish.

WILLY: I know it when I walk in. They seem to laugh at me.

[...]

WILLY: 'Cause I get so lonely – especially when business is bad and there's nobody to talk to. I get the feeling that I'll never sell anything again, that I won't make a living for you, or a business, a business for the boys [...] There's so much I want to make for – (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 55 – 56).

As can be seen, Willy is unable to perceive that the current business world is not the same as the one when he started his journey as a salesman. As Suzan Abbotson (2003) singles out, Willy's issues in business have to do with his brand of selling, which is outdated considering the increasingly technological reality of the business world. According to the critic, "times have changed and Willy has been unable to change with them; the values he espouses, where deals are made with a smile and a handshake, are those of a bygone age" (ABBOTSON, 2003, p. 271). The protagonist fails to recognize that the kind of business in which he was the number one salesman does not exist anymore. Raised in an American business work ethic in which appearance mattered more than substance, Willy is left behind by a changing capitalist society which ruthlessly emphasizes profit and brutalizes the unsuccessful. In the same line of reasoning, the excerpt above also presents Willy's vulnerability. Without his counterfeit social mask of a good father and fortunate businessman, the character

reveals that he feels insecure, lost, and unsure of the future. He worries about the destiny of his family and, above all, about his failure in building up his own company. However, these moments of sadness and discouragement are exceptions in the play, because the protagonist soon recovers his aspirational optimism for a better future, as he says in the following passage: “Business is bad, it’s murderous. But not for me, of course” (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 73). Therefore, Willy Loman is torn between his wish to keep up the fantasy that he is a popular and well-liked person, and his denial of admitting he has become a loser in the land of countless opportunities.

Figure 5 - Gabriel Braga Nunes (Happy), Marco Nanini (Willy Loman), and Guilherme Weber (Biff) in the 2004 Teatro João Caetano production of *Death of a Salesman* in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Directed by Felipe Hirsch. Photo: Flávio Colker.



Source: <http://www.pequenacentral.com/amortedeumcaixeiroviajante.html>. Access in April, 2022.

The third moment in which Willy Loman sheds light on the conflict between his dream and his reality can be analyzed in the role some characters have in shaping his identity. Firstly, Willy inherited his profession from his deceased father, who used to make and sell flutes. Even though he died when Willy was a child, his influence on Willy is suggested in the play when the stage directions describe the presence of a melody played on a flute that pervades the text. In addition, Willy’s greed for money has its origins in his father’s business. As described in the following passage, the

protagonist is amazed to discover his father was a successful businessman and a well-liked person. As his brother Ben states:

BEN: Father was a very great and a very wild-hearted man. We would start in Boston, and he'd toss the whole family into a wagon, and then he'd drive the team right across the country; through Ohio, and Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and all the Western states. And we'd stop in the towns and sell the flutes that he'd made on the way. Great inventor, Father. With one gadget he made more in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime.

WILLY: That's just the way I'm bringing them [Biff and Happy] up, Ben – rugged, well liked, all-around (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 69 - 70).

Ironically, in the quotation above it is possible to examine that Willy also inherited from his father his “great” ability to “invent” a counterfeit image of himself to survive in the competitive capitalist world. Therefore, Willy Loman's greed for money, his desire to be liked and to have a presence, spring from the reminiscences of his dead father.

Secondly, apart from his father, Willy also says that his decision to be a salesman was based on his wish to be like the famous and idealized travelling salesman Dave Singleman. In the play, he is the representation of business in the past, a context in which a seller could manage his career just on being popular and respected, and business transactions were made by individuals who used to respect each other. Furthermore, he is also the embodiment of all things Willy aspires: to be liked, remembered, and loved. Dave Singleman's image so strongly impresses Willy that he clings to the delusion that he may become the new Singleman of the present time and, hence, make his own mark in the business world. In the fragment below, the protagonist describes his model-figure to Howard, Willy's current boss.

WILLY: [...] His name was Dave Singleman. And he was eighty-four years old, and he'd drummed merchandise in thirty-one states [...] at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. 'Cause what I could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people? [...] when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral. Things were sad on a lotta trains for months after that [...] In those days there was personality in it [business], Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear – or personality. You see what I mean? They don't know me any more (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 104).

At least two aspects are notable in the passage above. Firstly, the names of the characters are highly symbolic and provide interesting insights. “Willy” suggests a childish version of the adult name “William”, a fact that overemphasizes immaturity in Willy’s personality. In addition, his last name “Loman” can be interpreted as “Low man”, a clear reference to his current social status – ordinary and insignificant. On the other hand, the last name of Willy’s idealized salesman, “Singleman”, calls attention to the individual’s uniqueness, “single man”. In the same vein, his name also points out the character’s prominent position in American society, for he is a salesman that “is singled out” from the others. Secondly, the quotation also depicts Willy’s stubbornness. He is so blinded by his version of the American Dream of success, inextricably connected to likeability, that he does not change his old-fashioned way of doing business. In the competitive and ruthless American system of capitalism, in which success is only measured by one’s ability to increase profitability, the protagonist seems to be out of sync with the demands of his society and profession, inasmuch as Willy is ironically a salesman who is no longer capable of selling. Instead of changing, he prefers to nourish his nostalgia for the past, complain about the present, sustain his illusions in face of reality, and blindly believe that “there’s still a possibility for better things” (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 75). So much so that throughout the play he is always bragging about how important he is and how many friends he has.

In light of this, Willy’s effort to emulate Singleman’s life reflects what Eric Landowski (2012) called “stuck-up individual”. As described in the second chapter of this study, the French semiotician’s term describes individuals who look up to an ideal type of man and attempt to mimic his actions as a way to change their own identity. Willy is so desperate to be like his model salesman that he ends up being trapped by his fantasies of the glorious days of the past. He is unable not only to let go of his illusions, but also to realize that individuals do not ascend to fame and fortune only because of their likeability.

The third and final character that acts as a significant model for Willy Loman is his brother Ben. Even though he only appears in the play in flashbacks or as a phantom of the protagonist’s fevered mind, Ben’s piece of advice on how to be successful seems to hover behind Willy the entire play. The protagonist considers his brother “a genius” (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 61) and “success incarnate” (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 61). Much of his fascination for Ben comes from his brother’s rags-to-riches

narrative and meritocratic discourse. What is more, he is also Willy's model of masculinity, based primarily on notions of heterosexuality, strength, richness, and endurance. The "legend" of Ben revolves around his journey to Africa as a poor man and his return to the US as a wealthy and respected person. Ben's discourse, which is repeated six times in the play, can be read in the following excerpt:

BEN: [...] when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. [He laughs]. And by God I was rich.

WILLY [to the boys]: You see what I been talking about? The greatest things can happen! (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 69).

In the course of the play, the memory of Willy's brother torments him. Although he looks up to his brother, who acts like a father for him, Ben's image always reminds Willy of the opportunity he missed when his brother invited him to go to Alaska. In this regard, Ben is the embodiment of a reckless life, full of adventures and perhaps effortless material success and sheer luck, all characteristics that Willy lacks. The protagonist is often seeking the answer to the question "how do you become successful?" from Ben, convinced that there is some sort of magic or secret to prosperity. Nonetheless, Ben always disappears in Willy's hallucinations and his question remains unanswered. The ghost of his brother, thus, only seems to reinforce the protagonist's envy of Ben's financial status. In this sense, considering that Willy's psychological condition deteriorates as the play progresses, the reader is never sure whether the "legend" of his brother's social ascension is really true or delusions of his mind.

At this point in the analysis, it is already possible to verify the protagonist's *hybris* and his tragic flaw (*hamartia*). Willy Loman is characterized as an ambitious, envious, arrogant, proud, and stubborn character. In his pursuit of the American Dream, his *hybris*, that is, his personal traits, are magnified by the ideology's promises that set him into motion. While acting, the protagonist engages in a battle with himself and portrays the concept of tragic American illusion. As I explained previously in this research, this term brings to light the clash between the promises of the American Dream and the challenges fictional characters face to pursue their desires. In Willy Loman's portrayal in *Death of a Salesman*, it is clear that he is already suffering the tension between his

dreams and his reality when the drama opens. What the reader witnesses, however, is a gradual increase in the internal battles of the protagonist as the story progresses. In addition, the clash between Willy's high hopes and his shattered dreams has a direct impact on the story's chronological order. As Willy deteriorates, past and present events occur simultaneously in the play as an aesthetic feature used to express the protagonist's anguish and despair.

Amid the fantasies created to avoid the reality that he is not able to handle, Willy is hounded by a sense of personal insufficiency. In denying reality so as to believe in the American Dream, Willy Loman triggers his tragic flaw. Besides reifying his son Biff to boost his self-esteem and impress his peers, Willy's second tragic flaw is to confuse the role he plays and the person he wishes to be. The more he tries to impress others with his counterfeit air of leadership and success, the more he confronts his failures and makes sure that he is none more so than a loser.

Earlier in my analysis, I pointed out that the name "Willy" would represent the character's immaturity. By examining the way in which he describes the United States in the play, it becomes clear that the character has pictured a utopian America in his mind. Despite the fact that Willy recognizes the social changes around him, he seems unable to follow the development of the country and the capitalist pressures to make more money. In Willy's speech below, he stresses that just like the population growth that is out of control, the competition in the labor market is unbearable.

WILLY: There's more people! That's what's ruining this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening! Smell the stink from that apartment house! And another one on the other side...How can they whip cheese? (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 35).

It is worth pointing out that although the protagonist throws light on the dark side of capitalism, which brutalizes people by turning human beings into potential rivals in the quest for success and profitability, he does not problematize or condemn the economic system that gradually destroys him. On the contrary, Willy struggles to live up to the US capitalist context, and by extension, the ideals and demands of the American Dream. The character's blindness in regard to his uncritical attitude towards the economic and social problems of his country is evident in the passage below. Willy

disregards his previous opinion on competition and states that he wants to build up his own business.

WILLY: Don't say? Tell you a secret, boys. Don't breathe it to a soul. Someday I'll have my own business, and I'll never have to leave home any more.

HAPPY: Like uncle Charley, heh?

WILLY: Bigger than Uncle Charley! Because Charley is not – liked. He's liked, but he's not – well liked (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act I, p. 49).

The dialogue between the protagonist and his son, Happy, reveals one more *hybris* associated to Willy Loman, jealousy. Besides reaffirming his view that the American Dream can be achieved through likeability, the character also looks down on his loyal friend and neighbor, Charley, and on his son, Bernard. Ironically, these characters are the only ones that seem to reach the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*. Charley has his own company and is economically well established. Bernard has become a highly successful lawyer after years of intense dedication to study. Even though the play explores a definite clash between capitalistic business and morality, unlike the Lomans, Charley and his son maintain their moral integrity and accomplish their personal goals. Neither Charley nor Bernard wastes any time trying to be liked or relying on faith in appearance, as Willy does. In this regard, Arthur Miller's play suggests that it *is* possible to achieve the Dream, but only by means of hard work, honesty, persistence, and education.

As the scenes unfold, Willy, who is failing financially, goes to Charley's office to borrow some money and his neighbor offers him a job. This scene is of high importance in the play, because it shows Willy's jealousy. For Willy, accepting Charley's job would mean that his neighbor has ascended higher on the status-ladder. Although it is true, Willy, with his hurt pride, does not accept the job and is furious with Charley. Therefore, the idea that his friend has become a man of consequence and he is only a lackluster salesman causes damage to Willy Loman's pride and dignity.

If the protagonist has his sense of pride hurt when Charley offers him a job, Willy's morale and dignity are destroyed by his current boss, Howard Wagner. This character is the embodiment of the pragmatic and uncaring portrayal of capitalism, as well as the exploitative way of doing business, whose main interest relies only on the bottom line of profit and loss. When the protagonist admits that he cannot handle

travelling anymore, Willy decides to demand he be given a desk job at Howard's company in New York. As the conversation between the employee and the employer progress, Willy talks about the moral code of business in the past and underlines that he has served the company for most of his life. However, Howard is impersonal in his treatment of Willy. For the employer, the protagonist's old values of being well liked in business hold no relevance in the present day, because all that matters, in Howard's perspective, is the profit line. In the end, the boss not only denies the non-traveling job that Willy wants, but also takes away his job at the company due to Willy's failures in business. In the quotation below, the protagonist's despair for being financially broke and fired is evident in the use of the exclamation mark to indicate Willy's worries about the payment of his life insurance, as well as in his own comparison with a leftover peel of a fruit.

WILLY: [...] There were promises made across this desk! You mustn't tell me you've got people to see – I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit! (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act II, p. 105).

Just like Willy's refrigerator and car which, according to him, seem to have a short lifespan, his life in Howard's company has expired. In this regard, the protagonist turns out to be a victim of Howard's intersubjective reification. To put it another way, the company only praised Willy when he was able to produce sales, increase profitability, and be one of the best salesmen. However, when he started to fail in business, Willy is automatically decimated and thrown away like a worn-out object. The protagonist's humiliating interview with Howard also sheds light on Willy's self-reification. According to Axel Honneth (2012), this term refers to the way in which people relate to their self-image and how their own desires assume the form of thing-like objects. Willy's self-reification is made plain when he begs Howard to give him his job back, each time asking for less money. Even when Willy turns himself into a cheap human commodity, the boss, unaffected by his financial obligations and years of dedication and service in the company, ends up rejecting Loman's pleas and reinforcing the message that "business is business" (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act II, p. 103).

This scene in Howard's office, which depicts Willy Loman's auction in the play, can be interpreted as the character's inability to sell not only commodities, but also himself. If a salesman is a man whose job is to influence people to buy things, Willy's double failures to do business in this scene act as both a catalyst and a magnifier for his low self-esteem and feeling of worthlessness. Moreover, this scene is also relevant to the development of the play, since it marks a moment in which the protagonist goes through a transformation. As I pointed out earlier in this research, Willy lives in a constant battle with his dreams and his reality. As a means to pursue his American Dream of success, he manipulates, reifies his son, lies, and attempts to be someone he is not. The concept of tragic American illusion, thus, pervades the play and presents the overwhelming force of the American Dream's values and demands as mainly responsible for Willy's tragic flaw and lack of sense of worth and dignity at this point of my analysis.

After his interview with Howard, Willy seems to leave his fantasies and reminiscences of the past behind and focuses now on his reality. In the fragment below, in which he speaks with Biff and Happy in a restaurant in New York after being fired, he states that woods are burning, and he is not interested in old stories anymore. It becomes clear in his speech that the trees serve as a symbol to represent his new cycle of life. If previously in the play any reference to natural beauty was an allusion to his idealism and happiness for the past, the destruction of the woods serves as a metaphor for Willy's reality taking over his illusions. As Willy explains to his sons:

WILLY: I'm not interested in stories about the past or any crap of that kind because the woods are burning, boys, you understand? There's a big blaze going on all around. I was fired today (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act II, p. 133).

As the scenes unfold, Willy faces his harsh reality once more. In the scene in the restaurant, which was supposed to be a moment of celebration of the Lomans' new jobs, but ends up being a meeting to talk about their failures and family problems, Willy figures out his mistakes and obsessions with success. Deeply shocked by his family situation, the protagonist goes to the restaurant toilet to reflect on his life, while his sons leave Willy behind to flirt with women. The place the protagonist chooses to think of his decisions in life is of high importance in the play. The toilet, which is a room

where one gets rid of waste liquid or waste matter from one's body, is a symbol of Willy's waste of time, energy, and wrong decisions to achieve his American Dream. What is more, the toilet, which also brings about images of a dirty place with an unpleasant smell, alludes to the protagonist's means to pursue his aspirations, that is, through interpersonal reification, manipulation, and falsehood.

At the Loman's house in the end of the play, Willy argues with Biff, and his son recognizes that he is a loser just like his father. Biff's outburst ends up destroying not only the last hopes his father had of making his mark on the world, but also Willy Loman's illusion that his sons were not failures.

BIFF: I'm not a leader of man, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! I'm one dollar an hour, Willy! I tried seven states and couldn't raise it. A buck an hour! Do you gather my meaning? I'm not bringing home any prizes any more, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home! (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act II, p. 161).

When taking the scene in Howard's office, the consequences of the Lomans' meeting in the restaurant and the father-son discussion at the end of the play together, it becomes clear that Arthur Miller structured the protagonist's transformation and development in the text upon the concept of tragic American illusion. The aforementioned scenes shed light on Willy Loman's downfall and the destruction of his illusory world. Furthermore, they also underscore the greatest and last sale of his entire life – the sale of his life for the insurance payment.

Willy's planting of seeds on the barren ground of his house while talking with Ben's phantom about his decision to kill himself is a clear reference to his desire to leave an inheritance to his offspring when he passes. Ironically his attempt to cultivate on infertile soil is a symbol of Willy's cultivation of false hopes in his life. Both the seeds and his dreams will never come to fruition. In the same line of reasoning, Willy's wish to pass something on to his sons suggests that his inheritance is learning from all the efforts and failures throughout his life in order to reach his American Dream of success.

Realizing that "after all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive" (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act II, p. 122), the protagonist believes that his life insurance payout will help Biff set up his own business, and, in a way, put his son "ahead of Bernard again" (MILLER, [1949] 1998,

Act II, p. 164). Before moving away at full speed to his suicide, Willy's last utterance "Shhh!" (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Act II, p. 165) suggests two possible interpretations. Firstly, it may represent his last attempt to silence his inner despair in constant conflict with his American dream and his American reality. Secondly, it also suggests his complete destruction, caused by ruthless capitalism as a whole and the demands of the American Dream in particular. Apart from showing Willy's loss of dignity and sense of agency, the hushing syllable also alludes to the protagonist's current place in society – he is a nobody, without a voice, hopeless, within a country littered with champions.

In the play's "Requiem act", which closes the text and presents the Loman family and Charley standing before the protagonist's grave, one can verify Willy's influence and the outcome of his attitudes. Apart from the Lomans and the neighbor, no one else showed up for the funeral, a fact that underscores Willy's fallacy of thinking that success is a result of being popular. His son, Happy, argues that he will follow his father's footsteps, demonstrating, thus, that he did not learn anything from his father's tragic downfall. Biff, on the other hand, states that his father held the wrong dreams. Charley suggests that Willy was a great man and dreams were all the protagonist had. Linda, the widow, although utterly shocked without her husband's company, singles out that, from that moment on, "We're free...We're free" (MILLER, [1949] 1998, Requiem, p. 168). They are free of Willy Loman's delusions, free of his lust for success, and finally free of the overwhelming influence of the American Dream.

In the portrayal of Willy Loman, the dramatist Arthur Miller presents us a character baffled by the conflicting demands of US society's obsession with material and personal success in which the ends justify the means. Willy's struggles to pursue his American Dream serve as a metonymic representation of the contradictory beliefs and the values that lie at the core of the American way of life. By reading the play through the lens of the concept of the tragic American illusion, it was possible to verify not only Willy's misguided dreams, but also the clash between his illusory world and his reality, and the means by which he attempted to reach his aspirations.

4.3 "WHAT DO YOU WANT THE GUN FOR, JESS?": LONELINESS AND REIFICATION IN MARSHA NORMAN'S *'NIGHT, MOTHER*

Published in 1982, *'night, Mother* is Marsha Norman's fifth literary production. It is a one-act play that takes place in a very ordinary middle-class house, more specifically in the living room and kitchen of the Cates residence. The story is set in the early 1980s and its plot features one evening in the lives of the protagonist, Jessie Cates, a middle-aged, epileptic, and unemployed woman who, since her divorce, has been living with her mother, Thelma, a widow in her late fifties. The story revolves around the unsettling mother-daughter relationship. Within the first 200 lines of the play, Jessie, while arranging the family chores, announces that she intends to commit suicide later that evening. As the scenes unfold, the daughter explains why she has come to the decision of killing herself, and, at the same time, her mother desperately attempts to dissuade her.

The first stage performance of *'night, Mother* took place at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in December 1982. Then, the play moved to the John Golden Theatre in New York City in 1983. In the same year, it opened on Broadway and had a ten-month run. Since its first performance on stage, the play has received numerous awards. In 1983, *'night, Mother* was awarded the Elizabeth Hull-Kate Warriner Award, the Suzan Smith Blackburn Prize, and the Hull-Warriner Award. It was also nominated for the Tony Award for best play, and Norman's production won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for drama. *'night, Mother* was also adapted to film. Marsha Norman herself helped produce the screen version of her drama, which was directed by Tom Moore and produced by Universal Pictures. Since its publication, Norman's work has been translated into many languages and continually staged around the world.

'night, Mother has been studied from a myriad of perspectives. While some critics, such as Waseem Khalaf (2019), Yan Liu (2011) and Linda Paige (2005) focus on a feminist interpretation of the play; others, such as Sarah Reuning (2012) and Richard Finlayson (2001) have addressed the work from the standpoint of depression and suicide issues. My critical reading of the play, however, presents a different account of the work.

As I stated before, Jessie Cates' inner struggles and reasons for committing suicide are the backbone of the play. In my analysis, I will attempt to demonstrate that one of the sources of her plight is her desire to fulfill her American dream of pursuing happiness. Considering this, the objective of the present subchapter is to verify the

influence of the Dream on Jessie's actions in the play, as well as to discuss how the tragic character manages the problems she faces and how she tries to solve them.

At the beginning of the text, Jessie tells her mother that she does not want to live anymore, while Thelma tries to change her mind. As the conversation between them unfolds, it is possible to see that Jessie's despair began in the past and her suffering is not a reaction to any event that happens as the plays runs. In this regard, Marsha Norman builds her drama on the tension between Jessie's American *dream* and her *reality*. Considering this, my critical reading of the play is structured in two parts. The first focuses on describing Jessie's dream and her inability to take charge of her life, while the second part examines the consequences of her actions, as well as her final effort to assert control.

In the past, the protagonist's sense of agency was undermined by the demand of the American ideology of gaining money. Even though she applies for jobs, all her efforts seem pointless. Her speech below clearly shows how Jessie feels inferior within the competitive and brutal capitalist world:

JESSIE: I took that telephone sales job and I didn't even make enough money to pay the phone bill, and I tried to work at the gift shop at the hospital and they said I made people real uncomfortable smiling at them the way I did.

[...]

JESSIE: [...] You know I couldn't work. I can't do anything. I've never been around people my whole life except when I went to the hospital. I could have a seizure any time. What good would a job do? The kind of job I could get would make me feel worse (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 35).

The fragment above shows that Jessie has a multitude of problems in her life. She acts awkwardly due to her lack of social skills and feels uncomfortable for being unemployed. Additionally, because she suffers from epilepsy, she has problems with self-acceptance and feels prevented from holding down jobs. Her illness, thus, functions as a metaphor to express not only her inability to take control of her own life, but also to highlight the fragility of her emotional state, which can easily fall apart, just like a seizure which can flare up at any time. Moreover, when Jessie states "the kind of job I could get", it is implicit that her thoughts consider even prostituting herself in order to gain some money. Therefore, the disease and her introverted character have resulted in an existence bound by limitations and lost opportunities.

In addition to her failure to hold jobs, Jessie also shows her desire to start a family. She had been married to Cecil and they had a son, Ricky. Nonetheless, her dream of having a happy marriage also collapses. Her husband was unfaithful, having had an affair with a neighbor's daughter, and Ricky has become a thief and a drug addict. Jessie tells her mom that she did everything she could to avoid the divorce, but her plea was not enough to save her marriage. Her outburst is shown in the speech below:

JESSIE: He wasn't the wrong man, Mama. I loved Cecil so much. And I tried to get more exercise and I tried to stay awake. I tried to learn to ride a horse. And I tried to stay outside with him, but he always knew I was trying, so it didn't work. (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 59).

By saying that Cecil was not a bad husband, Jessie demonstrates her feelings towards him and makes it plain that she still loves him. In the quotation above, the repetition of both the verb "to try", and the coordinative conjunction "and" help express how hard Jessie attempted to save her relationship, but, just like everything else in her life, she fails again. In the course of the play, Thelma confesses that her daughter only met her former husband because she had decided to make a match between them. In this sense, if, on the one hand, the mother's matchmaking provides her daughter with the man she loves, on the other, she has interfered in Jessie's personal decision to find her life partner. Additionally, Jessie's ex-husband's profession requires a great deal of skill. As Thelma says, he is "the best carpenter I ever saw" (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 57). Considering that a carpenter is someone whose job is to make and repair wooden objects, his leaving Jessie may be interpreted as a symbol of her hollow life, as well as the character's inability to build up/ make her dreamy family come true or to solve/ repair her problems.

The quotation above also points out Jessie's necessity to fit in. It is clear that in her mind she pictured an ideal image of a wife (a skillful, caring, and slim woman) and tried to embody that imaginary figure. Here, as I demonstrated in the second chapter of this research, the protagonist depicts Eric Landowski's (2012) "stuck-up individual". According to the author, the category describes a person who looks up to an ideal type of man/woman and desperately attempts to mimic his/her actions. In Jessie's context, however, her embodiment of the ideal type of wife was not enough to save her

marriage. Indeed, in the same passage she also portrays Alex Honneth's (2018) concept of self-reification. Jessie tries to change her personality in order to belong to the American social standard of the perfect wife and mother. In this regard, she has lost her sense of identity and authenticity to fulfill the requirements of a socially acceptable wife figure. As a "living commodity", she literally attempts to sell herself to her husband. Hence, Jessie's failed attempt at raising a family maximizes her inferiority complex and her lost sense of agency.

Jessie's mother also acts as a catalyst for her daughter's hopelessness. Thelma blames her daughter for her failure to obtain money to buy material objects and attain a comfortable home, a job, and social position. In this line of reasoning, she turns out to be the embodiment of the tenets of the American dream in the play and a powerful force that rages against the protagonist's reality. It is interesting to notice that while Thelma makes every attempt to talk her daughter out of killing herself, she ironically heightens the protagonist's inferiority. Indeed, Thelma often reminds her daughter of how meaningless Jessie's life has been. In the quotation below, it is evident how the mother perceives her daughter and how Jessie feels about Thelma's pressures:

MAMA: You never should have moved back in here with me. If you'd kept your little house or found another place when Cecil left you, you'd have made some new friends at least. Had a life to lead. Had your own things around you. Give Ricky a place to come see you. You never should've come here.

[...]

MAMA: You didn't have any business being by yourself right then, but I can see how you might want a place of your own. A grown woman should...

JESSIE: Mama...I'm just not having a very good time and I don't have any reason to think it'll get anything but worse. I'm tired. I'm hurt. I'm sad. I feel used.

MAMA: Tired of what?

JESSIE: It all (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 27 - 28).

The passage shows that Thelma blames her daughter for her grandson turning out badly - as stated before, he is a thief and a drug addict. In addition, she also regrets accepting Jessie in her home after she got divorced. Her moral lesson, expressed through the use of "if" clauses, which show the consequences of facts that did not happen in the past, stresses the need to have material goods and of following social rules. In other words, Thelma reinforces that Jessie not only has failed in her maternal role, but also as a successful person. To put it simply, she wishes her daughter were

different. In Thelma's sentence "a grown woman should", which is followed by an ellipsis, it is clear that she is on the verge of giving Jessie a long lecture about what an adult woman must be and what she must do. Hence, Thelma sees life as part of a manufacturer's instructions that need to be followed step-by-step. Consequently, she attempts to pass such knowledge on to her daughter. However, Jessie cannot stand Thelma's moral lessons. The way she interrupts her mother's speech, together with the enumeration of being tired, hurt, sad and used, is clear evidence of the character's failed struggles toward autonomy and self-identity.

In addition to that, the fragment also uncovers Thelma's sense of detachment from what is happening around her. The question "tired of what?" reveals her ignorance about Jessie's struggles to exert autonomy and achieve her version of the American dream. In fact, by analyzing the set of failures in her daughter's life, Thelma even doubts Jessie's ability to kill herself. As shown in the excerpt below, Thelma predicts that her daughter's shot will not succeed in killing her and, as a result, she will end up in a vegetative state on a hospital bed:

MAMA: We're just going to sit around like every other night in the world and then you're going to kill yourself? (JESSIE *doesn't answer*). You'll miss. (*Again there is no response*) You'll just wind up a vegetable. How would you like that? Shoot your ear off? You know what the doctor said about getting excited. You'll cock the pistol and have a fit.

JESSIE: I think I can kill myself, Mama (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 17, author's italics).

Curiously, as a result of the mother's detachment from her daughter's inner struggles, Thelma does not realize that Jessie is already living a vegetative life. In fact, the protagonist herself points out her death-in-life state when she says, "I'm cold all the time, anyway" (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 18). Ironically, the mother winds up referring to her own ear in Jessie's shooting, fact that metaphorically represents her deafness in regards to her daughter's emotions. As the action progresses, Thelma confesses her negligence with Jessie's feelings. As shown in the following passage: "I was here all the time and I never even saw it [Jessie's issue]" (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 73), it is evident that Thelma is not only deaf, but also blind to her daughter's loneliness.

Figure 6 - Fabianna Mello Souza (Thelma Cates) and Thaís Loureiro (Jessie Cates) in the 2016 Teatro Itapema production of *'night, mother* in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Directed by Hugo Moss. Photo: Grupo Assik.



Source:<http://www.facebook.com/boanoitemae/photos/a.718535238256948/891329010977569>. Accessed on January 10, 2022.

In light of the above discussions, it is fair to say that Jessie's *hybris* is her introverted, pessimistic and hopeless feelings. Even though she expresses a sense of agency, while attempting to be an ordinary woman who is not only able to socialize with her environment, but also to have a happy marriage and a good job, she is unable to fulfill her American dream of a perfect life. The pursuit and the demand of the ideology, then, only serves to heighten her weaknesses and undermine her self-confidence. Hence, the Dream acts as a trigger which moves Jessie into action. It becomes clear through the course of the play that the character faces the destruction of her illusory world and embodies the concept of tragic American illusion. Therefore, instead of a happy family and friends, Jessie finds betrayal and loneliness. Instead of a good son and a beloved mom, she comes across a thief and a demanding mother.

The destruction of Jessie's American Dream is explicit in two passages in the play. The first is her description of taking a bus. As shown in the quotation below, she uses the ride on a bus as a metaphor to explain her own life:

JESSIE: Mama, I know you used to ride the bus. Riding the bus and it's hot and bumpy and crowded and too noisy and more than anything in the world you want to get off and the only reason in the world you don't get off is it's still fifty blocks from where you're going? Well, I can get off right now if I want to, because even if I ride fifty more years and get off then, it's the same place when I step down to it. Whenever I feel like it, I can get off. As soon as I've had enough, it's my stop. I've had enough (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 33).

The fragment above suggests three possible interpretations. Firstly, the fact that Jessie can get off the vehicle whenever she wants suggests her desire and effort to assert autonomy. Secondly, Jessie's speech can also point out her miserable and unhappy life. Although Jessie singles out that she can decide where she wants to stop, that is, she has control over her life, the protagonist also makes it plain that she does not expect any progress in her existence. For Jessie, everything is meaningless. Finally, her action of getting off the bus acts as a metaphor for her demise. In this vein, Jessie highlights that death is not only more attractive than her imprisonment in life, but also her ultimate means of recovering her sense of agency. Therefore, the character seems to be torn between two worlds: the one of Jessie's dream, characterized by her attempt to change her life, and the world of her reality, comprised of loneliness, frustrations and lack of success.

The second excerpt that portrays Jessie's disillusionment with the American dream happens when she takes a look at an old photo of hers. In her speech, Jessie singles out her tragic flaw (*hamartia*) by enumerating all the things she attempted to do in order to accomplish her American dream:

JESSIE: [...] I found an old baby picture of me. And it was somebody else, not me. It was somebody pink and fat who never heard of sick or lonely, somebody who cried and got fed, and reached up and got held and kicked but didn't hurt anybody [...] It's somebody I lost, all right, it's my own self. Who I never was. Or who I tried to be and never got there. Somebody I waited for who never came. And never will. So, see, it doesn't much matter what else happens in the world or in this house, even. I'm what was worth waiting for and I didn't make it. Me...who might have made a difference to me...I'm not going to show up, so there's no reason to stay, except to keep you [her mother] company, and that's...not reason enough because I'm not...very good company (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 76).

It is evident in the passage above that the protagonist sees herself split into two parts. The first represents Jessie's happiness, innocence, optimism about her future and sense of thriving. On the other hand, her second self stands for what she has become, that is, sad, lonely, pessimistic, and, according to American social standards, a loser. Furthermore, when she says, "it's somebody I lost" and "who I tried to be", Jessie highlights her first tragic flaw in the play. In order to follow social patterns, she has tried to change her identity to take part in a society that underestimates her. As a result, Jessie winds up being punished for her transgression against the American social order and went through a metamorphosis, becoming a depressed and hopeless person.

Likewise, when she says, "somebody I waited for and never came", Jessie points out her second tragic flaw. Just like her manipulative mother who wanted to match her daughter to Cecil, Jessie also used people to achieve her desire to build a nuclear family. Here, it is worth mentioning that, according to Alex Honneth's (2012) renderings, Jessie embodies intersubjective reification. To put it another way, she uses other people as living commodities to achieve what she aspires to. Jessie's dream of raising a nuclear family is so fragile that, when she gets divorced, she literally abandons her son, Ricky, as if he were a broken or useless object. In this respect, Jessie unveils her manipulative and calculated personality, two more traits that characterize her *hybris*.

In this line of reasoning, the character dramatizes her inability to reach the promises and the demands of the American dream in the play. David Palmer (2018) reiterates my critical reading when he states that the source of Jessie's despair is her inability to feel connected to that ideology. According to the author, instead of success and fulfillment, Jessie only experiences failure and despair while trying to find her place in the sun. In Palmer's words:

Jessie' problem is that she cannot find her way to the feeling that her life is worthwhile. She suffers under [...] the demand of the American Dream; its inherent idea that for lives to be worthy and livable they must contain some sense of purpose and thriving; they cannot be merely the mindless, essentially empty passage of time, even if that is a life of comfort. By the standard of the American Dream, Jessie experiences herself as a failure. She no longer believes there is anything she can do to capture a sense of meaning, joy, and flourishing in her life (PALMER, 2018, p. 181).

In this way, the protagonist is gradually destroyed by her dreams as the play progresses. As stated earlier in this analysis, Marsha Norman composed her play based on the tensions between Jessie's dream and her reality. Up to this point of the study, it was possible to examine the reasons behind the protagonist's decision to commit suicide. In what follows, my analysis intends to discuss the meanings behind that choice.

After going through a number of problems in the past, Jessie is determined to carry out her plan of killing herself. At present, the protagonist demonstrates a strong will to gain dominance over her attitudes. To begin with, the happy memories of her diseased dad that pervade the play may be interpreted as her effort to look for strength in her father figure. Indeed, as described by the stage directions, Jessie's portrayal as a woman wearing "pants and a long black sweater with deep pockets, which contains scraps of paper, [and there may be] a pencil behind her ear or a pen clipped to one of the pockets of the sweater" (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 2) demonstrate her tendency to resemble a man in appearance and, in a way, be closer to her father. Besides, her description with scraps of paper and a pencil behind her ear is a clear evidence of Jessie's calculated behavior, inasmuch as she has been planning her death for ten years.

In this vein, it is not by coincidence that she looks for her dad's gun at the beginning of the play. The careless way in which she cleans and manages the weapon is a clear manifestation of Jessie's desire to be with her father and, above all, her last attempt to take on authorship of her life. Death, then, is Jessie's only option to escape from the emptiness of her existence.

At the end of the play, Jessie expresses her disbelief in the promises of the American dream. In her conversation with Thelma, she states that her self-imposed death does not mean she is giving up on life. On the contrary, Jessie cannot put up with the instability, the setbacks, and especially the uncertainties of the American ideology. When the protagonist says that she intends to use her father's gun for "protection" (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 9), she does not mean safety from criminals in her neighborhood, as Thelma interprets it, but protection from her reality and the world. As shown in the speech below, Jessie argues that she is not interested in things that "might" work, as she did in the past. Now, her focus is on actions that "will" work:

JESSIE: I'm *not* giving up! This *is* the other thing I'm trying. And I'm sure there are some other things that might work, but *might* work isn't good enough anymore. I need something that *will* work. *This* will work. That's why I picked it.

[...]

JESSIE: [...] *This* is how I have my say. This is how I say what I thought about it all and I say no. To Dawson and Loretta and the Red Chinese and epilepsy and Ricky and Cecil and you. And me. And hope. I say no! (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 75, author's emphasis).

Two aspects are notable in the passage above. Firstly, it is clear that Jessie goes through a transformation in the play. If, on the one hand, her past actions described her as a submissive, weak, and a dreamy woman, on the other, Jessie's final decision to kill herself in the present, which is expressed in the quotation by the repetition of the pronoun "this" and the modal verb "will", can be interpreted as an extreme act of her determination not only to control her life, but also to assert autonomy. Secondly, in her decision to say "no", Jessie reiterates her desire to cease her personal journey of delusions and suffering. In addition, her emphatic "no" also encompasses her family members and acquaintances who make her feel as if she were a useless person. Therefore, Jessie's death may be interpreted as a metaphor that alludes to a reaction against the backdrop of the optimism of the American dream. Jessie believed in the dream's promises, but only found suffering and hopelessness on her way to success and fulfillment.

Finally, the last scene of the play portrays Jessie's demise and her desire for freedom. The protagonist's last words, "Night, Mother" (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 88), which is a clear reference to the title of the play and acts as a farewell, is followed by Thelma's desperate attempt to change her daughter's decision. While Jessie locks herself in her bedroom with her father's gun, Thelma screams, pounds on the door, and asks for forgiveness. Jessie's final gunshot, according to the stage directions, "sounds like an answer, it sounds like NO" (NORMAN, [1982] 1984, p. 89). The deadly sound echoing the word "no" is a symbolic answer to Thelma's social pressures and plea for forgiveness, to society and its strict social rules, and above all, to the demands of the American dream that literally have destroyed the protagonist.

In light of the above discussions, it is possible to perceive the negative influence of the American dream upon Jessie throughout the play. The concept of tragic American illusion is made plain when she faces the clash between her dream of

pursuing happiness and the emptiness of her life. Her tragic flaws highlight the means by which Jessie pursues her dream: she manipulates people to achieve her goals and attempts to wear a fragile mask to take part in American society and hide her weaknesses. By regarding her life as a complete failure, the protagonist only finds a means to control her own life and to recover her sense of agency in death. Marsha Norman's play, thus, throws light on the impossibility of reaching the promises of the American dream.

[THE STAGE MANAGER stops talking and drinks some water. Then, he puts the three plays he was using in his oral presentation on his desk, sits down on his gaming chair, opens his e-mail account and sends his advisor information about his performance in the oral presentation. He seems calm and relaxed. Soon afterwards, the student stands up, takes a look at his watch and leaves the stage. The lights go down].

5 CONCLUSION

SCENE – The light gradually rises on THE STAGE MANAGER. Same set as in the introduction, but the student’s bedroom is now neat and organized. He is at the center of the stage and wears a modern, well-fitted suit. He gets his smartphone and sends his close friends and advisor *WhatsApp* messages informing that he is about to leave home to celebrate with them that he has been approved as a PhD researcher at PUCRS. Then, THE STAGE MANAGER takes a deep breath and starts speaking.

THE STAGE MANAGER. Throughout the current PhD research, my reader, I attempted to investigate the influence of the American Dream and the tragic on modern and contemporary US drama. In order to accomplish my main objective, I selected three dramatists and three plays to comprise my textual analysis. John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (1937), Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and Marsha Norman’s *‘night, Mother* (1982) not only allowed me to verify the relationship between American literature and the American Dream, but also revealed different perspectives to assess the effects of the ideology in the protagonists’ lives. George Milton’s, Willy Loman’s, and Jessie Cates’ struggles in the plays provided me with interesting insights into the fictional portrayal of American life by means of characters lured by dreams that remain beyond their reach. In this vein, I attempted to prove that the American Dream’s values and demands act as an updated version of the Greek *ate*, for the ideology influences the way the protagonists behave, drives them to motion, and leads them to their tragic flaw (*hamartia*).

In this sense, the theoretical support of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Peter Szondi’s (2002), Gerd Bornheim’s (2007), Sandra Luna’s (2008, 2012), and Albin Lesky’s (2015) studies were of paramount significance for the analysis of the concept of the tragic. Their renderings paved the way for my coining of the term tragic American illusion. As I stated in the previous pages, the concept throws light on the interplay between the dichotomies of the American Dream and tragic features. The term I developed in this research focuses on literary productions which explore in their textual fabric the clash between the promises of the American Dream and the vicissitudes of characters who attempt to pursue it. By bringing the conflict between *dream* and *reality*

to the fore, the tragic American illusion calls the very possibility of achieving the Dream into question.

As observed throughout this study, it was possible to verify that *Of Mice and Men*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *'night, Mother* explore the American social context in their textual fabric. On this matter, the literary critic Antonio Candido (2014) brings up important considerations. In his book *On literature and society*, he argues that literary criticism may develop an interdisciplinary approach regarding the interplay between structural and cultural elements during the critical reading of a literary production. In this sense Candido singles out the necessity to join external elements (social context) and internal elements (literary works) together. According to the critic:

[...] we can only understand the work by mixing text and context in a dialectically integrated interpretation, in which the old point of view that explained it by external factors, as much as the other, guided by a conviction that the structure is practically independent, are combined, when necessary, in the interpretive process. We know, further, that the *external* (in this case, the social) is important, not as a cause, nor as a meaning, but as an element that performs a certain role in the constitution of the structure, becoming, therefore, *internal* (CANDIDO, [1995] 2014, p. 142, emphasis original).

Considering the fragment above, external factors play a fundamental role in the reading of a text, since they may perform many functions in the development of a literary work. For this reason, external elements exert an intrinsic value over the text. In other words, literature absorbs and transforms social features (such as historical context, ideologies, social prejudice and so on) into literary language. Hence, studies that ignore the importance of the relationship between literature and society end up playing down the critical potential of a text.

Furthermore, Candido also makes some considerations in regard to both the influence of the social environment on literature, and the influence of literary texts on society. In this way, the critic establishes an understanding of written works as a critical key tool for unveiling social issues, values, and ideologies that are hidden in plain sight in society. In addition, Candido also points out that the reading of a text may be used as a means for affirming human dignity, for the reading may change or reiterate the individual's behavior and his/her view of the world.

In light of Antonio Candido's renderings, the plays I analyzed magnify critical perspectives on materialism and capitalism in the US context. By exploring the

reification of human beings, the desire to be someone else to be accepted in society, and the portrayal of characters overwhelmed by the capitalist system, the plots of these plays, in different ways, depict a negative image of the USA as a sick country. In their desperate pursuit of the American Dream's promises of wealth, success, acceptance, and happiness, George Milton, Willy Loman, and Jessie Cates only find their own destruction. In pursuing money, self-advancement, self-esteem and self-interest, the characters come across the fractures and pitfalls of the American Dream and lay bare the American ethics of success. In other words, there is a sense among John Steinbeck's, Arthur Miller's, and Marsha Norman's characters that the ends justify the means. Consequently, the process of reification of social relations, the clash between great expectations and the harsh reality of the characters' surroundings, along with a desperate attempt to fit into a materialistic and highly competitive society, cause them to be continually tortured throughout the plays. The playwrights' productions, thus, problematize the aforementioned American ethics of success and invite their readers to reflect on the fragility of the American ideology that praises people with privileges, and harms the ones without.

The findings of my study also point out that the American Dream values play a crucial role in determining the way the characters think and behave. As can be seen in my critical reading, the ideology has the power to heighten the characters' *hybris* and to trigger their tragic flaw (*hamartia*). The protagonists turn out to be victims of their desires, social patterns, behavioral frames, as well as of the necessity of keeping up appearances. In this regard the American Dream is described in the three dramatic texts as a double-edged sword, since it is both capable of inspiring great acts and, at the same time, creating deep frustrations.

Still on this matter, even though the plays portray George Milton's, Willy Loman's, and Jessie Cates' struggles to make the most of their opportunities and the effort they undergo to do so, they do not achieve their versions of the dream. However, the message conveyed in the reading of *Of Mice and Men*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *'night*, *Mother* is not completely negative. In Arthur Miller's work, for instance, the description of Charley, an honest and profitable businessman, and his son, Bernard, a good student and a successful lawyer, stresses that it *is* possible to achieve the American Dream. While George, Willy, and Jessie chase after their desires by means of falsehood, manipulation, lies, and even likeability, Charley and Bernard, on the other hand, get ahead through dedication, education, hard work, and persistence. What the

three plays seem to criticize, thus, is the characters' blind or naïve belief in the Dream and the means by which they attempt to pursue their aspirations. Just like the Aristotelian *katharsis*, in which the audience experiences both terror and pity while watching the performance of Greek tragedies and leaves the stage purged of any emotions responsible for the tragic hero's downfall, the journey of the protagonists' plight and fall in *Of Mice and Men*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *'night, Mother* serves as a warning of what happens when individuals do whatever it takes to strive for economic advancement and personal growth. Therefore, John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller, and Marsha Norman do not reinforce the hegemonic ideology of the American Dream in their literary productions; quite the contrary, in the microcosmos depicted in the plays, the characters become a metonymic representation of the nightmarish and blind faith in the national creed. The playwrights, therefore, criticize, problematize and call into question the many possibilities of attaining the American Dream.

As pointed out in my study, the literature devoted to the American Dream is vast and varied. In US drama, there are a set of plays that provide interesting perspectives on the theme. However, there has been little investigation into this field of study. To date, little is known about the role of ideology in the development of the plot and in the characters' actions. In my attempt to fill this academic gap, I coined my term "tragic American illusion", which lays bare the contrast between the characters' dreams and realities, in addition to shedding light on the means by which they try to pursue their goals. Besides verifying that the ideology has an overwhelmingly influence over the protagonists' actions, the results of my study highlight that the characters' tensions between their hopes and delusions not only led to the destruction of their illusory world, but also show that moral bankruptcy and unethical practices lie at the core of the American façade of material success. In fact, money is so present in the three plays that it functions almost like the antagonist in these works. The emphasis on pursuing money at all costs is a clear reference to the American capitalist culture, in which success is measured mainly by one's ability to increase profitability.

The results of my research provide clear evidence that the American tragic character depicted in North American drama is an individual lured by the promise that he may have access to the prosperity that the American Dream can afford. Nonetheless, as I demonstrated in my analysis, for George, Willy, and Jessie, the ideology is not what it purports to be. In their attempt to achieve the promises and opportunities laid out in the description of the American Dream, the protagonists are

self-consumed by their weaknesses and turn out to be victims of their own desires. The pursuit of their dreams of land ownership and social position (George Milton), success and likeability (Willy Loman), happiness and self-agency (Jessie Cates) creates a chasm between morality and success in the three plays. In sum, the characters see their American Dream gradually devolving into dissatisfaction, isolation, and mounting despair.

In light of the outcomes of this study, I will now present suggestions for possible future research on the tragic American illusion concept. It would be interesting to consider the role of the tragic American illusion in the development of modern tragedies, drawing mainly on the works of Raymond William's *Modern tragedy* (2006), and Georg Steiner's *The death of tragedy* (1980). Although the authors present different perspectives on tragedy in the present times, their works may provide new insights on the tragic American illusion. Furthermore, I recommend that future scholars should examine and discuss the influence of manliness as an important means by which characters attempt to pursue their dreams and acquire power in US society. In this regard, the studies of Raewyn Connell's *Masculinities* (1995) and *Gender in world perspective* (2009), as well as João Silvério Trevisan's *Seis balas num buraco só: a crise do masculino* (2021) offer a good starting point for critical reflections on manliness.

In addition to the suggestions above, it is worth pointing out that American drama is fertile ground for future research which intends to conduct a thorough study on the tragic American illusion. In the table below, I present additional works and playwrights which explore, within the fabric of their productions, the concept I developed in my study.

Table 4 - Suggestion for future research on the tragic American illusion

DRAMATIST	PLAY
Eugene O'Neill	<i>The Iceman Cometh</i> (1939) <i>Long Day's journey into Night</i> (1956)
Clifford Odets	<i>Awake and Sing!</i> (1935)
Elmer Rice	<i>Street Scene</i> (1929)
Thornton Wilder	<i>Our Town</i> (1938)

Tennessee Williams	<i>Cat on a hot tin Roof</i> (1955) <i>The Glass Menagerie</i> (1944) <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> (1947)
Arthur Miller	<i>All my sons</i> (1946)
Lorraine Hansberry	<i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> (1959)
LeRoi Jones	<i>Dutchman</i> (1964)
David Mamet	<i>Glengarry Glen Ross</i> (1984) <i>American Buffalo</i> (1975)
Sam Shepard	<i>Curse of the starving class</i> (1977)
August Wilson	<i>Fences</i> (1985)
Richard Greenberg	<i>Take me out</i> (2002)
Tony Kushner	<i>Angels in America</i> (1991)
Martyna Majok	<i>Cost of living</i> (2018)

Source: SILVA (2022).

At the end of this research, which does not exhaust the many possibilities of interpretation of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*, I hope my study has contributed to the understanding of the influence of the American Dream and the tragic in those plays. I hope this study may serve as stimulus to further scholarship in the field of American drama literary criticism and foster new renderings in regard to the concept of the tragic American illusion.

In the page that precedes the introduction of my PhD research, my reader, you have noticed that there are two songs from the bands Nickelback and ABBA. In Nickelback's *Rockstar*, the lyrics present the story of an individual who is fed up with his current social and financial situation and makes a deal with the devil. He decides then to trade his life for fortune and fame. In ABBA's *Money, Money, Money*, the lyrics revolve around the dreams of a poor person, most likely a woman, who makes a lot of plans if only he/she had money. Both in *Rockstar* and in *Money, Money, Money*, individuals are guided by their money-oriented version of success and prosperity. In the three plays I analyzed, George Milton, Willy Loman and Jessie Cates were willing to do whatever it took to achieve their American Dream and end up paying a heavy price for doing so.

And you, my reader, would you change who you are to achieve what you wish for?

[Well before the student has finished asking that question, THE STAGE MANAGER awaits his reader's response. Soon afterwards, he leaves his bedroom to celebrate with his friends and advisor. Lights fade very slowly to black. The stage is now plunged into darkness].

The curtain falls.

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