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✓ How to Get What You Want in American Drama ✓

American people seem to be obsessed constantly with the American dream in many different forms. Women want to marry well, and men want to succeed in business while many people think the "perfect" look is the true American dream. Others feel that attaining wealth and property are all that is needed for happiness. These dreams, whatever they may be, are so important to Americans that most people will use almost any means to achieve this illusion of the perfect American dream. In American drama, especially in the plays that we have studied for this class, the dominant themes have pertained to achieving the American dream. These playwrights portray the attainment of this dream by a variety of means such as lying, cheating, stealing, and killing.

Lying seems to be an excellent vehicle for characters to achieve their ideals in most of the plays. The women in several of the plays are very adept at lying to achieve their goals such as Carol in Oleanna. She is angry at John for dashing her dreams of a college education so with no qualms whatsoever uses the notes she took during her meeting with him and twists them to her own purpose. Taking revenge on John, she turns his words into an incriminating accusation of sexual harassment and attempted rape to satisfy her wounded ego over her college career. Also, Mommy from Dream lives a lie so that she can achieve her dream of marrying well. She feels that she is entitled to everything of Daddy's because she's had to let him have his way with her.

She is far more concerned with her status as a well-married woman than with her love for him, if she even loves him at all. In Desire, Abbie deceives Ephraim about their son. She lets him believe the child is his even though she has been having an affair with Eben. Ephraim wants a son to take over the farm, and Abbie sees this as her only chance to keep the home she has sought for all these years. Her deceit towards Ephraim has been continual; she pretends to care for him so that she can attain her dream, a home of her own. Amanda in Menagerie is an excellent example of a woman lying to herself to preserve her dreams. Amanda tells tales of all the gentleman callers that visited her when she was young. She was the belle of the ball always and could have chosen any one of the most eligible, wealthy bachelors for a husband. She uses these illusions to promote her dream of marrying well. The women in these plays have effectively used lying to obtain their most important personal goals.

Men in the plays have also lied very efficiently to achieve their most important ideals. Willy Loman in Salesman has spent most of his life lying about his sales career. He tells himself and anyone who will listen that the only reason he is not a top salesman now is that the company decided to cut down his territory when in fact he lost his territory because he was not a good salesman. He lies about his sons; in his mind, they are smart and well liked. Willy blames Bernard for Biff not graduating; if Bernard had helped Biff cheat, he would now be successful. Wealth is so important to Willy that he encourages deceit to achieve this dream. Another character, Big Daddy from Cat, is lied to so that he can keep the illusion of the strong, patriarchal role model. Big Daddy has spent his life building the plantation and his image, as the wealthy pillar of Southern society is his dream. The other family members cannot tell him the truth about his

cancer. They feel that lying to him is better than shattering his image as the strong leader of the family. These are just a few examples of lying to achieve a dream.

Another tactic utilized by the characters in the play to gain fulfillment of their dreams is cheating. Many of the characters feel they deserve to be happy at the expense of others such as Troy in Fences. He feels that he has sacrificed everything of himself to provide for his family. When he cheats on Rose with Alberta, he justifies his actions to Rose by saying “she gives me a different idea...” and that he can “get away from the pressures and problems...be a different man” (1526). Gaining personal freedom is worth the risk of cheating on his wife to Troy; he feels that he is justified in pursuing his dreams. Abbie, in Desires, also cheats with Eben to provide the son that will enable her to take the farm from Eben. Through cheating, Abbie has furthered one of her dreams.

Stealing is another method that allows many of the characters in the play to gain personal rewards. In Raisin, Walter Lee is determined that obtaining his own business will fulfill all his dreams of wealth and success. He goes against his mother’s wishes on the use of his father’s insurance money by giving it to Willy Harris as part of an investment in a liquor store. Walter Lee is so caught up in his own dreams of owning a business that he does not even think that Willy will steal the money. When Willy does take it, Walter Lee is bitter and thinks aloud that the “takers” are what counts in this life. A different aspect on theft is presented in Salesman. Willy Loman does not hesitate to steal materials when he adds on to his house. He feels that he is entitled because he wants his house to be as good as everyone else’s house; this is part of his dream of wealth and success. His son Happy also engages in theft to further his dreams by

stealing his managers' fiancées. To him this is perfectly acceptable because they have power and wealth and this is his way of achieving his own power. Biff, Willy's other son, also has no guilt towards stealing to further his goals. He feels that it is perfectly acceptable to steal basketballs from his employer because the job is beneath him, and he can possibly gain personally from stealing the merchandise. Stealing a pen from Oliver, at first, seems perfectly acceptable because the pen seems to be a symbol of wealth and success to Biff. He expects to have his dream of success fulfilled by stealing just as his father has.

← Probably the most morbid of the methods used to attain a dream is killing someone. Many of the plays use this element rather effectively in attaining goals. The character of Dodge from Buried Child very effectively eliminates the child from his wife's incestuous relationship with their son, Tilden. He seems to feel that the family's "dirty little secret" will be safe and family's standing in the community will be protected. Dodge has many reasons for wanting the child gone and most of them involve personal gains. He does not want to be reminded that his wife and son challenged his manhood; he wants to believe that he will always be the patriarch of the family. Another character that kills to achieve a goal is Mrs. Wright in Trifles. Mrs. Hale describes her as someone who was cheerful and pleasant when she was young, but after her marriage has become distant and timid. Her life has not lived up to her youthful dreams and when her husband kills the only bright element in her life, her canary, that seems to leave her no alternative but to kill him. By ridding herself of this man that has crushed her dreams, she seems to finally gain back some of her lost dreams of a happy life. In 'night, Mother again death is portrayed as means to achieve certain desires. Jessie is

very unhappy with her life. Her son is worthless and is in trouble with the law, she could not keep her marriage together, she has epilepsy, and she can not keep a job. She sees only the elements that are wrong with her life and she compares her inadequacies to others' achievements. To her the only way to finally fulfill any part of personal success is to end her life. She seems to be satisfied with her decision after she finally has an open, honest conversation with her mother. By killing herself, she feels that she has succeeded in a way by stepping away from the most common goals such as a successful marriage, properly behaved children, and a fulfilling career. Even though Jessie seems to fulfill her goals with her death, killing seems to be such an extreme measure to obtain a goal.

Most people view the acquisition of personal goals as striving for excellence. Americans especially view the idea of the American dream as an ambition worthy of continual pursuit. American playwrights do not impart to their audiences that attaining personal goals is wrong or evil, but they do point out that many of the methods used to achieve these dreams are simply unacceptable. How far are people willing to go to get what they think they want out life? Many playwrights such as Albee, Williams, Glaspell, and Miller seem to be warning society of the dangers of lying, cheating, stealing, and killing to obtain dreams.