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American Illusions

American definitions of success are developed and influenced in many ways. Many Americans see success through solely monetary measurements while others define success in more qualitative terms. In any case the question becomes, what is the overarching view of American success and how does that view define us as a people or a nation? Many Americans, especially young Americans, define success through their perceptions of society as opposed to realistically centered experiences and as a result their views or measurements of success are often impractical. A kind of addiction to success and denial of reality has developed in the minds of many Americans and consequently they become confined by false perceptions and inevitably succumb to socially manufactured deceptions.

The notion of addiction is one of the main themes in Karen Heller's, *By Success Obsessed*. In the text Heller concentrates on success or ambition and the negative affects it has on young women. In one passage, she says that success is 'out there on that far promontory with those other chimeras: wealth, happiness, power, and fame" (Keller 121) Her main point seems to be that success confines people, specifically women, and that it destroys the true value of a life that could be separate from the race to accumulate monetary wealth. In other words, this addiction creates a vicious cycle which breeds human desire for a certain measure of success that will forever remain unattainable to the vast majority of people.

The lack of realism that is fostered and embodied by many Americans, especially the younger generation is due, in large part, to the fact that they have not truly experienced any truth or certainty save that of family or higher education. As a result false statements and improbable predictions or possibilities can much more easily sway their notion of the future. This is where the impact of socially manufactured deceptions takes root in the psyche of Americans and begins to create an unrealistic perception of success or progress. Furthermore, once certain fallacious anticipations or desires are successfully embedded in the minds of these young Americans, an ardent quest for attainment begins.

This same type of struggle for material success is portrayed in Arthur Miller's, *Death of a Salesman*. The main theme of Miller's play centers around the portrayal of a family who lives life for money and the problems associated with such a lifestyle. The troubles or hardships related to a life that is motivated by pursuit of money driven success are issues that are rarely discussed or accounted for among young Americans. Happy, one of the main characters, fits the young American model perfectly. His perceptions and goals regarding life and success are developed solely through his relation to his father. One specific example in the text is when Happy is talking about the merchandise manager and he says:

He can't enjoy it once it's finished. And I know that's just what I would do. I don't know what the hell I'm working for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment—all alone. And I think of the rent I'm paying. And it's crazy. But then, it's what I always wanted (12).

As seen by this quote Happy never really accepts his situation and he seems to be able to lie to himself so that he doesn't have to realize the true reality of the world around

him. Which is similar to that of many Americans today who get caught up in false perceptions and thereby cause themselves to overlook the reality of life and the hardships of achieving monetary or material success.

Another writer who commented a great deal on success and how it affects American society was de Tocqueville. One of his main points deals with the never-ending cycle of success that was mentioned above. At one point in the text he says, “He who has set his heart exclusively upon the pursuit of worldly welfare is always in a hurry, for he has but a limited time at his disposal to reach it, to grasp it, and to enjoy it” (334) In other words, de Tocqueville is commenting on the phenomenon that exists in America where men are never satisfied with what they accumulate or accomplish. This is especially true with the younger generations who are always on the move and constantly looking for the next thing to conquer. Which leads to the point that the ambition of Americans in and of itself is not so much the dilemma, but more so the intended or perceived end of that ambition. In other words, the main point that many Americans conveniently forget to acknowledge is

Young Americans as well as most Americans have perceptions of success that are developed as a result of unrealistic experiences and indirect relations with people in the “real world”. These experiences in turn define America as a people and confine their potential to create real, meaningful lives that involve more than a quest for money or recognition. The overarching theme being that success, personified in money and material accumulation, is not a lazy river to wealth but an illusion that is largely created by societal misperception and subconsciously or deliberately tolerated in the minds of countless Americans.