

**Beyond the couch:
psychoanalytic consumer character readings into narcissism and denial.**

Dr Georgios Patsiaouras, Professor James Fitchett and Dr Andrea Davies

University of Leicester, School of Management, United Kingdom

e-mail: gp83@le.ac.uk

Abstract

The contribution of psychoanalysis to marketing theory does not need to come from putting consumers on the couch. We show how psychoanalysis and marketing can be approached as character analysis using fiction, literature and popular culture through a psychoanalytic informed character reading of Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's (1926/1950) *The Great Gatsby* and Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's (1949/1968) *Death of a Salesman*. We examine the consumption desires and practices of these key protagonists to show how the psychoanalytic theories of narcissism and denial can be applied to explain their predicament. Our analysis emphasizes temporality, describing psychic time, its functioning with the ego-ideal, and how consumption is implicated. We conclude that the seemingly distant domains of psychoanalysis, marketing and literature-fiction offers an interesting synthesis that is able to provide insights for consumer theory, the contemporary consumer and the historical account of consumers of the past.

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Introduction

“In the realm of fiction we find the plurality of lives which we need”
(Freud, 1915: 291)

Concepts such as ‘desire’, ‘drives’ and the ‘unconscious’ have an almost self-evident relevance to the way in which marketing and consumption is commonly represented today, making further reflection on the contribution and influence of psychoanalysis a must. Despite an obvious fit the influence of psychoanalysis on the field is not especially visible (Desmond, 2012). The relative absence of psychoanalysis in marketing and consumer research corresponds with broader trends and fashions in the social sciences rather than something that is specific to the marketing academe. It is well established that the 1960s and 1970s saw consumer research theory looking to behavioural and cognitive psychology rather than to psychoanalysis for its foundational theory, and as these conventions became subject to challenge, it was to theories of culture, social constructivism and phenomenology that the field turned for progressive direction. Until recently psychoanalysis has not featured prominently in debates and controversies in consumer research, which is one reason why today many critical and cultural researchers in marketing first encounter psychoanalytical concepts via Lacan and Žižek rather than through Freud or Klein.

In the last ten years there has been a revival in interest in ideas that link marketing to psychoanalysis with several authors (Tadajewski, 2006; Fullerton, 2007; Schwarzkopf and Gries, 2010) looking at the impact of motivation research and psychoanalytic theory on marketing practices, consumer behaviour and the evolution of marketing thought. While these reviews have given greater presence to psychoanalytic concepts the application of psychoanalysis remains relatively underdeveloped in all but a few recent applications (Desmond 2012; Lambert and Desmond 2013; Cluley and Dunne 2012).

Outside the marketing field, psychoanalytic informed interpretation of literature, popular culture and other cultural productions have been used to inform interpretations of consumption

and marketing (Felman, 1981; Bowlby, 1985, 1993a, 1993b). Fiction, songs, plays and other cultural texts are widely available and accessible to analysis and avoid the obstacles that have traditionally limited a psychoanalytic understanding. In this paper we aim to demonstrate how psychoanalytic readings of popular culture texts can be used to understand consumers of the past and the evolving nature of the marketplace and consumer culture. We illustrate how character analyses of protagonists in popular culture texts can provide useful empirical sites in which to probe the use of psychoanalytic concepts such as narcissism and denial in the shaping of consumer desire, feeling and action. To this end we bring two well-known texts to your attention, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

(Psycho)analysis and cultural text

There is an established tradition in marketing and consumer research aimed at analyzing interpretive insights on consumption and marketing practices via the use of fiction, popular culture, comics and films. Holbrook's and Grayson's (1986) study on the semiology of cinematic consumption for example focused not only on the structure of a plot or screenplay but also on how consumption experiences reflect aspects of character development by illuminating the symbolic meaning of commodities for protagonists. Reflecting on the interaction between marketing and literature Brown (1999) reviews the growth of 'literature in marketing' and identifies how literary criticism had been applied to consumption phenomena and advertising practices. Brown (2004) gives a comparative reading of Levitt and Holbrook, drawing on Freudian concepts. He locates the father-son relationships of Levitt and Holbrook to unravel their frustration(s), anxieties and personal development.

The application of literary analysis has somewhat neglected psychoanalytic readings of the consumer. It has primarily focused on semiotic theories and techniques which have been used to investigate both the intention of marketers behind advertising images and the interpretation of these campaigns from the view of potential customers (Mick, 1986; McQuarrie and Mick, 1992; Ogilvie and Mizerski, 2011). Stern (1989) emphasises that reader-centred psychoanalytic approaches to consumer desire and fantasy can elaborate on the mental space, values, pleasures

and hidden desires of the consumer. Stern introduces the utility of psychoanalysis to learn about consumers, concentrating on authorial motivation but limited reference to character analysis.

In this paper we develop psychoanalytic readings of fictitious characters as consumers. This enables us to explore the relevance of psychoanalysis for consumer behaviour via literature and vice versa. Our study aims to contribute to the literature of marketing and consumer studies by elaborating on a psychoanalytic understanding of how the concepts of narcissism and denial inform and shape consumer desire and choice. We take *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman* as historical fiction texts to identify narcissism and denial in the protagonists. Viewing these texts as spaces where meaning and knowledge *already reside*, we adopt a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective by immersing ourselves below the ‘surface’ meaning of the heroes’ thoughts and actions. We show how Fitzgerald’s and Miller’s texts embody and communicate unconscious material and meaning in their characters’ psycho-biographical portraits. Our psychoanalytic reading focuses on the personal and individual psycho-dramas of the two principle characters: Jay Gatsby (*The Great Gatsby*) and Willy Loman (*Death of a Salesman*). By ruminating on their existential condition within and the wider social context we consider their lives and consumption choices. Their divergent and contrasting narratives of consumer reality reveal complex psychoanalytic dispositions, but which ultimately lead the same morbid end.

Method and approach

Putting the Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman on the analytic couch can be considered a problematic proposal since neither character can be treated as a ‘real analysand.’ Literary analysis does not restrict the scrutiny of fictive characters (Toolan, 1998) but as we might anticipate these ‘clinical’ analyses of literal characters are not without their critics. These include problematizing the analogy which is drawn between fictitious personalities and real human beings as well as attention to the analysts’ determination to identify unverified unconscious motivations (Frosh, 2010; Wright, 2002). Felman (1981) argues that to simply apply psychoanalysis to literature is brutal and instead what is needed is to allow for a symbiotic relationship where the opportunities literature brings to psychoanalysis and understanding the psyche is also recognized and embraced.

In this study we employ a Freudian inspired analysis to explicate the subjectivities of our characters and provide a psychoanalytic reading of how the concepts of narcissism and denial inform and feed their aspirations and desires for others (family, friends and partners), material objects and professional outcomes. Our intention is not to apply ‘psychobiography’ (Elms, 1993) which attends to authors’ and scriptwriters’ lives and motivation. The characters Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman live through different periods of American history - during the economic prosperity of the Roaring Twenties (Gatsby) and the industrial boom of the late 1940s (Loman). Our analysis focuses on the formation of characters’ conscious and unconscious consumption thoughts and habits and how these motivate their behaviors within what was a dynamic cultural and economic environment of emerging tastes, business practices and consumer cultures. Perhaps the most common characteristic between Gatsby and Loman is the intense presence and expression of fervent wishes and consumer desires which trigger powerful emotions, passionate feelings, vivid imagination and destruction. We next provide a brief synopsis of the two texts, so as to introduce readers to the two protagonists from which we develop our character analyses, and to assist readers who may be unfamiliar with the cultural texts.

Jay Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* is widely considered a masterpiece of American literature. The narrator, Nick Carraway, is a young middle class Yale graduate who moves to an affluent suburb in New York to gain knowledge of the ‘bond business’. Nick’s mysterious neighbour is the young and extremely successful Jay Gatsby whose extravagant lifestyle and parties afford him a semi-mythical reputation of being an inheritor of a vast fortune as well as an adventurous and cosmopolitan entrepreneur. Gatsby confesses to Nick that his fortune was made by illegal activities and admits that behind the conspicuous display of material wealth and leisure he has a longing to be reunited with Daisy, his first love. Daisy lives in an ‘Old Money’ area of New York with her wealthy husband Tom. Tom is unfaithful to Daisy and has an affair with Myrtle Wilson, an insecure woman who tolerates violence and humiliation from Tom. During a party at a hotel Gatsby confronts Daisy and demands that she leave Tom. Gatsby and Daisy drive back home in Gatsby’s car followed by Nick. Nick finds out that Gatsby’s car hit and killed

Myrtle Wilson. George (Myrtle's husband) suspects she was killed by her lover and tracing Gatsby's car he shoots him dead in the pool at his mansion before killing himself. Nick recounts with disgust and sorrow that the only people who plan to attend the funeral of the wealthy and well-connected socialite are a few servants and Gatsby's father; a poor farmer who is nevertheless proud of his son's determination and upward social mobility.

In 1920 Fitzgerald argued that "an author ought to write for the youth of his own generation, the critics of the next, and the school masters ever afterward." This stands as a rather prophetic quote given the audience magnetism to Jay Gatsby's personality (Bryer, 1978:6). It is also evidenced in that almost a century later critics and educators continue to read, discuss, debate and analyze Fitzgerald's depiction of American youth. Economists, management theorists and consumer researchers go beyond discussions of youth and have examined Fitzgerald's book to consider the false values of the upper classes (Canterbery, 1999) and to examine the construction of consumption identities in an era of economic boom, indulgence and status competition via display of wealth (Jack 2010 in Ellis et al. 2010).

Willy Loman

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is also considered a masterpiece of contemporary American drama and literature, winning numerous awards including the Pulitzer Prize. The play is presented via a series of chronological events which occur during one evening and the next day. Willy Loman is a 63 year old salesman from New York and is married and has two sons. He is underachieving at work but this is only a partial reflection on his situation. Willy Loman has not been able to furnish his home and family with the material comfort he imagined he would be able to provide. We join Willy and his family as he returns home after another unsuccessful business trip. His wife, Linda, prompts the aging Willy to ask his boss to let him work from his home city so as to avoid the risks and dangers of life on the road. Willy's elder son, Biff, is 34 years old and is introduced as a son who failed to go to college, is a bitter disappointment to his father working in low-paid unskilled jobs. We are also introduced to Happy, Willy's younger son. Happy does his best to please and emulate his father. Both sons visit the family home and both express worry about their father's excessive fantasising and day-dreaming. Seeking to allay Willy's complaints and idealistic aspirations for both his sons, they announce that Biff has plans for a business that will deliver the much desired economic success and status. The next day Willy loses his

temper with his boss and gets fired and Biff finds he is unable to borrow money to finance his business plans. Meeting for dinner at a restaurant Biff tries to explain what has happened but fails to get Willy to fully comprehend. At home later that evening there is an emotional confrontation where Biff asks Willy to accept him simply as an ordinary man. He wants Willy to acknowledge that his dreams of business success for Biff are a self-deception and unrealistic. Willy sacrificially kills himself in a car crash, with the plan that Biff could use the money from the life insurance to fund his first entrepreneurial venture. The final scene is very poignant: contrasting Willy's delusion that he was popular and well-liked with the fact that no-one but his family and one friend attend the funeral.

When the play premiered on Broadway in 1949 it was widely praised by audiences and critics, offering original and forceful insights into human relationships in a post-war American economy and society (Sterling, 2002). There are many interpretations of the play: Miller's ideas and intentions have been approached and discussed as the failure of the American Dream: the destruction of a salesman by aggressive business tactics, dysfunctional family values and intergenerational conflict; the downfall of a man obsessed with money and social status, as well as a critique of the moral values and ethos produced by American capitalism (Koon, 1983). Competitive polarization between the individual tragedy and the political dimensions of the play has created opposing and somehow incommensurable camps of interpretation. These have eclipsed the application of psychoanalytic tools to elaborate on Willy's desires, thoughts and actions (Mitchell, 1990; Tyson, 1994).

A story of consumer (ex)success?

Many critics concur that the popularity and resonance of *The Great Gatsby* lies to a great degree on Fitzgerald's literary ability to capture the self-indulgence and recklessness of the Roaring 20s' (Tredell, 2007). Lasch (1991) by describing a culture of narcissism as one focussed on ephemeral hedonistic satisfaction and the desire to live for the moment without a sense of historical continuity or responsibility. 'Normal' narcissism helps individuals to direct desires towards the care of themselves, enhancing their instinct for self-preservation. When the condition of healthy self-love is lost it can become substituted by a pathological megalomania, excessive self-admiration and an unrealistic sense of the self. In Freud's 1914 essay "On Narcissism", he introduces the concept of the ego-ideal as the perfect image of oneself to which the narcissist aspires. Freud elaborates on narcissistic tendencies as:

“characteristics which, if they occurred singly, might be put down to megalomania: an over-estimation of the power of their wishes and mental acts, the ‘omnipotence of thoughts’, a belief in the thaumaturgic force of words, and a technique for dealing with the external world - ‘magic’ - which appears to be a logical application of these grandiose premises.” (Freud, 1914/1991:75)

For the narcissist possessions, objects, partners or individuals are felt to be an ‘entitlement’ (Rothstein, 1985). Kernberg (1975:16) argues that perhaps the most common characteristic of the narcissistic personality is the “unusual degree of self-reference in their interactions with other people, a great need to be loved and admired by others, and a curious apparent contradiction between a very inflated concept of themselves and an inordinate need for tribute for others”.

Kernberg (1975) clarifies that several components and behaviours such as a sense of superiority, entitlement, exhibitionism and authority characterize the thoughts and behaviour of narcissistic personalities. From a superficial perspective narcissistic individuals can be portrayed as very sociable and outgoing but a more nuanced exploration reveals that it is the narcissist’s intense desire for adoration and admiration from others that creates a deep dependency and need for approval. Campbell and Foster (2007: 117) reduce the qualities of the narcissistic self to three main ingredients: “a positive self, a relative lack of interest in warm and caring interpersonal relationships, and reliance upon self-regulatory strategies”. Regulatory strategies can vary in terms of expression and include for example, exploitation, vanity and the development of social skills and abilities so as to look unique, important, successful or special.

The narcissists’ ego-ideal is continuously mirrored in the possessions, achievements and shallow social relationships they seek to establish (Kohut, 1971; Mollon, 1993; Flanagan, 1996). Linking the Freudian notion of the perfect self (ego-ideal) with narcissistic behaviour and defences, Kernberg (1975:17) refers to the unhealthy and destructive impact of the ‘grandiose ego-ideal’ on narcissist’s life which leads to the development of a ‘pathological grandiose self’ that constantly seeks self-admiration through the devaluation of others. The outcome is that narcissists are “completely unable really to depend on anybody because of their deep distrust and depreciation of others” (Kernberg, 1975:17). Unfettered narcissistic behaviour and talk is not socially acceptable, is often perceived as threatening and can also attract social stigma. For these

reasons consumption is a viable means for which a narcissistic personality can achieve their desires (Lambert and Desmond, 2013; Cluley and Dunne, 2012; Bowlby 1993a).

The display of luxury brands and material goods, along with the rise of consumer culture, constitutes one of the most efficient means in order to satisfy narcissistic needs for prestige and social status. Gatsby constructs an identity of an exotic, heroic and cosmopolitan past and immerses himself and his guests in an orgy of spending, conspicuous consumption and waste of goods, services and symbols. Gatsby's Rolls-Royce, hydroplane, huge swimming pool, 'crates of oranges and lemons for cocktails', a full orchestra and 'a high Gothic library, panelled with carved English oak' and numerous servants (Fitzgerald, 1925/1960: 37) amaze and enthrall the hordes of visitors wondering about the identity and past of the host. We see that Jay Gatsby has meticulously organized the display of an exhilarating universe of material wealth and leisure which supplies him with the excitement, compliments, and the flattering gossip of freeloading guests. Gatsby demonstrates the usefulness of material objects and possession of luxury symbols to erect the ego-ideal, minimize the gap between actual and ideal self, and idealize "nostalgic recreations of a golden past or utopian visions of glorious future" (Gabriel and Lang, 2006: 90). In narrating his past Gatsby says:

"After that I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe - Paris, Venice, Rome - collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little, things for myself only." (Fitzgerald, 1925/1960: 99)

Gatsby's narcissistic ego-ideal is filled and supplied by his own idealized image of perfection and success - the grandiose self (Mitchell, 1991). Nick summarizes Gatsby's exaggerated and semi-divine self-perception of superiority and sense of omnipotence:

"The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God - a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that - and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end." (Fitzgerald, 1925/1960: 99)

Gatsby wants to achieve higher levels of entitlement, success, uniqueness and status which Campbell et al (2004) identify as expressions of narcissist's positive and grandiose self. He longs for Daisy to visit his extravagant house (his universe of self-admiration) not only to experience his grandiose material success but because her visit and approval would supply the narcissistic needs of his ideal self. Nick tells us that a "universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out of his brain" (Fitzgerald, 1925/1960: 99) and that Gatsby idealized Daisy as a royal figure who lives "high in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl" (Fitzgerald, 1925/1960: 120).

Gatsby is conscious that that conspicuous waste, abstention from work and display of hereditary wealth were the honorific signs of prestige and social status in his time, and he hopes to use this as a way to attract and lure Daisy. Gatsby never uses the books in his massive library room, or flies the expensive hydroplane, and he avoids drinking alcohol or introducing himself to his high status and enthusiastic guests during his luxurious parties (Tyson, 1994). For Gatsby his social relations supply his own feelings of self-doubt to sure up a shallow and fragile ego-ideal. Kernberg (1975: 17) says a narcissist like Gatsby will "experience little empathy for the feeling of others, they obtain very little enjoyment from life other than from the tributes they receive from others or from their own grandiose fantasies". We see the ownership of material possessions and establishment of interpersonal relationships serves a common purpose for Gatsby: to confer and communicate more fame, prestige and status to his own ego-ideal. Away from the magnificently decorated rooms full of expensive antiques, classy furniture and precious commodities, Gatsby spends most of his time in his bedroom which "was the simplest room of all" (Fitzgerald, 1925/1960: 120). Commodity narcissism is not just about having, accumulating and publicly displaying goods and services but is also the "desire to have at the expense of others" (Cluley and Dunne, 2012: 3). Commodity narcissism is evident in Jay Gatsby's desire to elevate himself above his neighbours, antagonists and of course uninvited guests, and even his 'love' for Daisy is about having her at Tom's expense.

For the narcissist there is a clear division between powerful, well-known and affluent individuals and the rest. Kernberg cited in Lasch (1991) argues that narcissistic patients:

"are afraid of not belonging to the company of the great, rich, and powerful, and of belonging instead to the 'mediocre', by which they mean worthless and

despicable rather than average in the ordinary sense of the term.” (Lasch, 1991: 84)

Daisy fuels Jay Gatsby’s narcissistic ego-ideal. Daisy, now married to Tom symbolises belonging to the upper-class old-money milieu. A reunion with Daisy would simultaneously annihilate Gatsby’s upbringing in a poor family and his criminal activity as a bootlegger. Gatsby needs to not only mesmerize and charm Daisy with superfluous spending and luxury consumption but also to transform his ‘new money’, accumulated by criminal and underworld activities, to ‘old money’ status. As Nick tells us:

“Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor.”
(Fitzgerald, 1925/1960: 90)

Gatsby is fearful of his past and fearful of returning to it. He desires class mobility and is frustrated by failure to achieve respectability.

Narcissism, Consumption and Time

Time, the passage of time and the experience of time, is important to understand unhealthy narcissism. Freud (1923: 152) distinguishes between ‘transference neuroses’ and ‘narcissistic neuroses’ identifying that the latter emerges from “a conflict between the ego and the superego” and it is in the super-ego that the ego-ideal is located. Although several different types of neuroses have been defined and discussed in psychoanalysis, patients with narcissistic neuroses, cannot attain transference with the analyst and Freud connects this with the development of psychosis. Narcissistic patients are unable to come to terms with the transience of time and this is also why they report feelings of emptiness and low self-esteem during the second half of their lives, especially in societies where the ageing process signifies dependence, lack of beauty, charm and fame (Kernberg 1975). In the final sentence of the novel we read that “so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” *Time* is a central concept in the novel where Jay Gatsby immerses himself in the financial euphoria and carnivalesque entertainment climate of the Jazz Age to the extent that he yearns to manipulate and distort time,

avoiding the responsibilities of tomorrow's realities, and importantly for Gatsby changing his past.

There is a universe of signs, status symbols, trophies and commodities that Gatsby employs to distort reality and manipulate time, particularly his past. A grand colonial mansion in Long Island, live musicians, sumptuous food for hordes of uninvited guests, a medal for bravery during WWI, a photograph from his 'Oxford days' and Gatsby's car "a rich cream colour...terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns" (Fitzgerald, 1925/1960:68). The exhibition of material wealth and Gatsby's desire for upward social mobility via status symbols becomes a vehicle to 'substitute' or 'erase' parts of his *past* identity. This substitutions and erasure of the past is evident in many ways. For example, we know about Gatsby's upbringing in poverty with a poor education and a family described as "shiftless and unsuccessful people" (Fitzgerald, 1925/1960:99). We also witness Gatsby telling Nick about his wealthy parents from the "Western city of San Francisco", a substitution of his biological family since "his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all" (Fitzgerald, 1925/1960: 76). Gatsby wants "nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: "I never loved you"...and "they were to go back to Louisville and be married from her house – just as if it were five years ago" (Fitzgerald 1926/1950:111). By asking Daisy to say to Tom "I never loved you" Gatsby aspires to obliterate four years of marriage and to delete his own past, as well as his ongoing illegal activities. The significance of time and how Gatsby manipulates time is particularly noticeable in the well cited dialogue where Nick and Gatsby debate whether the past can be recreated. Nick argues that "You can't repeat the past". Gatsby is astonished with Nick's defeatism and confidently replies "Can't repeat the past? Why, of course you can" (Fitzgerald, 1926/1950: 111).

Nick acknowledges Gatsby's narcissistic desire to control and evade time to conclude that:

He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was . . .
(Fitzgerald, 1925/1960:112).

As Mitchell (1991) observes, Gatsby's perseverance to reinstate an idealized past reveals an egotistic and desperate desire to control his parasitical guests, believe that he is financially and emotionally superior to Tom, and demand Daisy to refresh their romance. In Gatsby's mind economic prosperity and luxury possessions allow him not only to build his self-image and gain social status but also to imprison 'time', undo history, dilute and replace a past of poverty. As Tyson (1994) suggests Gatsby's struggle to acquire the money so as to buy and visibly display the possessions in his mansion functions as a desire to cancel history and as a healing or gratification of his own narcissistic rage and existential burden.

Kohut (1972: 385) points out how narcissistic rage emerges once a narcissistic vulnerable individual experiences an injury which threatens "the limitlessness of the power and knowledge of a grandiose self." An individual's anger transubstantiates into "the need for revenge, for righting a wrong, by undoing a hurt by whatever means" (Kohut, 1972: 380). For Gatsby's ego-ideal the impulse and destructive emotion of inferiority comes from his previous absence of wealth that prompted Daisy to settle down with Tom. When Tom publicly un.masks Gatsby's background he loses his temper and shouts that "She never loved you do you hear? She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me" (Fitzgerald, 1925/1960: 107). We might consider that Gatsby is overreacting to Tom's revelations and is unnecessarily aggressive but this is characteristic of the narcissist when faced with individuals who reject their values, criticize their image or threaten them (Bushman and Baumeister, 1998). Gatsby's narcissist personality views people and objects as mirror-images of his own 'grandiose self' and the absence, loss or distortion of the mirror-self creates unbearable anxiety, resentment and emptiness (Bromberg, 1983; Kohut, 1977). Once his delusions come under threat he experiences sadness, melancholia and a feeling of extreme loss (Bowlby 1993a). In the last day of Jay Gatsby's life he realizes that Daisy's future is with Tom and Nick tells us that Jay Gatsby:

"didn't believe it would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream." (Fitzgerald, 1925/1960: 120)

A story of consumer failure

In *Death of a Salesman* there is a noticeable lack of references to consumption objects, status symbols and luxurious goods but this does not mean they do not hold a symbolic importance in the framing of Loman's character. The absence of material wealth signal Willy's failure; a failure to furnish his family with the material comfort he expected to be able to give to them and to himself. The few passing references to consumer goods and brands are contradictory and chaotic. Shortly after proudly celebrating the "Chevrolet...is the greatest car ever built" Willy goes on to demonise the same product, "they ought to prohibit the manufacture of that car" (Miller, 1949: 26). In Willy Loman's life consumption and possessions take their symbolic role through absence rather than presence, and this absence signifies Willy's chronic dissatisfaction with his self-image. Ironically, Willy kills himself with the assistance of modern commodities and appliances (car, gas, and hose). These products becoming totally present only at the point of oblivion.

Psychoanalytical attention has been given to *Death of the Salesman* to include Willy Loman's pathological narcissism (Mitchell, 1990) along with an analysis of family relationships and dynamics (Manocchio and William, 1995). Our focus is on his narcissistic behaviour and how the denial of a painful 'external reality' (failure) and daydreaming (suspension of a painful external reality) operate as defence mechanisms. Denial is maintained through Willy's daydreams which are marked out with material and business success. Not every person or character in the play that lives and works under the same capitalist regime ends up destroying him or herself. Thus we focus on Willy's predominantly personal psychological breakdown resulting from his inability to cope with failure.

Narcissism, Consumer Failure and Denial

Willy's brother Ben made a fortune at the age of 21. He is charming, wealthy and is the mirror-opposite of Willy's failed ambition. Ben has achieved what Willy desires, and Ben haunts and feeds Willy's frustration with himself, emphasising his failure. Ben epitomises Willy's confidence in the American Dream which Willy believes is achieved through a winning personality and successful image. Willy exhorts his sons to develop and nurture the main features of being well-liked, telling them that these are the ticket and indispensable condition required in order to succeed.

“Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. . . I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. Willy Loman is here!” (Miller, 1949:23).

Willy comes back time and time again to repeat his idea or formula for success – to build an attractive and saleable image. Willy argues that “that’s the wonder, the wonder of this country. . . that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked!” (Miller, 1949: 68). As Campbell et al (2002) suggest narcissists might place much more emphasis on how their physical appearance can constitute the means to achieve increased status, power and influence, and in the play Willy Loman remains intransigent in the importance of being noticed and looking good, a saleable image.

We see his belief in the omnipotence of appearance when he advises his sons that “it’s who you know and the smile on your face”, “it’s not what you say – it’s how you say it” and that the “personality wins the day” (Miller, 1949: 65). Bowlby (1993a) suggests that selling is not something reserved just for salesmen but has become part of everyday life, it is an ‘act of living’ itself. So while it would be easy to read Willy Loman simply as a portrait of a salesman not adjusting well to a changing industrial base and evolving commercial reality we should rather see Willy’s job as an index of his whole life and psychological state. Willy is not only a failed salesman but also a failed father, failed neighbour and failed husband and these failures in his social and personal life are aspects of the play that can be eclipsed. He believes it is necessary to furnish his life materially so he can be recognised and admired in the neighbourhood, will earn adoration and respect from his sons, wife, and be respected by business acquaintances and partners. Kernberg (1989) elaborates on narcissist’s desire to come close to their ego-ideal saying that:

“Narcissistic patients typically project their own pathologic grandiose self onto their temporary love objects, so that they are either idealizing others who unconsciously represent themselves, or expecting admiration from others while identifying themselves with their own grandiose self-structure.” (Kernberg, 1989: 724).

Willy Loman’s frustration and eventual disappointment stem both from the fact that he never managed to compete or match with the successful and idealized image of his brother and that he never attracted the desired admiration from his sons. This series of failures leads to excessive self-absorption and day-

dreaming along with intense ambition so as to cope with feelings of inferiority. As Vaillant (1992) argues, back in 1924 Freud used for the first time the term “denial of external reality” elaborating on how ego mechanisms of defence, such as distortion, projection and repression, might form a hierarchical relationship to each other. Almost ten years later, Anna Freud (1937) offered the first detailed study of defence mechanisms by summarizing, enumerating and developing the findings of her father into ten main defence mechanisms. Although the study focused primarily on repression, regression and projection, Anna Freud probed into how denial responds to anxiety by precluding threatening ideas, harmful thoughts and impulses from intruding and affecting the conscience. Vaillant (1992) defines ‘denial’ as individual’s refusal to accept the threatening and unpleasant aspects of external reality so as to reduce and decrease his/her anxiety which stems from an anxiety-provoking stimulus (for example a medical diagnosis).

Stubbornly refusing to acknowledge his shortcomings and limitations, Willy Loman denies his failure to build and promote a successful image. Unable to meet his ego-ideal and employing defence mechanisms against failure, he seeks to alleviate anxiety stemming from a harsh external reality of insecurity, unemployment and defeatism. Although defence mechanisms like denial and nostalgia can assist the individual to balance his/her inner conflicts and enhance social relationships (Freud, 1938; Cramer, 1999; Blackman, 2003), in Loman’s psyche these mechanisms support a persistent refusal to embrace an objective reality and its unpleasant aspects. Before Willy decides to kill himself, Biff exhorts him to embrace an emancipating self-discovery but this proves to be fatal. Biff asks him to acknowledge that they are both ‘a dime a dozen’ and were “never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them” (Miller, 1949: 101). Even after such a brutally frank and straightforward exchange Willy cannot accept such a negative image and Biff is left screaming at him “I’m one buck per hour, Willy!” Willy continues to deny reality, rationalizing Biff’s emotional outbreak as a sign of personal approval in his father. Willy remarks to his wife “isn’t that-isn’t remarkable? Biff, he likes me!” (Miller, 1949:106).

Narcissism and Nostalgia

For Willy the old ways of salesmanship and neighbour relations based on popularity, charisma is fading. He is disorientated and unable to adapt to the changing nature of business where fierce competition is

replacing collaboration and networks, in what Friedman (2004) identifies as the transformation of salesmanship from art to business science. Willy is older and tired and we see him choose denial and nostalgia over his present realities when events and conflicts threaten his ego-ideal. Willy's psychological decline is expressed via pleasant or painful regressive episodes, hallucinations and waves of nostalgia related to true events or day-dreams of economic and social success or failure. His ambivalence towards modernity, denial for the present and his nostalgia for the past reoccur several times through references to the good old days. On several occasions Willy reminisces the semi-mythical character of David Singleman; the salesman who enjoyed popularity and business success until the age of eighty-four - exemplifying professional success securing a life of material success:

“in those days there was personality in it. . . 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” (Miller, 1949:63).

Personal nostalgia functions at an existential level by removing a person's responsibility for his failure and allowing existential inwardness so as to cope with present circumstances (Sohn, 1983; Sedekides et al, 2003). Boym (2001: 41) describes restorative nostalgia as “inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones” and that it “reappears as a defence mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life” (Boym, 2001: 14). In the play we witness Willy trying to protect the ideals from which he believes material wealth, status and popularity will follow. Willy imagines the time when his teenage sons once adored and admired him and Willy would tell them how to master the American-dream. He nostalgically recalls when Charley's son Bernard - an excellent student and once classmate of Willy's son - told him that Biff might fail a course and wouldn't be able to graduate. As Brandlee and Emmons (1992) suggest, narcissists develop a tendency to surpass others by displaying a high degree of competitiveness in knowledge based tasks, such as written exams, and publicly visible activities like sports. They will also highlight their skills and superiority even if their performance or results poor in reality. Willy re-tells this story with delight, marginalizing the importance of hard work in school and instead championing the primary importance of maintaining a popular image, or what we might say as a successful positioning of one's person in the marketplace for personalities. For Willy it is crucial that Bernard “isn't well-liked” and popular amongst his schoolmates:

“**Willy:** That’s just what I mean. Bernard can get the best marks in school, y’understand, but when he gets out in the business world you are going to be five times ahead of him. That’s why I thank Almighty God you are both built like Adonis” (Miller, 1949: 23).

Nostalgic episodes and denial of the present take place when Willy attempts to escape a series of traumas arising from interpersonal conflict. We see that seconds after he loses his job Willy psychically moves back to talk about the time when he once had the opportunity to supervise Ben’s successful corporation in Alaska. Nonetheless, attempts to substitute and submerge a painful reality with a distorted perception of the past only increase the intensity of his internal conflicts. Towards the end of the play Willy Loman’s family and friends attempt to restore and adjust Willy’s distorted perception of social reality. Charley, Willy’s long-time neighbour, friend and subject of Willy’s criticism tries to correct his delusions, attempting to demythologize Willy’s business gods and false archetypes when he asks:

“Why must everybody like you? Who liked J.P.Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he’d look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was very well-liked.” (Miller, 1949: 97).

For Willy financial failure and unpopularity equate to the loss of meaning he has constructed through fantasy and memory. In the final action of denial Willy abandons his reminiscences and kills himself, lamenting that “you end up worth more dead than alive”. Incapable of dealing with the accumulation of disappointments Willy aims to enhance his idealized personal image of success believing that a well-attended funeral will re-establish the iconic paternal status in the eyes of his son. Willy dies in denial never able to adjust or solve the difficult realities of his life. Mitchell (1990) pinpoints Willy’s anger as the main cause for his suicide along with the gradual realization that he wasn’t liked by fellow salesmen and colleagues. During the Requiem of the play Charley encapsulates the dramatic aspects of a salesman’s life, a life itself in commodity form:

“You don’t understand. Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there’s no rock bottom to the life...He’s a man way out there in the blue riding on a smile and a

shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back - that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple spots on your hat and you're finished." (Miller, 1949:107).

Storying Consumer Ex(success) and Failure

Our analysis locates and describes two stories, one of narcissistic consumption excess/success and one of narcissistic consumption failure. For a narcissist the ego-ideal appears as a 'grandiose ego-ideal' and has a destructive impact upon both Gatsby and Lomax. Both protagonists are driven to extremes of behaviour in their denial. Such pathological behaviours are a result of a narcissist's continuous desire for self-admiration and the devaluation of others. The 'grandiose self' is unable to depend on or listen to anybody because of a deep depreciation of others. A narcissist is unable to take a 'reality check' and denial and nostalgia we have shown are important ego-defences which are used to keep external reality out.

While we show that both Gatsby and Loman act and have subjectivities that are narcissistic, we also show that they display and have different narcissistic qualities. There are key differences between the strategies, actions, qualities and practices that they employ: Gatsby's behaviour and thoughts display vanity, a desire to be exploitative so as to achieve his goals, lack of empathy and a feeling of omnipotence. Willy Loman accentuates the importance of physical appearance and of being admired and popular in his professional capacity as a salesman but also in his family life. The two stories emphasize how narcissism incorporates several components and behaviours and that it is very difficult to define narcissism as a monolithic concept or personality characteristic which can be summarized with few qualities in pathological terms.

By examining theories of narcissism and ego defences (of denial and nostalgia) to characters in fiction we have illustrated how literary character analysis can be used to help comprehend, frame and apply psychoanalytic interpretations to consumer culture. The presence and expression of fervent wishes and consumer desires trigger powerful emotions, passionate feelings and vivid imagination in both Jay Gatsby and Willy Loman. Our analysis also pinpoints how consumption (actual) or imagined (daydreamed) is used to achieve forms of time shifting in that characters continually shift time to change and re-imagine the past and the future, and how narcissism and denial shape consumption desires to perpetuate Willy and Jay's ego-ideals through time.

Looking more broadly at how the analysis reveals obvious links to the discussion of desire and consumption. Apart from the classic Freudian and Lacanian understanding of sexual desires and longing for maternal love for example, our character analyses here show a contemporary psychoanalytic reading of narcissism and desire as means of fulfilment (Elliot, 1992), an emphasis which highlights the importance of socially esteemed and culturally significant material objects, symbols and individuals.

We would also like to emphasise the lines of comparison and trajectories of subjectivity that can be observed in the two character analyses presented here. In contemporary post-industrial marketplaces the stories of Willy Loman and Jay Gatsby mirror and reflect the desires, aspirations and illusions of millions of individuals who seek to sell their selves for others to consume and whose ego-ideal oscillates between the fear of potential failure and the pretentiousness of prospective success. A psychoanalysis approach allows us another opportunity to think whether, or to what extent the pursuit of individual or collective desires might constitute the source for narcissistic neurosis, anxieties, denial and obsession.

According to Riesman (1953) Willy Loman is distinctive compared to other-well known and avant-garde fictional characters because he symbolizes the failure of the failure, rather than the failure of the success. Arthur Miller argued in an interview that the hero remains ‘a fanatic’ to his beliefs - the (American) dream - and that “the trouble with Willy Loman is that he has tremendously powerful ideas” (Miller, 1998) which extend beyond the notions of security, comfort and accumulation of material goods. Echoing this same theme Fitzgerald wrote to a friend that the “whole burden” and main thrust of *The Great Gatsby* is about “the loss of those illusions that give such colour to the world so that you don’t care whether things are true or false as long as they partake of the magical glory” (Sealey, 2011: 64).

Both tragic heroes face the outcome of economic and social change as they have to cope with rejection, social exclusion and tragic mental deterioration. As readers we witness these as the outcome of narcissistic lives obsessed with recognition, social status and conspicuous display of material wealth. The economic uncertainty, unemployment and a rapidly changing consumer culture in the *Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman* have apposite contemporary resonance. The recent ‘trauma’ of the financial crisis and global recession have been subject to

psychoanalytic treatment to reveal the (ir)rational financial interests and the interrelations between unconscious needs, fears and desires, every day investment activities and purchasing behaviours (Tuckett and Taffler, 2008; Tuckett, 2011; Bennet, 2012). This paper complements such analyses by looking at fictional consumers of the past to allow contrasts and similarities to be evoked and as such many of the key themes in these masterpieces remain relevant and significant today.

Gatsby's decadence and Loman's inability to accept failure can encourage readers to question the ethos and ideals of a 'great American dream' that promises economic prosperity, access to luxury, achievement and abundance of material goods. We'll conclude with Arthur Miller's critical reminder which resonates with marketing as a subject for theory: He says, Willy Loman isn't "the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him...so attention must finally be paid to such a person" (Miller, 1949:40). Marketing and the implicated practices of consumption do not necessarily make individuals or consumer societies the finest that ever lived, no matter what ideological rhetoric might be deployed to shore up such contentions. And so it is important for marketing theorists to continue to engage with commentators from a wide sphere of arts and science to pay attention.

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