The American Dream ultimately leads to Willy Loman’s self-destruction. What are the origins of Willy’s version of the dream?

The American Dream as a national ethos has changed considerably and cyclically since the founding of the country, though it has always been rooted in the Declaration of Independence, the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Willy’s version is a post-depression one that originated with writer and historian James Truslow Adams, who wrote in 1935 of: “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyman, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.” For Willy, a full and happy life can be seen from the outside, it includes wealth, success, and social status.

In fact, for Willy, social status of a sort may be the most important, and the most difficult to attain. Another writer often cited in the context of post-depression America is Dale Carnegie, who’s famous book, How to Win Friends and Influence People was first published in 1936 and became America’s first self-help bestseller. Its influence was far reaching, contributing to a view that conflates friends, influence, happiness, and success — the version of the American Dream that Willy Loman worships and that becomes his undoing.

Willy believes (deeply) that success comes from being well-liked. He believes Biff will succeed and make a fortune because people tend to like him. Similarly, he remembers Singelton’s funeral as ‘well-attended,’ and he hopes that his will be be as well. Really, for Willy being well-liked is success, or at least part of it. Biff disappoints, Willy, as dramatically as possible, talking about the happiness he feels when living off the land and working on a farm. This is not only an escape from the rat-race, city life, and business, it is an embracing of isolation, for Willy, this squanders Biff’s preternatural ability to win friends and influence people.

Sales, Willy’s life is sales. Willy is haunted by the moment when Ben invites him join a new business venture. Willy refuses, saying that sales are his future. Why is Willy a salesman? Why won’t he go into business with Ben? Why won’t he accept the job that Charley later offers? Because, ultimately, sales is a face-to-face business. Influence is at the heart of it. When Willy Loman says “business is murderous, but not for me,” he fails to admit a failure that boils down to poor instincts in the arts of persuasion.

Adams, James Truslow. (1931). *The Epic of America* (Little, Brown, and Co. 1931)