



Death of a Salesman: A Tragedy, Myth, and the American Dream

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Abstract

Arthur Miller's play, *The Death of a Salesman*, focuses on the elements of idealistic realism. The purpose is to demonstrate class and social status as constructs of society. It is a play about the impact of capitalism. As we know, Arthur Miller is a social realist. Miller won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Death of a Salesman*. It is a deeply painful and difficult experience to read this play. The plot of the play revolves around the protagonist, Willy Loman, a middle-aged man living in an American city. Throughout the play, he questions the validity of his daily life and aspirations. He keeps experiencing shattered dreams while projecting his potential before his family. He knows the reality of the corporate world; still, he keeps himself in self-denial. He could not fulfill the American Dream. Willy Loman superficially pretends to be idealistic. He becomes nostalgic about becoming a successful businessman but fails. He is the echo of social injustice in postmodern American society.

Keywords: American Dream, Capitalism, Discourse, Empathy, Individual, Superiority, Self-delusion.

The American Dream is largely a main and wide area for the writers to portray the reality and the irony of the contemporary world. People elsewhere tend to accept to a far greater degree the conditions of life as unbearable. Miller wrote more than thirty plays, many of them won him Pulitzer Prize and multiple Tony awards. *Death of A Salesman*, (1949) its original title was the. 'Inside of His Head', earned him international recognition. It had become most celebrated play. In the period immediately following the World War II, American theatre

was transformed by Arthur Miller's plays profoundly influenced by the depression and the war, Miller tapped into American psyche and probed the dissatisfaction and unrest. Miller's works are infused with a sense of responsibility to human predicament.

Literature is always a mirror of society. Eventually, the values and morals every society follows, may be the sum total of the observations, distress, agony and misery faced by. At this juncture the purpose of writing and producing plays is seriously studied. A

dramatist is always inspired from the society, its manners, values, myths, ideals and trauma. Ultimately, the evolutions happen. The intention and aim of the playwright Arthur Miller is to sensitize the reader and produce empathy in his heart with the tragedy of the protagonist.

Alice Griffin in her book, "Understanding Arthur Miller", writes....." Arthur Miller could hardly have anticipated the effect, Death of A Salesman would have upon its opening night audience in 1949. Men and Women wept openly; During the intermission strangers asked in wonder how he knew their stories, or that of their father or uncle or brother. And this phenomenon has been repeated all over the country and all over the world." (Chapter Three, pg. no.35)

She further writes, "Miller said in an interview with Henry Rufskey on the Canadian Broadcasting Company network in 1979, "because the central matrix of the play iswhat most people are up against in their lives.....They were seeing themselves, not because Willy is a salesman, but the situation in which he stood and to which he was reacting and which was reacting against him, was probably the central situation of contemporary civilization. It is that we are struggling with forces that are far greater than we can handle, with no equipment to make anything mean anything." (Chapter Three, pg. no.35)

Willy Loman, the central figure, tries to achieve the American dream. He struggles throughout trying to prove himself a successful individual. His family specially his wife tolerated his false hopes. She always supported Willy's unreachable goals. Ultimately, the demands of society enforces him to embrace death as the possible solution. He becomes the target of exploitation, profit making system, consumerism, and capitalism. The death of Willy Loman makes us believe that the capitalists system can manipulate its subject. There was a rat-race of competitive

individualism, only to acquire and hoard wealth, to become an ideal and successful individual, who could boast one's abilities of fulfilling the American dream. This urge of the protagonist resulted as threatening to the level of decay. This hedonistic character of Willy Loman puts him into trouble. Actually Willy lived in a nostalgic imaginary world, a kind of Utopia. Willy was lost in his nostalgia, not mapping the actual demand of the work culture of his Employer. When the reality of existence is revealed, the only solution, he found was to embrace death.

The question for identity and self becomes more pronounced and complex. The emphasis now shifts from the external events to a probing in to the psychological reality and the inner self of the individual, the parameters being social, emotional, economical and egotistical. The play under consideration enlarges the purview to include two other important aspects the American mythical contexts of American dream and a inner probity added by the individual becoming a victim to this topical issue. The emotional demands that the protagonist makes over himself as a family man, father, husband, friend in addition to being Independent social and economic entity assume greater urgency and significance. Although rooted in the Ibsenesque tradition of realism with its typical pattern of presenting a gulf between aspirations and ability to achieve, it mirrors the dilemma of a disoriented and imbalanced mind.

This constituted the process of revelation of events and moral consequences, caused by the manifest and the hidden. Though not explicitly brought out through the dramatic action, the essential conflict is again between man and his conscience, individual verses his dreams, the chasm between aspirations and ability to fulfill them. All of them becomes more poignant because of the twentieth century materialistic and commercial contexts.

In his introduction to his collected Plays Arthur Miller elucidates the genesis of *Death of A Salesman* thus:

'The first image that occurred to me which was the result in, 'Death of A Salesman' was of an enormous face the height of the proscenium arch which would appear and then open up and we would see the inside of a men's head..... for the inside of his head is mass of contradictions.'(23)

Later in the same introduction Miller recounts,

'The play grew from simple images..... it grew from images of futility.... convoluted discussions, wonderments, arguments, belittlements, encouragements, fiery resolutions, abdications, returns, partingstremendous opportunities..... the images of aging and so many of your friends already gone.... the image of the son's hard public eye upon you, no longer swept by your myth no longer rousable from his separateness, no longer knowing you have lived for him and have wept for him.... The image of people turning into strangers who only evaluate one another.' (29)

The drama portrays the final days of the protagonist's tortured existence. Willy Loman is a 6years old travelling salesman who covers the territory between Brooklyn and New England in the course of his business missions. When seen for the first time he appears mentally physically and emotionally drained almost at the end of his tethered life seeking reassurances about his true identity from the tangible and intangible forces surrounding him in the wake of these conflicts. Willy emerges as an innately human figure pitted against these colossal forces. His combat strategy opposing the concentric patterns emerging from within and without codify him, as a heroic figure in human terms, despite the initial impression of disintegration.

Arthur Miller in his 'Introduction', in "Arthur Miller's Collected Plays", writes,.....A great deal has been said and written about what *Death of A Salesman*, is supposed to signify both psychologically and from the socio-political viewpoints. For instance, in one periodical of the far Right it was called a " time bomb expertly placed under the edifice of Americanism", while the *Daily Worker* reviewer thought it entirely decadent."(pg.27)

The carefully etched out setting is highly suggestive and anticipatory of the predicament of the protagonist. The sense of enclosure of being trapped or constrained contribute to the building up of the tragic predicament of the human sufferers. Willy Loman however tries to defuse the depressing and constricting reality by trying to be nostalgic about the past. He recollects the fragrance and beauty of the flowers in the past which only serves to enhance the plight of Loman in the present day. As he enters, his wife calls out and he answers:

Willy: It is all right. I came back.

Linda: Why? What happened? Something happen, Willy?

Willy: No, nothing happened.

Linda: You didn't smash the car, did you?

Willy: (with casual irritation) I said nothing happened. Didn't you hear me?

Linda: Don't you feel well?

Willy: I am tired to the death. I couldn't make it. I just couldn't make it, Linda.

The introductory image of Willy is one of fatigue, abjectness, irritability and failure. Evidence is provided by two utterances in the above conversation: 'nothing happened' and 'I just couldn't make it.' The first refers to external forces and second one is a logical conclusion of Willy's own little personal failures, lack of efforts, reticence and probably a total breakdown of confidence. Tired and exhausted

Willy fails to concentrate and the awareness of his failure makes him numb. The painful specter of reality looms large in the background. All his life Willy has been on the road and he desperately wants to settle down, have roots like the plants he is so obsessed with. But the impossible becomes possible only if he manages to qualify for the category of 'being liked' There are degrees of acceptance in Loman's mind and "merely being liked", is not sufficient. Ideals such as Dave Singleman are very well liked because a man who has a well built personality like Adonis is the man who makes an appearance in the business world, and the man who creates personal interest is the man who gets ahead. Loman firmly believes in what he preaches. He has illusions that:

'...they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England.....i have friends.

I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own.....'

And: '....Willy Loman is here' that is all they have to know....'

The inner core of Loman's theory of being well liked generates from the topical American myth of the salesman. It is characteristically American in origin and development and is committed to the Horatio Elgar ideal of the rags to riches romance and Franklin image of the hardworking early rising ambitious adventure. The successful man becomes an Idol for the common people The epitome of this cult in the play are Dave Singleman, uncle Ben and Charlie. Dave Singleman confirms to the myth of the successful salesman being respected, honoured, remembered, loved and helped by everybody. At the ripe old age of 84 he could pick up the phone and summon buyers without leaving his room. When he died hundreds of salesmen and buyers were present at his funeral. Dave was one of Willy's ideals and he secretly and very humanly coveted his image and popularity

because, "I realised that selling was the greatest career a man could want." (pg.)

But now time and values have rapidly changed. The personality, respect, comradeship and gratitude which were an intrinsic part of the salesman cult have ceased to have any useful relevance.

He really lives a life of delusion, believes in the cult of personality and desires to perpetuate it in his sons. As a consequence he indoctrinate the same values in his sons primarily the elder one named Biff. Arthur Miller's *Death Of A Salesman* is not against Capitalism but the havoc of the capitalistic consumerism. If described as a tragedy of a man who could not fulfill the criteria of success, put forth by the Capitalistic society, would be an oversimplification of the complex outcome of embracing of death in the form of suicide by the individual is essentially tragic.

Here Willy's suicide is sometimes ambiguous. His tragedy partially appears to be his failure as a successful citizen but the outcome of the sluggish attitude of his sons as well. He developed a patriarchal sense of guilt that he could not save or invest for the future of his family. So we can say that Willy's tragedy is more personal than political.

The dishonest affair of Willy Loman has big effect on his son Biff. He felt disappointed when found his father in a hotel room with another women. Biff in his anger decides not to care for his father's aspirations about his studies in the University of Virginia. This affair with another women becomes a mistake for his family relationship. Consequently, there is tension between father and son. Willy Loman is always haunted by his mistake and felt guilty. Biff's decision disappoints Willy and his American Dream.

Conclusion

After going through the analysis of the play *The Death of a Salesman*, we come to know that the protagonist Willy Loman, a salesman by

profession is also a romantic husband and lover and is idolized by his son. Willy Loman's character is influenced by his ambition to pursue his American dream. Willy Loman's ambition of being Dave Singleman, a successful salesman of New York could not be fulfilled. He is fired from Howard's company and his sons are not professionally settled. All these developments disappointed him, when he realizes that Biff is 34 years old, does not have a proper job with a big salary. This reality of being a failure broke him. The destiny of his ideal Dave Singleman is quite different from Willy. Dave Singleman is still respected in his old age while Willy is forgotten by his customers.

Literary works are expression of human feelings, sense, experience and destination. American dream is of a land in which life should be better, richer, and fuller for everyone, with opportunities for each according to ability and achievements. It was the belief that America is a place where people can achieve their dream, not only in achieving prosperity but also getting a better life in many aspects such education and social status.

Miller in Introduction clears his perspective, "There was no attempt to bring down the American edifice nor to raise it higher, to show up family relations or to cure the ill afflicting that inevitable institution. The truth, at least of my aim--which is all I can speak of authoritatively--is much simpler and more complex.....further. defends his hero Willy, "Above all, perhaps, the image of a need greater than hunger or sex or thirst, a need to leave a thumbprint somewhere on the world. A need for immortality, and by admitting it, the knowing that one has carefully inscribed one's name on a cake of ice on a hot July day."

This study aims to know the social realities of America in 20th century reflected in this drama. The findings describe that through the description of social realities, literary themes of brief and meaningful insight or a comprehensive vision of life, is Miller's way of

communicating and sharing ideas, perceptions and feelings with his readers. Very often Miller probes and explores with the reader the puzzling questions of human existence, most of which do not yield neat, tidy and universally accepted answers.

As we discuss morals and character, moral is not emphasized in a play but moral decisions differentiates characters. Behavior is a logical and necessary extension of psychology and personality. Willy Loman is 63 years old who works as a salesman for 36 years as Linda says in one of her speeches: Linda: When does he got the medal for that?

Is this his reward--to turn around at age of Sixty--three and find his sons, who he loved Better than his life. (Death of A Salesman)

The agony and insecurity of future and love for Willy is reflected in her speech as she seems to be defending her husband. Thus the analysis of the play, firmly establishes that man is essentially a trapped being, struggling paradoxically to extricate himself from this predicament as well as nourishing the very forces which cause this state of human existence. The basic factor which causes this tragic predicament of man is at first his own creation in the form of dreams, aspirations, and idealism.

Eventually, these dreams, aspirations and idealism acquire such destructive potential that they start functioning as impersonal and rather insurmountable forces which man is required to confront with his inadequate ability.

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