



## RELEVANCE OF *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* IN MODERN AMERICA

SONIA CHAHAL

Asst. Prof, Dept. of English

G.K.S.M. Govt. College, Tanda Urmar, Punjab



SONIA CHAHAL

### ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller is known for addressing serious social issues in his plays. His *Death of a Salesman* reflects the American society of the times in which it was written. The main character, Willy Loman is the victim of the American dream that makes him strongly believe in the possibility of attaining wild and grand success in a land of immense possibilities. Willy takes his own life in his vain pursuit of success. *Death of a Salesman* met with instant success when it was first staged in 1940's, as the Americans could instantly connect with the tragedy of Willy. However, the voice of a good piece of literature rings true in all ages. Willy Loman's story also seemed to repeat itself only recently when the common American found himself caught in the whirlpool of a terrible social upheaval that was the consequence of the great depression that took America, among other countries, by storm not very long ago. The great financial crisis, which began in 2008, not only shook country's economy but also took many valuable lives. Arthur Miller, like a wise seer, seems to have warned the American society many decades ago to take care of its small men, who might destroy themselves in the vain pursuit of an illusory success. The beauty of Miller's writing is that Miller also tries to provide answers to the complexities of life. In *Death of a Salesman* also he offers hints as to how men ought to live. However, Miller is no propagandist. He is essentially an artist, whose writings have provided solace to countless troubled souls all over the world.

**Keywords:** American dream, personal success, society, the great recession.

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### INTRODUCTION

*Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, an American playwright tells the story of Willy Loman who is a salesman by profession. A cursory reading of the play might mislead a reader into thinking that the play is written to give us insights into the psychology of Willy Loman on the last day of his life. However, on a close reading we find that the play not only mirrors the American society of the 1940's but also talks about man in relation with the society of his times. We soon realize that the reasons behind Willy's current disturbed state of the mind

are linked to the beliefs that the American society has always fostered in its citizens since its inception. The play was no less than a grim warning by Miller. Since a good work of literature has a perennial beauty, *Death of a Salesman* can also be very relevant and meaningful even in the present context where the common man is caught in an upheaval over which he has no control and which is sure to spell his doom.

Arthur Miller will always find a place among the most significant American playwrights because of his serious preoccupation with the problems

facing his society. His plays are never devoid of social context. He himself calls his plays a response to "what was in the air."<sup>1</sup> Miller, in almost all his plays, writes about man in relation with society. However, he is no social propagandist; he is essentially an artist. His plays treat the whole man—man in relation with society and as an individual. Man's social self as well as his psychological self are treated by Miller in his plays. *Death of a Salesman* is Miller's best known play. It was first produced on Broadway on February 10, 1949, and ran for 742 performances. To many spectators, the play seemed the most meaningful and moving statement made about American life upon the stage in a great many years.

The entire action of *Death of a Salesman* takes place in less than two days only—that is the last days of Willy Loman's life. In the opening scene, Willy Loman, a tired old man of sixty, comes home carrying two large sample cases. He is a travelling salesman. On seeing him, wife Linda feels worried because Willy was expected to return home later. He tells Linda that while driving he forgot where he was going. He kept driving off the road too. That's why he got scared and turned back. The second scene begins when light comes in the bedroom of Biff and Happy, Willy's two sons who have come home. Both review their lives and feel that they have achieved nothing in life. In the next scene, Willy's memory of an idyllic past is created. Biff and Happy are shown to be two lively and cheerful school boys, full of admiration and wonder for their father. Bernard, a studious boy from the neighbourhood, comes to suggest to Biff that they should study their maths together. Willy sends him away as a 'pest'. The next scene shows Willy back in the present, mumbling to himself in the kitchen. Happy, who has been unable to sleep, comes down and vainly tries to soothe his father. A neighbor named Charley (Bernard's father) also walks in. Like Linda, Charley understands Willy thoroughly. Charley and Willy start playing cards. Willy's memory again conjures a scene with Ben, his elder brother. Ben had left home for Alaska when Willy was very small. He had walked out of jungle, an unbelievably rich man. Willy goes off for a walk. In his absence, Linda, Biff and Happy discuss him. Biff

decides to visit Bill Oliver, his previous boss, to borrow ten thousand dollars in order to start a sporting goods business.

The next morning finds Willy happy at breakfast, having slept well on the false hopes of the previous night. This is followed by the famous scene in which Willy meets his young employer Howard to ask for a permanent posting in New York. Howard tells him that he is no longer needed in the firm-- in other words, he is fired. The next scene takes place in a restaurant where Willy is going to meet his sons for dinner. Biff tells him that his previous boss did not even recognize him. Soon after, Biff and Happy leave with two call girls. Willy does not even get his dinner. In the next scene, Willy has come home and is in the backyard busy planting the seeds in the dark. He is also talking to an imaginary Ben. It is obvious that Willy has finally decided to kill himself, so that his family may get the twenty thousand dollars that he has insured himself for. His only regret is he could not win his son's love. Just then Biff comes and seeks him out for a frank talk. A bitter quarrel follows at the end of which Willy realizes that his son loves him dearly. A strange calm descends upon Willy now and he goes out to kill himself in a car crash. The last scene shows the Loman family and Charley paying their homage to Willy.

*Death of a Salesman*, therefore, is concerned with the problems of an individual named Willy Loman who at sixty-three has finally realized that he is a failure and that after a lifetime of service, he has nothing to give to the next generation. That Miller wanted to give us a glimpse into the mind of the central character is evident from the fact that Miller had at first thought of giving this play the title "*The Inside of His Head*." <sup>2</sup> Though Miller thought the better of giving this title, *Death of a Salesman* definitely looks like a drama of individual psychology. In Willy's case, past keeps on interfering with the present. During the dream sequences, Willy seems unable to tell the truth from fantasy, the present from the past and engages in conversations with unseen persons. Miller's technique in this play seems very close to the stream of consciousness technique. When a sequence from the past comes, the audience gets

sufficient hints. In the scenes of the past, the characters enter or leave by stepping through the walls of the transparent set. Moreover, there is a variety of music and this helps the reader and the viewer to find the transition from past to present and vice versa. Whenever flute music is played, we know that Willy's mind is lapsing into the past. The music accompanying the boys is gay and when Ben comes on the stage there is a different kind of music.

*Death of a Salesman* is thus full of psychological insights and Miller definitely writes like a good psychologist. The play, however, cannot be called a mere psychological play. For Miller, man is essentially a social being and all his values have their roots in society. No doubt, in *Death of a Salesman* Miller successfully delves into the psyche of Willy Loman. But it would be wrong to classify it as a psychological play because if we try to trace the causes of Willy's mental state on the last day of his life, we will see that Willy's ideas, his mental unrest, his torments, his tragedy-- all have their roots in the society to which he belongs.

Willy Loman is a victim of the myth of success. His unwavering commitment to the myth of success is, to a large extent, the cause of his tragedy. The attitudes which the myth expresses have a long history in American culture. The success myth has its roots in the seventeenth-century middle class England. It was brought to the continent of America by the founding fathers. America was seen as a very fertile land with huge forests and mountains at that time. Many brave and enterprising persons came from England and many other European countries with the hope of getting rich quickly by exploiting the rich natural resources of the continent which were as yet unexplored. These people established colonies and settlements on the New Continent. These colonies became a homogenous group gradually. With time, the strain of colonizing got over as the settlers had succeeded in their efforts to subdue the Red Indians, who were now on the run. Increased leisure along with increased facilities for education and communication were largely responsible for the growth of nationalism. As a result, the British masters, who had been ruling all this time from across the Atlantic Ocean, were

overthrown after the Americans waged a war of independence in 1776. The war "was won in 1783 and the new United States of America created its own national government."<sup>3</sup>

In less than two and a half centuries, America has grown from strength to strength and has come to play a crucial role in the world affairs. In fact, it has evolved into the most powerful country of the world by becoming the unchallenged supreme power economically, politically and militarily. America has become the ultimate destination of the immigrants who view it as a golden land of endless opportunities. American history and lore are full of the stories of the brave souls who, struck gold, metaphorically speaking, and never looked back. Consequently, it has become the belief of the common Americans that grand success, even an unprecedented one, is possible for a man who makes effort. Thomas E. Porter traces the history of this myth of success in his essay "Acres of Diamonds". According to him, the success myth was "popularized by the efforts of Ben Franklin, its outstanding exemplar...and the 'land of opportunity' offered enough verification to assure its triumph in popular mind."<sup>4</sup> Russel Conquell delivered his celebrated lecture all over the country in which he was content to show that "religion and business are not opposed, that religion encourages men to get rich."<sup>5</sup> Horatio Alger embodied the myth in his novels. His heroes usually rose from rags to riches by being industrious and thrifty.

The citizens of America have internalized the American dream. From the time when America was a virgin land till the present time, the Americans are forever chasing this dream. In *Death of a Salesman*, the achievement possible in the earlier society is typified by Uncle Ben who travels out to unknown frontiers and carves out an empire for himself. This was the time before the frontier closed down and before the big corporations came in. After this, the image of robber baron was replaced by the hard-working, disciplined and industrial man "who could mine diamonds in his own backyard."<sup>6</sup> Willy Loman subscribes to the later form of myth; he accepts the Dale Carnegie approach to success that one can reach the top by making friends, being impressive and well-liked. A great harm that the

myth of success has done to the people of America is that it has made the "state of failure almost a crime among men."<sup>7</sup> Success is considered to be the right of every free citizen—even those with no extraordinary talent. The law of success teaches Americans that theirs is a great country and that there is no room in it for a man who proves a failure. The best, being able to keep abreast in the race, become rich and prosperous while people like Willy break down and die an unnoticed death. Willy Loman, as his name indicates, is a little man—society's low man. He tries with all his might to be ahead in the race but fails miserably in his pursuit of success.

We see in the play that the success myth has never let Willy rest in peace. The whole of his life is spent in the pursuit of success. He was a moderately successful man at one time and could maintain his family well. But he is never at peace. He wants to be a wildly successful man. When, even after a determined pursuit of success, it eludes him, he makes every effort to conceal his failure. In fact, the life of Lomans is based on a heap of lies. Even when he is moderately successful, the man must deceive himself. He claims to know all the important people in his territory and tells his sons that the cops will protect his car, no matter where he parks it in New England. At the end of the play, when we know that Willy is jobless and has to depend on his neighbour to maintain his family, he tells Biff, "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman and you are Biff Loman."<sup>8</sup> He holds an exaggeratedly high opinion of Biff too. Even when Biff has achieved nothing even at the ripe age of thirty four, Willy does not give up his illusions about his son. He thinks that Bill Oliver, Biff's previous boss, will advance any amount of money to Biff. When Biff fails to get anything, Willy refuses to listen to his account of failure. Till the end of his life, Willy persists in his illusions. In fact, he dies with the grand illusion of making Biff a great man and also with the illusion of a grand funeral which would be befitting to a famous and well-liked man like him. It is only seldom that the truth of his real identity penetrates his mind. But these occasions are very rare and on the whole he lives and dies in total

commitment to his dreams which he has borrowed from his society.

The society affects Willy in another way too. The business of the past which had "respect and comradeship, and gratitude in it" is all "cut and dried" (105). For Howard "business is business" and what is not good for the business must be eliminated. Willy has outlived his limited usefulness, he is old and senile. Therefore, without any human considerations, Howard dismisses the man who has put the best years of his life into the firm. Willy's outburst is indeed very pathetic: "I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit" (105). The irony lies in the fact that Willy has come to ask Howard for a permanent posting in New York, so that he doesn't have to travel anymore. But Howard is too preoccupied with his new tape-recorder to listen to an old man's reminiscences. On the contrary, Willy's ramblings convince Howard that company has no more use of Willy. Therefore, he dismisses Willy as he is no longer of any use to him.

We see that the social forces affect Willy and his life deeply in the course of the play. Miller has succeeded in making the play a true reflection of society of his times. This is proved by the reception that was accorded to the play when it was first staged. Americans identified with Willy so much that "it is reported that as the New Yorkers made their way to exit, their faces were stained with tears and their eyes revealed inner depression. Miller had succeeded in reminding them in two hours, of their own existence."<sup>9</sup> Miller, too, writes in the introduction to his collected plays, "I received visits from men over sixty from as far away as California who had come across the country to have me write stories of their lives, because the story of Willy Loman was exactly like theirs."<sup>10</sup> Miller has succeeded in capturing the reality of American society of his time and in expressing the deepest concerns of his fellow Americans.

Thus, the great success of this play in the United States was largely due to the self-identification of the Americans with Willy Loman and his problems. However, the touchstone of good literature is that it should have a universal appeal.

The impact of a good literary work is not limited to the times in which it is written. What a great writer writes should ring true of his age as well as of all ages to come. And Miller is truly a great artist. That is the reason why his *Death of a Salesman* finds an echo in the crisis that the powerful America passed through not very long ago. Willy Loman's story seems to be the story of the common American caught in the whirlpool of a terrible economic and social upheaval only recently that was the consequence of the financial slowdown in the most powerful country of the world.

In 2008-09, much of the industrialized world entered into a recession, sparked by a financial crisis that had its origins in reckless lending practices involving the distribution of mortgage debt in the United States. Sub-prime loan losses in 2007 exposed other risky loans and over-inflated asset prices. With the losses mounting, a panic developed in the inter-bank lending. As share and housing prices declined, many large and well-established investment and commercial banks in the United States and Europe suffered huge losses and even faced bankruptcy, resulting in massive public financial assistance. A global recession resulted in a sharp drop in international trade, rising unemployment and a slump in commodity prices. The recession has been considered the worst since the Great Depression of 1930's.

The impact of this financial crisis has been no less than 9/11 attack on the twin towers in America which had seriously damaged the image of America as an invincible country. The economic crisis has dealt a severe blow to America's image of immense financial strength which had the ability to shelter its citizens from deprivation and starvation. However, as is always the case, the common man of America has borne most of the brunt of the crisis. More than a million homes were lost to foreclosure in the United States. The displaced families often found themselves at the mercy of friends or relatives, who might or might not be able to take them in. Some people even took refuge in tent cities and parking lot communities across the country. In the US, job loss had been going on since December 2007 and it accelerated drastically in September 2008, following the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers.

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics calculated "US job losses to 2,385 million from September to December 2008 alone."<sup>11</sup>

It is the low man of the society who is always the least benefitted during the good times and the worst hit during the tough times. The low man of today is no different from Willy Loman of *Death of a Salesman* who has to take his own life to be noticed and counted in the society. "Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a man. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog..."<sup>(148)</sup> says Linda about her husband in the play. But the tragedy of the play is that it is too late for any attention to be paid to this low man of the society. Coming to the crisis that engulfed America not so long ago, we find that the case of the low men of modern America was little different from that of Willy. The common man was initially bewildered. Gradually, depression and sadness set in which resulted in a spate of suicides in America. In the US alone, "the suicide rate jumped by 4.8% between 2007 and 2010. Between 2008 and 2010, at least 10000 additional deaths were reported in North America and Europe an additional 5000 people committed suicide due to economic recession."<sup>12</sup> The most horrifying were the mass murder-suicides where the father killed the whole family before taking his own life.

Many were confused over the suicides in the modern America, the most powerful country of the world. What confused people was why this happened, in an age of unemployment insurance, food stamps, public assistance and food pantries. This incomprehension is very similar to the bewilderment of Linda in *Death of a Salesman* after the suicide of Willy Loman:

**Linda:** I can't understand it. At this time especially. First time in thirty-five years we were just about free and clear. He only needed a little salary. He was even finished with the dentist (152).

However, if we dig deeper, it seems that just being alive is not enough for the Americans just as it wasn't for Willy and that American dream is still alive in America. We see in the modern suicides a reflection of Willy's mind-set in which the idea of personal success is of paramount importance. Somehow, the immense opportunities in America

have made failure an unforgivable crime. Success is considered to be one of the fundamental rights of the people living in one of the largest democracies of the world.

Willy can neither be held entirely guilty for his predicament nor can he be totally absolved of all guilt. The modern American finds himself in a similar situation. Though he has exposed himself as extremely short-sighted in the current situation, the State definitely cannot be absolved of all guilt. Basically, it has been the easy availability of mortgage loans that has spelt doom for the little men of America. What surprises us that the government of America did not give any thought to the reining in of the corporate greed. In the name of liberalization, corporate sector was given a free hand to do whatever it might like to do. Most importantly, the idea of American citizens driven to the very edge of despair in such an affluent country was highly unimaginable, until it happened.

Through the story of Willy it seems as if Miller was warning the American State to take care of its small men to avoid the catastrophe that might engulf a society which has been, since its inception, fed on the staple diet of inexhaustible possibility of success. Miller also talks about the environmental issues in *Death of a Salesman* in as early as 1940. Willy feels suffocated amidst the buildings surrounding his apartment. His disgust is well revealed in the following statement, "The street is lined with cars. There is not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood. The grass don't grow anymore, you can't raise a carrot in the backyard" (52). He is so anguished by the destruction of natural beauty that he bursts out, "Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there?..They should have arrested the builder for cutting those down. They massacred the neighbourhood" (52). Population growth, deduction of wages and increase in competition are other social evils accompanying rapid industrialization and urbanization. Due to the cut throat competition and rat race, at the age of sixty three, Willy has to work on commission "like a beginner, an unknown" (85).

Though the tasks before the countries are greatly uphill and complex, for the common man, Miller's masterpiece can surely show the right path for coming out of a crisis which might strike a

society anytime, given the unpredictability of the modern times. The affluence of America has bred an unwholesome habit in the Americans. Most of them live from one pay-cheque to another and have never given any thought to saving for the rainy day. This has also contributed much to their present troubles. Another habit which has enslaved Americans is the buying of things on installments. The payment of these installments stretches till their last breath in many cases. It is on the last day of Willy's life that the final installment on the house is made. These habits precipitate an economic crisis and seriously undermine the mental health of the Americans. The present situation in America is a testimony to this.

Miller also offers some other valuable hints as to how men ought to live, though he does so with great subtlety. One way to achieve mental peace and happiness in this impersonal society that Miller hints at is impersonality and detachment in dealing with it. The embodiments of this impersonality in the play are Charley and his son, Bernard. Charley, a successful businessman in his own way is not a fanatic. His son, Bernard, is a successful lawyer. But unlike Willy, Charley has never imposed his dreams on his son. He tells Willy, "My salvation is that I never took interest in anything" (112). Charley is a satisfied man not because he is rich but because he does not have the wild dreams that Willy chases till his death. The problem with Willy is that Charley was never his ideal. Miller also seems to say that one must have an understanding of oneself and also of the society in which one lives. Charley understands his society and does not get frenzied by the dream of success. Willy remains till the end a man full of illusions. He has imparted wrong training to his sons so much so that they believe they are someone special. This seems to be the reason as to why Biff cannot stick to one job. Biff returns to New York again and again because he thinks that he is not earning as a person like him should earn. It is only when he has to wait six hours for Bill Oliver, his previous boss, and Bill Oliver does not even recognize him that reality dawns upon him.

Another possible way to happiness that Miller hints at in *Death of a Salesman* is through a family solidarity. Linda, the wife and mother, is affectionate, caring and sympathetic. Willy, though

curt with her at times, confesses to her, "You are my foundation and support, Linda" (53). In fact, it is with the support of unwaveringly loyal and devoted Linda that Willy is able to take the blows of an indifferent society. Willy is a loving father too. It is Biff's rejection of him, which becomes a cause of constant anguish for Willy. We feel that had Biff not condemned Willy for one lapse, Willy's anguish might have been lessened. What goes without saying is that Miller also demands utmost fidelity in conjugal relations. Willy's adultery estranges him from his son and also ruins the future career of Biff. When Biff comes to know about his father's adultery, his image of his father is lost. Moreover throughout the rest of his life, Willy remains guilt-ridden. Biff too loses any interest in life and consequently ruins his life.

However, as it is in life, there are no final answers to anything. Moreover, Miller is no zealous propagandist. Miller, like a true artist, only tries to give us hints as to how man can attain peace and happiness and live meaningfully in an impersonal, materialistic and ever-changing society.

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#### Corresponding Author's Biography

**Sonia Chahal** is an Assistant Professor of English at G.K.S.M. Govt. College, Tanda Umar, Punjab. Becoming a teacher of English was a dream come true for her. She is always eager to make her students fall in love with English language. She has a deep love for literature and her area of interest is American literature. She has presented papers at various national and international conferences.

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