



THE PORTRAYAL OF WILLY LOMAN'S CHARACTER IN "DEATH OF A SALESMAN"

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ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller secured his place among the leading dramatic figures in America in the 20th century, following the production of his first commercially successful drama *All my Sons* (1947). He gained even more reputation when his second play *Death of a Salesman* was performed on Broadway in February 1949 and had more than 500 continuous performances. It also found its way to the stages in most European countries and having performances even as far as Beijing. Therefore, this worldwide recognition of the play makes its central character Willy Loman a suitable subject for investigation and study. For some critics his stature as a tragic hero is not enough; for others who accept Miller's views on the subject, Willy is more than enough.

This paper approaches the central character of the play Willy Loman critically by throwing some light on the hidden aspects of his character. Also, it investigates his stature as a tragic hero and examines the influence of socio-economic forces (if any) on him. It enquires whether Willy carries the 'seeds of his own destruction' within him or not. His firm belief in the 'success story' has the lion's share in this study. To what extent has the 'American dream' as a myth contributed to shape the life and death of this character? In shot a detailed study of Willy's character forms the basis and nature of this critical study which follows the descriptive-analytical method as relevant to literary studies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Most critics agree that *Death of a Salesman* is a serious modern drama which has contributed to distinguishing its writer and putting him in the first row of American dramatists. This is partly due to the fact that the play was successful commercially as well as on stage to the degree that some critics say that not a single day passes on without its being performed somewhere in one part of the world. Yet, the utmost controversial aspect of this play is its claim to be a modern tragedy. Here, we will try to define the term 'tragedy' to pave the way for further discussion about the play in question.

For the Greeks, namely Aristotle, pathos was the destructive or painful act common in tragedy¹. In English the word 'pathos' refers to an element in art or life that evokes tenderness or pity. In modern English the critical usage suggests a distinction between some characters which are tragic and other characters which are pathetic. The elements which distinguish the tragic from the pathetic have to do with the concept of strength or regeneration. In other words, the tragic should show strength rather than weakness, renewal rather than

¹Sylvan Barnet, et al, eds. *Types of Drama: Plays and Context*, (NY: Longman2001) P. 804

decay. Tragic protagonists bring destruction upon themselves or if destruction comes from outside, they resist it. Moreover, their experience should be a learning one; in this sense they have to come to some kind of realization or understanding through suffering. On the other hand, the pathetic characters commonly tend to appear passive, unwitting, and unresisting. In view of this description, Macbeth is tragic whereas Duncan is on the other side of scale as pathetic. Othello is tragic but Desdemona is pathetic. Hamlet who tries to change a situation not created by him is tragic and Ophelia is pathetic². Finally Lear is tragic; Cordelia is pathetic. From the above it seems that the pathetic is someone depicted as weak and defenseless. Accordingly the four stated above as pathetic three of them are helpless women and the fourth is, in fact, an old man. Shall we consider Willy Loman the protagonist of *Death of a Salesman* a pathetic figure in the light of the above detailed explanation? It is too early to do such a thing as we have to approach this drama first before issuing any hasty verdict for it might look foolish to do such a thing at this stage.

Arthur Miller, in his defense of this play, tries to divert our attention to eight points that constitute a solid argument for the common man as a suitable and flawless tragic hero.

1. Time of flawless heroes has gone for ever.

As in Bertold Brecht, *Life of Galileo*³:

Andrea: Unhappy the land that has no heroes;

[...]

Galileo: No. Unhappy the land where heroes are needed.

Miller points out that in this modern age there is a general assumption that we are below tragedy especially by those who consider the high rank as an irreducible element for tragedy. They think that the noble blood is no longer found in modern man's veins. Miller, pointing out the nature of our modern time is in fact preparing the reader for a point of view which runs opposite to the general belief that a common man is not a suitable hero for an original tragedy.

²*Types of Drama*. P. 804

³ John Drakakis and Naomi Conn. eds. *Tragedy*. (London: Longman, 1998). P.1

2. He thinks that since psychology has built scientific formulations on Oedipus and Orestes, then nothing classifies them as different from ordinary people. In short, the essence of man is the same regardless to rank, color or race.
3. He argues that tragedy appeals for the common. They watch it and enjoy it because they see their lives on stage, they would not take the trouble of coming if not for this reason as it would fail to arouse their curiosity.
4. It is heroic when you believe in something and fight for it to the end or when you want to ascertain your name or position in society.
5. Tragedy is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly.
6. The flaw is nothing, man's image of his rightful status matters more than anything else. In this sense those who accept their lot or "settle for half" die peacefully without being tragic.
7. Insistence upon the rank of the tragic hero or the so-called nobility of that character is a kind of clinging to the outward of tragedy.
8. Tragedy enlightens and points the heroic finger at the enemy of man. It should question everything and show man's indestructible will to achieve his humanity. In this sense it liberates man, so it is pointless to call it a pessimistic genre⁴.

2. Willy's Contradictions

Willy tells lies from the start of the drama to its usual end in the scenes of the past as well as those in the presents. He takes a loan from Charley and pretends that it is his pay, he yells at Charley and accuses him of cheating while playing cards, he says that he is 'vital' to New England and popular wherever he goes, but the fact is he is unknown. So why does he tell all these lies and after a time believe them? Can't he live without fraud and self-delusion? Once he promised his two sons to take them but this never happens in the drama and we all know the reason for this except he sons, probably

⁴*Types of Drama*. P. 843 – 845.

Linda knows for whenever her husband tells her about the amount of money he has made in his trips and the figures he has broken, she comes over with a pen and a piece of paper so as to calculate. As soon as Willy sees this he retreats and the number given in the beginning tumbles short. It is strange how she covers up for him and when needs be blows him full of 'hot air' that he can not see himself or know his reality any more. However, she will never tell her boys that their father is lying to them because she herself cherishes the story of success.

Biff: Gee, I'd love to go with you sometime, dad.

Willy: Soon as summer comes.

Happy: promise?

Willy: You and Hap and I, and I'll show you all the towns. America is full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people. And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring you fellas up, there will be open sesame for all of us, 'cause one thing, boys: I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own. This summer, heh?

Biff and Happy, together: Yeah! You bet!

Willy: We'll take our bathing suits.

Happy: We'll carry your bags, Pop!

Willy: Oh, won't that be something! Me comin' into the Boston stores with you boys carryin' my bags. What a sensation.

*Biff is prancing around, practicing passing the ball.*⁵

Willy tells his sons all sorts of nonsense, whereas his wife Linda keeps her distance of watching adopting the silence of the lambs.

This promise of taking the boys along with him never comes true because Willy knows very well that he is a great liar concerning his popularity in these cities especially Boston. Ironically, Biff finds him out in the same town to which he makes reference in his exaggeration about how well-liked he is in that city. His feeling of loneliness is normal because he couldn't sell anything on that day in Boston. Willy

who likes to be like the old popular salesman is trying to keep balance by picking up a slattern like Miss Francis who wants a pair of stockings in return. This will serve to build his ego and his sense of importance after a hard day and he might feel better when he assaults her physically or 'ruins her' as she called it. It is evident that Willy is lying to his boys, to Linda who knows it and sometimes to himself since if he stopped believing that he is great and influential that will be his end. This kind of behavior has become part of Willy's nature and defensive mechanism against a hard world in which there is no place for the losers. He can not stop his lies now out of self-respect. Let us pursue our questions to their end. Is Willy an essentially bad 'guy' to be such a self-contradictory person or to build his whole life on lies? Before answering this question let us see how Willy himself was brought up.

Willy was brought up in his mother's lap and he hardly remembers anything about his father who died when he was three years old. In one of the memory scenes he asks Ben about him because Willy does not know if he is raising his sons in a steady way or not. Their father was a flute maker and a very tough man as Ben told Willy who grew up in his mother's lap, breast-fed, tender and loving. In his childhood, he saw that popular salesman and dreamt of the same career. Yet, he grew up as a child of the depression in America when a lot of successful works failed and small stores could not stand it so preferred to close down. It was a hard time for the Americans. Thus, no body in the drama except Willy says that Willy was a successful person in his life.

3. Love, Success and Self-delusion

The success story is an inherent part of the American history. The phrase 'the American dream' is a recurrent word that has become a concept not only found in folklore and fiction but a way of living, the American way of life. Yes, the frontiers period is over but new frontiers appear every now and then as dedicated Americans who made their country a super power out of the wilderness carry on their dutiful mission. The new world has become the refuge of all the dreamers of the world and Willy Loman is a man of massive dreams. He believes in the success story and in this respect no one can

⁵Death of a Salesman. P. 145

blame Willy for he is like all those who came to America fleeing from the old world with its bitterness, seeking opportunity, abundance, freedom, love, equality and justice in America, 'the new world', the homeland of the free. Willy Loman can not believe that his son Biff is lost in America:

Willy: Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world. A young man with such ----- personal attractiveness, gets lost. And such a hard worker. There's one thing about Biff ----- he's not lazy

Linda: Never⁶.

One thing is actually evident about Willy, he is always contradicting himself. A few moments before in the drama he was affirming Biff's laziness, and here he is clearing him of this epithet. Moreover, we should see how Linda agrees to every remark ejaculated by Willy in such away that does not help him by any means. It is not strange since Miller describes her in this drama as 'sharing Willy's dreams but lacks the temperament to follow them to the end.' Not to wade away from the point we are hammering on, Willy believes in the American dream like the greater bulk of his generation. It seems that the success story for most Americans was inescapable. You either read promotional literature that celebrates heroes, listen to stories of mythic success, see how some people go up the ladder very fast and wonder at this, read school books and listen to teachers that say an American is a superman or read Alger's stories of the rags-to-riches heroes in which someone very poor suddenly finds a wealth for example diamond mines as the victimized Willy believes, in fact a lot of American share the same idea. Their grandfathers came from the war-ridden old world to find a new haven or paradise in this place and so they are holding fast to that dream, though denied. One poem by a black American writer states how a lot of victims, like Willy, share this dream. The poem is entitled 'Let America be America Again' by Langston Hughes⁷. How marvelous and self-clarifying this long poem is.

⁶*Death of a Salesman*. P.134

⁷ Langston Hughes. "Let America be America Again," in *An American Grab Bag*. (Washington, D.C: U.S.I.A, 1986) ed. Dean Curry. PP. 67 – 68. See the Appendix

The whole American scene is in this poem which shows in details how the American dream has come true materially but withered and failed spiritually. The scars of the American experience are expressed in a rich language that characterizes Hughes' poetry. In addition the victims of the American dream are stated honestly and thoughtfully. Willy Loman falls in the category of the poor white man who is 'fooled' in America, yet still holding fast to his ideals. How can he live without 'success' and he has inflicted his philosophy upon his sons? Life will seem nonsense when he comes to the conclusion that he is a failure who has no any promise of success. At the moment he is like many who feel that their real dream was stolen and another fake copy is placed in their hands. Still they can not give up hope for life will be very hard without a glimpse of hope. Willy is clinging to this hope and he is blind to the illusion in which he lives.

Thus, one of the themes of *Death of a Salesman* is the American dream, here equated with the success story or the material level of it. The setting of the drama is meant to reflect a sense of a dream, a dream arising out of reality as Miller describes it.

Generally speaking, all people wish to succeed but their desire is sharpened, lessened or increased by many factors such as the environment or surrounding, personal drives which vary from a person to another. Willy's desire for success is out of control, on the extreme due to excessive urges. One critic pointed out how American mothers help to relate success and love till it becomes to succeed is to be loved and vice versa. When mothers reward their sons who do very well at school by showing great love and kisses, this will help later in mixing up these two concepts in the children's minds till they can not tell which is which.

Notice how a famous player looks popular when he is full of sound and fury, glorified by everyone and there is an aura of success around him but when his matches are over and he becomes an ordinary person life will begin to close in on him like Willy Loman in this drama. If not for love, Willy might never desire success in this way. He wants his sons and wife to love him and this is why he can do anything to become a successful man in a society

that punishes the failures severely and celebrate those who are successful. So Willy's need for success is only a means to an end. Miller defines his desire in his famous 'introduction' for the collected plays:

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.⁸

Willy Loman in this drama does everything for the sake of his own image as a father in a society that attributes holiness to success and considers failure as a crime. Perhaps, this is why Willy's ideals and symbols of success have an aura around them. These are three: his father, his brother Ben and the old salesman Dave Singleman. Willy considers these three men as success incarnate and he is either speaking about them or enquiring about one of them. Let us discuss them in more details.

To begin with, Willy father who was a flute maker and in a sense a great inventor as he makes his own flutes and sells them. Willy asks his brother Ben to tell him about their father who died when Willy was only a small boy in his mother's lab, not more than three years in age. The father was a ruthless pioneer who would stuff his whole family in a truck and drive throughout the country going from one town to another making and selling flutes. Willy is impressed about his father basically because he never leaves his family behind him; in this sense the world was a home for this man. But Willy is different from his father because he leaves his family behind him when he goes on tours and he is not an inventor as he sells wares made by other people. One psychologist says that a salesman like Willy soon forgets his selling of goods and begins to sell 'himself' by adopting the personality concept. In other words people buy from you not because the things you sell are good, but because you are impressive. So obviously Willy is trapped in the past and the flute played in the drama is a sound effect used as an expression of Willy's dream to become like his father. It is ironic that whereas Willy's father begins from Boston as a starting point, Willy ends or

dies psychologically in Boston where his son Biff finds a woman with him.

The second symbol of success is Dave Singleman whose name only testifies to the fact that he is unrepeatable. That man was mythic in his old age yet commanding and popular in life and in grave. He didn't have to take off his slippers or pajamas and the world was a home for him. Willy liked these two things about him; his popularity and turning a world into a home. Accordingly we may understand why Willy sometimes walks in the street wearing slippers and pajamas in an attempt to imitate Mr. Singleman, the exceptional and one, as his name suggests. Yet, it is clear that Willy's dreams of a career of a salesman has much to do with Singleman because in his childhood, he saw him and grew so fond of becoming another version of this well-to-do businessman.

The third and last apotheosis of success is Willy's brother Ben whose ethics are triggered in his advice to Biff, when he tells him "never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You will never get out of the jungle that way."⁹ Willy seems quite impressed by Ben's success as he calls him 'success incarnate' but it seems that the playwright is not in favor of Ben's values who has no sense of relatedness to family and whose adventurous spirit is motivated by hard feelings. Willy, though he admires Ben, cannot be like him because he grew up full of the milk of humanity. Yes, an aura of success accompanies Ben but sometimes he is so unreal that the spectators doubt his existence as a separate character if not for Charley's and Linda's reference to him. Yet, he is recalled whenever Willy wants to particularly when life presses hard on Willy. Once Ben gave Willy a job in Alaska but Willy, backed by Linda, refused it on the ground that he is doing very well as a salesman in New York. Willy tells his boys a lot about their uncle and once in order to show his brother how great and fearless his children are he encourages them to steal lumber from a nearby building. Therefore, although Willy admires Ben's aura of success, he can never be like him.

However, it is strange how in the name of love, Willy Loman cherishes success to the extent that he becomes an adulterer solely because the

⁸ Arthur Miller. *Collected Plays*. p.29

⁹ *Death of a Salesman*. P. 158

woman might put him through to the buyers. It is certain that he is misguided although he is true to his ideals. He pursues his dream of making the world a home to the last moment of his life and when he tries to die, he dies as a believer not as someone who has come to a realization. When he decides to commit suicide, he does that for the sake of his son Biff who might look magnificent with the insurance money in his pockets. He takes Biff's action of breaking down and crying out his agony as a sign of love and at once decides to sacrifice his life for the sake of Biff and his family.

On the other hand, some critics see Willy Loman as originally pathetic and without values. They think that he lacks the depth associated with tragic heroes. They can not see that Willy's philosophy is initiated by a need for love and human dignity. Miller argues if Willy hasn't got values, he will have died happily one fine morning but the fact is he has values and he is ready to pursue them to the end.

4. Linda's defense of Willy

All those who see his guilt as casual are emptying the drama from its real context. Willy cherishes success for the family he has betrayed in Boston, so he is down-trodden as Linda tells her boys "I tell you he put his whole life into you and you've turned your backs on him. *She is bent over in the chair, weeping, her face in her hands.* Biff, I swear to God! Biff, his life in your hands¹⁰." The end of the play has proved that Linda's point was right for she knows her husband more than anybody else; naturally most wives do. Here, she assumes the responsibility of defending her 'small' man, not only against a hard world but also against her two lost sons. She delivers the most moving speech on stage that kept a lot of audience crying as seeing their own lives on stage. Thus Linda says¹¹:

I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old

dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.

Critics wrote elaborately on the above speech made by Willy's wife Linda, who proved a loving wife, though kept in dark and nobody ever tells her about his treason for her. Her loyalty and faithfulness to him is part of her nature depicted here as the American traditional wife who cares about the details of her husband's life. She also finds excuses for him throughout the drama; one critic called her 'the blind leader of the blind.'¹² however, if she is truly blind then her blindness is only a kind of defensive mechanism because she knows her husband's shortcomings very well without any need to resort to pens for often when he lies about his commission she finds out the truth, soon and clear. Yet, she does not want to tell him because she feels that knowledge for him must be an irreparable action that leads to death. Of course she knows very well that his life is moving from the unsatisfactory to the worse. As he grows older, a haunting feeling of discomfort grips his body and soul. When he was in his prime age he was in race with the junk, buying things through installments and when he makes the last pay these things need change due to overuse and time factor. He has been paying these premiums his whole life, like most Americans who depend on loans for everything in their lives. Actually, when Willy paid the last installment to the insurance company, no one to live in it, his life is exhausted. The warmth of the past has gone forever and the world is no longer a home for Willy Loman. So once he had a dream; a dream so strong, so real and its only essence is that he is a human being. His dream is stolen and his life is taken. He lives in the past because it was better and he is afraid of the present because he feels frustrated and less secure.

However, the picture is gloomier than Willy's capacity for being optimistic, or his attempts to hold on to his massive dream. His philosophy of personal attractiveness is futile; as in classic tragedies a flaw or hamartia that leads to his tragedy. By definition the tragedy of a poor man who has no title or rank except his humanity in this

¹⁰ *Death of a Salesman*. P. 165

¹¹ *Death of a Salesman*. P. 162

¹² Charlotte F. Otten, "Who Am I?" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Death of a Salesman*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1983) PP.85 - 91

far and wide universe of falling stars, and men also who fall but keep to their place of identity. And Willy's identity is his philosophy of love; however misguided he is, however lacking knowledge or stature to recommend him. Let us ask a simple and straight forward question: Who is Willy Loman? We stated facts about him earlier so this time let us see some analysis of his character. In an essay entitled "The Lost Past in Death of a Salesman," Barclay W. Bates answers this question by stating that he is "four anachronisms: he is the archetypal cherisher of the pastoral world, the pre-industrial revolution artisan, the ham-handed outlaw frontiersman, and the dutiful patriarchal male intent upon transmitting complex legacies from his forebears to his progeny"¹³. In this sense Willy is the son of his environment; the holder of values reinforced by his society. Though these values are not necessarily all good, as when he tells his boys to steal lumber so as to look brave or when he finds excuses for Biff who stole a ball to practice with from the locker room and his father instead of punishing him encouraged him by assuming that the coach will thank him for his initiative. Later Biff stole once again and he told his father that in Texas he was in prison. It seems that the father does not know how to bring up his boys mainly because of his frustration, lack of knowledge and smallness.

5. Conclusion

Who killed the salesman in this drama; is it the society that has no regard for a small man or the system of capitalism that exploits workers when they are young and strong and leaves them without rewards or pension after they grow old and unable to do their jobs properly? It is certain that there is criticism of the American experience in this drama but it seems that the writer does not want to condemn the system since a character like Charley appears as honest, successful and practical; but he is not the type celebrated by Willy since there is no aura of success around him and he is depicted without a wife, an indication that a certain price is needed if you want to succeed.

¹³ Barclay W. Bates. "The Lost Past in Death of a Salesman" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Death of a Salesman*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall,1983) P. 60 (60 – 69)

Some critics compare the play to classic dramas such as Charlotte Otten who compared it to *Oedipus, the King* and drew some parallels between the two plays especially in their common theme of self-Knowledge or 'know thyself' as expressed in the earlier play in which we touch a kind of quest for identity from Oedipus who at the end of the drama knows who he is and his knowledge leads him to the action of plucking his eyes so as not to see his horrible deed¹⁴. Unknowingly, he has broken the 'unwritten law' by getting married to his mother and killing his old father. In the same manner, Willy broke the law of success but when he dies, he does so as a believer in the success story. He never accepts his short-comings or doubts for a second in the 'dream myth'. Fortunately his son Biff comes out with some sort of self-realization, when he declares at the end of the drama that "all Willy's dreams were wrong". It seems there is hope for Biff contrary to his brother Happy who is to the last moment still deluded and infected by 'Willy's virus' of personal-attractiveness and self-delusion.

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¹⁴ An interesting essay handling the same issue is written by Paul N. Siegel entitled "Willy Loman and King Lear," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Death of a Salesman*.(Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall,1983) PP. 92 – 97.