Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman: A Psychological Play

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Abstract

Undoubtedly Death of a Salesman is one of the triumphs of the mundane American stage. It moves its audience tremendously and it comes close to their experience or observation, and it awakens their consciousness, and it may even rouse them to self-criticism

- John Gassner

Arthur Miller is today considered one of America’s leading dramatists. Death of a Salesman is Miller’s best known play. It demonstrated his answer to critics of his earlier dramas who claimed he was incapable of producing other than a conventional play. It is the story of Willy Loman, a man with many dreams and delusions. As the play progresses, he loses his job, discovers that his idealized older son is a failure, and that his younger son, though successful in business, is morally rotten. In the end Willy, the protagonist has lost everything including his own self-respect, and has nothing more to lose except his life. Willy dies as a victim of what is called the great American dream. The word “American dream” denotes that a man can attain material success by means of personal attractiveness, personal charm, personal magnetism and personal contacts. Willy has always been deluded by the belief that his career as a salesman would take him to the top and that he would face no difficulties even in his old age. As a tragic hero, Willy is a victim of what is known as the American Dream. The actual title of the play is

Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem.
Arthur Miller is not a prolific writer. The reason perhaps is that he writes only when he has something fresh to say and that he refuses to cash in on an easy popularity by repeating himself. From what he has said about his own methods of working, it is clear that he is not easily satisfied with what he writes. It is lack of invention or dearth of ideas that limits him, but an excess of self-criticism combined with a restlessness of intellect. While working as a common labourer for a fifteen dollars a week, Miller discovered the value of literature and began to save part of his meagre salary to finance a year of college. He convinced the University of Michigan to accept him as a student even though he had never graduated from High school. At Michigan he supported himself by work on newspaper, aid from organisations, and occasional prize money from his writings. During his college years, he began writing his first drama. He graduated in 1938 and returned to New York, where he became associated with the theatre and later with radio, writing scripts for certain shows. Miller grew up during the years of the depression in America. *Death of a Salesman* is Arthur Miller’s best known play. Most critics agree that this is his finest work. The play can be read as a drama of the common man being defeated by a society which drains the ordinary man of his energy and then drops him. In fact, Miller’s intense concern for the fate of the common man caused him to align himself with the theatrical possibilities of communism. *Death of a Salesman* won the Pulitzer Prize as the play of 1949, and the movie version also won the first prize at Venice film festival. The play entrenched its author’s reputation as a leading American dramatist and one of the country’s significant writers. It is the play of a man’s journey into himself. Willy Loman is the central figure in the play and Loman is a pun on “low-man”. He is at the bottom of the rung in a capitalistic world. He owns nothing and makes nothing. He is a salesman whose job is to sell commodities made by someone else and owned by someone else. He is nothing. The protagonist of the play, Willy makes his appearance on the stage when the play begins. He has been a travelling salesman for a period of thirty years. His earlier work assignment had taken him to New England from where he has just returned. Having worked hard in his sales job, he feels a sense of fatigue and tells his wife Linda that he thinks he is incapable of being in this kind of job as he is unable to focus his attention while driving a car:

*The street is lined with cars. There’s not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood. The grass don’t grow anymore, you can’t raise a carrot in the backyard. They should’ve had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them?* (p.6)
Willy Loman is a tragic hero. A tragic hero should be a person of a high status or one holding an exalted rank. All Shakespearean tragic heroes fulfil this traditional view. Miller’s concept of tragedy is entirely different. He does not believe that the tragic hero must be a man of exalted rank. Miller’s protagonist is merely a middle class salesman. He belongs to the common people and to the common place. Willy Loman has two sons – Biff, older son and Happy, the younger son. Biff Loman is the eldest son who was once a star in a college with several scholarships. But he had left home fourteen years ago but was still unable to find himself. He is a representative of the sons of the middle class for whom the middle class dream has failed but for whom the only alternatives are various, all-embracing idealisms totally free from social structure. He is an unconventional, the hippie, and the radical in whom one cannot help seeing that the potent part of idealism is rebellion against the father and the father’s way of life but in whom a desperate longing for father-love remains. Biff had been away for several years but is presently staying at their house in Brooklyn. He is an outstanding athlete in school when he was fourteen years old. Several university teams offered him scholarships to pursue his studies. But his pathetic performance in mathematics in high school prevented him from the pursuit of higher education. This serious setback caused Biff to go to Boston where his father was then employed. He hoped to get his father to convince the mathematics teacher to alter his score in her subject so that he could study in the university. But to his dismay, he found his father in an affair with a woman in a hotel room. And the shock of this discovery affects him so much that he turns into an aimless youth just sailing along in life. Willy, his father, recalls all these events in Biff’s life when he meets him after a long time. Biff turns out to be a looser, confused and frustrated, not knowing what to do next. He wanders around many places in an attempt to figure out what he should do and what his objective in life really is. Somehow, he develops the habit of pilfering and even faces a sentence in jail for his petty thefts. Far from reprimanding him for stealing a football from the school locker room, Willy almost expressed his approval of Biff’s action and thus encouraged him to believe that thieving was not a serious matter. Thus brought up, Biff began to nurse certain illusions about himself and his future. However, on entering the arena of life, he found all his dreams of a rosy future dissolving into thin air. He wandered from place to place, took up job after job, but failed to make good. When we meet him in the play he is already thirty-four and a good for nothing. He tells happy that he has had twenty or thirty different kinds of jobs since he left home. Biff says:
Hap, I’ve had twenty or thirty different kinds of jobs since I left home before the war, and it always turns out the same. I just realised it lately. In Nebraska when I herded cattle, and the Dakotas, and Arizona, and now Texas. It’s why I came home now, I guess, because I realized it. This farm I work on, it’s spring there now, see? And they’ve got fifteen new colts. There nothing more inspiring or – beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt. And it’s cool there now, see? Texas is cool now, and it’s spring. And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my God. I’m not gettin’ anywhere. What the hell am I doing playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I’m thirty-four years old, I oughta be makin’ my future. That’s when I come running home. And now, I get here, and I don’t know what to do with myself. (after a pause) I’ve always made a point of not wasting my life, and every time I come back here I know that all I’ve done is to waste my life. (pp.10-11, Act 1)

Happy Loman is the younger son of Willy Loman. He works in a department store and has his own apartment in another part of the town. He is a contrast to his brother Biff. He assumes a secondary position as Biff enjoys the superior one. Happy is tall, powerfully made. He too develops a sense of insecurity and by his own admission, suffers loss of weight. He courts pretty maidens and in order to find stability he contemplates marriage. He never allowed himself to turn his face towards defeat and is thus hard skinned. When we meet Happy first, he is feeling worried about his father’s condition. He tells his brother Biff that his father cannot keep his mind on driving and that something is going wrong with him. But he does not feel over anxious on this score. Happy is proud of his numerous conquests over women and says that about five hundred women would like to know how he spent his boyhood and other particulars, meaning there by that a large number of women have felt interested in him at different times. Happy is basically a good-time guy, lacks depth in his character and as his name implies, he is superficial in his attitude. An opportunist by nature, he eagerly awaits the death of his boss in order to get a promotion. In a sense, he reflects the meanest side of Willy’s character. Happy’s negative traits outweigh any admirable qualities he might possess. He seems oblivious to life and its realities. In the very beginning, Happy used to be very shy with girls. Happy’s present capacity to become quickly acquainted with women is brought out in the scene in which he meets a girl in a hotel and within minutes, induces her to go out with him. He tells her that he sells champagne and compliments her by saying that her picture should appear on a magazine cover. Making love to women is a kind of game for him. He is more successful than Biff. He is not satisfied with what
he has achieved. He is making enough money but he thinks that he cannot go higher in life unless his boss dies. He has got his own apartment, a car and plenty of women, but still he feels lonely. Happy is fully aware of the fact that Biff is the favourite son. This does not, however make him feel bitter. His father’s neglect of him works upon his mind unconsciously perhaps and does leave its mark. That seems to be the reason for his neglecting his father in the restaurant when he goes out with a girl rather than stay back to look after his father. And yet it is he who defends his father’s views after Willy has committed suicide. Biff says that Willy has all the wrong dreams. Happy tells his brother not to talk like that and is almost ready to fight with him.

Happy says:

All right, boy. I’m gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It’s the only dream you can have – to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I’m gonna win it for him. (Requiem p.105)

He is the cause of catastrophe although this is not stated explicitly. Willy’s adultery in Boston is the cause of conflict between him and Biff. The stability of the family suffers when sex plays a role. Miller wants the family to survive. He throws in a lot of realistic details in the play. The speech of almost all the characters in this play is full of clichés and sentiment commonly heard in the U.S.A of the time. Willy, Biff, Linda, Charley........all of them used a language which is trite. The narrative technique used by the dramatist in the play is like Ibsen’s. Miller is concerned with the theme of man being the victim of the evils of a commercial society. However the individual is humanised in detail and depth. The ultimate feeling is that although in many respects man is a victim of society, he himself may be a weak individual who is particularly responsible for his state. Willy’s dream and fantasies of success and wealth are accompanied by failure and disillusionment in his professional and private life. His sons Biff and Happy grow up to be two average non-entities who believe their father’s desire of greatness and grandeur. In total commitment to the notion of selling Willy kills himself in an auto-accident, to achieve through death what he fails to achieve in life. Ironically, he sells himself as a last resort. According to some critics Linda in some respects is Miller’s mouth piece. She has been identified with all the best values in American society – care, love, courage and humanity. Because of these reasons she remains a very sympathetic character for most of the play. She is a devoted wife. She shows a constant wifely solicitude about Willy. This, indeed, is her dominant trait. This trait appears in the very opening dialogue when Willy has unexpectedly returned after having left in the morning on his business trip which was to keep him away from home for quite a number of days. Another
important role that she performs is that of a mediator between her husband and sons. She is constantly pleading for harmony and understanding. On such occasions she displays a special kind of wisdom in handling tense situation. She is the picture of the ever faithful wife. But her great weakness is that she does not have the imagination to see that Willy’s dreams were false, and even when she does not have the strength to correct them. To the extent that after having realized that all his course, indicates a weakness. She falls so much under her husband’s influence that she becomes a sharer of all his illusions. In other words, she becomes an unthinking partner in his fatalistic dreams and unrealistic hopes. Also, Linda restrains him from availing the golden opportunity offered to him by Ben. Her whole life is based on the welfare and happiness of the members of her family especially that of her husband. In fact she trusts him immensely and supports him constantly. An account of Willy by Linda reads as follows:

*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 that 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 grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.* (p.38 Act 1)

She lacks dynamism. She prefers to leave the family in a state of non-interference. On the positive side, however we see Linda’s fidelity and unflinching devotion to her husband. She remained unfailing in her duty until his end despite the fact that he sometimes treated her with scant respect. She trusts him immensely and loves him. When Willy comes home tired and spirit broken, Linda gives him comfort. She encourages her husband in his lies and self-delusion, rather than give him a correct assessment of what he really is. She supports him in all:

.........*I love him. (With a threat, but only a threat, of tears) He’s the dearest man in the world to me, and I won’t have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue. You’ve got to make up your mind now, darling, there’s no leeway anymore. Either he’s your father and you pay him the respect, or else you’re not to come here. I know he’s not easy to get along with – nobody knows that better than me – but....* (p.37 Act 1)

Linda is a pessimist who supports Willy’s dreams without having the slightest of faith in them. Her last speech, at Willy’s funeral is that she really doesn’t understand why Willy killed himself when things were perhaps going to take better turn. The speech at the funeral is an
acknowledgement of her distance from her husband. May be she never really tried to understand him and that Willy has to seek other women’s company as a substitute. Linda says:

Forgive me, dear. I can’t cry. I don’t know what it is, but can’t cry. I don’t understand it. Why did you ever do that? Help me, Willy, I can’t cry. It seems to me that you’re just on another trip. I keep expecting you. Willy, dear, I can’t cry. Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can’t understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there’ll be nobody home. (a sob rises in her throat.) We’re free and clear. (Sobbing more fully, released) We’re free. (BIFF comes slowly towards her.) We’re free.... We’re free...... (p.106, Requiem)

The play is replete with symbolism and this is present in almost every scene. For example, even a simple article as a pair of stockings which Linda darns and is given to Ms.Francis by Willy as a gift symbolises his career and self-esteem. His stockings are badly worn out with many holes and this is symbol of his family life which is a conflict-ridden. Linda’s action of mending the stockings shows her desire to mend the lives of the members of her family. But her action infuriates Willy Loman. He commands her to dump it in the garbage. This reveals his desire to be rid of problems in his family life and lead a life of happiness and contentment. Willy is beyond advice and change. In fact he is already dead, believing that, though his insurance, he is worth more dead than alive and this at least would atone for his cruelty to his wife and his betrayal of his sons. Lost honour and comradeship permeate Miller’s work. His heroes live on a vision which does not work. Arthur Miller uses symbols with great subtlety and effect. They are recurrent and thus help to structure the play symbolism is a device which was employed by Ibsen with great skill. The play opens with differences to cars. Cars are an American symbol of an individual mobility, freedom and social status. In Death of a Salesman, Miller uses the positive American suggestions of this symbol in a negative and ironic manner. From Linda’s account we are informed that Willy in the past did make attempts to pretend that he has attempted suicide and he always did these by using a car. In these incidents, it was a frantic effort to gain attention for him. The symbolism of the car lies in the fact that he actually drove himself to death. All the qualities that a car stands for power, speed and movement were the opposite of what Willy experienced in his life of pessimism, doubt and misery. Hence, when he finally makes up his mind to do away with his life, the car becomes an inevitable means to achieve his objective. As for as imagery is concerned the ‘burning woods’ is effectively employed. For Ben, the jungle becomes a synonymous for success, while to Willy it appears that the forest is on fire. This
implies that no time is left. According to his perception the fire has almost destroyed him. What remains is, merely the hopeless remnants of his poor dreams. Willy tells his son Happy that he is unable to drive through burning woods. Happy had suggested that his father should seek retirement from his job and this remark makes him actually conscious that the remaining days of his life have almost been numbered. Factors like, time, life, family appear to have a stifling effect on him. The cramped appearance of the high rise buildings in his neighbourhood also increase is sense of insecurity and restlessness. Owing to these insurmountable pressures, he ends his life in a tragic manner. In creating the character of Willy Loman, Miller’s purpose was to depict the life of a common man. Willy’s life is dull and insecure where the only excitement is provided by the language and myths of a highly competitive commercial society. His two simple ambitions are that he wants to be rich and he wants to be loud, particularly by his elder son Biff. But Willy dies with the satisfaction that Biff, who is supposed to have ruined his life out of spite and hatred for his father, really loves him. Willy’s failure as a father is a purely personal failure. His own moral and human failing are reflected in his sons. The play revolves round a family situation. It is specially the conflict between father and son, between Willy and Biff. It can also be called domestic drama because the problems of a family figure in it. Again the play is a critique of American society and its values. In this sense, it is a social drama. Willy Loman, like several other Miller heroes, is trapped by social and psychological forces which eventually destroy him. Willy is carried away by the American advertising to the point of believing that labels and brand names are real and that they would fetch instant success. America’s is a business culture where the salesman has a crucial role to play. The ability to sell one’s wares is the yardstick of success in one’s business as well as in life. a salesman feels thoroughly exhausted after thirty-six years of loyal service to his company and is driven to suicide. The death of an ordinary salesman is raised to the level of tragedy through Miller’s artistry. Willy, the salesman in ripe years is bewildered by the failure and futility in his life. His dreams are shattered. He goes bravely to his death. He drives off on a suicidal car ride. The play closes with a brief requiem in which the Loman family is joined by Charly, an old friend of the Lomans who has loaned money to Loman every week since he had been put on commission basis by the company. While Biff thinks that his father had the wrong dreams he acknowledges his father’s manual labour. Charely eulogises Willy. He says that nobody can blame Willy. Willy was a salesman and for salesman there was no rock-bottom to the life. Happy says that he will vindicate his father’s dream. Linda, in a soliloquy, calls upon the dead Willy to forgive her because she is unable to cry. She says that it seems her that Willy has gone out on just another business trip. She asks him why he killed himself. Ironically on that
day she made the last payment on the house and claimed rightful ownership. The requiem reveals more about the living characters and their attitudes and values about Willy Loman. A major theme that is dealt with is the theme of success and what it means in the modern world. And its primary level it refers to money, power, material comforts and living in society with a feeling of prestige. But we see that this kind of success is not the end of human life. It is more a state of mind or an attitude to one’s own life and that of others. For Willy, it is a system of success based on one’s personality and beauty that ensures success especially in the corporate world. Miller’s attitude is that we should strive to review the objectives we seek to achieve. This is a quality that Willy Loman lacked as he lived in a world of illusion unable to come to terms in reality. The play is a classic study of failure. Arthur Miller puts the so called affluent society of the United States of America on the stage for the audience through this play. The play is gripping in its intensity. It is a thrilling experience to see it on the stage and to read it in one’s study. It is enlightening and illuminating.

References


