

THE INDICTMENT OF AMERICAN DREAM IN DEATH OF A SALESMAN IN RESPONSE TO ARISTOTELIAN DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY

Rabiu Salisu Rabiu

School of Languages, Literature & Society, Jaipur National University, Jaipur, India

Corresponding Email: rabiusalisurabiu@gmail.com

Abstract

The character of Willy Loman will be under scrutiny. Aristotle has made several remarks about the definitions of drama, and tragedy as well; he sets down solid parameters about the 'ideal' protagonist. Naturally, many have deviated from that character profile. Aristotle often makes clarification about the 'elevated' position of his protagonists, and how the protagonist needs to have a tragic flaw "Hamartia" in order to set the stage for his grand downfall, as Aristotle believed that the only true form of drama was tragedy. Willy Loman is quite the painful thumb in this line of thought. His character completely lacks all the hallmarks of any sort of elevated position. His ideals aren't lofty, nor are his actions grand, but in this abnormality of his lies, greatness, ambitions, and his dreams. His inability to fulfill those dreams is sadly, his tragic flaw, and ultimately, his desire to manifest those dreams around him results in his downfall.

Keywords: *Character, Tragedy, American Dream, Illusion, Suicide.*



Scholarly Research Journal is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

Introduction

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* was written after the Second World War while the American economy was booming. Society was becoming very materialistic, and the idea that anyone could make it in America was popular. These societal beliefs play a large part in *Death of a Salesman*, a play in which the main character, Willy Loman, spends a lifetime chasing after the American Dream. Willy was sold on the wrong dream. He was hooked with a myth of American ideals and chose to put aside his real talents in pursuit of a fantasy. In several instances of the play, we see that Willy is a skilled carpenter. He wants to redo the front step just to show off to his brother, and he is constantly fixing things around the house. However, he doesn't see carpentry as an acceptable occupation. It entails hard work and there isn't any glory in it. Instead, he chooses to follow the dream of being a successful salesman. The problem is that Willy doesn't seem to have any of the skills needed to be a salesman. He deludes himself into thinking that he is vital in New England (Miller, 1949) but we find out during his meeting with Howard that even during his good years he wasn't doing as well as he thought he was. He has convinced himself that he averages one hundred and seventy

dollars a week in commission, but Howard tells him otherwise. This is a shock to Willy; has not used to having reality forced upon him. Willy sees being a salesman as a worthy profession; he apparently puts a lot of effort into his sales pitches.

The Real Illusion of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*

As Jacobson rightly made remarks on death of a salesman, he mentioned that, “*This differentiates Willy Loman from a dramatic tradition of introspective figures who, like Shakespeare's Hamlet or Milton's Samson, confront their situations in a profound social and metaphysical solitude. By contrast, protagonist who cannot be alone, who cannot summon the intelligence and strength to scrutinize his condition and come to some understanding of it-whatever agony it may cost him-seems disqualified for the tragic stature literature can bestow*”.(Jacobson, 1975).

Loman does not have profound soliloquies to his credit, but perhaps, he has something which causes a similar, if not greater impact- the surreal manifestation of Ben, one of the trailblazers of success for him. Biff and Dave Single man (his employer) are two other trailblazers for him, and the reader may take note in his/her critical thinking of the fact that Willy Loman stresses a lot on the quality of “personal” attractiveness. Biff’s image of a star athlete, and the successful entrepreneur image of Dave appeals to him, and he wants to desperately attain that level of success in his life. Loman’s futile efforts to accomplish whatever he envisages, his great aspirations despite the realization of mediocrity- all flaws- are ultimately the contributors of versatility in character. This is perhaps what makes Loman such a feasible protagonist, and such an appealing one as far as literary appreciation is concerned. Loman is the force that moves the events in the play; the one that is responsible for its volatility. The entire play may be an account of Loman’s struggle to achieve success, to be number one in the American society. He drags the entire family into the quagmire of his decisions, and attempts to influence their lives to reach satisfaction, as he seems resigned to his fate. Loman also assumes a commanding role as head of the household- not afraid to reproach and reprimand people when confronted with such a situation, often shown when he reprimands Biff, or talks about him and his sheer “laziness” in life. His anger bursts, however are shown to be quite hollow when he interacts with people outside the sphere of his house, displaying further disconnection to society. Loman’s death, his erasure, is probably one of the masterstrokes of such a protagonist - with his death gives insurance, his support to his family, and to achieve a plethora of other goals. To quote Jacobson:

“Leonard Moss has noted that he chooses death "not simply as an escape from shame but as a last attempt to re-establish his own self- confidence and his family's integrity."12 The insurance money makes it seem possible to synthesize the values of Ben and Single man. For by entering the dark, unknown "jungle" of death Loman might bring out tangible wealth, "like diamonds," thus becoming as much an adventurer as Ben but within the skyscraper world of New York. He imagines himself then having a funeral as massive as Single man's, one that would leave Biff "thunderstruck." Thus in a single act Loman hopes to achieve transformation, prominence, synthesis, and his lost unity with Biff".(Jacobson, 1975).

Biff, on the other hand, is quite the polar opposite in comparison to his father. Biff's character is an antithesis of what an ideal candidate for the American dream is- he has realized that it is just an illusion, and a futile dream-and accepted that reality. Biff's personality is stronger than that of his father, just because of that realization. The acceptance of that reality comes through in this line:“BIFF: Hap, *the trouble is we weren't brought up to grub for money. I don't know how to do it*". (Miller, 1949)

Biff knows that making money isn't everything, but is conflicted and somewhat indecisive in the beginning of the play, as Willy never really gives them all a chance, trying to influence them with his concepts of success. Biff has tasted his father's version of success, is attractive, both physically and personality wise (personal attractiveness) - but, is too 'lazy' for his own good. Biff knows that all these momentary achievements are extremely vacillating in nature, and wants his father to realize that. The relationship between father and son is volatile, but strong at the same time; Biff knows the in and out of his father, while Willy and however knowledgeable he may be about his son's traits does not want to accept him as he is. He is always looking for an opportunity to change Biff in order to satisfy some deep personal ambition, but Biff is unaffected by his father's attempts, even disgusted. This brief extract says a lot about that underlying resentment and bitterness

“HAPPY (*getting into bed*): I wish you'd have a good talk with him.

The light of their room begins to fade.

BIFF (*to himself in bed*): That selfish, stupid...

HAPPY: Sh... Sleep, Biff" (Miller, 1949).

Death of a Salesman is a tragic tale about Willy Loman, a man who desperately seeks success in a country known for its limitless opportunities. Unfortunately, few are able to attain such lofty goals. In his journey, Willy loses sight of what is important and becomes completely blinded by the riches that he would have been able to accomplish. Being a modern-day

tragedy, *Death of a Salesman* reveals the tragic side of the American Dream. It is true that in America we have the freedom to pursue our goals no matter how lofty they may seem, but in reality, few are able to achieve the great successes seen by a select few. The majority of people find that the American dream is merely a dream and nothing else. Either people do not strive for such superior goals or are unable to due to life events and bad choices. Willy Loman is among the majority. Although, unlike the majority, the American dream has become a hindrance to Willy's life because of his love of money, his low self-esteem, and his blinding hero worshipping of three successful men.

“WILLY: Like a young god. Hercules— something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him. Remember how he waved to me? Right up from the field, with the representatives of three colleges standing by? And the buyers I brought, and the cheers when he came out— Loman, Loman, Loman! God Almighty, he'll be great yet. A star like that, magnificent, can never really fade away!” (Miller, 1949).

In the end, it is this preoccupation with financial matters that defeats Willy. Because he places a high significance on money, he misinterprets what he should do “when he realizes that his true value of life lies in being a good father” as Witalec explains. Instead of giving his sons his time and energy, “he chooses to sacrifice himself in order to give his sons the material wealth he has always desired” (Witalec, 2004). In one respect he realizes that he should be looking towards his relationship with his sons, but he is still blinded by his love for money. He thinks the way to bless his sons is by making them riches in the way of his own choice not the other way round. He believes he is doing the right thing for his family by committing suicide and ultimately giving his children the twenty-thousand dollars from his life insurance. As a result, he misses out on life itself and takes one of the most valuable things away from his family (himself).

In Willy's fractured mind, there are fragments of truths where he realizes the importance of family over money. For instance, as his wife tells him that they almost have the house paid off, he states “...work a lifetime to pay off a house. You finally own it and there's nobody to live in it” (Miller, 1949). Here he realizes that he has worked very hard to get the material things he has in life. Now that he has gained it, his children are adults and are no longer running around the house. His wife reiterates this statement later, although she says it with a different tone. When Willy makes this statement he is speaking with bitterness over the years he had to work, and the times he missed out on with his sons. Whereas Linda says this with

sadness because now that she officially owns her house, she is completely alone. In this, Linda is the true victim, because she would have rather have her husband than own the house. Unfortunately, Willy does not understand how much she values him, because he's too blinded by his insecurities and self-absorption. To him, he sees her as his "foundation and... support" (Miller, 1949), but he only looks at the benefit she gives to him and not the benefit he gives to her. As a result, he misses out on the fulfillment of the symbiotic relationship that marriage provides. Although Willy says, "You know the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me" (Miller, 1949), it is true that he doesn't "take to" himself. If only he understood the love his wife had for him, and her willingness to stick up for him like when she says, "I won't have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue" (Miller, 1949), he may have been able to see the worth in himself as his wife does. Rather than realizing his worth within his wife's life, he continuously tries to seek importance in the world. Even when he assesses himself, he looks to physical characteristics such as appearance and personality as seen when he says, "I'm fat. I'm very—foolish to look at, Linda," "I joke too much!" and "I'm not dressing to advantage" (Miller, 1949). These are characteristics that the world judges each other on; whereas a person's true treasure is in the things that are not seen, such as love. Willy wants so badly to be "well-liked," that he often overlooks the fact that he is loved, even though his wife continually reminds him.

Self-absorption is the main reason for this inability because he only sees life from his own point-of-view. He makes decisions without fully understanding the repercussions that his actions will have on others lives and consequently his own. One of his greatest selfish decisions is his affair. Although Witalec argues that Willie truly believes he cheats "out of loneliness for his wife, Linda. But [in fact]... he is driven by feelings of inadequacy and failure to seek himself outside of himself, in the eyes of others. 'The Woman' makes him feel that he is an important salesman and a powerful man" (Witalec, 2004). Willy only looks at the benefit he will get from his decisions. In the case of his affair, his benefits are words of affirmation and carnal pleasure. Unfortunately, because Biff discovers the affair, Willy becomes very aware of the immense pain that results. In a criticism written by Marowski and colleagues, it expresses this betrayal by declaring that, "the trust Biff had given Willy now seems misplaced. Indeed, according to the flashbacks within the play, the young Biff and Happy had nearly idolized Willy, so this betrayal, while Biff is yet an adolescent, is particularly poignant." (Marowski, 1988). The affair results in a strained relationship with his son, and though Biff never tells the secret, the family dynamic is forever changed. Ironically,

what makes Willy feel like a successful salesman causes him to feel insecurities regarding his fatherhood and other aspects of his life as well.

His greatest insecurity is that he is never as successful as he feels he should be. It is, as Witalec says, “his vision of success [that] perpetuates crippling feelings of inferiority and inadequacy [which ultimately]... drive him to destroy himself” (Witalec, 2004). He creates his view of success based on three men that he idolizes: his father, his older brother Ben, and old Dave Single man. These men represent who he wants to emulate. Willy’s father is the least represented in the play because his father abandons him at a very early age. Though Willy’s father is rarely mentioned, there is a sense that his memory is always present. Whenever Willy is experiencing a flashback, Miller represents his father’s memory through a flute playing offstage. His father’s flute playing is one of the few sensory memories that Willy has of him (Witalec, 2004). In fact, the only times his father is mentioned is during conversations with his brother Ben. Ben describes his father as a “Great inventor... With one gadget he made more in a week than a man like (Willy) could make in a lifetime.” (Miller, 1949). Although it is clear that Willy feels a sense of pride for his father when Ben boasts this, it is important to note that his brother is also insulting him. Rather than encouraging Willy in becoming successful like his father, he is stating that he is not capable. Since this statement is coming from someone who Willy idolizes, he is more apt to believe that it is true; he cannot make that much money.

Willy’s idolization of Ben also hinders Willy in his quest for the American dream. In Willy’s mind, Ben is the personification of the American dream. He symbolizes the riches that he could attain. Willy covets the qualities in Ben that makes him successful, such as toughness and unscrupulousness. (Witalec, 2004) Although Willy does not realize he has his own strengths and tries too hard to emulate his brother. Willy, unlike his brother, is honest. Although he makes some bad choices such as infidelity, he chooses to work hard and take care of his family. As shown earlier, he also does not recognize another one of his great strengths, which is Linda, his own personal cheerleader. Ben does not have a person in his life that encourages him and loves him. Willy neglects to notice.

Because Willy chooses to support his family and work honestly, he is unable to achieve the same level of success as his brother Ben. On the other hand, Dave Single man embodies a success that is realistic. He represents “getting ahead by being ‘well-liked’” (Witalec, 2004). Willy boasts that Single man is so well liked that “when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral” (Miller, 1949). Therefore, Willy strives for the success that Single

man has. Willy is not completely blind, for he does see that he is aging, and his chances of having success like Single man is getting less likely. Heyen another critic of Miller mentions as the play progresses “Willy saw the truth. He knew he didn’t have Ben’s courage..., Dave Single man’s personality, his own father’s fortitude, and ingenuity. But Willy chose to continue dreaming even unto death” (Heyen, 1988). He then turns his hope for success to his children. In Willy’s eyes, he dies an honorable death, because he is fulfilling his dream in the only way he knows how, by providing for his children financially and giving them a chance at the American dream.

Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* is one of the most tragic characters from a twentieth-century play. He dreams of a life that he never being able to achieve, yet witnesses many people around him accomplishing their goals with ease. Due to his “tunnel-vision,” he overlooks the things in life that can bring happiness like doing the things he enjoys like gardening or more importantly spending quality time with the one person who has devoted her heart and life to him. Although he may not have become as rich as the men he idolizes, he does share one thing with them; his self-absorption and utter disregard for the needs of other people. Though Willy may feel he ends his life with purpose, he does so without fully understanding the creation of the American dream. The dream is meant to bring hope not despair, life not death, unification not separation.

The Failure of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*

All people -- from millionaires with mansions living on the hilltops to the poor and unhealthy bums living on the streets -- have one goal: to reach their fullest ability, or achieve their American Dream. The above examples are the extremes of an American system in which wealth and status decide your friends, future, and well-being. Personally, I think the American Dream is to attain the status that you desire -- whether it is social prosperity or affluence. Everyone's definition is different with the American dream as it can be viewed from many different aspects; if you were born poor, it would be to reach a decent life, but if you were well-off, your American Dream would differ from the former. Although the American Dream fails for many individuals, it is not the American system's fault; instead, it is due to a lack of hard work and dedication from the pursuers. In Arthur Miller's play, "Death of a Salesman", Miller uses many different characters to contrast the difference between the successes and failures of the American system. Willy is the long time salesman who has little sales ability but his imagination makes up for it. Linda, Willy's wife, has always been with him even through the deterioration of his practicality. Biff and Happy are

the two sons who follow in their father's fallacy of life, while Ben is the only member of the Loman family with that special something needed to achieve. Charlie and his son Bernard, on the other hand, enjoy better success in life compared to the Loman family. The play displays the rural-agrarian dream but does not make it clearly available to Willy. Miller seems to use this dream merely to give himself an opportunity for sentimentality. The play is ambiguous in its attitude toward the business success dream, but it does not condemn it. "Death of a Salesman" makes no judgment on America, although Miller seems always on the verge of one, telling us that America is a nightmare and a cause for tragedy. But Willy does not end up a tragic hero, but a foolish and ineffectual man for whom we feel pity. Although there is enormous room for failure, there are also many opportunities for great success in America; the system is not the one to blame, but only those who cannot grasp onto these chances. Willy can only blame himself for not making himself a successful salesman. The next character, Willy's wife Linda, is not part of the solution, but rather, she is another addition to the problem -- she adds to their dysfunctional family and their inability to see things for what they really are. She never points out to Willy the problems she sees or is having but rather puts them away to try and please Willy. Linda accepts Willy's greatness and his dream, but at the same time her admiration for his dreams causes problems. She encourages his dream, but she will not let him live his dreams by leaving to a place where it can be fulfilled.

Conclusion

In sum, I would support my argument by attacking the construction of what Willy says, because he is like his children, feeling self importance, but the gate is refused to be opened for him, talk- less to his children. Since the beginning of the play Willy Loman is extremely affected by capitalists system in his life. To leave the mark behind these are:

- i- Insurance money
- ii- Dream of the funeral
- iii- Committed suicide

Arthur Miller creates Willy Loman, an ordinary man as a tragic – hero so as to condemn the ideas of capitalists and to defame the myth of Aristotelian definition of tragedy, that only a great hero or noble man can be a tragic – hero and shows that tragedy could be fallen to the weak men of the societies. Just like Miller, F. Scott Fitzgerald creates Gatsby so as to criticize the idea of capitalism that one can only succeed by getting more money. Gatsby thought that he lost his beloved Daisy because of money, and the only way to bring her back is through the money but his dream has gone beyond that. At long last, Gatsby becomes rich

and die without achieving his gold. Miller tries to deploy his arguments by creating Loman family as an indictment of the capitalists' ideology in general and Willy Loman in particular, thus:

“WILLY: Oh, yeah, my father lived many years in Alaska. He was an adventurous man. We've got quite a little streak of self reliance in our family. I thought I'd go out with my older brother and try to locate him, and maybe settle in the North with the old man. And I was almost decided to go, when I met a salesman in the Parker House. His name was Dave Singleman. And he was eighty-four years old, and he'd drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, I'll never forget — and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. 'Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people? Do you know? When he died — and by the way he died the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven and Hartford, going into Boston — when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral. Things were sad on a lotto trains for months after that. (He stands up. Howard has not looked at him.) In those days there was personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear — or personality. You see what I mean? They don't know me anymore” (Miller, 1949).

With above mentioned statement by Loman he attempts to sacrifice his life for the happiness of his children in order to have high opinion for them. But the actual condemnation that occurred to Willy Loman is that, nobody cares about him, even his son Biff accused him: “BIFF: You saw it. The mice didn't bring it into the cellar! What is this supposed to do, make a hero out of you? This supposed to make me sorry for you? Willy Loman has been confused so much that he lost the focus of his life and convinced that his death is going to bring what his life fails to do so. Therefore, American dream has given much to the United State social ideals. Meaning anybody in United State has the chance to achieved success and prosperity. They look the dream upon everyone that they are the most important people in the universe. This is what led them for feeling fame and self importance. It is a kind of life that Willy Loman felt for himself, that the only way to accomplish this is to commit suicide. And at the end he dies with the spiritual compete in his mind.

References

- Jacobson, Irving. *Family Dreams in Death of a Salesman*. New York: n. pp 247, 1975. Print.
- Miller, Arthur. *The Norton Anthology: American Literature*. Vol. E, in *Death of a Salesman*, edited by Nina Baym, 2327-2392. New York: Norton and Company, 1949. Print
- Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. Great Britain: Heinemann Educational Books, 1949. Print
- Witalec, Janet. *Death of a Salesman*. Vol. No. 179. Detroit: Gale, 2004. Web 19 March 2019.