

DYSTOPIA: A CRITIQUE OF ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

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ABSTRACT

The universal element of all dystopian fiction is the utter bleakness of the worlds delineated. This paper presents the theme of dystopia as represented in Arthur Asher Miller's Death of a Salesman (1949). The playwright portrays characters of postwar era of America who resort to manners of escapism into illusionary realities in order to free themselves from their harsh and frustrated existence. Their predicaments result from their failure to reach a reasonable adjustment to their contemporary life, lack of fruitful communication among the family members in addition to their inner conflicts. Therefore, they all share discontent with their realities, a sense of boredom and frustration. They hang their hopes on the concept of the American Dream which turns to be a nightmare. The world of dystopia is the counterpart of utopia. Dystopia challenges utopia's (ideal societies) assumption of human perfectibility and perfect society.

Key words: dystopia, utopia, American Dream, commercialism, technology.

Introduction: Utopia and Dystopia

The history of utopian literature goes back to the early sixteen century when Thomas More published his work *Utopia*. As the Greek title implies, the term utopia describes an ideal society which does not exist. These ideal societies are often set in the future and they are contrasted to the society that the novel's protagonist is a member of. The utopians are pragmatic people. So utopian novels aim to show the reader improved concepts of life by emphasizing the moral and political inadequacies of the society to which it is contrasted. The main interest for the stability of utopia is the happiness and satisfaction of its inhabitants, enough food and housing for everyone and absence of greed and envy through the abolition of money.

The world of dystopia is the counterpart of utopia. The dystopian genre blossomed in the literature of the nineteenth century. It emerged and developed mainly as a critical response and an antithesis to utopian fiction. Dystopia challenges utopia's assumption of human perfectibility and perfect society.

Characteristics of Dystopia

It is pertinent to talk about the concept of dystopia as described by M. H. Abrams. "The term 'dystopia' (bad place) has recently come to be applied to works of fiction...which represents a very unpleasant imaginary world in which certain ominous tendencies of our present social, political and technological order are projected in some disastrous future culmination" (178). The universal element of all dystopian fiction is the utter bleakness of the worlds delineated. Writers of dystopian fictions explore worst possible scenario, highlighting a sense of fear in order to show that a perfect society is not possible. According to critics, some common features of dystopian works are:

- Harsh and repressive form of government controlling everything through violence and mind control

- Lack of governmental laws
- Science fiction elements (like time travel, space flight, and other forms of advanced technology)
- Chaos and disorder
- Dark setting and environment
- Conditions are unfit for people to live
- The protagonist discovers flaws in the society and struggles between what is right or wrong.
- Environmental disasters and scarce resources (water, food and the like)
- Post-apocalyptic (end of the world) scenarios
- warnings about the future of the society

Some scholars admit that dystopia is a product of our times and believe that its roots are in the advances of science and technology. According to George Kateb, dystopia is "a crystallisation of a number of ideas, attitudes, opinions and sentiments that have existed for centuries. And it is nothing but the development of technology and the natural sciences that is responsible for the crystallisation that has taken place" (3). Some other scholars like Frederik Lodewijk Polak look for the roots of dystopia in the political history of the modern age. Dunja M. Mohr is of the view that dystopia represents "gloomy prognostications...the negative extrapolation of and the logical conclusion or the outcome of current trends, of the flaws ailing contemporary society"(28).

Death of a Salesman: The Dystopian View

This paper aims at presenting the theme of dystopia as represented in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). The writer portrays characters who resort to manners of escapism into illusionary realities in order to free themselves from their harsh and frustrated existence. Their predicaments result from their failure to reach a reasonable adjustment to their contemporary life, lack of fruitful communication among the family members in addition to their inner conflicts. Therefore, they all share dissatisfaction with their realities, a sense of boredom and frustration. The dreamy world is simply the shelter and the refuge almost every character finds protection and security in. They hang their hopes on the concept of the American Dream which turns to be a nightmare. This paper strives to show how in the play the characters become victims and victimizers; victims of the surrounding circumstances in society and victimizers who deceive their families whose lives as a result, become tragic. The tragic plight of their family results from their personalities and from contemporary American capitalist society that discards the unsuccessful.

Arthur Miller is one of the greatest twentieth century dramatists. Over the course of his career, he wrote around 35 stage plays, the best known of which include *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *All My Sons* (1947), *The Crucible* (1953), *A View from the Bridge* (1955) and *The Price* (1968). *Death of a Salesman* (1949) was the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and Tony Award for Best Play. The play is a scornful assessment of the American Dream and of the competitive, materialistic American society of the late 1940s. The conflicts in the play relate to the tyrannies of the capitalistic system and the hoax of the American Dream. *Death of a Salesman* opened at Broadway at the Morosco Theatre on February 10, 1949 and ran for more than two years, tallying 742 performances featuring the tragedy of the common man, the 'low man'. The play encompasses an evening and the following day, but the action is mixed with flashbacks or memories of a period approximately 17 years earlier. It was written at a time of great economic and social change - when the American Dream changed from one driven by ideals to one driven by money. In Miller's view, the past informs the present, and to ignore it is to restrict the present.

Willy Loman (a travelling salesman of 63) is a product of the American Dream, a concoction of the over-optimistic American male. The main conflict is that of never having enough money - Willy is fired quite nonchalantly at a job that he has worked at for three decades, Biff's perpetual cycle of unemployment, and all the piling up of bills that have to be paid for all of the family's accessories. When Willy Loman enters the office of Howard Wagner, who is 36 years old and the heir of the company's founder, he is not paid any attention to. Howard is busy with his new tape recorder. When Willy finally manages to utter his wish to work in New York from now on instead of travelling, he is fed with empty phrases such as "*But you're a road man, Willy, and we do a road business*" or "*...it's a business, kid [Willy is over 60 years old], and everybody's gotta pull his own weight*" (Act 2). Willy's inability to accept the gulf between his own life and the American Dream leads to his rapid psychological decline. He yells at Wagner (in act 2) and insists that: "*You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away - a man is not a piece of fruit!*" Willy is both an individual and a representative of his society. Willy's problem as a salesman becomes the problem of all salesmen pursuing the American Dream to succeed in a capitalist society.

Money, social status, a well-kept home, a happy family and respectability (both economically and socially) - this is what Willy Loman chases doggedly. He fabricates his view of success based on the three men that he idolizes - his father, his older brother Ben and Dave Singleman. Willy believes that his sons Biff and Happy are pinnacles of 'personal attractiveness' and power, and compares them to the mythic Greek figures Adonis and Hercules. By mythologizing, he sets impossibly high standards for himself and his sons. He idealizes Dave Singleman, who died the noble 'death of a salesman' that Willy himself covets. He glorifies Singleman's on-the-job death as dignified. He never considers the sadness of the fact that Singleman was still working at the age of eighty-four and that he might have experienced the same financial difficulties and consequent pressures that he himself experiences. The dilemmas posed by capitalism and business are the integral thematic concerns in *Death of a Salesman*.

One of the reasons for Willy's failure is that he cannot adapt to modern society. He tends to compare the past with the present. He is not able to let go of the past and accept the present times and the changes that have taken place in the society. Moreover, Willy cannot keep up with the speed of technical progress. In the process of scientific advancement human beings have brought changes in nature as well:

Willy: Why don't you open a window in here, for God's sake?

Linda: They are all open, dear.

Willy: The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks... The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood... They should've had a law against apartment houses... Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening! (Act 1, sc.1)

The voice of excessive commercialism and money-mindedness that comes to co-exist with the increasing play of advanced technology and electronic gadgetry in the American economy tends to damage human responses. Through the character of Howard, Miller tries to suggest the extremely inhuman and materialistic nature of the American society. It is Howard Wagner who utters in the fiction the ultimate credo of capitalism - "*business is business*" (act 2). He is a man for whom time is money. In Howard's new business ethics, Willy's desperate attempt to recall his friendship with Frank Wagner is doomed to fail.

Willy laments the withering sense of family in the modern age. The following words reflect the irony of the human situation:

Work a life time to pay off a house. You finally own it, and there's nobody to live in it.
(Act 1)

He undergoes an existential crisis because he lacks a vision of his future. In *Death of a Salesman* the psychological analysis of Willy Loman is identical with Miller's interpretation and indictment of Society. Loman reflects Society. The following words exchanged between Linda and Biff justify that the play is a study of Society's habit of trying to force people to become one with the social functions which they perform.

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 allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog...The man is exhausted...He works for a company thirty-six years, opens up un-heard-of territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his salary away. (Act 1)

When Willy was brought face to face with his own reality, he could not bear it and so he killed himself. Miller shows how the common man is crushed by the uncontrolled external forces and false ideas.

Linda: Don't you feel well?

Willy: I'm tired to the death...I couldn't make it. (Act 1)

Willy loses the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, and this behaviour alienates him from others, thereby diminishing his ability to survive in the present. Prior to discovering the affair, Biff (Willy's son) adored Willy, trusted him and even subscribed to Willy's philosophy that anything is possible as long as a person is "well liked". The realization that Willy is unfaithful to Linda and he fails to appreciate her forces Biff to re-evaluate Willy and his perception of the world. Willy suffers from depression and anxiety as a result of his dissipating career, his estranged relationship with his eldest son, Biff, and his guilt over an extramarital affair.

Linda, who has developed an iron repression of her expectations to Willy's behaviour, "holds the home together, cares for the boys, cooks the food, buys, washes, mends the clothing, and, most of all, worries about money, whether there will be enough to cover the mortgage and the insurance and the innumerable repairs"(Griffin 53). While the men leave home for work, for sporting and social events, Linda is never seen away from the house. She is the supporter and defender of Willy in the clashes with her sons. So this dystopian work of fiction projects the culmination of the feminist issue where the identity of a woman has been dragged down to the nadir hardly leaving any scope for retrieval.

Conclusion

Dystopias dramatize the eternal conflict between individual choice and social necessity. According to Bloom: "In the character of Willy Loman, Arthur Miller has established a metonymic representation of the contradictory beliefs and value systems that were at the heart of American business culture in the decade after World War II" (107). *Death of a Salesman* shows us how our individuality, autonomy, privacy and free will can be taken from us if we fail to vigilantly protect them. As the play signifies a landmark in the maturing process of Miller's creative career, his self-assured depiction of the grim dystopian world gives an energetic and meaningful impetus to the genre.

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