

## SHAKESPEAREAN SHADOW ON MILLER: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR* AND ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

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### ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1605) and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949)—both the plays need no introduction, neither their writers need any. As the Elizabethans were overwhelmed by *King Lear*'s intense struggle for securing his dignity as a human being in a chaotic universe, so the modern people are moved by Willy Loman's desperate striving to attain, in Miller's own words "his 'rightful' position" (Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man") in a grim world governed by sheer business principles. And both the plays are endowed with certain wonderful qualities which have irresistible appeal to everyone, everywhere. Therefore, both these plays have several interesting fundamental similarities. This paper attempts a comparative study of these two texts to focus on their common features which are largely connected with their dramatists' concern about man's eternal conflict with the indifferent, pitiless universe. Of course, Miller's play is not of the same order of merit as one of the greatest English tragedy like *King Lear*. What this paper aims to highlight is that both the plays draw their tragic force from some similar universally significant aspects of human life.

**KEYWORDS:** Tragedy, William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Struggle, Isolation, Self Knowledge

### INTRODUCTION

Out, out, brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,

And then is heard no more: it is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.

(5.5.23-28)

Thus Shakespeare's *Macbeth* eloquently expresses his utter frustration and disgust with life. Sometimes, we too, being puzzled over our helpless situation in this universe, think alike. And from ancient times, tragedy has been seeking to solve the puzzles arising out of the ambiguities of our life. In other words, tragedy deals with the ultimate truth and meaning of human existence. Thus the tragedies, *King Lear* and *Death of a Salesman*, written in two completely different

periods, that is, in Elizabethan and modern periods respectively, attempt to explore man's relentless struggle against the larger forces, be it nature or society, and in so doing both display certain common traits. To be more precise, the protagonists of these plays have some similarities in their characters. Of course, they belong to different strata of society. Lear is a great British king and his struggle gains a cosmic dimension. On the other hand, Willy Loman is a pretty ordinary salesman and his striving does not attain that grandeur. But both are endowed with certain qualities which connect them.

## DISCUSSIONS

The protagonists of both plays, King Lear and Death of a Salesman are compelled to engage themselves in a grim soul searching business. The cause of the catastrophe of the king of ancient Briton and that of the salesman today is the same: each does not know himself and the world in which he is living. Lear has, as Regan says, "ever but slenderly known himself" (1.1.294-95). Being pampered and indulged for a long period as a royal monarch Lear has lost any sense of human limitations. Showcasing his idle vanity and whim he asks his daughters, "Which of you shall we say doth love us most" (1.1.52). His rewarding of Goneril and Regan reveals his superficial judgement and self-complacency. When he turns to his youngest daughter Cordelia, he hears that she can offer "Nothing" (1.1.87). Cordelia's blunt and unemotional statement infuriates Lear. In his majestic disclaiming of Cordelia, he is an intimidating king. Kent intervenes on Cordelia's behalf and it brings his banishment. Thus Lear's wayward judgement in casting out Cordelia and Kent deprives him of those who genuinely love him.

Insulated from the world around him, Lear is rudely awakened to its reality when he gives up his crown to Goneril and Regan who then reject him. The 'interrogatives of selfhood' in Lear's seminal speech beginning: "Does any here know me? Why, this is not Lear." (1.4.217) and ending: "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (1.4.221) denote that we are witnessing the beginning of an agonized crisis of identity. Now he appreciates the triviality of Cordelia's 'offence' and his own foolishness in treating her as he did. This is his first step towards self-knowledge. When he is cast out into the storm, the tempest in the heavens echoes the tempest in his mind. He is possessed of a new vision; the storm is the instrument of the gods in seeking out and punishing rampant evil, the evil of hidden guilt and hypocrisy, the evil of Goneril and Regan. The speech ends with an honest assessment of his own guilt without any trace of self-pity or self-delusion: "I am a man/More sinned against than sinning." (3.2.59-60) Lear's profound insight into the nature of real need is manifest when he says, "The art of our necessities is strange, And can make vile things precious" (3.2.70-71). Lear's journey towards self-knowledge finds its culmination when he understands how he was manipulated—"They flattered me like a dog" (4.6.96-97). He learns not only the deceitfulness of flatterers, but the limits of his own power: "they told me I was everything; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof" (4.6.103-04).

This self-awareness gained through suffering enables Lear to reconcile with Cordelia, not as a king condescending to his subject, but as a father embracing his devoted daughter, ". . . as I am a man, I think this lady/To be my child Cordelia" (4.7.69-70). When Lear dies he is certainly a better man. The vain tyrant has been transformed into a simple man who, albeit for the briefest intervals, judges well, sees clearly, loves truly.

In Death of a Salesman Willy Loman is, as Biff says at the end, a man who "never knew who he was" (105). Three of the most painful truths about Willy are his nearly total acceptance of the notion that he must succeed within the business world that eventually rejects him, the lying and self-delusion this acceptance leads him to, and the lack of insight into his own life this acceptance also entails. Willy is clearly an unquestioning devotee to the notion that "in the greatest

country in the world” one must be Thomas Edison, a B.F. Goodrich, or a Dave Singleman. Moreover, although it may become clear to Willy that he might have done better doing more manual work than that of a “well-liked” salesman, he cannot even consider such an alternative because part of succeeding is doing better than one’s ancestors. When he overhears Biff considering being a carpenter, he chides his son, “Even your grandfather was better than a carpenter” (42). Through such thoughts Willy ensures, participate in, society’s victimization of him. To make matters worse, knowing that he is, at best, a mediocre salesman, Willy must convince himself that he is a great one. Accordingly, from his “overactive” (3) mind comes lie after lie, lies that are at once ineffective because they fail to alter reality and too effective because they are infectious. Biff exclaims to Willy, “We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!” (98)

Thus we can say that Willy does not know his relation to his world which is governed by no eternal law of nature but by social laws rising from the nature of a particular civilization. In disregarding the social reality he ruins his sons by holding before them his vision of triumph. In this world, in which machines rather than human beings are important and the individuals are only so many counters in the game of business, Willy thinks that he and his sons will reach the top because they are well-liked. Lonely and insecure in his world of impersonal relationships governed by the market he must deceive himself if he is to live by his gospel of popularity. But in brief glimpses, Willy recognizes that he is a victim. After he is fired he complains to Charley, “After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive.” (71)

Death of a Salesman, then, is more than an American drama about a salesman. Basically all human beings are salesmen; all wear the salesman’s mask. The play reveals more than the weakness of Willy’s dream, more than the weakness of the American dream: it reveals the basic problem of self knowledge that each human being must face. Arthur Miller cries out with the Delphic Oracle, “Know Thyself”. And it is this phrase that we find inscribed on King Lear’s tomb and on Willy’s simple grave.

What happens to Willy Loman, like what happens to King Lear, reveals the cruel paradox of human existence. Both Loman and Lear move towards life’s end. Instead of finding fulfillment in life, both caught in bewildering circumstances. Each of them suffers because of a mistake—an error of judgement. So, their predicaments elicit not merely pity but fear.

Lear’s intense sufferings made the Elizabethan audience feel that their life is full of afflictions and miseries. This is true of us too. A tragedy signifies that no one, not even the richest and the greatest, is immune from the sorrows of life. Fate overtakes all—the rich and poor, the great and small. Through Lear’s sufferings we come to realize the helplessness of human nature in the face of overwhelming forces. We are filled with terror when we observe the greatest king like Lear coming to grief and falling from his glorious pedestal. We cry in horror “What a fall!” At that moment we realize powerlessness of man and the potency of the towering deities that determine our destinies. It is for this reason Gloucester says, “As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;/They kill us for their sport.” (4.1.37-38)

In Death of a Salesman Willy Loman, the salesman too acts as an image of us. The conflict Miller chose to communicate with his vision is that between Willy as a salesman and Willy as a man. Such a view of the conflict explains and justifies the dramatist’s uses of the past, each of the episodes now be seen as making the same, insistent point: Willy suffers from his attempt to live by his business ethics. He is content to govern all his relationships, including those with his

family, by the same standards that prevail when he is on the road. He cannot distinguish—as we do, between the ethics of business (a little happy cheating now and then) and the sterner ethics of life. Willy is blind to the fundamental contradiction between his progress as a salesman and his self-realization as a man. Truly Willy represents any man whose illusions have made him incapable of dealing realistically with the problems of everyday life. He has sold himself by taking on an artificial personality that is wholly unrealistic. In pursuit of his delusions he ruins not only his private life but his career as well.

Both *King Lear* and *Death of a Salesman* draw their tragic force largely from the universal relationship of a father towards his children. The love of parents for children is not anything that we attain through striving; the will of love is merely the assent to an instinctive law of human nature. But the values that make the parent-child relationship natural and wholesome are distorted and destroyed in both the plays. However, both the fathers are driven by similar eternal desires: *King Lear's* act to divide his kingdom among his daughters finds its modern counterpart in Willy Loman's thirst to leave a legacy not only through the life he lived but also through his two sons who will perpetuate his name. It is the common desire which creates a sort of emotional liaison between these two great tragic figures.

Cordelia in *King Lear* and Biff in *Death of a Salesman* serve as catalysts in triggering off the actions of these plays respectively. Cordelia's Joan-like quality of speaking the truth hurts Lear's pride, and he is gradually purged of his 'frenzy' through suffering. Finally calmness returns to him and he is united with Cordelia in heaven. In fact, she is that part of true love which Lear, in his fit of pride and anger failed to recognize. On the other hand, Willy lives vicariously trusting the theory of being well-liked. He is trapped by the American dream of success. Biff Loman is Willy's alter-ego. He realizes the limitations and danger of his father's dream and tries desperately to liberate himself from the web of falsehood created by his father's value-judgement. By growing and suffering Biff gets the self-knowledge which is necessary for redemption. Willy's tragic search for himself ends with the beginning of Biff's self-realization. Thus Cordelia and Biff shape the destinies of Lear and Willy Loman respectively. Their ability to love and struggle commands our admiration and deepens our faith in true love and affection.

Like all great tragedies, *King Lear* and *Death of a Salesman* ends with a sense of relief, “. . . calm of mind all passions spent” (Milton ). It may be said that at the end of both the plays the order has been restored.

In *King Lear*, like other Shakespearean tragedies, we find the existence of a moral order. Shakespeare shows that Lear himself to a great extent is responsible for his sufferings. Thus the sufferings result from the folly or the error of judgement of a character himself, we get the feeling that there is some divine order in the world. One of the major themes of *King Lear* is the fight of Good versus Evil. Although evil, the characters of Edmund, Goneril, and Regan, have their upper hand for most of the plot and cause the deaths of Cordelia, Lear, and Gloucester, at the end of the play, there is a hope that good will prevail. The evil characters have been removed and the worthy Albany and Edgar have been made the new rulers of the kingdom. As a result there is that a new order will replace the chaos that has been fully explored in the play.

And in a sense Willy Loman's sacrifice, too, is not in vain; in a sense the seed which he plants in his garden as he plans suicide comes to fruition. For Biff has learned who he is as a result of seeing his father's crowning degradation while acknowledging his love for his father and coming to respect him. According to Brian Parker in *Death of a Salesman* the positive gain is that Biff at least comes out of the experience with enhanced self-knowledge: “I know who I am kid” (105).

It is not the proud knowledge, rather an admission of limitation and weakness: Biff admits he will never be a big success in the eyes of the world. But such an admission is the beginning of the acceptance of truth; Parker says, "in religious terms it would be called humility." () and obviously, the humility is gained by Biff through the sacrifice made by Willy.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this way, a pervasive concern about the ultimate meaning of human suffering is reflected in both the tragic plays, William Shakespeare's King Lear and Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. These two great plays enlighten us about the state of man in its entirety, to be more precise, about man's struggle with the evil forces around him, as well as within him. Both the plays justify Miller's comment: "tragedy. . . is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly" (Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man"). When a man tries to "evaluate himself", misfortunes come and he suffers. Therefore, King Lear suffers and so does Willy Loman.

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