

An Introspection of the Human Soul: Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract

The twentieth century writers not only expressed their ideas and experiences in their works but also discussed realistically the daily lives of ordinary people to a great extent thereby, Providing social and political criticism. While some writers like Galsworthy, openly sympathized with people who were suffering due to the existing social and political evils, the others focused on the individual's search for identity. Arthur Miller is one such successful post-war American dramatist who through his works tried to show that it is difficult to escape from the impersonal forces prevalent in the society. Miller, in his best-known play 'Death of a Salesman', shows his concern over the skewed version of the American Dream that was based more on wealth and possessions rather than on hard work and achievement. In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss the falsity of the American Dream which led to the loss of identity and man's inability to accept change within himself and society as depicted in Arthur Miller's play 'Death of a Salesman'.

Key words: American Dream , Salesman, Willy Loman , Post-war

The concept of American Dream was introduced in 1776 as a part of the Declaration of the American Independence. It states that "all man are created equal and that they are endowed with certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and pursuit of happiness". Therefore, during the 1920s, the Americans believed that they could achieve the American Dream through hard work and felt that the family history or social status did not play significant role in accomplishing the dream. However, as the crave towards the American dream gained momentum, people became shallow and started drifting away from the ethical values. They no longer valued honest work. American Dream become corrupted and not worth pursuing as people became a part of the rat race to exhibit 'crazes in fashion, contemporary lingo, and popular pastimes.'

The play 'Death of a salesman ' is on similar lines with the novel 'The Great Gatsby ' by Fitzgerald , as they both reveal the shallowness of American materialism in the 1920s. Shallowness become widely apparent in the 1930s, with the advent of the Great Depression.

Miller planted his characters within a family structure to reflect the pressures of society. He successfully presented the hysteria ridden community through the character of Willy Loman , a little man who becomes a victim of the American myth that a man can become popular and wealthy if he has a good personality and pleasant social mannerisms. In line with the American spirit of the period to become rich overnight, Miller created the character Willy who was doubly ambitious. He wanted to be rich and at the same time be loved. He said "The wonder of this country is that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked." This misconception had eventually led to his disintegration.

In order to provide deep psychological insight into the character of the protagonist, Miller molds his thinking pattern on the success of three people. Initially ,Willy was influenced by his father who made flutes and who was contented with his earnings. Willy's father believed in hard work and perseverance but unfortunately, Willy did not get the opportunity to be guided by his father as he had abandoned his family and left for Alaska. He made his father into a myth of courage and success and measured himself against those imagined standards, but always fell short of achieving them. Miller, through the character of Willy's father tried to show the disparity existing between the two generations in terms of achieving the American Dream. The former, leading a contented and happy life with simple achievements and earnest efforts ,the latter making futile attempts to accumulate wealth at the cost of health, happiness and home.

Fitzgerald too in his novel *The Great Gatsby* portrayed Nick Carraway as a pragmatic man who wanted to be himself, tolerant, objective and reliable. The concept of amassing wealth hardly impressed him. Like Willy's father his dream too revolved around moral values. He says of himself " I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (p.49, 26).

The later generation has been very well represented by Willy's brother Ben who had inspired him to some extent . "when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich." Act 1, Part 7, pg. 33

Ben, was a self-made man influenced by capitalism. His motto was " never fight fair with a stranger." Act 1, Part 7, pg. 34. Ben went out in search of his father and ended up working in the diamond mines of Africa. Ben preferred ruggedness over personal integrity to achieve success and encouraged Willy to teach his sons to steal and to be fearless. Willy found his brother alienating him as he failed to be a successful salesman. He always regretted not

accompanying his brother to Africa. Through these relationships, Miller tries to highlight the hollowness of the society where survival of the fittest had become the policy of the day.

Willy was also inspired by Dave Single man, an 84-year old salesman who travelled a lot in trains and visited big cities. Dave had the gift of the gab and was successful in building his fortune and fame from his hotel room without struggling to meet the sales targets. "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?" Act 2, Part 7, pg. 100.

Willy dreamt that like Dave he too would have a grand funeral with buyers and salesmen from all over New England attending his funeral. "Ben, that funeral will be massive! They'll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire! All the old-timers with the strange license plates -- that boy will be thunderstruck, Ben, because he never realized -- I am known! Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey -- I am known, Ben, and he'll see it with his eyes once and for all." Act 2, Part 7, pg. 100

Miller, successfully tries to throw light on the impact of the evil forces revolving around the American Dream. Willy the protagonist had become a habitual liar and boasted about the success of his sales, the warmth of his reception and number of his friends. Once when Willy boasted of a successful sales trip, Linda, his wife coaxed him to reveal that his trip was actually not successful at all. Willy gradually opened up and revealed his inability to make the payments for their appliances and car. He complained that people did not like him and he was not good at his job. He looked dejected and had to be consoled by his wife. "I'm very well liked in Hartford. You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me." Act 1, Part 3, pg. 23

Miller used the symbol of 'car' as automobiles played an important role in the culture of the 1920s. During this period the automobile was a new technology, and soon became an important sign of wealthy Americans. More than being considered an important mode of transportation it had importance like a house, or a lavish party. In the play, Willy's car symbolizes manly glory. Willy and his sons kept polishing, loving and cherishing their car.

Initially, Willy compared Biff and Happy to the mythic Greek figures Adonis and Hercules respectively. He believed that his sons were epitomes of "personal attractiveness". He considered them to be the very incarnation of the American Dream. He taught them to be materialistic and failed to inculcate any sense of integrity or morality. But as Willy's age started catching up, he started to realize that he had failed to be a successful salesman as Dave Single

man .He felt he had wasted his life. His sons too did not flourish as he had expected them to do. Especially, Biff who was Willy's hope. He was the personification of Willy's dreams. One day when Biff went to Boston to inform Willy that he was not graduating, and request him to talk to his Math teacher, he found Willy with another woman. This revelation strained the relationship between the father and the son. He complained to his mother that Willy had become characterless. Linda got irritated by his remarks and came to Willy's rescue. "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 his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person." Act 1, Part 8, pg. 40. Thus, Miller vividly shows the sentiments of parents whose children fail to meet their expectations and at the same time candid views of the children about their parents.

Finally, Willy decided to end his life by committing suicide as he considered it the best thing he could do for his family. His idea was to sacrifice his life so that Bill could get \$20,000 from life insurance policy and fulfill his expectations. "After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive." Act 2, Part 4, pg. 76.

Conclusion

Through the play "Death of a Salesman", Arthur Miller aimed to condemn a system that promised and demanded total commitment to success without regard to human values. "You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away -- a man is not a piece of fruit!" Act 2, Part 2, pg. 61-2. In this play he has successfully tried to present the pathetic plight of the Americans affected by the social system which drove people to frantic. He has presented a man's journey into himself through his protagonist, a character who occasionally doubted himself, most of the times, yet rationalized his failure through lies, delusions, and self-deceptions. Finally, he is made to realize that the product he sold was his own self. In this context, Charley, Willy's neighbor aptly remarked "He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine . . . A salesman is got to dream, boy." . Requiem, pg. 110. Thus, the play takes us through man's epic journey to self-knowledge through experience.

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