

American Myth Of Success In Arther Miller's Death Of A Salesman**Dr. Nirakar Rout**

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Abstract

Arthur Miller, a distinguished name in American literature who significantly contributed to the world literature in the field of drama, in the twentieth century. His intellectualism, moralism and idealism are reflected in his plays. His protagonists fight against injustice, inequality, exploitation, rat race, commercialism, and inhuman practices prevailing in the then American society in which the Millers find themselves as victims. Human cruelty, self-centredness, excessive monetary greed, materialistic aptitude are the root cause of the downfall of moral and spiritual value. This article remaps American Myth of Success in Death of a Salesman. His plays include All My Sons(1947), Death of a Salesman(1949), The Crucible (1953), A View from the Bridge(1955), and After the Fall (1964) are his masterpieces. Death of a Salesman is a classic play of Arthur Miller is based on American dream, idealism versus deceitfulness, dream versus reality, man's struggle for existence in the land of success, and disadvantage of commercialism and industrialism. The myth of success is really a failure in Death of a Salesman though the protagonist's continues his struggle to live as a successful salesman. His every step becomes a great failure at each stage of his life. His unsuccessful attempts to be rich and prosperous overnight are the sole cause of his tragedy of his life. The American myth of success is proved to have failed in the play Death of a Salesman.

Keywords: Myth, Success, Dream, Reality, Failure

Arthur Miller's magnum opus, Death of a Salesman highlights the highly commercialized and industrialized American society where cut throat competition for material prosperity and monetary success continued. There a middle classman like Willy Loman becomes an utter failure in involving himself in the rat race where he is a tragic victim being trapped by family predicament, societal pressure and professional frustration. This article shows myth of success in Arther Miller's Death of a Salesman. Myth of success and American dream are chief traits of Arthur Miller's plays. In his plays all protagonists suffer from illusion and unattainable dreams that lead to their tragic fate. Willy Loman is from a middle class society who is a salesman of the Wagnor company during his whole professional career. The play in two acts exhibits that Willy's life is full of twists and turns. The highly American commercialized society where he has big dreams for him and his sons, ascribes his plight and inexpressible grief.

At first Willy's brother, Ben is taken for discussion who becomes a successful icon in the American myth of success. He recalls that he had been summoned by his brother to join the latter to go to Alaska. The man was a genius and success incarnate walked into a jungle and came out at the age of twenty one and became a rich magnate. Willy says to his elder son, Biff about his brother's successful story in the following manner:

BEN. Why boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty one I walked out. [He laughs] And by God I was rich.

WILLY. [To the boys]; You see what I been talking about? The greatest things can happen? (P.37)

Ben's successful story has lasting impact on Willy which has given him only failures, frustrations and regrets. He repents that if he had joined his brother to go to Alaska, he would have come out of the jungle and become a rich man. That is why he thinks himself unfortunate, despondent, and unsuccessful as he has already joined the Wagner company as a salesman. That was his error, putting him in pent up sorrow and suffering and his quest continues for material prosperity in his early sixties. Next to Ben, there is another character named Charley, a successful business man.

The myth of success is applicable to Charley, a successful business man, a good neighbor of Willy Loman. Charley is an embodiment of all virtues that make his life more comely. Though he is not well liked like Willy Loman and his sons, Charley is a successful man in the land of success, possesses good neighbourliness, human sympathies, helping attitude and keen intelligence. But Willy Loman, a self-willed, illusioned man lacks reality, spurns the former's offer. In past Charley helped Willy Loman monetarily showing his humanitarian value for his neighbor. The basic difference between Charley and Will is clearly discernible that the former is a realist but the latter is a dreamer. That is why Willy suffers for his illusory vision and Charley has established himself, competing in the rat race. Charley says to Willy that shows his neighbourly assistance and good will for Willy Loman:

CHARLEY. Why must everybody like you?...Now listen, Willy, I know you, do n't like me, and nobody can say I'm in love with you, but I'll give a job because – just for the hell of it, put it that way. Now what do you say?

WILLY. I- I just can't work for you, Charley.

CHARLEY. What are you jealous of me?

WILLY. I can't work for you, that's all, don't ask me why.

CHARLEY. [angered, takes out more bills] You been jealous of me all your life, you damned fool! Here pay your insurance. [He puts the money in Willy's hand.]

WILLY. I'm keeping strict accounts.

CHARLEY. I've got some work to do. Take care of your self. And pay your insurance.(P.77)

From the above dialogues between Willy and Charley show the latter's good nature , generous attitude and empathetic concern for Willy Loman. Bernard is a successful young man like his father ,the myth of success applies to him in comparison to his friend, Biff Loman. Bernard is studious and academically talented while the Loman brothers gifted athletes. Miller presents a contrast between Bernard and the brothers, Biff and Happy. Bernard's career flourishes, while Biff and Happy falter .Willy meets Bernard at his father's office .Bernard has become a successful lawyer, is about to argue before the Supreme court. But he downplays his professional accomplishments when he speaks to Willy. He has real love and care for his friend, Biff. When the latter gets plucked in Mathematics and helps him by providing him the answers to his math tests. The conversation

Between Willy and Bernard shows the latter's intimacy with his friend, Biff:

WILLY. (rising, faces Bernard) : I regard you as a very brilliant man , Bernard. I value your advice.

BERNARD. Oh , the hell with the advice, Willy .I couldn't advise you .There's just one thing I 've

always wanted to ask you. When he was supposed to graduate ,and the Math teacher flunked him-

WILLY. Oh, that son – of –a –bitch ruined his life.

BERNARD. Yeah, but , Willy ,all he had to do was to go to Summer school and make up that subject.

Thus Bernard attains the myth of success where as Biff has achieved nothing but failure like his father in the cut throat competition in the land of success. The myth of success is not applicable to the protagonist , Willy Loman who is a complete failure .He earns mental tension, despondency, frustration and dissatisfaction throughout his professional career. His inflated ego , pride and illusion are the causes of his tragic end. The protagonist proves Willy as a misfit in the American acquisitive society. He is a dreamer and an optimist but not a realist. Thus despair and dejection dog him from the beginning to the end and Willy is one of those innumerable people who lag behind the rat race. His life is full of twists and turns , making him a victim in the highly commercialized American society. He runs from the pillar to the post to be successful for his mundane dreams to realize but who moves backward and feels more and more frustrated and becomes for his domestic life and considers that he has no right to live in this land of success.

Though Willy Loman is a dreamer, he is aware that there is something wrong with him. He is a lover of beautiful things in his life. He forgets everything when he is driving amidst nature ,the beautiful scenery and sight of thick trees ,warm sun in the eastern sky. But he

suddenly felt that he was going off the road. He tells Linda almost in a confessional , confiding tone, ‘‘ I am telling ya , I absolutely forgot I was driving. If I ‘ d ‘ ve gone the other way over the white line I might have killed somebody .So I went on again –and five minutes later I ‘ m dreaming again.’’

Death of a Salesman is Willy Loman’s tragedy who is hollowed from within as he cannot adjust himself to the complacency , industry and competition that is rampant in modern America. Willy Loman as a modern tragic hero whose past and present co-mingle and co-exist , finds a hollow existence from the very start of the drama. He has unattainable dreams based on the American myth that success lies in being well liked of being commercially successful by having a lot of property – like a good house , a popular brand car and a job fetching a handsome salary.

Raymond Williams says on Miller’s universal themes :

He has restored active social criticism to the drama, and has written on such contemporary themes as the social accountability of business , the forms of the success ethics ,intolerance and thought control ,the nature of modern work relations. Yet he has written about these in such a way as to distinguish his work quite clearly from the ordinary sociological problem play for at his best he has seen these problems as living tissue and his most successful characters are not merely ‘‘ aspects of the way of life’’ but individuals who are ends and values in themselves.

Willy has big dreams to realize but his fate goes against him .He earnestly requests his employer , Howard to provide him a non-touring job in New York on account of his senility and he does not concentrate on driving. On the other hand his callous new boss spurns his proposal. Again Willy relents to continue his job in Boston but it is a matter of surprise and sorrow that Howard resents it and fired Willy which is the greatest shock of his life .Willy’s failures one after another cause his frustration and despondency ,piles of his sorrow and suffering to such an extent that is beyond repair. His great expectation and big dreams get shocking jolt and compels him to decide his tragic end. His pent up discontentment ,ever increasing grief find no outlet to get released. His talk with Howard manifolds his despair that mars his mental peace and sanity is stated below.

WILLY. All right, I’ ll go to Boston tomorrow.

HOWARD. No’no.

WILLY. I can’t throw myself on my sons. I ‘ m not a cripple !

HOWARD. Look, kid ,I ‘ m busy this morning.

WILLY . (grasping Howard’s arm) Howard, you ‘ ve got to let me go to Boston !

HOWARD. (hard, keeping himself under control) I've got a like of people to see this morning. Sit down, take five minutes, and then go home, will ya ...

Biff is also a failure like his father who plays a vital role for the development of the plot. Willy's hopes, aspirations and dreams are shattered by his elder son. Biff being a dreamer, is a mirage on whom Willy Loman pins his hope. The American myth crumbles and is broken into pieces. Like Willy Biff reflects his inescapable predicaments. His utter failure symbolizes the tremendous waste of human resources and his futile endeavor to get materialistic pleasure, fails drastically one after another. He is also a victim of American commercialized society. In a self-analysis and self-realization, Biff says to Happy: "Hap, I've twenty or thirty different kinds of jobs since I left home before the war, and it always turned out the same. I just realized it lately..." His hopes find a shocking jolt when Bill Oliver rejects the former's request for loan to start a ranch. Both the father and the son are lost, dispirited and discouraged persons to succeed in their life. Thus the myth of success in the twentieth century American society crumbles and collapses not only in case of Willy and Biff but also on the part Happy to some extent.

On the other hand the American dream is an apt theme for some minor characters includes Ben, Willy's elder brother, Charley and, his son, Bernard, who is a successful lawyer in this play. Willy Loman is a modern tragic hero who has made several unsuccessful attempts to get through in his life to achieve materialistic gain and monetary success throughout his life that leads him to draw insurance money for the welfare and betterment of his family. Linda who is Willy's support and foundation is also affected by the American myth of success and mourns for her husband's untimely demise which is very moving and heart touching. Linda says, "forgive me, dear. I can't cry. I don't know what it is, but I 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..."

From the above study the American dream becomes futile and meaningless so far as Willy's character is concerned, evokes pity and sympathy after his suicide. Willy becomes a tragic protagonist suffers inwardly beyond repair and measure throughout the play from the beginning to the end.

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