

Willy Loman as a Tragic Protagonist in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949)

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Abstract

This paper aims to study the reasons of sufferings and tragedy of Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Arthur Miller (1915-2005) the famous American dramatist, in his plays showcases consequences of tensed life style of working class. He portrays an individual as having been caught in social and domestic dilemma. In *Death of a Salesman* Miller presents the tragedy of Willy Loman who is a salesman by profession. After having spent major time in the same firm, he wants to have a place in the office instead of travelling to various parts of America. The failure of his son Biff who works without any fixed and stable jobs and low income, gives a lot of pains to Willy. Linda, Willy's wife is unaware of his disloyalty though she knows other shortcomings in his character. Willy finally commits suicide and leaves fortune through his insurance policy so that Biff could make something out of his life. The tragedy of Willy caused by victimization of him from family, working and subjective castration. His overt suppression eventuates into covert subjugation of emotional and sexual instincts which leads him towards adultery. His son knows it while wife ignores it, however it creates tension in the life of Willy which brings him towards the death.

Keywords: loss of identity, false image, sufferings, infidelity, flaws in character, false standard

I

Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) deals with loss of identity and a man's inability to accept change within himself and society. The play is a mosaic of memories, dreams, confrontations, and arguments, all of which make up the last 24 hours of Willy Loman's life. The play concludes with Willy's suicide and subsequent funeral. Miller uses "the Loman family- Willy, Linda his wife, Biff his eldest son, and Happy his youngest son-to construct a self-perpetuating cycle of denial, contradiction, and order versus disorder" (Scheidt 5). Willy's extra marital affair before 15 years earlier than the real time within the play, as Miller focuses, becomes the cause of:

...the aftermath to reveal how individuals can be defined by a single event and their subsequent attempts to disguise or eradicate the event. For example, prior to discovering the affair, Willy's son Biff adored Willy, believed all Willy's stories, 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 forces Biff to reevaluate Willy and Willy's perception of the world. Biff realizes that Willy has created a false image of himself for his family, society, and even for himself. (Scheidt 6)

Willy is not a supreme father or a loyal husband or a fantastically successful salesman like he wants everyone to believe. He is self-centered and fails to appreciate his wife. He is an ordinary human and only marginally successful working man. Willy frequently takes consolation in fantasizing about lost opportunities for wealth and establishing the name of his family. According to Scheidt it would be incorrect to state that Miller solely criticizes Willy. Instead, she thinks that Miller demonstrates how one individual can create a self-perpetuating cycle that expands to include other individuals. This is certainly the case within the Loman family. Until the end of the play, Willy effectively blocks the affair out of his memory and commits himself to a life of denial. He cannot

remember what happened, so naturally he does not understand why his relationship with Biff has changed. Willy wants Biff's affection and adoration as before, but instead the two constantly argue. Willy vacillates, sometimes criticizing Biff's laziness and ineptitude, other times praising his physical abilities and ambition.

The serious flaws in the character of Willy Loman are upholding false standards which lead to his catastrophe. First, he misunderstands the laws in the jungle applicable in the civil society. As he constantly praises the success of his brother Ben in the forest of Africa. Ben tells him "At the age of seventeen I walked into the jungle, and I was twenty- one I walked out. [He laughs.] And by God I was rich" (36). Obviously, Ben could be successful in the jungle by following the laws of jungle like 'might is right' or as a mightier animal snatches from the weaker animals. Willy wants to bring up his sons with the same rules into a civil society. He promotes his elder son Biff to steal timber from the site of building undergoing construction. He does it only to sow virtues like boldness or courage, of course he has misunderstood the virtues overlooking the comment of Charley his friend and neighbor' "the jails are full of fearless characters" (39). Willy Loman disregards that the civil world is guarded by the civil laws where snatching from others is a punishable act. Steven R. Centola points out that:

...Miller's play tells the story of a man who, on the verge of death, wants desperately to justify his life. As he struggles to fit the jagged pieces of his broken life together, Willy Loman discovers that to assuage his guilt, he must face the consequences of past choices and question the values inherent in the life he has constructed for himself and his family. (2007 25)

The oversimplified virtue of courage takes a dangerous turn in Biff as he develops a habit of stealing where ever he works. While working with Oliver he steals footballs and while he goes to meet Oliver after a gap of twelve years to borrow money for starting a business, he cannot control himself and steals a pen from his table in the office. This directly makes impact on his confidence as he is

conscious of his act and he runs from the situation.

Secondly Willy overlooks the true needs of his sons. He considers his sons, especially Biff smart than Bernard, the son of Charley who according to Willy is a bookworm and not influential like Biff. Therefore, he does not pay much attention to Biff's academic career. He takes pride into the glamour of Biff as a football player. He thinks that Bernard should show answers to Biff in the examination but Bernard cannot do that. This suggests that Willy is not serious about the academic achievements of Biff. Ultimately Biff, once a college star remains semi-educated, a school dropout and has to carry the life of a farm labor. He is not financially sound to help Willy in the old age. Willy's desperation gets thicker when he notices that Bernard whom he used to mock has become a successful lawyer and compare Biff with him who is very unlucky and lives an ignoble life.

Along with Biff's not holding foot, Willy Loman's financial condition gets worst because of other reasons. First being an old salesman he is very much exhausted and has lost his 'line' in the business. He fails to get response from his customers. He is derided because of his old age. Secondly because of his failure he is on the 'straight' on commission like a new salesman. He does not get salary now from his company. Thirdly, Willy has to pay number of installments on his gadgets, car and house. Ironically, Willy pays the last installment of the house and he commits suicide. Willy gets frustrated when he comes to know about Biff's failure to meet Oliver and he solves the problem in a unique way. He commits suicide and thus makes the amount of the insurance to Biff for his future.

Some critics find another flaw in Willy Loman's character causing his fall. Harlod Bloom for instance notices, Willy lives in a world of "phantasmagoria". When the drama opens and "...hardly a figure of capable imagination, nevertheless is a representation of terrible pathos" (Bloom 4). Bloom thinks that Willy is not destroyed by his sense of failure but:

Willy is destroyed by love, by his sudden awareness that his son Biff truly

loves him. Miller beautifully comments that Willy resolves to die when “he is given his existence...his fatherhood for which he has always striven and until now he could not achieve.” That evidently is the precise and terrible pathos of Willy’s character and of his fate. He is a good man, who wants only to earn and to deserve the love of his wife and sons. He is self-slain, not by the salesman’s dream of America, but by universal desire to be loved by one’s own.... (Bloom 5)

Obviously, the fulfillment of love could be the reason which leads Willy to commit suicide so that he can make provision for the future of his sons as they fail to make any career. Another critic, Fred Ribkoff thinks shame of having been exposed before his son Biff which leads to feelings of guilt and consequently of crisis is the root cause of Willy’s tragic end. Fred comments:

Willy is driven to commit his greatest wrong by feelings of shame that arise out of his sense of inadequacy as a man. His adulterous affair with “The Woman” in Boston, which haunts both him and his son Biff, is a desperate attempt to conform and maintain his self-esteem. (Fred 123)

Fred further comments that Willy turns out to another woman out of loneliness for his wife, Linda. However, his strong feelings of shame cause his loneliness and his need of a woman. “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” (Bloom 127). Fred thinks Willy does not come to terms with his shame and “...kills himself in order to preserve his dream of being “well liked” and a successful father and a salesman” (Fred 127). Steven R Centola points out that Willy thinks that he is destined to be successful. Nevertheless:

Beneath the surface optimism, [therefore] lurk his frustration and keen sense of failure. That is why he can be spry, amusing, and cheerful one moment and then suddenly become quarrelsome, insulting, and sullen the next. Through Willy’s incongruous behavior, Miller makes us sharply aware of the subterranean tensions dividing Willy. (Steven 26)

Steven thinks that Willy experiences futility when he is disregarded by Biff

as he has been expecting love from family. Willy makes a mistake to purchase the love of his family to measure his self-worth. Thus “Willy unwittingly hastens his own destruction by clinging fiercely to values that perpetually enforce his withdrawal from reality” (2007, 27). In an interview Miller says about the universal appeal of Willy Loman's character, “The Salesman is close to being the universal occupation of contemporary society-not only in America, but everywhere. Everybody is selling and everything is for sale” (Kullman 76). Willy Loman in this sense represents the salesman and their problems all over the world. Willy represents the dreams and aspirations of a person who longs for respect in the society.

Thus, the tragedy of Willy Loman happens mainly because of inculcating standards of success in himself and his sons. He is lost in mental torments because of shame arises in him as his disloyalty towards his wife before Biff who admires him till the moment of exposition. The relations between the son and father get so worst that they fiercely quarrel with each other. Biff thinks his father is a fake and Willy thinks Biff has not achieved anything substantial in the greatest country on the earth, America. Willy fails to deal with practical reality of the life as life is amalgamation of gains and loss. His treatment to his son is based on utopian expectations as he wants his son to be a charismatic sportsman. The failure of his son affects Willy which consequently damages his relationship with his son. His inappropriate judgment of life pushes him towards self-degradation. Meaning, Willy is a victim of the system but more than this he is a victim of his comprehension of normal human life which sometimes not in our capacity.

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