

## Betrayal and Guilt in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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### Abstract

Arthur Miller, one of the greatest American playwrights deals with issues related to man and society in his plays and exposes how the inherent imperfections in man pushes him to betrayal and infidelity with his own people and consequently to guilt, leaving the individual split in his loyalty. In his masterpiece *Death of a Salesman*, the destructive nature of betrayal and guilt is examined as they arise from self-deception and the chase for a flawed American Dream. Willy Loman's guilt regarding his infidelity drives his self-deception, while his own betrayal of his family's trust, along with his inability to achieve success, creates a cycle of disillusionment that impacts several generations of the Loman family. These transgressions emphasize how placing a higher value on material success than on integrity and truth can result in significant moral dilemmas and the collapse of personal and family relationships.

**Keywords:** Betrayal, Transgressions, Guilt, Success, Private, Public

## Introduction

Arthur Miller in his works focuses on the American social values, family life, traditions and rituals, and prejudices of the individual who is the member of family and society. In his plays, Miller seems to be preoccupied with the idea of unveiling the average American man's spiritual dilemmas, his quest for identity and success, his inward battles and mental conflicts in a mechanical competition ridden society. He wants to unravel the mystery surrounding the 'self' of man in relation to his relationships with the different institutions. Dramatic art is the most appropriate one to communicate with human beings in a realistic manner and when a dramatic persona comes on the stage to present life, says Miller, the audience feels confused with questions life : Who is he ? What is he doing there ? How does he live or make his living? Who is he related to ? Is he rich or poor ? What does he think of himself ? What do other people think of him, and why ? What are his hopes and fears; and what does he say the are ? What does he claim to want, and what does he really want? (Miller, 1996, 15) As human beings after birth travel from innocence to knowledge, they, as we call them lesser mortals, are lured away by the glittering aspects of life which generally appeal to the baser instincts of man. They start entering the prohibited zone of evils and betrayals which seem easier for them to fall a prey. The dramatic art of Arthur Miller reflects the barrenness in mind, inward battles and mental conflicts of the torn and withered personalities who become guilty of their transgressions due to their betrayal and unethical deeds in a family. Most of Miller's plays deal with some aspect of guilt in the family system; they reveal the social issues through the personal dilemmas. The family is a microcosm of a world beyond and the behaviour of an individual in love, sex, or parental relations is evidence of the choices imposed by social necessity. At time, man is ready to sacrifice everything for his family and society of which he is a part, and then, the very next moment, he does something which is not in tune with the family norms, resulting in his neuroses and as a result he behaves irrationally. In 'The Family in Modern Drama', Miller makes us know the stark reality that "We – all of us – have a role anteceding all others: We are first sons, daughters, sisters, brothers. No play can possibly alter this given role". (Miller, 1996, 81)

## Discussion

As a dramatist of human conditions, Miller engages himself in the ceaseless task of delving deep into the nature of human existence and tries to probe still deeper into the mystery of life and asks questions like : "How may man make for himself a home in that vastness of strangers and how may he transform that vastness into a home?" (Miller, 1996, 85) *Death of a Salesman*, a masterpiece by Arthur Miller, thrust the playwright into the climax of his career and the play won both the Pulitzer and the Drama Critics awards for 1949. Unlike his earlier play *All My Sons* where father ignores his responsibility towards 'all the sons

of this world' just only for the well-being of his two sons and thus commits a crime against humanity, against the society of which he is a part, Willy Loman, the protagonist of *Death of a Salesman* does not commit any such crime, yet he has certain illusions or aspirations regarding his two sons Biff and Happy. The play tells us how Willy, a middle-class salesman whose youth is a memory and present hollow and arid, decides to end his life. He is loved by his affectionate wife Linda, and he has two sons Biff and Happy, whom he has tried his best, throughout his life, to raise as men of influence and power. Biff, the elder son, now in his thirties, has not lived upto Willy's expectations which he had from when Biff was a high school football hero. Happy, on the other hand, proves a philanderer, a morally corrupt person, always running after "babes" Biff, despite his father's constant efforts for his success, proves a failure like Willy himself, who in the end realises that Biff loves him and commits suicide in the automobile so that Biff can have the insurance money. Thus, Willy's defeat in material life also leads to his defeat in his personal life – as a husband and father and even as a friend, - and he departs from this world as a misfit. According to Clinton Trowbridge, the biggest question in such a surrounding is : "...how can a person keep his sense of right and wrong while grappling for a living in a business world which recognizes only the principle of the survival of the fittest" (Trowbridge, 224)

Sex plays a significant role and a powerful divisive force among the Lomans separating parents from each other, and parents from children. Ronald Hayman remarks : "Miller uses sex as a means of carrying his social argument forward..." (Hayman, 38) This makes the point that you can establish all familial relations in the society except that of spouse. Though Willy's infidelity defiles his father-image, Biff still loves him and forgives him. Miller gives the explanation of how Willy is driven to his death by the revelation of Biff's love in the following words:

In this he is given his existence, so to speak - his fatherhood, for which he has always striven and which until now he could not achieve... it closes the circle for him and propels him to his death... he can prove his existence only by bestowing "power" on his posterity, a power deriving from the sale of his last asset, himself, for the price of his insurance policy. (Miller, 1996, 147)

Willy in his infidelity seems to be a bit unsympathetic to his wife so far as his family responsibility is concerned, yet at times his concern for Linda becomes evident on more than one occasion, and much of the goodness in him is demonstrated in his devotion to his wife, as depicted in their talks:

Linda: Willy darling, you're the handsomest man in the world -

Willy: Oh, no, Linda.

Linda: To me you are ... The handsomest ... And the boys, Willy. Few men are idolized by their children the way you are.

Willy, *with great feeling* : You're the best there is, Linda, you're a pal, you know that ? On the road, on the road, I want to grab you sometimes and just kiss the life outa you." (Miller, 1967, 149)

Willy's illusions and his infidelity bring havoc upon him, but he is so much loyal to his family that despite all flaws and short-comings in his character, he survives for his family, for his name and dignity and self-respect and even sacrifices his life for the sake of his family, his son Biff. Willy can not understand how his philandering on the road constitutes a betrayal of his wife; the ethos of the traveling salesman has no relation to home conduct; in fact, Willy has no home and no family. All the detriments of heredity and environmental influences and the strategies recommended by cultural attitudes pressure the hero to react to the immediate situation, the present point on the line, without regard for a wider context. Avtar Singh underlining the importance of cordial relations between man and society points out that in *Death of a Salesman*: "Society and individual are ... intricately linked together. The crisis is thus a dual one – first the American socio-economic system is indirectly responsible for branding them as failures and misfits and second is the guilt feeling emanating from individual failure to be a successful father, salesman and a husband." (Singh, 231)

*Death of a Salesman* is concerned with the analysis of human nature and the thought processes taking place at subconscious level of human mind. The play shows that seeds of evil always exist in human mind and this evil becomes instrumental in making the man transgress the bounds of decency and thus the individual becomes a torn personality, a neurotic in himself. The individual desires and passions stand always in his way to dignity; tempting evils like marital infidelity or sex, which are different faces of transgression, give a jolt to the healthy looking social life. In such a depressed situation, Miller suggests, man should learn to compromise in life, but the latter fails to understand this. He, instead of striking a balance between honest means to support the family and assertion of conscience, resorts to violating the moral code of conduct and consequently becomes a prey to guilt. Willy Loman, the protagonist of the play does not commit any such grave offence as Joe Keller has done, yet he has certain illusions or aspirations regarding his two sons Biff and Happy. The play tells us how Willy wants to preserve his identity and when fails, decides to end his life. Living in his own dreamy world, he forgets all about the hard realities of life and remains so till his death. No doubt, there is something wrong with him, that's why his realisation that after thirty-six years of slaving for the future of his sons, he is wiped clean off anything to give to posterity. He tries to "catch up" selling the last and only merchandise he has been left with 'himself' and even this attempt of self-murder, a transgression of life, proves futile.

Now the question arises – what is wrong with Willy? Who is responsible for his failure? Why, even after throwing his life at stake, his family can not get what he aspired for in his whole life? Who should be blamed for his tragedy? In fact, the man we meet or face, living in the American society, where only successful persons have the right to live, is always lost in his own corruptible world and confronted with his own pre-conceived notions like "being well liked" and "attractive personality". He thinks highly of his son Biff, always calling him "magnificent". Willy continually asserts his manhood, both through Biff's athletic prowess and through his own ability

to use tools. He repeatedly denigrates his friend Charley and Charley's son Bernard. All his aspirations and ideas lead Willy to trespassing which become instrumental in his tragedy. Miller, in an interview, speaks of Willy, "The trouble with Willy Loman is that he has tremendously powerful ideas." (Miller, 1996, 198) But he is a man of weak stature in proportion to his aspirations about himself as well as his son Biff. Though Charley's concluding remark in the last act may show that Willy himself is not responsible for his tragedy, "Nobody dost blame this man... A salesman is got to dream, boy," (Miller, 1967, 221) yet Willy is not a flawless character. Miller portrays Willy as a man of contradictions; he jumps from one thing or idea to other so rapidly that it keeps everyone guessing. His contradictions become evident in his speech when he speaks to Linda of Biff: "Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world a youngman with such personal attractiveness, gets lost. And such a hard worker. There's one thing about Biff – he's not lazy." (Miller, 1967, 132) And this contradiction makes his life hollow and he, in the end, transfers his hollowness to Biff, because his son is modeled on Willy himself. Biff is heading in the same direction Willy heads till he sees his true face in a Boston hotel, when he goes there with the hope that his father can talk to his Maths teacher out of flunking him. Willy, already losing his touch as a salesman, seduces a buyer not so much for the seduction itself, but to prove that he is still a man. When Biff finds the two of them together, suddenly all of the cheating that Willy has condoned becomes reprehensible. Alice Griffin describes the blame game between Willy and Biff:

Willy blames his son for failing to fulfill his early promise yet suffers guilt that the shock of the affair destroyed Biff. Biff blames his father for betraying a sons' trust, for accusing boyhood thefts, which have recurred as adult kleptomania, and for instilling in him the credo of wealth as success... (Griffin, 36)

For Biff, the worst thing about Willy's affair in Boston is that he has given nylon stockings to the woman while Biff's long suffering mother has had to repair her old stockings. Biff's awareness of his father's lechery destroys the strongest value in Willy's life, and his dignity and image bears a big jolt at the hands of Biff who in a fit of rage, tells Willy: "Don't touch me, you-liar! You fake! You phony little fake! You fake!" (Miller, 1967, 208) The shock that Biff bears leads him to self discovery – the only major difference from Willy who dies without self-realization about his status and role when he remarks, "Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!" (Miller, 1967, 217) Willy keeps on making one false move after another in pursuit of easy success, and this is indicated by his stories of bigness as also by his smiling acceptance of the little vices, like thieving and lying, which ruin the careers of his two sons, Biff and Happy. Fred Ribkoff remarks about Miller's sense of guilt and shame: "In *Death of a Salesman*, he suggests, perhaps unintentionally, that the path to "perfection" lies in a confrontation with feeling of shame that enable one to understand guilt and arrive at a clearer sense of identity, as well as to empathize with other." (Ribkoff 54) The incidents of transgression such as marital infidelity, thieving, lying

etc, related with Willy, make us aware that Miller is always preoccupied with an idea – the wide gulf existing between the private and public life and the interaction between social concepts and human transgressions. Robert A. Martin says that Willy himself "encourages lying...stealing, violence... slander and contemptuousness."(Martin, 100)

Despite all flaws and short-comings in the character of Willy, Miller, being a believer in positive values, affirms that this darkness of gloomy life which he portrays in the play is nothing but a gateway to the enlightenment of knowledge and realization that we see in Willy, though a bit late. Willy survives for his family, for his identity and 'name' and self-respect, and even sacrifices his life for the sake of his family, his son Biff. Willy is a man of will, Miller writes, and that the world will be sustained and survived not by power but by "... a force born of will – the will of man to survive and to reach his ultimate, most conscious, most knowing, most fulfilled condition, his fated experience". (Miller, 1996, 63) There can be no doubt of Willy's love and concern for his family, and whenever he transgresses his loyalty for his family, miseries come in bulk and the end is tragic. On the other hand, Ben, Willy's brother is a successful man, and any man can succeed with his philosophy of success: "Never fight fair with a stranger boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way."(Miller, 1967, 158) Willy thinks otherwise because, for him, personality is everything, yet he seeks Ben's advice regarding his sons. Gerald Weales writes about Willy: "Willy Loman is a character so complex, so contradictory, so vulnerable, so insensitive, so trusting, so distrustful, so blind, so aware, in short, so human – that he forces man on us by being one." (Weales 44)

Happy and Biff can not be called as men of commitment and integrity because they are also involved in numerous actions which don't behove to an honorable person. Happy is a perfect party animal who cares fig for ethical values, and so is Biff, though latter seems to be more close to his parents. Even Linda's thoughts are more preoccupied with the well-being of her eldest son Biff. Happy is more decisive while Biff has a wavering mind like his father Willy who like Happy has no qualms regarding fleshy transgression, as he comments : "...when you're all set, there'll be plenty of girls for a boy like you... that so? The girls play for you? ... But, you must really be makin' a hit." (Miller, 1967, 142) The conflict and tensions in Willy's mind is caused by guilt over his infidelity to his wife which only sharpens the sense of his failing to find a better social life. Therefore, whereas the struggle exists in personal relationships, the over-all message appears to be that it is also this kind of discord which exists between man and his milieu. The failure to find an honourable relationship in the recourses man takes is reflected in man's conformity to the norms his social set-up gives him. But his transgression of this acquiescence provides him place neither in the family nor in his society.

## Conclusion

Man has a natural liking for evils which prompt him to betray others for selfish gains and thus finds satisfaction temporarily. The evil done by him later on starts weighing on his mind and his situation becomes precarious and miserable. He goes into his cell, in seclusion, and thus becomes desperate. In such a situation, he becomes a lost figure, searching for solace and space which remain elusive to him due to his imperfections or wrong doings. In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller aptly juxtaposes man as a victim of personal longings and desires, and finds that man is always in a 'flux' with regard to his different roles at different levels and no role is in conformity with the other, as Jean Gould suggests : "Here the playwright not only placed on trial the moral values of his central character – Willy Loman, the salesman – but a society that by competition compels its individuals to forsake native talents in favour of achieving material success..." (Gould, 252) There's no doubt of Willy's love and concern for his family, and whenever he betrays his loyalty for his family, miseries come in train and the end is tragic. Miller, by this tragic end, wants to bring home the idea that "man should learn to settle for the half" if he wants to live happily in this world.

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