

American Dream and the Tragedy of the Common Man in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman

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Abstract: In *Death of Salesman*, the central subject is the collapse of dreams and false nature of protagonist which brings about not only his own ruin but also that of his family. The play also shows the contradicting feelings of self-deception, betrayal and guilt which speed Willy to his demise. According to Miller, the American Dream creates false hopes that prevent people from being proud of what they have accomplished to make their lives better than they would be elsewhere, and eventually fail at achieving anything. Willie Loman is an ordinary man who embodies traditional American values of success. He has reached the age where he can no longer compete successful in his chosen career, that of a traveling salesman. Faced with the termination of his job, he begins to examine his past life to determine its value. At this critical point in Willie's existence, his oldest son Biff has returned home for a visit, and Willie's old desire for his son to be a traditional success in life is rekindled. But the old tensions between the two men are also renewed. Once again, to Willie's great disappointment, his son rejects Willie's values and aspirations. ("Death of a Salesman Arthur Miller 1949 Drama").

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1. Introduction

Arthur Miller is one of the most renowned American playwrights in the history of American literature. He was a prominent figure in American theatre and many of his plays are considered classics. One of his most famous plays, the critically acclaimed *Death of a Salesman*, is considered by many critics to be one of the greatest representation of the American Dream in American theatre. Brenda Murphy proclaims that the play is perhaps the greatest dramatic work by an American (Murphy, *Death of a Salesman* 3) and with this play, Miller created "an attack on some of the basic values of American business culture" (Murphy, *Arthur Miller* 3). The American Dream lies at the heart of the play and serves as an underlying theme.

Set in Brooklyn during the late 1940s, *Death of a Salesman* follows the last day of the old, unsuccessful salesman Willy Loman's life and his struggle to achieve success. The play opens with Willy returning from a failed business trip late at night. He has reached the point of exhaustion where he not only is unable to continue his work, but also vacillates between the present and the past. He and his wife, Linda, talk about the visit of his oldest son Biff who has been working as a farm worker in the West. Biff and his younger brother Happy, who is also visiting, overhear their father talking to himself in the kitchen.

Linda tells her two sons about Willy's deteriorating mental health and suicide attempts. Biff decides to help his father. Biff and Happy come up with a business plan and ask Biff's former employer

for a loan to make it a reality. Inspired, Willy decides at the same time to ask his boss for local job. Both of them are unsuccessful. Willy's request was rejected and he was fired and Biff's former employer did not even recognize him. Willy asks his neighbor Charley to loan him money. Charley offers him a job instead but Willy rejects the offer. The climax comes when Biff reveals the truth about himself as a failure to his father. He begs him to give up his dream of him. In anguish, Willy decides to commit suicide so that Biff can collect his life insurance money.

The Loman family in some ways mirrors Arthur Miller's. Miller's family, who had lost everything in the Depression, moved to Brooklyn and lived in modest circumstances, rather haunted by their former economic and social success and their struggle to re-attain the American dream—the prosperity they had known when Miller was a boy. Miller's work is no wholesale indictment of material success; it is rather an examination of the particularly American sense that financial success is the result of social acceptance.

1.1 Tragic Hero

Death of a Salesman, produced in 1949, has become a classic of modern American theatre. It is a story of an average salesman with a dream of being rich and well-liked. This is a tragic story of a salesman called Willy Loman, whose past and present are mixed up with expressionistic scenes. There are several debates on Willy Loman pointing out that he is not a tragic hero in classical tragedy. For instance, Allan Lewis (1970) points out that there is "need for

redefining tragedy in the contemporary theatre” (47), because Miller’s character Willy Loman is a reflection of modern tragic hero therefore “Aristotelian concepts weigh heavily on an altered world” (Lewis, 1970, 47). In other words, it is not easy to apply the classical definition of “a tragic hero” to a “modern tragic hero”. Bigsby (1982) also draws attention to Miller who contributes much to the emergence of the new dramatic form and new formal structure in his plays (91). Moreover, Arthur Miller redefines the classical concepts of tragedy and tragic hero, derived from Aristotle, in his play *Death of a Salesman*, and the product of this redefinition is the protagonist Willy Loman. If we are to examine if Willy Loman represents a tragic hero, we need to define what tragedy is and who a tragic hero is. The purpose of this article is to depict Willy Loman not as a classical tragic character, but as a pathetic modern tragic hero of 1940s American bourgeois tragedy of an ordinary man. If one examines Aristotelian definition of tragedy, one may perceive that it neither fully explains nor embraces the protagonist Willy Loman. Aristotle defines tragedy as follows: an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear affecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (Ch VI, 36).

Thus, tragedy should arouse pity and terror with a tragic hero, a man “who neither is superior in virtue and justice, nor undergoes a change of misfortune because of vice and wickedness, but because of some error, and who is one of those people with a great reputation and a good fortune.”(Ch XIII, 42) In this case, it is important to answer the question of who can be considered as a tragic hero? According to the dictionary definition of tragic hero, it is a main character in a tragedy that makes an error in his or her actions that lead to his or her downfall. According to Aristotle, common characteristics of a tragic hero are as follows:

1. The tragic protagonist has a flaw in his character, most frequently of Hubris, which is overweening pride, haughtiness, or arrogance eventually leads to his downfall,
2. A tragic hero is often of noble birth and is almost universally male,
3. Peripeteia: a reversal of fortune brought about by the hero’s tragic flaw,
4. The hero learns something from his mistake and faces with serious decision. In other words, his actions result in an increase of self-awareness and self-knowledge,
5. There may sometimes be supernatural involvement,
6. The audience must feel pity and fear for this character, because suffering is a result of the hero’s own volition, it is not wholly deserved. (Aristotle 12).

1.1.1. Miller subverting the classical tragedy and the tragic hero

Arthur Miller in his play questions the validity of the classical concepts of tragedy or tragic hero, derived from Aristotle, as the fall of a man of high rank or a man of great importance in the world. In fact, the play raises counter example to Aristotle’s characterization of tragedy as the downfall of a great man. However, Willy Loman is not of “noble birth”, quite the contrary he is a common man, though certainly has Hamartia, a tragic flaw or error in judgment, his downfall is that of an ordinary man (a “low man”). Loman’s flaw comes down to a lack of self-knowledge like Sophocles’s Oedipus in *Oedipus the King*. However, Loman’s downfall threatens not a city unlike Oedipus, but only a single family, the Lomans. In the light of this perspective, Loman may not be considered as a tragic hero in terms of classical definition. Still, Miller places his protagonist as a tragic hero: not a classical but a modern tragic hero. Perhaps one should consider the alteration in the society and the needs of people adopting themselves according to the changes in an era.

The American Dream

The general notion of the American Dream centers on the belief that anything is possible through hard work. However, there are several definitions of the American Dream. Therefore, this article will focus on the definition popularized by the historian James Truslow Adams in his book *Epic of America*. His definition is as follows:

But there has been also the *American Dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (Adams 404).

The “American Dream” is “the belief that through the pioneer virtues of hard work, perseverance, ingenuity, and fortitude, one might find happiness through wealth” (“Death of a Salesman”). This is the center of our lives as Americans; we all want to accomplish it one way or another. The concept of the American Dream shown in the play *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller is believed by Harold Clurman to be divided into two meanings; the historical dream and the business success dream. In our society the biggest achievement is when you buy

your own house, and live with a stable job, it does not have to be a high paying job but one that allows you to pay your bills and live a decent life, if you have this then you have achieved the historical dream. In the other hand if you have a high paying job in the corporate world; meaning a white collar job, and although you might or might not own a house but you earn more than enough for your living expenses then that is consider to be the business success dream. Willie Loman had already achieved the historical dream, he had a house, car, family and a job, but he gets obsessed with the business success dream and tries or at least he think he does try to accomplish it but he dismantles his family in the process.

Willy Loman had accomplished the historical American Dream but because of his ambition he did not realize it. When Willy was deciding to go with his brother to look for his father he met Dave Singleman. Dave was an "eighty four year old salesman who had drummed merchandise in thirty-one states and who could now simply go into his hotel room, call the buyers, and make his living in his green velvet slippers" (Stanton 131). This view of a tranquil and successful career made him reconsider his decision and instead of going to Alaska he chose to be a salesman. It seems that Willy saw a "father figure" in Dave, so he followed the same path, hoping he would have the same future and the same success in the field (Stanton 133). After thirty five years of his career he saw he hasn't accomplished the success that he wanted. He devoted his life into a career as a salesman knowing that he was good with his hands, but "he possessed too much snobbery to admit that his own destiny was in a simple career as a carpenter" ("Death of a Salesman"). For Willy the difference between a white collar job and a blue collar job meant a lot, but he didn't do much to gain a white collar one and he stayed with his old job. His career as a salesman did give him and his family the normal success people would want. Willy wanted more, and since he saw he didn't accomplished it, he taught his kids into his way of seeing life, hoping they would have followed his path and accomplish the dream he had for himself.

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, the American Dream has a fundamental role in the play. Amy Sickels proclaims that Miller "critically examines the myth of the American Dream" (Sickels 79).

In the 1930s the Great Depression, economics dominated politics and the American Dream turned into a nightmare. What once was the land of opportunity and hope became a land of desperation. In other words, the land of hope, optimism, and the symbol of prosperity became the land of despair. Many farmers migrated to the big cities in the hope of getting a job. Instead of advancement, survival became

the major problem. By the emergence of the World War II, the situation deteriorated, which inevitably influenced the lives of ordinary American people in a negative way. The situation of those people may be observed as a representative everyman, Willy Loman and his family. Miller being the best-known American playwrights after WWII draws reader's attention to the devastating effects of the economics and politics of the era on a fictional character that mostly represents a member of an ordinary American family with an American Dream/Nightmare. Loman was repressed and ignored in the capitalistic society. He tries to survive and be "noticed" like the other ordinary men in the society:

. . . 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 finally paid to such a person. (Act 1, 44)

Linda in this quotation speaks for the ordinary man in the society. Linda tries to protect her husband from the negative effects of the system of Capitalism that enslaves and exploits Willy. As Willy is the victim of the system, Linda expresses her humanity protesting its outcome on the lives and psychology of ordinary people. Still, Willy runs after his ideals for reaching his goal as Uncle Ben, who is a representative of his ideals and fantasy, and who realized the American Dream:

Like a young god. Hercules – something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him . . . And the buyers I brought, and the cheers when he came out – Loman, Loman, Loman! God Almighty, he'll be great yet. A star like that, magnificent can never really fade away! (Act 1, 54)

Willy tries to be like Uncle Ben who is successful in realizing the American Dream. Willy likes to be respected and wants to become a star. He wants to get rid of his position as a "common man" and be rich.

At the beginning of the Post-war era, a vast majority of Americans as well as people all around the world migrated to urban centers to make their living conditions better. The migration ceased the traditional farming, and transformed people into nucleus families. The negative affects of migration and longing for the past and urban life echo in Willy's statement: ". . . they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks . . . the street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood. The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the backyard" (Act 1 12). As Beşe emphasizes, Miller raises issues as the "impacts of environmental forces

on the individual and his family and the responsibilities or irresponsibility of family and society in relation to each other” (Beşe, 2003, 3). Miller observes the process of materialism, capitalism, and false success policies which bring disillusionment, isolation, and alienation.

Post-war American dramatists attempt to redefine domestic life that becomes a disappointing matter because it mostly illustrates disintegration in the family life. As Bigsby suggests, the central theme of the twentieth-century American drama is “alienation: man from God, from his environment, from his fellow/man and from himself” (Bigsby, 1982, 125). It is a world in which the relationship between man and environment is destroyed.

Despite the fact that the American Dream is not openly expressed, defined or mentioned in the play, it is well-known that Arthur Miller took inspiration from the American society (Page 102-103). This is brought to light through the characters. According to Chester E. Eisinger, there are various renditions of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*, in which “Willy Loman himself gives us the corrupt version of the [American] [D]ream” (Eisinger 98). Zheng Dan-qing also supports Eisinger’s claim, highlighting that it can be considered as the cause of his demise (Dan-qing 27). Indeed, Willy Loman is an unsuccessful salesman, considering the fact that he misunderstood the basic concept of the American Dream, namely that hard work equals success. If he had a more realistic understanding, he would have accepted Charley’s job offer (76) and worked his way up the ranks instead of chasing his unrealistic vision of wealth and success until his death.

As one can see, there is an apparent emphasis on a particular theme in Adams’s definition of the American Dream— self-fulfillment. This is divided into two parts: firstly, every man and woman has the opportunity “to become richer and better”. Secondly, the success one may achieve is according to one’s “ability or achievement“. In other words, Adams advocates that everyone has the opportunity of achieving success, but also stresses that one can only attain the success equivalent to one’s own ability and achievement.

Willy’s concept of success hinges on his own idea of success: “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it—because personality always wins the day” (51). That is, as Eisinger clarifies, Willy’s dream rests on the cult of personality. It is necessary, he holds, to make a good appearance and to be well liked, “Appearance is a key concept” in his notion of success (Eisinger 98). In other words, Willy believes that personal attractiveness is the only necessary ingredient to attain wealth and success. For the route to success is

not paved with hard work but by having a charismatic personality.

In the play, Willy’s understanding of success is primarily conveyed through his words and actions. One of his most famous quotes that is related his conception of it is when Willy gives his opinion on Charley’s business: “[b]igger than Uncle Charley! Because Charley is not – liked. He’s liked, but he’s not – well liked” (Miller 23). The concept of being well liked is the essence of his notion of success.

What is more, Willy makes another prominent statement which gives more details of his view and the entailment of being well liked: “[b]ecause the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want” (25- 26). As one can see, these quotes give an insight on the emphasis placed on being well liked by Willy. In his mind, it is the key to achieve success.

Willy’s false dream tormented the whole Loma family, since he started loosing his job, instead of looking for another one he stayed there, making his family believe that he was highly required in the company, but at the same time they had him working on commission. Howard Wagner, who was Willy boss, did to him what in business is known to be “lean and mean” which meant to move him to commission and then after a little period of time finally fired him (Murphy and Abbotson 199). Willy after seeing that at his age he had no way of being successful, he thought that the only way to accomplish the business American Dream was through committing suicide, which was a bad idea because the only thing he was going to cause will be sadness in his family. But he saw it from another point of view, which was from his ambition in the idea that success meant money, and that he wanted his sons specially Biff to accomplish his dream. He commits himself into several attempts for suicide. In the confrontation he had with Biff, he showed his dad the hose, so he’ll know that they are aware of his attempts of committing suicide, during the argument Biff tells his dad “What is this supposed to do, make a hero out of you? This supposed to make me sorry for you”, after this Willy should have realized that committing suicide wasn’t going to help him in raising his sons respect for him, but his thirst for the business success dream was much higher, so he didn’t pay attention to the advices given by his family.

As Biff said, Willy thought that taking his own life will make a hero out of him, and Willy thought that “To save his life, he has to kill himself” because he hoped that his family especially Biff would get the insurance money (Heyen 51). “Willy commits himself to a pathetic death and meaningless legacy (even if Willy’s life insurance policy ends up paying off, Biff wants nothing to do with Willy’s ambition for him)”

Willy didn't realize that even though if his son gets the money, his dream is completely different than Willy's. Willy wants a white collar job for his sons, while Biff will be happy with a job at a farm, working outdoors, so Biff wouldn't care if he gets his dad's money or not (Heyen 49). Nobody understood his decision but him, not even his wife. Linda thought of it as no necessity because "for the first time in thirty five years we were just about free and clear" meaning even the house payments were all done, now that they completely own their house, there'll be nobody to occupy it. But in the other hand for Willy "Admission of failure would have led to suicide the same way as his enduring dream to led to suicide", so in his point of view the two choices that he had leading him to the same result (Heyen 49). But on the others point of view, he acted like a coward, taking his own life just to get some money to his family.

Conclusion

As a result, Arthur Miller emphasizes his character Willy Loman not as a tragic hero in classical tragedy, but as a modern day tragic hero and a pathetic tragic hero in 1940's America who quests for self identity because of the harsh outcome of the commercialized world. Miller creates a hero of modernism with an influence from the social movements in his era. Thus, he revises both the classical tragedy and tragic hero to create his favorite subject of the modern-day tragedy. Lewis states that "Aristotelian concepts weigh heavily on an altered world" (1970, 47). In the modernist era (beginning with industrialization late 19th century and early 20th century) a new kind of tragic hero was created out as a reaction to the English Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, and Romanticism. The modern hero does not have to be of a high estate – but rather an "ordinary person". Those ordinary people are mostly affected by materialist and capitalist values as Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. The modern hero's story does not necessarily require the protagonist to have the traditional catharsis to bring the story to an end. He may suffer without the ability to change events that are happening to him. The story may end without closure. This new hero of modernism can be called the "modern-day tragic hero", or the "anti-hero". How did this type of anti-hero derive from? What effect/s made the spring of such protagonists? The answer lies perhaps in the social and economical outcomes of the era between the great American Depression and the post-WWII, which affects most of the ordinary Americans whose "American Dreams" are shattered into pieces by the cruel Capitalist system. To emphasize such devastating effects of the era, Miller has chosen the genre tragedy by turning its tenets upside down. Thus, Miller revised the classical

Aristotelian tragedy creating a successful modern-day tragedy, because as Miller states, "it is time that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time – heart and spirit of the average man" (1974, 897). Through this revision, he redefined the tragic hero: Willy Loman, a product of society, became a modern tragic hero crying out the social injustice in a shattered dream.

Although in the play it doesn't say whether or not the Loman family got the insurance money, it does clarify the confusion about the American Dream that Willy had, and in consequence the influence that it had on his sons. But what we have to remember is that Willy has been thirty five years in the selling business. He is definitely a professional in what he does, so "He is a salesman! He's trying to sell us the wrong dreams!" but he was only one who bought (Heyen 51). The bad part of this is that because of his obsession with the business success dream he destroyed and dismantles his family in the process.

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