

Defensive Self-Identity and Crisis: Misunderstanding Media and Communication in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract

This paper aims to demystify Willy's compunction of his entire life and how it affects his other relationships with his family members. In Arthur Miller's masterpiece, *Death of a Salesman*, the main character, Willy Loman, struggles with an existential crisis born of his incorrect notion of media and communication, causing a defensive identity. This paper delves into how Willy's misunderstanding determines his tragic end and more significantly affects our comprehension of human psychology and pressures in society. Willy Loman, an ill-fated salesman, is obsessed with the glamour of success through the media, as represented in the ideal of a self-made man, cultivated in advertisements and mass media. Obsessive chasing of the American Dream, based on materialism and social class, makes him incapable of noticing what is going wrong in his own life or even what constitutes true success. The only focus of Willy's perception of communications is superficial charm and image projection, which misses real human bonding and meaningful dialogue. It brings him further into isolation and makes a circle of self-deception wherein he conjures up a shadow of success to get him away from his inadequacy and failure feelings. Miller's treatment of Willy Loman foregrounds the danger of mistaking representation in media for identity in human life. Tropes about the media with which Willy clings distorted his sense of self and made him an unreliable actor against the real, thereby alienating himself from his family and the social world. Defensively assuming this wrong conception about communication finally goes to kill Willy with its tragic consequence where he fails to reconcile the idea of aspirations that he dreamed in his life with actual reality. This paper will evaluate the nature of infatuation and suffering in Willy Loman's life which will help us, paradoxically, to understand our lives of ourselves, our values and our society. Willy cannot connect the circumstances which create a life of disappointment. The representation of his sufferings, pain and agony provides a mixed reply: anger and delight, resentment and sympathy. This paper aims to arouse some therapeutic values, through the careful consideration of Loman's character, to the civilized people.

Keywords: Moral exploration, painful edge of consciousness, flawed dreams, cruelty of human existence, and human destiny.

Introduction

Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is perhaps the universal tragedy of love, despair, pain and deep infatuation which in now a day characterizes life in various countries of the universe. Miller's efforts to encompass his tragic cycle to its very general conclusion by addressing a sign of the protagonist's victory (Martin 105). An empathetic feeling about Willy from audiences' perspectives is involved to depict the frailty of human life gyrated by undissociated circumstances. We should intellectually disseminate him in Willy's existential situation, we may also feel his situation and drastic condition imaginatively too, keeping in mind the larger society, that someone chooses to be free on an easy way out. We not only feel pity for Willy and his unsuccessful dreams but also fear for ourselves. Willy's analysis of finding the way-out path of his life dubious to him, baffling himself to resolve his point of view of life. Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* talks about the story of a man who, on the edge of death, desires dreadfully to justify his life, reciprocating one of the central thoughts of society where we all exist (Centola 29). For Miller, Willy Loman wins the favour of audiences by becoming a virtuous man because he gains virtue, and heroism at the cost of his life just to safeguard his entire family. Like an existentialist, Miller analyses virtue, nobility and magnanimity, in some anti-Aristotelian terms. Miller is not portraying Willy's character with some provisions of fixed assets, but rather he is depicting the protagonist who wins the exact value of the universe during his search for exact truth in the 'existential moment', countering the keynote of the play (Jackson 75).

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Reading Miller's *Death of a Salesman* proceeds us towards Willy's self-delusion and hamartia, commemorating Miller's capitalistic society which is very responsible for dehumanizing an individual. Miller's extreme delineation of Willy's character wholeheartedly captures the audience's attention, arousing human dilemma. *Death of a Salesman* engulfs the story of a simple businessman, though he is unsuccessful in his career, who wants to scrutinize his life by justifying his past deeds and guilts he has constructed for himself and his entire family (Centola 30). The story simply defines a struggle between son and father for self-recognition and position in society. This play broadens the question of social status and recognition on which this relationship is centred. Miller's efforts to gross his sad sequence to its usual inference by giving a symbol to the hero's triumph. In *Death of a Salesman* Miller paints Loman as an erroneous dream hunter, a man who merely throws his life away on the false promises of Madison Avenue, the powerhouse of money, and a desire for some unrealself-glorification. We may be weird by Willy's suicide, representing an act that lacks good faith to redefine Sartre's expression. But what constitutes the play to the status of tragedy is not Willy's committing the act of suicide, but rather determines a very basic fact of society with a similar choice taken by the society. (Martin 106) Martin also pointed out boldly "it is clear that Willy's life and suicide are perceived by his wife and sons as full of pathos. Although Willy talks grandly of heroic deeds, of great feats of salesmanship, it is evident to everyone (including Willy himself), that his life-long dream of success is flawed (100).

Literature Review

Before start writing this critical research journal paper, I examined thoroughly Maeve Barrington's *The Salesman Was Human: The Death of a Salesman* paper. It depicts a general overview of the protagonist's psychoanalytical approach to vivify the ultimate consequences at the cost of his own life. Next, I examined Stephen A. Lawrence's paper titled *The Right Dream in Miller's Death of a Salesman*. In his paper, I felt a strong emotional attachment and ecstasy towards his sons and his wife as well as an opposite attachment to his job and long-term career. This paper fails to objectify my current paper. Then I read Robert A. Martin's *The Nature of Tragedy in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman*, depicting different types of tragedy and despondencies in Willy's family which shattered the family values completely. I also read B. S. Field, Jr.'s *Hamartia in Death of a Salesman* which gives very subtle details of how Willy's error of judgements gradually leads him to the path of eternal damnation of his life.

Discussion in Brief

Miller's determinism

Miller manages to paint Willy Loman as of dual characteristics- lack of self-knowledge and self-judgement which lead him to destruction. Miller accomplishes Loman as a short-tempered, paranoid and bewildered man of inactive habit. Willy's subconsciousness defects his consciousness towards his sons and wife who have been thoroughly dependent on him. Miller notes in the introductory section of his *Collected Plays* that:

"he (Willy) has achieved a very powerful piece of knowledge, which is that he is loved by his son and has been embraced by him and forgiven". (Martin 104)

Miller acknowledges that Willy is not merely portrayed as a figure of a loser losing self-pity and honour, but is a failure character who fails to attain the prime opportunity and confidence of his life (Cardulio 583). Willy fails to fulfill his dream and vision, keeping himself detached from his personal life and involved too deeply with commercial society which helps him to forget himself from his own family. This is the play in which readers can hear less than educated Lomans family who are capricious of being fuss. Willy's self-delusion and self-confusion arrest him to be of no primary concern for his family values and sentiments. Little knowledge of attaining little happiness seems below the level of understanding Willy, for he is unable to cope with his past unsystematic memories which are, at the creed of the prime time of his life, responsible for his destination (Centola 31). He should have learnt from his past life and executed these in his future to assume his limit and capacity to embrace the American dream. His limitless ambition in life creates the complex interrelationship of opposed loyalties and ideas in his mind, synchronizing every fact of the play.

Throughout the play, Willy encounters several traits which are very personal. He is very much conscious, greater than expected, and tries to fulfil his unpredictable dreams, hazarding his personal life, sentiments and family members. He is obsessed heavily, and this obsession infuriates Willy to be destined for his success of becoming an ideal, successful businessman. He is getting frustrated by his regular unsuccessful life, and morose by his untrustworthy behaviour with his family members, even though shows his jealousy towards Billy and Happy for their unwillingness to their father's consent. If Willy is responsible for his downfall, what responsibilities our society are performing to maintain and secure human life during his post-traumatic situation? Why we are not protecting him from his gradual downfall, danger and misfortune? Shouldn't he be guided by the natural creed of humanity and smile? He has to resist himself to defend his disbelief and discomfort with his family. He never

supported his family unintentionally but intentionally he challenged others to be his obedient followers lest they act, feel and react differently (Jackson 66). The Loman family is revolving thoroughly with Willy Loman whose principle aim of maintaining the surroundings is dubiously different and defensive too, which also pushes him back to the path of destruction. Willy is conscious enough that he likes working with his own hands, frustrated by any attempt to implant itself in an environment where nothing can grow.

One can read *Death of a Salesman* without becoming aware of these contradictions, it is worth noting that so many find themselves influenced by the play, and so convinced the emotion Miller has been able to generate is something more than cheaper sentimentality which they feel the need to defend the play against the harsh criticisms remained in it. That would be the best way out of the dilemma (Martin 100). Willy's life and death clash with our shaped values of society, and our consciousness to justify the legitimacy of achieving the American dream of a businessman who defends his other family persons too. Daniel E. Schneider interpreted the play as an expression of Willy's aggression against his older brother Ben, as Happy's aggression against Biff. Martin argued "perhaps *Death of a Salesman* has the rare quality of presenting its protagonist as both a figure of pathos and of heroism. And it is even conceivable that Willy's misplaced optimism, his inheritance from nineteenth-century America, is alone enough to classify him as a tragic figure. For whatever else Willy is in his penultimate moment of sacrifice- he is not pessimistic(101-102). Willy Loman is demanding, as Phillip Gelb argued in his interview with Miller, a sense of ecstasy which the machinery world human beings deprived of. He gloomy and despondent behavior makes him gradually but utterly an unsuccessful man of inactive habits, disbalancing his all healthy relationships in his life.

Conclusion

Death of a Salesman has a theme of multiple interpretations. One of the most recurrent interpretations is Willy's isolation from nature. Others are his suffering from a lack of love, a loss of identity, and a worship of the False God of personality (Field 20). He is fated to be doomed and also defeated by society; he is too weak and immoral for any social conditions and customs. He is unable to understand the gap between him and his two sons who are quite young and advanced to the age. Will's catastrophe is variously described; he suffered a miserable and pointless death; suffered the agony of seeing that he had worthless and reckless sons; suffered the agony of whole twenty-four hours of insane self-torture which takes up the real-time of the play's performance or simply that he had a miserable funeral. Willy's crime is that he has tried to mould his sons in his image, that he has turned them into windbags and crybabies. They are not sexually impotent, no more than Willy is, but they are impotent in a large sense.

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