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WHO KILLED THE SALESMAN?  
-ON ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

MD. EHASANUL HOQUE

Lecturer, Department of English, Noakhali Science and Technology University,  
Noakhali, Bangladesh



MD. EHASANUL  
HOQUE

ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller and his plays are praised as strong critics of capitalist societies and their dehumanizing force upon individuals living in them. *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by Miller is based on a salesman's obsession with success myth in the context of great economic depression. Arthur Miller's American dreamer Willy Loman is an illustration of much practiced philosophy of being well liked. People in a modern business oriented society tend to run after profit without realizing their own capability. Success, in a fast growing modern society as in America, does not depend on any miracle. Success and failure go side by side. Willy Loman, in the play *Death of a Salesman* exemplifies America's success myth. That his failure is the wrong assumption of the myth- is well discussed in the field of American Literature. Many modern and post modern critics try to examine the problems of capitalist society for Willy's tragedy. This paper will try to investigate an exclusive character study of Miller's protagonist to determine other important causes related to his failure and to analyze the one who is sinned against than sinning.

**Key Words:** Social tragedy, American Dream, Materialism, Success, Personal tragedy, Tragic flaws

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his plays Arthur Miller has dealt mostly with the social issues of his day and this is the case with *Death of a Salesman* too. *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller is one of the most acclaimed literary pieces that portray the after effects of the Depression of 1930s; focusing the confrontations of individuals with their society and with their own selves, and the ultimate result of the American Dream of success. American Dream in its truest sense includes "home ownership, medical care, higher education – the real promise of improvement and mobility up the ladder of social status" (Ford, 290). Since materialism advances in the society, the dream gets diverted from its true meaning, causes distress in different spheres of human life.

*Death of a Salesman* consists of two acts and a requiem. Its plot revolves round the last twenty-four hours in the life of the protagonist of the play, Willy Loman. In this play Miller has tried to analyse Willy Loman, a flesh and blood human being. Willy pursues a very common mirage. This pursuit is the pursuit of success

which is what everyone of his clan is pursuing. But Willy's extraordinary fervor and enthusiasm exalt it to a high, sublime level. Willy Loman is a fervent believer in the romantic American dream. He thinks that a man can rise to a high position and can attain wealth by means of personal attractiveness, personal charm, personal initiative, and personal contacts. He persists in believing in this American myth to the point of absurdity. And at the end of the play, in order to fulfill the dream, though not possible for him but for his son Biff, Willy commits suicide.

It is probably Miller's characteristic of dealing with social issues that caused *Death of a Salesman* to be the center for much critical debate as to what it signifies, right from the beginning. Among those who so much celebrated the play were critics with a Marxist line of thought. They perceived it as a 'social play', an attack upon, or a criticism of society and its system of beliefs, knowing Willy Loman to be flawless. They also labeled Miller as a true social writer who is critical of capitalist society and its values. On the contrary, there appeared a growing trend among many of those who approached this play to condemn Willy Loman out of hand, believing his actions to be the root of his destruction. I personally find the arguments put forward by the second group stronger. This paper attempts to study Willy Loman's character and make detailed analysis of the various causes of his death on both social and personal levels. The article aims to prove that Willy's tragedy is not only the result of American society and the system of values it imbibes in the minds of weaklings like Willy, but most of the blame for the tragedy is because of Willy's own inability to contain his vaulting and unrealistic ambitions and false set of values.

## **2. Willy Loman's death as a social tragedy**

The malaise that afflicts Willy has its roots in American society, a society which is highly commercialized and competitive. If Miller focuses his emphasis on the apparent discrepancy between what America seems to promise and what she actually delivers to those who have familiarized the ethic of success, he is by no means an unqualified critic of the American dream. This chapter tries to focus on the contribution of various social factors resulting from the illusions of the American dream on Willy Loman's death.

### **2.1 Defining the American Dream**

America stands on the concept of the land of Democracy, Equality and Opportunity which contribute it greatly to be a Utopia to all. People appear to believe that American society is structured on these idealistic concepts and so they start to come to an unexplored continent with new hopes and aspirations since its discovery. Subsequently, this idealistic and large vision comes up with a short phrase 'American Dream'. American Dream as noted in the Oxford Dictionary implies "the ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved". The dream epitomizes the social, economic and political stability for all and an American system that ensures success for every individual. James Truslow Adams, an American historian first forges the phrase 'American Dream' whose utterance has been regarded as the first characterization of the idea: "[T]hat 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 and achievement" (Laitinen, 20).

Securing equality and democracy in the society, the dream expands the path of opportunity for all which enables them to restore 'the better, richer, and fuller' life than the past. The phrase 'American Dream' can be articulated in various ways but to be concrete, the substance of the dream is deeply rooted in the familiar words of Thomas Jefferson uttered in the Declaration of Independence of 1776: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". Thus American Dream becomes an apparition for which every American quests to make a day better than yesterday. It entices every individual to build a better life irrespective of his/her origin. By nourishing the dream every American shares the benefit of the nation's prosperity. The dream enterprise is a chance to all Americans.

But the matter of great regret is that the basic paragon of the dream is exploded. The land was economically unstable and it had experienced an Economic Depression in 1929 which caused a number of changes and chaos in the fabric of American society in the thirties. During the World War I farmers had to

produce more crops to provide food to the armed forces. The surplus victuals were remained unsold when the war was over. Farmers went bankrupt unable to pay the lent money. Factory owners manufactured a large number of goods borrowing money from banks. People were in meager of money and "by 1928 products were harder to sell" (Crothers 200). As a consequence the stock market has been crashed and the Economic Depression of 1929 took place. Moreover, "the dream has been overshadowed by slavery, segregation, racism, monophobia and insufficient women's rights" (Laitinen, 22-23). This is why the dream with its real essence no longer exists in American society. The dream, as a punch of time appears as an illusion to all. The dream, therefore, is dead.

## 2.2 Willy Loman as a victim of the American Dream

In *Death of a Salesman*, American middle class sentiments, ideas, dreams and beliefs are projected very closely by Miller. The play presents the conflict between an individual's capability and limitations to grip a place in the world of trade, and the requirements of a capitalistic society. It shows the disillusionment of Willy Loman resulted from misinterpreted notions of success. Willy Loman, an ordinary, sensitive individual is trying to ascertain his identity in a world where rapid urbanization and crumbling human values corrode his soul continuously. Amidst growing materialism human spirit incessantly craves for a fine and beautiful dream. Willy has found himself in a society where beautiful dream means the dream of having success at hand. It is fully reluctant to embrace the ill-fated people. Moreover the success oriented society undermines its unproductive inhabitants: "Willy, but there is just no spot here for you. If I had a spot I'd slam you right in, but I just don't have a single solitary spot" (Miller, 62).

Willy trances for recognition as a being in the society, an individual who has his own home and business and thereby respected and loved! "Someday I'll have my own business and I'll never have to leave home any more" (Miller 62). Willy presumes that Ben has attained the ultimate goal in life and he strives to follow Ben in the dream to be successful salesman. Ben says: "William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!" (Miller, 40-41), yet Willy never finds the diamonds and adopts a 'low man's' life. Willy is disgruntled in his professional life where "Ben's promise is the promise of all the self-help prophets of the nineteenth century" (Porter, 144). In comparison with Ben, Willy is an unsuccessful being in that society. The society shapes Willy's thought and imbues a sense of attaining success at any cost. However the society does not show him the way of accomplishment and relatively the strain of cost-effective escalation in the society makes Willy bewildered at his situation: "[t]he pressures of economic growth in urban society created the salesman mystique and these same forces punish the successful inexorably" (Porter, 144-145). Willy is entrapped by the Economic Depression of 1929. Having failed to achieve the diamond from the selling, he becomes a victim of American success myth.

That Willy is the victim of the American society to which he belongs is further illustrated by the manner in which he is treated by his present employer Howard. Working for the same farm for 35 years, he becomes useless for the farm: "I don't want you to represent us" (Miller 65). He has been discharged with no pension as he is outdated and unsuccessful. Willy's provision exhibits the Marxist view that "capitalism alienates us from the products of our labour, from the things that we make, because they are not ours" (Woodfin, Zarate 62). Willy's extinction from the farm draws his disintegration from the cherished dream. The elimination makes Willy to fall into disillusionment and he creates a false world around him. Willy gives artificial impressions about himself to his family: "they don't need me in New York. I'm New England man. I'm vital in New England" (Miller 10). He makes us believe that he is very happy in his job and certainly this is another illusion of Willy that he has created for himself. Conflict between the American values and Willy's own values leads him to the path of destruction. Thus the dream is so forceful that it diminishes one's own identity.

## 3. Willy Loman's death as a personal tragedy

It would, however, be completely wrong to say that Willy is wholly a victim of the social system. He possesses many loopholes and drawbacks in his personality which contribute a lot to and are mainly responsible for his tragic failure. This chapter will try to investigate an exclusive character study of Willy Loman to bring into light his various tragic flaws which brought about his final catastrophe.

Willy Loman is the staunchest believer in the romantic American dream that states, a person possessing sufficient enterprise can rise from a lower to an exalted station in life. He is cocksure that a person can scale glorious heights by means of personal attractiveness, initiative, poise and contacts. His hubris is that he possesses these qualities made for success. He applies this view to himself as well as to his sons. When he talks with Biff, he says, "the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal attractiveness, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want (Miller, 1961: 25). He speaks of himself in almost eloquent epithets when he remarks that he is 'vital' to the Wagner Company as its salesman in the New England territory. He runs into rhapsodies when he uses such expressions as 'knocked them dead', and 'slaughtered them' to convey his conquest of the territory, New England. He brags that he is so popular that the cops in his territory would look after his car no matter in which street of a town in New England he chooses to park it.

Willy's expectations about his son's bright future, similarly, assume the scale of pathological obsession, although Biff has hardly achieved anything outstanding in life up to the age of thirty-four. Biff, Willy believes, has 'spirit' and 'personality' and he is molded of a sterner and sumptuous stuff as he looks like an Adonis: "you are both built like Adonises" (Miller, 25). His fondness for Biff is so intense that he is even prepared to pardon the petty pilferage to which Biff has become prone because, he thinks, Biff is an exceptional young man who would mend himself when he matures! Willy is convinced of his son's capacity so much that he holds the view that his sons, because of their personality and attractiveness, would do better in life than Bernard, the book-worm and he himself would build up a more thriving business than Charley has built up. Willy says, "That's just what I mean. Bernard can get the best marks in the school, y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him" (Miller, 25).

According to A. C. Bradley, the famous Shakespearean critic, 'character is destiny'; Willy has willingly evolved his character by hinging himself upon hallucination. That proves lethal to him. Willy himself is aware of his limitations and yet he ignores them under the sheer intensity of his illusion! He knows his humiliations and shortcomings and yet he chooses to shut his eyes to them. He confesses to Linda in so many words that people do not "take to him", that they "pass him by", and that they "laugh" at his fatness; he also admits that he has miscalculated his sales. All this, of course, he does in a moment of mental illumination of self-discovery. Otherwise he continues to deceive himself with unrealistic hopes both with regard to himself and Biff. It seems like a willful blindness to facts. He sees before him a striking example to prove that the American dream is not infallible. There is Charley who has built up a flourishing business without conforming to the terms of the American dream, and there is Bernard who has become a very successful lawyer without having played football. Charley says that his son has risen to a high position even though he did not formulate any plan for him: "My salvation is that I never took my interest in anything" (Miller, 75). As for Willy's formula of success, Charley says, "Who liked J. P. Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he'd look like a butcher. But with his pockets on, he was very well liked" (Miller, 77). And yet Willy is not disillusioned. Rightly did Charley ask him: "When the hell are you going to grow up?" (Miller, 76)

In this highly commercial and competitive society Willy cannot turn down the false vanity that is imposed upon him. He believes the norms for success in salesmanship are 'personality', and 'being well liked'. He highly evaluates these propositions and puts all these into actions; fails to reach into the ultimate goal because of his misinterpretation of the concept of success. It is a matter of great regret that Willy imprisons himself with his self created illusions and at the end of the day he finds that his illusions come into nothing and there left only one "way he can make his life pay off is by self-destruction" (Porter, 49).

Willy was highly inspired to build up his career as a salesman to see the flourishing career of an American salesman, Dave Singleman. Emphasizing on Singleman's 'personality' and being 'well liked', Willy pleads to die a death as memorable as that of Dave Singleman. "When he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral" (Miller, 63). Dave Singleman's death becomes memorable because he may prove some exemplary traits in his service and that's why all were remain present even in his funeral. But Willy is an

incomplete as an orator, a key facet of salesmanship through which he can impress the buyers to buy the goods. Apart from this, it was really a toilsome job for Willy at this age to carry out samples in different cities and persuade the buyers to buy his products. Willy belongs to a time when “people quickly lost their optimism about the future. They stopped buying things that they could not afford” (Crothers, 201). Thus the buyers become unfamiliar to him. Willy loses the touch and contact with those people who once knew and liked him and were ready to help him in his bad time. The hopeless cry of Linda: “But where are all the people he knew?” (Miller, 110) affirms that the dream of Willy Loman to be a Dave Singleman, is only an illusion. If he paid least heed to the philosophical ideal of Socrates – “Know thyself”; he would never wish to be a salesman rebuffing his talent in craftsmanship.

Willy’s unquestioning faith in the American dream seems to have made it unnecessary for him to develop any high moral ideals. The method Willy adopts in bringing up his sons has great flaws; consequently “his path is painfully drowned” (Ford 559). He has been turning a blind eye to Biff’s thefts, petty as they were. Willy takes the matter lightly and laughs at that kind of borrowing. Without showing any disagreement against the stealing Willy stops the dispute between Biff and Happy. He ropes “Coach’ll probably congratulate you on your initiative!” (Miller, 23). This practice exhibits nothing but the moral deterioration of Willy and consequently Biff. The fragile morality makes their disintegration from the vision a step ahead. Even when Biff fails in the examination, Willy blames the teacher whom he describes as “that son-of-a-bitch”. He is so obsessed by his illusion regarding Biff that he is not prepared to listen even to Biff’s account of his interview with Bill Oliver. His illusion does not allow him to listen to an account of failure.

Willy’s blind devotion to the American dream prevents him from accepting Ben’s offer of a golden opportunity in Alaska where he could have become rich. He is not only by nature unadventurous, as soon as Linda reminds him of Dave Singleman, Willy is convinced that he will do much better in his own company than in Alaska

Willy: ... Linda! He’s got a proposition for me in Alaska.

Linda: But you’ve got – (To Ben) He’s got a beautiful job here.

Linda: You’re doing well enough, Willy!

Willy: Sure, sure. I am building something with this firm, Ben, and if a man is building something he must be on the right track, mustn’t he? (Miller, 67)

He deceives himself to such an extent that he thinks that his funeral will be a “massive” affair and will be attended by very important people in the trade like Dave Singleman’s funeral. Actually only Charley and Bernard attended the funeral besides the members of his family. The hopeless cry of Linda shows us the reality: “But where are all the people he knew?” (Miller, 110)

The sense of guilt that he carries with him on account of his past infidelity to his wife has also something to do with the mental instability of Willy. Linda is a devoted wife. “She constantly believes in Willy and is even ready to reject her sons for this man who dreams such strange illusions” (Carey, 2001). Whereas Linda loves him so much, he proves false to his marriage vow by developing an illicit relationship with a woman – Miss Frances. Willy has gifted this woman many stockings. On the contrary, Linda, to save a few pennies, always mends her stockings. So whenever he sees Linda mending her stockings, he is reminded of the Boston woman to whom he had once made love. He is also aware of the shock that Biff had received on seeing him with that woman in the hotel in Boston. This event breaks down the closest relationship – ‘real pals’ between father and son; and brings about a gap between them. Biff says: “I can’t get near him”. This is one of the basic reasons for Biff’s having gone astray.

Willy’s wrong philosophies of life, his wrong illusion that he is better than Charley and his false pride bring the final catastrophe for him. After being fired by his present employer Howard, Willy goes to Charley’s office. When Charley comes to know that Willy is jobless, he offers him a job in his company. But Willy rejects his proposal. He is so engrossed in his false pride that he can never think of serving under Charley. He is afraid that if he works for Charley, it will prove him lower in dignity than Charley. Through this Willy loses his last chance of survival. If he had taken the job there, he might have started a new life. Moreover, Biff also could

not manage a loan from Bill Oliver. So nothing is left for Willy now. In the final hallucinatory talk with his brother Ben, Willy decides to commit suicide to provide Biff with the insurance money. In this way, Willy brings his tragic end by himself.

#### 4. Conclusion

The problem in *Death of a Salesman* is the inability of human beings to accept the changed reality and develop new attitudes compatible with one's changed circumstances of life. The tragic failure of the protagonist in the play arises because of his insensitivity to the inevitability of change. This study has tried to dramatize a situation in which the personal motives of the characters are in conflict with the norms of the society. Society, imbued with the values of materialism has obviously victimized Willy's life. But Willy, in a greater degree, with his own flaws in his character has brought about the catastrophe upon himself. He is unable to face reality. He has an unbalanced mind. He cannot boast of a strict morality. He is weak and vacillating. He is given to self-deception and self delusion. Thus Willy, because of his indomitable trust on the American Dream, inability to contain his vaulting and unrealistic ambitions and wrong philosophies of life, has sinned more against than being sinned.

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