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NIETZSCHEAN STUDY OF *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* BY ARTHUR MILLER

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ABSTRACT

This article takes into account Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, in particular the notions of Slave Morality and Master Morality, in order to analyze the major characters of *Death of a Salesman* (1998) especially its tragic protagonist Willy Loman. Therefore, firstly Nietzsche's related concepts will be explained and then the play will be studied based on those concepts. In this study understanding master morality, slave morality and their differences as well as the idea of 'will to power' is essential to analyze the characters based on Nietzsche's philosophy. This paper considers Willy Loman as an actual low man who does not know himself and cannot bear changes while his son, Biff, seeks to create and set his own values. He ferociously shows his discomfort toward his father's slave-like morals and is moving in a path that might guide him toward master moralities. This paper shows the importance of knowing what the characters' moralities are since their decisions and actions are closely related to their especial kind of morality.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, slave and master morality, Willy Loman

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INTRODUCTION

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is one of the few thinkers who have challenged the issue of morality in its global dimensions. Morality is present in all the human communications and plays an influential role in shaping human's relationships. Morality shapes people's behavior and the way they act is considerably related to the certain type of morality they have. In Nietzsche's view there are two kinds of morality which are totally in contrast to each other: one of them directs people toward being slave and the other leads people toward mastery. Therefore in Nietzsche's philosophy they are called 'slave morality' and 'master morality'. The earlier has been widespread by Christianity and the later takes its origin from aristocratic thought. Nietzsche (2002) identifies people with master morality as 'noble' and pious, describing

them the ones who have devised their own values, while they do not see any need for other people's approval. He believes that the nobles prescribe value to things and therefore they are 'value makers' that can therefore enjoy self-reliance, gaiety, and self-valorization. But the ones with Slave Morality are weak, and are always jealous of the hygienic power and excellence of the noble, and in their value system they are dependent upon others.

The aim of this article is to go into the depth of the *Death of a Salesman's* characters' behaviors and to analyze their personalities in the domain of morality for investigating the effects of having each of these moralities on the characters' lives and on their communications with other characters as well.

*Death of a Salesman*, published in 1949, is the most famous play by Arthur Miller. It is a story of a sixty year old salesman, Willy Loman, on the verge of losing his job. He has a fragile personality and one can see his struggles with his two boys, Biff and Happy, during the play. Finally, He loses his job and the story ends with his tragic death. One can easily identify the features of slave morality in Willy Loman's life and perspectives and to some extent master morality in his son, Biff. Therefore this article focuses on the differences between Willy and his children's mindset that pushes them toward distinct destinations. And by doing so it can provide readers with the vast information about characters' personality and the kind of morality they possess. But more important than that is having the chance of getting to know what the consequence and results of having particular moralities are in light of Nietzsche's philosophy.

#### **Review of Literature**

Miller's *Death of a Salesman* has been studied from different perspectives; however the central point of discussion behind them is mainly the idea of American dream. Artan (2014) studies death of a salesman under the domain of American dream and the theme of narcissism because he believes that there is a connection between these two in character of Willy Loman. The purpose of his study is "to demonstrate that a close reading of the protagonist, Willy Loman suggests that his notion of success in relation to the American dream can be regarded as narcissistic" (Artan, 2014, p.2). According to Artan, American dream is the main theme of this play and Miller shows it through the characters' wishes. He believes that Willy Loman is an unsuccessful salesman since he has misunderstood the notion of American dream and the fact that Willy sees success in working hard, the way of speaking, appearance and attractiveness that makes him a narcissist who wants to be superior and be liked by everyone.

Tracy and Robins (2003) study the case of *Death of a Salesman* as an integrative model of fragile self-esteem. They say that "Willy's search for the "American dream" of fame, fortune, and admiration is the hallmark of his identity and consider him as an example of a man with narcissistic fragile self-esteem.

Much of the scholarship, on Miller, tends to study death of a salesman with the purpose of showing the American dream with Willy as the center of it. This article, in contrast, wants to study the personality of characters deeply, with a philosophical approach to find out what the morality of characters is. Another article which can to some extents resemble this paper is Lawrence's article though, he does not show any interest to scrutinize the reasons behind characters' behaviors.

Stephen A. Lawrence (1964) talks about some contradictions in Miller's play in which, for example, Willy is responsible for his bad life or it is society that misplaced values in his life. He does not exactly say why Willy has a bad life the only answer he makes for this question is that "perhaps there is a sense in which both society and Willy are responsible for the death of a salesman" (Lawrence, 1964, p.548). This short article also talks about the personality of other characters however it does not provide reasons for Willy's downfall or others characters' especial behaviors. The writer talks about Willy's need for attention, his need for love, and his desire of being liked by others but the concepts seem to be vague as far as he does not show the readers any proof, such as some personal factors related to Willy, as the reason of his behavior.

#### **Methodology**

Nietzsche is known as a philosopher of morality. He has paid attention to moral valuation and studied this subject through different periods of history. For talking about his morality, firstly it is needed to have a discussion about values. One of Nietzsche's goals was to show how values can be unoriginal, and he constantly

asks man to get rid of those values and to create their own system of valuation. At the beginning of *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1998), Nietzsche poses some basic questions about value judgements to challenge their origin and their:

Under what conditions did man invent those value judgments good and evil? And what value do they themselves have? Have they inhibited or furthered human flourishing up until now? Are they signs of distress, of impoverishment, of the degeneration of life? or, conversely, do they betray the fullness, the power, the will of life, its courage, its confidence, its future? (Nietzsche, 1998, p.2,3)

In order to answer these questions, Nietzsche studied the historical origins of moral values. He introduces Christianity as an attitude that provided people with values which were not really valuable, in other words they were fake values. In the past, aristocratic features such as nobility, originality, power, strength, innovation, self-knowledge and independency were considered values, and people with such table of values created and made the values without any outside ruling power. In contrast, there was another group of people who were following the values which had been prescribed to them and were under the influence of Christianity. There are big differences between these two and consequently between their moral evaluations.

The good and the bad which these two groups of people create are completely different from each other. The valuation of the slaves which Nietzsche calls 'herd' is just a superficial valuation which is formed out of the Christian influences. Before Christianity they were nobles who made values, but When Christianity came, it reversed the aristocratic values of nobles by paying attention to the poor people. "A faith in yourself, pride in yourself, and a fundamental hostility and irony with respect to "selflessness"" (Nietzsche, 2002, P.155) were considered value by noble people but Christianity changed these values and "pity, obliging, helpful hand, the warm heart, patience, industriousness, humility and friendliness" received full honors. (Nietzsche, 2002, P156).

Considering all these issues Nietzsche believes that one can move from being herd to nobility and then to a superman by having a very strong will which he calls 'will to power' and also one needs it in order to be a value maker.

In talking about will to power, first it should be clarified what "will" is and what "power" is in Nietzsche's idea. The power that Nietzsche talks about is in contrast of what people usually think about it. It is not a disruptive power which normally powerful people exercise over lower people. It is, in fact, a hygienic power which is a model for many philosophers such as Michel Foucault. This is not a physical power but it is a power of mind over minds. It is a power of self-knowledge and self-mastery, the power of making values and sovereignty. This power exists everywhere and in Nietzsche's word "life is will to power" (Nietzsche, 1968, p 148).

One of the reasons of Nietzsche's criticism of herds is the fact that they lack the "will" for having this power. As it was said herds are so weak by themselves since it prevents them from having self-knowledge and self-mastery and that is why there cannot be found any will to power in herd, because they do not know themselves, and consequently do not know what is their goal. As Nietzsche (1968) says ""willing": means willing an end. "An end" includes an evaluation" (Nietzsche, 1968, p.150) and when someone has this special will to power will inevitably move towards the path of being a superman.

In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1998) Nietzsche writes about the features and differences of morality of slaves and masters. He has determined some specific characteristics for each of these groups, and the most important one might be having or lacking the will to power, since without it, one does not have any motivation to gain the features and the morals of masters. Therefore, the integral part of having master morality is to have the will to power. People with master-like nature go beyond pre-determined good and evil by the help of their will, since they have known their *selves*, and they are not dependent on anyone for evaluations.

Nietzsche (1968) says that during the history of mankind, whenever a person does not know the answer of something strange and when he feels frightened he hangs to Christianity. The person sees it as a supernatural power, which can explain the entire indefinable phenomenon. The more he pays attention to

that power the less becomes his own power. That person starts to underestimate himself and his important role in the universe. As a result

when man experiences the conditions of power, the imputation is that he is not their cause, that he is not responsible for them: they come without being willed, consequently we are not their author: the will that is not free (i.e., the consciousness that we have been changed without having willed it) needs an external will. (Nietzsche, 1968, P.86)

The will of a weak man is not related to himself, it is an outside power, whether the power of universe or of Christianity. This is the will that comes from outside man and therefore one feels being belittled. This is the way that people with slave morality live; they do not regard themselves responsible for the happenings, and suffer from lacking the inner will to make changes, and consequently they are stuck in Christianity in order to find their lost power in it. But masters look for the power and will through their own *selves*; they feel responsible for their deeds, because they believe that things have occurred out of their own will. As Nietzsche (1986) puts it:

Step by step man takes possession of his exalted and proud states, he takes possession of his acts and works. Formerly one believed one was doing oneself an honor by denying responsibility for one's highest acts an attributing them to \_ God. Absence of free will counted as that which imparted a higher value to an action: a god was conceived as its author. (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 87)

Therefore masters are not dependent on Christianity in their value system as far as they have the gift of the will to power for self-making; however it does not mean they do not believe in religion, in fact they do, but they never underscore their own important role in shaping their own lives.

A Nietzschean master besides having an active will to power as a tool for mastering himself and taking the responsibility of what happens to him, possesses a especial sense related to will to power ,called *amor-fati*, which causes him to take the control of his life. The word amor-fati means 'to love your fate' and the essence of it is affirming life in all its aspects. A person with this sense may not complain about his hardships; he tries his best and at the end accepts life as it is and never feels conquered.

### **Discussion**

*Death of a Salesman* first published in 1949, is a tragic play which portrays the life of Loman family. Willy, a sixty year old salesman has to go back and forth to different cities because of his job, and recently has faced some difficulties in driving. He is getting old and the company which he works for does not want him anymore, therefore he is on the verge of losing his job. Willy has a kind of one dimensional life which is summed up just in being a successful employee, therefore the probability of losing job has a really bad effect on his behavior and since the only value for him is to be successful on his business the failure of it would be his fall.

The first act of *Death of a Salesman* (1998) starts with the conversation between Willy Loman and his wife, Linda. Willy is talking about his losing control of the car and its probable crash on his way back at Yonkers. Willy confesses he was distracted while driving, because he was dreaming. So from the very first pages of the play, a reader can guess that Willy is a dreamer and as the story goes on, there are more scenes of Willy's dreams about the past. In the first act, at night, Happy and Biff are talking about the reasons of Willy's crashes. Biff has recently come home from West, and is not that much aware of the happenings of the family. He relates the car crash to Willy's sight problem, but Happy thinks that it is because of his mental distractions and dreams.

Happy [getting out of bed]: he's going to get his license taken away if he keeps that up. I'm getting nervous about him, y'know, Biff?

Biff: his eyes are going.

Happy: no, ive driven with him. he sees all right. He just doesn't keep his mind on it. I drove into the city with him last week. He stops at a green light and when it turns red and he goes. [he laughs]. (Miller, 1998, pp.8.9)

His constant dreams and flashbacks, besides creating a person who is weak, provides the first reason for naming Willy as someone having slave morality, and that is lacking amor-fati. A Nietzschean character with master morality believes in amor-fati— the love of fate—and does not carry the past over his shoulders. He looks forward to future and does not complain about his hardships and misfortunes. But in the case of Willy, a reader can see a different situation. Willy Loman manifests a contrasting worldview. He is a kind of person who is dissatisfied of everything, all the time he is complaining about his life, his sons, his job and even his house, and he lives part of his life in his dreams about the past.

No wonder he [Willy] searches desperately back through his life for evidence of the moment he took a wrong path; no wonder he looks to the next generation to give him back that life by achieving what had slipped so unaccountably through his own fingers. (Miller, 1998, pp.vii, viii).

The fact that "he searches desperately back" might mean that Willy's will has been that insignificant that he cannot approve his fate and instead of accepting his endeavor, he constantly revises his past life.

Willy's dreams do not only remind him of the past, but he has so many dreams about future as well. Therefore the mixture of Willy's dreams and daydreams, side by side with his meta-fictitious reconstruction of past, creates a kind of struggle for him in which he constantly finds himself guilty though he does not admit it in front of others.

One of the instances of his guilt through which a reader can reach another level of Willy's slave morality is the math exam of Biff; he failed it and never took a summer course due to the impressions of his father. When Willy remembers the past, the reader sees Biff as an ambitious young boy who likes sport and does not pay much attention to school subjects. And Willy supports him as far as he believes that school marks are not important and what matters is entering a good business. In an act that Bernard is talking to Willy he asks Willy about what happened when Biff had decided to take a summer course, but when he saw Willy, he did not want to take it anymore. Indirectly Bernard points out that Willy is the reason that Biff did not continue his study.

Willy [angrily]: what are you trying to do, blame it on me? If a boy lays down is that mt fault?

Bernard: now, Willy don't get \_

Willy: well, don't\_dont talk to me that way! What does that mean. "What happened?" (Miller, 1998, p.73)

Willy never admits that he is blame worthy for his son's misfortunes, so one can conclude that Willy not only possesses a low degree of amor-fati, but also he might be suspected of being a person who finds less concrete amount of will and determination in himself. As it was mentioned, amor-fati and the will to power are two related concepts. It seems that there is not so strong and active will to power in Willy for taking the responsibility of things and this is the way slaves look through the world. Besides that, in many scenes Willy is seen trying to tell his sons what they should do. It seems that Willy's aim was to bear his children in a way that they would follow his own business. Even at the present time of the story the situation is the same. When Biff wants to see Oliver for borrowing some money, Willy starts saying to him what to wear, how to act, what to say, and such things, as if Biff is a kid. Willy has been always trying to dictate his sons, especially Biff, what to do; he prescribes his own values to them. So Willy is not only responsible for Biff's bad life, but also he has another fault, which is prescribing his own personal values to his sons. As Nietzsche (2002) says "no father questions his right to subject the child to his own ideas and valuations" (Nietzsche, 2002, p.84). This is one of the ways that values are passed to other generations, once Christianity made values and once the fathers did it. The reason of such a behavior is that Willy himself has a slave like manner and the result of that is the fact that by his behavior and enforcing his values, Willy is making slaves out of his sons.

With more search in Willy's character he can be found as a man who does not know who he really is as if he is not aware of his potential abilities. Actually, his lack of will to power and amor-fati makes him be far away from self-mastering. He is full of dreams and he even cannot stop his mind from thinking of past, and it seems that he cannot overcome his self. Nietzsche emphasizes a lot having self-knowledge, and believes that

unless someone has it, he cannot rule over his self. In this play, Biff is the person who sees this lack of self-knowledge in Willy:

Biff: he had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong.

Happy: [almost ready to fight Biff]: don't say that!

Biff: he never knew who he was. (Miller, 1998, p.111)

According to Biff, Willy does not know his *self*, and as a result, he has false dreams which he never could reach. But Not only he lacks body-knowledge, also his behavior toward Biff shapes a person out of Biff who is prevented from knowing his true self and the reason of that is Willy's imposition of some values on Biff; however he is aware of the result of his father's behavior, therefore he is not behaving like slaves as much as his father is. Once, when they are arguing, Biff says "dad, you're never going to see what I am" (Miller, 1998, p.103). From this sentence and by reading the whole play it is obvious that Willy never sees who Biff really is, instead he wants to see him as a man he expected him to be. For instance, when Biff is explaining what has happened in his meeting with Oliver, Willy stops him frequently and continues their conversation with the sentences that he liked to hear from Biff. Biff could not tolerate this situation and wants to show Willy that he is not the kind of person that Willy thinks. He becomes angry and suddenly says:

Biff: I stole myself out of every good job since high school!

Willy: and whose fault is that?

Biff: and I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is! (Miller, 1998, p.105)

As Biff says, Willy has given Biff fake senses without any valuable content, he has made someone out of Biff, who is not original, it is not the real Biff and that is why Biff cannot do things correctly. Since Willy gives Biff fake values, he cannot get any self-knowledge about his real personality.

Another feature of slaves which was discussed is preventing changes. And it can be found in Willy so vividly even in his routine life in which he is reluctant to change. One instance can be seen in the scene that Linda is making breakfast and Willy does not agree with Linda to change his everyday cheese.

Willy: why do you get American when I like Swiss?

Linda: I just thought you'd like a change\_

Willy: I don't want a change! I want Swiss cheese. Why am I always being contradicted? (Miller, 1998, p. 6)

In any situation, whether in his routine life or in more important issues Willy resists change. A tangible example of a situation in which Willy appears as a person who does not undergo any change is when Charley offers him a job, but Willy does not accept since he believes that he has his own job— another instance of not seeing the reality.

Charley: I offerede you a job. You can make fifty dollars a week. And I wont send you on the road.

Willy: ive got a job.

Charley: without pay? What kind of a job is a job without pay? [he rises.] now, look, kid, enough is enough. Im no genius but I know when im being insulted.

Willy: insulted!

Charley: why don't you want to work for me?

Willy: whats the matther with you? Ive got a job. (Miller, 1998, p.74)

Because of his slave-like morality, Willy is afraid of changes; he prefers to stay in his bad present situation, but does not accept Charley's offer.

The name of Willy Loman can show his characteristics, his first name comes from the word "will", and as it was discussed this man is full of wills, desires, dreams, and wants. But alas, the things that he wants are all in vain so they make him be a low man, to be a slave. All of these are the proofs that Willy has slave morality; he is a kind of person with weak soul and will, who is afraid of changes, wants his sons to follow his rules and also has an excessive need of gaining others' attention; however everything is against him, and he does not gain anything. B. S. Field, Jr. (1972) estates that

Because he is morally incapacitated, he is socially incapacitated. Everything is against him. The city is killing him. The competition is killing him. He cannot get along with the son he loves most. The very seeds he plants no longer grow. Nothing he does has any consequences. He simply cannot make anything happen. (Field, 1972, p.23)

Willy is portrayed as a man who cannot make any changes and is unable of making things better and at the end how he ends his life proves his weak soul, but it seems that his death is the only thing that Willy has control over it.

Biff is different from his father in the case of their morality. He is a thirty-four year old man and for a long time his life has been shaped under the influences of his father. While his father has always wanted to satisfy others, and it has been really important to him how people think of him, other people's satisfaction has not been that much important for Biff. Although he is a mature boy, he could not find any fixed job. However, by changing jobs, he is constantly changing and remaking his values in order to find himself. As it was mentioned, Biff's valuation was under the influence of his father when he was younger. But now, he wants to set the values himself, the same as masters, without any outside force. He wants to go beyond the good and the bad that his father has set for him and to find himself. Biff does not want to be like his father, and believes that 'he knows his self'. Gerarld Weales analysis of what Biff says provides an example of his resistance toward Willy. Weales (1962) says that this sentence "is a positive statement, a finger pointing in some verifiable direction, a refutation of all the beliefs to which Willy clings and for which he dies" (Weales, 1962, p.169). And as far as Biff resists Willy's will, Willy behaves with him in anger, because Biff is not a kind of person that Willy wants him to be. He did not follow his father; he followed his own dreams and made his own values by going to the west, and consequently Willy is so angry at him.

Linda: when you write you're coming, he's all smiles, and talks about the future, and\_ he's just wonderful. And then the closer you seem to come, the more shaky he gets, and then, by the time you get here, he's arguing, and he seems angry at you. I think it's just that maybe he can't bring himself to\_ to open up to you. Why are you so hateful to each other? Why is that? (Miller, 1998, p.38)

As it was said by giving fake values, Willy prevented Biff from knowing his real self, but the good point is the fact that Biff is aware of it and wants to change this situation. He says to Willy "why am I trying to become what I don't want to be" (Miller, 1998, p.105). Through this sentence a reader can feel there is a will to power in Biff though very light. But at least he has this will, he knows that he must get to know his self and the result is that he is moving toward having master morality even though his soul is not very strong, yet.

### **Conclusion**

Morality plays an important role in human being's life, therefore it is worthy to receive much attention. Sometimes a man is so powerless that becomes entangled with fake values, but there are also people who want to create their own system of thoughts and valuation. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman is portrayed as a low man who can be put in the first category. Because of his weakness of soul, Willy could not make any elevation in his life but his son, Biff, although is facing some difficulties, he is trying to make his life better and he is successful to some extent due to his master-like morality. Based on the analysis done in this paper, it can be concluded that it is very important to know what the morality of characters is, because it affects their behaviors and decisions in the lives. In other words, it is important because their view of life can be traced in their morality.

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