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DEATH OF A SALESMAN: A MODERN TRAGEDY

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ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller's Pulitzer Prize winning drama *Death of a Salesman* established its author's reputation as a leading and significant writer. This drama is a man's journey of self re-evaluation late in life. It creates a man's entire life in terms of past and present. The drama portrays the tragic vision of the theme of disillusionment of a common man caught with in the whirlpool of American myth of success. This drama is different from Aristotle's concept of a tragedy who has given it a concrete shape by defining it as 'the imitation of an action...in a language beautified in different parts with different kinds of embellishment, through action and not narration and through scenes of pity and fear bringing about the catharsis of these emotions.' This paper deals with Arthur Miller's concept of tragedy in his play *Death of a Salesman*.

Keywords: Tragic Flaw; Tragic Vision; Disillusionment; Dreams; American Social setup.

Introduction:

"Unlike the drama by Sophocles, Shakespeare and Lorca, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is a tragedy set in our characters who, however, we regard that quality of their thought speak in our own languages and with our own peculiar accents."

These lines of Beirman, Hart and Johnson define Arthur Miller's tragedy *Death of a Salesman* in a beautiful way. It is a tragedy which is different from Aristotelian concept. In his masterpiece, *The Poetics*, Aristotle defines tragedy as imitation of an action. It must have a beginning, middle and end. The function of tragedy is to arouse the emotions of pity and fear. The best tragic plot is one which shows a good man suffering as a consequence of some error or Hamartia, on his own part. The plot must have three unities of time, place and action. But *Death of a salesman* is a tragedy, different from the classical and Elizabethan tragedies as its hero Willy Loman does not belong to a noble family. He is an everyman caught within the whirlpool of American myth of success.

Willy Loman is the protagonist of the play. But he is not as Aristotle defines his tragic hero. The character of Willy Loman is not from high rank. But Willy is a common man. He is a modern American salesman who is suffering from the economical and social insecurity. He nurses the illusion that in his old age, he will become a famous salesman. And in the image of his illusions and false beliefs, he brings up his children. He never allows his sons to face reality. His admiration Dave Singleman's prolonged success illustrates his obsession with being successful. He says,

“And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. ‘cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go at the age of eighty four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people?”

Yet he wins our admiration because he knows his course of action. He is a representative of the whole mass of the American civilization. He is the symbol of increasing urbanization at the cost of man’s mental peace. He represents what civilization, artificiality and the blind chase for success is doing to every sensitive soul. His ideals and dreams are constantly being shot at. His massive dreams and his achievement form a ridiculous contrast. Willy has failed as a business as well as a father. Willy imagines and always boasts of his being well-liked by a lot of people. Ironically his funeral is attended by nobody except his friend Charley and his son Bernard. Miller writes,

“I did not write *Death of a Salesman* to announce some new American man or an old American man, Willy Loman is, we think, a person who embodies in himself some of the most terrible conflicts running through the streets of America today.”

Aristotle says, ‘*tragic hero is a person who must evoke a sense of pity and fear.*’ He is considered a man of misfortune that comes to him through error of judgement or Hamartia. This play arouses pity but no fear. Willy Loman is too little and passive to play the tragic hero. Some critics agree that catharsis reconciles or persuades to disregard, precisely those material conditions which the play calls our attention to. Miller believes that the common man is apt as a subject for tragedy. The whole concern of the play is competition, success and money in the materialistic sense. Willy is a man of flaws. His problems are basic and are faced by the common people. He makes false choices in life and prepares his own destruction. ‘*Attention, attention must be paid such a person*’, says his wife Linda to her sons when she recognizes the depth of his anguish. The play persuades to pay attention to the tragedy of this victim of the American social set up. Miller’s depiction of the truth of the individual psyche and also of the world around the individual is certainly noticeable. He writes,

“I hope I have made one thing clear to this point- and it is that society is inside of man and man is inside of society, and you cannot even create a truth fully drawn psychological entity on the stage until you understand his social relations and their power to make him what he is and to prevent him from being what he is not.”

Miller adopts the structure in which an explosive situation is both explained and brought to a crisis by the gradual revelation of something which has happened in the past. Willy makes one false move one after another in pursuit of success. Willy, Biff, Happy and Linda –all characters are unable to cope with the competition. When Biff makes him realize that Willy himself has been the cause of his son’s failure, destroy the strongest value in Will’s life and he commits suicide by smashing his car.

Unlike Shakespearean or Greek tragedies which begin with the hero’s ignorance but end with the hero’s achievement of self knowledge, Willy does not achieve any self-knowledge and he remains the same. He has lofty dreams and ambitions, but does nothing to fulfill them. He wants so many things but all he manages to do is to suffer. His failure is not only due to the pressure of competitive system, but also due to his inability to tell the truth even to himself. He brings his sons up on false principles and ruins them also. He is too weak to face the harsh realities of life. He remains in utter ignorance throughout his life and dies with his illusions. M.W. Steinberg writes,

“While we may be prepared to accept the argument that a common man, that is one without rank, may achieve heroic stature, the tragic nature of *Death of a Salesman* does not stem from this possibility. Willy Loman fails to gain this size. He falls a victim of the society. His moments of clear self knowledge are few...”

There is also a conflict between man and his family, between man and his society, between man and god, between man and his dreams as well as within man himself. It is through his dialectics of intra family and social interactions that miller has unveiled the illusive layers of the success along with Loman’s subconscious and unconscious guilt and fear, as Linda explains,

“He drives seven hundred miles, and when he gets there, no one knows him and what goes through a man’s mind driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent?”

Death of a Salesman is a powerful diagnoses and a ruthless exposure of materialism, Industrialized America through the character of Willy Loman’s inevitably choosing a path full of disastrous consequences. Any comparison between Willy and any other Greek tragic hero is highly debatable. Willy is here too weak to play tragic hero. It is a tragedy in the light of Miller’s own views which is different from the classical and Elizabethan tragedies as its hero does not belong to a noble family and he is a common man who is representing the blind pursuit of American dream of success.

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