



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.4. 2020 (Oct-Dec)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

TRAGIC THEATRE: A REPORT ON ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

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Article information

Received:30/08/2020
Accepted: 18/10/2020
Published online: 25/10/2020
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.4.9](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.4.9)

ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* has often been cited as an epitome of tragedy, however, stereotyping Miller as a tragic playwright is not something critics the world over have unanimously agreed upon. Having said this, the aim of the present study is to bring out Miller's tragic vision, a vision that is inherently found in many of his theatrical productions. The present study, *Death of a Salesman* features Willy, a travelling salesman who is undoubtedly pursuing a quest for both himself and his father. Willy along with his sons, Happy and Biff exemplify the disillusionment that most Americans felt in the wake of a crumbling "American Dream", a dream that Willy subconsciously holds on to, even though he understands that the dream will lead to nothing but disillusionment. Rather than coming to grips with his own failure to attain his vision of the American Dream, he goes to the extent of killing himself and it is here that one understands how Willy's escapism shelters him from the harsh reality. The entire play is situated around Willy's blatant disregard for reality and how such a disregard gives him enough strength to end his own life. What Willy fails to understand is that no matter how much he distorts truth, reality remains unchanged.

Keywords Pathos, American Dream, reality, truth, distortion.

Introduction

Steven Barker in his essay "The Crisis of Authenticity: Death of a Salesman and the Tragic Muse" deliberates on Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, *Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem* (1959) and comments that:

To consider the play within the context of traditional notions of the tragic, notions that date back to Plato, is to invite an altered vision. As mimesis of cultural crisis, *Death of a Salesman* must be treated as an exemplum of the tragic vision in the twentieth century, quintessentially defining the crisis of authenticity that is the tragic. (35)

Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is often cited to be a play that is firmly grounded in both realism and expressionism. This dream like play is a result of an eclectic mix of dramatic realism and expressionism. Though realism was quite popular during the nineteenth century, it nevertheless lost out to expressionism, an

important tenet of modernism. What makes *Death of a Salesman* intriguing is this curious amalgamation of contrary tenets such as realism and expressionism. Realism as the term suggests involves portraying the external world in the way it appears rather than as expressionism, which according to the *Oxford Dictionary* deals with “a style of painting, music, or drama in which the artist or writer seeks to express the inner world of emotion rather than external reality”.

Miller uses stage settings and music to create an air of fantasy as far as the audience is concerned. The walls that are seen on the stage are fluid enough to incorporate both realism and expressionism. When the main action in the play is occurring in the present the walls are rigid and the characters use the left door on the stage to move from one room to the other. On the other hand when it is an analeptic episode, the characters merely “leave a room by stepping ‘through’ a wall on the forestage.” (7)

Miller’s use of music beginning with the flute music when the curtain goes up on the play and again when the curtain goes down on the “Requiem” also adds an element of tragedy to the already tragic figure that is Willy. The flute music in particular is the only thing that Willy remembers about his father, who found success in Alaska. Willy’s failure as a successful entrepreneur is further heightened by the fact that his brother too found success in Africa. Willy attempts to assuage his own feelings of guilt and inability by creating a façade that is incredibly superficial at best and one that crumbles in the face of probing questions put forth by Linda, his wife.

However, what is surprising is that though Willy’s father and Brother, Ben are not characters that feature throughout the play, they are nonetheless pivotal as far as Willy’s concept of success goes. Miller portrays Willy’s father as a man who is in touch with nature and this is quite opposite to that of Ben’s portrayal, which comes across as a man who found worldly success. However, Willy neither manages to reach up to his father’s nor his brother’s level of success and this is precisely what he has trouble accepting.

As Leah Hadomi in the essay entitled “*Rhythm Between Fathers and Sons: Death of a Salesman*” says:

To Willy’s mind, Ben is the personification of the great American virtues of self-reliance and initiative by which an enterprising man may attain untold wealth; and it is through Ben that Willy tries to maintain personal connection with the myth of the individual’s triumphant march from rags to riches. (17)

In Willy’s father one can observe a love towards nature and a desire to see the world in all its natural glory; however, in Ben’s case there is an unsentimental and single minded focus when it comes to attaining wealth and success. With such a successful father and brother, Willy’s inability to succeed in life becomes even more poignant. In spite of lacking his father’s natural affinity towards success and his brother’s single-minded focus on entrepreneurship, Willy still believes that in order to get ahead in life all that anyone requires is to be “well liked” and to cultivate what he calls “contacts”. ()

The crumbling of his dreams of success for both his son as well as for himself ultimately pushes Willy towards an angst that culminates in the ambiguous nature of his death, accident/suicide.

The play begins with Willy Loman, a travelling salesman returning home in one of the boroughs in New York City, Brooklyn late one night. Willy’s career as a salesman is not all that successful; however, he does try to put forth a positive image to Linda. She attempts to convince him to talk his employer, Howard Wagner into giving him a position in the same company, a position that required less travelling. Willy’s dissatisfaction with his elder son’s career choice is also something that keeps aggravating him and one that adds on to the general air of pathos in the play. However, Linda supports Biff and reprimands Willy for his critical perspective. Willy’s dissatisfaction with Biff seems to come from his own sense of disappointment and failure. This can also be seen as Willy’s attempt to live vicariously through his son, Biff.

Willy’s prattling on while having a snack in the kitchen along with Biff and Happy’s decision regarding Willy’s false sense of career advancement is portrayed marvelously by Miller. Even after trying his hand at

almost every kind of work, Biff is unable to sustain a workable plan as far as his future goes. And this is what leads to Biff's innocuous question; "Why does Dad mock me all the time." (15)

Though Happy is moderately more successful than Biff, he too shares the same views as those of Biff's and make plans about buying a ranch in the "Wild West" as it is popularly called. The scene segues to the past, where the now younger Willy sees Biff and Happy washing his car with a satisfied air of camaraderie.

Willy's plans of career advancement are met with awe and admiration by both of his sons, Biff and Happy. Both of them believe that Willy is indeed capable of starting a business and making it more successful than even Charlie, their next door neighbour. Charlie's son, Bernard comes searching for Biff, a high school football star who needs to study math if he wanted to continue his education. This is where the audience can see Willy's philosophy towards success being put forth with great clarity. He believes that even though Bernard is both more intelligent and more diligent he would not amount to much in the real world, since he is not "well liked".

The boys are sent off to do their household chores after being rebuked by the now younger looking Linda. Willy attempts to portray a picture that he was exceptionally successful in his last sales trip, but these images of grandeur disappears when Linda coaxes him into revealing the true nature of his trip. However, the ever-faithful Linda does try to make him feel better, but soon realizes that she is unable to get through to him. It is here that Willy undergoes a hallucinogenic episode that involves his mistress and the stockings that he gave her.

The action again switches to the present, wherein the audience sees Willy in the kitchen along with Linda, who is otherwise occupied with the mending her stockings, an act that that distresses Willy and one that prompts him into scolding her. The distress that Willy feels can be interpreted as a sense of guilt that he probably feels for gifting stockings to his mistress while Linda has to make do with old ones that require constant mending. Just as they finish talking Bernard comes in searching for Biff once more. Linda now tells Willy about Biff's amoral character and the fact that he often gets rough with the girls that he goes out with. However, this unwelcome news is further aggravated by the imagined voice of his mistress's laughter, a laughter that leaves Willy so aggrieved that he ends up snapping at both Linda and Bernard for no reason. Even after Linda's and Bernard's departure, Willy still continues to mumble to himself. The now older looking Happy comes into the kitchen and tries in vain to calm Willy down, who now agitatedly talks about not going along with his brother, Ben and the diamond mine that he found in Africa. After this outburst, Happy goes off to bed leaving Willy in the company of Charley who had come along after hearing Willy's agitated voice. Charley tries to soothe Willy down by offering him a job, however, the offer is turned down by Willy and they soon begin playing a game of cards.

Willy has another hallucination and sees Ben entering the room and mistakenly calls Charley Ben, who then tells him that he is leaving for Alaska to further his business enterprises. Charley soon becomes confused and seeing nobody in the room questions Willy about whom he is talking to. These questions irritate Willy to such an extent that he yells at Charley, who then leaves the house. After Charley leaves Willy imagines that Linda and Ben are talking to each other and enquires about Ben's life. Ben talks about his life and how he had reached Africa. Ben answers some of Willy's questions regarding their father and how he sold the flutes that he had made:

Father was a very great and a very wild-hearted man. We would start in Boston, and he'd toss the whole family into the wagon, and he'd drive the team right across the country; through Ohio, and Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and all the western states. And we'd stop in the towns and sell the flutes that he'd made on the way. Great inventor, Father. With one gadget he made more in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime. (38)

Willy's concept of success is derived from this aforementioned description of his father's success. And since he considers it to be a touchstone for analyzing both his and Biff's success, he is never satisfied with anything less than what his father or brother had achieved in their lives, which at least in part explains the

reason behind Willy's tragic life. Just as Ben is about to exit, Charley and Bernard come in to tell Willy that both Biff and Happy are stealing lumber, however, Willy does not stop talking to Ben even after he leaves.

The action segues back to the present and the audience now sees Linda coming downstairs and finding Willy outside. She is joined by Biff and Happy and all three of them discuss Willy and his state of affairs. Finding Biff's attitude to be a trite too harsh, Linda tells him about Willy's attempt to kill himself, which pushes Happy into rebuking Biff for his less than successful career. Willy comes back inside and finding Biff in the room, begins to shout at him. Happy manages to stem Willy's tirade by telling him they were thinking of opening a sporting goods business together, whereupon Willy advises them to get their monetary backing from Bill Oliver, one of Biff's former employers. This scene depicts Willy's fragile grip on reality and his unconscious need to keep up with the pretense that Biff might in fact be a success much like his father and brother. He is reluctant to come to grips with reality as far as Biff's failure is considered probably since he feels that Biff's success might eclipse his failure.

Another reason for Willy's deception arises out of his belief that he is not inherently lovable because of his failure, and this includes the love that he gets from both Linda and Biff. As Bloom says in his introduction to *Modern Critical Interpretations: Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman* (2007):

He is a good man, who wants only to earn and to deserve the love of his wife and his sons. He is self-slain, not by the salesman's dream of America, but by the universal desire to be loved by one's own, and to be loved beyond what one believes one desires. (5)

Act I ends with all the characters going off to bed after a brief argument between Willy and his sons. Act II opens on a brighter note, with Willy having his breakfast and sitting companionably, with Linda. However, his mercurial mood swings causes him to complain about the appliances in the house, appliances that more often than not keep breaking down. Willy wants to go and meet Howard Wagner and persuade him to give him a job in the city and just as he is about to leave, Linda tells him that he is supposed to meet Biff and Happy for dinner.

However, when Willy enters Wagner's office he is unable to get in a word edgewise and only gets to request Wagner for a job in the city, whereupon Wagner asks him to take a few days off rather than keep him stationed in the city. After Howard leaves, Willy sees Ben entering the room who then asks him to go along with him to Alaska, however, Linda remind him of his responsibility as a husband and a father.

In the next scene there are two conversations occurring between Willy and Bernard, however the narrative here is not straight and the audience gets to see a blend between the past and the present, a past where Biff is destined for greatness and a present where Bernard's star is on the rise. Being an attorney at law, Bernard is on the way to Washington D. C. to fight a legal dispute. Bernard in this scene introduces the reason behind Biff's failure, however, though Willy understands what Bernard is hinting at, claims that he is not responsible for what happened to Biff and how he never went to summer school to pick up his grades, an act that would have led to Biff getting a sports scholarship.

Willy finally admits to Charley, who had come to see Bernard off that he was fired and though Charley is angry he does lend him money. Willy then goes to Frank's Chop House where is supposed to meet his sons and gets into an argument with Biff about his illusion of grandeur and tells him that Oliver had failed to even recognize him. However, when he gets to know that Willy has lost his job, he manages to calm Willy down by telling him that he might have some good news to share with him. After a series of analeptic episodes and proleptic episodes, the audience gets to know the reason why Biff never went to summer school and work on improving his math grades. Biff's awareness of Willy's adultery disillusioned him to such an extent that he loses faith in his own abilities and since he no longer trusts Willy's words, everything that Willy had ever told him becomes suspect.

Losing touch with reality, Willy talks to an absent Ben about an insurance of twenty thousand dollars, enough money for Biff to make something of his life. Linda soon calls out to Willy but the next thing she hears is Willy's car as it speeds away.

The requiem features an un-crying Linda asking for Willy's forgiveness for not being able to cry at his funeral and Charley defending Willy from Biff's criticism regarding the untenable nature of Willy's dreams. Biff goes ahead with his plans of going west; however, Happy decides on not joining him and intends to stay on in New York City. The curtain drops on Linda finally breaking down and crying out "We're free . . ." and the poignant music of a flute playing in the background. (112)

Acknowledgement

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Prof. L. Manjula Davidson, my research supervisor and the former, Head of the Department, for her rigorous and detailed reading of my manuscript. I would also like to thank The Chief Librarian, Dr. V. S Krishna library, Visakhapatnam. This research paper would not have existed without their recommendations and constant help.

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