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Arthur Miller's death of a salesman: A tragedy of a modern man

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Abstract

Arthur Miller is considered a great dramatist of the expressionistic school of drama which explores outer symbols and impressions of the inner state of mind. Miller insists that courage, responsibility, truth, and faith should be the central values of every man and without these values a man is hollow. His *Death of a Salesman* is a popular play and he portrays Willy Loman as an average man in American society. The objective of this paper is to find out and underline *Death of a Salesman* as a tragedy of modern man.

Keywords: Death of a Salesman, irony, modern age, expressionism, family, society, the individual too, values, and modern man

Introduction

Arthur Miller is considered a great dramatist of the expressionistic school. He is a famous tragedian who composes social tragedies which are different from those of George Bernard Shaw and John Galsworthy. He presents in his tragedies that both society and the individual are responsible for the tragedies of man. His concept in his tragedies is necessarily modern and is different from classical ideas. Miller envisages tragedy as a serious and modern drama of the modern average and ordinary man in a modern situation. He shows that an individual is surrounded by environmental forces, the family, the society, and the state, too.

Arthur Miller has been very properly observed by Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs. They said, "...he is simply realistic or naturalistic (indeed his best and most theatrical devices seem to be borrowed from expressionism), he nevertheless is closer to Ibsen in ideals, approaches, and effects than to any other dramatist." *Contemporary European Literature of the Western World, Volume 4 (Recent American Literature)* by Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., Woodbury, New York, pages 310-11

Death of a Salesman is a familiar play by Arthur Miller in which he portrays Willy Loman, who is the central character of the play. He is an old salesman who comes home from one of his trips unable any longer to control his car. When he comes he is carrying two black, battered sample cases. They seem to have some ominous meaning as they weigh him down. He dreams and seems to be quite old and broken and starts shouting at his wife Linda. His two sons Biff and Happy listen to his loud in their room upstairs where they lie sleeping. Biff is his oldest son who has just come home from wandering. His second son Happy explains to his brother Biff that their father is losing his mind. How ironic is the situation? How pathetic is the situation? These are some questions here and the objective of this study.

They further observe, "Miller's work is not highly original in technique; it represents an organic synthesis, an end product in which the diverse elements are not always apparent on the surface. Basically a realist-naturalist, he concerns himself (unlike Tennessee Williams) with the typical and outwardly normal in American life, and his style is straightforward and vernacular. He deliberately creates characters who are ordinary instead of extraordinary." *Contemporary European Literature of the Western World, Volume 4 (Recent American Literature)* by Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., Woodbury, New York, page 311

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In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller portrays the theme of self-interest. Willy Loman, who is a salesman, is the hero of the play. He is driven by two examples of success that have a strong hold on his imagination. Firstly, a brother runs away and becomes rich, and secondly, a very successful salesman to whom purchasers come without his having to take the slightest toil. Thus, Loman is propelled not by ambition for himself, but for Biff and Happy. He wants every good thing for them like all other people in the world. This is a social practice in every society by every individual. But his sons come eventually to despise him against his expectations. His expectations were kept aside and they began to think about themselves. The confrontation starts, and in it with Biff, he sees everything with brilliant clarity. Biff openly asserts his independence and rejects all the expectations of his father which he has spun for him. His expectation to be cared for by his son becomes clear to him. In this situation of confrontation, Willy Loman goes out crying out, "That boy – that boy is going away to be magnificent!" He has one idea that has just taken place in his mind is to commit suicide which will make able Biff to come into the twenty thousand dollars of his life insurance.

He talks to his wife Linda. One can imagine the life and ambition of Willy Loman in the following dialogues:

Willy: I was driving alone, you understand? And I was fine. I was even observing the scenery. You can imagine, me looking at scenery, on the road every week of my life. But it is so beautiful up there, Linda the trees are so thick, and the sun is warm. I opened the windshield and just let the warm air bathe over me."

(Miller, Arthur, 1961, *Death of a Salesman*, Penguin Books, Great Britain, Page 9, Act One)

Regarding the theme of *Death of a Salesman* Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs observes, "Death of a Salesman (tragedy, 1949) treats a similar theme more expressionistically: the conflict between business ethics and the emotional relationships of a family. The action in Willy Loman's house and yard and various places he visits in New York and Boston, moving with the greatest of ease through an unmixed and scaffolded setting whose spatial reality is in flux." Contemporary European Literature of the Western World, Volume 4 (Recent American Literature) by Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., Woodbury, New York, pages 314-315

Death of a salesman is the most popular play by Miller. Willy Loman has two sons Biff and Happy who are lost ones. They consider that their father lost. Willy Loman has cherished false ideals about life which fall like a pack of cards. He gives undue importance to money and is lost in the world of attachment which is wealth. He suffers from a sense of inadequacy and insecurity. He has also a sense of loneliness and isolation like the heroes in the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd. Now Willy Loman is a dreamer. The mental state of Willy Loman is considerable when he thinks to commit suicide for the well of the family getting the insurance amount in his name. He kills himself by dashing his car against a tree. Thus, the play shows a clear picture of the materialistic society in America and the world.

Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs observes, "Willy's American dream is more complicated than the simple idea of getting rich some day. It centers most

significantly on his sons and his hopes for them. They weren't much as students and their morality is weak, too. When they were young, Willy alternated between excessive pride and a deep worry." Contemporary European Literature of the Western World, Volume 4 (Recent American Literature) by Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., Woodbury, New York, page 315

Gerald Weales has made a very fine comment related to the theme of *Death of a Salesman*. He says that it is a play about the last terrible day of a man and about the flood of facts and lies, of reality and fantasy, of the actual and the potential that made him and killed him. According to Dillingham, "...loss of conscience is the theme of the play." According to Eleanor Clark, "...the play is an attack on American capitalism." All this shows that there are different views regarding the theme of *Death of a Salesman*.

But the most important fact is that it is a great work of art which reveals the reality which modern society faces over the globe. Nowadays man has become a money-making machine and moral and human values are weighed on material benefits. Here religion fails to command and nurture human and moral values in modern society which has been victimized due to captured glamour over the world in the advanced society. In this state of glamour in society, every man is compelled to flow with the current to survive ignoring all human and moral values. Thus, Miller has revealed the reality which he witnesses in the current situation.

Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs observes, "He represents us, definitely American, twentieth-century man. In business today anybody who doesn't try to succeed is aberrant – Mr. Business-Man, as the song says. But the universality of the play forces us to participate whether we're in business or not." Contemporary European Literature of the Western World, Volume 4 (Recent American Literature) by Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., Woodbury, New York, page 316

Death of a Salesman is indeed a tragedy of modern man. Willy Loman is the central figure in it and he is intrinsically American and attains universality. He has been shot through with weakness and faults, but he is almost a personification of self-delusion and waste. The apotheosis of modern man is in an age too vast. He is also an archetypal father. He has been not far removed in his hopes. He is a demoniac figure in a shabby business suit and is unable to compromise his dream. He is in a tragic-comic state and hurled himself foolishly and wonderfully against the world's windmills and must pursue a conception of himself. He is destroyed because he seeks a kind of ecstasy in life that is naturally impossible in the dry and wide world. Willy Loman's inherent humanity and his capacity for love and self-sacrifice sympathetically and poignantly qualify this destruction which happens to millions of people every year. Willy Loman is a failure and his reason is misplaced faith in the power of personal attractiveness. He is also a man of extraordinary concern for the well-being of his sons like many other fathers and he does not allow the freedom of his sons to find out their own values. He wants to bring his sons

up in his own manner of illusion and false beliefs. Thus, his sons never get a chance to face the reality of the world. Willy Loman is also a victim of a society that encourages and develops in its people false values which fall like a pack of cards on the ground of reality. The world is itself the biggest completion where fate and chances are very powerfully active. All this has caused his doom.

Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs observes, "Willy has gradually become tired and ineffectual; in spite of the encouragement of his wife Linda, he knows his life has been a failure." Contemporary European Literature of the Western World, Volume 4 (Recent American Literature) by Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., Woodbury, New York, page 315

Willy Loman also suffers from a sense of inadequacy and inferiority. He wanted to talk like many others about something he does not know anything about. He hints several times about his sense of insecurity and loneliness which lead to absurdism as revealed in the Theatre of the Absurd. He has the sense of lack of communication of his inarticulate grouping into the meaning of a purposeful life. He feels that his life is built on a temporary edifice.

Willy Loman is socially a low man He is a salesman who sells not goods but himself. He sacrifices his life or sells it in order to justify the waste of it. Like all other fathers, he is several things at a time – he is a father, husband, salesman, member of society, and a thing of the human psyche. But much more he is a tragic character who has arrived in this world to play his different roles in different conditions. Willy Loman is a representative of the whole of the American civilisation. He is against the machine-like civilisation which has deprived man of his real identity and peace of mind. He is not an average man of America but all of the advanced societies over the globe. Willy Loman embodied the most terrible conflicts running through every part of America and other advanced societies over the globe. He is indeed everyman and his abode is dreadful. Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs observes, "Willy understands that he is worth more dead than alive. He commits suicide for the twenty thousand dollar insurance money" Contemporary European Literature of the Western World, Volume 4 (Recent American Literature) by Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., Woodbury, New York, page 316

The beginning of the play mentions that Willy Loman has reached the ebb-tide years and is old and worn out to continue his travels. His condition is that his back aches when he carries heavy bags of samples that were once his pride. He feels unsafe when he drives the car to reach destination to destination – from one town to another one. His sons Biff and Happy see all this but despise him. His wife also sees all this and defends him. What is the poignant scene, when he is fired from his job he begins to see through himself? This is the time when he realises he is and he has been a failure.

Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs observes, "There is Willy's need to praise himself and underneath in his

feeling of inferiority. Many Americans exhibit bluster over emptiness. Catharsis in experiencing this play is easy. American dream is more complicated than the simple idea of getting rich some day." Contemporary European Literature of the Western World, Volume 4 (Recent American Literature) by Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., Woodbury, New York, page 315

There is a new, bitter but real stage in his life – now his age is his enemy, too. It awards fatigue to his mind and body. He cherishes boyish dreams and hopes and buoyancy. But his age condemns him. Now he has a new makeup of life – he has confusion, weakness, goodness, illusion, self-sustaining illusion and stupidity revealed in the plays of the Absurdist Movement. All this makes him an average American or an average modern man. He is indeed a breadwinner almost to the end, and a breadwinner even in his death. His rock-bottom faith has been in the capacity to get along with people to make a good impression. He slides at his old age. What an ironic situation is in his life like all others in a definite part of life. Once he was a wanderer by car to perform his duties as a salesman. Now he is only able to slide. Lastly, he is still pushing his favourite son Biff toward a failure worse than his own. Here an irony lies in the denial of man's true nature and talents along the way. It is also important that only society or fate cannot be held responsible for his tragedy. He has also a fatal flaw like all others in the world which has been broadly cast in the plays of Shakespeare. Willy Loman lives in the world of dreams, not in reality like others. The American capitalistic society is also responsible for his tragedy. One can easily feel his tragic end when his firm finds him useless, and shunts him away, while he has worked for thirty-four years. This shows the absurdity of life. This shows the tragedy of all mankind.

Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs observes, "This is our life. You build a house in the country and what happens? It becomes suburbia and then city and then slum." Contemporary European Literature of the Western World, Volume 4 (Recent American Literature) by Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., Woodbury, New York, page 316

Thus, in any way, none can say that Death of a Salesman is merely a drama of a family dispute between a father and his sons – a conflict between capitalism and communism – a conflict between self and soul – between psyche and conscience – between religiously and irreligiously This is indeed a tragedy of an average modern man in the advanced society over the globe.

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