

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*: A Re-evaluation

Gunasekaran Narayanan

Miller, in his "Introduction" to the *Collected Plays*, says that *Death of a Salesman* is a play that poses the question ... "whose answers define humanity?" (32). Both the popular and critical acclaim that the play has received so far confirms the author's description of it. The play deals with the distance between illusion and reality, the sense of isolation, lack of understanding and the struggle for being.

The central energy of *Salesman* is derived from an explanation of technological culture, in which illusion takes the place of dreams, and fantasy substitutes reality. This phenomenon, ignorance of reality or non-recognition of facts, has been a potent source of European theatre since the time of the Greeks; but what lends weight to Miller's discovery is that it is not an exceptional experience to a few but is actually common throughout industrial civilization. Miller points out with remarkable artistic perception the hold of illusions on individuals and its disastrous consequences, the dreams that are intertwined with illusions, the gulf that separates the actual practices from the professed ideals of society.

Willy Loman is a typical postmodern hero. The playwright has taken particular care throughout to underline the sense of inadequacy in Loman's life and his idealized attitude towards a society he never understood. Loman encounters many pitfalls in his character. In spite of them, his substantial loyalty to the cherished ideals of his society is unquestionable. He trusts them with the naiveté of a child, and to a large part his failing as a man may be directly traced to his uncritical acceptance of contemporary values. Loman clings to the dream of success with a fantastic allegiance that he can maintain only at the price of his identity. Darlington aptly points out that Willy unknowingly surrenders his "conscience - that which is most fundamentally himself - for a place in society that was never his" (44).

Willy's concept of success is personified by two individuals - Ben and Dave Singleman, whom Jacobson considers to be the "mythological projections of his own needs and his society's values" (47). To him, Ben represents the adventurous spirit of rugged individualism, rapid wealth and the American story of rags to riches. He went out to make his fortune in Alaska but because of his "faulty view of geography" wound up in Africa, and through a combination of pluck and luck struck it rich (156). To the awe - struck Biff and Happy he says, "why boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty - one I walked out. And by God I was rich." To which Willy frenziedly adds, "You see what I been talking about? The greatest thing can happen!" (157).

Willy feels that his sons have certain tangible signs which characterize the personality that is likely to succeed. They are physically strong and well-built, and above all, attractive. Biff is a football hero, the captain of the high school team and though Happy is not gifted with Biff's ability he has a pleasant personality. Willy is ambivalent in his attitude towards education. It is true, he feels, attendance at college confers prestige, especially when coupled with an athletic career. On the other hand, education does not make an appreciable difference in the struggle to succeed.

The truth he arrives at is not created by American culture specifically. It is his subjective interpretation of success. Willy's commitment to the ideology of success directs the educational career of his sons. Even if success passes him by, he can still look forward to a vindication of his life through them. "The world is an oyster, but you don't crack it open on a

mattress” he tells them ecstatically (CP 152). If Willy is mesmerized by Ben’s success story, he is also seduced by some of its ramifications. “Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You’ll never get out of the jungle that way,” the uncle intones his nephew, Biff, and it is precisely this stress on the justification of means by ends that enables Willy to wink at the boys’ faults (CP 158). Biff has been a thief from his high school days: he steals a football from the locker and lumber from a local construction job. Willy laughs at both the thefts and treats lightly, considering them to be a manifestation of the power of personality and a fearless competitiveness like Ben’s. He tells Biff “Coach will probably appreciate you on your initiative. . . . That’s because he likes you. If somebody else took the ball there’d be an uproar”(CP 144). When Charley warns Willy that the watchman will catch the boys in their thievery, Willy avers that, though he gave them hell, the boys are ‘a couple of fearless characters’(CP 158). When Charley replies that the jails are full of fearless characters, Ben adds that the stock exchange is also. The boys have been brought to respect the ideology of success; their success will be the salesman’s vindication and he tries to mould them in his own image. His practice of situation ethics is evident. Willy chooses to imitate the salesman side of his father. The most influential of these was his meeting with David Singleman, an old New England salesman who came to represent for Willy, the father he never knew. It is Singleman’s life and more especially his death that comes to symbolize what Willy thinks he wants for himself. Ashe explains to Howard, his boss:

Old Dave, he’d go up to his room, y’ understand, put on his green Velvet slippers – I’ll never forget – and pick up his phone and call the buyers and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want (180).

Miller almost certainly intended the irony implied by Willy’s interest in a job that required no more than lifting a phone, but the more dreadful irony relates to the interpretation of business which Willy derives from Singleman’s example. Willy looks at only surfaces of reality. His knowledge is local, situated and slippery.

What Singleman’s achievement represents to Willy is a demonstration of the co-operative and benevolent nature of capitalism. Singleman’s ability to sell by phone at the age eighty-four was proof to Willy that he was remembered, loved and helped by so many different people. This conclusion seemed to be confirmed by Singleman’s funeral which was attended by hundreds of salesmen and buyers. Singleman, in other words, represented free enterprise with a human face, and it is part of Willy’s tragedy that he never realizes that such a system does not exist.

The only member of the family who distrusts Ben is Willy’s wife, Linda. To her, the words of Ben are disgusting as they pose a threat to the family’s stability and security. The strength and tenacity of her love for Willy and her determination to hold her family together appear to be in reassuring contrast to those around her. She represents the values of decency, courage, self-sacrifice, and devotion. She has chosen a difficult path and has stuck to it. Indeed it is possible to suggest that part of the power of the play can be found not only in the way other members of the family tear each other apart, but in the way Linda attempts to hold them together. She has a painfully realistic insight into the character and situation of the man she married. She knows that the fifty dollars which he gives her as his pay cheque has actually been borrowed from Charley. She allows him to lie, as she does not want to rob him of his remaining dignity by informing him of her awareness of his deception. She is also aware of his obsession with

the idea of suicide. She quietly subverts his plans instead of shaming him by revealing to him her knowledge of it. She knows that he is fragmented. Fully cognizant of his weaknesses, Linda can also comprehend Willy's loneliness and heartbreak. In her overwhelming devotion to him, she has helped to build a doll's house around him and, consequently, has done to Willy what he has been doing to Biff and Happy. In being a good wife, Linda has extended her devotion to an extreme that has become destructive not only to her husband but also to her sons, who have also become victims of her gingerbread house. To a great extent, Linda's follies are attributable to her longing for security and relatedness.

Willy's fortunes are at low ebb in the chronicle present of the play. His ideology of success is tested by harsh realities which he alternately faces and flees from. He struggles hard to hold on to his identity and this means holding on to his faith and in the nature of that faith, Willy lies constantly: about the gross sale he has made about the reaction of businessmen to his personality, about his boy's success and importance, about his own prospects. Neil Carson is right when he says that Willy engages in constant deception to conceal the truth from himself (56). From the observer's point of view established in the play through Charley, they are pathetic efforts to protect his identity. His infidelity is justified as a provision against the rebuffs of the day. There is an explicit rejection of spiritual values in his life. When he momentarily faces reality – his inability to drive to Boston, the mounting bills and the dwindling income - he has to take refuge in the past and project the future. The salesman cannot abandon his concept of success and its pursuit without reducing himself to zero, and therefore he must hope.

The events of the first act - past and present - contra pose optimism a harsh reality. Act One presents Willy as a fired drummer and his boys as mediocre also-rans, a clerk and a farm-hand, both over thirty. They are lost and confused by their failure to get ahead and Willy is at the end of his tether because he cannot even drive a car anymore. In the first act, all difficulties, past and present, are smothered by a pervading optimism:

Happy: Wait a minute! I got an idea....' Loman brothers'. Baby,
We could sell sporting goods.

Willy: That's a one-million-dollar idea (167-68).

This scheme is generated out of his ideology of success. "Loman brothers" has, for Willy and the boys, that authentic ring of personality, solidity and achievement. Enthused by his sons' earnest endeavor to actualize the dream, he determines to ask his young boss Howard for a place in New York for himself, for a job that would take him off the road.

The interview episodes provide the basis for the movement of the second act. The scene in which Willy meets Howard is so painful that it makes one wince. However, it should be noticed that its tone is a blend of pathos and irony rather than indignation and indictment. The aging salesman who pleads for a job in New York receives his dismissal notice instead. The beleaguered salesman has not collided with a capitalistic ogre, but, ironically with a younger embodiment of his own traits. The scene should be construed more as an arraignment of Willy than as an indictment of the system. The system has not broken down.

Actually it is not Howard, but Charley who is the truly successful businessman in the play and who provides the counterbalance to Willy. Though both of them live in same neighborhood and have essentially similar backgrounds, their views are sharply divergent. Their difference is not ideological but is the result of a seasoned perception which Charley maintains and which Willy has lacked.

Miller's approval of Charley reveals not only his acceptance of the man but of the capitalistic system in which he thrives, assuming that for all that can go wrong with it, "the norm of capitalistic behavior is ethical or at least can be" (37). Through Charley, Miller emphasizes that the system is not a fictitious construct. It can be trusted to develop meaning or to give order. Miller indicts Willy for his lack of understanding of the system. Insisting that it is not a matter of what you do but "who you know and the smile on your face!" Loman optimistically locates the secret of success in "contacts" and "personal attractiveness", expectant that "a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being well-liked" (184).

But Willy fails to see that men buy appearances only in their leisure. In terms of structure, the interview episodes, one witnessed and the other reported, are dramatizations of the failure of the concept of success as Willy understood it and preached to his sons. Their respective experiences produce different reactions in father and son. Willy is incapable of understanding his defeat even when Charley, a good neighbor, spells it out for him: "The only thing you got in the world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman and you don't know that" (192). He is still not in a position to draw a line of demarcation between the marketable and the imaginary. The meeting of the father and sons in the restaurant is an ironic reversal of the victory celebration. They run away from the failure their father has become and from their own failure. They leave the old man and go off with two chippies.

Two crucial events dominate the restaurant scene. Biff's inability to get the required finance from Oliver is linked to his failure in math and his flight to Boston. Relying on personality, he had mimicked the effeminate instructor to his face and had cut the classes for football practices. Despite Bernard's help in the exam, he flunked math and the instructor refused to make a concession. When the boy runs to his father for help, he finds a woman in Willy's hotel room and his idol crumbles. The travelling salesman's joke becomes a traumatic experience for the boy, driving away his disillusion and preparing him for present insight. Biff considers the affair as a betrayal of Linda, the family and the home. The image of the husband is shattered when Willy gives the woman "mamma's stockings" (208). Willy's search for material and physical pleasure at the cost of inner balance and spirituality is underlined throughout the play.

The result is a situation in which he finds himself alienated and increasingly lost in memories and dreams. In one respect Willy is caught between two cultures: the vanished agrarian frontier that he rhapsodically associates with his father and modern urban society, the tape-record civilization of Howard Wagner. Biff suspects that perhaps the Lomans have been miscast in their salesman role. "They've laughed at dad for years, and you know why? Because we don't belong in this nut-house of a city! We should be mixing cement on some open plain or carpenters", he tells his mother (166). So when Biff comes to realize who he is, his insight flashes out of the contrast between the office and open sky.

The climactic scene in the second act is the confrontation of father and son. Because he suspects the truth, Willy is unwilling to face Biff or Linda. But this time Biff is not to be put off: "The man don't know who we are! The man is gonna to know...We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!" (216). Willy is no longer a salesman; no longer a father; Willy is 'the man'. The identity supplied by economic and familial society is stripped away and the issue is joined at rock bottom. Biff adds:

I am not leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like the rest of

them! I'm one dollar an hour, Willy. . . . Do you gather meaning? I'm not bringing home any prizes any more, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home! (217).

Facts fall before faith and the salesman cannot admit such heresy. Willy knows who he is: "I am not a dime a dozen. I am Willy Loman and you are Biff Loman" (217). Willy's immediate reaction is the assumption that Biff is trying to spite him in revenge for his disillusionment, but the young grabs Willy and cries, "Pop, I'm nothing; I'm nothing, Pop. . . can't you understand that? There is no spite in it anymore. I'm just what I'm that's all" (217). Biff literally tries to pound his message into his father. In the play's most shattering moment, he breaks down on the old man's shoulder, sobbing uncontrollably, "Will you let me go, for Christ's sake!" he begs. Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens" (217). Biff's open cry does not make him see the hollowness of his values. Willy goes to his death without endorsing Biff's statement. His suicide is not an act of penance for holding on to wrong values. It appears to be penalty. There is no recognition scene in the traditional sense. There is a notable absence of the tragic, articulated awareness of self-delusion and final understanding. Otten aptly observes that the play "reveals the basic problems of self-knowledge that human beings must face. . . . Miller cries with the Delphic Oracle 'know thyself' (91).

Willy is almost a personification of self-delusion and waste. His dream is to join the Dominate Power Structure. There is a road to reach the Structure. As he practices moral relativism he fails to locate the road. He is seen justifying unethical means throughout the play. He encourages his son to steal and indulge in debauchery. He does not act in conformity with the universal laws of nature. Anti-conformity is an important trait of postmodern hero. His own neighbor Charley succeeds in joining the Structure. Till the end, he sticks to his perception of 'truth'. He fails to understand social reality as it really is. He does not recognize that there is 'depth' in each and every aspect of issues related to man and society. He looks only at the flowers of the plant. He is unwilling to see that the plant has roots. He does not analyze his ambitions and actions in the light of advice and comments made by people like Charley. He cannot recognize that man is as much acted upon as he is acting. His practice of situation ethics illustrates his disbelief in the soul and spiritual connection. He is not as enlightened as Biff is. He lacks heroic virtues and qualities such as being morally good, idealistic, courageous and noble. The hero does not create truth but rather discovers it. What Willy has created is a false ideology. He looks at only the 'surfaces' of concrete experiences; he tends to avoid looking at abstract principles involved in the manifestation of experiences. He is unaware that social dynamics, such as power and hierarchy, affect human conceptualizations of the world.

The outcome of the experience of Loman is not fallible and relative, rather certain and universal. The fall of Grand narratives is one of the themes of postmodernism. It is true that the play moves outside the established conventions of its genre. Miller's dramaturgy does not indicate his distrust of the existing form of drama. He does experimentation with the dramatic form to accommodate his theme and meaning. The play merges the dramatic form with the novelistic form. Interior monologue technique is adopted to reveal the 'inside' of Willy's head. He succeeds in his experimentation. It is not disjunctive and open -the play has a purpose. It has no scope for free play. Miller's text cannot be separated from its author. In fact, he has made the Grand narrative grander. The play suggests new directions and possibilities for all of the world drama. Neil Carson's remarks sums up the thematic greatness of the play:

I respond more strongly to Will's universality than I do to many more emotional tragic heroes. As for Willy's blindness, that too seems to me a

more valid representation of man's contemporary experience than 'enlightenment' provided by some acknowledged tragedies. Furthermore, it is ultimately the audience's enlightenment which is important, not the character's, and in this respect I do not think *Death of a Salesman* fails. What emerges at the end of the play seems to me an appropriate blend of pity, fear, and consolation – pity for Willy, fear that we may be as self-deluding as he, and hope based on the knowledge that we, if we so desire, take control of our lives. I doubt if we can ask more of serious drama. . . .(59)

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