

## Corruption of the “American Dream” in *Death of a Salesman*:

A Thematic Analysis of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*

### LA CORRUPTION DE «RÊVE AMÉRICAIN» DANS *MORT D’UN COMMIS VOYAGEUR*:

UNE ANALYSE THÉMATIQUE DE *MORT D’UN COMMIS VOYAGEUR*  
D’ARTHUR MILLER

ZHAO Juan<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Arthur Miller published his most famous work *Death of a Salesman* in 1949. This play received numerous awards for its literary merit, including the Pulitzer Prize for drama and it is regarded by many critics as the perfect embodiment of the modern American drama. Willy Loman, the hero of the play, is caught-up in the “American Dream” which consists of a genuine and determined belief that in America all things are possible to all men regardless of birth or wealth. If you work hard enough you will achieve anything. However, Miller believes that people have been ultimately misguided and Miller’s play, *Death of a Salesman*, is a moving destruction of the whole myth.

**Key words:** *Death of a Salesman*; American Dream; corruption; tragedy

**Resumé:** Arthur Miller a publié son œuvre la plus célèbre *La Mort d'un commis* en 1949. Cette pièce a reçu de nombreuses récompenses pour ses qualités littéraires, y compris le Prix Pulitzer pour le théâtre et est considérée par de nombreux critiques comme l'incarnation parfaite du drame moderne américain. Willy Loman, le héros de cette pièce, est fasciné par le «rêve américain» qui consiste en une croyance sincère et déterminée qu'en Amérique tout est possible à tout le monde sans distinction de naissance ou de fortune. Si vous travaillez assez dur, vous pouvez réaliser tout. Cependant, Miller croit que les gens ont été finalement peu judicieuses et la pièce de Miller, *Mort d'un commis voyageur*, est une destruction mouvant de tout le mythe

**Mots-clés:** *Mort d'un commis voyageur*; rêve américain; corruption; tragédie

---

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Beijing Technology and Business University, 100048 Beijing, China.

\*Received June 2 2010; accepted 28 August 2010

## 1. AN INTRODUCTION TO ARTHUR MILLER

Arthur Miller was born on October 17, 1915 in New York City. He began writing at an early age, and by the time he graduated from the University of Michigan he had begun to receive recognition as a playwright. In 1949, after returning to New York, he published his most famous work, *Death of a Salesman*, a critique of the industry-driven society of the city. This play received numerous awards for its literary merit, including the Pulitzer Prize for drama. Many critics regard *Death of a Salesman* as the perfect embodiment of the modern American drama. Though some criticize Miller for his colloquial tone and mundane images, Miller's distinctly modern plays continue to find applause among students, teachers and dramatists. He would go on to publish *The Crucible*, an account of the Salem Witch Trials, which in popularity is probably a close second to *Death of a Salesman*. Though Miller has more recently tried his hand at novel writing, he is still best known for his thematic plays, which usually comment on the dark nature of contemporary American society.

## 2. PLOT SUMMARY OF DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Willy Loman has been a traveling salesman for the Wagner Company for thirty-four years. He likes to think of himself as vital to the New England area. A long time ago, Willy met a salesman named Dave Singleman who could go into a town and pick up a phone and would be able to place many orders without ever leaving his hotel room. When this man died, people from all over the country came to his funeral, and this man became Willy's inspiration.

As the play opens, Willy has just come back home after having left for New England that morning. He tells his wife, Linda, that he just can't seem to keep his mind on driving anymore. He asks about his son, Biff, and he drifts off to when Biff was a high school senior fourteen years ago. Biff was playing in an important football game and people from all over the country were coming to offer him scholarships. Then something happened later that year, because Biff did not go to college. It later revealed that Biff had failed math and gone up to Boston to ask his father to appeal to the teacher. When he reached Willy's hotel room in Boston, Biff found his father having an affair with a strange woman. After that episode, Biff despised his father and could never bring himself to provide Willy with the happiness of having a successful son.

After fourteen years of being away, Biff returns home. He and his brother Happy think of a job that would enable Biff to settle down in New York. They remember Biff's former boss, Bill Oliver, and plan to ask him for a loan of ten thousand dollars to begin a business of their own. They tell their father about their plans, and Willy believes that the two boys could conquer the world in business together. Willy explains that the important thing in life is to be well-liked and to have personal attractiveness. He tells Biff that Mr. Oliver always thinks highly of him and he reminds Biff of how good looking he is.

The following day, Willy is supposed to meet the two boys for dinner. He is so excited to have boys on the brink of success that he decides to ask for a job in New York City. Howard Wagner, the present owner of the Wagner Company founded by his father, tells Willy that there is no room for him in New York, and then explains to Willy that he cannot represent the firm in New England because he has become detrimental to business. Willy is now forced to go to Charley to borrow enough money to pay his insurance premium. It has been revealed that Willy has been borrowing fifty dollars each week for a long time and pretending it is his salary. Even though Charley offers Willy a good job in New York, Willy refuses to accept it because he says he can't work for Charley. Willy takes the money and leaves to meet his sons at the restaurant.

Biff and Happy meet in the restaurant and Biff explains that he has been living an illusion. He tells Happy that he has stolen himself out of every job, including this meeting place where he stole a pen from Bill Oliver's desk. When Willy arrives he tells the boys that he has been fired and refuses to listen to Biff's story. Willy sits there and pretends that he has another appointment the following day. Willy becomes furious and is about to make a scene, so he goes off to the bathroom. Biff, out of frustration, leaves, and Happy who has picked up two girls, follows him, leaving Willy alone.

Later that night, Biff comes home and finds Willy out in the backyard planting seeds and talking to the illusion of his brother Ben. Willy has not seen Ben for a number of years, and in fact Ben has been dead for some time. Biff explains to Willy that it would be best if they break with each other and never see each other again. He tries once again to explain that he is no longer a leader of men and that he is just a common person who has no outstanding qualities.

Willy refuses to believe him and tells Biff once again how great he can be. Biff becomes frustrated again because Willy refuses to see the truth. He finally breaks down and sobs to Willy to forget him. Then, Willy is taken aback his son's emotion toward him. Willy resolves on suicide, because with twenty thousand dollars in insurance money, Biff could be magnificent. So that is what he did, Willy crashed his car and caused his own death. It becomes apparent to the reader that Willy died a forgotten man, because no one came to his funeral except his family.

### 3. CORRUPTION OF THE “AMERICAN DREAM” IN *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

The “American Dream” is based on the “Declaration of Independence”: “We believe that all men are born with these inalienable rights—life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.” (Thomas Jefferson, 1776). This “dream” consists of a genuine and determined belief that in America, all things are possible to all men, regardless of birth or wealth; if you work hard enough you will achieve anything. However, Miller believes that people have been “ultimately misguided” and Miller’s play, *Death of a Salesman*, is a moving destruction of the whole myth.

The origins of the American Dream seem to have been rooted in the pioneering mentality of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century immigrants, most of them came to America because of a new and better life, in particular, the opportunity to own one’s land. But land rented out and so cities developed and massive variations arose in wealth, which meant that this “American Dream” changed from being a potential reality, into being a dream, like the name implies. Most of Miller’s plays are directly or indirectly about the American Dream, because ultimately this dream wasn’t going to succeed as lots of people wished. *Death of a Salesman* written in 1949, is a moving destruction of the whole myth.

To be hard working, honest and have ambition were the ways of the American Dream. This leads to success, wealth and in due time-power. But this dream for everyone develops, and encourages greed, selfish behavior, pride and rivalry between one another.

Willy Loman is “caught-up” in this American Dream. It causes business to develop in the world. Capitalism and also the profit motive and competitive instinct, makes Willy have a weakness in his personality. This weakness is caused by a combination of business pressures. Willy wants to prove himself through a successful salesman, but as he fails, his own life destroys him.

“I’m the New England man. I’m vital in New England.”  
“Never leave a job until your sixty.”

Willy’s quotes above show that he is insecure, and is not a successful businessman he says he is.

Miller based Willy’s character on his own uncle, Manny Newman.

Miller said, “That homely, ridiculous little man had after all never ceased to struggle for a certain victory, the only kind open to his this society --- selling to achieve his lost as a man with his name and his son’s name on a business of his own.”

This explains exactly what he has in mind for Willy to be – as he was, “trying to achieve his lost self.”

The things that are meant to happen in business are success, wealth and esteem. This is what Ben has achieved and done. Miller stresses his success and material reward in Ben. He does this by Ben repeating himself a lot, “I walked into the jungle, and when I came out I was rich.” But Ben also has emptiness in spite of his success. In the eyes of the audience, he has no real happiness.

When Dave Singleman was mentioned, by Willy when he was trying to tell Howard what being a salesman used to be like, we only have Willy's evidence, as all we know, this man maybe made up in Willy's head. But this man is a huge icon for Willy to look up to.

"He was eight-four years old, and he'd drummed merchandise in thirty-one states."

Also Willy desperately wants a funeral similar to Dave's, "When he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral."

This is because Dave was greatly valued, whereas Willy isn't, nor is he loved as much. Rather than the old way of Dave Singleman's time, Howard isn't interested in the story of Dave. To have a successful business, it has to be efficient, sometimes having to be ruthless. Now people buy products, not for dreams or personalities. Willy said, "There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for brining friendship to bear – or personality." Howard Wagner treats Willy harshly, because Willy has been very loyal to the business, and has had no reward for his length of service.

"They don't even know me anymore." He has the feeling of being used by the firm, and with no gratitude.

"I put thirty-four years into this firm... You can't eat the orange and throw away the peel --- a man is not a piece of fruit!"

He needs to believe he is "vital in New England", but knows he is not; he is just kidding himself.

Biff said about Willy, "He had all the wrong dreams. All, all wrong, and he never knew who he was." Being a salesman is very unpredictable, and precarious as a living.

Charley has realized that Willy's view of success is seriously flawed. Charley said, "The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell." And as Willy can't sell anything, he got nothing. Willy has lost all self-respect. Eliza Kazan, director of the original Broadway production, said, "Willy's fatal error is that he built his life and his sense of worth on something completely false. This is the error of our whole society." Willy can't function as salesman, also a human being, because he's not liked. "Willy's liked, but he's not well liked," is the opinion of other people.

Willy has been a failure in life. But he feels even more so because of the fact that success in the American Dream is supposed to be available to anyone. This figure has significantly effected his family, especially his sons. Biff is just as hopeless as Willy in many aspects.

The values of the city are power, brings money. Willy has never liked the city, and prefers the country, because there is not so much pressure. He is attracted to the wild, free and open countryside. "The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks." Willy finds the city very claustrophobic.

The American dream has been centrally built around the idea of the family. This is the spiritual side. Biff sums up,

"We've never told the truth for ten minutes in this house. The man doesn't know who we are! The man is gonna know!"

It is Willy's fault the way Biff feels, "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!"

Willy's loneliness, unfaithfulness to Linda and his insecurity, leads to his affair in Boston with another woman. Willy buys new stocking for this woman in Boston and makes Linda mend his own old ones. But Linda cares for Willy a lot, and constantly tries to cover up for him and also tries to understand him.

Willy says, "That's funny, I could have sworn I was driving that Chevy today." He is forgetting things, but Linda covers this up by saying, "Well, that's nothing. Something must have reminded you." Should Linda have questioned his behaviour more?

Willy feels guilty for Biff as he knows about Willy's affair, which would have had an incredibly traumatic effect on Biff's life. It would be devastating. Because of this, Biff went to prison for "steeling a suit." Biff went on steeling to compensate his feelings inside.

Unfortunately, Happy is doomed to repeat his father's mistakes, with his attitude to women He has casual relationship. He isn't as honest as Biff at the end of the day e.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Firstly, this play is a modern tragedy. Willy is a tragic figure. The whole of his life has been totally unpredictable, “He doesn’t put a bolt to a nut, he doesn’t tell you the law or give you medicine. He’s a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back, that’s an earthquake.” Although Willy is always “falling”, the audience sympathise with him. John Mason Brow said, “Miller’s play is a tragedy modern, and personal, not classic and heroic; its central figure is a little man sentenced to discover his smallness rather than a big man undone by his greatness.”

Secondly, *Death of a Salesman* is a play about relationship. With Willy and Linda: Willy doesn’t look after, or care for Linda as much as he should, but Linda does. “Linda has developed an iron repression of her expectations to Willy’s behaviour – she more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties.” Also Willy and Biff, both failures, contrast totally to Charley’s and Bernard’s success. Biff “flunked math”, whereas Bernard got all the correct results he needed for college. Now Biff has no job. Bernard is a top lawyer. Bernard says, “I’ve got a case in front of the Supreme Court.” Willy can’t understand why Biff isn’t as good or powerful in life as Bernard. “What...what’s the secret?” asked Willy, “Why didn’t he ever catch on?”. “After age of seventeen nothing good ever happened to Biff.” Bernard replied, “He never trained himself for anything.”

Thirdly, this is a play of original structure. Miller was going to name this play “inside his mind”. We can understand why regularly we see Willy’s “dreams” within his mind. It is a very clever way to tell the audience what happened in the past and why things are how they are now in the present day. An example of this is Biff having not got on with Willy. Miller wanted to make the transitions from scene to scene seamless. Miller said, “There are no flashbacks in the play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present, because in his desperation to justify his life, Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between now and then.”

*Death of a Salesman* contains much that is critical of modern American society. Willy’s misjudgement of his failure in life is demonstrated in the play. He feels as though he has failed because he has no fortune to show for it in either his or his son’s names. What he has truly failed is his family life and his married life. That is the corruption of the true “American Dream”.

## REFERENCES

- Miller, Arthur. (1961). *Death of a Salesman*. Harmondsworth: Perguin Books.
- Carson, Neil. (1985). *Arthur Miller*. London: Macmillan.
- Smith, Susan Harris. (1997). *American Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 常耀信 (1990). *美國文學簡史*. 天津: 南開大學出版社
- 郭繼德 (1998). *亞瑟·密勒論戲劇*. 北京: 文化藝術出版社
- 史志康 (1998). *美國文學背景概觀*. 上海: 上海外語教育出版社