

Who Is to Blame for Willy Loman's Death?

— On Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

QUI EST A BLAMER POUR LA MORT DE WILLY LOMAN ?

— DE MORT D'UN COMMIS VOYAGEUR

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Abstract: In 1949 Arthur Miller was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his *Death of a Salesman*. This play presents the last twenty-four hours in the life of Willy Loman, a traveling salesman aged sixty-three. Willy Loman lives a tragic life. He is a failure as a father, a husband and a worker. At last, he commits suicide. The present paper starts with making a summary of the plot and presenting the value of the study on Willy Loman's death. Then, it discusses some social factors in Willy Loman's death, such as the influence of the American Dream and the Great Depression. It also makes a detailed study on the flaws in the character of Willy Loman, some of which contribute to his own death. The paper aims at a further study on Willy Loman's death and attempts to put forward the author's view on various causes of his death.

Key words: social tragedy, personal tragedy, the American Dream, flaws

Résumé: En 1949 Arthur Miller a été attribué le Prix Pulitzer pour sa *Mort d'un commis voyageur*. Cette pièce présente les dernières 24 heures de la vie de Willy Loman, un commis voyageur âgé de 63 ans. Willy Loman a connu une vie tragique. Il est une défaite en tant que père, époux et employé. Finalement, il se suicide. L'article présent commence par le résumé de l'histoire et la présentation de la valeur d'étude de la mort de Willy Loman. Ensuite, il traite des facteurs sociaux de sa mort, tels que les influences du Rêve américain et de la Grande Dépression. Il fait aussi une étude détaillée des défauts de caractère de Willy Loman dont certains contribuent à sa mort. L'article vise à une recherche approfondie sur la mort du héros et tente d'avancer l'opinion de l'auteur sur les causes variées de sa mort.

Mots-Clés: tragédie sociale, tragédie personnelle, Rêve américain, défauts

1. INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller is regarded as one of the most celebrated American dramatists in the twentieth century. *Death of a Salesman* is probably his most popular play, which won the Pulitzer Prize for the best play of 1949.

Death of a Salesman is a deceptively simple play. It only contains two acts and a requiem. Its plot revolves around the last twenty-four hours in the life of Willy Loman.

Willy Loman is a traveling salesman aged sixty-three. He has worked for the Wagner firm for thirty-four years, unsuccessful and being about to lose this job. At the very beginning of the play, he comes back home and is tired to death. Linda, his wife, loves

him and even admires him. She is the only person who understands Willy and tries her best to help him. But what she does is of no avail. Willy is still unhappy. He often goes back to the happier past in the year of 1928. At that time, his son Biff is a football star in high school with several scholarships. Willy himself has the most beautiful yearning for future success. But for the last fourteen years, Biff has been unable to find a satisfied job and Willy has been taken off salary. Everything goes worse. Willy is in a trance. Happy, the other son of Willy, suggests that they ask for a loan to begin a business of their own. This idea makes everybody feel encouraged. They go to sleep with hopes. But the following day, when Willy and his sons meet in the restaurant, both of them bring bad news. Willy is fired and Biff does not succeed in borrowing money. Realizing his responsibility for Biff's aimlessness and

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disillusionment, Willy has a hallucinatory talk with his brother Ben and decides on suicide to provide Biff with insurance money.

On Willy Loman's death, there are various interpretations. Some consider him as the victim of the American Dream, while some believe that he himself is responsible for his downfall, and there are also a few scholars reaching a conclusion that Willy Loman's death is a personal tragedy as well as a social tragedy.

The present paper attempts to study Will Loman's death and make a detailed analysis of the causes of his death on both the social and personal levels.

2. WILLY LOMAN'S DEATH AS A SOCIAL TRAGEDY

This chapter introduces the social backgrounds and the relationship between Willy Loman's death and the social factors.

2.1 Social backgrounds

Arthur Miller sees himself as a responsible realist. (Elliott, 1988) Some critics also claim that Arthur Miller as a playwright is very much concerned with social criticism. It is quite true. *Death of a Salesman* takes root in American society deeply. Although it seems that this play only describes the tragedy of a common salesman, in a larger sense, the tragedy reveals various problems of American society, especially something about the American Dream and the Great Depression in 1920s and 1930s.

2.1.1 The American Dream

The American Dream is one of the essential elements for people to know American culture and American people.

The history of the American Dream is as long as or even longer than the history of America. At the very beginning of American civilization, the earliest settlers had already had their American Dream. They felt many kinds of boundaries in Europe, in the aspects of resources, religion and chances. They wanted to get away, to get rich, and to carry their faiths or philosophies to what they called the New World. America represented a new life of freedom, holding a promise of spiritual and material happiness. America was a fairyland, a land of great possibilities.

The essence of the American Dream is just as what was expressed in Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence of 1776, where it was stated: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, which among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

As time goes by, the essence of the American Dream

remains, but at different times, it has different peculiar meanings. Before the state was founded, it was the dream of freedom, equality and the democratic system. During the 18th and 19th century, when America was mainly an agricultural society, the dream was transformed into self-reliance or self-confidence. As the human society develops into the 20th century, the dream of material advancement is prominently featured, which we are most familiar with.

Most Americans are born with the American Dream. They dream of making personal achievement, enjoying popular fame, or getting great wealth through their hard work. They have great expectations of life and any failure in achievement leads to keen disappointment. Their lives are too much devoted to the pursuit of wealth, power, social position and the like. They struggle hard in all walks of life, trying to realize their aims. By their own efforts, many have achieved success. But more people have been defeated and disillusioned.

After the above analysis it can be found that the American culture and society are shaped largely by the American Dream. The American Dream is most prominent. It puts much stress on the material well-being but ignores spiritual life. Economy develops faster and faster. People can become rich overnight. This phenomenon gives a strong incentive to people holding the dream. The competition for material and success is fiercer and fiercer. Then, some succeed while millions of others meet with utter failure.

2.1.2 The Great Depression

Arthur Miller was born in 1915. He experienced the whole process of the Great Depression when he was young. It influenced him and his work greatly. In the play, Willy Loman continuously goes back to his happier past as a way to escape from the unsuccessful and unsatisfied reality. The happy time was set in 1928, one year before the Great Depression had happened. So it is necessary to have a study on the Great Depression.

The United States witnessed economic prosperity during and after the First World War. But the vibrant, roaring 1920s ended with a bang — the great stock market crash of 1929. The collapse of Wall Street meant terrible times: businesses failed, factories closed down and millions of Americans found themselves out of work and their hopes abandoned. The American landscape saw armies of wandering men and women searching for jobs. Here are some exact figures: "The total number of unemployment in 1933 was 17million, about 25% of the total labor force, without counting the many millions working part-time. Wages decreased 60%. The whole country was like a ship sailing through a violent storm." (Lai, 1995 : 500)

As the Great Depression deepened, the American Dream had become a nightmare. What was once the land of opportunity was now the land of desperation. What was once the land of hope and optimism had become the land of despair. The American people were

questioning all the maxims on which they had based their lives — democracy, capitalism, individualism. Briefly, the Great Depression worsened the difficulties in accomplishing the American Dream and more and more people met with defeat.

2.2 Willy Loman's death and the American Dream

With the prominence of the American Dream, Miller set *Death of a Salesman* in this social background, so it is reasonable to say that "*Death of a Salesman* presents a rich matrix of enabling fables that define the myth of the American Dream." (Roudane, 2001:60) Willy believes in the American Dream of fame and fortune. But the society drains the common man of his energy and then drops him.

Most Americans are born with the American Dream, so is Willy. It plays an important role in his growing process. Once in his youth, he has seen a man named Dave Singleman who is able to stay in his hotel room, where he telephones buyers and sales a tremendous amount of merchandise without even leaving his room. When Dave Singleman dies at the age of eight-four, buyers and salesmen from all over the country come to his funeral. Dave Singleman sets a perfect example of being successful as a salesman. Thus, the dream has shaped in Willy's mind. And all his life has been spent in trying to imitate this person.

The success of his brother Ben also contributes significantly to his firm faith in the American Dream. Ben is a person who possesses nothing but he enters the jungle when he is seventeen, and when he comes out at twenty-one he is rich. He achieves the complete success that Willy can only dream about. (Carey, 2001)

These two persons objectively set the essence of the American Dream in Willy's mind. Willy strengthens this faith and even carries this dream to his grave. In all his life he is trying to accomplish it.

Under the dominance of this dream and his eagerness to accomplish it, he even develops some wrong philosophies. He believes "a man can end up with diamonds here on the basis of being liked." "Personality always wins the day." These are apparently wrong philosophies, which should take responsibility for his tragic ending, but it is quite reasonable to say that "His inadequate values and ideals also come from this society." (Sun, 1998 : 186)

He lives in a society which the American Dream dominates people's mind. In this sense, Willy Loman, like Maggie in Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Clyde in Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, is the victim of the American Dream. Their tragic life is just as a scholar says, "The American obsession with financial success has ruined him and people like him." (Chang, 1990:400)

At the end of the play, Willy realizes his failure in

pursuit of the dream, but he does not give up. In the final hallucinatory talk with his brother Ben, Willy decides on suicide to provide Biff with insurance money. He still hopes that his son could fulfill his American Dream. It is his greed and madness in pursuing success finally destroys him. (Yang, 1999)

3. WILLY LOMAN'S DEATH AS A PERSONAL TRAGEDY

This chapter makes an analysis of Willy Loman and introduces the relationship between his death and his tragic flows.

3.1 Analysis of Willy Loman

As the main character, Willy Loman is not well liked by most people around him, nor by the readers. He has many shortcomings. The following part will make an analysis of Willy Loman.

Linda Loman is his wife. She loves her husband and even respects him "in spite of all his difficulties." She constantly believes in Willy and is even ready to reject her sons for this man who dreams such strange illusions. (Carey, 2001)

Linda: ..., because I love him. He is the dearest man in the world to me, and I won't have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue. ... (Miller, 1961:43)

But to a wife like this, Willy is still dishonest. He plays a role of an absent lover in their marriage. He develops a guilty relationship with a woman — Miss Frances, and Willy has given this woman many stockings. On the contrary, Linda always mends stockings. So the stockings are used as a symbol of Willy's guilt.

However, Linda must take part of the blame for the tragedy of Willy Loman. Linda is not a person with an adventurous soul. She can not understand Willy's dream of success. Willy once has an opportunity to go off to Alaska to make great fortune with his brother. But Linda stops him. She tries to remind Willy of his great future in the Wagner firm. She reminds him of the great Salesman Dave Singleman. At last, Willy makes an agreement with her and gets rid of that idea.

Willy: ... he's got a proposition for me in Alaska.

Linda: But you've got ... (to Ben) He's got a beautiful job here.

Linda: You're doing well enough, Willy!

Linda: You're well liked, and the boys love you ...

(Miller, 1961:67)

"Whenever Willy attempted to see himself realistically, Linda would bolster his ego by disclaiming

his realistic observations.” (Carey, 2001:63) That is to say, every time, if Willy himself realizes the real situation and wants to face reality, Linda stops him, because she loves him, she does not want him to lose his yearnings and his hopes. Perhaps her original intention is to comfort his husband, but from time to time, her comforts make Willy believe more and more firmly in his illusions.

The central relationship in the play lies between Willy and his first son, Biff. Biff is also a tragic figure. The reason is rightly pointed out by Carey in *Cliffs Notes on Miller's Death of a Salesman*: “Biff’s tragedy is that he has accepted completely all of Willy’s values and has not developed any of his own.” (Carey, 2001:65) During his growing-up process, his father has taught him many of his philosophies and values of life, which the most important one is to be well-liked and to have personal attractiveness. These are lots of example revealing his father’s influence on him. Here is one of them.

Willy: Bernard is not well liked, is he?

Biff: He’s liked, but he’s not well liked. (Miller, 1961:25)

Willy places many hopes on Biff. He gradually realizes that the chance for him to be successful is becoming slimmer and slimmer. So he places his only hope on Biff, just as he says “I’ll put my money on Biff.” But he uses the wrong way. Carson declares: “He convinces himself and his sons that success is a product of being well-liked, but at the same time he encourages competitive and even unlawful behaviors.” (Carson, 1982:52) He “keeps congratulating” Biff’s idea of stealing the coach’s ball. “Coach’ll probably congratulate you on you initiative”, he says. (Miller, 1961:23) In youth, Biff and his father are the closest friends—“real pals”.

But in the second scene Biff says: “I can’t get near him”. It is certainly because he finds his father’s secret relation with a mistress. It brings about a gap between them. (Zhai, 1994) He finds that Willy is only a fake. He can not accept those dreams and values which are infused by his father any more. Due to Willy Loman, he becomes a lost individual. Meanwhile, for the sake of Biff’s success, Willy decides to commit suicide. It is like a strange circle.

3.2 Willy’s tragic flaws

From the analysis of Willy Loman, we could find he is a person who has many shortcomings: dishonesty, setting bad example for his sons, false pride, jealousy, devoting to illusion, having wrong philosophy of life. He himself is responsible for his own death. The following part will stress on some main flaws which lead up to his death.

3.2.1 Inability to face reality

The structure of this play presents a major flaw of Willy

Loman — inability to face reality. “The story is told partly through the mind and memory of Willy Loman.” (Carey, 2001:9) What’s more, “the times of the play fluctuate between a point in 1942 and another time in 1928.” (Carey, 2001:9) By this means, Arthur Miller entrusts the inability to face reality to Willy.

From the beginning of the play, he is dominated by his illusions till he decides to commit suicide he still holds illusionary talk with Ben, who has already died. The inability to face reality harms him at least in two aspects. Firstly, this inability results in the losing of his many opportunities to be successful. He has the wrong illusion that he could be as successful as the salesman named Dave Singleman. He misses his opportunity to go to Alaska with Ben to make a fortune. He has the wrong illusion that he is better than Charley so he can not work for Charley. This time he loses his last chance to succeed or to be alive. In the Requiem his son Biff maintains that Willy is to blame because he can not see the reality on its cold terms. Secondly, illusions occupy him. Therefore, he gives up his will to fight with reality. Too much illusion consumes up his energy and confuses his mind. He can not face the reality, thus, he meets his tragic ending.

Another harmful result is his loss of recognition of himself. He always wishes to be a successful salesman like Dave Singleman. He drops in this dream and never thinks of that he may wrongly choose his career. Compared to working and staying at home, he accomplishes less when he works in the company. But Willy fixes up his house with great skills and ease. Willy’s family appreciates what Willy does for the house and the family. They share many happy memories of him working on the house. So Willy is not good with people, but he is very good with his hands. He is suited at a job which requires hard labor rather than being a salesman. However, Willy puts his whole life into being a salesman. If he puts his life into being a carpenter, he probably would have accomplished much more. But he rejects it in his pursuit of the American Dream.

3.2.2 False values

Willy Loman holds a lot of false values, and these false values victimize his tragic life. The most remarkable one is to be well-liked and to have personal attractiveness. Willy attaches too much importance to this value. When he talks with Biff, he says “the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want.” (Miller, 1961:25) But actually, the rules in the business world are not the same as his philosophies. “Business is business.” It requires much more than to be well-liked and to have personal attractiveness. In most cases, hard-working, skills, working experience is much more important in getting profits. Profit is everything. The business world only wants you for profits. Willy does not realize this golden truth. He firmly believes in his value. Even when he meets failure in his work, he puts

the blame on that people do not like him and maybe he is not dressing to advance. By holding this false value on work, Willy is abandoned by the business world without any doubt, and is abandoned by his dream of success as well.

Another false value he holds is his false pride. This point is directly spoken out by Howard.

Howard: where are your sons? Why don't your sons give you a hand?

Willy: They're working on a very big deal.

Howard: This is no time for false pride, Willy. You go to your sons and tell them that you're tired.

Willy: I can't throw myself on my sons, I'm not a cripple.

(Miller, 1961:65-66)

Another excerpt which shows this flaw appears after he is fired. When hearing of the news that Willy loses his job, Charley offers him a job. Willy refuses his help because of his pride. He never thinks he is lower in dignity than Charley. He even thinks he should be better than Charley, therefore, he could not work for Charley. His false pride this time results in his total joblessness.

What's more, Willy does not allow people to tell him what to do. When he is young, he finds his own hero and tries to become the hero in this own existence. At the start of his career he thinks that no one can tell him what to do. He believes that he can not be bossed around and that he is too important to fall under anyone's authority but his own. He teaches Biff and Happy not to take orders from anyone. He thinks this will make Bill, Happy and himself successful, but it is in fact a major contribution to his failure. Willy does not become a

"Big Shot". But he thinks he is. This must have made people be disgusted with him. His lack of status contributes to his co-workers' disrespect. As a result, none of them attends his funeral.

4. CONCLUSION

Willy Loman commits suicide at last. "At the funeral, which none of his business acquaintances attended, a friend points out 'Willy was a salesman ... a man... riding on a smile and a shoeshine... Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory'." (Hart, 1995: 190)

"Willy Loman is clearly a victim of what he devotedly adheres to — the capitalist system and its values." (Liu, 2001:265) The American Dream, the Great Depression contribute to his death. His death is a tragic version of the American Dream. He is the victim of the American society.

His tragic life is also victimized by his own flaws in his character. He is unable to face reality. He holds false values such as pride and wrong philosophies of life and work. Thus, his tragedy can also be regarded as a personal tragedy.

In short, Willy is a victim of the American society as well as a victim of himself.

This paper is only an attempt to put forward the author's view on various causes of Willy Loman's death. It is hoped that it can draw more attention on this topic and contribute to further study on it.

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