

IMPRISONMENT IN "DEATH OF A SALESMAN" FOR ARTHUR MILLER

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ABSTRACT:

The current research tackles the idea of imprisonment in Arthur Miller's play "Death of a Salesman". The play shows people crushed and suffocated by society, the society that filled the minds of its individuals with particular legends, traditions, values, and systems contrasting with principles and morals. Consequently, they seem to be shaped of several contradicting characters and at times disrupted between fantasy and reality. This disruption between the two becomes unbalanced and unpredictable until driving some people to loss or even death.

Willy Loman is an aging salesman, belongs to the middle class and feels frustrated due to the pressures of his class. Although he loves his family, yet he is incapable of fulfilling his own dream because he is unable to seek positivity through negativity. He only finds positivity in the past he remembers and in the life he imagines, which is totally different from the life and reality he lives in, the reality where he feels imprisoned. He pursues the American dream which is in fact a fake dream. The play shows the problems faced by the common man and his struggles with society to attain his dream.

Keywords: positivity, negativity, American dream, success, imprisonment, reality.

1- INTRODUCTION:

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is an American dramatist who criticizes the problems of society. He has written many plays, the most famous ones are: All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, The Crucible, A View from the Bridge, After the Fall, Broken Glass, and Resurrection Blues⁽ⁱ⁾.

The best of his well-known plays is "Death of a Salesman". This play gained then critical and popular success after its opening at Broadway theatre 1949.

The author wrote this play while he was (17) years old. There are (6) major characters in the play: Willy Loman the aging salesman, Linda Loman his love and long-suffering wife, Biff Loman his first and eldest son, Happy Loman his second and younger son,

Charley his generous friend and neighbor, and Bernard the son of Charley and the friend of Biff⁽ⁱⁱ⁾.

"Death of a Salesman" represents the greatest depiction of the American Dream in US theatre by many critics. It chiefly revolves around the people who live a dual meaning life, with aim but no direction. Willy Loman is the chief and central character in this tale. He dreams and wishes to be a successful salesman. His two sons Happy and Biff also wish to earn a lot of money, have a business of their own and a vacation house.

The family of Loman in the play somewhat resembles the family of Arthur Miller in being of middle class, losing everything in the Depression, moving to Brooklyn and living in humble conditions, following the American dream and financial and social success⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾.

2- THE TRAGIC HERO:

"Death of a Salesman" talks about a common 63 years salesman wishing and dreaming of wealth and being well-liked by other people. Willy Loman is the tragic hero of the play whose mind is distracted between past and present and at the end he commits suicide for not achieving his dream. He reflects the modern tragic hero. He has already fulfilled the usual dream of any man on earth by buying a house and an automobile, and having a family and a business, yet he is possessed by the dream of success in business, so he hardly tries to realize that dream but in vain. Willy has achieved and completed the traditional American Dream, yet due to his aspiration and ambition he fails to realize more than that^(iv).

As Stanton says, "cautious analysis exposes that the American Dream in "Death of a Salesman" is directed to males. Willy Loman is the protagonist of tragedy, and the impacts of his ironic laws are evidently imprinted on his sons. The origins of his tragedy lie in his loss of attention because of his father and his apparent shortage to "Ben" his brother. All conflicts are male-male- Willy vs. Biff. Willy vs. Howard. Willy vs. Charley"^(v).

3- THE IMPRISONMENT OF MATERIALISM:

"Death of a Salesman" addresses the hero's failure, who is a salesman with a family of three members "wife and two sons". After he relies on a false dream and erroneous principles to fulfill this dream, he recognizes that both of his sons are also failures. He thinks that they, he and his sons, are well-liked by people, thus they ought to be successful in life and business. Also, he believes that Charley and his son Bernard, the neighbors and friends, are not well-liked, thus they must be failures. Yet, all of that thinking and belief is incorrect. Consequently, he throws and imprison himself in the dream of a successful career and a lot of money. In the end, after his failure in everything, even in his relationship with family especially his son Biff, he drives his car madly to death so as to provide and benefit his family with a good insurance as a way of achieving success through his death^(vi).

"Death of a Salesman" is a mixture of tragedy, social, realistic play. Miller states that the play deals with the repression of the person by putting him beneath the society domineering needs.^(vii)

These needs are having attraction, wealth, and fame, i.e. achieving the American Dream with whatever means whether good or bad. This play "explores the perils of unchecked capitalism" and is "a hostile evaluation of Western materialism and the recurrent, hurting side impacts among those in its wake."^(viii)

The play starts with a careful depiction of a 1940s typical American house, reflecting the ever more money-oriented and urbanized society then^(ix)

All these things mentioned in this depiction show the difficulty of achieving the American Dream in the middle of society for any individual. The surroundings embody the passive effect of materialism, progress, and urbanism on his house, hence it signifies his loss of success. Likewise, the high buildings lessen the house of Willy, which makes Willy the "low man" in the area, a person seeing the others get higher while he remains the same^(x).

His house was very low and humble where a poor family lived compared to the surroundings in a time of easy money-making, signifying his non-realization of progress and business^(xi).

Furthermore, these big and high apartments only permits a little blue light to fall on Loman's house from the sky, which is an ironical reference to a site of finance and investment or to a site of interment trap of no exit, this scene obviously draws the attention to the weakness of Loman's house and the decline of the natural world^(xii).

The phrase "a silver athletic trophy" signifies the American Dream of life, freedom, search of happiness and possession, whereas the trophy symbolizes the competition in American capitalism^(xiii).

Willy enters carrying two big weighty bags full of samples to be sold, although they are not made

known, yet they are in symbolic filled with sixty years of his lifetime. It is clear that he is physically and spiritually tired and this tiredness is evident in his look as a worried and sad salesman with bent shoulders and head. Therefore, he symbolizes a defeated man burdened with life's needs^(xiv).

He, directly after returning home, expects his failure and death. He dazedly says to his wife Linda "I'm tired to the death"^(xv), meaning metaphorically exhausted for that reason he between time and time commits suicide and will do it again; therefore, he continues by saying that he can not make it, he just can not success in this matter^(xvi).

His both sons Biff and Happy talk about the circumstances of their father and show discontent with their jobs also. They feel that their future is vague and uncertain. They are discontented with their present situation as well. Biff demonstrates his boredom and hatred of trying various types of jobs but hopelessly with an ambiguous and unattainable future because he is not concerned or having interest in arranging it correctly like any careless and thoughtless person.

This view was common at that period and is still widespread today. Biff intends to work in a ranch with horses. He wishes to be in the heart of nature far from city and its polluted atmosphere. He points to the negativity of the materialistic city compared to the positivity of non-materialistic rural areas. The same as his father, he is torn between homesickness for countryside and his need for real success and real achievement^(xvii).

While Happy demonstrates a self-centered stance towards his boss and proves extra vices such as envy and greed. He wants to become the boss in the future and to judge people on their faults although he lacks the qualifications to do that. He longs to fulfill his dreams even if it costs him leaving his ethics and principles. He thinks that he is well-liked and attractive who is only interest in appearances, wealth and women, proving his shallowness just like his father^(xviii).

Miller hopes to explain his view of materialism via the chat between Loman's two sons, which is not a criticism or disapproval of dreams-attaining, but a criticism to excessively ambitious dreams, reckless people with no feeling of responsibility, and materialistic society. They look like their father in their vainly dreams in different ways. Willy and Biff "**feel a deep attraction to the beauty of nature, but while Willy chooses to lead a life bound by materialism, Biff chooses a life of simplicity in the open reaches of the West.**"^(xix) While the father and his son Happy have similar attitudes towards envy, competitiveness and greed.

Thus, they take from their father a false principle of being well-liked by the people, i.e. famous. It is surely not a mistake thinking, but the mistake lies in the way of being so and the way of using that correctly in a society gives value to appearances and money^(xx). In this sense, Miller states his viewpoint about thieving when Biff pompously shows his brother and father a ball thieved by him, but the father laughs with his son for thieving when he tells him to return it, despite Happy's assurance that his father will be angry of him.

Moreover, Willy relates having a good job if the person is well-liked like him, as he says to his sons that one day he will own his own private business, and he will in no way be obliged to depart the house no more. His son "Happy" ironically answers that he will do like "Charley" their neighbor. However, his father answers him by saying that he will be higher than "Charley" because "Charley" is not well-liked like him^(xxi). Charley is a neighbor mentioned intentionally as the first competitive to their father. Apparently, Charley is regarded as a successful businessman by Willy's sons. What the father says is an evidence on considering Charley, as his competitor and rival through underestimating and showing him a failure and a loser in front of his sons. Charley who is drawn by the author as a capitalist in the play^(xxii).

In a similar way, when Charley's son "Bernard" advices Biff to study mathematics so as not to fail, he is been laughed at and mocked by them, especially Willy who believes that the well-liked is

better than the intelligent or the hard worker, so he overrates his son Biff on the account of Charley's son Bernard.

Willy is contented that Bernard the same as his father in being liked and not well-liked which possibly prove their impracticability and failure as businessmen, saying that "Bernard" Charley's son is able to get the highest marks at school, but when he goes to world of business, his son will be higher than him five times; therefore, he thanks God that his both sons are well-built like Adonises, because the one who looks good in the world of business, the one who makes personal interest, is the one who prospers and be successful^(xxiii).

Paradoxically, the contrary is proved in future events. The author criticizes Willy and his family for their disregard of learning and for their conflicting dreams. Willy arrogantly resembles his sons with Adonis, a Greek handsome legend, which replicating the importance of attraction to anyone to be successful, that's why he wishes the people to feel his importance.

At the end, in spite of Biff and Happy's muscled bodies and being well-liked, they remain unsuccessful, while Bernard with his intellect becomes wealthy, successful and happy. In fact, he lastly appears in the Supreme Court as a decent highly regarded civilian and a happy father with two sons^(xxiv).

4- THE IMPRISONMENT OF DREAMS:

The play of "Death of a Salesman" centers around dreams and the imprisonment of dreams. Actually, the dreams of Willy are of two kinds: the American dream which is represented by the success in business and the rural-agrarian dreams and he fails in both whether living in urban with success or living in nature as well as losing his job. The dream as a pursuit for positivity via negativity is personified in Willy with his two types of dreams. He also failed in the eyes of his family. He desires to be greater and more important than he really is. That is why he wastes his life in illusions and makes wrong steps one after the other in pursuit of positivity via negativity, in other words in pursuit of easy and quick success. His dream of

financial success is a false one and this false dream ruins him and his son "Biff"^(xxv).

Willy misses the line of incidences and there is a dream within a dream and not just a dream within reality. After he complains to his wife Linda that life has grown very hard for him, he surrenders inside his daydream to a figure of a woman who is a secretary of a customer, whom he has a relationship with in Boston^(xxvi).

From the conversation between him and his wife "Linda", it is obviously shown that Willy is incapable to have happiness even in his dreams due to his being affected continually by contradictory matters and memories which never permit him to experience and sense satisfaction. It is obvious that he is suffocating in the external and internal world. There are also other instances of dreams when he goes back 14 years ago in his mind to see himself in a dream telling his sons about friends of his such as Providence mayor with whom he drank coffee, and the policemen of New England who guarded his car everywhere he parked^(xxvii).

Furthermore, he always dreams while driving as if he is driving his first car the red Chevy, which aids him to maintain his relationship with the vicinity and nature, which was pure and uncontaminated prior to its massacre.

All memories and recollections of the past are cozy and filled with beautiful landscapes and views, while in the present he has an isolated yard behind his house in which no sun shines to plant a carrot. And now, he no more smells the lilac, wisteria and daffodils odor, but only the horrible smell coming from the apartment houses. Even the recollections he has with his son Biff are interrupted by the builder who cuts the lovely elm trees between which he and his son Biff dangles the swing^(xxviii).

Ben, Willy's brother, in a dream shouts in a high voice at his brother to exit the cities because they are filled with payments of talk and time and law courts^(xxix). Yet, in what way Willy can join his brother and father who died and left him behind in this world

without giving him wings with which he flies the same as Daedalus did with "Icarus" his son. The words of Ben obviously demonstrate that his world is a world where there are borders to cross, new chances to grasp, and lands in which people can make money with their fists^(xxx).

The critic Smith states that the figure who travels between the past and the present in the head of Willy is the death figure besides the personification of an idealistic and impractical dream. Miller intentionally considers the dispute against Ben, no doubt is there about opportunism, dishonesty, or meanness as success incarnates. Ben does not show at the requiem, as he may have if the author thinks his situation deserve arguing^(xxxii).

Willy, in his final dream with his brother Ben in the backyard, looks for Ben's consent on his choice of suicide. Willy is persuaded to do that in order to realize a compromise with life and family and to attain the contentment he looks for his entire life. This is his last attempt to reconstruct the instants of life and accordingly to fit the rough parts of his relation with his son Biff with each other. This matter will make him a better and bigger salesman as he put up his life for sale and thus he bought it back in a retrospective way, at the same time he purged his self of sin and guilt, leaving a legacy of hope to those with an obvious despair like a knife pointing at his heart^(xxxiii).

His wife Linda, who is the only one left for him to take care of and pull to the present every time he is lost in the past memories, informs Biff that his father is "**a little boat looking for a harbor**"^(xxxiii) and perhaps only the love of Biff will give forgiveness to this lost 'Ulysses' which may guide him home. Biff's affirmation of love is the thing that pushes Willy to do his final large sale to trade his life for an insurance life. He may have the incorrect dreams as believed by his son Biff, yet as believed by Charley, he should not to be blamed and censured for this thing. A salesman, as part of his job, must smile, dream and expect people to return the smile with a smile^(xxxiv), and when they do not smile back, that will be an earthquake^(xxxv).

CONCLUSION

In the play "Death of a Salesman", most of the characters are centering on their personal struggles, Willy and his states of failure, his son Happy and his egotism, and his other son Biff with his emotional paralysis. His wife Linda is worried about the ways for soothing the family.

Miller addresses several pressures to which the characters exposed to, especially the economic pressures, the competition for money, keeping up with the surrounding high apartment houses, hopeless anticipations to achieve the American dream of freedom, happiness, wealth.. etc. Generally speaking, "Death of a Salesman" pursuits positivity via negativity. It depicts and portrays common man's problems, his clashes and conflicts with society to fulfill the dream.

We may conclude that Willy is incapable to differentiate between illusion and reality. All through the play, his dreams of success are crushed since he is weighed down by a system where he looks as if he is destined for failure. He has unlimited trust and confidence in the American Dream to the point of self-illusion and shares the similar fake hope with his both sons Biff and Happy.

They are all, the father Willy Loman and his both sons Biff and Happy, imprisoned by materialism and the American Dream which distracted their minds and made them leave their ethics and principles just to reach that dream.

ENDNOTES

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(ix) Arthur Miller, *Op.Cit*, Act I., p.1.

(x) Eric J. Sterling, (2008), "Introduction," in *Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman*, ed. Eric J. Sterling, Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., pp.9-10.

(xi) *Ibid*, p.10.

(xii) Matthew C. Roudané, (1997), "Death of a Salesman and the Poetics of Arthur Miller," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*, ed., Christopher Bigsby, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.66.

(xiii) Ahmed W. Hachim, *Op.Cit*, p.641.

(xiv) Matthew C. Roudané, *Op.Cit*, p.66.

(xv) Arthur Miller, *op.Cit*, Act I, p.1.

(xvi) *Ibid*.

(xvii) Leah Hadomi, (2007), "Rhythm Between Fathers and Sons: Death of a Salesman," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Death of a Salesman*, ed.,

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(xviii) *Ibid*, p.19.

(xix) Deborah Cosier Solomon, (2008), "The Emergence of Hope in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman," in *Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman*, ed. Eric J. Sterling, Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., p.138.

(xx) Christopher Bigsby, *Op.Cit*, p.108.

(xxi) Arthur Miller, *Op.Cit*, Act 1, p.18.

(xxii) Juan Ignacio Guijarro-González and Ramón Espejo, (2008), "Capitalist America in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman: A Reconsideration," in *Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman*, ed. Eric J. Sterling, Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., p.63.

(xxiii) Arthur Miller, Act I, p.20-21.

(xxiv) Josep M. Armengol, (2004), "Attention, Attention must be Finally Paid to Such a Person": a Men's Studies Rereading of Arthur miller's Death of a Salesman, *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, No.10, p.38.

(xxv) Kamlesh, *Op.Cit*, p.34.

(xxvi) Thamir Rashid Shayyal, (2012), Imprisonment in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, *Larq Journal for Philosophy, Linguistics and Social Sciences*, Issue 8, Year 4, p.29.

(xxvii) *Ibid*, p.18.

(xxviii) *Ibid*, p.6.

(xxix) *Ibid*.62.

(xxx) Harold Bloom, ed., (2005), "Introduction" in *Willy Loman*, Philadelphia: Chelsea House publishers, p.2.

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(xxxii) Christopher Bigsby, *Op.Cit*, p.114.

(xxxiii) Arthur Miller, Op.Cit, p.54.

(xxxiv) Thamir Rashid Shayyal, Op.Cit, pp.31-32.

(xxxv) Ibid, p.111.

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