



Title- Relevance of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman as a Tragedy for All the Times

Author- Dr Pooja Malik

Assistant Professor

Amity School of Liberal Arts

Amity University Haryana, India

Abstract

Drama has been a very popular genre in American Literature as well in the world literature. American Drama is rich in its approach towards individual as well as towards the society as a whole. When it comes about the famous playwrights of American Literature, the name of Arthur Miller comes out as a powerful shining star on the firmament of American Literature. He is bracketed with Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, and is one of the five major American dramatists of international repute, namely Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee. As it comes about Death of a Salesman, the play revolves around the concept of American Drama and narrates the last twenty-four hours of Willy Loman's life, who is the main character of the play. It is a tragedy which is relevant for all the times in many aspects and this research paper attempts to explore these aspects with the help of critical analysis.

Key Words: American Literature, Drama, American Dream, Critical Analysis.

Drama is a genre of literature which is enjoyed and celebrate most by each and every section of the society. Drama is something which reveals the complexity of human psychology as well as provides the relief also to fatigued minds. However, the genre Drama has to go through a lot of experiments and challenges to reach the present yet now it has touched the heights that even a society cannot be imagined without the literature as Drama. As far as American literature is concerned, a remarkable number of dramatists has been given to the world, with their never surpassing genius and intellectuality. American Drama is rich in its approach towards individual

as well as towards the society as a whole. When it comes about the famous playwrights of American Literature, the name of Arthur Miller comes out as a powerful shining star on the firmament of American Literature.

Arthur Miller is the most prized playwright of American dramatists. Born in 1915, Miller is one of the topmost of American playwrights. He is bracketed with Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, and is one of the five major American dramatists of international repute, namely Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee. Marching ahead with greater determination, steadier steps and increasing boldness Miller has continued to maintain his place in the glorious high road of American Drama. As time rushes on its winged chariot, the plays of Arthur Miller seem to ooze out more and more relevance. As Francis Nelson has said,

“As time goes by, his plays continue to endure, many of them in fact gaining in strength and impact.”

Miller's major works are All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, The Crucible, A View from the Bridge, After the Fall and The Price etc. Miller's works, if taken together as a whole, shows Miller's own sense of involvement with modern man's struggle to be himself which has made him one of the modern theatres most compelling and important spokesman. His plays when seen in an order exhibit a development in the direction of simplicity in construction and immediacy in language.

As it comes about Death of a Salesman, it came in 1949 and in this tragedy past and present are mingled in expressionist scenes. The play revolves around the concept of American Drama and narrates the last twenty-four hours of Willy Loman's life, who is the main character of the play. As per the concept of American Dream:

‘United States is a land of opportunity that allows the possibility of upward mobility, freedom, and equality for people of all classes who work hard and have the will to succeed.’

Willy Loman, the central character of the tragedy Death of a Salesman, takes this concept of American Dream in distorted form and spends his whole life in his illusion, even ends up his life with the same illusion. He takes American Dream only from the perspective of physical appearance and thinks that it is must and enough to be attractive and popular among the people in order to get success as a salesman.

In the play *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman is a sixty-three-year-old salesman and has been working for the last thirty years in the Wagner's company but still could not get the recognition as a successful salesman. Willy's life Linda is a loving, caring and dutiful wife who always have been admiring and supporting Willy in all his decisions and disappointments, even in illusions for which her character is criticized also. Willy has two sons, Biff Loman and Happy Loman where Biff is thirty-four years old. Willy Loman looks at Biff as his own reflection and puts all his expectations in him. Biff also takes his father as an omnipotent and an ideal in his life, but Biff's ideal comes to an end when he finds his father in a hotel with some another woman. This was a kind of mental shock for Biff and from there onwards, his performance started to get down and by the time of his college or university education, he is not able to perform in the football team and never gets settled in the life neither personally nor professionally. While Biff is presented as the reflection of Willy's expectations, Happy Loman is presented in the play such younger brother who is basking under the personality of his elder brother. He faces a certain kind of ignorance on the part of Willy as Biff is the centre of concentration for Willy. As a result of this ignorance and the financial condition of the family, Happy develops a theft syndrome in himself and he is not even checked or stopped by Willy at the time of his first theft. In comparison to Biff, Happy is more cheerful, hopeful, and courageous person in the play. He is the one who gives the hope to the family in the form of a business idea in the end of the play when the family has lost. Though the things don't go rightly and the play ends with the tragic suicide of Willy Loman.

The route cause of Willy Loman's tragedy is his credulousness. He does not understand the fraud and profiteering motives of the commercial world around him. He takes everything that is advertised, at its face value. He does not understand the concept of American dream in its true sense and becomes the victim of the opportunistic commercial world. He is fired from his job after the thirty long years of loyalty and hard work. In the later phase of his life, he has developed a habit of talking to himself and whenever he talks to himself, he always talks about the past. He remembers his brother Ben who went into the dark jungles of Africa and came out as a rich man. Though Ben had asked Willy to join him, but Willy could not, as he was a salesman. Willy was glad that his sons were well-liked, quite unlike his neighbour Charley and his son Bernard who were liked but not well liked. Charley is a successful businessman and offered Willy a job in his firm at a salary of seven hundred dollars per week, but Willy declined the offer because of his proud and illusion as a salesman which he continued to maintain by the end of his life.

The day, Willy came back home, he had dreamt his greatest dream. He would ask Biff to get a loan for the business and Willy himself would talk to Howard Wagner about his job. He already assumes that both would succeed and conceives of a happy dinner in a restaurant. But both the father and the son failed. Charley offers job to Willy, but he refuses it and manages somehow to reach home for dinner. Here the failure of Biff was a last straw in the back of camel and there is an argument between Willy and Biff which reveals the callous realities and illusions to Willy. Though Willy gets a consoling realisation that Biff had loved him all through. He thinks of Biff and wants to make him a gift of twenty thousand dollars as his insurance money. Willy drives out crazily and kills himself. In the Requiem, all the characters try to analyse and understand the tragedy of the salesman Willy Loman.

Willy's tragic predicament is clear by the statement of Linda who shares this predicament from day to day, when she tries to favour Willy in his argument with Biff and says,

"I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He is not the finest character that ever lived. But he is a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So, attention must be paid. He is not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention must be finally paid to such a person."

Actually, Willy Loman is a salesman who sells not only goods but also his very 'self'. Willy is a salesman through and through. In his lifetime, he sells goods, and, in his death, he sells his life. He commits suicide so that his sons can venture out anew in life with twenty thousand dollars. This was the money that his sons would inherit as the price of Willy's life, through insurance premiums.

To reach the conclusion it can be said that Willy is a victim of his own illusions and the deadliest illusion in his life is that he sincerely believes that a man can achieve anything, accomplish any feat, if he has got a pleasing personality. As he is illusioned one, he tells his sons that Bernard (son of Charley) might get the best marks but in practical world of business, they would be five times ahead of him.

"That is why I thank Almighty God you are both built like Adonises. Because 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."

These illusions of Willy have infected the life of his family members too. He is the one who could not fulfil the needs of himself, as well as of his family. He has achieved something great

or remarkable neither on the social front or the professional front of his life. He is terrible trapped in the contemporary materialistic and opportunistic society of America and becomes a mere cog in the American system and like all others, fulfils only a utilitarian purpose.

In addition, in this play Miller has given a new concept of tragedy. Indeed, Miller has shown a certain kind of sensitivity in *Death of a Salesman* towards contemporaneity and meant his play to be a tragedy. At about the time of the play's opening, Miller himself made his intention about tragedy clear in an interview when he said,

“The tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing, his sense of personal dignity.”

As per Miller, ‘Tragedy takes place when a human being loses the grip over the forces of life. Moreover, tragedy is a manifestation of truth.’

In this play, Arthur Miller also discusses the concept of ‘tragic victory’. He repudiates the idea that a man who sacrifices himself for a cause should make the audience feel some kind of elation. A man's death is a terrifying thing and should not bring joy to anyone. At the same time Miller says,

“In a great variety of ways, even death, the ultimate negative, can be an assertion of bravery.”

With all these discussions, one more thing gets proved very well that the tragedy of *Death of a Salesman* is a modern tragedy as the problems which have been discussed in this play, are the problems of all the times. The problems of infidelity in marriage, generation conflicts, unemployment, partial unemployment, competition in the race of career formation, hard realities of commercial world, familial differences, dissatisfaction in social and personal life are the evergreen problems of almost each society, and specially in developing countries where a middle-class man has to face a new struggle everyday to meet his basic needs. The tragedy of Willy Loman and his family is the tragedy of every middle-class family, and this fact includes the element of eternity to the popularity of the play.

The play is indeed a remarkable success and an evergreen creation from the pen of Arthur Miller who seems put his all-literary genius in this play which is a rainbow of all the colours of a middle-class family and the materialism-oriented society.

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