

THE TRAGEDY OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Abstract:

In a society considers success a requirement and failure a crime, Arthur Miller is tracing in his play Death of a Salesman one of the poignant and inevitable misfortunes of society. Willy Loman, Miller's protagonist of the play, fails to achieve the salesman ideal in which his failure has forced him to live in dreams and illusions and makes him a liar. The play is a challenge to the American dream that has become distorted to the dream of business success. Death of a Salesman offers a contrastive picture of the salesman of the twentieth century and the salesman of the nineteenth century and it tends to be a distinct mode of social criticism in the hands of Arthur Miller. Willy Loman places heartedly his trust to be well-liked salesman on the twentieth - century version of the American dream but no reward and instead he meets his tragic end.

Keywords:dramatic,dream,American,tragedy,family etc

Death of a Salesman is a play written by the great modern American dramatist Arthur Miller. Miller's prolific writing career extends over 60 years in which he had written 26 plays, a novel titled *Focus*, and a collection of short stories entitled *I Don't Need You Anymore*, besides many travel journals. The major part of his work has been concentrated on plays which they appeared to address social issues where the individual is suffering a social dilemma or being at the mercy of society. The dramatist has keenly observed the ambitions and ideals of the individual; meanwhile, Miller has been able to recognize the internal and external forces that aim to bring the tragic defeat.

Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is one of those great pieces of art which centers on the loss of identity and a man's inability to accept change within himself and society. The play mainly details the last 24 hours of Willy Loman's life which it is recognized to be filled with memories, confrontations, and arguments which also leads to the tragic defeat of Willy when the play closes with his suicide and subsequent funeral. Miller had made full use of Willy's family that consists his wife Linda and his two sons Biff and Happy to reveal within the play the themes of contradiction, a self-perpetuating cycle of denial, and order versus disorder. Miller has aimed not to criticize his protagonist as much as to expose how the individual may create a self-perpetuating a cycle of denial and life of denial that naturally worsen his life and may worsen the life of others.

An important part of Miller's play has been aimed to reveal man's attempt to reach the American dream through Willy's pursuit of success and happiness. The American dream has been built with the concept that all things are possible to all men, regardless of birth or wealth and if the man works hard enough he can achieve anything. Thus, Miller's play exposes that all people have been ultimately misguided by the concept of the American dream and the play stands to be moving destruction of the whole myth. The roots of the American dream seem to be settled in the minds of the 18th and 19th immigrants who came to America following the promise of a new and better life. Those immigrants had dreamt to own land but their dream had crashed and changed from being a potential reality into being just a dream. Therefore, to a certain degree, most of Miller's plays have discussed the destruction of that dream as the dream in itself had developed and encouraged greed.

The protagonist of *Death of a Salesman* was bogged down with the American dream and he spent his whole life trying to prove himself but he fails; he was still stuck with that false image in which this image, in turn, didn't help him to realize that he can no longer handle working and didn't help to realize that he was deceiving himself and destroy his own life and family. Thus, Most of Willy's problems had been made from his chase towards that dream which led also to put the whole family in endless torture; he taught his sons that the opportunity comes from their being handsome and successful and insisted to bring them up with the wrong dreams. Willy's preference to force value and takes it granted to any kind of

success makes him cope with the image of the traditional tragic hero who has a tragic flaw as well as Willy appears to be ready to lay down his life to secure one thing; his personal acts arouse the feeling of pity and fear.

The dramatist calls his play a tragedy and many critics see eye to eye with him that the play is a modern tragedy. But some critics such as Eric Bentley and Eleanor Clark have claimed that Miller's play could not attain the stature of a genuine tragedy as a result to its extreme awareness as well as they consider the play's protagonist too passive and too little to present the tragic hero. For them, the play is not placed according to Aristotelian concept of tragedy and tragic hero as they contend that Willy is a common man, not a prince or a king and that protagonist has failed to arise required tragic feelings which are the essential factor for the tragic action. The views of the critics which deny the play to be modern tragedy seem to be wimp because in the modern world, the concept of tragedy needs no royal system of kings, princes or queens and also the common man stands to be the hero of a tragedy since he suffers like royal figures and since he faces or meets the tragic defeat that those royal figures have appeared to face or meet in many writings in an era characterized to exalt the royal system and its figures. The course of time subjects of tragedy has turned to construct on another shape. The traditional subjects for tragedy don't cope now with modern society and appear to be alien.

Modern tragedy has been defined and understood as a serious piece of literature which describes a conflict between the protagonist and a superior force in which there is a sorrowful or disastrous conclusion that brings pity or terror. Willy Loman has been struggling all his life for success and struggling to find hopes of the American dream; his failure to be successful and even to teach his children how to be successful excite pity; meanwhile his defeat and suicide excite terror. Miller's protagonist faces a superior force and his flaw as a tragic figure is that he is unable to understand things in a more realistic perspective which means that he has spent most of his life in an illusion. In other words, Willy is the victim of an illusion dream as he has placed his trust in false values and in Robert Hogan's words:

Willy is the modern man who has accepted wholeheartedly the twentieth-century version of the American dream, and who then reacts like the psychologist 's rat when it discovers that the door to its particular dream has been inexplicably shut ...he has extolled the businessman's virtues, he has tried to be "well liked", and Willy is numbly baffled the failure of the American dream. (Hogan, 1964, p.21)

Willy Loman lives in an illusion and his fatal error is that he has built his life and his sense of worth on something wrong in which his mind has been filled with an idea belongs to an

illusion and this idea has significantly affected his whole family; his family has become, like him, unable to distinguish between reality and illusion as he has created a fantastic atmosphere for himself and his family. Charley, Willy's friend, has realized Willy's fatal error and has tried many times as a practical man who understands his limits and acts accordingly to help Willy but Willy's false pride always prevents him from accepting any kind of help thinking that he and his sons are men of greatness. He has believed that the only way to success is to be well-liked and that when he has been trying through his flashbacks of past business relationships to assert that he was once well liked ; but the fact may contradict what Willy attempt to convince himself as he is unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy ; he is nurtured by the wrong dreams and though he has appeared in many scenes of the play to be skilled carpenter he has found no glory in carpentry and decided to follow the dream of being a successful man.

Miller has aimed to throw light on the American social order at a period following the Second World War. The society of that period was recognized to be very materialistic and the playwright through his protagonist of this play has succeeded to transfer his work to a demonstration of the affliction with which America had been stricken ; meanwhile, Miller has declared the birthing of the consumer society as his protagonist is the manifestation of the consumerism which destroys the society .

Although Willy's defeat can be partly attributed to the fault of his family and the failure of certain values propounded by the society, at the same time it is no less his own doing. Thus, there is another message from the playwright in which he has carefully stressed at the point that the society ought not to contribute to the stultification of the individual, meanwhile the individual ought not to prove a threat to society. It is significant to note that Miller within his attempt to reveal the tragedy of the American dream has been successful to dramatize some of the contemporary social themes such as the social accountability of business and success ethic.

Conclusion:

Miller's Death of a Salesman was set against post-war America in which the playwright's protagonist who rides on the waves of illusion represents the failure of the American myth of success at that time. The protagonist of Miller's play lives in a world of fantasy and denial; he had a dream to be a well-liked salesman and thought that his pride lies on getting money whereas this false dream has finally led him to his tragic end by committing suicide. Arthur Miller has been able also to dramatize at the back of his work the contemporary social views such as the success ethic or the social accountability and has been able to reveal a man in his social relations as a whole.

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