

## ***Death of A Salesman by Arthur Miller: A Tragedy of Common Man***

**Dr. Santosh Thakur**

*HOD, Deptt. of English, G C Nalagrarh  
District Solan, (HP)*

### **Abstract**

*Arthur Miller, one of the major American dramatists of the twentieth century deals with the realities of an individual's struggle for survival in a world full of competition and corruption in his dramas. He captures the fundamental human conditions, which transcend cultural configurations in his dramas and he places the idea of commitment and responsibility very high. Born on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1915, in Harlem, New York, Arthur Miller, the son of a well-to-do manufacturer, who faced financial losses during the Depression of 1929, leaving the young and adolescent boy in financial stress forcing him to do various types of jobs such as a helper in a truck, as a truck driver, as a crewman on a tanker and as a waiter for survival. This gave him an exposure to the real world around and he got invaluable experience of competition, corruption, materialism and success at all costs in a harsh world.*

Reference to this paper should  
be made as follows:

**Dr. Santosh Thakur,**

*Death of A Salesman by  
Arthur Miller : A Tragedy of  
Common Man,*

Notions 2018,  
Vol. IX, No. 4,  
pp. 7-11,

Article No.2

Online available at :  
[http://anubooks.com/  
?page\\_id=5005](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=5005)

## **Introduction**

*Death of a Salesman* (1949) is perhaps one of the greatest American plays, was actually entitled *The Inside of His Head*, intended to bring out the psychological ups and downs of the mind of the protagonist Willy Loman. This play engendered a lot of criticism as it was widely diffused in a movie, yet got immense critical acclaim world-over for its universal appeal. Focus in this play is on family, neighborhood and values of city life. The play deals primarily with Willy Loman's mind, his concerns, dreams, fancies, pain, anguish and inward struggle to cope with the changing scenario around.

*Death of a Salesman* unmask the sons – Biff and Happy as good for nothing drifters, driving Willy Loman to suicide that he does not deserve. Linda Loman, Willy's wife is confined to family, not actively involved in her husband's work, is just a mediating factor in father-son conflict without success. Willy emerges as a complete failure in terms of American marketing and business system, exploitative of the poor and the down-trodden, consequent upon the breakdown of his relationship with two sons.

*Death of a Salesman*, a socio-moral tragedy of a salesman – Willy Loman, a common man from the lower strata of the society must face inevitably the naked materialism around. Though the small man's tragedy does not fit in Aristotle's *Poetics*, yet the play appeals more immediately to all on account of being a tragedy of a marginal man in the modern times. Willy Loman represents the modern common man, as all the characters also represent modern society and temper.

*Death of a Salesman*, a play in two acts, centers on Willy Loman, a travelling salesman past sixty, lives in a metropolis, has a very small house amidst towering buildings around. Linda, his wife loves him, and lives perpetually on the edge of concern for Willy, "...she more than loves him, she admires him...his massive dreams and little cruelties...turbulent longings within him..." (Miller, 131). Willy is tempest tossed and desperately needs rest, returns from Florida, dog-tired, in a state of absent mindedness. Now aged, life is slipping away, feels an outcast, is unable to adjust in the phrenetic megacity. He lives in the past memories especially of his dead employer Wagner and brother Ben. His sons – Biff and Happy prove miserable failures in his expectations, and just the reverie of their beautiful, handsome childish faces lingers on Willy's mind. World has changed tremendously for Willy now. Linda and both the sons are concerned for Willy as they know his state of mind, but are unable to help him. Both the sons are escapists and Willy is cursing himself for his sons' failures as his own. Both sons also dream of comforts and luxuries, but reality is different and very harsh.

Willy, old, past his prime, still shouldering the responsibilities of the family, regrets the fact that he could not chide his sons for their mistakes when they were kids. He dreamt for them good life and big fortunes but sadly and ironically over-pampered them. He created false images for and of them and gave the false 'big grandiose' dreams to them. But in due course of time his sons proved miserable failures. Willy was pained to see the son of Charley, the neighbor, Bernard become a successful lawyer. Willy's false pride of the only trait his sons imbibe from him. Whenever the neighbor Charley wanted Willy to know the truth, the latter boasted of his sons and never listened to the facts. Linda loves Willy in spite of his failings and is a constant source of encouragement for him. She loves him and cannot bear his insult. Willy's suicide attempts worry her deeply.

Willy wishes his sons to settle in life, but they fail, leaving him miserable with disappointment and self-pity. His livelihood is taken away which adds to his confusion and misery. Dejected and broken and feeling guilty for the mess he has made of his own life, Willy commits suicide, hoping Biff and Happy will benefit from the insurance policy.

The entire play focuses on Willy Loman. He is a low man who has lost his identity and recognition in a phrantic materialistic society. Jean Gould rightly says, "In condemning Willy Loman to die by his own economic system that fashioned his fate. Salesmen are the patsies of the industrial ringmasters whose products they parade...." (253). Willy represents the roadside victims. Viewed psychologically, however, there is another dimension to Willy's personality. He is himself responsible for his failure and tragedy. He values outer show and appearance. He never taught his sons the values of studies and hard work. His view of reality is very superficial. He cut himself off from learning from others because of his false pride, knowing very well that he belongs to the lower strata of society.

Willy suffers from a false self and is unable to develop a proper ego, which intercepts between his inner world and outer reality, between past and present, and he also fails to develop a proper state of mind to solve the problems of life. A failure as salesman, Willy always pretended to be great before his sons, proves disastrous because Biff and Happy imbibe his false qualities of inflation and pretence. He fails to perform his role as father owes partly from the fact that his own father died when he was barely three years old and thus had no father as model. He fails to impart proper education to his sons, could not give them values of hard work, application and responsibility which Bernard, the neighbor's son has. Rightly says Hayman, "Willy is every bit as son-fixated as Joe Keller" (28). [Joe Keller is another protagonist

of *All My Sons*, another play by Arthur Miller]. In Willy's case it is extreme because through his sons he wants to realize his foiled ambitions and fantasies

Willy Loman magnifies himself by presenting himself to his wife and children as higher than what he is, as his educational qualification is also very low. His fictitious attributes are a ploy on his part to compensate for his lacks and inadequacies, which he has. Sri Aurobindo says, "...our mind is persuaded to present to us and to others a partly fictitious representative figure of ourselves which support our self-affirmation, justifies our desires and actions, nourishes our ego." (532-33). Sometimes fictitious attribution is a way of sensing unrealized potentials or latencies which have to be activated and realized through hard work, but Willy fails and falters because he lacks qualities of commitment, courage and discipline. In his case fictitious attributions have become excessive as a result he loses touch with ground realities. His ambition is not merely to become financially rich but he wants a respectable place in society, but the emotional longings of a person, who is in deep misery both emotionally and in the cut-throat competitive marketing society.

Willy, old and weak, lonely and feeling inferior, affection starved fantasizes about great happiness, "I see great things for you kids, I think your troubles are over. But remember, start big and you'll be big" (168). This is his own way of whistling in the dark and of bucking himself up, when he feels down and out, as his main problem is that he avoids facing present problems and like a "neurotic" (Herold E. Burt, 346), he hangs on to dead past for resuscitation.

Willy is unable to adjust himself into the present time and present society. Time has stopped for him, which has afflicted his mental equilibrium, as he jumps back and forth from past to present. C. W. E. Bigsby observes, "neither past nor present, however, is secure and wholly knowable... It is the theater that Willy makes of his life, neurotically restaging it in an attempt to discover the moment of lost authenticity" (90-91). Like Lady Macbeth, Willy turns progressively inward, and loses contact with outside world. Like Lady Macbeth, he is in a state of sleepy wakefulness and suicide is the last recourse in such cases and that does happen with both of them.

Willy Loman is a character that indicts modern America in so far as a man is exploited lifelong, consequently takes refuge in the dark side of American dream. His suicide is an escape, an act which lays bare the tentacles of materialism – tentacles which crush those on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder. In *Death of a Salesman* Miller has highlighted the negative side of the American dream of success owing to his struggle in life to come up in the society and setbacks faced by him during the 'Depression' period. Herein Miller presents the tragedy of an individual.

### **References**

- 1 Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman* (1949). In *Collected Plays*. 1957. Rpt. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1973. Print.
- 2 Gould, Jean. *Modern American Playwrights*. 1966. Rpt. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1967. Print.
- 3 Hayman, Ronald. *Arthur Miller*. London: Heinemann, 1970. Print.
- 4 Burt, Herald E. Et. Al. Eds. *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychological and Psychoanalytical Terms*. London: Longman Group, 1958. Print.
- 5 Bigby, C. W. E. *Modern American Drama: 1945-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Print.