Notions Vol. 8 No. 1, 2017 **ISSN: (P) 0976-5247, (e) 2395-7239**
ICRJIFR
IMPACT FACTOR
3.9531

NOTIONS
A PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

Understanding Themes, Motifs and Myths through Death of Sales Man by Arthur Miller

Dr. Ch. Anuradha
Lecturer
Department of English
KBN College, Vijayawada.

Arthur Miller has emerged as one of the most successful and enduring playwrights of the post-war era in America, no doubt because his focusing on middle-class anxieties brought on by a society that emphasizes the hollow values of material success has struck such a responsive chord. The recurring theme of anxiety and insecurity reflects much of Arthur Miller's own past. Born the son of a well-to-do Jewish manufacturer in New York City in 1915, Miller had to experience the social disintegration of his family when his father's business failed during the Great Depression of the 1930s. By taking on such odd jobs as waiter, truck driver, and factory worker, Miller was able to complete his studies at the University of Michigan in 1938. These formative years gave Miller the chance to come in close contact with those who suffered the most from the Depression and instilled in him a strong sense of personal achievement necessary to rise above the situation. He began writing plays in the 1930s, but it wasn't until Death of a Salesman was performed in 1949 that Miller established himself as a major American dramatist. Winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1949, Death of a Salesman has to this day remained a classic. The play's intellectual appeal lies in Miller's refusal to portray his characters as two-dimensional — his refusal to involve himself in a one-sided polemic attack on capitalism. Even critics cannot agree as to whether Death of a Salesman is to be categorized as social criticism, a tragedy, or simply a psychological study. Of necessity, each person will have to draw his or her own individual conclusions. The fact that performances of Death of a Salesman have met with acclaim throughout the world testifies to its universality: the play's conflicts and themes appear not to be uniquely American.

Willy believes wholeheartedly in what he considers the promise of the American Dream—that a "well liked" and "personally attractive" man in business will indubitably and deservedly acquire the material comforts offered by modern American life. Oddly, his fixation with the superficial qualities of attractiveness and likeability is at odds with a more gritty, more rewarding understanding of the American Dream that identifies hard work without complaint as the key to success. Willy's interpretation of likeability is superficial—he childishly dislikes Bernard because he considers Bernard a nerd. Willy's blind faith in his stunted version of the American Dream leads to his rapid psychological decline when he is unable to accept the disparity between the Dream and his own life.

Abandonment

Willy's life charts a course from one abandonment to the next, leaving him in greater despair each time. Willy's father leaves him and Ben when Willy is very young, leaving Willy neither a tangible (money) nor an intangible (history) legacy. Ben eventually departs for Alaska, leaving Willy to lose himself in a warped vision of the American Dream. Likely a result of these early experiences, Willy develops a fear of abandonment, which makes him want his family to conform to the American Dream. His efforts to raise perfect sons, however, reflect his inability to understand reality. The young Biff, whom Willy considers the embodiment of promise, drops Willy and Willy's zealous ambitions for him when he finds out about Willy's adultery. Biff's ongoing inability to succeed in business furthers his estrangement from Willy. When, at Frank's Chop House, Willy finally believes that Biff is on the cusp of greatness, Biff shatters Willy's illusions and, along with Happy, abandons the deluded, babbling Willy in the washroom.

Betrayal

Willy's primary obsession throughout the play is what he considers to be Biff's betrayal of his ambitions for him. Willy believes that he has every right to expect Biff to fulfill the promise inherent in him. When Biff walks out on Willy's ambitions for him, Willy takes this rejection as a personal affront (he associates it with "insult" and "spite"). Willy, after all, is a salesman, and Biff's ego-crushing rebuff ultimately reflects Willy's inability to sell him on the American Dream—the product in which Willy himself believes most faithfully. Willy assumes that Biff's betrayal stems from Biff's discovery of Willy's affair with The Woman—a betrayal of Linda's love. Whereas Willy feels that Biff has betrayed him, Biff feels that Willy, a "phony little fake," has betrayed *him* with his unending stream of ego-stroking lies.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Mythic Figures

Willy's tendency to mythologize people contributes to his deluded understanding of the world. He speaks of Dave Singleman as a legend and imagines that his death must have been beautifully noble. Willy compares Biff and Happy to the mythic Greek figures Adonis and Hercules because he believes that his sons are pinnacles of "personal attractiveness" and power through "well liked"-ness; to him, they seem the very incarnation of the American Dream.

Willy's mythologizing proves quite nearsighted, however. Willy fails to realize the hopelessness of Singleman's lonely, on-the-job, on-the-road death. Trying to achieve what he considers to be Singleman's heroic status, Willy commits himself to a pathetic death and meaningless legacy (even if Willy's life insurance policy ends up paying off, Biff wants nothing to do with Willy's ambition for him). Similarly, neither Biff nor Happy ends up leading an ideal, godlike life; while Happy does believe in the American Dream, it seems likely that he will end up no better off than the decidedly ungodlike Willy.

The American West, Alaska, and the African Jungle

These regions represent the potential of instinct to Biff and Willy. Willy's father found success in Alaska and his brother, Ben, became rich in Africa; these exotic locales, especially when compared to Willy's banal Brooklyn neighbourhood, crystallize how Willy's obsession with the commercial world of the city has trapped him in an unpleasant reality. Whereas Alaska and the African jungle symbolize Willy's failure, the American West, on the other hand, symbolizes Biff's potential. Biff realizes that he has been content only when working on farms, out in the open. His westward escape from both Willy's delusions and the commercial world of the eastern United States suggests a nineteenth-century pioneer mentality—Biff, unlike Willy, recognizes the importance of the individual.

References

Miller, Arthur, Death of a salesman, Penguin Publications, 1992.
Valency Maurice, the Cart and the Trumpet: the Plays of Arthur Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973)