Delusion of the Self seen as a Cultural Product in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

Gunasekaran Narayanan
Associate Professor of English
Government Arts College(Autonomous)
Nandanam,
Chennai
ngsek57@yahoo.co.in

Death of a Salesman is no longer being viewed as a period piece, a time-bound commentary on capitalism and its victims. The response of the audience is also not judged in terms of economic or social circumstances. Miller in his "Introduction" to the *Collected Plays* says that *Death of a Salesman* is a play that raises "question . . . whose answers define humanity" (32). Both popular critical acclaim the play has received so far confirms the author's description of it.

The central energy of *Salesman* is derived from an explanation of a particular aspect of culture, twentieth century technological culture, in which illusions take the place of dreams and fantasy substitutes reality. This phenomenon, ignorance of reality or non-recognition of facts, has been a potent source of European theatre since the time of the Greeks; but what lends weight to Miller's discovery is that it is not an exceptional experience to a few but is common enough in industrial civilization. Miller points out with remarkable artistic perception, the hold of illusion on individuals and its disastrous consequences, the dreams that are intertwined with illusions, the gulf that separates the actual practices from the professed ideals of society. In fact one may not be very far from the truth if one describes the play as a dramatic exercise in exploring the board spectrum of illusion as a cultural product of the American society.

The playwright has taken particular care throughout to underline the sense of inadequacy in Loman's life, his idealized attitude towards a society he never understood and above all, to convey the image of a trapped animal in a rigid social structure.

Loman encounters many pitfalls in his character. In spite of them, his substantial loyalty to the cherished ideals of his society is unquestionable. He trusts them with the naiveté of a child, and to a large part his failing as a man may be directly traced to his uncritical acceptance of contemporary values.

Loman clings to the success dream with a fantastic allegiance that he can maintain only at the price of his identity. Darlingham aptly points out that Willy unknowingly surrenders his "conscience - that which is most fundamentally himself – for a place in society that was never his"(44). Eventually he sacrifices himself and his sons to the deceptive and demanding deity.

Willy's success myth is personified by two individuals – Ben and Dave Single man whom Jacobson considers to be the "mythological projections of his own needs and his society's values"(47). To him Ben represents the adventurous spirit of rugged individualism and rapid wealth and the American story of rags to riches. He went out to make his fortune in Alaska but because of his "faulty view of geography" wound up in Africa, and through a combination of pluck and luck struck it rich (Collected Plays 156). To the awe – struck Biff and Happy he says, "why boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty - one I walked

out. And by God I was rich." To which Willy frenziedly adds: You see what I been talking about? The greatest thing can happen!" (CP 157).

Willy's commitment to the success ideology directs the educational career of his sons. Even if success passes him by, he can still look forward to a vindication of his life in them. "The world is an oyster, but you don't crack it open on a mattress" he tells them ecstatically (CP 152). If Willy is mesmerized by Ben's success story, he is also seduced by some of its ramifications. "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way," the uncle intones to his nephew, Biff, and it is precisely this stress on the justification of means by ends that enables Willy to wink at the boys' faults (CP 158). Biff has been a thief from his high-school days: he steals a foot-ball from the locker and lumber from a local construction job. Willy laughs at both the thefts and treats lightly considering them to be a manifestation of the power of personality and a fearless competitiveness like Ben's. He tells Biff "Coach will probably appreciate you on your initiative. . . . That's because he likes you. If somebody else took the ball there'd be an uproar"(CP 144). When Charley warns Willy that the watchman will catch the boys in their thievery Willy avers that, though he gave them hell, the boys are 'a couple of fearless characters'(CP 158). When Charley replies that the jails are full of fearless characters Ben adds the Stock Exchange is also. The boys have been brought to respect the success ideology: their success will be the salesman's vindication and he tries to mould them in in his own image.

Willy has chosen to imitate the salesman side of his father, not through any urging on his father's part but rather as a result of circumstances. The most influential of these was his meeting with David Single man, an old New England salesman who came to represent for Willy, the father he never knew. It is Single man's life and more especially his death, that come to symbolize what Willy thinks he wants for himself.

What Single man's achievement represents to Willy is a demonstration of the co- operative and benevolent nature of capitalism. Single man's ability to sell by phone at the age eighty-four was proof to Willy that he was remembered and loved and helped by so many different people. This conclusion seemed to be confirmed by Single man's funeral which was attended by hundreds of salesmen and buyers. Single man, in other words, represented free enterprise with a human face, and it is part of Willy's tragedy that he never realizes that such a system does not exist. The other side of his father is epitomized by Ben who constitutes another substitute father figure.

Willy's fortunes are at low ebb in the chronicle present of the play. His success ideology is tested by harsh realities which he alternately faces and flees from. He struggles hard to hold on to his identity and this means holding on to his faith and in the nature of that faith, Willy lies constantly: about the gross sale he has made, about the reaction of businessmen to his personality, about his boy's success and importance, about his own prospects. Neil Carson is right when he says that Willy engages in constant reception to conceal the truth from himself(56). From the observer's point of view established in the play through Charley they are pathetic efforts to protect his identity. His infidelity is justified as a provision against the rebuffs of the day. When he momentarily faces reality - his inability to drive to Boston, the mounting bills and the dwindling income - he has to take refuge in the past and project the future. The salesman cannot abandon the myth without reducing himself to zero and therefore he must hope.

The events of the first act - past and present - contra pose optimism a harsh reality. Act one presents Willy as a fired drummer and his boys as mediocre also-rans, a clerk and a farm-hand, both over thirty. They are lost and confused by their failure to get ahead and Willy is at the end of his tether because he can't even drive a car anymore.

In the first act, all difficulties past and present are smothered by a pervading optimism:

HAPPY. Wait a minute! I got an idea…' Loman brothers'baby,

We could sell sporting goods.

WILLY. That's a one-million-dollar idea (CP 167-68)

This scheme is generated out of the heart myth. "Loman brothers" has, for Willy and the boys, that authentic ring of personality and solidity and achievement. Enthused by his sons' earnest endeavor to actualize the dream he determines to ask his young boss Howard for a place in New York for himself, for a job that would take him off the road.

The interview episodes provide the basis for the movement of the second act. The scene in which Willy meets Howard is so painful that it makes on wince.

But it should be noticed that its tone is a blend of pathos and irony rather than indignation and indictment. The aging salesman who pleads for a job in New York receives his dismissal notice instead. The beleaguered salesman has not collided with a capitalistic ogre, but, ironically with a younger embodiment of his own traits. The scene should be construed more as an arraignment of Willy that as an indictment of the system.

Actually it is not Howard, but Charley who is the truly successful businessman in the play and who provides the counterbalance to Willy. Though both of them live in same neighborhood and have essentially similar backgrounds their views are sharply divergent. Their difference is not ideological but is the result of seasoned perception which Charley maintains and which Willy has lacked.

Miller's approval of Charley reveals not only his acceptance of the man but of the capitalistic system in which he thrives, assuming that for all that can go wrong with it, "the norm of capitalistic behavior is ethical or at least can be"(CP 37). Miller indicts Willy for his lack of understanding of the system. Insisting that it is not a matter of what you do but "who you know and the smile on your face!" Loman optimistically locates the secret of success in "contacts" and "personal attractiveness", expectant that "a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being well-liked" (CP 184).

But Willy fails to see that men buy appearances only in their leisure. Both the reversal of Biff's goals and the beginning of his self-knowledge occur at Oliver's office. In terms of structure, the interview episodes, one witnessed and the other reported, are dramatizations of the failure of the myth as Willy understood it and preached it to his sons. Their respective experiences produce different reactions in father and son. Willy is incapable of understanding his defeat even when Charley, good neighbor, spells it out for him: "The only thing you got in the world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're salesman and you don't know that" (CP 192).He is still not in a position to draw a line of demarcation between the marketable and the mythical. The meeting of the father and sons in the restaurant is an ironic reversal of the victory celebration. They run away from the failure their father has become and from their own failure. They leave the old man and go off with two chippies.

Two crucial events dominate the restaurant scene. Biff's inability in getting the required finance from Oliver s linked to his failure in Math and his flight to Boston.

Relying on personality he had mimicked the effeminate instructor to his face and had cut The classes for football practices. Despite Bernard's help in the exam, he flunked math and the instructor refused to make a concession. When the boy runs for his father's help, he finds the woman in Willy's hotel room and his idol crumbles. The travelling
salesman's joke becomes a traumatic experience for the boy, driving away his disillusions and preparing him for present insight. Biff considers the affair as a betrayal of Linda, the family and the home. The image of the husband is shattered when Willy gives the woman "mamma's stockings" (CP 208).

The result is the situation in which he finds himself alienated and increasingly lost in memories and dreams. In one respect Willy is caught between two cultures: the vanished agrarian frontier that he rhapsodically associates with his father and modern urban society, the tape-record civilization of Howard Wagner. Biff suspects that perhaps the Lomans have been miscast in their salesman role. "They've laughed at dad for years, and you know why? Because we don't belong in this nut-house of a city! We should be mixing cement on some open plain or carpenters", he tells his mother (CP 166). So when Biff comes to realize who he is, his insight flashes out of the contrast between the office and open sky. Willy is no longer the salesman, no longer father: Willy is the man. The identity supplied by economic and familial society is stripped away and the issue is joined at rock bottom. Biff literally tries to pound his message into his father.

In the play's most shattering moment he breaks down on the old man's shoulder, sobbing uncontrollably, "Will you let me go, for Christ's sake!" he begs. Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens" (CP 217). As Biff regains his composure Willy feels astonished and elevated. "Isn't that remarkable?" he exclaims, "Biff - he likes me!" (CP 218). He finally knows an exultant peace in a momentary spiritual communion with his son. Biff's open cry makes him see the hollowness of his values. Willy goes to his death with the comforting discovery that his son really loves him. His suicide is an act of penance for holding on to wrong values and for having tried to perpetuate the same in his sons. Otten aptly observes that the play "reveals the basic problems of self-knowledge that human beings must face. In this sense Miller shows us the form and pressure of our time. He cries with the Delphic Oracle 'know thyself' (91).

The play has been criticized because there is no recognition scene in the traditional sense. It is said there is a notable absence of the tragic, articulated awareness of self-delusion and final understanding. But in emotional terms, the entire play is a long recognition scene. Willy's heroism and stature derive not from an intellectual grandeur but from the fact that, in an emotional way, he confronts himself and his world. Lois Gordon rightly observes: "As Lear in madness comes to truth, so does Willy Loman"(105-06)

Works Cited

Booth, Wayne C. *Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961. Print. Carson, Neil. *Arthur Miller* 1982; London: Macmillan, 1983. Print.

Choudhuri, A.D. *The Face of Illusion in American Drama*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ:Humanities Press, 1979. Print.

Corrigan, Robert W. "The Achievement of Arthur Miller*". Comparative Drama* 2 (1968): 141-60. Print.

Darlingham, William B. "Arthur Miller and the Loss of Conscience." *The Emory University Quarterly* 16 (1960): 44. Print.

Gordon, Lois. "Death of a Salesman: An Appreciation". Twentieth Century Views of Death of a Salesman. Ed. Helen Wickenham Koon. Englewoodcliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982. Print.

Hogan, Robert. *Arthur Miller*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1964. Print.

Humphrey, Robert. *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1965. Print.

Jacobson, Irving. "Family Dreams in Death of a Salesman." *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller*. Ed. James Martine. Boston: G.K. Hall and Company, 1979. Print.

James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 1. New York: n. p. 1890. Print.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. New York: Random House, 1934. Print.

Koon, Helen Wickham, ed. *Twentieth Century Views of Death of a Salesman*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: prentice Hall, 1983. Print.

Krutch, Joseph wood. *The American Drama since 1918*. New York: Brazilles, 1957. Print.

Lewis, Allan. *America Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1970. Print.

Liddell, Robert. *A Treatise on* the *Novel*. 1947; London: Jonathan Cape, 1971. Print.

Lodge, David, ed. *20th Century Literary Criticism*. London: Longman, 1972. Print.

Lubbock, Percy. *The Craft* of *Fiction*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1954. Print.

Lumely Frederick. *Trends in 20th* Century *Drama*. New York: Oxford U P. 1960. Print.

Martin, Robert, ed. *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller*. Boston: G.K. Hall and Company, 1979. Print.

Miller, Arthur. *Collected Plays*. New York: Viking, 1957. Print.

Muir, Edwin. *The Structure of the Novel*. 1928; London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. Print.

Otten, F. Chorlotte. "Who Am I?. . . A Re-Investigation of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman". Twentieth Century Views of Death of a Salesman. Ed. Helan Wickenham Koon. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1983. Print.

Overton, Grant. *The Philosophy of Fiction.* New York: Appleton & Company, 1928. Print.

Sharma, K. K. *Modern Fictional Theorists*. Ghaziabad: Viman Prakashan, 1981. Print.

Thelm, Peter M.A. *The Modern* Confessional *Novel*. 1961; New Haven: Yale U P, 1974. Print.

****