

## A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF MILLER'S WILLY LOWMAN – A DREAMER, MORE SINNED AGAINST THAN SINNING

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### ABSTRACT

*Death of a Salesman* is based on a salesman's obsession with success myth in the context of great economic depression. Arthur Miller's American dreamer Willy Lowman is an illustration of much practiced philosophy of being well liked. People in a modern business oriented society tend to run after profit without realizing their own capability. Success, in a fast growing modern society as in America, does not depend on any miracle. Success and failure go side by side. Willy Lowman, in the play *Death of a Salesman* exemplifies America's success myth. That his failure is the wrong assumption of this myth- is well discussed in the field of American Literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Many modern and post modern critics tried to examine the problems of capitalist society for Willy's tragedy. This paper will try to investigate an exclusive character study of Miller's protagonist to determine other important causes related to his failure and to analyze the one who is more sinned against than sinning. In this paper, American dream of success and Miller's treatment of it is discussed. After that, a psychoanalytic criticism is done to analyze the character of Willy Lowman.

**Keywords:** American Dream, Success Myth, Freudian Psychoanalysis, Capitalist society, Personality, Well Liked.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Arthur Miller's Pulitzer winner play *Death of a Salesman* dramatizes the life of a salesman who is so much obsessed with his American philosophy of well liked and ultimately being frustrated, commits suicide. He is fired even from his commission based job and fails to make his beloved son Biff settle in life. He chooses committing suicide with the hope of helping his son's establishment and proving him with to be a worthy salesman as he thinks that his funeral will be attended by a number of buyers and salesmen from all over the country. The poor number of attendants shown in the requiem illustrates the tragedy of Mr. Lowman.

Throughout his life Willy Lowman tries to become successful by his wrong ideals. He also instills the ideals in his sons' life which actually proves to be catastrophic. Having served Howard's company he is not rewarded and could not manage a work in New York. Biff becomes over confident, fails to graduate and breaches his relationship with Willy because of the latter's "fakeness". His other son Happy is not happy with his present situation and illustrates almost all the characteristics of American way of life. Willy goes beyond time and frequently muses upon his past – sometimes to escape from reality and sometimes to seek refuge. He is shattered and talks to himself.

Most of the critics blame that Willy's downfall is his self created. He is a victim of his self version of American dream of success. Moreover, the capitalist societies also contribute to his miserable situation. He believes in pluck and luck theory and does not encourage his sons to study as they are well built, attractive and full of personality. He prefers chances to hard work. Therefore, the whole Lowman family has suffered much.

But a careful reading of the play arouses many questions. In fact, Lowman's tragedy is the tragedy of American everyman. Every week, the salesman borrows money from his friend Charley and tells lie to his dearest wife Linda about his income. However, we mark that more or less he is a family man and all that he concerns is the wellbeing of his family. Miller's protagonist may not be ranked as classical tragic hero as he is in every respect a common man aspiring to do the well being of his family. Yet he deserves "attention" and sympathy. It is not a crime to look for ways of success. Is Willy Lowman destined to suffer that extent by committing a sin of having a false dream? It is not because of his old age or tiredness that he succumbs to commit mistakes. "American myth" has its success record too. Having such dream is not a sin in that society. It is also full of uncertainty as well. The dream is a dream- it may or may not come true. This study will try to investigate some other issues that held responsible for Willy's tragedy.

## **AMERICAN DREAM:**

The term American dream denotes the idea that all people can succeed through hard work and that all people have the potential to achieve a happy and successful life. But many people have their own edition of the dream. Miller's salesman fails to cope with American society and its charming course. He is a personification of this success myth and deeply influenced by Horace Alger's ideal of American Dream.

The idea of American dream is deeply rooted in the country's history dating back to the 1600's when people began to come up with all sorts of hope and aspiration to "the blessed land". It is a God gifted land and they are to explore its resources. The land of opportunity provides great fortune and success formula to the Americans. Max Weber denotes that the myth has its origin in the 17<sup>th</sup> century England and it has come to America with its founding fathers. Religion was described in terms with business in the latter half of 19<sup>th</sup> century and in fact, "Clergyman found no disparity between the acquisition of riches and Christianity" (Porter 1979). The successful man became the idol of the fortune seekers. Russell H. Conwell delivered his lectures 'Acres of Diamond' and showed that religion and business are not opposed; rather religion encourages man to get rich. The proverb "early to bed early to rise makes a man healthy wealthy and wise" will first make you healthy to be attractive to result in wealthy and last of all "wise". Horatio Alger, is the another clergyman who embodied the dream in his novels. "Alger converted the attitude that canonized the successful businessman into a popular literary formula, the rags to riches romance (Porter 1979). The irony is that Miller's salesman uses the model only to undermine it. Instead of doing hard work and looking for the opportunity he becomes a day dreamer. The play therefore turns into an anti myth, the rags to riches formula is reversed and thereby it becomes the story of a failure in terms of success myth.

## **MILLER AND THE PLAY:**

Millar was born in 1915 and is renowned for his critical understanding of social problems. He proved his

worth by understanding and portraying the inner psychology of his characters. Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is set against a post-war America where he draws the depression and magic of American business world. After the production of *Death of a Salesman* in 1949, he was considered by many as one of the world's most significant living dramatists. His family was rich depending on clothing business which engaged more than a thousand workers. But the crash of Wall Street in 1929 caused damage to their business. His education was also affected by the economic depression in the then America. In fact he had to earn to support his educational expenses. This economic fall and prevalent American success myth must have influenced Miller to manifest the background of the play. Again the conflict of the play is related to Miller's conflicting relationship with his uncle Manny Newman which sounds like Willy Lowman. His uncle imagined a continuous competition between his son and Miller. Newman's confidence on his household is identical with Lowman's. Miller may have created the characters in *Death of a Sales Man* on this basis.

### **MILLER'S TREATMENT OF AMERICAN DREAM:**

Miller has chosen his protagonist from a profession whose skill and success mainly depend on personal attractiveness. Salesmen promote the goods of others by commoditizing themselves. Thus the characterization of Willy Lowman can fittingly demonstrate Miller's experiment of American myth of success. Willy has created his own world dominated by male figures. His role model Ben and Dave Singleman are successful; moreover, Willy is searching for his identity with the type of those for whom recognition matters much. He wanted to be a good father, liked by his boys securing wealth and honor for the family. He considers himself "well liked" without realizing the harsh realities and thus, misconceptualizing his vision he turns to be a misplaced fellow. His son Biff finds himself lost in the real world. Willy boasts of knowing that everybody looks at Biff and waits for his instructions. He becomes happy when Biff steals a football from school's locker. Willy says "coach'll probably congratulate you on your initiative" (p. 2121) because you are well liked. He shows his boys' performances to his brother Ben and asks them to take away construction materials from neighborhood. Miller tactfully shows Willy's ideal of American myth through subtle actions and focusing lights on the inner of his mind. The expressionistic stage setting, use of light, sound and introducing Willy's imaginary talk with Ben all contribute to the Playwright's attempt to highlight Americanism.

We get the message of Willy's false notion of ideals from the beginning by Miller's use of symbols and various expressions used in the play. The American west, Alaska, African jungle are uttered several times to illustrate the play's recurrent theme of American dream. Stocking scene is used to indicate Willy's alienation and infidelity. His two heavy suitcases symbolize the burden of two sons. Again these baggages illustrate pluck and luck theory. We find Willy planting seeds in the shadow which will not grow anything as there is no sunlight. It focuses the fact that without proper steps you will not able to get the fruit. Willy cannot breathe in his house which is suffocating by being surrounded by large apartment buildings. Linda cannot grow carrots here. His walls are transparent denoting the idea of glasses and thereby fragile, like Willy's trivial city life.

### **WILLY'S FAULT:**

He loves Linda but does not share his nature of struggle to her. His dominating nature and ego refrains him from telling her that he is laughed at by people around him or that he is borrowing money every week from his friend to maintain the family expenditure. He exaggerates in his reconstruction of realities. He is a complete American man having a house on mortgage, a car, a refrigerator etc. At the advent of his most miserable situation he does not correct himself and becomes happy to know that sons are going to start a new business because business can earn happiness and they are sure to succeed, as they have attractiveness. He is completely living in falsehood. Without realizing his fault and cause of unhappiness he constantly tells lies to others. He refuses to accept a job offer from Charley telling him that he has a good job. In the earlier period of his career we are not sure about his performance. He had to travel throughout the States which causes a sort of loneliness in him. Again, being frustrated, he is easily trapped by a prostitute who showed her likeliness towards him. She was the one who paid attention to him. His desire to be recognized made him her customer in that hotel which brings the disastrous filial relationship in the play. So obsessed with the idea of his well liked theory, Willy does not find it immoral to suggest Bernard to show his papers to Biff in the examination. He views that an athlete champion

needs not to study. He considers Ben to be his role model without considering the fact of Ben's secret. He is very much moved by Ben's statement "I was seventeen when I walked into the jungle and I was twenty nine I walked out. And by God I was rich" (p. 2130). Ben is an Orientalist in his notion of Africa. It is "dark but full of diamonds". There is mystery and romance. But you can explore and enjoy its treasure. Willy on the other hand, recognizes one dimension of Ben's success without realizing his hard work in fulfilling his dream of success. "It's not what you do. It's who you know and the smile on your face .... a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being well liked". He is having the idea that success can be achieved by personal attractiveness. Linda's blind love for him does not allow her to correct her husband. She objects her son's stealing but does not tell boldly to her husband. At the end of the play Biff does not hurt his father's wrong belief. Willy's tragedy is intensified by all these facts. His family "engages in constant deception to conceal the truth from themselves in different ways Charley, Bernard, Howard and Ben each present Willy with facts that he will not recognize as such" ( Neil Carson, p. 57) . We have all arguments to hold Willy's false notion of life responsible for his own miseries. Throughout the play he is not ready to realize that. Even he "prefers to commit suicide to his illusion"

His father was also a salesman and he used to pick up the whole family in a van and move around the country. But we come to know that Willy's another role model, this time his father, was suddenly lost and proved his irresponsible nature by not informing the family about his whereabouts. The audience does not know whether he eloped with another woman or not. Both father and the son suffer the tension of modern world. Once again the playwright shows the stability of female characters. Willy's mother, Linda took responsibility of the family- an evidential illustration of male dominated American society.

### WILLY'S TRAGEDY:

Against Willy's faults or mistakes let us consider the tragic and traumatic events he faces in his life which may help us assume the level of his suffering. Willy is an aged man having two sons who are yet to be settled. Biff, the illustration of his personality ideal is a total failure who cannot settle anywhere. Against all sorts of frustrating events Willy dreams one after another plan but all shatter down. We may accuse him of having a false notion but we cannot help feeling sympathy for this old man who is disowned by his dearest son. The story of personal attractiveness that he held high throughout his career can no more be meaningful in terms with his failure to attract the buyers any more. Now a day he is laughed at by people.

The ageing salesman has reached the end of his usefulness. Out of the frustration and on the pressure of family expenditure the old man drives unthinkingly and thereby falls into an accident. His dearest wife Linda can understand him. She plays the motherly role and warns Biff that if he has no affection for this father, he will not have any for her. She knows that "a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid to him" (p. 2134). It is Linda who discovers the hose pipe and unfolds Willy's plan to commit suicide. Willy's notion of "personal attractiveness" reaches to such an extent that he can not accept his failure. The material success is all that matters to him. It is more insufferable to him to accept the idea that he is a failure to the eyes of his sons. Like Miller's uncle Manny. Willy is always in a competitive mood with Charley- his friend and neighbor. He always considers himself to be more liked than Charley. But Charley has become a success and his son outreaches Biff and Happy. This fact of failure and jealousy also has a traumatic effect on Willy. Willy has served Howard's company for many years and "well-liked" by old Wagner. When he informed the present owner, the successor, of his desire to work in New York, he is refused and fired from his commission job. Willy fails to recognize that "business is business" (p. 2174). This is an extension of mechanization. In an industrial society a machine that performs well in terms with profit can only retain a valuable position. An aged man is like a phantom- of no use- and thereby, is thrown away. Now there is no hope left for him so that he can bring it for Linda except the one Biff is to give. But he does not know that frustrating news is waiting for him. It is very pathetic to see an aged person shattered by his dreams and struggles in life. Willy's tragedy cannot be the outcome of his false dreams only; there are other points to consider.

Willy Lowman is a family man. He always concerns about his family in spite of his having a high opinion of himself. "When he momentarily faces reality his inability to drive to Boston, the mounting bills dwindling income-he has to flee to the past and to project the failure. The salesman cannot abandon the myth without reducing himself to zero. Thus, he must hope" ((Porter, 1979).

In spite of Lowman's falsehood and failure in life he has many admirable characteristics which can attract his wife and friend to pay attention to him. It is Linda who realizes Willy's problem. She even knows that Willy tells lies to her, but she does not hurt him. She is just like traditional American women and takes care

of him at this critical situation. Parker (1969) draws an analogy between Linda and Mary of Frost's poem "Death of the Hired Men" (1915). Frost's Mary persuades her husband to take care of old Warren and so does Linda urges that Willy not be allowed to die like an old dog. She proposes Willy to have a trip in the open air. Linda never questions about his objectives. She always tried to protect him and it is her suggestion that Willy should go to Howard and ask for a job in New York. She is contrasted with the other members of the family. We find a good and dearest husband Willy through the characterization of Linda. Willy is also caring for his wife. The liar husband turns to be a different persona by the touch of Linda. His goodness is apparent in his attitudes towards Linda. Though he is often dominating over her, his concern about her is evident—"I was fired and I'm looking for a little good news to tell your mother, because the woman has waited and the woman has suffered" (p. 2160).

Willy always insults Charley. But as a real friend Charley sticks to him with his all sorrows and owes. Charley even offers him a job and gives money to him every week. Charley is contrasted with Willy. He turns to be a successful man and father of a successful lawyer. He is the only person who attends Willy's funeral other than the bereaved family members. His son Bernard is also sympathetic towards Willy. He shows his due respects to his father's friend.

Miller's presentation of Charley, Linda and Bernard shows light onto the soul of Willy Lowman. It is through them we can find other side of the coin—that is a person so loveable, respected and dearest. Willy is a human being and needs recognition which he looks for throughout his life. We cannot blame a loveable person for the ruin of his family. Happy remains self centered having no responsibility for the family. Biff stays away from Willy which may not be the only solution. Linda is too blind to take practical initiative to get Willy rid off his false ideology. On the other hand, the capitalist modern society does not provide room for an old sales man. Therefore, Willy does not get support from in and out of his family.

A careful analysis of Willy's character, his childhood alienation, guilty conscience, failure, fatherhood and other dimension of his mental manifestation will reveal the soul of a common man being affected by psychological disorders. A Freudian psychoanalytical approach to Willy's character may project that he is actually "more sinned against than sinning". Willy's tragedy is not only the tragedy of an American being affected by "success myth" but it is the story of everyman having the similar features identical in the inner psyche. He could not cope with the changing business world; nor does he get rid of the marks deeply rooted in his psyche. But his sufferings are more devastating that cannot be weighed up by his sins.

Freudian approach holds that human beings are mostly motivated by unconscious desires, conflicts and fears. The unconscious is the store house of those pains fears, failure and suffering we do not want to bring forth. Considering these effects we can look into the mind of Willy Lowman. His father was a salesman whose profession Willy has chosen. As a family oriented man Willy's concern, about his father who disappeared when he was a 'baby' is natural. Willy asks Ben about their lost father. He was deprived of fatherly affection. This sense of loss may have been stored in his subconscious self. Willy did not agree to go with Ben who became successful at his early age in Africa. He has responsibility for his family. Ben, on the other hand, "was more capable of becoming at ease in the world than Willy Lowman, whose refusal to join with his brother, a choice rooted in an ethic oriented to the family and to society, signaled his financial, social and family failure (Jacobson, 1975). Willy talks with Ben when he is alone which clearly marks the evidence of this sense of loss. Willy's over concern about his sons may have been a counter balance for sense of responsibility.

Willy tries to find the cause of his failure and it is only then Ben appears to let Willy count the opportunities that he did not use. He was also the one who "went north the first time, the Wagner company didn't know where New England was?" (p. 2113). He saw the company grows. Thus to have a desire of owning such a company of his own is not unnatural – "Tell you a secret boys. Don't breathe it to a soul. Someday I'll have my own business" (p. 2121) bigger than Charley's because he is not well liked. Stanton remarks "Willy Lowman is the tragic protagonist and the effects of his tragic flaws are clearly engraved upon his sons. The roots of Willy's tragedy seem to be in his lack of attention from his father and his perceived inadequacy to his brother, Ben" (Stanton 2011).

He talks of his father several times when he is in his imaginary world. The flute is symbolic as his father's memory is accompanied with it. The playwright uses the flute music when Willy is in his past. All these losses might have found a store house in Willy's mind which hinders his natural and logical thinking. His wish to have a business like Wagner Company and to look Biff in Howard's place is repressed.

We can also analyze Biff's case from Freudian view of Oedipus complex. To this notion, the male child is



jealous of his father to gain attachment with his mother. Willy's mother lost her husband which is the cause of pain. We can assume the pain and worries Willy's mother had to undergo which Ben and Willy are witnesses. Again Biff is very much concerned about his mother. He does not want to hurt his mother by telling the fact what he encountered in Boston hotel. Willy is the only person whom he dislikes and even hates after that incident. Biff wants her mother to be happy and interferes his father's behavior with his mother—"I don't like you yelling at her all the time, and I'm telling you, that's all" (p. 2139); though to Linda, "Willy is the handsomest man in the world" (p. 2134). Such complexity of Biff worsens Willy's case. Willy's sense of guilty feelings is also another effect on his psyche which comes back recurrently to his conscious mind. He does not like Linda mend stockings which remind him of his relationship with the prostitute in Boston hotel. He broke the rule of sexual code which society has set for him. Freud marks that we are socially programmed to feel guilty when we break this norm. Furthermore, Willy's sense of failure is identical with Freudian death drive theory that closely ties of being alone, of abandonment or of intimacy. We notice that Willy is always worried about his failure. He is haunted by Biff's hatred who abandoned him after the Boston incident. The only relief to his dismay is to win Biff's love. "Isn't that – isn't that remarkable? Biff- he likes me!" (p. 2178). Charley's and Bernard's success intensifies his fear of being the one who is confined to his own world of failure.

Nonetheless, according to Marxist view, literature is the product of social ideology to which it belongs. It is the superstructure of a class divided economy. Miller's society is profit oriented and there is no one to look after a heart broken sixty three years old salesman. Happy, the American young man still dreams to succeed. Happy says in Requiem "Willy Lowman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It is the only dream you can have –to come out number one man" (p 2175). But, does Willy deserve such a death? With such negligence? Such failure and suffering? Perhaps he is sinned because he wants to be number one but his sufferings are more. Like, Lear of Shakespeare he is sinned more than sinning.

## CONCLUSION:

Miller did not propose any solution to the problem of American dreamers. There are characters like Charley and Bernard who succeeded without having a dream. To some extent, Happy is a prosperous American young man. On the other hand, Ben succeeded miraculously. Willy Lowman fails in spite of having a dream for his family. It is the real world where funeral procession and wedding feast take place at the same time. Willy's tragedy is heroic as he sacrifices his life to get insurance money. Unlike Greek tragic hero he is not from higher status, but he takes a heroic death startling the American materialistic society. Steinberg comments "Willy Lowman does not gain *size* from the situation. He is seen primarily as the victim of his society; his warped values, the illusions concerning the self he projects, reflect those of his society (Steinberg, 1969).

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