

Exploring *Death of a Salesman* Through a Psychoanalytic Lens

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Abstract— *Psychoanalysis is a modern literary theory concerned with personality and the unconscious, and it has a close relationship with literature. It is widely used in literary criticism as a tool for interpreting character, motivation, and meaning. The present paper is a critical and comparative research study of the American playwright Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. The purpose of this paper is to examine the psychology in human mind through the character of Willy Loman. This study is a bit different from traditional one as it is mainly concerned with the central male character, Willy Loman, a salesman who has to shoulder the responsibility of the family. The family consists of Willy's wife, Linda Loman and two sons, Happy Loman and Biff Loman. Linda is a devoted wife but, unconsciously does not understand that Willy also requires physical involvement for she is often seen busy with her chores. As for his sons, both are far from the bitter reality of life and have dreamful approach towards life. At the age of sixty, when it is the age of retirement, he has to travel far and wide to sell his things. The indifference of the sons, ignorance of Linda and overload of responsibility make him frustrated and disappointed. His disillusionment and emotional crisis are comparable to those of Shakespeare's King Lear and Macbeth. Finally, Willy's frustration and disappointment hasten his tragic death.*

Introduction

Arthur Miller, in *Death of a Salesman*, portrays the life and destiny of an American family that dreams of prosperity and elevated social status. Rather than focusing solely on social contradictions or economic conditions, Miller foregrounds the psychological struggles experienced by the family members. Central to the play is Miller's unflinching analysis of distorted social values and moral decline. The past is not merely recalled through dramatic conflict; instead, Willy Loman is no longer the master of his memories but their helpless victim too. His inability to reconcile illusion with reality reveals the deep psychological and communicative failures within the

family. These failures ultimately lead to the breakdown of values, personal integrity, and family relationships.

Psychoanalysis:

Psychoanalytic therapy involves reinterpreting an individual's life narrative. It places significant importance on the relationships between the unconscious mind and cognitive processes. This approach holds that gaining awareness of these connections is therapeutic and essential for mental well-being. Psychoanalysis highlights underlying motives, concentrating on concealed or disguised drives, which aids in clarifying literature on two distinct levels: the level of the writing itself and the level of character behavior within the

text. Psychoanalysis emphasizes the subjects involved and seeks to explain how meaning and identity relate to psychological and cultural influences. Psychoanalysis plays a significant role in our current comprehension of reading, interpretation, and the connection between literature and culture. We exist in a post-Freudian era. It is undeniable that our perspectives on human existence differ from those of previous generations. While psychoanalytic methods of literary analysis may sometimes lack depth or appear overly simplistic, the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis remains highly significant.

Psychoanalytic Study of Arthur Miller's Play: Death of a salesman

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* throws an intense light on the plight of a man in a family. The play, a bit, deviates from the traditional view in which the main concern is always the plight, status, position, psychology of a woman whereas *Death of a Salesman* is focused on the same issues but herein the play, the concern is a man of 60 years, 'Willy' whose plight is over pathetic, miserable; and psychologically overstressed due to his anxiety for the career of his sons, Biff and Happy and his overload of responsibility.

Willy is a victim of the fast growing machine like world where he finds his position only as a tool of a big machine like family at personal level and the society at universal level. Miller, in his "On Social Plays", writes, "In short, the absolute value of the individual human being is believed in only as a second value; it stands well below the needs of efficient production. We have finally come to serve the machine. The machine must not be stopped, marred, left dry, or outmoded...Our pity for the victim is mixed, I think. It is mixed with an air of self-preserving superiority...so long as modern man conceives of himself as valuable only because he fits into some niche in the machine-tending pattern, he will never know any thing more than a pathetic doom." (*The Theater Essay of Arthur Miller 1978:60*)

Linda, Willy's wife, is very close to him. Willy shares everything with her. At a place, Willy asserts with Linda:

You're my foundation and my support, Linda, (Death of a Salesman 1949:13)

The routine work of driving in his car, 'Chevy' as a salesman to sell his things has made him tired of his life which is worsened further due to the shifting and unstable attitude of his son, Biff for his job. He, very painfully, says to Linda:

I'm tired to the death. (the flute has faded away. He sits on the bed beside her, a little numb) I

couldn't make it. I just couldn't make it. Linda. (8)

As a father, Willy is too worried to control his mind. He can't ascertain the taste of 'coffee': he finds it difficult to control the steering of his car. He tells Linda:

...I opened the windshield and just let the warm air bathe over me. And then all of a sudden I'm going off the road! I'm telling ya, I absolutely forgot I was driving. If I'd've gone the other way over the white line I might've killed somebody. So I went on again, and I nearly- [He presses two fingers against his eyes I have such thoughts. I have such strange thoughts.(9)

Moreover, it is only Linda who understands the mental condition of Willy and at the same time worried about his well-being. She wants him to work in 'New York' as he is 60 and immediately requires retirement. Unfortunately, the situation is not very favourable for Willy, for his immediate boss, Howard does not appreciate and understand Willy's labour and problem respectively. Willy has worked the whole life and paid off the loan of the house wherein the family lives. Moreover, he and his son, Biff are not on good terms. Both doubt each other. This tense situation has only aggravated Willy's agony. He is excessively concerned about Biff. His concernment leads to his excessive mental strain. He utters:

How can he find himself on a farm? Is that a life? A farmhand? In the beginning, when he was young, I thought, well, a young man, its good for him to tramp around, take a lot of different jobs. But it's more than ten years now and he has yet to make thirty-five dollars a week! (11)

Willy is disturbed by everything-whether it be his choice of 'cheese' or it be the cutting of trees and making of apartments or it be population. One of his statements shows his restlessness:

There's more people! That's what's ruining this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening! Smell the stink

from that apartment house! And
another one of the other side...
How can they whip cheese?
(12)

Happy has a soft corner for Willy whereas Biff is critical towards Willy, but both share common views towards life. Fun is the only preferable motto in their life. Their insobriety and fickleness only aggravate Willy's agony. Though Happy has marked some abnormalities in Willy's behaviour, but both Biff and Happy fail to recognize it in time. Their failure results in total disruption of Willy's entity. The conversation between Biff and Happy confirms it:

Biff: Everything I say there's a twist of mockery on his face. I can't get near him.

Happy: He just wants you to make good, that's all. I wanted to talk to you about Dad for a long time, Biff. Something's happening to him. He-talks to himself.

Biff: I noticed that this morning. But he always mumbled.

Happy: But not so noticeable. It got so embarrassing I sent him **Florida**. And you know something? Most of the time he's talking to you. (15)

Both Happy and Biff should have a mature understanding for the economical crisis of their house but instead they fly in the dream world. They want only beautiful babes around them. They ignore the fact that their father Willy has reached the evening of his life, and it is high time, at least, one of the two came forward to take the responsibility of the house. For Biff, Willy is "...selfish, stupid..."(21)

Willy is always found mumbling whenever he is alone. He talks to himself. His sons' reckless and fun-loving attitude has disturbed Willy mentally. He always discusses those things which, actually, he wants to do with his sons, when he is alone and mumbling. Biff's and Happy's fun for girls proves to be painfully disturbing:

Willy: just wanna be careful with those girls. Biff, that's all. Don't make any promise. No promises of any kind. Because

a girl, y'know, they always believe what you tell'em, and you're very young.

Biff, you're too young to be talking seriously to girls. (light rises on the kitchens, Willy, talking. shuts the refrigerator door and comes downstage to the kitchen table. He pours milk into a glass. He is totally immersed in himself, smiling faintly.)

Willy: Too young entirely Biff. You went to watch your schooling first. Then when you're all set, there'll be plenty of girls for a boy like you. [He smiles broadly at a kitchen chair] That so? The girls pay for you? [He laughs] Boy you must really be makin' a hit.

(**Willy** is gradually addressing-physically-a point offstage, speaking through the wall of the kitchen, and his voice has been rising in volume to that of a normal conversation)](21)

There is sudden shift in Willy's temperament. On the one hand he is worried about his sons' future and their fickleness, on the other, he loves his sons, especially, Biff, who is good at playing football and, together with his sons, makes a plan to visit America. He is also thankful to "... Almighty God you're (Happy/Biff) both built like Adonises". (25) The economical crisis of the family haunts Willy. It is difficult for Willy to afford it. He says to Linda:

A hundred and twenty dollars! My God, if business don't pick up I don't know what I'm gonna do! (28)

At this age, he has turned mentally vulnerable. Being commented on hurts him. Such a mental condition makes Linda concerned about Willy. He says to Linda:

I know it when I walk in.
They seem to laugh at me.

Again:

I know the reason for it, but they just pass me
by. I'm not noticed. (28)

For him life is ... the hell, life is short, a couple of jokes. (28-29) The overload of responsibility has made him irritated. His old age has made him slow at his work. He hits right on the face of the man who calls him 'walrus'. (29) He knows that it is not anyway fruitful but he cannot resist it. He, himself, accepts it:

I gotta overcome it. I gotta
overcome it. I'm not dressing
to advantage, may be.(29)

He appears to be in dilemma. He is, actually, a victim of adverse situation and his own illusion. While Linda is talking to Willy, he hears "the laughter of a woman...through Linda's lines."(29)

Willy's tragedy grows in his mind as may be seen in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear. Here in the two tragic plays, tragedy gets its base on the psychological ground. Macbeth is instigated not only physically but also mentally by Lady Macbeth and that psychological provocation is visualized into Macbeth's physical actions. Lady Macbeth utters:

Was the hope drunk
Wherein you desert yourself? Hath it slept
since?
And makes it now, to look so green and pale
from this time
Such I account thy love
Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire
Wouldst thou have that
Which thou have that
Which thou esteem'st ornament of life
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting 'I darenot' wait upon 'I would'.
Like the poor cat I' the adage? (Macbeth
1997:358)

The second instance maybe seen when Lady Macbeth dies. Even Lady Macbeth's tragedy gets its origin in her mind when she becomes the victim of the repetitive actions of cleaning the spots of blood of King Duncan:

Here's the smell of the blood still:
all the perfumes of Arabia will
not sweeten this little hand.Oh,
oh, oh! (395)

The third instance may be seen when Macbeth becomes the victim of the dual meaning predictions of the three witches who say:

Be bloody, bold, and resolute;
laugh to scorn The power of man,
for none of woman born Shall
harm Macbeth. (383)

And ultimately, Macduff born prematurely stands against Macbeth. It affects Macbeth adversely and psychologically leading to his tragic death.

Similarly, like the two Shakespearean heroes, Willy becomes the victim of his own deception. He takes pleasure in self-commendation by boasting himself of his success in business but the reality is just opposite. He praises his sons for their personality and expects a positive change in their lives. There comes about a his tragedy. Happy cannot do anything in his life and so is Biff. Willy and Biff are change in his thought. Very soon, he realizes his mistake and that realization causes at war with each other. Many a time, both altercate with each other.

In intensifying Willy's tragedy, Linda is also responsible though she has an indirect involvement. No doubt, Linda is a devoted, true and dedicated wife. Whenever Willy is angry, depressed or frustrated, she solaces him. But, there she makes one mistake unconsciously that she shares not much time with Willy, and it results into Willy's extramarital affair with another woman.

Willy gets frustrated and disappointed with the monotonous and agonies into tears, and therefore he is susceptible and vulnerable to such an cumbersome life. Being a man, he cannot cry like a woman nor can he vent his animal instinct, he gets trapped into the trap of extra-marital affair that leads to a psychological pressure on his mind as he is caught red handed with a half naked woman in the room of a hotel by Biff. Biff is adding salt to injury:

Biff: [his weeping breaking
from him]: Dad...

Willy [infected by it]: Oh, my
boy.....

Biff: Dad...

Willy: She's is nothing to me.
Biff. I was lonely, I was terribly lonely

Biff: You-you gave her Mama's stockings? [His tears break through and he rises to go]

Willy: grabbing for Biff): I gave you an order!

Biff: Don't touch me, you-liar!

Willy: Apologize for that!

Biff: You fake! You phony little fake! You fake! [overcome, he turns quickly and weeping fully goes out with his suitcase.

Willy is left on the floor on his knees]

Willy: I gave you an order!
Biff. comeback here or I'll beat you. Come back here! I'll whip you!" (Death of a Salesman, 95)

Biff, too, realizes his reality. He is 'flunked' in Maths by Mr. Birnbaum. He realizes his real ground and accepts his real position. This Biff's acceptance of bitter truth affects him psychologically, and 'at the peak of his fury' he utters:

Pop, I'm nothing, Pop. Can't you understand that?

There's no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all. (105)

With his tears, his anger calms down. It is only Ben who creates the halo of optimism in his life, Ben's own experience in his life and his becoming rich affects everyone in the family. Actually, his enriched position stands in sharp contrast to that of Willy's. This contrast, indirectly, multiplies the pressure of earning more on Willy. This race of maintaining financial standard in society and responsibility to fend the family members, have crushed him. The moment Ben is away, he searches for him anxiously, "Ben, Ben where do I...? Ben, how do I...? (108) The upheaval within his mind is as intensified as is in the mind of King Lear. Lear rushes out in an open heath, where storm has broken out:

...the tempest in my mind

Doth from senses take all feeling else

Save what beats there. Filial ingratitude!
(King Lear 1928:62)

Again:

Why, thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume-Ha! Here's three on's are shophisticated! Those art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here. (Tearing off his clothes] (65)

Willy, too, like Lear rushes down, sits in his car, drives and accelerates it unusually and rams into leading to his death, which is most acceptably, the way to salvation.

Willy's position may be estimated through Charley's estimation while all gather for the funeral of Willy in the graveyard. It is only Charley who understands the position and the difficulties of the life of a salesman. Charley says to Biff:

Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand; Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in blue, riding on a smile and shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back-that's an earthquake. And then your hat, and you're finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory. (Death of a Salesman, 111)

Certainly, Willy's death is tragically psychological. His tragedy grows right in the mind that makes him do something unreal and immoral. But, there are some possibilities that could have saved Willy from falling into tragic life. If Willy

had better means to survive; if Biff and Happy could have been a bit more responsible boys; if Willy had not to fend the whole family; if Linda had fulfilled the physical needs of Willy; if Willy had not indulged into extra-marital affair with the woman, but these possibilities were never tried and thus it resulted into a tragic death of a salesman, Willy.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the play, Miller delineates intense drama that compares to what Freud labelled basic human components which govern an individual's entire behavioural pattern: the id, ego, and superego (Freud, Ego 10) Although it may not have been intentionally crafted as a psychological drama in the Freudian tradition, Miller has nonetheless offered extensive insights into human relationships through this play. The playwright developed ideal platforms for examining human characteristics through a troubled family, whose behaviors and connections amplify the fundamental Freudian idea of the human psyche.

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