

A Quest for Positivity through Negativity in Death of a Salesman

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ABSTRACT: *Death of a Salesman is basically a novel about the lives of those people who are living a double meaning life. Arthur Miller creates in Willy a typical member of middle class with negativity of middle class pressures. Willy Loman the aging salesman loves his family but is unable to satisfy his own dream. He is a psychological study: self deluding, a man unable to quest positivity through negativity. He discovers positivity in a remembered past and imaginary life, an existence dramatically different from the one he is living and in which he feel imprisoned. He follows the American dream of success through entrepreneurship. He believes that if a person is well liked and has an attractive personality, he will be successful in business. Willy's American dream of financial success is in fact a false dream. It describes the problems of the common man and his conflicts and struggles with society to achieve the dream.*

Keywords: *negativity, self deluding, positivity, imprisoned, dream, false, struggle.*

INTRODUCTION

Death of a Salesman is basically a novel about the lives of those people who are living a double meaning life. They have aim but no direction. Willy Lowman is the central character about whom the story revolves. He has one and only desire to be a successful salesman. Not only Willy but also his two sons Happy, and Biff desire to make more money, to have their own business, and to enjoy a vacation house.

Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman* as a short story at the age of seventeen while he was working for his father's company. The play based on six major characters. Willy Loman the aging salesman loves his family but is unable to satisfy his own dream. Linda Loman, Willy's love, long-suffering wife; enables his delusions. Biff Loman; the eldest son of Willy Loman; bemused about his place and purpose in life; discovers Willy's affair. Happy Loman; the younger son of Willy Loman; is ready to perpetuate Willy's dreams. Charley generous neighbor, Willy's only friend, frequently offers support but is knocked back by Willy. Bernard friend to Biff is Charley's son who has become a very successful lawyer. Ben, Willy's dead brother, idolized by him, made his fortune in Africa. Howard Wagner, the son of the former owner of the Wagner Company. Miss Frances is the secretary of one of Willy's clients, the woman in Boston with whom Willy has an affair. And Litta and Miss Forsyth, the two women that Happy picks up in the restaurant, are the minor characters. It is possible to say that the play is all about the American Dream, Illusion vs. Reality.

Willy Loman, a 63 year old salesman working on commission. His wife Linda, a smiling house wife throughout the day and has two grown boys named Biff and Happy. Willy is a salesman by profession and when he was an adult, he had two options to live his life. On one hand he had the choice to live in his countryside and to work outdoors and on the other hand the possibility to live in the city and earn money in. The businessman named Dave Singleman was the person who motivated his life. Willy was that impressed by the fact that Dave Singleman is famous and people praised and liked him all over the country and that he had drummed merchandise in Singleman. Willy believes that he has found the secret to success and being praised and liked by getting a work in a selling firm as Dave Singleman.

Arthur Miller creates in Willy a typical member of middle class with negativity of middle class pressures. He is a psychological study: self deluding, a man unable to quest positivity through negativity. In fact he is at the bottom of the capitalistic world. Willy is a salesman by profession. He creates a theory involving personal attractiveness and being well-liked. He has firm faith that if a person is well-liked and has a great deal of attractiveness, then all doors will automatically be opened for him.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

In *Death of a Salesman* Willy Loman discover positivity in a remembered past and imaginary life, an existence dramatically different from the one he is living and in which he feel imprisoned. The quest for positivity through negativity has become a need to escape. This hunger for positivity is a main component to define his identity in a society that keeps evolving without ever slowing down. When things seem to close in on Willy, he starts thinking about his brother Ben who stands as an example for Willy. "That man was a genius that man was success incarnate!" Ben stands for everything that Willy is not. Ben was the adventurous person who ran away from home and after a few years came back and was rich. He first went to Africa before following his father's path to Alaska. He is the man who had once come by to see Willy and who had suggested to Willy that there was great opportunity for an aggressive and adventurous man in the forest of Alaska. But this was some time ago, and Willy could not go because he had told so many people lies about his great future with the Wagner Company. In fact Willy, like his son Happy, remains in the East and accepts the myth of the salesman as represented by Dave Singleman in the play. Willy wants to be like Dave Singleman who "without ever leaving his room, made his living" (63), Dave Singleman represents the supposed quintessential myth of success that Willy forces himself to follow.

Willy follows the American dream of success through entrepreneurship. He believes that if a person is well liked and has an attractive personality, he will be successful in business. Mostly all critics assert that the play shows the idea is a false one, and therefore the American dream is a false dream. According to Brooke Atkinson, *Death of a Salesman* describes the dream's helplessness to the play's protagonist, Willy Loman. To him, Willy's belief that success can be

obtained through personality is not logical, for what seems logical in pursuing success, in this regard, is to sell a product of a good quality. He remarks that Willy has always believed that success comes to those who are 'well liked.' He does not appear to be much concerned about the quality of the product he is selling. His customers buy, he believes, because they like him—because he is hale and hearty and a good man with jokes.

It is possible to say that *Death of a Salesman* a play about dreams. In fact, Willy dreams have two types - the American dream, i.e. the business-success dream and the rural dream. Moreover Willy does not only fail to achieve the business-success dream, but he also fails the substitute of this dream, that is, to maintain his job. The dream as a quest for positivity through negativity is embodied in Willy Loman who dreams two types of the American dream: 'the business-urban success dream' in which Willy sees himself as a successful tycoon, and 'the rural agrarian dream' which brings forth Willy's romantic-escapist notions of a life of communion with nature. For the success dream, Willy's models are Dave Singleman (the perfect ex-salesman), Charley (the friendly neighbor), and Uncle Ben. Further Willy's boss Howard's single minded pursuit of 'success' has turned into a monster, he is Willy's ideal. One cause of Willy's remorse is that he is a failure in the quest of this substitute of a dream—a failure in his own, as well as in his family's eyes.

Moreover the two dreams, i.e. the business-success dream and the rural agrarian dream, are used to emphasize the inner life of Willy who wishes to be greater than him. In fact Willy's rural-agrarian dream is a sort of safety valve to withdraw from the harsh realities of failure in the pursuit of the success dream. The two sources of Willy's remorse are two effects of the success dream, one is direct, i.e. his own failure, and the other is indirect, i.e. Biff's failure. The first source of Willy Loman's is the failure of his 'success' dream. Over a long life of illusions, Willy makes one false move after another in quest of positivity through negativity i.e. easy success. The second source is perhaps the more painful, that he has failed his children.

Willy's American dream of financial success is in fact a false dream. This false dream has destroyed Willy and his son, Biff. In order to achieve success he [Willy] must 'sell' himself. But Willy cannot succeed. This failure states that he is a failure in life. The American dream is full of the false notion on which the dream seems to depend, i.e. on being well liked and personality. The American dream of success and wealth is nothing but selling the self. Willy and his sons build their dreams according to the American dream. Even Willy realizes the illusory nature of the American dream is not clear at the end of the play.

In fact Miller is deeply concerned with social realities. He studies the impact of these realities on human beings while they seek to find a meaningful existence. It is possible to say that the death of Miller's salesman is symbolic of the breakdown of the whole concept of salesmanship inherent in the American society. For more than forty years Willy has striven to be a success and has tried to pass on his ideas to his sons. Willy's direction in life has been fixed by ideas to

which he has been exposed throughout his life, from the end of the last century up until this moment.

Miller himself believes that Willy rejects his natural talent of working with his hands and believes only in his dream of business success. Linda, Willy's wife, praises, over his grave, that 'He [Willy] was so wonderful with his hands.'⁽³⁰⁾ Willy's negligence of his own natural ability of working with his hands is partly the responsibility of the society. Willy Loman might have been a superb craftsman, but he is forced by the demands of a mechanized world to provide all the things to his family.

When "Death of a salesman" is written, that period was time of business prosperity and an era of financial prosperity for Americans. However, even in such immense transform action, the classic American faith in individualism was still present in the minds of a lot of people. Willy character faces this quandary exactly. He continues to believe in "old faith" rather than to face him with the new business culture. Willy had experienced many successes in his work as a salesman living a life of luxury because he has worked hard. But as the play goes on, Willy began to think himself as a failure in different domains of life because he cannot understand the new business climate he faces. Willy describes this problem to his wife Linda in the play.

One of the main reasons that make Willy cannot obtain the change the time is because he believes that one can achieve success in the business world by being well-liked and an imposing personality. Willy tells this idea to his son Biff advising him that being well-liked is the only way for success. We understand that Willy wishes his family to be successful, especially his two boys, Biff and Happy. His aim in life is to live the American Dream like his businessman turned out that he is still searching to find himself. This is what disappoints Willy and makes him feel ashamed about this and believes that deep inside that he is responsible for Biffs choices in life and his failure to be successful. Further Biff has discovered Willy's affair that causes Willy to lose his son's love and respect. This affair has left a deep impression on Biff's mind, and has changed the relationship between father and son. Biff treats Willy in a way that shows he does not have any respect for him. Biff's behaviour towards Willy's order denotes that he does not have any love or respect for his father; otherwise he would not dare say so. The fact is that, he has lost respect for his father since the moment he found him with that woman in Boston. When he felt that his father was betraying his mother, he castigated Willy. Willy not only loses trust and respect of his son, Biff but also loses his peace of mind. Whenever he finds Linda mending stockings, he feels guilty, because he used to give Linda's stockings to his woman in Boston. It is easy to say that Willy feels nervous when he finds the stockings in Linda's hands. This shows that he is sorry about what he had done.

Another reason that makes him disturbs is Willy's aging. By getting older he can't do the things he wanted to do. He is not earning enough money to support his dream and his wife. Being 60 years old disturbs his work because he is getting too old for the traveling and he is not

the salesman he once was. He asks his boss for a promotion and the boss fires him, so, this situation ruins Willy's pride. The last reason is the conflict between Willy and Biff. Biff tells him that he failed to be a good father. This statement has totally broken him down and he feels that his life is totally finished.

Willy's dreams and quest seem to be rightfully his. That is, no one can force him to leave dream and to estimate his abilities and character the way he likes. Further Willy's dreams and self-image are turned against him. Biff's hatred and disrespect for Willy's Boston affair made him lose his son's love and respect as well as peace of mind. All this negativity makes him lose sight of his true abilities and set his sights on false prestige and popularity. In order to achieve these qualities, Willy indulges in lies and pretensions. At last when he fails to make himself and his family successful he kills himself in order to maintain the illusion that he has sacrificed himself to give Biff the money to fulfill his dream. Ribkoff comments, "Driven by shame, he kills himself in order to present his dreams of being 'well liked' and a successful father and a salesman" (48). Willy has firmed faith that since it was his decision to kill himself, he has won control over his guilt and shame. Willy fails to understand that his illusion of success was a lie when he commits suicide. A quest of positivity through negativity is another major theme in the play of Arthur Miller because Loman family is all unable to separate reality from illusion to some degree.

CONCLUSION

In "Death of a Salesman" all the characters are struggling with their subjective nature. All the characters are not united, but centering on his or her personal struggles. Willy and his failures, Happy and his narcissism, and Biff with his emotional paralysis. Even Linda shows more of a subjective than substantive nature as she worries about the ways for appeasing the family. Miller talked about many pressures that put characters into action. The economic pressures include the race for money, keeping up with the neighbors, desperate expectations of fulfill an American dream of happiness, serene and resplendent. All in all, *Death of a Salesman* is one among the plays that makes a quest for positivity through negativity. It describes the problems of the common man and his conflicts and struggles with society to achieve the dream.

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