

The Illusion of Success Myth and American Dream in Arthur Miller's Death of A Salesman

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the Arthur Miller's portrayal of the failure of American Dream through his tragic protagonist Willie Loman. Miller presents the audience not just an issue to watch or read rather to empirically investigate the American Dream. The play takes the American Dream on the psychological level and showcases its impact on the mentality of American society. Loman's longing for success compelled him to confront the changing means of the society which makes his homeless, uprooted and solitary. The play debunks the success myth of American Dream.

KEYWORDS-American Dream, Drama, New World, Chosen people, land of opportunity

Introduction

American Dream is one of the most significant social ideals in the history of American Literature. It does not merely identify to an individual; rather it refers to the American society which was ceaselessly struggling hard to escape from the clutches of orthodox religious conventions. American Dream is the vision and the story of American success. Quest for success and material prosperity were the driving forces for the historical divorce from the old world and transition to the new world. The term American Dream was first used by James Truslow Adams in 1931 in his famous book *The Epic of America* in which he defined this dream as

“A dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable and be recognized by others for what they are regardless of the fortuitous, circumstances of birth or position.” (214-215)

This new world became the ultimate destination for every aspirer: Many of the poor migrated to New World to become rich, rich dreamt of being richer, the weak dreamt to be stronger, the energetic came to have work. America has grown up with the idea of Utopia, the dream land. Even before the puritan forefathers, the migration leaders, too, have advocated advancement towards the progress, assuring the favour of the God. The idea is closely associated to autonomy that are announced and explained in the Declaration of Independence (1776), ““All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (123).

American history, the idea of 'chosen people' and 'promised land' is frequently cherished as the common belief for generations and driving zeal for American Dream. Herman Melville, in his work entitled 'White Jacket: or, the World in a Man-of-War' repeatedly emphasizes the American notion of 'chosen people' in following words:

We Americans are the peculiar, Chosen People-we bear the ark of the liberties of the world.... Besides our first birth-right embracing one continent of Earth-God has given us... God has predestined, mankind expects great things from our race; and great thing we feel in our souls (Rifkin 18).

The peculiarity of the feeling of Americans as the 'chosen people' and America as the 'land of opportunity' makes American Dream uniquely particular and strongly supported the idea that American Dream can be achieved on the soil of America only. American Dream as the idea of success was their lifetime motif. Being a 'chosen people' of God they felt quite confident to attain their motif. The idea that they are the selected few is encouraging them to march towards the greatness.

Willie Loman's perception of American Dream

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is a vivid commentary on American Dream. Willy Loman as a representative character is at the center of the play who is a victim of misjudgment of his inner self and outward realities resulted into delusion of his desires and aspirations. He believed in his belief that the past plays the major role in an accomplishment or deeming of human life. The first draft of the play was titled as, *The Inside of His Head*. His ideas of success and failure are based on his past and amount of an experience he received from it. It is quite natural that an indulgence in past and long experience of life should enable everyone to have mature and realistic self-evaluation, but in case of the protagonist of the play – Willy Loman, it does not materialize and consequences lead him to wrong notion of dreams and desires. Willy always mis-evaluated and in the efforts of attainment of dream and expectations failed to work on proper note. Ultimately it withered him psychologically and physically to be victimized of unfortunate suicide. Arthur Miller, himself while commenting on the nature of the play, *Death of a Salesman* explicitly asserted his views :

Death of a Salesman is a sleepery play to categorize because nobody in it stops to make speech objectively stating the great issues which I believe it embodies ... it reverberates, echoes, resonates its rhythms roll deep down towards and into American desires and delusions (Heyen 47).

The protagonist of the play Willy Loman, has been working as a travelling salesman for Wagner firm since last thirty-four years. Now at the age of 63, not bringing expected business for the firm and straightway removed from salary to commission as he is not remained valuable for the firm. Willy is hurt by this ungrateful act of the company and quite disgusted with his state. Yet he has no other way than to keep himself associated with his work to run his family. Linda Loman, Willy's wife, a typical middleclass house wife, having much concern for the family, feels pleasure in sacrificing her own wishes for the sake of her husband and sons. Despite his illusions and difficulties she has great care and love for Willy. She feels it is her divine duty to be always with husband, in all his adversities and

pleasures. Biff Loman is thirty-four year old, elder son of Willy, a recognized star footballer at his high school level. His 'physical attractiveness' has heightened Willy's expectation for him. He showed great promise for future but for last fourteen years he has been "unable to find himself". Happy Loman is Willy's younger son of the age thirty two, independent, working in a departmental store, living in his own apartment. But he feels rejected by his father. Willy, too, is not expecting much from him that by working in a departmental store, has defied his lofty dream of success. Charley, a next door neighbour of Lomans having life-long acquaintance for Willy has loaned money every month to Willy as he has been put on commission basis. Bernard is Charley's son, a successful Lawyer of his age and a childhood friend of Biff. He is always compared with Biff.

To Willy, world is a market place and everything is a saleable commodity. Being an absolute salesman, he thinks Biff is not making use of his 'personal attractiveness' in the greatest country like America where everything is sold and purchased. Despite all the salesmanship qualities

Biff possesses, his failure and 'not finding himself' is a matter of worry for him. In fact, Willy has a kind of nervousness and haste to materialize his desires, his own realization of age and Biff's cool response to his father's expectations makes Willy victim of frequent nervous break downs.

In such situations Linda is the only source of consolation and encouragement for Willy. Though, Linda has no any space in Willy's dreams and desires, and she too is not insisting about it; as a good wife and mother she prefers to encourage her family. Despite Willy's failure in the life, Linda ranks him high, saying: "Just try to relax, dear. You make mountains out of Mole hill" (13)

Willy's failure and suffering is a result of misjudgment and miscalculation of success and failure as well. Man, who himself could not find his way throughout whole life, is expecting lot from his son who is unable to find himself 'at the age of thirty-four'. Whatever tragic consequences Willy goes through are resulted out of an inadequate reliance and improper notions of success. The haste for success has led him to wrong moves. His frequent shifting from present to past has always made him to realize an urgency to regain the lost golden empire. On the background of present hard realities and an insecurity of 'maddening competition', his haste for attainment of success has adversely affected the logic of life. In a nostalgic tone, when he talks about the suffocation which feels in the boxed houses of bricks and windows, it seems that he feels more suffocated internally by the bitter fruits of depression. And for him, lungful breath of success is the only breath of consolation. Of course, there is nothing wrong in Willy's earnest feeling for success but his hopes are residing on wrong values and wrong means. He wishes to employ Biff as an apparatus in his experiment of success and is not enough handy to borne the results. The play end with Willy's funeral and the failure of his dreams as he has always been dreaming of having big funeral, ironically, nobody comes to his funeral as his wife Linda indicates.

In this way the play provides two models for success namely Ben and Charlie. While Ben combines elements of the past values with modern tendency and Charlie on the other hand get success by reason and logic. In contrast Willy never understood this and stuck with his old belief of strict individualism and quick success. Through the play the

playwright hints that the problem is not in the American Dream, rather, it is in our version of it; it is in the way we apply it.

Conclusion

Willy Loman is lost in the heart of darkness, in a cruel competitive spirit of American society where the profit is the sole objective, a weak old and infirm man like Willy has no any place. But the tragic thing is that Willy ignoring his abilities and realities tries to run with the spirit of

American society. Keeping his desires close to heart, he tries to accept the challenge of survival. In the cat-rat race of competitive American society and his dreams he is exhausted. It has instilled an intense spiritual crisis in him.

In an extensive work by June Schluter and James K. Flanagan, entitled Arthur Miller, Death of Willy Loman has been precisely evaluated :

... Willy dies in service of the dream he has worshipped all his life, the dream that has nurtured a vision of self that bears little resemblance to reality and he leaves that dream as legacy to his sons, who have no more chance at success than Willy has had. ... he goes to his death without the wisdom of self discovery, he remains a pathetic “Low man”(Flanagan 63).

Thomas E. Porter, in his work, Myth and Modern Drama appreciates the play Death of a Salesman as it deals with an Algeresque ideal and rag-toriches notion of American Dream. While justifying Willy’s desire to the pursuit of American Dream of success he regard it as a popular formula :

Success is a requirement American make of life. Because it seems magical and inexplicable; as it is to Willy, it can be considered the due of every free citizen, even those with no notable or measurable talents ... The citizens may justly and perhaps even logically ask – if Eddison, Goodrich and Red Grange can make it, why not me, why not Willy Loman (17).

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