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THE AMERICAN DREAM IN DEATH OF A SALESMAN

After the magnificent premiere on the stage of the Morosco Theatre on February 10th, 1949 /1/, during the following period, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* had less and less people in the audience, notwithstanding the fact that it was an extraordinary play that will win the Pulitzer Prize and become his most celebrated and most produced play. The question is why? Regardless of the fact that the play was publicly attacked by HUAC (the *House Un-American Activities Committee* that carried out anti-communist investigations from 1938 till 1975 among notable persons and public figures in America at the time thought to be associated with Communism /2/) because of its author's political history which was one of the reasons, inside the theatre hall, the people were faced with a story about themselves and for many it was too hard to stand. The plot which, nonetheless, according to some critics, failed to comply the permanent laws of tragedy as Aristotle suggested (Is its action large or impressive enough to be an appropriate subject for a tragedy?, Does Willy achieve the tragic self-awareness in the end of the play or does he die still clinging to an illusion?, Is the language of the play too colloquial and prosaic for a tragedy? /3/), is considered to be a tragic story about Willy Loman, the salesman from the title, a "low man" to whom every ordinary man from the theatre hall can be identified with. The author purposefully used Willy to show how the blind faith in the American Dream, viewed as shallow promise of happiness through material wealth, can cause tragic effects. Paradoxically, the very reasons which caused the decreasing number

of people attending the performances at first, were also the reasons why this play is widely regarded as “one of the most significant accomplishments of the American theatre” /4/. It is a timeless story, forever valid, and it may be linked not only to a particular, post World War II American man, but also to every man in the world who blindly believes in ideals and who stubbornly remains unchanged.

If Everyman will forgive me, in Arthur Miller’s Salesman there’s much of Everyman. Bothered, bewildered, but mostly bedeviled. As Willy Loman is, he’s not a great deal different from the majority of his contemporaries. He, even as you and I, builds himself a shaky shelter of illusion. /5/

Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* is in consistency with his style of writing dramas – socially and politically conscious realism through which he created characters and their complex connections to their social, economic, family, religious roles (It can be discussed, for example, whether Willy is good or bad father and husband?). Also, in his plays, Miller deals with emotions without being pathetic or melodramatic, which also adds to this realistic tone of his dramas.

Through Willy, the author examines the myth of the American Dream, through whom he portrays the universal hopes and fears of the middle class Americans. Before discussing it any further, firstly, something must be said about the original, innocent ideal. The concept of the American Dream originated during the colonial period from 18th century America. It meant the same opportunities for everyone according to their abilities and regardless of their social status or circumstances of birth” /6/. It is rooted in the American Declaration of Independence – “All men are created equal” /7/. Originally, it referred to the right for all who came from Europe to America to get a piece of land for farming. In the modern times, it indicates the same chance for everyone to

achieve prosperity, to be educated, to make individual choices, without any restrictions, for all the same.

In *Death of a Salesman*, the very core of the social criticism is the corruption of this American Dream and this essay will try to explain the elements of that criticism in the play through presenting the importance of setting as a tool used for criticizing the society in which the Loman family lives, and through presenting the main character, Willy Loman, who is created as such deliberately, again, as the author's way to tell the story about the middle class, post World War II individual who was unable to cope with the changes that the new order brought.

Death of a Salesman or as it is subtitled *Certain Private Conversation in Two Acts and a Requiem* is a play meant for the stage and therefore it is important to pay attention not only to what is said by the characters but also to the setting, music that can be heard (here, it is the music of a flute), costumes, equipment and objects used in the play, light, because all this is very important and contributes to the reading and understanding of a play. At the very beginning, the author is presenting to his readers the time and place in which this play happens:

The action takes place in Willy Loman's house and yard and in various places he visits in the New York and Boston of today. /8/

The key word here is "today". This "today" refers to New York in 1949, but it can unquestionably refer to any year or any modern city in the world, which all together adds to the timelessness of the topic of the play. Therefore, what is the conclusion of this play can be said to be valid for everyone, everywhere who blindly believes in dreams and ideals – these beliefs can cause nothing else but tragic effects.

At the beginning of Act 1, there is the music:

A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon. The curtain rises. /9/

By imagining this beautiful and soothing melody in the minds, the readers have the picture of the past times, which were more natural and idyllic habitat of the Natural man. It is implied that those times are long gone the same as the innocent American Dream, and that now this Natural man from the past who suffered certain violations is transformed into a Material man who lives according to the material laws, not natural laws any longer.

Finally, the Salesman's house is presented:

Before us is the SALESMAN'S house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange. As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile seeming home. An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality. The kitchen at center seems actual enough, for there is a kitchen table with three chairs, and a refrigerator. But no other fixtures are seen. At the back of the kitchen, there is a draped entrance, which leads to the living room. To the right of the kitchen, on a level raised two feet, is a bedroom furnished only with a brass bedstead and a straight chair. On a shelf over the bed a silver athletic trophy stands. A window opens onto the apartment house at the side. /10/

"Small, fragile home" surrounded on all sides by "a solid vault of apartment houses", simply furnished, suggests the home of a simple family that is just getting by. The tall buildings are towering their home as if taking their freedom away, as if they are vulnerable and trapped. Somehow, as if those buildings represent Willy's number of unrewarding years working as a travelling salesman that have weighed on his shoulders and are burden to him now. That small house is separated from the environment, from the reality of those buildings, surrounded by the blue light that indicates the dream-

like state of the play, to the past and to the period when people lived in houses, before World War II, when the American Dream was still alive. Yet, on the sides, there is “an angry glow of orange” suggesting that something is trying to invade the Dream and that its days are numbered. The new order has come, new reality according to which families are no longer living in houses; the communities where people support each other and care for each other no longer exist. Now, in apartments, people live separate lives, they do not know each other and do not care, whatsoever. America became the country of extreme individualism where “*every man is for himself only*” /11/.

From the beginning of the play, the readers see that Willy Loman lives in a delusion; to be a salesman for him means to achieve a significant financial success not through using one’s training or education but through being familiar with how to manipulate the clients by power of persuasion.

And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. 'Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people? /12/

However, the business conditions have changed, the job market now requires the specialized knowledge and training in order for someone to succeed. Since Willy lacked that knowledge, he was destined to fail. The business world no longer rewarded smooth-talking, charismatic salesmen but people capable to promote products (plus, he talks as not being aware that a man at the age of 84 still must work!). Optimistically, Willy, till the very end, believed that the present is never bad as it seems and that the future is even better. Nevertheless, this fake optimism can be connected to the American

Dream in the sense that the success in the new American society is debatable – the hard work, “personal attractiveness” and honest efforts are not as important as who you know and who likes you, for providing someone’s comfortable living. Although Willy rejects to admit the error of over-emphasizing the importance of “personality” and never stops hoping that the events will turn around, it is seen that his optimism in the end is substituted with the sense of despair.

Willy: Funny, y'know? After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive.

Charley: Willy, nobody's worth nothin' dead. Did you hear what I said? /13/

Willy, prone to fooling himself, childishly believed that his “personality” will make him “well liked” but he ended up being an embarrassment to the company, so he was fired (Charley’s words from this excerpt can be interpreted as the author’s message that death solves nothing, but a man must deal with the problems by facing them).

Howard Wagner’s words: “Cause you gotta admit, business is business” /14/ can be seen as awfully cold-hearted since he equates Willy’s value as a human being to his ability to make money for the company. That is why Willy finds death as a solution because after he is dead the insurance policy will provide his family more money than he could earn for the rest of his life. This is, again, an instance of criticism of the American culture where laws of business failed to ensure the human treatment for all the citizens and that it abandons a man in the time of need. This is why Willy cannot be blamed for turning into an angry, resentful person after having based his life hopes only on a few promises and stories and was betrayed. In the end, Willy is exhausted by trying all his life. He is a truly confused, overwhelmed, small man that the readers pity and sympathize with, the same as Linda does when she

calls him "[...] *a small boat looking for a harbor*" /15/. Willy's blind faith in the original version of the American Dream lead him to a rapid psychological decline. The readers perceive this through Willy's incompetence to accept the disparity between the Dream and the reality. He is lost in this world in which he no longer fits and eventually killed by the hope for a life that is long gone (the author does not reject Willy's optimism but only warns the readers about the danger of blindly and naively following the ideals). Willy, as a symbol of the death of the American Dream, can no longer be alive when the Dream is dead.

To sum up, through these two arguments it is viewed how the author simply and effectively used the elements of drama to criticize the corrupt American society of the period. Also, it is important to add that the period in which this play was written (late 1940s), was the period when America started to grow as a military, political and cultural power, and among other American products that were exported to the rest of the world, the most important were the American Capitalism and the American Dream, as hard work rewarded by the middle class symbols of success – house, car, gadgets... (and this all took place at the time when the Native Americans, Hispano and other immigrants were fighting for the basic human rights in America that would enable them to live that Dream if they wished, so in this sense the play poses one more question, as important as all others: Is the Dream equally available to all?). It means that this ideology did not stay only in America, but it spread throughout the world. After the WWII, a general feeling of safety and security in the newly formed prosperity in America, made people buy everything on credits, which eventually turned them into machines who would work only to pay the bills and buy the necessities. This ideology invited people to believe that the success is within their reach of grasp, but Arthur Miller in this play proved that this was not exactly so. Through the story about the

Loman family who were the victims of these larger forces in the society beyond their control, the general tendency in America of the period is presented, and that is to praise only the superficial values.

In favour of what has already been said in the introduction of this essay – that this is a timeless story, is the fact that Americans did spread their values throughout the world. These values are still valid so in that sense it is a story not only about Willy, Linda, Biff and Happy from the first half of the 20th century America, it is rather a universal story about everyone everywhere. To conclude,

[...] *Willy Loman – a corpse who happily refuses to stay dead, who ever since he first died the death of a salesman on the stage of the Morosco Theatre on February 10, 1949, has been coming to elicit sympathy, evoke pity, provoke anger, stir up controversy, ask for judicial appraisal* /16/ still, to remind us, the readers, of the author's warning to reason critically in order to see more than it is apparent.

Notes:

/1/ WALES, Gerald Clifford, (1996) *Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman, Text and Criticism*, Reprint of the 1967 ed. Published by The Viking Press, New York, in series: The Viking critical library; ISBN 0 14 02.4773 4; *Introduction*, page VII

/2/ <http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/miller/biography.html>

/3/ WALES, Gerald Clifford, (1996) *Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman, Text and Criticism*, Reprint of the 1967 ed. Published by The Viking Press, New York, in series: The Viking critical library; ISBN 0 14 02.4773 4; Noyes C.P. & Cowley, Malcolm: *Topics for Discussion and Papers*, page 415

/4/ <http://www.answers.com/topic/arthur-miller/>
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- /5/ WALES, Gerald Clifford, (1996) *Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman, Text and Criticism*, Reprint of the 1967 ed. Published by The Viking Press, New York, in series: The Viking critical library; ISBN 0 14 02.4773 4; Garland, Robert, *Reviews*, page 199
- /6/ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Dream
- /7/ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Declaration_of_Independence
- /8/ WALES, Gerald Clifford, (1996) *Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman, Text and Criticism*, Reprint of the 1967 ed. Published by The Viking Press, New York, in series: The Viking critical library; ISBN 0 14 02.4773 4; *Death of a Salesman, the Text*, page 9
- /9/ *Death of a Salesman, the Text*, page 11
- /10/ page 11
- /11/ <http://www.enotes.com/death-of-a-salesman>
- /12/ page 81
- /13/ page 98
- /14/ page 80
- /15/ page 76
- /16/ WALES, Gerald Clifford, (1996) *Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman, Text and Criticism*, Reprint of the 1967 ed. Published by The Viking Press, New York, in series: The Viking critical library; ISBN 0 14 02.4773 4; *Introduction*, page VII