

**Reality and Reverie in Twentieth Century America in Arthur Miller's
*Death of a Salesman***

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Abstract:

Arthur Miller was a greatest American writer, who was born in 1915. His dramas have a pronounced social content. There is at the same time, a preoccupation with man's psychological problems also in Miller's work. The present study is focused on the economic depression and stagnation that American was passing through at the time of Arthur Miller is reflected in the play. Miller was sympathically disposed towards communism which he felt to be a panacea for all social ills. The scope of the article examines the themes of Reality and Reverie in the selected novel of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. It focuses on character development and narrative techniques using a reality a reality technique in 20th century literature.

Keywords: American dream, depression, social condition, economical crisis, insurance, etc....,

Introduction:

Arthur Miller was born in New York in 1915. He suffered very much during his early boyhood. He had to get up early in the morning to deliver bread for the local bakery. He was unimpressive at school, with no academic achievement to his credit. In his autobiographical work entitled *A Boy Grew in Brooklyn* he talks of his school days.

America was in the grip of a severe depression when Miller left college. He held many unlitary jobs to support himself. He worked as a truck-driver, waiter, crew-man on a tanker and so on. His acquaintance with ordinary jobs went into the making of his plays later. Miller's dramas have a pronounced social content. There is at the same time, a preoccupation with man's psychological problems also in Miller's works. The chief message that Miller conveys is that man should be concerned not only with his personal life or with the problems of his family but with his role as a citizen of the world outside his family. This is the theme of Miller's major dramas. *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible*

(1953) and *A View from the Bridge* (1955) and, with some modifications, of his two latest works, *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy*, both produced in 1964.

Textual Analysis:

The play *Death of a Salesman*, Willy lives wrapped up in the past. At crucial moments he recalls what he did or what happened to him in the past. A large chunk of the play shows Willy's absorption in such reveries. It is extremely difficult for the reader to distinguish between reverie and reality in those contexts in which one sentence shows Willy talking to a real person and the very next sentence shows him swinging back to the past and talking with some non-existing person. Some of the figures recalled by Willy have no existence outside his reveries. Willy's elder brother Ben who amassed a huge fortune in Africa and the unnamed woman with whom Willy had a clandestine affair at a restaurant in Boston are both figures occurring only in Willy's reveries. The young Linda carrying the washed clothes, Biff and Happy in school uniform, their neighbour Charley and his son Bernard all these people occur not only in Willy's reveries but, having grown up, bulk large in real situations also in the play.

In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller shows 'haves' riding roughshod over 'have-nots'. Howard and Bill Oliver are prosperous employers. But they are not prepared to share the good things of life with labourers. Singh states that: Miller investigated the problem of individuals suffering in an artificial society in his works. In addition, he merged realistic people with current sorrow in his work. His plays jamb from his social conscience and regard for people who are vulnerable to the misleading values implanted in them by society, and his plays jamb from his social conscience and consideration for those who are vulnerable to the deceitful values imposed in them by society." (1562).

In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy has spent the best part of his life, visiting far-off places "he drives seven hundred miles, and when he gets there no one knows him anymore, no one welcomes him" (57) and pushing his company's products. According to Spalding, Willy's job as a salesman "in the United States during the 1940's was an occupation as typical of its time and place as that of a priest would be in medieval Europe" (41). He has established the Wagner Company on a firm footing. But now he is too old to travel far and wide. Instead of offering him a sedentary job in the local office, his young employer coolly sacks him. This is an inhuman act. According to Abbotson, "the historical economic interests and forces working on American society from the turn of the century until the time." (1563)

Willy is treated like an inanimate object. As he himself says, the treatment meted out to him is like eating an orange and throwing away the peels. In his youth Willy was like an orange. In his old age he is like the condemned peels. As Bigsby observes, Willy's problem is that "he has so completely internalized the values of his society that he judges himself by standards rooted in social myths rather than human necessities" (xviii). Bill Oliver, another young employer, is no less inhuman than Howard. Biff seeks to obtain a massive loan from

Oliver to start a business. Oliver refuses even to meet Biff. In sheer despair, Biff steals his pen and runs away.

Unemployment and under-employment are shown to be widespread in Miller's America. "An air of the dream clings to the location, a dream emerging out of reality," (11 DS). Biff runs from pillar to post in search of a decent job but cannot earn more than a dollar an hour wherever he goes:

There's nothing more inspiring or—beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt. And it's cool there now, see? Texas is cool now, and it's spring. And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my God, I'm not getting anywhere! What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I'm thirty-four years old. I ought be Makin' my future. That's when I come running home." (22, DS)

As he himself dejectedly says, he belongs to the category of cheap goods that cost only "a dime a dozen" (132, DS). Talented young men like Happy, not getting any outlet, waste themselves in sexual orgies.

Migration to other Places for a better living:

Not getting well-paid jobs in America, Americans are shown going abroad to better their lives. At the tender the age of seventeen Ben goes to Africa where he soon comes to own diamond mines. He is ambitious of starting a business in Alaska where he has already bought a forest and needs some trustworthy person to look after it. "when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich! (41, DS)

People resorting to installment system:

The concept of buying on credit and paying in easy installments is shown to have taken deep-roots. Willy has bought a house, a car, a refrigerator and a washing machine on credit and is struggling to pay installments for all these things.

I don't know what the hell I'm working' for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment—all alone. And I think of the rent I'm paying. And it's crazy. But then, it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I'm lonely" (23). Willy bitterly complains that the articles he has bought out on credit keep breaking down every now and then and by the time he clears away all the loans they will become completely useless and he will have to buy new ones again on credit. The hire-purchase system thus involves people in endless debts.

Abbotson says that "Willy evidently found his products hard to sell in a period when nobody had money to buy anything but necessities" (137). A change happened after World War II, but it became "a young man's world, and Willy, in his sixties, is swiftly becoming outmoded, his sales style also being out of date" (137).

Lack of morals:

Immorality is shown to be spreading fast. Big cities are infested with call-girls. A giggling call-girl takes advantage of Willy's loneliness in Boston and wheedles costly gifts

from him. Two glamorous call-girls in New York make Happy pay for their drinks and take them out, leaving behind his father uncared for. Disgusted with Happy's irresponsible behaviour, Khodambashi employs that, "Happy who is a follower of his father's way of life is most probably going to have a tragic ending, an ending similar to that of Willy" (354). Linda calls him an animal and the scum of the earth.

Buildings crowded lack of open spaces: because of the indiscriminate construction of apartment houses, Nature is shown to be receding fast. Willy's house in New York is surrounded by a track cluster of towering apartment houses so much so that he feels himself boxed in. He nostalgically yearns for the past when the backyard, blooming with daffodils and peonies, was filled with fragrance. Now, the whole place reeks with a bad smell. Willy's efforts to grow vegetable plants in the airless, gloomy background are bound to fail.

Willy's suicide

Towards the end of the second Act, Willy imagines himself talking with Ben about his intention to commit suicide so that the insurance company will give Biff twenty thousand dollars. Ben objects to this proposition, saying that the insurance company will not honour his policy if he commits suicide. Willy says that he worked hard like a 'coolie' and paid all the premia and so the insurance company cannot dodge. Ben says that Biff will have only contempt for his father if he commits suicide. Willy replies that he is not contemptible. It will be proved by his funeral which will be attended by thousands of old-timers coming from different parts of America. With the insurance money Biff's position is sure to skyrocket. After analysing all the pros and cons, Ben approves of Willy's plan to commit suicide. The reverie ends with Ben disappearing into darkness and Willy rushing away in his car to smash it and kill himself. Thus the play is full of Willy's reveries and recollections. He is shown to be born between the past and the present. In short he is in a schizophrenic state.

Dramatic techniques:

Miller's dramatic techniques are quite modern. Instead of ringing down the front curtain at the end of every scene, Miller uses the technique of focusing on different parts of the same stage to indicate shifting of location. Thus, light is focused on one part of the stage which serves as Willy's house. After the action connected with that part is over, light is focused on another part of the stage which serves as Charley's office. Very few scenic aids are used for places other than Willy's house. For example, Charley's office has nothing except a few chairs. Howard's office is also bare. He is seen plying with a tape-recorder. Biff remains standing there for long and finally runs away with a pen which he finds on a table. Willy's car is heard rushing but is never seen. Quick movement of action from one place to another is possible because Miller avoids using heavy and gorgeous scenic aids and depends chiefly on the focus light.

Miller uses certain symbols effectively. Willy's car is a symbol of self-destruction. Ben's looking at his watch repeatedly images the hurried pace of modern life. The unnamed prostitute's smile is indicative of her deceitfulness. There are some apt mythological

references in the play. Willy compares Biff to Adonais and Hercules. Sometimes trifles are used as objects of comparison. Thus Willy compares himself to orange peels.

The play has an abrupt, inconclusive end. We do not know whether the insurance company will honour Willy's policy or not. We do not know either how Biff and Happy are going to fend for themselves. Unlike the Shakespearean tragedy in which a problem is solved and a new order is ushered in, Miller's play ends in a confused state, with the problems remaining unsolved. This underlines Miller's view of life as an unbroken chain of problems.

Another striking device used by Miller is juxtaposing or contrasting characters to highlight one another's merits and demerits. Thus the several call-girls who wheedle money out of Willy and his sons throw into bold relief the staunch devotion and selflessness of Linda. The dreamy Willy is contrasted with the shrewd, practical-minded Charley and Howard who do not give room to sentimentalities in business matters. The methodical Bernard heightens the laziness and irresponsibility of Biff and Happy. Situations are also contrasted with one another. Thus the problems faced by the Willy family before and after his death are contrasted. The contrast between the dream and the reality is a major motif. Willy dreams that his funeral will be attended by thousands of old-timers coming from different parts of America. But in reality nobody other than the members of his family attends his funeral. Biff looks upon his father as an ideal to be emulated but the reality as glimpsed by him is that Willy dallies with a prostitute during his trip to Boston.

Conclusion:

This play is regarded by all as the finest of Miller's works. Willy Loman is also wrapped up in self-delusions like Keller in *All My Sons*. He thinks that with his personal attractiveness and pleasant social manners he is a most successful salesman. He is not aware of his limitations. But as the play progresses, his shortcomings surface one by one. He loses his job, discovers that his idealistic elder son is a failure and that his younger son, though successful in business, is morally rotten. Like Keller, Loman also commits suicide, as all his dreams are shattered. *Death of a Salesman* exposes the boastful, self-made American businessman who cannot, however, stand a crisis.

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