

A Psychological Approach to Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman

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Introduction

Death of a Salesman is written by Arthur Miller, one of America's leading 20th Century dramatists. It won the Pulitzer prize as the best play of the year, and the movie version won first prize at the Venice Film Festival. It is the story about Willy Loman, a salesman over sixty, who works hard all his life but fails and gets dropped by capitalistic society, including his family and the place where he works.

This paper will be a psychological approach to the play which analyzes the three major characters, Willy, Biff and Happy. This approach will include a discussion of (1) the motives of the three major characters, (2) the substitutes they find for knowing that they are failures, (3) the relationship between them, (4) the reasons for their failures, (5) whether they become aware of the reasons by the end of the play.

Analysis

To become successful, one must have a clear and definite motive.

Willy's last name is a pun on "low-man." He is at the bottom of the rung in a creative or capitalistic world. He owns nothing, and he makes nothing. Thus, for this reason the play deals with life of salesman. The salesman is the man who peddles wares made by someone else and owned by someone else. He has then no sense of accomplishment or ownership.¹

To Willy who belongs to a low social class and who is selling goods for others, the idea that a person must be not just liked but well-liked is paramount. Willy thinks that if a person is well-liked, then the entire world opens up for him. Willy took this idea from an old salesman named David Singleman who was so loved and respected that all he had to do was to go into a town and pick up a phone and then could place many orders. And when Dave singleman died at the age of eighty-four, buyers and salesmen from all over the country came to his funeral. Through all his life, Willy has tried his best to become this person.

In the larger part of the play, Biff rejects Willy's views, or at least seems to be essentially opposed to Willy's purpose in life. However, when we search deeper, we see that Biff is indeed closely aligned to Willy's concept of life.²

Similar to Willy, Biff's dream is to become a star and work without taking orders from anybody. When he was a child, he stole a ball from school, thinking that he will not be punished because he is well-liked. He also stole some wood to show what a fearless person he is. When Happy suggests borrowing money from Bill Oliver, the boss of the company which Biff quit almost ten years ago after stealing some basketballs from the stockroom, Biff thinks that he may be able to borrow the money by using his personal attractiveness.

Affected by Willy's idea, Happy also believes that a person has power only if he is well-liked. What Happy needs is power and recognition. He wants to become successful in business. Happy can't stand being "one of the two assistants to the assistant"³ and working under people who are not well-liked. He wants to take the place of a merchandise manager who earns a lot of money. He is dreaming that someday when he walks into his company's store, the waves will "part in front of him"⁴. He keeps flirting with girls to show that nobody can resist his personality.

When a man fails, he sometimes finds substitutes for knowing that he is a failure to be able to live in a desperate situation. Willy has a constant temptation to exaggerate his success and to deny or to minimise his failure. One substitute he uses to prevent knowing his failure is self-deception. Throughout the play he is a man who is portrayed as someone who can not face up to reality. Even when his failure is pointed out to him, he reinterprets it to make it conform to his own needs.

Early in the play, Linda asks Willy to ask for a position in New York so that he won't have to travel. But Willy refuses on the ground that he is vital to New England.⁵ It is not long before the reader knows that Willy is not really vital to New England and is in fact a hindrance to his company. But for his self-respect, Willy must continue to believe that he is indeed vital to New England. He explains that in New England he opened up new territories for his company.

When Biff and Happy were little boys, Willy always told them that he would take them up to New England and the boys would see how "they know me up and down New England."⁶ But Willy never gets around to taking his boys with him, because when he must face reality, he knows that he is not vital and is not well known. The illusion that he is vital has to become a reality in order to allow Willy to continue with the daily drudge of living.

On his trips to sell goods, Willy gets very lonesome and desperate because he has no friends and also is not attractive to the buyers. Therefore, when a slattern like Miss Frances, a buyer in Boston, allows herself to be picked up for the price of a pair of stockings, Willy gladly does so because she serves to build his ego. With her he feels the importance that is denied him as he must wait outside closed doors hoping for an order. Though "his concern for Linda and the boys is genuine,

his need for an illusion he is well-liked and successful overcomes his feelings of loyalty."⁷

In a capitalistic society, to be a failure means to have nothing of economic value to leave at death. Near the end of the play, we see Willy is planting in his garden. Willy's need to plant something is here paramount. He has virtually seen his entire world crumble around him and he has nothing to leave his sons. "I don't have a thing in the ground,"⁸ he says. Thus with the world closing in on him, Willy feels the strong need to have something tangible that he can leave to others when he dies. By doing this, he deceives himself that he is not completely a failure.

Like his father, Biff is also tormented by the knowledge of personal failure. Biff's dream is to become a star who people focus their attention upon. However, he has to work as an unknown worker that no one will pay attention to. Therefore, in order to live in such a situation, he keeps stealing something to get people's attention and to show people his individuality which is thought by him as greatness. By stealing, he wants to deny losing his personal attractiveness.

To Biff, taking orders from somebody means being a failure. However, in every work he engages, he is always in a low position. The daily work he has to do is just taking orders and obeying them. To avoid the suffering caused by awareness of his failure, he keeps changing his job.

Happy appears at first to have come to terms with life better than either his father or his brother. He has his own car and his own apartment.⁹ However, he is very unhappy to know that he is only an unimportant character in his company. He keeps flirting with girls to show the power he has over woman. By doing that, he increases his self-esteem. He patently envies the successes of a merchandise manager and some executives of his company. By having affairs with those people's girlfriends he feels he "outboxed"¹⁰ them, which means he defeated them.

While waiting for Biff and Willy in a restaurant, Happy tries to impress a girl with stories of his achievements and his work. When Biff tells him that he wants to tell Willy about his failing in borrowing money from Oliver, Happy suggests not telling the truth but fooling Willy that Oliver is interested in their plan. He tries to deny his failure by lying.

In sum, we can say that there is "a familiar trait in the Lomans: the need to pretend to be more than they actually are."¹¹ Moreover, the recognition that the play is about inter-family relationships seems to be world wide:

When the play was produced in China in 1983, the actors from the Chinese National Theatre were glad of an opportunity to work on a foreign play that was simply concerned with family relationships . . . In such matters as the relationship between a father and his sons . . . or two brothers of

differing natures . . . they found that there were already plenty of examples of Chinese drama.¹²

It is this description of the relationship between the father and the sons that made the play so popular in China. Most people in the countries in which the play has been performed also found it familiar and easy to understand.¹³ Therefore, I think it is very important to analyze the relationship between Willy and his two sons.

The relationship between Willy and Biff is the most important thing to comment on. "As a schoolboy, just before he was due to enter university, Biff loved and admired Willy."¹⁴ Willy was very satisfied with young Biff who seemed to be promising greatness. Everything was going well according to the scenario of Willy's dream of greatness for the family . Biff and his father were the closest of friends-real pals.¹⁵

When Biff failed math and went to Boston to ask his father for help, he discovered an unpleasant truth that Willy had an affair with a woman which destroyed the relationship between them. Biff's faith in his father was destroyed. "Biff never recovered from this discovery of Willy's falsity because the emotional support that he had from Willy had been removed."¹⁶ The belief Biff now has that Willy is a fake stays with him and accounts for his own failure. "I can't get near him."¹⁷ Biff says about Willy. Biff is afraid of seeing his father from whom he got all his false values. However, Willy does't entirely give up hope. He still loves Biff deeply and believes that Biff is very attractive. He accuses Biff of being a lazy because he thinks that Biff is trying to spite him. He never doubted that there could be anything wrong with Biff's ability. Therefore, when Linda criticizes Biff, Willy immediately comes to his defense. "Willy will allow no one else to criticize Biff."¹⁸

Biff has not lost all his love for Willy either.

His admiration for his father does lead him into trying for the job with Bill Oliver, a job for which he has little enthusiasm, but one which he feels obliged to apply for on the basis of Willy's decline and his need for Biff's support.¹⁹

When Willy hears that Biff will try to borrow money to establish his own business, he feels extremely happy and gets completely immersed in his dreams of Biff's success. To Willy, Biff's success is also his own success.

Biff fails in borrowing money from Oliver, but he comes to a realization about himself. He knows that he is not a great genius. He realizes that he does not have any talent. At the same time, he is also able to look at his father realistically.

The reason is that earlier Biff had been functioning under Willy's influence and had no values for himself. When he lived in Willy's world of illusions, he had to function according to these values. But now, for the first time, Biff is trying to see real values now.²⁰

In fact, he even understands Willy's dreams and tries to get Willy to "take that phony dream and burn it before something happens."²¹ It is as though Biff knows that Willy's dream is bringing him to the verge of disaster. Biff tries several times to tell Willy the truth. However, Willy thinks that Biff is spiting him and refuses to listen. Therefore, Biff's struggle to face reality has only left him exhausted: in the end, he simply breaks down and sobs on Willy. And ironically, Willy sees this only as a sign that Biff needs him and thus Willy is once more in his world of illusion. This sense of being needed then gives Willy sufficient motivation to commit suicide because now he feels that he will be leaving something for Biff. That is the insurance money. Willy thinks that with twenty thousand dollars in Biff's pockets "that boy is going to be magnificent."²²

In the play, Willy is always talking about Biff and seldom says anything about Happy. We can see that Happy is the neglected son in the family. As a child, Happy was constantly telling his father that he is losing weight. This statement was later replaced by another statement where Happy says: "I'm gonna get married."²³ Both of these statements function as a sort of substitute for the lack of attention he is given by Willy. Since Willy never paid attention to Happy, Happy's rejection of his father that we see later in the play is partially justified. This rejection of his father is clear when, in a restaurant, for example, Happy says to one of the girls whom he has picked up, "No, that's not my father. He's just a guy."²⁴ Happy had functioned so long as the rejected son that it is no wonder he now rejects his own father. And once more, we must remember that Willy committed suicide so that Biff would have twenty thousand dollars worth of insurance. Whenever Willy thinks of the insurance money, it is always in terms of Biff—Happy is never mentioned.

Even though Willy's philosophy was essentially directed toward Biff, it is nevertheless Happy whose life was most affected by Willy's ideas. At the funeral of Willy, Happy does not accept Biff's idea that all the dreams that Willy had are wrong. He says that Willy Loman "did not die in vain. He had a good dream."²⁵

The relationship between Biff and Happy seems very good. Happy is the good brother who admires Biff. When they were children, Happy used to carry his shoulder guards and enthused over the games in which Biff played. He learned everything about women from Biff. When he plans to start his own business, he believes that he will be successful if he does it with Biff. However, we can not overlook the fact that Happy is tremendously overshadowed by Biff because he had

always been seen as the less talented one. In a situation where he must take a back seat to Biff's abilities and qualities, Happy's attempt to achieve some sort of recognition made him a competitive person. When he found that he was overshadowed by Biff, Happy tried to get some attention by announcing that he is losing weight and that he is going to get married. Even at the funeral of Willy, the brothers continue their rivalry. Biff says that Willy's whole life was a bad dream and suggests that Happy go with him to the countryside. However, Happy says, "I'm not licked that easily"²⁶ and refers once more to his fraternal dream, "The Loman Brothers!"²⁷ Happy reaffirms the part of Willy that he identifies with "the only dream you can have - to come out number-one man."²⁸ He plans to show Biff and everybody else that Happy Loman is great.

We have seen that the three characters are failures. It is very important here to see that Miller shows us why they have failed.

Willy is a man so foolish as to believe that success in the business world can be achieved not by work and ability but by being well-liked, by a kind of hearty popularity that will open all doors and provide favors and preferential treatment.²⁹

Unfortunately, this theory leads Willy into the fallacy of trying to sell himself instead of his wares. It is Willy's loss of self-recognition that causes his tragedy. When he is no longer able to sell himself, the world is meaningless to him. Willy's placing too much value on this one particular game of selling himself and acting rather childish about it by being an extremist show Willy's emotional immaturity. Charley, Willy's rival and his only friend, finds Willy's weakness and asks Willy: "when the hell are you going to grow up."³⁰

Willy inherited a manual skill from his father but refused to use it in his working life. For some reason he always regarded the skills of the builder as being inferior to those of the salesman.³¹

So we can say that Willy failed because he was not able to choose a suitable job for himself.

Willy's telling lies also leads to his failure. Willy was always telling his family that he was very important to his company and sold a lot of goods in New England. Therefore, when Ben, Willy's older brother, offered him a great opportunity in Alaska, Willy was unable to take advantage of the golden opportunity because Linad reminded Willy how well he was doing with his company and how his boss had promised him a membership in the company. Thus, Willy got trapped in his own lies.

Biff's tragedy is that he has accepted completely all of Willy's values and has not developed any of his own. Thus, when he sees that Willy's values are false, he has no values of his own to rely on. Consequently, Biff becomes a lost individual. Though Willy is always complaining about Biff's changing his job without any reason, we can see the reason of Biff's changing his job when Biff says to Willy, "you blew me so full of hot air r could never stand taking orders from anybody."³² When Biff is waiting to see Oliver to borrow the money, he feels insulted and steals Oliver's pen because he was told by Willy that the person who has personal attractiveness will never have to wait.

Happy's main weakness is his inability to resist women.³³ By flirting with girls, Happy increases his confidence that he is very attractive and well-liked. By having affairs with the girlfriend of some of the executives of his company, Happy feels he is superior to them and is able to take their places. However he is too fond of women that he can not concentrate on his work. Happy has become a slave of sexuality.

People who failed become more miserable when they don't know why they failed. When Biff tries to impress upon Willy the reality that he is nothing, Willy is simply interested in his dream and refuses to listen. When Biff feels desperate and cries, Willy sees Biff's crying only as a sign of affection.

The exhausted, idealistic man who had visions of a great future for his sons does not in the end come to terms with reality, but retains his hopes. To Willy, death is the only answer.³⁴

Willy believes that if Biff can get the insurance mony, Biff will become great.

After Biff fails in borrowing money from Oliver, he sees that he does not have the greatness which Willy is proud of. He realizes that city life does not fit him and he should work in the country.

He is full of bitterness because he sees that he and the rest of the family have led a false existence;the time has arrived to face up to reality.³⁵

At the funeral of Willy, we can find that Happy has not learned the lesson of Willy's death, retaining the same beliefs and ideals that he had before. Happy says, "He fought it out here and this is where I'm gonna wit it for him."³⁶ He still believes that he has great power to become successful. "Happy has not only failed to learn from Willy's fatal dreams but does not seem to have understood them."³⁷

After studying the three major characters pychologically, we find that they all want to become successful by using their personality but fail because they have blind faith in the need to be well-liked. All of them find substitutes such as self-deception, stealing, flirting with grils for knowing that they are failures. Though Willy and Happy are not able to discover the answer about why they

become failures, Willy does realize that he is not well-liked before he decides to die. Biff also shows us his acceptance of reality at the end of the play. Therefore, this play is a tragedy because it leads to the catharsis of Willy and it does offer some hope through the character of Biff. We don't know if Biff will become successful, but at least, he is trying to begin a new life. Biff is no longer a lost man.

Notes

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4. Miller, p.18.
5. Miller, p.10.
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17. Miller, p.15.
18. Roberts, p.21.
19. Last, p.37.
20. Roberts, p.39.
21. Miller, p.106.
22. Miller, p.106
23. Miller, p.53.
24. Miller, p.91.
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26. Miller, p.111.
27. Miller, p.111.
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31. Spalding, p.40.

32. Miller, p.104.
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34. Last, p.35.
35. Last, p.39.
36. Miller, p.111.
37. Spalding, p.51.

(卒論指導教員 Allan Blondé)