

# The Collapse of a Low Man's Great Dream: Reading the Fusion of Traditional Marxism in *Death of a Salesman*

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## Abstract

*Death of a Salesman* premiered in 1949, deeply revealing an intuitive understanding of the society at that time. Since then, the tragic masterpiece has been studied hundreds of times in a variety of theories. In the third decade of the twenty-first century, more and more people are pursuing wealth and success, emphasizing on the materialistic in life. It is worth reading *Death of a Salesman* again. This paper relies on the original playscript rather than others' theories, and perceives the fusion of the Marxism's influence on the play through a close reading of the text.

## Keywords

Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, American Dream, Marxism's Influence

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## 1. Introduction

Arthur Miller (1915-2005), a significant force in American drama during the last century, passed away in the beginning of this century. His tragic masterpiece *Death of a Salesman*, nevertheless, will never fade away/out with the death of the dramatist. In the play, Miller, through the tragic story of an aging traveling salesman, successfully dramatizes the conflict in the American consciousness between the desire for material success and the search for adventure and happiness, and deeply reveals an intuitive understanding of the society of his time.

A variety of theories have been employed on the studies of *Death of a Salesman*, such as sociolinguistic analysis (Akins, 2009: pp. 5-12), interpersonal acceptance and rejection theory and family systems theory (Chavkin & Chavkin, 2015: pp. 27-44), and psychoanalytic theory (Anwar, 2018: pp. 31-38). Indeed, the criticisms on the masterpiece are too numerous to be reviewed here. Rather

than applying a theory to interpret the play, however, this short article will undergo a close reading of the text, scrutinizing the imprints of traditional Marxism—the doctrine of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) between the lines, which is a very powerful and influential intellectual force in the first half of the twentieth century.

## 2. Willy's American Dream

In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller profoundly depicts Willy Loman's American dream. Willy, the tragic figure, lives in the American dream for all his life, and believes that the United States is the greatest country in the world, in which, as long as one can adventure, he will definitely be successful. As Willy puts it, "The greatest things can happen!" (Miller, 1958: p. 157) He is always unrealistically optimistic, and self-important. For example, although he is only a common traveling salesman, and his friend—Charley's business is successful, he blindly believes that he will have his own business which will be much bigger than Charley's.

In his mind, his brother, Ben, is the concrete embodiment of success of the American dream. Ben is a wealthy entrepreneur. He went to the diamond mines on the Gold Coast of Africa, and walked into the jungle when he was seventeen. Four years later, Ben walked out of the jungle, having gotten rich. Willy respects him as a hero. At the first time he introduces Ben to his sons, he proudly says, "This is your Uncle Ben, a great man!" (Miller, 1958: p. 157)

Furthermore, the success of his sons is also an important part of Willy's American dream. As he blindly thinks himself superior to Charley, Willy always thinks his sons superior to others. He always dreams that Biff, his elder son, entertains great expectations, for instance, that three universities are offering scholarships for Biff, and Biff will be a football star.

Willy began to fill his children with the spirit of the commercial adventures since their early youth. He tells them, "[...] the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead." (Miller, 1958: p. 146)

He teaches his sons, using Ben as their model, to aspire towards becoming great men of the future. When he discusses how and what he should teach his boys with Ben, he strongly revealed these feelings, "... [Ben] was rich! That's just the spirit I want to imbue them [Willy's two sons] with!" (Miller, 1958: p. 160)

The desire for reaching material success through adventure, which Arthur Miller vividly draws out in *Death of a Salesman*, in fact is the product of the commercial/capitalist society. Unlike the feudal society which is rigidly stratified, the capitalist society provides every one the equal opportunity to be successful, because everything is fair in buying and selling in market. Thus, if someone is smarter, more aggressive and hardworking than other people, he promises to be more established.

Also, Willy's unrealistic optimism is deeply influenced by the established val-

ues present in the United States during the late 1940's—a time when the United States had won the great victories in the two world wars. The United States accumulated the huge capital through buying cheaper black slaves at the beginning of its development, and by selling arms during two world wars. After the Second World War, the U. S. dollar became an international currency, and the United States became the strongest country in the world. Thus, the American government blindly thought that they could easily control most of countries in the world. As one saying put it, “When American sneezes, all of the world will get the flu.”

### 3. The Conflict between the Dream and the Reality

In *Death of a Salesman*, through the conflict between Willy's dream and reality, Miller clearly shows how Willy's dream is unrealistic. According to the play, some Americans like Ben had indeed realized their American dream, but not everyone can win in this kind of commercial gambling. If someone wants to be a very successful businessman, he must be ruthless and not worry about other people's feelings. In this play, Miller uses Ben's mouth to tell audiences about the trick for success in competitions,

Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way. (Miller, 1958: p. 158)

The depiction of Ben's experience and life in the play is compendious, but from Ben's words, shrewd behavior, and unfeeling attitude towards people, audiences can still imagine how Ben unscrupulously competes and struggles throughout his life, at last becoming a material success.

However, Willy is not Ben. Since he is not hardhearted and practical enough, he can only be the foil, or prey of such millionaires rather than one of “Ben”s—successes. Just like a pyramid, a few “Ben” successes need thousands upon thousands of “Willy” failures as foundation stones. In the play, Willy cannot realize his ideal. As his counterparts, his sons cannot either. After tramping around for many years, and trying twenty or thirty different kinds of jobs, Biff runs into snags and is defeated everywhere he turns. At last, he wakes up from his phony dream built up since his childhood, and begins to realize the true social status of him and his father. Biff painfully tells the truth to his father,

Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you! (Miller, 1958: p. 217)

I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! (Miller, 1958: p. 217)

Unfortunately, Willy cannot wake up from his beautiful dream at all. He feels that Biff has failed to live up to his expectations and complains vigorously that Biff has degenerated, even in the greatest country in the world! He shouts in a huff,

I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!  
(Miller, 1958: p. 217)

But, what does “Loman” mean? “Loman” is not an equivalent of a millionaire’s name like “Rockefeller” or “Ford”. No, it only means “low man”. As Harshbarger pointed out, “Miller has incorporated a pun into his protagonist’s name: ‘low man.’ [...] Willy is a ‘low man’ most obviously in the sense that he has been a small and insignificant failure.” (Harshbarger, 1979: p. 53) Willy Loman is only an unimportant little man existing in society. This is a cruel reality which Willy himself refuses to recognize!

When Willy was young, perhaps he had been a very well received salesman who had a smile and a shoeshine, and was humorous and happy. After more than thirty years of struggle and worry, however, he is old and infirm now, and his mind is so overactive that he can not concentrate on his driving. One time or more Willy even stops at a green light, and then goes when the light turns red. He realizes something must be done; therefore, he wants to work in the office instead of driving everywhere everyday. Unfortunately, since he has lost the value which he had in the past, he is fired. At that point in time, Willy angrily says to his boss,

I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can’t pay my insurance! You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit! (Miller, 1958: p. 181)

On the surface, it seems fair that Willy works for Howard and then gets his salary for his work, but essentially this kind of exchange is not fair. Willy’s lines above remind of us the viewpoint of Marxism, the wages capitalists pay to workers are only for workers’ labour rather than their work. The “work” is the result of the “labour”, but more valuable than the “labour”. The balance between the labour and work is surplus value, which is held by capitalists. This is how capitalists exploit workers. Willy is also exploited by Howard in this way, being squeezed out surplus value for thirty-four years. As a common traveling salesman, he has to drive hither and thither, sometimes working ten, or twelve hours a day and literally exhausting himself.

In such a commercial/capitalist society, the fetishism of money, property, and commodities becomes so powerful that people’s relationships become mere money relations. The sentimental veil among people has been torn away, and people can hardly keep their dignity as human beings. As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels vividly described in *The Communist Manifesto*,

It [the bourgeoisie] has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom, Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has sub-

tituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation (Marx, 1964: p. 6).

With the development of capitalism, obviously, the whole society became wealthier, and the living standard of working class in developed countries like America is being raised as well. However, in light of Marxist viewpoints, workers in capitalist society are still poor—relatively poor. For instance, although incomes of a worker in America might be higher than that of a business man in an emerging country, in his own country his income and social status are both much lower than those of a wealthy man. Human beings are not animals. People not only need food, clothes, and house, but also need other people's respect and understanding. If a person is always in a low social status, he or she will feel depressed and miserable. Compared with workers in emerging countries, Willy seems richer because he has his private car, but he has to work hard in order to pay the mortgage and installments for his refrigerator, washing machine, vacuum cleaner, and so on. He is often sad and lonely on the road, and does not have people to talk to. When business is bad, he really worries that he will never sell anything again and will not be able to make a living for his family.

#### 4. The Collapse of Willy's American Dream

At the denouement of *Death of a Salesman*, by using Willy's death, Miller illustrates to the audience that Willy's dream has truly collapsed in the reality. Willy can not realize his dream at all; however, he still hopes his sons, the continuation of his life, will make it real. Thus, he commits suicide so that his family may collect the twenty thousand dollars from his insurance policy, thus creating a condition for his sons to succeed.

Linda, Willy's wife, loves her husband and sons more than herself. She cannot understand Willy's death. After her husband's death, she repeatedly asks, "Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it" (Miller, 1958: p. 222). In her opinion, having worked a lifetime to pay off the house, Willy almost owns it, and will not need to worry about paying a mortgage any more. He will be able to relax and enjoy life, for example, planting the garden. But he takes his life and will never live in the house for which he has struggled all his life. Why did he have to commit suicide!?

Linda is a nice and kindhearted woman, and she opposes cruel struggles. For example, when Ben teaches Biff the trick of fighting, she dissatisfiedly asks her husband, "Why must he fight, dear?" (Miller, 1958: p. 157) Unlike her husband, she stands aloof from worldly success; for her, her husband and sons are her whole world. Since she has never been involved in any fierce competition, naturally, she cannot understand the sadness and pain after the failure of violent struggle, and therefore she is unaware of the spiritual crisis of her husband.

As "outside eyes", nevertheless, audiences could clearly see that Willy has suffered a grave spiritual crisis before his suicide by observing his contradictory actions. For instance, although Willy desperately needs a job, asking only forty dollars salary for a week work from Howard, his boss, he turns down a better job

offer from Charley, his friend, without any hesitation. Willy has belittled Charley before, thinking that his business would be much more successful than that of Charley. In the end, however, he seems to have no way to go except accepting Charley's charity. How can he face such a "taunt" that indeed injures his self-esteem?!

What Willy seeks for all his life is not only a house or a job, but material success. As long as he is successful and outstanding, he will be rich, powerful, and respected by others. For Willy in *Death of a Salesman*, it is only material success that will be able to bring the greatest satisfaction; otherwise, life is totally meaningless. The very complex of Willy, the American dream in the play, comes from the reality of American society, and influences all his behaviors. Unfortunately, after more than thirty years of struggle, his energies wane, his mind begins to crack, and he has totally failed. Reviewing his life, nevertheless, he does not doubt his American dream at all. Instead, he regrets that he did not go to Alaska so that he lost the most important chance to be successful in his life. Consequently, he decides through his suicide to provide a chance for his sons to continuously seek material success.

Doubtlessly, from *Death of a Salesman*, audiences are able to tangibly perceive that Willy's contradictory actions are motivated by the delusions of his American dream, and his suicide is the inevitable outcome of the conflict between his miraculous dream and the cruel reality he lives. No wonder, thus, in a periodical of the far Right, the play has been claimed a "time bomb expertly placed under the edifice of Americanism" (Miller, 1958: p. 27).

## 5. Miller's Selective Realism

As analyzed previously, through the collapse of the lowly traveling salesman, Arthur Miller links the individual, Willy Loman, to the social whole. We might regard *Death of a Salesman* as a modern realistic tragedy with its emphasis on social concerns, which reminds of us those of Ibsen. In fact, Miller has a high opinion of Ibsen, and, for instance, he once discusses Ibsen's realism in his writing (Miller, 1958: pp. 19-22).

Evidently, Miller's manipulation is influenced by realism. As Engels points out in his letter of 1888 to Margaret Harkness (1854-1923), "Realism to my mind implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances." (Eagleton, 1976: p. 46) The very comments of Engels were thought of as the definition of realism by Marxist critics for a long time.

Unquestionably, the theory of realism plays a very important role in Marxist literary criticism, though some Marxist dramatists and directors, such as Berthold Brecht (1898-1956), are antirealists. First of all, Marx and Engels both liked realistic writers like Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) and Charles Dickens (1812-1870), and gave these two writers high evaluation. Moreover, in the former Soviet Union, the theory of "socialist realism" appeared in the middle of 1930s, and was then believed to be the only correct methodology in literature and arts. Histori-

cally, realism influenced many artists, who believed in Marxism, or who were leftwing, and Miller is one of them.

*Death of a Salesman*, on the other hand, differs from traditional realism in some respects. Although in the play Miller employed a realistic approach to deal with the relation between the characters and the environment, he heightens certain details of action, scenery, and dialogue while omitting others. We might call Miller's realism a selective realism, which is mainly based on traditional realism, but sometimes neatly shifts to antirealism (Wilson & Goldfarb, 1983: p. 342).

Flashback, for example, plays an extremely important part in *The Death of a Salesman*. To express Willy's particular mental state, Miller weaves those scenes from the past into Willy's stream of consciousness. Just as its original title, *The Inside of His Head* (Miller, 1958: p. 23), suggests, the play frequently highlights selected elements of Willy's inner world. As a result, locations of *The Death of a Salesman* sometimes freely shift from one to another. In Act One, for instance, when Willy is deeply moved by the love from Linda (his wife), guiltily thinking of his disloyalty, simultaneously, the scene transfers from his kitchen into an inn where he meets The Woman (his lover), and then switches back into the kitchen after their meeting:

Willy, with great feeling: You're the best there is, Linda, you're a pal, you know that? On the road—on the road I want to grab you sometimes and just kiss the life outa you.

The laughter is loud now, and he moves into a brightening area at the left, where The Woman has come from behind the scrim and is standing, putting on her hat, looking into a "mirror" and laughing.

...

Willy: Good night. And keep your pores open!

The Woman: Oh, Willy!

The Woman bursts out laughing, and Linda's laughing blends in. The Woman disappears into the dark. Now the area at the kitchen table brightens. Linda is sitting where she was at the kitchen table, but now is mending a pair of her silk stockings. (Miller, 1958: pp. 149-150)

On one hand, the scene above tells audiences events of the past through both characters' actions and dialogues; on the other, it also describes Willy's psychological movements. In the traditional realist play, however, flashbacks are events of the past exposed to audiences through characters' dialogues rather than living scenes.

Additionally, Miller also used elements of symbolism in his play. Like a specter, Ben frequently appears in the play with his music, and always repeats that he has a little time, and the jungle is dark but full of diamonds. It appears that the jungle symbolizes a dichotomy, or a paradox, which mixes danger and wealth. At the climax of Willy's inner struggle, Ben—the symbol of material success (an epitome of the American dream)—reappears. He encourages Willy, "Yes, outstanding, with twenty thousand behind him [Biff]." (Miller, 1958: p. 218) Money! Biff will be



successful! Thus Ben, the specter, tempts Willy to take his own life.

Forms of literature and arts are historically changed, transformed, broken down and revolutionized as that content itself changes (Eagleton, 1976: p. 22). With the development of the human inner world, some artists tried to present the infinite qualities of the spirit, not only day-to-day activities. In fact, the appearance of realistic drama has partly changed after the Second World War. More or less, it has been influenced by a variety of antirealism, and has incorporated some antirealistic elements. Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is an example of these dramas.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, in his *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller puts his protagonist, Willy Loman, into a particular social environment. By building a relationship between Willy and others portrayed in society, Miller demonstrates a series of tragic conflicts. Willy's problem is that he has implicit confidence in the established values of his society so he becomes unable to take proper measure of himself. Finally, the tragically deluded figure is destroyed by the society in which he dwells. In one word, Willy Loman is a typical character under typical circumstances, matching the criterion of realism in Marxism. Basically, Arthur Miller utilizes a realistic approach, but he also absorbs some antirealistic elements, keeping pace with the literary and artistic development of his times. In this way, his *Death of a Salesman* has reached the perfect unity in form and content.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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