

Arthur miller's play "death of a salesman" essay

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As of today, it represents a commonplace practice among critics to refer to the play *Death of a salesman* (by Arthur Miller) in terms of being nothing short of a dramaturgic masterpiece. There are indeed a number of good reasons for this to be the case. After all, it is not only that the themes and motifs, contained in the play, are utterly humanistic, but also the specifics of how Miller conceived it to be staged suggest that *Death of a salesman* can be discussed, as such that marks a revolutionary point in the development of Western dramaturgy, as we know it. In my paper, I will aim to explore the validity of this suggestion at length, while elaborating on what can be considered the play's overall discursive significance, and outlining the most innovative aspects of its first production in 1949.

Arthur Miller was born on October 17, 1915, in New York. His formative years were strongly influenced by the Great Depression. After having received a high school diploma, Miller worked as a shipping clerk at the automotive parts warehouse, while being often required to take active part in promoting these parts to the potential clients. After his graduation from the University of Michigan, Miller returned back to New York, where he started to participate in a number of theatrical projects, such as the Federal Theater Project – hence, gaining an insight into the essentials of a theatrical production. Around the same time, Miller also began to explore his potential in playwriting.

Miller's first critically acclaimed play was 1947 *All my Sons*. It was namely this particular play, which marked the beginning of Miller's preoccupation with exposing the inconsistencies of the so-called 'American dream', to which he never ceased referring in terms of a highly irrational and

emotionally damaging pursuit of riches. All my sons instantaneously established Miller as one of America's most prominent playwrights. Nevertheless, it was in the aftermath of the 1949 production of his tragedy *Death of a salesman* that Miller gained the status of a 'cult figure' in American dramaturgy.

As it will be illustrated later in the paper, there were a number of the objective reasons for this to be the case. Throughout the course of his life's latter phases, Miller continued to remain strongly affiliated with dramaturgy. Even though his sub-sequential plays, such as *The misfits*, *In Russia*, *Broken glass* and *Resurrection blues*, were not quite as successful with the audiences as *Death of a salesman*, they nevertheless did strengthen Miller's fame, as one of the greatest playwrights of all times. Arthur Miller died in 2005.

The plot of *Death of a salesman* revolves around the character of Willy Loman – an aging salesperson, who failed at trying to live up to his dream of becoming a 'man of substance' (in the sense of attaining a financial security). The tragedy of the situation, in this respect, is that right until the play's very end; Willy continues to refuse to admit that, contrary to what he used to believe about himself, he simply did not have what it takes to be able to succeed in business. Essentially the same can be said about Willy's sons, Biff and Happy – just as it happened to be the case with their father, they could not help ending up being referred to as 'losers'.

Nevertheless, despite the apparent simplicity of the play's actual tale, *Death of a salesman* is indeed utterly powerful, in the sense of how it dispels many

urban myths that even today are being commonly associated with the American way of living. The most prominent of them is undeniably the one, concerned with the so-called ' American dream', which in turn is based upon the assumption that, for as long as a particular American citizen happened to be an industrious/hardworking individual, nothing can prevent him or her from becoming a millionaire. Many of Willy's remarks, with which he comes up throughout the play's entirety, expose him as a typical ' American dreamer'.

For example, according to this character: " The world is an oyster, but you don't crack it open on a mattress!" (Miller, 1998, p. 28). This, of course, implies that throughout the course of his life, Willy never ceased believing that one must adopt a rational stance, when it comes to addressing life-challenges – something that would guarantee the concerned individual to be able to attain a social prominence.

Nevertheless, as practice indicates, one's chances to ' strike it rich' have more to do with the notion of blind luck than with the notion of entrepreneurial industriousness. This is exactly the reason why in the play, Willy Loman is depicted as someone who was bound to experience the sensation of cognitive dissonance – the direct consequence of the fact that the character's image of self and his sense of ' true-self' did not quite correlate. As Weales noted, " The distance between the actual Willy and the image Willy is so great... what the play gives us is the final disintegration of a man who has never even approached his idea of what by rights he ought to have been" (1962, p. 171).

Thus, it will be fully appropriate to suggest that *Death of a salesman* provides a new dimension to the theme of a tragic hero in the works of dramaturgy. After all, prior to this play's first production in 1949, it was assumed that the act of a tragic hero had to radiate the spirit of honorableness. Ever since 1949, however, this effectively ceased to be the case. The reason for this is that, even though the process of Willy Loman's mental deterioration can indeed be discussed in terms of a high tragedy, the play's main character did not fall victim to the external circumstances (as it is being usually the case with tragic heroes in classic tragedies).

Willy's ultimate demise came as a result of his intellectual inflexibility. This, of course, endows Miller's play with the clearly defined humanistic sounding. *Death of a salesman* does not only provide viewers with the in-depth insight into what accounts for the process of Americans being victimized (as a result of their belief in the 'American dream') by the consumerist society, but it also specifies the actual reasons, as to why this state of affairs continues to last.

Partially, this also explains why during the initial phases of the Cold War, Miller's theatrical account of the unsightly effects of people's compulsive strive to attain material riches, as their main priority in life, balanced on the edge of being declared 'anti-American'. After all, *Death of a salesman* does divulge the sheer inconsistency of the so-called 'American values' (meant to glorify people's irrational obsession with trying to become rich at any cost), which America's policy-makers of the time were trying to forcibly impose upon just about everyone in this country (Gibson, 2008, p. 98). In his play,

Miller was able to show that, contrary to what many profit-driven Americans happened to believe, money is far from being considered the actual indication of one's worth.

There is, however, even more to it – Miller's play exposes the erroneousness of the popular assumption that America is actually the greatest nation on earth. The logic behind this suggestion is as follows. Death of a salesman clearly refers to the character of Willy Loman as a ' typical American' – hence, implying that the rest of people in this country do share many behavioral traits with the play's main character. Yet, it is namely the fact that, despite his advanced age (63 years old) Willy acts as an utterly infantile (immature) individual, which makes him so memorable, as a tragic hero. The validity of this suggestion can be illustrated, in regards to this character's inability to critically reassess the soundness of his emotionally comforting but misleading beliefs. As Otten pointed out, " Willy does not understand the corruptness of the (American) dream... he dies in defense of the imperative that consumes him" (2002, p. 36).

This, of course, means that, just as it happened to be the case with Willy, many citizens in this country are in fact ' grown up kids', quite incapable of resisting the temptation of instant gratification. Thus, it will be fully appropriate, on our part, to suggest that despite having been written in 1949, Death of a salesman does contain clues, as to what would be the main cause of America's eventual decline in the future (our present). Namely, the fact that, due to being obsessed with the ' American dream' (consumption), many of this country's citizens do not have what it takes to be able evaluate

such their obsession critically. It is understood, of course, that this provides Miller's play with yet additional credit – being exposed to the dramaturgic masterpiece in question will indeed come in rather indispensable to just about anyone, who strives to pinpoint the main inconsistencies of the American way of living.

The first theatrical production of Death of a salesman (directed by Elia Kazan) took place on February 10, 1949, at the Morosco Theatre in New York. This production turned out to be a huge success, which in turn contributed rather substantially towards the popularization of Miller's play throughout the world. According to Most, " Within a year of the Broadway opening (in 1949), productions had been mounted in Great Britain, Denmark, Sweden... (Miller's) play has seen three successful Broadway revivals since its opening in 1949" (2007, p. 548). There appear to have been two major reasons for this: the fact that Miller's play parted with the classical conventions of a dramaturgical tragedy, and the fact that the play's staging presupposed the incorporation of the elements of realism and expressionism – something that has never been accomplished before.

In order to achieve this, both: Miller and Kazan had to find the way for Willy's flashbacks and daydreams to be integrated in the onstage performance in such a manner, so that the viewing audiences would not be prompted to regard the play's plot implausible. This proved rather challenging. After all, the realist tradition in dramaturgy is mainly concerned with the director's strive to help viewers to ' submerge' themselves into the theatrical action – something that naturally presupposes the importance of the stage-settings.

In its turn, this makes it inconsistent with the expressionist approach towards conceptualizing a theatrical production, which has traditionally been associated with the assumption that the settings play only a minor role, within the context of how actors interact with the viewing audiences.

The mentioned inconsistency posed the playwright with the task of guaranteeing the realist sounding of the play's clearly expressionist scenes, such as the ones where Willy cuts short his conversations with Linda, Biff and Happy, in order to reflect upon the remarks of his long-deceased brother Ben, who appears out of nowhere. Initially, Miller proposed to go about designing the onstage-shifts from the actual reality of Willy's world to the 'reality' of his daydreaming, by the mean of taking advantage of the 'curtain drop' technique. Nevertheless, even though the play's original script did contain certain provisions for the utilization of the expressionist settings, after the production-plan entered its organizational phase, Miller figured that it would make so much more sense having the settings designed in accordance with the principle of realism. As Murphy noted, "As the play took shape... he (Miller) dropped this notion in favor of a minimal set, which he has variously described as 'without any setting at all'" (1995, p. 10).

After having deliberated the issue for some time, Miller decided to choose in favor of a traditional set – the first production of *Death of a salesman* featured the setting of a regular middle-class house. The switches from the actual reality to the reality of Willy's past were made possible by the deployment of the previously unheard-of theatrical technique: "Whenever the action is in the present the actors observe the imaginary wall lines,

entering the house only through its door at the left. But in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping ' through' a wall onto the forestage'' (Miller, 1998, p. 12).

To foster the realness of the abrupt transitional shifts from one reality to another, the director supplemented the play's settings with the contextually appropriate illumination, while assigning just about every twist of the plot with its own musical accompaniment. Thus, even though the play's action took place within the framework of two alternative realities, viewers did not experience any ' spatial' discomfort, while exposed to the actors' performance. Therefore, it will only be logical to conclude this part of the paper by reinstating once again that the overwhelming success of the first production of Death of a salesman was predetermined objectively. It is not only that this production helped the audience members to come to terms with their own anxieties, in regards to the notion of the ' American dream', but it also provided other playwrights and production directors with the insight into what accounts for the whole realm of the previously unexplored theatrical opportunities.

I believe that the earlier provided line of argumentation, in regards to the discussed subject matter, is fully consistent with the paper's initial thesis. Apparently, the play Death of a salesman did succeed in both: exposing the sheer wickedness of one's preoccupation with trying to become rich, and establishing a number of new principles for designing a theatrical production. This is the reason why this particular play continues to be referred to, as one of the finest products of American dramaturgy.

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