

Sample term paper on death of a salesman - an analysis of the american dream

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Arthur miller's award winning play death of a salesman where Willy loman is the salesman driven by the emerging values of post war capitalism and materialism and wanted his sons to adopt the same. The conflict arises when his sons cannot do the profit or money-making. The play becomes of what was popularly known to be the American dream. This paper aims to analyze this over reaching theme that explicitly critiques. The paper also aims how the play impacted the American public considering it was published when capitalism was booming. It is important to understand how the people responded to the play when everyone had been rushing towards becoming rich and powerful.

Willy loman is our American dreamer in the play. The concept of the American dream emerged in the 1900 and continued post war period till 1960. Immigrants came for a better life meaning more money and fame and thus happiness (Miller). This is the most recurring theme of the play and a critique of it. Willy's death and the failure of biff to follow his father' footsteps is a critique of the shallow and meaningless life that his father led. He ultimately refuses his fate as he wants to be creative.

When I was a boy —eighteen, nineteen — I was already on the road. And there was a question in my mind as to whether selling had a future forme. Because in those days I had a yearning to go to Alaska. See, there were three gold strikes in one month in Alaska, and I felt like going out. Just for the ride, you might.

Willy Loman is though an ordinary man but dreamt of the success of being over the top. He takes up salesmanship and is completely absorbed in his

job. He then tries to pass this legacy to his son but he rejects it. Plus finding about his infidelity, he feels betrayed and refuses to comply with his father. The “ American Dream” is “ the belief that through the pioneer virtues of hard work, perseverance, ingenuity, and fortitude, one might find happiness through wealth” (“ Death of a Salesman”). Willy Lowman gets completely obsessed with achieving the business dream further and further even though he had accomplished for his family a comfortable house and all the comforts. He wanted to be the best in his job but due to his age his performance started slowing down. He had a loving and devoted wife ((Miller). He says: “ How can he find himself on a farm? Is that a life? A farmhand? In the beginning, when he was young, I thought, well, a young man, it’s good for him to tramp around, take a lot of different jobs. But it’s more than ten years now and he has yet to make thirty-five dollars a week!”

His sons also respected and loved him but with his ambitious nature he ends up destroying his family. In that sense this play could be called a tragedy that occurs with the values of capitalism and money making in the modern post war world. That becomes his hamartia and leads to his downfall. His tragedy unlike the classic heroes like Prometheus is his own. He does not suffer because he tries to do others some good. Here, his ambition is for his own driven by the want to be "on the top".

Most of the dialogue of the play and event revolve around this theme. The rhetoric of Biff becomes the major way in which Miller criticizes the materialistic values. Linda is seen to be mentioning time and again the utilities and items that are representatives of this modern lifestyle by showing the utter dependence on them. Biff’s plans of starting a boxing tour

signify the quick mindset or the short cut ways in which money could be made. Time and again, the entire family is absorbed in making their lives and future better. Willy is seriously worried about what sort of career would Biff would be making and at the same time worried about his performance getting affected. All revolves around the cycle of money. Money becomes the driving force of life.

The play also gives rise to conflicts. The main conflict again is furnished by overall theme. Capitalist values and system is an illusion in the success of the American dream. Not being satisfied with their comfortable current state, they try to figure out all sorts of options to make more money. That is why Biffs' unemployment, Willy's unemployment and reduced sales add panic to the family and leads to hoarding of the bills. However still Willy and his son Happy are absorbed in the illusion of the American dream success even though the realities show otherwise. This is not optimism but a sort of blind faith in some hoax. Biff is the practical man here but he too is driven by the possibility of get rich quick:

“ I spent six or seven years after high school trying to work myself up.

Shipping clerk, salesman, business of one kind or another. And it's a measly manner of existence. To get on that subway on the hot mornings in summer. To devote your whole life to keeping stock, or making phone calls, or selling or buying. To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when all you really desire is to be outdoors, with your shirt off. And always to have to get ahead of the next fella. And still — that's how you build a future.”(Miller)

In that sense the figure of Willy becomes too gullible and narrow minded who

becomes oblivious to the harsh realities of the capital world and believes that his sons would succeed in it in making even more money. He becomes the victim of the system that his time represents (Miller). It is like a dog eats dog world. Some critics have argued that Willy Loman represents the everyman who then gets destroyed by this world but as said above he is so blinded by the ambition to make money that he overcomes what happens to himself and his family in that course. The optimism that the American promised (which is illusionary) ultimately is attacked by the predicament of Willy Loman.

Following a Marxist approach one can critique Willy as the hero of the Proletariat but can he really be the hero? His strive towards capitalism ultimately leads to his death. His life and death does not glorify the idea of his dreams remaining unfulfilled. On a platonic level, he kind of achieves what a 60 year man should have except the one fact that he wants to see his son in a settled career and job which is no wrong. Yet the approach is not correct. It is the tragedy of every American who strives blindly to more and more. The dream ends up in a nightmare.

A lot of critics support the point which Miller supposed to make through the play. Eugene O'Neill comments that how the play depicts the American society by saying that the play becomes a proof of showing that "United States instead of being the most successful country in the world is the greatest failure". Rise of capitalism and the loss of values leads to ultimate destruction. A vivid comparison could be made with what vision of society did Dickens have in hard times. The society is driven by materialism and capitalism in the industrial society.

Impact on the society

Millers play won lots of accolades including the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 1949. The play heavily impacted the young audience at that time by clearing their minds and enabling them to pursue reality. The salesman becomes the hero in the sense he makes the people realize the ills of the capitalistic system. Critics have commented how miller brings his hero who is a staunch representative of the industrial society, morally exploring the costs by his tragedy. It has found a way in universities and schools and is studied till today principally because of this reason. Not only it critiques the capitalist system but focuses on family and relationship of father and the son. By 1950, the play already became a legend. The play had a huge cultural impact later on all groups of people.

It is interesting that how the image of the salesman affected the youth that they refused to make careers in this field. Businessmen aimed at literally tearing off salesman image from that of Willy Loman. Willy's image entered people's mind and consciousness. The sales executives club of New York mobilized themselves against this erosion of the image and life of the salesman in 1966. It really shook people up. The play's continuous productions and then later a film adaptation heightened this. This continued till the 1970s despite improvement of actual circumstances and business opportunities in the field. Nothing helped, not even rising the pay roll. The play brought of a curse that took years to go away. Willy's salesman image still lingers the minds of the people. The title of the play itself has become a metaphor for the illusion of the enrichment that reckless business and profit making offers. Willy has been identified with those who have been high

profile businessman yet living an empty life.

Willy Loman and his death have become allegorical in defining the corrupt values of capitalism. Biff's refusal to follow his father's footsteps then represents the negation of belief in the illusion that he represents. But on the same lines, Happy's embracing the idea is what remains unexplained. Could it mean another tragedy? Everyone starts as innocently as Happy seems to be in the end but ultimately would he also become Willy Loman is the question that becomes important. Miller does not romanticize it, we are clear on that but why is it passed as a legacy to Happy? Nevertheless, the play remains to be one of the classic productions of the American theatre.

Works Cited

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