

The Analysis of the Causes of Willy's Death in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman

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ABSTRACT

Death of a Salesman is a classic tragic work in contemporary America. It discusses some social factors in Willy Loman's death, such as the influence of the American Dream and the Great Depression. It also makes a detailed study on the flaws in the character of Willy Loman, some of which contribute to his own death, such as his misguided social values and his twisted relationship with his family. The paper aims at a further study on Willy Loman's death and to put forward the author's view on various causes of his death. Then it concludes that Willy's death is the result of American society and his own character defect.

1. Introduction

Arthur Miller is regarded as one of the most celebrated American dramatic in the twentieth century. *Death of a Salesman* is probably his most popular play, which won the Pulitzer Prize for the best play of 1949. *Death of a salesman* is a deceptively simple play. It only contains two acts and a requiem. Its plot revolves around the last twenty-four hours in the life of Willy Loman. Willy Loman is a traveling salesman aged 63. He has worked for the Wagner firm for thirty four years, unsuccessful and being

about to lose this job. At the very beginning of the play, he comes back home and is tired to death, Linda, his wife, loves him and even admires him, She is the only person who understands Willy and tries her best to help him. But what she does is of no avail. Willy is still unhappy. He often goes back to the happier past in the year of 1982. At that time, his son Biff is a football star in high school with several scholarships. Willy himself has the most beautiful earning for future success. But for the last 14 years, Biff has been unable to find a satisfied job and Willy has

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been taken off salary. Everything goes worse. Willy is in a trance. Happy, his other son, suggests that they ask for a loan to begin a business of their own. This idea makes everybody feel encouraged; they go to sleep with hopes. But the following day, when Willy and his sons meet at the restaurant, the bad news that two sons gave Willy and his own dismissal made him gone crazy and ended up killing himself. There are various interpretations about Willy's death: some consider him as the victim of the American Dream, while some believe that he is responsible for his own death. The present paper attempts to study Willy's death and make a detailed analysis of the cause of his death on both social and personal flaws.

Arthur Miller was an American playwright. Miller was born on October 17, 1915, in New York City in a family of wealthy Jewish businessmen. While he was at school, he began experimenting with drama. He attended the University of Michigan in 1915 and returned to the East to write plays for the stage. In 1949, he performed on Broadway, winning the Pulitzer Prize and many Other Tony Awards for "Death of a Salesman." Miller's public life was based in part on his marriage to Marilyn Monroe. Miller died of heart failure in the early hours of February 10, 2005. Arthur Miller, along with Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, are known as the three masters of American drama in the 20th century. His legacy continues to live on internationally and has been adapted into films.

Research on the cause Willy's death of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* by domestic and foreign scholars has gone deep to many aspects. For example, some scholars have explored the undercurrent of anxiety running beneath the surface of postwar Jewish life. (Hodin,46) Some focusing on the dialectic relation at the heart of the play's structure between tragedy and social drama.^[2] The study of this drama in China has made gratifying achievements. For example, using Freudian psychoanalysis to explain the tragedy of Willy Loman in the play; Or a detailed interpretation of family space from knowledge, rights and space. (Xiaoyong Liu, 58) The delicate father-son relationship between Willy and his son.^[5] I believe that Willy died not only because of his failure to recognize the deceptive American dream and the aftermath of the Great Depression, but also because of his own misguided values and his inability to relate properly to his family.

2. The Analyze of the Cause of Willy's Death

2.1 Social Factors

2.1.1 Fail to Recognize the Deceptive of the American Dream

One of the main factors that led to Willy's suicide after

he lost himself was that he failed to see through the deception of the American Dream^[1]. Willy was a devout believer in the American Dream. He believes that if he keeps working hard, he will be rich and successful in the end. However, the reality was far from his expectations. Willy, who believed in the "American Dream", was never willing to face up to the disappointments in life. He was not only good at self-deception, but also used to it, so over time Willy lost himself in fantasy and reality. Willy's value orientation led him to imagine that he could achieve great success like his brother Ben and the old salesman Sigman. However, frustrated in reality, Willy falls into a dreamy memory of having a dialogue with his brother Ben, and imagines asking his brother Ben for the secret of success. Just like what Ben says in the play: "William, when I walk into the jungle, I was 17. When I walked out I was 21. And by God, I was rich! Willy: ... was rich! That's just the spirit I want to imbue them with! To walk into a jungle! I was right! I was right! I was right!" (1137) Willy dreamed of staying in the big city and building a business of his own. To become a salesman like Sigman, who had made great achievements and was loved and respected by many people, who could still sell in many states in his eighties, and who could make a few phone calls from a hotel and get customers to come to him in person. Willy's brother Ben and the old salesman Sigman are his idols on the surface, but in fact they are Willy's fantasy of another self, which is also the concrete embodiment of Willy's lost self. His illusions showed that his dream, a miniature of the American dream, was indeed fascinating, while the reality was cold and cruel. "Willy seemed to be living in his illusions and was somewhat afraid of facing the reality, thus why at the end of the play when his illusions disappeared, he finally was ready for the last act, killing himself. The death of Willy and the disappearing of the illusions stand for the downfall or distortion of American dream."^[6] Willy gradually lost himself in the pursuit of his American dream. In the American society that advocated materialism and money first, he felt that only constant competition could realize his value and maintain his so-called dignity. His twisted American dream took a heavy toll on himself, eventually becoming a victim in such a social jungle.

2.1.2 The Hangover Influence from the Great Depression

Miller was born in 1915, he experienced the Great Depression, and these experiences were the sauces of his works and they had a great impact on his outlook of life. In the play, Willy continues to look back on his happy past as a way to escape the harsh reality. In 1928, it was the happy time before the Great Depression had happened.

Before the Great Depression happened, the economy of American was prosperous. The whole society was in great depression. And for that reason, the American Dream had become a nightmare. It intensified the difficulties in accomplishing the American Dream and more and more people met with defeat. Just like Willy in the play. It was one of the important factors that led to Willy's death.

2.1.3 The Mercenary Values of American Society at that Time

At that time, the rapid development of industry and commerce led to the great prosperity of material economy, the large population was out of control, the fierce competition made people crazy, and the simple and intimate relationship between people turned into a pure relationship of interests. Therefore, the only criterion to measure success has become the accumulation of material wealth, giving people the illusion that wealth can realize the value of life. In that mercenary society, friendship and credit are no longer important, this is like Willy who built success on the basis of popularity and like ability. He can't accept the fact that people become worthless in old age, so he is on the verge of mental breakdown. In the end, he actually believed that he would get a large fortune after his death, so that he could obtain wealth to prove his value. No matter how hard Willie tried to pursue his dream in such a profit-driven and ruthless society, it was in vain. This is one of the reasons why he finally became crazy and committed suicide.

2.2 Willy's Own Tragic Flaws

2.2.1 Willy's False Values

Willy spent his life mistakenly believing that being liked was the only secret to success. He believed that a person can acquire material wealth if he has personal charm and good popularity. In his mind, his son would be more successful than his friend Charlie's son, because he felt his sons were more popular. He believed that being popular would allow teachers to be more lenient in their studies and to be more flexible in their future work. He prided himself on his son's popularity, but mocked his neighbor's son as a nerd. Willy naively puts the key to his dream on the unreliable "likes" of others, and this conflict between dreams and reality doomed his failure and suicide.

2.2.2 Willy's Discordant Relationship with His Family

Willy's eventual choice of death was inextricably

linked to his family. Like other fathers, he loved his children and had endless expectations for them. For Willy, children are not only a continuation of his life, but also a continuation of his dreams. He wanted his son to admire him and fantasize about his son making a difference at work. At first her son Biff looked up to Willie and looked up to him as a role model. But when he accidentally caught his father cheating on him, his lofty image of his father suddenly collapsed and ceased to exist.^[3] From then on, Biff began to give up and languish. An unbridgeable chasm opened up between father and son. Willy had been feeling guilty and tortured by his mistakes. In order to make up for his mistakes, to get Biff to forgive him, and to fight for the possibility of realizing his "American dream" in Biff, Willie finally chose to crash the car and kill himself. Willy's wife was also the catalyst for Willy's suicide. When facing Willy, she was always submissive and agreeable. She had no judgment and could not tell right from wrong. Whenever Willy doubts himself, Linda always gives examples to prove that people like him, which makes Willy go on living in illusion: "You don't talk too much, you're just lively; To me, you are. The handsomest; and the boys, Willy. Few men are idolized by their children the way you are." (1133) When there is a conflict between father and son, she always blames her son, and when Willy suspected that he was unpopular, she immediately gave him blind encouragement; When Willy was suicidal, she didn't try to persuade or stop him. All Linda's behaviors were blindly loving and admiring Willy, which made Willy unable to correctly understand him and reality. Willy, who was becoming more and more blindly arrogant, finally chose to die and went to the extreme.

3. Conclusion

Miller once said, "When we are faced with a man who is willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of his personal dignity, the feelings of tragedy are aroused in us." Like a classic tragedy, the play arouses our sympathy and fear. We can only sympathize with Willy. He has a wrong attitude towards life and overestimates his own abilities. But his fault does not deserve such severe punishment. In *Death of a Salesman*, when we saw Wiley commit suicide, we also became very frightened, because Willy was not only representative of the post-Depression American middle class society, but also representative of all ordinary people. In our daily life, we can't seem to get rid of some inevitable failures. Willy's unrealistic dreams made it impossible for him to survive in a cruel world. But the tragedy of Willy's suicide was also that he blindly followed his personal values and could not distinguish between fantasy and reality. It is because of various contradictions within

the family as well as the prevalence of money worship and the social reality of weak human feelings. "It is the noble human spirit that is revealed in tragedy. Man takes pleasure in seeing pain because he sympathizes with the suffering."^[4] The complex and profound tragic image of Willy gives us great enlightenment and leads us to think and explore the value of life, the meaning of family and the future of society, so that our realm is constantly improved and sublimated.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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