



Death of a Salesman: Willy Loman as a Flawed Protagonist

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Abstract

The play *Death of a Salesman* is set in New York, the hometown of the protagonist Willy Loman. New York has stood as a symbol of success and modern life to the modern world— symbolizing the American Dream. This American Dream has allured people from all over the world. Willy Loman too is caught in the quagmire of this dream. His tragic downfall is his inability to see the truth about himself and his children. To add to his *hamartia* is his misinterpretation of the American Dream and imposing his flaws on his sons, thus bringing a downfall for himself and his family. He is never able to learn from the lessons that life has taught him and, in the end, meets his end without realizing his flaw. This makes him all the more tragic. The paper tends to understand the reason and extent of Willy Loman's *hamartia*, making him a flawed protagonist—or we may say, an antagonist.

Key Words – *American Dream, hamartia, requiem, illusion*

In his work **The Poetics**, Aristotle defines tragedy as imitation of an action. According to him, the function of tragedy is to produce the emotions of pity and fear. A tragic plot is one which shows a good and noble man suffering due to some flaw or **hamartia** on his own part. However, when we analyze **Death of a Salesman**, it appears before us as a tragedy different from the classical and Elizabethan tragedies. The apparent reason for this is that its hero, Willy Loman, does not belong to a noble family. On the other hand, he is an everyman caught within the vortex of the American myth of success. He is a modern American salesman who is suffering from economic and social insecurity.

He believes that he will become a famous salesman by impressing people with his looks. He lives under the illusion that “good looks” is the key to success and in the image of this illusion and false beliefs, he brings up his sons. He never allows his sons to face reality. He is obsessed with being successful without understanding the real meaning of the American Dream. He says, “The man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates a personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want” (33).

In fact, Willy represents the common American civilization. He is the symbol of increasing urbanization at the cost of man’s mental peace. He represents what civilization, materialism, and the blind pursuit of instant success are doing to every sensitive soul. Miller’s plays are always built in social context. He himself calls his plays a response to “what was in the air.” In his zest to impress society, Willy lives on false notions and ignores the realities and hence fails as an employee as well as a father.

Willy imagines and always claims that he is popular among people. At the same time, in his moments of delirium, he himself admits that people don’t like him anymore—probably because he talks a lot. Even after serving as a salesman in Wagner Company for more than three decades, no one recognizes him. As he ages and becomes unable to perform well in the company, he is taken off salary and put on commission like a beginner.

In his illusion, he always believed that since he is popular, many people will be present at his funeral, but ironically, his requiem is attended only by his friend Charley and his son Bernard. Miller writes, “I did not write **Death of a Salesman** to announce some new American man or an old American man. Willy Loman is, we think, a person who embodies in himself some of the most terrible conflicts running through the streets of America today.”

The whole concern of the play is to bring forth the aftereffects of this run after success and money under the illusion of an incorrect definition of the American Dream. Willy is a man of flaws. His problems are the problems of a common man. He makes false choices in life and prepares his own destruction. “You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away... a man is not a piece of fruit!” (61–62), remarks Willy himself when he is bereft of his monthly salary and is paid on commission despite his service to the company for more than three decades. These lines bring out the depth of his anguish and arouse our pity for Willy.

Miller believes that the common man is as appropriate a subject for tragedy as a character of noble descent.

The play throws light on the tragedy of this victim of the American social setup. Miller's depiction of the truth of the individual psyche and also of the world around the individual is certainly noticeable. He writes, "I hope I have made one thing clear to this point—and it is that society is inside of man and man is inside of society, and you cannot even create a truthfully drawn psychological entity on the stage until you understand his social relations and their power to make him what he is and to prevent him from being what he is not."

Miller adopts a narrative style in which a situation is built and brought to a crisis by the gradual revelation of something which has happened in the past and then simultaneously presents the past and the present. Willy makes false moves one after another in pursuit of success. Willy and his family are unable to cope with his false ideals as he is excessively obsessed with the superficial aspects of success, which he also instills in his sons, neglecting to teach them the value of hard work, integrity, and realistic career goals.

When his own son Biff tries to make him realize that Willy himself has been the cause of his son's failure, he destroys the strongest illusion in Willy's life—that his sons idealize him. As a result, he commits suicide by smashing his car. It is his last effort to prove that his life has been worthwhile because he thinks that after his death, the insurance money will go to his family. His guilt and failure to demarcate illusions from reality are his greatest flaws and the reason for his ultimate tragedy.

That Miller wanted to give us a glimpse into the mind of the central character is evident from the fact that Miller had at first thought of giving this play the title **The Inside of His Head**. However, unlike Shakespearean or Greek tragedies, which begin with the hero's ignorance but end with the hero's achievement of self-knowledge, Willy does not achieve any self-knowledge and he remains the same. He has lofty dreams and ambitions but does nothing to fulfill them. He wants so many things, but all he manages to do is suffer.

His failure is not mainly due to the pressure of the competitive system, but also due to his inability to tell the truth even to himself. He chooses a salesman's job, whereas he loves the countryside and is good at carpentry and construction. However, he sticks to the job as a salesman even though it brings him failure, only because he thinks the job will establish his status in society.

He raises his sons with false principles and ruins them as well. He is too weak to face the harsh realities of life. He remains in utter ignorance throughout his life and dies with it. Willy Loman falls as a victim of society. His moments of clear self-knowledge are few. There is a conflict in his life on multiple levels—between man and his family, between man and his society, between man and his dreams, as well as within man himself.

It is through these tensions of intra-family and social interactions that Miller unveils the illusive layers of Loman's subconscious and unconscious. As Linda explains,

“I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So, attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person” (40).

Death of a Salesman is a powerful diagnosis and a ruthless exposure of materialism and industrialized America through the character of Willy Loman's inevitable path to disastrous consequences.

Though any comparison between Willy and a Greek tragic hero is controversial, Willy is too weak to be a classic tragic hero. It is a tragedy in the light of Miller's own views, which differ from classical and Elizabethan tragedies. Here, the hero does not belong to a noble family but is a common man representing the blind pursuit of the American Dream. His downfall is due to his own flaws.

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