

Unveiling the Glamour of Salesmanship in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract

Salesmanship is a dynamic element of marketing strategy where selling plays a vital role in an industrial economy. As a profession, salesmanship is glamorous in capitalistic economy as it promotes sales of goods and services worth billions and billions of dollars. Moreover, it offers handsome salaries and bright prospects that persuade an ordinary salesman to rise to the top executive position. But, salesmanship is not only lucrative but also illusory and exploiting. Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Salesman' deals with the theme of salesmanship and focuses on the dark side of this profession through his dramatic lens. This paper attempts to show how Miller unveils the glamour of salesmanship through his tragic protagonist Willy Loman, and proves that this capitalistic aspect can cause frustration and leads an employee to ruin.

Keywords: American Dream, Glamour, Business, Salesmanship, Appearance, Reality, Disillusionment, Insecurity and Death.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is a social drama that shows the crisis of a family in a capitalistic social context of America. The family consists of four members- Willy Loman, Linda Loman, and his sons Biff and Happy. Willy Loman is the protagonist of the play who is a travelling salesman by profession of the Wagner Company. He represents the company in the market and works hard to promote the sale of goods of the company for long thirty six years, but this job cannot ensure his financial security. This financial insecurity causes his nerve-wrecking anxiety and mental imbalance which leads him to commit suicide. Through the tragedy of Willy Loman in the context of economic depression America suffered during the post world war period, Arthur Miller portrays the picture of unhappy human relationship in the industrial world and exposes the exploiting nature of salesmanship that appeared in business with its elusive promises in a capitalistic society.

Business is an umbrella term that includes many activities ranging from manufacturing goods and services to retailing. In commercial activity, salesmen play a significant role in expanding the market of products as well as conveying goods and services to the hands of consumers. Richard T. Hise, a Professor of Marketing at Texax A & M University and consultant to major U.S Corporations, (1980) writes, "Personal selling is the employment of men and women who determine the needs of potential buyers and attempt to persuade these prospects to satisfy their needs through the purchase of products and services" (p. 2). A salesman basically discovers the needs of potential buyers and provides them with information about their essential products with a view to satisfying their demands. Harold M. Mike (in Sikder, Nasrin, Alam, and Islam, 2017)

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says, “Salesmanship is a technique by which a salesman can sell his goods or services to a person” (p. 399). So, a salesman acts as a bridge between manufacturers and buyers. The main objective of salesmanship is the maximization of profit of the companies because a salesman can only be benefited when the company he represents thrives through maximum profit.

The content of the play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and the point of view of Miller have been interpreted by several critics based on American Cultural Myth and social context. The doctrine of historical American society is the “Success Myth or American Dream”. James Truslow Adams (1932) defines the American Dream as “Life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement regardless of social class or circumstances of birth”. In fact, as it is indicated in the definition, the American Dream means that America, a vast country with ample opportunities, provides every citizen irrespective of cast, creed or religion with a chance to become rich through hard work and diligence. Since the play operates in such a cultural milieu, critics argue that Miller defends the American Dream while criticizing its defects and deficiencies. Brenda Murphy (in Centola, 2008) has pointed out, “While there has been some effort to defend Miller as an upholder of the American Dream, most critics who have written on this subject have attempted to explain Willy's demise as a failure on his and often Miller's part, to comprehend American history and values” (p. 38). The critical comment implies that the character represented by Willy – not fate or destiny or external force represented by the profit oriented materialistic society – is responsible for his tragedy. Steven Centola (2008) also remarks, “Undeniably, Willy does indeed fail to understand the intricacy of the workings of American history and the complexity and oftentimes inherently contradictory aspects of American values (p. 38)”. All these critics basically hold Willy Loman responsible for his own tragedy. Their comment is plausible as some social factors operate upon Willy which he fails to comprehend.

Willy Loman, hardworking and energetic, embraces the success myth of America and joins the Wagner Company as a traveling salesman since the profession in his time appears to be tentative and glamorous to him. In fact, a profession sounds glamorous if it fulfills certain criteria such as job security and benefits, especially health care, with significant retirement benefits, compensation or pay, opportunities to use skills and abilities, and safe work environment. While discussing the benefits of salesmanship Richard T. Hise (1980) points out, “There are a number of advantages that are generally associated with sales careers. They include good opportunities for advancement, excellent compensation, flexibility and freedom, a high level of personal satisfaction, and strong demand” (p. 31). The play encompasses three paradigms of salesmanship: the first represented by Willy Loman's father, “a very wild-hearted man and ... he'd toss the whole family into the wagon, and then he'd drive the team right across the country; through Ohio, and Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and all the Western states” (Miller, 1949:38). Willy's father was a peddler as “The occupation of traveling salesman began, in the United States with the Yankee peddler in the early nineteenth century. The peddler would buy up cheap, portable manufactured goods in the early industrial centers of the Northeast, pack them in a wagon or peddler's pack, and set off for the rural South or the frontier villages of the West, where he would travel from small town to small town, selling his wares at high profit. Peddlers were entrepreneurs, operating completely on their own, free to buy and sell whatever they wanted and to travel wherever they

liked" (Murphy, 1999:2). The historical reference testifies to the initial stage of salesmanship, ensured with some of the criteria of a good profession such as independence, freedom, maximum earning, investment, hard work and happy life.

The second paradigm is represented by Dave Singleman, whom Willy sees as his hero and a success symbol, was an old man and he used to "... pick up his phone and call the buyers and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living" (Miller, 1949: 63). Dave Singleman was basically a drummer and a drummer was a real commercial traveler or traveling salesman as Murphy (1999) says, "Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the drummer, usually a young man with a pleasant personality, was sent by a large manufacturing firm or wholesaler to greet small retail merchants who came from outlying areas to the industrial centers in order to buy their stock. The drummers would go to hotels, railroad stations and boat landings, greet the merchants, help them to make their way around the city, and offer them free entertainment in hopes of securing their orders for merchandise. As competition between wholesalers intensified, the drummers were sent on the road with sample cases and catalogs, going out to the merchants rather than waiting for them to come to the city (p. 2-3)". Willy, Ben, the elder brother of Willy and Charley, a friend of Willy, also belong to this paradigm and the third paradigm is represented by Howard Wagner, the present owner of the Wagner Company. Through this paradigm shift, Miller gradually reveals the evolution of business pattern and values associated with it. Willy Loman, being inspired by the success of Dave Singleman, joins the Wagner Company as he wanted to be, "...remembered and loved and helped by so many different people" (Miller, 1949:63). Therefore, he rejects other offers and embraces salesmanship as his career as he dreamed that this profession would bring him love, honour, respect, and affluence. The philosophy that motivates him while joining salesmanship is the personality myth which signifies that the personality of a salesman is more important than the commercial products being sold by the salesmen. He believed that personality, friendship and personal loyalty could bring success in his life. As he puts, "Be liked and you will never want" (Miller, 25-26). Willy, with this cult of personality, represents Wagner Company in the market and travels from New York to Boston and other states. From his conversation with Howard, it is obvious that he was, in his youth, satisfied with his job and income that propelled him to carry on. As he says, "[I]n 1928 I had a big year. I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commissions" (Miller, 64). Willy, a fervent votary of the American Dream, believes that he has a chance to rise to a high position and acquire a vast wealth. He holds a very high opinion of himself and his profession. He believes that he can be rich by means of personal initiative, charisma, attractiveness, and by using personal influence. He is so blinded by the illusion of salesmanship that he thinks salesmanship is the only job to become an important person as well as an affluent one. Thus, Willy degrades his own moral faculty because of his blind faith in salesmanship and starts overlooking moral degradation of his elder son, Biff. In a dream sequence, he tells young Biff and Happy, sons of Willy, "Tell you a secret, boys. Don't breathe it to a soul. Someday I'll have my own business" (Miller, 23). Then Happy asks Willy curiously "Like Uncle Charley, heh?" (Miller, 23). Willy replied, "Bigger than Uncle Charley! Because Charley is not-liked. He's liked, but he's not-well liked" (Miller, 23). As a travelling salesman, Willy has to travel from city to city and town to town. Besides, he has to meet a lot of people with samples and develop a bond with a lot of

buyers for his business purpose. His acquaintance with many people is a matter of self-pride which makes him over-estimate not only himself but also his profession. He thinks that he is a very important and dignified person in society though the reality is not so. He tells his sons that he visited Providence and met the Mayor. He adds, “He said, ‘Morning!’ And I said, ‘You got a fine city here, Mayor.’ And then he had coffee with me” (Miller, 23). A travelling salesman may meet a Mayor of a city as he is a public representative and an accessible person, but this meeting with a very important person does not elevate the value of a profession or the worth of any person but Willy fails to understand it as he earns handsome money on commission basis for the time being.

It is not unusual for a travelling salesman to meet people from all walks of society. But it does not mean that all people are friendly to him and respect him equally. Willy, in fact, develops a false sense of pride and gets puffed up because of his acquaintance with the dignitaries of society. Willy tells Biff and Happy:

I’ll show you all the towns. America is full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people. And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring you fellas up, there’ll be open sesame for all of us, ’cause one thing, boys: I have friends, I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own” (Miller, 24).

Willy's acquaintance with the Mayor of Providence transforms his own mindset, and thus, he looks upon himself a dignified person and holds the view that salesmanship is the most honorable job in the world. Therefore, Willy wants to infuse ‘personality’ myth into Biff as he holds the view that Biff will certainly shine in life by developing a charismatic personality. Bernard, the son of Charley, complains to Willy against Biff that Biff neglects studying Math but Willy overlooks it. Moreover, Bernard tells Biff in front of Willy astonishingly, “ Listen, Biff, I heard Mr. Birnbaum say that if you don’t start studyin’ math he’s gonna flunk you, and you won’t graduate. I heard him!” (Miller, 25). Willy does not take it seriously, rather he mocks Bernard, “Bernard is not well liked, is he?” (Miller, 25). On top of that Willy tells his sons:

Bernard can get the best marks in school, y’understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y’ understand you are going to be five times ahead of him. That’s why I thank Almighty God you’re both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me, for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. ‘Willy Loman is here!’ That’s all they have to know, and I go right through (Miller, 25-26).

Willy is blinded by the magic and illusion of salesmanship. He fantasizes that at a later part of his career he would be a powerful man and exercise power over the buyers. Willy is thus driven to push the main secrets of the personality myth/ success myth into his elder son. In reality, salesmanship is mathematically correlated to loss and profit and a company gives priority to this over other issues. If a company goes on making a loss, it cannot survive in the business world. The success of a company depends on the performance of the sales representatives. There is no

scope for sympathy and compassion. Willy Loman fails to understand this pragmatic aspect of his job and cannot cope with the difficulties in his career. Richard T. Hise (1980) points out, "Because of the travel requirements, salespeople frequently find that they have to be away from home for extended periods of time. This can lead to family problems, especially for salespeople with children" (p. 38). In fact, the very nature of salesmanship demands a lot of travel. For this reason, Willy has to travel from city to city and he has to be away from his family and stay in motels and hotels for many days. While living alone in hotel rooms, he feels lonely and exhausted. Although he loves his wife, Linda and his children, he seduces his buyer, Simmons' secretary with stockings and spends a night with her in a Boston hotel. Willy is discovered by Biff in that hotel with Miss Francis. Biff is stunned and shocked at the debauchery, and the act of adultery. Willy, out of embarrassment, tries to hide his shame and lies to convince Biff that the woman is a buyer and her room is being painted and she has simply taken shelter in his room. Biff is not convinced, and Willy pleads, "[W]hen you grow up you'll understand about these things. You mustn't— you mustn't over-emphasize a thing like this" (Miller, 95). What Willy is trying to express is that he is faithful to his wife and children but he is tempted because of his depressive loneliness. We can sympathize with Willy, but the irony is that the discovery of his sin creates violent discord in his family. Hostility between father and son leads to disintegration of the family bond and the ruin of Biff's career.

Since Willy had to be away from home at the early stage of his career as his job demanded, he could not be a strong father-figure to his sons. Biff neglected his study of Math, but Willy did not consider it important. Biff develops a habit of stealing since his boyhood but Willy overlooks his immoral behavior again and again. As Biff is not punished or corrected, he oversteps the boundaries of acceptable conducts: he dares to mimic his Math teacher and dishonors him. Consequently, Biff does not graduate as he fails in Mathematics. Moreover, Biff degenerates morally to the extent that he continues stealing from every job he joins. He confesses outright to Willy, "You know why I had no address for three months? I stole a suit in Kansas City and I was in Jail" (Miller, 104). He adds, "I stole myself out of every good job since high school" (Miller, 104). Biff comments, "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" (Miller, 16). The present job that Biff has in Texas exposes Biff's disdain for the job of salesman as it does not offer him any bright prospects. His ultimate realization is "I've always made a point of not wasting my life, and every time I come back here I know that all I've done is to waste my life" (Miller, 17). In fact, Willy was Biff's role model and his ideal father, but the discovery of his father's extra-marital affair with Miss Francis leaves an indelible trauma on Biff for which his transformed mind cannot bear his father's success theory and value system. Biff bounces back and forth in quest of self-identity but his mental turmoil leads to the path of frustration. As a result, he becomes disillusioned about the job of salesmanship and fails to establish himself in a complex profit oriented highly commercialized American society.

The elusive glamour of Willy's job starts to fade when Willy Loman confronts the harsh reality of life at the age of sixty three. Willy experiences traumatic financial crisis. Hise (1980) points out, "Although compensation in the selling profession is generally good, it often does not come in on

a regular basis. Erratic income can make it very difficult to establish a budget and is a frequently cited reason why salesmen's wives suggest that their husbands leave the selling profession" (p. 39). Willy cannot make ends meet because of his erratic income. He buys a house, but he fails to make the mortgage payment within twenty five years to own it. Similarly, he fails to own a brand new car as he has to pay the cost in installments. He had a dream to own a large business, but this dream is also nipped in the bud as he fails to accumulate sufficient capital. His economic crisis is so terrible that he is unable to earn a living for his family. His mental anxiety is so deep that he is pushed to the verge of insanity. Salesmanship makes him sink into quicksand (metaphorically speaking). Willy fully realizes the brutal and competitive nature of salesmanship when his salary is taken away. Linda says, "A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man. He works for a company thirty-six years this March, opens up unheard-of territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his salary away" (Miller, 44). Willy Loman has to think of beginning anew with nothing. He is exhausted, and the company he represented for thirty six years exploits him and throws him away like soiled paper.

Miller exposes the ugly reality of salesmanship through the conversation between Willy and Howard Wagner. At one point of the conversation, Willy divulges his feeling, "And there was a question in my mind as to whether selling had a future for me" (Miller, 63). Arthur Miller raises this question through the tragedy of Willy Loman; the playwright asks whether there is any bright future of salesmanship or the job is at all glamorous to ensure financial security to the employees. Willy, an old man, has to drive car seven hundred miles a day without even earning a single penny. Willy tells us the reason for becoming a salesman, "In those days there was personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it" (Miller, 63). What he means is that at the early stage of salesmanship, personality had a value in this profession and it was also a respectable job. But the value of personality in salesmanship declines after the great economic recession in the 1930s. The whole economic scenario changes in the U.S.A and a pragmatic attitude towards business develops during Howard's generation. Business ethic also changes because of competitive economic environment. Though Willy requests Howard to arrange an official job for him, Howard shows absolute indifference to him and casually remarks, "[B]usiness is business" (Miller, 63). It means that to Howard profit is more important than any other issue. His attitude to business is pragmatic. He realizes that Willy Loman is no longer a useful and profitable tool to earn huge profit for his business and so he decides to dismiss him from his job although Willy solicits Howard like a beggar to allow him to continue his job deducting his commission from sixty to forty a week. Willy vehemently tells Howard, "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, 64). The ultimate realization of Willy is that a salesman has utility in the business world as long as he has strength and energy.

Arthur Miller does not attack the whole capitalist system and delineate it as an antagonist. Rather, he sharply attacks one aspect of capitalism- the salesmanship- which is directly related to the operation of marketing and unveils its diabolical nature through symbolic characterization. The play contains contrasting characters who represent both success and failure in the dramatic

landscape of the American society. Charley, a neighbor and relative of Willy Loman, represents success of capitalism. He is an established businessman and there is no crisis in his life. He is not obsessed with the myth of Personality, and he does not inject any idealism into his son, Bernard. Therefore, there is no chaos and disorder in his life. He is in a position to offer jobs to others and is capable of giving to charity. Bernard also becomes a successful lawyer under capitalistic system. Ben, the elder brother of Willy Loman, becomes successful because of his adventurous spirit. Happy, the younger son of Willy, is happy as he has a regular salary. Failure in the play is represented by Willy, and by Biff, his older son. It is noticeable that the characters representing success are not travelling salesmen. They become successful through their own business enterprises. Willy fails to achieve his goal in life as he has no regular salary. Charley comments, "The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman and you don't know that" (Miller, 76-77). Here Charley satirizes Willy, deflates his hubris, and holds Willy responsible for his own tragedy.

Brenda Murphy (1999) also expresses her opinion regarding Willy's failure: "From the point of view of men like Howard and Charley, Willy's failure in business is a failure to adapt his old-fashioned sales technique- based on the buyer's personal loyalty to the salesman- to the new post-war business climate where salesmanship was based on knowledge of the product and service to the customer" (p. 9). The comment is significant as it points out Willy's ignorance of reality, "[I]t's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear-or personality" (Miller, 1949: 63-64).

Willy Loman is an old man at the end of the play, incapable of driving long hours, and impressing others. Salesmanship appeared to him with its illusive glamour and infused in his mind the philosophy, "I always felt that if a man was impressive, and well liked, that nothing -" (Miller, 77). Accordingly, he adheres to the job from youth to old age but when he is fired from the Wagner Company, he realizes that though he was not lazy throughout his career, he had failed to bring his family out of the vicious circle of poverty. His job has absorbed the essence of his manhood: "I've got to get some seeds, right away. Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground" (Miller, 96). Willy had cherished a dream but salesmanship has soaked up all energy out of him and made his life completely barren. Without ensuring economic security, Willy's job had plunged his life into the abyss of uncertainty and frustration from where Willy has no other option other than committing suicide in order to provide for family.

The focus of the play *Death of a Salesman* is the tragedy of a salesman, not a businessman. Arthur Miller imparts a universal message through the crisis and suicide of his protagonist that capitalism should not exploit individual labour for its thriving: it must ensure the welfare of the employees as well in utilizing their talent, efficiency and labour. Besides, Miller, through his involvement with social issues, raises the awareness of his audience to the nature of modern life by reflecting the aspirations, worries, and failures of a little man and expresses his strong condemnation towards rate race of the American society. The play implies that an individual should not behave like its hero to whom success means two things-being rich and being popular. Obsession for these two things is sure to lead an individual to destruction if he is unable to

achieve the goals. Miller says (in J.B.E Turner), “The play was begun with only one firm piece of knowledge, and this was that Loman was to destroy himself---his sin was to have committed himself so completely to the counterfeits of dignity and the false coinage embodied in his idea of success---”(p.13).

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