

Death of Salesmanship and Miller's Death of a Salesman

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Abstract

*When technical revolution in **Death of a Salesman** formed the transformist task in American society, certain changes cropped up and Willy Loman in **Death of a Salesman** failed to cope with them. A vigorous understanding of Miller's creation involves the task of stretching beyond the boundaries of individual, to the extent of fathoming out the labyrinthine complicity of social phenomena. **Death of a Salesman** holds a philosophy called the "American Dreams" 'a misfit idea' in a decade of unprecedented consumerism and technological advances. It gave the wrong ideology and deceived the human mind of the new middle class after the war until they were lost in a maize ready to be attacked by the lurking capitalist spider. This paper sets out to prove that Willy Loman, the every middle class man could not survive in the capitalist turmoil because he was a human being, he was not a salesman, he was a romantic, he believed in life, loved nature like Shelly, Keats and Rabinthdrath Tagore. There was no way out in this rat race but to his ultimate death because he did not want to compete with technology, with the new values, ideas and ethics of the civilized world where man killed man for power and greed and where there was no respect for a human being.*

Key words: Transformist task, consumerism, technological advances, society, capitalism

One of the greatest tragedies in American plays, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* premiered in 1949. It portrayed the salesman who represented the everyday common man, the American. This was the decade of the unprecedented consumerism and technological advances. Willy Loman believed that he could make it big in life using 'the theory of being liked' but this was not enough for survival with the start of a new era of modernity which Willy Loman was finding so hard to adapt to. Willy Loman had grown obsolete and modernity accounts for the obsolescence. Arthur Miller shows the ambivalent attitude to modern objects and the modern mindset. The technological revolution brought about the transformist task which ultimately brought his downfall. In a fast moving world, competition is great, the individual must be ready to move in alignment with the rat race otherwise he may be classified as the inactive or the passive. The decade of unprecedent consumerism and technological revolution couldn't provide room for inactivity.

In Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, we find a tragic flaw in the character, a 'crisis in consciousness'. Here the tragic flaw is the unwillingness to accept that the theory and philosophy of being well liked does not quite fit in a competitive society where a small group of people get intoxicated with an idea- flourishing technology, thriving competition growing up in an American Society where the transformist battle was taking place.

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Miller writes about the tragedy of a common man who faces the modern dilemma moulded by society and who becomes a tragic hero when he commits suicide. The hundred million dollar question is whether the salesman commits suicide because of his lack of expertise in his salesmanship or because he could not face the harsh realities of the prevailing capitalist warfare or the self realization that he was a romantic and a human being and his philosophy, dreams and vision did not match the fast moving changing environment.

In 1923-1933 the Great Depression caused by the 1929 Wall Street crash and agricultural industrialization had forced farmers and Blacks in 1930 to move to the cities. In the late 1940's the white urban middle class people moved from the cities to the suburbs toward the west causing cheap buildings to build up rapidly, suffocating the natural countryside. Willy Loman, a romantic at heart, who saw the tragedy of the new era, says 'There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood.' (Miller, 1961:12). Linda adds that it is impossible to grow seeds with insufficient sunlight. The horrifying reality is, as Willy expresses, that the population is growing out of control and 'the competition is maddening' (Miller, 1961:12). Willy realizes what is happening around him. Obviously he is talking about his profession and the cut throat competition.

The birth of modern salesmanship occurred in the decades around the turn of the century. Entrepreneurs and businessmen developed modern sales techniques, created procedures for management that were parallel to those of the new science of mass production. Salesmanship became of interest to psychologists, economists and politicians with the rise of mass manufacturers in the United States. The country, as envisioned by the pioneers of modern selling, now comprised sales "territories".

At this point of discussion there is a need to look at how salesmanship emerged through the ages and then compare the real salesman to Willy Loman who represents a small cult who in turn represented the typical salesmanship with the theory of being liked. Death of a salesman as Roudane states is "a rich matrix of enabling fables that define the myth of the American Dream" (Roudane 1987). Dale Carnegie (1888-1955), the American writer also added to the ideas of the American Dream through a series of persuasive essays on the 'cult of personality' as being instrumental for success in business.

In the 1880s the salesman or canvasser toured from farmhouse to farmhouse on foot or in a wagon selling goods on commission. Other salesmen travelled by wagons and trains hauling trunks filled with merchandise samples or carrying thick catalogs. But in the late nineteenth century, a newer, more aggressive, and highly managed form of salesmanship emerged. Mass manufacturers began to build their own cadres of salesmen, and in doing so, developed the first modern sales forces—"modern" because their use of salesmen set the pattern for companies in the decades that followed. The final decades of the nineteenth century were an unusually fertile period for American business. The economy was changing rapidly, propelled by the emergence of large industrial manufacturers. Several companies grew from small entrepreneurial concerns to large enterprises including Heinz, Kellogg, Duke, and Post—also attended local schools for business, learning accounting and other aspects of commerce (Friedman 2004).

By the time it came to the twentieth century the salesmen played a supporting role to advertising. Salesmen's functional roles included overseeing every detail of selling—assigning territory, setting up sales quotas, and establishing compensation schemes.

Other selling changes include Frederick W. Taylor's scientific management movement which revolutionized production and contributed towards new selling techniques. Taylor instructed managers to analyze and standardize all work routines, making them as efficient as possible and giving workers clear schedules for the completion of tasks. Around the turn of the century, "scientific sales management," as one business writer called it, had somewhat similar implications for selling. The concept of a standardized modern salesman according to Friedman should be 'polished, intelligent, energetic; a man of affairs; a student of human nature; an observer of conditions; alert, affable, dignified, enthusiastic'.



Fig.1 Process of Salesmanship

The modern concept of Personal selling or salesmanship is an important method of selling. It is the process of assisting and persuading a prospective buyer to buy a product in a face-to-face situation. A salesman must have etiquette, his déjà vu with the client must be precise and his objective clear. Obviously one would not expect gifts such as silk stockings to buyers' secretary as a way to do business. Willy exploited his craftsmanship to the depth of seducing the buyers secretary with silk stockings to reach his buyers.

Selling is offering to exchange something of value for something else. It involves direct and personal contact between the seller and his representative with the prospective buyer. It provides feedback and performs the complete job of selling. But it is more expensive and time-consuming. The purpose of personal selling is not to ensure the present sale alone, but winning a regular

customer. According to Still, Cundiff and Govoni (1996:176), the qualities of a salesman include the following:

- Ability to define the products' exact function in relation to the goals of the company
- Ability to allocate sufficient time for thinking and planning
- Ability to utilize time efficiently
- Ability to select and train capable subordinates and willingness to delegate sufficient authority to enable them to carry out assigned tasks with minimum supervision
- Ability to exercise skilled leadership
- Ability to utilize time sufficiently

As seen above the modern concept of salesmanship emphasizes on time management and its efficient use, planning set objectives, and leadership qualities. The school of thought today has different set standards compared to the door to door selling of the 1930's sales which Willy Loman was accustomed to doing.

According to the Dr Subanhanjali Chopra, to be successful, a salesman must possess several qualities:

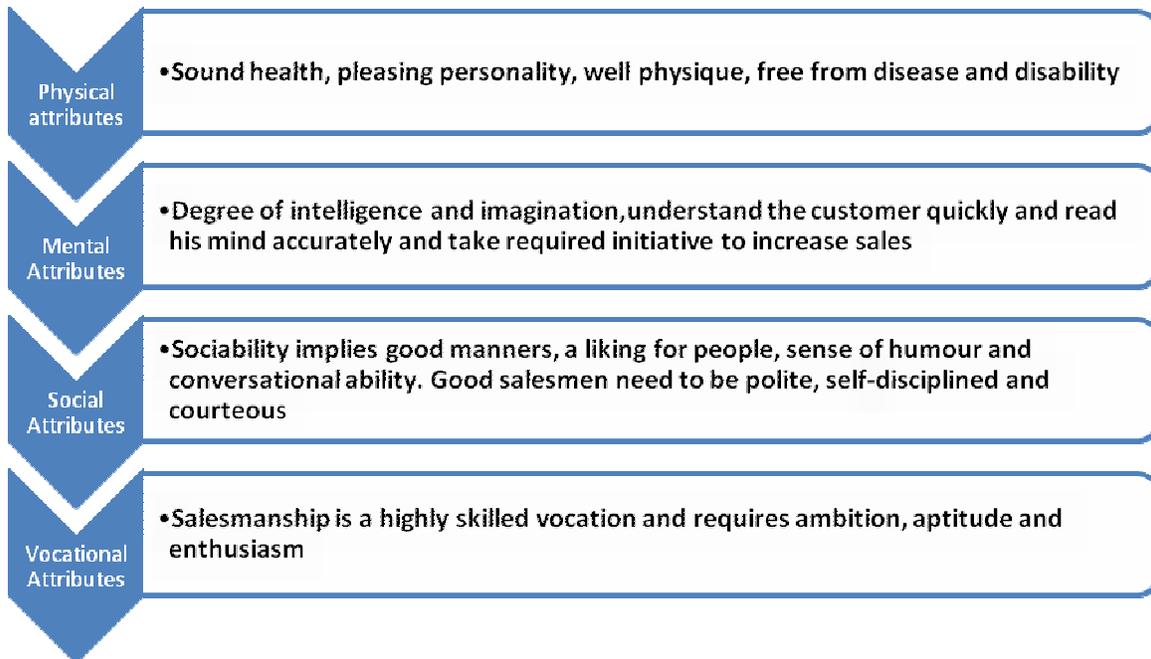


Fig 2 Qualities of a successful salesman

He adds that pleasing personality and good health are needed for an active salesman (Chopra, 2008:269). Unfortunately Willy suffers from hallucinations at the age of sixty. Miller uses the flash back technique to allow the salesman to move backwards and forward to the present reality until the past and the present reality blend and it is impossible to differentiate the time setting.

This leads to a deranged Willy Loman. He remembers his brother Ben and regrets missing the opportunity of going to Africa with him, as Ben explains, 'when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty one. And by God, I was rich!' It was a break- there was an opportunity to explore Africa and he took it and he got lucky (Miller, 1961:32). It was Willy's regret only by choice because he wanted to play it safe for his family. He wasn't ready to take risks. But sometimes it is risk that makes a success story for a salesman.

The second quality points out intelligence and imagination. After giving 25 years to the company Willy Loman was burned out. A good salesman should always have his mind open for change. He was tired of travelling and living on commissions and wanted to settle down. But he was not prepared even to make little changes in his food habit, like taking American Cheese. He could not adapt to the changing environment. He was not creative and prepared to adapt to changes according to the need of the changing environment. According to Jones, the salesman should possess the ability to review carefully his work at the close of each day, and decide just where and how he has been weaker than what he should have been (Jones 1919: 170).

The third quality of a salesman includes sociability, liking for people and a sense of humour. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the American business economy was enjoying one of its greatest periods of prosperity with the growth of mass production. As a result pressure was created on the salesman to sell products to keep up with the production. The product was not important and the salesman's job was to socialise with the buyers so that they would buy his merchandise. Willy tells his son that 'personality' was considered salesman's greatest asset. In fact, he believes in the theory of being well liked. There were many like Willy, who put all their faith in personality, friendship, and personal loyalty – 'Be liked and you will never want' (Miller1961:25-26) – this was a new way of thinking about salesmanship.

The fourth quality includes skill for the vocation, ambition and enthusiasm. Willy Loman is back dated. His desire and quest for knowledge has reached a minimum point because of old age. He never listens to Jack Benny on the radio of his car. The wire recorder scene with Howard indicates Willy's lack of interest in new products while Howard listens in fascination to his daughter, son and wife's voice on the recorder. He gets confused with the red/green traffic lights. He doesn't know why his windsweep wiper suddenly turns on by itself. Howard Wagner, who, after the death of his father Frank, has taken over the business which employed Willy. Miller is pragmatic and impersonal in his treatment of the aging salesman. When Willy admits that he can't handle the road anymore, Howard refuses to consider finding him something to do in New York as his father might have done, explaining the present reality, "it's a business, kid, and everybody's gotta pull his own weight' (Miller1961:62). When Willy loses self control, shows his desperation, Howard fires him, telling him that he is not in a fit state to represent the firm. He has ambitious dream but does not do anything to materialize it. Willy speaks of his dream 'It's the only dream you can have – to come out number one man' (Miller1961: 111). He wants to do well but he could not keep pace with the fast moving business climate because of his illusory American dreams. As Willy tells Ben in one of the daydream sequences that takes place in 1931,

‘business is bad, it’s murderous’ (Miller1961:40). The salesman is up against a highly competitive business world that placed the blame for failure squarely on the individual. Salesmanship is an essential quality, an innate character trait that could be nurtured and developed, but not to be created by the aspiring salesman. During the twenties, salesmanship was beginning to be treated as a highly skilled profession. The next stage that developed was the manipulation of the psychology of the buyer, versus psychology of the expert salesman. With mass production and increased competition, buyers began to think more about profit margins and consumer satisfaction than about their own personal relationship with the salesman. The quality and the salesman’s knowledge of the product was of more importance. Companies began to train their salesman in the methods of salesmanship and to educate them about the products they were selling.

The profession of selling underwent a tremendous change after the war. In the late forties, a movement to professionalize the salesman began, promoting sales as a career for college graduates. An important part of this movement was to emphasize the salesman’s expertise and downplay his personality. Students were taught in business courses that the salesman’s job was to learn everything he could about his product, and about the market, to gather all the data he could and analyze it using the most sophisticated statistical methods – but Willy believes otherwise, ‘today, it’s all cut and dried, and there’s no chance for bringing friendship to bear – or personality’ (Miller1961:63-64).

Willy’s aspirations to be a salesman came from Dave Singleman, Willy’s hero who was eighty four years old and had drummed merchandise in thirty-one different states just by calling up buyers who would place orders. Willy says that he decided then that he wanted to be traveling salesman because he wanted to become like Singlman, and be ‘remembered and loved and helped by so many different people’ (Miller1961:63). Dave Singleman was his inspiration ‘I realized that selling was the greatest career that man could want’ (Miller 1961:63).

Willy’s generation remembered the time when there was ‘respect, and comradeship, and gratitude’ (Miller1961:63) in business, for the aspiring salesmen were urged to develop the qualities of character that would make customers respect and want to buy from them to make the sales a success, as Willy puts it, “the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead” (Miller1961:25). Once his own personality was attended to, the salesman could concentrate on the psychological manipulation of the customer.

Now, the question may be asked why didn’t Willy succeed, was it because of his age or his time? With most of the younger men from the military, middle-aged salesmen like Willy made an adequate living during World War II, despite the fact that the manufacturing of consumer goods was severely restricted. In the post-war period demand for new things changed the scenario completely. The enormous American war industry was being retooled to produce consumer goods, and the advertizing business was expanding rapidly as Americans were ‘educated’ into desiring things like vacuum cleaners, television sets, and refrigerators, which had not been manufactured in large quantities before the war.

The newly invigorated American business sector seized on the youthful and energetic workforce of young men returning from the military, displacing the women and older men who had been employed during the war. Men like Willy Loman, sixty three years old in 1948, were being displaced by younger generation everywhere.

Happy and Biff Loman represent the typical members of the younger middle class generation. Happy works in a department store. His job carries a regular salary rather than the precarious commission that Willy lives on. He lives a carefree bachelor life, more interested in, as Linda tells him, his car, his apartment and his women than in helping his family. His final response to his father's death is to proclaim that he is 'not licked that easily. I'm staying right in this city, and I'm gonna beat this racket!... So Willy's success was that he was able to translate the same deceiving dream to his son. Willy had failed in life and Happy was following his footsteps. Biff built like Adonis was a good football player but unlike his neighbor Bernard had flunked maths, missed the chance to go to a university, while Bernard ended up being a successful lawyer. Despite the fact that Biff has won the chance to play in Ebbets field through his accomplishments on the football field, Willy really believes, as he tells Ben, that 'three great universities are begging for him, and from there the sky's the limit, because it's not what you do, Ben. It's who you know and the smile on your face! . . . that's the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked!' (Miller, 1961:67-68). The play's overwhelming message is that this is a lie, and that Willy is a fool to believe it. It is one of the things that destroys him. The discovery of Willy's illicit affair with his client's secretary led Biff to burn his 'University of Virginia sneakers' and drain out all his hope in life. Willy knew that he was 'a phony little fake' (Miller, 1961:95) as Biff had expressed in pain. He knew that he contributed towards Biff's failure to do anything in life,' who tells happy 'I don't know what the future is. I don't know-what I'm supposed to want' (Miller, 1961:16).

The Loman family live in a materialistic world where dreams and hopes have no directions, where values are diminished and promises are broken. It is the world where the rich become richer and the poor become poorer.

Willy Loman is a lover of nature. In fact, he has many characteristics of a romantic. In the first Act, Willy describes the country scenery 'Its so beautiful up there Linda, the trees are so thick, and the sun is warm'(Miller, 1961:9). He promises Linda 'You wait kid, before it's all over we're gonna get a place out in the country, and I'll raise some vegetables, a couple of chickens' (Miller, 1961:56). He misses the country life 'The grass don't grow anymore, you can't raise a carrot in the backyard (Miller, 1961:9). He says' remember those two beautiful elm trees out there....They should've arrested the builder for cutting those down. He says, 'More and more, I think of those days Linda. This time last year it was lilac and wisteria. And then the peonies would come out, and the daffodils. What a fragrance in this room!'. (Miller, 1961:9). Willy wants to return to nature. He is suffocated with the cramped city atmosphere and longs for the freshness and simplicity of nature. He feels the presence of the unseen powers of nature. The unseen, transcendental world is more real for him than the world of senses. This is seen as he continuously talks to his brother Ben sharing his unhappiness with a ghost from the past' Didn't I

work like a coolie to meet every premium on the nose? And now they don't pay off!' (Miller, 1961:100). Willy Loman is the dissatisfied individual. He is dissatisfied with his life, the capitalist movement, and with the fate of humanity.

A romantic like Willy Loman may revolt against the existing condition, he may escape into his own world of his own creation. Often he escapes into the past. The play's background music played on flute on and off stage using expressionism techniques tells the tale of the travelling salesman and speaks of the success of past salesman using traditional skills as opposed to the challenges that the present salesman is faced with the new school of thought in accordance to the competitive demand of consumer market in the post war era. Flutes symbolize Willy's father's success story out in the west. This music follows him throughout the play and ironically follows his ultimate death.

Willy Loman like Wordsworth finds in Nature a never-failing friend of man as described in a few Miles above Tintern Abbey.

"Knowing that nature, never did betray

The heart that loved her"

(Wordsworth, William; Tintern Abbey lines 123-124)

For Wordsworth, Nature is all grace and solace to lead man 'from joy to joy; to impress his mind with 'quietness and beauty' to feed his heart with 'lofty thoughts' and to enable him to perceive' the power of harmony and the deep power of joy; in all that he beholds for the sake of humanity as is felt when Willy Loman tries to forget his torment and his fight against the transformist movement in the name of humanity. But Willy Loman a logical salesman knows that his death would provide \$20,000 insurance money for his family, especially Biff to keep alive his dream of success in defiance of the capitalist corporate America which shattered the dreams of many.

We find Willy Loman acting several roles in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Not only does he take the domestic role of a father and a husband and a lover; he is also a salesman and a romantic. He is also the messiah with a message for humanity. He is the alienated man, the tragic hero. What more, he is the typical every day common man- a human being.

Willy Loman is a middle class common man everyone can associate with. He is adored by his wife and worshiped by his sons until he has an illicit relationship with a buyer's secretary and is exposed to Biff. Willy, a romantic at heart, hated the idea of industrialization, he says, 'The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks' (Miller, 1961:12), he was suffocating and he wanted to go back to the country and lead a simple life- he was a burned out salesman and he couldn't keep up with the fast moving world. Not only that, Willy like Wordsworth had characteristics of a true romantic. They believed that goodness of humans is hindered by the urban civilization. They hated the idea of industrialization and longed to 'return to nature'. Willy wanted to teach humanity to the people he interacted with but the capitalist took over the towns and cities and he lost hope. The only thing he tried to cling on to was his philosophy of Dale Carnegie ideals of being liked and being successful. When Howard fires Willy, it was because he considered him to be obsolete and the prevailing scenario stated that

'Business is business'. However, when Charley offers him a job, Willy refuses to accept because he didn't want charity. The pride was in him. He didn't want more than he could take just for the sake of blending in with society or making his family happy.

The prevailing view in the post-war capitalistic America was that the business culture had changed its style and concept. Gone were the days where trust and 'being liked' and good sold products. This was replaced by knowledge of product, market and demand and competition. Willy's plea for loyalty and humane treatment – 'you can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit!' (Miller, 1961:64) – is irrelevant to Howard's way of thinking. Willy's attitude toward business and success is seen as he tells his boss Howard Wagner that he is aware that in 1948, the 'real time' of the play's action, business is 'all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear – or personality' (Miller, 1961:63), but he still longs for the days when 'there was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it' (Miller, 1961:63). Willy's complain to Howard that salesmanship was becoming 'cut and dried' meet the answer from the latter 'I can't take blood from a stone' (Miller, 1961:64). The American dream falls with a big bang as Ben says 'Never fight fair with a stranger boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way'. (Miller, 1961: 38). This was the principle followed in America just after the war.

Somewhere throughout the play during the travelling and technological shock and the realization that he was in a losing game in the confusion of the past discussions with Ben and his present day pain with Biff, Willy Loman becomes lonely and suffers the disillusion of a dream that he could not fulfil. He should have changed when the climate changed but he was resilient to the change and the sufferings continued until his death.

Willy was unsuccessful in business because he was unable to adapt his old-fashioned sales technique – based on the buyer's personal loyalty to the salesman – to the new business climate where salesmanship was based on knowledge of the product and service to the customer. Miller suggests that Willy's failure was also due to what Brenda Murphy calls, 'a deep **cultural dissonance** in the messages he has heard throughout his life.' (Murphy 1999:10). Willy has heard the hard truth from the capitalists, but he has chosen to believe in the Dave Singleman myth and that it was humanity that mattered to him as was in the early part of the century.

The change of salesmanship strategy was of course one reason for his downfall; the displacement of younger energetic dynamic salesman after the war was of course another reason. But does this clarify that he was a total failure? He held pride in his job, he loved his children and wife, the mistress was just a passing fancy on the lonely road- 'it didn't mean a thing'. Willy Loman left more than a measely \$20,000 of insurance cash when he died; he left hope to start a new beginning. Happy interprets his dream, 'He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him' (Miller, 1961; 111). He adds 'I'm going to stay right here in this city, and I'm beat this racket!..... he had a good dream. It's the only dream you could have- to come out number one man'(111). A Willy Loman, a salesman, a middle class man a universal representation of the struggle of a dreamer for success, wanted to voice a message to all, "to beat the racket you had to

believe in your dreams” that’s the only way to survive in this cruel world regardless of the competitive cultural climate. Charley summarises Willy’s life, ‘Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.’(Miller, 1961:111). Willy Loman died in the name of honor. He was broken and shocked that he had given so much for his ideology and it slammed back into his face. He died for the American Dream that he cherished because he couldn’t bear to see it crush and disappear into oblivion- his death was part of the play, he had to die so that people would tell his story of the tragic hero as the ‘man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine’.

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