

## The Representation of Modern Man in Arthur Miller's Play Death of a Salesman

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### Abstract

During the beginning of the 20th century, many people believed in the American Dream, which stated that anyone, no matter their background, gender, or race, could achieve success and recognition in society. However, the American Dream is slowly fading and transforming into more of an illusion after the economic recession of the 1930s. *Death of a Salesman* focuses on the Loman's family, with each member having their own ideas about how to attain happiness. The family is continuously haunted by the American Dream in the story, as it offers hope for a brighter future while simultaneously destroying their present circumstances. Willy Loman believed that he could accomplish anything as long as he had the love and approval of others, embodying the American Dream. He thought that by beginning on a grand scale, individuals would finish in a grand way and would never be content with their current possessions. His continual fixation on the past justifies his circumstances by revealing the root causes behind his previous decisions. Willy is so immersed in his idealized life that he gets lost in the present moment, trapped in his thoughts, and tries to take his own life numerous times. In the end, one of Willy's attempts will be the final thing he achieved.

**Keywords:** American Dream, Modern Man, Illusions, Lose of Identity, Failure.

## 1. Introduction

While America was founded on aspirations and visions of liberty and joy. In the midst of the Great Depression, joy was definitely lacking in the lives of many individuals. During the Great Depression, exploring themes such as the rise of different political viewpoints, the decline of love and morality, and the increase in life's challenges were common and considered to be sources of stress. America, the land of opportunities, transformed into a vacuous society centered on wealth and material possessions, leaving its inhabitants devoid of affection and ethical principles (Mohammed, 2015 : 129).

In many plays about US history in the twentieth century, there is a focus on how certain actions like revolt, repression, and killing are repeated throughout history, and whether they can be changed or stopped in the present or future (Mhayyal, Basaad and Saleh, Asmaa, 2023: 323).

In his 1839 Short Story "The Fall of the House of Usher," Edgar Allan Poe criticizes the modern man's tendency to think that every phenomenon in the universe can be explained solely through science and logic. By incorporating grotesque aspects like mystery, distortion, and the supernatural, he convinces the main character to abandon his previous beliefs and acknowledge the presence of cosmic, immeasurable, and infinite forces. The purpose of this article is to examine how the writer used elements of the grotesque to construct a terrifying world that instills fear in the reader, making them consider the possibility of experiencing something similar to the protagonist. The periods of enlightenment age and the Industrial Revolution led individuals to question traditional beliefs and adopt a new mindset. People ignored the spiritual aspects, creativity, and imagination; logic, fact, and science became the prevailing ideas in society. This resulted in the spiritual aspect of individuals ceasing to exist. Intellectuals found it to be a concerning issue in the nineteenth century (Alwan, 2015 :37).

Death of a Salesman (1949) may be considered as one of the top American works. The plays' actual title was *The Inside of His Head*, which aimed to reveal emotional highs and lows experienced by Willy Loman, the main character in the story. This theatrical performance received a great deal of backlash for being widely spread in a film, but still received immense praise. The universal appeal of the product has received critical acclaim globally. The main focus of this play is centered around the family (Thakur, 2018 :8).

Gould (1967 :253) frankly said "In condemning Willy Loman to die by his own economic system that fashioned his fate. Salesmen are the patsies of the industrial ringmasters whose products they parade....". Willy symbolizes those who have been affected by accidents on the road. From a psychological perspective, Nevertheless, there exists an additional aspect to Willy's character. He holds himself accountable. due to his lack of success and the unfortunate events that unfolded. He esteems superficial displays and looks. He didn't teach ever. He instilled in his sons the importance of education and diligence. He has a very shallow perspective on reality. He isolated himself from gaining knowledge from others due to his own arrogance, recognizing his mistake. He is very aware that he is part of the lower class.

### **The Statement of Problem**

The major problem of the present study deals with the life of modern man in "Death of a Salesman" by Arthur Miller who was notably influenced by the obstacles of modern man beyond modernity which inspired him to write his most successful play. The life of Modern man is full of Failure, Loss of Identity, Illusions, Tragedy. Arthur Miller as a social reformer tries to criticize the life of modern man who is living in illusions away from success and modernity. So, this study focuses on the problems that faced Willy Loman, such as losing the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, and this behavior alienates him from others, thereby diminishing his ability to survive in the present.

### **The Significance of the study**

The study concentrates on the state of modern man in Miller's Death of a Salesman. No one can dismiss the image of modern man in this famous play as it is the most important topic of the play. Arthur Miller as a great playwright portrays the life of modern man in which it's full of illusions, failure. So, the importance of the study embodied in portraying the life of modern man in the play and addressing the loss of identity and a man's inability to accept change within himself and society. The play is a montage of memories, dreams, confrontations, and arguments.

### **2. Modernism**

According to Azizi and Eshaq Zai (2022 : 57-58) The origin of the term "modern" can be traced back to the Latin word "Modo" which translates to "Today" and has distinct characteristics from ancient times. 'Modern' has been utilized in different periods and locations to differentiate modern techniques in place of ancient ones and it plays a significant role in all stages of society towards adopting new and contemporary ideas and practices. Moving towards newer and sophisticated cultural trends while disregarding certain outdated customs in the dissemination of rationalist ideas in society and their implementation within the framework of contemporary style. Also, modernism encompasses various cultural movements that have their origins in the developments of Western society during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The term is in reference to an assortment of creative, building, musical, written, and practical arts trends that occurred during this time. Modernity is a line of thinking that involves the utilization of human intelligence. The ability to produce, enhance, and alter the environment using technology and empirical skills.

Modernism appeared as a real development that impacted Western Europe. In his opinion, it expanded greatly to include other regions of the universe during the late 1800s and 1900s. Essentially, the Modernism processes occurred roughly, both geographically and in terms of social relations, within a particular social group. This suggests that the impact of Modernism over the period of two centuries was unequal (Linehan, 2012 : 10).

Modernism is a vast idea due to its numerous facets. Daly emphasizes that Frederic Jameson's analysis of modernism focuses primarily on aesthetic enjoyment, which plays a crucial role in compelling individuals to remain indoors, a reality he deems unfortunately alienating. This means that modernism is seen as both a conclusion and a unique phase within that larger process; where members of previous societal

structures are reeducated in the ways of the market system, particularly in regards to culture and psychology (Hasan, 2016 : 18)

### 3. Death of a salesman

Over the years, the play 'Death of a Salesman' (1949) has sparked numerous debates and criticisms regarding its themes, classification as a tragedy and social drama, position in American Drama, "pathos" and impurities, and the downfall of its protagonist. One of the most contentious topics surrounding the play is its genre, some argue it is a tragedy, others label it as a "social drama", and some view it simply as a pure Broadway production (Turku, 2013 :224).

The entire drama revolves around Willy Loman. He is an insignificant individual who no longer has a sense of self and acknowledgment in a chaotic materialistic society.

Ghodekar (2021 :32) stated that In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller explains how Willy Loman, an American dreamer, experiences a decline in his self-esteem due to a series of adverse events in his life. Willy desires for his sons Biff and Happy to thrive and establish themselves, but they do not achieve success. Willy is confident that Biff will prosper in his future career as a businessman. Yet, actually, Biff is still on a quest to discover his true self, causing pain and disappointment for Willy. The disputes between Willy and Biff are ingrained and longstanding. When Biff was a child, he excelled in athletic activities. Nevertheless, he did not succeed in his math class. Biff journeyed to Boston to see Willy, who was away on a business trip. He found out that his father was involved in an illicit relationship with another woman. Biff departed and never attempted to retake the math class. Willy is experiencing guilt and holds himself accountable for the decisions Biff makes in his life. He also feels responsible for Biff's failure. This confrontation causes Willy to feel weak and incredibly burdened with guilt, a feeling that lingers as a constant reminder. Willy, feeling down, cannot find a solution to improve the situation.

Prasad (2023 :302-303) mentioned that *Death of a Salesman* is truly a tragic tale of modern men. Willy Loman is the main character, embodying American ideals and achieving a universal status. He is filled with weaknesses and flaws, but he embodies self-deception and squandering almost perfectly. Modern man's ultimate achievement is in a time period that is exceedingly large. He is also a classic example of a father. His hopes have not been very distant. He is a demonic presence in a worn-out suit and refuses to give up on his dream. He is in a state that combines tragedy and comedy, throwing himself foolishly and beautifully against the windmills of the world, and he must seek to understand himself. He is ruined as he desires a form of euphoria in life that is inherently unattainable in the arid and vast world. Willy Loman's natural human traits, including his ability to love and sacrifice for others, make his downfall relatable and emotional, reflecting the experiences of millions yearly. Willy Loman fails because he mistakenly believes too much in the influence of charm. Like many fathers, he has a deep care for his sons' well-being and does not give them the freedom to discover their own beliefs. He desires to raise his sons according to his own way of deception and incorrect beliefs. Therefore, his sons are deprived of the opportunity to confront the harsh truths of the world. Willy Loman is a casualty of a culture that promotes and

fosters fake beliefs in its individuals, which crumble in the face of actuality. The world is the ultimate arena where destiny and opportunities hold great influence. All of this has led to his downfall.

### **3.1 Willy Loman as a Representation of a Modern Man**

Death of a Salesman, is a about a common man who experiences a socio-moral tragedy when he confronts the blatant materialism prevalent in society. Even though the tragedy of the small man is not in line with Aristotle's Poetics, the play is more relatable to everyone because it focuses on a marginalized man in contemporary society. Willy Loman embodies the contemporary ordinary individual, much like the rest of the characters symbolize contemporary culture and attitude. (Thakur, 2018 :8)

The modern man doesn't care much. Throughout the play, Willy consistently demonstrates his feelings of insecurity and voices frustrations over outcomes not aligning with his expectations. In exchange, he is not taking any action to ensure things proceed as expected. He declines the job that Charley offered. He has no interest in the love from his family. He does not see it as a safety net to slack off and dismiss it. For instance, Linda has built a strong suppression of her disapproval towards Willy's actions because she not only loves him, but also respects him, seeing past his changing moods, anger, ambitious goals, and occasional unkindness. During his difficult times, she has demonstrated interest and provided support to him. In the kitchen, she exclaimed to him that he was the most handsome man in the world. You are to me. She looks up to me and values who I am. In the play, Linda becomes angry at her two sons, Happy and Biff, when they abandon Willy in the restaurant. (Rim, 2020 :38).

The modern generation may appear to be more indifferent towards their own lives, particularly those who experienced the atrocities of war. Regardless of whether they participated in it or not, the experience of war altered how people viewed the world. The modern man's tragedy lies not in his decreasing knowledge of the meaning of his own life, but in his decreasing concern for it. Primarily, Miller possibly represented the tragic existence of a contemporary man who began to show a decreased concern for the purpose of his life. In the play, Willy Loman appears to prioritize society's perception of him over achieving real success and gaining attention. After being dismissed from his job, Willy goes to his neighbor Charley to ask for a loan to cover his expenses. Charley hands over the money to him. He also extends a job offer to help improve his circumstances. Willy declines the offer surprisingly despite the great need for it and is upset about the job that was proposed. Pride is being displayed here through carelessness. He would opt to remain unemployed and have unpaid bills, instead of getting a job through Charley. Through this act, he puts himself in a situation of owing and lack of stability. Willy Loman aims to offer safety, protection, and comfort. Nevertheless, he lacks the ability to perform those tasks in this unfamiliar environment. In 1948, the current world requires successful, hard-working, and wealthy entrepreneurs. Although the Second World War was filled with fears and uncertainty, the advancements made during this time shaped the world's modern perspective by promoting collaboration and innovation. (Rim, 2020 :31).

Willy Loman is considered a man of low social status. He is a salesman who markets himself rather than products. He gives up his life or trades it away to rationalize its squandering. Similar to any other father, he plays multiple roles simultaneously acting as a father, husband, salesman, member of society, and a manifestation of the human mind. However, he is primarily a tragic figure destined to fulfill various roles in varying circumstances during his time in this world. Willy Loman represents the entirety of American culture. He opposes the robotic society that has stripped humans of their true identity and inner peace. He is not just an ordinary American man, but a representative of all the developed societies worldwide. Willy Loman epitomized the severe conflicts present in all aspects of America and other developed societies around the world. He truly represents all individuals and his residence is terrifying. Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs point out that "Willy recognizes he is more valuable deceased than alive. He takes his own life to claim the twenty thousand dollar insurance payout" (Heiney D, Downs LH. 1974 :316)

Willy Loman represents the individuals who have been harmed on the side of the road. When looked at from a psychological perspective, there is an additional aspect to Willy's character. He bears the responsibility for his own failure and tragedy. He places importance on external presentation and looks. He failed to instill in his sons the importance of education and diligence. His perception of reality lacks depth. Due to his false pride, he isolated himself from gaining knowledge from others, fully aware of his place in the lower social class. (Thakur, 2018 :9).

Willy's struggle with a fake identity affects his ability to form a healthy sense of self, causing a barrier between his internal thoughts and external experiences, as well as between his past and present. Additionally, he lacks the necessary mental framework to navigate life's challenges. Willy's failure as a salesman results in his sons, Biff and Happy, adopting his inflated and pretentious qualities, as he always pretended to be successful in front of them. His inability to fulfill his duties as a father stems in part from the absence of a father figure in his life, as his own father passed away when he was just three years old. He fails to provide his sons with the appropriate education, and is unable to instill in them the same values of hard work, dedication, and responsibility that Bernard, the neighbor's son has. Hayman says it correctly, "Willy is every bit as son-fixated as Joe Keller" (Hayman, 1970, p. 28). Willy's situation is very intense because he aims to achieve his failed dreams and desires through his sons. (Thakur, 2018 :10).

Those who resided in the contemporary world during the time of the great depression had encountered feelings of insecurity and fear. This doubt regarding the truth of the world had occupied a place in the hearts of Americans post-war. In one of his recollections, Willy seeks guidance from his brother, Ben Loman, on the topic of parenting. Willy admits to Ben that he is experiencing feelings of insecurity. Furthermore, he returned from his previous journey without any profits. Willy believes that the world should clear the path for his success. He feels entitled to wealth and admiration. However, instead of focusing on finding a way to cover the bills, Willy Loman chooses to spend his time in the kitchen, comparing himself and his two sons to

his neighbor and his son. Charley's neighbor and his son Bernard are both doing well in their careers and education. Nevertheless, they do not possess the same charismatic personality that Willy's family has. Seemingly, Willy's surroundings gave off an impression of helplessness, but it was mainly his own thoughts about the unfamiliar world that made him feel that way in his circumstances. (Rim, 2020 :32).

The contemporary individual is characterized by a lack of motivation to strive for success in life. However, he won't simply be a transient individual. Miller goes on to explain that the contemporary man also has:

"unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful" (Miller, 1949 :3).

While the play events continue, Willy informs Linda in the opening scene that he had played a part in the construction of the company where he is presently employed. Nevertheless, as he has aged, he no longer engages in selling merchandise like he did before. As a result, Willy feels he is entitled to respect and recognition for his past achievements at the company. Perhaps, in earlier times, these beliefs were taken into consideration. Nevertheless, values that were once important to Willy in today's modern world don't seem to matter much, especially to his young boss, Howard, who prioritizes productivity over traditional values (Rim, 2020 :32).

Primarily, Miller portrays Willy as an ordinary person who refuses to accept reality. A scenario that specifically affected the lost generation and numerous individuals who experienced the horrors of war and its consequences. After the war, numerous individuals, including the lost generation, experienced a psychological or emotional condition as they reflected on the period preceding and following the First World War and the impact on their lives. Throughout the play, Willy frequently reminisces about his past, particularly his time as a prosperous salesman. He recalls discussions and anecdotes about his successful brother Ben, who departed as a youth and became wealthy in Africa. At one particular time, it is important to mention that Miller belonged to the lost generation and that, when he fashioned the character of Willy, it may mirror his genuine beliefs and personal experiences. Miller experienced the conflict of the world pre and post-war, while Willy denies the truth following his defeat (Rim, 2020 :33).

Willy Loman's denial of reality ultimately resulted in his demise. As stated by his son, yelling "I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them!..." (Miller 1948 :106). It was the first time the family heard the truth being spoken openly and honestly. After his argument with Biff, Willy had a final discussion with Ben where he faced the reality that he is just an average man and will never be anything more than a typical salesman. (Rim, 2020 :34).

The whole drama is based on Willy Loman who has lost his identity and acknowledgment in a hectic society. Jean Gould correctly asserts that:

"In condemning Willy Loman to die by his own economic system that fashioned his fate. Salesmen are the patsies of the

industrial ringmasters whose products they parade....” (Miller, 1949 :253).

Willy is being regarded as a victim of society, a victim of a harsh economic system that exploited him initially and then abandoned him. During that period, fueled by a focus on wealth and different ambitions, individuals, particularly those in the business world, were willing to do whatever it took to ensure their continued presence and achievements in society. The employers were very exploitative, viewing employees as fruit, consuming the fruit and discarding the peel. No matter how many sacrifices Willy has made for the company, his boss only focused on his current performance and declined to offer him another opportunity. (Zhao, 2015 :406).

Rim (2020:34) stated that Willy's refusal to the reality is finally taken him to funeral. As his son reveals, screaming:

"Iam not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them!..." (Miller, 1949 p.106).

It was the family's inaugural moment of honesty spoken aloud. After his feud with Biff, Willy's final talk with Ben made him face the reality that he is just a regular guy and will never be anything more than a normal salesman.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Death of a Salesman demonstrates that pursuing a dream without understanding what is truly important or without accepting accountability for the choices will not lead to happiness in anyone's life. The story highlights the significance of understanding the identity and not relying on the expectations of others. A perfect future is impossible if a person is not satisfied with the present and continually escapes into fantasy. Willy's dreams of success are combined with failure and disappointment. The disappointment is happened in both his career and personal life. It highlights the realization that setting high expectations for ourselves can lead to disappointment. Indulging in worldly and physical cravings will ultimately lead to feelings of sadness and ruin. Willy is equivalent to the others and he is a symbol of modern men who are enthusiastically chasing after materialistic pleasures. Every part of it Willy's life will come to a tragic end. Willy's life ended, but he was unable to accomplish his goals, hopes and anticipations. This is the destiny of the modern man. Willy's blindness to the reality of the American dream causes his mental decline, preventing him from distinguishing between the illusion and his own reality.

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## تمثيل الإنسان المعاصر في مسرحية موت بائع متجول لأرثر ميللر

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### الملخص

خلال بداية القرن العشرين، آمن العديد من الناس بالحلم الأمريكي الذي ينص على أن أي شخص، بغض النظر عن خلفيته أو جنسه أو عرقه، يمكنه تحقيق النجاح والتقدير في المجتمع. ومع ذلك، يتلاشى الحلم الأمريكي ببطء ويتحول إلى وهم أكثر بعد الركود الاقتصادي في ثلاثينيات القرن العشرين. تركز قصة موت بائع متجول على عائلة لومان، حيث يمتلك كل فرد أفكاره الخاصة حول السعادة وكيفية تحقيقها. تطارد العائلة باستمرار الحلم الأمريكي في القصة، حيث يقدم الأمل لمستقبل أكثر إشراقًا بينما يدمر ظروفهم الحالية في نفس الوقت. كان ويلي لومان يعتقد أنه يمكنه إنجاز أي شيء طالما كان لديه حب وموافقة الآخرين، مجسدًا الحلم الأمريكي. كان يعتقد أنه من خلال البدء على نطاق واسع، سينتهي الأفراد بطريقة رائعة ولن يرضوا أبدًا بواقعهم الحالي. إن تركيزه المستمر على الماضي يبرر ظروفه من خلال الكشف عن الأسباب الجذرية وراء قراراته السابقة. لقد انغمس ويلي في حياته المثالية إلى الحد الذي جعله يضيع في اللحظة الحالية، ويعلق في أفكاره، ويحاول الانتحار عدة مرات. وفي النهاية، كانت إحدى محاولات ويلي هي آخر ما حققه.

الكلمات الدالة: الحلم الأمريكي, الرجل العصري, الاوهام, فقدان الهوية, الفشل.