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Family Dreams in Death of a Salesman

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ONE CRITIC, perhaps facetiously, has called *Death of a Salesman*¹ a “tragedy for extroverts.”² This differentiates Willy Loman from a dramatic tradition of introspective figures who, like Shakespeare’s Hamlet or Milton’s Samson, confront their situations in a profound social and metaphysical solitude. By contrast, a protagonist who cannot be alone, who cannot summon the intelligence and strength to scrutinize his condition and come to some understanding of it—whatever agony it may cost him—seems disqualified for the tragic stature literature can bestow. With reference to Aristotelian standards, Sheila Huftel has remarked that Loman fell only from “an imagined height.”³ Indeed, to an extent his drama represents merely the collapse of a Philistine. Yet if one does not look upon Loman with a scowl of condemnation for his adherence to values he barely understands, for his anti-intellectualism, his contradictions, his insensitivities and petty cruelties, he does not because the fall from a height only imagined is nevertheless a fall. Loman is not, as critics have too facilely stated, a modern Everyman but an anomaly, a bourgeois romantic, an odd synthesis of Joe and Chris Keller, or of Everyman and Faust. He moves one not with his mediocrity and failure but with the frustrated energies of his outreach beyond mediocrity and failure toward a relationship to society constantly denied him.

Loman wants success, but the meaning of that need extends beyond the accumulation of wealth, security, goods, and status. As Arthur Miller said in an interview, “The trouble with Willy Loman is that he has tremendously powerful ideas.”⁴ But he yearns toward them

¹ Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem*, in *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays* (New York, 1957), pp. 130–222. Further references to this edition will be noted in the text by page number.

² Richard Watts, “A Matter of Hopelessness in *Death of a Salesman*,” *Tulane Drama Review*, II (May, 1958), 64.

³ Sheila Huftel, *Arthur Miller: The Burning Glass* (New York, 1965), p. 114.

⁴ Arthur Miller, “Morality and Modern Drama: Interview with Phillip Gelb,” *Educational Theatre Journal*, X (Oct., 1958), rpt. in *Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman: Text and Criticism*, ed. Gerald Weales (New York, 1967), p. 175.

more than he lives by them. What Loman wants, and what success means in *Death of a Salesman*, is intimately related to his own, and the playwright's, sense of the family. Family dreams extend backward in time to interpret the past, reach forward in time to project images of the future, and pressure reality in the present to conform to memory and imagination. These "ideals," these dreams, can be examined in terms of four variables: transformation, prominence, synthesis, and unity.

I

Robert Hogan has noted that much of Miller's work developed from the image of man "struggling to be at one with society."⁵ Miller elucidates the nature of this struggle in "The Family in Modern Drama," where he finds all great drama to be concerned with some aspect of a single problem: "How may a man make of the outside world a home?" What does he need to do, to change within himself or in the external world, if he is to find "the safety, the surroundings of love, the ease of soul, the sense of identity and honor which, evidently, all men have connected in their memories with the idea of family?"⁶ This concern remains a constant in Miller's work. He is quoted in *Psychology and Arthur Miller* by Richard I. Evans as observing that his own sense of drama resides in the emotional tension within a person drawn to the past in order to orient himself to the present. His characters feel displaced from what they should be, even from what they "really" are.⁷ Although Miller does not make explicit reference here to childhood and the family, the sense of radical loss and the passionate need to regain some previous and necessary state seem fundamentally the same as in "The Family in Modern Drama."

With the success of *All My Sons*, wrote Miller, "It suddenly seemed that the audience was a mass of blood relations and I sensed a warmth in the world that was not there before."⁸ He attributed success to the power to transform a relatively impersonal social world into a home that offered familial warmth. His next play, probably

⁵ Robert Hogan, *Arthur Miller* (Minneapolis, 1964), p. 8.

⁶ Arthur Miller, "The Family in Modern Drama," *Atlantic Monthly*, CXCVII (April, 1956), 36-37.

⁷ Richard I. Evans, *Psychology and Arthur Miller* (New York, 1969), p. 56.

⁸ Arthur Miller, "Introduction to the Collected Plays," p. 22.

the most stunning portrayal of failure in the American theatre, dramatized a man's inability to achieve this transformation. Nothing Loman says or does can evoke that "warmth in the world." Instead, society responds to him with an indifference that can only seem cruel in juxtaposition to the hopes he carries with him even to the point of death.

Loman articulates his need in appealing to his employer with an image of the past, a Golden Age: "In those days there was personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear—or personality" (pp. 180–181). Earlier Miller characters found these values outside the business world: Gus in the Merchant Marine, in *The Story of Gus*;⁹ Chris Keller in the Army, in *All My Sons*.¹⁰ Loman once found them in having coffee with the mayor of Providence, in being recognized in places like Slattery's, Filene's, and the Hub, and by enjoying such good standing with New England policemen that he could park his car anywhere he liked without getting a ticket. His sense of self-value, then, depended upon the response of others. Such gestures of recognition provided signals that society, for a period in his life, was a home for him, one where he might hope to make his sons as happily at ease as he.

Prominence, whether gained through wealth, business associations, or public esteem, appeared to be the major catalyst in turning the world's indifference into warmth and admiration. Loman expressed awe at the prominence of Thomas Edison, B.F. Goodrich, and Frank Wagner, but the most compelling images of success were Ben, Dave Singleman, and Biff. The entrepreneur, the renowned salesman, and the star high school athlete represented possibilities in life to which Loman could not attain. They were surrounded men. At school, Biff was surrounded by admiring classmates and, at the Ebbets Field game, by cheering crowds and brilliant sunlight. At the peak of his career and at the end of his life, Singleman was surrounded by the affection of customers and fellow salesmen.

Ben, however, was surrounded by the mystery and power of his enterprising audacity. He represented a way of being at home in the

⁹ Arthur Miller, *The Story of Gus*, in *Radio's Best Plays*, ed. Joseph Liss (New York, 1947), pp. 307–319.

¹⁰ Arthur Miller, *All My Sons*, in *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays*, pp. 58–127.

world that differed from Miller's statement about the public response to *All My Sons* and from the attainments of other successful characters in *Death of a Salesman*. The world was a home for Ben not by the affection he won from it but by the command of his wealth, power, and mobility. In the world of finance he was as much a pioneer, a "great and wild-hearted man," as his father. His imagination and life extended as easily to Alaska, South Dakota, and Africa as to New York. Apparently indifferent to social relationships, he needed neither the human warmth of the family nor society's positive response. His sphere of action related to things and quantities rather than people; even his seven sons seemed more like commodities than members of a family. Thereby the play implies, not without irony, Ben was more capable of becoming at ease in the world than Willy Loman, whose refusal to join with his brother, a choice rooted in an ethic oriented to the family and to society, signaled his financial, social and family failures.

The world became a home for Dave Singleman in an opposite fashion. Like Ben, he enjoyed wealth, power and mobility; but these were more entirely enmeshed within social relationships. The nature and extent of his prominence was succinctly illustrated in his ability to sit in a hotel room and make his living by phone, comfortably attired in the luxury of green velvet slippers. This image has had a decisive power in Loman's life:

And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. 'Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people? (p. 180)

Unlike Ben, Singleman achieved a success that presented him with a world of loyalty, aid, and love. His scope of action was spatially more limited in being national rather than international; but response to him was more personal. For Loman, the surest indication of public love for Singleman is that when he died the "death of a salesman" in the smoking car of a train on the way to Boston, people travelled from all over the country to attend his funeral. In juxtaposition to Loman's funeral in the "Requiem" of the play, this reveals the extent to which Singleman's prominence granted him a home in society that Loman cannot achieve. Singleman mastered

his society not through the demonic qualities one perceives in Ben but through a synthesis of man's social and economic impulses.

The world became a home for Biff Loman when, as an athlete, he evoked affection and admiration from the people around him. His life seemed full of promise, with a choice of three college scholarships to signify the abundance of future success life can offer the already successful. When he became captain of the football team, a crowd of girls surrounded him after classes, and girls paid for him on dates. His friends waited for him after school, not knowing how to occupy themselves until he arrived to organize them into sweeping out the furnace and hanging up his mother's laundry. As contrasted with his friend Bernard, who was only "liked," Biff was "well-liked," which seemed to grant him, in Loman's view, certain allowances that could not be bestowed upon those who received less fervent popular esteem. At the all-star Ebbets Field game he was the tallest player, dressed in gold with the sun all around him while the crowd shouted "Loman, Loman, Loman!" (p. 171), so that his father sensed him raised beyond the level of the merely human by the extent of his prominence among others.

Prominence for Ben, Singleman, and Biff has an impersonal quality that contradicts Loman's repeated insistence upon the value of personality and what he calls "personal attractiveness." His heroes tend to stand among yet above other people. He remarks that at the Ebbets Field game Biff seemed like "Hercules—something like that" (p. 171), and his accounts of Ben's being "success incarnate" have more the tone of hagiography than family anecdote. For Loman these figures exist less as individuals with actual characters, talents, and problems than as mythological projections of his own needs and his society's values. This has two kinds of consequences for his life. For one, the means for achieving success remain a mystery to him. Although he perceives Ben as a sign that "The greatest things can happen!" he can never discover how those things happen. When he asks Ben how to succeed he receives not an answer but an incantatory formula: "When I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich" (p. 157). Ben proves willing to use violence when it is necessary or useful, and he boasts of his mnemonic powers; but these cannot lead Loman to understand how Ben became wealthy, much less how anyone else might. Another consequence of Loman's mythological projection is

that characters without strikingly luminous qualities, such as Charlie or Linda, cannot move Loman deeply enough to help him. Charlie's aid and friendship represent the only instance where someone in society does form something like a family tie with him. Yet Charlie can offer only help, not promise; realistic advice, not transformation. He has succeeded in business, but no aura of magic power surrounds him or his advice.

The consequences of failing to attain prominence and to transform society into a home are loneliness, frustration, and ultimately despair. Because Loman needs gratification to take a social form, his life is crushed by indifference, criticism, rejection, and abandonment. In his scene with Howard Wagner he appeals to quasi-familial ties in the past—"I was with the firm when your father used to carry you in here in his arms" (p. 179)—but the reality that "business is business" and not a family makes his appeal irrelevant. At the same time that Wagner's act corresponds, figuratively, to rejection by a son, it also records a final loss of hope that family ties can exist on a social level. But, still unable to accept failure in his struggle to be at one with society, Loman prefers death with the illusion of transformation to life without it.

II

The assumption that prominence brings affection and privilege frequently has led the Lomans to boast or lie about themselves. Signs of prominence, what Loman and Happy refer to as "the old humor, the old confidence" (p. 137), can be used as a facade. Loman returns from a business trip exclaiming, "I'm tellin' you, I was sellin' thousands and thousands, but I had to come home" (p. 147). His fabrications create so extreme a polarization with his incapacities that an acceptance of failure—his own or Biff's—becomes impossible. Happy proves more calculating in the scene at Frank's Chop House, where he presents himself and his brother with false, glossy images for the sake of seducing women.

Happy's need to command attention comprises a persistent if minor note throughout the play. He admires and envies the merchandise manager—"when he walks into the store the waves part in front of him. That's fifty-two thousand dollars a year coming through the revolving door . . ." (p. 140). The distorted reference to the Moses

myth signifies the extent to which monetary values have absorbed religious emotions. When he asserts that he can become “number one man,” Happy has the merchandise manager in mind; and this represents a decayed ideal, one of mere wealth and power, with neither Ben’s daring nor Singleman’s social prominence. Happy’s need to be “number one” has another significance also, for he has never been the sole focus of his father’s attention, always a poor second to Biff. He seems always to be merely present in the Loman household, an adjunct. At several points he makes an open bid for his father’s attention, asking whether Loman has noticed how much weight he has lost; but his father never answers. As an adult, Happy envies the positions of those above him while achieving an underhanded sort of prominence by taking bribes and seducing “gorgeous creatures,” including the fiancées of company executives. Although he describes himself as having “an overdeveloped sense of competition,” he cannot compete on an appropriate level but instead does so sexually, or takes refuge in an athletic past, claiming he can outbox anyone in the office. He claims not really to want these forms of pseudo-prominence; but as much as his brother, though in a different form, Happy becomes a thief, stealing women for transient pleasure and stealing the illusion of prominence with lies.

Unlike his father and brother, Biff does not emulate the images of prominent men but rejects the years he has spent riding subways, keeping stock, buying and selling, feeling it ridiculous to spend a year in suffering for the sake of a two-week vacation. He surrenders his opportunities for a prominent adulthood by refusing to repeat a mathematics course after he has found his father with a woman in a Boston hotel room. Yet his need for the illusion of prominence continues with his repeated acts of petty theft—repetitions, in essence, of behavior his father once applauded as “initiative.” As an adult he has the same problem as the young David Frierber in *The Man Who Had All the Luck*:¹¹ “I don’t know what the future is. I don’t know—what I’m supposed to want” (p. 138). However gratifying his life of simple physicality on ranches in the West, he has thought himself less than mature—“I’m like a boy” (p. 139)—and has found himself periodically returning home with a sense of incompleteness and waste. Only the intense pressure applied by his father, and his experience of

¹¹ Arthur Miller, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, in *Cross-Section: A Collection of New American Writing*, ed. Edwin Seaver (New York, 1944), pp. 486-552.

failure and theft in Bill Oliver's office, reconciles him in a final sense to his life of simple work, food, and leisure without expectations of prominence.

Insisting that it is not a matter of what you do but "who you know and the smile on your face!" Loman optimistically locates the secret of success in "contacts" and "personal attractiveness," expectant that "a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked!" (p. 184). Yet even the means of becoming "liked" evade him, as in his contradictory advice to Biff:

Be quiet, fine, and serious. Everybody likes a kidder, but nobody lends him money. (p. 168)

Walk in with a big laugh. Don't look worried. Start off with a couple of your good stories to liven things up. (p. 169)

The inconspicuous diligence of a youth like Bernard is dismissed as "anemic." Instead of reconciling himself to failure in business skills, Loman blames the responses of others: people do not "take" to him, they pass him by, find him too fat, poorly dressed, foolish, a "walrus" (p. 149). Under stress, his needs demand vicarious gratification through the success of his sons. This becomes evident in his response to an insult from his brother:

Ben: Great inventor, Father. With one gadget he made more in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime.

Willy: That's just the way I'm bringing them up, Ben—rugged, well-liked, all around. (p. 157)

Because he habitually deflects consciousness of his own failure by focusing attention on his sons, Loman cannot accept Biff's way of life in the West on its own terms but tries to reabsorb him into a business-oriented culture. Unable to accomplish this, he perceives his life as an empty, infertile waste. "Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground" (p. 209).

III

Blurring distinctions, Loman tends to view prominence and transformation as identical, and this habit of mind prevents him from enjoying the skills he has and appreciating the supportive elements within his own family. Loman neglects the distinctions between

different people, values and methods, attempting through sheer force of hope to reconcile the disparate. His decision not to join Ben in business is rooted in his assertion that the values of Ben can be synthesized with those of Dave Singleman, and this ignores the contrast Ben points out between social gestures and tangible commodities. He also ignores the differences between criminality and initiative, encouraging his sons to steal, so that the front stoop of the Loman house, which Biff claims to contain “more of him” than his career as a salesman, is built with stolen materials.

Happy and Biff formulate schemes to synthesize values, hoping to attain prominence and to reunite as brothers. Their short-lived dream of a Loman ranch in the West attempts to synthesize sports and commercialism, the pastoral and the urban, playfulness and seriousness, youth and adulthood. They imagine that their partnership will regain them the public attention they enjoyed in high school. Biff’s pastoral values reflect his father, who bewails the loss of open air and space, the overcrowded conditions of city life, and the absence of flowers almost as often as he condemns his son for becoming a farmhand. On a Loman ranch, Biff could not only do the kind of work he liked but also “be something.” Yet a brief but revealing bit of dialogue exposes the rapid death of this dream:

Biff: Hap, the trouble is we weren’t brought up to grub for money. I don’t know how to do it.

Happy: Neither can I!

Biff: Then let’s go!

Happy: The only thing is—what can you make out there? (p. 140)

The synthesis they try to create collapses under the weight of a single question. Happy’s later plan for a Loman line of sporting goods would also give them an opportunity to work together. “And the beauty of it is, Biff, it wouldn’t be like a business,” Happy exclaims, “We’d be out playin’ ball again” (p. 168). But this dream of synthesis, like that of a Loman ranch, founders upon the need for money.

The ultimate attempt at synthesis in the play is Loman’s suicide. Leonard Moss has noted that he chooses death “not simply as an escape from shame but as a last attempt to re-establish his own self-confidence and his family’s integrity.”¹² The insurance money makes it seem possible to synthesize the values of Ben and Singleman. For

¹² Leonard Moss, *Arthur Miller* (New Haven, 1967), p. 45.

by entering the dark, unknown “jungle” of death Loman might bring out tangible wealth, “like diamonds,” thus becoming as much an adventurer as Ben but within the skyscraper world of New York. He imagines himself then having a funeral as massive as Singleman’s, one that would leave Biff “thunderstruck.” Thus in a single act Loman hopes to achieve transformation, prominence, synthesis, and his lost unity with Biff.

IV

Scattered images of family unity in *Death of a Salesman* evoke the sense of loss: “All I remember is a man with a big beard, and I was in Mama’s lap, sitting around a fire, and some kind of high music” (p. 157). Loman’s very early family life remains the vaguest of memories, symbolized by the high-pitched sound of the flute which, as Edward Murray has noted, acts as an “auditory binder” in the play.¹³ It juxtaposes Loman’s pastoral longings for the past with the overbearing actualities of the city towering around him. Also, Loman’s image contrasts the quiet repose of the past with the restlessness that characterizes the rest of his life. Another passage evoking an image of lost family unity captures his relationship with the young Biff, when life was “so full of light, and comradeship” (p. 213).

Loman wants to feel a unity of generations linking his father and Ben with him and his sons. He appeals to Ben: “You’re just what I need, Ben, because I—I have a fine position here, but I—well, Dad left when I was such a baby, and I never had a chance to talk to him and I still feel—kind of temporary about myself” (p. 159). Yet the need for family unity is juxtaposed against the reality of family disintegration. Loman’s father abandons his family, and Ben leaves soon afterward. Loman violates the unity of his family with the woman in Boston, not only by sexual infidelity but by giving her the stockings that should go to Linda. Biff leaves home because of his discovery, and Happy leaves to set up his own apartment and enjoy his women. Sex proves a powerfully divisive force among the Lomans, separating parents from each other and parents from sons. Happy abandons his father in another way, by merely sending him away to Florida when Loman’s emotional breakdown becomes embarrassingly visible. He cannot respond sympathetically to his father’s problems. “No, that’s

¹³ Edward Murray, *Arthur Miller, Dramatist* (New York, 1967), p. 34.

not my father," he dismissively remarks in the restaurant scene, "He's just a guy" (p. 205).

Linda remained loyal, but her constancy cannot help Loman. She can play no significant role in her husband's dreams; and although she proves occasionally capable of dramatic outbursts, she lacks the imagination and strength to hold her family together or to help Loman define a new life without grandiose hopes for Biff. Critics have attacked her as "profoundly unsatisfactory" as a character,¹⁴ "not in the least sexually interesting,"¹⁵ and a symbol of the "cash-payment fixation."¹⁶ But given Loman's inability to accept disagreement from his sons or Charley, it is hard to suppose that he would tolerate a less acquiescent wife. He calls her "my foundation and my support," but her stability cannot prevent his collapse.

In "The Family as a Psychosocial Organization," Robert D. Hess and Gerald Handel have noted that "The family's life together is an endless process of movement in and around consensual understanding, from attachment to conflict and withdrawal—and over again. Separateness and connectedness are the underlying conditions of a family's life, and its common task is to give form to both."¹⁷ In *Death of a Salesman*, beginning the process "over again" becomes impossible. The present action of the play forces an explosive reunion, bringing members of the family together in order to make their separateness explicit and irrevocable. This pattern typifies Arthur Miller's work; it occurs in *All My Sons*; it characterizes *After the Fall*,¹⁸ and it encompasses most of *The Price*.¹⁹ Attempts to recreate family unity—like Ben's offer of partnership, Biff's return home, or the brothers' schemes to go into business together—have the dual effect of illuminating areas of conflict and forever sealing family members off from one another. The peripatetic big dinner scene toward the end of the play, then, presents a cacophony of dissonant motives; and the centripetal forces of their separate lives prove

¹⁴ C. W. E. Bigsby, *Confrontation and Commitment: A Study of Contemporary American Drama 1959–66* (London, 1967) p. 35.

¹⁵ Henry Popkin, "Arthur Miller: The Strange Encounter," *Sewanee Review*, LXVII (Winter, 1960), 56.

¹⁶ G. Bliquez, "Linda's Role in *Death of a Salesman*," *Modern Drama*, X (Feb., 1968), 383.

¹⁷ Robert D. Hess and Gerald Handel, "The Family as a Psychosocial Organization," in *The Psychosocial Interior of the Family*, ed. Gerald Handel (Chicago, 1967), p. 10.

¹⁸ Arthur Miller, *After the Fall* (New York, 1964).

¹⁹ Arthur Miller, *The Price* (New York, 1969).

stronger than the need for unity that brought the Lomans together. Torn between Happy's callous ability to let him continue living in illusion and Biff's cruel but necessary demand for honesty, Loman yields to a hope forged in despair: that Biff might finally recant and become "magnificent" with the insurance money. But his death changes nothing; it implies instead that a man's frenetic attempt to make the world a home can defeat the viability of his private home, even cost him his life.