The Nature of Tragedy in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman

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WHAT THE *PERFORMANCE* OF A PLAY gives an audience is less a set of ideas, propositions, or abstractions about life and how to live it than what Arthur Miller has called a "felt experience," the imaginative sharing and participation in the lives and actions of imaginary characters. The performance is mythic; our sensibilities are enlivened by imaginary characters and we become engaged in their conflicts. Our thoughts and emotions are never so detached from theirs that we can remain "objective" in our feelings for them and in our judgments of them. If the play touches our humanity, we weep, or we smile; their movements move us, and our thoughts about them are kindled by our feelings toward them. Thus, we are *most* completely engaged in the play, as in any performing art, as it is being performed within a particular space and time. So it may seem, to a degree, presumptuous or meretricious to discuss those ideas of a play, of which the play touches on, without both the writer and reader having directly and immediately experienced the play itself.

Yet many great plays—especially those written by Arthur Miller—are also plays that engage us directly in social, political, and moral questions, in questions that may be posed early in the plays themselves, and which continue to stimulate and engage us. Significantly, these questions may linger, or stimulate us as an audience to ask other related questions, after we have experienced the play. Not only are our feelings stirred by such drama, our ideas about the lives, the social and personal relationships of the characters and their environments, are stirred as well. So Miller

does offer us a way to go back to those familiar or less familiar ideas he presents in his plays—by his near-faultless blending of the social, political, moral, and personal questions presented directly or indirectly through his characters.

Miller's great achievement as a playwright allows us to see and understand particular characters or groups of characters as possessing universal, human traits, even as we also see how their lives illuminate, by association, our own lives as individuals and as members of our larger society. In recognizing these larger concerns, we recognize as well that Miller's plays are not exclusively about individuals, but more precisely, are about humanity and human societies with all their contradictions and complications. As an audience we respond to the pointless death of one salesman; but we also respond as members of a society for whom, not the fact, but the *nature* of Willy Loman's life and death simultaneously diminishes and exalts us.

Willy Loman is not a case study to be argued or defended, but a representative character to be "felt" and "experienced." Still, in *Death of a Salesman*, we feel compelled to ask: "Who is Willy Loman?" for if we do not understand him and do not know who he is, we can hardly understand his death. We may be moved by Willy; but we also want to know what our responses are about. We have, in other words, an emotional investment in watching and hearing him with his family. How can we come to understand the nature of this experience? If Willy is a pathetic figure, do we feel this to be true—do we know this is true? Or is Willy a tragic figure? Do we feel this and know it to be true? Finally, we ask ourselves, what does this character's death mean in social terms—does it represent more than the death of one obscure salesman? To answer these questions, we must as audience and witnesses enter into our "felt experience" of Willy's life and death, and also, paradoxically, to view from a distance how his life affects our understanding of ourselves, our society, and our shared values.

For several thousand years, philosophers, those early cogent critics, have pondered the meaning of aesthetic experience. Within the realms of playwriting and the theatre, Aristotle's definition of tragedy, as described in *The Poetics*, continues to inform us of what this "felt experience" involves. According to Aristotle:

> Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of those emotions. (Butcher 61)

In assessing *Death of a Salesman*, some critics have found fault with Miller's intention to portray Willy Loman as a tragic figure. Willy has been criticized for being "too little" or "too common" to meet the supposed requirement of Aristotle, i.e., that tragedy can only affect or be affected by noble beings, who are themselves of a "certain nobility or magnitude." But here, it is necessary to note two important points. First, Aristotle's *Poetics* conceives that the prime quality of tragedy is not character, but plot; and second, that Aristotle's opinion about tragedy is based only on the plays he knew—about what necessarily constitutes tragedy. Other philosophers and thinkers—including Miller—have slightly or strongly disagreed with Aristotle's extended definition. But Aristotle's definition of tragedy has retained more followers than detractors, so it is perfectly understandable that classically-oriented critics might object to Willy's qualifications as a figure of tragedy.

Eric Mottram, for one, in his essay, "Arthur Miller: The Development of a Political Dramatist in America," notes that

> If the plot is not to be simply a mocking of the non-passive man, it must show a real chance of heroism and change. This Miller fails to do. (33)

He further argues that although Miller allows for the common man, such as Willy Loman, to be the agent, in Miller's words, who "thrusts for freedom" that as a tragic protagonist the

> common man is liable to arouse only pity as a poor fool in terror for his life unless he is allowed an understanding that his revolt is towards ends which have a specific chance of attainment. (33)

It seems reasonable enough to raise the question, does Willy Loman really have an opportunity to develop as a free human being, or are his actions and choices those that proceed from a piti-

ful and confused character in an impossible situation that leads inexorably to his self-destruction? In short, is Willy, in Mottram's phrase, "a poor fool"? If Willy lacks the ability to engage the circumstances that create a life of disappointment, and if he must die self-defeated, isn't he really just a pathetic character?

It is clear that Willy's life and suicide are perceived by his wife and sons as full of pathos. Although Willy talks grandly of heroic deeds, of great feats of salesmanship, it is evident to everyone (including Willy himself), that his life-long dream of success is flawed. At the age of 63, he confides, ironically, to his imagined image of brother Ben: "I still feel—kind of temporary about myself" (51). He nevertheless keeps searching for the "secret" of success, and pathetically asks Bernard (who was never "well-liked," but who is now a successful lawyer) to help him understand what it is (93). Even Linda, who maintains that "attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" (56), and who is Willy's strongest defender, recognizes that Willy is fighting an impossible struggle that has left him talking to himself. After his suicide, she confesses that "I can't understand it"—seemingly confirming her previously unspoken opinion of Willy, that he continued to decline emotionally to the point where he cut himself off from her and her sons forever.

Given Willy's self-deluding dream, his suicide, his constant confusion over the right way to live his life, and how to raise his sons ("Because sometimes I'm afraid that I'm not teaching them the right kind of—Ben how should I teach them?"), and given his wife's opinion of him—of a man of "character" (57) but "not the finest character that ever lived" (56), and given his sons' opinions of him—a failure—how can we possibly see Willy as anything other than, as Eric Mottram describes him, a pathetic, pitiable "poor fool in terror"?

We do, however, see more than a pitiable "poor fool" in Willy. Our "felt experience" of Willy's character includes a sense of his idealism and his will to succeed against all odds. Willy is not merely pitiable. Although his enthusiasm may outstrip the realities of his situations, it also lets us admire his joy of living. A man who is constantly on the edge of pessimism according to his current sales chart, Willy can repeatedly rebound and fill himself with joy, pride, and optimism for the future of his son Biff. A

man both of temperament and sensitivity, Willy can be moved to tears by tears, and can be moved beyond mere self-pity. Realizing that Biff loves him, Willy cries out with vibrant enthusiasm: "that boy—that boy is going to be magnificent!" (133).

Numerous critics have suggested that Willy's inability to understand the reality of his competitive salesman's world marks him as merely a pathetic figure, and determines, in effect, his fate. Such criticism implies that Miller fails to give Willy any chance to grow or to free himself from the siren's song of Madison Avenue. But Willy does act freely, not in destroying himself out of a sense of desperation and self-pity, but in sacrificing what is left of his life to provide a more secure future for Biff. Consequently, the small, common man has gained a kind of noble stature in acting heroically in facing death, and in a manner that few of us would have the courage to display. Willy, pragmatically sees his act as one that will immediately benefit Biff through his insurance policy money, and—despite his fear—he acts out his scenario with a strong and passionate determination.

Whether Willy's suicide is seen as a noble act of self-sacrifice by his family is not the point of this play. Willy acts freely—he does *not* have to kill himself. As Miller suggests in "Tragedy and the Common Man," "the morality that the common man chooses, that distinguishes his choice from merely psychological or sociological considerations, implies first the desire and ability to *act*" (5-6). A failure to act freely—even if that free act is an act of sacrifice—conveys to the audience something more than tragedy. But Willy does act freely—and although he acts unwisely, he nevertheless acts heroically, attempting to find in action a solution that evades him in his speech and imagination.

This, however, does not argue that Willy is not, in some ways, a pathetic character. Perhaps *Death of a Salesman* has the rare quality of presenting its protagonist as both a figure of pathos *and* of heroism. If this is so, then *Death of a Salesman* is Miller's finest achievement—for it appears to artfully represent the modern dilemma specifically and generally within the American dream of materialistic success and failure. While graphically portraying the pattern of pathos in Willy Loman, which in Miller's words, means devising a character who "has fought a battle he could not possibly have won" ("Tragedy and the Common Man" 7), Miller

also creates a character who "is reaching for a token of immortality, a sign that he lived" (Evans 98), and one who acts heroically on his own terms in trying to provide for his son.

And it is even conceivable that Willy's misplaced optimism, his inheritance from nineteenth-century America, is alone enough to classify him as a tragic figure. For whatever else Willy is in his penultimate moment of sacrifice—he is not pessimistic. In an interview with Phillip Gelb, Miller commented that.

> Willy Loman is seeking for a kind of ecstasy in life which the machine civilization deprives people of. He is looking for his selfhood, for his immortal soul, so to speak. (198)

It is Willy's capacity to act, to act freely, courageously, and with optimism and even ecstasy, that defines him as more of a tragic, rather than pathetic, figure. Despite our dismay at his suicide, we are nevertheless moved by Willy's desire to provide for Biff and regard him as someone who is not, finally, "in terror for his life" (33).

In "Arthur Miller and the Idea of Modern Tragedy," M.W. Steinberg complains that

> Willy Loman does not gain "size" from the situation; . . . his warped values, the illusions concerning the self he projects, reflect those of his society . . . he goes to his death clinging to his illusions. He is a pathetic figure, yet Miller in his essay written at this time says that there is no place for pathos in real tragedy. Pathos, he remarks, is the mode for the pessimist, suitable for the kind of struggle where a man is obviously doomed from the outset. And earlier in the essay Miller postulated that tragedy must be inherently optimistic. In Miller's view of tragedy and his expression of it in his plays, there seems to be some confusion that needs to be examined. (86-87)

In *Death of a Salesman* there may be, indeed, a suggestion of a seemingly defeated character who may or may not obtain a pyrrhic victory, or even an immortal "thrust for freedom," which, according to Miller in "Tragedy and the Common Man," "is the quality in tragedy which exalts" (5).

Steinberg is not the only critic to describe Willy's play of memory "inside his head" as that of a victim's. *In American Drama*

Since World War II, Gerald Weales notes briefly that even at the play's beginning, Willy Loman is "past the point of choice" (7). Again, for Weales and Steinberg, Willy appears as a victim whose fate is already sealed. But if this were so, there could be no dramatic conflict possible in the play.

Clearly, Willy is a tragic, if occasionally self-contradictory, figure. That he acts unwisely in confronting Biff and in relating to his family is obvious. But his motives are well-intentioned as he struggles to achieve a victory over those forces that seem to conspire to keep his sons from achieving his own dreams. Willy does not die heroically; his tragedy is that he dies blindly and alone. To argue that he does not gain size or stature from his struggle is to ignore the courage required for his sacrifice. But Willy's death serves to underscore the point that the capacity to act is considered more noble and heroic than one's limited capacity to live in harmony with a mechanistic society that eventually destroys by entropy. And although Willy is more than, as Steinberg argues, "a victim of his society"—he is a tragic victim in that he believes it is necessary to sacrifice his life in order to provide for his son. Willy has bought into the American Dream of material success and the ever elusive cult of "personality." Indeed, Willy carries with him a host of negative qualities that by themselves would make him a pathetic figure. His natural talents as a carpenter and builder have found limited outlets. His love of nature, his desire to breathe fresh air are all thwarted in his prison-like brick home in Brooklyn. Worse still, his real identity is obscured and crushed by a job that consumes his life and daily happiness.

As P. P. Sharma notes in "Search for Self-Identity in *Death of a Salesman*," Willy feels "terribly lonely and insecure," which

> is symbolically brought out in the scene when he accidentally switches on the wire recorder and, panic stricken, shouts for Howard's help. Instead of looking within himself, he looks outside to others. (77)

As Sharma notes, Biff, unlike Willy, "gradually learns to be himself, instead of staying on as a compulsive victim" (78).

Certainly, added to Willy's shortcomings are his lack of self-knowledge and successful business acumen. As an audience, we

laugh at Willy's contradictions, his distorted logic, and cringe at his stubbornness. In addition, he both practices and encourages lying, cheating, stealing, violence, day-dreaming, adultery, slander, and contemptuousness. He is the butt of jokes and feels obliged to crack a salesman "right across the face" for calling him a "fat walrus." Nevertheless and notwithstanding, we feel his pathos, and are both moved by and pity his sense of obligation to Biff. Willy Loman is not merely "insecure" and a "compulsive victim," he is absolute and reveals himself as multi-dimensional. As Miller comments in the Introduction to his *Collected Plays*,

> he [Willy] has achieved a very powerful piece of knowledge, which is that he is loved by his son and has been embraced by him and forgiven. (147)

In other words, Willy is at this point not merely a lost figure drowning in self-pity and pathos. He is a tragic figure, who attains a modern tragic stature, according to Miller, by his desire and willingness "to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity" (4). The knowledge that Biff loves him, despite their past differences, allows Willy to achieve a moral victory, which, for Miller, is the stuff of tragedy. Willy regains a faith in himself, just as we in the audience ponder Miller's own conception, the "belief—optimistic if you will, in the perfectibility of man" ("Tragedy and the Common Man" 7). The play might also have been titled *Death of a Father*.

Some critics and scholars, however, disagree with Miller's ideas on what constitutes the tragic condition and continue to view Willy as a misguided dream chaser, a character who foolishly throws his life away on the false promises of Madison Avenue, the power of money, and a desire for some imaginary self-aggrandizement. After the play is over, we may be haunted by Willy's suicide and thereby conclude that it represents an act lacking in "good faith," to borrow Jean Paul Sartre's expression. But what elevates this play to the status of tragedy is not only Willy's self-conscious choice to sacrifice his life, that given the nature of our society, we might also make a similar choice. If we fail to empathize with Willy, it may be as Miller suggests in the foreward to his *Theater Essays* that "we have lost the art of tragedy for want of a certain level of self-respect, finally, and are in

disgrace with ourselves" (xliii). And, as if to underscore his own concerns in *Death of a Salesman*, in his essay "The Family in Modern Drama," Miller has commented that:

> If, for instance, the struggle in *Death of a Salesman* were simply between father and son for recognition and forgiveness it would diminish in importance. But when it extends itself out of the family circle and into society, it broaches those questions of social status, social honor and recognition, which expand its vision and lift it out of the merely particular toward the fate of the generality of men. (73-74)

Just as Miller sees the stage as "*the* place for ideas, for philosophies, for the most intense discussions of man's fate," he also believes that we can, by contemplating dramatic tragedies, acquire that same knowledge that the tragic figure acquires "pertaining to the right way of living in the world" ("The Nature of Tragedy" 9).

How then do Willy Loman's experiences represent those questions that social plays ask? Is there more to the idea of tragedy than transcends the struggle between father and son for forgiveness and dignity? As an audience, our "felt experience" involves our own empathetic feelings toward and about Willy. While we may intellectually identify with him in his existential situation, we may also imaginatively feel, concerning the larger society, that someone might also be led to take "the easy way out." Not only do we pity Willy and his broken dreams, we also fear for ourselves, either at present or in the future, in which the possibility of gaining money through suicide can become a social reality—the final affirmation in a failed life. This is why Willy reflects a social pattern as well as a personal tragedy.

In his new foreword to the Methuen second edition of *The Theatre Essays*, Miller laments the decline of actors and playwrights in the theater as films and television attract them to a different medium. But he ends his lament by stating:

> Embarrassing as it may be to remind ourselves, the theatre does reflect the spirit of a people, and when it lives up to its potential it may even carry them closer to their aspirations. It is the most vulgar of the arts but it is the simplest too. . . . All you need is a human and a board to stand on and something fascinating for him to say and do. With a few right words, sometimes, he can

> clarify the minds of thousands, still the whirling compass needle of their souls and point it once more toward the stars. . . . The-atre is not going to die, it is as immortal as our dreaming. (xix-xx)

The tragedy inherent in *Death of a Salesman* is no longer only an American tragedy. It is part of the universal tragedy of love, grief, despair, and betrayal that today characterizes life in most countries of the world. With "a few right words" Miller has again and again expressed in his plays the thoughts and fears of people everywhere. And occasionally he has even pointed that whirling compass needle of their souls toward the stars.

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