

***Death of a Salesman* (written in 1949 by Arthur Miller)**

Central theme: a man is "worth more dead than alive." – Willy Loman.
Willy finally kills himself to secure an insurance for his son.

Themes taken from Arthur Miller's Introduction to *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays* (published in 1957, Viking Press)

- **Question of Realism-** The play will either be intent upon rounding out the characters by virtue of its complete answers to the common questions, or will substitute answers to a more limited group of questions which, instead of being "human", are thematic and are designed to form a symbol of meaning rather than an apparency of the "real". We know a great deal more about Hamlet and Macbeth than we can ever surmise about Oedipus or the heroes and heroines of Strindberg's plays. When the career of a person rather than the detail of his motives stands at the forefront of the play, we move closer to non-realistic styles, and vice versa.
- **Conception and manipulation of Time-** *Death of a Salesman* explodes the watch and the calendar. The compacting of time destroys the realistic style not only because it violates our sense of reality, but because collapsing time inevitably emphasizes an element of existence which in life is not visible or ordinarily felt with equivalent power, and this is its symbolic meaning. The Greek "unity" of time imposed on the drama was not arbitrary but a concomitant of the preponderant Greek interest in the fate and career of the hero rather than his private characterizations; his social and symbolic side rather than his family role.
- **Tragedy-** the less capable a man is of walking away from the central conflict of the play, the closer he approaches a tragic existence. In turn, this implies that the closer a man approaches tragedy the more intense is his concentration of emotion upon the fixed point of his commitment, which is to say the closer he approaches what in life we call fanaticism. From this flows the necessity for scenes of high and open emotion and plays constructed toward climax rather than evocation of a mood alone or of bizarre spectacle.
- The play written in the belief that it was unveiling a truth already known but unrecognized as such. Miller's concept of the audience is of a public each member of which is carrying about with him what he thinks is an anxiety, or a hope, or a preoccupation which is his alone and isolates him from mankind. In that sense, the purpose of theatre is to make man more human, to reveal him to himself so that he may touch others by virtue of the revelation of his mutuality with them, to make him less alone.
- The nature of the creative act- It is misleading to state that there is some profound conflict between art and the philosophically or socially meaningful theme.
- *Death of a Salesman-* **The first image that came to Miller was of an enormous face the height of the proscenium arch which would appear and then open up, and one would see the inside of a man's head** (*The Inside of His Head* was the first title). The inside of his head was a mass of contradictions. The Salesman image was from the beginning absorbed with the concept that nothing in life comes "next" but that everything

exists together and at the same time within us; that there is no past to be “brought forward” in a human being, but that he is his past at every moment and that the present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to. He wished to create a form which would literally be the process of Willy Loman’s way of mind. Miller wished to speak of the salesman most precisely as he felt about him, to give no part of that feeling away for the sake of any effect or any dramatic necessity. The form seems like that of a confession, for that is how it is told, now speaking of what happened yesterday, then suddenly following some connection to a time twenty years ago, then leaping even further back and then returning to the present and even speculating about the future. The assumption also was that everyone knew Willy Loman.

- Willy Loman does not merely suggest or hint that he is at the end of his strength and of his justifications; he does not gradually imply a deadly conflict with his son. Instead, he is avowedly grappling with that conflict at the outset. The ultimate matter with which the play will close is announced at the outset. **The play was begun with only one firm piece of knowledge and this was that Loman was to destroy himself.** Miller was convinced that if he could make Loman remember enough he would kill himself, and the structure of the play was determined by what was needed to draw up Loman’s memories like a mass of tangled roots without end or beginning.
- **The dramatic tension of Willy’s memories-** Loman was the kind of man you see muttering to himself on a subway, decently dressed, on his way home or to office, perfectly integrated with his surroundings excepting that unlike other people he can no longer restrain the power of his experience from disrupting the superficial sociality of his behavior. Consequently he is working on two logics which often collide (eg. If he meets his son Happy while in the midst of some memory in which Happy disappointed him, he is instantly furious at Happy, despite the fact that Happy at this particular moment deeply desires to be of use to Loman). Loman is literally at that terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present. In dramatic terms, the form, therefore, *is* this process. **There are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present, and this, again, because in his desperation to justify his life Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between now and then.** There is an inevitable horror in the spectacle of a man losing consciousness of his immediate surroundings to the point where he engages in conversations with unseen persons. Additionally, the mere fact that a man forgets where he is does not mean that he has really moved. Indeed, his terror springs from his never-lost awareness of time and place. Basically, the friction, collision, and tension between past and present was the heart of the play’s particular construction.
- **What Willy was selling- “Himself”.** The play grew from simple imagines and images of futility.
- **The image of aging-** So many of your friends already gone and strangers in the seats of the mighty who do not know you or your triumphs or your incredible value.
- **The image of the son’s hard public eye on the father;** the son who is no longer swept by the father’s myth.
- **The image of people turning into strangers** who only evaluate one another.
- Finally, **the image of a need to leave a thumbprint** somewhere on the world. A need greater than hunger.

- **The image of a suicide** so mixed in motive as to be unfathomable and yet demanding statement. Revenge was in it, and the power of love, and a victory in that it would bequeath a fortune to the living and a flight from emptiness. With it, an image of peace, the peace that is between wars.
- **The image of a man making something with his hands.**
- **Willy's stature as a tragic hero-** Aristotle having spoken of a fall from heights, it goes without saying that someone of the common mold cannot be a fit tragic hero. However, it has been a long time since the *Poetics*. Aristotle lived in a slave society where a vast number of people were divested of alternatives. Therefore tragedy was only possible for the higher ranks of society. Miller's point is to point out the sharp alteration in the meaning of rank in society between the present time and the distant past- Therefore, the stature of the hero may not be so utterly dependent upon his rank that the corner grocer cannot become a tragic hero, providing that the grocer's career engages the issues of the survival of the race, the relationships of man to God, etc. Moreover, intensity matters. If the intensity, the human passion to surpass his given bounds, the fanatic insistence upon his self-conceived role, are not present, there can be no living thing. The lasting appeal of tragedy is due to our need to face the fact of death in order to strengthen ourselves for life.
- **Question of the so-called tragic victory**, which is closely related to the consciousness of the hero- Here "victory" does not mean that the hero makes us feel some certain joy when, for instance, he sacrifices himself for a "cause", and unhappy because he dies without one. However, a man's death is and ought to be an essentially terrifying thing and should make nobody happy. But in a great variety of ways even death can be an assertion of bravery, and can serve to separate the death of a man from the death of animals. It is this distinction which underlies any conception of a victory in death:-
(Direct quote from Miller's Introduction)- "It was not out of any deference to a tragic definition that Willy Loman is filled with a joy, however broken-hearted, as he approaches his end, but simply that my sense of his character dictated his joy, and even what I felt was an exultation. In terms of his character, he 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. In this he is given his existence, so to speak—his fatherhood, for which he has always striven and which until now he could not achieve. That he is unable to take this victory thoroughly to his heart, that it closes the circle for him and propels him to his death, is the wage of his sin, which was to have committed himself so completely to the counterfeits of dignity and the false coinage embodied in his idea of success that he can prove his existence only by bestowing "power" on his posterity, a power deriving from the sale of his last asset, himself, for the price of his insurance policy.
I must confess here to a miscalculation, however. I did not realize while writing the play that so many people in the world do not see as clearly, or would not admit, as I thought they must, how futile most lives are; so there could be no hope of consoling the audience for the death of this man. I did not realize either how few would be impressed by the fact that this man is actually a very brave spirit who cannot settle for half but must pursue his dream of himself to the end. Finally, I thought it must be clear, even obvious, that this was no dumb brute heading mindlessly to his catastrophe.

I have no need to be Willy's advocate before the jury which decides who is and is not a

tragic hero. I am merely noting that the lingering ponderousness of so many ancient definitions has blinded students and critics to the facts before them, and not only in regard to this play. Had Willy been unaware of his separation from values that endure he should have died contentedly while polishing his car, probably on a Sunday afternoon with the ball game coming over the radio. But he was agonized by his awareness of being in a false position, so constantly haunted by the hollowness of all he had placed his faith in, so aware, in short, that he must somehow be filled in his spirit or fly apart, that he stalked his very life on the ultimate assertion. That he had not the intellectual fluency to verbalize his situation is not the same thing as saying that he lacked awareness, even an overly intensified consciousness that the life he had made was without form and inner meaning.

To be sure, he had been able to know that he was as much the victim of his beliefs as their defeated exemplar, had he known how much of guilt he ought to bear and how much to shed from his soul, he would be more conscious. But it seems to me that there is of necessity a severe limitation of self-awareness in any character, even the most knowing, which serves to define him as a character, and more, that this very limit serves to complete the tragedy and, indeed, to make it at all possible. Complete consciousness is possible only in a play about forces, like *Prometheus*, but not in a play about people. I think that the point is whether there is a sufficient awareness in the hero's career to make the audience supply the rest. Had Oedipus, for instance, been more conscious and more aware of the forces at work upon him he must surely have said that he was not really to blame for having cohabited with his mother since neither he nor anyone else knew she was his mother. He must surely decide to divorce her, provide for their children, firmly resolve to investigate the family background of his next wife, and thus deprive us of a very fine play and the name for a famous neurosis. But he is conscious only up to a point, the point at which guilt begins. Now he is inconsolable and must tear out his eyes. What is tragic about this? Why is it not even ridiculous? How can we respect a man who goes to such extremities over something he could not in any way help or prevent? The answer, I think, is not that we respect the man, but that we respect the Law he has so completely broken wittingly or not, for it is that Law which, we believe, defines us as men. The confusion of some critics viewing *Death of a Salesman* in this regard is that they do not see that Willy Loman has broken a law without whose protection life is insupportable if not incomprehensible to him and to many others; it is the law which says that a failure in society and in business has no right to live. Unlike the law against incest, the law of success is not administered by statute or church, but it is very nearly as powerful in its grip upon men. The confusion increases because, while it is a law, it is by no means a wholly agreeable one even as it is slavishly obeyed, for to fail is no longer to belong to society, in his estimate. Therefore, the path is opened for those who wish to call Willy merely a foolish man even as they themselves are living in obedience to the same law that killed him. Equally, the fact that Willy's law—the belief, in other words, which administers guilt to him—is not a civilizing statute whose destruction menaces us all; it is, rather, a deeply believed and deeply suspect "good" which, when questioned as to its value, as it is in this play, serves more to raise our anxieties than to reassure us of the existence of an unseen but humane metaphysical system in the world. My attempt in the play was to counter this anxiety with an opposing system which, so to speak, is in a race

for Willy's faith, and it is the system of love which is the opposite of the law of success. It is embodied in Biff Loman, but by the time Willy can perceive his love it can serve only as an ironic comment upon the life he sacrificed for power and for success and its tokens.

- **Question of political philosophy in the play-** [direct quote from Miller's Introduction]:- A play cannot be equated with a political philosophy, at least not in the way a smaller number, by simple multiplication, can be assimilated into a larger. I do not believe that any work of art can help but be diminished by its adherence at any cost to a political program, including its author's, and not for any other reason than that there is no political program—any more than there is a theory of tragedy—which can encompass the complexities of real life. Doubtless an author's politics must be one element, and even an important one, in the germination of his art, but if it is art he has created it must by definition bend itself to his observation rather than his opinions or even his hopes. If I have shown a preference for plays which seek causation not only in psychology but in society, I may also believe in the autonomy of art, and I believe this because my experience with *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* forces the belief upon me. The most decent man in *Death of a Salesman* is a capitalist (Charley) whose aims are not different from Willy Loman's. The great difference between them is that Charley is not a fanatic. Equally, however, he has learned how to live without that frenzy, that ecstasy of spirit which Willy chases to his end. And even as Willy's sons are unhappy men, Charley's boy, Bernard, works hard, attends to his studies, and attains a worthwhile objective. These people are all of the same class, the same background, the same neighborhood. What theory lies behind this double view? None whatever. It is simply that I knew and know that I feel better when my work is reflecting a balance of the truth as it exists. A muffled debate arose with the success of *Death of a Salesman* in which attempts were made to justify or dismiss the play as a Left-Wing piece, or as a Right-Wing manifestation of decadence. The presumption underlying both views is that a work of art is the sum of its author's political outlook, real or alleged, and more, that its political implications are valid elements in its aesthetic evaluation. I do not believe this, either for my work or other writers' works.