



## Spirit of affirmation in Arthur Miller's death of a salesman

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### Abstract

Arthur Miller has maintained the spirit of life-affirmation in his plays and also in his other writings. He has tried to understand the true nature of complex modern social life and has created dramatic situations in a manner to show how his major characters, despite adverse social conditions and pressures, come to stand by certain moral judgment. He has beautifully and powerfully projected the contemporary situation of American society when American dream was presenting an illusionary picture as has been depicted in all of his plays in general, and *The Death of a Salesman* in particular through the character of Willy Loman.

**Keywords:** Arthur Miller, salesman, Willy Loman, nature

### Introduction

*Death of a salesman* is considered as one of the most powerful and popular tragedies in which past and present come together and coexist in an expressionistic style involving or centering round a middle aged travelling salesman who keeps trying afresh throughout his life. There can be no opinion about the fact that the play evokes pity and sympathy, the two principal ingredients that constitute tragedy.

Tragedy is a traditional form that includes patterns of action with conversational meanings. The meaning of this form can be seen only in a historical perspective when we look at the tragedy from a distance, the pattern emerges, stripped to its essential framework, the tragic action is a movement from guilt through suffering to purgation and insight.

The most important quality of Arthur Miller's tragedy of common man in the present play is its Americanism which is demonstrated by the contrasting reactions of American and English reviewers. The English man treats Willy, the protagonist, without regards for his American context, The New York reviewers see him as the representative of a large historical perspective and without the American context, a salesman is a 'small man' unable to cope with his environment. But, Willy is also a representative of an American type, the salesman, who has escaped an ideal shape for him and passed on him by forces in his culture. This ideal is the matrix from which Willy emerges and by which his identity is determined which is peculiarly American in origin and development seed, flower and fruit.

The great success of the play, *Death of a Salesman* has been largely due to the emotional identification of the American with Willy Loman and, when the audience is moved by this play, it is not only the fate of Willy Loman only, but also the fate of millions of such men who live by their values and suffer on account of it. Primarily, the present play deals with the myth of success in America and Willy's betrayal of great American dream of success is at the very heart of the conflict in the drama.

Willy Loman, an ordinary salesman in a competitive society,

dreams of becoming a successful businessman through his hard work and the false values based on 'well liked personality.' He strongly believes that success is the reward of making friends and influencing people, being impressive, being persuasive, being well liked as he tells his sons: "The man who makes an appearance in men, who creates personal interests, is the man who gets a head." The dream of success has become for him a mode of self-fulfillment through wrong ideals in a society where profit motive is a main factor in determining social relations.

But, he feels guilt and betrayal because even after accepting these false values of the society, he is a failure one and, internally he realizes that he cannot get success with these false values. Arthur Miller enhances the psychological factors in Willy's characters so that the surfacing of guilt is more complex. Willy Loman of *Death of a Salesman*, is more complex character than Joe Killer of *All My Sons*, although both represent the guilt that is vested in authority. Willy Loman's guilt has two sources, one is the failure of his success dream, and the second and perhaps the more painful cause of his guilt is his feeling that he has failed his children.

There is no doubt in denying the fact that society, to a large extent, is also responsible for Willy's tragedy and if we go through Miller's views as propounded in his famous essay, *Tragedy and the Common man*, Willy's fall would be entirely due to the hostile and manipulative economic system in which he lives. Even the false dream of success would be popularized and encouraged by the same economic system. Thus, we can safely and rightly conclude the fact that society betrays Willy Loman because of its false values and, that is why, the play is a record of the social and economic system. Willy's interview with his employer brings out the protest that he is not to be treated as an orange whose peel is thrown away after it is eaten.

It is an established fact that this is the society where money seems to be the only attraction and where physical charm of an individual have little value, and Willy fails to understand this cleavage between his ideal and the social reality and

continues to believe in the validity of his dreams and, therefore, his conflict with the society and his destruction are inherent in the situation right from the beginning.

In his quest for success, Willy has two models before him: his elder brother, Ben and old Single man, and he also urges his sons to follow these models as he wants a successful business for his sons so that the name 'Loman' may live forever. No one can blame Willy for dreaming such a dream, but this dream has come to stay with him as a part of his being and he can even lay down his life for it. Thus, Willy tragic predicament lies in his success dream which has been woven in to the core of his being, and American dream- its essence and its form- an integral part of his personal being. We can say that Willy is a product of producer-consumer society in which the go- between is a pivotal figure.

Willy also tells lies in his business to promote his illusions, and under the false exterior of uprightness and total devotion to family, Willy also dreams of being a super salesman and always tend to forget his sense of being average when he asserts: "I'm the New England man. I'm vital in New England." And, further, in his assumed glory, he points out: "And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. .... I have friends, I can park my car in any street in New England and the cops protect it like their own."

His wish is to sensationalize everything about himself as he bluffs Linda about his sales when he says: "I did five hundred gross in providence and seven hundred gross in Boston." When Linda tries to figure out his commission, he is deflated, and in this way, by telling lies to Linda, he betrays her. His Jazzed-up notions about himself makes him fantasies his funeral.

The theft-motif in the play throws more light on Willy's views about life and his philosophy of success when he says that theft is committed by a man who has personality guts and good looks and who, because of these qualities, is well liked. In this way, we find that Willy's recollections of Single man are romanticized and exaggerated. The desire to get everything without doing anything seems to be inherent in the ideal whose magic has worked so potently on Willy. The pursuit of this dream of success has distorted Willy's vision and flawed his concept of morality. On account of Willy's dreams, the entire family, including his children, suffer a lot and Willy tries to unite their family through this dream plan.

Towards the end of the play, we can safely and rightly aver that like Jay Gatsby of *The Great Gatsby*, Willy has also wrong dreams, and his tragedy brings home the idea that in order to achieve happiness and fulfillment in life, a balance has to be struck between the individual thinking and the social actions. People, like Willy, are the symptoms of growing diseases in the society, but Miller is sympathetic towards them like Linda who feels the attention must be paid to Willy, Miller seems to suggest the idea that men like, Willy and Joe are not to be judged harshly, as their guilt is not absolute, and in an imperfect world, it should be viewed sympathetically.

### ***Look Back in Anger as a Play of Angry Young Man Movement***

It is an established fact that in the late 1950s a number of young writers, among whom A. Wesker, Kingsley Amis, and above all, John Osborne who are worthy of detailed consideration, had an immense success in Britain. They were

grouped under the label of "Angry Young Men". They gave voice to the young generation who, dissatisfied with the world they lived in, wanted to create their own way of living. They struggled against the Establishment and some of its values: family, patriotism, the Established Church and culture. They began to cry out against conventions, tradition and authoritarianism. They felt cheated as the promises of the Welfare State had revealed to be empty: society fed them well, educated them well, but still kept them trapped in a class system that opened the doors to the rich public school members of the upper-middle class and kept them closed in the faces of the members of the working class.

### **Paper**

The post-war Britain of nineteen fifty is largely believed to be a free society, characterized by the widespread affluence and political stability. Political discontent become the thing of past; the new Britain was marked by a spirit of euphoria, and an acute emphasis on the established British ruling class traditions.

A generation of new men was emerged and the writers like Kingsley Amis and John Braine started writing around 1953, but their importance was not recognized until 1956 when John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* was hailed as a landmark achievement in the history of English literature.

John Osborne belongs to a group of dramatists who makes a powerful expression of the disillusionment sense of defeatism, nihilism or what Soren Abby Kierkegaard has rightly called the angst in the post-war society. *Look Back in Anger* is a superb work of art where we find the two important streams of modern drama converging in to a single vision of life; the theatre of absurd, and the angry Youngman, both blending and harmonizing into what Martin Esslin roughly calls, the theatre of angry absurdist.

Like Samuel Beckett and Edward Albee, John Osborne does not adhere to the conventions and convictions of the past decade which are a logical connection between the situations and persons. Osborne does not highlights the utter futility of human existence like the angry young man dramatists where all vital causes are lost leaving man mentally disorganized and frustrated self.

The writers of the nineteen fifty show their protagonists protesting against the richer sections of society, but their protest lacks moral substance and despite of showing their rebellion, their restlessness is actually a manifestation of their egoism. Like Jim Dixon of Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*, and Joe Lampton of John Braine's *Room at the Top*, Jimmy porter of *Look Back in Anger* is also the angry young man who represent the whole generation of disenchanted youth because heroes like them fire the imagination of young generation as they feel the pulse of the age; and capture the mood of the moment, mood that is one of despair and disillusionment, failure and frustration.

This is what we find in the character, personality, career and interpersonal relations of Jimmy porter, the heroic hero of the play *Look Back in Anger*. By making a radical departure from the traditional norms, Osborne divides the play in to three acts instead of five acts in which almost a static situation is expressed and explored to delineate the anger and frustration of the hero vis-à-vis the passive and docile demeanor of his

wife Allison porter; and innocence, harmless and hatred sarcasm of his friend, Cliff Lewis.

At the outset of the play, Jimmy is shown criticizing and even debunking the posh newspapers with their trash and meaningless information like the appeal of Bishop of Brimley to contribute generosity for the making of hydrogen bomb. Jimmy is also angry with the monotony of Sunday newspapers where the news items speak of the religious Janatism of a lady who has broken her rib for the so called of holio cause.

In fact, jimmy represents all the important existences, social and political traits and trends of the post-war English – a drift towards anarchy, instinctive leftish-ness, surrealist sense of humour, casual promiscuity, and bankruptcy of noble and brave causes. The uneasy discontent and frustration embody disillusionment and rebelliousness which is translated by Osborne in terms of jimmy's relationships with his wife, Allison, his friend, cliff, his mother-in-law, his father-in-law, Colonel Redfern, followed by Helena.

At the social level, Jimmy is waging a war against class-distinction as he comes from a working- class, and his wife from a middle-class family as he evident through jimmy, and Hugh considers it as a hostage who is also called as lady pusillanimous with the passion of python. So, the whole of the play is a powerful indictment of the things, persons, and institutions ranging their hatred for ringing church bells, posh-Sunday newspapers white tiled university and midnight invocations to the Coptic goddess of fertility by the people of midland.

Albeit, scholars like A.E Dyson analyses the play in terms of author's self-portrait, but john Russell Taylor finds jimmy as an embodiment of the completely bored with life and in order to give a new meaning to his life and existence, he involves himself in reading newspaper, and even playing on the trumpet and, that is why, Jimmy is not only a folk-hero like the Byronic heroes, but also a cult-figure like Jim Dixon of Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*.

That is why, jimmy tries his hands in so many things like journalism, advertising, vacuum-cleaner, organizing a jazz band and now as a sweet-vendor who considers his wife as an outdated because of her being chased and moral, and Helena Charles as an expert in the economics of supernaturalism who look forward to the past. In fact, jimmy is not completely disenchanted and disillusioned with his wife and family, but also has a moral concept of his own in where he cares for the virtues of fidelity and solidarity which he finds only in his friend cliff and not in Helena and Allison.

Jimmy porter is, in fact, a moralist and political neutralist, expending his energy in avoiding social commitment. He is, at his best, a romantic and a political context, inflamed by his interests and causes that are outside him. His emotional outbursts are the result of his psychological resentments and are never aimed at any concrete achievements.

According to Lindsey Anderson, both *Look Back in Anger*, and *The Entertainer*, are dense with social and political topicalities on which john Osborne explores a complex psychological and social perspectives in the form of a powerful and superb vision of despair, disillusionment, disgust and nihilism which express and illustrate the dominant moods of the post-war English society of nineteen fifty.

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