
FAMILIAL CONCEPT IN ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

By **Yogesh Singh**(Reg. No-1807322), PhD Scholar

Department of English, Starex University, Gurugram(Haryana)

The American drama of the 20th century portrays how gradually the social change, social problems and the cultural mutations took place. The importance of the American drama especially in modern and post-modern era is obvious in the various themes which are reflecting the American society in particular and the whole globe in general. Themes are varied including the horrors of the wars, biographies and autobiographies, the great depression, political hypocrisies, radical politics, personal issues such as fragmentation of the personality, self-realization, the struggle to preserve personal values, the outsider in a hostile group, anguish, despair; family issues such as family fragmentation, family relations, father-son relationship; social and moral issues such as the ambiguity of morality, fear of death, the dehumanization of modern society, the individual resisting social values, social injustice; horrible diseases, the psychological disorder and its interrelated effects on the individual, family, and society. Drama, being the most immediately responsive to the social context from which it emerges and in which it appears, vibrates to changing pressures in society. Many American playwrights have largely focused on tragic themes in their works. American writers who lived between World War II and the new millennium include writers like Eudora Wetly, John Updike, Kurt Vonnegut, Sylvia Plath, Edward Franklin Albee, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, Ralph Ellison etc.

Arthur Miller has a coveted place among the modern American playwrights. His own humble background gave him a deeper understanding of the plight of the common man and his society. Miller's values tampered by hardships from his life during the Depression, through the Second World War and the post-war period, and from his own Jewish heritage, are also the values of the characters in his plays. These experiences gave Miller a unique self-identity. Although Miller's family was relatively well off at the time of his birth, the Depression was nearly the ruin of the family. This shift of fate forced Miller to take on the life of the blue-collar worker, the backbone of American society, and these experiences became the major themes of his plays. His plays deal with the ordinary people he is associated with and the small sad events of their common lives verging on poverty. From the time of his very first play which he produced while still at the University of Michigan, Miller focused on one single subject: the struggle of the individual attempting to gain his rightful position in society.

Arthur Miller's life and career provide a fascinating picture of an American of his time and depict a unique phase of the modern American society. Miller was born during the years when the First World War was going on and he witnessed the callousness and barbarity of the II world war. The traumatic experiences of that period are visibly etched in his dramatic works. It was a world entirely different from the earlier one in which people could assume the continuance of man with his civilization and culture on this planet. It is a radically different conception of man's future that rules the world now. In fact, we are standing on the edge of a precipice dreading the icy plunge.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is one of the few modern plays that can rightly claim to be substantial and powerful. Many critics have observed that this play is concerned primarily with father-son conflict, while others see the play as a family drama. In *Death of a Salesman*, (1949) as Benjamin Nelson points out, "ten generations of father-son relationship are woven into... and in each case a father is involved in passing something on to his son," (Nelson 129). In the play we see four generations of the Loman family (Willy's father, Willy, Biff and Happy, and their expected children), three generations of Charley's family (Charley, Bernard, Bernard's two sons), and three generations of the Wanger family (Frank, Howard, Howard's son and daughter).

Every family traditionally begins with a father, and the Lomans are no different. In the Loman family, father, Willy centered to the conflict is the protagonist. He is an old-fashioned working man who places a great deal of emphasis on the American value system, though it is invariably corrupt. He believes in nothing but total sacrifice to hard work and steady income to finance a family and build a career and home. Sadly, Willy, striving to be the leader and provider for his family, turns out to be an inefficient father in that he neglects the human element of his family life and bows to the wishes of the working class society and values. He is the personification of the American dream gone wrong because it has no other outlet but to go wrong. Ronald Hayman writes of Willy as 'the modern Everyman,' a man in whom all other average fellows can be identified.

At home, Willy never really behaves as an ideal father, but as the real life father who has just as many problems as anybody else. Willy just seems not capable of

enough to handle these problems in an effective way. Miller's main point here is not to critique the American father, but to show how the American values affect the American father and the American family. What is important to society is many times destructive to the individual, whether the individual realizes it or not. The sad thing about Willy is that he never did fully realize what society and the values of American business and industry took away from him. As Willy's son Biff says at the close of the play, "he never knew who he was," (Miller 105).

Death of a Salesman brought Miller international fame, and the play became one of the mile stones of modern American theatre. It tells the tragic story of a salesman named Willy Loman, whose past and present are mingled in expressionistic scenes. Loman is not the great success that he claims to be to his family and friends. The post war economic boom has shaken up his life. He is eventually fired and he begins to hallucinate about significant events from his past. Linda, his wife, believes in the American Dream, but she also keeps her feet on the ground. Deciding that he is worth more when dead than alive, Willy kills himself in his car hoping that the insurance money will support his family and that it would give his son Biff a new start in his life. It is a point of debate whether Willy's suicide is an act of cowardice or a last sacrifice on the altar of the American Dream.

In this play Miller presents the picture of an aging salesman baffled by a life time of failure in a society which apparently places more value only on success. The story of the play deals with Willy Loman, a salesman of lower middle class, "past sixty years of age" (2) whose tragedy lies in the acceptance of the over-publicized ideals of material success and blatant optimism. Willy is not simply an individual who

is determined to achieve an objective and who strives desperately to attain it; he is also representative of an American type, the salesman. The confusions and dreams of a single individual on the verge of psychological collapse are made to embody the collapse of national myths of personal transformation and social responsibility. Miller's achievement lies in his ability in depicting the anxieties of a culture which has exchanged an "existential world of physical and moral possibility for the determination of modern commercial and industrial life," (Bigsby 174) through the character of Willy Loman.

The dislocations of Willy's private life open up craters in familial relationships as well in a society which is focused on material success as a substitute for spiritual fulfillment. All the characters in the play are aware of the fact that they should neutralize the world of consumerism and status. At the same time they are blind to the consolation available through personal relationships. The love which they feel for one another is real enough and to some degree it shapes their actions and determines their desperate strategies. But it fails to hold them back from the fate in which they willfully conspire.

The play is a story of failure in terms of success, or the story of the success myth. The ideal Willy has accepted for himself and his sons is something that is deep-seated in the American consciousness. Success is a requirement Americans make of life and Willy is a personification of the success myth which came to the continent with its founding fathers. He is a dreamer who holds people like Ben, his brother who "walked into a jungle, and comes out, at the age of twenty-one, and he's rich!" (26) and Dave Singleman, the eighty-four years old successful salesman who died "in his

green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford, going into Boston when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral,” (57) as the models to emulate but he has followed in vain the fascinating mirage of success. After having given all his life to the company he worked for, Willy has gained nothing from his employer. Himself a victim of the callous world of competitive business, Willy strives for the success of his sons so that the name “LOMAN” is recognized in the community. No American can blame Willy for his dreams. Not only because such dreams “come with the territory” (105) of salesman, as Charley, his friend says over his grave, but also because they derive from the essence of American Dream. Willy’s mistake is not so much that he dreams of success for “no man only needs a little salary,” (105).

His dream is that of an average middle-class American who wishes for a good education and good life for his children. Willy has internalized the dream of success of a happy family in which his two sons will grow up to carry on successfully their father’s profession. The whole of Willy’s family lives under the spell of his dream which casts a sinister shadow over their destinies. His dream for the family is, “someday I’ll have my own business, and I’ll never have to leave home any more,” (17) and he feels that his sons will get married that will have a good guest house and that there will be total peace of mind for the whole family.

Willy discovers certain tangible signs which characterize the personality likely to succeed in his sons. The boys are physically strong, well-built, and attractive. He wrongly believes that they are really good in academics and sports whereas in reality they are good for nothing. It is Willy who is responsible for their failure, propelled by

the aspiration to rise above the average and come out ‘a number one man’; he mismanages the lives of his two sons and forces them into the wrong avenues of life. For Willy, his family is of utmost significance, yet he fails in two most important familial roles of a father and that of a husband.

Willy’s failure as father is that he could not raise his sons into two decent human beings. He is partially ruined by his own father, a dreamer who was driven to use his sons as heirs to the kingdom that he believed must be built. Willy’s father was also a travelling salesman who made and sold flutes. Willy’s earliest memory is that of sitting under a wagon and travelling in the country. And this remains the world of his aspirations, a natural world in which he can create things with his own hands, in which his identity is forged by his own actions. But the past had not been wholly idyllic. Familial betrayal had existed even then. His father had abandoned the family in order to leave for Alaska, to make his fortune there. Willy is his “father’s victim and he must perpetuate that hollow ideal that is his father’s legacy” (Dogra 8). Being driven by the image of success, he spoils his sons, overlooks their dishonesty and tortures them with his ambitions for them. He is otherwise a good father who has great faith in his sons “You’re both built like Adonises,” (19) says he. He used to impress them when they were young:

“...I’ll show you all the towns. America is full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people. And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring you fell as up, there’ll be open sesame for all of us, cause one thing, boys: I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own,” (18).

The children too used to think highly of their father. In one of her conversations with Willy, his wife Linda says, “Few men are idolized by their children the way you are,” (23). But things begin to turn otherwise when his sons fail him in his expectations: Biff, his elder son, remains unemployed at the age of thirty four and fails to share the responsibility of the father while the younger son Happy turns into a moral debauch indulging in cheap sexual pleasures with least consideration to share the burden of his father. Happy’s seduction of the executive’s fiancée is a destructive manifestation of sex as an undisciplined passion; a threat to the solidarity of family life.

Willy’s relationship with his sons is different in each case. Biff, the elder one, is sensitive and gets easily affected by circumstances. Happy as the name suggests, is a happy go- lucky sort of person. Throughout the play it can be seen that he is more sympathetic towards his father. When we first meet both the men we find that Happy is worried that Willy might get his driving license cancelled on account of his careless driving. “I’m getting nervous about him,” (8) says he to Biff. Biff ascribes it to his weak eye sight, but Happy contradicts him, saying that he drove into the city with him last week, and knows better. Every time Biff complains about his father’s mocking at him, Happy would jump up to defend his father, telling him that Willy is on the brink of collapse. He says, “He just wants you to make good, that’s all. I wanted to talk to you about Dad for a long time, Biff. Something’s happening to him. He talks to himself,” (9). Again, in the Requiem, when Willy has been buried, Happy although is angry over his father committing suicide, is still out to show that:

“Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It’s the only dream you can have to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I’m gonna win it for him,” (105).

Death of a Salesman is largely built around the relationship between Willy and Biff. Here as elsewhere in Miller’s work the relationship between father and sons is a crucial one because it focuses on the question of inherited values and assumptions which is a microcosm of the debate between the generations. It highlights the contrast between youthful aspirations and subsequent compromises and frustrations. The family, so much an icon of American mythology, becomes the appropriate prism through which to view that mythology. The sons’ identity depends on creating a boundary between each of them and their father. On perceiving himself outside the axial lines which has defined the father’s world; while the father is hard bent to impress him with his ideals and wants him to perpetuate those ideals.

Biff and Willy’s relationship is more complex than that of Happy and Willy as it is bedeviled by guilt and has undergone many changes. Past and present move forward together in the play to bring into sharp focus the personal relationship among the Lomans. This relationship can be studied on three parallel levels. First, Biff’s hero-worship of his father and Willy’s massive dreams about Biff’s future; secondly, Biff’s shock at discovery of a woman in the room of his father at a Boston hotel and the failure of Willy’s dreams about his son; lastly Biff’s efforts to disillusion his father and Willy’s realization of Biff’s love for him.

On the first level, there is a mutual idealization of each other by Willy and Biff. Biff is a football player the captain of the high school team and when he goes to play at Ebbet's field, Willy looks upon him with heightened hopes and remarks:

“Like a young god. Hercules something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him. Remember how he waved to me? Right up from the field, with the representatives of three colleges standing by? And the buyers I brought, and the cheers when he came out Loman, Loman, Loman! God Almighty, he'll be great yet. A star like that, magnificent, can never really fade away!” (48)

When Biff's friend and classmate, Bernard, complains about Biff's carelessness in Maths and says that, “Just because he printed University of Virginia on his sneakers doesn't mean they've got to graduate him,” (19). Willy is sure that with “scholarship to three universities” (19) nobody can “flunk” him. He dismisses Bernard as a “pest” and “anaemic” (19).

Similarly, Biff's idealization of his father can be very well noticed at several places. He wants to impress his father with his skill. When Willy expresses his happiness about Biff's becoming the captain, Biff pleasingly says “Just for you, I'm going to break through for a touch down,” (18). Biff as a boy had a lot of confidence in his father. It is due to this that he had come running to him in his Boston hotel room but had seen the woman there. He had come to Willy because he had “flunked math” (81), and was sure that Birnbaum could give the remaining four points to him if Willy talked to him. He says, “if he saw the kind of man you are, and you just talked to him in your way, I'm sure he'd come through for me,” (87).

The idealized attitude of the father and the son towards each other disappears with Biff's discovery of a naked woman in Will's room at the Boston hotel. Willy tries to buy her attention with a gift of stockings while his wife sits at home mending her own. Biff's love and adoration of his father, turns into an unforgiving spite. He sits motionless and dumb on the suitcase and his faith in his father gets shattered. The image of a guilty person replaces that of an ideal father, a loyal husband and a wonderful man. Whereas a few moments ago, Biff was sure that his father's talking could make the teacher listen. He, after this incident shrinks back from his father telling him that, "he wouldn't listen to you," (89). He calls his father a "phony little fake" (89) and weeping bitterly turns out of the room. He is shocked to see his erstwhile heroic father as no more than a dribbling 'liar' and a profligate. On the other hand, Willy's hopes for Biff are also shattered and his dream destroyed.

The event proves traumatic for both of them. Biff, after the hotel incident, can never experience the idolized presence of Willy. He sees the affair as a betrayal of Linda, the family and the home. But Willy does not understand Biff's reaction; for Willy what he does on the road has no connection with his home life where he is an upright man, a devoted husband and loving father. Thus all he feels is the weight of his son's disapproval. Biff turns bitter towards his father. He could have yielded to Willy's dreams of becoming a success in the business world, had his illusion about his father not been sheltered. But now that he knows his secret guilt, he deliberately tries to hurt his father by not complying with his wishes. He refuses to retake a Mathematics examination, thereby abandoning his chance of reaching university and his access to a better career. Willy feels guilty because he feels responsible for Biff's

failure. Biff equally feels guilty because he recognizes a responsibility which he cannot fulfill, the responsibility to redeem Willy's empty life.

Once Biff has sensed his father's guilt, he is out to shatter his illusion. He says to Willy, "And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody," (98). He also cuts him down to size by denouncing his false opinions and airy dreams of himself and his son. Indeed he returns home with an intension not that remote from that of Chris Keller. There is the same passion for truth which springs from guilt and self-interest as has characterized the protagonist of *All My Sons*. The following conversation forms the crux of the play.

Biff: Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!

Willy: [turning on him now in an uncontrolled outburst]: I am not a dime a Dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!

Biff: 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! I'm one dollar an hour, Willy.... Do you gather my meaning? I'm not bringing home any prizes any more, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home!

Willy: [directly to Biff]: You vengeful, spiteful mut!

Biff: [at the peak of his fury]: Pop, I'm nothing! I'm nothing, pop. Can't you understand that? There's no spite in it anymore. I'm just what I am, that's all.

(99)

Biff is genuinely worried about Willy. He asks his brother to do something for their father because he himself cannot do anything. He is worried that Willy is going to kill himself, "...help him.... Help me, help me; I can't bear to look at his face! " (85) says he to Happy.

Biff and Willy remain bewildered for most of the play, unable to analyze the pressure working upon them, unable in particular to confess the guilt, the love and the hate that connect and divide them. They both feel a profound but unfocussed sense of dissatisfaction with their lives. This is due to lack of understanding on Willy's part. He can't see anything beyond his dream of success. Unable to understand that his sons are well able to find their own ways, he keeps on pressing them with his ambitions. Willy's desire that Biff should succeed is in part at least, evident of his love but it is a love which threatens to destroy him. Since it expresses itself in a desire on Willy's part to bequeath his son, the thing he values the most of all is his dream. The relationship between Charley, Willy's friend and his son Bernard provides a contrast to that of Willy and Biff, whereas Willy is always worried about his sons. Charley has always left Bernard to find his own way. Charley tells Willy that his son's success, a successful lawyer, has been a consequence of his own lack of concern, announcing that, "My salvation is that I never took any interest in anything," (69). Had Willy not taken so much interest in Biff's career there would not have been so much of unhappiness in the lives of the father and the son.

Though Willy fails as a father, he proves to be a loving and caring husband. A family solidarity centering round the wife and mother, is one alternative that Miller

seems to suggest in the midst of a chaotic world. Linda who is wise, warm and sympathetic is the heart of the family. She knows her husband's faults and her sons' characters. For all her frank appraisals, she loves them. She holds the family together; she keeps the accounts, encourages her husband and tries to protect him from heart break. She becomes the personification of family so much of the goodness in Willy is demonstrated in his devotion to his wife. He adores her and refers to her as "my foundation and my support," (7). Linda also regards him as "the handsomest man in the world (23). She always tries to soothe his tense nerves. She asks him not to worry too much about Biff's career as sooner or later, "he will find his way," (7). She assures him of his sons' love for him. She acts as a cementing force in the family. Biff is attached to her, and Happy's hopelessness is most graphic in his failure to be honest when concerned about his family. The family's devotion to one another, even though misguided, represents a recognizable American ideal.

Linda is a devoted wife. She never spares her sons to make them realize the mistake of not taking the responsibility of the family off their father's shoulders. She cannot tolerate Biff's bitterness towards Willy and clearly tells him that if he doesn't have any feeling for him, he can not have any feeling for her son also. She tells Biff:

"... I love him. [With a threat, but only a threat, of tears] He's the dearest man in the world to me, and I won't have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue....Either he's your father and you pay him that respect, or else you're not to come here," (37).

Willy inspite of his faults is a loving husband and a caring father whose only concern is his sons' career. Linda understands this that whatever Willy does, he does for his family. She rebukes Biff, when he tells her that Willy has got no character, saying that,

“The man who never worked a day but for your benefit? ... Is this his reward to turn around at the age of sixty-three and find his sons, who he loved better than his life, one a philandering bum...?” (39) He puts his whole life into you and you've turned your backs on him. (P 41)

Later, she reprimands her sons for leaving Willy stranded in the restaurant, “You are a pair of animals! Not one, not another living soul would have had the cruelty to walk out on that man in restaurant,” (92).

Willy is also deeply concerned about his wife when he is fired from his job. He says to Biff and Happy, “...I'm looking for a little good news to tell your mother, because the woman has waited and the woman has suffered,” (78). She has, he feels, ‘suffered’ and ‘waited’, like Hickery's wife in O'Neil's *The Iceman Cometh*, for something good to happen. However his love for Linda stems from the fact that she never challenged his false persona. In fact, she does everything to promote his illusions. She blocks off criticism of Willy from any quarter. It is not for nothing that Happy, who has completely bought his father's dreams, wishes to have a wife like Linda, “Somebody with character, with resistance! Like Mom, y'know? ” (13), someone who will never confront him with the falsity of his dreams.

The most powerful positive value presented in the play is that of family loyalty. There is no doubt of Willy's love for his family, particularly for his son, Biff. It is the betrayal of this loyalty which ruins Willy's life rather than commercial failure and it is in the name of the family love that he finally kills himself. He dies "as a father not a salesman" (Corrigan 105) but perhaps because he romanticizes his own father whom he never knew. Willy has a false ideal of fatherhood, exposed most blatantly at the very moment when he decides to sacrifice himself for Biff. He says, "Ben, he'll worship me for it!" (Miller 101). His conviction that only by leaving Biff his insurance money, can he fulfill his paternal duty, is a distortion of the responsibilities he feels towards his son. Parental love which is really a disguised form of egotism is a recurrent theme in Miller's work, and the explanation he finds for it is revealed in Willy's reply when Charlie tells him to forget about Biff. Willy says, "Then what have I got to remember?" (28)

In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller presents "a conflict between the uncomprehending self and solid social or economic structure-the family, the community, the system" (Corrigan 3). Willy Loman loses the vital contact with the community as he tries to keep intact his proximity to his individual idealized constructions. He has internalized the illusion of success. The idea of a successful salesman is not only picked by Willy as his own ambition in life but also turned into a natural possibility for family. Deprived of love when young, offered only a model of acquisitive self-interest, he passes on the same destructive lesson to his sons. His sons are his only chance to succeed by proxy. The success of himself and his sons is what

he is concerned with. His family alone is important for him; he can not look beyond the dream structured around his family.

Willy ultimately fails to fulfill his dream. The Requiem clearly shows that he is not immortalized in death. His funeral is certainly not like the grand one he had imagined, and he still remains misunderstood by his family. But death does not defeat Willy Loman. The Requiem proves that his memory will continue to live on in those who truly mattered to him while he was alive. He might not have won their respect, but he is definitely loved-and perhaps that Willy ever really hoped to achieve. Miller says that what Willy wanted “was to excel, to win out over anonymity and meaninglessness, to love and be loved, and above all, perhaps, to count. (Miller, *Timebends* 184) After considering the importance of family values of Willy Loman, we are decidedly more inclined why his struggle and death make Miller’s drama a tragedy of lasting and universal significance.

To sum up we can say that Miller has regarded family as a ‘polis’, a unit of society. Family to him is not merely a means to depict the emotional bonds among the members of a family. He believes that one has to start from home and that home is the starting point for every individual. The play is thus structured in such a way to show the pleasure of the past, the dreams and hopes the characters have and how these aspirations have turned sour. Willy Loman built his life in such a way that he has finally trapped himself in an impossible situation. In this play we find that Willy believes to be the arch-stone of success. All the members of the family suffer due to his dreams and dreams and dreams. He has failed as a salesman and as father too.

Works Cited

Bigsby, C. W. E. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1984

Corrigan, Robert W., *Arthur Miller: A Collection of Critical Essays*;

Englewood Cliffs, N J: Prentice Hall. 1969.

Dogra, O. P. *Miller, Death of a Salesman, The Collapse of the Dream” Perspective on*

Arthur Miller ed. Atma Ram New Delhi Abhinav Publication 1988

Miller, Arther. *Death of a Salesman*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961.

Miller, Arthur. *Timebends: A Life*. New York: Grove. 1987.

Nelson, Benjamin. *Arthur Miller, Portrait of a Playwright*. London: Peter Owen,
1970.