CHAPTER III

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

When *All My Sons* catapulted Miller into fame, *Death of a Salesman*, his second important family play firmly entrenched him on the pedestal of success. Published in 1949 its original title was *The Inside of His Head* and fetched for Miller the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics Award, Antoinette Perry Award, Theatre Club Award to mention only a few. The play repeats the syndrome consisting of father, mother and two sons. Miller had by this time gained awareness of the true potential available in the exploration of human relationships within the family, and his constant forays into the field of playwriting lent him confidence in matters of technique. *Death of a Salesman* took up from where *All My Sons* left off. The latter had dealt with the subject of the human psyche in a realistic fashion, emphasizing the relation between individuals, particularly father and sons in the face of moral dilemmas and guilt consciences. Miller is a traditional figure. Thematically his plays observe a connection but their methods show a marked contrast. The method of *All My Sons* is linear, and predominantly Ibsenite, being a rare example of a dramatist discovering an existing form suitable to the realization of his own experience. The action begins after the War and works itself out along Ibsen’s retrospective method. However, the human image
explored is partial, with the War serving as the central pivotal motif which externalizes the intrinsic guilt of Joe Keller. Miller explains himself in his Introduction thus:

I think now that the straight-forwardness of the All My Sons form was in some part due to the relatively sharp definition of the social aspects of the problem it dealt with. It was conceived in wartime and begun in wartime; the spectacle of human sacrifice in contrast with aggrandisement is a sharp and heart-breaking one.¹

Death of a Salesman essentially continues the same human image that was etched out in All My Sons, but with a greater perceptiveness and fullness. Its realistic rootedness is as solid as in the previous play, but the quest for identity and self becomes more pronounced and complex. The emphasis now shifts from the external events to a probing into the psychological reality and the inner self of the individual, the parameters being social, emotional, economical, and egoistical, lending to the emergent human image greater comprehensiveness on the one hand and depth, profundity, and insight, on the other. The result is a multi-dimensional exposure of the real personality of the individual. The play under consideration enlarges the purview to include two other important aspects,- the American mythical context, and an inner probity added by the individual becoming a victim to this topical issue. The

¹ Miller, "Introduction," Collected Plays, p.22.
emotional demands that the protagonist makes over himself as a family man—father, husband, friend in addition to being an independent social and economic entity assume greater urgency and significance. Miller becomes more adventurous in this play, by experimenting with a pastiche of expressionism, dream technique, flashbacks, memory, symbolism, all contributing to the complexity of the structural fabric of the play. Structurally, therefore it is an achievement of remarkable originality. Although rooted in the Ibsenesque tradition of realism, with its typical pattern of presenting a gulf between aspiration and ability to achieve, the play extends the borders of realism without straining its credibility. It mirrors the dilemmas of a disoriented and imbalanced mind. Like the preceding play, Death of a Salesman also adheres to the belief, that the complete vision of an individual as a dramatic entity, can be achieved, by a comprehension of his past as well as his present. This constituted the process of revelation of events and moral consequences, caused by the manifest and the hidden. However, the need for exposure through innuendos, hints, allusions, and half veiled intimations, so patently used in the earlier play, is minimised as "everything is assumed proven to begin with." The process of revelation constitutes a mere recall of the already known. Though not explicitly brought out through the dramatic action the essential conflict is again between man and his conscience,
individual versus his dreams, the chasm between aspirations and ability to fulfil them, all of which become more poignant because of the twentieth century materialistic and commercial context.

In the "Introduction" to his Collected Plays Miller elucidates the genesis of Death of a Salesman thus:

The first image that occurred to me which was to result in Death of a Salesman was of an enormous face the height of the proscenium arch which would appear and then open up, and we would see the inside of a man's head...for th inside of his head is a mass of contradictions.  

Later in the same Introduction Miller recounts,

The play grew from simple images....It grew from images of futility...convoluted discus-ssions, wonderments, arguments, belittlements, encouragements, fiery resolutions, abdications, returns,partings... tremendous opportunities....The images of aging and so many of your friends already gone....The image of the son's hard, public eye upon you, no longer swept by your myth, no longer rousable from his separateness, no longer knowing you have lived for him and have wept for him....The image of people turning into strangers who only evaluate one another.

In an interview with Olga Carlisle and Rose Styron Miller remembers:

2. Ibid., p.23.
3. Ibid., p.29.
...the father was really a figure who incorporated both power and some kind of a moral law which he had either broken himself or fallen prey to. He figures as an immense shadow....The reason that I was able to write about the relationship...was because it had a mythical quality to me.... Willy is based on an individual whom I knew very little who was a salesman;.... He gave one of those impressions that is basic, evidently. When I thought of him, he would simply be a mute man: he said no more than two hundred words to me....Later on, I had another of that kind of contact, with a man whose fantasy was always overreaching his real outline. I've always been aware of that kind of an agony, of someone who has some driving, implacable wish in him which never goes away, which he can never block out. And it broods over him, it makes him happy sometimes or it makes him suicidal, but it never leaves him. Any hero whom we even begin to think of as tragic is obsessed, whether it's Lear or Hamlet or the women in the Greek plays.

Death of a Salesman originated in this fashion and its roots extended to a sketch entitled In Memorium which Miller wrote during the depression days, describing a salesman named Shoenzeit, who committed suicide by jumping in front of a subway train. The drama portrays the final days in the history of the protagonist’s tortured existence. Willy Loman is a sixty year old travelling salesman who covers the territory between Brooklyn and New England in the course of his business missions. When seen for the first

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time he appears mentally, physically and emotionally drained, almost at the end of his tethered life, seeking reassurances about his true identity from the tangible and intangible forces surrounding him. In the wake of these conflicts Willy emerges as an innately human figure pitted against these colossal forces. His combat strategy opposing the concentric patterns emerging from within and without, codify him as a heroic figure in human terms, despite the initial impression of disintegration.

Willy Loman’s house, a small dream like, fragile seeming place is hemmed in by a towering angular vault of apartment houses of all shapes, on all sides, with a sharp contrast in the light that falls on his house, which is blue tinted, and the angry orange glow on the surrounding area. Willy’s house appears like a dream arising out of reality emphasising the soullessness of society which is represented by the concrete jungle hedging Willy, depriving him both literally and figuratively of fresh air, light, and symbolic Life Force:

Willy: Why don’t you open a window in here, for God’s sake?

Linda: (with infinite patience) They’re all open, dear.

Willy: The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks. 5

He feels suffocated by the 'bricks and windows' and remembers with nostalgia the 'elms they planted, the lilacs, wisterias, peonies, daffodils, but now even the grass cannot grow.'

The carefully etched out setting is highly suggestive and anticipatory of the predicament of the protagonist. The sense of enclosure, of being trapped or constrained is akin to the one created by Ibsen in his *Brand* and *Little Eyolf*, where the fjord and the surrounding hills flanking the place of dramatic action, contribute to the building up of the tragic predicament of the human sufferers. Willy Loman, however, tries to diffuse the depressing and constricting reality by trying to be nostalgic about the past. He recollects the fragrance and beauty of the flowers in the past, which only serves to enhance the plight of Loman in the present day. As he enters, his wife calls out and he answers:

Willy: It's all right. I came back.
Linda: Why? What happened? Did something happen, Willy?
Willy: No, nothing happened.
Linda: You didn't smash the car, did you?
Willy: *(with casual irritation)* I said nothing happened. Didn't you hear me?
Linda: Don't you feel well?
Willy: I'm tired to the death. I couldn't make it. I just couldn't make it, Linda.⁶

The introductory image of Willy is one of fatigue, abjectness, irritability, and failure. Evidence is provided by two utterances in the above conversation: "Nothing happened" and "I just couldn't make it." The first refers to external forces, and the second one is a logical conclusion of Willy's own little personal failures, lack of effort, reticences, and probably a total breakdown of confidence. Tired and exhausted Willy fails to concentrate and the awareness of his failure makes him numb. At this point of time, in order to counter the miserable depression engulfing him, Loman takes recourse to dreaming, feeling the warm air soothing and bathing him:

Willy: (With wonder) I was driving along, you understand? And I was fine. I was even observing the scenery. You can imagine, me looking at scenery, on the road every week of my life. But it's so beautiful up there, Linda, the trees are so thick, and the sun is warm. I opened the windshield and just let the warm air bathe over me.⁷

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6. Ibid., p.131.
7. Ibid., p.132.
But the painful spectre of reality looms large in the background. This however does not prevent him from hoping and dreaming:

Willy: ....Tell you a secret, boys. Don’t breathe it to a soul. Someday I’ll have my own business, and I’ll never leave home any more.

Happy: Like Uncle Charley, heh?

Willy: Bigger than Uncle Charley! because Charley is not liked. He’s liked, but he’s not well liked. 8

All his life Willy has been on the road and he desperately wants to settle down, have roots like the plants he is so obsessed with. But the impossible becomes possible only if he manages to qualify for the category of "being liked". There are degrees of acceptance in Loman’s mind and "merely being liked" is not sufficient. Ideals such as Dave Singleman are "very well-liked" because a man, who has a well built personality like Adonis is the man who makes an appearance in the business world, and the man who creates personal interest is the man who gets ahead. Loman firmly believes in what he preaches. He has illusions that,

...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.... 9

8. Ibid., p.144.
9. Ibid., p.145.
and,

"Willy Loman is here!" that's all they have to know... 10

The inner core of Loman's theory of being well liked generates from the topical American myth of the Salesman. It is characteristically American in origin and development and is committed to the Horatio Alger ideal of the rags-to-riches romance and the Franklin image of the hard working, early rising ambitious adventurer. The successful man becomes an idol for the common people. The epitome of this cult in the play are Dave Singleman, Uncle Ben and Charley. Dave Singleman conforms to the myth of the successful salesman being respected, honoured, remembered, loved and helped by everybody. At the ripe old age of eighty-four he could pick up the phone and summon buyers without leaving his room. When he died hundreds of salesman and buyers were present at his funeral. Dave was one of Willy's ideals and he secretly and very humanly coveted his image and popularity because,

I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. 11

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10. Ibid., p.146.
But time and values have rapidly changed. The personality, respect, comradeship and gratitude which were an intrinsic part of the salesman cult have ceased to have any useful relevance:

Today, it’s all cut and dried, and there’s no chance for bringing friendship to bear- or personality.  

Willy’s second ideal is his brother Ben whose persona is an extension of the absent father figure in the life of Willy. The image of Ben created by Loman’s imagination is of a gentleman on the move:

Linda: Where’ve you been all these years? Willy’s often wondered why.
Willy: Where is Dad? Didn’t you follow him? How did you get started?
Ben: Well, I don’t know how much you remember.
Willy: Well, I was just a baby, of course, only three or four years old.
Ben: Three years and eleven months.
Willy: What a memory, Ben!
Ben: I have many enterprises, William, and I have never kept books.
Willy: I remember I was sitting under the wagon in- was it Nebraska?
Ben: It was South Dakota....
Willy: I remember you walking away down some open road.

12. Ibid.
Ben: I was going to find Father in Alaska.\textsuperscript{13}

He is a stolid, physically strong man in his sixties with an authoritative air, and is utterly certain of his destiny. To Willy’s disintegrating consciousness Ben symbolises a cold, righteous, ruthless, self assured deity, an absolute contrast to his own instabilities and insecurities. In all their confrontations Willy appears subservient, docile as a hero-worshipping child seeking advice and guidance from an archetypal figurehead:

Willy: No, Ben! Please tell about Dad. I want my boys to hear. I want them to know the kind of stock they spring from. All I remember is a man with a big beard, and I was in Mamma’s lap, sitting around a fire, and some kind of high music.\textsuperscript{14}

Ben represents the adventurous spirit of rough individualism with a surefire \textit{modus operandi} for gathering a "quick buck." Like his father who was a peddler and had abandoned him for wealth, when he was tiny Ben also took out on his own to make a fortune in Alaska. His magic formula was:

Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p.156.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 157.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
This chant is often repeated in Loman's mind. However Ben's philosophy has certain ramifications also:

Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way.  

The Ben figure possesses the vital secret to success. Willy's conscience rejects the archetypal mythical pattern of its image, preferring instead the Dale Carnegie formula of winning friends and influencing people as,

...it's not what you do, Ben. It's who you know and the smile on your face! It's contacts, Ben, contacts! The whole wealth of Alaska passes over the lunch table at the Commodore Hotel, and that's the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked.

Willy lives a life of delusion, believes in the cult of personality and desires to perpetuate it in his sons. As a consequence he indoctrinates the same values in his sons primarily the elder one, named Biff. The initial undercurrent of tension between Biff and Willy because he "had not found himself" dissolves in nothingness, as the image of the ideal reasserts itself and Willy counters his own argument with: Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world a young man with such-personal

16. Ibid., p.158.
17. Ibid., p.184.
and, 

I’ll have a nice talk with him. I’ll get him a job selling. He could be big in no time. My God! Remember how they used to follow him around in high school? When he smiled at one of them their faces lit up. When he walked down the street...

Biff is transformed from the lazy bum into a mythical charmer a la Dale Carnegie in his father’s mind, which revels in calling Bernard the earnest, loyal, worried, realistic friend of the past, and the successful lawyer of the present appearing before the Supreme Court, an "anemic" "a worm" "a weakling." With this stance of contempt acting as catharsis Willy exonerates Biff from offences of petty thieving, dismisses Bernard’s complaint that Biff is "stuck up" and has been debarred from the mathematics examination by the teacher. His mental image of the successful human being includes this and much more. In order to reassure himself on the manner in which he has brought up the boys he seeks approval from the Ben persona who seals the argument with,

...you’re being first-rate with your boys. Outstanding, manly chaps!

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18. Ibid., p.134.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p.159.
Subconsciously Willy is aware that Biff has all the weaknesses that he suffers from because "he talked too much" "cracked too many jokes" becoming a butt of ridicule:

Biff: He's not like this all the time, is he?
Linda: It's when you come home he's always the worst.
Biff: When I come home?
Linda: When you write you're coming, he's all smiles, and talks about the future, and- he's just wonderful. And then the closer you seem to come, the more shaky he gets, and then, by the time you get here, he's arguing, and he seems angry at you. I think it's just that may be he can't bring himself to- to open up to you.\[21]

He tries to instil in Biff the confidence he had lacked throughout his life, instructing him to be serious, maintain his self-respect, because of the belief that the employer was being conferred with a favour by him instead of the contrary:

Willy: ...Knock him dead, boy. What'd you want to tell me?
Biff: Just take it easy, Pop. Good night.
......
Willy: And don't undersell yourself. No less than fifteen thousand dollars.
Biff: Okay. Good night, Mom.

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Willy: Because you got a greatness in you, Biff, remember that. You got all kinds a greatness..."22

His advice to Biff is "to start big and you’ll end big," avoid childish mannerisms, not to be humble and modest, walk with confidence, not to look worried, start with a couple of interesting stories because "personality always wins the day" and "You guys together could absolutely lick the civilized world."

The truth of Willy’s situation is far removed. The remarkableness of his plight arises from the fact, that all his life he believed implicitly in these ideals and deluded both himself and his family into confirming their faith in them. The veracity of the issue lies in,

Willy: ....My God, if business don’t pick up I don’t know what I’m gonna do!

Linda: Well, next week you’ll do better.

Willy: Oh, I’ll knock ’em dead next week. I’ll go to Hartford.... You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don’t seem to take to me.

......

I know it when I walk in. They seem to laugh at me.23/

22. Ibid., p.170.

23. Ibid., p.148.
Loman’s confidence is at a low ebb. He is suffering from an identity crisis which causes his image to slowly shrink. Willy starts to undersell himself and desperately endeavours to search for self:

I’m not noticed...other men they do it easier.... I can’t stop myself...I talk too much...I joke too much! I’m fat, I’m very foolish to look at...they do laugh at me.... I know I’m not dressing to advantage.24

Willy Loman is part and parcel of a heavily advertised consumer society in which objects like the car, the refrigerator can be procured through instalments, houses are available on mortgages, life is insured and premiums to be paid for a lifetime:

Willy: What do we owe?
Linda: Well, on the first there’s sixteen dollars on the refrigerator_
Willy: Why sixteen?
Linda: Well, the fanbelt broke, so it was a dollar eighty.
Willy: But it’s brand new.
Linda: Well, the man said that’s the way it is. Till they work themselves in, y’know.
Willy: I hope we didn’t get stuck on that machine.
Linda: They got the biggest ads of any of them!

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24. Ibid., p.149.
Willy: I know, it’s a fine machine. What else?

Linda: Well, there’s nine-sixty for the washing machine. And for the vacuum cleaner there’s three and a half due on the fifteenth. Then the roof...25

It is his earnest and heartfelt desire to own something outright for "I’m always in a race with the junkyard." The house would really belong to the Lomans after twenty-five years of instalment payments and an additional burden of maintenance through cement, mortar and labour so that "there ain’t a crack to be found in it anymore." But there are many invisible cracks in the human framework that has laboured to keep up appearances. The yawning gap between appearance and illusion, either acquired as habit or self-imposed as an escape- is the archetypical tragic motif to be found in Ancient, Elizabethan and Modern tragedies.

The desires and aspirations of Loman outlined above sum up his personality. But when the play begins Miller emphasizes clearly that Willy has become aware of things having gone awry and haywire somewhere, and an intensely guilty conscience continues to probe into its reasons. His recurrent lapses into the past which is fairer

25. Ibid., p.148.
than the present provides evidence of it. Willy is so depressed and distraught that the boys begin to worry about his newly acquired habit of constant mumblings. They feel that something is happening to Willy and Miller's play is a slow, deep and clinical exploration into the psyche of Loman, presenting a coherent image of an individual who had spent a lifetime pursuing ambitions, aspirations and searching for his identity, which he defended and guarded through misrepresentations, lies and delusions. The discovery of failure finally catches up with him and he prefers to evade it by retreating into the past when his sons were young and hero-worshipped him, and he took pride in them. Images of the past and the present coalesce and the playwright unfolds the strains and tensions inside Loman's mind. Each time Willy tries to prove his loyalty to Linda a woman's mocking laughter punctuates the discourse. The episode of the stocking serves to dramatically represent Willy's trauma revealing one of the causes for the massive guilt complex he suffers from. This corrosion is recognised by Linda who observes:

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. I know he's not easy to get along with- nobody knows that better than me- but...

26. Ibid., p.162.
Later on in the same strain Linda continues:

I don’t say he’s a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He’s not the finest character ever lived. But he’s a human being and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person. and

The man is exhausted. . . . A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man.

Act II opens on a much rested Willy who had slept like a "dead one" hoping that Biff was heading for a change. He forgives his son’s non-success saying "there simply are certain men who take long to get solidified." Loman’s own attitude also indicates a change:

Willy: ...they’ll get married, and come for a weekend. I’d build a little guest house. ’Cause I got so many fine tools, all I’d need would be a little lumber and some peace of mind.

Linda: I sewed the lining....

Willy: I could build two guest houses, so they’d both come.

Already he dreams of the marriage of his sons, their home, children and peace. The lightness of his mood is indicated

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27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., pp.162-163.
29. Ibid., p.174.
by his constant references to seeds, plants implying new life, regeneration, rebirth but his hopes are thwarted by his interview with Howard Wagner. With every plea Willy’s stature shrinks further. Not wanting to anger his employer further he keeps pandering to his ego stalling for time, tentatively reminding Wagner about the reason for his visit. Despite his futile pleading "I’m just a little tired," Howard does not give a hearing even on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. Instead Loman is told to "quit". Willy beseeches in vain lowering his price underselling himself for a desk job. Howard is barely interested because "business is business" and Willy’s job has already been usurped by someone else. His plea,

You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away- a man is not a piece of fruit! 30

falls on deaf ears echoing hollow in his own ears. In his bluster Willy reverts to lies and falsehood regarding the commissions he earned, and Wagner advises him to swallow his pride and seek help from his sons, but for all his collapse Willy still possesses self-respect as "he’s not a cripple." This interview with Howard exhausts him and his vacant glance into space objectifies itself into a relapse into the past enquiring from brother Ben:

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30. Ibid., p.181.
...how did you do it? What is the answer?... nothing's working out. I don't know what to do.\textsuperscript{31}

However, the exercise provides cause for further disheartening because the image that crosses his mind's eye is Bernard's, and Willy realises how the present events have belied the past expectations. Bernard of the present is all Willy wanted his sons to be, prosperous, settled and married. In order to save face again he starts to delude his audience with "Oliver wants Biff badly, called him from west, long distance, cart blanche, special delivery." Willy very conscientiously maintains Biff's false image despite the awareness that Charley and Bernard could always penetrate the chink in the armour. Bewildered by the hollowness of his ideals, tenaciously adhering to them at his own expense Loman asks Bernard "What-what's the secret?" wondering why Biff "didn't ever catch on." The answer he gets is very truthful and the estimate is also exact. Patiently Bernard explains- "Biff didn't train himself for anything" and candidly enquires:

There's just one thing I've always wanted to ask you. When he was supposed to graduate, and the Maths teacher flunked him...all he had to do was to go to summer school and make up that subject.\textsuperscript{32}

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\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p.183.
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\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p.189.
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By stating the obvious Bernard touches a raw nerve in Willy's mental balance. It has been his guilty secret for fifteen years and, like Joe Keller before him, he had successfully evaded the issue. But with the best part of his life behind him, after being reduced to a diminutive shell of his former self, Willy wonders,

Bernard: Then why wouldn't he go?

Willy: Why? Why! Bernard, that question has been trailing me like a ghost for the last fifteen years. He flunked the subject, and laid down and died like a hammer hit him!

Bernard: Take it easy, kid.

Willy: Let me talk to you- I got nobody to talk to. Bernard, Bernard, was it my fault? Y'see? It keeps going around in my mind, maybe I did something to him. I got nothing to give to him.\(^3\)

Bernard asks and Willy knows as certain that he is the literal reason behind Biff's ruin, because he had tutored to him a wrong set of ideals and values, and more importantly failed him in the hour of need. Hence the question "What happened in Boston" looms like nemesis from the past needling him, preying upon his already crumbling defences and he looks at Bernard as at an intruder, an enemy:

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Bernard: I just bring it up because you asked me.

Willy: Nothing. What do you mean, "What happened?" What's that got to do with anything?

Bernard: Well, don't get sore.

Willy: What are you trying to do, blame it on me? If a boy lays down is that my fault?

Bernard: Now Willy, don't get_

Willy: Well don't- don't talk to me that way! What does that mean, "what happened."34

Loman's guilt ceases to be private because it extends to engulf his family and close circle of friends. He had always been uncomfortable with his elder son Biff, believing that he spoiled him, never suspecting that Bernard would also not be a stranger to the undercurrents peculiar to the Loman family. The facade of success which was an instrument to camouflage the guilt appears meaningless and unnecessary, and from deep out of Willy's subconscious the image of misdemeanour crystallizes itself in the sequence when Biff visited him in Boston. To the accompaniment of loud music and laughter the knocking reverberates through Willy's being totally laying bare his soul and conscience. The woman appears in a flashback:

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34. Ibid., p.190.
The woman: Aren’t you going to answer the door? He’ll wake the whole hotel.

Willy: I’m not expecting anybody.

....

The woman: Gee, you are self-centered! Why so sad? You are the saddest, self-centeredest soul....Aren’t you going to answer the door?

Willy: They’re knocking on the wrong door.

The woman: But I felt the knocking...

Willy: It’s a mistake.

The woman: Then tell him to go away!

Willy: There’s nobody there.

The woman: It’s getting on my nerves, Willy. There’s somebody standing out there and it’s getting on my nerves.35

Willy becomes nervous and high strung and his feeling of guilt gets pronounced, because he has let Biff down in his hour of need. When his son has sought help confessing "Dad I have let you down" he had total confidence in Willy’s ability to speak, convince and impress the maths teacher with the aura of his personality. Instead Biff stares open mouthed, horrified at the betrayal of his mother. So stupified is Biff that he remains motionless for sometime breaking down like a child, because in that one moment of realization Biff sees his father as a fallible human being

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35. Ibid., p.205.
capable of making mistakes. Willy is exasperated. He commands and comforts him but the only thing that Biff gives him is "Never mind," for God has forsaken the pedestal; he was a fake, phony and a liar and these words echo and haunt Willy Loman for fifteen long years. Nettled and peeved by the situation Willy threatens to beat his son, and the chasm between them keeps on enlarging, leaving Loman totally helpless in its wake.

Willy’s little world is threatened from all directions and his bafflement from its bewildering variety of forces, as well as his incapacity to handle the issues and compartmentalize them, almost alienates him from his immediate moorings. Being human he feels shackled by them. He exclaims, "I’m strapped." All his life he has been feeding his family with his inflated version of being successful, whereas in actuality he had been an ordinary commoner. Willy’s trauma originates from the fact that he could not come to terms with his own proletarian existence and banal capabilities and aspired for things beyond his reach. Eventually, with his mind being rendered a total blank, he is at a loss to fabricate further tales of false triumphs. He confesses,

The gist of it is that I haven’t got a story left in my head.36

36. Ibid., p.199.
In the face of such circumstances it is not surprising to see Willy Loman contemplating suicide, but the act would be misunderstood if its manifold reasons are left unexplored. The rubber tube discovered by Linda and later removed by Biff was the first pointer to such a possibility. "You end up worth more dead than alive."

Loman reverts to planting of seeds symbolically implying a desire to start afresh, all over again, but it is too late for stability and roots to appear as seeds take long to grip the soil and exhibit signs of new life. The enormity of his offence to his wife and sons demands atonement. Willy feels that he will be displaying more courage by committing suicide than spending a life of lies cowering like a coward behind his culpability and misconduct:

Does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up a zero.37

But like Thomas Beckett in Eliot’s Murder in The Cathedral, he too has to die for the right reasons. Loman’s death was prompted by an overpowering urge to measure up to his son’s standard of hero-worship:

...it changes all the aspects. Because he thinks I’m nothing, see, and so he spites me. But the funeral... that boy will be thunder

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37. Ibid., p.212.
struck, Ben, because he never realised- I am known! Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey_ I am known Ben, and he’ll see it with his eyes once and for all. He’ll see what I am, Ben! He’s in for a shock, that boy!38

Willy’s dreams are so much a part of his being that he still wants to prove something to Biff. The Ben persona that acts as his alter ego cautions him. "He’ll call you a coward," "He’ll hate you William." The confrontation between the father and son towards the end provides Willy with the final raison d’etre:

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

Willy: I’m 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.... I’m not bringing home any prizes any more, and you’re going to stop waiting for me to bring them home!

......

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.

......

Linda: Why is he crying?

Biff: Will you let me go, for Christ’s sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens.39

38. Ibid., p.213.
39. Ibid., p.217.
The emotional breakdown of Biff before Willy elevates, astonishes and chokes him with love, for Biff has once again turned to his father in a state of acute and utter helplessness. His son again needs him. The action completes its full circle providing Willy with a meaning not for life but for death. Ben's ambiguous interjection,

It does take a great kind of man to crack the jungle.\(^{40}\)

relentlessly pursues Willy's subconscious mind, with the unalterable choice he has to make between the personality cult and the rugged hardness of the promised diamonds, which can only be available if Willy too becomes coolly deterministic. Willy Loman does not die the death of a coward but of a man who has made a conscious, determined bid of his own volition to choose the path of self-immolation.

Like Eliot's Harry in *The Family Reunion*, he realises the need to act as a scapegoat for the redemption of both himself and his family. This motif of guilt and expiation lends universality to the apparently topical looking concern of the play.

Loman has managed to step out of the guilt ridden world through death, at the same time freeing Biff from the legacy of phony idealism, petty transgressions and guilt

\(^{40}\) Ibid., p.218.
conscience. With the realization that Biff loves him Loman too, is metaphorically freed from his bondage. Willy says wonderingly,

Loves me. Always loved me. Isn't that a remarkable thing? Ben, he'll worship me for it!  

His sacrificial death is the last gesture of an individual who has managed to discover himself, and perceive the reality which has hitherto been shrouded by his self-created illusion. He has become a new man. The finest requiem for Willy comes from his life-long friend Charley: "A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."  

The relationship between father and sons occupies a very special position in all of Miller's family dramas and the present play is one of its foremost examples, insofar as it localizes the problems of the salesman from his arena of American territory to the domain where he is lord and master and the people he interacted with become his close friends and immediate family circle, consisting of father, mother and two sons. The tension between Biff and his father highlights the innate and basic humanness of their

41. Ibid., p.219.
42. Ibid., p.222.
respective characters. At thirty four Biff Loman looks and feels lost because he has "still not found himself." He is moody, wears a fatigued, worn and jaded air seeming less self assured than his younger brother Happy. His father always feels the distance between them and senses an undercurrent of tension whenever they are together. Somewhere along the road right from youth he has also misplaced his confidence, humour and assurance. Though Biff feels and worries for his father, still he does not want to be blamed for his preoccupations:

Biff: Why does Dad mock me all the time?

Happy: He's not mocking you, he_

Biff: Everything I say there's a twist of mockery on his face. I can't get near him.

Happy: 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.

Biff: I noticed that this morning. But he always mumbled.

Happy: ... You know something? Most of the time he's talking to you.

Biff: What's he say about me?

......

Happy: I think the fact that you're not settled, that you're still kind of up in the air.

......
Biff: Never mind. Just don't lay it all to me.  

So confused is Biff that he "does not know what he’s supposed to want." Biff Loman has always reacted against the rigid, monotonous schedule of a regular job. He does not want to conform. Instead he wishes to go out, work on a farm in Texas and experience the cool, nippy spring air. He thus has an acute consciousness of having wasted his life.

Happy, his brother, feels that Biff is an idealist, a poet as well as a mixed, jumbled up kid. Though well liked he is not a success in business, but still desires to marry and settle down steady. The unhappy secret behind Biff’s lack of confidence is that he has seen through his father’s phony dreams and pleasant exterior and, being the eldest born can sense the resultant insecurities, and yet imbibes those dreams himself. Biff feels emotionally cornered because all his life he has existed on the tenets and values indoctrinated in him by his father:

Biff: (to Linda) Stop making excuses for him! He’s always, always wiped the floor with you. Never had an ounce of respect for you.

Happy: He’s always has respect for_

Biff: What the hell do you know about it?

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43. Ibid., pp.137-133.
Happy: Just don't call him crazy!

Biff: He’s got no character—Charley won’t do this. Not in his own house—spewing out that vomit from his mind.

Happy: Charley never had to cope with what he’s got to.

Biff: People are worse off than Willy Loman. Believe me, I’ve seen them!  

Though ineffectual against the emotional demands of his parents Biff still remains helplessly tied because he does not have the strength to strike out on his own. Biff’s problem is that he just "can't hold Mom, I can't take hold of some kind of life."

He too has a hankering to be well liked and strives his level best to adjust to his father’s demands, but is extremely sensitive and overprotective towards Linda, because he is aware of Willy’s disloyalty and unfaithfulness. Biff felt that his father had always "wiped the floor with Linda" and never had an ounce of respect for her. He, therefore, challenges Willy with "since when did you get so clean?"

Act III starts with hope for Biff who, it is informed, had not been beaten by the attitude of the maths

teacher and had decided to enrol. But to the amazement of his friends Biff disappears for a month and returns a bitter, disillusioned youth. Insecurity prompts him into cleptomania. Life has been very difficult for him because from its outset he had felt the burden of responsibility. Instead of leading the comfortable worry-free existence of an ordinary young man, Biff was enacting a role, the script of which was prepared by his father:

Bernard: ...Dad tells me Biff’s in town.

Willy: Yeah, Biff’s in. Working on a very big deal, Bernard.

Bernard: What’s Biff doing?

Willy: Well he’s been doing very big things in the West. But he decided to establish himself here. Very big.45

The personality cult, the salesman myth, and the Adonis figure, were fitted on Biff because Willy found himself lacking the essential requirements. He is not checked for petty thieving, not encouraged into serious study, being coached into a behaviour quite contrary to his own person. He cannot understand how and when he started to visualise himself as a salesman and discovered late that

45. Ibid., p.188.
they had lived all their lives in a "dream". Goaded by his misery and despondency he tries to protect Willy by the only values he has been nurtured on, and he defends himself also through the self same lies and deceit. Trying to extricate his family from its web, Biff says:

I'm going to tell you everything from first to last. It's been a strange day. and,
Let's hold onto the facts tonight, Pop. We're not going to get anywhere bullin' around.

On being interrogated by Willy he protests,

Dad, you're not letting me tell you what I want to tell you!

Biff's dilemma lies in his knowledge that he has to protect his father from his own self. Loathing and hating himself for deserting his father in the restaurant Biff realises that he cannot be the success that Willy demands of him:

Dad, you're never going to see what I am, so what's the use of arguing.

He pleads to Willy declaring,

We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house.

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46. Ibid., p.193.
47. Ibid., p.200.
49. Ibid., p.215.
The truth being,

...I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is!"50

Biff had been searching for his identity in vain and is near realizing it when he states "I'm a dime a dozen and so is Willy Loman." At the height of his fury he tries to convince Willy that he's nothing special "I'm just what I am that's all." After his fury is spent he breaks down beseeching his father to release him from the web of deceit and phony idealism. Willy's ultimate triumph rests in the fact that his fate is continued in Biff who has gained awareness of his identity. Biff is thus successful in gaining the knowledge that eluded Willy his whole life.

Linda Loman and Willy's brother Ben act as his alter egos, and the primary movement of the play is the shuttling of Willy between the two, one symbolising home and the other standing for the spirit of adventure. Linda more than loves her husband, she admires and worships him, sharing all his longings and dreams. Overprotective, caring, infinitely patient she handles Willy with great trepidation, providing him with requisite excuses, as she is not unaware of the lies that form the basis of Willy's existence. It is

50. Ibid.
Linda’s influence which manifests itself in the stable and secure aspect of the myth that encourages Willy to settle for a home and a steady job, rather than wander along with his big brother Ben. She fails to understand the reason behind her husband’s over-reaction towards Biff. All she knows is that "they are so hateful to each other." To Linda "Willy Loman is the dearest man in the world" and,

I won’t have anyone making him unwanted and low and blue. 51

because

Willy, darling, you’re the handsomest man in the world... To me you are. 52

Linda Loman is basically a realist and is never fooled by the pretense drama enacted by Willy each month. But she allows him his lie because she doesn't want to rob her husband of his dignity by showing awareness of his petty deception. She also realizes that Willy is obsessed with the idea of suicide but yet again cannot embarrass him by disclosing her knowledge of his schemes. Fully aware of the futility of the small lies and weaknesses Linda, unlike her sons, can comprehend Willy’s deceit, heartbreak and loneliness. The best form of appreciation for Linda comes from her younger son Happy: "they broke the mould when they made her."

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51. Ibid., p.162.
52. Ibid., p.149.
Linda has been throughout her married life the prop and support that Willy always needed. She knows the truth about him but continually helps to inflate Willy’s false image of himself. She comforts him with "You’ll do it yet dear" but cannot ignore the reality of the due premiums and reminds him of "grace periods." Her attitude to Willy is thus ambivalent despite the motivation which strongly moves her. She understands only those aspects of his character which are perceptible to her. Sensing the impending calamity Linda cautions Biff to be sweet to him for "he’s only a little boat looking for a harbor."

Love and loyalty apart, Linda’s problem was an incomprehensibility of Willy’s dreams. She recognises in him a hard working self-sacrificing provider but cannot interpret his aspirations and though her feelings for her husband numb her to an extent, so that she cannot cry at his grave, yet she fails to understand why at a time when they were "all clear" and "free" should Willy choose to die.

In *Death of a Salesman* Miller employs a variety of techniques to highlight and enhance the visual, psychological, emotional, and social picture of the human being in its totality and reveal an inner reality which makes the emerging human image universal. The salesman myth provides the outward trappings within which Miller places
his hero, encouraging him to respond to it as only a human being could. This myth provides the conceptual framework as well as the arbitrary forces that pressurize the lonely individual. Willy Loman is one such loner. He has "powerful ideals" and values which emerge from his inner psyche, over which he has no control. His commitment to them is so total and absolute that when faced with truth Willy is unable to admit that life was a failure. Caught between his commitment and awareness, Loman is emotionally torn apart. The constant shifts from deceptions, and lies to knowledge, from a feeling of guilt to cognizance, lends Loman his humanness and Miller’s recourse to flashback dream sequences, co-mingling of past and present lead to an explosion of time sequence. He appears suspended in a state of timelessness. Willy’s figure shrinks and his littleness gets enhanced when pitted against the inexorable, awesome concept of time. Though Loman loses in size but he gains in stature because of the unequal imbalance of the struggle, and his experience becomes the universal war between the individual and the superhuman, colossal forces of destruction surrounding him.

The central motif of Miller’s play is a search for identity and this quest is not limited to the protagonist but extends to the subsidiary characters of the play as well. However these subsidiary characters are mere
extensions of the protagonist, Biff and Happy being two aspects of his personality and Linda and Ben providing support as alter egos. Hence Willy’s image should not be seen in isolation but in its totality. Further, the central issue of guilt was again employed by Miller because it is a tried formula for soul searching, thereby aiding the playwright in his exploration of the individual’s psyche.

Thus, our analysis of Death of a Salesman outlined above, firmly establishes that man is essentially a trapped being, struggling, paradoxically, to extricate himself from this predicament as well as nourishing the very forces which cause this state of his human existence. The basic factor which causes this tragic predicament of man is at first his own creation in the form of dreams, aspirations and idealism. Eventually these dreams, aspirations and idealism acquire such destructive potential that they start functioning as impersonal and rather insurmountable forces which man- their creator- is required to confront with his inadequate ability. His eventual defeat becomes inevitable and projects him in the image of a man which has universal relevance.