CHAPTER II

DEATH OF A SALESMAN : THE INTERIOR LANDSCAPE
CHAPTER II

DEATH OF A SALESMAN: THE INTERIOR LANDSCAPE

The play, *Death of a Salesman*, thoroughly centred in the mainstream of American theatre, presents a critical outlook on contemporary American society. It employs a dramatic form more expressive than the realistic technique in which it is, however, rooted, succeeding as do some of the works of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams in evolving a poetic drama based on the mores, the language and the experience of American life. It shows the primary struggle of the American dramatists to present the common man as the focus of dramatic imagination.

The effectiveness of the play lies in the fact that instead of tending to be argumentative and hortatory, it becomes a distinct mode of social criticism in the hands of Arthur Miller by adopting the process of "inside looking out" rather than "outside looking in."\(^1\)

Miller's work demonstrates his concern for humanistic questions and his mastery of theatrical technique, and *Death of a Salesman* is hailed as "one of the finest dramas in the whole range of the American theatre." Death of a Salesman offers a compelling insight into the American success scene with its "concentrated expressions of aggression and pity."3

*Death of a Salesman* can be seen to belong to the line of dramatic writing beginning with Ibsen and moving on to Bernard Shaw, Galsworthy and Clifford Odets. Its theme is not new to the American stage, with Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*, George Kelly's *The Show-Off* and Clifford Odets' *Paradise Lost* being its antecedents. But *Death of a Salesman* states its theme with penetrating clarity in an era of complacency. Willy Loman, like Ibsen's John Gabriel Borkman, has been cast out of the mainstream. He is a small cog in a large machine drowned in desperation by impersonal events, like Elmer Rice's Mr. Zero. Again, as one of the oppressed, he has a kinship with Clifford Odets' Lefty. Some of the


critics have seen in Willy Loman, the protagonist, a modern everyman. Willy enables Miller to give an exposition of his social criticism. *Death of a Salesman* may lead us back to the medieval morality tradition in certain respects, but as Miller says "I didn't write *Death of a Salesman* to announce some new American man, or an old American man. Willy Loman is, I think, a person who embodies in himself some of the most terrible conflicts running through the streets of America today."

Willy Loman's fragile-looking home originally stood in a wooded suburb flanked by two great elms. It is now overshadowed by the concrete jungle. The towering apartment houses, like O'Neill's elms, are a visual equivalent to the terrible claustrophobia which is the play's theme. Willy Loman cannot even grow seed in his back garden. The choked seed appropriately symbolizes his condition in a society dominated by modern commercialism. The pressures of a

---


success-oriented society impose on the individual a sense of alienation and lostness. The house is as much a character in the play as the farmhouse had been in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*. The hard towers of the buildings casting their menacing shadows over the house indicate that modern mechanization and urbanization have crushed the common man's life and dream.

Death of a Salesman offers a contrastive picture of the salesman of the twentieth century and the salesman of the nineteenth. Ben, the brother of Willy, possesses all the nineteenth century middle class values. He belongs to an older, freer America where there was still an unexplored treasure of wealth. We can see hard, firm, self-reliant, self-confident nature, the virtues of the nineteenth century middle class, in the character of Ben. Ben tries to persuade Willy Loman that "the jungle" is the place for riches. The presentation of Ben reveals how Miller uses expressionism in Death of a Salesman. Ben is less real than the other characters of the play because he is not so much a person as the embodiment of Willy's desire for escape and success. Willy calls him "success incarnate." He represents a side of Willy's own mind.
Willy's brother Ben would seem to belong to the Spencerian or the social Darwinist school of success through strength. He explored the treasure with his adventurous strength, determination and firm aim. Long ago he set out for Alaska to find success; instead he found himself on the way to Africa, where he made his fortune in diamonds. Ben is the embodiment of the American will of success. Ben's words are something like a criticism of the meaningless busy life of modern America. "Get out of these cities, they're full of talk and time payments and courts of law. Screw on your fists and you can fight for a fortune up there." [6]

Put Willy himself subscribes to a later form of the dream which is the personality cult propounded by Dale Carnegie, the "win friends and influence people" theory which exploits human relations for purposes of gain. Advising his sons, he says, "Be liked and you will never want;" (p.146).

While Willy stresses the importance of personality, of being "well liked" and acceptable

to the world, of pleasing others, while insisting on proper form, dress, manner and style, Ben ignores all this. Ben is presented as "a satiric caricature of the old, independent entrepreneur." 7

Willy Loman is an outdated, redundant figure whose heroes are his brother Ben, who boasts "when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!" (pp. 159-160), and Dave Singleman, who at the age of eighty-four, operates from his hotel room. They are figures from the past. Willy's attempt to follow in their footsteps fails because he belongs to a world where product is preferred to personality. Willy is thus the victim of an illusive American dream. He places his trust in false values, which inevitably crumble, so that as Robert Hogan has said he is baffled by the failure of the dream:

Willy is the modern man who has accepted wholeheartedly the twentieth-century version of the American dream, and who then reacts like the psychologist's rat when it discovers that the

door to its particular dream has been inexplicably shut ... he has extolled the businessman's virtues; he has tried to be "well liked." For this he should have been rewarded, but no reward comes, and Willy is numbly baffled by the failure of the American dream.

The evil generated by the societal dreams is seen in every character, in Howard, who is insensitive to Willy's needs, and in Charley, who practises a stolid morality without preaching it. Willy worked for the firm for thirty-four years when Howard was young. But now Howard has no place for him. Willy's moving appeal that he should be given a place is not heeded by Howard as it is simply a matter of dollars and cents. "Kid, I can't take blood from a stone, I -" (p.181). The set in Howard's office culminates in Charley's. Charley will help Willy with a job or with money, but he will not instruct him. He expects Willy to make his own choice, as he did in the case of Bernard. He believes in the theory, "My salvation is that I never took any interest in anything" (p.191). The evil is thus seen as part

of the human condition. In his dreams and aspirations, in his hopes and despair, Willy Loman is intrinsically American. He is almost the personification of self-delusion, the apotheosis of the modern man in an age too vast, demanding and complex. In his love and aspirations for his children, he is also the archetypal father, not far removed in his hopes, mistakes, catastrophe and reconciliation from the most ludicrous and sublime of all archetypal parents, King Lear.

A grim ironic humour lies in Willy's self-contradictions, which resemble the Fool's repeated sallies about the topsy-turvy absurdity of Lear's having given the authority of the Kingship to his daughters. Through the rever- sions to the past of his distraught mind, he brings before us the sardonic contrast between his dream of what Biff was to be and what he has become. He has not yet recognised the folly of his criminal miseducation of his sons. Happy and Biff have always occupied exaggerated importance in the mind of Willy. Happy always thinks that he can outbox, outrun and outlift anyone in the store. "His overdeveloped sense of competition" leads him into many sexual adventures, false value, as the play depicts them. Biff's physical
prowess and personality rather than his hard work would fetch him success, as Willy Loman proudly assumes. Reliving the past, Willy Loman winks at Biff's theft of the football from the school, saying that the coach would probably congratulate him on his initiative if he knew it. Quite contrastingly, he wonders, "why is he stealing? What did I tell him? I never in my life told him anything but decent things." (p.152). He, who counsels his sons, "walk in very serious" ... start big and you'll end big." (p.168), and if anything falls off the desk ... don't you pick it up." (p.170), in Howard's office hands Howard the cigarette lighter from his desk and pleads for just a small salary. It is something akin to proud Lear's self-abasement in going from daughter to daughter, as each reduces the number of knights he may have.

In the golden mist of his grandiose dreams, Willy Loman overlooked his sons' weaknesses. He discovers his own responsibility in his sons' failure, and he ennobles himself towards the end of the play by a sort of expiation that death is. He sacrifices himself so that his son Biff may cash in on his personality: "Can you imagine that magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket?"
The transfigurational possibilities in the character of Willy Loman can be seen when we notice that he dies as father and not as a salesman. Thus Willy Loman's failure is not so much a failure to sell whatever it was that he was selling, but as a man in his relationship with his sons. It is finally a failure of love. Miller is thus tracing in *Death of a Salesman* the idea of a corrupt paternal morality.

In reality Willy is a tired drummer. His failure in achieving the salesman ideal forces him to live in dreams and illusions and makes him a liar. This is the influence of a society that considers success a requirement and failure a crime. "The pressures of economic growth in urban society created the salesman mystique and these same forces punish the unsuccessful inexorably."

Willy Loman's tragedy is one of the poignant and inevitable misfortunes of society. As Miller states, "Had Willy been unaware of his separation from values that endure he would have died contentedly while polishing his car.

probably on a Sunday afternoon with the ball game coming over the radio." His acceptance of the ideals derived from the society and his failure in realizing them drives him mad. The society which offered him the values punishes him when he cannot realize them.

Death of a Salesman is a challenge to the American dream, not to the historical American dream of a land of freedom and equality but to the American dream that has become distorted to the dream of business success. While in All My Sons the mode of exposition was linear or eventual with one fact or incident creating the necessity for the next, in Death of a Salesman, the concept is that nothing in life comes next. Things exist in a simultaneity and togetherness and at the same time within us. There is no past to be "brought forward" in a human being. He is his past every moment. The present is that which his past is capable of noticing and reacting to. In his desperate attempt to justify his life, Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between then and now. There are no flashbacks.

in *Death of a Salesman* but a mobile concurrency of the past and the present. In adopting this mode of exposition, Miller essentially affirms realism even while transcending it. *Death of a Salesman* thus explodes the watch and the calendar. The eye of the play revolves from within Willy's head, sweeping in all directions and covering time past and time present. Miller's belief seems to be that in order to know an individual as a dramatic entity, one must comprehend his past as well as his present. Thus in *Death of a Salesman* Miller avoids the scrupulous expository form of *All My Sons*. Rather than make an intricate verbal connection, Miller brings things together to Willy's mind thus replacing exposition by illustration accentuated by memory. Willy's life is presented not as a linear development but as a structure of complex interrelationships of past and present, illusion and reality. A Kaleidoscopic picture of character and event emerges from this mode of narration - which is akin to Ibsen's "retrospective method" - by means of which an explosive situation in the present is brought to a crisis in terms of what happened in the past.
In the play one instance of the past is Willy Loman's adultery which has destroyed the strongest value in his life. This revelation leads Biff to understand the illusive life of his father. He is no longer a salesman, nor father or husband. He is a "liar" and "phony little fake" and a "dime a dozen."

The set for the play designed by Jo Mielziner offers a successful mingling of realism and non-realism. "An air of dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality" (o.130). As Helene Wickham Koon points out, Miller's ability to reconcile these two normally antithetic types of expression into a coherent entity gives him the advantages of both. The scenes that take place in the present offer a realistic portrayal of Loman's life. The daily actions of mending stockings, or of washing the car are meticulously shown in the play. Interlocked with this realistic depiction is the tradition of the expressionist theatre. Though Miller does not write in the poetic vein of Maeterlinck and Strindberg, he suddenly shifts tone and distorts normal

---

time as they do. In the midst of an ordinary conversation Willy’s long dead brother Ben appears, and the tone shifts from Happy’s prosaic utterance, “I’m getting married, Pop, don’t forget it. I’m changing everything. I’m gonna run that department before the year is up,” (p.218), to Ben’s ominous words, “The jungle is dark but full of diamonds, Willy.” (p.218). The effectiveness of Death of a Salesman as a play depends upon such sudden shifts in time and place.

The skeletal framework of the house gives it a sense of fragility which is intensified by surrounding it with menacingly tall apartment houses producing a claustrophobic effect. It is as though rural woold is feels the menacing presence of the asphalt jungle. The set is expressionalistically lit in order to reinforce the suggestion of “an air of dream” rising out of reality. Whenever Willy remembers the past, the stage is drenched in green, in a pattern of leaves. The tree references in the play symbolise the rural way of life which modern commercialism is choking. The original wooded suburb of Willy’s house was flanked by two elms. The image of the choked seed is symbolic of the entrapment which Willy Loman has suffered. The very fragility
of the house seems to indicate how fragile the dividing line is between past and present. By means of a productive tension between the past and the present which is at the heart of the construction of the play, and by insolubly linking the final days of Willy's life with the years that have shaped them, *Death of a Salesman* achieves a remarkable dramatic cohesiveness.

The simultaneous presentation of past and present, dream and reality, makes a double exposure possible in *Death of a Salesman*. We can notice this, for example, in the memory scenes which appear gradually usurping the present. In the card game with Charley, Willy talks to the remembered Ben and the actual Charley simultaneously. Willy's mobile concurrency of the past and the present defines two crucial facets about his life. The first one involves his brother Ben before whom he is an adoring, fearful, supplicating child seeking guidance. Guidance is also the keynote of a second set of flashbacks in which Willy dispenses advice to his sons. This advice relates to Willy's ecstatic belief in the ideal concerning the deceptive and demanding deity called success. Both these sets of flashbacks culminate in Willy's infidelity, an infidelity which
is a symbol of his degradation and which marks the traumatic destruction of Biff. Ultimately each event from the life of Willy Loman makes the point that his life is caught in an unresolvable dichotomy between fact and fancy.

The play depicts Willy Loman’s isolation graphically and presents him, even in the midst of his family, as a solitary figure increasingly lost in memories and dreams. In the scene where Willy talks to the remembered Ben and the actual Charley simultaneously, Willy is shown as having been caught between two cultures: the banished agrarian frontier that he associates with the melodies of the flute of his father and the modern urban society as represented by the tape-recorder civilization of Howard. While the play is dotted with references to the natural world and fluted melodies, it also abounds in references to products, monetary figures, mortgages and finally the insurance policy. While Willy Loman equates success with universal adoration, Linda equates it with material well-being. To a great extent, Linda’s mistakes with her husband and sons are the consequence of her longing for security, a hardly reprehensible desire. For Linda this desire has become as encompassing and intense as Willy’s mystical dreams of conquering the world. Her reaction, when Willy is about to be carried
away by the Ben motif is noticed here:

Linda: You're well liked, and the boys love you, and someday— (to Ben)— why, old man Wagner told him just the other day that if he keeps it up he'll be a member of the firm, didn't he, Willy? (p.183)

Linda says so not because she believes in the illusive schemes of Willy, but because of her concern for her family and her husband. She knows "Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived." (p.162), "For five weeks he's been on straight commission, like a beginner, an unknown!" (p.163)

Thus even while noting Willy's lifelong exertions to keep his family going, Linda can still label him as the trail blazer who opened unheard of territories for his firm. She never quite comprehends the dreams of her husband, although she defended them, and occasionally she too was swept off by them. Linda's portrayal seems to indicate that her devotion and loyalty to Willy are slightly over-emphasised and over-articulated. But in the "Requiem" it is to Linda's emotions that the audience respond, though
there is diversity of characteristic reactions to the situations presented in the form of Biff's talking about an individual, Happy's striking an attitude, and Charley's extemporizing on an idea. The fact may be that the audience, in their instinctive expectation of a summing up, fasten themselves on to the dominant note, which is Linda's grief and identify themselves with it. In a moment of self-criticism, Miller confessed, "My weakness is that I can create pathos at will. It is one of the easiest things to do." 

But one of the strengths of *Death of a Salesman* is its refusal to put the blame exclusively on a person or an institution or the society at large.

Although Willy Loman's destruction is partly the fault of his family and the failure of certain values propounded by the society, it is no less his own doing. Nevertheless the charge of polemicism has been levelled against the play by critics who assumed that the play is a dramatization of a socio-political philosophy. The scene where

---


Willy Loman is dismissed by Howard is often regarded as one which can be traced to "party-line literature" of the thirties. But the scene, providing the tape recorder as its key image, can be seen as Miller's comment on a society in which man's involvement with the machine has replaced his responsibility to his fellowmen. Miller has insisted that *Death of a Salesman* is neither a left-wing diatribe against American capitalism nor an implicit approval of the capitalist system. He has carefully stressed the point that the society ought not to contribute to the stultification of the individual. At the same time the individual also ought not to prove a threat to society in which he lives. In the scene with Howard where Willy is brutally turned out of employment, there is a blend of pathos and irony in it rather than indignation and indictment. Willy, who had just advised his son to put on a bold front in order to impress a prospective employer, finds here age giving way remorselessly before youth. Indeed, the inevitability of Willy's dismissal, rather than its brutality, is the keynote of the entire episode. What is for the insensitive and the self-absorbed Howard little more
than an embarrassing predicament is for Willy nothing less than a life and death issue.

The tape recorder also provides a means of dramatising Howard’s ingenuous pride in his children which prompts him to give a deaf ear to the constant appeals of Willy. In this respect Howard resembles Willy whose pride in his sons has blinded him to any recognition of the worth of Bernard. Howard’s question, “Why don’t your sons give you a hand?” (p. 182) emphasises this particular point. Howard’s preoccupation with the tape recorder can be viewed as Miller’s bitter commentary on a society where mechanisation serves as both the cause and the illustration of mental and moral breakdown as seen in the case of Willy whose growing isolation the play graphically depicts. Even in the midst of his family, Willy is a solitary figure increasingly lost in memories and dreams.

Eric Bentley in his In Search of Theatre complains about what he perceived to be the conflicting points of view presented in Death of a Salesman. As tragedy, he declares that the play is weakened by its social consciousness, and as social drama it is affected by its aspira-
tion to tragedy. Consequently the play appears to be a peculiar, unsuccessful hybrid:

The "tragedy" destroys the social drama; the social drama keeps the "tragedy" from having a genuinely tragic stature. By this last remark I mean that the theme of this social drama, as of most others, is the little man as victim. The theme arouses pity but no terror. Man is here too little and too passive to play the tragic hero.14

For many, Death of a Salesman is simply not a tragedy at all because its hero Willy Loman is rather commonplace, and the play's atmosphere dependent upon the delusions and weaknesses of an American materialistic society. The problems raised by the play seem to be too ignoble to arouse catharsis.

Miller does not approve of the tradition of tragedy in the modern time being measured by "Greeko-Elizabethan paragraphs." He further rejects the notion that the common world is below tragedy. Death of a Salesman represents a different kind of tragedy in which the universality of the

14 Eric Bentley, In Search of Theater (New York, Knopf, 1957), p. 82.
catharsis is testified to when the play-goer finds Willy in himself. Thus a cathartic effect is achieved. There is, in Willy Loman's decision to die a burst of heroic determination in defeat which perhaps constitutes the essence of an austere tragedy. The 'Requiem,' which dramatizes the disparate funerals of the play's two salesmen, the last scene of the play, parallels the choric theme. Willy's influence, so tragic in life is effected properly only in death. Willy discovers his responsibility in his son's failure and he ennobles himself by a sort of expiation that death is. He dies as father and not as salesman. In life Willy taught Biff lessons of fraudulence; in death, he teaches the lesson of truth. Linda, when she says to her sons,

he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" (p.162)

is actually demanding sympathetic understanding for Willy. She is in fact admonishing the audience that Willy is a human being.

It is from this human and social centre, which intertwines the personal and the sociological, that the
play *Death of a Salesman* stems. As Raymond Williams has pointed out:

The key to social realism, in these terms, lies in a particular conception of the relationship of the individual to society, in which neither is the individual seen as a unit nor the society as an aggregate, but both are seen as belonging to a continuous and in real terms inseparable process.\(^1\)

From the point of view of Raymond Williams, Miller's work comes nearer this conception of the relation between the individual and the society than the work of many post-war writers with some exceptions like Albert Camus. Miller, in *Death of a Salesman*, dramatizes such contemporary social themes as the social accountability of business, the success ethic and its manifestations and so on. By depicting the inside of Willy Loman's head and by showing a mass of contradictions there, Miller is revealing man in his social relations as a whole. He works out a constant parallelism and contrast which is integral to the structure of the play. The play presents a critical analysis of the social system by means of the tale of a dispossessed and defeated commoner told in terms of a fusion of the Expressionistic and realistic styles of dramatic narration.