Chapter Three

Death of a Salesman: Conflict Between Dream and Reality

In an interview with Philip Gelb, Miller once claimed that his sense of form comes from a positive need to organize life and not from a desire to demonstrate the inevitability of defeat and death. We are doomed to live, and one had better make the best of it. It is a basic commitment for Miller as he does not see the point in proving that we must be defeated. He is trying in _Death of a Salesman_, in this respect, to set forth what happens when a man does not have grip on the forces of life and has no sense of values which will lead him to that kind of grip, but the implication is that there must be such a grasp of those forces, or else we are doomed.

With the success of _All My Sons_, Miller wrote in introduction to _Collected Plays_, “It suddenly seemed that the audience was a mass of blood relations and I sensed warmth in the world that was not there before.” (22) He attributed the success of the play to the power to transform a relatively impersonal social world into a home that offered familial warmth.

His next play, _Death of a Salesman_, however, dramatized a man’s inability to achieve this transformation. Hence there happens a conflict between dream and reality. This conflict is intensified further because of the ever
widening gap between the rich and the poor in the harsh socio-economic structure, thereby evolving the issues of class and never vociferous gender in the play.

About the origin of the play, Miller writes in *Collected Plays*:

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. (23)

In fact, *The Inside of His Head* was the first title, for the inside of the protagonist’s head was a mass of contradictions. About its montage-like technique, Miller says that nothing in life comes “next” but that everything exists together and at the same time within us; there is no past to be “brought forward” in a human being, but that he is at his past moment and that the present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to. Willy in his desperation to justify his life has destroyed the boundaries between now and then.

The stage directions function in an important way in delineating the spatial and physical machinery of the play. An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality. No solid walls separate the rooms or characters. As Miller writes in *Collected plays*:

in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping ‘through’ a
The play grew from simple images. From a little frame house on a street, which had once been loud with the noise of growing boys, and then was empty and silent and finally occupied by strangers. In Willy’s daydreams about past, Lomans’ neighbourhood was filled with grass, trees, and freshly painted cars, homes, and soaring hopes. It was a time when Linda smiled easily.

The light and sound effects too portray many of the play’s deeper ambiguities and conflicts. Interestingly, Tennessee Williams, not Ibsen or Shaw, inspired Miller as far as technique of this play is concerned. After watching *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Miller was enthused to work more precisely with the language as he later wrote in *Timebends: A Life* that it was a play that didn’t deal so much with “the story or characters or direction, but [with] words and their liberation...the radiant eloquence of its composition moved me more than all its pathos.” (182)

About the protagonist of *Death of a Salesman*, Miller clarifies that he is a man whose fantasy is always overreaching his real outline. He has 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.
Like any other play, a clash between pastoral and commercial is starkly visible in this play. Willy laments:

There’s not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood. The grass don’t grow anymore, you can’t raise a carrot in the back yard. (134-35)

He feels suffocated in the small room and yells at his wife,

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

(134)

And wife replies with infinite patience,

They’re all open, dear.

(134)

Willy grumbles again:

The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows,

Windows and bricks. (134)

From an ecological point of view, Willy’s raving about overpopulation, builders massacring elms to construct apartment complexes, and his discomfort in the small home, resonate for twenty-first century audiences in London, Beijing, and any major city in the world. His longing for pastoral landscapes and suffocation reflects the uneasiness of the rural class which is attracted towards cities, overlooking its moorings in working with soil in company of Nature.
Willy loves to work with cement and wood but takes to salesmanship which is not his heart’s calling anyway. Biff desires to work on ranches but father would not allow him for the same:

Is that a life? A farmhand? (134)

Hence the circle of frustrations gets revolving for the family. In one way or another, different classes of people apparently feel that they’re in the play. Willy knows that America is not a country where all people have equal power. This self knowledge gets bestowed upon him within the marketplace, as evident during the scene in Howard’s office:

I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and I can’t pay my insurance! You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away - a man is not a piece of fruit! (181)

American capitalism which is class based, is divided into higher, middle and lower classes and Willy Loman comes in the lower middle class. But his aspirations are embedded in high class spurred by capitalism where one wishes to own every consumer item mortgaging a substantial number of years of one’s life. He asks the grown Bernard for advice who has no great mantra for success to offer.

Willy talks of Ben who went to the jungle and came out a rich man. These false notions make him feel temporary about himself. Those who become rich exploiting the system may have some drive, but one can’t make so much
money through honest means. The labour class doesn’t make enough money. Loman is working in a system where he has no surplus money and those who have no surplus money, and cannot take to wrong means, would not be successful.

Bernard tells Willy that sometimes it’s better for a man just to walk away. But Willy is not able to do so for he has got to add up to something. The sky is the limit, and one must go in to fetch a diamond out – such like clichés escape his lips. Linda cries to him – Why must everybody conquer the world? (183)

And the baffled husband replies - Does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up a zero? (212)

What he does not understand is that

All Americans cannot and do not succeed, that men do sometimes cry that having sons is no guarantee of masculinity or success.

(Oberg 309)

Although Willy repeats that “The woods are burning,” (CP 152) he refuses to locate what he only vaguely feels and knows. Biff perhaps knows the truth as he says – “We don’t belong to this nut-house of a city; we should be mixing cement on some open plain, or carpenters. A carpenter is allowed to whistle!” (134) Willy is not able to understand his son’s uneasiness:

In the greatest country in the world, a young man with such-personal attractiveness gets lost. And such a hard worker.

There’s one thing about Biff that he’s not lazy.

(CP 134)
And the next moment, he shouts at the boy – “Biff is a lazy bum!” (134) He is at a loss to know why he’s always contradicted? In fact the problem with him is that he is not ready to settle for the half and this results in contradiction in his behaviour. At one moment, his advice to Biff is:

Be quiet, fine, and serious. Everybody likes a kidder, but nobody lends him money. (168)

But a little later -“Walk in with a big laugh. Don’t look worried. Start off with a couple of your good stories to liven up.” (169) His son, however, is more realistic and knows what he wants in life. For him, there is nothing more inspiring or beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt. He frankly admits:

It is a measly manner of existence. To get on that subway on the hot mornings in summer. To devote your whole life to keeping stock, or making phone calls, or selling or buying. . . . And always to have to get ahead of the next fella.

(138)

He believes that he can achieve some respectable position by following his heart’s avocation. But Willy wants to absorb him in a business -oriented culture. At all costs , Willy must leave his thumbprint on the world. He must constantly name and re -name himself. Forever doomed to linger in the margins, Willy locates his essential self within the epicenter of the business world:

I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own. (145)
Willy is living in his own dream world but is trying to survive in a new one – a clash of dreams with reality. Bred on the old world values, he is not able to accept new business values. He yells at his sons in the restaurant:

I’m not interested in stories about the past or any crap of that kind because the woods are burning, boys, you understand? There’s a big blaze going on all around. I was fired today.

(199)

Unable to accomplish anything, he perceives his life as an empty, infertile waste: “Nothing’s planted. I don’t have a thing in the ground.”

(209)

He is ready to ignore the difference between criminality and initiative, encouraging his sons to steal: “Coach will probably congratulate you on your initiative.” (144) He takes pride in his sons’ fearlessness when they steal from a nearby building – “You shoulda seen the lumber they brought home last week. At least a dozen six-by-tens worth all kinds a money.” (158) Charley warns him – “Willy, the jails are full of fearless characters.” (158)

However, Willy boasts that he taught his sons nothing but decent things. (199) Gradually, his pride descends to arrogance and from arrogance to ignorance, an ignorance fostered by a competitive American business work ethic.

The play exposes the inadequacies of bourgeois America. It becomes a critique of a capitalist society that brutalizes the unsuccessful. And Willy
completes the brutalization process by reducing himself to a commodity, an object, a thing, which enables him to make the greatest and last sale of his entire professional life; the sale of his very existence for the insurance money. Charley romanticizes his calling at his funeral:

Nobody dast blame this man. . . . He’s a man out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. . . . A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory. (222)

In an interview with *The New York Times*, Miller once claimed that the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity. This is why Linda, sobbing quietly as the curtain falls, “can only contemplate what could, or should have been.” (Bigsby, 81)

Denying subjectivity in the presentation of father-son relationship, Miller, however, accepts the primitive notion that father was really a figure who “incorporated both power and some kind of a moral law which he had either broken himself or had fallen prey to.” (*TE* 268)

Willy’s schizophrenia is intensified when the failed son accuses father for his failure:

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!” (*CP* 216)
The son tries to convince his father that there’s no shame in being a mediocre but the father outbursts:

I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman! (217)

In writing this play, Miller tells us in the Introduction to his *Collected Plays*, he made the assumption that everyone knew Willy Loman and we do. The adulterous father. The marginalized mother. The wayward children. A family’s battle to pay bills. Unemployment. The child’s quest. Spite. Loss. Felt but unexpressed love. Guilt and shame. Self-reliance. Theatergoers see themselves, their parents, or their children in the play. As one of his audience once remarked about it: I always said that New England territory was no damned good.

For this anonymous theatre-goer, the source of Willy’s trouble was not his false ideals and lack of self knowledge, but the sales resistant New England territory. The play offers a critique of the industrialized society.

What Miller wants to depict, in this most successful play with a so called unheroic hero, is that society has always been like that more or less. It is upon us rather how we take a course of action in this materialistic hodgepodge to find “the safety, the surroundings of love, the ease of soul, the sense of identity and honour which, evidently, all men have connected in their memories with the idea of family” (*TE* 73)
Willy’s problem is the problem of the salesman, the man who lives out there in the blue, on a smile and a shoeshine. And this is the problem of every American or rather of every man, who has followed the American dream of success to the end of the rainbow - the same American dream which the rest of the world mimics - and Willy’s downfall derives both from his personal failure in relation to his values and from the failure of the values themselves.

Willy, Howard and Howard’s father evolve generation gaps and with these comes a change in values also.

Willy’s only hubris is the belief in the propaganda of a success-oriented society. The promises he makes to himself, to Linda, his wife and to Biff and Happy, his sons are equally hollow. Nothing is more important to him than his family and his main idea in bringing up his sons is to teach them to cash in on their personal attractiveness – Be well-liked and you’ll never want —to equip them, in effect, for successful career in selling.

Living in an atmosphere of sales-talk, and making his livelihood out of sales-talk, he can no longer think in any other terms. And the crisis sharpens when he begins to tell lies even to his wife and sons claiming that he is making thousands in business.

Very beautifully Miller asserts that the play grew “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.” (CP 29)
Thus the image of ferocity when love has turned to something else and yet is there somewhere in the room if one could find it. Willy turns his sons into strangers who only evaluate him in return. As Miller says:

I sought the relatedness of all things by isolating their unrelatedness, a man superbly alone with his sense of not having touched, and finally knowing in his last extremity that the love which had always been in the room unlocated was now found.

(TE 142)

Living in capitalist system, Willy does not challenge it on economic and political ground which means Miller himself does not want to offer a political analysis of capitalism. He describes only common man’s discomfiture. Willy commits suicide, showing no awareness for politico-economic conditions of the contemporary times. No development of his mind is shown on this ground.

Shakespeare mentions these details in his plays even four hundred years ago. For example in Pericles, he asserts using the analogy of fish and water that the bigger ones eat the smaller ones. Miller’s lacking in these observations makes Willy’s reading only emotional. He is not able to adjust in new environment of business world where money alone is the value, leaving space for no other value.

Arthur Miller said in an interview “the trouble with Willy Loman is that he has tremendously powerful ideas.” (TE 98) Had he been aware of the hollowness of his life in the modern industrialized system, he would have died contentedly polishing his car on some Sunday afternoon at a ripe old age. One
may ask – How does Charley get his way? How does he manage to be so decent and so happy belonging to the same class, same neighbourhood and the same background?

Apparently people like Charley belong to a class who do it by following the natural bent of their virtue, by not listening to the voices of greed, selfishness, and of private ambition. They are plain, honest, hard working and kind. Charley’s son gets success without any pushing from his father. When necessary, they break the rules to do good. They seem to propound the theory of ‘survival of the nicest.’

Bernard helps Willy’s son Biff to cheat in his exams. As he later admitted to Willy that he loved Biff, although Biff always took advantage of him. Charley also helps Willy financially. The purity of these good deeds is further indicated by Willy’s failure ever to say even a moderately friendly word to Charley.

He rather takes pride in calling Bernard ‘anemic’ who is liked but not well-liked. He believes in Dale Carnegie’s philosophy that success is the reward of making friends, being confident and impressive. B. F. Goodrich, Edison and Red Grange are his heroes. Ben tells him -

Why, boys, when I was seventeen, I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. He laughs. And, by God, I was rich. (CP 157)

Ben represents a class which gets respect by the command of his wealth, power, and mobility. In fact he needed neither the human warmth of the family
nor society’s positive response. His sphere of action related to things rather than people. Ronald Hayman writes:

Miller is not content to present Willy as a passive victim of society: he is given a choice (as Ben offers him an open – air job in Alaska ) and Willy opts to stay where he is. (34)

Miller’s heroes stand much above the other people. Irving Jacobson puts it rightly:

For Loman these figures exist less as individuals with actual characters, talents and problems than as mythological projections of his own needs and his society’s values. (251)

What’s driving Willy nuts is that he’s trying to establish a connection with the world of power; he is trying to say that if you behave in a certain way, you’ll end up in the catbird seat. That’s your connection: then life is no longer dangerous.

Though Willy tells Biff that “The world is an oyster, but you don’t crack it open on a mattress!” (152) he himself doesn’t understand its implications. He never taught his sons to work hard, to strive for something purposeful, and to succeed in the world with honest means. Bernard tells Willy in no uncertain terms that he did not train his sons for anything.

In fact, we have two viewpoints in the play. One is Willy’s viewpoint towards the world. And the other is that of Biff. And the point to see is who
would wield power, therein lies the beauty of the play.

This play raises interesting questions about success in mind whether this push towards personal success dominates our life more now than it used to be. One may add that it is closer to a greater madness today and there’s no perspective on it at all.

The girl Maggie cast after Marilyn Monroe in *After the Fall* is a symbol of that obsession. She is consumed by what she does. In other words, success, instead of giving freedom of choice, becomes a way of life. We are ranking everybody every minute of the day.

As a thing in itself, success is self-satirizing; it is self-elucidating in a way. Because the very people, who are being swallowed up by this ethos, nod in agreement, when one tells them, “You are being swallowed up by this thing.” To really wrench them and find them another feasible perspective is, therefore, extremely difficult.

As Happy complains of the meaningless of his life:

Sometimes I sit in my apartment – all alone. And I think of the the rent I’m paying. And it’s crazy. But then, it’s what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddamit, I’m lonely. (139)

This reminds one of T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* like situation where a lady, despite all her riches, is a victim of neurosis:
What shall we do tomorrow?
What shall we ever do?

For Miller, it matters not at all whether a modern play concerns itself
with a grocer or a president, whether the hero’s fall is because of his pride or the
unseen forces of nature. According to him the lasting appeal of tragedy is due to
our need to face the fact of death in order to strengthen ourselves for life.

Miller says in an interview that art is uncompromising and life is full of
compromises. To bring them together is a near impossibility, and that is what he
is trying to do:

I was trying to make it as much like life as it could possibly be
and as excruciating – so the relief that we want would not be
not be there: I denied the audience the relief.

(TE 287)

With great conviction, he believes in the role of a great writer who is
the destroyer of the inner chaos as he avers in “The Shadows of the Gods” that
he is “a man privy to the council of the hidden gods who administer the hidden
laws that bind us all and destroy us if we do not know them.” (TE 180)

The dramatist also asserts that one is not at the mercy of social pressures
only as Shaw or Ibsen has shown in their plays. There is a general discontent in
all the classes of people with the endless frustration of life. At bottom every one
of us is a victim of the misplacement of aims. The discipline required by
machines is the same everywhere and will not be truly mitigated by the old age
pensions and social security payments. So long as modern man conceives himself as valuable only because he fits into some niche in the machine-tending pattern, he will never know anything more than a pathetic doom.

Drama is pre-eminently a public art which prospers when evolution of society has reached a certain point. Miller believes that *Oedipus* is not only about the death of a father and mother. His disaster comes because there is blight on his city which is killing people. As Miller asserts in an interview, “It’s not a soap opera about incest; it’s a tragedy about the fate of a community. Hamlet is not just the son of a mother who is fooling around with a man who has murdered her husband. He’s the prince of Denmark, and when it is said, ‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,’ it’s to direct attention to the fact that this country has to be governed.” (Kullman 76)

Similarly The Salesman is close to being the universal occupation of contemporary society – not only in America, but everywhere. Everybody is selling and everything is for sale. Even the relationships come in this category. Hence the doubletalk of Willy to his wife and sons. Only the law of success governs the society.

From the gender point of view, the play presents a grammar of space that marginalizes Linda Loman and, by extension; all women are banished to the periphery of a patriarchal world. For many feminist critics, it stages “a nostalgic view of the plot of the universalised masculine protagonist of the poetics.”

(Bigsby 1997, 61)
As his play offers a critique of the commercialised society, Miller shows sensitivity to class question but the play gives no evidence to his sensitivity to gender as much. Miller witnessed the suppression of his own mother in her married life as in *Timebends: A Life*, he wrote about his mother, Augusta Miller that she was a cultured woman who played piano, sang, and read extensively. He deplored the fact that she was married off by her parents before she could attend college. A woman of fine tastes married to an illiterate businessman, whose duty was to please her relations at her own cost – this dichotomy of a woman’s life was internalized by the playwright.

A female character Rose in his play *The American Clock* rues - They treat a woman like a cow, fill her up with a baby and lock her in for the rest of her life. In his plays under study, woman is not empowered, although she gives the family enough strength to endure in crisis. Linda regards Willy as very brittle who will collapse like a sick man if not taken care of. She recognizes the incongruity between his aspirations and the reality that thwarts them.

The dramatist’s depiction of her personality in the beginning of the play is apt to understand her well:

Most often jovial, she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to Willy’s behaviour – she more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties, served her only as sharp reminders of the turbulent longings within him, longings which she shares but lacks the temperament to utter and follow to their
Willy violates the faith of his wife with the woman in Boston, not only by sexual infidelity but by giving her the stockings that should go to Linda. Willy insists that Linda throw away her worn stockings, but, unknown to Willy, she keeps them. Ronald Hayman writes that “Miller uses sex as a means of carrying his social argument forward.” (38) Ignorant of the husband’s philandering around, she considers her husband the most handsome man in the world.

If she casts herself a supportive wife, strictly confining herself to kitchen, she is also a complex figure who plays a central role within the family dynamics. She knows from the beginning that Willy is trying to kill himself but sustains the illusion not knowing how to deal with such a stubborn husband.

Her ranting, after her sons abandoned Willy at the restaurant, affirms her unconditional love for her husband. She lambasts Happy and his “lousy rotten whores!” (211) and orders Biff to clean up the scattered flowers she has just knocked to the floor:

Pick up this stuff, I’m not your maid anymore. Pick it up, you bum, you!” (211)

Linda represents a down to earth, traditional woman whom the husband calls in his emotional moment –

You’re my foundation and my support, Linda. (135)
She endeavours to jacket her husband fulfilling ‘man for the field and woman for the hearth’ notion. Her tearful threat to Biff is poignant:

He’s the greatest 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 or 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 . . .

(162)

When Linda says over his grave “He was always so wonderful with his hands,” she comes out having been made by him though he did not know it or believe in it or receive it into himself. Only rank, height of power, the sense of having won he believed, was real. Linda’s undying love for him gets reflected beautifully in these lines:

I don’t say he is a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money . . . but he’s a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. . . . The man is exhausted.

(162-63)

She constantly defends him before the sons and pleads that a small man can be as exhausted as a great man, “Be loving to him. Because he is a little boat looking for harbour.” (176)

Her request to Biff:
Just say good night. It takes so little to make him happy.

(168)

exhorts Happy to assert –

What a woman! They broke the mold when

they made her. (169)

In fact, Linda is the only character in the play who understands Willy’s dilemmas in the harsh economic society. Her confrontation with Happy evokes sympathy for Willy:

Now that you get your spending money someplace else

you don’t trouble your mind with him. (163)

In her desperation, she places the indifferent economic system and sons on an equal level in their exploitation of the man, when he has become old:

And what goes through a man’s mind, driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent? Why shouldn’t he talk to himself? Why? . . . And you tell me he has no character? The man who never worked a day but for your benefit? When does he get the medal for that?

(163)

Tears don’t well up in her eyes at Willy’s death as she is unable to understand why Willy has done so. It seems to her that Willy is just on another trip. She feels free as she has paid all the installments of the house loan and now
she can claim her nest as her own. But ironically, the husband has already taken
a flight to another world leaving her all alone.

This loving woman, ameliorating her own self in keeping her household
happy, does arouse some uneasy questions in one’s mind regarding the position
of woman in patriarchal society. For Willy never gives her her due place,
remaining obsessed with his sons always. The sons take all the space leaving
Linda on the margin. She is not on the centre of the plot. Though sons are not
worthy, yet the father thinks of them all the time, never bothering for wife on
whom he walks away gifting silk stockings to the whore which lawfully should
go to his wife. She is left behind at home waiting while the father and sons are
celebrating in a restaurant and she carries on with life never complaining.

In Boston too, another woman refers to herself as a football, one who has
just been booted out of an illicit affair with Willy. Happy’s leering at Miss
Forsythe “I got radar or something” (100) and philandering reflect the status
given to woman in the play. She is no better than an object like a car or an
apartment for him. But Linda does show more strength of character in dealing
with a volatile situation at home. Terry Otten writes in Death Of a Salesman at
Fifty – Still Coming Home to Roost - Even if Linda’s fierce will and love for
Willy cannot save him, this does not make her a ‘useful doormat’. Her sons as
well as husband consider her a woman of substance, though they may not be
vociferous in their views in patriarchal structure.

Mathew Arnold rightly says that literature addresses only one question
that is, how to live, and it is only a moral question, not the business one. But
ironically complete consciousness is possible in a play about forces, like *Prometheus*, but not in a play about human beings. Hence Willy’s and others’ sufferings who live according to their own notions in life. W.H. Auden beautifully asks about the successful modern man, who enjoys all modern amenities in life, in his poem *The Unknown Citizen*:

Was he free? Was he happy?

Oh! The question is absurd . . .

We are a terribly lonely people, cut off from each other. The practical problem today is what to believe in order to proceed with life. Is success immoral? Self-realisation, one thinks, is most important. Any hero whom we even begin to think as tragic is obsessed, whether it’s Lear or Hamlet or Joe or Willy. That’s why Willy’s death changes nothing and the conflict between dream and reality goes on.
Works Cited


