

**LATE-LIFE CRISIS OF PROLETARIAT STRATUM AND IDEAL
MANHOOD: A STUDY OF ARTHUR MILLER'S
*DEATH OF A SALESMAN***

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Abstract

Late-life crisis has been constant in the lives of working class people since the establishment of modern industrial civilization. Man has to establish his identity, maintain moral earnestness and give security to his family even after his death. He continues to struggle with various social and personal challenges and adversities of Nature as well. The writers with their keen observance are able to showcase every moment artistically. Arthur Miller is a modern tragic artist of twentieth century America who writes with great social consciousness. His play *Death of a Salesman* deals with loss of identity and a man's inability to accept change within his 'self' and society. Willy Loman, the main character who perceives his entire life as a failure and his suicide is a desperate attempt to redeem himself by giving up his own life for the sake of his family to get the money from his life insurance. In his mind the only worthy thing he can do with his life is to die. In addition to that his extramarital affair and the hours the job takes away from his being a father and a husband results in his alienation from his wife and children. In short, life is the decisions one makes.

In the light of the aforementioned this article explores the late-life crisis of working class people and the struggle to maintain their personal dignity in family and society with reference to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

Key words: Working class, Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman, Proletariat etc.,

Introduction

Arthur Miller is a twentieth-century American playwright known for his social conscience and concern for humanity's well-being. Joblessness, industrial persecution, economic insecurity, domestic disputes, and political corruption are all shown in most of his plays. He was in the limelight, most famously for refusing to give evidence against others to the House Un-American Activities Committee, being the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama among other awards, and for marrying Marilyn Monroe. At the time of his death, Miller was considered one of the greatest American playwrights. The play *Death of Salesman* is a milestone in his literary career.

It deals with the life and death of sixty years old salesman, Willy Loman. Willy represents the struggle of the proletarians against the capitalist society. His later life crisis and struggle to establish personal dignity in family and society must be discussed.

Willy Loman as a Proletarian

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in their work *Manifesto of the Communist Party* describe the Proletariats as follows,

The proletariat is that class in society which lives entirely from the sale of its labor and does not draw profit from any kind of capital; whose wealth and woe, whose life and death, whose sole existence depends on the demand for labor – hence, on the changing state of business, on the vagaries of unbridled competition (42)

Willy Loman is a 34-year-old salesman who is oblivious to his lack of sufficient knowledge and training in the business as he waits for success and fortune. Linda, Willy's wife, supports him in all of his endeavours and believes that one day Willy will rise to the occasion. His sons Biff and Happy have their own worlds where Willy is a moderator. Biff is a foot ball player in the area but he is unable to go up to the mark. Because of Willy's compulsion Biff does some odd jobs with no interest. He wonders how his father has not achieved anything in these thirty four years of his salesman career. He also has a dream that he can live a simple, natural and peaceful life in a farm. On the other hand, Happy is an easy-goer who does care about his father's words and roams with girls happily. With the overconfidence of becoming rich Willy leads a dual life. He has an affair with a woman in the neighboring area but he does not give up his family for anything.

Willy Loman is a good example for the struggle of a proletarian who strives for the success and wealth that come from the national ethos the 'American Dream' but is left disappointed and confused when he comes to know that hard work by itself will not bring about success. The play talks about the effect that the national myth and the power of money have on a hard working American family and brings about important questions that one should ask his 'self' when determining his success in a capitalistic society. The play also portrays the power of money and exposes the proletariat's dependence on the bourgeois' employment and salary, while simultaneously revealing the classist values behind the labor forces.

The American Dream is the national philosophy of America which is ingrained in the declaration of independence. It was a promise given by the makers of America that if one works hard enough in America, He will emerge rich and successful. Getting rich quickly is reflected in Miller's play when Willy's brother Ben Loman boasts himself to Biff and Happy: "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" (37)

Willy Loman's search is to realize what he views as the American Dream, the "self-made man" who rises out of poverty and becomes rich and famous is a predominant theme in the play. He is so confident of achieving his dream, the national myth, which began during colonial times, and which was further developed during the nineteenth century by such industrialists Andrew Carnegie and Rockefeller. In the years of twentieth century, the American Dream was represented by Henry Ford, whose great success in the automotive industry was achieved when he developed the assembly line. Also in the 1920s, a career in sales was being hailed as a way for a man without training or education to achieve financial success. The advertisements, glittering Pamphlets and discourses that promoted strategies for improving the skills of salesmen were widely distributed at that time. But in course of time the capitalists changed the strategies by

giving important training to youngsters who work quickly. Willy lacks such knowledge or training, so he is destined to fail in a business world that demands the ability to play a specific part in a large establishment.

When viewed through a Marxist lens, the concept of the American Dream reveals that it has robbed the happiness of the family in the majority of proletariats' lives. Willy Loman is a representative proletarian trying to attain The American Dream, while the bourgeois benefits from him. The proletariats chase the effortless wealth and success while the bourgeois sits in the comfort zone and feeds off the hard work from the working class.

Late-Life Crisis of Willy and his Struggle for Establishing Ideal Manhood

Willy Loman is completely unaware of one important fact about life: change is the only constant. When he speaks to Howard, his old age lunacy is obvious. He tells the stories of achievers that have been passed down through the generations. Willy wants his children to follow him in this regard. He does not worry about the dreams of his children. Biff and Happy are in dilemma about what to do next in life. Biff says to his brother that he has been living an illusion. Besides, he tells that he has stolen himself out of every job that he has ever had, and he wants to make everyone, especially his father, understand that he is no longer bringing home any prizes. But when Willy arrives, he tells the boy that he has been fired and he refuses to listen to Biff's story. This shows his old age insanity. His sons are likewise battling with their own version of success as a result of his influence. Happy leads a materialistic existence, whereas Biff strives for a simpler, more natural, and spiritual existence. Earlier, Biff was a popular foot ball player in his area but he could not go beyond the mark. Willy Loman and his two sons live a happy life on the outside, but on the inside, they're falling apart as from representing the stark reality of American proletariat families: an ambitious work ethic that only leads to a depressing failure.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in their work *Manifesto of the Communist Party* state that, "Each step in the development of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by a corresponding political advance of that class." (15) This is expressed in the play when Willy gets fired. Willy expresses to his boss Howard that he's tired of travelling and would rather take a position in New York. Howard responds back by firing him. Howard states that Willy has never averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commissions. (62) While Howard benefits from cutting Willy loose, Willy gets laid off simply by asking for an added salary and a work position closer to home.

The concept of 'American Ideal' has been well instilled in the minds of all, particularly the proletariats who mistakenly take it by heart but it is actually meant for skilled. The proletariats realize when they are thrown out the job. They get late enlightenment and disappointed at the age of sixty. Their lives go clueless and they are alienated or alienate themselves. Erich Fromm describes this term in his book *Marx's Concept of Man*. "Alienation implies that the individual doesn't see himself as an agent in the hands of the world, but rather that the world remains alien to him" (Fromm 44). In other words, selling has become merely an object to Willy who has no relationship with the product itself.

Willy Loman is living in a world of illusion where he finds himself a hard working 'self made man'. He is almost blindfolded that his company has misled him to nameless destination. While he works for rich and wealthy life, he still doesn't understand Biff's desires to be out in nature where he can express his freedoms. Willy is struggling to bring his family happiness, while at the same time forcing Biff into the same kind of alienated labour that he himself is trapped in. Because of his father's capitalistic logic, Biff is left insecure with his choice of work, even if it does bring him happiness. When Biff to Happy, he says,

What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I'm thirty-four years old, I oughta be makin' my future. That's when I come running home. And now, I get here, and I don't know what to do with myself (16).

From a Marxist point of view, Willy's demise is a protest to the dehumanizing system of a capitalistic world that diminishes down the hard workers into nothing but a matter of no value. In committing suicide, Willy hopes to show that he can still make a difference in his family's lives. Even if his life hasn't been what he wanted and he wasn't able to provide what he wanted, he could at the very least ensure that Biff and the rest of his family will get \$20,000 from the insurance company. However, the negative effects of capitalism and the falsity of the national myth shouldn't take all the blame for the Loman's demise. The different struggles that the family face in daily life lead them to the tragic ending. Mostly Willy Loman but along with the members of his family they all face things that happened in the past that shaped their future mostly in a bad way. The play *Death of a Salesman* gives false hope of this dream that will never come true.

Conclusion

Arthur Miller requests the audience to pay attention on the people like Willy Loman, a representative of proletariats. A reader will remember the following words of Linda.

I don't say he's a great man. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He is not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person. (38)

Willy Loman has been a tireless travelling salesman and he likes to think of himself as being vital to the New England territory. His inspiration is Dave Singleton, a popular salesman in the city who would go into a town, pick up a phone and would be able to place many orders without ever leaving his hotel room. When he died, people from country came to his funeral. He is an achiever of American dream.

Willy Loman consistently keeps his American dream without ever bothering himself about the consequences of his illicit affair. Willy dies for the cause of his so-called American ideal. But unfortunately no one attends Willy's funeral except his family. Arthur Miller suggests that America has forgotten the values that guided previous generations of Americans, such as love for the family and diligence. He also warns of the consequences of unknowingly following the ideas of capitalist America. Arthur Miller suggests that capitalist America has instilled the idea that popularity directly affects success for Americans like Willy.

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