

Tragedy and Value:

Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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In the many years since the performance and publication of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, one central question has haunted literary critics and students and keeps recurring in any discussion of the play: is it or is it not a tragedy? The question of the tragic and genre definition in relation to *Death of a Salesman* followed the publication of Miller's essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" in *The New York Times* (February 27, 1949), only two weeks after the opening of the play. Many critics, opposing the view of the tragic presented in that essay, raised various questions which, according to them, invalidated Miller's claims that the protagonist of his play (although he did not mention explicitly any of his works) was a tragic hero. They discussed the problem of the hero's stature, "heroism", and representativeness, the question of insight and self-awareness, and the problem of values. There were also those critics who claimed that tragedy can no longer be written in the modern world, for we have lost religious faith and a sense of values, and skepticism has become a characteristic trait of mankind. In our increasingly complex world, according to these critics, man has come to see himself as the victim rather than the master of things, and tragic dignity has given place to mere sentimentality. Joseph Wood Krutch, for example, states that

we write no tragedies today... as a result of one of those enfeeblements of the human spirit..., a further illustration of that gradual weakening of man's confidence in his ability to impose upon the phenomenon of life an interpretation acceptable to his desires... .¹

Tragedy can arise only when "a people fully aware of the cala-

mities of life is nevertheless serenely confident of the greatness of man, whose mighty passions and supreme fortitude are revealed when one of these calamities overtakes him."²

It has also been argued that there is an incompatibility between the tragic view of life and the intention of social criticism revealed in *Death of a Salesman*. Such is the opinion of Eric Bentley, who sees two conflicting aims in Miller's work:

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. More important than this, the tragedy and the social drama actually conflict. The tragic catharsis reconciles us to, or persuades us to disregard, precisely those material conditions which the social drama calls our attention to

Other critics defended the opposing view and on the basis of a number of different criteria concluded that the play is indeed a tragedy. Underlying most of these endless discussions there was the assumption that to consider a play as tragic or non-tragic implied a value judgement — that is, a tragic play would necessarily be better than a play belonging to any other genre. In defense of *Death of a Salesman* as tragedy a variety of critical opinions thus followed, some considering the play as perfectly fitting the mold of classical tragedies and others viewing it as an adaptation or variation of Greek and Elizabethan standards. William Hawkins stated that

Death of a Salesman is a play written along the lines of the finest classical tragedy. It is the revelation of a man's downfall, in a destruction whose roots are entirely in his own soul.¹

Esther Merle Jackson, among others, focused on the responses evoked by Willy Loman's predicament, and considered them the same as those described by Aristotle in his *Poetics*:

The enactment of his suffering, fall, and partial enlightenment provokes a mixed response: that of anger and delight, indignation and sympathy, pity and fear, which Aristotle described as catharsis.⁵

Some critics have emphasized the notion of representativeness, considering Willy Loman as the prototype of modern man and his predicament, therefore fitting another requisite of the classical tragic hero. Comparisons then have been made between Willy Loman and the protagonists of Greek or Elizabethan tragedies. Miller's *Salesman* has been compared to *King Lear*, in that both plays present the theme of the "know thyself" and know your world, and exemplify the need to keep a sense of human limitations.⁶ Willy Loman's error has been seen as identical with Oedipus' flaw, that is, the misuse of reason in an individual who conflicts with his society and thus creates tragic circumstances that lead to his destruction.⁷ *
 Willy's suicide has been equated by Esther Merle Jackson with Oedipus' self-blinding and Antigone's self-murder, for it is "obviously intended as a gesture of the hero's victory over circumstances."⁸

Other critics have seen some differences between *Death of a Salesman* and classical tragedies, and felt that, although Miller's play is a low-key adaptation of the genre, the tragic quality is nonetheless present in it. They have referred somewhat patronizingly to Willy Loman as a "suburban King Lear,"⁹ and a number of labels have been used in relation to the play — "low tragedy"¹⁰ (or tragedy of commonplace life in commonplace circumstances), "liberal tragedy"¹¹ (understood as the conflict between an individual and the forces that destroy him), "tragedy of consciousness"¹² (defined as the imitation of a moral crisis in the life of a common man), "tragedy of illusion"¹³ (the notion of tragic fall being transformed here into the presentation of a fall from an imagined height).

Still other critics have focused on the question of tragedy by trying to determine who the tragic hero is in *Death of a Salesman*. Although most critics who consider the play a tragedy agree that Willy Loman is the tragic hero, there have been some opposing views. William Beyer, for example, states that

The play, it strikes us, is essentially the mother's tragedy, not Willy Loman's. Willy's plight is sad, true, but he is unimportant and too petty, commonplace, and immature to arouse more than pity... . What the mother stands for is important and when she goes down the descent is tragic.¹⁴

Others have considered Biff as the tragic hero, for, according to them, he is the only character in the play to achieve insight and self-awareness, and to adopt an affirmative stance.¹⁵ Still other critics have looked for the qualities in Willy that enable him to attain a certain greatness. His death, for example, has been seen as a sort of expiation that ennobles him and represents an acceptance of responsibility; his tremendous capacity for love, and his commitment to his ideal of success, have been pointed out. Some critics have claimed that he achieves partial insight, as seen in his dialogue with his brother Ben who is merely a projection of his mind.¹⁶ Others, echoing Arthur Miller, focus on the Salesman's fanatical commitment to his dream and on his alleged refusal to settle for half. William B. Dillingham has gone so far as to state, in a questionable version of Hegel's theories, that Willy Loman fits

Hegel's description of the tragic hero, the character who seeks a "good" too far on in the wrong way so that he loses his identity, his necessary values, and is carried to destruction.¹⁷

The critical confusion and the avalanche of contradictory

opinions, most of which are based on isolated elements of Aristotle's definition of tragedy, were initiated by Miller himself, in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man." In this essay, and in various other short articles, Miller tried to formulate a modern definition of the tragic hero and of the nature and function of tragedy.

The underlying assumption in "Tragedy and the Common Man" is that, contrary to what many critics imply, tragedy is possible in the modern world. In answer to the accepted notion that only characters who hold an elevated position in life are fit material for tragic heroes, Miller stated that "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were."¹⁸ According to the writer, as a general rule, "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."¹⁹ The underlying force that propels all tragic characters to action is, in Miller's view, the attempt to gain or regain what each of them considers to be his rightful position in his society. The tragic hero, then, feels a compulsion to evaluate himself justly, and reacts against the indignity derived from displacement or from his feeling of not attaining his rightful status and thus preserving his personal dignity. The "tragic flaw" which characterizes the hero is then "his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status."²⁰ The hero is the man who acts against that which degrades him, and questions the scheme of things with which he is faced. Fear and terror, the responses usually associated with tragedy, according to Miller, result from the sense of displacement and from "the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world."²¹ Man's destruction in his struggle for self-assertion and realization in society reveals that the source of misery is to be found in social factors. Tragedy "posits a wrong or an evil in man's environment,"²² and

herein lies its morality. Tragedy enlightens, for it shows that society is the enemy of man's freedom; it is a stifling force that prevents the individual from attaining full realization of his potential. Although Miller realizes that society alone is not responsible for the hero's failure, he clearly places the responsibility for it more on social forces than on the individual's inner weakness. Tragedy can only come about, he says, when the author questions everything—institutions, habits, customs — that in some way prevents man's fulfillment. The function of tragedy is to attack and examine whatever it is that degrades man and lowers his nature, and to reveal the truth about society. Although it is true that the hero is destroyed in his struggle against society, an element of optimism is derived from tragedy, and it resides in the recognition of man's willingness to throw all he has into his search for self-assertion:

For, if it is true to say that in essence the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality, and if this struggle must be total and without reservation, then it automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity.²³

Miller, therefore, concludes that the average modern man is as capable of becoming a tragic hero as kings or noblemen, and thus by implication defends the right of *Death of a Salesman* to be considered a tragedy.

In another essay, entitled "The Nature of Tragedy,"²⁴ Miller tries to distinguish tragedy from pathos; he explains that tragedy implies a hope regarding the human condition, this being what raises sadness out of the pathetic towards the tragic. The playwright must always posit a world in which good might have been allowed to manifest itself without succumbing to evil:

Tragedy arises when we are in the presence of a man who has missed accomplishing his joy. But the joy must be there, the promise of the right way of life must be there,

Otherwise pathos reigns, and an endless, meaningless, and essentially untrue picture of man is created — man helpless under the falling piano, man wholly lost in a universe which is too hostile to be mastered. In a word, tragedy is the most accurately balanced portrayal of the human being in his struggle for happiness.²⁵

There are various questionable assumptions in Miller's definition of tragedy. Not only his theory itself is loose and vague, but also its application to the plays is not always consistent.

This leads us to the discussion of the question of the conflict of values in tragedy, an aspect clearly explained by Hegel and Max Scheler in their various writings on the tragic. These two philosophers were able to grasp what the quality of the tragic really is, as an essential feature, a constant moment of the universe itself, which must be distinguished from any art form in which it may be present.

The basis of Hegel's theory of tragedy is related to his view of the function of negation in the universe, whereby any action elicits an antithetical counterpart. Tragedy, according to him, presents a collision of ethical forces in which both sides of the contradiction, if taken separately, are justified. The claims of both are just because both forces that inspire them are aspects of the ethical substance which rules the world of man's will and actions. What is not justified is the claim of exclusiveness on the part of the conflicting forces and the resulting attempt to ignore the equally justifiable claim of the opponent. The characters become in a sense monolithic. Hamartia lies here not in the rightfulness of the power the character asserts, but in his assertion of his right being exclusive. Although we recognize this flaw in the opposing characters, we cannot blame them, for they are ethically justified in themselves.

Tragic guilt and moral guilt are therefore never equated. A tragic conflict will not occur when good is destroyed by

evil, or vice versa. Only when a good value is destroyed by another equally justified value does the tragic conflict occur. Scheler adds that the destruction, which occurs as result of the clash, such as a character's death, is not in itself tragic. The tragic lies in the fact that one high positive-value destroys an equal or higher value. The characters must believe in the value for which they stand and they must convey their conviction of the legitimacy of their particular values. This conviction is what leads a tragic character to a consciously chosen act of renunciation and self-sacrifice, for he cannot live if he ignores his spiritual values and his duty. But this renunciation of his will to live, which is also a positive value, occurs accompanied by great suffering, as Eugene H. Falk explains in his book *Renunciation as a Tragic Focus*. The tragic hero does not choose death out of despair or in consequence of a feeling of insufficiency and failure. Man's tragic potential resides in his capacity to renounce the worldly values he cherishes for the sake of a superior duty. And this act of renunciation is accompanied by a deep sense of loss, because the hero's worldly aspirations were capable of realization and fulfillment.

Let us now examine Miller's statement that tragedy posits an evil in the environment, an evil which destroys man. This already implies an unequal struggle in which man becomes a victim. We come back to one of the points constantly stressed by Hegel and Max Scheler — if external evil is what destroys the character, there is no manifestation of the quality of the tragic, but merely a sad or pathetic event. Another point Miller fails to consider is that a character's image of himself is not necessarily a worthy one, and the ideals to which he is committed may not have any ethical justification. Furthermore, commitment may be blind or fanatical, thus revealing a complete lack of insight. Tragic commitment, according to Hegel, must be total, but examined, never the result of blindness of fanaticism. Not every

struggle, not every pursuit of happiness or of what one considers to be one's "rightful status" carries in itself the potential for tragic action. A value must be there, a positive, ethically justifiable value to which the character consciously commits himself, and which conflicts with another value of a similar nature. We must also consider the fact that not every value confers greatness upon the character that espouses it. The value may be selfish, or wrong in ethical terms, or false. In addition, it is not very clear what Miller understands by the search for dignity as a value. If carried out under false premises, can such a search be justified? What is then the importance of awareness and insight in tragedy? Would a character who is self-deluded — and half aware of his falsehood — be as "tragic" in his search for dignity as another who has authentically and wholly committed himself to an ethical course of action? Is suffering unaccompanied by knowledge and insight capable of evoking tragic pity and fear or is it merely pitiful waste? These and other questions show how open to debate Arthur Miller's theories are, and how loosely he has used certain terms such as dignity, rightful status, and values. In order to discuss these problems from the viewpoint of Hegel's comments on the tragic and tragedy, let us then examine first the question of values in *Death of a Salesman*.

The play portrays the last day in the life of Willy Loman, a sixty-three-year-old salesman. After having put more than thirty years into the firm for which he works, Willy, who has been having increasing difficulty in selling, is reduced to straight commission status. Returning home from an uncompleted selling trip, he is faced with his two sons, on whom he had placed his hopes and who have failed him: his favorite son Biff, a drifter at thirty-four, and Happy, the younger son, a minor employee in a store, concerned only with women and a comfortable life. In the repeated conflicts between Willy and Biff, it is revealed that something in the past caused Biff to abandon his dreams and become hostile to his father.

We later find out that Biff found his father in a hotel with a strange woman, a scene which destroyed his faith. Willy is now exhausted, and he is faced with the wreckage of all of his hopes and illusions. When his wife Linda tells her sons that the father has been trying to kill himself, Biff decides to stay home and look for a loan from a former employer to finance a business. Willy, with his optimism raised, asks Howard, his boss, for a job in New York so that he can stop travelling. Things turn out wrong — Willy is fired and Biff, who is not even recognized by his former boss, realizes that he based his hopes on lies. After a violent confrontation between father and the older son in a restaurant, Biff and Happy go off with two girls they met there, leaving their father in the restroom, humiliated and alone with his memories. When they return home, Biff tries to make his father understand that both of them are only "fakes", and that he has now found his identity. His feelings overcome him, and he shows that he still loves his father. Willy, for whom Biff's love is the supreme gift, decides to kill himself to provide him with the insurance money so that he can start a new life. In the funeral, the reactions of the sons are shown as diametrically opposed. While Biff realizes that his father had the wrong dreams, Happy proposes to come out number-one to show everybody that his father was right.

Willy Loman has committed himself to, and transmitted to his sons, a set of social values that have been known as constituting the "American Dream" — the search for money, material success, and popularity. He worships success, and in pursuit of this hollow dream, he is tricked into ignoring the calls of his true nature and into trying to be something he is not. The "rightful status" he is trying to achieve is equated with the overpublicized values of society and the illusion that appearance and a "jolly locker-room personality", as a critic has said, are substitutes for moral values and solid accomplishments. In the race for recognition and wealth, Willy Loman pledges allegiance to the code of business success, and for that he sacrifices his values as a human being. The

dream of success based on easy business ethics is transmitted by him to his children — the false promises of unlimited human possibilities for those who have personal attractiveness, talk well, and are popular:

It's not what you do ... It's who you know and the smile on your face! It's contacts, Ben, contacts!²⁶

In order to succeed, it is important not only to be liked, but to be "well liked":

That's just what I mean. Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me, for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. "Willy Loman is here!" That's all they have to know, and I go right through. (p. 33)

The ideals to which he pledges himself are vague and superficial. For him, it is not a question of the difference between being right or wrong, or of moral or ethical values, but only a question of degree: you are liked or well-liked. Seeing everything in light of the American Dream, Willy creates a false image of himself and of his sons, and of what might happen to them in the competition of life. He encourages their weaknesses and inflates their images of themselves so high that they are unable to cope with reality once they are faced with it. Misconstruing the ideal of fatherhood, Willy is blind to his son's adolescent mistakes and, by not correcting them, and even by encouraging them, causes the solidification of these mistakes into adult habits. Linda warns him that Biff is driving without a driver's license, that he is too rough with girls, that he should return the football he stole. But

Willy always finds an excuse to justify Biff, and even encourages his sons' stealing, for that shows that they are fearless individuals with initiative:

Willy: Sure, he's gotta practice with a regulation ball, doesn't he? To Biff:
Coach'll probably congratulate you on your initiative!

Biff: Oh, he keeps congratulating my initiative all the time, Pop.

Willy: That's because he likes you. If somebody else took that ball there'd be an uproar. So what's the report, boys, what's the report? (p. 30)

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Willy: ... Boys! Go right over to where they're building the apartment house and get some sand ... You shoulda seen the lumber they brought home last week. At least a dozen six-by-tens worth all kinds a money... I gave them hell, understand. But I got a couple of fearless characters there. (p. 50)

In other opportunities, Willy again demonstrates how he teaches his sons to take the easiest way around things, even when it means breaking the law or being dishonest. The best examples of this attitude and his willingness to make his son exploit others are found in the dialogues relating to the math exam Biff might fail: Bernard, the son of their neighbor Charley, warns them that the math teacher said he would fail Biff, who then would be unable to graduate and go to the University of Virginia (for which he has a scholarship). Bernard, who is a studious boy and who admires and loves Biff, wants to study with him and often comes to the Lomans' home for that. Since Biff never studies, Willy then insists that Bernard give him the answers. The alternatives he is presenting to the boys are clear: one does not need to study if one's father himself approves of and even suggests cheating as a solution:

Willy: ... You'll give him the answers!

Bernard: I do, but I can't on a Regents!

That's a state exam! They're liable

to arrest me! (p. 40)

Later, in the hotel in Boston, when Biff tells his father that he has failed, the only thing Willy can say is to blame Bernard and the teachers. It never occurs to him whose fault it really is, and once again he shows Biff how not to accept responsibility for one's acts:

Biff: Dad, I flunked math.

Willy: Not for the term?

Biff: The term. I haven't got enough credits to graduate.

Willy: You mean to say Bernard wouldn't give you the answers?

Biff: He did, he tried, but I only got a sixty-one.

Willy: And they wouldn't give you four points?
(pp. 117-18)

This is the philosophy of life Willy is teaching his sons — people have to give you what you need, you order them and they obey, as in the scenes in which Biff tells his friends to sweep out the furnace room. He is totally incapable of realism and spends his life only talking. In a way, what he tries to do and teaches his sons is how to sell oneself to others on the basis of superficial qualities and easy and flexible ethics. His sons are adult results of this easy ethics taught to them: Biff, a drifter and a thief, who recognizes only later that he "never got anywhere because Willy blew him so full of hot air he could never stand taking orders from anybody!" (p.131); Happy, a "philandering bum" (p. 57), as his mother calls him, applies in his adult life the same principle of salesmanship he learned from his father. His "technique" of conquering women by means of lies and pretenses is another example of a person selling himself. Both sons, indulged by their father into creating an empty sense of superiority, compensate in different ways for the impossibility of realizing their hopes

— Biff by stealing himself out of every job he has, Happy by corrupting the fiancées of the employees superior to him.

Willy's dream results from the wrong worshipping of hollow materialistic values to which he devotes his whole life, and which he wants his sons to achieve at any cost. We can almost say that, in a way, for him the end justifies the means. One can do wrong, but if one proves to be fearless and full of initiative, success will be there at the end. Completely blinded by his notion of how to attain success, Willy ignores all the warnings he receives from various people in different moments. His wife warns him on several occasions about Biff's attitudes; Bernard explains the danger of failing math; Charley tells him that the watchman of the construction site will call the police if the boys steal more from him; and Biff himself, in the last scene with his father, asks him to burn his "phony dream... before something happens" (p. 133). It is useless, however, for Willy has accepted certain social values and even if he could recognize their hollowness, he would be unable to change at this point and face reality. As a critic has said,

His failure to build anything worthwhile stems from his inability to confront reality and his failure to adopt the affirmative stance which his son Biff finally outlines to him at the end — "I'm just what I am, that's all."²⁷

The main problem with Willy and the cause of his sense of emptiness at the end is the fact that he has turned away from himself and has therefore misplaced his identity. Forgetting his own values as a human being in order to conform to society's standards, he creates a false image of himself, and he is unable to live up to this created image. He lives in a continuous conflict between what he is and what he wishes to be, between reality and his dream, and his sense of failure gradually over-
comes him. Having denied his true nature and talents for the

sake of the American Dream, Willy has to fail, and his life becomes a series of excuses for this failure. He finally transposes his hopes to Biff. These become a burden that almost destroys his son when his illusions about his father are shown to be false. ~~Both Biff and Willy are, in a sense, paralyzed — Willy by his illusions, Biff by his disillusionment. Only Biff is capable, at the end, of overcoming his state of paralysis, as he realizes he is only what he is, and that is all. Willy, however, still blind, reveals through his suicide that he is totally unable to act in an effective and rational way.~~

One of the reasons for which Willy is unable to accept himself or his sons as they are, and continuously substitutes for their true identity an imagined one, is that he has certain models to which he wants to measure up — or even surpass. These models are, first, his father and Ben, the symbols of the pioneer success and of the challenge of the frontier. As Ben (recreated by Willy's memory) says

When I walked into the jungle I was
seventeen. When I walked out I was
twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!

Willy: ... was rich! That's just the
spirit I want to imbue them with!
To walk into a jungle! I was right!
I was right! (p. 52)

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Ben: Father was a very great and very wild-
hearted man. We would start in Boston,
and he'd toss the whole family into the
wagon, and then he'd drive the team
right across the country; through Ohio,
and Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and all
the Western states. And we'd stop
in the towns and sell the flutes that
he'd made on the way. Great inventor,
Father. With one gadget he made more
in a week than a man like you could
make in a lifetime.

Willy: That's just the way I'm bringing them up,

Ben — rugged, well-liked, all —
around. (p. 49)

Other models against which Willy measures himself are Charley and Bernard. Charley, his only friend, as he recognizes at the end, has his own business, and Willy dreams of being more successful than he is:

Willy: Someday I'll have my own business,
and I'll never have to 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. (p. 30)

Charley, who is a very rational person, constantly and unsuccessfully tries to bring Willy back to reality and have him face things. Later, when Willy is working on commission and has no money to pay his bills, Charley lends him fifty dollars a week, the money to pay his insurance, etc. Knowing that his friend wants a job in New York and that his boss refused his request, Charley asks Willy to come work for him. Willy, however, refuses, for he is too proud to do it:

Charley: I offered you a job. You can make
fifty dollars a week. And I won't
send you on the road.

.....

Willy: I — I just can't work for you, Charley.

Charley: What're you, jealous of me? (pp. 96-97)

While he compares himself to Charley, Willy uses Bernard as a point of comparison for his children. He refers to Bernard as a "pest," "a worm", "an anemic", and tells his sons that even if Bernard is a better student, in the business world they will be ahead of him. At the end, Willy is shown how wrong his predictions were. While his own sons accomplished nothing solid, Bernard — like his father Charley — became a success. He is described as "a quiet, earnest, but self-

assured young man" (p. 90); he is married and has two children, has become a lawyer and is about to argue a case before the Supreme Court, and he has friends who have tennis courts — for Willy, the image of total success, domestic, social, and professional. But Willy still dreams that one day Bernard and his own sons will all play tennis together, and that with the insurance money, Biff will "be ahead of Bernard again!" (p.135)

The difference between Charley and Bernard and the Lomans is summarized by Charley when Willy finds out about the defense of the case before the Supreme Court:

Willy: ... The Supreme Court! And he didn't even mention it!

Charley: ... He don't have to — he's gonna do it. (p. 95)

Unlike the Lomans, Charley and Bernard are not talkers. They do not boast, either of what they are not, or of what they are and do. They evaluate themselves and their world realistically, and they do not give exaggerated value to anything. As Charley puts it: " his salvation is that he never took any interest in anything." (p. 96) While Willy reveals an inherent incapacity to transpose imagination into effective action, for he is completely blinded and paralyzed by his illusions, Charley has no illusions. He is generous but firm, and he always says things as they are. Willy, a more intense character than Charley, has a great capacity for love; this is frustrated by his pursuit of the wrong aspect of the American Dream because he does not accept himself as he is, and because he has an inordinate tendency to self-deception.

Willy would rather conform to the life imposed upon him than to choose his own way. He is a conformist and suffers not only because he has ignored his true nature, but because he cannot measure up to the code of material success to which he has dedicated his life. In his old age, he is faced with the failure of his way of life. He has achieved no success,

no wealth, no popularity; neither have his sons, and he has nothing to put in place of his shattered dreams. Having exhausted himself with illusions and false hopes, he is now faced with failure. He is bewildered, his pride is battered, he is tired, and his despair grows as he feels an increasing sense of alienation, unrelatedness, aloneness, and loss of meaning in his life. In a state of near-breakdown, Willy longs for the past in which his children still believed in him. It is through his compulsive need to recover the past and the recurring flashbacks that his sense of guilt and confusion becomes apparent. One sees it, for example, in the scene with Biff in the hotel room in Boston, when the son realizes that his father is a fake. Willy is utterly confused and in contradiction with himself when he comes to perceive in part his own guilt and emptiness. As he tells his brother Ben, "sometimes I'm afraid that I'm not teaching them the right kind of — Ben, how should I teach them?" (p. 52) He encouraged his sons to steal, and then complained: "What is he stealing? He's giving it back, isn't he? Why is he stealing? What did I tell him? I never in my life told him anything but decent things." (p. 41) The painful memories of his affair with the other woman recur very frequently — he constantly hears her laughter, he becomes more upset when Biff is around, he cannot stand the sight of Linda mending her stockings, and once he promises that "he will make it all up" to her. He also realizes that "some people accomplish something..." (p. 15), and he suffers because he thinks that his son hates him:

Willy: Oh, Ben, how do we get back to all the great times? Used to be so full of light, and comradeship, the sleigh-riding in winter, and the ruddiness on his cheeks. And always some kind of good news coming up, always something nice coming up ahead. And never even let me carry the valises in the house, and simonizing, simonizing that little car! Why, why can't I give him something and not have him hate me? (p. 127)

Having failed to succeed in business terms, Willy then

feels unworthy of love. He never realizes that the values to which he pledged himself are wrong, but he comes to realize that his life is empty and that he has accomplished nothing. This partial insight explains his compulsion to buy seeds and plant, although one knows that nothing will grow in the little garden covered by the shadows of the neighboring buildings. In the same way, nothing could grow in Willy, for he allowed the true human values to be destroyed by the mechanized society to which he pledged himself. His failure is a result not only of a personal failure in relation to his values, but also of a failure in the values themselves. He accepted society's distortion of certain basic values, and he himself misinterpreted certain ideals which could have been positively acted out. Richard J. Foster summarizes this process of distortion as follows:

A final set of values implicit in Willy's character, and defeated by the circumstances in which he finds himself, are his unformed impulses toward two of the original American virtues — self-reliance and individualism of spirit. These virtues, implying basic self-sufficiency and personal creativity, not domination of others, are perhaps the pure forms underlying the corrupt and destructive societal imperatives of success and getting ahead. Willy has the self-reliant skills of the artisan: he is "good at things," from polishing a car to building a front porch, and we hear of his beloved tools and his dream of using them some day to build a guest house on his dreamed-of farm for his boys and their families to stay in. But self-reliance has collapsed, the tools rust, and Willy has become the futile and pathetic victim of a machine culture. And individualism has been translated and corrupted in Willy into a belief in the jungle value of privilege for the strong: he encourages his boys to steal, and he calls it initiative and their right.²⁸

For the sake of distorted societal values, Willy abandoned some incipient values that attracted him. Foster summarizes these values as concern with nature, freedom, and the body, and a comprising free self-expression and self-realization, individualism, and the simple life. Willy's recurring memories of

his father and Ben, symbols of pioneer and free life, the flute music of his childhood, the trees in front of the house, and his own sons playing in the yard, and his remarks about the beauty of the country's landscape, are all part of a natural world degenerated and destroyed by mechanistic society. The result is a sense of alienation and suffocation: the garden is sterile, there are no trees or light, the little house is surrounded by big apartment houses, the sense of nature is lost. Willy's fixation with his garden, at the end, reveals the attempt to return to these calls he ignored, but it is too late. His world has already collapsed and he realizes that he is a failure.

Arthur Miller has stated that

The trouble with Willy Loman is that he has tremendously powerful ideals. We're not accustomed to speaking of ideals in his terms; but if Willy Loman, for instance, had not had a very profound sense that his life as lived had left him hollow, he would have died contentedly polishing his car on some Sunday afternoon at a ripe old age. The fact is he has values. The fact that they cannot be realized is what is driving him mad ... The truly valueless man, a man without ideals, is always perfectly at home anywhere... because there cannot be a conflict between nothing and something. Whatever negative qualities there are in the society or in the environment don't bother him, because they are not in conflict with what positive sense one may have. I think Willy Loman, on the other hand, is seeking for a kind of ecstasy in life, which the machine civilization deprives people of. He's looking for his selfhood, for his immortal soul, so to speak.²⁹

Reading this statement, one has to ask oneself where the flaw really is. Who is to be blamed, society or Willy Loman himself? It is true that there is in *Death of a Salesman* (and in Miller's statements) an indictment of society — represented in Willy's boss Howard — for destroying man's true potential, for degrading and humiliating man, for exploiting and then abandoning him, for

valuing the machine over the individual (as in the scene in which Howard is so interested in his tape recorder that he barely listens to Willy). We must consider the fact that Howard is making use of the very business notions defended by Willy — the privilege of the strong to decide and command. Willy is not a non-conformist in conflict with his environment. On the contrary, he accepts the values of his environment and loses his identity in the process. When he fails to live up to those standards and his vague ideal of success crumbles, he realizes that he has accomplished nothing solid. He placed his emphasis on the wrong things, and he retreated into a world of self-delusion for which he is more responsible than anybody else. It is true that he is a man in search of something, but the values to which he pledges his allegiance are empty, hollow, meaningless. Furthermore, the methods through which he means to attain success are also questionable — stealing, cheating, lying, using women to get to buyers, etc. There is definitely an evil posited in Willy's environment, but there are other characters who do accomplish something, especially Charley, a businessman who is a decent person, and Bernard, who works seriously rather than indulging in self-cult as Biff, Happy, and Willy do. The failure is therefore to be found mainly in Willy himself, in the values he has chosen, and in the easy ethics he employs and transmits to his sons. He does not die, as Mr. Miller has said, "for the want of some positive viable human value,"³⁰ but because he did not accomplish what he wanted and feels empty and desperate. He did have some values, but the wrong ones, and his life therefore lost its meaning. He cannot preserve his view of himself, for he is forced to face the fact that he is a failure. But even at the end he does not question the values themselves. His death is still an instance of distorted thinking and a result of his continuing belief in the ideology that ruined him. He thinks that 20,000 dollars of the insurance money is all that is needed to save Biff and bring about a magnificent destiny that will place him, once again, ahead of Bernard.

He gives his son the only thing that Biff does not want from him — money.

Occasionally, Willy shows some self-awareness. He tells Linda that he is fat and that he talks too much, he has recurring memories of the Boston scene, he realizes that he is a failure — but he never questions the assumptions that underlie this failure and his self-delusion. The problem for Willy is that he cannot make enough money, and he never realizes what the real failure is. The critic Benjamin Nelson has stated that

Willy can relive the most crucial events of his life and still wonder how he has erred in raising his sons. His memory is active and his search for answers intense, but his ability to perceive the meaning of these answers is limited. He can still sincerely ask Bernard near the end of the play what the secret of success is.³¹

Most of the times, Willy refuses to face the implications of his illusions and of the attitudes caused by them. He does not realize that the values he has are false, and, as the critic Saisselin has said, he is a pathetic man "who dies having learned nothing."³²

Willy dies without learning anything about the inherent flaw of the values themselves. His gained insight refers only to his sense of personal failure. The values remain unquestioned by him and he struggles against self-knowledge until the very end. Only Biff arrives at an understanding of a different way of life. He realizes what Willy failed to see: one is what one is, and that is all. He comes to understand that his father's ideal is false and that he must set out on a new path to try to recover his true identity. Happy, on the contrary, does not reject his father's dream, and he is determined to fulfill it and come out "number-one". It is again an instance of a blind, irrational commitment to the wrong ideal of mere materialistic success.

Willy does have values, but they are distorted, misinterpreted, and empty. His commitment to them is fanatical, blind, and unexamined, and he is unable to evaluate himself justly and to face reality. He never comes to understand that his failure is a logical result of his approach to life and of his self-delusion, and he is not really aware of the implications of this approach. His destruction is therefore not tragic, but merely pathetic, for he pledges himself to the wrong values and later realizes that his life has been empty. There is no ethical justification for his values nor for the methods he employs. His death is meaningless, for it proves only that he is desperate and lost. No feeling of reconciliation can accompany Willy's death, but merely a sense of the pathos of the situation. Willy is a deluded figure who never knows himself, and who dies not because of a sense of duty, but out of desperation.

There is no tragic renunciation in this play, for Willy's death is at the same time an act of desperation and a search for personal redemption. The sense of guilt for Biff's failure has haunted Willy Loman for many years, and he longs for the possibility to give him something and regain his love. When he finds out that his son still loves him, he then decides to sell himself for the insurance money. If in life he cannot help Biff, in death he can. He races happily to his death in the illusion that he has found a solution for his conflict, never really knowing what the conflict is. His death is an act of expiation, and, ironically and pathetically, he solves nothing and expiates nothing, for Biff has already forgiven him and does not "worship" him for having killed himself. Willy's death is the easiest way out for him, and he formulates this when he says to his brother:

Why? Does it take more guts to stand here
the rest of my life ringing up a zero? (p. 126)

Willy's death is not an instance of renunciation of worldly values he cherishes. On the contrary, he has nothing to lose, and his life means nothing to him. Death, for him, is in a

sense, a form of escape, for the value of life is lost. Biff's love, which he regains at the end, matters so much to him that his death is almost a way to pay it back. To reinforce the fact that his death is mainly an act of despair resulting from his feeling of insufficiency and failure, it is only necessary to remember that Willy had been trying to kill himself even before he realized that his son still loved him.

No tragic grief surrounds Willy's predicament, merely pathos. It is a feeling that comes from within the hero, for he is self-deluded to the very end. Miller has said that Willy dies because he is unable to settle for half, and because he refuses to surrender his dream. I believe that Willy has surrendered his dream when he realized that he has failed and that he has transposed it to Biff because he realizes his own incapacity to fulfill it. On the other hand, it is not true that he has not settled for half. It is enough to recall the scene in which he humiliates himself in front of his boss, hands him the lighter, gradually decreases the amount of money for which he is asking, and finally begs Howard to let him go to Boston again. Willy has compromised his dream and tried to settle for half, and his desperation reaches its climax when he loses everything. His death does not result from the search for dignity, or from a refusal to yield his view of himself, but from the sense of unworthiness, anguish, and despair.

Willy Loman is a pathetic symbol of man's predicament in an increasingly complex and demanding world, where pressures may lead one to misplace his identity and stifle his true self. He is an example of a man unable to evaluate himself and his world realistically, a man who chooses the wrong priorities and pledges his allegiance to false dreams. He dies the death of a bewildered, lost person, his pride battered, his energy exhausted, his sense of guilt even more intense. Death means, for him, self-redemption, and a heritage of money for his son to fulfill the success dream. Willy dies defeated and still unaware of any true values. His life and death are pitifully

wasted because of the flaw in those values to which he blindly committed himself.

Death of a Salesman is a powerful play, but it is not a tragedy from the viewpoint we chose as our focus. The quality of the tragic does not emerge from the conflict experienced by Willy Loman. What emerges is merely the sense of pathos resulting from his loss, anguish, and alienation.

N O T E S

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- ²⁰Miller, p. 144.
- ²¹Miller, p. 145.
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- ²³Miller, pp. 146-47.
- ²⁴Arthur Miller, "The Nature of Tragedy," *The New York Herald Tribune* (March 27, 1949), Sec. 5, pp. 1-2.
- ²⁵Miller, "The Nature of Tragedy", p. 2.
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- ²⁷Bigsby, p. 34.
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