

Familial relationships in *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract: Arthur Miller is considered to be one of the greatest playwrights of the twentieth century in the world. No other contemporary of his, has been able to capture so nicely the theme of family relationships, the American dream of success, and the working of the human mind. Social dreams or ideologies are passed on through the socializing influences of family and institutions. Miller has successfully dramatized the conflict between family relations and social relations. In fact, Miller has dealt with several aspects of family relationships in the play i.e. between husband and wife, father and son, mother and son, brother and brother. It is one of those plays where father son relationship is shown with its full intensity and in changing aspects but love and feeling of mutual sacrifice surpasses all bickering and petty concerns.

Key Words: family, relationships, success, failure, well-liked, American dream.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Arthur Miller was one of the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century. Very few writers in any country have so captured the universal themes of family, of the transience of success, of moral corruption, of the working of the human mind and the exploration of guilt. **Death of a Salesman** is perhaps the finest example of the treatment of such themes of success and of family relationships.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Miller has dealt with family relationships in almost all of his plays like **Death of a Salesman**, **All My Sons**, **The Price**, and **The Crucible**. Family is the first institution of society, for in every society family provides comfort, security and love. This social institution becomes all the more important because of its numerous advantages. Apart from this, the institution of family assumes great significance in America and Europe where the family system is under great stress and is even on the verge of break-up. No wonder, socially conscious writers like Miller have made family, especially relationships within the family, their major thematic concern.

Death of a Salesman, like **All My Sons**, dramatizes the conflict between family relations and social relations. The society is seen as hostile and alien to the individual whereas it is the family which supports an individual. It is the hostile attitude of the socio-economic system that is responsible for the alienation of Joe Keller of **All My Sons**, John Proctor of **The Crucible** and, of course, of Willy Loman of **Death of a Salesman**. The materialistic society, the business ethics and false dream of success exert a profound influence in their lives. Benjamin Nelson remarks: "Both plays, **Death of a Salesman** and **All My Sons**, involve the interaction of the inner circle of the family with the outer circle of the society. However, in **Death of a Salesman** the action is rooted more concretely in the familial arena: man's social responsibility is an important motif, but it is subordinated to the more dominant theme of a father's conflict with his sons."¹

3. THREE FAMILIES COMPARED & CONTRASTED:

In **Death of a Salesman** as many as three families are discussed, those of Willy Loman, Charley and Wagner. But the play deals chiefly with Willy Loman and his family. The other two families are directly presented or referred to merely for the purpose of comparison or contrast. The action of the play involves three generations of Lomans: Willy's father, Willy and his brother Ben who appears only in events belonging to Willy's past and Willy's sons: Biff and Happy. Likewise another family is that of Willy's neighbour Charley. In Charley's family we have again three generations: Charley, Bernard and Bernard's two sons. The third family relationship portrayed is that of Wagner, the employer of Willy Loman. In the Wagner family Frank, Howard and Howard's son and daughter form the three generations. As Nelson remarks "In all, ten generations of father-son relationship are woven into the tapestry of **Death of a Salesman** and in each case a father is involved in passing something to his son."²

In fact, Miller has dealt with several aspects of family relationships in **Death of a Salesman**: between husband and wife, father and son, mother and son, brother and brother. In the play, the husband-wife relationship is portrayed through Willy Loman and his wife Linda Loman; father-son relationship through Willy and Biff and Willy and Happy. Mother-son relationship is depicted through Linda and her two sons, Biff and Happy. Brother-brother

relationship figures in the relationship between Biff and Happy in the dramatic “present” and between Ben and Willy in the dramatic past of the play.

3.1. FATHER- SON RELATIONSHIP:

No doubt, all the relationships in a family are equally important but some are given prominence by the playwright to serve his purpose. In *Death of a Salesman* the father- son relationship, especially Willy- Biff relationship is Miller’s chief concern. Willy and Biff are greatly attached to each other. Biff idolizes Willy and follows him like a devotee. He does everything that Willy tells him to do: he polishes Willy’s car, takes his advice regarding girls and shows profound faith in his understanding and abilities. Willy, on his part, identifies his life and dreams with the success of his sons, particularly Biff. Willy thinks that Biff has all the qualities which make a person great and successful: physical charm, strength, ruggedness personal attractiveness and initiative. He applies this view to himself as well as to his son Biff. He firmly believes in Biff’s abilities. Though at school, Biff is not as good as Charley’s son Bernard, yet Willy nurtures the thought that in his life his son will be more successful than Bernard and that he himself will build a more flourishing business than Charley has done. He says: “Bernard can get the best marks in school, y’ understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him.”³ He is proud that his sons are “built like Adonises” (p.146) and does not hesitate to boast of their physical strength. Biff is Willy’s favourite son. He remembers with pride Biff’s young manhood. Biff was the most attractive and popular boy among his friends, and the Captain of the football team. Even when Biff steals a football, Willy sides with Biff. He tells Happy that the football coach will probably congratulate Biff on his initiative.

Willy, like many fathers, however, commits the blunder of transferring his ideology and dream to his favourite son, Biff. But unfortunately for himself and Biff, Willy is a victim of the American dream of success. His psyche, his relationship with his sons, his behaviour – everything is shaped by this American dream. He measures success in terms of wealth, status and popularity. Willy has the image of Dave Singleman, a successful salesman as his model. He remembers him as the perfect salesman who, at the age of eighty four, led a luxurious life in a hotel and carried on his sales by phone. Willy’s brother Ben further confirmed his illusion in this regard. Ben, who had followed the Horatio Alger formula, and suddenly became rich was to Willy “success incarnate”. Ben’s example of success, “When I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty one I walked out. And by God I was rich” (p.157), has become a kind of mantra for Willy. Willy, thus, shows great respect for the American dream of success and unsuccessfully tries to translate it into reality. He brings up his boys being “well liked, all around.”(p.157) Willy, thus, thrusts his own ideals and dreams on his son Biff: “Because”, Willy tells Biff “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.” (p.146) But Willy does not realize is that his dreams for Biff are not in keeping with his son’s nature and temperament. The result is that Biff has not been able to “find himself” even at the age of thirty- four. As he tells Happy in Act I: “I’ve had twenty or thirty different kinds of jobs since I left home before the war, and it always turns out the same. I just realized it lately.”(p.138) Thus, Biff has come to see himself in his true light whereas Willy is not even willing to face the truth. In a scene from Willy’s past, he tells his sons: “Tell you a secret, boys. Don’t breathe it to a soul. Someday I’ll have my own business and I’ll never have to leave home any more.”(p.144) And he has to say this about Charley: “Bigger than Uncle Charley! Because Charley is not liked, He’s liked, but he’s not well liked.”(p.144)

Thus, Willy is completely under the influence of American dream of success. He fails to see that Biff has not been trained to achieve the greatness that he wants for him. And it is Willy himself who is responsible for Biff’s failure. Even Willy feels guilty and thinks that Biff hates him for this. What is more, Willy’s projection of himself as a model for his sons proves to be Biff’s undoing; for, Willy has his feet of clay. This is why Biff’s hero- worship of his father comes to an end when he discovers Willy with a prostitute in a Boston hotel. Biff’s father- fantasy is broken and he is left disillusioned and aimless. Biff sees the affair as a betrayal of Linda, his mother, of the family, and of the home. The image of the father and the husband is broken when Willy gives the woman “Mama’s stockings”. He is enraged at Willy’s infidelity and calls him a “fake”. He loses faith in his father and drops the idea of continuing his studies. As Willy learns later from Bernard, Biff came back to his room the same day, burnt his sneakers and thus put an end to a bright career in sports. Thereafter, they are never able to trust each other. Biff’s knows his father’s secret and Willy also knows that Biff knows that secret. As a result of this, a latent hostility develops between them, which comes to surface whenever they confront each other. Linda, too, refers to it without knowing its background, when she asks Biff:

“When you write you’re coming, he’s all smiles and talks about the future, and –he’s just so wonderful. And then the closer you seem to come, the more shaky he gets, and then, by the time you get here, he’s arguing and he seems angry at you...why are you so hateful to each other? Why is that?”(p.161)

This hostility is the root cause of estrangement between the father and the son. Biff's failure to achieve success in any field is a shattering blow to Willy. He cannot accept that Biff is a failure. But his love for Biff is so great that he is obsessed of doing something for him even when he believes that Biff doesn't respect him anymore. "Why can't I give him something and not have him hate him?" (p.213) he asks Ben. Willy struggles desperately to regain his fatherhood. He does not even hesitate to sacrifice his life for the sake of his son's future. Leela Muralidharan rightly remarks: "Willy Loman dies at his happiest moment. He is at last rewarded with the knowledge of Biff's love for him. His life is in disarray, he is a failure in his profession, but all these pale into insignificance once he realizes that his son loves him and has always loved him."⁴ Willy's suicide sets an example of love for his son Biff. "In this he is given his existence," says Miller, "his fatherhood, for which he has always striven and until now he could not achieve."⁵ Through his suicide, Willy seeks a reconciliation with his son and also Biff's restoration in life.

Happy is a prototype of Willy and he, too, adores his father. He fully believes in his father's dream of success even though he is less favoured by Willy. In spite of this, the two brothers share a good relationship with each other. Happy is more successful than Biff in so far as he has got a stable job. He has succeeded in getting his own apartment, a car and women. Like his father, he dreams of material success and social status. He makes enough money but he believes he cannot go higher in life unless the merchandise manager in his firm dies. Willy's ideals can be clearly seen in Happy. Happy, like Biff, is so puffed up with Willy's ideals that he can't take orders from anybody. He has all the material comforts yet he is not content. And just as Biff has become a compulsive thief because of his failure, Happy has become a compulsive womanizer. He has inherited the worst of Willy's traits without the saving possibility of love. He is unable to realize the hollowness of his father's dreams even after Willy commits suicide. He says in Requiem: "I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have – to come out number one man." (p.222)

In contrast to the Loman family, another family depicted by Miller is, that of Charley, who is Willy's neighbour and friend. Through Charley and his son Bernard, the father-son relationship has been portrayed in a different light from that of Lomans. Willy and Charley are nearly of the same age, are from the same neighbourhood and at one time had a similar social and economic status. Charley's son Bernard is also of the same age as Biff's, yet, their future turns out to be very different from each other's. Charley and Bernard's relationship is based on love and understanding. Both of them are concerned with the basics; unlike the Lomans who build castles in the air. They do not follow the phony American dream and their feet are firmly on the ground. Charley never had any theory to preach, no magic formula to achieve the position that he has reached: "My salvation is that I never took any interest in anything" (p.191) He never preached his son or exhibited any interest in success. The result is that he is a successful businessman, whereas Willy is without any job. Even Bernard is presented as a foil to Biff and Happy. Bernard was a friend and a fan of Biff's in his adolescence. But unlike the Loman boys he never sacrificed his studies for the sake of games. That is why he is bespectacled at a young age. But this "anaemic" boy rises to the position of a Supreme Court lawyer, whereas Biff and Happy are nowhere in their careers. Bernard is settled and has two sons but Biff and Happy are still bachelors with no hope of settlement. Avtar Singh rightly remarks:

Charley and Bernard have succeeded where Willy and Biff have failed: thus, their principle function in the play is to serve as contrasts. Charley says that he has succeeded because he has never been passionately dedicated to anything. Yet the play shows that Charley is dedicated to being a good man, as opposed to being a success in Willy's terms. Although unaware of his dedication, Charley's unconscious commitment to human above material factors is the key to his happiness, just as the reverse is the key to Willy's failure.⁶

3.2. HUSBAND –WIFE RELATIONSHIP:

The husband- wife relationship is portrayed through Willy and Linda. Linda is a supportive wife. She is always there when Willy needs her. She is wise and sympathetic. She holds the family together: she keeps the accounts, encourages her husband when he is disheartened. Through Linda, says Porter, "Miller suggests a family solidarity centering around the wife and mother."⁷ Linda's devotion to her husband can be seen throughout the play. She shows a constant wifely solicitude for Willy. Willy, too, is fully aware of her devotion to him and he acknowledges this fact: "You're my foundation and my support, Linda." (p.135)

3.3. MOTHER – SON RELATIONSHIP:

Linda as a mother to Biff and Happy is equally warm and loving. She and her sons share a good relationship. She is an affectionate mother and quite indulgent towards her two sons. She likes it when they are at home. The two sons, too, love their mother and respect her. Happy, for example, says that he would like to marry someone like their mother while Biff considers his mother a perfect woman. Linda loves both her sons but she is not crazy about them. Her love for them has not blinded her from the fact that her sons are quite casual about and almost indifferent to the sad plight of Willy. She constantly defends her husband even though she is unaware of the cause of friction between the father and the son. She plays an important role in the reconciliation between Willy and Biff.

3.4. SIBLINGS' RELATIONSHIP:

Next is the brother- brother relationship which is portrayed through Biff and Happy. Biff is two years senior to Happy, but both are quite close to each other. In their adolescence Happy knew that their father always favoured Biff but he had no grudges against each either. Both the brothers become nostalgic when they remember their past years and think of the days when they shared their secrets, their desires, their confidences. Both are still unsettled but they agree that they would like to marry a girl like their mother "somebody with substance" (p.140) It is Happy to whom Biff reveals his true state: "I've had twenty or thirty different kinds of jobs since I left home before the war, and it always turn out the same...I know all I've done is to waste my life."(p.138-139) Happy too, shares his confidences. Biff makes a proposal of raising cattle in the countryside while Happy suggests the name "Loman Brothers." Thus, the two brothers share a bond of love and understanding.

The other two brothers depicted in the play are Willy and Ben. Ben is not directly presented but portrayed only through events depicted in Willy's past. Willy has a great admiration for his elder brother, Ben, who left America at the age of seventeen and returned when he was rich. For him Ben is "success incarnate". He always asks for Ben's approval, even in the upbringing of his sons. Willy keeps asking Ben the secret of his success, but he receives only cryptic answers. Towards the end, he asks Ben's opinion about his contemplated suicide and only when he is satisfied that Ben approves, does he proceed to kill himself. Ben is intended as a contrast to Willy. The purpose of introducing Ben is to show that civilized and urbanized America with her law and justice could not give Willy what Ben has acquired outside America. But then, Willy could never be so ruthlessly machiavellian as Ben and hence his failure.

4. CONCLUSION:

Thus it can be said, Miller goes deeply in portraying several aspects of the family relationships in **Death of a Salesman**. Different aspects of family relationships have been dealt with but the prominent place goes to father- son relationship. **Death of a Salesman** is one of those plays where father- son relationship is shown with its full intensity and in changing aspects but in which love and the feeling of mutual sacrifice surpasses all bickering and petty concern.

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