



Tragic Strain in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman

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Abstract: Arthur Miller is one of the greatest playwrights that America has ever produced. He is also one of the greatest critics of contemporary American society, as his works often portray his hero as a misfit in an unkind and materialistic world. Here in this play, Willy Loman is futilely fighting against oppressive forces which never let him succeed. In this brutal world of cut throat competition, Willy fights for survival as well as desires to fulfill his American dream of success; his tragedy evolves in this race for existence and desire fulfillment. Willy Loman, the protagonist in the play, unlike the Shakespearean heroes; is neither a prince nor a king. Yet, he is portrayed as a tragic hero who has an insatiable desire to succeed. He has lofty dreams and mammoth ambitions but he becomes a mere cog in the American system and his ambitions remain unfulfilled.

Key Words: tragic, success, American dream, success myth, failure, salesman, anti – hero.

1. INTRODUCTION

A tragedy is a tale of intense agony of the soul of the protagonist which leads to the catastrophic end, either of the hero or the heroine. As Aristotle has defined “tragedy is an imitation of an action which is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude.” (1) The tragic hero in a tragedy is governed by his or her pre-ordained end. He also suffers from ‘hamartia’ which hurls him headlong into the slough of sorrow and from which he resurrects like Jesus Christ experiencing nobility and chastity, which is called the cathartic effect. Although he doesn't remain alive to taste its sweetness.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A tragic hero unlike a modern hero, like that of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, is a person who doesn't come from the common strata of life. He is a prince, or a king or a superhero but he must suffer from a tragic flaw. However, the concept of Aristotle's tragedy, today, has undergone a sea change. Aristotle has stated in *The Poetics* that the tragic character should be good but not too good and “his catastrophe should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty.” (2) But it has been established that our judicious and prudent actions do not always lead to good nor the contrary to what is bad. There is no metaphysical solutions either for a person or for sins or sorrows. In this mysterious and incalculable world, to act and not to blunder are not two but one. Paradoxically, the wisest and the best are but as children and there is no truth in the doctrine either in life or tragedy, the mirror of its grievous mischances, that the afflictions of the good are necessarily the fruits of their own acts, of imperfect character, of faulty judgement, that error never creep into the reckonings of Fate or that her (Fate) awards are impassable. On the contrary, pious and true men have been hated for their piety and truth (as Christ was nailed to death and Saint Joan was burnt alive) persecuted for their services to humanity, imprisoned, tortured and assassinated. In P.B.Shelley's 'Prometheus Unbound', Prometheus suffers not for his faults but for his virtues. The same may be the fate of Shakespearean's characters like Cordelia in the play *King Lear* and Desdemona in *Othello* who experience tragic bitterness merely because of their goodness done to others whereas characters like Iago (*Othello*), Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, Oswald (*King Lear*) flourish till Act iv when they, too, are forced to embrace death because of their Machiavellian schemes against the pious characters. (3) Even in *The Old Man And The Sea* (Hemingway's novella) and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* we find an ordinary character, a fisherman, Santiago and Willy Loman, a salesman, are tragic heroes who suffer either in the hands of the destiny or social scenario of the dream relating to America's social myth.

3. AN ORDINARY MAN WITH LOFTY AIM

Death of a Salesman embraces in its texture the pathetic character Willy Loman who suffers endlessly because of social circumstances in which he is placed. A comically deluded fool, becomes a tool in the hands of his extreme



confidence and utter despair. Unlike , the tragic hero of Aristotle or Shakespeare or Sophocles , Willy Loman is an ordinary character who wants so many things to do. No doubt, he has lofty dreams and mammoth ambitions but he becomes a mere cog in the American system and his ambitions remain unfulfilled.

If we read *Death of a Salesman* between the lines we'll come to know that there is almost nothing to be said for Loman. As he has no creed or philosophy of life beyond that of making money, making buddies. He cannot be faithful to his helpful and long suffering wife. Again, unlike Shakespearean hero, his lack of stature , his narrow view of reality , his obvious character defects, diminish and decimate the scope of the action and the possibility of universal application . Against a large historical perspective and without the American context ,Willy Loman “ has been criticized for being ‘too little’ or ‘too common’ to meet the supposed requirement of Aristotle.”(4) Willy’s character thoroughly lacks all the hallmarks of any elevated position. Neither his ideals are lofty nor his actions are grand. But inspite of this, his inability to fulfill his dreams is sadly his tragic flaw which leads to his downfall. As Jacobson rightly remarks – “ This differentiates Willy Loman from a dramatic tradition of introspective figures who, like Shakespeare’s Hamlet or Milton’s Samson , confront their situations in a profound social and metaphysical solitude.” It is true that Willy Loman is really a ‘low character’, but we must not forget that he is also the representative of an American type, the salesman who has accepted an ideal shaped for him and pressed on him by forces of his culture. This ideal is the matrix from which Willy Loman emerges and by which his destiny is determined. He is ,infact, the personification of the success myth conceived by Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman*. The worst of Willy is committed to deal with Horatio, Alger ideal, the rags to riches romance of the American dream and the so-called ideal hurls him headlong from his dream to the bitter realities of life where he tastes nothing but agony and experiences nothing but frustration.

4. AMERICAN DREAM OF SUCCESS

Willy Loman’s history begins when he carries out on his shoulders the dream of America. With the acceleration of the plot, the subsequent events reflected in the play show him failing to overcome the social environment. Besides, he also fails to achieve the phantom of success he has pursued throughout his life. He returns from a trip without making a single sale, he braces the boss for a New York job and a salary raise and is ‘fired’ for his pains. (5) He finishes by facing the hard fact that his whole life has been a lie. The triumphal ascent of the Alger hero is reversed in every particular. The rags to riches dream, he had conceived never materializes and the salesman never escapes his rags.

Death of a Salesman encompasses two dimensions- the dream world of success myth with its merging of passed triumphs indicates of glory to come of glimmering possibilities and the actual world of small bricked enclosed house of Loman, the walls of which are cut away to permit free passage to the personae in dream. The first touch of reality shatters the so called his American myth into ashes. The worst part of his character is that when his utility ends, he is discarded. (This is perhaps the way of the world, where the rising Sun receives salute and when it droops , people discard him from their bosom.) His personal ambitions and desires go to the winds and he becomes a pathetic figure. His death in the end of the drama establishes nothing for him.

5. ANTI – HERO QUALITIES

The typical characteristics of Willy Loman personae establishes him in the tradition of the anti-hero. The name itself is descriptive. Willy is a ‘low man’ on the economic and social totem pole. Linda, his wife, who sees him clearly and sympathetically calls him a small man. He is a white collar worker, who works on salary and/or commission for a company. His economic future is at the mercy of his employer. He does not show any marked intellectual capacity or training and his wisdom expressed in platitudes is gnarled from common sense. When he is away from home, his moral life functions according to the travelling salesman tradition, not excluding the clandestine affair or the blue joke. He does not , however, consider himself dissolute, according to his rights, he is honest enough. For better or worst the salesman is intended to represent the average lower-middle class American. Besides, his antecedents are also typical for a man who resides in Brooklyn, the family background which Arthur Miller gives his hero, stretches the imagination. In a sequence with Ben, Willy remembers his father, a man with a great beard who played the flute . His (Willy Loman’s)father was also a travelling salesman. After the death of his father , Willy Loman had a yearning to step into the shoes of his father. This background fits an idealized model for Willy rather than any plausible or realistic family tree. As a typical character, this small man has a typical background. Unluckily he envisions his origins in terms of the American experience where he fumbles miserably and falls to his nose without gaining any experience.

Willy Loman’s status in society ,his family background are typical to even more of a type to his identity as a salesman. He is a product of a producer- consumer society in which the go- between is a pivotal figure. Society has labeled him and Willy has accepted the label, society has offered him a set of values and an objective and he has committed himself to them. tn so accepting them, Willy becomes The Salesman. He cannot define himself in any other term. So he insists in his debate with Charley that “he has a job”, he is the “New Englishman”. Even after he has been



fired like King Lear who poses himself to be a King even after abdicating the throne, Willy Loman remains in 'job' even after he has been fired. His adherence to the cult of his personality, "of being well- liked" is a reflection of his identity. Before he can sell anything, and if he can sell also, he must sell himself, his personality. He has been shaped by a society that believed and optimistically in the myth of success. He has become the agent and representative of society. Society which is based on cut- throat competition and which unfortunately cuts more of the throat of a person than giving him employment. It is because of this cut – throat competition prevailing in society which becomes the root cause of the catastrophic end of Willy Loman.

6. PLOT OF THE PLAY

The plot structure of *Death of a Salesman* dramatizes the failure of myth by depicting the past and present failures of the salesman. Events in the chronological present are germination of seeds sown in the past; both present and past are blended together in Willy's consciousness which first of all unhinge him, and then pushes him to the slough of sorrow resulting into his death. Arthur Miller builds up a sense of fate in his drama by showing the impingement of the unalterable past upon the present . Willy Loman's whole life has been shaped by his commitment to the success ideology ,his dream based on the Alger myth; his present plight is shown to be the inevitable consequence of this commitment. The events of the Act I – past and present contrapose optimism and harsh reality and between these two Willy Loman is virtually sandwiched. In the chronological present, he is a tired drummer. His son Biff is almost victimized in the clutches of the world of competition. And his second son Happy is virtually a contemptible young man who has carved out a Eutopian world where he deceives himself more insistently. He directs his energy towards chasing damsels and corrupting them. Thus, we see that like Willy, Biff and Happy are lost and confused by their failure to go ahead. Willy's home coming after the abortive trip is contrasted with his return in the "good old days". In a way all the characters are tightly woven into the false values which are clearly destructive . In this world of optical illusion, Willy Loman fails to understand the truth of cut – throat competition, and thus, finds himself caught in the so – called glittering values where he fails to find himself economic freedom. He represents all those Americans in the mesh of the myth and the moral preserves it generates. As a type, he is a mere product of social and economic forces outside of himself. But in his struggle with those forces , he is a total failure. He, undoubtedly, battles to retain his faith, but is shaken by doubts about his ability to live. According to his belief, he humiliates himself to discover the secret that lies at his heart. And thus, he goes to his death without knowing why he has lived or why he is dying. He fulfils the destiny of the type. But as an individual who has suffered he remains unfulfilled. The salesman can neither suffer nor be converted but the family man – the husband, the father and friend – does suffer

The worst part of the character of Willy Loman is when he becomes a victim in his own eyes; when his son finds him with a woman in a restaurant. This is, perhaps, the worst part of his tragic pain. The moment Biff sees him in the fold of a woman, he becomes disillusioned. His ideal is smashed into pieces and he (Loman) becomes "a phoney little fake". Besides, the image of husband and father is totally broken. The worst part of it is when Biff sees the affair as a betrayal of Linda, the family and the home. The image of husband and father is broken when Willy gives the woman (Mama's stockings.)

7. CONCLUSION:

It is only after his death that Willy acquires 'freedom' in his grave. He has suffered sometimes at the hands of society or from his delusions or he falls headlong in the eyes of Biff and his wife Linda. As he has committed a sin against humanity and a crime against family, he must go to his death, helpless and deluded. Unfortunately, like the tragic hero he cannot acknowledge his mistakes, he must experience bitterness from what he does or what he is asked to do by society. We feel that Willy's suffering is real and deep. He arouses the emotions of pity ,fear and sympathy in our souls. We feel cathartic when he goes to the eternal sleep after his death. Willy acquires grandeur and magnanimity only after his death.

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