Between Reality and Fantasy: A Psychoanalytic Study of Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of the Salesman*

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Original Article

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Abstract

This study investigates the impetus behind Willy Loman's aberrant behavior in Arthur Miller's *Death of the Salesman*. Despite aspiring to become a famous businessman, embodying the struggle of American society to materialize the American Dream, Willy ultimately fails despite his steadfast ambitions. The unfavorable circumstances, such as the challenging capitalist society, the high ideals of the American dream, and the parasitic consumerist culture, all retard his efforts in establishing his career: resulting in consistent failure, he starts exhibiting abnormal behavior. Utilizing Freudian defense mechanisms such as regression, denial, repression, and displacement, this article aims to explain the incongruent personality of Willy Loman in his unpromising endeavor to safeguard himself from anxiety and depression. Focusing on the protagonist's attitude towards his family and the abnormal behavior he manifests throughout the story, the paper employs textual analysis to argue that Willy cannot cope with reality and, therefore, in denying reality, takes haven in the self-imagined disillusioning realm of success. Willy associates his failure with others, repressing the unpleasant realities and regressing the present he feels is unfavorable, creating an illusionary world around him in which he is the most successful Salesman. The study concludes that Willy's illusions of Willy result from various psychological propensities that he unconsciously adopts to face the unsettling situation.

Keywords: *Death of the Salesman,* Willy Loman, Defense Mechanisms, Abnormal Behavior

Introduction

Considered one of the iconic playwrights, essayists, novelists, and screenwriters in the annals of American Literature, Arthur Asher Miller (1915-2005) can be regarded as one of the most influential figures and enduring dramatists of the post-war epoch in America whose piercing criticism of societal issues characterizes his genius. Revolutionizing the American theater through his plays, Miller has canonized the art of theater in the US, earning him a distinguished place in American literature. Miller's plays deal with common psychological problems of the common person and middle-class anxieties; the theme of depression and insecurity manifests much of Miller's past. Being a dramatist of the crisis era, Miller represents its vivid aspect in such a manner that it remains no more an anxiety of a single family but of every American during the economic crisis. Due to his personal experience of the common life in America, mostly his plays reflect his worry for the common person.

Death of a Salesman (henceforth called *Salesman*) opened on Broadway on February 10, 1949, at the Morocco Theatre. It is Miller's best-known and critically acclaimed work of art, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, a Tony Award for Best Author, and the New York Drama Circle Critics

Award. *Salesman* took Miller to the zenith of his success, earning him worldwide recognition. The play's protagonist, Willy Loman, not only depicts a single American individual but also represents every American family. Brenda Murphy (2011) remarks that *Salesman* is possibly the greatest dramatic work by an American; Miller created "an attack on some of the basic values of American business culture" (p. 3). Similarly, it is such a rich work that even critics cannot agree on whether Salesmen should be considered a social criticism, tragedy, or psychological study. As a result, everyone will have to extract their meanings and conclusions.

Salesman recounts the story of Willy Loman, a 63-year-old traveling salesman by profession, working for Howard Wagner on commission. At the beginning of the play, he is depicted as an exhausted salesman who is no longer able to earn enough money. Both his sons, Biff and Happy, are failures like him. Throughout his life, he has tried to be successful with his misconceived ideals. He lives out and out in delusion and daydreaming. He also teaches his wrong ideas to his sons, which proves to be catastrophic. Linda, his wife, is his strong supporter, encourages him throughout her life, and consoles him not to lose hope. She loves him despite all his illusions and failures; Willy is the 'most handsome' man for her. In the case of the American dream, Willy has lost his mental well-being. He often hallucinates and talks to his dead brother, Bin, in daydreams. He is extremely disappointed; he thinks that even though he and his sons are well-liked and well-admired, they could not succeed. At the end of the play, Willy commits suicide to provide his sons with insurance money so that they may be able to get themselves stabilized and live a prosperous life.

Considering the above brief introductory remarks, this paper aims to explain the cause of Willy's failure. Utilizing the defensive reflexes of the unconscious propounded by Sigmund Freud, it uses textual analysis as a research method to demystify Willy's delusional psychology and aberrant behavior, his frequent retreat into the world of fantasy, his unhealthy relationship with other characters, particularly his sons, and his misconception of reality that shape his past, present, and future. In other words, the paper attempts to discover the protagonist's tragic flaw, a personal trait in the character of Willy Loman that bars him from attaining self-actualization and lies at the heart of the tragedy.

Literature Review

Shocked by the economic anxiety and the following war, Arthur Miller developed a sense of insecurity and discontent with contemporary capitalist American ideals. This growing aversion greatly affected his writing: psychological problems of the common person, middle-class anxieties, and motifs of depression and insecurity became prominent features to characterize Miller's writing, occasionally hinting at his past. Miller's concrete treatment of social anxieties in his oeuvre transcends socio-economic issues, presenting an organic portrait of the restless spirit of the age.

Irving Jacobson (1975), in his article *Family Dreams in Death of a Salesman,* calls Loman, unlike other critics who claim to consider Loman a modern Everyman, an incongruent synthesis of 'Everyman and Faust' (p. 247) who is consistently driven by the desire for social acknowledgment that is persistently denied to him. Loman's notion of success transcends tangibles such as wealth, goods, and status, reaching the realm of ideas; however, his dilemma is his inability to actualize ideas and dreams. Consequently, he is consumed by his struggle to make himself home with the outer world, a motif that characterizes most of Miller's writings, by finding love, security, and identity. In other words, Loman yearns for a family. Unable to achieve the sense of being a/in family, Loman ends up in failure, loneliness, and utter despair; his life is crushed by criticism, abandonment, indifference, and rejection as he yearns for gratification (p. 248). Because Loman needs gratification to take a social form, his life is crushed by indifference, criticism, rejection, and

abandonment. In one of the scenes with Howard Wagner, appealing to familial ties in the past, Loman asserts: "I was with the firm when your father used to carry you in here in his arms," to which Wagner answers: "Business is business" (Miller, p. I79). Wagner's answer suggests rejection and a final loss of the possibility of creating a family on a social level.

Moreover, Loman's death implies that a man's fierce desire to make the world a home can sometimes cost him his family and even his life. Barclay W. Bates (1968) claims that Willy suggests 'the lost pastoral life' hinted at by his frequent imaginary voyages of bygone years. These apartment houses, of course, symbolize urban (p. 164). *Salesman* begins with Willy's returns from a selling trip to New England. As he imagines the pastoral past (warm sun, thick trees, and the warm air) while driving, Willy cannot control the car and runs off the road, symbolizing his failure as a businessman in the industrial American society. His nostalgic ambivalence is ironically and repeatedly revealed in the opening scene, where he complains to Linda about Biff's obsession with farm life, while moments later, he is angry with the disappearance of rustic amenities such as fresh air, grass, and backyard gardens from Brooklyn. Not happy with the growing population, Willy considers the competition for a better life maddening. So, he soon finds himself transported to a day in boys' lost youth: a house surrounded by trees and open space while Biff and Happy polish Willy's car (p. 165). On another occasion after the restaurant scene, Willy, accompanied by the flute melody, searches for a seed store. Towards the end of the story, Willy, while kneeling in the backyard trying to plant the seeds he has purchased, realizes Biff's love, abandons the hope of fulfilling his pastoral past, and sacrifices himself by giving insurance money to Biff to launch a business career (p. 167). Biff and Happy, like their father, are also drawn unreasonably towards the simplicity of a pastoral life, which they call the "Florida idea" (p. 167). Interestingly, Biff, after having experienced pastoral life, is finally able to free himself from the bondage of his father's dreams: "I saw the things that I love in the world. The work and the food and the time to sit and smoke ... all I want is out there, waiting for me" (p. 168). When choosing the pastoral life, Biff denies the lure of the American dream of the pursuit of wealth and becomes more human.

Fred Ribkoff (2000), while explaining the crisis of identity in Salesman, attempts to show the intricate relationship among shame, guilt, and identity in his article Shame, Guilt, Empathy, and the Search for Identity in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. Ribkoff claims that Biff triumphs over the situation by confronting shame and separating his identity from his father's. At the same time, the latter fails to do so, ultimately crippling himself and his family. Willy, Ribkoff argues, is 'driven by shame' and that 'he kills himself to preserve his dream of being "well-liked" and a successful father and salesman' (p. 54). Ironically, his suicide neither benefits his sons nor him when no salesmen come to attend his funeral. His wife Linda's words at the end: "We're free and clear" (p. 39) 'reveal the degree to which she and her husband lived in denial' (p. 54). These words surface the deeply felt shame of the couple behind the illusion of being a successful salesman and the crippling feelings of inferiority and inadequacy that ultimately drive him to self-destruction. Willy could not understand his guilt because he could not confront and come to terms with his shame like Biff nor his son's pain and his responsibility for it. In *Salesman*, Ribkoff contends that Miller unintentionally suggests that 'perfection lies in a confrontation with feelings of shame that enable one to understand guilt and arrive at a clearer sense of identity, as well as to empathize with others' (p. 54).

Diane Long Hoeveler (1978), in her article *Death of a Salesman as Psychomachia* attempts to show that 'all the characters in the play are not only filtered through Willy's perceptions but represent aspects of his splintered mind' (p. 632). She maintains that Miller paints the complex

moral world of American values and beliefs through the play's characters: Linda represents security, Biff personifies the vanished promise of America, and Happy, ironically allegorical, represents sensuality and sterile materialism and sensuality that has consumed the frontiers. Ben, on the other hand, is the character who is the most obvious functional element of Willy's mind, symbolizing Willy's desire for success by following Darwinian philosophy; Charley signifies capitalism, while in Bernard and young Howard, being father and son is reflected in Willy and his sons' failures. Therefore, all the characters are reflections of Willy, each representing an aspect of his failure and the entire America to materialize her dream (p. 634). She reiterates that *Salesman,* as subtitled by Miller as "certain private conversations," are 'private conversations within Willy's mind and with those characters who shape and have been shaped by his values' (p. 634). This, however, does not suggest that Linda, Biff, Happy, and Charley are not actual characters; instead, they, as Miller believes, express the possibility of an alternative notion of reality. Therefore, convincing himself of being a significant salesman in New England, he takes self-pleasure in thinking of himself as a loving husband, devoted father, and handsome person and that his sons can conquer the world. But all these imaginings are mere delusions, though unfortunately believed to be true to some degree by all the family members, as made clear by both Happy and Linda's insistence on Biff to tell his father only what he wants to hear. In other words, all the characters are Willy's dream of reality, as suggested by the initial scene in which an air of dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality (p. 634).

Frank Ardolino (1998), in his article *Miller's Poetic Use of Demotic English in Death of a Salesman,* claims that *Salesman* takes place in Willy's mind, characterized by 'the paradoxical union of reality and the delusory fulfillment of his grandiose dreams of omnipotence' (p. 121). Willy associates his paradise with when Biff and Happy grew up in Brooklyn. Ironically, incorporating the future into his changeless paradise, Willy believed that Biff, who he thought to be "divine" as a football player, would one day become a successful businessman. Before Biff realizes Willy's desired and projected future, he loses faith in Willy's dreams, ultimately destroying its coherence. As a result, Willy is transferred to the condition of confusion about his present and the notion of paradise. Willy is not experiencing the normal chronological time; instead, he lives in a hyperbolic future and struggles to actualize it at the cost of his destruction (p. 121).

Moreover, Ardolino, quoting Giles Mitchell, argues that Willy demands perfection, omnipotence, grandiosity, omnipotence because he has the personality disorder pathological narcissism. He is blinded by his fatal flaw, filling him with hubris to the extent that he challenges the limits of his humanity. Consequently, like an annoyed god, he believes that he will achieve apotheosis by punishing his hubris by committing suicide. This might account for the audience's response to Willy's fate with pity and fear: Willy's fate might have been theirs (p. 120).

Discussion

Defense Mechanism

Defense mechanisms are the unconscious strategies adopted by the mind to cope with anxiety. Unlike conscious strategies used by an individual to evade an unwanted situation, defense mechanisms are involuntary psychological attempts that alter one's behavior to alleviate mental distress (Cramer, 1994). Defenses are divided into certain categories by the researchers, ranging from mature defenses that keep an individual in the state of self-awareness regarding their thoughts and actions to intermediate defenses that keep the unwanted psychological states out of conscious awareness to immature defenses that restrict individual's awareness of and response to the stress (Perry et al., 2015). It was Sigmund Freud who first presented the term in *The Neuro-*

psychoses of Defense (1894), arguing that to keep away undesirable feelings or unacceptable thoughts having the potential of creating a "distressing effect" on the human mind, the mind unconsciously adopts certain tactics to resist these possible distressing impacts. An individual's actions, feelings, and thoughts are, Tyson (2006) claims, produced because of the interaction between the id, the ego, and the superego (p. 25). If a malfunction occurs in the parts above the human psyche, it results in anxiety. Therefore, to release anxiety, the mind adopts various defense mechanisms, such as denial, repression, regression, selective perception, and projection (15). After Freud, Anna Freud (1936) developed a systematic treatise on the function, development, and varieties of defense mechanisms. She broadened the scope of the functions of defenses, claiming it to be the primary goal of the ego in warding off anxiety and guilt from both internal and external sources of danger: internal danger—"dread of the strength of the instincts" (A. Freud, 1936, p. 63) — was seen to result in defense against "instinctual anxiety" (p. 63) while external danger to the ego was thought to occur as a result of children disobeying parents, resulting in "objective anxiety" and adults internalizing conscience resulting in "superego anxiety" (p. 60).

Defense Mechanisms in the Character of Willy Loman

Attacking the dehumanizing consequences of capitalism in transforming the American dream into an American nightmare, *Salesman* portrays Willy Loman's professional failure in the backdrop of his psychological imbalance. Miller uses Willy's downfall to attack the false ideals of the American promise and the timeless human dilemma in general. Now, at odds with his past choices and the ideals he has created for himself and his family, Willy desperately attempts to justify and keep his broken life together. His struggle and anxiety can better be understood in the light of his psychological states that guide his speech and actions in the play. Anguished and alienated, Willy is drawn continuously towards failure and, ultimately, suicide by the demons of his mind, luring him into the realm of delusion.

Denial

Though Willy is a failure, he cannot face this fact. He lives in a self-created world of success from which he seeks continuous gratification. Since the world is imaginary, Willy must constantly uphold it. In other words, he must deny the existence of the real world, made only of delusions and failures, for it is the cause of his perpetual anxiety. He resorts to lying when he tells Linda that "they do not need me in New York" and that "I'm vital in New England" (04, Act I). But, after a month, once not showing a similar pretense, his mournful nostalgia clearly shows that "when [he] went north the first time, the Wagner Company didn't know where New England was!' (04; Act I). It can be inferred that Willy is in constant denial of reality. There is no truth in his claim of becoming in charge of New York and increasing opportunities for the company had the old Wagner been alive.

Similarly, Willy exaggerates before his boys about himself for being liked and admired by the Mayor in Willy's recent trip to the north: "Well, I went north to Providence. Met the Mayor"; "he said, "Morning!" And I said, "You got a fine city here (18; Act I). However, it was Willy who said 'Morning' first, not the Mayor; it was Willy who had coffee with the Mayor, even making the event questionable. Willy tries to give an impression of himself being a notable, "know[n] up and down [in] New England by finest people" (19; Act 1), aspiring to become a bigger salesman, "Bigger than Charley! Because Charley is not—liked…not—well-liked" (18; Act I). He struggles to assure the boys that he comes from a great origin when he asks his brother, Ben, to tell the boys "the kind of stock they spring from" (33). Ben recounts that "Father was a very great man" who "with one gadget he made in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime' (34, Act 1). However,

Willy does not admit that he is not from the higher class of America. On another occasion, unlike Linda, Howard refutes his claim of averaging "a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commissions" for Howard's father by reminding him of the reality that "[he/WILLY] never averaged (62; Act 1). Howard, knowing reality, does not count on him. Willy continues to persist in the delusion of actually being a great man. Even on occasion before his suicide, in the last conversation between Willy and Biff, he, unlike Biff, could not realize his actual social standing: Growling at Biff's realization of being "a dime a dozen," he responds angrily that "[he is] not a dime a dozen! [he is] Willy Loman" (105; Act II).

Regression

Haunted by frequent images from the past, Willy Loman shows signs of frequent regression into the past. He returns from a selling trip to New England, where he while imagining the warm sun, thick trees, and the warm air while driving, runs his car off the road. This accident symbolizes his failure as a businessman in the industrial American society. Later, he complains to Linda about Biff's obsession with farm life; however, moments later, Willy protests the disappearance of Brooklyn's rustic amenities such as fresh air, grass, and backyard gardens. He could not see himself thrown into wild competition with millions of ambitious businessmen.

Consequently, he seeks refuge in the past on a day in the boys' lost youth: a house surrounded by trees and open space while Biff and Happy polish Willy's car (p. 165). He continues to seek gratification in his memories without knowing that he is trying to escape his present, which is synonymous with failure. Towards the end of the story, Willy, while kneeling in the backyard trying to plant the seeds he has purchased, realizes Biff's love, abandons the hope of fulfilling his pastoral past, and sacrifices himself by giving insurance money to Biff to launch a business career (p.167). Biff and Happy, like their father, are drawn unreasonably towards the simplicity of a pastoral life, which they call the "Florida idea" (p.167). Interestingly, Biff, after having experienced pastoral life, is finally able to free himself from the bondage of his father's dreams: "I saw the things that I love in the world. The work and the food and the time to sit and smoke ... all I want is out there, waiting for me" (p.168). When choosing the pastoral life, Biff denies the lure of the American dream of the pursuit of wealth and becomes more human.

In one of the scenes, after Willy's fight with his neighbor Charley, Willy relives a meeting with his brother Ben, where Willy's insecurity is evident. Will mourns the fact that his "dad left When [he] was such a baby and [he] never had a chance to talk to him" and that [he] still feels—kind of temporary about [him]self" (36; Act I). This suggests that Willy also has some traumatic memories of his past, such as being abandoned by his father at the young age of 3 and being caught in feelings of inadequacy and insecurity for the rest of his life. Willy Loman might have become a successful carpenter rather than an esteemed salesman, for he can make a ceiling that Charley, his brother-in-law, comments as a "piece of work." Willy dreams of a rustic life D, hoping to build beautiful guest houses on his desired land for his boys. Biff and Happy: "Cause I got so many fine tools; all I'd need would be a little lumber and some peace of mind." Moments before his suicide, he contemplates and admires his own house as a skilled artist: "All the cement, the lumber, the reconstruction I put in this house. There isn't a crack to be found in it anymore" (54; Act II). However, it is significant to note that Willy's craft of carpentry does not belong to the capitalist world he lives in. Marching into Marx's alienated world of labor, Willy performs work that is "not personal to him, is not part of his nature; therefore, he does not fulfill himself in work, but denies himself. . .. It satisfies no spontaneous urge but is only a means for satisfying wants that have nothing to do with work" (Eric and Marry, 1962, p. 97). More excruciating than Marx's

imagined world, Willy, in a complex world of selling and buying products, cannot produce concrete labor. His rewards are not enough to support his family, and the ultimate success he desires is never in sight. Therefore, while discussing the promising career of a salesman, Willy insists he is "building something with this firm," to which Ben replies, "What are you building? Lay your hand on it. Where is it?" (64; Act II).

Surprisingly, it is his wife Linda who keeps him in his delusion by praising his false career: "He's got a beautiful job here" and is "doing well enough" (64). When Ben asks why, she asserts: You're well-liked, and the boys love you, and someday— [*To BEN*]—why, old Wagner told him just the other day that if he keeps it up, he'll be a member of the firm, didn't he, Willy" (65; Act II). Willy wonders that if he had taken the job in Alaska, things would have been different for him and his family. This is because Ben is Willy's second self. As Centola remarks: "Ben is the other self which Willy could have had he chosen to live by a different code of ethics" (qtd. in Bloom, 2006, p.29). The reason why Willy adores Ben is because to find a fatherly figure through them. Secondly, he idolizes Ben and considers him a role model because Ben symbolizes a version of the American dream. As Centola assumes: "Ben is undoubtedly the embodiment of one kind of American dream to Willy" (qtd. in Bloom 29). To accomplish his version of the American dream, Ben's achievements are significant to him.

Similarly, Dave Singleman also symbolizes another version of the American dream. Lenkerd and Cortina call it "the dream of the salesman" (250). As Willy exclaims: "When I met a salesman in the Parker House. His name was Dave Singleman… I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want" (60-61 Act II). Growing up in a transitional time, Willy Loman could not create an acceptable identity for himself. Society has made Wall Street and Walden Pond ideal for aspiring capitalists, making less-promising skills such as carpentry a symbol of shame: "Even your grandfather," Willy tells Biff, "Was better than a carpenter" (citation). Willy was an outcast in an industrial society who could not come to terms with the demands of the market and, hence, paid the ultimate price of his life.

Repression

It is significant to note that while regressing to happy moments in the past, Willy represses the painful moments of his life. The repressed memories pop up accidentally in his conversation with other characters. In a conversation between Willy and his neighbor's son Bernard about Biff having flunked math, Willy fears that Biff will no longer be able to get a Scholarship. Bernard tells Willy that after failing, Biff "disappeared from the block for almost a month. And I got the idea that he'd gone up to New England to see you. Did he talk with you then? (p. 72). This reminds Willy of what had happened in Boston. Willy has pushed this memory to his unconscious because Biff, after flunking math, went to Boston to meet his father to ask for assistance and to talk to his math teacher, Mr. Brinbum, to get him passing marks. To his surprise and shock, Biff finds Willy with a woman in a hotel. Willy tries to justify himself and clarify the situation by exclaiming that "she's nothing to me, Biff I was Lonely, I was lonely", but Biff expresses his anger by calling him a "liar!" (95 Act II). Biff is shocked to see Willy's devilish self behind an innocent mask. He cannot handle this reality because Willy, throughout the play, has trained Biff to take illusion for truth. So, Willy, in the eyes of Biff, becomes a "phony little fake" (Salesman 208). Willy, after being left alienated and disgraced by the scornful gaze of Biff, attempts to retreat to his lost innocence from the past through self-deception that ultimately takes him to his grave as an insignificant person as Biff puts it: "who he was" (Salesman 221).

Displacement

Frustrated with his failures, Willy displaces his anger upon other characters. For instance, in one of the scenes, when his wife is mending her stockings because "they are so expensive", Willy gets angry and tells her: "I won't have you mending stockings in this house! Now throw them out!" (26; Act I). His frustration and anger are the psychological impact of his failure of not being able to provide enough money for his family. In the same line later in the play, when Biff returns from the west, Willy blames him: "You are trying to put a knife in me—don't think I don't know what you're doing!" (103; Act II). Biff replies that he is responsible for his and his son's failure.

Conclusion

Willy Loman views the outer world through the distorted medium of his fantasies, resulting in his personality splitting. Growing increasingly unstable, the chasm between external realities and Willy's inner world increases as the play progresses. He continuously attempts to project his desires upon a reality that consistently prohibits his will and ambitions, and when he fails to accomplish this task, he is driven towards suicide. Willy's psychology plays a pivotal role in the play's action: the action derives meaning from his inner world. Transported by the actual events, for instance, the return of Biff to the world of fantasies, Willy's psyche oscillates between real and imaginary realms, creating a rhythmic alternation between actuality and Willy's psychology. Each character represents a significant part of Willy's psyche and his ideals. The play's action is the cause of his deep immersion in the world of fantasies and the effect of his delusional perception of external reality. Willy regresses into the promising world of imagination and recollection, where he can fulfill the dreams and desires denied to him in life when reality becomes excruciating for him.

It should be noted that memories, however actual, are falsified by Willy's wishful thinking to attain the desired possibility. Therefore, immediately experienced reality fuses with recalling past events to create a strange perception of time. Torn between his need for harmonious self-expression on the one hand and his instinctual desire to assert himself as a competent salesman on the other, Willy tries to earn social recognition. Such contradictions in his tendencies accounts for the conflict in his conception of the ideal self and his conception of other characters about his idealized personality. In addition, his ideal self is fragmented, just like his real self.

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