



Revisiting the American Dream: Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" as a Modern Tragedy

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Abstract

This comprehensive study delves into the literary works of Arthur Miller, with a particular focus on *Death of a Salesman*, to examine the intricacies of the American Dream and its devastating consequences on individuals and society. Through a critical lens, this research investigates Miller's portrayal of the "common man" as tragic hero, the disintegration of moral values, and the illusion of social mobility. By analyzing the dramatic structure, themes, and character development in *Death of a Salesman*, this study demonstrates how Miller's work embodies the characteristics of modern tragedy, challenging traditional notions of heroism, catharsis, and narrative structure. This study examines Arthur Miller's literary works, particularly *Death of a Salesman*, as a paradigmatic example of modern tragedy. By analyzing the play's themes, characters, and dramatic structure, this research demonstrates how Miller redefines traditional notions of tragedy to reflect the complexities of modern American life. Willy Loman's tragic flaw, rooted in his pursuit of the American Dream, serves as a critique of capitalist ideologies and the illusion of social mobility. This research argues that *Death of a Salesman* embodies the characteristics of modern tragedy, including the "common man" as tragic hero, non-linear narrative, and the absence of catharsis.

Keywords: Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Modern Tragedy, American Dream, Capitalist Critique, Tragic Hero, Non-Linear Narrative, Absence of Catharsis, Literary Analysis, Dramatic Structure

Introduction

The American Dream, a notion deeply ingrained in the fabric of American society, has long been synonymous with success, prosperity, and happiness. However, beneath its gleaming facade lies a complex web of illusions and realities. Arthur Miller's seminal play, *Death of a Salesman*, penned in 1949, boldly challenged the notion of the American Dream, exposing its inherent flaws and devastating consequences. Through the tragic narrative of Willy Loman, Miller masterfully crafted a modern tragedy that continues to resonate with audiences today, probing the darker aspects of the American experience.

As a scathing critique of capitalist ideologies and the illusion of social mobility, *Death of a Salesman* raises fundamental questions about the nature of success, identity, and the human condition. Miller's deconstruction of the American Dream reveals a stark reality: the pursuit of material wealth and status often culminates in emptiness, disillusionment, and tragedy. This play's enduring relevance stems from its unflinching examination of the tensions between individual aspirations and societal expectations, highlighting the fragility of the human psyche.

This exploration revisits Miller's *Death of a Salesman* as a modern tragedy, analyzing its thematic resonance, dramatic structure, and character development. By situating the play within

the cultural and historical context of post-World War II America, this study aims to:

1. Examine the ways in which Miller subverts traditional notions of tragedy.
2. Investigate the play's critique of the American Dream and its consequences.
3. Analyze the tragic figure of Willy Loman as a symbol of modern alienation.

Through this critical lens, this research seeks to illuminate the enduring significance of *Death of a Salesman* as a powerful commentary on the human condition, inviting a reappraisal of the American Dream and its implications for contemporary society.

Revisiting the American Dream: An Exploration of Illusion and Reality

The American Dream, a concept deeply ingrained in the fabric of American society, has long been synonymous with success, prosperity, and happiness. However, beneath its gleaming facade lies a complex web of illusions and realities. This examination revisits the American Dream, probing its historical roots, cultural significance, and the devastating consequences of its unfulfilled promises.

Historical Context: The American Dream originated in the 17th century with the Puritans, who sought a new life in the New World. Over time, it evolved to encompass ideals of liberty, equality, and material prosperity. The Declaration of

Independence and the Constitution enshrined these principles, cementing the Dream's place in American ideology.

Cultural Significance: The American Dream has been a powerful cultural force, shaping American identity and influencing literature, art, and film. Works like Horatio Alger's "Ragged Dick" and F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" exemplify the Dream's allure. However, critics argue that it perpetuates consumerism, individualism, and social stratification.

Illusion vs. Reality: The American Dream's promises often clash with harsh realities:

1. Social Mobility: Economic inequality and systemic barriers hinder upward mobility.
2. Material Prosperity: Consumerism and debt undermine financial security.
3. Equality: Racial, gender, and social disparities persist.
4. Happiness: The pursuit of wealth and status often yields emptiness.

Consequences: The unfulfilled promises of the American Dream have far-reaching consequences:

1. Disillusionment: Individuals struggle with feelings of failure and disappointment.
2. Social Unrest: Inequality and injustice fuel social movements.
3. Cultural Critique: Artists and writers challenge the Dream's narrative.

Revisiting the Dream: To revitalize the American Dream, we must:

1. Redefine Success: Prioritize well-being, education, and community.
2. Address Inequality: Implement policies promoting economic and social equality.
3. Foster Critical Thinking: Encourage nuanced understandings of the Dream's complexities.

The American Dream remains a powerful cultural force, but its illusions must be confronted. By acknowledging the disparities between promise and reality, we can work towards a more inclusive, equitable society. Revisiting the American Dream invites us to reimagine a nation built on mutual support, social justice, and genuine prosperity.

Dramatic Techniques of Arthur Miller

Arthur Miller, a prominent American playwright, employed a range of dramatic techniques to craft compelling and thought-provoking plays. His works, such as "Death of a Salesman" and "The Crucible," continue to captivate audiences with their complex characters, moral dilemmas, and social commentary.

Key Dramatic Techniques:

1. Realism: Miller's plays often explore the everyday lives of ordinary people, reflecting the struggles and concerns of the American middle class.

2. Symbolism: Objects, characters, and settings carry symbolic meanings, adding depth and complexity to the narrative.
3. Irony: Miller frequently employs irony to highlight the contradictions between appearance and reality.
4. Flashbacks and Non-Linear Narrative: Non-linear storytelling creates suspense, reveals character backstory, and underscores themes.
5. Dialogue: Miller's dialogue is characterized by its naturalism, idiomatic language, and subtle revelations of character.
6. Characterization: Complex, multidimensional characters drive the plot and explore themes.
7. Conflict: Inner and outer conflicts propel the narrative, illuminating character flaws and societal issues.
8. Tragic Hero: Miller's protagonists often embody the tragic hero archetype, succumbing to their own flaws.

Characteristics of Modern Tragedy:

Modern tragedy, emerging from the post-World War II era, deviates from classical tragedy's traditional norms. Playwrights like Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Samuel Beckett redefined the genre, incorporating contemporary themes and techniques.

Key Characteristics:

1. Non-Aristocratic Protagonist: Everyday individuals, not nobles, face tragic circumstances.
2. Inner Conflict: Psychological struggles supersede external conflicts.
3. Absence of Catharsis: Audience emotions are left unsettled, reflecting the complexity of modern life.
4. Tragic Flaw (Hamartia) Reinterpreted: Flaws are no longer solely moral, but also psychological or societal.
5. Indeterminate Ending: Ambiguous conclusions leave audiences pondering.
6. Non-Linear Narrative: Fragmented, episodic, or reverse-chronological structures.
7. Existential Themes: Absurdity, alienation, and the search for meaning.
8. Social Commentary: Critique of societal norms, politics, and values.

1. Experimentation with Language: Non-realistic dialogue, stream-of-consciousness, and silences.

Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Salesman':

Willy Loman, a 63-year-old traveling salesman, returns home to Brooklyn after a business trip, exhausted and defeated. His wife, Linda, tries to reassure him about his struggling sales career, but Willy's deep-seated insecurities and illusions about his success are evident. Willy's conversation with Linda reveals his obsession with the American Dream – wealth, success, and popularity. He boasts about his sales abilities and exaggerates his

importance to his company, but Linda knows the truth. Their sons, Biff and Happy, are visiting for the weekend, and Willy's hopes for their future are tied to his own failed dreams. Biff, the elder son, is struggling to find his place in the world. He's been bouncing from job to job, unable to settle. Happy, the younger son, is more conformist, but lacks ambition. Willy's refusal to accept Biff's limitations exacerbates their strained relationship.

As Willy's mental state deteriorates, he becomes increasingly paranoid, convinced that his company is plotting against him. He relives memories of his past, including meeting his former boss, Dave Singleman, who died wealthy and respected. Singleman's funeral procession, with hundreds of salesmen in attendance, left a lasting impression on Willy.

Willy's affair with a woman, The Woman, is revealed through flashbacks. Biff discovered the affair years ago, and it has strained their relationship ever since. Willy's inability to accept responsibility for his actions and his refusal to confront reality drive his family further apart.

Desperate for financial security, Willy asks his friend, Charley, for a loan. Charley offers Willy a job, but Willy's pride prevents him from accepting. Instead, he convinces himself that his company will provide for him.

In a climactic confrontation, Willy demands a steady salary and a New York-based position from his boss, Howard Wagner. Wagner fires Willy, shattering his illusions.

Crushed and humiliated, Willy's mental breakdown accelerates. He relives memories of his past, including The Woman and his failed relationships. Biff confronts Willy about his unrealistic expectations and encourages him to accept reality. Willy finally acknowledges his failures, but it's too late. Willy's funeral procession, attended by only a handful of people, contrasts starkly with the grand funeral of Dave Singleman. Linda, Biff, and Happy mourn the loss of a man who never achieved his dreams.

As they reflect on Willy's life, Biff realizes that his father "had the wrong dreams" and that "he never knew who he was." Linda poignantly remarks, "He had a good dream." The play ends with a sense of tragic loss, highlighting the devastating consequences of Willy's pursuit of an unattainable American Dream.

The story of "Death of a Salesman" is a powerful commentary on the human condition, exploring themes of identity, family dynamics, and the elusiveness of the American Dream.

"Death of a Salesman" as a Modern Tragedy:

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is a seminal work of modern American drama that challenges traditional notions of tragedy. Miller's play rejects the classical ideals of tragedy, instead

embracing a more nuanced and relatable portrayal of the human experience. This paper argues that *Death of a Salesman* is a modern tragedy, characterized by its exploration of the "common man" as tragic hero, its critique of the American Dream, and its use of non-linear narrative and symbolic language.

The Common Man as Tragic Hero

Miller's concept of the "common man" as tragic hero revolutionized the traditional understanding of tragedy. Willy Loman, the play's protagonist, is an ordinary salesman struggling to achieve the American Dream. His tragic flaw lies not in hubris or moral failing, but in his inability to reconcile his illusions with reality. Willy's downfall is a result of his own self-deception, exacerbated by the societal pressures of capitalism and the cult of personality.

Critique of the American Dream

Death of a Salesman is a scathing critique of the American Dream, which Miller saw as an unattainable illusion. Willy's pursuit of success and material wealth is revealed to be a hollow and unfulfilling goal. The play exposes the dark underbelly of the American Dream, highlighting the exploitation and disillusionment that can result from its pursuit.

Non-Linear Narrative and Symbolic Language

Miller's use of non-linear narrative and symbolic language adds depth and complexity to the play. The non-linear structure, which blends past and present, underscores Willy's fragmented psyche and his inability to confront reality. Symbolic elements, such as the rubber hose and Linda's stockings, serve as potent reminders of Willy's failed dreams and illusions.

Dramatic Structure and the Absence of Catharsis

Death of a Salesman's dramatic structure subverts traditional tragic conventions. The play's conclusion, rather than providing catharsis, leaves the audience with a sense of discomfort and unease. Willy's death serves as a stark reminder of the consequences of his illusions, rather than a redemptive moment.

Modern Tragedy Elements:

"*Death of a Salesman*" incorporates several elements of modern tragedy, which differentiate it from classical tragedies:

1. **Use of flashbacks, flash-forwards, and dreams:** The play frequently shifts in time, using flashbacks and flash-forwards to reveal Willy Loman's past and possible futures. This nonlinear narrative structure allows the audience to understand Willy's psyche and the reasons behind his current state. Dreams, both literal and metaphorical, also play a significant role in the narrative, often blurring the line between reality and illusion.
2. **Multiple plots and more than one central character:** Unlike traditional tragedies that

typically focus on a single protagonist, "Death of a Salesman" features multiple interconnected plots and gives significant attention to more than one character. This allows for a more complex and nuanced exploration of its themes.

3. **Common man's struggle against society:** In contrast to classical tragedies that often focus on the downfall of kings or heroes, "Death of a Salesman" centers on a common man, Willy Loman. His struggle against societal pressures and expectations evokes both pity and fear, fulfilling Aristotle's concept of 'catharsis' in tragedy.
4. "I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been." This quote, a moment of self-realization for Willy, is a key element of modern tragedy. (<https://www.bseln.com>)

Conclusion

In conclusion, "Death of a Salesman" is indeed a modern tragedy. It breaks away from the traditional concept of tragedy and presents a poignant depiction of the common man's struggle against society. Its innovative use of narrative techniques and its exploration of modern themes have earned it various honors, including the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. It's a masterpiece of modern American drama that continues to resonate with audiences today. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is a paradigmatic example of modern tragedy. Through its exploration of the "common man" as tragic hero, its critique of the American Dream, and its innovative use of dramatic structure and language, the play redefines traditional notions of tragedy. Miller's work continues to resonate with audiences, offering a powerful commentary on the human condition and the complexities of modern life.

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