

## The Absurdity of Life in Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman*: A Psychological Perspective

Dr. Ghassan Awad Ibrahim

Assistant professor, Department of English, Al-Turath University, Iraq.

Corresponding Author: Dr. Ghassan Awad Ibrahim, E-mail: [gasan.awad@turath.edu.iq](mailto:gasan.awad@turath.edu.iq)

### ARTICLE INFO

Received: 18 June

Accepted: 10 Oct

Volume: 1

Issue: 3

### KEYWORDS

Absurdity of life, social issue, psychological damage

### ABSTRACT

The research paper deals with Arthur Asher Miller's treatment of a very significant social issue during and after one of the worst epochs in the America's history when lower class such as workers suffer a lot as they are neglected and no longer respected which leads to the absurdity of life for the individuals of this important and destitute slice of the U.S. community and almost culminates in dangerous psychological damages to them. In his play, entitled *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Miller presents the tragic character (Willy Loman) who exerts not only his strenuous efforts but also his entire life in boosting the company where he works but finally he has been frustrated as he has been tossed like a peel of a banana outside the company without even a pension due to his old age. In his masterpiece, Miller (1915-2005) relies heavily on the art of Expressionism when he exploits memories, dreams, flashback as well as symbols and exaggeration to reveal the emotions, pains and discomfort not only of Willy but also of some of other characters.

### 1. Introduction

Miller is renowned for his groundbreaking tragic play *Death of a Salesman* since it "established him as a major dramatist, and this and *The Crucible* (1953) are now acknowledged classics of the modern theatre." (Miller, 1949, viii)

In his masterpiece, *Death of a Salesman*, Miller employs different techniques of expressionism which is according to J.A. Cuddon in his book *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, "refers to a movement in Germany very early in the 20<sup>th</sup> c. (c.1905) in which a number of painters sought to avoid the representation of external reality and, instead, to project themselves and a highly personal vision of the world. ... In fact, expressionism dominated the theatre for a time in the 1920s. Theatrically it was a reaction against realism (q.v.) and aimed to show inner psychological realities. The origins of this are probably to be found in Strindberg's *The Dream Play* (1907) and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907)." (Cuddon, 1980: p. 253) Besides, the playwright mixes several major elements that cause the tragedy of the protagonist (Loman), thus, "Different explanations have been put forward of its essential theme: some have regarded it as communist propaganda denouncing the evils of Capitalism, while others have seen it as a sympathetic study of the problems of big business. Some have interpreted it in Freudian terms and attributed to its author abstruse psychological theories, while from a catholic point of view it has been approvingly regarded as a warning of the meaninglessness of life where there is no religious faith." (Miller, 1949, viii) By writing this play, Miller as a social reformer really wants to oust his community from the predators' voracity and prevents exploitation of common people who are in a bad need for protection against those who wrong them so that justice, peace, and order may prevail in his community. He explains by his own words the reason that stands behind writing the play when saying: "The very impulse to write, I think, springs from an inner chaos crying for order, for meaning, and that meaning must be discovered in the process of writing or the work lies dead as it is finished." (Ibid, xxv)

Furthermore, one of the most reasons of writing this play is the suffering and poverty of the playwright himself (Miller) along with his family who have experienced humility and deprivation in their country (the United States of America) during the Great Depression period in the thirties of the last century when America witnessed the worst era of its economic history as it was knocked down by an "economic crisis," therefore, and despite of the fact that the

Millers who were wealthy are now growing surprisingly and increasingly unfortunate enough to fall victims at the absurdity of the very serious situation of the crisis:

The Millers were prosperous manufacturers until they were ruined by the economic crisis which hit America in 1931. Thereafter, Arthur Miller grew up in poverty; he worked as an errand-boy in early mornings before going to school, where he did not distinguish himself. (His teachers could not remember him later.) After working for two years in an automobile parts warehouse, he had earned enough to be able to enter the University of Michigan, where he helped to maintain himself by various jobs. Working at different times as a waiter, a factory hand and a lorry driver has given him plenty of experience of hardship and adversity. (Ibid, vii)

It is noteworthy that the severe Great Depression does not only deprive the American private civilian workers such as Willy of getting their pensions but also thousands of veterans despite their failure attempts to gain their rights as "by 1932 the nation was in the middle of the Great depression, and in May of that year about fifteen thousand unemployed and penniless veterans camped on the Mall in Washington DC to petition for immediate payment of their bonuses. ... A month later President Hoover ordered the army to clear out the veterans' encampment. ... Soldiers with fixed bayonets charged, hurling tear gas into the crowd of veterans. The next morning the Mall was deserted and the camp was in flames. The veterans never received their pensions." (Kolk, 2014: p. 188)

### **Discussion and analysis**

Similarly, in the play, Willy Loman, a common man, diligent, and prolific worker, becomes a victim of the U.S. capitalist and political system when he is intensely exploited by his private company where he works and spends a long period of his life, serving his company as a salesman and exerting much effort to boost the economy of it, and finally is absurdly and easily dismissed from his business even without pension because of his old age, thus, Willy can be considered the advocate and the victim of capitalism simultaneously. The American critic Mary McCarthy points out that "Although he [Willy] is a victim of the system, he is its devoted adherence. He is himself an expression of the business man ideal, and in his dreams of his father and his brother Ben he admires the American pioneer ideal." (McCarthy, 1959) According to Collins COBUILD Dictionary, Capitalism "is an economic and political system in which property, business, and industry are owned by private individuals and not by the state." In fact, the manifest injustice and the human rights abuses of the capitalist system to its common people, including Willy, appear evidently in the writings of some of the American critics to show the absurdity of life in the capitalist society. In his introduction to Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, the American critic E. R. Wood confirms that "Willy Loman is certainly a victim of the Capitalist system, exploited and then cast aside." (Miller, 1949: viii) Besides, Miller indirectly criticizes capitalism in his play when the character Linda, Willy's wife, explains that her husband "works for a company thirty-six years this March, opens up unheard-of territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his salary a way." (Miller, 1949: p. 39) Once again, Miller criticizes through his own words the private companies workers' dismissal from their jobs after they get old and praises at the same time the importance of the labour of a salesman in private companies in which

... against this view is set the realism of the business man: 'when a man gets old you fire him. You have to – he can't do the work.' Miller says that he meant (among other things) to 'celebrate the common sense of business men, who love the personality that wins the day, but know that you've got to have the right goods at right price.' To the extent that their success depends on the salesman, it is in the life of the salesman that the harsher aspects of the capitalist machine are most apparent.

(Ibid, viii)

It is noteworthy to mention that Mary McCarthy who has been already mentioned above criticizes and confirms at the same time that her country America which according to her "is the country where the values of Capitalism, Free Enterprise, Big Business are seen at their most rewarding and their most destructive. Willy Loman experiences both aspects." (McCarthy, 1959: ix)

It is a matter of fact that common people like Willy suffer a lot from the hardships of life and their disastrous impacts on their psyches. In her preface to her groundbreaking book *Trauma And Survival In Contemporary Fiction* (2002), the American professor Laurie Vickroy is convinced that:

Trauma narratives, I contend, are personalized responses to this century's emerging awareness of the catastrophic effects of wars, poverty, colonization, and domestic abuse on the individual psyche. They highlight postcolonial concerns with rearticulating the

lives and voices of marginal people, rejecting Western conceptions of the autonomous subject and describing the complex negotiations of multicultural social relations. The writers and theorists discussed in this study see trauma as indicator of social injustice or oppression, as the ultimate cost of destructive sociocultural institutions.

(Vickroy, 2002: x)

Besides, Willy's appalling conditions in addition to his recent shock of not only losing his job but also his dignity since he is considered valuable and worthy of respect due to his great diligence presented to his company cause him severe dejection and psychological damages. According to the American psychiatrist Judith Herman "People who have endured horrible events suffer predictable psychological harm. There is a spectrum of traumatic disorders, ranging from the effects of a single overwhelming event to the more complicated effects of prolonged and repeated abuse." (Herman, 2015: p. 3) Willy's psychological damage is represented by hallucination, one of the most symptoms of schizophrenia due to his current traumatic experience, which can be identified as "the experience of seeing something that is not really there because you are ill or have taken a drug," according to Collins COBUILD Dictionary. Eventually, Willy escapes into his daydreams of pleasant things for a period of time, usually about things that Willy himself would like to happen such as wealth and great success to relieve the pain and unpleasant feelings he currently suffers as he has recurring flashbacks to his dead father and brother Ben and talks to them separately, remembering, thinking and discussing pleasing things happened to them in the past which is according to an unknown neuro-psychiatrist in the introduction to the play when he or she explains Willy's psychological disease as saying: "The past, as in hallucination, comes back to Willy Loman, not chronologically as in a flash-back, but dynamically, with the inner logic of his erupting volcanic unconscious. In psychiatry we call this 'the return of the repressed', when a mind breaks under the invasion of primitive impulses no longer capable of compromise with reality." (Miller, 1949: x) Moreover, the English psychoanalytical professor Cathy Caruth explains the function of the flashback and its significance to the traumatized psychological patients as saying: "The flashback, it seems, provides a form of recall that survives at the cost of willed memory or of the very continuity of conscious thought. While the traumatized are called upon to see and to relive the insistent reality of the past, they recover a past that encounters consciousness only through the very denial of active recollection." (Caruth, 1995: p. 152)

Obviously, Willy after he has been severely shocked by the heir and the current owner of the company whose name is Howard Wagner, he adheres himself unconsciously to good memories of events from the past, his dead family, and the previous owner of the company who by now is dead, wishing that he is alive "If old man Wagner was alive I'd been in charge of New York now! That man was a prince, he was a masterful man. But the boy of his, that Howard, he don't appreciate. When I went north the first time, The Wagner Company didn't know where New England was!" (Miller, 1949: p. 4) Willy's tragedy starts when he struggles to have a chance to talk to Howard, the owner and the boss of the company, where Willy works, is indifferent to his suffering and busy with his personal enjoyment by hearing his family members' voices through the recorder which is a new invention in the beginning of the twentieth century while Willy is burning from inside to ask him about only transferring him from the place of his work in New England state to one of the company's branches in New York state where Willy and his family live. As soon as Howard pays attention to Willy, he replies calmly and carelessly about the psychological injury that inflict Willy, as saying: "Kid, I can't take blood from a stone, I -," (Ibid, p. 59) the very thing which causes him, after moments of the existence of Howard, a serious mental illness of schizophrenia which induces hallucination at high level as he begins to see his dead brother Ben and asks him questions "Oh, Ben, how did you do it? What is the answer? Did you wind up the Alaska deal already?" (Ibid, p. 61) Seemingly, Howard does not only fire him but also he insults him intensely and cruelly. Moreover, the situation of dismissal falls on Willy's head just like a violent storm, prompting him indirectly to feel so depressed and frustrated, trying to forget the cruel situation which has already hit him. The well-known Austrian psychoanalyst and neurologist Sigmund Freud confirms that "[People] think the fact that the traumatic experience is forcing itself upon the patient is a proof of the strength of the experience: the patient is, as one might say, fixated to his trauma. ... I am not aware, however, that patients suffering from traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident. Perhaps they are more concerned with *not* thinking of it." (Freud, 1920: p. 13) Apparently, Willy after all these years which are nearly more than three decades he spends in serving the company, he asks only to transfer him from his office in New England so that he may have some rest when he will be near his family in New York but Howard is too vulgar, rude, and indifferent even to his entreaties of staying at the company and getting only "forty dollars a week – that's all I'd need. Forty dollars, Howard," (Miller, 1949: p. 59) instead of "sixty-five dollars a week, I could swing it," for his services to the company. (Ibid, p.57)

It is important to mention that Willy through dreaming, remembering and hallucinating, he in fact tries unconsciously to get rid of the much pain of the feeling of great discomfort he has already experienced after the dismissal shock "in Breuer and Freud's resonant phrase; for their suffering to be relieved, the sore past must be allowed to emerge into the present, its pressure relieved." (Freud, Breuer, 1952: vii) Moreover, Willy as a current

psychological patient talks to himself unconsciously and this process is called in psychology "talking through" so that he can be relieved and according to Freud "The psychical process that had originally taken place has to be repeated in as vivid a way as possible, brought to its *status nascendi*, and then, 'talked through'. This makes any phenomena involving stimuli – cramps, neuralgias, hallucinations – appear once more at full intensity and then vanish [*schwinden*] forever." (Ibid)

Eventually and especially after being traumatized, Willy feels so failure that he does not achieve something to be proud of by his family after his death especially he is now sixty-three years old and he is in despair to see his two sons (Biff and Happy) are also failure and penniless just like him, thus, he discusses the matter with his brother Ben through experiencing hallucination of putting an end to his life by committing a suicide so that he can get rid of his miserable condition and at the same time to enable his wife and sons to get the life insurance policy which according to Willy is a "guaranteed twenty-thousand-dollar proposition. Now look, Ben, I want you to go through the ins and outs of this thing with me. I've got nobody to talk to, Ben." (Miller, 1949: p. 96) Thus, the purpose of Willy's plan of committing suicide is that he wants actually his family to get the aforementioned life insurance to build their future, to compensate Linda for his betrayal to her in the past and to regain the respect of his son Biff after his death when Biff will see people from everywhere attend his funeral since Biff according to Willy "thinks I'm nothing, see, and so he spites me. But the funeral – (Straightening up.) Ben, that funeral will be massive! They will come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire! ... He'll see what I am, Ben! He's in for a shock, that boy!" (Miller, 1949: p. 97) Apparently, Willy has suffered a lot from Howard's atrocity, prompting him to put an end to his life. The American activist Michael Savage expresses grave concern at the cruelty of man such as Howard against poor people such as Willy as he says: "Where is the outrage? More important, where is the humanity? Where is the decency? And answers that "it is gone. It is lost in the sea of mass hysteria that dominates our world in a way and at a level that history has never before seen. Can it be stopped before we have an actual civil war? Can it be stopped before America is lost?" (Savage, 2018: p. 2)

## Conclusion

It is an axiom that injustice and oppression are existed on this earth since the early beginning of creation because of greed and cruelty of some people. Concerning to Willy's case, he is deeply grieved by the injustice and cruelty of Howard due to his old age and in addition to that Willy has never imagined that he one day would be scorned and expelled from the company where he spends most of his life in a very humiliated and cruel way that he even does not get a pension or bonus for working very hard and for a long time. His dismissal is the spark that prompts him to think gravely of killing himself so that his two failure sons Happy and Biff especially the latter who is the elder son can get life insurance after his death. In fact, it is so late that Willy begins to think seriously about the future of his sons and how they would achieve his daydream of great fortune and big success in life after his death. Miller's presentation of man's collapse in his drama because of the enslavement of man to his brother man may stem from his moral responsibility as a dramatist conscious of the main ingredients of justice and humanity to be achieved at any community on this world in order to enable the latter to fulfill social justice, freedom and all signs of happiness.

## References

- Caruth, Cathy (1995) *Trauma Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore and London. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cuddon, J.A.(1980) *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Revised Edition published in the United States of America by Doubleday & Company, Inc.
- Freud, Breuer (1952). *Studies in Hysteria*. London. Imago Publishing Co., Ltd.
- Kolk, Bessel Van Der (2014): *The Body Keeps The Score; Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York 10014, penguin.com. Hudson Street. Penguin Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 375.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1920 (1955). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 18. Translated under the editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. 24 vols. (1953-74). London: Hogarth.
- Herman, Judith (2015) *Trauma and Recovery; The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York, Basic Books, A member of the Perseus Group.
- Mary McCarthy, *Sights and Spectacles*, Heinmann, 1959.

Miller, Arthur (1949), *Death of a Salesman* (Great Britain: the Cresset Press), All subsequent textual quotations from Miller's play throughout this paper are taken from this reference book. All spellings are kept as in the original.

Vickroy, Laurie (2002). *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press.