

**Capitalism, Meaning, and Morality in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949)****Received date: 03/11/2022 Accepted date:11/06/2023 Published date:20/06/2023****Abdelwahid Abidi***University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria, Email: [abd.abidi@univ-adrar.edu.dz](mailto:abd.abidi@univ-adrar.edu.dz)***Abstract:**

The socio-economic environment has always exerted a great impact on people's morality and meaning of life. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a fierce conflict between Communism and Capitalism, the thing that led the Americans to cling tightly to their capitalist creed. Capitalism, or the market, and its relation with morality has been one of the controversial issues in the American society. This has become a recurrent theme in post-world war II American Literature, drama in particular. The study is an attempt to show the effect of capitalism on morality and meaning of life in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949).

**Keywords:** Capitalism; Meaning; Morality ; Death of a Salesman; America

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## 1. Introduction:

Capitalism is not only an economic system, but also a social and a cultural one. This connection between the market and culture has been the concern of many American intellectuals. Some believe that the market can have a negative impact on people's meaning of life and morality, others believe that the market is neutral, and it is people's actions that are moral or immoral. However, living in capitalist world seems to exert so great a pressure on the individual that he/she finds it hard, if not impossible, to resist getting involved in issues of morality and meaning of life. Arthur Miller, in *Death of a Salesman* (1949), sheds light on many of the contradictions of Capitalism and the effects these contradictions have on the individual's sense of reality, meaning of life, and moral values.

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is one of the American playwrights who devoted their plays to the discussion of the consequences of capitalism on the individual's morality and meaning of life. Abbotson stated that Miller's "influence on American theater has been a profoundly moral one"(Abbotson, 2000, p. 24). Miller openly criticized capitalism, despite the fact that this was not allowed in America at that time. Any critique against capitalism was considered an attack against America itself. Arthur Miller stood before the the House Un-American Activities Committee (Sterling, 2008, p. 45) because of his views. Miller focused on the dark side of capitalism, and some of its inconveniences, which have to be avoided, if people are to live a meaningful life. He does not give up capitalism

all together, but he shows where capitalism goes awry. In most of his plays, Miller shows the contradiction of life in the post war period, a period characterized by the great industrial development and a lack of meaning in life. It is no coincidence that the psychologist Harry Wells considers plays of Williams and Miller as exemplary representations of the American psyche in the period. He wrote, “Arthur Miller in his plays and scenarios combines the contradictory features of capitalism with their contradictory aspects in the individual consciousness to depict the development of character within a social context” (Wells, 1963, pp. 150–151). Most of the conflicts in Millers play are enmeshed in the capitalist world of materialism and competition.

### **1. Capitalism, Meaning and Morality**

The connection between morality and capitalism is one of the most controversial issues in the American literature and culture. Capitalism is an ideology based on competition and the accumulation of capital, and this, to some extent, contradicts the virtues of gratitude and altruism that are important in human life. The sense of community is very important for morality. In the American society, along with the fervor for capitalism, values of competition, and the American Dream, there arose the questions morality and the meaning of life in the increasingly materialistic, commercialized culture.

Despite the material development that the capitalist system, or free market system, yields, it still results in many consequences on the individual's morality and meaning of life. The conflict between the

spiritual and the material is not a new topic. However, for the wheel of the market to keep running, there was a lot of justification done by the development of media technology. Agnew has stated that, “the market was made meaningful at the very moment meaning itself was becoming marketable” (Agnew, 1986, p. 12).

The capitalist principle of the accumulation of capital has permeated all aspects of life. The meaning of life itself has been based on the amount of money one has. However, this has a great impact on the individual's meaning of life. Agnew stated that, “the subjective terrain where material necessity, social constraint, and cultural imperatives meet”(Agnew, 1986, p. 1) has not been accorded the importance it deserves. On the contrary, capitalists considered “the principle of *quid pro quo* both as guide of action and standard of morality”(Baran & Sweezy, 1966, p. 324). The value of any work, action, or behavior was determined by the value for which it can be exchanged. Everything has become money-dependent. In this connection, Baran and Sweezy affirmed “the insistence on the inviolability of the equivalent exchange when what is exchanged costs nothing, strict economizing of resources when a large proportion of them goes to waste- these are obviously the very denial of rationality which the concept of *quid pro quo* originally expressed”(Baran & Sweezy, 1966, p. 326).

The meaning of life has not grown in parallel with the economic development. On the contrary, they seem to have an inverse relationship. Despite of the increase of job opportunities in the

capitalist world, the critics of capitalism believe that these jobs seem not to provide an authentic meaning of life. Goodman, as reported by Baran and Sweezy, believed that, “there will be “full employment”, but there get to be fewer jobs that are necessary and unquestionably useful; that require energy and draw on some of one’s best capacities.”(Baran & Sweezy, 1966, p. 332). Since all relations between members of society are merely financial, unfortunately, sometimes, even among the the members of the same family, life becomes gradually devoid of meaning. Life is reduced to pecuniary relations based on consumption. Baran and Sweezy, have similarly argued that, “work and consumption thus share the same ambiguity: while fulfilling the basic needs of survival, they increasingly lack their inner content and meaning”(Baran & Sweezy, 1966, p. 333).

A rapprochement between economists and social scientists and literary critics has become a necessity. Agnew complains that “current economic theory...fails to render an adequate account of the motives at play in the market, because it consistently excludes from consideration the very social, cultural and historical contexts within which those motives have been variously structured”(Agnew, 1986, p. 3). The effects of capitalism on meaning and morality are so varied that no one can limit them, nor can one fully understand how these effects creep within the individual’s consciousness. This conflict between the economic and social, Agnew believes, was itself the reason behind the emergence of cultural studies, to show the relation between the financial and the cultural. He wrote,

Cultural studies owe their birth, after all, to the concerted efforts of the nineteenth century Anglo-American thinkers to reserve a portion of their collective world of meaning from incorporation within the price system; these writers strained to keep the “priceless” aspects of culture at safe remove from the a symbolic system (money) the operation principles of which they were otherwise content to leave unchallenged (Agnew, 1986, p. 6).

The relation between morality and literature dates back, at least, to Plato. It has been underestimated in the modernist period, and it has been revived in the contemporary world. In Post-War period, and because of the devastation caused by the war, the question of morality and meaning of life resurfaced. The innocent belief in science, technology and progress was put to question, and the need for a literature that would enforce moral values and the meaning of life emerged. This is one of the controversial issues in American literature and criticism. However, as Hyman affirms, “ No critic can ignore the fact that beliefs and feelings of a writer, particularly his moral beliefs, are not only involved in the creation of the work but are often the very subject of the work itself”(Hyman, 1971, p. 83).

The morality of the capitalist system has been a recurrent theme in literary and non-literary texts. Most of the economists warned that the development in economy could not be achieved without some moral costs because the values of self-interest and profit



are very important for success in the market world. These latter values seem to collide with values of friendship and cooperation, and morality (Storr & Choi, 2019). In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller sheds light on the challenges that face the individual in the capitalist world.

### **3. Capitalism and Meaning of Life in *Death of a Salesman***

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is one of the plays that focus on the question of morality and meaning in the capitalist American society. In order for the capitalist system to function, there has to be a fierce competition between sellers and buyers, and among producers and consumers. The feeling of satisfaction does not serve the system. The idea of the American Dream, which was based mainly on the insatiability of the desire for success, fueled the system. However, this competition for the very limited places at the top has so many consequences on the worth, meaning of life, and morality of people. Material gain was the defining principle not only of the American Dream, but also of the American identity as a whole. In his introduction to Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Bigsby stated, "If personal meaning, in this cheer leader society, lies in success, then failure must threaten identity itself" (Miller, 1998, p. vii). Life is attached all the time to a better future no matter how good is the present. Throughout the play, Arthur Miller showed that this belief has so many destructive effects on the individual's life, if the individual, and society as a whole, did not take into the consideration the moral

values, and establish meaningful authentic relations between people and not merely economic, profit-based relations.

*Death of a Salesman* is about the last twenty-four hours of a sixty-year-old father named Willy Loman. The play takes the reader back through his past and the beliefs he held about success, and how he brought up his children to be successful. The play alternates between scenes from the past and others from the present. This was done on the purpose of showing where and when exactly Willey's life took a wrong direction. Willy's life was ruined because of his beliefs about the success and American Dream. Willy believed that in the capitalist society, one does not have to study or work hard, one needs only to have a good appearance and to have "contacts", that's how one will become rich. He taught this to his sons. Willy remembers when Bernard, the son of his neighbor Charley, comes to the Lomans' house to ask Biff to come and study with him, Willy says to his children:

Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank the Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because 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 will never want (Miller, 1998, pp. 20–21).



Despite the positive effects that the idea of the American Dream has on inspiring people to the best they can to achieve success, it also had some destructive effects, particularly on people who did not achieve it. Willy Loman based his life on the stories of those successful people, and wanted his children to follow that way. Biff blamed his father for his failure. He said, "I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is"(Miller, 1998, p. 102).

Everybody wants to be great, why not. Just dreaming of greatness and fame without leading a meaningful life can be maddening. Unfortunately, this is what life has become in the contemporary world. In one of his flashbacks to the past, Willey remembers the days when his son Biff was still a successful football player. He says

Without a penny to his name, three universities are begging for him and from there the sky is the limit, because it's not what you do, Ben. It's who you know and the smile on your face! It is contacts, Ben, contacts! The whole wealth of Alaska passes over a table at the Commodore Hotel, and that's the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked!(Miller, 1998, p. 65).

This belief has alienated Willy Loman from reality. He is unable to see the real conditions he was living in, but leading a fake life, considering himself as an important person and can never see his real misery. Willy refuses a job his neighbor Charley offered him, though he badly needs that job. Instead, he borrows money from Charley. Willy ruined his life by his belief in the Dream. Once Bernard said to Willy “if at first you don’t success...” Willy says, “yes, I believe in that...” Bernard responds, “But sometimes, Willy, it’s better for a man just to walk a way.

” However, Willy is not the one to stop dreaming. He responds, “but if you can’t walk away.” Bernard replied, “I guess that’s when it’s tough.”(Miller, 1998, p. 73) Willy is torn between his belief in the inevitability of success and the difficulty of achieving what he is dreaming of. The only way out that Willy could find to provide for his family was to kill himself and the death insurance would go to his son. Willy did not only dream of the life of a salesman, but also dreamt of the death of salesman, but neither was achieved. His wife Linda, at his funeral said “He only needed a little salary”(Miller, 1998, p. 110). So many Americans share Willy’s view of life and success. People are valued more if they were celebrities or rich, and they are most of the time taken as examples of success. However, Miller through the play affirms that the meaning of life does not lie only in fame and money. A human being has to be valued as a human being primarily. This is expressed in Willy’s wife Linda’s words to Biff

I don't say he is a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was not in the paper. He is not the finest character that ever lived. But he is a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person (Miller, 1998, p. 40).

Willy could have led a better life, if he were satisfied with his life, or if he accepted his neighbor's help when he offered him a job, or when his brother wanted him to go with him Alaska, but Willy wanted easy money, on the basis of being liked, and this has ruined his life. Life has deeper meanings than just running behind fame and easy money.

#### **4. Capitalism and Morality in *Death of a Salesman***

The question of morality has also preoccupied Miller throughout his career. Abbotson stated that, "Miller's strong sense of moral and social commitment runs throughout the play" (Abbotson, 2007, p. 137). Miller's *Death of a Salesman* was considered as, "a definite clash between capitalistic business and morality" (Abbotson, 2007, p. 138). Miller believed that the capitalist system exerts a great pressure on the individual's morality. Despite the fact that one could keep his morality and integrity in a capitalist society, but that was not always easy. Abbotson wrote, "Miller saw business matters at odds

with conventional morality, with humanity threatened by the onset of technology and the growing pressures of ownership; all these issues are reflected in the dilemmas of the Loman family and the other characters to whom they are economically linked.”(Abbotson, 2007, p. 137). Bigsby has also spoken of Miller’s belief in morality and moral values in the capitalist system, though at that time it was not easy to criticize capitalism. Abbotson added that “Miller is not as secure in his religious convictions as writers such as Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, but he is as deeply concerned with morality and the consequences of its absence”(Abbotson, 2000, p. 21).

Willy’s meeting with Howard is one of the most degrading, dehumanizing moments in the play. This shows the negative side of capitalism when business is the only thing that matters and everything else follows. When Willy first entered, Howard looked at him over his shoulder. Instead of listening to Willy, Howard was busy with his recording machine. When Howard was looking for his lighter, Willy picked up. Willy is in a very desperate situation, and needs a little help. Willy worked for the company of Howard’s father for thirty-six years, when Howard was still in his father’s arms. Willy needs a little help, but Howard is unable, or unwilling, to offer it. All what Willy did for the company meant nothing to Howard. For Howard “Business is business.”(Abbotson, 2007, p. 60).

Willy stood up mourning the old days, “in those days there was personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship,

and gratitude in it. Today, it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear – or personality” (Abbotson, 2007, p. 61). Willy is begging Howard for a desk job because he is old, first for sixty-five dollars then for forty dollars, but Howard will not accept. Even worse, Willy was fired in this very desperate situation.

Miller considers the way Howard dealt with Willy Loman as one of the inconveniences of the capitalist system that emphasizes the economic gain and neglects moral values. Howard did not consider Willy's friendship with his father, nor the years he has spent in the service of the company. Unranga argued that, “the roots of Willy's moral and emotional emptiness stems from childhood events. The abandonment by his father stunts Willy's emotional growth, which impedes his ability to understand himself” (Sterling, 2008, p. 88), and not because of capitalism. However, what the critic seems to have overlooked is that Willy's abandonment by his father, or even by his older brother, was also because of capitalism. It seems that the father himself was overworking, and giving his sons less time, and of course, this is because of capitalism. This was expressed in the words of Willy's brother Ben.

Father was a great and very wild-hearted man. We would start in Boston, he'd toss the whole family into the wagon, and then he'd drive the team right across the country; through Ohio, and Indiana, Illinois, and all the Western states. And we'd stop in

towns and sell flutes that he'd made on the way. Great inventor, Father. With one gadget he made more in a week what a man like you could make in life time(Abbotson, 2007, p. 34).

Willy's father focused only on material gain. Ben's words show this. Describing his father as "wild-hearted," and that "he'd toss the whole family into the wagon." These words show that the capitalist world is harsh, and no matter how hard one tries, there are all the time challenges. When nobody attended Willy's funeral. His wife, Linda, said that possibly they blame him. Charley, the neighbor, responded, "Naa, it's a rough world, Linda. They wouldn't blame him"(Abbotson, 2007, p. 110). Though he represents the example a successful, honest, altruistic character in the play, Charley knows that the world is rough and it is not all the time easy to keep one's integrity.

Despite the challenges that the capitalist world poses, Miller still believes, that there is hope. One does not have to give in to the false dreams and shallowness of the capitalist world. Miller gives examples of rich people who still keep their moral values, like Charley and Bernard, and ones spoiled by money like Howard. At the same time, there are people who still find hard, but this did not lead them to act in immoral ways. For example, the waiter Stanley, who says, "It's a dog's life. I only wish during the war they'd a took me in the Army. I coulda been dead by now;"(Abbotson, 2007, p. 77). However, when he saw Willy's situation he did not want to take money from him, "As

Willy Turns, *Stanley slips the money into his jacket pocket*"(Abbotson, 2007, p. 96).

Willy's brother Ben is also one of the capitalists who have made their money in a dubious way. When his brother Willy asked him about the way, Ben answered, "When I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out, I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich"(Abbotson, 2007, p. 33). Ben considers the way of making money like going into the "jungle." Ben states this more clearly when he says to Biff, "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You will never get out of the jungle that way"(Miller, 1998, p. 34). Miller offers different ways of living a moral life in such a world, but there are all the time challenges. Miller shows that there is still hope to save moral values along with the development and material success. Arthur Miller's *Death of Salesman* "does more than portray financial failure; it celebrates spiritual success"(Sterling, 2008, p. 137).

## 5. Conclusion

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is one of the literary works that show that despite the material development that the world is witnessing, there is a need to enforce the meaning of life, and moral values. Despite the great material success that capitalist societies achieved, some intellectuals believed that the system has some detrimental effects on morality and meaning of life. Meaning and morality are inextricably linked. The collapse of the one can lead to the collapse of the other. Capitalism, according to Miller, does not

make people necessarily immoral, but it provides a fertile environment for that collapse of morality and shallowness of the meaning of life. Miller shows that what destroyed Willy's life is his fake dreams, and his inability to face reality and to be satisfied with what he already achieved. In addition, Willy's neglect of moral values in bringing up his children and in dealing with his wife was also one of the reasons that led his financial collapse, and ruined his family. Miller affirms that one does not have to risk his life, his morals for the sake of material gain.

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