

**REINVENTING THE ART OF TRAGEDY IN
MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA**
The Case of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract

Modernism according to Chris Baldick (2001) in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, is "a general term applied retrospectively to the wide range of experimental and Avant-Garde trends in the literature (and other arts) of the 20th century, including Symbolism, Futurism, Expressionism, Imagism, Vorticism, Dada and Surrealism, along with the innovations of unaffiliated writers." (159) Going back to the norms of Greek tragedy, indeed, was a source of inspiration for many modernist writers who regard it as a raw material to explore themes that are related to the twentieth century. In his play *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller creatively exhibits the idea of the tragic hero aiming at a social criticism of the America Dream.

Key Words: *Modern American Drama, Greek Tragedy, Myth, The American Dream*

Introduction

The modernist period in English literature occupied approximately the years from the beginning of the twentieth century to 1965. In a broader sense, the period was marked by sudden and unexpected breaks with traditional ways of viewing and interacting with the world. Modernist American writing reacts to several changes during the first part of the 20th century mainly to the rapid technological advances of

industrialization and mechanization. In the post-war “Big Boom” (1945-1970), business flourished, the middle-class prospered and Americans began to enjoy the highest national average income in this era. However, instead of progress and growth, the modernist witnessed decay and a growing alienation of the individual. The machinery of the modern society was perceived as impersonal, capitalist, materialistic, and antagonistic to the artistic impulse.

The Great War, most certainly, also had a great deal of influence. The period between the two World Wars has been characterized as the United States’ traumatic age (Loughran, 2010). The enormity of the war had undermined human kind’s faith in the Western society and culture. A generation of young men lost creating a constant feeling of hopelessness. Post-war literature on its turn reflected the sense of uncertainty, disillusionment and fragmentation. All these factors helped the modernist writers and artists to insist on the elevation of art over anything else (morality, money, and middle-class values). Alienated from the social reality, modernists often approve on the idea of bringing something new, they explore the human subconscious relying sometimes on the use of the myth as a reaction against rational realism.

Modernists, such as Arthur Miller, Ibsen, J.M. Synge, Eugene O’Neill, and Samuel Beckett agreed that the human character may only be noticed and understood through memories and thoughts versus external description. Modernist’s reaction, in fact, was against realism and Victorian morality and they tried hard to prove sexuality and sexual desire as an important subject in the human’s life cycle and not as a taboo. They also use the stream of consciousness as a major literary and aesthetic device and reject the chronological and narrative continuity using fragmented and non-linear plot. Above all, modernism was a movement that strongly called for change; it was a repudiation of the

monopoly of capitalism's effects on the human being. (Rahn, 2011)

While classical tragedy generally involves heroic people in simple awful situation (often their own making); modern tragedy places everyday people in similar troubles in a more realistic contemporary setting. It highly puts the mundane juxtaposed to the beautiful.

The difference between traditional drama and modern drama, actually, lies in theme and style. Greek drama is the basis of almost all tragedies and modern tragedy, as well, is based upon the classical tragedy in addition to some new elements. The classical tragedy is based on unities: one timespan, one setting, and one story with no breaks and no flashbacks as they originated in the Greek theatres. Most importantly, the action follows one inevitable course and the tragic hero must be royal or highborn. Indeed, this hero is losing, through his own pride and own choices, a mighty prize.

Modern tragedy, in contrast, redefines the genre in a more naturalistic manner, with ordinary protagonists, realistic timelines and settings, and multiple non-linear plots. The style of tragedy greatly changed after the two World Wars with less bloodshed and off stage deaths and much use of irony becomes trend. In classical tragedy, the plot used to be dominated by the role of the protagonist, whereas in modern tragedy each of the roles is important.

One of the most controversial modern plays, which represents a painful observation of the American life, is Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). An extraordinary masterpiece that altered the course of modern theatre. The play addresses the exhausting conflicts within one family, but it also tackles greater issues regarding American national values. The play examines the cost of blind faith in the American Dream. In this context, it offers a postwar

American reading of personal tragedy in the tradition of Sophocles "King Oedipus", the dreamer who brings his defeat with his own hands.

Probably, the notion of myth in this play is not related only in the fact of undertaking Oedipus as a source to resemble Willy's character. It is also recognized in the way Miller charges America with selling a false myth built around a capitalist materialism fuelled by the postwar economy, the moral vision of the original American Dream established by the country's founders.

The idea of the American Dream is rooted in the United States Declaration of Independence (1776) which proclaims that "all men are created equal" and that they owe the rights to be free and to pursuit happiness. The American Dream, indeed, is a national belief of the United States, a set of ideals in which freedom contains the opportunity for prosperity and success, and a progressive social flexibility achieved through hard work (Early, 1968). However, what does it mean to live in a society that promises a lot but guarantees nothing? Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman* with that question in mind. It is a play about the struggle for success and disappointment of the American Dream. **It is about Willy's broken dreams.**

Arthur Miller seems to believe that his plays could ask difficult questions about morality and responsibility and then challenge people to change their lives and the world. Hence, Miller could span his touch to change American theater of the twentieth century by raising people's awareness to their human possibilities,

According to Miller, *Death of a Salesman* is a "tragedy of the common man." Throughout the play, Miller avoids mentioning Willy Loman's sales product. The audience never knows what this poor salesman sells. Perhaps because Willy Loman represents "*Everyman*." By not specifying the product, audiences are free to imagine what Willy may sell. In this

essence, Willy can be anyone of the present audience, and Miller then succeeds in being connected and attached with the viewer.

Characteristically, the protagonist Willy Loman, is a regular, aging, travelling salesman weighed down by his humble life, but he still believes that his charm and optimism will make him rich. Willy, as dreamer, is constantly trying to be a better man. He wants to become rich and prosperous, to be liked by everyone, and to be successful in his work and life. These aspects come together to make up his American Dream. Nevertheless, as a man, Willy is the kind who is haunted by the realities of life. He is ashamed that he cannot pay the bills. He has been unfaithful to his wife, in spite of the efforts he makes to follow the rules and advice his sons to do the same thing, he is unable to bring happiness neither to himself nor to his family. Tortured by his memories and delusions, feeling the sense of failure, Willy is brought to ruin by his own weaknesses. In Willy Loman, Miller created a tragic hero in a twentieth-century style. In order to deal with the failures of his life, Willy escapes by remembering the past and fantasizing about how things could have been. In doing so, he loses touch with reality and makes plans to commit suicide. As the play reaches its conclusion, the audience is left to consider an important question: What does a man do when he considers his life to be a failure?

Conclusion

Death of a Salesman aims at exemplifying a story about the American society through the character of Willy Loman. The play is not as much about the death of a salesman as it is about the death of something bigger. It is about the death of the promise of the American Dream. It seems that the Depression and the after-effects of World War II influenced Miller to write plays about ordinary, everyday people, working and struggling to get ahead. Presumably, the tragic feeling that may evoke out of this play is the fact of seeing a

character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing, his sense of personal dignity.

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