

1-1-1978

Death of a Salesman as Psychomachia

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"*Death of a Salesman* as Psychomachia"

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In a footnote to an article on "Point of View in *Death of a Salesman*," Brian Parker observes that "the play's technique of presenting all events and characters as though strained through Willy's mind resembles the Morality technique in which characters and events are allegories of the central character's psychomachia."¹

Parker does not develop this idea, but it is an important one, for the drama can be interpreted as a psychomachia, and doing so will shed light on the perennial objection to the play, that it is a confused mingling of expressionism and naturalism. The drama, for all its modernistic techniques, can be read very much like *Everyman*. Willy is, like that medieval hero, a generator of other personalities which are to a large extent fragmented aspects of himself. Angus Fletcher, in his study of allegory, makes some interesting remarks that can be applied to a reading of Willy's character'

The allegorical hero generates a number of their characters who react against or with him in a syllogistic manner. I say 'generate' because the heroes in Dante and Spenser and Bunyan seem to create the worlds around them. They are like those people in real life who 'project' ascribing fictitious personalities to those whom they meet and live with ... the finest hero will then be the one who most naturally seems to generate sub-characters — aspects of himself — who become the means by which he is revealed, facet by facet.²

This paper will attempt to show that all the characters in the play are not only filtered through Willy's perceptions, but represent aspects of his splintered mind. As Fletcher observes, "the fragmentation of the allegorical hero enables a writer to deal with a highly complex moral world by creating a composite protagonist who is not by any means as restricted as he appears."³ Miller dramatically presents the complex moral world of mid-nineteenth-century American values and beliefs, for each of the characters embodies an abstract quality. Linda, the devoted wife, represents that pernicious American value, security. Biff, the all-American boy turned thief, embodies the vanished frontier, the lost promise of America, while Happy, whose name is the most ironically allegorical, represents the sterile materialism and sensuality that have eroded the frontier spirit. Ben, as a number of critics have noted,⁴ is the character who most obviously functions as an element of Willy's mind, representing the fantasy of success through the ruthless Darwinian spirit, while Charley, a sort of double for Ben, embodies the domestication of capitalism within the city. Charley's son, Bernard, and young Howard are, as sons and fathers, mirrors in which Willy sees his own and his sons' failures. All the characters in the drama then, are mirrors or doubles for Willy, for all represent aspects of not only his failure, but the failure of America to achieve its promise.

The drama is, as Miller makes clear in the subtitle, "certain private conversations," that is, private conversations within Willy's mind and with those characters who shape and have been shaped by his values. This is not to suggest that Linda, Biff, Happy and Charley do not exist as actual characters who have as much reality in the drama as Willy has. It is instead meant to suggest that Miller believes and has attempted to express the notion that we shape our perceptions of reality as many ways as possible. Thus, Willy convinces himself that he is the crucial salesman in New England, that he is handsome, a loving husband and devoted father and that his sons are able to "lick the civilized world." All these conceptions are, of course, delusions, but, unfortunately, they are believed to some degree by all the family members. Their motivation in believing these fantasies is made clear when both Happy and Linda warn Biff to tell his father what he wants to hear, not what has actually happened. Happy and Linda, like Biff, are less to be blamed than Willy, for it is Willy who has forced his family to play the parts that he has designed for them. They

are all characters in a dream, Willy's dream of reality. The initial stage directions make this explicit: "An air of dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality."⁵

Linda, according to a recent critic, prods Willy to his doom by "helping him shirk the responsibilities of the kind of knowledge needed to hold himself and his family together."⁶ But Linda is much more a victim of Willy than vice versa. In his Introduction to the *Collected Plays*, Miller observed that "Linda is made by Willy though he did not know it or believe in it or receive it unto himself."⁷ When Willy remembers receiving a job offer in Alaska from Ben, he immediately hears Linda's voice: "Why must everybody conquer the world? You're well liked, and the boys love you, and someday—why, old man Wagner told him just the other day that if he keeps it up he'll be a member of the firm" (p. 183). In this episode Linda clearly represents not so much an actual woman holding her husband back, but an aspect of Willy's own mind, an aspect that is afraid of risks and uncertainties. Willy, however, chooses to remember that it was Linda who persuaded him to remain a salesman, but we have only his rationalizing memories of the event. His quick acquiescence to Linda's position reveals that Linda functions primarily as an echo of Willy's own position; she embodies his need for security even at the price of mediocrity. Ironically, Willy assures Linda that she is his "foundation and support," and to a large extent she is, for her existence testifies to Willy's domestic success. The house, appliances, cars and insurance prove that Willy has achieved the necessary social status in a society which confuses a facade for substance.

Ben, on the other hand, represents Willy's dreams of financial success through ruthless strength: "The man knew what he wanted and went out and got it" (p. 152). But Willy was not willing or able to take the risks that great success demanded; therefore, he magnifies the cunning required and dangers faced—from the darkest jungles of Africa to the arctic terrors of Alaska—in order to justify his own hesitations and failures.

If Linda and Ben embody Willy's dreams of domestic and financial success, Biff is a living reminder of Willy's failure as both. Biff represents the great American dream gone wrong. He could have recaptured the pioneer spirit of his grandfather, the itinerant inventor,

but he has been fatally infected by Willy's values. Although Biff recognizes his father as a fake, he also needs to recognize that he, too, in embracing his father's beliefs, is also a fake. The climax of the play for Biff occurs in Bill Oliver's office, for it is there that he is forced to recognize the fact that he has lived and believed the fantasy that Willy has created of and for him. Biff had let Willy shape him so that he became the embodiment of Willy's dream of parental success. But Biff, on some level, realized this and his thefts had been pathetic attempts to break the mold of perfection that Willy's mind had created.

Willy's materialism and philandering find expression in his other son, Happy, who confesses that he finds pleasure in seducing the fiancées of executives because "maybe I just have an overdeveloped sense of competition or something" (p. 141). Like Biff, Happy has been warped by Willy's belief in success at any price. His promiscuity and insensitivity reach their pinnacle in the "celebration" dinner when he deserts his father for a woman he has just picked up—an event that parallels what Willy did to Biff in that Boston hotel room.

The scene in the hotel room, which returns to Willy with violent force in the restaurant, represents Willy's failures as a husband and father. When Bernard probes close to the buried incident by asking Willy if Biff met him in Boston, Willy turns on him: "What are you trying-to do, blame it on me? If a boy lays down is that my fault?" (p. 189). By refusing to accept responsibility for Biff, Willy is also refusing to accept responsibility for himself. When Biff explodes at Willy: "You—you gave her Mama's stockings! Don't touch me, you—liar! You fake! You phony little fake! You fake!," he expresses the self-accusations that Willy has carried and will carry to his death. Willy has failed, as American society, in Miller's eyes, has failed, to be true to its pioneer heritage. The myth of the American dream—an easy, soft life and an easy, painless death, as represented by the old salesman Dave Singleman—has been replaced by the reality of Willy's death.

The short Requiem that concludes the play has been criticized for its sentimentality and the artificiality of its speeches. The purpose of the Requiem, however, is made clearer by recognizing the drama as a psychomachia. All the characters who had previously functioned as parts of Willy's dream or nightmare are now supposedly free of him. In fact, Linda's final words are, ironically, "We're free" (p. 222). But each

of the characters continues to embody the values that Willy demanded of them. They are not free of Willy any more than he could be free of them and of his need to control them. This interconnectedness of human beings reveals Miller's major theme and further explains his reason for using both expressionistic and naturalistic techniques.

In an interview with Ronald Hayman, Miller compared *Death of a Salesman* with the later *After the Fall* by stating:

I have worked in two veins always and I guess they alternate. In one the event is inside the brain and in the other the brain is inside the event. In *Death* we are inside the head. That's why I've needed to kinds of stylistic attack.⁸

Miller is more explicit about his stylistic techniques in his Introduction to the *Collected Plays*. There he concludes that

The first image that occurred to me which was to result in *Death* was of an enormous face the height of the proscenium arch which would appear and then open up, and we would see the inside of a man's head. In fact, "The Inside of His Head" was the first title.⁹

Miller continues in the Introduction to remark that the major tension in the play is between the past and the present, but it can more accurately be said that the major tension in the drama is between the self and the others. Willy descends into himself and encounters his wife, his sons, his older brother and his neighbors, but it becomes clear to us, if not to him, that all these people are not others who have been respected by Willy as individuals in their own right. Rather, he has shaped all of them, with disastrous results.

Willy does not recognize this, however, for he has always viewed other people as mirrors of himself. He does not understand what he has done to Linda or Happy, but he is forced to recognize what he has done to Biff. The drama revolves around the exploration of one mind's grappling with its responsibilities for others, and because of that the technique utilized has to be expressionistic, for we have to be inside Willy's mind to understand and appreciate its rationalizations. But just as Miller recognized the in the relationship between the individual and society,¹⁰ so does he reveal that in any treatment of one man's mind we will encounter larger social issues, thus the naturalistic

element in the drama. Willy's mind is the mind of mid-twentieth-century America, obsessed with security, status, financial success, athletic and sexual prowess, and public recognition.

The drama, then, utilizes both expressionism and naturalism in order to capture an extremely complex moral vision, for when we view or read the play we are both immersed in one mind which is many minds, and yet we are allowed the aesthetic distance so that we can objectively evaluate that mind's and our society's values. Miller's basic theme, that we are all morally responsible for one another, becomes artistically embodied in the technique of psychomachia. In Willy Loman we see what has become of a man and a nation that have not learned to accept their responsibility for others. When Miller first saw the play produced, he noted:

Then it seemed to me that we must be a terribly lonely people, cut off from each other by such massive pretense of self-sufficiency, machined down so fine we hardly touch any more. We are trying to save ourselves separately, and that is immoral, that is the corrosive among us.¹¹

Miller captured this theme in his utilization of psychomachia, for Willy is both self and society, the embodiment of an American that is spiritually dying.

Notes

1. Brian Parker, "Point of View in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 35 (1966), 157.
2. Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, (Ithaca, Cornell Univ. Press, 1964), pp.35-36.
3. Fletcher, p. 159.
4. See particularly Sister M. Bettina, "Willy Loman's Brother Ben: Tragic Insight in *Death of a Salesman*." *Modern Drama*, 4 (1962), 409-412.
5. Arthur Miller, "Death of a Salesman," in *Collected Plays*, (New York: Viking Press, 1957), p. 130. All quotations from the drama and Miller's Introduction to the *Collected Plays* will be from this edition.
6. See Guerin Bliquez, "Linda's Role in *Death of a Salesman*." *MD*, 10 (1968), 383-386, for an indictment of Linda's effect on Willy.
7. *Collected Plays*, p. 24.

8. Interview recorded in Ronald Hayman, *Arthur Miller* (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 14.
9. *Collected Plays*, p. 23.
10. See Miller's essay on "Tragedy and the Common Man." In *Death of a Salesman*, ed. Gerald Weales (New York: Viking, 1967), p. 145: "Our lack of tragedy may be partially accounted for by the turn which modern literature has taken toward the purely psychiatric view of life, or the purely sociological."
11. Arthur Miller. "'The Salesman' Has a Birthday." An article written for the *New York Times* on the first anniversary of the opening of the drama, rpt. in Weales, p. 148

Photo redacted: copyrighted material.	Arthur Kennedy, Lee J. Cobb and Cameron Mitchell as they appeared in the New York production of "Death of a Salesman", 1949. "Miller continues in the Introduction to remark that the major tension in the play is between the past and the present, but it can more accurately be said that the major tension in the drama is between the self and others."
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