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# Research Chronicler

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Prof. K. N. Shelke



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## Death as Redemption in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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### Abstract

Death has been obsession for many for many reasons. Miller's characters suffer the loss of identity in the materialistic world. Willy Loman could not save anything by which his kids could make up something. At the age of 62 he kills himself thinking atleast the insurance money may help his kids to start something for their survival. The present article tries to explore the intricacies of human relationships and the reasons behind the suicide of Willy Loman.

**Key Terms:** Arthur Miller, death, redemption

Arthur Asher Miller was born in New York city on October 17, 1915. He is an important American dramatist whose work occupies a significant place in the tradition of American literature. Miller grew up during the years of the Depression in America, and this was the most important single factor which determined his work. His four plays All My Sons (1947), Death of a Salesman (1949), The Crucible (1953), and A view from the Bridge (1955) depict the impact of social change on man. Miller died on February 10, 2005 at his home in Roxbury of heart failure.

Arthur Miller in his plays talk about families. As societies are formed of families, the changes in society create a great impact on families too. It was during the First World War that the American society was

going through major changes. Perhaps nobody thought of the impact of the world wars. The soldiers were fighting on the battle field, and the deaths and frustrations were reaching whole America. Miller lived in such an age. His life itself had gone through many changes. He suffered the great loss of Depression. The economy of the nation collapsed the economy of all homes.

Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is a drama that depicts the life of Willy Loman. He is a salesman of 62 trying to do something for his family. He has struggled throughout his life to give his family what it needs. But he at 62 finds himself a loser. His wife Linda is always there to support him but he does not think her his soul companion. His elder son Biff is not able to find a proper job and his younger son Happy keeps on changing his

jobs. Willy tries to give something to his kids by which they can continue their life. But he is unsuccessful.

Willy's character is of a typical American man who wants to live with all luxuries, wants to give his sons all the facilities of a rich family but forgets that his earnings are not enough. Everything he has brought home is on loan and most of his salary goes to pay the installments. He lives in a world of fantasy where he is the boss but the reality of life haunts him. When Biff leaves the house and Happy takes a flat on rent, Willy finds himself alone. A man who was at the center of the home loses the center and wanders around the sphere. He is out as a salesman surrounded by people but inside he is lonely. He wants to live a family life where his sons and he are living a perfect life.

“Work a lifetime to pay off a house. You finally own it, and there's nobody to live in it.”

..... Willy, Act One, Page 4.“

Willy calls his wife his harbor. He is a boat which keeps on sailing from place to place but it doesn't rest anywhere. Where he stops are the temporary halting spots. But his wife is a resting place for him. He comes there and feels at home. He knows she is the one who cares for him. But he is not happy with her also. He explodes all his anger on her. A man teased and troubled and hardly welcomed at any place, vomits his frustration in front of his wife. She understands all these problems and consoles him, that's why she is his harbor. He has an affair with a woman but she is not for him.

A man always wants a mother and a beloved for him. But he does not find this in one woman. After having kids, husband becomes another kid for her and the relationship strengthens. But the bond is lost for husband. The way wife looks after him, caresses and fights against everybody for him, husband unknowingly starts respecting her as his mother. Now he needs someone with whom he can make love, the emotional, and the physical. His desire for fresh beloved is never lost. The kidding, the fondling, the pranks, the teasing – all he wants till death. Wife, he cannot bear doing this because a man always thinks his wife subordinate but at the same time he wants her to be equal. This dilemma makes him frustrated. His motherly wife is now everything for him. His sons don't ever say that he has done great duty for them, don't recognize at least what he has done for them. The society, the children now don't require him. So the purpose of life is lost. A man wants recognition from society and children but Willy doesn't get this, so he wants to quit.

No doubt his wife is there for whom he should live as she needs him. But when ninety percent is lost, ten percent is never cared for. Now he is not her husband but a son who has lost the purpose of life. It is man's tendency to think that his wife belongs to him but he doesn't to her. This is the role changing. Linda is just a woman, a traditional one who has to work and die, a woman meant for reproduction, care and death. She is perhaps the most tragic figure in the play. Sons don't care for her, society she doesn't know, husband who doesn't think of her, but she is still living and wants

to live for her family. This is never understood by Willy. He is in his world, a man of high self esteem, facing the downfall, a hero who has lost the table but wants to die a heroic death.

After the birth of kids, the roles are changed in a family. A man becomes a father and a woman becomes the mother. Children keep this image of their parents till they die. In childhood parents are gods for kids. So for Biff, his father is an ideal person. The way Willy narrates the fictional elements in front of his kids; Biff has put his father on the high position. For him his father is the epitome of success and charity. But when he sees his father with another woman, the glass is shattered and broken. A perfect image is lost. He loses his hope in purity. He wanders, doesn't know for what. Unable to find a place where he can comfort himself, he comes back. He has strong hatred for his father. It is strange that he never does anything great for his mother but cares for her. A man in him doesn't allow another man to insult his mother. He becomes another man and not his son.

Happy is altogether different from his brother. The qualities the elder brother possesses, younger develops some opposite ones. For him relationships have lost their meaning. Marriage is not institution for him which brings two souls together for lives to come. In life nothing is permanent and so the relationships also. He believes in enjoying life. In the rat-race one rat often kills the other to survive. He knows he is a part of this race.

But Happy is decent with his brother. Both of them decide to start business

together. This relationship between brothers is a quite unique one. They have no property to get from their father, so there is no question of fighting. They don't have to share much, so there are no chances of losing anything; and that's why they are friends. This friendship between them keeps them together. They share funny jokes, matters regarding women and also their view regarding parents.

As Happy is not very serious about his life, he also is frustrated.

"But then, it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty

of women. And still goddamit, I'm lonely.".....Happy, Act one, Page 11

He doesn't have much expectation from life, nor from his family members. Removing everyday attachment, he has left the house, rented a flat and tries to enjoy life. He represents the modern youth whose expectations from society, life, family members and even from himself are over. Whereas Biff is a unique combination of his mother and father. His attachment towards mother makes his father an unknown person for him. He is back with his family members as he loves his family but he has developed frustration from society like a middle aged man develops.

Willy could not bear the loss inside. He feels that it was due to his failure in business that his sons have to suffer. He is unable to cope up with the new environment. Willy, a man, who always thought he could have changed his life, his one decision changed the whole thing, he always thinks. If he had gone with his brother, he would have been something different. His wife stopped him

from going away. But he never blames her. On the contrary, he comes home like a child, puts his head on his wife's lap and forgets all his worries. He is happy with her. But he couldn't keep his family intact.

It is the impact of the nuclear family that reaches kids in this way. Everything has to be separate. Willy's home is a nest where both of them worked hard to see their chicks fly, but when they flew, they flew away. Willy always blames himself for not leaving anything behind by which his kids can develop themselves. He finds one way, the only way that is suicide. He needs relief, relief from the indifferent society, relief from the kids whose unemployment is a torture for him, relief from his wife who too much cares for him. He feels guilty for her that he was not faithful to her. He knows that he is wrong somewhere but unable to change himself. He finds one solution to all his problems.....the only one that is death.

*Death of a Salesman* is the story of a modern man who is helpless. With

industrialization and new inventions, man's life is becoming comfortable. But for these comforts man is losing self control. New amenities are so tantalizing that one cannot stop himself from having them but in buying those things man is utilizing all his resources. There might be very few who are still investing money for their future and might be giving better life to their kids but they have different problems in their old age. But most of the people are finding themselves helpless to survive in the modern world, in the nuclear world. Miller with Willy portrays this modern man of the world. Willy represents the modern man who is frustrated but needs to be looked after. As Linda says,

"He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's 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 a dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person."

.....Act One, Page 38

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