

4 Death of a Salesman

Death of a Salesman stands apart from almost all of Arthur Miller's other work. Nothing in *The Man Who Had All the Luck* or *All My Sons* prepared New York audiences for the quite extraordinary achievement of *Salesman*; and many critics have never forgiven the playwright for not repeating the triumph. *Salesman* seems both the epitome of everything Miller has aimed for in the theatre and a separate and unique creation. It is the exception to almost every easy generalisation about the dramatist. It was written in almost a single burst of creative inspiration, from personal experience not from an outside source; it contains a deep vein of humour and a compassionate tolerance not always found in Miller's work; it is one of the few instances when the playwright has projected himself into a character quite unlike himself, writing in this play from the point of view of the father rather than the alienated son; and it is Miller's most successful attempt at creating individual characters with universal significance. When he first appeared on the American stage, Willy Loman was recognised as a kind of

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American Everyman – a universal symbol made real by hundreds of minutely observed details of speech, manner and psychology.

The most original feature of the play is its form – a form for which Miller had been searching since the beginning of his writing career.¹⁹ *Death of a Salesman* struck New York playgoers as something entirely novel, 'a fresh creation in a style of its own' as Brooks Atkinson described it. The success of the play owes much to the brilliant fusion of various theatrical elements which is a result of the original collaboration of scene-designer, director and playwright. One of the most striking features of the original production was Jo Mielziner's set. Developing ideas he had worked out in *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Mielziner created a skeletal setting which provided three interior playing areas and permitted a variety of other scenes to be played on a large forestage. The house was set against a background which could be transformed by a change of lighting from an oppressive cityscape to a leafy pastoral. This permitted a rapid alternation between the scenes in the present and others from Willy's memory of the past. The production flowed smoothly from the Loman kitchen out into office or restaurant on the forestage, and from fully lit scenes to isolated pools of illumination. The effect was a combination of detailed realism and a more poetic expressionism. The actuality conveyed by accurate period properties such as the 1929 refrigerator was filtered through a haze of affectionate memory which muted the colours, softened the lights and made the characters seem larger than life.

The sense of heightened or poeticised realism in the staging was matched by the acting. Kazan, Lee J. Cobb and Arthur Kennedy had all been with the Group Theatre and the style of the production had its roots in the acting

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tradition of that company. But the performers were able to transcend the limitations sometimes associated with the rather introverted 'method' style. Lee Cobb particularly, a huge rumped man with a deep, rich voice, endowed the character of Willy with a dignity beyond his station in life. It was Cobb's ability to lift his performance onto the high plane of tragic acting, to create a character who was exhausted without being weak, misguided rather than insane, that contributed so largely to the impact of the New York production.

The most novel feature of the play, however, was the rich interpenetration of past and present. The great advantage of the Kazan staging was that the present was never erased by the past but was rather made richer by it. Whereas the film version of the play showed Willy's memories as flashbacks – substituting one time and place for another – the stage production shows past and present existing simultaneously. The result is an enlargement of the scope of the dramatic form to include the world of subjective experience normally excluded from the stage. It is the very richness of *Death of a Salesman* which is at once its greatest strength and its principal problem. On the one hand, the form permits an intricate interweaving of thematic material in which incidents are thrust into the play with a minimum of exposition and developed only so long as they are thematically relevant.²⁰ On the other hand, the mixture of verbal and theatrical images defies simple analysis and conveys to many readers and spectators an impression of narrative confusion. This is largely due to the fact that the story proceeds in two dimensions – real time and remembered time. The 'external plot' deals with the last twenty-four hours of Willy's life from his return home late Sunday night to his death Monday evening. Then there is the 'internal plot' which treats the past from Willy's earliest

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memories of his own father to the fateful summer of Biff's failure in high school. In outline, the play is very similar to an Ibsenite play of ripe circumstance except that the exposition of events from the past is dramatised instead of being simply reported. This similarity makes it possible to discuss the work as a play of social criticism not unlike *All My Sons* in which one might look for the central conflict in the opposed value-systems of the two main characters. According to such a view, *Salesman* is an indictment of the American capitalist system which values machines more highly than men. The central scene takes place in Howard's office where Willy's pleading for his job and invoking his human connection with Howard is cruelly juxtaposed with Howard's indifferent insistence that 'business is business' and with the mechanical imitation of human voices on the wire recorder. The difficulty with this interpretation is that it simplifies the play, ignoring the humane capitalist, Charley, and forgetting altogether that Willy is a very active collaborator in his own downfall.

Another related approach to the play is to see it as a domestic social drama in which the central character is Biff. This interpretation would identify the central conflict as being between Willy's determination to make Biff into a success in capitalistic terms, and his son's search for a more valid life as a man who works with his hands. Here the playwright's earlier examinations of father-son conflicts in *Luck* and *Sons* seem to anticipate the opposition between Willy's phoney doctrine of materialistic success and Biff's perception of a more humane ideal based on the freedom and companionship of the American west. But once again such an interpretation seems a distortion of the play. While it is true that Biff represents the possibility of undeluded integrity, it is not clear precisely what kind of social order he embodies, not is it at all apparent that we are to prefer Biff's

rather unimaginative bumbling to his father's irrepressible hopefulness. Finally, the experience of the play makes it impossible for spectators or readers to respond to Biff as the central character because of the overwhelming presence of Willy.

It is the presentation of Willy's internal life which is the most striking feature of the play and the one which must be understood before a final assessment of the work can be made. Willy's memories do not materialise at random. They are triggered by certain incidents in the present, and Willy is changed by remembering them. A detailed examination of this process is impossible, but a single example may illustrate the point. Willy's first return to the past in the play is the result of his recollection of the time when Biff seemed so full of promise. It is brought on by Biff's return home and the inevitable tension between the two men which is a consequence of Biff's apparent inability to settle down. It begins with Willy remembering his son waxing the car and proceeds to recollections of other details such as the way in which Biff 'borrowed' a football from the school locker-room. The guilt Willy felt even then about exaggerating his own accomplishments and encouraging his sons to disregard the law is suggested by the appearance of Linda in the memory.

Since Willy could never deceive his wife with quite the same facility that he could impress his sons, Linda serves as a kind of conscience making him confess his true earnings and his real sense of inadequacy – 'The trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me.'²¹ The temporary feeling of intimacy with his wife reminds Willy that he has not even been honest with Linda, and he attempts to justify his infidelity to himself – 'I get so lonely – specially when business is bad . . . I get the feeling that I'll never sell anything again, that I won't make a living for you, or . . . a

business for the boys.' But even this rationalisation is undercut by the intrusion of the image of the woman in the Boston hotel room and the reminder that, in some ways, he had been more generous to his mistress than to his wife. As he approaches the final unspeakable fear – the possibility that he has betrayed Biff too by the double folly of lying and being found out – the voices become more and more accusing. Nevertheless Willy represses the memories and cries out his denial – 'I never in my life told him anything but decent things.' When he returns to the present he is like a man who has glimpsed the ultimate horror, and his immediate impulse is to protect his innocence. At first he tries to blame his failure on tactics or an error in strategy – 'Why didn't I go to Alaska with my brother Ben . . . What a mistake!' But the memories pushing up into his consciousness will not let him accept that lie. The first recollection of Ben shows Willy's subconscious fear that the things he has been telling his sons were not always as decent as he had claimed – 'I've been waiting for you so long! What's the answer?'

This subtle exploration of Willy's subjective life has led many critics to approach the play as a psychological drama with strong Freudian colouring. According to this interpretation, the work concentrates on family relationships and especially on the conflicts between fathers and sons. This is a more fruitful path into the complexities of the work than the two previously discussed, for father-son conflicts are all-pervasive. Indeed one of the most striking characteristics of Willy is that he is both father and son. The quintessential boy-man, Willy is the eternal adolescent arrested at an early stage of development and because of it unable to help his own son to a healthy maturity. In a very real sense Willy and Biff are more like brothers than father and son, and it is Biff who grows up first.

Willy's problems as a father are shown to be a direct result of his own deprivation as a son, and it is part of the richness of *Death of a Salesman* that its perspective encompasses three generations. Willy's memories touch on the critical moments of his life and the earliest of these concern his hazy recollections of his own father – 'All I remember is a man with a big beard, and I was in Mama's lap, sitting around a fire, and some kind of high music.' The music, of course, is the flute music which sounds periodically through the play and which, Miller informs us in the stage directions, tells of 'grass, trees and the horizon'. The pastoral associations of the music are related to the wanderings of the Loman family 'through Ohio, and Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and all the Western states' where the elder Loman made and sold his flutes. But the father-image evoked by the music is much more complex than is sometimes suggested. For, according to Ben at least, their father was also a 'great inventor' who 'with one gadget' could make more in a week than Willy would make in a lifetime. The patriarch of the Loman family is therefore a shadowy ideal who embodies a variety of qualities. Musician, craftsman, salesman, inventor (as well as wife-deserter), he is a combination Wandering Jew and Yankee pedlar who has left a mingled heritage to his sons.

Since their father left when Willy was a child, he remains a dim figure in his son's imagination. Willy's determination to give strong guidance to his sons is a result of his sense of the lack of such guidance in his own life. 'Dad left when I was such a baby . . . I never had a chance to talk to him and I still feel – kind of temporary about myself.' Willy has chosen to imitate the salesman side of his father, not through any urging on his father's part but rather as a result of circumstances. The most influential of these was his meeting with David Singleman, an old New England salesman who

came to represent for Willy the father he never knew. It is Singleman's life, and more especially his death, that come to symbolise what Willy thinks he wants for himself. As he explains to Howard,

Old Dave, he'd go up to his room, y'understand, put on his green velvet slippers – I'll never forget – and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without even leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realised that selling was the greatest career a man could want.

Miller almost certainly intended the irony implied by Willy's interest in a job that required no more effort than lifting a phone, but the more dreadful irony relates to the interpretation of business which Willy derives from Singleman's example. What Singleman's achievement represents to Willy is a demonstration of the co-operative and benevolent nature of capitalism. Singleman's ability to sell by phone at age eighty-four was proof to Willy that he was 'remembered and loved and helped by so many different people'. This conclusion seemed to be confirmed by Singleman's funeral which was attended by hundreds of salesmen and buyers. Singleman, in other words, represented free enterprise with a human face, and it is part of Willy's tragedy that he never realises that such a system does not exist.

Willy's inability to see the nature of the system in which he functions is the more extraordinary in that part of him worships the very ruthlessness that helps to destroy him. The other side of his father – the inventive and irresponsible side – is epitomised in the play by Ben who, as Willy's older brother, constitutes another substitute father-figure. The character of Ben differs from all the other figures in the

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play in several respects. There is a quality of unreality about Ben which suggests the generalised characters of Expressionist drama. He refuses to answer questions about himself and communicates cryptically – ‘when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!’ There is no attempt on Miller’s part to reveal Ben’s psychological make-up, and indeed the character seems almost a two-dimensional projection of Willy’s imagination. Ben is the only character who appears to Willy out of an historical context, and he seems at times to be more like a ghost or *alter ego*. It is probable that he represents in part Willy’s depression over his brother’s recent death and the breaking of the last connection with his father. But perhaps he functions primarily as a dramatic embodiment of those qualities of assurance, daring and lack of scruples which Willy secretly admires but does not possess. The ‘jungle’ where no one fights fair is where Willy knows the wealth is to be found, but his own nature yearns for the security of home, garden and an adoring family.

One aspect of the play, therefore, deals with Willy Loman as a son trying to please a father he never knew. His own nature is ill-suited for the competitive world of business and he tries to adjust in two ways. He convinces himself and his sons that success is a product of being well-liked, but at the same time he encourages competitive and even unlawful behaviour. He fails because he never understands the inconsistency in his beliefs and that his desire for the emotional security of popularity is at odds with the realities of the profession he has entered.

CHARLEY: The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you’re a salesman, and you don’t know that.

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WILLY: I’ve always tried to think otherwise, I guess.

Willy’s failure to come to terms with his own father cripples him in his ability to be a father in his turn. Deprived of affection as a child, he smothers his own sons with love, and oppresses them with the nakedness of his hopes for their success. Here it is important to comprehend the paradoxical nature of the ‘conflict’ between Willy and his children. For what Hap, and especially Biff, have to fight is not indifference or hostility, but a surfeit of love. The terrible irony of the play is that Willy’s struggles, sacrifice and final suicide are not for his own material advancement, but for his sons. Even when Biff is thirty-four years old Willy cannot rid himself of the compulsion to help him. When Charley gives him the advice of the practical realist Willy cannot take it.

CHARLEY: He won’t starve. None a them starve. Forget about him.

WILLY: Then what have I got to remember?

CHARLEY: You take it too hard. To hell with it. When a deposit bottle is broken you don’t get your nickel back.

It is this overwhelming need to have his sons succeed that is the underlying drive of his life and the cause of his tragic agony.

From the point of view of his sons, therefore, when they understand this love, Willy is a ‘prince’. But Biff has had an opportunity to get to know Willy better than Willy ever knew his father, and he has come to realise that Willy is also a ‘phoney’. It is the ambivalence of Biff’s attitude to his father, and the defensiveness it arouses in Willy, that together cause the conflict between them. The form of the

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play, however, precludes a full examination of that conflict. Since only Willy's memories are dramatised, the opposition is seen almost entirely from Willy's point of view. It is his shock and guilt we feel when Biff discovers him in the Boston hotel room, not Biff's. And although we understand that Biff then loses faith in his father's ability to influence his teacher, and that he suddenly sees the discrepancy between what Willy pretends to be and what he really is, we never learn exactly how that shock affects his subsequent life.

True, we are told about the externals – that he burned his University of Virginia sneakers, refused to go to summer school to upgrade his math-mark, and then embarked on a seventeen-year programme of failure – but we never grasp the precise connection between Biff's disillusionment with his father and his own inability to know himself. For when the play begins, Biff is still torn between resentment of his father and emotional dependence on him. He feels 'like a boy', unable to compromise with the world, but uncomfortable at home. His rejection of his father as a 'fake' at fifteen has in no way altered his need to please him. It is only in the course of his last visit home that he at last seems to understand the emotional block which has been crippling him. After stealing the pen from Bill Oliver's desk he is finally prompted to ask the all-important question: 'Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be?' At that moment he realises that 'all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am!'

There is on the face of it no obvious reason why Biff did not make this discovery years ago (or conversely, what it was that triggered it at this particular moment). One of the problems Miller himself came to see in the play was that Biff's achievement of self-understanding is not fully enough documented and is overshadowed by Willy's

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delusion and defeat. It is hard to agree with this criticism altogether because it seems evident that the play Miller has written is not, after all, fundamentally about father-son relationships, nor is the documenting of Biff's disillusionment central to Miller's concerns. Those, it seems to me, are ultimately more philosophical than psychological.

The most fruitful approach to the play, therefore, is to see it like *Luck* and *Sons* as a drama about self-delusion. Miller's central preoccupation is not social, not psychological, but existential. Throughout his career the playwright has been preoccupied with the role the individual plays in his own fate. Why do people behave so differently in moments of crisis? Why, for example, were some men crushed by the Depression while others survived unscathed? Since the external factors were more or less the same for everyone in the 1930s, clearly the differences were within. Those who believed in the system felt guilty for their failure and gave up the struggle. The secret of survival seemed to lie in the discovery of the hidden laws. In the pursuit of this discovery the greatest obstacle was not the absence of facts, but the wilful blindness that rendered many people incapable of seeing those facts. At its core, *Death of a Salesman* is a play about the destructive nature of dreams.

The distinction between psychological and philosophical in this context is a fine one and perhaps involves no more than a difference of emphasis. For clearly the question of belief is both intellectual and emotional. It is Miller's insistence on this fact that underlies the peculiar blend of sex and politics in his plays. The mixture has confused some critics and annoyed others who do not see the connection between the subjects. In *Salesman*, for example, the scene in the Boston hotel room has seemed to some an unnecessary embellishment unrelated to the main theme of the

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play. Such critics would argue that Biff's discovery of his father's infidelity is not closely connected with his rejection of Willy's doctrine of being well-liked. Miller's point, however, seems to be that it was in fact the shock of Biff's discovery that prevented him from seeing the truth about himself for so long. His anger with his father serves as an excuse to avoid looking for the real causes of his failure which are in himself.

Looked at as a play about knowing, *Salesman* focuses on the conflict between facts as they are, and the attempts of various persons to ignore or disguise those facts. The conflict is not embodied in any particular moment of crisis (except perhaps in the last scene between Willy and Biff), but it is all-pervasive. The Lomans engage in constant deception to conceal the truth from themselves. In different ways Charley, Barnard, Howard and Ben each present Willy with facts that he will not recognise as such. Biff's gradual recognition of what has gone on in the house and his determination to tell Willy the truth appear to the others as a betrayal. In the final confrontation between the two men, Biff cannot make his father face the truth. Willy has too much emotional capital tied up in his dreams of Biff's magnificence, and he prefers to sacrifice his life rather than his illusion. The ending is ironic in that Miller intends the audience to see that Willy is deluded and that a way out exists. As Willy says of Biff, the door of his life was wide open if he had had the courage to go through it. The 'tragedy' of Willy Loman's suffering and death is that they are unnecessary.

Miller has often said that he was surprised by the reaction to *Salesman* because he had thought the play much more hopeful than audiences found it to be. One wonders, however, if such remarks are not a trifle ingenuous. For the epilogue Miller has written for the play (called a requiem in

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the text) seems something of a dramatic *non sequitur*. To begin with it is an almost shameless exploitation of pathos. The scene of Linda at the graveside, her powerfully moving final speech with its achingly ironic concluding cry 'We're free . . . we're free', and particularly the background flute music, are devices aimed unerringly at the tear ducts. The impression that Willy is a pathetic victim is reinforced by Charley who (somewhat inconsistently) provides in the epilogue the play's most eloquent justification for Willy's romantic hopefulness.

A salesman . . . don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back – that's an earthquake. . . . Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.

It seems clear from the rest of the play, however, that we are intended to blame Willy (as Biff certainly does) for having all the wrong dreams. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we are to blame him for holding on to those dreams long after they cease to correspond with any possible reality.

Perhaps the apparent inconsistency is a result of Miller's own ambivalent feeling towards his characters. Certainly there is no question that the world of Willy Loman is the world of Arthur Miller's youth. Not only was Willy patterned on a salesman who worked for Miller's father, but there are numerous parallels between the events in the play and Miller's own life. Like Biff, Miller was a poor student and a good athlete who failed to get into university and worked at a variety of odd jobs before finding his true vocation. When he did decide to become a writer, he had to wait almost

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seventeen years (from 1932 until *All My Sons* in 1947) before he could justify his career in terms that his father could understand. More important than the personal correspondences, however, are the patterns of emotional and ideological conflicts in the play. As one critic has pointed out, the drama is not about an unsuccessful salesman so much as it is about a Jewish family.²² The tight family bond, the intense pressure on the eldest son, the strong rivalry between close friends, the anxiety to fit in and be popular are all a little more understandable in a Jewish immigrant context. Furthermore, the speech patterns of the play seemed to this critic to be more natural in Yiddish translation than in the original. Finally, the tone of the work – a blend of pathos and irony – is very close to Jewish literature with its long tradition of turning pain into humour. One strong effect of *Salesman* (as of some other of Miller's plays) is of a secret personal drama partially concealed beneath the seemingly innocent text.

Critical reaction to *Death of a Salesman* has been sharply and often heatedly divided. Sometimes the differences between critics have been along 'ideological' lines – socialists seeing the play as an indictment of capitalism, and salesmen viewing it as a celebration of their profession. Not infrequently they can be attributed to different critical assumptions. The more relentlessly intellectual American critics, led perhaps by Eric Bentley, have tended to decry Miller's lack of intellectual rigour. Such critics tend to attack what they take to be the author's personal beliefs rather than confining themselves to a discussion of the self-contained world of the drama. Ultimately, however, the differences seem to come down to a question of temperament. Plays like *Death of a Salesman* seem to separate critics into what William James would have called the 'tough-minded' and the 'tender-minded' camps. The

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'realistic', 'scientific', 'objective' personality often finds Miller sentimental or naive. Willy Loman to such critics is a weak, deluded, child-man – a figure of pathos not tragedy. The world of the play, just because it is the world of the common man is inherently uninteresting because it excludes the extremes of divine idiot and creative genius. Tender-minded critics on the other hand, acknowledge the limitations of Willy's character and world, but see them as strengths not weaknesses. Speaking not for all such critics but only for myself, I respond more strongly to Willy's universality than I do to many more exceptional tragic heroes. As for Willy's blindness, that too seems to me a more valid representation of man's contemporary experience than the 'enlightenment' provided by some acknowledged tragedies. Furthermore, it is ultimately the audience's enlightenment which is important, not the character's, and in this respect I do not think *Death of a Salesman* fails. What emerges at the end of the play seems to me an appropriate blend of pity, fear and consolation – pity for Willy, fear that we may be as self-deluding as he, and hope based on the knowledge that we can, if we so decide, take control of our lives. I doubt if we can ask more of serious drama in the twentieth century.