



Exploring the Psychological Shaping of the Characters in *Death of a Salesman* from the Conflict of Social Relations

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Abstract. *Death of a Salesman* follows the 24 h before Willy Loman's death. The old salesman worked all his life and had to rely on his friend Charlie to help him out. Meanwhile, he also had two sons who just sit around – Biff and Happy. He wanted to change the status quo, but was mercilessly dismissed by his boss. Finally, in desperation, he suicided in order to getting the insurance payment for his sons. In the drama, the conflicts in each scene and the shaping of the characters are very distinct. This paper examines the physical and psychological dilemmas faced by Willie through the physical, psychological and social aspects of the play, starting with the relationships between the characters and analysing the masculinity-tainted men and the othered women in the context of the play, the generation and transmission of nostalgia and the tragic ending of being first alienated and then abandoned by society.

Keywords: *Death of a Salesman* · Arthur Miller · the American dream

1 Introduction

Since the birth of the United States in 1776, the American Dream has been born with it, becoming a concentrated manifestation of the American national spirit and traditional values. With the development of high industrialization and the changing theme of the times, the American Dream gradually alienated itself from the hard work and bravery promoted during the Puritan period to the pursuit of commercial success.

In the play, Willy's psychological level is still stuck in the past, believing that work diligently can lead to success, but in the materialistic employment relationship, the American dream that Willy desperately wants to achieve is essentially a “gold-digging” one. Once money and wealth are gone, the dream naturally dissipates. This paper will analyze the drama from two dimensions, “within the family” and “outside the family”, and explore the physical and psychological difficulties Willy faces.

2 Within the Family

2.1 Men Poisoned by Masculinity and Women Reduced to Otherness

Masculinity is a set of personality and psychological traits that males should have an achievement orientation, a focus on task completion, or a behavioral orientation, and its traits include, but are not limited to, “strength,” “courage,” “resilience,” “self-improvement,” etc. These traits are “naturalized” as gender traits that can be used to organize practice at all levels of social institutions, but for men who are subordinate in race and class, overemphasis can lead to self-perceived dissonance and emotional repression [1].

In Linda’s presence, Willy is always the dominant figure in the family, in a position of superiority, able to make any decision, and relentlessly interrupting and questioning Linda; Linda, on the other hand, is submissive to Willy and tolerant and patient with his complaints and bragging.

Willy was abandoned by his father and older brother during his childhood for the reason of finding wealth, and has a deep sense of inferiority and insecurity [2]. Linda is redemptive to him, presenting her blind, adoring, almost slave-like love to him, allowing him to construct an absolute patriarchal position both physically and psychologically for him to be violent, erratic, and hysterical in making orders in the home.

At the same time, the blind obedience and connivance brought by Linda’s love also became an enabler of Willy’s death. For one thing, when Willy comes into contact with the outside world with such a false state of mind, he becomes aware of his actual powerlessness and imbecility, further deepening his doubts about himself and the construction of illusions [3]. For another, Linda’s love does not satisfy Willy, so he gives his lover stockings, which could be called a luxury item after the war, to enjoy the femininity they exude in his lover when he is young, only to find Linda mending them when he returns home. Feeling a huge gap, the affair brought him not only pleasure but also guilt [4]. Although he tried to forget that his son Biff found out about the affair in order to prevent the collapse of his paternal status, the more he is spoiled in the family, the more it reminds him of the cheating, the more it exacerbates his feelings of alienation and aggravates his irritability, creating a vicious cycle [5].

Lynda has the thoughtfulness and tenderness of the dominant female culture in post-war America, and is the one who gives the most to the family [6]. Within the family relationships, she is the mediator of conflicts between father and son, an indispensable presence in taking care of the household, but in fact, she is a lonely and abandoned subordinate [7]. Her own will and presence are sidelined and marginalized by everyone, including herself, and she is reduced to a “female other” in the family, so much so that when readers watch the whole play, they will lament Willy’s tragedy, but few will pay attention to Linda, who has lost her voice [8].

2.2 Generation and Transmission of Nostalgic Constructs

Modern nostalgia theory believes that “nostalgia is an adaptive mechanism derived by people with both avoidance and affinity tendencies, in the case of environmental changes that damage the continuity of the self [9]. The core of it is the construction of ideal social

bonds and a sense of belonging in symbolic time and space, in order to compensate for the lack of reality and maintain the continuity of the self [10]”.

Among the things that Willy regrets are not only the scandalous infidelity to his wife Lynda and not being able to return to the joyful scenes of his children’s childhood, but also the regret that he did not go on an adventure to Alaska with his brother Ben [11]. Ben went out on an expedition and came back with a lot of money [12]. While Willy worked hard for most of his life, his salary only remain at a basic level, he needed to rely on his neighbor to pay off his debts, and finally he was fired by his new boss who thought he would take care of himself for the sake of his old staff [13]. The huge contrast with the reality makes Willy have to construct his own idealized time and space to attain self-affirmation of his identity and fill the gap that he was once unable to be recognized by society [14].

Whenever Ben appears in Willy’s fantasy, he is always well-dressed, in contrast to the anxious Willy, as if to remind that his difference with Willy has led him to successfully achieve his American dream, while Willy has not. Ben in Willy’s imagination is a guide like existence [15]. Every time Willy is on the verge of collapse or to make a major decision, he appears at Willy’s side, directing Willy to think back to the happy times in the past [16]. At the same time, he makes judgments on Willy’s decisions, and eventually Ben also suggests that “nothing venture, nothing have”, causing Willy to suicide [17].

Ben has already died, so in the fantasy, although it seems that Ben is in the lead, in fact, it is Willy’s self-questioning [18]. He is in self-persuasion but refuses to compromise, under the impact of the spirit and reality of despair towards collapse [19]. Just as Ben plays a “light” role for Willy in his predicament, Willy’s education of his two sons also has a great influence on their lives [20].

Willy’s interpretation of the American dream was that he could succeed in his career by virtue of his personal charm and efforts, therefore he not only boasted himself, but also placed his dream on his two children [21]. Simultaneously, the concept of “learning is not important” was taught to them during their childhood, which made them despise Bernard who studied hard and form the habit of asking Bernard for answers whenever they took exams [22]. The sons gradually became inactive and unmotivated [23].

Willy is very concerned about his eldest son, Biff. He exaggerated Biff’s talent and indulged Biff’s stealing habit, thus Biff became a habitual thief with low self-esteem and incompetence [24]. Willy neglected his younger son, and Happy grew to inherit his father’s delusion, always wanting to make a big hit, but finally became a blockhead who connived at sex [25]. By the time Willy wakes up from his illusion that his children have an infinite future, and finds that his education has a negative impact on his sons, everything is too late [26]. This is one of the reasons that led to his impulsive pursuit of death - he wanted to leave something for his sons with the only thing he could do to fill his burden of guilt and powerlessness, and was also avoiding his share of responsibility [27].

Biff’s future options are variously argued as either repeating the same mistakes and continuing to live in the shadow of his father’s conflicting values, or making a fresh start and pursuing his true heart. The writer prefers the latter [28]. After Biff found out that his father’s cheating, the status of his father in his heart was shaken, so instead of communicating with Willy and find a way to save the family crisis, he

simply went to escape [29]. At the same time, he insisted on punishing his father with self-loathing: failing exams, stealing on purpose, and constantly giving up new jobs [30]. With his mother's persuasion, he begins to discover Willy's suicidal intentions and slowly understands his father's expectations of him [31]. After Willy's death, he may be able to see that what Willy has been holding on to is an unrealistic illusion, and thus begins to rebuild the future with the past as the foundation, leading to a higher level of self-construction [32].

3 Outside the Family

With the accelerating industrialization of capitalism, the management of social production became more and more technical, and eventually evolved into a set of commercial management systems. Under this process, workers are only a part of the whole manufacturing process [33]. They are assigned to a specific position, just like other means of production, and become the object of management. Since then, the work of human beings has become abstract labor objectified in commodities, and personality, sentiment and other human elements have been diluted [34].

From Willy's perspective, he was a veteran employee of the company, had created considerable profits for the company, and was also valued by the previous boss, even the name of the new boss was given by himself, and he was qualified to seek a position in the office. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the boss Howard, Willy is no longer able to sell goods, and has no value anymore. In the interest of the company, the approach that is most compatible with the capitalist production management style is to fire him: the old employee who cannot create more benefits is better replaced by a new employee.

This seems to embody the future direction of a money-worshipping society: people are forged to meet the needs of social production, alienated to gain a foothold in a materialistic society, and those who lose the functions needed by society are mercilessly abandoned by socially - Willy is the victim of social dissimulation followed by abandonment [35].

4 Conclusion

As a tragic character, Willy's failure at work, his doubts about himself, and the corruptness of his family members all make him feel lost, and his sense of disconnection prompts him to grab pieces of the past to build a place in his mind to escape reality.

Why does Willy's tragedy resonate with so many people? As dramatist Arthur Miller said: "The character of the plays that do shake us arises from the underlying fear of the situation of deprivation of status, the catastrophe contained in pulling us away from our chosen self-image in the world. This fear is strong among us today, perhaps even more so than in the past. Indeed, it is the ordinary person who experiences this fear most."

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