Death of a Salesman as a Social Play

Arthur Miller

About Author

Arthur Miller was born in Harlem on October 17, 1915. He is the son of Polish immigrants. Miller's prolific writing career spans a period of over 60 years. During this time, Miller has written 26 plays, a novel, several travel journals, a collection of short stories and an autobiography entitled Timebends: A Life. Miller has received numerous honors and awards throughout his career. Miller died of heart failure in 2005.

Introduction

Ambition is one of those things that can be either your best friend or your worst enemy

Death of a Salesman is a play written by American playwright Arthur Miller. It is believed to have been published in 1949. Death of a Salesman has won three Tony Awards for Best Revival and is also considered as one of the greatest plays of 20th century. It is the story of Willy Loman, a salesman with many dreams who dies as a victim of American Dreams. It also addresses the painful conflicts within a family and also tackles issues regarding American National values and blind faith in the American Dream.

Theme of The Play

There are several themes in the play –
The American Dream

The American Dream is the main theme of the play. Everyone in the play has their own way to describe their American Dreams.

Dreams and Hopes

Willy Loman is a dreamer of epic proportions. His dreams of material success dominate his thoughts to the point that he becomes completely unable to distinguish his hopes from realities in the present.

Success and Betrayal

Throughout the play, Willy pursues concrete evidence of his worth and success. Death of a Salesman is full of betrayal. Willy betrays Linda’s love and Biff’s trust with his affair.

Characters of The Play

Though there are many characters in the play, there are four, eye-catching characters in the play which stated below:

- **Willy Loman**
  Willy Loman, a sixty-three-year-old traveling salesman who loves his sons and wants them to have worldly success, although he does not know how to help them achieve it.

- **Linda**
  Linda Loman, Willy’s wife, a fearful but patient woman who loves her husband despite his failures.

- **Biff**
  Biff Loman, Willy’s thirty-four-year-old son, who is still trying to find himself. He is a high-school athlete but gets nowhere after graduation.

- **Happy**
  Happy Loman, Willy’s younger son, modestly successful in life as a clerk in a store. He is a woman chaser.
**Opening Scene**

Death of a Salesman takes place in New York and Boston. The play begins in the home of Willy Loman, a salesman who has just returned to home from a trip for seeking the job. His wife, Linda, suggests him to take a job in New York rather than to travel.

**Play – Summary**

After his return, Willy reminds Biff that he could do better than this in the field of business. He further tells him that he is wasting his time and talents in the farming. On the same night, Willy is shouting at the imaginary people. Because of his shout, Biff and Happy wake up and worried about their father. So, Biff plans to borrow loan from his former employer Bill to start a business. Linda tells her sons that they are having a difficult time financially. Meanwhile, Willy argues with Biff for being so reckless, but Happy immediately interrupts informing Willy that next morning Biff has planned to see his former boss, Bill. Willy is now happy and goes to sleep. All hopes for the better morning – Willy is hopeful in getting local job and Biff expects to get a loan to start a new business.

The next morning, Willy overconfidently approaches his boss. So instead of providing him with a local job, the boss fired him. He is now jobless. Then Willy went to see his sons. Willy reaches there and wishes to hear good news from Biff, but Biff sadly tells him that he could not get the loan. Biff realizes that they are living in the illusion. He left his father alone in the restaurant and returned to home.

When Biff and Happy return home, their mother is mad at them for being so careless about their father and leaving him alone at the restaurant. An argument starts among the family. Willy realizes that though Biff is a failure like him, he loves him much. Distressed and frustrated, he decides to commit suicide so that the insurance money could be some use to Biff to start a new business. Within a few minutes, he commits suicide. Linda feels so strange that though her husband is well liked by all employees why no-one attends his funeral. Biff feels
sorry for his mother who is still living in an illusion. He decides to be honest to himself, but unfortunately Happy wants to follow the footprint of his father.

**As a Social Play**

Death of a Salesman is a Sociological tragedy. It is a typical modern tragedy that shows the social reality of a common man. Generally, it is believed that a drama cannot be both tragic and social because a social drama arouses pity but not terror like tragic plays. Death of a Salesman deals with the common theme of individual versus society.

In Death of a Salesman, Willy Loman is a victim of the American Dream. American Dream is the beliefs of Americans that it is possible for a man to raise to the top through the good looks, personality and social contacts. Willy Loman is also a believer of this belief which is called American Dream. Much of Willy’s suffering is because of the nature of American society. Willy caught by the evils of capitalism. He is ruined by the social forces and capitalism. He loses his life seeking his place in the society. And at last, the American social system leads Willy to kill himself. Esthen Jackson remarks –

**Death of a Salesman represents a social myth about human suffering in an industrial age.**

Therefore, Death of a Salesman is a social drama which is actually a criticism of American culture. It deals with the evils of capitalism.

**Conclusion**

In the words of Eleanor Clare –

**The play is a crude Marxist attack on the brutal capitalist system in America.**
Death of a Salesman is primarily a criticism of American Society. It strikes a balance between the social problem of the shattered myth of success and Willy Loman’s family problems. Miller uses appreciate concrete symbols for the social realities of his time and place. He achieves an internal drama of a man’s epic journey to self-knowledge through experience.

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