

An Intensive Study of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* as an Anti-Socialist Element

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Abstract

In "Death of a Salesman" the central theme is the destruction of dreams and deceptive nature of a protagonist which takes him to ruin along with his family. For years Arthur Miller and his works were praised (Particularly in the hands of Marxist critics) as very strong of capitalist societies and their dehumanizing forces upon individuals living in them. In the views of Frankfurth School, Arthur Miller's own plot in the play, this paper intends to point out some faults and contradictions in depicting the characterization and other aspects of the play that would question Miller's opposition against capitalism and to his remarks towards criticism of it.

Keywords: Death of a salesman, Protagonist, Capitalism, high culture, Marxism, popular culture, social play

1. Introduction

Arthur Miller plays always dealt with the social issues of his era and the same issue dealt in *Death of a Salesman* too. It is widely said that this characteristic that caused death of a salesman to be the mid for much critical debate as to what it signifies, right from the beginning. In the group, those who so much celebrated the play were critics with a Marxist line of thought. The whole group perceived it as a "social play", an attack upon, or a criticism of society and its system of beliefs, knowing Wily Loman (the major characters of the play) to be flawless. This group also mentioned Arthur Miller as a genuine social writer of the capitalist society and its values (Finkelstein, 1967) (Gassner, 1954) (Lewis, 1970). In other perspective, there appeared a flourishing trend among many of those who approached this play to condemn Willy Loman out of hand, believing his actions to be the root cause of his demolition and knowing society to be free of any guilt (Corrigan, 1969) (Carson, 1982) (Downer, 1967) (Lumley, 1967).

The primary aim of this present paper is to make an intensive research of the play with the help of Marxist literary criticism and at the same time the path to enable us to solve all the doubts and contradictions of the play. Ultimately the aim is to answer the question whether we can it a "social play" (as celebrated by most of the Marxist critics) or not.

It is indeed to be clear some ideas about literature and social criticism, the way a writer deals with social matters and how important his social and political views can be observed in drafting Miller's works from a Marxist point of view. Only few who are slightly acquainted with Marxist criticism know that what it wants from a writer is to commit his art to the cause of the proletariat. The major doctrine related to this topic was called "Proletkult".

The aim of the doctrine states that "Literature must be tendentious, party minded, optimistic and heroic; it should be infused with a revolutionary romanticism, portraying heroes and prefiguring the future" (Eagleton, 2001, p.35). In this aspect, there is Marx's view about the relation between a writer's social and political views and his writings. In a statement Marx says in a criticism of Sue LaSalle's novel, that what it shows diverges from what it says. He further adds that the French bourgeois ideology is the dominant ideology in the work and the main force that caused the novel to sell so well, "The aim is to reach beyond its ideological limits and conveying a message to deliver a slap in the face of bourgeois prejudice" (Eagleton, 2001, p.44-45).

In the article of Eagleton, as he argues, according to Lukacs modern writers should do more than "merely reflect the despair and ennui of late bourgeois society; they should consider and try to take up a critical perspective on this futility, revealing positive possibilities beyond it" (Eagleton, 2001, p.48). In other perspective to Eagleton, if we tend to regard Brecht's ideas about theatre and its role in the society, we see that he believed bourgeois art to be based on illusion. Only with the help of this illusion it makes people think that what is presented to them is reality itself. The major audience in bourgeois theatre is "the passive consumer of a finished, unchangeable art object offered to them as real" (Eagleton, 2001, p.59-60).

The complete play does not allow the audience to think about how it is made, how it represents its characters and events and in what ways (if there is any) can these characters be different from what they are. Because the dramatic illusion conceals the fact that it is constructed, it prevents an audience from "reflecting critically on both the mode of representation and the actions represented" (Eagleton, 2001, p.62). Brecht completely recognized that this reflected an ideological belief that the world was fixed, and unchangeable, and that the function of the theatre was "to provide escapist entertainment for men trapped in that assumption" (Eagleton, 2001, p. 62).

On the whole we see that bourgeois art (which is the dominant form of art according to Brecht) is exactly the opposite of the "Social" art that Marxist writers and critics use to favour and praise. The primary aim of the art that Marxists believed in is the art that is revolutionary, an art which shows the shortcomings of the bourgeois system and makes completely the entire audience to react against it and eventually bring about the change required.

2. An Intensive Analysis of the Play "Death of a Salesman"

The most expectation of Arthur Miller is for a theatre of "heightened consciousness." Miller completely speaks of two passions in man, the "passion to feel" and the "passion to know." Miller believes that we need, and can have, more of the latter in his plays. The main aim of Miller believes

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that drama must “help us to know more and not merely to spend our feelings” (Corrigan, 1969, p.61). He strongly points out “the end of the drama is the creation of a higher consciousness and not merely a subjective attack upon the audience’s nerves and feelings” (Williams, 1971, p.274).

This vital idea is akin to that of Brecht mentioned before. But these prove to be merely ideas since we can hardly find any traces of them in this play. The scene would be a controversial would be the final Requiem scene, where Linda, his two sons, and Charley are at Willy’s burial ceremony. The narration is structures and the characters speeches are formed seems to make it an unnecessary and detached part of the play. The character Linda’s cry scenes and statements or Charley’s words that are used to justify Willy’s actions have only one function; that is to sell Willy to the audience and to draw the maximum attention of the audience to get tears out of them. No reason could be found for the sudden change in the mind of Charley, regarding Willy’s ideals.

The character Charley used to criticize Willy for his wrong ideas and values and tried to make him understand that having dreams is of no use, in the final part we can identify him by defending Willy by saying that “a salesman has got to dream” (Perrine, 1974, p.1470). It is very difficult for anything to found in this scene to help to raise the knowledge of the audience about the world they live in and its laws or give in detail the reason what made the character Willy’s ideas suddenly seems so high praiseworthy to Charley. Taking this scene in one aspect, but regarding what has been said, this scene seems to be merely an attack upon the feelings of the reader or the audience. In the final paragraphs of his introduction to his collected plays Miller rejects the idea that man is at best the sum of forces (psychological and social) working upon him from within and without and adds that:

“True Man is more than the sum of his stimuli and is unpredictable beyond a certain point. A real drama, like a history, which stops at this point, the vital point of conditioning, is not reflecting a reality.... If there is one unseen goal toward which every play in this book strives, it is that... we are made and yet more than what made us” (Miller, 1967, pp.54-55).

It is very clear that Miller believes that man is able to pull his weight in life. In the play it is much quoted and well explained by many critics who try to prove that what happens to Willy in his life and his final death are mostly direct outcome of his own choice and the result of the society doesn’t play much role here. Marxist critics, who believe in the character of Willy Loman as a victim of society and its values, say that at the end Willy revolts against these values and changes the fate that society had in store for him that made him by committing suicide.

This group suicide means rejection of society and its depersonalizing system since what it wants from an individual is to accept his nothingness and to declare (like Biff does) that he is “a dime a dozen” a man with no real human value. Willy’s character Willy doesn’t want to accept that the outcome of all the ideas proposed by society is this and by killing himself he tries to prove that he can still have individuality be loved and remembered.

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Taking into account why most Marxist critics believe him to be a revolutionary hero who puts under question the capitalistic system of society. Based on it in one way, but it should be argued that on the contrary Willy as a character has accepted his fate and what the society had in store for him. To the fact, I agree that what Willy believes in and teaches to his sons are given to him by society, but I also believe that at the end when Willy finds out that these values are shallow and nothing more than a lie, as a character he tries to act differently to defy them.

The character Charley tells him, in this society which is based on competition, a man's value is measured by how much more he has than the others and at the end the only thing that counts is what one has to sell. As the character Willy finds out, personality, individuality and being respected and valued as an individual human being regardless of the material gains one has achieved are no more in question in the society. In the final, Willy has not achieved any material gains he has no place in the society and must give up his dreams. Only with this vision that leads him to suicide since it means he has sold himself for 20000 dollars and that is exactly what society wants him to do and the society expects from him because Willy has nothing left to sell in his life other than his life itself. So as could be seen even at the end of the play the character Willy is completely defeated and society is the ultimate winner.

In the play, where other characters have also accepted the conditions and terms of the society but they are different from Willy in that they have never questioned it and completely tried to fit it as best as they could draw their attention and that is why they have become most successful one (of course in the eyes of a capitalist society). The portrayal of this society what we face in this play and Miller does not show any way out of its futility, there is no hope for a better future for people who admired like Lomans pointed out in the play. Arthur Miller's play gives us the idea of unchangeability of the society and fate, and in this way, he has written a bourgeois theatre rather than a social one. Obviously, this is certainly not a kind of social play which Marxists like Lukacs, Engels or a revolutionary writer and critic like Brecht had in mind and believed in. Adding to this, Marxists believed that a true social play portrays heroes, and prefigures a hopeful future, but in this play, we see the opposite. The character Willy, if we can call him a hero at all, is a consenting hero, one who in seeing the uselessness and futility of opposing society, the character never bothers and throws away all his ideals and does not rest his hope in the future. Even the character talks of any future it is what the society means by a future; that is to be number one and to have more than the others. This makes the character why he hopes that in the future Biff will be better than others in terms of the money he has and says "imagine that magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket! When the mail comes, he will be ahead of Bernard again" (Perrine, 1974, p.1468) Furthermore, neither he nor his actions can be called great or heroic. In the play it seems to be no hero, no heroic act, and no sign of hope for the future; this is certainly not the kind of social drama that is meant to the theme of the play that is discussed in the beginning of this part.

Taking into account with the concepts tend to be, despite what many critics believe, Miller's ideas too are not revolutionary, radical and new. Miller does not propose revolution in his play

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against the social law and order, but at the end of the play the social order is confirmed. In the era of Miller's play does not make any attempt to startle the society with new ideas. He believes that the theatre should enunciate "ideas which are already in the air, ideas for which there has already been a preparation by non-dramatic media" (Corrigan, 1969, p.59).

Arthur Miller's "Death of a salesman" is an instance reaction of "pseudo-criticism" as termed by Adorno. The term coined by him to refer to those works of the culture industry that claim to be critical of the society. Adorno firmly believes that the so-called critical works of the culture industry actually heighten the lie of individuality and defeat any such critical purpose as a consequence. To strengthen the point he gives as an example the case of a radical film director who wishes to show the darker aspects of a merger between two corporations.

"The most important and the dominant figures are revealed as monstrous, their monstrousness would still be sanctioned as a quality of individual human beings that would obscure the monstrousness of the system whose servile functionaries could be they are" (Bernstein, 1996, p. 57).

Arthur Miller's "Death of a salesman" this is the prevailing situation. It was discussed and confirmed that we get more and more involved with the personal world of Willy Loman, his thoughts, past life and his feeling of sin with the help of flash backs and the expressionism technique, so that we cannot blame him and cannot see anyone else as responsible for his miseries. This keynote of the point is emphasized by the fact that even Miller first chose "*Inside His Head*" as the vital title of the play (Miller, 1967, p.50).

The most important and the final issue to be discussed would be the issue of cliché characters and their role in the play. Women characters played a vital role in the play. It is quite easy to be disturbed by the apparently passive female stereotypes we find in *Death of a Salesman*. The character where women have been either marginalized and appear as loyal wives like Linda, or easy women (like the women, Miss Forsythe and Letta), or the characters have been rarely featured at all in the play, such as Willy's mother, or Charley's wife. Women of Linda's generation were made to provoke of thinking to be dependent on their men, stay at home and raise their children.

As a critic, Abbotson states, in the time of World War Two many women were called to perform jobs outside home which were previously considered unsuitable for them and which gave them new authority and ambition. Very few women were reluctant to pass this authority back to the men on their return from the army. The "working girl" was becoming a social reality by which many felt to be threatened in their way (Abbotson, 2000, p.53-55). The focus where made to be diminishing such a treat these women were often dishonoured and belittled wherever and however possible, largely to affirm old fashioned opinions of Bourgeois society makes it clear about what was right to the life and proper for men and women to do in their life.

3. Conclusion

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The social aspects of Arthur Miller and his play *Death of a Salesman* regarding the social issues and social criticism would be difficult and a challenging task. Miller's play has different aspects each of which either proves or disapproves the categorization of the play as a social one. In consideration to the above research, one thing is clear and that is, Miller to my view never tried and wanted to put all the blames on the society, show to the society that it as an evil that must be finally to overcome. He firmly believes in society and the people's attitude and does not rule it out though he sees some flaws in it, however it must also be said that to reach a more reliable vital answer in this regard, studying of a single play of a writer like Miller would not be satisfactory enough and a more complete and thorough study which would include with the same analysis of Miller's other plays would be necessary. In all these aspects of bounded criticisms having in mind, we should consider Miller is one of the greatest and most influential playwrights of his time in America and throughout in the world, someone whose plays are performed very strongly long after they have been written with the same theme or even greater enthusiasm shown by the audiences when the plays were first appeared on the stage.

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