

## Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*:

### A Postmodernist Study

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**Abstract:** This study makes an attempt to analyze *Death of a Salesman* in an attempt to mirror the struggling modern characters who live in the world of postmodernism but are the slave of the preventive beliefs of modernism. This play is the story of all human beings who are in search of success, Love, Pride, and Ambition, but are oscillating between the modern and postmodern values. They find themselves disintegrated and isolated in the cruel language of postmodern and consumer world. The study tries to show the entrapped modern man who finds the postmodern language weird and its values as resisting forces against the fossilized metanarratives.

**Key words:** Miller; *Death of a Salesman*; Postmodernism; Metanarrative; Silence; Binary oppositions

## INTRODUCTION

The study starts with a brief introduction of postmodernism, then it moves to a short analysis of *Death of a Salesman* focusing on the aspect of isolation, which is followed by a close study of the play in a postmodern bedrock, and finally the study comes to its conclusion by displaying the condition of the modern man trapped in a postmodern world.

## POSTMODERNISM

“Postmodernism” is used to describe a wide gamut of aesthetic, cultural, historical, literary, and philosophical goings-on. It is often also used to suggest, variously, an eclectic style, a historical period,

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and a philosophical concept, as well as an anti-style, an atemporal event, and a non-concept. Often associated with deconstruction and poststructuralism, it is a term which undergoes uninterrupted redefinitions. In the visual arts and in architecture, postmodernism is referred as pastiche or eclecticism. In philosophy, it stands against defining logocentrism and epistemological certainty that has characterized Western philosophy since Descartes. Postmodern philosophy is anti-foundational, and sometimes is viewed as contemporary skepticism. In the 1960s, French philosophers such as Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard departed from conventional studies in the history of philosophy and began to address the epistemological crisis reinforcing Western philosophical thought. Their early scholarship focused on the structure of language and its role in forming world-views. The work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, especially his posthumous text entitled *Course in General Linguistics*, presented the intellectual insight that was necessary in order to separate the synchronic and diachronic elements of language. Dividing language and, in effect, freeing the sign from the signified, permitted poststructuralists to redefine language as a system of differential signs.

Jacques Derrida's early writings obfuscate Saussure's linguistic turn. Derrida could not stand the fact that the Western philosophical tradition privileges spoken (the sonic) over written language (the graphic). It is within this pyramid that the speaker is accepted to be self-authenticating and in control of meaning. The writer, within this representation, is displaced and, presumably, is not in control of meaning. Saussure, according to Derrida, continues the Western tradition by giving more importance to the spoken word over the written word. Derrida describes this as phonocentrism, a suppression of writing. His work seeks to invert the hierarchy and so present writing as a necessary displacement of meaning within language. Derrida's innovative variations on Saussure's linguistic turn inaugurated postmodernism's sustained dismantling of the metaphysics of presence in the Western philosophical tradition. Derrida's critique of language was followed by critiques of truth and meaning in philosophy. Drawing on the work of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, Derrida has disrupted the fossilized belief that authors intend meaning and that there is a certain truth to be uncovered in texts. Derrida, in the Nietzschean tradition, views philosophy not as a search for truth, but as a rhetorical engagement with the world. Truth and meaning are not fixed: they are metaphorical. Others have extended Derrida's insights to the study of culture, literature, politics, and psychoanalysis, and, indeed, the displacement of meaning and truth characteristic of postmodernism has proved relevant to diverse academic disciplines. Cast in the best possible light, postmodernism challenges hierarchies and presents a multiplicity of interpretations with an optimism that is not shared by the majority of scholars. Postmodernism's anti-foundationalism is often linked to, if not actually equated with, the logic of late capitalism (Fredric Jameson) and political conservatism. Emphasis on epistemological undecidability and the loss of the subject appears to have persuaded many scholars to view postmodernism as nihilistic and irrational. Nevertheless, postmodernism has come to be considered a significant endeavor in culture studies.

The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has articulated postmodernism within the aesthetic and political spheres. Lyotard's postmodernism critiques the totalizing tendency of modernity's monolithic world-views. Where there is completion and unity in modernism, one finds deferment and fragmentation in postmodernism. Lyotard's major contribution toward a definition of postmodernism is his theory of metanarratives. Modernity, according to Lyotard, privileges all-encompassing narratives such as fascism, Marxism and capitalism. Lyotard's postmodernism encourages little narratives that claim to avoid totalization and preserve heterogeneity. Lyotard's challenge to the tendency to conceptualize history as events in a linear sequence means that, for him, postmodernism never can be represented in language or in history. Postmodernism for Lyotard is neither a style nor an historical period. Instead, postmodernism is an unrepresentable deferment of conceptualization and totality. Given the emphasis that postmodernists place on anti-foundationalism and epistemological uncertainty, one can conclude that postmodernism is not easily discernible. It is defined by the use to which it is put within diverse contexts and in the employ of its various exponents.

Contemporary Continental philosophy focuses on postmodernism's reassessment of the Western philosophical tradition, and, in doing so, continually reshapes the contours of the term.

## **DEATH OF A SALESMAN**

*Death of a Salesman*, an austere satire, brought Miller artistic success as well as international recognition. This play has been viewed by many as a caustic attack on the American Dream of achieving wealth and success. The play made Arthur Miller and the character Willy Loman household names. *Death of a Salesman* offers number of intriguing interpretations. It is about the paradoxes of being alive in a technological society; it is about the sense of isolation brought by technological advance and the price people pay for progress. It is a tale of violence within the family, about individual suppression by placing him below the overbearing needs of capitalist society. It is a play about a man who kills himself because he is not liked. It expresses all those feelings of a society falling to pieces which we have, feelings that, to him, are one of the reasons for the play's continuing popularity. But the observation that goes most directly to the heart of the play is contained in a comment made in relation to the production Miller directed in China in 1983: "*Death of a Salesman*, really, is a love story between a man and his son and in a crazy way between both of them and America" (qtd. In Bigsby, 2005:102)

## **ARGUMENT**

*Death of a Salesman* is a new type of serious play merging the forms of realism and Expressionism to suggest new directions and possibilities for all of the world drama. The play deals with various elements such as fall of the Grand narratives, disintegration of family ties, distance between illusion and reality, the sense of isolation, lack of understanding, and the struggle for being. Bigsby(2005) believes:

There is no crime in *Death of a Salesman* and hence no ultimate culpability (beyond guilt for sexual betrayal), only a baffled man and his sons trying to find their way through a world of images, dazzling dreams and fantasies, in the knowledge that they have failed by the standards they have chosen to believe are fundamental. Willy has, as Biff alone understands, all the wrong dreams (102).

Arthur Miller, one of the most famed writers of our time, explores in his writing the theme isolation. He interweaves this theme with his characters. In *Death of salesman*, Willy Lowman is a man who is alienated and lives in isolation. The theme of isolation is the focal point of the story, since it is what drove him to his suicide. He is the perfect example of a man alienated by a society that is controlled by money and power. The materialistic world makes trouble for him instead of helping him.

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*Death of a Salesman* is a real masterpiece which breaks the boundaries of time and place and goes beyond the specific epoch.

## FALL OF GRAN NARRATIVES

In *The postmodern condition*, Lyotard defines postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives”. A metanarrative sets out the rules of narratives and language games” (1984: 24). The postmodernist authors flout these metanarratives as ideologically constructed, so postmodernism is deconstructionist by nature.

Lyotard claims that in postmodern era our social “language game” no longer requires metanarratives to justify the utterances made in them. The modernist notions of justification, system proof, and the unity of science no longer hold. He analyzes the production of knowledge by science, as well as the discourse of everyday social life, in terms of discontinuity. Lyotard (1984) believes:

Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy (32).

*Death of a Salesman* is a story of a man who sacrifices himself to an idea, the false promise of a golden future. Willy Loman in particular has absorbed the values of his society until they seem part of what he wishes to see as his own definition. His is a salesman; the epitome of a society built on social performance and wedded to the idea of a transforming future. Future for Willy is rosy and full of hope. Bigsby in *Critical Study* (2005), declares:

Willy Loman is a man who wishes his reality to come into line with his hopes, a man desperate to leave his mark on the world through his own endeavors and through those of his children. Though he seems to seek death, what he fears above all is that he will go before he has justified himself in his own eyes and there are few, from New York to Beijing, who do not understand the urgency of that need (101).

Willy Loman, desperately driving the highways of New York and New England, is at the end of a historical process that once saw men blaze trails into the heart of the unknown and of a utopia that promised a new identity and a new hope. His exhaustion reflects entropy that infects more than just himself. Biff and Happy are no less bewildered by the loss of energy than their father. *Death of a Salesman* is a proclamation of the end of Enlightenment and Grand narratives. Willy's sense of needing love and respect causes him to dedicate his life to the eternal American quest of a transformed tomorrow.

Robinson in *Nietzsche and Postmodernism*(2000) states:

Our postmodern world seems very likely to become one of spiritual emptiness and cultural superficiality, in which social practices are endlessly repeated and parodied, a fragmented world of alienated individuals with no sense of self or history, tuned into a thousand different TV channels. This is certainly the vision of both present and future offered to us by the postmodernist Jean Baudrillard. For him, this postmodern world is one of simulacra in which there is no longer any difference between reality and surface. Modern citizens will not be ‘Overpeople’ – just consumers of media in a world of signs without signifiers (p.43).

As Nietzsche saw the modern age as concerned with *Becoming* rather than *Being*, in this sense Willy Loman can stand as an ideal figure. He is never at rest, a traveler for other reasons than his job. Willy bends toward the future. His is a pending life. He is on hold, waiting to hear the good news of his imminent arrival in the promised future of possibility. In Bigsby's words:

He holds his breath in awe of the promise, dying for want of the air he should breathe in a shared present. The irony is that, staring through the windshield towards the future, he increasingly finds himself looking into the rear-view mirror, suddenly struck by the irony that the meaning of his life might exist in the past. It is guilt that draws him back, but the greater irony is that he might, after all, have missed the epiphany for which he has waited an entire life (2005:115).

The apparent fixities of the social world are revealed as contingent. Yesterday's new technology becomes today's obsolete product. The rural becomes the urban; brilliant hopes fade into regrets. Yet Willy's memories are those of a culture attempting to live mythically. Therefore, there is no rosy day in the advance of the technology.

Willy apparently yearns for tomorrow but is kept away by all evidence of the consumer society, high-rise apartments, wire recorders which lie outside his control. The problem is that the future holds the certainty of dissolution. His refrigerator and his car are disassembling themselves before his eyes and so, he knows, is he.

## THE DISINTEGRATED FAMILY

Family is the first unit of the society which has important roles in man's life. It is the source of power and support for its members. In the Lomans family unity and coherence have been fading away. This family has only four members, but they are as far as separated islands. Lack of understanding and generation gap are very obvious in the Lomans, which lead to their disconnection.

Therefore, disintegration and isolation are outstanding concerns of postmodernism, which have been portrayed very creatively in *Death of a Salesman*.

Willy's memories of the business for which he has worked throughout his life is that it had once been a family, connected at a human level. But, as Bigsby refers in *Critical Study*(2005), "this is now blotted out by the mechanical sounds of a wire recorder he feels powerless to stop, as he stands in his boss's office while that fantasy of familial loyalty is destroyed with a casual disregard"(115).

## DUALITY AND THE CONFLICT

The characters in *Death of a Salesman* find themselves in an oozy ocean of dualism. Duality of theme, duality of self, duality among the characters, and duality of time are quite vivid in the play.

Willy as the father of family, who traditionally must act as a unifying core in the orbit of family, is completely absent and Biff is separated from his father. The relationship between Willy and his son is central. There are the magnetic forces that paradoxically pull them together and thrust them apart. Biff wants to save Willy, and at the same time to free himself. He is angry at Willy's weakness, helplessness, and at Willy's love for him. Biff and his father see the world differently. The essence of this drama is contained within these tensions. Father and son are a divided self. Bigsby interestingly in *critical study* (2005) gives the following details:

Their identities are ineluctably intertwined. For Willy Loman, Biff is his justification and vindication. In refusing to embrace his father's dreams he is, thus, denying him fulfillment, expiation, that sense of identity that comes from passing the torch from generation to generation. For Biff, his father stands between himself and his life. He is the past that has to be transcended, the falsehood that must be rejected, but also the debt that must be discharged (102).

The past is the burden they bear in a play in which the past threatens at every moment to break through into an increasingly desperate present. There is a race on, a race for Willy's life and Biff's soul. Therefore, drama is born out of a situation in which the individual cannot walk away. In wrestling of Biff and Willy, Biff is Willy's ace in the hole, the proof that he was right, after all, that tomorrow things will change for the better and thus offer a retrospective grace to the past. Willy, meanwhile, is Biff's flawed model, the man who seemed to sanction his hunger for success and popularity, a hunger suddenly stilled by a moment of revelation.

Willy desperately needs Biff to embrace him and his dream. He needs the affection and success of his sons to destroy his failure. Biff, by contrast, desperately needs to cut the link between himself and Willy. This is the motor force of the play. There can be only one winner and whoever wins will also have lost. Miller says: "the story of *Salesman* is absurdly simple! It is about a salesman and it's his last day on the earth" (1996: 423).

Biff, at the interview, chooses to steal the pen of the man on whom his future supposedly depends, the thefts he has committed since catching his father in a Boston hotel room with another woman, are, at least subconsciously, indirect acts of vengeance. As Bigsby(2005)says:

though Happy rededicates himself to Willy's false dreams, his is a voice that now lacks social resonance. Biff, alone, draws the necessary conclusions from the death of a man he loved but from whom he had to separate himself, Biff the man who 'returned for Willy's blessing without which he cannot find himself as a man', a fact which was unplanned by Miller, but, as he once remarked, 'there it is'.(119)

## THE SENSE OF DISPLACEMENT

The theme of displacement is quite tangible throughout the play. It is a sense of feeling alienated towards Time and Place. As Hooti and Shooshtariyan comment (2010:27) " It is assumed to be the sense of not being in a place where one person or thing belongs to be".

Miller, through his drama tries to make human relations felt between individuals and the larger structure of the world. Willy is a man of his time and yet also, somehow, timeless, Loman has attracted international audiences and continues to interest them even to the present day.

Willy may have a capacity to enjoy life but he is dissatisfied with the quality of that life, a dissatisfaction which leads him to illusion and isolation. He creates an illusion to protect himself and to prevent him from having to really address the problem. Willy is a man who attaches his life to a myth which proposes a life without limits but who finds himself trapped in a shrinking physical, social and psychological space of capitalism. Bigsby (2005) believes:

Willy is a man who kills his loneliness in a Boston hotel with a woman whose attraction seems to lie less in her sexuality than in the access she can grant to the buyer, the consolation she offers for his sense of failure, a woman herself not without a degree of desperation(109).

She is a lonely woman who genuinely likes Willy and his line of gab. She sees him twice a month and they talk and behave like husband and wife for a night. Bigsby(2005), insists:

Her laughter, which wells up and breaks through Willy's consciousness, is not, then, without a degree of self-mockery as she simultaneously acknowledges Willy's pathos and kills her own loneliness with a man whose humor comes from a deep sense of worthlessness for ever at battle with a desperate need to be acknowledged. It is a scene, however, that turns on what Miller has called an 'hallucinatory surrealism' (110).

When the woman tells Willy: " Why n't you have another drink, honey, and stop being so damn self-centred?" Willy just, answers "I'm so lonely" and women says: "You know you ruined me, Willy" (Miller, 1998:91, henceforth Miller). Bigsby(2005), interestingly hints:

As it now seemed to Willy, they were not so much talking to each other as stating their dream-like, disjointed, and intensely compressed positions. And, of course, it is the nature of much of Willy's ostensible dialogue in the play that it is in fact a discussion with himself, an externalised account of his internal interrogation. Since he conducts these internal conversations in the presence of others, however, there is a surreal quality to many of the interchanges in a play whose sub-title is 'Certain Private Conversations'. The privacy is that provided by Willy's mind (111).

Willy wants to make an impression, to be remembered after his death, to give something to Biff and Happy, and his inability to do any of these haunts him. Once he realizes his life has been futile: he is old, has achieved little, is scorned by his boss and his sons, which makes Willy come to face, the absurdity of life.

Willy Loman also, has lost his contact with the natural world. He can do no more now than spread seeds on barren ground. He has also lost touch with those around him. Willy is a representative figure of postmodern man who is separated from himself, from his fellow men, and from nature. Therefore, he has been changed into a commodity. Market conditions force him to be separated from society and turns to the only place he thinks he belongs to, his children. When a person feels that he has not been able to make sense of his own life, he tries to make sense in the life of his children. But one is bound to fail within oneself and for the children. In the case of Willy, his children by rejecting his love make him alienated from his ultimate excuse of life.

What else can Willy do, then, but climb back into his car and drive off to a death that at last will bring the reward he has chased so determinedly. A reward that will make up his sense of guilt, justify his life, and hand on to another generation the burden of belief that has decayed his soul. Miller confessed that it made him wonder:

whether we are all forever being hunted, pursued by one or another sloganized meaning, one or other packaged view of life and death which in our weakness we surrender to when in the privacy of our midnights what we most long to find is the freedom to be and believe everything. Maybe that is what Willy does, since he is all mood, all feeling, a naked branch of an old tree swaying in the wind. Willy moves with the air and from one moment to the next, one feeling to the next, and in a sense believes everything at once . . . that he is loved, that he is contemptible; that he is lost, that he has conquered; that he is afraid, that nothing frightens him and that everything does, and on and on and on. It may be that he has escaped the categories simply because he is a human, and too self-absorbed to be embarrassed by being one. Whatever else you may say about him, he is unmistakably himself . . . even including the times when he wishes he wasn't.(qtd. In Bigsby, 2005: 116)

## THE LOGIC OF THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

Jameson (1991) explicates that postmodernism is a socio-economic product which has to be understood as a cultural phenomenon emerging out of capitalism. Jameson in his famous essay, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, argues that the aesthetic forms and techniques of modernism have been located at the service of consumerism in postmodern aesthetic:

Theories of postmodern...bear a strong family resemblance to all those more ambitious sociological generation which brings us the news of the arrival and inauguration of a whole new type of society, most famously baptized 'post-industrial'...But often also designated consumer society (qtd. In Newton, 1997: 268).

By the rise of consumer culture and material goods, ownership of what can be called luxury items, such as refrigerators, washing machines, pressure cookers and automobiles rose notably after World War II.

Miller believes: "In each of us, whether recognized or not, is that same bloody ethnic nationalism. This is not coming from the moon. This is coming from us. And we have not come close to even confronting this thing" (qtd. In Abbotson, 2007: 94).

Miller by his drama conveys the necessity of a humanistic response to the contemporary world. Such a description closely resembles the objectified picture the postmodern critic, Jameson, creates of contemporary society, where he announces the death of individualism, "symbolized by the emergent

primacy of mechanical production” (1991:15), by which all becomes identical and exists without individual identity, choice, or spirit.

Miller carefully criticizes the consumer society and its capitalist logic. In fact Willy himself as salesman uses the language of advertisement to earn money. But this consumer world has harsh rules; it exploits everybody and as Willy affirms: “eat the orange and throw the peel away”(Miller: 61) although “a man is not a piece of fruit” (61)! In fact man must struggle for survival in a consumer society, which is like a consumer industry produces not things, but dreams disguised as things.

Willy by the harsh machinery of the contemporary consumer world is beaten down. He cannot get up back. Linda exhorts “But he’s a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid”(40). Willy is the victim of the American Dream and materialistic condition. Willy Loman’s condition is so close to everybody in the consumer world that develops a sense of kinship to each person. He makes the audience aware of a common fatality and vulnerability.

The society that Willy belongs to, is the business world. His boss, Howard, is the representative of the business world, which rejects Willy. Unwilling to accommodate Willy's inability to travel anymore, Howard says, “No, but it's a business, kid, and everybody's gotta pull his own weight” (60). Indeed Willy is born as a salesman. Murphy defines this idea:

In the scene between Willy and Howard, he nearly sells Howard on the myth of Dave Singleman before he sabotages his sales pitch by losing his temper. Willy Loman is a very confused man, but his confusion about what it means to be a salesman and what it takes to succeed at the job is as much cultural as personal (qtd In Abbotson, 2007:108).

Willy is fired, in the end, not because a hard-nosed employer wants to eat the fruit and throw away the peel but because Willy cannot even sell himself. Bigsby(2005) describes Willy Loman “as agent of an intrusive commercialism victim and martyr creature touchingly, tragically doomed by the business culture he represented but which also leaves him as solitary figure in the social landscape”(110).

In the contemporary consumer world the problem of postmodern man is, he is not being himself. He becomes vehicle for participation in a cycle of production and consumption. He sells a commodity and becomes a commodity. When man thinks he can acquire everything, material or immaterial by buying it, he regards his personal qualities and the result of his efforts as commodities that can be sold for money. Thus man misses the experience of the activity of the present moment and chases the illusory happiness called success.

There are many like Willy, who put all their faith in personality, friendship, and personal loyalty—“Be liked and you will never want” (Miller: 21), but by coming a new way of thinking about salesmanship everything has changed. Mass production and consumer culture have begun to alter his business economy, therefore, salesmanship has been treated as a profession to be learned. With mass production and increasing competition, buyers and merchants have begun to think more about profit. Murphy’s idea about competition is interesting:

With the stock market crash in 1929, and the Great Depression that followed it, the competition among salesmen became more and more cutthroat. As Willy tells Ben in one of the daydream sequences that takes place in 1931, business is bad, it’s murderous . Using all of the tricks that Willy has learned in a lifetime of selling, including seducing the buyer’s secretary and bribing her with stockings, Willy is barely able to eke out a living for his family (qtd In Abbotson, 2007:110).

But during this period, the prevailing idea was still that, as Willy puts it, “the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead” (21). According to Murphy:

in the post-war period, there was a pent-up demand for things like new cars, tires, brand-name liquor, and nylon stockings, which had not been available during the war. The enormous war industry was being retooled to produce consumer goods, and the advertizing business was expanding rapidly as Americans were “educated” into desiring things like

vacuum cleaners, television sets, and air conditioners, which had not been manufactured in large quantities before the war. (qtd. In Abbotson, 2007:111).

*Death of a Salesman* does not simply show the predicaments of the modern man stuck in a postmodern world, but also displays the conflicting views of these two worlds. Bigsby(2005), suggests:

Willy Loman's American dream is drained of transcendence. It is a faith in the supremacy of the material over the spiritual. There is, though, another side to Willy, a side represented by the sense of insufficiency that sends him searching through his memories looking for the origin of failure, looking for expiation. It is a side, too, represented by his son Biff, who has inherited this aspect of his sensibility, as Happy has inherited the other. Biff is drawn to nature, to working with his hands. He has a sense of poetry, an awareness that life means more than the dollars he earns. Willy has that, too. The problem is that he thinks it is irrelevant to the imperatives of his society and hence of his life which, to him, derives its meaning from that society (105).

The Loman family is caught up in mindless consumerism, "whipped cheese" (6) and that these new products disrupt attempts at meaningful human interaction. Shockley states:

Miller shows the power of advertising and consumerism, and the contradictions of attitudes toward products in the Loman family by having Willy call his Chevrolet both "the greatest car ever built" and "that goddamn Chevrolet" in the space of only a few minutes, and in Willy's remark that "Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it's broken!" But while Willy utters these remarks, he still is completely caught up in the pursuit of the dream.(qtd. In bloom, 2007:86)

## I HAVE MONEY THEN I AM

In *Death of a Salesman* the *Becoming* of man is weighed through his bank balance. It is the strength of his bank account, which accordingly mirrors the importance of his existence as a being.

The alienation that the industrial era brought upon men is witnessed in the character of Willy Loman. Through this alienation, Willy's connectivity to society is severed and his tie to moral responsibility on behalf of mankind is weakened greatly. He brushes with the uglier side of capitalism, and yet seemed unable to recognize or condemn this brutal side.

Shockley asserts:

In competitive society the rewards of being successful for Willy is to be well liked and to be rich. To be rich also means to be "free" in the two senses above, with the added self-confidence of being admired, a model for others (qtd. In Bloom,2007: 84).

Miller in *Death of a Salesman* gives the bitterest satire on human condition in contemporary century. He writes about dehumanization result from Enlightenment. Miller criticizes the universal values of Enlightenment humanism. In the capitalism society, consumer culture shows the end of Grand narratives and western metaphysics, which bring tremendous rifts and disintegration among people. Willy represents the reduction of human existence as portrait of man crushed into nonentity.

## ISOLATION IN THE VORTEX OF THE TIME

Time, for Willy, is like the sea, advancing and retreating, with concealed currents, disturbing eddies that threaten his equanimity. That transiency is a vital element of *Death of a Salesman* and the competitive

society. The world is changing. Willy's memories no longer mean anything to his employer. The past seemingly exists to mock him. Willy lives a temporary life, a life of cars, trains, offices, hotel rooms. The rhythm of his existence is determined by timetables, appointments, and sales targets.

Death lies at the end of tragedy like the ultimate promise of form. It offers a retrospective grace, flooding contingency with a meaning that can only come from its apparent dissolution. Willy dies with a smile, not relishing an irony or accepting a fate but driving to redemption. He died with the conviction that he has completed the ultimate deal with the consumer world.

Willy Loman dies in the machine that has carried him daily deeper into despair and yet which is the ambiguous symbol of his culture, on the move into the future yet itself always in thrall to entropy. Willy, it seems, is defeated in his very *self*. There is almost no subjectivity not compromised by internalizing the assumptions of the world he believes himself to be seizing, the world he imagines to contain the meaning of his life. When he calls out his name there is no echo because there is no longer any substantial reality to reflect it back to him.

Willy cannot live in a world not energized by the imagination. He goes gently into the night precisely because his death is drained of the tragic, no matter what Miller may have chosen to believe. Willy dies in hope. He dies radiant with unexamined optimism, almost an absurd hero finding meaning in his conspiracy with death, purpose in the purposeless. This situation reminds us of William Shakespeare who in his famous sonnet, *That Time Of the Year* interestingly declares: "Death's second self that seals up all in rest" (Baker, 1987: 496). Willy attempts to resist by succumbing to the time, dying while still denying the finality of death. Even in the face of death, he insists, there is still a tomorrow. This situation is resulted from capitalistic condition which always promises better future.

What Willy Loman finally seeks is not success but, like Gilgamesh, he wants to find immortality. He wishes to pass something more than an inheritance to his sons. He wants to live in and through them, which is why he offers a death with such calmness.

Willy Loman's last ride takes him out of time and into myth, where he will be immune to decay. The future, to which he had looked for resolution, but that so tormented him, will now be dissolved. He never does close the gap between what he wishes to be and what he is. Willy had always thought of *Time* as his friend until he suddenly finds it as enemy which causes his isolation and decay.

## THE LANGUAGE OF SILENCE

In postmodern condition as Derrida declares: "language is not innocent means of commutation"(qtd. in Butler,2002: 18).Thus Miller in *Death of a Salesman* uses the flute music. The music is a crucial counterpoint to Willy's mood, a commentary on a man who hears a different drummer but believes his destiny is to keep step with a society resolutely marching towards a promised revelation. For Miller, the music is powerful, offering a post-romantic outlook. Miller, himself remarks:

I recall thinking that all the important things were between the lines, in the silences, the gestures, the stuff above or below the level of speech. For a while I even thought to study music, which is the art of silences hedged about by sound. Music begins *Salesman*, and not by accident; we are to hear Willy before we see him and before he speaks. He was there in the hollow of the flute, the wind, the air announcing his arrival and his doom (qtd. In Bibsby.2005:116).

The play ends, as it had begun, with the sound of a flute while the leaves dissolve and the surrounding apartment buildings come into sharp focus. Time bends back on itself, a life now complete. Biff is presumably about to light out for the territory, following the sound of the flute. We can consider *Death of Salesman* as Willy's long poem, as Bigsby nicely states:

Much of the play is Willy who hears the voices, shapes the rhythms, an, creates the rhymes. He turns experience into metaphor, bringing together discrete moments to forge new

meanings which then dissolve. When he dies we leave his consciousness for a stripped-down stage and people whose words are baffled approximations for the man whose world we have seen from the inside (2005:116).

Therefore, Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is the presentation of the unrepresentable. One of the clearest definitions of postmodernism has been presented by Lyotard as proposing that:

The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that Which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations – not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that is something unrepresentable. (qtd. in Malpas, 2005: 49)

The play edges towards silence with only the flute music now audible, as the surrounding apartment buildings come into sharp focus. The materialistic world's past and present are thus brought together, as "they had been in Willy's mind, a reminder of utopian dreams lost somewhere in their materialization" (Miller: 119).

## WORLD OF DREAMS AND LOSS OF REALITY

The postmodern conditions make the lives of the people like Willy Loman a dream in itself. Miller by choosing a salesman for his central character identifies an icon of the consumer society, because a salesman always trades in hope, a brighter future. Willy Loman sells a dream of tomorrow, he sells what a salesman always has to sell, *himself*. As Charley insists, "The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell (Miller: 75). Bigsby in his *Critical Study* (2005) gives remarkable details:

Willy as a salesman has got to get by on a smile and a shoeshine. He has to charm. He is a performer, a confidence man who must never lack confidence. His error is to confuse the role he plays with the person he wishes to be. The irony is that he, a salesman, has bought the pitch made to him by his society. He believes that advertisements tell the truth and is baffled when reality fails to match their claims. He believes the promises that America made to itself – that in this greatest country on earth success is inevitability (107).

Willy's house has no possibility to social relevance. It is the reminder of harsh reality, which Willy tries to turn a blind eye to. Willy is a tragic figure who has nowhere to take refuge.

It is the logic of the market which shapes Willy's dreams and that of the others. This logic deprives him of the dignity he seeks and the significance for which he yearns. In a modern world where market dictates the dream, daily life, and values of its people, the meaning of dignity, and freedom of man goes under question. Man especially a salesman, in this commercial society is just a means. Man in this situation has lost his dignity and humanity.

Willy's dreams are fruits of living with the language game of consumer society. Miller in *Salesman' in Beijing* explicates:

The salesman, in the 1920s, was a vital force in building the trade and commercial network of the country. The salesman needed little or no education, but an engaging personality and a faith in the inevitability of next week's upswing. Every salesman knew some other man who had hit it big, opened his own business, and died respected and rich. The myth of the salesman exemplified the open ranks of a society where practically overnight a man could leap to the head of the line. (1984:130)

Willy Loman is a man who never finds out who he is. He believes that the image he sees reflected in the eyes of those before whom he performs is real. Willy as a salesman like an actor speaks the thoughts of other men and thinks they are real. Willy plays the role for buyers and even for his family. He gradually loses his audience, first the buyers, then his son, then his boss. He loses his confidence to perform the role he believes is synonymous to his self.

Willy oscillates between awareness and denial. He discounts what he has but has no clear idea what he wants. He does not have any clear description of success and fame. Also Willy has to deny the basic points of reality in order to believe in the dream. Willy tries desperately to deny that his sons were failures and that he is failing as a salesman. Shockley pleasantly explicates:

The entire play is basically a struggle within Willy's mind between his vision of himself and the painful reality of facts intruding upon his "dream." Perhaps the most painful and poignant moment in the play comes when his son Biff tries to tell Willy that he's not now and will never be the "success" Willy imagines for him. Willy cannot hear him. Actually, in denying basic facts each man was trying to create himself from myth. One was of course more successful at doing this than the other.(qtd. In Bloom, 2007: 80).

Willy continually fantasizes about the farm in the west. This idea allows Willy to have the freedom of love and will allow him to break free from the restrictions and inhibitions that he has working as a salesman. Willy in one flashback says to both Biff and Happy, "You see what I been talking about? The greatest things can happen" (Miller: 33)!

## BINARY OPPOSITIONS

Displaying the binary oppositions is one of the characteristics of postmodern drama. By focusing on the binary oppositions postmodern drama stresses on the lack of stability in postmodern world. Miller's drama is full of binary oppositions which contradicted one another. Selden in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (1993), agreeably asserts:

*Death of a Salesman* concerns the Loman family. Willy is a failed salesman whose sons, Biff and Happy, are also failures... The great American Dream is embodied in Willy's brother Ben who went into the jungle at 18 and came out very rich at 21 and appears to Willy from time to time in the play.(57)

Therefore, the two brothers, Willy and Ben can be seen as different sides of the same personality. In this way the characters of two brothers complement each other, which suggests the two sides of one person. By this strong contrast, Willy feels himself as a failure in consumer society. This sense makes him feel isolated from his society, family and even himself.

Murphy's idea about binary opposition in Willy's mind is interesting. Murphy explains that:

One of the primary characteristics of Willy Loman's character is his penchant for self-contradiction: "Biff is a lazy bum! . . . There's one thing about Biff—he's not lazy" (p.5). One area where this is evident is Willy's attitude toward business and success. As he tells his boss Howard Wagner, he is aware that in 1948, the "real time" of the play's action, business is "all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear—or personality" (p.61), but he still longs for the days when "there was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it" (p.71).(qtd In Abbotson, 2007: 107)

## THE SAD STORY OF THE POSTMODERN MAN

Willy Loman's story is a tragedy in so much as it represents the misfortune of man's demise when he is taken over by his weaknesses and even worse, is persuaded by misguided values to pursue a life of unhappiness and ultimately destruction. It is also a tragedy in so much as Loman's pattern of behavior, his personality and the attitudes he imparts on his boys Biff and Happy negatively influences them as well.

Willy Loman's untimely but purposeful death offers a striking proof that the application of false values cannot have a positive end, regardless of how passionately they are ascribed by the individual. Miller writes that, in Loman, he has attempted to personify certain values which civilized men, in the twentieth century, share. Fortunately, Miller's play offers an open perspective on what may be considered a common human circumstance as well as the groundwork for consideration on how to prevent a demise similar to that of Loman.

All of Loman's family is effected in the same way or to the same degree, it becomes apparent that the false values that dictate Willy Loman's occupation and view of the world will shape the development and ultimate destruction of the Loman family, at least in as far as Willy Loman is concerned. Similarly, while Willy Loman does nothing markedly destructive to society as a whole, his pursuit of the American dream under the auspices of successful and esteemed salesmanship has the potential to bring ruin on his family in *Death of a Salesman*.

In *Death of a Salesman*, rather than being considered a threat to society, Loman may be considered society's victim, as he has contrived to live a life by what he believes are the dictates of society and by what he believes will bring solidarity, prosperity and self-esteem to his family and, perhaps more importantly, to himself. Unfortunately, his sons are disillusioned by his behavior and his wife becomes an advocate of his dependency on values that have no worth but what are ascribed to them by a discriminate and unfamiliar society.

The occupation of salesman is the best choice for illustrating weakness of the consumer society and its false values such as the imperative of earning substantial incomes, gaining social esteem as well as personal and public regard.

Willy Loman, a man whose dedication to his work and family was once a top priority, shifts to make the world revolve around him. He goes through a major personal and professional problem that he cannot escape. Willy's depression leads to his self-indulgence and denial, two key aspects to a problem play. Willy, as well, lived a life of restrictions on his work, constantly wanting to be promoted, and seriously thinking that his popularity outnumbered anyone else's.

*Death of a Salesman* also shows controversy in that Willy Loman ends his life for the sake of his family, thinking that they will be better off. Willy states, "Can you imagine that magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket?" (Miller: 819). Willy feels his family to be better off without him, but *with* his earnings. This controversy ends Miller's play.

Willy Loman has personal and occupational bondage: "Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory"(111)

It is not the fault of men like Willy Loman that industrialization has removed society from the focus on a work ethic to the focus on the product of work including income and status. the pursuit of the Dream leads to the character's death.

Willy has worked hard all his life and is still a failure. His sons, Biff and Happy, are even more disenchanting with the life they have been told, by society, to pursue. "I don't know what the hell I'm workin' for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment—all alone...it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddam it, I'm lonely"(12). Material success is emptiness in Salesman.

## CONCLUSION

The problem in *Death of a Salesman* is the inability of human beings to accept the changed reality and develop new attitudes compatible with one's changed circumstances of life. The problem of isolation arises in the play because of the protagonist's insensitivity to the inevitability of change.

This study has tried to dramatize a situation in which the personal motives of the characters are in conflict with the arbitrary norms of society. Society forces man to put on false faces and live his life through inherently contradictory and false values. The study has made an attempt to show the individuals stuck in the limbo of modern and postmodern values. He has to encounter the dilemma of creating an image of himself out of the illusory social life he is compelled to live. In order to succeed in public life, the individual desperately attempts to put on a socially acceptable mask and performs a role before the society. In this process, he becomes isolated from his own self.

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