



GSJ: Volume 8, Issue 12, December 2020, Online: ISSN 2320-9186
www.globalscientificjournal.com

Selling or Being Sold: 'Eat the Orange and Throw the Peel away' - Reading 'Death of a Salesman' by Arthur Miller as a Modern Tragedy.

K.G. Swarnananda Gamage

English Language Teaching Department, Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka
swarnananda@bpu.ac.lk

Abstract

Death of a Salesman (1949) by Arthur Miller is generally recognized as one of the most notable plays of American theatre. It is also regarded to be one of the first and finest works that seriously criticized the American dream in which man is expected to achieve success overnight by proving oneself better than others. The success, in this case, is normally judged by the amount of money and material that could be acquired by somebody. In the given situation, a man who finds it difficult to make money is an utter failure. In this modern tragedy, Willy Loman, the salesman did not commit suicide, yet he had to, as he was in a no-way out situation not being able to pay even his insurance. Therefore, Death of a Salesman is a vivid deviation from a Greek, Roman, or Elizabethan tragedy where the hero is either killed or he/she commits suicide. This paper discusses the tragedy of the salesman as a two-way process, both personal and social. Willy Loman's personal character traits as well as eat- the orange- and- throw- the peel- away society are equally responsible for the downfall of the salesman who hails from the American middle class. It is also analyzed in the article that the way Arthur Miller generalizes this particular tragedy which could be the tragedy of any individual living in a consumer market society in which not only everything but also everybody has a price, and everything, as well as everybody, is sold in one way or the other. Hence, Willy Loman's timeless and placeless tragedy mirrors the common man's tragedy as proven in the play.

Keywords- *Death of a Salesman, American Dream, Modern tragedy, Arthur Miller, Consumer society.*

-

Introduction

Death of a Salesman, first staged in 1949, depicts not only a tragedy of a salesman in competitive consumer society but a possible tragedy of a professional of any kind. It marked a unique place in American theatre in post-war of America as one of the best theatre works that American theatre has ever produced. Arthur Miller with his brilliant contemporary, Tennessee Williams brought American theatre to a new level of which the dramatists of all time afterward are inspired. Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *The Street Car named Desire* (1947) together with Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* (1953) were recognized as eye-openers not only the American theatre but the world theatre in the mid 20th century. The mid 20th century is recognized as one of the most influential eras of the universal theatre; in Europe too there was a renaissance in theatre. In early- mid 20th century period, Fedrior Garcia Lorca (1898- 1936) set the scene in Spain with his brilliant theatre productions , *Blood Wedding* (1933) *Yerma* (1934), and the *House of Bernada Alba* (1936) whereas, the famous German dramatist, Bertold Bercht popularizing epic theatre marked an indelible place in the world of theatre with his thought-provoking works, to name few, *Mother courage* (1945) *Life of Galileo* (1943) *The Good woman of Szechwan* (1943) and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948).

However, the most notable of the period was the rise of the absurd theatre with the Samuel Beckett's revolutionary production *Waiting for Godot* in 1952 and Eugene Ionesco's contribution to theatre of Absurd with the world-famous productions like *Rhinoceros* (1959), *The Chairs* (1952), *Jack of Submission* (1955) is also praiseworthy mainly because they created a trend to analyze psychological violence and suffering without emphasizing mere physical violence and suffering which were the highlighted features among other things in Greek, Roman, and Elizabethan theatre. Inspired by all these trends and techniques Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams developed their American style which was enriched and influenced by the expressionist theatre where physiological sufferings of the people created due to a revolt against some of the dehumanization aspects of the modern urban culture were analyzed in an extremely subtle manner. Therefore, the play is famous as an expressionist play too; expressionist theatre also seems to display strong emotions and dramatize the spiritual awakenings and psychological sufferings of their protagonists that created due to the inability of modern society to meet real human needs which are spiritual as well as material. Expressionism as a whole reflects a revolt against some of the dehumanization aspects of modern human society. Not only Willy Loman, the protagonist but Biff, the son of Willy and the other most notable character of the play are solid examples of the unbearable emotional suffering created due to dehumanization aspects of the modern market society portrayed in 'Death of a Salesman'. Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) are also renowned as the first literary works that questioned American Dream seriously at a time, people blindly perusing American Dream as a very pragmatic path to success.

Death of a Salesman provides us with extremely harsh criticism of urban, commercialized competitive society in which man looks very much alright physically but psychologically suffers much more than he could express as Willy Loman, the salesman does, though he is expected to be looking happy and content. *Death of a Salesman* displays the emotional suffering of people who are caught up in the society which is at a rat race; people following or rather imitating something blindly mainly because others do so.

Death of a Salesman, by all means, is a modern tragedy and a complete deviation of the tragedy that is portrayed mainly in Greek, Roman, and Elizabethan theatre. The tragedy was defined by Aristotle in his classic work, the Poetics.

“A tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language; in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions.”

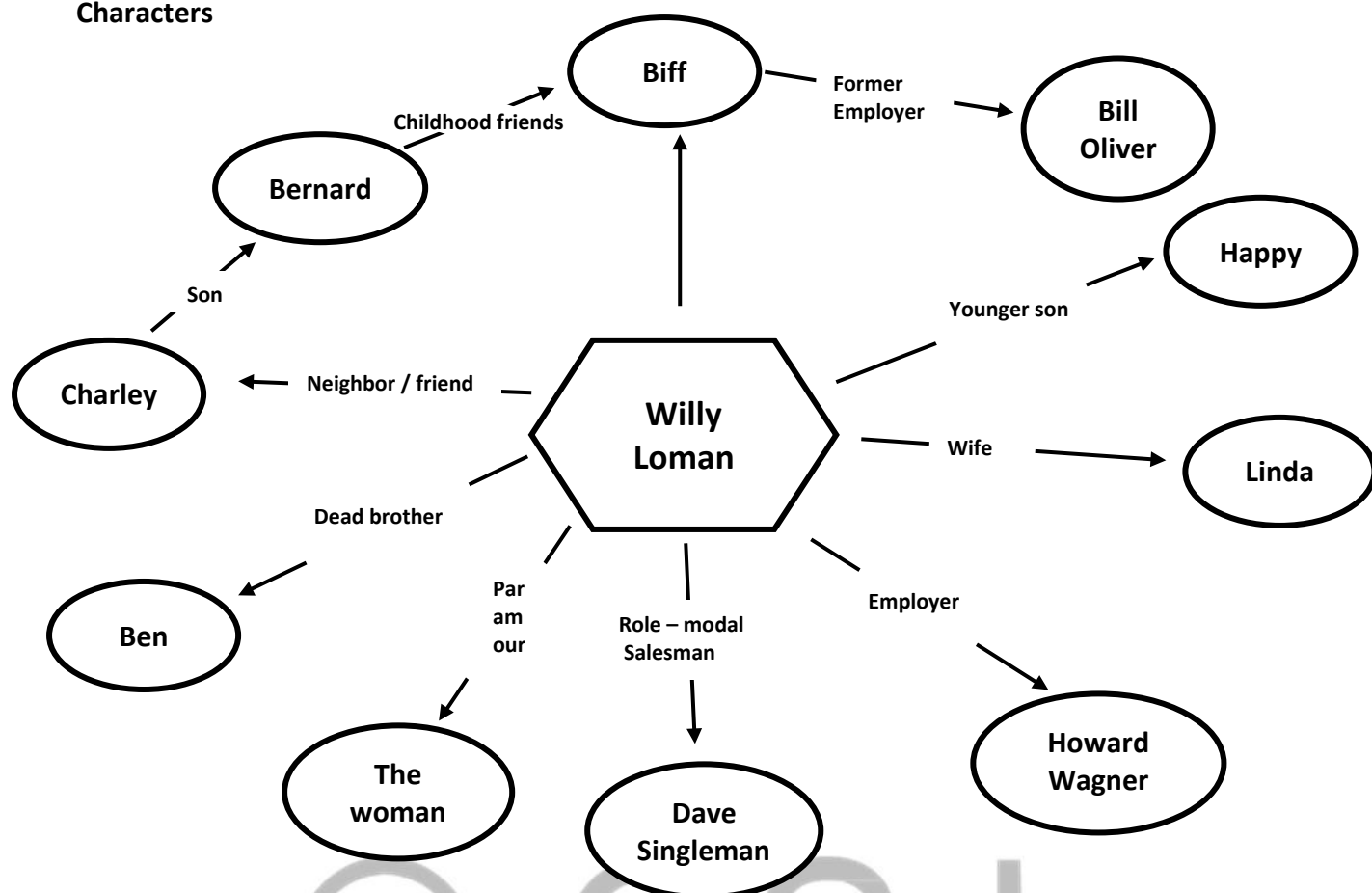
Aristotle

It is a fall of a man of high standing (hero) due to a tragic flaw, that spontaneously generates pity and fear. The fall is huge that the protagonist is more often than not either killed or commits suicide - higher the man bigger the fall.

Willy Loman is neither a man of high standing nor his tragic flaw is completely of his own. Yet, he subsequently commits suicide. Nevertheless, Willy Loman's tragic flaw is complex, not easily recognizable as Greek, Roman, and Shakespearean tragic heroes'. Whereas the committing suicide is concerned too, Willy Loman is pushed or forced into a situation where there is no way - out; if he does not, the whole family must commit suicide. Yet, in Shakespeare tragedies protagonists are totally lost in a personal predicament; in 'Hamlet', Hamlet questions 'to be or not to be is the question' (Act 3, Scene I) and in 'Othello', Othello questions himself in the end "where should Othello go? (Act 5, Scene II).

In a modern tragedy too there is a significant downfall of the central character (or characters) which usually occurs due to both personal and social failure. However, The person's (or people's) failure is not the sole reason for the downfall of the man but the society he/she (or they) dwells in too is equally responsible for the downfall which could be easily described as personal as well as social. For instance, Will Loman's committing suicide is not just a personal failure though it looks to be yet, obviously a social failure too as there are responsible social factors beyond his control.

Characters



Discussion

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller is a solid example for a modern tragedy that is more social than personnel or both the society and the person are equally responsible for the tragedy portrayed in the literary work. Willy Loman certainly had his weaknesses which are largely responsible for his downfall. He made up his mind to become a salesman seeing Dave Singleman, the role model salesman in a restaurant room. Even then America was considered a land of opportunity, and according to Willy 'the greatest country in the world' (p. 11) However, Willy Loman made the mistake of blind following. When he becomes sixty and is unable to pay his insurance, he is reminded of the choice he made at the climax of the drama; where he is dismissed by Howard, the employer and the owner of the company, he had been working for thirty-four years.

"And I was almost decided to go when I met a salesman in the Parker House. His name was Dave Singleman. And he was eighty- four years old and he'd drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, he'd go up to this room, y' understand, put on his green velvet slippers- I'll never forget- and pick up his phone and call the buyers and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living, And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. (P. 63)

Willy Loman was unable to realize that there was no way that one could follow or imitate someone else in the same capacity, the same caliber. Yet, unfortunately for Willy when he becomes sixty he is not in a position to pay even his insurance. His pathetic present situation is well described by Linda, Willy Loman's very loving, understanding, and dutiful wife.

.... He's exhausted. Instead of walking, he talks now. He drives seven hundred miles, and when he gets there no one knows him anymore, no one welcomes him. And what goes

through a man's mind, driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent? Why shouldn't he talk to himself? Why? When he has to go to Charly and borrow fifty dollars a week and pretend to me it's his pay? How long can that go on? (P. 45)

The final remark and the question Linda raises is a serious message inculcated in the play- 'How long can that go on?' There is obviously a limit and afterward one must terminate all which is in most cases, nothing but committing suicide.

Self-interest, being so proud of himself is another personal flaw, Willy Loman had which largely contributed to the downfall; he lived in a bubble where he is extremely popular, respected, and wanted. He tells his sons, "Someday I'll have my own business, and I'll never have to leave home anymore"

Happy- "Like Uncle Charley heh ?"

Willy- "Bigger than Uncle Charly? Because Charly is not liked. He is liked, but he's not well liked" (P. 23)

Willy Loman considers himself well-liked, that could be pretty normal assumption of a salesman ; he further says he had coffee with the Mayor of Providence and had friends everywhere in New England.

"... And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England"

"... I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own" (P. 24). Willy Loman in his bubble believes that "I am the New England man. I am vital in New England" (P. 10)

Biff, the elder son of Willy and the most significant character next to Willy in the play, though completely lost of the same weakness, the excessive self-interest manages to come out of the self-deception towards the end of the play. Biff confesses " I am not a leader of men, Willy, neither you are..." Pop I'm a dime a dozen, and so you are (P 105).

However, Willy Loman doesn't accept this harsh reality and is not ready to come out of the shell he lives in. His reply is "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman"(P.105).

Committing adultery is the other most notable personal trait of Willy that immensely contributed to the downfall of him as it created a direct impact on Biff and his being lost even at the age of thirty-four. Linda Loman is an ideal wife in many ways; she provides the emotional boost for Willy who struggles throughout to meet his sales target. She is a very understanding wife and prefers him to all others, very dutiful and sacrificing. When Willy is downhearted and heartbroken, " I am fat. I'm very foolish to look at Linda..." (P.29)

Linda consoles him "Willy darling you're the handsomest man in the world... to me you are"(P.29). Linda firmly instructs her two sons, "He's the dearest man in the world to me and I won't have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue. You got to make your mind now, darling there is not leeway way anymore. Either he's your father and you pay him that respect of else you're not to come here"(P.43)

These instances suggest the devotion and the utmost concern Linda possesses for Willy. Yet, Biff happened to find a woman in his father's room in Boston when he came all the way to inform Willy that he flunked maths. This particular incident, unfortunately, changed Biff's life ; being a sensitive boy who was extremely attached to his father and treated him as his sole role model was unable to tolerate the father's fickle behavior, Biff remarks " You fake, You phony little fake! You fake! (P 95).

Above all, Willy's gift to the woman, the stockings that obviously have been bought for Linda, made Biff so heart-broken, furious, and disappointed over the whole scenario. 'You – you gave her mama's stockings' and further adds "Don't touch me you – liar" (P. 95).

Biff eventually changed his mind, gave up schooling, and did not enroll in the university. This made Willy bitter and extremely guilty conscious, of which he was never able to get over. Thus, the guilt continues to torment Willy and whenever a hint of the issue is raised in the play, the laughter of a woman is heard; Arthur Miller has utilized auditory imagery to signify the guilty consciousness.

Throughout his life Willy Loman seemed to seek 'shortcuts to success' and for this weakness, he was largely inspired by his brother, Ben who appears on the stage as a non-realistic character to personify the greed for success in no time. Ben's frequent remark in the play, "... when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle and when I was twenty- one I walked out. And by God I was rich" (P 37) provides the proof.

The strong desire to be successful overnight got inculcated in Willy's personal traits mainly due to the inducement by his brother, Ben who is dead and gone yet, the inspiration remains solid. It is further proven in the instance where Willy commands his two sons to steal sand from the building apartment; his neighbour and true friend, Charly warns... "... if they steal any more from that building the watchman put the cops on them."

Willy – "I got a couple of fearless characters there", Charly quite rightly replies "Willy, the jails are full of fearless characters"(P.39). Biff subsequently paid the price for this as stealing was a habit formed in him due to the image of 'fearless character'. He used to steal something everywhere he worked and subsequently ended up in jail as well.

Willy Loman not only considers himself to be cut above the others but also strongly believes that his sons are superior to others; he always ridicules Bernard , the son of his neighbor-friend, Charly, and calls him ' a worm' and 'a book worm'. On contrary, he always overestimates his sons specially Biff. He replies to Bernard when he complains that Biff is not working hard and subsequently going to fail in maths. "What are you talking about? With scholarships to three universities they are gonna flunk him ?"(P.25). Biff, however, realizes what went wrong in the end, and quite rightly accuses his father for making him a man of high self-interest. "And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is !" (P. 104).

Biff Loman in the play is such a developing character for; he achieves a kind of self-realization which also could be recognized as epiphany. Biff remarks in the end. " I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither you are, you were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them ? I am one dollar an hour"

(P.105). He further adds and pleads his father to accept reality. " Will you let me go, for Christ's sake? Will you take the phony dream, and burn it before something happens?"(P. 106). Willy Loman however, does not make up his mind to accept this harsh reality and continues to believe in the "phony dream", just before he leaves home to commit suicide he tells Linda and Ben last "Imagine! When the mail comes he'll be ahead of Bernard again!" (P.107). Therefore, it is quite obvious that though Biff reaches epiphany Willy does not , he dies in the dream of self-deception as it is apparent that Biff would not be able to beat Bernard in the present circumstances; yet Willy, in his mind, is not ready to accept that Biff is a failure.

At the funeral Biff who has already realized the ill effects of wrong dreams, remarks "He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong (P.110), He never knew who he was (P.111). Charly, who could be regarded the month piece of Arthur Miller here elaborates the harsh realities of not

only Willy as a salesman undergoes but any professional would face in the capitalistic consumer market society where everything and everybody has a price and everything and everybody is sold in one way or the other.

“ Nobody don’t blame this man. You don’t understand ; Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life he don’t put a bolt to a nut, he don’t tell you the law as give you medicine. He’s man way out there in the blue riding on a smile and shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back that’s an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you’re finished, Nobody dust blame this man. A salesman is got to dream boy. It comes with the territory.(P.111)

The capitalistic consumer society, Willy Loman lives in is equally responsible for the downfall or the failure of Willy, the salesman. When the play begins to unfold, Willy has already become an utter failure as a salesman who is not in a position to play even his insurance. He travels over seven hundred miles and comes home empty-handed, Linda Loman, being an extremely understanding woman reads the predicament in the proper sense. “I don’t say he’s a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money, His name was never in the paper, he’s not the finest character that ever lived. But he’s f human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He’s not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person. You called him crazy – “ (P.44)

Arthur Miller thereby, demands more attention from the whole society as Willy’s tragedy not merely a salesman tragedy, lost is American dream encounters yet a social tragedy that any professional or rather any individual may inevitably face. Linda further explains,

“..... and he’s exhausted instead of walking he talks now. He drives seven hundred miles, when he gets there no one knows him anymore, no one welcomes him. And what goes through a man’s mind, driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent? why shouldn’t he talk to himself ? why? when he has to go to Charley and borrow fifty dollars a week and pretend to me that it’s his pay? How long can that go on ? How long” (P .45)

The question raised – “ how long can that go on ? is a question aimed at the consumer society in which people would be able to survive as long as you earn enough, as Charley remarks” when you got yourself couple of spots an your hat , and you’re finished’ (P.111). Willy Loman is not ‘ a man of high standing .He is a pretty ordinary man who manages hand to mouth life with his earnings as a salesman ; according to Linda not ‘ a great man and his name was never in the paper’ nevertheless , such people should have provisions to live in an honourable manner in the society. The day Willy earned well his employer , Wagner ‘ put his hand on Willy’s shoulders’ , he is embraced and welcome , yet now everybody offers him cold shoulders. However, attention must be paid, “he’s not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog.” (p.44)

Linda raised an echoing question ; “ how long can that go on ?. Willy therefore decides ‘enough is enough’ and he is no-way in a position to continue in the way it is, and decides to find a clerical in the main office of their company in New York . He requests a low salary compared to what he earned in the good old days, yet Howard , the son of former employer , Wagner is reluctant to accommodate Willy in the office. Willy’s expected salary sixty five dollars a week” becomes “fifty dollars a week” but Howard refuses- “ business is business; Willy finally pleads “ if I had forty dollars a week – that’s all I want forty dollars Howard”. (p .64)

This depicts a fact that the price of a man in this market society constantly fluctuates and however much you care you can’t help for it as your price is determined by others or rather

the society. Howard's reply to this pleading request is a harsh criticism of the system, and ruthlessness and cruelty that are associated with the trade. "kid, I can't take blood from a stone" (p.64). The system obviously seeks blood 'it's a blood – sucking system; and moreover the message underneath is – 'we have already sucked your blood and left only bones – the stone'. Willy Loman's legendary remark in this case is extremely vital in binging the main theme of the play, and Arthur Miller's social message is finely inculcated in the words of Willy Loman's reply to Howard.

"You mustn't tell me you're got people to see – I put thirty four years into this firm. Howard and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not of piece a fruit! (P.64)

Arthur Miller's vision is pretty clear here; man is just a marketable commodity in the consumer society in which not only everything but everybody is sold in one way or the other. Once you are sold or rather bought by someone who may appear in the name of a company, your fate is decided and no way could you demand anything - you are bought and sold.

The 'boxed-in' life of New York city too is a contributing factor in building so much emotional suffering for Willy Loman. Though he is a salesman in profession, he is in need of cultivating some vegetables in his garden, and the farming life is something he dreams of. Nevertheless, highly urbanized city of New York does not provide provisions for that sort of life; Willy Loman's remark validates the situation "the street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don't grow anymore, you can't raise a carrot in the backyard, they should have a law against apartment houses" (P. 12)

In addition to the boxed-in life they lead, the rapid population growth and the competition among the people in the city are juxtaposed in the play by Arthur Miller depicting the fact that it is not only personal weaknesses that contributed to the downfall of Willy but the inevitable pressure that is mounting in the society too is an equal contributor "There's more people! That's what's ruining this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening. Smell the stink from that apartment house and another one on the other side. How can they whip cheese?" (P. 12)

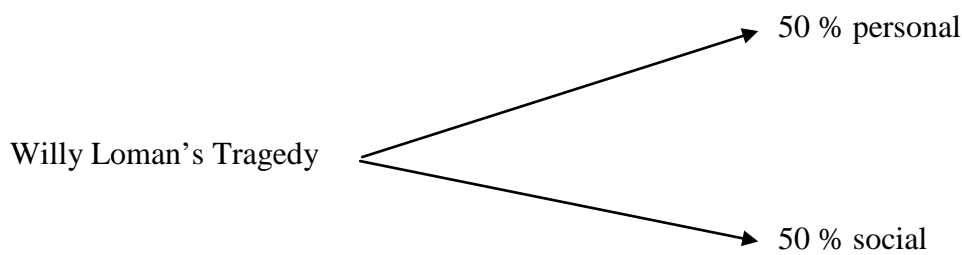
American society even by mid-twentieth century is a consumer society where the majority of the middle class is caught up in an easy payment or down payment system. Lomans too have purchased in the same, therefore, have to pay for the house, car, fridge, washing machine etc monthly. In the given situation there are ready-made payments every month whether you earn or not. In the present context as Willy doesn't earn, he is unable to pay even his insurance - they are in a no way out situation. All Willy's earnings are counted as seventy dollars (P. 27) yet they have got to pay 'hundred and twenty dollars'! My God, if business don't pick up, I don't know what I'm gonna do!" (P. 28). The pressure generated by the situation is one of the apparent reasons for his downfall that leads to committing suicide, and there, he remarks to Linda, "Well, I figure, What the hell, life is short, couple of jokes" (P 28).

When Willy is fired by Howard or by his company, in other words, he realizes that he is "a peel thrown after eating the orange". He commits suicide in such a way that it would look like an accident through which the family could claim his insurance. He dies to save his family; though sons did not read the situation in the way it should have been, Linda is pretty certain that Willy Loman is nobody but a family man. In the case of committing suicide, the person concerned is not paid the insurance. Nevertheless, an accident is different. The "tragic hero", Willy Loman commits suicide in the pretext of an accident and as a result, the family is benefited from the insurance money with which Linda pays the last payment of the house.

“Why did you do it? I search and search and search, I can’t understand it, Willy, I made the last payment of the house today. Today dear. And there will be nobody home [a sob rises in her throat] We are free and clear... We are free... We are free” (P 112)

It is an extremely sacrificing move to kill yourself to make your family “free and clear”; Miller showcases a tragedy of a salesman in the competitive, materialistic, egoistic and capitalistic society where not only everything but also everybody is sold in one way or the other. However, this could be a tragedy of anybody, any professional as Willy Loman’s tragedy is a common tragedy which is timeless and placeless.

In this modern tragedy, therefore, both the social factors and the personal factors equally contribute to the downfall of the protagonist.



Conclusion

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller was first staged in 1949. The play is known to be one of the best productions of American theatre mainly because it is recognized more often than not as one of the first literary works that seriously questioned American dream. Tragedy in theatre is a commonly used, popular category, nevertheless, Death of a Salesman is a solid example of a modern tragedy where the protagonist though he is not a person of high social standing, commits suicide in the tragic circumstances. Willy Loman too like ‘Othello’ in Shakespearean tragedy, like Okownkwo in modern tragedy fiction, Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe, is pushed into a situation where he lacks provisions to survive anymore.

As the same as Othello and Okownkwo, Willy Loman commits suicide. However, Willy’s tragedy is a complex blend of personal failures and social failures; both Willy Loman himself and the capitalistic competitive consumer society, he dwells in are equally responsible for the downfall of this pretty ordinary man whose name was never in the paper and led a hand -to-mouth life with his family. In Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller very closely reads the subtle complexities of American society with a far-sighted vision through which he depicts the future or rather upcoming calamity, the modern man has to undergo. Death of a Salesman therefore could essentially be recognized as an eye-opener that also serves the purpose of ‘a wake-up call’. The play is over seventy years old yet the impact it created remains and the words “ you can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away” echo unto this day.

References

- Achebe, C. (1988). *Things Fall Apart*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers
- Dutta, S. (2004). *Greek Tragedy*. London: Penguin Books. Evans, B.I (2012). *A Short History of English Drama*. New Delhi: Kalyani Publishers
- Evans, B.I (2012). *A Short History of English Drama*. New Delhi: Kalyani Publishers
- Gamage, S., *The Indispensable Literary Terms & Techniques*. (2, Ed.). Colombo: Olanco Printers, 2020
- Gamage, K. G. (2019). *Introduction to A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Colombo: Olanco Printers.
- Gamage, K. G. (2017). *Introduction to The Glass Menagerie*. Colombo: Olanco Printers.
- Gottfried, M. (2004). *Arthur Miller: His Life and Work*. Perseus Books Group. p. 118. ISBN 978-0-306-81377-1.
- Lorca, F. G. (1992). *The House of Bernarda Alba*. London: Penguin Group.
- Meserve, W. (1972). *Studies in Death of Salesman*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company. ISBN 978-0-675-09259-3.
- Miller, A. (1961). *Death of a Salesman*. London: Penguin Group.

