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Jason Koch  
1302 A  
Schonberg  
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The Tragedy of One Man

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* can be seen as an eulogy of a dreamer, which depicts one man's tragic life and death as he tries to bring his family into grace. Miller does, however, also use this play to express underlying themes and ideas. Reading *Death of a Salesman* from the starting point of a Marxist results in the perception that Miller uses his play as a means to demonstrate the effects of a changing capitalist society. On the other hand, a psychological reading of *Death of a Salesman* allows the play to be seen as one man's flight from shame and his own weakened self image. The Marxist perspective is a viable reading of this drama but it does not truly define it as a tragedy. To better understand this piece of literature as a tragedy one should observe the psychological reading which depicts the tragedy of one man.

Many people wonder if Willy is really responsible for his own death, or is he, as Luke Carrol put it in the *Herald Tribune*, "a pathetic little man caught in an undertow that's too strong for him." Willy Loman is bewildered by a capitalist system which drives its men into frantic, all-consuming dreams of success, doomed not only by their grandiosity but also their inherent contradictoriness.

Willy's dreams of success are rooted in the concept of the "American Dream", which is the

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idea that this is a land of unlimited opportunity in which any ragamuffin can attain riches and any mother's son can become president (Hadomi 159). This concept of success is personified by two characters in the play: David Singleman and Ben Loman. The first an old sales man, David Singleman, who could travel anywhere and place many orders by phone in his hotel room. And when this man died at the age of eighty-four people came from all over to attend his funeral. This is the type of man Willy aspires to become and this is why he chose sales as his occupation. Ben, Willy's older brother, is another symbol of the ruthless success Willy tries to reach in his life. "There was the only man I ever met," Willy says, "Who knew all the answers" (Meyer 1734). Willy has treasured up the memory of Ben until it is more real to him than any of the people in his life. The character of Ben materializes again and again in the play as Willy savors his favorite brag: "When I was seven-teen I walked into the jungle and when I was twenty-one I walked out. and by God I was rich" (Meyer 1732).

The statement, "Rich", echoes throughout the play as Willy is railroaded by a capitalist system as he strives to reach his dreams. Willy Loman desperately wants to believe that he has succeeded, that he is "well liked" and a great salesman. But at the age of sixty-three and nearing retirement, Willy is seen as a man who gave all of his life to a business, only to be thrown in the scrap-heap and as a householder whose pattern of life was interwoven with installment plans with which he could hardly catch up.

In another time, Willy Loman might have been a happy carpenter. He can put up a ceiling which his brother-in-law, Charley, lauds as a "piece a work". Dreaming of a rustic retirement, Willy hopes to build guest houses on his yearned-for country land for Biff and Happy: "Cause I got so many fine tools, all I'd need would be a little lumber and some peace of mind" (Meyer 1743). On

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the morning of the day which ends with his suicide, he admires his own house: "All

the cement, the lumber, the reconstruction put in this house. There ain't a crack to be found in it any more"(Meyer 1744). Belittling Charlie, Willy says, "A man who can't handle tools is not a man"(Meyer 1730).

But it is important to note that carpentry is no more his work in the world than it is Charley's. Willy marches in Karl Marx's army of alienated labor, performing work that is "not personal to him, is not part of his nature ; therefore he does not fulfill himself in work, but actually denies himself...It satisfies no spontaneous urges, but is only a means for satisfaction of wants that have nothing to do with work"(Koon 65). Willy's alienation, however, is perhaps more excruciating than even Marx could have imagined. Business civilization tells Willy that selling is a task as whole and complex as that of any artisan, but the products of Willy's labor are never concrete and observable. The cabinet maker can contemplate the finished cabinet; even the assembly line worker can reap the benefits of his labor. But Willy can never know the real value of his salesman's skills because many factors -his customer's unique needs and his merchandise's quality among them-contribute to his success or failure. The immediate financial rewards of Willy's work are barely sufficient to provide his family with the necessities and scant comforts of lower middle class life, and the final rewards he anticipates, wealth and eminence, are never insight. Willy never receives any of these rewards because of the changing capitalistic society in which he lives.

As *Death of a Salesman* opens, Willy Loman returns home "tired to death"(Meyer 1714)in reveries about the beautiful countryside and the past, he's been driving off the road; and now he wants a cheese sandwich. But Linda's suggestion that he try a new American type cheese-"it's whipped"(Meyer 1716)-irritates Willy: "Why do you get American when I like Swiss?"(Meyer 1716). His anger at being contradicted unleashes an indictment of modern industrialized America:

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"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"(Meyer 1716). But just as Willy defines the conflict between nature and industry, he pauses and simply wonders: "How can they whip cheese?"(Meyer 1716).

The clash between the old agrarian ideal and capitalistic enterprise is well documented in *Death of a Salesman* (Koon 82). The son a pioneer inventor and the slave of the industrialized world, Willy Loman epitomizes the victim of a changing capitalistic society. Miller eludes to this even in the character's name Loman, which pronounced correctly reveals the words Lo-man. *Death of a Salesman* engages the audiences conflicting attitudes toward this changing society: Fear of the new and unfamiliar; marvel at the progress; and the need ,finally, to accommodate technology to cultural mythologies by subordinating it personally (Koon 52).

This is evident in the Howards office who is Willy's boss. In this scene Willy is going to ask to work in NewYork but instead of getting his office job he is fired. Willy has now lost every thing: his years of service, his pride and his salary because he is no longer as productive as he once was. This scene not only marks a tragic point in Willy's life it also gives proof of the changes that occur in a capitalist system. Willy's termination goes along with the "out with the old and in with the new theory of such a system. Howard now finds Willy useless to him just like his old hobbies and like these hobbies he must replace Willy with something better and more effective.

As Willy sees his world crumble before him his only action is to celebrate the success of David Singleman. Willy epitomizes Singleman in an unexpectedly eloquent passage:

Do you know? When he died-and by the way he died the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven and Hartford going to Boston-

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when he died, hundreds of salesman and buyers where at his funeral...In those days there was a personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and Comradeship, and

gratitude in it (Meyer 1748).

This passage eludes to Willy's conflict with the changing Capitalistic society. The business has changed it has left his kind behind, and now he does not know how to perform his job. He once thought you could succeed on the merits of personality alone but now he wonders if he is too talkative. Willy now wonders if he ever possessed the qualities of a successful salesman.

Willy the apparent victim of Capitalism-He will kill himself in a car wreck-shows us how we must integrate a changing society and personality in order to survive. This is one reason why, Linda insists, "attention must finally be paid to such a person" (Meyer 1736). But perhaps the most fitting lines of the play were spoken by Willy's friend Charley: "Nobody dast blame this man. For a salesman there is no rock-bottom to life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you law or give medicine.. A salesman has got to dream, boy, it comes with the territory" (Meyer 1778). And just as Charley stated the territory is to blame for Willy's tragic end because he never had a chance to succeed in this capitalistic society.

Willy Loman the tragic hero Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, powerfully illustrates self psychology principles governing shame and the possibilities of self restoration. The character seems to be in descent physical health, but the play illustrates that he is suffering some episodes of mental incoherence and distortion. Willy has begun to run his car off the road and often forgets his destination. However, Willy's mental health is not only distorted, but also the play displays the character as having hallmark symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder (Welleck 241). This disorder is defined as a disorder in which the individual shows an exaggerated sense of self

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importance and they often show a lack of empathy and the need of admiration (Sue, Sue & Sue 252). Throughout the play, Willy exaggerates his own achievements, and the talents of his son, Bill. He is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success and power. His personality is seen as insulting and impatient, but this is just a result of his lack of empathy. He constantly seeks admiration from his wife and sons because he wants to be seen as a success. But to dismiss Willy Loman as just another obnoxious NPD is to miss the enduring pain of those depleted souls who suffer the empty depression of mirrored ambitions (Welleck 214). It is in this sense that Willy Loman is tragic men as Heins Kohut understood him.

Heinz Kohut is a social psychologist who has done extensive research on the influence of a person's psyche on their psyche. Kohut used his definition of the self- "the self is the center of the psychological universe and it is a conceptualization of the structure whose establishment makes possible a creative-productive, fulfilling lie."-and the concept of shame to examine the character of Willy Loman and the drama *Death of a Salesman* (Welleck 213). Kohut labeled Willy as Tragic Man because as many people Willy's struggle to grasp comfort and stability is destroyed in a universe lived imperfectly (Welleck 215). Arthur Miller uses this concept of the self and shame to illustrate the downfall of the central character.

The concept of a declining and weakening self image is seen through out the play. Willy Loman epitomizes Tragic Man trying desperately to balance his fragile equilibrium. "I'm tired to death" he declares (Meyer 1714). This statement reveals a state of self depletion, which the character is not truly aware of. Willy's cocky and often arrogant attitudes often shadowed by a sense of doubt. He brags of his popularity and how well liked he is, but often worries that he is talkative, and perhaps laughs too much. He is bewildered in a universe that is hard to grasp and seems out of

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control. Willy is constantly at ends with refrigerators that breakdown, and a car that is in perennial despair. These continuous action can be interpreted as

attempts to concertize the pervasive feelings of a crumbling and unpredictable self (Welleck 214).

Willy's temperament is in constant flux, he is easily frustrated and angered, his mood is often shifting. The character searches for reassurance from the those around him, in order to cope with a puzzling and unsupportive world. For example, Willy forces his wife Linda to act in exact conformity to his psychological and physical needs, he will not tolerate any form of separation. He never allows her to speak her own mind she is only there to support him and his ideas.

Willy is constantly struggling to gain control of his self and the world around him but he sees this as being unattainable: "I can't stop myself-I talk too much", and "the trouble is people don't seem to take to me"(Meyer 17). Estranged from the continuity of life he is oddly unconnected. "There's something my father should have taught me," he muses, and poignantly, "I still feel-kind of-temporary about myself"(Meyer 1734).

Willy, seeing his life is not going anywhere and that he has not become the success that he envisioned, uses his son, Biff, to revitalize himself. Will manipulates Biff into trying to become the great salesman that he wanted to be, even though Biff longs for another life. Will is using Biff in this way to fulfill his thwarted ambitions. But this is not the only time Willy has tried to use Biff to revitalize his self esteem. Biff has always been an important source of self esteem for Willy and through his football prowess he acted out his father's exhibitionism and grandiosity. Willy was popular and handsome. It is noted that when the self is in danger, when it is basically fragile, there is no room for empathy (Welleck 218). This causes the individual to focus primarily on restoring the crumbling self, however possible. Ultimately, it is this that causes Willy to focus primarily on

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his own overwhelming needs, and to block out those closest to him. This sense of detachment has led Willy to identify with his shameful life.

"Shame involves painful self knowledge followed by self-reproach. In shame one asks, "What kind of person am I?" And the answer is, "I am not as I should be." It is in this sense that shame overwhelms Willy Loman, Tragic Man (Welleck 220).

When Willy looks back on his life, he becomes painfully aware of his failures, to his self and those around him. He realizes the error in his persistent determination to be well liked. He is ashamed that he did not become the successful-admired salesman that he envisioned, nor did he become the father of great sons. Nor did he continue in the footsteps of greatness that his father, and brother, Ben, left behind. With each of these realizations comes the shameful awareness that he is without a sensible value system, and has never developed the reasonable ideas and goals that are essential to a healthy suit (Welleck 220).

Willy tries to settle on calming, soothing images from his past, but instead the memories become riddled with shame and humiliation. For instance, he tries to focus on the relationship he had with his son, Biff, but this is overshadowed by an adulterous affair that destroyed their relationship and Biff's future. Willy also tries to focus on the success of his brother, Ben, but inevitably he must turn to his own failure. Willy's shameful past is brought to a dramatic realization as it is pushed into the present. Willy begins to feel at fault for Biff's failure, he will not admit this, but it is evident in his behavior; as he asks Bernard what went wrong in Biff's life that caused him not to succeed. In reality Willy is not angered at Biff for being a "bum", but he is ashamed of himself for the mistakes he has made like the incident in Boston. This is why Willy sees suicide as a glorious way out of his shameful life. Suicide will allow Willy to give Biff his life back in the

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terms of twenty thousand dollars.

The psychological demise of Willy Loman is further illustrated through the

setting and language of the play. Willy often alludes to how he is becoming boxed in by the industrialized world around him. But is this observation intended to be taken literally or does it symbolize the realization of the character. The more Willy realizes about his past life and his future ahead of him, the more he feels the wall are closing in on him. In a way Willy is not being surrounded by the buildings around him but the shame of his life. This point is further illustrated when Willy tells Ben, "The woods are Burning"(Meyer 1762). This statement depicts the emotional chaos involved in the character's life. To Willy it appears as if everything in his life, past and present, is surrounding him from his adultious affair to his termination at work. Willy world is coming to a climatic downfall due to the shame that he bestowed upon himself.

Arthur Miller wrote, "The tragic feeling is evoked when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing-his personal dignity" (Hadomi 162). This statement is critical in determining which of the two standpoints best describes Death of a Salesman as a tragedy.

When viewing the drama from the Marxist stand point one is forced to believe that the changing capitalistic society is at fault for Willy's personal demise and his suicide. This view point wants the reader to believe that Willy Loman was a pathetic fool, who killed himself to escape a world in which he had outlived his usefulness. But if this is true. How does preserve his personal dignity? By taking his own life-for this reason-Willy has done nothing to preserve his dignity, instead he has become a maître to other poor and unfortunate soul's who are confused by such a changing capitalist system. The Marxist stand point also wants the reader to believe that society is

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at fault for the tragedy in Willy Loman's life. It states that brute economics is the reason Willy is unstable and on the brink of disaster. But if this is true why is it that Willy is the only one effected by this? Charley, Willy's friend, is depicted as a successful man who has his own business and has a son who argued a case before the Supreme Court. Even Willy's brother, Ben, has succeeded in such a society, he has made millions off of the diamond business. This proves that society can not be the cause of the Tragedy evident in Willy's life. The only one responsible for the tragedy seen in the play is Willy himself.

The psychological standpoint most accurately depicts the tragedy of one man, Willy Loman. It supports Miller's quote regarding the tragic feeling. This perspective states that Willy took his own life to make a menc for his life of shame, by giving his sons the only thing he had left, the insurance policy. As Willy ponders committing suicide he tells his dead brother Ben, "He thinks I'm nothing, see, and so he spites me"(Meyer 1772) , and goes on to say, "Can you imagine the magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket"(Meyer 1776). Willy Loman is prepared to take his own life because he feels there is dignity in a death that will give his son a life.

This may be the only dignified thing Willy has done throughout the play. Willy is depicted as a pathetic man who is crushed by the world around him. Although, the psychological standpoint concludes that Willy is not destroyed by society but his own personal unconsciousness. Willy is haunted by his past which leaves him disillusioned about his future: "I still feel-kind of-temporary about myself"(Meyer 1734). Willy has lived a life of shame which has resulted in his weakened self image, he is no longer sure if he even still possesses the one tool essential to his trade-a good personality. He often worries that he is too talkative and that people do not take to him. Willy has become unsure of himself and this is what leads to the tragedy of the play not the Capitalistic

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system. This reduces Willy to a feeble man forced to wallow in his own self pity

and this is the true tragedy of this play.

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