

The American Dream and the Masculine Ideal: A Study of Willy Loman's Collapse in *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* offers a haunting portrait of a man whose identity is shaped and ultimately shattered by an unforgiving vision of the American Dream. This paper explores how the play constructs and critiques a version of masculinity rooted in economic success, emotional restraint, and social status. Willy Loman, the central figure, is examined not simply as a failed salesman, but as a man consumed by the pressure to embody an ideal of manhood he can never fully achieve. Drawing upon theories of hegemonic masculinity and the socio-economic context of post-war America, this study investigates how Willy's collapse reveals deeper cultural anxieties around failure, self-worth, and male identity. The paper also considers how other characters, especially Biff and Happy, either resist or perpetuate these ideals, highlighting the generational toll of such expectations. Ultimately, the play is read as a powerful critique of the illusion of success and the emotional cost of living by a script of manhood that allows no room for vulnerability or self-doubt.

Introduction

"Death of a Salesman" by Arthur Miller is a devastating criticism of American society's values, specifically those values that permeated post-World War II American society. The play questions the American Dream, one defined by material possessions and economic success that has increasingly permeated American society and relates it to the masculine ideals of the time. The post-war, American male ideal was one that forced the economic and social success on an individual as regular behaviour. Miller's presentation of Willy Loman exposes the damage of the idealized male and how abnormal it is to expect a man to live up to this ideal. Willy is destroyed by the very idea and becomes the character that Miller illustrates as incapable of attaining these unattainable goals. The theme presented emphasizes that the toxic American Dream covers masculinity too; the intersection is where Willy becomes disillusioned and continues to push onward in society's expectations until he reaches total demise. The thesis is clear as no one in the family accepts this toxic American ideal, even at the expense of the father.

The American Dream and Its Economic-Capitalist Roots

The post-World War II American Dream shifted to equate success with economic power, pressuring men like Willy Loman in "Death of a Salesman" to meet unrealistic standards. This system, driven by capitalism, linked masculinity to wealth, creating a cycle of ambition and failure, as Willy's collapse exemplifies systemic flaws (Anwar, 2018; Rezapour & Anushiravani, 2021). Capitalist ideals also intertwined with gender roles, pressuring men to prove manhood through economic success, which intensified Willy's inner conflict and alienation, reflecting societal expectations and hegemonic masculinity (Botton, 2020). This convergence of capitalism and gender norms fostered an environment where men faced high standards, often leading to despair and existential crises.

Masculinity as a Performance: Willy's Identity Crisis

Linda's observation that Willy is "only a little boat looking for a harbor" poignantly illustrates Willy Loman's profound disorientation in fulfilling his responsibilities as the family's provider (Miller, 1949/2018, p. 61). Willy Loman's identity crisis stems from performative and materialist masculinity, as theorized by Connell, which positions men as 'winners' or 'providers' always expected to succeed. When these demands

become unattainable, men struggle with societal ideals they cannot fulfil (Yang, 2020). Butler emphasizes that masculinity is an act reinforced through repetition and societal recognition (Botton, 2020). In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy's constant effort to appear successful highlights the tension of performative masculinity, trapping him in a loop of unfulfilled ambitions and psychological distress. His view of success through materialism leads to an identity crisis, as he cannot meet these standards. This performative act breeds feelings of inadequacy, reinforced by societal perceptions of masculinity and fatherhood archetypes, such as Willy's father-god illusion, which intensifies his hypermasculinity and breakdown (Hong, 2008). Gleitman notes Willy's failure to integrate tenderness and vulnerability causes psychological distress, with his suicide seen as a heroic failure to perform as he believes he should (Gleitman, 2020). The pressure to perform an acceptable masculinity further damages him, leading to disillusionment and his ultimate demise. Willy's identity crisis affects his self-image and relationships, as he relies on defence mechanisms like denial and repression to cope with the gap between aspirations and reality (Jalal et al., 2023). This dissonance worsens his insecurity, straining his relationships with Linda, Biff, and Happy, and distorting his perception of self and family. His psychological distress creates emotional distance, reflecting societal failure and the flawed pursuit of the American Dream, as critiqued by Miller.

The Collapse: Disillusionment and Emotional Breakdown

Willy ultimately comes to a profound subconscious realization that "nothing is planted" and that he lacks "a thing in the ground" (Miller, 1949/2018, p. 104), a recognition that underscores his crisis stemming from disillusionment with the American Dream and societal masculinity expectations, leading to madness as he becomes detached from reality due to his failure to achieve success (Jalal et al., 2023). This failure causes psychological breakdown through repression and denial, driven by capitalism and patriarchy, resulting in an existential crisis (Joynal, 2023). Arthur Miller critiques these societal pressures, exposing how they distort masculinity and foster disillusionment.

Willy's emotional repression, linked to societal ideals, equates success with suppressing feelings and financial status (Jalal et al., 2023). His false sense of security from success blinds him to his vulnerabilities, prompting defence mechanisms like denial and displacement that distance him from himself and his family (Jalal et al., 2023). The societal demand for an ideal man forces Willy to hide his true emotions, intensifying the pressure. Miller uses Willy's story to highlight the broader societal focus on careers over well-being, causing personal and familial tensions in mid-20th-century America (Yeboah et al., 2022).

Linda, Biff, and Happy: Reflecting and Resisting the Masculine Ideal

Arthur Miller's tragic play, *The Death of a Salesman*, depicts a family fundamentally affected by hegemonic masculinity. The titular character, the salesman Willy Loman and his wife and two sons struggle with societal expectations concerning manhood and masculinity. Each individual character interacts with the hegemonic masculinity ideal reinforced by Willy Loman in different ways. Willy's wife Linda Loman embodies the stereotypical gender role expected from women in the society and conforms to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity in her relationship with her husband by providing moral support and emotional stability. However, by prioritizing relational and emotional aspects of life her character subtly defies the masculine ideal by questioning the belief that one's value is determined only by their ability to provide monetary wealth (Gleitman, 2020). Willy's sons, Biff and Happy are also impacted by traditional masculine beliefs and stereotypes but they are continuously at odds with it. Upon realizing that his father's definition of success is limited, the character of Biff attempts to succeed by being his authentic self, whereas Happy continues to strive for success defined by his father and seeks validation through societal recognition of his accomplishments (Yeboah et al., 2022). Arthur Miller weaves the tensions between conformity and defiance to stereotypical gender roles and norms in the family members to criticize the societal tradition that has bound them together.

On the other hand, Biff Loman's deliberate renunciation of his father's dream brings about a striking departure from the values Biff inherited from his father's image and a deeper pursuit of his own identity. In contrast to Willy and his unfaltering adherence to society's definition of success, Biff grows increasingly jaded by the realization of how "fake" his father's dreams are (Rezapour & Anushiravani, 2021). Thereby, instead of striving for success as society defines it, Biff seeks satisfaction in aspects of life outside of this perception, challenging its validity and its superficiality in correlating material success and achieving the American Dream. Biff's dismissal of his father's obsession with success embodies a rejection of hegemonic masculinity in that he embraces a more fulfilling life for himself over the expectations society sets for the ideal male (Gleitman, 2020). Through Biff's journey to attain his own truth - authenticity - and self-identity, Arthur Miller subverts the expectations and values forced upon him by his father, revealing a cultural moment that challenges the performative nature of masculinity in search of one's personal truth. Linda Loman, too, occupies a complex position as she supports Willy while both adhering to and subverting traditional gender roles through her quiet resistance. She is a stabilizing figure in Willy's life, an adherence to the gender standard associated with caring for the family, as it is her role to support him through his disastrous falls. Yet, when she implores Willy to find success for his family and to cast aside their notions of success, she subverts the gender standard through her focus on relationships rather than material wealth. In doing so, she challenges the hegemonic masculinity that links worth and value to economic prosperity and success. Linda Loman, therefore, complicates gender roles and norms, as she diminishes Willy's ability to assign worth in anyone based on capitalism (Yang, 2020). Through her subtle acts of defiance, Linda represents a critique of gender performativity, resembling a culture that abides by the expectations of rigid masculinity (Botton, 2020).

Arthur Miller's Critique

Willy Loman, as a modern tragic hero, is positioned by Arthur Miller to critique the ideals of masculinity and the growing societal and structural failures that lead to his demise. "Death of a Salesman," alongside Miller's essay "Tragedy and the Common Man," attempts to redefine tragedy, and see a common man perspective as an extension, instead of a deviation, from Aristotelian tragedy (Yeboah et al., 2022). The conflicts that Loman faces between his aspirations and societal 'markings' pushes him into the tragic hero status, with Miller's work offering a lesson in how men like Loman suffer through non-existent criteria for success and yet feel the fracture that occurs (Bayouli & Sammali, 2019). Miller is critical of success and the cultural pressure pushes reflecting materialistic gain over the economy, family, and mental health. Willy is tortured by how his rise to success impacts him and the breakdown of the American dream, a critique of performative masculinity at the hands of the era (Yeboah et al., 2022). In the end, Willy is left as a tragic victim of an age defined by performative need. Instead of proving manhood through individual struggles, success, or just effort, masculinity was at the hands of the public's eye through expectation.

Arthur Miller did, in fact, hinge on Willy Loman's tragic fate to emphasize his critique of society and its 'masculine' correlated expectations when it comes to the American Dream as such. He, instead, chose to illustrate a broken and disillusioned image of the American Dream: it promised individual prosperity with its clear avenues of intent, yet the consequences further reveal its failures to economically and emotionally provide fulfilment on the family level, as it reveals how these preoccupations keep careers of success alive (Rezapour & Anushiravani, 2021). At the centre of the tragic story is, however, Willy Loman's constant strives toward this dream as if it has become a paradox for the common man; while it ruins him and his family, with their lives literally 'unraveled' under the pressure of the socio-idealistic expectations donning him (Bayouli & Sammali, 2019). In the play, Miller's critique implies that the same pursuit strips away personal value and wellness, leaving it vulnerable to a diseased societal construct, one that prioritizes economic instead of emotional value. However, with Willy's downfall alongside his desired hope and appeal, Miller insinuates these are the integral forces set against individuals post-World War II America where masculinity is intertwined with economic prosperity, and the lack of emotional support ultimately exposes the vulnerabilities of families and the dream to collapse.

Conclusion

Arthur Miller skilfully critiques the American Dream throughout the play "Death of a Salesman" and how it is intertwined with toxic masculinity. One main aspect of the play is the character of Willy Loman who portrayed the tragic consequences of the American Dream and how it prioritizes shallow ideals over the genuine pursuit of happiness. Miller's play serves as a warning on the dangers of associating worth and value with achieving economic and social power and how it contributes to the cycle of emotional dread. The idea of associating personal success and fulfilment with the attainment of an ideal is still applicable today and resonates with the pressures of the modern growing up masculinity and the ever-elusive dream of success. In the forefront of tradition, Miller challenged the ideology of oppression through this tragic play and urged individuals to rethink their association with success and fulfilment with the American Dream.

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