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The Fall of Willy Loman: Rise of Marxism or Hope for Capitalism?

In post-Depression America, the United States endured internal battles in political ideologies between capitalists and Marxists, which is the focus of Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*. According to Helge Normann Nilsen, author of "From Honors At Dawn to Death of a Salesman: Marxism and the Early Plays of Arthur Miller," the Great Depression had a profound impact in forming the political identity of Arthur Miller: "The Great Depression created in him a lasting and traumatic impression of the devastating power of economic forces in the shaping of peoples' lives" (146). This lasting effect on Miller is embodied in the character of Willy Loman, an unsuccessful salesman whose life collapses from the strain of his competition for wealth, demonstrated by Nilsen as she claims the fault lies in the "Impairment of [Willy's] conscience and sanity by intolerable economic pressures" (155). Because of his focus on material success, which Marxists view as a critical flaw in capitalism, Willy loses his sanity battling the corruption within himself and the American free market system. I believe, however, that while Miller embraced and promoted Marxist values and that the messages in *Death of a Salesman* are directed at capitalists, Miller was not condemning all aspects of capitalism. Although his portrayal of Willy may seem politically biased, Miller's portrayal of Charley as a generous and kind man contradicts the notion that *Death of a Salesman* is purely Marxist propaganda. Miller, therefore, was not denouncing capitalism, but calling instead for reforms within the existing system.

The Great Depression can arguably be attributed to the avarice of a society engrossed with the attainment of wealth in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Nilsen reaffirms this viewpoint in stating, “This disaster was one of the vagaries of capitalism” (153). The “vagaries of capitalism” are rooted foremost in materialism and insatiable greed, qualities that are clearly displayed in the character of Willy Loman. As Miller related in a public interview, at the time of the Great Depression, “The main subject of conversation was money...How do I get some, more or less honestly” (“Miller on America” 13). Inspired to combat the forces of corruption and avarice in American free market society, Miller set out to write *Death of a Salesman*. Concerned for the future of America, specifically out of fear of fascism, Miller campaigned for reforms in free market society:

“Then Mr. Hitler arrived...either capitalism was at its end or it would take tremendous revisions to survive...if capitalism ended in fascism, something profound had to change, and not only within the views of the left” (“Miller on America” 13).

Miller’s play can therefore be interpreted either as an attempt to convert Americans to the system of Marxism, or as a message to capitalists that corruption and greed must be avoided at all costs if America is to remain intact. The debate among critics as to the true intentions of Miller in *Death of a Salesman* extends beyond the character of Willy; readers and critics alike find the character of Charley to be both enigmatic and useful when examining Miller’s criticisms of capitalism.

According to Nilsen, Miller designed his characters in a way that reveals the corruption of the American free market. She states: “He portrayed his major characters as products of the American capitalist society and its influence” (146). Therefore, Willy was designed to represent capitalism and its “glorification of private property...orientation toward profitmaking... [and]

egocentric individualism” (Nilsen 146). As a result of these perversions in American plutocratic society, Nilsen argues, the loss of sanity and career is inevitable, as demonstrated in the personal and professional downfall of Willy Loman (146-156). A blind faith in a system founded on the hopes of success in spite of the fact that many are not destined for success, Nilsen claims, is what causes Willy to embrace the notion that anyone can succeed with little effort (146-156). As some critics argue, Willy is blindly accepting of many values that can arise from capitalism and result in moral corruption. These numerous critical flaws in Willy’s character epitomize Miller’s criticisms of capitalism, designed to encourage readers to criticize and correct their flawed or corrupted personalities in order to avoid a fate similar to Willy’s. Indeed, Willy exhibits many of these personality flaws that Miller deemed corrupted, yet he lacks the individualistic qualities required to flourish in a free market environment.

The addled struggle for prosperity within Willy is apparent to readers as he is driven mad because of his inability to obtain financial security. Unlike his brother Ben, who became wealthy in the diamond industry, Willy is unsuccessful, causing him to become mentally unstable. Willy’s desire for achievement is so great that his only means of experiencing partial success is through an emphasis on his few material items including his car and refrigerator: “I told you we should have bought a well-advertised machine...Charley bought a General Electric” (*Death of a Salesman* 2159). According to Nilsen, a capitalist society promotes the sole protection of one’s self and family, disregarding the needs of society at large: “[Capitalist] society fosters no sense of responsibility to anyone beyond self and family” (146-147). In his journey to gain higher socio-economic status, Willy succumbs to the pressures of his materialism by losing his sanity as he is unable to fulfill his aspirations. Not only does his greed cause an obsession with success, but it leads to a resentment of those with money, including his friend

Charley. Truly egocentric and insensitive, Willy goes far beyond the exclusion of everyone but himself and his family as described by Nilsen; Willy ignores his responsibility to his family in favor of personal gratification by having an affair and controlling the life of his son Biff.

In addition to his obsession with material goods, Willy also seeks gratification in taking possession of other people. Willy's avarice and endless search for power prompts him to commit adultery in spite of his happiness with Linda, confirming Miller's arguments against solipsism. Willy's lover admits that he is self-centered: "You are the saddest, self-centeredest soul I ever did see-saw" (*Death of a Salesman* 2181). The lover's comment reveals that everyone is aware of the possessive and selfish attitude that Willy carries. The discovery of this affair leads to the dissolution of the relationship between Biff and Willy because of Willy's lack of concern for his family. As Nilsen relates, Willy's egomaniacal personality later becomes concentrated on Biff despite the revelation of this affair: "[Willy] has transferred his hope of success to his son Biff...blind to its destructiveness and is obsessed by his plans for Biff" (153). As Willy realizes his life will never reach its full potential, he then becomes fixated on living through Biff. As Nilsen argues, however, Willy is "blind" to the fact that Biff has no desire to follow in his father's footsteps and is incapable of "perceiving Biff as a person and an individual" (153-154). Because of his inability to see others as individuals, Willy also displays an air of arrogance when faced with adversity.

To compound his faults of materialism and egocentrism, Willy Loman maintains an attitude of superiority and pride that penetrates both his professional and personal life even after the collapse of his career and relationship with Biff. Confident in his ability as a salesman, Willy holds the notion that a man need only be liked or have opportunities, expressing this belief as he argues "It's contacts...a man can end with diamonds...on the basis of being liked" (*Death*

*of a Salesman* 2166). In spite of business being bleak, Willy continues to deny any problem, claiming: “Be liked and you will never want...I never have to wait in line to see a buyer,” although he receives regular payments from his friend Charley (*Death of a Salesman* 2140). Upon losing his job, Willy again approaches Charley to ask for monetary assistance, but his conceit and pomposity is expressed when he refuses a job offer by stating: “I don’t want your [expletive] job” (*Death of a Salesman* 2171). Too proud to accept long-term assistance from a friend, Willy is content to continue receiving regular payments. Willy’s conceited attitude stems from his rejection of the fact that he and his son are a “dime a dozen”, as Biff relates (*Death of a Salesman* 2189). While Willy may represent the typical greedy businessman in many respects, there is a lack of genuine individuality in his demeanor, posing interesting questions as to the true motives of Arthur Miller in writing *Death of a Salesman*.

A cornerstone of capitalist ideology, individuality is critical in the journey for success. Among the traits criticized by Miller in *Death of a Salesman*, self-identity in Willy Loman is a major source of debate among liberal and conservative critics. Nilsen and Mike Sell, author of “Miller and the Drama of American Liberalism,” argue that Willy is very much a victim of America’s focus on self-preservation because of his failure as a man and salesman. When analyzing the motives behind Willy’s affair in Boston, liberals argue that individuality is a vice that leads to his immoral and corrupted behavior. Through his affair, Sell argues, Willy epitomizes the “depredations of individualism” (31). Sell proceeds to denounce the capitalist claim that a unique identity is necessary for success, “*Death of a Salesman* is...a subversion of the potent myth of American individualism” (30). Because of the inherent lack of moral character in free market society, liberals argue, Willy represents the “failure to sell well and achieve the mythic stature of the successful entrepreneurial capitalist” (Sell 31). Like Sell,

Nilsen agrees that “Rugged individualism is the ideology of the *laissez-faire* capitalism that he [Willy] believes in so deeply” (154). As a result of his blind acceptance of this capitalist teaching, Willy is destroyed by the values he worships. While there may be some evidence of Willy’s corruption through individuality, other critics fail to recognize this connection.

While Nilsen’s and Sell’s arguments seem plausible, other critics argue that Willy displays no sense of individuality based on his misguided vision of the American success ideal. Sighe Kennedy, author of “Who Killed the Salesman?,” and Ruby Cohn, author of “The Articulate Victims of Arthur Miller” claim that Willy’s failure as a salesman is due to his inability to distance himself from the corruption and focus on material success in America. Cohn claims that Willy fails to succeed in the free market environment because “The [American] dream is vague in detail...Willy feels that success will come in some undefined way” (41). In his failure to generate a genuine identity, Cohn continues, Willy remains fixated on the goal of achieving success, but is hindered in that “[His] words suggest his immaturity...his perception is limited” (44). Kennedy also refutes the portrayal of Willy as an individual, claiming Willy’s failure results from his blind acceptance of corrupted ideals: “Willy represents any man whose illusions have made him incapable of dealing realistically with everyday life” (35). Because Willy is unable to view the world in a rational way, he becomes trapped in the corruption present in current American capitalist society and is unable to attain success. Although Kennedy acknowledges Miller’s use of symbolism in the character of Willy as a way to communicate his fear of corruption in free market America, she disagrees that Miller is politically biased. Through his portrayal of Charley, Kennedy explains, “Miller is almost painfully scrupulous in showing that Willy’s tragedy must not be set at the door of his particular type of work” (35).

In addition to schisms in the interpretations of Willy, Charley's nature conflicts with the traditional view of a capitalist according to Marxists, posing interesting questions as to the motives of Arthur Miller in writing *Death of a Salesman*. Dennis Welland, author of "Death of a Salesman" and Lois Gordon, author of "Death of a Salesman: *An Appreciation*", acknowledge Charley's generosity towards Willy, but view him as insensitive and corrupted. Gordon and Welland view Charley as insensitive and impersonal through his comment "My salvation is that I never took any interest in anything" (*Death of a Salesman* 2171). This comment may be interpreted to mean that Charley had no interest in his son, and ultimately, Willy. When analyzing this freestanding statement, it provides evidence that capitalists must remain impersonal in order to remain successful. As Welland claims, Charley befriended Willy many years prior, but "understands him in a wholly unsentimental way...subordinat[ing] sentiment to business efficiency" (21). Therefore, because he takes no interest in anything, Charley represents a typical businessman whose sole concern is profit. Although he assists Willy, Charley prospers only through a purge of emotional involvement with others, a quality Marxists view as necessary in order to maximize efficiency in a free market. Gordon supports this claim by stating, "Charley, who, ironically, by a kind of indifference and lack of dream, has succeeded within the American system" (101). While there may be some evidence to justify that Charley exhibited some traits of insensitivity in his statement, there is much debate among critics when considering Charley's interactions with Willy and Bernard.

Although convincing, Charley's comment regarding his lack of interest was taken grossly out of context in order to manufacture an unwavering interpretation of Miller's play. Charley offered this advice to Willy in light of Biff's failures. By never taking an interest in anything, Charley was insinuating that he refused to manipulate or force Bernard to succeed, advocating

instead for the creation of one's destiny through individual effort. As Cohn relates, "Charley's son Bernard is successful by hard work", whereas Biff "remained a slave to his father's phoney dream" (42). Realizing that Willy was forcing Biff to live in Willy's shadow, Charley was merely implying that genuine individuality is necessary for success. Indeed, throughout the play, Charley is wholly devoted to Willy's well-being, offering advice and financial support to a man deeply troubled by his failures. As Kennedy relates, Charley never abandons Willy in spite of the inevitability of Willy's suicide, instead he "Constantly tries to help him out of his self-pity, to calm the frustrated rages" (35). By supporting financially, Charley allows Willy to maintain a respectable appearance among his family members, something Willy values dearly. Kennedy applauds Charley's efforts, but recognizes that his assistance merely prolongs the inevitable: "In spite of all Charley's efforts, Willy's mind keeps slipping...getting more and more confused" (38). Obviously, Charley's wholehearted devotion to Willy fails to align with Gordon's and Welland's interpretation of him as insensitive and corrupt. Whereas Miller's portrayal of Charley highlights positive aspects of free market America in print, Laslo Benedek's film version of *Death of a Salesman* vividly captures his kind and generous nature in a way that offers hope for capitalism.

Benedek's 1951 film version offers valuable insight into the character of Charley and his demeanor. As Bosley Crowther states in his 1951 film review "THE SCREEN: FOUR NEW MOVIES OPEN", Howard Smith, the actor portraying Charley, "[Does] finely." Throughout the film, Smith accurately conveys his devotion to Willy, revealing many aspects of a businessman that many liberal critics fail to recognize in the play. Had Charley been portrayed as a selfish, insensitive man who failed to support Willy, he would then confirm Gordon's and Welland's arguments; instead, he is depicted as a generous, caring man who regularly offers assistance to



Willy in his times of need. Not only does Charley support Willy financially through regular payments and a job offer, but he supports Willy emotionally as well by remaining a loyal friend. As Crowther relates, Benedek's version accurately captures the emotions associated with a dramatic and deeply moving story line: "Indeed, one perceptible advantage...is the broader frame of reference." In Smith's portrayal, his body language accentuates Charley's depression as he realizes Willy is rapidly deteriorating. Indeed, Smith seems deeply troubled by Willy's condition, prompting him to visit regularly and attempt to lift his spirits. Although Smith has a deep, rough voice, he fails to express annoyance or disgust in the face of Willy's condition; instead, his long, solemn face conveys the emotions of a sensitive man. Benedek's film, I feel, supports the argument that Miller utilized the character of Charley as a means of depicting his version of an atypical businessman who remained untouched by the corruption prevalent in America.

I believe that while Miller used *Death of a Salesman* to promote his Marxist views in a way that would appeal to critics of capitalism, his messages were meant not to condemn capitalism outright; instead, the character of Willy Loman was used to convince American capitalist society in general to evaluate itself and its attitude towards others. Miller's incorporation of materialism, egocentrism, and arrogance in the character of Willy allows readers to understand the historical and personal basis of his criticisms of capitalism, but I feel many critics fail to capture the intentions of Miller completely. While the messages of anti-capitalism may shine through for some, I feel the portrayal of Charley as a generous man in print and film, ever loyal to Willy, was Miller's way of offering hope for free market America by revealing the positive aspects of a businessman who had not allowed greed to influence his personality. Therefore, through the contrasting personalities of Charley and Willy, I feel that Miller was

calling for internal reforms within American capitalism in order to exterminate the corruption that he felt would be the downfall of not just one man, but the downfall of American society as a whole.

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