

## *Short Research Article*

# Interpretation of Tragedy in Death of a Salesman from the Social Perspective

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### **Abstract**

*Death of a Salesman is the representative work of Arthur Miller, a famous modern American dramatist, which creates the character Willy Loman who arouses the strong aesthetic emotion of tragedy. From the perspective of individual, family and society, Willy's death reflects the tragic connotation of lost individual self-value, distorted role of family pillar and shattered dreams at the bottom of society in American society.*

### **Keywords**

*Tragedy, American Dream, Death of a Salesman*

## **1. Introduction**

Arthur Miller is one of the most famous American playwrights of the last century. He has been writing since college, and has published plays such as *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Test*, and *Broken Glass*. *Death of a Salesman* makes Miller a sensation across the playwrights in U.S. *Death of a Salesman* revolves around the last 24 hours of the 63-year-old traveling salesman Willy Loman, who devoted his life to promote the sales of their goods, in order to succeed but eventually committed suicide. Willie's suicide is the distorted understanding of the "American dream" pursued by everyone. From a broader sense, the play looks at the values of the national problems, analyze the cost of people blindly believing in "American dream". This paper aims to explore the real cause of death of Willy Loman, that is, his tragedy is the tragedy of itself and the social interaction, and to provide with characteristic interpretation of personal tragedy of postwar American.

## **2. The American Dream Complex**

Every nation's literature has its own complex, for the American literature, this complex is the "American dream". The enduring theme of American literature in the 20th century is the persistent pursuit of the

heavy sense of loss and haunting American dream. So what is the American dream? Everyone has equal opportunity, and hard work can gain wealth and recognition from others, thus gaining freedom. Its basic values include individual liberty, self-reliance, equality of opportunity and competition, material wealth and diligence. As stated in the Declaration of Independence, the American Dream is translated into these solemn and sacred words: "All men are created equal, and that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are innate human rights". The average American thinks that if he works hard, he will succeed and be happy.

### **3. The Personal Tragedy of Willy Loman**

In this drama, the protagonist Willy Loman's "American Dream" is very different from the traditional American dream. Willy believes that a person with good looks and popularity can be liked and become successful. His older brother, Ben, was the embodiment of this illusory, idealistic American dream. Ben enters the jungle at the age of 17 and achieves material success through ruthless competition by every possible means. Willy always looked up to his brother and held him up as a shining example to himself and his children. Whenever he felt at a loss, he would console himself with his brother's words. He did not see his brother's opportunistic American success, nor did he recognize the sorrow of David Singman working at the age of 84. Based on the lack of a clear picture of the American Dream, rather than hard work of the traditional American dream, Willy constructed what he called the "American Dream".

Not only did he revel in this shallow, mistaken American dream, but he outdid his two sons, for whom the solution he thought was to "give him the answer" when he did not work hard at mathematics; His very superficial obsession with charm and popularity is at odds with a stronger, more pragmatic understanding of the American dream. In contrast, neighbors Charlie and his son Bernard, both ridiculed by Willie as less popular but with a down-to-earth attitude toward work and study, were in sharp contrast to Willie and his son. At the beginning of the play, it is sensed that Willy is suffering from a severe form of self-deception, always getting stuck in his idyllic past to escape the present. He was thrilled by the hopeless "Florida plan" proposed by his two sons to console him. He built his image of success in his sons' eyes by bragging on himself. He finally couldn't accept the sad reality of his two sons' failure and tried to use his death insurance money to revive them.

### **4. Willy Loman's Social Tragedy**

"American Dream" is the ideal of Willy's life, but he is facing the American society of 1940s, which is not possible to make his little salesman realize the dream of "getting ahead". After the civil war, because of the abolition of the backward of southern plantation economy and system, combined with the industrial revolution, the United States rose from agricultural country to become the world's industrial powers, in the social and historical conditions, everyone can make a fortune. Thanks to the two world wars, the post-war American economy developed rapidly and materialism prevailed, people were immersed in the concept of materialism and regarded material success as the only criterion for people's

success, thus blinding the moral concept of the “American dream” originally expressed by the founder of the country. “Living in a society with a high emphasis on materialism, achieving self-worth and success through hard work has become a history, and the common dream of people is to have a lot of money and become a successful person” (Zhu, 2005, p. 26). It can be said that Willy’s tragedy is not a personal tragedy, but a social tragedy.

In such a capitalist society where money is paramount, productivity is more or less a reflection of a person’s value, goods and money are above everything else, and those who can no longer bring capital appreciation are bound to be abandoned. Ben had ventured to Alaska in his early years, but he had chosen the path of success that old salesman Singman had followed. A salesman is a man who lives and sells himself -- a man who lives and dreams by the fleeting power of his image, by the “smiling face and polished shoes” (Miller, 2005, p. 1082). But one day, “If people don’t smile back, the world will fall down” (p. 1082). Willy was too old to make money on long journeys, and he had no value as a salesman or as the main breadwinner of the family, so he was abandoned. Willy exaggerate their career, to the survival of life on the great promotion of beautiful fantasy, didn’t realize the wrong understanding of the self value ourselves. If we say that Willy Loman’s understanding of the American dream is ridiculous, so is the capital society he finds himself in. He is like hundreds of millions of ordinary people to sell the myth of the American dream.

## 5. Conclusion

Willy Lowman, obsessed by the American dream, finally leads to his demise. As a loser, his failure is more of the social reason, however, when the play has been played 742 times, it struck a chord with the audience widely, touched the hearts of the audience. Willie’s survival crisis is, in fact, is the crisis of capitalist society as a whole. It is through this figure that the author accuses the material myth promoted by the American society at that time. Guided by the myth of materialism, the commodity a man can sell is himself. As Willy once said to Charlie: “Miles of roads, trains, trades, years, you’re worth more dead than alive” (Miller, 2005, p. 1087). Willy’s suicide is a tragedy of both his own and society.

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