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UNVEILING OF WILLY LOMAN'S MIND THROUGH EXPRESSIONISTIC TECHNIQUES: A STUDY OF ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

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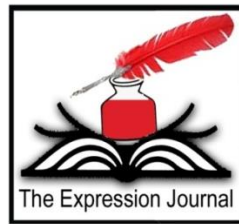
Abstract

Arthur Asher Miller was an acclaimed American playwright, screenwriter and essayist. He was born in 1915 in New York City, U.S. He is well-known for his famous plays such as All my sons, Death of a Salesman, The crucible and A view from the bridge. He has received 1949 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, 1984 Kennedy Center Honors, 2003 Jerusalem Prize, etc. He, in his plays, has focused on the life of common man and his disappointments because of misplaced notions of happiness and success. In *Death of a Salesman*, it is effectively portrayed through Willy Loman, the protagonist. His pursuit for happiness and success mantra is in materialism and American dream. Consequently, his life becomes hollow because of misplaced notions of happiness. A sense of guilt crops up because of a gap between dream and reality. Unable to cope up with his failure and a sense of guilt because of that costs him his life. Miller makes use of expressionistic techniques, popular medium in Drama during his times, to bring out the plight of a common man through the character of Willy Loman.

Keywords

Expressionism; Techniques; Materialism; American Dream; Disappointment; Guilt Agrarian.

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Expressionism is an important stylistic technique in modern American Drama. It is a descriptive term which covers many disparate cultural manifestations. Expressionism is a form a form which manifestly seeks to dramatize the conflict of either social, religious or moral forces.

Elmer Rice explains expressionism as an attempt to go beyond mere representation and to arrive at interpretation. The author does no attempt so much to depict events faithfully as to convey to the spectator what seems to be their inner significance. To achieve this end, the dramatist often finds it expedient to depart entirely from objective reality and to employ symbols condensations and other devices which, to the conservative must seem arbitrarily fantastic. The expressionist dramatist does not maintain any pretense of showing life as we ordinarily see it. He concentrates directly upon what goes on in the mind of the protagonist without any concern for naturalistic portrayal of his suffering. The characters themselves become mental images explaining a mental process.

In American theatre the influence of realistic trend was desire for experimentalism in the early plays of early decades of the twentieth century. The main emphasis was shifted to the exposure of the inner tension of characters from that of the explanation of the outer surroundings in detail. Certain subtle devices were introduced in order to bring out the inner dilemmas of characters and at the same time to modify the stark realism as in the plays of Eugene O'Neil and Arthur Miller. It is not wrong to say that American drama in modern times began with expressionism and progressed with expressionistic devices employed by various dramatists and even after the second world war in the so called theatre of the absurd, the desire to use complicated devices for presenting the depths of the human consciousness on the stage has continued to attract attention.

The rise of the expressionistic drama owes its origin to the plays of dramatists like Anton Chekhov who were interested in bringing out the mental states of their characters through the use of visual and auditory devices. Expressionism with its various devices such as symbols, phrases and references to myths, does what soliloquies in Elizabethan drama and chorus in Greek drama had done to serve the purpose of bringing out many hidden aspects of characters as well as relevant social values. The aim of an expressionistic playwright has been to win the attention of

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the audience and hold it for the entire span of the play by revealing mental states of characters. They believe that no play could be effective on the stage without a subtle plot and novel devices which make the audience think about the possibilities of experience. The emphasis has been shifted to the disturbances taking place within the human consciousness of characters to analyze and bring out the nature and force of the tensions from which characters suffer.

The hallmarks of the expressionistic technique are its employment of symbolic characters its presentation of dream states in which hidden forces of every variety become plainly visible. It also employs psycho-analysis, concurrent treatment of time and sexual motif to explore the hidden truths of existence. The use of these devices is called literary expressionism which is influenced by Dostoevsky, Freud and Bergson. This article is an attempt to unveil the mind of Willy Loman with the help of different devices of the expressionistic technique.

Willy Loman is the protagonist of the play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by Arthur Miller. The story of Willy Loman is that of a man caught in the grip of common place values and pressures of his society. It is the capitalist system of the contemporary society that has done Willy in. Miller has adopted the value structure of American society as the background of the action of the play.

Arthur Miller had grown during the tumultuous depression years and his experiences of an economic struggle and consequently a strong awareness of the social and economic problems. In Miller's dramatic world, man engages in a quest for meaning and relevance in an imperfect world and even though he meets a tragic end, he gains a knowledge that makes the act of his living worthwhile. Usually what he learns is the expounding depth of his own and other's imperfection and the futility of living in a make-believe world of innocence, love and truth. Miller, through literary expressionism, probes not only the hidden truths of the individual but also the basic reality of the civilization and culture of which the individual is a part. His illustration of the truth of the individual psyche and also the society and the world around the individual in *The Death of a Salesman* is remarkable and also intentioned.

In *Death of a Salesman* Miller enhances psychological factors of Loman's character so that the surfacing guilt is more complex, deviating from the conventions of realistic theatre. Miller chooses to dramatize the goings on in the consciousness of the protagonist. The dilemmas of the protagonist are underlined by inclusive use of symbols, dreams and realistic techniques. Willy Loman has two sources of his failure which burden him with the feeling of guilt. The first is the failure of his "Success dream". Over a long life of illusions, Willy makes false moves one after the other in pursuit of early success. His dreams are the dreams of the entire world, the dreams of a happy hopeful past and the inescapable dream of past guilt. This is indicated by his stories of bigness as also by his smiling acceptance of all the little vices like thieving and lying which ruin the careers of his two sons — Biff and Happy. Willy's illusion of success consists of a simple formula— "talk big, have an aggressive personality and the whole continent will be at your doorstep," "Au they know my boys, they know me up and down New England, the finest people and when I bring you fellows up, there'll be open sesame for all of us, 'cause one thing, boys: I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England and the cops protect it like their own" (Miller, p.24)

Willy's wife knows that his pose of bigness is a fraud. In reality, he is a superfluous, like an orange peel, in a highly competitive society. His life is full of fakeness yet he keeps up the pose till the end. Willy's models for this dream are Dave Singleton, a perfect ex-salesman; Charlie, a friendly neighbour and Uncle Ben, who had become rich all of a sudden, "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.32).

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Even his boss, Howard, whom the single-minded pursuit of success has turned into a monster, is Willy's ideal. But Willy's grand self-illusions and big talk do not stop his gradual realization that he is a flop, a big zero," I know it when I walk in. They seem to laugh at me... I don't know the reason for it, but they just pass me by. I'm not noticed." (p.28) Willy feels guilty because of his feeling that he has failed his children. He has encouraged the notion in Biff's mind that he is number one. In all, American hero who can lick the world with his one finger. Willy's burden and responsibility in his sons' failure becomes almost unbearable when he is caught with Miss Francis, a woman with whom he becomes intimate in an hotel in Boston. He remains constantly haunted by the hollowness of all he had placed his faith in. He is intensely conscious that the life which he has built for himself without form and inner meaning when Biff discovers Willy in the hotel room with that woman and sees the stockings, he had presented her. He calls him a liar and a fake. Such details do not form a part of any narrative realism but these are dramatized through the half conscious fantasies of an agonized mind unsure of the issues of his existence. Then whenever Willy sees Linda mending old stockings, he would tell her not to do this at least in his presence.

The society is also, to a large extent, responsible for Willy's fall which is due the hostile and manipulative economic system in which he lives. His falls dream of success and bigness are the products popularized and encouraged by the same economic system. It reveals the harshness of the social and economic system. Once again, the external pressures are seen only in so far as they impinge upon Loman's sensibility. Willie's interview with his employer brings out his protest that he is not to be treated as an orange peel which is thrown after the orange is eaten. To forget the harsh reality of his failure in the commercial world Willie seeks escape in the 'rural agrarian dream' which brings forth his romantic escapist notions of a life of communion with nature. There is a factor of 'pastoral' which forms recurring contrast in Willy's mind with the immediate environment of big identity and capitalism. This contrast is sharpened by the devices of an expressionistic set, showing Willy's house dwarfed in by high-rise buildings and the playing of the pastoral music. Willy remarks, "The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks" (13).

It symbolizes an unattainable peace that once belonged to a better life in Edenic America. Willy laments its loss when he says, "The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the backyard." (12) This lament continues into a reminiscence of two beautiful elm trees with swings and hammock on them. The strange melody that accompanied Willy's dream is one of 'grass, trees and horizon'. His dreams are full of talk about lilacs, wisteria and daffodils. At this moment Willy seems unable to distinguish between the past and present. This state of his mind is beautifully projected through the symbols of grass and trees along-with melody. He loses himself in his recollection, interrupting a conversation with his neighbour Charley to address the absent Ben; and he loses all sense of the present in a restaurant toilet when he recalls his past exposure by his son. The melody of the flute is the music of Willy's father. It is the music of his father's life and the music of Willy's dream. The entire stage setting is transparent with objective and subjective experience occupying the same apace as if they were intermingled inextricably in a man's life. The barriers of time and space disappear. In such surrealistic sequences Miller's use of expressionistic technique is the most effective in rendering difficult states of Willy's mind.

Images-car; road; refrigeration; bags; a woman's laughter — through their rhythmic re-appearance in the past and present, in different contexts, grow into symbols of his entire life. The tape-recorder episode in the office of Howard also reveals the inability of Willy to

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switch off his past through its expressionistic implications. The tape recorder is an obvious symbol of the merchandise life which proves the doom of Willy and suggests his mental breakdown. It suggests by contrast the unhappiness experienced by him in the content of his filial relationship. Willy stumbles and accidentally switches on the tape-recorder. This objectifies his predicament because he cannot switch off his past. This submerging of past into present to complete the picture of guilt-ridden consciousness is largely done through expressionistic images. Willy makes an abrupt statement, "woods are burning...." The statement objectifies the mood, exhaustion and predicament of Willy. The burning of woods has reference to the unnatural environment in the city of New York vis-à-vis Willy's craving for respite in natural surroundings. It also evokes a reference to Ben motif. Ben went into the jungle at the age of seventeen and come out rich at the age of twenty- one. This statement carries complexity of meaning in the context of the play. This pastoral dream also highlights the contradiction in Willy's character in as much as he holds this view of pastoral life as a source of great comfort to himself while regarding the same idea in Biff's desire of a farm life in Texas as a symbol of his failure.

Willy's rural agrarian dream is a sort of safety valve to withdraw from the harsh realities of failure in the pursuit of the success dream and the burden of guilt of spoiling his own as well as his sons' life. This dream is something to fall back upon in moments of great self-commiseration, which is indicated by the melody of grass, trees and horizon and by Willy's vision of a hammock between two elm trees. The play opens with the stage direction of a musical effect, "A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass, and trees and horizon" (7). It reminds us of Willy's father who was a flute maker and had a pioneering spirit. Willy also dreams to be a pioneer, but there is none of the pioneer in him. His struggle to pursue both the dreams at the same time and his failure in one lead to the failure of the other.

The last scene reveals the traumatic state of Willy's mind when he goes out into the garden with flashlight, hoe and seeds and begins to plant a garden at night. He has gained his moment of truth. After having acknowledged his failure, he decides on death through which he hopes to achieve his wife's economic security by his insurance policy, sons' affection and his own self-respect. His death is his redemption and expulsion from the perverted garden. The beginning of the garden at this crucial moment, besides being the last act of defiance against the stifling encroachment of urbanization and industry, is symbolic of Willy's advance into an area of peace and innocence which had always been suggested to him by the garden images. If the garden is symbol of Willy's peace and good life then by implication it is the machine-the source of all industry and a competitive economic system- which symbolises the evil that destroys the garden.

Once again, the significance of music is marked at the close of the life of Willy. There is a sound of a car starting and moving away at full speed. Simultaneously, there is a crushing music, "As the car speeds off, the music crashes down in a frenzy of sound, which becomes the soft pulsation of a single cello string" (108). Willy's ambition and way of life linger unfulfilled in the music sounded at the end of the play, "Only the music of the flute is left...over the house of hard towers of the apartment buildings rise into sharp focus." (112). There is an expressionistic significance even in the names of characters in the play. The name Willy Loman conveys the sense of a low man through its sound effects. The name Dave Singleman conveys sense that he is a man who can easily be 'singled out' as the salesman he objectifies Willy's ambition of becoming a great salesman. Biff means 'a smart blow' and it is he who gives Willy a smart blow at Boston and also when he tells Willy that he is nothing just as Biff is nothing.

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Thus, the play tells the predicament of Willy Loman's mind through expressionistic techniques by making successful use of its various devices. How Willy, a man caught in the illusions of success dream and talks of bigness finds himself lost. And then because of the traumatic experiences and the guilt feeling for spoiling the life of his sons ultimately drives himself to his sad end.

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