

The Theme of Materialism Portrayed in Death of a Salesman

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Abstract

Death of a Salesman is one of the greatest American plays written by Arthur Miller. This play depicts materialistic American society of the late 1940. Willy Lowman attempts to hide his failures behind delusions of grandeur. This play deals with Willy's inability to meet the expectations of the American dream. Death of a Salesman, the most famous work of Arthur Miller addresses the painful conflicts within one family. This play also tackles larger issues regarding American national values and examines the cost of blind faith in the American Dream. In this respect, it offers a postwar American reading of personal tragedy. Miller charges America with selling a false myth constructed around capitalism & materialism nurtured by the postwar economy, the materialism that obscured the personal and moral vision of the original American dream. This play portrays fundamental American values and the American dream of material success. After World War II, the United States faced profound and irreconcilable domestic tensions and contradictions. Although the war engendered an unprecedented sense of American confidence, prosperity and security, the United States became increasingly embroiled in a tense cold War with the Soviet Union. The propagation of myths of a peaceful, homogenous and gleeful American Golden age was tempered by constant anxiety about Communism, bitter racial conflict and largely ignored economic and social stratification. Uneasy with this American milieu of denial and discord, a new generation of artists and writers influenced by existentialist philosophy and the hypocritical postwar condition took up arms in a battle for self-realization and expression of personal meaning. Such discontented individuals railed against capitalist success as the basis of social approval, disturbed that so many American families centered their lives on material possessions.

Key Words: Illusion, Reality, Materialism, Dream, Conflicts, Obsession

Introduction:

The title refers not only to the death of the main character, Willy Loman but also to the death of his career and his hopes for better life for himself and his family. Death of a Salesman was published in 1949. In that year, America was enjoying an economic boom that initiated a significant trend. This play depicts the absorption of small

businesses by large corporations that reduced the importance of the individual worker and increased the importance of the company as a whole. The Willy Lowman must cope with this trend. Willy Lowman, an aging salesman haunted by a feeling that his life has been a failure. He hallucinates about past events.

These hallucinations centre on his dreams for better tomorrow. He thinks about the future of his two sons Biff and Happy. Linda is loyal, devoted and subservient housewife. Willy Lowman, like so many other American men is in conflict with society, his family and himself. In his struggle to compete in materialistic America, he comes up short; Society beats him down. In his effort to communicate with his son Biff and mould him to succeed, he fails. Ultimately, Willy's inner and outer conflicts destroy him.

The play centres on the inability of Willy Lowman to fulfill his dream of a more prosperous and rewarding life for himself and his family. Willy's failure as a breadwinner and father are due to his own shortcomings. He is also a victim of the survival of the fittest business philosophy taking hold in America. Throughout his career Willy remains an average salesman. He thinks himself far above average. Consequently he expects more than he deserves. He always expects Biff to be a high achiever. Willy Lowman believes that the measure of a man is his ability to achieve material success. In this respect he lionizes his brother Ben who became wealthy by mining diamonds in Africa. Willy Lowman desires for public recognition, money and lifestyle. He is so obsessed with abnormal desire to win esteem and respect as a businessman that he loses his grip on sanity and reality. The specific cause of his debility may be rooted

in attempts at an early age to keep up with his high achieving brother, Ben and to adapt to an aggressive, fast-paced and materialistic society.

This play uses flashbacks to present Willy's memory during the reality. The illusion not only suggests the past but also presents the lost pastoral life. Willy dreams of success in his whole life and makes lies about his and Biff's success. The more he indulges in the illusion the harder it is for him to face the reality. Biff is the only one who realizes that the whole family lived in the lies and tries to face the truth.

Conclusion:

Death of a Salesman is widely considered to be one of the greatest plays of the 20th century. Arthur Miller uses Death of a Salesman to expose America's preoccupation with materialism after World War II. The preoccupation is the main cause of Willy's mental stress. Death of a Salesman is commentary upon American society and values. It presents the painful conflicts of a working class family who struggled to make decent living and fulfils the American dream. The play also illustrates its critical commentary on American society through Willy's obsession with the dream. Death of a Salesman is a tragic play in which the main character is brought to extreme sufferings due to his tragic flaw, moral weakness or inability to cope with lack of support.

References:

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