A Man is Not a Piece of Fruit

*Death of a Salesman* from a Marxist Perspective and the American Dream

En människa är inte en bit frukt
En handelsresandes död ur ett marxistiskt perspektiv och den "Amerikanska Drömmen"

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Date: 22 March 2013
Löpnummer
Abstract

The aim of this essay is to analyze Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman* from a Marxist perspective and the idea known as the American Dream. The play is a stinging critique of the increasingly materialistic and capitalist American society at the time. Willy Loman, the main protagonist of the play, is the embodiment of the middle class uneducated laborer who enthusiastically is trying to attain the American Dream, but is eventually left disillusioned and crushed. When Willy fails to bring in the profit as he once used to manage, he is disposed of by his employer as a commodity, worth no more than ”a piece of fruit” and finds himself discarded as a useless orange peel (64). Arthur Miller has in his play highlighted the effects of the American Dream on an average American man and his family and the author has in Willy Loman created a powerful symbol, a victim beaten, consumed and disposed of by the capitalistic dog-eat-dog system.
Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller deals with the social issues of his day, which is likely to be the reason why the play has been the cause for critical debate and celebrated by Marxist critics right from the very beginning (Emami 353). The play was first performed in 1949 on Broadway and, aside from arousing the interest of Marxist critics, also won the hearts of the American public as well as a string of major awards (Abbotson 11). While the plot might appear to be that of a simple tragedy telling the story of a disillusioned salesman and his family, Miller has skilfully created a multi-layered piece of heartfelt theatre that deals with questions that are universal to mankind: the meaning of happiness, success and failure, parenting and aging. Travelling salesman Willy Loman, the main protagonist of the play, is the embodiment of the middle class uneducated laborer who at first is enthusiastically trying to attain the American Dream, but eventually is left disillusioned and crushed. Categorized as what Karl Marx terms alienated labor, which I will return to below, Willy lives a hollow life, devoid of a real sense of self-worth and satisfaction. Finally, when Willy fails to bring in the profit as he once used to manage, he is disposed of by his employer as a commodity, worth no more than a “piece of fruit” that is consumed and discarded as a useless orange peel (Miller 64). In this essay I will argue that the play highlights the effects of the capitalist American Dream on an average American man and his family.

As the concept of the American Dream plays an integral part in the following analysis, it might be helpful to give some background on this concept. The abstract idea of the American Dream originates in the seventeenth century, when people from all over the World arrived to what was later to become the United States of America. Historian James Truslow Adams provides an image of the hopes and aspirations held by the original pioneers and adventurers, be it material gain, a plot of land or religious freedom (30), made possible in this new and largely unexplored continent. But it was not until 1931 that the term "American Dream" was coined by Adams himself in The Epic of America. He describes it as follows:

The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. ... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (214-15)

However, during the second half of the nineteenth century the American Dream began to carry a slightly different meaning, as Alastair and Bergström point out: while the nineteenth-century version of the concept consisted of a family or a single pioneer who ventured out into
America's unexplored territory hoping to make a living from the land itself, the dream was altered during the economic boom after the civil war, when a number of powerful magnates emerged in the finance world and the Dream increasingly began to incorporate ideas of extravagant wealth (340). Hence, with the industrial revolution the American Dream lived on with a new twist. The United States of America experienced an economic shift from agriculture to urban industry, and then from manufacturing into service and sales. It became possible for some individuals to make money, and some managed to make a fortune. Alastair and Bergström explain how this led to a hope that the big money was within reach for anyone, and the possibility of getting rich quick and moving from rags to riches seemed to be possible even for the lowly worker with nothing in his hand but enthusiasm, a will to work and a belief in the American Dream (341).

The myth of getting rich quick, almost miraculously, is reflected in Arthur Miller's play in which Willy's brother Ben brags to the Lomans: "Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one, I walked out. He laughs. And by God I was rich" (37). There is no account of what Ben was actually doing in the jungle, except that he was dealing with diamonds. This was of course not an effortless endeavor; however, by implying that he acquired wealth in such an effortless manner, Willy is mocked for his fruitless labor of being a lowly salesman, a beaten man beating the pavement day after day without the reward of dollars in the pocket. Ben was in fact a cruel and immoral man, who proclaimed: "never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way" (38). Wealth like Ben's was therefore achieved if one wanted it badly enough. Wanting something badly enough, coupled with hard work, determination and initiative, is according to the Oxford English Dictionary's earliest definitions of the American Dream, all a part of the magic formula for success: "the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination and initiative" (oed.com).

From a Marxist perspective, though, the American Dream has, according to Lois Tyson, become an ideology or a belief system. As an example, Tyson points to the fact that "every family wants to own their own home on their own land" (56). She sees this as an example of internalized capitalist ideology since most Americans seemingly self-evidently want to own their own properties without acknowledging that this desire might be created by our capitalist culture (56). In contrast, many Native Americans would consider it absurd to own a piece of land, which they compare to owning and selling the air that we breathe. Hence, from a Marxist view point, the middle class in the United States has been blind to the
reality around them by their belief in the American Dream. It has, according to Tyson, “programmed” them to believe that if someone works hard, they will most certainly achieve financial success which in turn will bring them happiness (55). Such was the case for Willy Loman, whose unwavering and almost gullible faith in the American Dream proved to be nothing but an empty promise and a wild goose chase.

However, reading a literary work such as Death of a Salesman from a Marxist perspective is not only a matter of examining whether it mentions the plight of the working class or not, or its exploitations by the bourgeoisie. According to literary critic and cultural theorist Terry Eagleton, the aim of Marxist criticism is to explain the work on a general level, paying close attention to its style, form and meaning as the product of a particular time in history (3). Marxist criticism involves grasping its expression in relation to the historical epoch in which it was created. Eagleton quotes Russian Marxist critic Georgy Plekhanov: “The social mentality of an age is conditioned by that age’s social relations. This is nowhere quite as evident as in the history of art and literature” (Eagleton 5). So then, according to Eagleton, literary works are not mysteriously inspired and should not be interpreted simply in terms of their authors’ psychology. Instead, they are forms of perception of particular ways of seeing the world reproducing the “social mentality” or ideology of an age (Eagleton 6). Even though this is a theory that differs from what most students of literature are taught, namely that the greatest art transcends its historical conditions, Eagleton emphasizes the historical aspect, and quotes the renowned painter Henri Matisse as having said that all art bears the imprint of its historical epoch, but that great art is that in which this imprint is most deeply marked (Eagleton 3). Historical analysis of literature was of course not initiated by Karl Marx; however, the uniqueness of Marxist criticism lies not in its historical approach to literature, but in its revolutionary understanding of history itself (3). Nevertheless, this understanding of historical contextualization can be taken into account in the study of literature. For a deeper understanding of the doctrines of Karl Marx, Eagleton refers to the following famous lines from A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure … It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. (11)
In other words, a man’s social being forms his consciousness or identity and men are not free to choose their social relations; they are constrained into them by material necessity (Eagleton 4, 6). While reading *Death of a Salesman*, it is therefore helpful to see the context in a historical light.

In looking at the historical background of Arthur Miller’s play, it clearly reflects certain aspects of American society in 1949 of which examples will be given later in this essay. As indicated above, Eagleton claims that every writer is individually placed in society, responding to the time in history from his own particular standpoint, making sense of it in his own concrete terms (7). Author Ian Sinclair gives some insight into the economic situation in the United States of America in 1949 and describes how, after a period of lean years brought on by the Great Depression and followed by the Second World War, the U.S. experienced a financial boom (6). Gearing up towards large industrial production during the war, these industrial benefits were directed towards the domestic market. There were suddenly plenty of products, from food items to electronic gadgets and even cars, available and within reach for the average American. Housing and apartment block construction business was also booming (Sinclair 6). Sinclair explains that, although some could afford to spend and buy goods, this buying of goods and spending in turn brought on inflation and the average American with an average wage could suddenly not afford to pay their bills (6).

Another shift in the economy, according to Sinclair, was the increased use of buying on credit, which in turn led to increased inflation. It became customary to buy houses, cars and household gadgets on credit, which was also the case in Willy Loman’s household, as they bought their refrigerator, washing machine and vacuum cleaner on credit (Miller 27). As we see, the scenario described above fits Willy Loman to a tee; the average American, trying to attain all that he feels entitled to because of the alluring promises of the American Dream. At the same time, it benefited the upper class that the enthusiastic middle class, the uneducated "Willy Lomans" were working hard to chase the quick buck and attain their dreams. Although Willy himself never attains his riches, his hard work helps those who are already well off to become even better off. With industrialization, Sinclair points out, big business flourished at the expense of the middle man and the average, lowly worker. Those who were the first to feel the pinch of financial change were the unskilled laborers such as clerks, waiters and salesmen like Willy Loman, a status that is underlined by his name: Willy the "low man." This was the moment in time when the upper middle class enjoyed the benefits of the boost, and the rich became richer and the poor became poorer (Sinclair 6).
In addition, it is necessary to keep the political climate of the time in mind and it is a privilege to have Arthur Miller’s own outline of the political message in *Death of a Salesman*, as he elaborated on the topic of current politics and drama in an interview with Colby H. Kullman in 1998:

Drama, any theater, is a manifestly, preeminently public art which exists in historical time. It prospers when the evolution of a society has reached a certain point. But we know politics is embedded in every work of significance. I don’t understand why people try to separate these two elements. It’s all one twine rope. You cannot separate them ... Hamlet is not just the son of a mother who is fooling around with a man who has murdered her husband. He’s the prince of Denmark, and when it is said, ‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,’ it’s to direct attention to the fact this country has to be governed. The politics of America is implicit in the whole of *Salesman*. The *Salesman* is close to being the universal occupation of contemporary society—not only in America, but everywhere. Everybody is selling and everything is for sale. (Kullman)

Therefore, according to Miller’s own words above: ”politics is embedded in every work of significance,” which might add relevance to an analysis such as this one.

At the time when Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman* the United States of America was in the first stages of the Cold War. A new political competitor, that held a diametrically opposing ideology, began to make headway: the Soviet Union. Sinclair points out that Americans felt the need to demonstrate loyalty to their political capitalist and materialistic convictions to prove their ideological and economic superiority by spending and buying like never before. Acquiring new fancy gadgets, such as cars, a new fridge, a vacuum cleaner and luxury items such as nylon stockings, was a step up on the social ladder and, in fact, even an act of patriotism. Personal and national pride had become fused together, and being rich and owning advanced technology was “proof that ‘the American Dream’ of freedom and opportunity was morally and materially superior to Communism’s dictum of ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’” (Sinclair 7). In comparison, it is interesting to observe how strikingly similar this famous quote by Marx is to Adam’s definition of the American Dream mentioned above: “the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (224-25).

Taking a look at the author’s life, it seems safe to say that Arthur Miller lived a controversial life, mainly because the links to Marxist ideas became an issue also in his own life. Miller was under scrutiny and a target for The House of Un-American Activities
Committee (HUAC) in the 1950s, accused of projecting threatening, pro-communist views (Bradford). As Miller was forced to appear before the HUAC, he was asked to disclose the names of other people who had appeared at pro-communist gatherings, which Miller refused. He also received a request by a congressman to produce a signed photograph of actress Marilyn Monroe, whom he married in 1956, and in so doing the hearing would be dropped. Miller refused, just as he refused to disclose any names. He stated: “I don’t believe a man has to become an informer to practice his profession freely in the United States” (Bradford).

Miller was determined, he did not give in to the demands of the HUAC and as a result he was charged with contempt of congress. The conviction was eventually overturned, however, and based on these experiences, Miller produced his next award winning play, The Crucible in 1953. The play draws a parallel between the U.S. anticommunist paranoia of the 1950s and the 1692 Salem witch trials, exposing both to be “maliciously motivated with ritualistic, public denunciations of innocent people” (Abbottson 12).

In the continued analysis of Death of a Salesman, it is clear that the main protagonist, Willy Loman, cannot be accused of having been an uncaring father to his two sons. On the contrary, Willy seems to enjoy spending time with his sons while they are still young, for example enjoying activities such as polishing the car together (Miller 21). However, the family eventually becomes dysfunctional largely due to Willy’s twisted sense of values. Being liked, or popular, and making it in the business world appears to be Willy’s main concerns. He teaches his sons that: “the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want” (25). In using productivity, financial gain end popularity as a yardstick for success, Willy and his family eventually miss out on the qualities of life that cannot be bought with money. Willy is the typical middle class, average worker, a door-to-door salesman, slaving away to raise the daily buck to pay the monthly bills, trapped in the rat race of trying to attain to the American Dream. Now in his sixties, Willy has still not reached any level of success whatsoever (Miller 64). Without being aware of it, he is just a pawn in the big game, and he is used as a tool for bringing in the profit to fill the pockets of those who are already well off. He is being consumed like a commodity, like a ”piece of fruit” (Miller 64) to be discarded as a useless orange peel as soon as his usefulness is gone.

Willy lives his life devoted to selling merchandise as a door to door salesman, and tries to teach his two sons, Biff and Happy, to pursue similar careers. The two sons are now in their thirties and on one occasion they are home for a visit. Willy criticizes his oldest son Biff, and later Willy’s wife Linda reproaches her husband:
You shouldn’t have criticized [Biff], Willy, especially after he just got off the train. You mustn’t lose your temper with him.

Willy: When the hell did I lose my temper with him? I simply asked if he was making any money. Is that criticism?

...

Linda: He was crestfallen, Willy. ...

Willy: How can he find himself on a farm? Is that a life? (11)

The conversation above indicates how Willy firstly measures his son by whether he makes any money or not, and secondly, is displeased with his son’s choice of work and insinuates that working on farm is not even "a life." Biff has different dreams than his father and enjoys manual labor, working with the horses out in nature on farms in the West, which Willy does not approve of. There is a contrast to be noticed, between, Biff on the one hand, wanting to work on the farms and, on the other hand, the hollowness and emptiness of Willy’s life. Willy has spent most of his life in his occupation as a salesman, but, significantly, not even once is it brought out what he actually is selling. Willy Loman has been so caught up in the soul-less procedure of selling, that he has lost the essence of his work. This is a phenomenon Karl Marx terms alienation. In *Marx’s Concept of Man*, Erich Fromm describes this concept as follows:

Alienation (or "estrangement") means, for Marx, that man does not experience himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that the world (nature, others, and he himself) remain alien to him. They stand above and against him as objects, even though they may be objects of his own creation. Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object. (44)

The action of selling has become the object, and he does not seem to have any relationship whatsoever towards the product itself. Erich Fromm compares this process to vitiation, or loss of value, to such a dramatic extent as to the point of starvation: "So much does the performance of work appear as vitiation that the worker is vitiated to the point of starvation. So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker is deprived of the most essential things not only of life but also of work" (95).

Willy is definitely a starving man, starved of satisfaction, joy, fulfillment and a sense of self-worth. Karl Marx describes the phenomenon in his *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1841*:

The fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does
not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. (30)

Willy Loman is the embodiment of a tormented man with a tormented mind, stripped of his worth and dignity, as he is wrapped up in his fruitless endeavor trying to sell his merchandise without being able to even bring enough income to cover the bills and immediate expenses in his middle class life. However, in spite of the fact that the riches and comfort that Willy has worked for and hoped for all his life are not in sight, he still has no understanding for his son Biff’s desire to be out in nature and work with the animals on the farm, doing something that he feels is part of his intrinsic nature, where he can freely develop his physical and mental energy (Marx 30). Willy is fighting the very thing that brings his son happiness and which could give him a fulfilled life, as he is trying to force his son into the same type of alienated labor that he himself is trapped in.

As a result, Biff is insecure with his choice of work since the capitalist logic, introduced to him by his father, has become deeply rooted in him as well. Biff confides in his younger brother Happy and says,

In Nebraska when I herded cattle, and the Dakotas, and Arizona, and now in Texas. It’s why I came home now, I guess, because I realized it. This farm I work on, it’s spring there now, see? And they’ve got about fifteen new colts. There’s nothing more inspiring or — beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt. And it’s cool there now, see? Texas is cool now, and it’s spring. And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my God, I’m not gettin’ anywhere! What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I’m thirty-four years old, I oughta be makin’ my future. That’s when I come running home. And now, I get here, and I don’t know what to do with myself. (Miller 16)

Biff is confused and he knows that his father is disappointed in him. Willy’s disappointment in what his son has amounted to also shows in how he remembers Biff’s days of glory as an American football player, and says, ”My God! Remember how they used to follow him round in high school? When he smiled at one of them their faces lit up. When he walked down the street” (11). Obviously, Biff is not financially successful enough, nor popular enough, to earn his father’s approval.

Willy’s constant disapproval and criticism of his son seriously damages their relationship, and no doubt, the same is true for Biff’s feeling of self-worth. Willy could have, as a good father, encouraged his son in his endeavors to become a farmer. But farming was, in Willy’s mind, not the thing to do at the time. Willy makes the ultimate mistake for a parent
in not accepting his son for what he is, and laments that his son is not in business, and not making enough money. The question: "how dare he have a dream of working with farming, and not pursuing business like his dad?" lies underneath Willy’s disapproval. Biff is confused and his self esteem is wounded. Biff even asks his brother Happy for advice and wonders why his dad is always mocking him. He says, “Everything I say there’s a twist of mockery on his face” (12).

Not only is Biff confused, but Willy seems confused himself as well. He accuses his son of being a lazy bum. When Linda defends Biff and says that, “he is just very lost”, Willy rhetorically questions how an attractive young man like Biff could get lost, in “the greatest country in the world”. The next moment he turns around and exclaims that Biff is such a hard worker and “definitely not lazy” (11). Willy is torn between, on the one hand, what he thinks his son should be like to fulfill the image of the successful young American man, and, on the other hand, a father’s simple appreciation and admiration for his son.

Biff has grown up to be something of a kleptomaniac as a manifestation of the materialistic values of the time, which have been reinforced by his father. It turns out that Biff, unbeknownst to his family, has spent several months in prison for having stolen a suit and has not been able to keep a single job that he had, because of stealing (104). Willy had the opportunity to influence his son’s values when Biff arrives home to tell his father that he has “borrowed” a football from the locker room at school, but Willy does not speak up (23). For some reason Willy thinks that Biff is so popular that the coach will not even mind that Biff stole the football. Willy says: “That’s because he likes you. If someone else took that ball there’d be an uproar” (23). Similarly, Willy encourages the boys to pick up some sand from the building site nearby, to rebuild their front stoop. The boys bring the sand, and even come home with some good pieces of wood. Willy brags: “You shoulda seen the lumber they brought home last week. At least a dozen six-by-tens worth all kinds of money” (35). Willy is thus responsible for Biff stealing, as he fails to teach his son the proper values and the difference between right and wrong.

Regardless of this, matters have become difficult in the Loman family. Willy’s wife Linda has a positive outlook, while Willy is often wearing his glasses with negative lenses. Linda comments how she enjoys having both their sons home for a visit and says, “it was so nice to see them shaving together, one behind the other, in the bathroom. And going out together. You notice? The whole house smells of shaving lotion” (10). Instead of seeing the positive, Willy answers: "Figure it out. You work a whole lifetime to pay off a house. You finally own it, and there is nobody to live in it” (10). It might be interesting to notice the
symbolism here. The house is not appreciated by Willy, and he complains that the house is empty. It is a house, an empty shell, not a home full of love. There is no love, or feeling of mutual appreciation within the walls of Willy Loman’s house. The empty shell that is his house is symbolic of Willy Loman as a person. He is an empty shell as well, hollow and devoid of appreciation and love, both for himself and for those who are supposed to be his loved ones. Just as there is no joy or laughter within the walls of the Loman’s house, there is no joy or laughter within Willy Loman. There is just anxiety and worry about finances and the future. As Willy is getting older, he sees that his dream, the dream that he has worked for most of his life, has less and less chance of coming true. Instead of appreciating the fact that he has a family; a lovely wife that cares for him, two healthy grown sons and a house of their own, Willy looks at the downside and even curses the fact that they have a house, but no one to live in it.

Linda is also aware that Willy is entertaining the thought of ending his life (40). Already in the opening act, when Willy returns home after his unsuccessful business trip, Linda asks him “You didn’t smash the car, did you?” (8). Linda is constantly worried about Willy as he has intentionally crashed the car before, but at those times he has come away unharmed. Linda has also found a piece of a rubber tube hidden behind the gas boiler in the basement, which Linda suspects that Willy is planning to use to commit suicide (41). They are not honest with each other. Linda is trying to protect Willy’s ego and self-image and plays along with him, trying to uphold his image of the successful and popular salesman that he once was.

It is evident though, that Willy is longing to be able to perform some action, or service, with his life, by which he would retrieve some kind of satisfaction, like the feeling of simply bearing fruit. However, Willy’s life is crumbling, he has just been fired (Miller 76) and then left behind all alone at the restaurant where he was supposed to celebrate a victory dinner with his sons for having been able to borrow two thousand dollars to start up a business (90). Instead of a celebration dinner, it turns out a disaster. Alone, drunk and forsaken at the restaurant by his two sons, Willy suddenly has an urge to buy seeds (96). ”I’ve got to get some seeds, right away. Nothing’s planted. I don’t have a thing in the ground” (96). Willy is getting older, his days are coming to an end, and he has nothing in the ground, nothing is planted. He has nothing to leave behind, no legacy, and no thriving business and no fortune. Not even his sons have attained much of anything, at least not in Willy’s eyes. He thus has an urge to plant seeds. Here is a foreshadowing of that which is going to come to pass, that Willy’s life is about to end.
Whether Willy is naturally suited for his profession as a salesman is debatable. Similar to the phenomenon that Karl Marx describes as alienated labor, Willy’s profession is an activity very much carried out apart from his real life, and not bringing him much satisfaction. Karl Marx explains in *Wage Labour and Capital* from 1847:

And this life activity [the worker] sells to another person in order to secure the necessary means of life. ... He works that he may keep alive. He does not count the labor itself as a part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his life. It is a commodity that he has auctioned off to another. (Chapter 2)

The work of selling his products seems very much as a labor apart from Willy’s life, and only a means of bringing in the dollars to be able to pay the bills. It seems as if Willy has other dreams than the selling of himself, his time and his company’s products. This becomes clear when there seems to be an opportunity for Biff to get the business loan of the aforementioned two thousand dollars. Willy immediately starts fantasizing about buying a house in the countryside. He would build a guesthouse for Biff and the younger son, Happy, for when they have families of their own and come for a visit. "And they’ll get married, and come for a weekend. I’d build a little guest house. ‘Cause I got so many fine tools, all I’d need would be a little lumber and some peace of mind" (56). This inclination shows a glimpse of Willy’s true nature of in fact wanting to be out in the countryside and do manual labor. It seems to be an indication that the competitive ultra-capitalist world of business and salesmanship is just as ill suited for Willy as it is for his son Biff, whom Willy criticizes (11).

As already mentioned in the section about the background to the American Dream, the idea of Willy’s brother, Ben, having made a fortune in such a seemingly miraculously easy way is a continually tantalizing thought in Willy’s mind and makes the foundations of his sanity crumble even more. Ben’s story actually contributes to Willy’s decision to end his life: “The voice of Ben speaks out more and more clearly: ‘Twenty thousand – that is something one can feel with the hand, it is there...It does take a great kind of man to crack the jungle...One must go in to fetch a diamond out.’ Ben’s words and example – grown to an obsession – directly lure Willy to his death” (Kennedy 38). Ben represents the opportunity that Willy lost, and illustrates what he could have attained, but failed.

Finally, since Willy has spent his whole life working for Howard, he asks him whether it would be possible to have a small office in New York instead of having to travel around as a salesman (62). Willy begs for his salary: "if I had forty dollars a week – that’s all I’d need” (64). When Howard replies by firing him, Willy seems to have an epiphany. He realizes that he is not worth more than a disposable commodity to his employer, now that he is unable to
bring in any profit to the company. He exclaims “I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can’t pay my insurance! You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away — a man is not a piece of fruit!” (Miller 65). He has sold his life activity, to use Karl Marx’s term, and he has not received the return he was promised by the American Dream. After this Willy concludes “after all the highways and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive” (77). He decides to end his life and drives off in his car and crashes it in the hope that Biff, the oldest son, will get the “magnificent” amount of two thousand dollars from the insurance company for his death (107).

From a Marxist perspective, Willy Loman is a direct victim of society and its values and Willy ends his life hoping to beat the system at its own game. Willy protests, through his death, against the derogatory and depersonalizing system that commodifies individuals as if they were nothing but a piece of fruit, or a ”dime in a dozen”, a man without worth beyond what he can produce (Miller 105). In committing suicide he wishes to demonstrate that he can still make a difference. Even though his life had been, seemingly, good for nothing, at least he could perform a heroic deed through his death; that of ensuring that Biff gets a good sum of money from the insurance company.

Willy Loman lives his life with faith in the American Dream, until he realizes that he is worth nothing to the employer to whom he has given his time and strength all his working life, thirty-four years. At Willy’s funeral, Biff understands and laments that his father had all the wrong dreams: “All, all wrong” (110). Willy dies as a victim of his gullible faith in the American Dream after having lived a mediocre and unfulfilled life. He is finally crushed and consumed, just a dime in a dozen, worth no more than a piece of fruit and, after his usefulness is gone Willy Loman is thrown away as a useless orange peel.

Bibliography


