

The Quest for Identity in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

Himadri Sekhar Roy

[Ph. D. Research Scholar (ICCR), University of Pune]

Assistant Professor of English,

Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

The paper deals with Miller's technique of presenting characters like Willy in his famous drama, *Death of a Salesman*. The dramatist has projected the story of the central character, Willy Loman who always wants to find his identity through the play. His faith in the myth is tested by harsh realities which he alternately faces and flees. He fights to hold on to his identity. This means holding on to his faith, and, in the name of faith, Willy lies constantly: about the gross sales he has made, about the reaction of businessmen to his personality, about his boys' success and importance, about his own prospects. These lies echo, not the drab reality about him, but the shining hope he has. Willy must have hope because it sustains him; when identity is at stake there are matters more important than facts and aspects.

KEYWORDS

Identity Crisis; *Death of a Salesman*; Willy Loman.

The typical characteristics of the Willy Loman persona establish him in the tradition of the mythical hero, or in *Death of a Salesman*, in the tradition of the anti-hero. The name is descriptive, Willy is a "Low man: on the economic and social totem-pole. Linda, his wife, who sees him clearly and sympathetically, calls him "a small man". He is a white-collar worker who works on salary and or commission for a company, his economic future at the mercy of his employer. He does not show any marked intellectual capacity or training and his wisdom, expressed in platitudes, is garnered from common-sense authorities. When he is away from home, his moral life functions according to the "travelling salesman" (Porter 133) tradition, not excluding the clandestine affair or the blue joke. He does not, however, consider himself dissolute, according to his lights, he is honest enough. For better or worse, the salesman is intended to represent the average lower-middle-class American.

The antecedents of the salesman are also typical. For a man who resides in Brooklyn, the family background that Miller

gives his hero stretches the imagination. In a sequence with Ben, Willy remembers his father, a man with a big beard who played the flute. His father, too, was a travelling salesman:

Ben: Father was a very great and very wild-hearted man. We would start in Boston, and he would toss the whole family into the wagon and then he'd drive the team right across the country; through Ohio and Indiana, Michigan, Illinois and all the Western states. And we'd stop in the towns and sell the flutes that he'd made on the way. Great inventor, Father. With one gadget he made more than a man like you could make in a lifetime. (*Death of a Salesman* 49)

The father disappeared one day when Willy was a baby, following the Yukon gold-strike. He lived many years in Alaska and Willy had a yearning to join him there. (*Death of a Salesman* 85) This is the stock from which Willy and his boys are sprung, American stock with a penchant for travelling and selling. This background fits an idealized model rather than

any plausible or realistic family tree. As a typical character, the salesman has a typical background; he envisions his origin in terms of the American experience. It is one version of the idealized experience of the race.

Willy's status in society and his family background is typical: even more of a type is Willy's identity as a salesman. He is a product of a producer-consumer society in which he is a pivotal figure. Society has labelled him, and Willy has accepted the label. Society has offered Willy a set of values and an objective, and Willy has committed himself to those values and that objective. In so accepting, Willy becomes the salesman. He cannot define himself in any other terms. So he insists in his debate with Charley that "he has a job", that he is the "New England man" even after he has been fired. His adherence to the cult of personality of being "well liked" is a reflection of his identity; before he can sell anything and if he can sell nothing else, he must sell himself, his own personality. He has been shaped by a society that believed steadily and optimistically in the myth of success, and he has become the agent and the representative of that society.

This image of the salesman includes the image of an older, freer America. Before the frontier dosed down and the apartments closed in, before business became an impersonal, corporate endeavour, opportunity knocked incessantly. For Willy, the achievement possible in this earlier society is typified by Uncle Ben, the shadowy figure who appears out of nowhere, to the accompaniment of flute music, on his way to new capitalist triumphs. Whether Ben is a projection of Willy's imagination or a real figure out of the family history is irrelevant; his function in the action does not depend on his "reality". He comes from an idealized past; he is the Robber Baron, the captain of industry. Ben carries with him the aura of success, and when he visits, it is only for a few minutes between expeditions. There are diamond mines in Africa, timberlands in Alaska, and mysterious appointments in Ketchikan that demand his attention. Ben's methods are illustrated in a sparring match with Biff. He is physically strong - Biff can hit him in the stomach with impunity. He is

ruthless - the sparring ends abruptly when Ben suddenly trips the boy and poises the point of his umbrella over Biff's eye: "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way". (*Death of a Salesman* 49) This is the code of the self-made man.

Ben possesses the precious secret to success. It is summarized in his ritual chant, the formula which sums up his accomplishment: "when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich". (*Death of a Salesman* 48) What happened in the jungle is never explained. It is the mystery of the success; the Eleusinian rite known only to initiates. Uncle Ben is the older version of the Salesman, the ruthless capitalists whose adventurous strength ripped riches from the frontier. To Willy, Uncle Ben is the palpable proof of his doctrine.

While the shadowy figure of Ben establishes the general truth that any man can succeed, Willy does not accept Ben's method. Ben represents the robber baron who travels out to unknown frontiers and ruthlessly carves out an empire. As Ben's method has faded with the passing of the empire builders and with the advent of the big corporations, Willy decides to rely on personality:

It's not what you do, Ben, It's who you know and the smile on your face! It's contacts, Ben, contacts. The whole wealth of Alaska passes over the lunch table at the Commodore Hotel, and that's the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being well liked. (*Death of a Salesman* 86)

This quality can't be held in the hand like Ben's timber, but on the other hand, Ben's own formula - his inner strength and ruthlessness is also mysterious. Willy accepts the Dale Carnegie approach to success; winning friends and influencing people become his pick and shovel to dig diamonds as industriously as Ben ever did. But Willy does not go off to Africa or Alaska, nor is his confidence in a transcendently virtuous life. His faith in personality conceals the secret in an imponderable and makes that faith untestable by any pragmatic standard. The dream of success, in the eyes of the playwright, is the

more destructive because, though indemonstrable, it has a myth-like capacity for inspiring a transcendent belief. There are, however, certain tangible signs which characterize the personality likely to succeed. Willy discovers them in his sons. The boys are physically strong, well-built and attractive. Biff is a football hero, the captain of the high school team; Happy, if not gifted with Biff's athletic ability, has a pleasant personality and basks in Biff's reflected glory. Against the picture of the glowing athlete and the hail fellow, Bernard the neighbour's boy wears glasses, studies hard and is not well-liked. If physical prowess and a moderate anti-intellectualism seemed to have little to do with success, the propagators of the success ideology saw an intimate connection:

Statistics show that executives are physically stronger and larger of stature than their subordinates. For example, college presidents, as a class, are taller and heavier than the college professors. Bank presidents are physically stronger than the clerks; Railway presidents are larger and physically stronger than the employees..... Physical welfare is the second qualification for winning the race of making good. (Babson 98-9)

Biff does not have to work hard at his studies; books are not necessary for advancement. Bernard, whose scholastic efforts are the object of mild derision supplies Biff with answers and this is only right, the homage due to the personable and popular. When, in spite of Bernard's help, Biff fails in Mathematics, Willy blames the teacher. Willy shows a typical ambivalence toward education. On the one hand, attendance at college confers prestige, especially when coupled with an athletic career; on the other, education does not really make an appreciable difference in the struggle to succeed. Some self-help advocates maintained that college was actually harmful to a young man's chances. It undermined those rugged personal qualities demanded by a career by an overemphasis on the development of the mind, it fostered an interest in impractical humanistic matters, and it devoured the best

years of a man's life. The salesman finds in his sons those qualities which point toward success. As high school boys, they are leaders, popular with the crowd, athletic and handsome. Their present status as philandering clerks and wandering farmhand cannot erase the glory of their past potential as Willy experienced it. "A star like that, magnificent, can ever really fade away". (*Death of a Salesman* 68)

Willy's commitment to the success ideology directed the education of his sons. Even if success passes him by he can still look forward to a vindication of his life in them. They have been instructed in the clichés of both the "Virtue" and the "Personality" school. Industry is important: Whatever else can be said about Biff, he is a "hard worker". One of Willy's fondest reminiscences is the high sheen the boys kept on the red chewy. If Biff "gets tired" hanging around, he can point to then-new ceiling in the living room. Willy's aphorisms emphasize the importance of industry and perseverance: "Never leave a job till you are finished". "The world is an oyster, but you don't crack it open on a mattress". But personality has its privileges and Willy can wink at the boy's faults in the name of personality. Biff has been a thief from his high-school days; he steals a football from the locker room and lumber from a local construction job. Willy laughs at both thefts because they reveal the power of personality and a fearless competitiveness like Ben's. "Coach will probably congratulate you on your initiative... That's because he likes you. If somebody else took the ball there'd be an uproar". (*Death of a Salesman* 30) When Charley warns Willy that the watchman will catch the boys at their thieving, Willy avers that, though he gave them hell, the boys are "a couple of fearless characters". When Charley responds that the Jails are full of fearless characters, Ben adds that the stock exchange is also. The boys have been brought up to respect the success ideology; their success will be the salesman's vindication.

In the chronological presentation of the play, Willy's fortune is at low ebb. His faith in the myth is tested by harsh realities which he alternately faces and flees. He fights to hold on to his identity. This means holding on to his

faith, and, in the name of faith, Willy lies constantly: about the gross sales he has made, about the reaction of businessmen to his personality, about his boys' success and importance, about his own prospects. These lies echo, not the drab reality about him, but the shining hope he has. From the observer's point of view established in the play through Charley and Linda, they are pathetic efforts to protect his identity. Willy is unfaithful to his long-suffering wife, but this infidelity is an assuagement of his loneliness on the road, a restorative to his flagging spirits, and a provision against the rebuffs of the day. When he momentarily faces reality his inability to drive to Boston, the mounting bills and the dwindling income- he has to flee to the past and to project the future. The salesman cannot abandon the myth without reducing himself to zero. Thus, he must hope.

Perpetual optimism, then, is not so much a piece of transparent self-deception as it is a necessary quality of his personality. It can be associated with the kind of wishful hoping that underlies the entire American business operation, an indefatigable spirit of the impossible takes a little longer.

Basically, this optimism represents no precise philosophical position at all, but rather

a studiously cultivated sense of euphoria. It is an emotional attitude marked by a tendency to emphasize the brighter side of things . . . It is an effusive and expansive attitude. In the business world, one of its typical manifestations is the conviction that there is no assignable limit to business opportunities, that markets need not remain static but are constantly open to further development, even with territory geographically limited. It is somewhat beside the point to ask if Americans believe in this optimism. It is not a thing you believe in. It is in the air. It is felt. It has its effect, whether you elect to believe in it or not. (Ong 31)

Miller has not left this optimism hanging in the air; he weaves it into his hero's personality. Happy's diagnosis is accurate: "Dad is never so happy as when he's looking forward to something". When Willy is lost, disturbed, hanging on the ropes, he demands that this hope be fed: "The gist of it is I haven't got a story [read: 'lie'] left in my head, Biff. So don't give me a lecture about facts and aspects. I am not interested. Now, What've you got to say?" (*Death of a Salesman* 107) Willy must have hope because it sustains him; when identity is at stake there are matters more important than facts and aspects.

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