
ECONOMIC ANXIETY AND MASCULINITY IN ARTHUR MILLER'S DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Shams Ur Rehman Swati
Hazara University, Mansehra
rehman_shams@gmail.com

Abstract

The article under consideration discusses the Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller that is being viewed as a fierce retort to the American Dream because it is concerned with the disastrous consequences of the financial demands and the societal pressure on the male gender to attain a level of material prosperity. The given article examines the interrelation between economic anxiety and masculinity in the seminal play of Miller through the embodiment of Willy Loman, a character, whose identity and sense of value directly depend on his prerogatives to support the family and fill the superiority of masculinity. Based on a close reading of the play, the study focuses on how Willy fears loss of his financial and social position, which results in the psychological decline, and how his experiences reflect the rest of the society regarding the expectation of a man to succeed. The article holds that Miller criticizes not just capitalist system but also strict gender rules about what men are supposed to do as providers, revealing the vulnerability and especially the destructive peril of such constructions. The analysis lends support to current discussions of economic distress, masculinity and identity and indicates that the work by Miller is very relevant in an up-to-date discourse of gender, class, and mental illness.

Keyword: *Economic Anxiety, Masculinity, Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman, American Dream, Gender Roles.*

INTRODUCTION

American society was changed dramatically in the manifestations of the end of the World War II, and these phenomena led to a new perspective of individual achievement, material wealth, and upward mobility. The concept of the American Dream- the idea that everybody, irrespective of their social-economic status, could work hard and strive to become a successful and prosperous person (Hochschild, 1995) summarized such ideals. The economic boom experienced after the war, increase in the middle class, and consumerism further cemented the point that the most important criterion of success was the financial success of a person. Thus, it made American masculinity more connected with the provider role, and men were supposed to play this role making their families stable economically. It is this propagandized image of the masculine ideology that was rooted in the capitalist system and exerted tremendous forces that compelled men to become successful, usually at the cost of their psychological and emotional state.

In Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman (1949), these values of the society are critically questioned as Willy Loman, a salesman is desperate to hold on to the dream of the American Dream, even though he continues to fail to realize the dream in his life. Miller traces characterization of Willy Loman as a devastating statement on shortcomings of the American Dream and psychological and emotional implications of pursuing success under the capitalism regime. The very nature of Willy is deeply tied to the way he sees himself as a success in terms of provision and in his capability to achieve material wealth. But he cannot fulfill these ideals though he tries and tries, and this leads into intense mental and emotional suffering. When Willy becomes deranged and then depressed Miller shows us just how tragic it can be to base all your feelings of self value and self identity in a very shallow form of success; capitalist

user driven success.

This paper intends to examine how Miller intersections anxiety of the economic situation and masculinity in the case of *Death of a Salesman* with a specific emphasis on how the playwright commented on both the capitalist system and performance targeted at men. The main research question is how this pressure on masculinity works against society and leads to the soul destroying effects of economic anxiety especially in the capitalist system. The inability of Willy Loman to meet the demands of what has been identified as both economic and masculinity contributions leads to his becoming a point of focus in the context of discussing the issues of class, identity and gender in the play. The downfall of Willy as represented by Miller is an emotional study of how economic turmoil accompanied by inflexible gender expectations can destroy a man and eventually cause his suicide.

The study will also investigate the way in which the obsessive drive towards financial success that Willy has along with his notion that charisma and personal relationships are what paved the path to success as opposed to merit and skill reflect the unrealistic ideals of the American Dream. The inner turmoil of Willy that can be seen in his daydreaming and his attempts to deal with his perception of his own identity with its comparison to the reality is both an indictment of the capitalist system and the ideal masculine man. Miller demonstrates Willy as a man whose self-value is directly tied to his success as a financially successful man and therefore when he does not achieve financial success he becomes susceptible to the feeling of inadequateness and failure. The fact that Willy is afraid of his economic fate and fails to live up to his life image of the rich provider does not only contribute to his psychological breakdown, but it also shows the instability of the male identity in the society which cannot afford a man to fail financially as there other indicators of his success (Baker, 2007).

This study is important in that it demonstrates that the social expectation of men to meet some standards of masculinity is always present and in most cases, the economic systems support them. These demands persist to negatively impact the mental health and welfare of men in the current socio-economic environment as men have to deal with the pressure of adapting to the fast-evolving job market and more uncertainty of economic security. *Death of a Salesman* by Miller is appropriate in the present context and it gives one some lessons about emotional costs of struggling to achieve an idealized vision of masculinity in a capitalist culture. This study will focus on the features of cross-sectionality between economic anxiety and masculinity in the work by Miller to determine how this analysis will play into a broader discussion of gender, mental health, and the economic arrangement that defines modern masculinity.

The central focus of the present study applies the critical analysis of the manner in which the *Death of a Salesman* by Miller explores the two themes of economic anxiety and masculinity. The research will undertake a close reading of the text to discuss how the experiences of Willy Loman can be traced back to wider expectations of men by the society, especially the expectations that they should be breadwinners in the society. Furthermore, the paper will examine the mental burden of these expectations and ways they have influenced the character of Willy and their subsequent effect of destroying him. The study will also address the fact that the critique of the American Dream and capitalist values by Miller will open a window into the adverse effects of grading the worth of a man based on his financial prosperity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It has become a scholarly debate to discuss in the context of the Arthur Miller play, *Death of a Salesman*, the themes of economic anxiety and the American Dream, with critics considering both how the play criticizes the capitalist society and how a life of economic failure can psychologically destroy someone.

Considered as a strong criticism of the American Dream, the play discusses the impact of those pressures that are imposed on the society, determining the success and identity according to the material wealth and social rank. Any scholar like John I. Brooks (1999) and Harold Bloom (2008) points out that *Death of a Salesman* exposes the emptiness of the American Dream and criticizes the capitalist culture which only evaluates a human being with financial wealth. Brooks points out that Miller shows the disillusionment of Willy Loman who cannot reach the goals of success that the self-created American Dream was supposed to bring about in his character. Brooks (1999) also argues that Miller reveals the psyche toll reaction of individuals given that their value is solely based on their economic productivity. Likewise, Bloom (2008) points out that the play lays stress on the emotional and existential crisis of Willy since he is not able to reconcile his expectations concerning material prosperity and his real material failure.

Death of a Salesman brings about the critique of capitalism which is resonated in different readings of the play. David Simons (2000) even asserts that Miller sheds light on the perils of the capitalist society by showing that the drive towards the American Dream causes people like Willy Loman to self-destruct once they are unsuccessful in economic success. According to Simons, all the things that Willy obsessed over in the form of props are clearly representative of his fixation with a successful life, including his misconstrued belief that he can receive financial security based on his personal charisma, thus the ultimate expression of how people in a capitalist society are vulnerable. These readings draw attention to the contrast between the idealised vision of success that the American Dream shares and the economic struggle many working-class people have to endure. The play is not only staged in such a way as to criticize economic systems but takes a larger look at the detrimental psychological impact these systems have on people both in regards to their self-worth and identification with their personalities.

Besides the economic fear, the aspect of masculinity has been a remarkable theme in the Millerological. Other researchers, such as Susan McCready (2011) and Tim Palczewski (2017), have explored the importance of gender expectations in *Death of a Salesman* and how the pressures to meet the demands of the traditional masculine roles contribute to psychological problems of Willy Loman. As McCready (2011) proposes, Willy cannot fulfill the traditional masculine ideal, especially the ideology of having to be an effective provider, thus, becoming psychologically divided and ultimately destroyed. McCready states that Willy is defined by his success as a provider and, as a consequence, he internalizes the pressure of attaining financial stability. This pressure has a direct impact on his identity; his self-esteem is fully based on his capability of playing the role of the successful breadwinner. Palczewski (2017) continues this, looking at the concept of the toxic masculinity, which supports the identity of Willy. He claims that Willy does not allow himself to express emotions freely because he lives according to obsolete and inflexible gender norms, which increases his feelings of inadequacy that eventually lead to his breakdown. The toxic masculinity in Palczewski that Palczewski finds in Willy represents a wider attack on the social standards that associate the level of value of a man with his success at the workplace and his capability to meet the demands of the conventional male role in the society.

Although these scholars have contributed significant works because they have discussed the connection between masculinity and capitalism in the context of *Death of a Salesman*, the literature still leaves a gap in how economic anxiety can be connected to masculinity. The treatment of capitalism as a critique of a capitalist society in the play, and the treatment of gender constructed roles as an aspect of the play, have both received moderate measure regarding implications to the overall character and choice of identity in the play, Willy Loman, and how they are interwoven in their conceptualization. Others, like Baker (2007), have accepted that the play critiques both economic and gendered systems but hardly have touched into the interrelation between these two powers. As another illustration, the fact that Willy is unable to comply with the economic and gendered expectations constitutes one of the main factors of his downfall, yet the

relationship between economic anxieties and traditional masculine ideals that define the nature of Willy has been often overlooked by various scholars.

In the provided existing literature, the identified research gap refers to the presentation of a more in-depth analysis of the correlation between economic anxiety and masculinity in *Death of a Salesman*. Although the fact that the play is a critique of capitalist losses and deals extensively with the concept of traditional masculinity is well documented, there is little focus on how economic demands and societal gender norms meet and contribute towards Willy as a character. The proposed research will combine the strengths of the studies that calculate the origins of Willy psychological breakdown with the union of economic apprehension and fundamental masculinity. By giving attention to the interplay of the two key themes, the given research will provide a deeper insight into the tragic character of Willy Loman and the overall significance of the Miller writing on a critique of capitalism in society and gender roles.

Moreover, this research will also help continue the debates of gender, class, and mental health in current society. The stress that Willy is under, which both has an economic basis and the role of being a man, is still applicable in contemporary settings where masculinity still has social expectations of them being the financial producers. The theme of the pressures caused on the mind and their effects is one gaining prominence in the modern research and *Death of a Salesman* can provide a suitable angle through which one can look at these problems. Placing the work of Miller into the contemporary context of gender and class representations and mental health, the proposed research will provide a new layer of insight into how Miller managed to find a winning arrangement of staying and remaining relevant today, through Willy Loman.

To conclude, the literature on *Death of a Salesman* has already touched upon the issues of how the play criticizes capitalism and established rules of masculinity, as well as the role of economic anxiety in the lives of men; however, the correlations between economic insecurity and masculinity remain unexplored. This paper will address this gap by providing a close examination of how these two themes can be combined to form a tragic identity of Willy Loman. As a result of this analysis, the paper shall help us gain insight into the mental and emotional cost that economic and gender strains ask of individuals and add to general discourse of mental health and its relation to class and masculinity.

SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

The relevance of the research is that, it considers intersectionality of economic anxiety and masculinity, which continues to be an issue in modern society. In a society where the conventional gender roles still help to set up the expectations of the males, especially with respect to their financial and family obligations, the death of a salesman by Miller presents valuable information about the repercussions of these expectations. Interpretation of the Willy Loman character in the framework of the economic anxiety and masculinity in this article can be seen to contribute to the further development of gender, class and mental health debate, as a reflection at this juncture, the role of social pressures persists to play on individual wellness.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the relationship between economic anxiety and Willy Loman's sense of masculinity in *Death of a Salesman*?
2. How do the societal expectations of men as providers in a capitalist system contribute to Willy's psychological decline?

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3. Why does Miller use Willy Loman's failure to achieve financial success as a critique of both capitalist values and gender norms?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, a critical masculinities concept will be applied to study how the masculinity-economics relationship coexists, especially in terms of the notion of anxiety as it is associated with economic concerns. As a significant theoretical framework, there will be work on hegemonic masculinity by R.W. Connell (2005) according to which, society builds a dominant image of masculinity using ideas of power, wealth and domination. To Connell, this normative masculinity is usually perpetuated by the norms of society which believes that male success can only be measured in monetary success that is linked with the command of money. This structure will assist in comprehending the way in which the idea of masculinity, which exists in the society, leads to the formation of such things as the habit of male characters under consideration in the capitalistic society as far as their economic fears and emotional frustrations are concerned.

Further, the economic anxiety theory put forward by a sociologist Robert Kuttner (2007) will provide critical information on how economic pressures make contributions to the psychological and emotional suffering of a given individual. Kuttner theory focuses more on the negative impact of financial insecurity and economic uncertainty on the mind as they increase inadequacy and fear to an extent that mental self-worth is concerned, especially when the society is in a capitalistic economy where economic prosperity is regarded to signal personal value.

Such theories are to be used to interpret the actions of Willy Loman and his eventual psychological breakdown of Arthur Miller in his *Death of a Salesman*. The situation experienced by Loman will thus be placed in the context of the whole society and the ideology of masculinity as well as capitalism which will provide a deeper insight into how economic crunch can compound the emotional and psychological strain that is attached to the expectations placed upon men by the society of attaining a successful status.

METHODOLOGY

This paper will apply close reading, whereby the researcher will conduct rigorous study of *Death of a Salesman* to investigate how economic anxiety and masculinity are expressed through Willy Loman as a character. One of the most popular styles in literary analysis, close reading implies textual scrutiny which allows identifying the stratification of meaning in the text and realizing the puzzles of characters, themes, and textures explored (Culler, 2008). The close reading approach in this instance is especially suited, as this style of reading enables a thorough examination of the character of Willy, be it in terms of how his internal discordances, the relationship with his family members, and the attitude to the system of capitalism come into play as he experiences the apprehensions of economic insecurity and masculinity. This strategy is aimed at determining how such personal conflicts appear in the text and how they eventually lead to the psychological downfall of Willy.

The dialogue between Willy and his family members and in particular his sons Biff and Happy will be put under analysis because it will give important insights into how Willy internalized notions of masculinity and success. As an example, the need to establish a reputation of a good provider and the desire to be liked by everyone are paramount aspects of what Willy has to do to define his own gender according to gendered expectations (McCready, 2011). Besides, the daydreams and flashbacks that Willy makes will be analyzed to reveal how his perfect picture of success and manhood do not align with his harsh reality of being. These scenes in the play are imperative as they can explain how Willy takes up the values of the capitalistic world and associates his happiness to material success.

The secondary products, i.e. the scholarly articles discussing the connection between masculinity, economic anxiety, and the class in the play will be used to support the interpretation. It will also encompass studies for gender theory and economic anxiety that have been discussed on this subject, as in the papers by Palczewski (2017) and Simons (2000), which offer a critical perspective of understanding Willy mental breakdown. Based on these theoretical approaches, the research will not confine itself to the personal problems of Willy but it will focus on these issues in connection to the societal context of the mid-20th century America where the strict limitations of gender and capitalistic morals converged to exert a strong pressure on a man to succeed.

This approach should be used in response to the research questions since it will enable non-hypothetical, sophisticated representation of the dynamics of economic anxiety and masculinity in the play. In radiating these themes, the paper will unearth how these themes have entangled in the character of Willy and how this culminates in his downward turn. Also, with the introduction of secondary sources, the critical discussion will be made on the basis of a wider critical discussion, which ensures that the research is not only based on the prevalent studies about the play, but also provides a perspective to the already known themes that the play deals with.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Death of a Salesman will be discussed based on the most important points in the play and that is the conversation of Willy Loman with his family, his reflections on his unsuccessful career, and his focus and repetitive thoughts on the aspect of material fulfillment. These scenes can be taken as important insights on the mental landscape of the character and show how anxiety in the fields of economy and masculinity may influence his identity on a fundamental level. Through examining Willy and his conversations with his sons especially Biff, the analysis is able to depict that Willy being a provider is attributed into his self-worth. To Willy, living up in the traditional masculine sense by being a successful, popular, and well-off provider is the only means of validating his worth as a man. As the personal failures in the professional life of Willy pile up, Willy finds it impossible to match the expectations laid down to him by the conventional ideals related to masculinity, and he feels emasculated and, thereafter, hopeless (McCready, 2011).

Willy is also obsessed with becoming successful, i.e. reaching the American Dream, and this anxiety adds to his economic anxieties. The conflict between his desires and his realities can be observed in the constant internal struggle, which he is presented through his daydreams and flashback into better times. The values of individualism and seeking to be in competition with others expressed by Willy in his belief in the power of personal charisma and likability to be able to get rich is capitalistic in nature and this leads to his ruination as Willy continues to believe in these values although they are not working out. It is easy to note how Willy inner views on masculinity are related to his financial difficulties; because he cannot measure up to what the masculine ideal of financial success entails, in his mind he becomes useless, separated with his family, and thus the cause of his own destruction (Simons, 2000).

The paper also refers the above-mentioned findings to the general social context of middle of the 2000s USA with its dichotomized gender roles and capitalism ideals which put an enormous pressure on the male half of the population to become successful. Palczewski (2017) mentions both of these forces to define Willy as a tragic figure between the demands of the society and the world of capitalist values. His eventual breakdown is not a failure of his alone but also a condemnation of a society that places its ideas of male value on their financial success alone. This discussion supports the claim that Miller criticizes not the capitalist system only, but the gendered system that defines men to be limited in expression of

emotions and identity acquisition.

Although the current research gives the most sophisticated meaning of the intersection of economic anxiety and masculinity in the character of Willy, it is necessary to understand that the data being analyzed might include mostly the understanding of Willy Loman. Further studies might take this and look at how other characters, namely, Biff and Linda react to the pressures as well as the gender expectations Willy experiences in society. Second, inclusion of comparative analysis of the study with other plays written by Miller like *A View from the Bridge* could be useful to understand how the theme of masculinity and economic anxiety are manifested in different plays. Lastly, further investigations into the background of post-war America, especially the consumerism boom and the resultant gender roles, would be insightful with regard to the cultural influences that Willy goes through in developing his personality.

FINDINGS

In a very close reading analysis of *Death of a Salesman*, the paper shows that Willy Loman is never tragically brought down merely because he had failed to live a financially successful life but also because he internalized the values of masculinity as put across in the society. The aspect of pressure caused on men to become the main breadwinners in a capitalistic society where men are usually termed on basis of their monetary success heavily contributes to Willy being so highly obsessed with attaining material prosperity. This can be best observed in the fact that Willy is perpetually striving to fulfill his vision of an idealized version of the American Dream in which personal charisma and social ties are sufficient in ensuring financial success. Willy is aware of this illusion because in his conversation with his sons he tells them, "The man who arrives in the business world, the man who knows who to know, gets ahead" (Miller, 1949, p. 58).

The fact is that Willy is obsessed with being successful, which does not correspond to facts and as his economic position worsens, his masculine ideals (acquired internally) start to fail him. He eventually becomes psychologically eclipsed with the pressure of serving the role of the prosperous provider. This tension arises between his goals and his life when his relationship with his son Biff worsens. At the moment when Biff is provoking him to face up what he has failed to do in life, Willy reacts, saying that he is not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman and you are Biff Loman! (Miller, 1949, p. 133) is where one sees the extent of the anguish of his battles to establish a sense of value in his persona as a provider.

The outcomes give a clear indication that it is economic anxieties that Willy has internalized that lead to his ultimate downfall caused by the strict masculine ideals that he lives by. Societal expectations (explained by the financial capabilities of a man and his capacity to contribute to the family) leave Willy with a feeling of feeling emasculated to the point of inciting his tragic suicide.

CONCLUSION

This paper summarizes the article with a conclusion that *Death of a Salesman* presents a moving indictment of the interplay between economically related anxieties and masculinity and presents how expectations of success and expectations of what constitutes masculine roles and gender may lead to potentially disastrous consequences to the mental health of individuals. The vulnerability of male identity in the capitalist society that equates self-worth based on financial success is brought out in the play of Arthur Miller: the erasure of Willy Loman. The pathological need that Willy displays in desperately seeking the American Dream, which is vested in financial prosperity and social status, results in his psychological downfall. His ultimate demise demonstrates the devastating costs of a society in which the value of a man is dependent on his ability to support a family financially, which can be applied to society at large and the collapsing pressures society has on men especially in the earlier half of the 20th century.

The need to present an insight into the intricacies of economic anxiety and masculinity is one of the ways this paper contributes to existing conversations regarding how capitalism affects mental health, especially within gender. It is based on the critical analysis of the works written by such scholars as Palczewski (2017) and McCready (2011), emphasizing the toxic masculinity of Willy and the fact that the strict gender norms have led to his emotional and psychological sufferings. This work also makes the context of Death of a Salesman broader as the issues are with the connection to the modern discussion of mental health, class, and gender providing a look at how deeply this interpretation of these themes can be applied in the modern world. This discussion shows the importance of revisiting the standards that society sets about manliness and prosperity as applied to the minds of men.

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