

DEATH OF A SALESMAN : TRADITIONS OF TRAGEDY

Death of a Salesman has, since its birth over forty years ago, assumed the status of a modern classic, comfortably so on the whole in terms of high quality literary and production values and as a comment on the American scene. The considerable bibliography that has grown up around it attests to this ; if there are any notes of dissent or contention regarding it, they would relate to its genre-definition. A serious play, certainly, but whether tragedy or pathos or ironic sermon is another matter. Within the limits of this presentation, I hope to offer less a clarification of these defining norms than a refocusing on certain problems the essential richness of Miller's texture suggests. Miller's own commentary "Tragedy and the Common Man", published in the *New York Times* in 1949 (the same year as *Salesman*), for all that it should not be specifically taken as a comment on the play itself, offers some useful direction-indicators :

The possibility of victory must be there in tragedy. Where pathos is finally derived, a character has fought a battle he could not possibly have won. The pathetic is achieved when the protagonist is, by virtue of his witlessness, his insensitivity, or the very air he gives off, incapable of grappling with a much superior force. Pathos truly is the mode for the pessimist. But tragedy requires a nicer balance between what is possible and what is impossible. And it is curious, although edifying, that the plays we revere, century after century, are the tragedies. In them, and in them alone, lies the belief-optimistic, if you will, in the perfectibility of man. It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it the only place it can possibly lead in our time - the heart and spirit of the average man (1).

Tragedy and pathos here seem to be equated with personal sufficiency or adequacy (or the lack thereof) in the central character, and if for a moment we assume this for *Salesman*, our instinctive reaction must be for pathos. Willy Loman in the course of the play shows all the attributes of the loser : confusion of values, self-contradiction, emotional instability, inability to face reality, and hysterical false pride. He would seem almost a walking textbook of the little man whose inadequacies can only be excused in the insidious name of good intentions. Nothing here of an Oedipus or a Hamlet or a Byronic hero-villain, whose failings are at least clothed in an aura of glamour. If anything in terms of a traditional framework, Willy might seem to qualify for a modest backseat in an "Everyman-as-American-Tragedy" vehicle, a study in the ruinous imperatives of an American dream of wealth as virtue and virtue as wealth. In the words of his wife Linda (a perhaps unrealistic character in her selfless devotion to him), he is not "a great man". Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him... He must not be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention must be paid to such a person. "If we were to examine this aspect of the story in depth, the medieval thesis of the summoning to death of Everyman (or its more recent variation in Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilych*) might yield valid insights. For clarification, a plot-summary of the Everyman story follows :

God sends Death to summon Everyman and he, in anguish, implores a respite and obtains only a few hours to gather together the friends who shall go with him on

his supreme journey. Everyman appeals vainly to Fellowship, his boon companion, to Kindred and to Goods. None of them will hearken to him. Then he remembers Good Deeds, whom he has long abandoned, who is lying on the ground, weak and miserable, but who hears his prayer, helps him, and recommends him to her sister Knowledge. Knowledge sends him to Confession, and Everyman, shriven of sin, is ready to meet God. At the moment at which he reaches the grave, Beauty, Strength, Discretion and Five Wits depart in spite of their promise to follow him. Knowledge would go with him but cannot. Only Good Deeds is left ; she alone is not vain and will plead for him. Everyman dies pure of sin and forgiven (2).

I will not attempt here to manipulate the details of the one play in terms of the other, except to note that Miller's characters do seem to have a morality cast of definition about them : Ben as a kind of death-angel, Bernard as honest achievement, Howard as goods and services, Happy as good fellowship, Linda as faithful good deeds, and so on ; also, the moral implications of Miller's characters in terms of the medieval Deadly Sins might prove interesting : Happy as Lechery, Biff as Sloth, Willy as several dimensions of Pride. But in the ultimate sense, as with Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych, Willy's Everyman clothing hangs rather loosely on him ; the fit is far from exact. And certainly the suicide of Willy is on the face of it a far cry from the holy dying of Everyman.

But if Willy is not precisely the traditional Everyman figure, he does suggest a theme that has preoccupied men at all stages of human history, namely the definition of significant labor in society. In *Salesman's Requiem*, Charley synthesizes Willy's life in the world in terms of this :

Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back - that's an earthquake... Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream... It comes with the territory.

Only a little here about Willy to suggest Aristotle's definition of significant labor as either healing, teaching or agriculture, but if we allow ourselves reflection on Willy's history and behavior something significant suggests itself. Along with all the exaggerations, false perspectives, and inanities about his salesman's role that Willy indulges in, there is the hard fact that he has genuine (if perhaps limited) talent in carpentry and home-maintenance, including gardening. There is a painful irony -ironic because of the core of physical truth to it- in Willy's claim "All the cement, the lumber, the reconstruction I put in this house ! There aint a crack to be found in it any more". And Willy's final act, before driving off to his destiny in his final illusion, is to plant, carefully and caringly, a vegetable garden. (Of this, more later.) If one remains with this means of defining Willy (and perhaps defining his tragic potential), one may view much of the evidence of the flashbacks and illusions, as well as the characterizations in the play in the light of Willy himself as a wasted homebody trapped by circumstances in a career unsuited to him and even unworthy of him.

First, the flashbacks and illusions, involving as they do Ben, Charley and Bernard, and the two sons Biff and Happy as boys. Ben as either fact or fiction (and a large part of Miller's dramatic skill consists in keeping Ben a dream-like figure who might be said never to have existed except in Willy's imagination) is the world-

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beating traveller-salesman (whether it's Alaska or Africa hardly matters), the epitome of a kind of American dream of quick wealth, the consummate operator whose calm advice to Willy represents a kind of spiritual paternalism in the fantasy framework of sales and commerce. Ben is clearly what Willy is psychologically and temperamentally incapable of being and therefore admires the more extravagantly. (It is perhaps significant that Ben's encounter with Linda leaves her cold and unmoved.) In contrast to Ben, Charley is the stay-at-home success, the unglamorous plodder whose realistic appraisal of Willy's situation is bound to make for the maximum resentment. Bernard, the wimp who makes good, is finally all that Willy and Biff and Happy are not, a doer rather than a talker whose storm-signals to the Loman family go unheeded until the end, and an extension of the essential sobriety of his father. Biff and Happy as images and attitudes fall on the opposite sides of Ben and Charley in Willy's fantasy-world, Biff as "On the Road" a half-decade before Kerouac's success with the idea, and Happy a stay-at-home whose sexual bravado masks a kind of social passivity. What is mainly notable about the brothers is their common ground of failure where Ben and Charley have succeeded, as commercialists. Biff is a variation on the "Athlete Dying Young" theme, the high school hero whose life stopped with a football game and a crushing discovery about his father, the sort who has drifted from scene to scene, further complicated by a kleptomania problem. Biff has clearly been the favored son, the result of Willy's very American weakness, for the sports hero and all the hoopla that goes with that fantasy. And ultimately it is Biff who after the years of disappointment tries to break away from the fantasy in a way that Happy cannot. We may well doubt that much real success lies in store for Biff, but for the purposes of the play at least a kind of personal redemption beckons at the close.

It is around this quintet of Ben, Charley and Bernard, and Biff and Happy, that we may build a framework for estimating Willy as merely a pathetic or possibly a tragic figure. Ben and Biff serve a common ground of reference in Willy's fantasies, the larger-than-life aspect of the American dream. It is perhaps significant that Willy tries to make of Biff a late starter in the manner of a Thomas Edison, with his electric light (an essential image of domestic well-being), or a B.J. Goodrich, of the rubber tire (an image of movement and mobility). Success on native ground, the instinct towards roots and settlement, and success on alien ground, the instinct towards pioneering and the frontier, have been the hallmarks of the American dream from the beginning ; and it is Willy's lot to identify with them in myopic fantasy-terms, glamourizing the predatory Ben and hyping the sports hero in Biff, all the while he dismisses Charley and Bernard as drab plodders. It is only when he learns Bernard is to argue a case before the Supreme Court that he can begin to understand Charley's strictures on doing rather than just talking. And from there he can move towards his end, in the last conjuration of Ben for advice on the only big money Willy has ever come close to realizing, the life insurance payable on his death. It is significant that before Willy sets off on his last, fatal drive, he measures and plants a garden outside his nearly paid-for house, a last show of his instinct for his home. When one considers the implications of these last moments in his life, one may be close to the tragic potential in his story. Suicide vitiates life insurance - that promise for Willy will go as unrealized and hollow as all his fantasies. But the garden seems an extension of the careful work he has done on his home over the years, a suggestion of where his deepest instincts have been all along. As a settler, rather than as a mobile, trail-blazing pioneer, Willy might have succeeded, modestly but solidly. His failure as a salesman suggests a much more ultimate failure, his inability to know himself

and realize what talents he actually has. The death of a non-salesman, the death of a well-intended man of limited but real ability in another direction, brings us back to something like the Everyman in Willy, who may resemble Sinclair Lewis' George F. Babbitt who at the end of his story realizes he has never done anything with his life he really wanted to do. This is possibly more an American tragedy than Dreiser's story, in terms of America's representing the ideal of opportunity, focusing as it does on the American field of dreams that excites the weak as well as the strong but in material terms rewards only the strong. A far cry indeed from the medieval assumption that the lowest peasant stood as good a chance of heaven as the mightiest king, depending on the life he led. Willy has substituted confused day dreams for a realistic appraisal of himself and if he dies for this, he may at least and at long last have in Biff the spiritual potential for what he, Willy, might have realized. It won't be the money that sets up Biff in life, but rather the understanding of what its pursuit may lead to and a determination to part company from Willy and Babbitt and be himself. "I know who I am, kid" he tells Happy, as the latter gives every indication of following in Willy's fantasy - footsteps. And at the grave-site it is Biff who pronounces a kind of benediction on Willy :

... on Sundays, making the stoop ; finishing the cellar ; putting on the new porch ; when he built the extra bathroom ; and put up the garage. You know something, Charley, there's more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made,

As for Willy's last fantasy of insurance-diamonds, we may recall the dying words of Ferdinand in the *Duchess of Malfi* :

Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust
Like diamonds we are cut with our own dust.

Miller's language may not approach this, but as his own executioner, Willy dies covered with the dust of the American dream gone wrong.

Finally, a note on place. Early in the play, Willy counters Linda's suggestion of re-assignment in New York with "I'm the New England man. I'm vital to New England". On the face of it, as fatuous as most of Willy's illusions ; in the course of the play, not only is he removed from the New England assignment, but as it turns out, it is in New England that the crushing encounter between Biff and Willy has taken place. But if Willy hardly resembles Grant Woods' famous American Gothic portrait, there is in the New England stereotype of the modestly circumstanced homesteader a hint and suggestion of the Willy who resents the encroachment of New York City around his home, whose thoughts run to hammocks and grass and trees and whose sales-idol is an eighty-four year old who did business from his room via telephone. A far cry indeed from the world-ranging image of Ben and another indication that home and not the road is Willy's forte, that we have indeed witnessed the death of the non-salesman and the miscast lifetime

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NOTES

- (1) *The New York Times*, February 27, 1949.
- (2) As summarized in E. Legouis and L. Cazamian, *A History of English Literature* (tr. H. D. Irvine), London 1960.