Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

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Death of a Salesman

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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best criticism available upon Arthur Miller's masterwork, his American tragedy, *Death of a Salesman*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological sequence of their original publication. I am grateful to Daniel Duffy for his assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction seeks to define how *Death of a Salesman* achieves true aesthetic dignity despite Miller's clear limitations as a writer. The chronological sequence of criticism begins with Esther Merle Jackson's attempt to set Willy Loman in the context of ancient tragic myths that became drama.

The distinguished (and tragic) German-Jewish critic, Peter Szondi, briefly but pungently illuminates Miller's swerve away from Ibsen's formal influence into the realm of memory and its discontents. Miller's formal manipulation of point of view in *Death of a Salesman* is analyzed by Brian Parker, while Ruby Cohn explores the paradox of Willy Loman as one of Miller's "articulate victims."

In an intentionally impressionistic essay, William Heyen pursues Willy Loman's elusive appeal by discussing his distinctively American echoes. The drama's social influence upon us is studied by Christopher Innes, after which D. L. Hoeveler, in a very different mode, examines Willy's tragedy as a psychomachia, a civil war within the soul.

In the wide compass of Richard T. Brucher's essay, Willy Loman, heir to Walt Whitman, embodies the need to align technology with American values. William Aarnes sees the play both as a dramatization of meaninglessness and as a desperate quest for finding meaning again through dramatic form. In this book's final essay, C. W. E. Bigsby reads Willy Loman's tragedy as an alternation of little dreams and massive cruelties, a pattern of family betrayals that reflect the social betrayals of American dreams in our era.

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Introduction

I

Rather like Eugene O'Neill before him, Arthur Miller raises, at least for me, the difficult critical question as to whether there is not an element in drama that is other than literary, even contrary in value (supposed or real) to literary values, perhaps even to aesthetic values. O'Neill, a very nearly great dramatist, particularly in *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night,* is not a good writer, except perhaps in his stage directions. Miller is by no means a bad writer, but he is scarcely an eloquent master of the language. I have just reread *All My Sons, Death of a Salesman,* and *The Crucible,* and am compelled to reflect how poorly they reread, though all of them, properly staged, are very effective dramas, and *Death of a Salesman* is considerably more than that. It ranks with *Iceman, Long Day's Journey,* Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire,* Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth,* and Albee's *The Zoo Story* as one of the half-dozen crucial American plays. Yet its literary status seems to me somewhat questionable, which returns me to the issue of what there is in drama that can survive indifferent or even poor writing.

Defending *Death of a Salesman,* despite what he admits is a sentimental glibness in its prose, Kenneth Tynan memorably observed: "But the theater is an impure craft, and *Death of a Salesman* organizes its impurities with an emotional effect unrivalled in postwar drama." The observation still seems true, a quarter-century after Tynan made it, yet how unlikely a similar statement would seem if ventured about Ibsen, Miller's prime precursor. Do we speak of *Hedda Gabler* organizing its impurities with an unrivalled emotional effect? Why is the American drama, except for Thornton Wilder (its one great sport), addicted to an organization of impurities, a critical phrase perhaps applicable only to Theodore Dreiser, among the major American novelists? Why is it that

we have brought forth *The Scarlet Letter, Moby-Dick, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Portrait of a Lady, The Sun Also Rises, The Great Gatsby, As I Lay Dying, Miss Lonelyhearts, The Crying of Lot 49,* but no comparable dramas? A nation whose poets include Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Hart Crane, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill and John Ashbery, *among so many others of the highest aesthetic dignity—how* can it offer us only O'Neill, Miller, and Williams as its strongest playwrights?

Drama at its most eminent tends not to appear either too early or too late in any national literature. The United States may be the great exception, since before O'Neill we had little better than Clyde Fitch, and our major dramas (it is to be hoped) have not yet manifested themselves. I have seen little speculation upon this matter, with the grand exception of Alvin B. Kernan, the magisterial scholarly critic of Shakespeare and of Elizabethan dramatic literature. Meditating upon American plays, in 1967, Kernan tuned his initially somber notes to hopeful ones:

> Thus with all our efforts, money, and good intentions, we have not yet achieved a theater; and we have not, I believe, because we do not see life in historic and dramatic terms. Even our greatest novelists and poets, sensitive and subtle though they are, do not think dramatically, and should not be asked to, for they express themselves and us in other forms more suited to their visions (and ours). But we have come very close at moments to having great plays, if not a great theatrical tradition. When the Tyrone family stands in its parlor looking at the mad mother holding her wedding dress and knowing that all the good will in the world cannot undo what the past has done to them; when Willy Loman, the salesman, plunges again and again into the past to search for the point where it all went irremediably wrong and cannot find any one fatal turning point; when the Antrobus family, to end on a more cheerful note, drafts stage hands from backstage to take the place of sick actors, gathers its feeble and ever-disappointed hopes, puts its miserable home together again after another in a series of unending disasters stretching from the ice age to the present; then we are very close to accepting our entanglement in the historical process and our status as actors, which may in time produce a true theater.

That time has not yet come, twenty years later, but I think that

Kernan was more right even than he knew. Our greatest novelists and poets continue not to see life in historic and dramatic terms, precisely because our literary tradition remains incurably Emersonian, and Emerson shrewdly dismissed both history and drama as European rather than American. An overtly anti-Emersonian poet-novelist like Robert Penn Warren does see life in historic and dramatic terms, and yet has done his best work away from the stage, despite his effort to write *All the King's Men* as a play. Our foremost novelist, Henry James, failed as a dramatist, precisely because he was more Emersonian than he knew, and turned too far inward in nuanced vision for a play to be his proper mode of representation. One hardly sees Faulkner or Frost, Hemingway or Stevens as dramatists, though they all made their attempts. Nor would a comparison of *The Waste Land* and *The Family Reunion* be kind to Eliot's dramatic ambitions. The American literary mode, whether narrative or lyric, tends towards romance and rumination, or fantastic vision, rather than drama. Emerson, genius of the shores of America, directed us away from history, and distrusted drama as a revel. Nothing is got for nothing; Faulkner and Wallace Stevens, aesthetic light-years beyond O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, seem to mark the limits of the literary imagination in our American century. It is unfair to *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* to read them with the high expectations we rightly bring to *As I Lay Dying* and *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*. Miller, a social dramatist, keenly aware of history, fills an authentic American need, certainly for his own time.

II

The strength of *Death of a Salesman* may be puzzling, and yet is beyond dispute; the continued vitality of the play cannot be questioned. Whether it has the aesthetic dignity of tragedy is not clear, but no other American play is worthier of the term, so far. I myself resist the drama each time I reread it, because it seems that its language will not hold me, and then I see it played on stage, most recently by Dustin Hoffman, and I yield to it. Miller has caught an American kind of suffering that is also a universal mode of pain, quite possibly because his hidden paradigm for his American tragedy is an ancient Jewish one. Willy Loman is hardly a biblical figure, and he is not supposed to be Jewish, yet something crucial in him is Jewish, and the play does belong to that undefined entity we can call Jewish literature, just as Pinter's *The Caretaker* rather surprisingly does. The only meaning of Willy Loman is the pain he suffers, and the pain his fate causes us to suffer. His tragedy makes sense only in the

Freudian world of repression, which happens also to be the world of normative Jewish memory. It is a world in which everything has already happened, in which there never can be anything new again, because there is total sense or meaningfulness in everything, which is to say, in which everything hurts.

That cosmos informed by Jewish memory is the secret strength or permanent coherence of *Death of a Salesman,* and accounts for its ability to withstand the shrewd critique of Eric Bentley, who found that the genres of tragedy and of social drama destroyed one another here. Miller's passionate insistence upon tragedy is partly justified by Willy's perpetual sense of being in exile. Commenting on his play, Miller wrote that: "The truly valueless man, a man without ideals, is always perfectly at home anywhere." But Willy, in his own small but valid way, has his own version of the Nietzschean "desire to be elsewhere, the desire to be different," and it does reduce to a Jewish version. Doubtless, as Mary McCarthy first noted, Willy "could not be Jewish because he had to be American." Nearly forty years later, that distinction is pragmatically blurred, and we can wonder if the play might be stronger if Willy were more overtly Jewish.

We first hear Willy say: "It's all right. I came back." His last utterance is the mere repetition of the desperately hushing syllable: "Shhh!" just before he rushes out to destroy himself. A survivor who no longer desires to survive is something other than a tragic figure. Willy, hardly a figure of capable imagination, nevertheless is a representation of terrible pathos. Can we define precisely what that pathos is?

Probably the most famous speech in *Death of a Salesman* is Linda's pre-elegy for her husband, of whom she is soon to remark: "A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man." The plangency of Linda's lament has a universal poignance, even if we wince at its naked design upon us:

> 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. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.

Behind this is Miller's belated insistence "that everyone knew Willy Loman," which is a flawed emphasis on Miller's part, since he first thought of calling the play *The Inside of His Head,* and Willy already lives

in a phantasmagoria when the drama opens. You cannot know a man half lost in the American dream, a man who is unable to tell past from present. Perhaps the play should have been called *The Dying of a Salesman*, because Willy is dying throughout. That is the pathos of Linda's passionate injunction that attention must be finally paid to such a person, a human being to whom a terrible thing is happening. Nothing finds Willy anymore; everything loses him. He is a man upon whom the sun has gone down, to appropriate a great phrase from Ezra Pound. But have we defined as yet what is particular about his pathos?

I think not. Miller, a passionate moralist, all but rabbinical in his ethical vision, insists upon giving us Willy's, and his sons', sexual infidelities as synecdoches of the failure of Willy's vision of reality. Presumably, Willy's sense of failure, his belief that he has no right to his wife, despite Linda's love for him, is what motivates Willy's deceptions, and those of his sons after him. Yet Willy is not destroyed by his sense of failure. Miller may be a better interpreter of Miller than he is a dramatist. I find it wholly persuasive that Willy is destroyed by love, by his sudden awareness that his son Biff truly loves him. Miller beautifully comments that Willy resolves to die when "he is given his existence . . . his fatherhood, for which he has always striven and which until now he could not achieve." That evidently is the precise and terrible pathos of Willy's character and of his fate. He is a good man, who wants only to earn and to deserve the love of his wife and of his sons. He is self-slain, not by the salesman's dream of America, but by the universal desire to be loved by one's own, and to be loved beyond what one believes one deserves. Miller is not one of the masters of metaphor, but in *Death of a Salesman* he memorably achieves a pathos that none of us would be wise to dismiss.

Death of a Salesman: Tragic Myth in the Modern Theatre

Esther Merle Jackson

Perhaps the dominant theme in the drama of the twentieth century is an attempt to recover—or, more precisely, to restate—a tragic apprehension about the human condition. A pervasive concern about the ultimate meaning of human suffering is reflected, in one way or another, in the work of all of the major playwrights of the twentieth century: in that of Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw, Claudel, Synge, Lorca, and O'Neill, as well as in that of Pirandello, Brecht, Sartre, Camus, and more recently, Wilder, Williams, Beckett, Genet, Albee, and others.

The American drama has been particularly concerned with the modern face of suffering. Since its emergence, barely a half-century ago, the American drama has attempted, rather consistently, to record the kinds of crises which have characterized our times. The great American masterworks—*Mourning Becomes Electra, The Time of Your Life, The Skin of Our Teeth, A Streetcar Named Desire,* and others—have been concerned with the response of mankind to rapid technological advance. But the American dramatist has encountered serious difficulties in his search for a mode of expression appropriate to this theme. For he has been handicapped by a critical problem affecting communication: by the absence of a body of natural myths—symbolic interpretations of the life of man. Unlike Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Corneille, or subsequent playwrights in the interrelated European traditions, the American dramatist has been unable to employ as the instrumentation of his vision the great natural legends which are the residue of centuries of civilized growth.

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The absence of conventional patterns of mythic interpretation has made it necessary for the American dramatist to devise new ways of seeing, interpreting, and re-creating reality. In terms of his ability to formulate coherent mythic patterns, perhaps the most effective dramatist in the American group is the "middle" playwright Arthur Miller. In his major works, *All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, The Crucible,* and *A View from the Bridge,* Miller seems to demonstrate a superiority to other American dramatists in the symbolic interpretation of universal dimensions of collective experience. Indeed, perhaps the most nearly mature myth about human suffering in an industrial age is Miller's masterwork, *Death of a Salesman.* In this work, first performed some thirteen years ago, Miller has formulated a statement about the nature of human crises in the twentieth century which seems, increasingly, to be applicable to the entire fabric of civilized experience. The superiority of *Death of a Salesman* over the other worthy American dramas such as *Mourning Becomes Electra, A Streetcar Named Desire,* or Miller's own work, *The Crucible,* is the sensitivity of its myth: the critical relationship of its central symbol—the Salesman—to the interpretation of the whole of contemporary life. In this image, Miller brings into the theatre a figure who is, in our age, a kind of hero—a ritual representative of an industrial society. It is its intimate association with our aspirations which gives to the story of Loman an ambiguous, but highly affecting, substratum of religious, philosophical, political, and social meanings. The appearance of the Salesman Loman as the subject of moral exploration stirs the modern spectator at that alternately joyful and painful periphery of consciousness which is the province of tragedy. The enactment of his suffering, fall, and partial enlightenment, provokes a mixed response: that anger and delight, indignation and sympathy, pity and fear, which Aristotle described as "catharsis."

Miller writes that, in Loman, he has attempted to personify certain values which civilized men, in the twentieth century, share. The movement of tragedy from the ground of the lawless Titan Prometheus to that of the common man Loman does not represent, for Miller, a decline in values; on the contrary, it is evidence of a hopeful development. For Loman, a descendant of the nineteenth-century protagonists of Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, and others, reflects Western civilization's increasing concern with a democratic interpretation of moral responsibilities. *Death of a Salesman* attempts to explore the implications of a life for which men—not gods—are wholly responsible.

Some of the problems with the interpretation of this play have grown

out of the author's own statements about his intent; that is to say, Miller seems to have created in *Death of a Salesman* a new form which transcended his conscious motive. *Death of a Salesman,* despite the presence of those social implications which Miller notes in his later essays, is a myth, not a document; that is to say, it is not, in the conventional sense, a problem play. Unlike Miller's earlier work, *All My Sons, Death of a Salesman* is not concerned with such human failings as may find permanent social, political, or even psychological remedy. *Death of a Salesman,* like *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge,* is, rather, a study of a man's existence in a metaphysical universe. It is, like *Agamemnon, Oedipus the King, Hamlet,* and *King Lear,* a mythic apprehension of life. Willy Loman, like the traditional tragic protagonist, symbolizes the cruel paradox of human existence. His story [according to Miller's introduction to *Collected Plays,*] stripped to its mythic essentials, is familiar:

> An aged king—a pious man—moves toward life's end. Instead of reaping the benefits of his piety, he finds himself caught in bewildering circumstances. Because of a mistake—an error in judgment—a tragic reversal has taken place in his life. Where he has been priest, knower of secrets, wielder of power, and symbol of life, he now finds himself adjudged defiler, usurper, destroyer, and necessary sacrifice. Like the traditional hero, Loman begins his long season of agony. In his descent, however, there is the familiar tragic paradox; for as he moves toward inevitable destruction, he acquires that knowledge, that sense of reconciliation, which allows him to conceive a redemptive plan for his house.

As in traditional tragedy, Loman—the ritual head of his house—seeks to discover a design in the paradoxical movement of life; to impose upon it a sense of meaning greater than that conferred upon it by actuality. The play asks the ancient questions: What real value is there in life? What evil resides in seeming good? What good is hidden in seeming evil? What permanence is buried beneath the face of change? What use can man make of his suffering?

Miller describes this drama as a study of circumstances which affect human destiny in the moral universe:

> I take it that if one could know enough about a human being one could discover some conflict, some value, some challenge, however minor or major, which he cannot find it in himself

> to walk away from or turn his back on. The structure of these plays, in this respect, is to the end that such a conflict be discovered and clarified. Idea, in these plays, is the generalized meaning of that discovery applied to men other than the hero. Time, characterizations, and other elements are treated differently from play to play, but all to the end that that moment of commitment be brought forth, that moment when, in my eyes, a man differentiates himself from every other man, that moment when out of a sky full of stars he fixes on one star. I take it, as well, that the less capable a man is of walking away from the central conflict of the play, the closer he approaches a tragic existence. In turn, this implies that the closer a man approaches tragedy the more intense is his concentration of emotion upon the fixed point of his commitment. . . . The assumption—or presumption—behind these plays is that life has meaning.
>
> (Introduction, *Collected Plays*)

Now the significant element in this statement is the playwright's suggestion that the ordinary actions of common men have ultimate meaning; indeed, that they are the concrete expression of conflict in the moral universe. The implication of this proposition is indeed profound. For it assigns primary responsibility for the conduct of the universe to man. Miller's position is, thus, opposed to that commonly assigned to Ibsen. Certainly, it is in contradiction to *Realism,* which is concerned primarily with the meaning of action and being in a material world. It is, similarly, at variance with the philosophy posited by so-called Christian dramatists such as Claudel and Thornton Wilder, who assign the larger role in the conduct of the universe to a divine power. Miller's position is, at this point, Sophoclean in nature. For like Sophocles, he suggests that the critical role in the moral universe is that of man himself.

Now Miller's Classic stance is not singular in modern theatre. A study of the masterpieces of the last fifty years, both in Europe and in America, shows this Classic concept of human responsibility to be common to many examples of Contemporary drama. Miller's position is roughly parallel to that of Jean-Paul Sartre, who in an earlier discussion of Contemporary French theatre, wrote:

> For them [the young playwrights] the theatre will be able to present man in his entirety only in proportion to the theatre's

> willingness to be *moral*. By that we do not mean that it should put forward examples illustrating the rules of deportment or the practical ethics taught to children, but rather that the study of the conflict of characters should be replaced by the presentation of the conflict of rights. . . . In each case, it is, in the final analysis and in spite of divergent interests, the systems of values, of ethics and of concepts of man which are lined up against each other. . . . This theatre does not give its support to any one "thesis" and is not inspired by any preconceived idea. All it seeks to do is to explore the state of man in its entirety, and to present to the modern man a portrait of himself, his problems, his hopes and struggles.

Throughout the critical writings of the Contemporaries, in the essays of O'Neill, Saroyan, Wilder, Williams, and Miller, as well as in the work of Europeans such as Sartre, Camus, Anouilh, and others, this dramatic motive is articulated: to illumine the moral choice which lies hidden beneath the face of actuality, to show modern man the present image of human destiny.

Now to say that Miller and others are in process of evolving a Contemporary tragic myth is not to suggest that *Death of a Salesman* is an imitation of the Greek tragic form. Indeed, Miller states quite clearly [in his introduction to *Collected Plays*] that changes in the perception of universal law, as well as alterations in the very idea of man, would make Greek tragedy invalid as an expression of our time. He writes that he seeks, rather, to evolve a form which may stand in the same kind of relationship to the moral crises of the twentieth century as did Greek, Shakespearean, or French tragic drama—each to its own epoch. While Miller and others appear, then, to have adopted certain characteristics belonging to traditional tragedy, they have rejected others. *Death of a Salesman* appears to imitate Classic tragedy primarily in its acceptance of the principle of the ultimate responsibility of the individual. That which appears to differentiate this work from traditional forms is its relocation of the tragic environment. For *Death of a Salesman,* like other examples of the Contemporary genre, elevates to meaning a new protagonist: the common man. Perhaps of greater importance is the fact that it removes the ground of the tragic conflict from outer event to inner consciousness. *Death of a Salesman,* like *Mourning Becomes Electra, The Hairy Ape, A Streetcar Named Desire,* and others, may be described as a *tragedy of consciousness,* the imitation of a moral crisis in the life of a common man.