

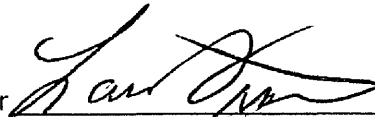
Willy Loman and the American Dream

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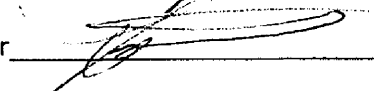
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First Reader



Second Reader



Willy Loman and the American Dream

The unavoidable question in *Death of a Salesman* that lingers is whether Willy Loman is an attack, defense or ploy in the representation of the American dream. *Death of a Salesman* has created considerable controversy for its theatrical style, production values and its dramatic content. When first exposed to it as an underclassman, I wasn't affected by the controversy of its theatrical style or production decisions. I accepted it as a modern tragedy and a hybrid of American Realism and German Expressionism without reservation about its theatrical style. But I found it hard to accept and participate in the political debates it seemed to engender; in fact, I was offended by its obvious ambiguity and invitation to argument. I never felt comfortable in either position, considering *Death of a Salesman* as being a defense of or an attack upon the American Capitalist system or the pursuit of the American dream. These arguments seemed contrived to me, and these issues and the intentional ambiguity of Miller in *Death of a Salesman* smacked of manipulation and seemed to be career moves designed to enhance the appeal of the play by creating controversy. Miller readily admitted that he had written his previous play, *All My Sons*, to shock and promote discussion (S. C. Abbotson 1999, 46). So, why can't Willy be a straw man that was created to bring more and continuing controversy and attention to Miller's work, which had just caused political commotion with the play *All My Sons* about war profiteering. Of course, Miller was accused of being a communist when that play appeared in 1947, also (A. Miller, *Timebends* 1987, 238). It became clear to me that *Death of a Salesman* could be interpreted as an oblique attack on the American dream or an ambiguous defense of that dream that one could embrace or reject according for personal or partisan reasons. It was a clever manipulation by the author designed to capitalize on his reputation as a leftist and the

controversy of *All My Sons* to give the play more appeal and to enhance its chance at success, blending ideological controversy with the universal themes of family, love and death.

Death of a Salesman, far from being a social drama, is rather a compelling psychological exploration of character and relationship. Mr. Miller took advantage of his considerable talent and the ambiguous moods of the time to once again hang his claim to greatness on the hook of an intense family drama dealing with fathers and sons, not to attack the American dream. But to look at the relationship of fathers and sons to their individual dreams and the inner dynamics of manhood and what I believe his main purpose is, to connect Family to society. Miller wanted to show that “Willy’s, business life, that he had lived and believed in was an unbroken tissue that was man and society, a single unit rather than two,” (A. Miller, *Timebends* 1987, 182) but not to blame society for the ills of man and the individual as he had in his Michigan school days. He had become more subtle and is no more a callow university student with political pretensions blaming Society for the ills of the individual as he did with *No Villains*, his first prize winning play at the University of Michigan (A. Miller, *Timebends* 1987, 91). He brings the full talents of a mature playwright who knows his craft and audience. He had already proven his capability to write a well-made play with *All My Sons*. Now he would demonstrate how well he knew the Broadway audience of 1949 and give them what they wanted, a well- made play with a cathartic ending and ambiguous references to society as a whole that would appeal them. This audience would include the remnants of the 30’s and 40’s anti-fascist socialist idealists and rising 50’s reactionaries. It seems he also struck a timeless and universal chord in Willy Loman as a straw man for both left and right, who could use him to defend or attack the capitalist system

It also became clear to me with time and more research that Miller’s play is no attack on the American dream but a clever and ambiguous defense of that dream and the values that make

its pursuit possible, and that Willy is a straw man and ploy to bring attention and controversy to the play as a modern tragedy. I intend to prove this by using Miller's own words, life and production, including corroboration from those close to him and from his work. My paper will present Miller as a failed socialist of the 30's who morphed into an old fashioned Yankee moralist who took advantage of the times to write a well-crafted play with universal appeal and enough melodrama to strike a chord in freedom loving peoples everywhere. That it endured all these years is the remarkable factor and a testament to its universality. I will divide my work into: One, an introduction to the reviews and controversies of the play, two, why he became a writer and why he was no ideologue, Three, his so called reputation as a Leftist, four, the genesis of *Death of a Salesman* and my proof of his intentional ambiguity, a summary and conclusion.

Arthur Miller, arguably, is America's premier playwright, and *Death of a Salesman* is his masterpiece. In its debut in 1949, it caused quite an impression and controversy. Not only did enthusiastic reviews by commercial critics cause a commotion among regular play-goers but there was uproar among serious theater scholars regarding his presumptuous presentation of it as a classic Aristotelian tragedy not of those of noble birth but of the common man. His definition of tragedy has been attacked and defended many times in many forums. Susan C. W. Abbotson, noted Miller scholar in *Critical Companion to Arthur Miller, a literary reference to His Life and Work* states:

that Miller two weeks after the debut of his play writes a provocative essay in *The New York Times*, 'Tragedy and the Common Man' defending his contention that his play is a tragedy". Abbotson continues, "That his authoritarian tone rankled academics who espoused an Aristotelian view of tragedy such as John Gassner and Joseph Wood Krutch. Gassner and others eventually came to see the play as a potential tragedy but a low tragedy not a high one such as the Greeks and Shakespeare. (S. Abbotson 2007, 330)

I have no problem with accepting his dramatic structure. But, other critics who had trouble with the dramatic structure have not acquiesced and continue to defend the Aristotelian model. In *The Heath introduction to Drama* the editors say about *Death of a Salesman*,

It is not, however, a modern tragedy. Society has not destroyed Willy Loman. Willy Loman has destroyed himself... Willy is a man, and maybe he should have some attention paid. But Willy is a very little man... far from the heights demanded of tragedy. (J. Y. Miller, 731)

Controversy and interest continue among critics and scholars about these issues, even now. But, as I said I have no argument with the dramatic structure and it is not part of my exploration. Although one could connect his defensive essay, “Tragedy of the Common Man” with its provocative authoritarian tone as another ploy to cause controversy but as Dorothy Parker said, “too many ironies in the fire.”

Miller’s melding of realism and expressionism has also been questioned. Susan C. W. Abbotson, also quotes Brenda Murphy in *Miller: Understanding Death of a Salesman*,

Miller needed a dramatic form that would combine the subjectivity of expressionism with the illusion of objectivity afforded by realism.” She goes on to say, “that Miller was aided in the creation of this form by the director Elia Kazan and the stage designer Jo Meilziner. (S. Abbotson 2007, 130)

I find Miller’s decisions to be sound and to have produced a well-made modern tragedy of the common man crafted in a melodramatic fashion. By using lighting and stage techniques in innovative and provocative ways he shows Willy’s inner thoughts of the past in one part of the stage while Willy is in the present in another part of the stage. Abbotson agrees,

Death of a Salesman would be a new type of drama merging a modern tragedy of the common man with the artistic principles of Realism and Expressionism. It has been accepted over time as taking U.S. drama and theater in new directions. It has probably become the best known U.S. play worldwide. (S. Abbotson 2007, 130)

The quote above suggests why I find *Death of a Salesman* important in any analysis of American culture. I don't dismiss the controversy over dramatic structure. It is just that my aim in my thesis is to examine Miller's themes and purpose in *Death of a Salesman*. Given this situation I must limit my argument.

I concede Miller's premier position in American drama and the standing of *Death of a Salesman* in the pantheon of great dramas in spite of his presumptuousness. I also concede that one can make a case that its main theme was that it was a social drama that blamed the capitalist system and the American dream for making Willy Loman its victim. At its debut in 1949, many accepted that position (S. C. Abbotson 1999, 05). I cannot, I think of his aim not as political but as a continuation of his life's work. The play is an examination of family, manhood, and the price of success, but mainly I think he just sought to continue the success he had found on Broadway with *All My Sons*. Miller was no ideologue but a careerist who took advantage of the Zeitgeist to create controversy and interest in his play. I will attempt to prove this using the words, life, and works of Arthur Miller with the corroboration of those who knew him well. In order to do this effectively and coherently I should put certain terms into perspective as to their meaning in reference to Miller and his work.

When I refer to a well-made-play it is based on Scribe's work and a quote of G. B. Shaw's in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I paraphrase, "The manufacture of a well-made-play is not an art but an industry. A play planned and conducted to a definite and obvious ending." Now, in reference to Miller, *All My Sons* was to be his last and best effort to write a classic well-made-play. He was two years removed from the University of Michigan with about 6 to 9 unproduced plays to his credit and he was nearing 30 when he began writing *All My Sons* as his final shot at playwriting. If he didn't succeed he was giving up. He took several years to write this play,

holding it back until he was sure everything was perfect. This was his version of a well-made-play. The initial reviews were mixed. Some felt the play too contrived, predictable and overly plotted (S. C. Abbotson 1999, 48). Some even accused him of being a Communist. (S. C. Abbotson 1999, 48) The positive review of the *New York Times*, by Brooks Atkinson, saved him. (S. Abbotson 2007, 48), and (A. Miller, *Timebends* 1987, 237,243-44) the play became a hit.

As for my reference to a social drama, such plays usually have a social problem, most likely an individual in conflict with some sort of institution but every drama does not involve a social problem. G. B. Shaw says some dramas involve universals such as love, death, accident or personal character. (Corrigan 1964, 972-73) Miller takes this paradigm and intertwines it with contradictory forces that work on people, past against present, society against the individual, and greed against ethics. (S. Abbotson 2007, 10)

I refer to Ambiguity in two ways. One, in reference to the Zeitgeist, the mood of the time Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman* and the effect it had on the audience of 1949. The Zeitgeist, refers to the post-war hysteria about the Soviet Union. America was adjusting from being an ally of Russia in World War II to again being an enemy which it had been since the revolution of 1917 (A. Miller, *Timebends* 1987, 234) Two, His intent seems to be intentionally ambiguous for Willy cannot be pathetic if this is to be a true tragedy. He must have a chance at victory. (A. Miller, *New York Times* "Tragedy of the Common Man" 27 February 1949)

The 1949 audience is special in that it includes both left and right and Miller caters to both. I will deal with this later.

Before my proofs I think it important in order to ascertain the themes and purpose in Miller's work—to look at why Miller felt he had to write. Here is what he said as quoted by C.W.E. Bigsby:

...One had the right to write because other people needed news of the inner world and if they went too long without such news they would go mad with the chaos of their lives... I wrote not only to find a way into the world but hold it away from me so that it would not devour me. (C. Bigsby 1984, 246)

Mr. Miller's words are reflective and look inward. He does not sound like a crusading socialist. This is no outpouring of dogmatic socialist theories. He states his purpose as personal: to understand others. By exploring these inner conflicts his attempts will reveal universal truths far more important than the pettiness of partisan politics. He does not write as an ideologue espousing ideas or advocating a system. I reinforce this because his words on *Death of a Salesman* describe a play about a dysfunctional family abandoning personal responsibility and getting lost in individual goals with the wrong dreams and values being imparted from father to sons, not a socialist harangue. This is a tale of a man lost in a personal delusion. Willy seems caught in a nightmare, watching his position of provider and man of the house slip away.

This universal issue of manhood and being displaced as the provider is important for it supports Miller's own contentions of what the theme of his play is; why Willy qualifies as a tragic hero in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man."

But surely the right of one monarch to capture the domain from another no longer raises our passions, nor are our concepts of justice what they were to the mind of an Elizabethan King... The quality in such plays that does shake us, however derives from an underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world. Among us today this fear is strong, perhaps stronger, than it ever was. In fact, it is the common man who knows this fear best. (*New York Times* "Tragedy of the Common Man" 27 February 1949, sec2,1)

The universality of being deposed is not reserved for kings. Excuse the cliché, but “A man’s home is his castle” and he is king in his own home. Miller makes a passionate plea for the common man’s vulnerability to royal tragedy. This is an artist at work. Willy is a victim of dreams, most certainly, and Miller presents him that way but not as the victim of the American dream. He is victim to the fantasy that he is well liked and successful. Miller in the first act portrays him as an old washed up salesman who can’t drive ten miles without turning back in defeat; overwhelmed by reality, bad news for a traveling salesman. His illusion of success is predicated on personal popularity and good appearance. However, Miller has Willy looking pitiful, and when he asks for adjustments in his working conditions the boss fires him. He is a victim of his dreams all right, but the wrong dreams, ones he couldn’t attain. Willy has been reaching for the stars his whole life. When he was young the pursuit of his dreams was enough and success seemed inevitable. Now in his waning years the world is exposing him as a failure.

When a man’s position is usurped in the larger social context as Willy’s is by his failure as a businessman. He becomes difficult and defensive at home. So, naturally when Willy is displaced in society, his place in the family is jeopardized and his tensions with his sons are heightened making a basis for a play. I paraphrase Christopher Bigsby on page 24 of *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*: Willy represents the past and authority which must be challenged. The son’s revolt is tempered with guilt. Will the sons be captured by the father’s myth and justify their lives at the expense of their individuality? (C. Bigsby 1997, 24-25).

Bigsby is not alone in focusing on the psychological drama in the play instead of the political ambiguity. Harold Clurman, as a close confidant who would be privy to Miller’s thoughts and purposes of the play, supports my claim that this is an exploration of family,

fathers, and sons. He wrote in volume one of *Theatre*, the annual of the repertory theater of Lincoln Center:

Death of a Salesman, like the two preceding Miller plays, involved a father in conflict with his son on a moral issue. Miller is a moralist, according to one view, a moralist is a man who believes he possesses the truth and aims to convince others of it. In Miller this moralistic trait stems from a strong family feeling. In this context, the father as prime authority and guide is central. From *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, his first attempt on Broadway, through *Death of a Salesman*, the father stands for virtue and value; to his sons he is the personification of right and truth...The shock which shatters Miller's dramatic cosmos always begins with the father's inability to enact the role of moral authority the son assigns to him...

Mr. Clurman is particularly convincing as he has quite a reputation as an ideologue himself, so it is revealing that he doesn't take advantage of the circumstances and ambiguity to trumpet his political theories. No, he knows Miller's modus operandi and sees the work for what it is, a psychological struggle between fathers and sons. Although, political ambiguity is noted with more time in a 1984 review in the *New York Times* of the Dustin Hoffman production, the theme of fathers and sons is reinforced, Frank Rich concedes.

That Miller's condemnation of the American success ethic is "stated baldly" but he then makes references to the symbolic older brother Ben forever championing the American dream in literary prose. He stresses, however, that *Death of a Salesman*, like most of Miller's work is most of all about fathers and sons and points out that there are many father-son relationships in the play. In fact, he states eloquently the drama's tidal pull comes from the sons' tortured attempts to reconcile themselves to their father's dreams. For him, it's not Willy's pointless death that moves us; it's Biff's decision to go on living. Biff, the princely high-school football hero turned drifter, must find the courage both to love his father and leave him forever behind. There is more evidence that *Death of a Salesman* is primarily a love story between a man and his son and America,

Although Miller is ambiguous about the fault of society, he is clear about the fault of family. It seems much of the play's tension and melodrama come from Willy and Biff's dueling delusions and Biff's tortured attempts with Willy's and his own dreams. Willy's needless death is not as a victim; it is just pitiful in a melodramatic sense, but not cathartic. The catharsis is in

Biff's gaining knowledge by recognizing and showing his love for Willy, yet letting go of trying to please him. Much of the play's emotional impact comes from Willy's and Biff's dueling delusions and Biff's tortured attempts to deal with Willy's and his own dreams. Willy's pointless death is not as a victim nor is it cathartic. The emotional impact is in Biff's decision to go on living. He and we gain wisdom.

Rich continues as he uses Miller's own words to reinforce this,

Willy takes flight late in Act 1 when he first alludes to his relationship with his own father. Recalling how his father left when he was still a child, Willy says, 'I never had a chance to talk to him, and I still felt--kind of temporary about myself.' Much of the play's emotional impact comes from both archetypical sons' tortured attempts to reconcile themselves to their father's dreams, as much from Willy's pointless death as from Biff's decision to go on living. Fifty years later, the fearfulness of Willy's predicament is undiminished because at heart we have the intuition that the soul of a man disposes him to provide for his family. If he can't do that, then in some fundamental way he has failed as a man, and he knows it. We may repress this instinctive knowledge but ultimately it pops up like a rubber duck in the bathtub. Fifty years from now, whatever new varieties of social progress have been inflicted on us, we can be sure that- in its timelessness, however unintended by its author-*Death of a Salesman* will be alive and well.

Miller's play has proven to be exactly that with its many successful revivals. Some suggest that Miller's greatness as a playwright was his intuitive grasp of the direction of American society's evolution (Roudane' 1995, 126). One would have to agree considering that interest and scholarship continues from 1949 to the present day.

Miller heightens Willy's failure by Biff's circumstances: he is adrift and out of work. Willy has spent most of his life invested in Biff's success, another of Willy's pipe dreams. It is clear that Willy has burdened his boys with unrealistic expectations and given them the wrong tools for success, to be well liked and "personality wins the day". Miller contrasts this with the success of others in the play (Charley and Bernard) hard work, (Howard) inheritance, or (Ben) sheer luck (S. C. Abbotson 1999, 5). The boys have tried to live up to Willy's expectations and

failed. Miller has Biff resisting them because he now realizes that Willy's dreams do not match his (Corrigan 1964). Biff must find the courage to leave his father, forgive him and still love him. It is a rite of passage; we can only hope Biff is becoming a man. Happy is as deluded as Willy. All three seem headed for a disappointing climax, but not because of any system. These are three failed individuals lost in a dream world, not the American dream. They are members of a failed and dysfunctional family.

I know I am trying to present Miller's work as family drama as compared to a social drama; but, it would be naïve and disingenuous to dismiss Miller's significant social commentary on capitalism and the American dream. There is no doubt that he addresses larger issues about American values and one should pay attention to these, especially since the question of *Death of a Salesman's* social themes started a debate that has lasted close to 70 years with ammunition for both sides plentiful. (S. C. Abbotson 1999, xvi) Murphy and Abbotson say,

Miller has been criticized for presenting Willy's failure as the inevitable end of a man who has finally broken under the pressures of the American economic system. "They go on to state that the play's social statement is centered on the "American Dream" or "success myth." The notion that any American can realize material wealth and his dream through hard work and devotion to business. They claim some defend Miller as an upholder of this "American Dream" and Willy's failure is personal but most critics write that Miller blames the American economic system for Willy's failure. (S. C. Abbotson 1999, 05)

I disagree. Miller's *oeuvre* was always a moral exploration of the family and society especially in *Fathers and Sons* according to Clurman. My contention is that the play is not an indictment of the system. It is an ambiguous cautionary tale that gives the audience what it wants. The audience could identify with Willy any way it wants and view his suicide as heroic or

cowardly. It can blame the system or blame Willy. In the end Miller gives them a sentimental and melodramatic ending. They can feel pity for Linda and Happy or hope for Biff.

But the theater is not that simple or predictable. Over time, there have been a wide variety of interpretations and analysis of the themes of Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. The attack on capitalism and the American dream will be our focus. Yet my analysis of Miller's words on theme and purpose are focused on inward personal relationships like the ones I mentioned earlier. His purpose in these writings was not outwardly political but that's not what others saw in 1949 and in later revivals. Cultural critics seem drawn to it. We will stick to the attempts to attack it on political grounds with a comparison to communism and Marxist theory as the main complaint, since the Cold War was so much in the news.

But, this would not be the only issues, Miller's controversial dramatic structure brought attention to the play. Also, his ambiguous Hero (?) would act as a lightning rod for many groups looking for a cultural argument. Feminists later commented on the gender issues given the masculine slant to the 1949 debut. Materialism and the post war rush for the good life was also the focus of analysis. Psychological issues were also evident in *Death of a Salesman*; given Willy's state of mind in fact, Miller initially was going to title it "The inside of His Head". That theme was the reason for unifying his tragedy with realism and expressionism to better show what was going on in Willy's head. The coming role of technology and Willy's interaction with it has also been examined. It is a tribute to the universality of the play that in these post-modern times you can find an argument and create controversy for most schools of criticism. There are the "New Critics" and the Deconstructionists happy and willing to join the controversy and who can keep up with the French. These issues would call for a paper of their own. Which, is why I

have limited my argument to the supposed attack on the “American Dream” and Miller’s political philosophy.

These other issues came later with change and time. Let’s examine some opinions left and right. Who disagreed that Miller was an upholder of the American Dream and some thought him a socialist sympathizer who blamed the system and the dream for Willy’s troubles.

In the creation of *Death of a Salesman* Miller would ironically be reviled by the leftist intelligentsia and yet be suspected of communist sympathies (S. Abbotson 2007, 129). One finds it hard to believe that he would be misunderstood, ergo, the ploy is working.

Tom Driver states about Miller as a Marxist, “Some believe his work presents a socialist commentary he bears a quasi- Marxist stamp and most of his plays tend to become mere partisan social critiques” (Driver, 48). Driver is dismissive of Miller’s supposed attempt to martyr Willy at the cross of Capitalism and views it as Partisan claptrap. He has a point.

William Wiegand, sees Miller “as a borrower of Clifford Odets’ Marxist themes as a preacher who sermonizes on the pathetic martyrdom of an oppressed middle class” (wiegand, 85-103). Wiegand dismisses him as a minion of the left and a copycat. I see the connection.

Eleanor Clark surmises, “It is of course, the capitalistic system that has done Willy in...this comes straight from the party line of the thirties, the idea emerges lucidly from the confused motivations of the play that it is our money economy that has bred the absurdly false ideals of both father and sons” (Clark, 633). Sarcasm and contempt drip copiously and rightly so to the true believer.

Henry Popkin claims, “Miller blames the system through a liberal parable of hidden evil and social responsibility” (Popkin, 34,59). Miller stretches belief, and Willy is sacrificed. Miller is melodramatic. It was not just critics from the right who saw the attack on the American dream, but the left had critics who saw the same attack; Linda Winer, reviewing the 1999 revival in

The 1949 Pulitzer prize- winner remains one of America’s few great dramas, one that challenges middle- American values without losing the very people it is shredding. There isn’t an unnecessary line in what Miller originally subtitled ‘private conversations in two acts and a requiem. Every sentence reveals character. Each action demands a reaction ... ”Salesman” is an indictment of the American dream, materialism and the loss of respect for simple work. (Winer 1999)

Miller had certainly struck a nerve with the ideologues, and I believe that was his intention. I think he was quite intentional in giving them cannon fodder for their attacks. But he also left room for other interpretations. Let’s take a look at one of the minority opinions, someone who did pay attention to Miller’s history and fondness for Father and son dramas. Leading critic of the time and defender of Miller, Brooks Atkinson, of the *New York Times*, on 20 February 1949, had this to say about *Death of a Salesman* and the system at its premiere.

Discarded in his old age from the only world he knows, Willy Loman, the worn out salesman, crawls into his grave where he thinks he is worth more to his family than he would be if he was still tinkering around the house. But Mr. Miller does not blame Willy, his sons, his boss or the system, And he draws no conclusions. Mr. Miller In the space of one somber evening in the theatre has caught the life and death of a traveling salesman and has told it tenderly with decent respect for Willy’s dignity as a man.

Hmmm, Miller does not blame the system, nor does he draw any conclusions about the American dream. Big business and the Capitalist system are not the villains or the theme of *Death of a Salesman*. Political themes are barely mentioned by the premier critic of his time, Atkinson. Later in the 1999 revival, the noted theater historian and critic, Robert Brustein, who

was not taken in by Miller's political ploy, treats the play as the social melodrama it was.

Brustein points out that much of the power of the 1999 revival of the play:

Is also based on the sure-fire convention of Yiddish theater. As if it was in a direct line from Second Avenue.... *Death of a Salesman* climaxes with a rebellious son being reconciled with his estranged father . . . The moment when Willy discovers that Biff actually loves him still has the capacity to drench an audience in tears. (Compare Al Jolson being forgiven by his stern Orthodox father for having become a teaterzinger rather than a cantor. (Brustein, 2930)

Yet the previously mentioned other critics attack political themes with passion.

Clurman, Atkinson and Brustein were more concerned with the dramatic content rather than the political, but their opinions seems to be gaining favor. Ambiguity has been noted in revivals, and the twenty first century zeitgeist is certainly much different than 1949 with the end of Communism and the cold war.

I found that it was easy to line up friend or foe for attack or defense of the American dream. I'm going to accept that ambiguity as proof of an intentional ploy. Miller was too proficient and experienced a writer not to make his position distinct, evident and unclouded if he so desired.

The Longman Anthology, in their analysis of Willy agrees regarding the play's ambiguity:

Sometimes lost in the contradictions surrounding the death of this salesman are the facts that Willy's dreams were not all bad and that the play is not a condemnation of the free enterprise system. We must remember that while Willy sought success, he also wanted a good life for his family. What he sees in Dave Singleman, although sentimentalized is the notion that personality, respect, comradeship, and gratitude are worthwhile goals. But unfortunately, Willy sees them as the end rather than as means to an end. He is seemingly ignorant of the fact that it was personality, respect, comradeship, and gratitude that made Dave Singleman successful and not success that made him personable, respected, friendly, and worthy of gratitude. The play also portrays the success of Charley and Bernard, which is in no way indicated as being unethical, evil or immoral. (Michael L. Greenwald 2002, 1162)

Willy might be victimized but the Longman Anthology seems to be saying we shouldn't blame the system, but maybe Willy himself. Miller always leaves room for these kind of rationalizations. Especially about Willy and his skewed interpretation of the American dream, they go on,

To Willy, Dave Singleman and his brother Ben personify the American dream, and he envisions himself raising a family that will inhabit this dream world. Realizing that he will never achieve this dream, Willy projects this vision onto his sons, who represent the two parts of their father, the skilled laborer (Biff) and the inept businessman (Hap). The play, the Longman editors go on to imply, is about the death of more than one salesman. It is also about the death of the salesman in Biff. Biff unlike his father, whose lack of awareness of his plight is total, has acquired full awareness and is released from his father's dream world and is willing to accept his limitations and live within them (Michael L. Greenwald, 1162)

It should be made clear that I am not talking about the idealistic American Dream starting with our country's formation as a haven from religious persecution. Nor about the get rich quick dream of the explorers, adventurers and robber barons who plundered our resources or about the go west admonishments of Greeley. I also exclude the dream deferred of racial equality. No, I refer to the idealized middle-class dream of a home in the suburbs with a white picket fence, a refrigerator and maybe a T. V. that had its basis in the 30's (Brater 2013). By this definition, Willy is no victim of the American dream. He has attained it; He has worked steadily, his mortgage will be paid off, and his family loves him. But Willy is not satisfied with the dreams he has attained. He is in pursuit of the ones he can't attain, the wrong ones, as I stated earlier and as Miller has Biff point out in the requiem. The majority of the audience in 1949 chose to ignore that Willy had always provided and sacrificed for his family in order to achieve the degree of success he had. They focused on his failures to project the proper values to his sons, and thus crippling them in their pursuit of not their dreams, but his. Miller, of course was ambiguous,

Miller weaves Willy's conflicted relations with his family and sons with ambiguous political polemics for and against the institutions, deliberately designed to cater to all the post-war audience in a blatant attempt at controversy and success. I believe the dramatic structure was also part of this attempt, and it has continued to be effective. Once again flattering Miller with his timeliness and universality. I hesitate to blame Mr. Loman's problems on the capitalistic system and the American dream as the audience of 1949 hastily did, nor do I think that was Miller's purpose. I do not think Mr. Miller's play unfolds as a social drama attacking the capitalist system and the American dream.

Yet, if we assess his actual position versus his aspirations and dreams, his position was not ethically compromised and represented the decent values of the American middle class. He had achieved the American dream of 1949. So Miller is not attacking the American dream but Willy's relationship to it. Achieving the Dream wasn't enough for Willy. Although he has had a measure of success, he wanted more, and in his waning years he recognizes he can't achieve any more. So, once again he projects his unrealistic dreams onto his sons, Biff and Happy. He will get them money to start a sporting goods company. This is a drama focusing on family, especially father and son relations (S. C. Abbotson 1999, 141), not a social drama. A social drama as stated previously usually has an individual in conflict with some sort of institution and the author a partisan advocate either for or against the institution. (More about this later.) Miller does not reject the basic values and institutions of America, but he does reject Willy's values. Social drama would not have the legs or universality of *Death of a Salesman*; can you imagine Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* getting the reception that *Death of a Salesman* got on Broadway in 2001?

George Bernard Shaw is quoted in *The Modern Theater*,

Social questions are produced by the conflict of human institutions with human feeling... Now the material of the dramatist is always some conflict of human feelings with circumstances; so that, since institutions are circumstances, every social question furnishes material for drama. But every drama does not involve a social question, because human feeling may be in conflict with circumstances which are not institutions, which raise no question at all, which are part of human destiny... like love, death, accident, personal character, lies outside all institutions; and this gives it a permanent and universal interest which makes the drama that deals with independent of the period and place. Family, love and death with these alone you can, if you are a sufficiently great dramatic poet, make a drama that will keep your language alive long after it has passed out of common use. (Corrigan, 972-973)

Time has proven that Miller did this in *Death of a Salesman*. He created universal conflicts that were part of all human destiny--Love ,Death, Family, Character--and intertwined them with as he said the contradictory forces that work on people; past against present, society against the individual, and greed against ethics. These themes will evoke all manner of emotions in any system, especially when political ambiguity is introduced.

Miller uses the Zeitgeist to embellish and enhance the appeal of his well-made play with political controversy. The play is a psychological, dramatic expression of one man's reaction to being displaced by society as head of his family and deals with the universal themes of family, fathers, sons, love, death and success. Although, it is about dreams it is not specifically attacking the American Dream. Rather, he explores how the dream relates to Willy and his family, how Willy had the wrong dreams and projected them on his sons and family.

Miller was challenging an American idealistic notion that success of the individual in business was somehow tied to his success in society or vice versa. In Willy's mind likability and good looks in the larger society equaled success in business. Abbotson compares Miller's and Willy's thoughts on success to the writings and success myths of Dale Carnegie, Horatio Alger, Benjamin Franklin, and others (S. C. Abbotson 1999, 15-30). According to Abbotson, American

society has always embraced conflicting myths and beliefs about success, and Willy seems to admire and idolize the success myths of guys like Ben. Miller explores this with the characters within *Death of a Salesman*. He contrasts the Protestant work ethic of Charley and Bernard with the success myth of Ben Loman and the inherited wealth of Howard Wagner. He shows a clear moral distinction between the callousness, greed and selfishness of Ben and Howard to win their fortune at the cost of others, and Charley and Bernard whose success is tempered with thoughts of others (S. C. Abbotson 1999, 14-15). Although Miller presents the success myth as the basis of Willy's life, it is not the basis of his play, as there are exceptions in the play, noted above. In my initial analysis of *Death of a Salesman*'s theme, purpose and genesis, Miller's words are focused on and seem to deal with personal relationships and inward motivations within the family, yet mindful of society as a whole. His words and purpose were not outwardly political or an attack on a social system, but these are what many others have perceived through the years despite the play's ambiguity and contradictions. Miller, himself in his introduction to his *Collected Plays* says, "A play cannot be equated with a political philosophy." (A. Miller, Arthur Miller's *Collected Plays With An Introduction 1957*). Abbotson and I agree that while Miller refused to allow his play to be reduced to its political implications, he made those implications clear and sometimes contradictory whenever he had the opportunity (S. C. Abbotson 1999, xvi). His quote above denies that *Death of a Salesman* is a social drama, and the quote below confirms this:

Miller states in his essay "The Family in Modern Drama", "How may a man make of the outside world a home... If, for instance, the struggle in *Death of a Salesman* were simply between father and son for recognition and forgiveness, it would diminish in importance. But when it extends itself out of the family circle and into society, it broaches those questions of social status, social honor and recognition, which expand its vision and lift it out of the merely particular toward the fate of the generality of men." (Martin, 69)

Here, he seems to take his play out of the realm of family drama that Atkinson, Brustein and Clurman have placed it and give it more social significance.

In the introduction to *Death of a Salesman* in *The Bedford Introduction to Literature* the editor, Michael Meyer, recognizes this when he compares and interprets Miller to Chekhov and Ibsen

In that he places his characters in a social context so their behavior within the family suggests larger implications: The death of this salesman raises issues concerning the significance and value of the American dream of success. (Meyer 2008, 1907)

It also raises the question of my thesis. Does Willy Loman represent an attack, defense or ploy? Miller's leitmotif of ambiguity sometimes rising to a crescendo leaves no alternative but to answer, "all of the above." Why? Because of his reputation as a leftist and his previous success with *All My Sons*--a controversial mixture of family drama, social drama and war profiteering--he had become a lightning rod for the debate between the retreating 30's and 40's true believer socialists and the post war 50's reactionary right. Why not take advantage of this controversy and cater to it by creating a straw man that both sides could defend and attack as they had done to him over *All My Sons*? Miller alludes to this in *Timebends* as to how he was attacked politically for *All My Sons*. He said, "Joe McCarthy was still some 5 years in the future but his entrance music was wafting in the air." (A. Miller, *Timebends* 1987, 238) Willy Loman was his alter-ego and straw man for the audience of 1949 and the future to fight over. His new play would continue the controversy and (hopefully) success of his previous work *All My Sons* which as I said he said he wrote to shock and promote discussion (S. C. Abbotson 1999, 46). Miller in creating Willy in his image as a lightning rod and straw man for the left and right would be creating a play representing both an attack and defense of the American dream. Miller's leftist

reputation would facilitate this. It would rally the 30's and 40's true believers and incite the 50's reactionaries in the 1949 audience.

Miller's leftist reputation began with his school days at Michigan. Miller and his first wife Mary, although never actually members of the Communist Party had strong sympathy for the communist cause. (S. Abbotson 2007, 5). It was the 1930's, and America's campuses and the theater community were in rebellion against the failed America of the Great Depression. (A. Miller, *Timebends* 1987, 237) The prestige of the communists was cresting (A. Miller, *Timebends* 1987, 232) Miller earned a reputation as a leftist because of this flirtation with Communism in the 1930's, which really was short-lived. He, as many artists, was drawn to the idealistic aspects of communism, but realized the Artist could not thrive in such a regimented society (S. C. Abbotson 1999, 129).. He was no advocate of communism but like many college students in the 30's he had a flirtation with socialist theory; in fact, a case could be made that during the 30's a majority felt this way.

As idealistic 1930's college students they would naturally be influenced by their time in Ann Arbor, which was regarded as a radical enclave in the heart of the midwest. Yet, Miller says in *Timebends*,

nevertheless, with all the radical turmoil on the campus in the 30's, it was a myth that the student body, let alone the faculty, was predominatly leftist. Most students by far and almost all the faculty, were mainly interested in their careers, just as they always are. (A. Miller, *Timebends* 1987, 97)

Yes, he was influenced by his time at Michigan. He became more interested in becoming a playwright rather than a Marxist. Later in *Timebends* he says,

No one in my generation can be understood without reference to his relationship to Marxism as the “the god that failed.” (A. Miller, *Timebends* 1987)

Miller would pursue his craft and not an ideology. He would go on in *Timebends*, “I rejected communism and Hollywood as being too restrictive of the artist.” (A. Miller, *Timebends* 1987, 129)

Miller’s leftist reputation, ambiguity, and the controversy over *All My Sons* probably accounts for the misinformed majority opinion in 1949 and probably for continued misinterpretations. Miller had become a lightning rod for the anti-communist post-war reactionaries. I think as I said earlier the attacks on him as a strawman for the fears and arguments of the opponents of communism gave him the idea of creating an ambiguous Willy for the same purpose. Well, we have a reason for his leftist reputation and political ambiguity, but why *The Death of a Salesman* and family drama, not victimization and social drama?

Many who haven’t read *Death of a Salesman* think they know what the play is about. Oh yeah, Arthur Miller, Willy Loman, victim of The American dream and capitalism. It is understandable that people would think that this was the message that Miller would try to convey, given his early leftist leanings. His comments on why he chose to write--especially why he chose to write *Death of a Salesman*--and why he felt the tragedy of the common man was in being displaced would certainly be lost in his notoriety as a leftist. We have evidence that he was no longer a leftist. What proof do we have of his purpose in writing *Death of a Salesman*?

It was said earlier that in the introduction to *Death of a Salesman* in *The Bedford Introduction to Literature* the editor Michael Meyer compares Miller to Chekhov and Ibsen in that he places his characters in a social context so their behavior within the family suggests larger implications. Miller would certainly do this in his masterpiece, connecting the problems within

the family to the larger society. If we examine his work previous to *Death of a Salesman* we will see that this is not the first time Miller has connected problems in the family with the larger society or vice versa.

No, it is not Miller's first attempt to explore the dynamics of familial relationships and manhood intertwined with social and political implications. He began as a 1930's college student attacking the system and society yet still in the context of an intense family drama. In his autobiography *Timebends: A Life* he mentions that in his first play at the University of Michigan, *No Villains*, he used models from his own family to tell a story about a strike at a garment factory that set a son against his own father. The father, a coat manufacturer, was facing a strike and possible bankruptcy. As the title indicates he blames no individual but society. (A. Miller, *Timebends*, 91) This obviously was early in his career, and he was having a flirtation with the left as most university students in the 30's had. He later rewrote the play as a comedy and titled it *They too Arise*. This was the beginning of his success, and *No Villains* earned him his first Hopwood Award at the University of Michigan. The play was never produced, and he would realize little success with his writing for years to follow. During that time he was perfecting his craft.

The father and son conflict would be fertile ground for Miller. Later in his career he would continue this exploration and write *All My Sons*. If you recall this was to take several years and was to be his final stand as a playwright. It is a story about a father who gets away with selling faulty air plane parts to the Air Force, but ultimately things go wrong and his two sons find out. Sound familiar? He has evolved in that he doesn't blame society but individual responsibility for the troubles of the father. It would become a Broadway hit and his biggest success to date.

One would think that this would reinforce his proclivity for family drama, not that he would see this new found success as an opportunity to climb on a soap box and attack a cherished notion of a victorious and confident nation in his next play. No, one would think he would stick with what he knew. As he stated in the introduction to his collected plays, about *Death of a Salesman*, "I set out not to write a tragedy but to write the truth as I saw it." (A. Miller, *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays With An Introduction* 1957)

Miller was well acquainted with the truth of failed salesman as his father Isadore lost his business in the Great Depression of 1929. He felt the displacement it caused in their lives when they had to move from the upper east-side of Manhattan to a more humble residence in Brooklyn. This is also where he would say in a later interview with Robert Sylvester for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1949 that at least thirty uncles were in and out of his house, and that most of them were traveling salesmen. In this statement he shows respect and understanding for successful salesmen and implies his attack might be personally on Willy and not the system. Ambiguously, of course.

Abbotson says that, "After the success of *All My Sons* Miller felt free to create something more adventurous, hopefully something never before seen on stage...seeing tension as the very stuff of drama Miller tried to recreate in a play what he saw as the contradictory forces that operate on people past against present, society against the individual and greed against ethics. He was not sure of his topic." (Abbotson, 10)

Whatever the topic, his themes would be the forces that operate on people. These forces were clear and contradictory, and this would create more ambiguity.

His topic would come to him later in a chance encounter with his Uncle Manny Newman, who would be the model for Willy, his strawman with all the contradictory forces

working on him. Abbotson in her *Companion* relates the genesis of *Death of a Salesman*: “After the success of *All My Sons* Miller was confident and began looking for an idea for his next work, something new and edgy. He ran into his Uncle Manny Newman at a matinee performance of his play. He asked how he was doing and right away Manny went into explaining how well his sons were doing, building them up against their successful cousin. There was no pause. Manny took the conversation there immediately. This gave Miller an idea to write a play with no transitions. The dialogue would flow from one scene to the next without any apparent breaks, in no chronological order. He would create a form that displayed the past and the present as if they were occurring at the same time. He would be able to show the audience what was going on inside the head of his protagonist, a salesman. Uncle Manny became the prototype for Willy. Manny had a wild imagination and a tendency to brag. He was also prone to black moods and bouts of despair and may have committed suicide” (Abbotson, 130). Manny was aptly named. He was a walking manuscript for Miller to follow for his next play and topic. Miller had a topic, themes, and a ploy. He had already mastered the well-made-play, now he would show his mastery over the 1949 audience.

The audience of 1949 and future audiences, as we will discover with successful revivals through the years found Willy (Manny) fascinating; he would appeal to or offend both the left (Old Guard 30’s and 40’s socialists) and the right (Vanguard of retreating 50’s reactionaries). The audience could identify with Willy and view his suicide as the act of a hero or a coward. Miller would give the audience whatever they wanted. First, the Old Guard, I quote from *The Fervent Years*.

The Old Guard, had just gone through the stock market crash and the depression. It was a time when the free market had failed them and they were looking for new ideas. The theater was not immune. It was going through a period of espousing leftist political

principles; of course by 1949 it was swinging the other way, but there were still people unafraid to criticize, as Harold Clurman said in *The Fervent Years*: “I have called the thirties a period of spiritual activity. Actually, however, the thirties were almost as scornful of the word as the twenties had been. Spirit smacked of mysticism and was therefore anathema. In the thirties the demands of the spirit for the younger people could only be satisfied by action that in some way became social or political. Hence the appetite for meetings and demonstrations and parades in some cause in which a specific social issue was at stake... (Clurman 1945, 289)

Miller, of course, would be familiar with this part of his audience due to his own 30's flirtation with the left, Clurman and Miller were also familiar with the backlash Vanguard, as Clurman would state later in the *Fervent Years* about the late forties

“A sharp reaction set in which made everything that smacked of a departure from the status quo more than a little suspect... The political constriction that began to make itself felt around 1947 and reached its climax about 1953 made almost everyone disinclined to commit themselves to any opinion that suggested anything besides loyalty.” He goes on to say that it made people less glib and less dogmatic. He also felt that what happened to most of his contemporaries is that it made them want to be inconspicuous citizens with no other thought but to get on, no other ideal other than celebrity or success. (Clurman 1945, 305-306)

Clurman and Miller were good friends and working colleagues. I propose that Miller was either influenced by these opinions or he might even be the model for this evolution of a thirties activist into a fifties reactionary. The ambiguity of *Death of a Salesman* suggests the latter.

Miller, in the previously mentioned interview in *Saturday Evening Post* of 1949, would tell Sylvester, and I paraphrase, that the fantasy ridden and agonized Willy pursued the seductive but unreal “Bitch Goddesses” of popularity and success. Exactly what Clurman attributed to his contemporaries? What a coincidence? Miller would admit in his autobiography, *Timebends: A Life*, that he was not above dreaming about success and the power, wealth and fame that went with it. (A. Miller, *Timebends* 1987, 232)

Arthur Miller in 1949 was a perfect example of a young, empathetic thirties idealist running into the realities of familial responsibilities, (marriage and children) and post war career opportunities; mixed in with the cooling of young 30's idealist fervor. It was a perfect storm for success. All Miller had to do was morph into the postwar American ideal of individual responsibility, morality and hard work. That's what won the war wasn't it? The idealism of the thirties was becoming moribund and an anachronism, yet, still was a force in the audience of 1949.

Miller presents to this audience his strawman Willy as an Everyman with universal appeal or rejection that the audience of 1949, the generation who had survived the stock market crash, the Depression and World War II could embrace with guilt, pity, sympathy or contempt; in short, he made them feel the way they wanted. He told audience what they wanted to hear. As we have seen in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, Miller's heroes do not make decisions based on wisdom and reason, but rather on feelings and impulse. This is far from challenging audiences; Miller manipulates audiences and leads them to what they want to hear. *Death of a Salesman* is well suited to this description, because, as Margaret Spillane says in her review of the 1999 production in *The Nation*,

It is a particularly visceral play, one where both sides of the footlights collaborate in making meaning. This latest production of salesman rescues Miller's play from the safe shelf of syllabus drama and reinstates its visceral power. Theater audiences are always more than viewers. They are witnesses and to what they can never at the outset be sure, no matter how well they know the text. Each time a play is performed the contract between players and an audience has to be renewed. As Hecklers and John Wilkes Booth has shown, each side of the footlights contains the power to force the script in unforeseeable directions. (Spillane, 7)

Even Miller was surprised by the emotional reaction to his play. One presumes that even with manipulation and ambiguity, Miller did not expect the depth of the reaction: grown men wept openly, there was too much identification with Willy, the plays ironies were being dimmed by all the empathy. (S. Abbotson 2007, 194) Had he gone too far?

Attention must be paid to Miller's manipulations. Miller could be misunderstood during changing times. One can come to the conclusion that ambiguity was desired and the key component of his play. Miller was well aware of the ambiguity in his play. He says in his introduction to *Collected Plays* "'Salesman' is a slippery play to categorize... (A. Miller, *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays With An Introduction*) In the years since the play opened there have been an impressively large number of books, articles, essays and discussions. All attempting to evaluate, explain, attack and defend in a variety of ways *Death of a Salesman* and like the discussions the play goes on and on. He seems rather proud of it, reinforcing that it was his intent to create controversy and ambiguity. Indeed, it is a slippery play to categorize. There have been many revivals over time, and critics' opinions like concrete either set or crumble with time. Let's review what some critics said about Miller's ambiguity. Many, as I said earlier, who haven't read the play think they know what *Death of a Salesman* is about. As David Klinghoffer, reviewing the 1999 production in the *National Review*,ⁱ describes his early perceptions:

ARTHUR MILLER: Eyes roll up in one's head at the mention of the name. The McCarthy witch-hunt era, bankruptcy of the American dream, rapacious capitalism... For most, the play has something to do with the bankruptcy of the American dream. Willy Loman, travelling salesman, is driven to suicide because success American-Style is all about nakedly marketing oneself. 'The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell,' declares Willy's neighbor Charley. Later however, Klinghoffer stresses that the fact is the play is about Willy being displaced as a provider, about manhood. A man's descent into failure is horrendous to contemplate. Whatever line of work you are in; we are all salesmen, selling out products, our services, ourselves. Says Willy's neighbor Charley, in a line that crystalizes the anxiety of uncountable men everywhere, not just in America:

and when they start not smiling back’ –employers, partners, and customers-- ‘that’s an earthquake.

Miller’s manipulation and ambiguity has Klinghoffer changing his perception of the play mid review. Miller could be misunderstood during these changing times, and he wouldn’t mind. He could accept that some of his audience would disconnect, and reinforce their prejudices, and go back home. Even though some critics attack this ambiguity not as conscious skillfulness but as confusing, they still support my claims about family drama and ambiguity. I paraphrase Lloyd Rose in the *Washington Post*,

The play works on stage, and stays with people, because of the tortured relationship between Willy and his elder son Biff... This is a play about hating your father and loving your father and owing your father and, above all, never being good enough for your father. It’s about letting the old man go, As a play about Willy, *Death of a Salesman* is powerful but wobbly. Is the man in his predicament because he wasn’t actually much of a salesman or is he the victim of the capitalist system? Miller provides lines that support both points of view, and the result isn’t a complex ambivalence but simple confusion. I think this was Miller trying too hard, but the play works and stays with people.

Other critics have commented on the play’s ambiguity. Craig M. Garrison states, “the play makes, finally, no judgment on America, although Miller seems always on the verge of one.”

Further, Garrison adds:

The play romanticizes the rural-agrarian dream but does not make it genuinely available to Willy. Miller seems to use this dream merely to give himself an opportunity for sentimentality. The play is ambiguous in its attitude towards the business-success dream, but does not certainly condemn it. It is legitimate to ask where Miller is going and the answer is that he has written a confused play because he has been unwilling or unable to commit himself to a firm position with respect to American Culture. Miller prepares us for stock response-relief in escape to the west and the farm; firm satisfaction in the condemnation of the tawdry business ethic and then denies us the fulfilment of our

expectations... Willy is not a tragic hero; he is a foolish and ineffectual man for whom we feel pity. We cannot equate his failure with America's ... The system is not the one to blame. Willy can only blame himself for not becoming what he wanted to be. (Garrison 2001, 0924)

Of course, this is true, but, Miller uses many characters to contrast the difference between success and failure within the system. Brother Ben, Howard, Charley and his son Bernard, effectively illustrating that in America there is a lot of room for success as well as failure.

I suppose in criticizing Willy we ultimately criticize the system that created him, but to condemn Willy is not to condemn America for that system--as I said--has also produced Charley, Bernard, Ben and Dave Singleman, all successes. The inherent criticism of the system must be seen as a cautionary tale. The American dream is there for the winning, and defeat can be avoided. Miller's ambiguity is intentional. He wants the audience to identify with Willy. Willy must have a chance at success if the play is to be a tragedy. The pathos of victimization would nullify that. The reality of Miller's psychological play seems to have eluded the political critics, and they have fallen for the ploy. They heard what they wanted to hear. Willy's story is one of individual failure and over reaching; some critics wanted us to take Miller as some political radical, condemning American values and advocating change. These critics should rather pay attention to Willy's demise physically and mentally, and attack Willy personally for foisting unrealistic dreams on his family, and consider the damage he has inflicted by doing so

A more apparent example of the ambiguity in the play linked to the changing zeitgeist are the two reviews of Clive Barnes in the *New York Times*, one on the 1975 revival with George C. Scott and two on the 1999 revival . In the first he declares Willy Loman a failure and more important a failure of society. He claims Miller is one of the first to question the American

Dream. Conversely, in 1999 he says, “‘Salesman’ is a play with counter balanced themes, a challenge to the American dream and more important what Miller himself describes as ‘A love story between a man and his son and in a crazy way between both of them and America.’” We do not hear attack or defense. Balanced? Challenge? Love story? Time has given a more measured tone to the reviews.

Miller makes it clear there is a clash between capitalism and morality, and yet he inserts ambiguity; he gives us the problems of the System: the Lomans, Ben and Howard contrasted to the solutions Charley and Bernard. ” Abbotson also ambiguously in *her Critical Companion* tells us, “The play deals with the impact of Capitalism and materialism on an average family. The Lomans are depicted as social failures... but the deeper question, is it because of their own inadequacies or caused by society’s unrealistic standards of success? The Lomans are failures but Ben and Howard are successes at the cost of their moral integrity. Charley and Bernard have managed to attain both.” Abbotson goes on, “It is clear that Miller would prefer us to follow the example of Charley rather than Howard or Ben. Ben abandons his family. Howard ruthlessly fires an old man. Charley seems to have found a way to survive in business with his morality intact. Willy and Charley have taught their offspring different values. Willy teaches his boys that all you need to be successful is to be well-liked Charley makes sure Bernard understands that he has a better chance to get ahead through thoughtfulness for others and hard work.” (Abbotson, 137-38) Scholars have convincingly argued that the Willy/ Biff relationship is central to the play, with the father/son relationships the most popular topic of study (S. C. Abbotson 1999, 141). Abbotson says that Bigsby in his 2005 study points out, “that Miller claims, the play is not an attack on American values but is an exploration of the betrayal of those values and the cost of this in human terms.” (Abbotson, 137-38)

Abbotson has scholars and Miller agreeing that fathers and sons are the focus of the play (S. C. Abbotson 1999, 141) in the end the play is not an indictment of the system. It is an ambiguous cautionary tale that I repeat gives the audience what it wants. People were moved by the sentimental and melodramatic ending, feeling pity for Linda and Hap or hope for Biff

The political ambiguity in the play I have portrayed as a ploy for controversy and success, but the real ambiguity was built into the play by Miller as a struggle between Naturalism and tragedy. (Roudane' 1995, 68) Is Willy a tragic hero or is he a naturalistic victim? If he is a victim the play is pathos and an attack... a hero, tragedy and a defense, Although I think Miller intentionally gives us ample evidence for both. He suggests this to us in the defense of his modern tragedy. (A. Miller, *New York Times* "Tragedy of the Common Man" 27 February 1949) He states that the hero (Willy) in order to be tragic has to have a chance at victory; he cannot be at the mercy of forces or institutions beyond his control. He cannot be the victim, so victory is always ambiguously available. The American dream is there for the taking with the right formula as he illustrates in the play with other characters.

Willy is about personal character; the play is not a socially dramatic attack on capitalism and the American dream. Nor is Willy a victim. On the contrary, if we take our 1949 definition of the American dream, Willy has attained it. He was worked steadily. His mortgage will be paid off, and in his own way he is a good father. He certainly defends his sons. But Willy is not satisfied with the American dream he can attain. He is in pursuit of dreams he can't attain. Remember The Longman Anthology. In its analysis of Willy, his dreams were not all bad and the play is not a condemnation of the free enterprise system. Willy sought success and wanted a good life for his family

But, in conclusion, Willy and his family are failures, but not because of capitalism or the bankruptcy of the American dream. Arthur Miller does not specifically blame capitalism for Willy's failure because within the same play there are examples of the success of the system. We have Ben, the exception from within the Loman family negating once again the hypothesis that it is the system that is hostile to the Lomans, and we have Charley and his son Bernard who work within the system to reach the dream and are successful. The play seems to say that success is up to the individual and the choices he makes, and we shouldn't forget that Miller defended the play in his essay as a tragedy. By his definition, a tragic hero cannot be a victim of forces or institutions beyond his control. Willy and the Lomans had access to the American Dream but made the wrong choices for success and must pay the price of failure.

Critics and historians, except for Harold Clurman, who knew him best, seem to have been influenced by Mr. Miller's leftist reputation and the Zeitgeist of the years leading up to the debut of the play rather than the reality of Mr. Miller's psychological play. This play is not the leftist agitprop that some assumed. I don't think Miller ever challenged capitalist society in such a way as to suggest the necessity for a radical change. He seemed to advocate a return to old liberal New England values. Now they would be viewed as conservative values. He was never a political radical, and the dominant image of his play is the struggle of an individual in relationship to his family and self, as Miller says, "his fear of displacement." No one in *Death of a Salesman* breaks the social contract to attack the American dream, and if that is the case Mr. Miller as its author is a de facto endorser of the American dream. Although at an ambiguous and half-hearted pace, he is still a running dog. The corporate bloodhounds will have to look under another bed for the enemy. Although Mr. Miller speaks American themes his appeal is international and universal. He is above all a moralist. He speaks as all writers strive to, from the

specific to the universal, and that journey starts with the self, Willy, and closes full circle with the self, Biff.

I thought *Death of a Salesman* worthy of further study because I doubted Miller's reputation as a leftist, and Willy Loman was always a mystery to me. My research has led me to certain conclusions. Miller presented Willy as a straw man and ploy to create controversy and ambiguity in the representation of the American Dream. He did so in order to successfully pound the square peg *Death of a Salesman* (modern tragedy) into the round hole of Aristotelian tragedy. As to his reputation as a leftist, I say unambiguously, Mr. Miller, I knew leftists and you are no leftist.

I close with a quote from Miller himself announcing the death of socialism in the first sentence.

Sometimes I think it's only that I'm suffering because socialism collapsed as an ideal. Sometimes it seems as though we had a peculiar advantage, growing up in the depression. As bad as it got there was always a kind of promise in the air- people seemed on the way to being good. We were supposed to be such hard-headed materialists, now I think we were really the last of a long line of romantics. Everyone could be saved if only society were just as prosperous. It didn't matter how well or bad a person was--only what he believed. There's no belief any more... but I've been struggling with it, you see. Anyway, I think the struggle is necessary. When the struggle is given up (and it's really given up in totalitarian places) then we're all up for grabs and I'm not ready to give up... You've got to grapple with this somehow. It seems insane to say this, and maybe I've lived here too long in this district, in New England, but I believe there is an appeal to people left. You have to work at it but you can make it, and this is a democracy here, you see. I'm not so sure I would feel this way if I lived in the middle of New York City where I was born, you see? But this is as real as that, isn't it? I mean, this is taking place. This is not a delusion in my mind. See, these people here in their blundering, in our blundering, sometimes completely mistaken way, once they get a glimmer of some path, can make it happen within certain tenets but they are very broad tenets... My effect, my energy, my aesthetic, lies in finding the chain of moral being in the world... Somehow.

Is this an attacker of the American Dream? I think not.

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