

The Fall of Alger's Success Myth in Arthur Miller's Play

Dr. Marsela Turku

Aleksander Moisiu University Durrës, Albania

Abstract

Alger's theory supported the idea that the key to success lies in the character. His heroes rise to the top by being devout (but not pious). They are likeable chaps with a ready quip and a vigorous sense of humour. Alger's belief that all people are equal in God's eye, implied that opportunities offered to people are equal, thus their success lies inside their personality, their personal magnetism, their virtues, their gifts. Therefore it is only our character that seals our success or failure. This theory not only prevailed before the twentieth century, but also was a model that many people believed and created their way of living. Arthur Miller in his play *Death of a Salesman* examines the fall of Alger's success myth in modern society through the main character. Willy's restless and uneasy psychological aspect is the main aspect where Miller based this tragedy. In this paper we will focus in the Alger's myth theory, its influence in the play and the tragedy it provokes by not changing the attitude.

Keywords: myth, Alger's theory, failure, American dream.

Introduction

According to *Max Weber*, the myth of success has its roots in the seventeenth-century bourgeois England and later this idea entered America by being referred to as the "land of opportunity." This land offered unlimited and equal opportunities for everyman who tried his luck and in a short period of time the successful man become the idol, the one to be followed and admired. This ready-made formula offered and nourished by a considerable number of important writers, philosophers and politicians of the time indoctrinated the American people with the myth of success and the people who could achieve it. The Americans believed that material success was to be taken as a sign of God's blessing and reward of the virtue.

The clergyman whose name is mostly linked with the myth of success is probably Horatio Alger. Between 1868 and 1926 his books sold ten millions of copies.

He developed a formula for his dream of success that Lynn defines as:

Like many simple formulations which nevertheless convey a heavy intellectual and emotional change to vast numbers of people, the Alger hero represents a triumphant combination- and the reduction to the lowest common denominator –of the most widely accepted concepts in the nineteenth-century American society. The belief in the potential greatness of the common man, the glorification of the common man, the glorification of individual effort and accomplishment, the equation of the pursuit of money with the pursuit of happiness and of business success with spiritual grace: simply to mention these concepts is to comprehend the brilliance of Alger's synthesis (1955: 6-7)

Alger's theory supported the idea that the key to success lies in the character. His

heroes rise to the top by being “industrious, thrifty, devout (but not pious), common-sensual. They are likeable chaps with a ready quip and a vigorous sense of humour. They have little trouble getting employment and, once in the shop there is no stopping them. [. . .] All successful literature, of which Alger’s was the fictional apotheosis, assumed that all individual could pull himself up by bootstraps.” (Martine, 1979: 26-27) Alger’s belief that all people are equal in God’s eye, implied that opportunities offered to people are equal, thus their success lies inside their personality, their personal magnetism, their virtues, their gifts. Therefore it is only our character that seals our success or failure.

Historically speaking, from the end of the nineteen century until the Depression, industrialization quickly progressed and huge industrial businesses began to pop up one after another in the United States. The Westward Movement with the “Frontier Spirit” was replaced by industrialism or capitalism. Thus the Alger success myth, prevalent before the twentieth century, was gradually replaced by new concepts of success and apparently, it was the Depression that played a crucial role in changing the conventional ideas of success (Oikawa, 204, 122). *Death of a Salesman* relies heavily on Alger the theory of the success myth, although in the opposite direction. It seems that Miller is unconsciously affected, as all the Americans, by the Depression. Thus his intention is not to focus on the rags-to-rich formula, but on the subverted success/myth theory, the disillusionment of the hero who never saw his dream of success materialized. Miller’s centre of attention is on an ordinary American salesman, an antihero, a representative of the average lower-middle-class American to reverse the formula and to present the reader with a story of failure after the success myth formula. Willy Lowman’s history begins at a particular age of his life, he is not young anymore, the signs of disillusionment are clear to the reader/audience from the very beginning of the play, but not to Willy.

Miller examines the fall of Alger’s success myth in modern society through Willy’s restless and uneasy psychological aspect. Furthermore, he criticizes the modern society as well through the emptiness and vainness of the twentieth-century view on success. This is exactly a satire on the American dream of success presented through the sufferings and disintegration of an American middle-class family.

Family Dream within the American Dreams

Death of Salesman is probably the most dramatic portrayal of family failure in the American theatre. According to *Jacobson*, what *Loman* wants and what success means in *Death of a Salesman*, is intimately related to the playwright’s sense of the family (Jacobson 1975: 247-48). Throughout the play *Death of a Salesman* evokes the images of scattered family unity, the sense of loss and father-son conflict. *Miller’s* main point is not the critique of the American father, but rather the American values and American dream’s effects on the American family and American fathers.¹ Thus what the play discloses is the fact that what maybe important to society is many times destructive to the individual, whether the individual realizes it or not. The sad thing about Willy is that he never fully realizes what society and the values of American business and

¹ Compare: <http://voices.yahoo.com/the-american-family-arthur-millers-death-salesman-23961.html>.

industry takes away from him and his family life. He believes in total sacrifice to hard work and steady income to finance a family and build a career and home, but unfortunately he turns out to be a rather insufficient father because he neglects the human elements to his family life.

However, the importance that *Willy* attaches to his role as a father is obvious since the very beginning of the play. Willy is concerned about his double role as a father; as the family financial provider and as the educator for his sons. Thus he is obsessed with the idea "to accomplish something" (133) or frighten at the prospect of "Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground" (209). He is not certain if the way he is rearing his sons is the right one. This feeling makes him wonder whether he has been a good father, that's why he asks for Ben's approval of the way he has brought up his sons:

WILLY: Ben my boys- can't we talk? They'd go into the jaws of hell for me, see, but I-

BEN: William, you're being first-rate with your boys. Outstanding, manly chaps!

WILLY, *hanging on to his words*: Oh, Ben, that's good to hear! Because sometimes I'm afraid that I'm not teaching them the right kind of- Ben, how should I teach them? (159)

A look at the memory scenes explains why Willy values his family and his sons so highly. Willy lost his father when he was very young: "*All I remember is a man with a big beard, and I was in Mama's lap, sitting around a fire and some kind of high music*" (157), then he suffered the disappearance of his older brother. Their loss affected Willy's personality, his male identity in an irreversible way and it brought about the feeling of shame, the sense of inadequacy, inferiority and the need to prove oneself to others. Thus he fights to compensate this loss through his family unity and through the unity of generations linking his father and Ben with him and his sons. He appeals to Ben: "*You're just what I need, Ben, because I—I have a fine position here, but I well, Dad left when I was such a baby, and I never had a chance to talk to him and I still feel – kind of temporary about myself*" (159, emphasis added).

"Yet the need for family unity is juxtaposed against the reality of family disintegration Loman's father abandons his family and Ben leaves soon afterwards. Lowman violates the unity of his family with the woman in Boston [. . .]; Biff leaves home because of his discovery, and Happy goes to his apartment to enjoy his women. [. . .] Linda remained loyal, but she cannot play a significant role in her husbands' dream and prevent his collapse because she lacks the imagination and strength to hold her family together." (Jacobson 1979: 51)

"In 'The family as a Psychosocial Organization,' Robert D. Hess and Gerald Handel have noted that "the family's life together is an endless process of movement in and around consensual understanding, from attachment to conflict and withdrawal- and over again. Separateness and connectedness are the underlying conditions of a family's life, and its common task is to give form to both" (1967:10). In *Death of a Salesman*, beginning the process "over again" becomes impossible. The present action of the play forces an explosive reunion, bringing members of the family together in order to make their separateness explicit and irrevocable" (Jacobson 1975; 58).

Willy's fault is to believe in the American dream, which *Susan Harris Smith* (1995: 32) defines as "possibly a driving delusion that many Americans actively participate in

and promote" and for his faulty way of trying to actualize it. Willy spends most of his life mistakenly believing that values associate with the family and that of being well-liked opens the door to success in the business world. He also transfers his confusion to his sons who have inherited their father's powerful ideas but not the way of putting them into practise. Biff and his brother's success and sense of self-worth depends on their father's conception of success and manhood and on his approval. This father-son relationship reveals a patriarchal influence towards his sons and it serves as a cover for Willy's inherited sense of failure and inferiority. The feelings of shame and inadequacy and failure as a man/ salesman drive him in an adulterous affair with another woman, through which he pretends to be the successful businessman he is not. But, unlike his father, Biff faces failure and shame. He is the only one who is conscious of the fact that he could not become "magnificent" or "be something" and he shatters his father's illusions by telling him:

"I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw the sky. I saw the things that I love in this world. The work and the food and time to sit and smoke. [. . .] Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What I am doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all *I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am! Why can't I say, Willy? He tries to make Willy face him, but Willy pulls away and moves to the left.* (132; emphasis added).

By the end of Act Two Biff has a clear understanding of who he is not. "I am not a leader of men," he says to his father in a "fury," before 'he breaks down, sobbing' (132-133). The complexity of the son's feelings towards his father is immeasurable. In tears, he asks his father, "Will you let me go, for Christ's sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?" (133) To Willy, Biff's tears symbolize simply his son's feelings of love, affection, forgiveness and empathy. He now understands that his son loves him for what he is and not for the high aspiration and illusions that he has built through the years. Willy's response to Biff is, "Oh, Biff! *Starring wildly:* He cried! Cried to me. *He is choking with his love, and now cries out his promise:* That boy – that boy is going to be magnificent!" (133; emphasis added). But Willy can not "settle for half but must pursue his dream of himself to the end," (Miller, 1957: 34). Willy convinces himself that only his death can help Biff become "magnificent" and his death can also help him to preserve his American dream as a successful father and salesman. Whereas Leonard Moss (1967: 45) has noted that "he chooses death not only as an escape from shame but as a last attempt to re-establish his own self-confidence and his family's integrity." The insurance money makes seems possible to synthesize the values of Ben and Singleman. For by entering the dark, unknown "jungle" of death Loman might bring out tangible wealth, "like diamonds" for his family and at last realise his American family dream of success.

In the end, Willy dies without realising his dream and without being understood by the people. Biff says: Willy "had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong..." (138) he neither had the grand funeral he wished, nor was he understood for the action he did. But what the Requiem clearly shows is the fact that Willy despite his failure as a salesman, was a success father who has sown the seed of love and respect in his family who will keep alive his memory and his dreams and perhaps show to the world that he did not die "in vain," that he was successful in the most difficult profession in the

world in that of “being a father.”

Conclusions

The entire play is an embodiment of what happened to the myth of success as it existed during the worst economic crisis in American history, and it also echoes Hearn's (1977) explanation about the influence of the Depression on the success myth: “The Depression decade provides a dramatic focal point for an analysis of this important aspect of American culture because it was in those years that desperate economic conditions challenged the traditional myth of success as it had never before been challenged”.

References

- Bigsby, C. W. E. 1984. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*. Great Britain, Cambridge University Press.
- Bloom, Harold. 2009, *The American Dream*, InfoBase Publishing, New York.
- Centola, Steven R. “Family Values in Death of a Salesman” in *Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman*, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House Publishing, New York, 2017), 25.
- Clurman, Harold. 1958. *Lies like Truth*, Brove Press Inc.
- Conwell, Russell H. 1905. *Acres of Diamonds*, New York: Harper.
- Hadomi, Leah. “Rhythm Between Fathers and Sons, Death of a Salesman” in *Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman*, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House Publishing, New York, 2017), 13.
- Hearn, Charles R. 1977. *The American Dream in the Great Depression*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press. J. G. K. Hall.
- Jacobson, Irving, “Family Dreams in Death of a Salesman,” *American Literature* 47 (1975): 247-58. Duke University Press.
- Koon, Helene. 1983. ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Death of a Salesman*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Lynn, Kenneth S. 1955. *The Dream of Success*. Boston. Boston University Press.
- Martine, James J. 1979. *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller*. Boston, Massachusetts.
- Miller, Arthur. 1949. *Death of a Salesman*. New York. (Subsequent references to this edition are marked Salesman).
- Miller, Arthur. 1978. “Tragedy and the Common Man,” *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller*, ed. Robert A. Martine, New York: Penguin Books, 1978).
- Miller, Arthur. 1987. *Timebends: A Life*, New York, Grove.
- Miller, Arthur. 1949. *Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversation in Two Acts and a requiem*. New York: Penguin.
- Moss, Leonard. 1967. *Arthur Miller*, New Heaven.
- Oikawa, Masahiro. 2004. “The terror of Failure and Guilt for Success: The American Dream in the Great Depression and Arthur Miller's *The Man Who Had All the Luck*.” *Ritsumeikan Annual Review of International Studies*, 2004. ISSN 1347-8214. Vol. 2. pp. 117-139.
- Porter, Thomas E. 1969, *Myth and Modern American Drama*, “Acres of Diamonds: Death of a Salesman,” Detroit, Wayne State University Press.
- Smith, Susan Harris. 1995. “Contextualizing *Death of a Salesman* as an American Play.” *Approaches to Teaching Miller's “Death of a Salesman.”* Ed. Matthew Roudané. (NY: MLA 1995): 27-32.
- Weber, Max: “The Spirit of Capitalism” last accessed July 30, 2012 <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/WEBER/toc.html>.