

Research Paper Example APA Style (Using Electronic Sources)

To be successful, a writer of fiction must create characters that seem to the reader to be real. The more real the character is, the more successful the author will be. This is especially true for playwrights. In the case of Arthur Miller, one of his most successful characters is his most real, Willy Loman. In the play, *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman is presented as a salesman who “seeks to discover just where and how he failed to win success and happiness” (*Death of a Salesman* n.d.). This search, which leads to tragedy, is real because the character is real. The search is as ambiguous as the character. Willy is ambiguous about his sons, his friends, and his success as a salesman.

In order to understand the present state of Willy Loman, Miller alternates between the present and the past. Willy Loman, like many parents, wants only the best for his sons; he wants them to be successful. To be successful, according to Willy, they must become “rugged, well liked, all-around” (Miller 1949/1971, p.53). That is, in fact, the way Willy sees them. “That’s why I thank Almighty God you’re both built like Adonises” (Miller 1949/1971, p. 40). In picking this image, Willy unconsciously, or Miller consciously, picks an image that is only skin deep and so very ephemeral. As Terry Thompson (2002) comments:

Their young lives, once as promising as that of that of the handsome Adonis, come to nothing, not because they are killed by a wild animal, but because, like Adonis, they believed that their physical attractiveness and their superficial charm would carry them through their lives. (p.162)

Of the three things that last, faith, hope and love, the Bible tells us the greatest of these is love. Willy finally realizes with great joy that his estranged son loves him. “Biff – he likes me!” says Willy (Miller 1949/1971, p. 125). “To which Linda and Happy quickly respond with enthusiastic reinforcement: ‘He loves you, Willy!’ and ‘Always did, Pop’” (Phelps p.1 of 2). That, however, is not enough. Willy still needs Biff to be a success, “a magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket” (Miller 1949/1971, p.127). This money is to be gained by Willy’s suicide.

Secondly, friendship, having a whole lot of friends, or in Willy Loman’s oft- repeated phrase, “being well liked,” is important to most folks. One man in talking about a picture of his friends says that the picture “reminds me of the good times we have shared and the support that their friendship still gives me today” (Friendship n.d.). Once again, Willy seems to be superficially, at least, good at getting, having, and using friends. Although a bit prone to over exaggeration, some of what Willy says must be true. He is known. “And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England” (Miller 1949/1971, p. 38). Willy was even a friend of his original boss. The boss consulted Willy before he named his son and made promises to Willy about future rewards. These promises, however, were not enough, and they did not last. In the end, Willy has only one friend, Charley. “Charley, you’re the only friend I got” (Miller 1949/1971, p. 95). And this friendship is not enough. Charley wants to offer Willy a job, but Willy cannot accept it. To work for Charley, for his only friend, would be to admit that he, Willy, is not a success.

Finally, Willy Loman is ambiguous about his “attitude toward the business-success dream” so dear to Americans (Garrison n.d., p.1of 2). Willy Loman had he been alive

today would have jumped on the dot-com bandwagon in a second. Becoming wealthy in America was possible, no hard work necessary. All one had to do was take a risk: go to Alaska or to South America just like Willy's brother Ben. "Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was seventeen I walked out. And by God I was rich" (Miller 1949/1971, p. 53). This never happened to Willy, but he did make money. He was enough of a success as a salesman to have worked for the same company for thirty-six years. He was enough of a success as a salesman to have been able to pay off the mortgage on his house. When, however, the buyers no longer know him and he is forced to work on commission alone, "the catastrophe of Willy Loman's having believed in capitalism's promise of reward for faithful service" explodes in his face, and he is fired (Spillane 1999, p.1 of 2). And Willy should have known better. Only Charley can sense the ambiguity. "The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that" (Miller 1949/1971, p. 94).

Willy Loman is real. He is the quintessential American businessman, a "dreamy salesman whose imagination is much larger than his sales ability"(Garrison n.d., p.1 of 2). And yet, without imagination, what American businessman would ever have been a success? Willy Loman is a parent who wants the best for his boys, and Willy Loman longs to be not just liked but well liked. He is just like all of us, and we can relate to him, sympathize with him, and, in the end, pity him, secure in the knowledge of "there but for the grace of God go I."

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