Changing Definition of Tragedy and Loss of Identity in Death of a
Salesman:

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Arthur Miller is known to us as the best American Dramatist, who not only contributed to the world of drama in the United States but also to the whole world. His best known dramatic literary works include; The Crucible and Death of a Salesman. Arthur Miller was the second child of Augusta Miller and Isodore Miller. He was born on October 17, 1915 in New York. Both his parents were migrants from Poland. He had an elder brother, Kermit Miller and a younger sister, Joan Copeland. After becoming an author, Miller drew great inspiration from his family, uncles and aunts, which he made the basis for his literary works. In 1987, Miller came out with his autobiography, called Timebends: A Life. Even in his plays from No Villain to The Price, Miller wrote about his differences with his brother, Kermit, the latter being more virtuous of the two. Judaism influenced greatly both the life and works of Miller, even though he believed that he was an atheist, a non believer. Arthur’s family was seen to have a Jewish taste and style in everything they did. His works, The Man Who Had All The Luck and The Price also circle around the comparison between brothers, however Arthur always considered himself better of the two.

Isodore Miller, Arthur’s father was the owner of the Miltex Coat and Suit Company. He financially succumbed to The Great Depression. Thus, Arthur Miller bore the repercussions of a dilapidated family business in his childhood. As a child he had a growing interest in theatre and music, inspired by his mother. Miller had an affluent childhood as they were rich enough to own a beautiful apartment in Manhattan at 45, West, 110th Street, Near Central Park. But after the Wall Street Crash they shifted to a Duplex and later to a six bedroom house in Brooklyn. He has depicted the same story in The American Clock, in which the Baums suffer the same tragedy.
There was a crash of the whole economy during the Wall Street Crash in 1929, which was a complete crash of the stock market. As Miller’s father had investments in stocks, this slowdown of the economic situation forced his mother to sell off most of her jewellery and they had to sacrifice all their comforts. The house at Brooklyn with all its activities was a great inspiration for the society and backdrop for Death of a Salesman, in which the Loman’s house is located in similar locality. Near his new Brooklyn home were residences of his relatives, Balsams and the Newmans. Arthur was quite close to Uncle Manny whose family became an inspiration for writing the drama, Death of a Salesman and truly depicted the Loman family.

With their financial position on the decline, Miller’s elder brother, Kermit, quit the New York University to attend to the family business and Arthur himself suffering from low marks and poor finances struggled to get a place in The University of Michigan where he was to show them a minimum bank account of $500 to prove that he could finance his education. Miller soon got a job at Chadick-Delamater Auto Parts, where he became a clerk. It was from this point onwards that he developed an interest in the Russian Novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov. He also realized by this time that writers could influence the way people think. By 1934 he had also collected the money he needed for Michigan.

Arthur Miller went into journalism and entered the staff of Michigan Daily. This was his college newspaper, in which he joined in as a reporter. In his graduation years, he met Mary Grace Slattery, who later became his wife. Miller was running out of funds, when he wrote the play, No Villain, inspired by his own family. In the year 1936, he won the Hopwood Award of $250 for the same play. The very next year he wrote, They Too Arise which got him a scholarship of $1250 from Theatre Guild’s Bureau of New Plays, which also assisted him to study playwrighting under Kenneth Rowe, who was a Professor at Michigan. Rowe influenced Miller in understanding the techniques of writing drama. In 1937, Miller again won the Hopwood Award for Honors at Dawn which was similar to No Villains because it talked about strikes during the depression and two brothers who were dissimilar.

After graduating from Michigan, he had a short stint at the Federal Theatre, which shut down by June 1939 fearing an infiltration from Communists so he again returned to his parents’ home. Despite of all financial constraints, Miller decided to marry, Mary Slattery, who was a Catholic and the couple moved to a new apartment in Brooklyn Heights at 62, Montague Street.
After a week of his marriage he left for South America, to work on his play, *The Half Bridge*. Time away from his family and always keeping work on priority put a burden on their married life. Miller also worked constantly for a number of Radio Plays, some of them being political satires, such as *The Pussycat and The Expert Plumber*, which was a play with a subtitle, *A Fantasy*. However, Miller was not very happy writing for the Radio, due to the demands of the listeners, there was restriction on his writing. He had to cater to their tastes and demands. At this time he wrote his stage plays, *Boro Hall Nocturne* and *The Half Bridge*, based on Nazis, both the plays could not be produced.

Miller was looking for a producer for his plays. He approached Joseph Fields, who appreciated his play, *The Man Who Had All The Luck* and with the help of Herbert Harris staged it on the Broadway but unfortunately it closed down after six performances. This play portrays the character of David Beeves, who did not recognize his blessings and became suicidal. Miller was very disheartened and he decided to leave Playwriting. He was more successful as a radio dramatist. Miller wrote a number of radio plays including, *The Doctor’s Fights, adaptation of Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, adaptation of Ferene Molnar’s The Guardsman, The Phillipines Never Surrendered* and *Grandpa and the Statue*. In 1947 Miller was ready with *All My Sons* which is based upon a father and son relationship which suffers as the father sells faulty aircraft parts to the airforce. His son does not approve of his father’s fraudulent practices. This play became a hit with three hundred and twenty eight performances. It was due to *All My Sons* that Miller was recognized as a talented Playwright. The success of All My Sons provided Miller with the finances to move into a new house, a farmhouse in Roxbury, Connecticut and 31, Grace Court in Brooklyn Heights, the latter used as their family residence.

Delving deep into the world of drama, Arthur Miller now produced Death of a Salesman which depicted the rising tension in the society. There was a conflict of the individual with the society. It is a play about Willy Loman, an individual fighting against the society. The premiere was on February 10, 1949 at the Morosco Theatre in New York. The play got a great response and won various awards including the Pulitzer Prize, The New York Drama Critic Award, The Theatre Club Award and a Tony. The reality in the play attracted the common audience. The depiction of realism gave the script a sweeping success. The film *Death of a Salesman*, by Columbia Pictures was released on December 1951. In 1955, Miller gave two new plays, a
modified version of *A View from the Bridge* which revolves around the story of a man who reported two immigrants, one of whom was dating his niece and another literary work, *A Memory of Two Mondays* revolves around the lives of people working in an auto-part workshop. Both the plays were staged in Coronet Theatre. Slattery had already been fed up by the rumours of Monroe’s affair with Miller. In 1956, Miller stayed in Reno for taking a divorce from Slattery. It was during this period that he wrote, *The Misfits*, which was published in Esquire Magazine. He married Marilyn Monroe in June, the same year.

Arthur Miller was awarded an honorary doctorate degree by the University of Michigan in 1956. Just before *The Misfits*, Monroe was asked to appear opposite Yves Montrand in *Lets Make Love*, which was also the beginning of a new relationship and an end to her old one with Miller, who divorced her in 1961. It was during the film rehearsal photography sessions that Miller and Monroe had met Ingeborg Morath, who was a professional photographer. Miller and Morath became good friends, only to get married in February, 1962.

Miller grew in academics and in 1992, the First Arthur Miller Conference was held in Millersville University in Pennsylavnia. In the second Arthur Miller Conference, the Arthur Miller Society was formed in 1995. In the year 2002, Morath succumbed to her poor health condition. Miller died of a heart attack in February 2005, when he was eighty nine years old. At this time he was living in his Roxbury residence. Thus, May 7, 2005, was announced to be the First Arthur Miller Day at Roxbury, Connecticut.

Miller drew inspiration from his uncle Manny for forming the plot of Death of a Salesman. He once met his uncle Manny Newman after the performance of All My Sons. During this meeting when Miller inquired about his sons, Manny went ahead to build castles of praise for his sons. Miller picturised Willy Loman as a similar character who viewed life as a competition, in which he and his sons had to make a mark. Uncle Manny’s elder son was Buddy and younger one was Abby, both could be compared to Biff and Happy respectively, as the elder one was also interested in sports like Biff and the younger one was always interested in the opposite sex, more like Happy. Even Uncle Manny was much like Willy, in the sense that he had mood swings and was suicidal.

Aristotle was the great philosopher who gave out the concept of tragedy. In his famous work “poetics”, he has used some key terms to explain his definition of tragedy. Out of these
terminologies, the concept of “hamartia” underwent a huge transition, especially in the society of 1940s. Talking about the concept of Hamartia Nagarajan has commented:

This term is usually rendered into English as ‘tragic flaw’. It derives its meaning etymologically from archery. It means ‘to miss the mark’, ‘to err or fail’. In the gospel according to St. John, the term means ‘sin’. The protagonist commits a moral error, and, for this, he receives his punishment. . . For example, a character of conspicuous virtues and abilities who has distinguished himself through them in one sphere is thrown into a different sphere of action. Tragic flaw results in his exercise of his value system in the new sphere in which it does not hold good.

(Nagarajan 13, 14)

There is a slight change in the above concept of hamartia as far as Death of a Salesman is concerned. Due to tragic flaw Willy Loman is sent into a different sphere of action but here there is not just a failure of the character. It is the failure of the whole society in which characters like Willy were existing. Arthur Miller has thus, democratized the concept of tragedy, blaming not just the protagonist but the Milieu for ‘errring or failing’. It is the milieu which is responsible for this modern social tragedy. We see Willy struggling against himself, struggling against the society and struggling against fate.

Arthur Miller has truly depicted the society of 1940s which was striving to achieve the American Dream of success. There was no bonding in relationships, we see lack of bonding between employer and employee and father and son relationships. The social milieu was such in which nobody cared for relationships and bonds. Willy having spent a lifetime, working as an employee to Howard Wagner and his family enterprise, deserved sympathy from him, as he had spent his entire youth working for them. Howard instead of acknowledging this fact, completely turns a cold shoulder to Willy. He not only flouts his demand for a fixed position in New York, but he also fires him from his current profile. Such was the society of the times, which did not value any personal contributions made to the overall success of the mythical American Dream.

Willy after devoting his lifetime of service to the Wagners, is turned down, even without a second consideration as marked by Miller:
Willy: Well, tell you the truth, Howard. I’ve come to the decision that I’d rather not travel any more.

Howard: Not travel! Well, what’ll you do?

Willy: Remember, Christmas-time, when you had the party here? You said you’d try to think of some spot for me here in town?

Howard: With us?

Willy: Well, Sure. . .

Willy: God knows, Howard, I never asked a favour of any man. But I was with the firm when your father used to carry you in here in his arms. . .

Howard: I appreciate that, Willy, but there just is no spot here for you. If I had a spot I’d slam you right in, but I just don’t have a single solitary spot.

. .

Howard: ‘cause you gotta admit, business is business. . .

Willy: If I had forty dollars a week- that’s all I’d need. Forty dollars, Howard.

Howard: Kid, I can’t take blood from a stone. . .

Willy: I’m talking about your father! There were promises made across this desk! You musn’t tell me you’ve got people to see- I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can’t pay my insurance! You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away- a man is not a piece of fruit! . . .

(Miller 61-64 )

This conversation delves deep into the psyche and conscience of the society represented by people like Howard, who were neither compassionate nor sympathetic, viewing their employee’s contribution just as a give and take relationship. As Willy was old now and he was no more of any use to Howard so he was ready to discard him and his services. Willy’s frustration with such a society is reflected when he compares himself to a piece of fruit. He feels that he had been consumed just as a fruit and now the useless part, that is, the peel, was to be thrown away. His constant appeals and requests to Howard had no effect on him. He was not even moved by the memories of his childhood or the memories of his father, whom Willy had served as a loyal employee. He just knew that Willy was paid for whatever services he rendered to the firm and
that there was no love lost between them. Thus, it takes Howard no extra effort to fire Willy as he felt that blood could not be extracted from a piece of stone. Here we see Willy struggling against the society and its norms. The post-depression years were not very lucrative from business point of view. Willy had served Howard’s father from the pre-Wall Street Crash days. At that time, business and stocks went soaring up high along with which the commissions of salesmen like Willy also increased by leaps and bounds. In the post-depression years, business and stocks went down drastically. Willy did not analyse these changes in the milieu, in a practical way, rather he was too emotional to understand the practical changes that had come about in the society in all these years. Explaining the genuineness of Howard’s behavior, Bigsby has given the reason for Willy’s dismissal from the firm:

Why, though, given his state of mind, given the failure of his sales figures to match the importance of his territory, has the company kept him on, allowed him to represent them until he effectively precipitates his own dismissal? It is not entirely clear. He may, indeed, have once had a genuine relationship with the father of his current employer, but the downward spiral has been underway for some time. It seems that Howard, the former boss’s son, has barely noticed him, wrapped up, as he is, in his own concerns, unwilling, it seems, to tackle an issue of the employee who, anyway, has only a few years before retirement. Willy is fired, in the end, not because a hard-nosed employer wants to eat the fruit and throw away the peel but because Willy cannot even sell himself. His pitch to Howard is a disaster. (Bigsby 110)

Moreover, we see a complete change in the value system, when Willy’s sons, Biff and Happy abandon him in his life to strive alone. In the second Act, both the sons leave Willy in the washroom and walk out of the restaurant. Biff’s restrained relationship with his father can be explained in the Boston Hotel incident but there is simply no excuse for Happy’s behavior, who even refused to acknowledge Willy as his father, in front of Miss Foresythe or her friend. The two sons don’t realize the contribution of Willy towards their life and family. Both Biff and Happy were busy thinking about their own plans, in their lives and cared little for their old father
who was extremely attached to them. We see a suffering father and son relationship in a
dilapidated social structure.

While Willy lives and re-lives the experiences of his past through flashbacks into the past
events of his life, his sons are busy in their present achievements and failures. Willy often thinks
about the good old days, when his sons admired and looked upto him. He acknowledged all their
good parts and sidelined all their bad qualities. Willy was not ready to acknowledge Linda’s
complaints about Biff, that he had started stealing, drove without a driving license and about his
attitude towards girls. He only saw the positive aspects of Biff’s personality. He dreamed about
the day of his championship and ignored all the complaints made by Bernard about Biff not
attending his maths classes. Both his sons were self-centered and selfish and had little in them to
understand Willy’s emotions. Such a father and son relationship is a satire on the society which
was feelingless, driven by personal goals and thus, extremely selfish. This is revealed in Happy’s
conversation with Biff, while they were waiting for their father to arrive at the restaurant:

Biff: Hello, kid. Sorry, I’m late.
Happy: I just got here. Un, Miss-?
Girl: Foresythe.
Happy: Miss Foresythe, this is my brother.
Biff: Is dad here?
Happy: His name is Biff. You might’ve heard of him. Great football
player.
Girl: Really what team? . . .
Happy: Did you see Oliver?
Biff: I saw him all right. Now look, I want to tell dad a couple of things
and I want you to help me. . .
Biff: Well, I waited six hours for him, see? All day. Kept sending my
name in. Even tried to date his secretary so she’d get me to him, but no
soap. . .
Biff: Hap, he’s got to understand that I’m not the man somebody lends
that kind of money to. He thinks I’ve been spiting him all these years and
it’s eating him up.
Happy: That’s just it. You tell him something nice.
Biff: I can’t.
Happy: Say you got a lunch date with Oliver tomorrow.
Biff: So what do I do tomorrow?
Happy: You leave the house tomorrow and come back at night and say
Oliver is thinking it over. And he thinks it over for a couple of weeks, and
gradually it fades away and nobody’s the worse.
Biff: But it’ll go on for ever!
Happy: Dad is never so happy as when he’s looking forward to something!
(Miller 80, 83)

It is seen that the two sons have nothing in mind for Willy, while they wait at the restaurant,
Happy stays engaged in his favourite pastime, he’s on a lookout for girls walking in and out of the
restaurant. He even fixes up a date with Miss Foresythe. Biff on the other hand, has nothing to tell
his father, as his meeting with Bill Oliver was a failure. Happy even goes one step further to
device a plan in order to fool Willy into thinking that Biff’s meeting with Oliver was a success and
that he had been called by him and that he was thinking over the prospects of loaning money to
Biff. Happy and Biff are more concerned about saving their skin rather than contemplating on the
effect of such lies on Willy, who was already leading a stressful life and combating with the woes
of the society.

Such a society viewed its ageing and experienced members as useless. Once a person
came of age, like Willy he was considered good for nothing because now he could not make useful
contribution for the growth of the society. His sons considered him as useless because now he
could not make useful contribution for the support of his family or for the society. His sons
considered him to be a useless piece of furniture in the house and did not bother to make a cordial
relationship with him.

His employer Howard Wagner also undermined his thirty years of contribution to his
firm and discarded him just as a person discards the peel of a fruit after eating the fruit inside. This
shows a fatal flaw in the society which did not care for experience and tenure which a person gains
after spending almost a lifetime. The experience of ageing members of the society did not add any
additional value to them rather it rendered them valueless for the society. Commenting on Howard’s attitude towards Willy, Bigsby has remarked:

The world is changing. Willy’s memories no longer mean anything to his employer. The past seemingly exists to mock him. His horizons have shrunk in almost every respect. He is still waiting for revelation and redemption even as his grasp on the real slackens. The apparent fixities of the social world are revealed as contingent. Yesterday’s new technology becomes today’s obsolete product. The rural becomes the urban; bright hopes fade into regrets. Yet his memories, specific to himself, are those of a culture attempting to live mythically, to retain the language if not the substance of frontier individualism and a dream of the new. (Bigsby 115)

The American Dream had created a rat race for success, only those people could compete in this race, who were young and full of strength, energy and full of vigour. This race was not meant for those who were old and retired, thus the society did not attach any value to them and treated them like discards. This race for success instilled a feeling of greed among the members of the society. This greed is exhibited in Howard’s attitude. Entrepreneurs like Howard cared little for employees who had dedicated a lifetime towards working for their firm. Howard’s greed stopped him for giving a fixed position to Willy in New York, who was a tenured employee and deserved that much of consideration from him. Employers cared little for their employees as they were more busy earning profits than creating a conducive work atmosphere for their workers. Similar greed is seen in Willy’s sons, who care more for their own career than for their father. They were more interested in things which were of their own personal interest. They did not bother to please Willy or Linda and completely abandoned them. The constant requests of Linda to rescue Willy from a suicide had no effect on the two sons as described in Linda’s speech in the following lines:

Linda: I’m-I’m ashamed to. How can I mention it to him? Everyday I go down and take away that little rubber pipe. But, when he comes home, I put it back where it was. How can I insult him that way? I don’t know what to do. I live from day to day, boys. I tell you, I know every thought
in his mind. It sounds so old fashioned and silly, but I tell you he put his whole life into you and you’ve turned your backs on him.

[She is bent over in the chair, weeping, her face in her hands.] Biff, I swear to God! Biff, his life is in yours hands! (Miller 47)

Linda has the realization that in a society like theirs there was no room for emotions, as she says, it sounded ‘old fashioned and silly’ to sermonize the sons like that. However, Biff and Happy made no clear efforts to save their father from committing a suicide. They did not heed the warning of their mother.

The society suffered from the grave problem of hollow ideals. For instance, Willy craved to become popular. He believed that a man could only be successful if he was popular. He even goes to the extent of thinking about the massive gathering at his funeral after he would kill himself. He believed that such a gathering would reiterate his popularity among his friends and relatives and prove that he had been a popular and successful man all throughout his life. In one of his dreamy conversations with Ben, Willy discusses his own funeral:

Willy [Now assured, with rising power]: Oh, Ben, that’s the whole beauty of it! I see it like a diamond, shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I can pick up and touch in my hand. Not like- like an appointment! This would not be another damned-fool appointment, Ben, and it changes all the aspects. Because he thinks I’m nothing, see, and so he spites me. But the funeral- [straightening up] Ben, that funeral will be massive! They’ll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire! All the old-timers with the strange license plates- that boy will be thunder-struck, Ben, because he never realized- I am known! Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey- I am known, Ben, and he’ll see it with his eyes once and for all. He’ll see what I am, Ben! He’s in for a shock, that boy! (Miller 100)

Willy always wanted to cast a deep impression of his own success on his family as well as the people around him. He lived like a virtuous salesman all his life, doing everything which made him look successful including a shoe shine and a smile. The spiteful attitude of his sons, especially that of Biff had instigated him for a suicide, by which he would prove to his sons and to the society as well that he was a successful man. The immense pressure of the milieu which
had respect only for successful men, created suicidal tendencies in men like Willy, who could not cope with such pressures. Willy was ready to die so that he could prove himself popular and successful to compliment the needs of the society which had place and respect only for successful and rich men. This false image of success which was related only to material gains was a hoax which Willy did not understand. He kept chasing the society’s parameters of success without realizing what he actually wanted from his life. Willy could have been more successful if he would have strived for happiness which he himself wanted. For instance if he would have accepted Ben’s job offer or the offer made to him by Charley, he could have been happier in his life.

However, happiness is no measure for success in the society in which Willy existed. Chasing ones own dreams was related to the broad parameters set up by the society in which individual hopes and dreams had no place. It was an era of industrialization when big industries and commercial enterprise was growing. In such a big picture, men like Willy, a low-paid travelling salesman or his son Biff, a shipping clerk in his previous company, had no recognition. Big industry was growing and small time workers had no value despite their hard work. In such an environment big-time managers and higher ranked executives gained enormous respect but at the same time nobody cared about salesmen and lower rank officers like Willy, Biff and Happy. Biff tells Happy in a conversation, while waiting for Willy at the restaurant, that Bill Oliver did not even recognize him, leave aside giving him a loan:

Biff: He walked away. I saw him for one minute. I got so mad I could’ve torn the walls down! How the hell did I ever get the idea I was a salesman there. I even believed myself that I’d been a salesman for him! And then he gave me one look and- I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been. We’ve been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk! (Miller 82)

Willy was a common man, in fact he is the representation of the down-to-earth common man who was trying to make a mark in the society which had unrealistic expectations. It was the drawbacks of the society which did not allow men like Willy to lead a normal life and restrained him under its hollow ideals. He believed that success could be gained by working hard, looking presentable and becoming popular. He was running after attaining material gains by struggling
all throughout his life as a mere salesman, only to be fired from his job one fine day. He forgets about what the real Willy inside him wants- chasing not his dreams but the dreams of the society-the American Dream of success. Even Willy’s personal preferences are guided by the ideas of success and the American Dream. He holds his Hastings refrigerator in high esteem, he even believed that Chevrolet was the best car ever. American products guided his personal preferences and the use of them exemplified that they were the insignia of the successful, the ruling class. In two plays of Arthur Miller, we see the force of the society with which the characters have to contend; The Crucible, although it belongs to a different time and period and Death of a Salesman. The society acts like the all powering lethal force which crushes the individuality of a man. Discussing the false promises that America made to the common man, and the effect of those false hopes Bigsby has remarked:

There is no crime in Death of a Salesman and hence no ultimate culpability (beyond guilt for sexual betrayal), only a baffled man and his sons trying to find their way through a world of images, dazzling dreams and fantasies, in the knowledge that they have failed by the standards they have chosen to believe are fundamental. Willy has, as Biff alone understands, all the wrong dreams but, as Charley observes, they go with the territory. They are the dreams of a salesman reaching for the clouds, smiling desperately in the hope that people will smile back. Needing love and respect he is blind to those who offer it, dedicated as he is to the eternal American quest of a transformed tomorrow. What else can he do, then, but climb back into his car and drive off to a death that at last will bring the reward he has chased so determinedly, a reward that will expiate his sense of guilt, justify his life, and hand on to another generation the burden of belief that has corroded his soul but to which he has clung until the end? (Bigsby 111, 112 )

Such a society was full of evils and double standards. Biff is a representative of an individual with double standards as he stops respecting his own father for seeing a woman at Boston who was Willy’s secretary and her work was to introduce him to business clients. On the other hand he truly approves of Happy’s numerous relationships with women and never chides
him for any such act, moreover, Happy is viewed in a positive light by him. Biff readily agrees to Happy’s introduction about him to Miss Foresythe and he too looks forward to meeting her friend. The same person completely disapproves to respect his own father for one act of adultery to which he himself was a witness.

When Biff goes to meet Willy at the Boston Hotel, he realizes that his father had been seeing another woman. This is the breaking point in the father and son relationship as depicted by Miller:

Willy [pushing her away from him]: All right, stay in the bathroom here, and don’t come out. I think there is a law in Massachusetts about it, so don’t come out. It may be that new room clerk. . .
Biff: Why didn’t you answer?
Willy: Biff! What are you doing in Boston. . .I just heard you. I was in the bathroom and had the door shut. Did anything happen home? . . .
Biff: Dad, I flunked math. . .
The Woman [ enters, laughing. She lisps this]: Can I come in? There’s something in the (bath tub), Willy, and it’s moving!
[Willy looks at Biff, who is staring open-mouthed and horrified at the woman] . . .
Biff: You fake! You phony little fake! You fake!
[Overcome, he turns quickly and weeping fully goes out with his suitcase.
Willy is left on the floor on his knees] (Miller 92, 95 )

Biff held Willy responsible for the turmoil in their relationship because he knew for sure that Willy had been cheating on his mother, Linda, which was not excusable. This made their relationship go from bad to worse and was eventually responsible for the ‘spite’ Biff always had for Willy. This made Willy slowly suffer inside. He did not derive any happiness from the events of his present life so Willy started existing in the past. He would cherish and re-live the events that he had spent with Biff and his family. Biff was his favourite son so his attitude towards him mattered a lot to him. Linda realized this and so she even warned the two sons about the suicidal tendencies their father had lately developed.
The society with its deep flaws, had its deepest flaw in its idea of success as outlined by Julius Novick in his essay ‘Death of a Salesman; Deracination and its Discontents’:

The ‘success myth’ can be seen as Willy’s defense against this ‘uneasiness’, but in his case it brings terrible consequences. America is famously the land of opportunity, the golden land, where anyone can make good, meaning make money. But if anyone can, then everyone should, and what excuse is there for those who don’t? . . . Willy Loman, says Miller, ‘has broken a law. . . which says that a failure in society and in business had no right to live’. This is a common American situation. . . (qtd in 136 Bloom)

This myth of success was shaking the very foundation of the society. Success of a person was equated with his wealth, which is never a true parameter. Since Willy repudiated the whole idea of becoming successful in terms of wealth, he had to device other means for the survival of his family in the society. He believed that if he committed suicide, his family would get an enormous sum of money which will support their survival in the existing society.

However, as discussed, Willy is not a tragedy stricken character. There is a complete change in the connotation of tragedy from Aristotle’s traditional definition about tragedy that speaks about a character of greatness, falling from his former position of greatness due to a mistake of judgement on his part. Contrary to this, Death of a Salesman talks of a shift in tragedy from the character to the Milieu.
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