

An Existential Examination of Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman*

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Abstract: Existentialism in literature is a movement or tendency that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. The prime aim of existentialism is to focus on the problems of human existence with a view to providing solutions. The existential concerns are existence before essence, alienation, estrangement, encounter with nothingness, freedom, choice and responsibility, fear, anxiety, finitude and temporality, emotional life of man, authentic existence, failure of communication, death and the like. Existentialism is a revolt against the impersonal nature of the modern industrial and technological age which has subordinated humans to machines. This paper examines the existentialist ethics that permeates the fabric of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). The voice of excessive commercialism and money-mindedness that comes to co-exist with the increasing play of advanced technology and electronic gadgetry in the American economy tends to damage human responses. The protagonist, Willy loses the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, and this behaviour alienates him from others, thereby diminishing his ability to survive in the present. Willy undergoes an existential crisis because he lacks a vision of his future.

Keywords: American dream, existentialism, freedom, choice, anxiety.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement oriented towards two major themes - the analysis of human existence and the centrality of human choice. The existential analysis of human existence was inspired by the works of Soren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-55), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and some other German philosophers like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). This philosophical movement became popular around the close of World War II in France and was promoted there by the philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86) and Albert Camus (1913-60). Though these existential writer-philosophers have employed the term in somewhat diverse ways, still we find enough of commonality between their theories. The existential concerns of the thinkers and writers are existence before essence, alienation, estrangement, encounter with nothingness, freedom, choice and responsibility, fear, anxiety, finitude and temporality, emotional life of man, authentic existence, failure of communication, death and the like. 'Existence precedes and rules essence' proclaims Jean-Paul Sartre in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness* (1943). By this he means that the implication of an individual's life (essence) is not determined by God or fate; rather, individuals define themselves through existence - the choices and actions that constitute a human life. Everyone experiences individual moments

(regardless of their situation or status) in which they are free to choose. With this comes the responsibility to act not only in one's self-interest but also in the interest of all humankind. Choice is essential to human existence, and it is inescapable. Sartre says that humans are not like objects; they are self creating and are free to choose their paths. According to the existentialist thinkers, humans are free to think and act according to their choices. They are not free to breed anarchy and harm the environment and society around them, but they are free to have harmonious co-existence with their community. Human beings suffer not because of any external forces, but because of their misuse of freedom and responsibility. Unlike objects, humans are responsible for their actions and choices. Existentialists believe in living and in fighting for life. They evade intruding on the lives and territories of others. Since there is no such thing as absolute right or wrong, one has no business telling others how to behave, or imposing standards from outside that the individual should develop for himself.

Nietzsche, the father of atheistic existentialism says that humans are evaluating animals. The most common denominator of existentialists is a rejection of authority. The only authority which any person has is himself. Existential philosophy suggests that the universe is not designed to be purposeful or entirely coherent and understandable. We must create meaning in our lives. Existentialism sees life not as coming ready-programmed by some higher power with meaning and rationale or purpose, but being what we ourselves make of it as individuals. Finding meaning in life is important for the reason that it helps us to interpret life events. Rollo May and Irvin Yalom (2005) state that our values provide us with a blueprint for life. The existential philosophers also accentuate that the major choices we make in life are generally accompanied by anxiety. To grow as a person, one must constantly challenge one's structure of meaning, which is the core of one's existence, and this necessarily causes anxiety. The dimension of time fascinates existentialists. Our minds are able to bring the past into our current life. Existentialists view the acceptance of death as vital to the discovery of significant meaning and purpose in life. Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-61), the existentialist thinkers, regard man's relationship with society as indispensable. They call attention to the requirement for sublime virtues like love, sympathy and sacrifice in man to establish a harmonious interpersonal relationship. Ponty remarks: "We are involved in the world and with others in an inextricable tangle" (Merleau-Ponty: 307). An individual must be responsible or accountable for the authentic existence of 'himself' and his or her 'respective spouse', and secondly, he or she has to be responsible for the welfare of 'others' (society). In existentialist ethic, man's pretences, unworthy aspirations and self deception on account of his growing desire to lead a comfortable life, to amass wealth and to dominate others, certainly crush his interrelationships. The foremost aim of existentialism is to focus on the problems of human existence with a view to providing solutions. Existentialists take a stand that world of science and technology has created a lot of confusion in the man's mind about his 'authenticity' and "real self". They assume that machine, which has been created by man

has become his tyrant; the machine and technology which should have been the servant of man has become the master of man. Man's status has been drowned in the sea of impersonal forces. He is today searching sense and meaning amidst technology. Existentialism is, therefore, "essentially the philosophy of man and his endeavour to reaffirm and regain the lost status of man in this advanced technological and mechanised society" (Taneja: 280). Since science regards man material, existentialism is a reaction against science. Existentialism is a revolt against the impersonal nature of the modern industrial and technological age which has subordinated man to the machine. Jackson, in *Existential Anthropology* (2005) talks about the events that demonstrate the precariousness of human existence. He claims that our ambiguous relation to non-human nature and technology - our fear of it - stems from our social fears:

We fear the inert, unresponsive, silent and alien appearance of the extra human world because we see mirrored and magnified in it our deepest social anxieties - that we will not be recognised, that our voices will not be heard, that our actions are without significance, that we are mere means to genetic ends that far outreach the time-scale of our conscious lives, and that we possess no more meaning than grains of sand on a beach... (Jackson: 124).

He understands technology in the framework of our existential struggle to find a balance between controlling our fate and accepting the limits of our control. The philosophers also lay emphasis on emotional suffering - suffering which cannot be eliminated from life. Although we cannot always control or prevent events that cause suffering, existential theorists believe that we have the freedom to choose how we react to those events. Encounter with nothingness is conceived as a crisis in existentialism. The word is used in two senses. In the first sense, nothingness is a kind of gap or separation which lies between a man and the world. The second sense of nothingness is that of futility. Existentialism is a philosophy of reaffirming and regaining the lost status of man in the advanced scientific and technological society. The concern of existentialism is to defend the individual from objectivization (process of objectifying something) of society and technology. Existence does not mean mere living. It rather means complete, strong, self-conscious, responsible and progressive life of man. This paper reveals that an existential ethics permeates the fabric of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Over the course of his career, he wrote around 35 stage plays, the best known of which include *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953), *A View from the Bridge* (1955) and *The Price* (1968). *Death of a Salesman* was the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and Tony Award for Best Play. The play is a scornful assessment of the American Dream and of the competitive, materialistic American society of the late 1940s. The conflicts in the play relate to the tyrannies of the capitalistic system and the hoax of the American Dream. *Death of a Salesman* opened at Broadway at the Morosco Theatre on February 10, 1949 and ran for more than two years, tallying 742 performances featuring the tragedy of the common man, the 'low man'. The play encompasses an evening and the following day, but the action is

mixed with flashbacks or memories of a period approximately 17 years earlier. It was written at a time of great economic and social change - when the American Dream changed from one driven by ideals to one driven by money. Miller describes the play as "certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem." Willy's "conversations" are interior ones, "inside his head" (once considered a title for the play). In the playwright's view, the past informs the present, and to ignore it is to restrict the present. According to Sartre, an individual is a reflection of society; he not only stands for himself but also for all men who build a society.

Loman reflects Society; indeed he *is* his Society. His individual life is a microcosmic representation of the life around him. At the same time he is a product of Society, and Miller is remarkably skillful in showing the interplay of personal choice and social environment. One might say that the play is a study of Society's habit of trying to force people to become one with the social functions which they perform... (Barnes: 379).

Willy undergoes an existential crisis because he lacks a vision of his future. One of the reasons for his failure is that he cannot adapt to modern society. He tends to compare the past with the present. He is not able to let go of the past and accept the present times and the changes that have taken place in the society. The existential philosophers are critical of scientific conceptualism. With the tremendous progress in science and technology, rapid industrialisation and urbanisation have taken place. As a consequence, crowded towns rise up in which an individual is lost. Due to unparalleled progress of science and technology, huge industrial complexes and townships have sprung up. Hence, everywhere man is losing touch with nature. In fact, with the growing application of technology and consequent increase in the mechanisation of life, there is a growing despair in the minds of humans. The worth of human efforts is decreasing and a sensitive mind finds itself lost and forlorn. Willy is suffocated with the cramped city atmosphere and longs for the freshness and simplicity of nature. Moreover, he cannot keep up with the speed of technical progress. In the process of scientific advancement human beings have brought changes in nature as well:

Willy: Why don't you open a window in here, for God's sake?

Linda: They are all open, dear.

Willy: The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks... The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood... They should've had a law against apartment houses... Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening! (Act 1, sc.1)

In his youth Willy had the choice between two ways of life. On the one hand he had the opportunity to lead a life in the countryside and work outdoors and on the other hand the prospect to live in the city and make money in business. The decisive point of his life was the meeting with Dave Singleman:

His name was Dave Singleman. And he was eighty-four years old, and he'd drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, he'd go up to his room, y'understand, put on his green velvet slippers ... and

pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want (63) .

For Willy the pressure to sell meant an estrangement from family and friends and dissolution of his sense of identity. Being an economic non-entity in the family makes him suffer from a feeling of estrangement. The voice of excessive commercialism and money-mindedness that comes to co-exist with the increasing play of advanced technology and electronic gadgetry in the American economy tends to damage human responses. Through the character of Howard, Miller tries to suggest the extremely inhuman and materialistic nature of the American society. It is Howard Wagner who utters in the fiction the ultimate credo of capitalism - "business is business" (Act 2). He is a man for whom time is money. In Howard's new business ethics, Willy's desperate attempt to recall his friendship with Frank Wagner is doomed to fail. Arthur Miller's rebuttal to the principle that "business is business" (80) ...You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away ... a man is not a piece of fruit!" (82) - bear an echo of the youthful idealism of the 1930's and are a plea to treat employees as human beings and not as commodities or mere figures in a monthly company chart. The unstable mental and emotional state causes Willy to relive the past through flashbacks. He loses the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, and this behaviour alienates him from others, thereby diminishing his ability to survive in the present. Willy's dreams of material success and freedom ultimately dwarf the other aspects of his mentality to the point that he becomes completely unable to distinguish his wild hopes from rational realities in the present. He has a distorted idea of the American dream, believing that being liked and popular will make one successful. His ego refuses to accept that his once popular son has not achieved anything in his life after he left high school. Willy lies about his achievements. When speaking to his sons, he tells them that he "got on the road, and...went north to Providence. Met the Mayor". He tells Linda that he, "did five hundred gross in Providence". In fact Willy lies about his stature as a salesman. Charley is Willy's only friend, as Willy admits in Charley's office in act 2. Since Willy has problems to earn his living, Charley offers Willy a job out of pity. He has lost his job and has no source of income to pay his bills. Willy gets angry and his ego fights off his feeling of failure:

Willy: I don't want your goddam job!

Charley: When the hell are you going to grow up?

Willy (furiously): You big ignoramus, if you say that to me again I'll rap you one! (Act 2, 97)

Charley attempts unsuccessfully to make Willy differentiate between reality and fantasy. As we have discussed earlier, choice is vital to human existence. Willy opts the wrong career and does not accomplish much during his life because of his poor career choice. What is tragic about Willy is that he is not able to re-orient himself to the varying needs of the market. The protagonist is the victim of two enemies - time and his own fanaticism:

A reminder of the swift passage of time sounds throughout the play like a leitmotif. Neither Howard nor Ben has time for Willy. Howard rushes

Willy out: "I need the office," while Ben is always looking at his watch and cannot wait. His last words to Willy are "Time, William. Time! and "The boat. We'll be late". Concern with time reinforces the theme of change (Griffin: 56).

Loman's thoughts and feelings of alienation and loneliness are the direct psychological outcome of his interactions with society. Alienation describes the split between the self one knows one is and the impression one strives to present to others. Alienation is displayed in many ways throughout the play where Willy, Biff and Happy are isolated from themselves, from society and from their families. Willy knows deep down what his capabilities and problems are which is why he exiles himself socially. Subconsciously, this could be the reason for his "conversations" because he feels he can't talk to anybody. "I've got nobody to talk to, Ben" (II, 126). He is isolated to a degree where he can't talk to anyone but himself. Willy talks to himself to look for comfort and he seeks advice from his dead brother Ben on how to become successful. Existentialism is the consciousness of a man that he is existing in terms of his own flowing of experience, a flow which he can know, feel, sense only within himself. For the existentialists time is the measure of the flow of consciousness. Time makes man measure himself in the light of his experiences (Barnes 6). Willy Loman found the environment seriously faulty in the sense of the lack of human response, filial disobedience and the impersonal nature of the commercial world.

To a certain extent these frustrations have been spawned by an incredible technology, which by its very efficiency has separated us from one another. Technology has given us separate rooms, our own television, a personal car, but little personal contentment (Meyer: 182).

Anxiety arises from one's personal strivings to survive and to maintain and assert one's being, and the feelings anxiety generates are an inevitable aspect of the human condition. Underneath his public persona, Willy knows that he is a failure. He tells Linda, "*people don't seem to take me*" and "*they seem to laugh at me*" (28). His thoughts of alienation and solitude are the direct psychological results of his interaction with society. When Willy was brought face to face with his own reality, he could not bear it and so he killed himself. Miller shows how the common man is crushed by the uncontrolled external forces and false ideas.

Linda: Don't you feel well?

Willy: I'm tired to the death...I couldn't make it. (Act 1)

The theme of dystopia is represented in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* - it dramatizes the eternal conflict between individual choice and social necessity. Money, social status, a well-kept home, a happy family and respectability (both economically and socially) - this is what Willy Loman chases doggedly. Faced with the reality of his lies and the notion that Biff could be a success if only he had money, Willy kills himself so that Biff can get the life insurance money. Willy's inability to accept the gulf between his own life and the American Dream leads to his rapid psychological decline. He dies a forgotten man with the legacy of a family ill-equipped for the modern world. Miller, through the play talks about existentialism and shows us how our individuality, autonomy, privacy and free will can be taken from us if we fail to vigilantly protect them.

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