WILLY LOMAN'S TORMENTING TIME AND SPACE HALLUCINATIONS[1]

***Abstract**: Arthur Miller's* "Death of a Salesman" *deals with the exploration of human psychology entangled with the personal space and time, which get mixed with the past and future relating hallucination to reality and inescapable confusion to extreme subjectivism. Miller's protagonist, Willy Loman, is a common man struggling for position in society, in a time when everything seems possible.*

***Keywords**: individual, society, hallucination.*

While the American society was renewing its options for the future in the years after World War II, Arthur Miller was dealing with issues related to tragedy and the image of the average man. His most famous play, *Death of a Salesman*, had a major impact upon the audience becoming a cultural icon after more than fifty years on stage. It made people relate to the events in the Loman family life and focus more on the changes society was facing. The social pressure was unbearable for many and so, their problems were voiced in a way that could reach people everywhere.

As Willy Loman, the protagonist develops as a character throughout the play, his personality disintegrates and his death comes as a sort of surrendering in front of life and its problems. He wants to make a supreme gesture through which he can erase the mistakes he had committed and also his behavioural flaws. To make the character even more troubled Miller makes Willy suffer from dementia and his mental problem is exemplified several times as he can no longer identify what happened in the past and what the present stands for. There is an overwhelming presence of the past forcing its way into the present in such a manner that the audience has to observe it as to perceive the imprint it leaves on the characters. The trajectory of the lives of the Loman family members is one which begins in hope and ends up in sadness and misunderstanding.

One central theme that the author focuses on is the protagonist's inability to somehow switch off the recorded past of himself, his sons or even Howard, his previous boss. This past coming back to haunt him is the main instrument of his destruction. Willy is not only the victim of society and capitalism; he is also the victim of his actions.

Miller tried to create a clear distinction between what represented a projection of happy past times and the sad, but real present by using some special stage-setting indications. If the first act highlights some optimistic elements from the protagonist's life by placing him as someone who remembers the joyful past events related to his family and work, the second one does not focus on the future but mainly on the remorse some previous happenings bring forward. The flashback technique induces Willy in such a state that as time passes he starts to get more and more confused as he intertwines confusion with reality.

Due to the fact that Miller wanted to make clear all the changes Willy was going through he adapted his perspective on the stage by placing the Lomans' house in

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cross-section seen together with its external surroundings. Miller stated, even from the beginning, the fact that Willy's house is special because "an air of the dream clings to the place, a dream arising out of reality". (Miller, 1973: 7) However, Willy never does fulfil his dreams, the dreams which never seem to actually fit into the reality of his life.

The author decided to project another perspective from the traditional structures and as he broke out of realistic time and space he chose to mix these elements with psychology. The perspective the audience receives is a subjective one because the play is sieved through the protagonist's eyes and at some point it might seem rather difficult to perceive every little detail that the author intends to underline. As Robert Hogan observed "the play beautifully balances the interior of a man's mind with a full evocation of his world." (Hogan, 1964: 23)

Even if some critics were a bit surprised by this perspective they eventually admitted that this type of exposure brought people closer to the story of a salesman who once believes himself capable of greatness. This idea helped the audience observe the whole interior setting of the house. The centrality of the house together with the music and lighting fills the stage with the expressionistic elements that Miller needs in order to break boundaries. There are several actions taking place at the same time, characters involved in independent movements, life in itself manifesting on the stage. The spectators can have an insight on the intimacy of the characters and so be inside and outside their actions simultaneously. Still, it could seem rather puzzling having different characters doing different things at the same time. The audience's attention cannot be entirely split, so Miller solved this problem by using lights on the characters who spoke and were involved in direct action. All the other rooms, characters, and props remain in the shadow as symbols of the overall play. By placing such props on the stage the audience can move more easily and almost instantaneously into the next scene. There is no obvious gap and no loss of time. This type of projection which does not allow any time delays or fragmentations in the dialogue manages to project a less disjointed and fractured sequence of events. It may resemble a dream like situation.

Miller focuses on the house the Lomans live in to be able to identify the family with a space they own and connect to. The image that it has marks the existence of an ordinary family trying to fulfil ordinary duties in order to achieve peace and quiet and pay off debts. An important issue, which seems to haunt the Lomans is the financial situation that forces them to make sacrifices in order to obtain some decent assets. This continuous fight against the lack of money, even if it is not presented in such a blunt manner makes them react immediately when it comes to income and future plans. The house is also a life long commitment to paying debts and waiting for the moment when it could actually be owned by the ones, who had been inhabiting it for so many years.

When Miller decided to adjust every little detail to help tell the salesman's story he even made Willy's house a character in itself. In the play the household is presented as surrounded by a vault of apartment houses, seeming so fragile and small. There is the pressure of the outside world which eventually dismembers the home and finally destroys it. The household is dwarfed by the presence of so many new buildings. This issue is revealed more properly by Willy's desire to plant some seeds he had bought and by his incapacity of finding the seed: "Where the hell is that seed? You can't see nothing out here. They boxed in the whole goddam neighbourhood." (Miller, 1973: 101)

There is an obvious parallel between the house and the members of the family, focusing mainly on Willy. In the end of the play Linda tries to explain to him (even if he is dead) that the last payment for the house had been made and that they have it entirely

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to themselves, but that there is no one who could enjoy it and live there. The society of the time was crushing the individual and so the neighbourhood was minimizing the house, taking over the sunlight and its individuality.

The house is used mainly for developing actions which take place in the present. It limits the action between the walls of the house moving around to emphasize reality. There had to exist a means through which a separation between past and present could be made for the audience to follow the action and to perceive that for Willy distinguishing between the two temporal moments is quite hard to achieve. Miller constructs this effect by manipulating the space and boundaries of the rooms. When the action takes place in the present the characters behave normally moving from room to room through the doors. On the other hand, when Willy's recollections are staged the characters have some sort of independence from the restrictions of the walls and the action mainly takes place in front of the house, not inside. This is the way through which the audience can distinguish between reality and memories.

There are plenty of examples of Miller's manipulation of space and time boundaries. One of them would be in Scene 3 from Act I when Willy is placed in the kitchen pouring a glass of milk for himself, mumbling alone. This is part of the present. After just a few moments he remembers a conversation he had had with Biff, when the latter was a teenager and resumes it. He not only remembers it but acts accordingly as in the real expression of father-son relationship. As it is not a real conversation Willy is addressing a point somewhere offstage beyond the walls of the kitchen. This digression to the past is underlined by the protagonist's posture and eye contact. As the play progresses the action moves to the front of the stage and every member of the audience is forced to notice the events taking place in Willy's head. All these changes Willy is going through may become unsettling, but it is very effective to notice them from proximity. The audience has no other option but to watch and react.

Willy sees himself stuck between real walls but also between metaphorical ones. There are the brick and stone of a continuously developing society as well as metaphysical walls. In Miller's vision the public had to make some sort of distinction between the real moments Willy was living and the memories which became entangled with the present underlining his dementia so "as the action of the play, taking place in Willy's mind, with effortless fluidity breaks through the walls of the stage house, the strength of the walls of his neurosis is accentuated". (Welland, 1979:46)

The play was created by using the time and place switching technique getting it closer to the audience, who was more fascinated with the cinema. This set and time interchanging can become a bit puzzling but it helps to reinforce the troublesome times Willy was facing. The protagonist it recalling events from his live in a random manner, they are not chronological or even controlled by Willy. In psychology this is called *the return of the repressed* and it emphasizes that the primitive impulses gain over the compromise of reality. As Proust observed there is a type of involuntary memory which emerges from life experience in itself.

> Therefore, the past remains a subjective experience and can create no illusory bridges between the individuals whom the analysis brings together - individuals whom it had left in lifelong separation. Thus, instead of an interpersonal action that would call forth discussion of the past, the present generated by the thematic discloses the psychic state of the individual overpowered by memory. (Szondi, 1988: 20)

In Miller's case, he creates a character, which is overwhelmed by some of his past actions and by their consequences and he feels forced to admit his guilt and act

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accordingly. Even if Willy's suicide does not help his family at least in his opinion he was able to do something for their future.

When placing Miller's directions on a proper stage there is no great difficulty because the present is not entirely erased by past events appearing out of nowhere, but made more elaborate. The present and the past are on the stage simultaneously, the latter filling the gaps between dialogues. This makes the play richer, but at the same time it can present a narrative ambiguity, which places Willy between separate worlds.

The audience is faced with Willy's dreams, memories, or recollections of past events, which have to be differentiated by the ones that are real and taking place in the present. This allows people to observe Willy's inabilities to focus on one temporal sequence and to proceed accordingly.

> The protagonist regards himself in the past and, as self-remembering I, is absorbed into the formal subjectivity of the work. The scene presents only the epic object of this subjectivity, the remembered I itself, the salesman in the past, his conversations with the members of his family. The latter are no longer independent dramatis personae; they merge as references to the central I, in the same manner as do the character projections in expressionist dramaturgy. One can readily grasp the epic nature of this play of memory by comparing it to the "play within a play" as it appears in the Drama. (Szondi, 1988: 21)

Death of a Salesman presents two types of plot: the external one dealing with the last twenty four hours in Willy Loman's life from his return home late on a Sunday night and his death on Monday morning and the internal one which describes memories varying from when Willy was a child to the point when his older son, Biff, failed in highschool. Biff's failure is a sort of revenge of the son against the father, as he had discovered that Willy had been unfaithful. This was the memory the protagonist had tried hardest to repress, but unfortunately he had no accurate possibility of actually doing so. This final surrender of Willy places him in a state of loneliness and alienation that cannot be surmounted. As Neil Carson noticed "Willy's memories do not materialise at random. They are triggered by certain incidents in the present and Willy is changed by remembering them." (Carson, 1982:48)

The protagonist does not clearly understand his problems and so he wants to avoid admitting his psychological imbalance and try to focus on elements which could define the trajectory of his life and that of his family. There is a sort of *battle for supremacy* between what the past challenges the present to be and what it really is. Willy's flashbacks are represented by two categories: the first involves himself depicted in a sort of parallel to his brother, Ben and the second one presents Willy's relationship to his sons and his intention of teaching them about the ideal success in business. As Benjamin Nelson stated:

> This is not a simple flash-back technique by which Willy's life is presented in a neat linear development but rather a complex interrelationship of past and present, illusion and reality, through which character and event emerge concentrically, almost kaleidoscopically, out of the vast whirlpool of Willy's semiconscious existence. (Nelson, 1970: 108)

Miller used a tormented character to introduce some new elements specific to Modern theatre. His insight into the mental perspective Willy had, as consequence a multiplicity of times and spaces, led to a loss of identity. There was no other connection made, but through the correlation to ideals, hopes and plans from previous periods of time. Memory has no time and space limits and this brings forward the past of several characters, which is however relevant only to a single consciousness.

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The playwright intended to punctuate every change the characters where facing moving from one mood to the other, from one time limit to another. Even the lights on the stage shift subtly, in tone and colour, to suggest spatial fluidity together with a mixture of social, psychic and actual time. Miller's stage directions give important hints to his characters line of construction. Willy's slowly drifting away to his car and sales journeys confront the lack of hope. The scenes Willy projects create his body language as the one of a man who is beaten by the burden of existence. He first enters the scene carrying two large valises, a symbolic representation of his two sons. He has been carrying both of them with himself for too long. He never had time to rest and surrender to himself. Willy is induced into a state where his ego is taking over. As Jung pointed out the increased fatigue and worrying may lead to personality fragmentation. Even if Willy is in no way a hero in the true sense of the word he has some glorious dreams, which place him as a seeker for ennoblement in economic achievement. His personality betrays him through his obvious flaws, but also through the falseness he had faced his sons with.

In a way it could be noticed that all that was left of Willy were his dreams. He could not separate himself from them, be it from the past or present, regarding himself or his sons. The longing for hope and glorious future plans mark Willy as a character and enable him to transmit the grief and failure to an audience which is hooked and overwhelmed by his message.

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