

CATCH 22 OF COMMON MAN'S MASCULINITY IN ARTHUR MILLER'S DEATH OF A SALESMAN

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Abstract

Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" (1949) presents the working-class masculinity under threat. This paper has sought to argue that the threat is posed not only by the protagonist's inability to assert his working-class masculine identity due to his (fear of) unemployment, but also by the instrumental use of reason by the employer and hegemonic masculinity. It has tried to unfold this threat in terms of R. Connell's idea of 'hegemonic masculinity' and CALM report on crisis of modern masculinity published in 2014. The assumption is that Miller has depicted this threat by presenting the male protagonist in such an unfavorable situation that it relegates him to the vulnerable position of not being able to assert his masculine identity. It is also assumed that this threat is further validated by the presence of dominant masculinity. This research has sought to dramatize the playwright's consciousness of the masculinities in conflict and its outcome in America. This research is critically significant because reading this drama from the perspective of the crisis of subordinate or working-class masculinity is a far cry.

Keywords: working-class masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, identity crisis, instrumental rationality, suicide

Introduction

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* as a classic in American literature is a highly estimated play. In the play, the playwright has sought to recount the story of the central character Willy Lowman, who is unable to hold grip to his own existence, in American setting. As an unsuccessful salesman in his old age, he makes an effort to be successful in order to put his life in order. However, his effort ends with disappointment. Dissatisfied with his sons' progress in life, anxiety with his elder brother's progress, revelation of the secret of his extra-marital affair and bogged down by his boss Howard, he loses the control over his mind and commits suicide just to provide his family with financial support that could possibly come from the life insurance company. The interest of this research paper is the protagonist's unflinching tendency of looking forward to the success embedded in his boss(es) and elder brother which, I believe, signifies the dominant masculinity. Willy's anxiety with this dominant masculinity and his inability to meet this end is what makes him put an end to his life. Even his act of committing suicide emanates from his inability to achieve the status of dominant masculinity. This research paper, therefore, has sought to know how the protagonist's obsession with the ideology of dominant masculinity, motivated by the ideology of American dream, inculcated in his mind leads him to commit suicide.

Numerous critics have examined *Death of a Salesman* from different perspectives. However, none of them have examined it from the perspective of hegemonic masculinity. Harold Bloom has approached it as a modern American tragedy relating it to the tragedy of the Jews. He argues, "Miller has caught an American kind of suffering that is also a universal mode of pain, quite possibly because his hidden paradigm for his American tragedy is an ancient Jewish one" (*Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman* 3). He identifies Willy as the character in the play sharing the fate of the Jewish people. Similarly, Leah Hadomi has examined this play from the perspective of the lived relationships. He stipulates:

The relationship between Biff and his father revolves around misunderstanding and guilt; that between Willy and his father takes place wholly in the realm of fantasy. There is a similar doubling of brother relationships: the ambiguous relationship between Biff and Happy and the tie between Willy and his brother Ben in the former's fantasy world. In both relationships, the son who left arouses envy in the son who why stayed. (*Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman* 13)

Likewise, Stephen Barker in the article *The Crisis of Authenticity: Death of a Salesman and the Tragic Muse* also approaches this play as a tragedy portraying "the crisis of contemporary culture; culture, in turn, is the perpetual crisis of authenticity" (*Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman* 37). The critic's argument is that Willy, the representative of the American culture, is not true to himself as a result of which he feels homeless within himself. In other words, Willy lives his life with lies. Barker further makes this idea clear as he says "Willy carries his tragic homelessness around with wherever he goes, since it is something by which he knows himself. This homelessness of self-division is what finally makes salesman the tragedy of the common man" (41).

Besides, Fred Ribkoff examines this play as a tragedy on the basis of the protagonist's destroying himself as a result of the feeling of shame and guilt. In the process of searching for his identity, Willy is "driven by shame" and he kills himself in order to preserve his dream of being "well-liked" and a successful father and salesman" (*Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman* 127). Ribkoff substantiates his notion as he opines that "his vision of success perpetuates crippling feelings of inferiority and inadequacy that drive him to destroy himself" (127). The present research is quite different from the ones conducted so far because it has sought to examine the play from the perspective of the insights of masculinity studies. This research paper has been designed in three sections: introduction, textual analysis and conclusion. The first section has introduced the issue, shown the departure from the previous researches and discussed the design of the whole research. The second section has analyzed the text by drawing the insights of masculinities studies. And the last section has shed light on the findings of this research.

Crisis in the Common Man's Masculinity

Arthur Miller's modern tragedy "*Death of a Salesman*" deals with the issue of masculinity. "*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*" has defined 'masculinity' as "the quality of being masculine" (942) and the word 'masculine' has been defined as "having the qualities or appearance considered to be typical of men; connected with or like men" (942). This definition

makes it clear that masculinity is a gendered tag attributed to men for possessing certain typical qualities which have lasting effect on the way they act, speak and do the things. And they do these things on the basis of certain societal expectations. This means they are like the actors who anticipate late Shakespeare's notion of every individual living in the society. In other words, they act on the basis of the idea of masculine gender role acceptable in the society that is often considered as the social behavior in social sciences. They internalize this role in the process of socialization. R. W. Connell in "*Masculinities*" acknowledges that "being a man or a woman means enacting a general set of expectations which are attached to one's sex" (22). Thought in this vein, masculinity is a cultural coinage that means a male enacting a set of socio-cultural expectations. His actions are shaped by the masculinity norms. It is expected that he behave like a man, not a woman. Connell confirms that "masculinity is the internalized male sex role" which is carried in the body of a set of socio-cultural norms or ethics of how a man is to think, act and behave through years of practice, though they are bound to change with the change in spatio-temporal setting (23).

The protagonist of the drama "*Death of a Salesman*" Willy Loman and his two sons Happy and Biff represent the working-class masculinity. They are seen to be making an attempt to meet the standard that helps them to maintain their position in the society. Willy, at the age of 63, faces difficulties in maintaining his position as the breadwinner for the family. He does not get support from his sons in this matter, no matter how mature the latter become. He struggles even when he is old because he wants to be what he ought to be from the perspective of the society, i.e. a breadwinner. He knows his responsibility for his family as it is expected in the society. The *essentialist* definition of masculinity holds the idea that a man has to be "active, energetic, bear responsibility and take risk" (Connell, 69). Since there's no one to support him financially, Willy finds no any other option save being a responsible man providing his family with the bread by working even in his old age. And there is a hidden motive behind his working in his old age i.e. he wants to assert his masculine identity. *Normative* definition of masculinity holds the idea that "masculinity is what men ought to be" (Connell, 70). Willy seeks to preserve his image of masculine identity by trying to be what the society thinks he ought to be. And his consciousness of what he ought to be is but being able to be the breadwinner that is all determined by the society. He becomes very much obsessed with the breadwinner idea and that's the reason he very often uses the expression being "well liked" (*Death of a Salesman* 792). He wants to be 'well liked' because his being 'well liked' sustains his job that further helps him to maintain his masculine identity by continuing to be the breadwinner. If everyone likes him, he can sell the products. His failure to maintain his position of well liked as a salesman costs him a lot and he has this knowledge. After all, he is a worker, a salesman; not the boss. And his position of being a worker time and again relegates him to the situation of having the fear of losing the job. But he continues his struggle despite his old age to maintain his masculine identity. Haschemi Yekani argues that "... masculinity is not so much something one can claim; rather it is a position that needs to be achieved often in terms of heroic struggle" (*The Privilege of Crisis* 36). Sure, he does not claim his masculine identity; rather he exerts full effort from his side to acquire it without caring what the obstacle is on his way ahead.

In addition to maintaining his masculine identity with this work ethics, the idea of being 'well liked' carries within it his inclination to and fear of the dominant or hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is the culturally constructed and accepted ideal that every male aspires to. Every male wants to practise hegemonic masculinity and feel the sense of superiority thereby getting admiration. For Willy Loman, hegemonic masculinity is the culturally accepted image of a business man who is rich, has a grand personality and has the admiration of everyone in the society. He notices this image, to some extent, in his friend Charley, an offstage hero Ben and his previous boss. His proneness to hegemonic masculinity is clear in his 'well liked' idea. This 'well liked' idea becomes his obsession so much that he invokes the image of Ben in his daydream. Every time he finds himself in the problematic situation, he gets into the world of daydream where he gets relief. And his problematic situation always appears to be the financial one. The financial insecurity frequently hurls him into the daydream and he starts regretting not going to Alaska and not being rich like his brother who, upon going there, ends up rich through diamond business. He, at one point of dialogue, says, "... God! Why didn't I go to Alaska with my brother Ben that time! Ben! That man was a genius, that man was success incarnate! What a mistake! He begged me to go" (787). This dialogue shows his inclination to the hegemonic masculinity that stands for a tremendous success in the field of business ending up rich like his brother Ben.

Willy's act of referring time and again to the mythical heroes like Hercules and Adonis when he talks about his sons also shows his obsession arising out of his thinking too much about his failure in attaining the dominant masculinity that would strengthen his identity. He expresses his wish to be a great person in the field of business when he says, "... someday I'll have my own business and I'll never have to leave home anymore" (777). This dialogue not only shows his dissatisfaction arising out of his present life, but also his desire to acquire the position of hegemonic masculinity i.e. being rich and successful in the future. It seems that he is being fed up with his salary-man life. He also mentions what it is like to be a great and successful person in appearance when he gives a series of instructions to Biff as the latter is about to leave home for going to meet Bill Oliver to ask money for starting a new business of selling sports goods. He tells his son to "wear a business suit, and talk as little as possible" (787) and not crack any jokes, which is followed by another advice to be "quiet, fine, and serious" (787) and further says that "everybody likes a kidder, but nobody lends him money" (787) and "it's not what you say, it's how you say it – because personality always wins the day" (787 and 788). The reader is again reminded of how his mind is inclined towards the hegemonic masculinity because here he ends his dialogue with his emphasis on a good 'personality' that is again a trait of dominant masculinity for him. Connell argues "hegemonic masculinity is an ideal that many men aspire to, but only a few can practice" (79). Willy also aspires to but fails to get it, and that's the reason that he wins our sympathy. Further, talking about hegemonic masculinity, Connell confirms:

The concept of 'hegemony', deriving from Antonio Gramsci's analysis of class relations, refers to cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in the social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which generates the dominant position and the subordination (77)

As it is depicted in the drama, a group of successful businessmen claim and try to sustain hegemonic masculinity and this form of masculinity is culturally exalted. This is the reason Willy surrenders himself to the idea of hegemonic masculinity because he has the fear that if he does not practise it, he is sure to be pushed to the margin. Connell argues that “marginalization is always relative to the authorization of hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group” (80-81). Willy strives to practise it because of the fear of marginalization. The group he does not belong to is the dominant group and its authorization is sure to marginalize him. That’s the reason that he carries it as if it is a burden so that he doesn’t seem odd.

Willy Loman as the father contaminates his son with his ‘well liked’ idea as well. He, accepting his inability to aspire to that dominant position of hegemonic masculinity, wants his sons, especially Biff, to practice it. It is because of his extreme obsession with the idea of hegemonic masculinity. He always resorts into the daydream and through that goes back to the past when he was very happy with his sons for they used to love him, respect him prior to his son Biff saw him with a woman in a hotel. He relives those past happy moments reenacting them in the daydream. He does so because present does not let him live his life peacefully. He had a dream of making his son a great person in the field of business, however, they don’t become successful and it becomes intolerable for him. Biff finds himself helpless in the business world his father tries to fling him into. He thinks he is not fit. It happens after he flunks mathematics in the high school and he shows his unwillingness to continue it because of his exposure to the unfaithfulness of his father of involving in an extra-marital affair. He rather likes to live his life away from his father after he becomes the sole witness of it turning down his father’s idea of being a great person in the field of business. His failure in the high school blocks him from many opportunities. And ever after he remains a manual worker working as a farmhand and changing his job various times.

Happy also shares the same fate of Biff in terms of not being successful in the world of business. He is not a successful man like his brother. He always roams here and there with girls not caring his family. He does not care the sentiment of other family members. Willy becomes obsessed with his inability of becoming a good father, a prerequisite of traditional masculine identity. His obsession or embarrassment with the life keeps increasing. He drives his car without his knowledge that he is driving. He meets with several accidents because of his frustration and depression in his life for not being able to meet the standard of masculine identity. He nearly hits a boy. Talking about his unconscious driving with his wife, he says “no, its me, its me. Suddenly I realize I’m goin’ sixty miles an hour and I don’t remember the last five minutes” (772). Driving for five minutes without its knowledge is fetal. That is the result of his frustration and depression arising out of his fear of difficulty in maintaining his masculine identity. This type of fear is also seen in the shame he feels when he doesn’t accept the offer of his neighbor Charley. He expresses his desire to work on road under his boss for fifty dollars a week but he does not accept the same type of offer from Charley and that’s because of his humiliation arising out of his fear of losing the weight of his masculinity. He has the fear of being unemployed in every step of his life. He feels that his working-class masculinity has become an anachronism in the modern world. Miller in *Death of a Salesman* is trying to show the threat posed to the working class identity by the burgeoning modern industries. He is showing that Willy is out dated for he is not being able to cope with the modern development.

Willy's working-class masculinity is shown to have been threatened also by the hegemonic masculinity. Howard, as his boss belonging to and representing the dominant masculinity, tries to subordinate or marginalize Willy's working-class masculinity thereby rejecting him for the job thinking that it's no use of keeping him in the job because it is not productive. He tells Willy, "no, it's a business, kid, and everybody's gotta pull his own weight" (791), when the latter tries to appeal to him emotionally in making request to put him in the job. He uses the very reason, which was once and is a backbone of the scientific and technological development, to sack Willy from the job. The reason that was very much prominent in the 18th century as the key to freedom and weapon to fight against authority is seen to have been used as an instrument not only to exploit, but also to threaten the working-class masculinity. Connell contends that "hegemonic masculinity establishes its hegemony partly by its claim to embody the power of reason, and thus represent the interests of the whole society" (*Masculinities* 164). He further substantiates this idea by arguing that "hegemony relates to cultural dominance in the society as a whole. Within that overall framework there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men" (78). So, it is clear that the people belonging to the dominant masculinity use reason to subordinate and put into crisis the working class masculinity. And this is the reason that Willy, ultimately getting frustrated, obsessed and depressed, commits suicide. Segal contends that "men's engagement in paid work is central to social construction of masculinity" (29). This idea of masculinity embedded and asserted in the paid work is further made clear by Morgan who affirms that "paid employment, both as means of making money and of getting out of the house, is therefore likely to be an important anchor for traditional masculine identities"(29). Willy commits suicide because he feels his life to be absurd without assertion of his working-class masculinity which could be accomplished with the employment. Jane Powell in the preamble of CALM, a registered charity organization existing to prevent male suicide in the UK, report entitled "A Crisis in Modern Masculinity: Understanding the causes of Male Suicide" notes that:

Men have some very fixed expectations about how they are to be as men—breadwinners, there is a crisis, responsible for finance and legal matters, practical. We see too that work plays a key role for many men's self-esteem, and job loss has a disproportionate impact upon men. We see clearly here that when they hit depression they enter a cycle of frustration and unhealthy behaviors which is difficult to break. Not only do men feel they cannot talk about their problems and resulting depression but they also do not feel that their needs are really being considered by employers, governments and unions. (2)

This quotation best sums up the actual situation of Willy's frustration and depression arising as a result of his job loss putting his (working-class) masculine identity in crisis, which ultimately leads him to end up with committing suicide as an unhealthy behavior. CALM report informs that men aged 55-64 years are significantly more likely to say that they are 'very often' frustrated with their life (26). Willy is 63 years old when he gets frustrated and commits suicide. As a breadwinner for his family at the age of 63, Willy becomes helpless in meeting the expectation of the society vis-à-vis his gender role as a man expected to fulfill the daily needs of his family. The age he should have retired is but a struggling phase for him and even when he

opts for continuing the struggle to assert his masculine identity as per the societal expectation, bourgeois policy of use and throw of laborer grounded in the capitalism's instrumental use of reason and hegemonic masculinity he faces prevent him from realizing that. As a result, he loses his job and thus loses his self-esteem. Humiliated, Willy gets frustrated and depressed enough to end up his life by committing suicide.

Conclusion

Willy's act of committing suicide in the drama is the result of his inability to assert his working-class masculinity that gets threatened by hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a socio-cultural construct for it is the kernel of gender system. The creation of hierarchy among various masculinities by the society as they are accepted and institutionalized in the form of culture is what renders dominant masculinity an opportunity to pose threat against the subordinate masculinities. Willy's working-class masculinity, therefore, is the victim of the hegemonic masculinity of his boss(es) and this victimization relegates him to be humiliated, frustrated and depressed for neither can he assert his working-class masculinity, nor can he own the hegemonic masculinity. Besides, the threat against his working-class masculinity is also posed by the instrumental use of reason by his boss who uses him when his body has energy to work and sacks him when he gets physically weak. Therefore, the playwright has sought to show that the threat posed to the subordinate masculinity in the play is grounded in the very economic, socio-cultural and political systems in America. The (unequal) power relationship existing in between the people of hegemonic masculinity and working-class masculinity is a cultural construction legitimated by and institutionalized in social practices and economic activities that, in turn, have rendered the latter susceptible enough to have their existence and identity threatened by the former in America. Willy, as a victim at the hands of the people belonging to the hegemonic masculinity, is the representative of the latter.

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