

The Eternal Legacy of the American Salesman

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ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller's play "The Death of A Salesman" and David Mamet's play "Glengarry Glen Ross" are both set decades apart and the American political and historical situation is very different in both the plays yet they share the same underlying factor -an individualistic capitalistic economy which had become more brutal over the years leaving no scope for the weak and vulnerable. These plays clearly showcase the vulnerabilities, stress, anxiety and depression of the salesmen and the disillusionment that affects them and those around them which has remained unchanged over the decades. By using the salesmen and their lives the writers reflect the lives of most modern day Americans.

Key words: Glengarry Glen Ross, Death of a Salesman, America, Individualistic, Political, Historical, Capitalistic, Disillusionment

INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller's "The Death Of A Salesman" written in 1949 it deals with the modern salesman and his family, the play revolves around his personal and professional life where one controls the other in a strange sense causing much anxiety. But only in the end does the protagonist finally understand his folly. And David Mamet's "Glengarry Glen Ross" written in 1983 a much later period dealing with four salesman competing under stressful conditions, where the top two salesmen would be prize winners but the bottom two would be sacked. The setting for "The Death of a Salesman" is Brooklyn, New York the home of 63 year old William Loman alias Willy Loman, his home used to be the ideal place to live but later it had transformed into the only house in apartment blocks, which illustrates changing times but the Loman family being left behind in all the competition and their inability to keep pace with all the change around. The harsh realities are too much for Willy to comprehend due to which he is utterly exhausted and he lapses into his trance where he is incapable of coming to terms. Sometimes he faces his demons whereas most times he flees from them, finding refuge in lying. He feels he is the dominant one in the patriarchy, because his wife believes him and understands his mental state though her husband never fully understood her or had much respect for her, she tries hard to protect all of her family. Struggling with his delirium and trying to accommodate her adult sons too, unaware of her husband's infidelity- his mistress is nameless, she was the secretary to one of his clients whom Willy needed as a tool to get more deals figures. She is ever present in the play her laughter is heard in the background, a symbol, a reminder of Willy's lies his disillusioned relationships with

his wife Linda and with her which later involves his son Biff. This nameless character's laughter is heard when Willy told Linda was his best friend which demonstrates just how easily he could lie, this was an important characteristic for a salesman. He was always a salesman which illustrates just how deceptive he could be. Linda tries hard to protect the identity of Willy which she knows was crumbling within under the burden of failures, among her other womanly duties she takes on the role of propping him. Willy was child like easily confused. As his name sounded will he? Unsure who relied on others for support, coupled with recurring flashbacks which he constructs to suit himself, he makes his own memories, he was disillusioned as a young child by the abandonment of his father and his older brother Ben. He had tried to keep his own sons from being disillusioned in him, but he knew at the back of his mind that he had had little success, they too were suffering from the lack of physical and financial security. To make matters worse their father's praise about them had an adverse effect when Biff stole the sports equipment from the school gym, Willy was glad to know the skill his son pos-essed rather than reprimanding him. Linda sees through Wil-ly's pretensions and continues to encourage him, she is the only balancing factor of the family of the three fully grown disillusioned male members.

HOPES AND REALITY

Only Linda was satisfied and saw through all their facade this displays the core of the American tragedy where everyone was chasing fame and fortune with no respect for what they already had, there was always something missing. They

needed more and never had enough. The American Dream was for the ones who were disillusioned with their own lives, they try to measure self worth based on standards of American dream, their version is corrupt and unlike the ideals laid down by the founding fathers, they are materialistic. Both Willy and Biff his 34 year old son were unhappy and unsatisfied. His other 32 year old son Happy had a steady job in NY but wanted to become an important executive who took bribes in an attempt to move up in the department store where he works. Biff as an adult saw his father as fake who lived for illusions and for fond memories of the past which in reality were totally fabricated. But Biff was willing to face and acknowledge the realities that his father chose to run away from. Biff realised in high school that the world was not ideal and that his father was not perfect.

Willy followed the Carnegie approach of the individualistic, capitalistic world the concept that if a person lived and had a great deal of personal attractiveness all doors open for them automatically this was a life around dreams, where one could get the work done by the charm of character rather than do the manual work physically. This suggests that Willy was a hopeless parent who had himself lacked any ideals, he had created his own ideals which were mere deception. Willy did not show any marked intellectual capacity or training or wisdom a trait he passed to both his sons. Another one of his ideas where these were qualities for guaranteed success. He wanted success from his sons, according to his own definition, he saw the characteristics to succeed in them just because they were physically well built and attractive. He also wanted the family profession to be that of a salesman as his own father before him and clearly wanted Biff to follow in his footsteps. Biff was brought up on these ideas about being personally attractive and being well liked, Biff never questioned these values, but as a teenager he fully began to understand that his father lived in a world of illusions and dreams. And unfortunately had brought up his children in the same world but could not keep up the pretensions from Biff. The shock and disillusionment the teenager faces. With the shattering of his father's perfect image leaves him disturbed him for the rest of his life, the impressionable teenager loses track of his life altogether and his personality takes a self destructive direction. Biff was deeply distressed and his kleptomania got worse. Because Biff was brought up to think being smart and well liked he imagined just like his father led him to believe, it could facilitate his return to the employer he stole from, this was the result of a distorted outlook ingrained in him. When he tried to find the right perspective the world as he knew was never the same again, and he did not have the hallucinatory refuge as that of his father. Willy wanted his sons to have 'virtue' and 'personality', but not hard work. Willy never respected that though he too was good at working and being constructive but looked to it as labour work and so beyond their status. Biff who was good at working with his hands, Willy should have taught his sons to know their weakness and strengths – to chose a career based on his skills and interests and not on false perceptions and the opinions of others. Willy had put too much emphasis on appearance and popularity and not enough value on hard

work or on being successful academically as a result both his sons were unethical and unsuccessful. He had created a new legacy of being unsuccessful and couldn't bring himself up to acknowledge it.

Willy was a product of a producer society in which society offered him a set of values and objectives to which he was committed to. In order to be acceptable to society he became a salesman, he wanted to be "well liked" and popular, because of this ideology though he was fired he refused to accept the fact in his mind. Everyday and everything was almost like selling himself in order to achieve a sale to follow the myth of success which was again defined by society. The individual salesman's image was like that of free America where everybody could live the American Dream. In the play is typified in Ben, Willy's older brother, who had become exceedingly rich in his prospecting expeditions, he was truly a capitalistic triumph. This heightened optimism creates every situation was a business opportunity.

Willy was rarely self critical he realised that he talked too much and joked too much. He pot shots his neighbour Charlie out of jealousy, where the underdog like Charlie was successful whereas the likes of himself and his two sons, who were sure to be successful weren't. Willy was disillusioned with his illustrious neighbour Charlie. Yet Charlie who puts up with Willy, he tolerated Willy's looking down on him and on his son Bernard this shows the difference between the father son relationships between the two families. How Charlie was a successful man personally and so was his son whereas Willy was neither. Willy took sadistic pleasure in teasing Charlie and Bernard was another form of self delusional trait. Charlie and Bernard are reasonable and try to bring Willy to understand the realities of the situations and the ground realities. Willy tried to compete with not only Charlie but also with his son Bernard who was as successful as his father, and the reality that both Biff and Happy were just as unsuccessful as their own father.

Willy's confrontation with Howard, Charlie and Bernard become too much in one day and push him over the brink. For Willy time was more of a fluid blending into one another- flashback serves to foreshadow, he invents a past where he cannot be sure if he was looking at his make believe present so if the past was not true neither can the present be true. He was a perpetual daydreamer who tried every route to escape the present, waiting for the present to change to the past. He conveniently edited the story of his life, seeing things as he wanted and not as they were he encouraged his sons faults never trying to correct them. He was also one directional as he had put all his focus and hopes on one son Biff, and choose to ignore Happy because of which there was unnecessary pressure on Biff, where he felt inadequate in fulfilling his father's dreams.

Willy imagined the presence of his father and brother but they disappeared before his suicide, this was the only time when Willy was alone and could see things in their right perspective, not as his misconstrued version, for the first time he looked forward and not backwards as he had done so far. The act of planting seeds late at night though the season was almost to end, signal the new beginning he

foresaw for his son Biff an act that everything was not lost yet. Even though he was delayed he believed he could still amend something though it was late it was not too late to do something for his family.

He was satisfied that he lived his life and had finally been able to provide the security that Linda had lacked all her life. He had made endless road trips marketing before his suicide he wanted to make a final road trip for Biff's sake. He was a salesman to the end where he literally sold himself as a product, a sale with his life and a sale for life. He had fulfilled all his duties he had paid the mortgage for the car, the last instalment for the fridge and the house. So in a way he had fulfilled his obligation to his wife and wanted to finally redeem his son Biff, whom he knew he had grievously wronged. In the end Willy was more successful than his inspiration and role model eighty three year old David Singleman whose funeral comprised of other salesman and train passengers, whereas Willy's funeral comprised only of his immediate family and his neighbour Charlie and his son Bernard, those who had truly loved him accepting him besides all his faults, he had failed as a salesman. In his death his funeral showed that his life long principle that was to be 'liked' finally proved that he was not much 'liked' by others after all.

Willy's wife exclaims at the funeral that they were all free, freedom could have various connotations, that she had a house all paid for and so the monetary pinch she had lived with all her life was finally gone and she had her house as her security that her house was finally really hers. An end to all her insecurities of constantly worrying to make the house payments and the endless instalments, that it might all be taken away, be evicted. In her old age she was free from that fear. Finally she might be able to think for herself alone rather than about the house and everybody else. It could also mean that she had put up with her husband's absence on business for his long road trips and she had to wait anxiously for his safe return, now that he was dead and buried she was free from anxiety. Maybe she was aware of his affair and she no longer had to pretend to not know, and finally free from having to conceal her disillusionment, she had buried them with him and forgiven Willy for all his material mistakes and freedom from the burden on knowing it all along. Freedom from relentlessly putting up with his delusional behaviour and rallying for him often having to go against her own sons in defending him. Free from being unappreciated all her life, having to give to the relationship which gave her nothing much in return, free from the emotionally draining trying to retain her own last shred of sanity.

THE IDEAL SALESMAN

The title "The Death Of A Salesman" the title is figurative rather than literal, the true death is the death of a dream. Another dream in the metaphorical sense. Willy's iconoclastic, self delusional belief, considering himself capable of controlling whom he wanted how he wanted and when he wanted. Dreams leading to denial- of a life he chose for himself, in the end he tried to plant a garden to leave something tangible behind. He had dreamt of being like Dave Singleman and be loved like him. Of self delusional dreams,

meticulously constructed conflicts and elaborate fantasies. Disillusionment got in the way of happiness the play accommodates all the elements of a typical Greek tragedy in that it follows the unity of time, place and action. Willy and his dream dies as tragically as he had lived, all his life, believing untruths and delusions. The buildings that surround his home show he has stayed where he was but time had moved on, he was not equipped and nowhere close to competing or catching up with others his life was totally superficial with nothing concrete or solid in his legacy so it was best he stopped trying to cope.

GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS

David Mamet worked as an office manager at a Chicago real estate office in 1969, which was his inspiration to create the character of the manager Williamson in the play. *Glengarry Glen Ross* premiered in 1983 in London and 1984 in Chicago. Compared to Arthur Miller's play which used the life of a salesman as a tragedy, Mamet's play is far more fierce and cut throat without any morals or ethics. The space of time between the two plays, make the gap wide enough to show how immoral society had become. The older salesmen were far more different they were in a league of their own. Four Chicago salesman work together at selling undesirable real estate at unreasonable and inflated prices at *Glengarry Highlands Development*. The discourses of these sales people throughout the play uncover the inhuman level of presence which as touchy people, they are fated to resist. Their four letter words uncover the distress and despondency in which they are destined to carry on the shaky presence. The first act opens at a Chinese restaurant, where Levene tries to talk Williamson for better sales in 1965 he had sold *Glen Ross Farms* and was called 'The Machine'. He tries all tactics from bragging, threatening, begging, flattering and finally bribing – but Williamson refuses to disobey company policy, this is similar to Willy's subservient confrontation with Howard, when he requested to be changed to a desk job, but is fired instead because of his advancing age he was no longer useful, as though he had reached his sell by date like a product on a shelf that was no longer good enough.

COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT

Competition is an integral part of capitalism, the bosses Mitch and Murray declare a sales contest which would be awarded based on the month's end sales, the first prize a Cadillac and the runner up got a set of steak knives – it is the strangeness of the two prizes that makes it even more striking. The first prize a Cadillac was for the undoubtedly the best, the clear winner and so the most deserving winner where as the second prize a set of steak knives is symbolic of becoming a winner after cutting out all possible weaker, vulnerable competition, bringing out the predatory instinct literally making the kill. Veblen characterises the modern American salesman as "the traits which characterise the predatory and subsequent stages of culture, and which indicate the types of man best fitted to survive under the regime of status are

in their primary expression, ferocity, self seeking, clannishness and disingenuousness – a free resort to force and fraud.” The bottom two the two worst performers were to be fired, a chalkboard was put up to show each man’s sales- as if charting each man’s destiny preparing the bottom two for the inevitable. The chalk board turns the men to being mere sales figures without identities, someone who had done much for the company but was going through a bad patch in life, their years of loyalty was reduced to mere statistics. Similar to the nameless woman laughing in the background who had turned around the perfect relationship between Biff and Willy the competition turns over the relations the men who had worked with each other over the years. Mitch and Murray the two bosses who never appear raise the tension by introducing the competition similar to the sound of the laughing woman.

The competition signals to the end at the very beginning itself where three of the four men were certain of being fired, because three of the four were under performing with only one Ricky Roma being very sure of himself because he was the best among them. The men didn’t matter their productivity and being able to make the deal was all that mattered no matter his personal anxiety he had to try and perform. Mamet’s real estate office is a system that does not value people as individuals, but as a resource for profit, competitors are viewed as obstacles to be eliminated and their language reflects their attitudes. Mamet’s business office prevents any sense of community by producing a competitive discourse of closure. The compartmentalising of the discourse as either acceptable or unacceptable each social situation constructs its own form of discourse there is the use of expletives and invectives “an endless vituperation”, Dennis Carroll notes that the play’s language, in the first act does not further the plot as suggests “pattern of interactions” among the characters. The pattern is that of the salesmen closing themselves off from one another in their drive to close sales. They are ruthless in manipulating not only their clients but also their colleagues literally verbally overpowering paralyzing the other.

There was also talk of a former salesman Graff who had started his own company, Graff like David Singleman the ideal salesman, was supposed to be a good model. The phantom salesman ever present as in David Singleman in “Death of A Salesman” Graff is found here who was wiser and kinder than their present company, the salesman were naive to think that Graff was kind, he too was an unscrupulous salesman and knew well how to manipulate others well. Graff was in touch with all the salesmen in Mitch and Murray trying to exploit the weakness of the salesmen at Mitch and Murray to sell him good leads offering them a high price. Moss a salesman in his 50’s had the idea of stealing from the office, kleptomania was present in Arthur’s characters Biff and Happy. Moss wanted Aarnow another salesman in his 50’s who was very timid, who kept to himself and spoke to all his clients in a gentle manner, to do it but if he wouldn’t then Moss would do it himself, and if caught would tell the police that Aarnow was his accomplice, this strategy was employed in Willy’s treatment towards his kind neighbour Charlie being gentle seemed to be

a flaw which everyone looked to exploit taking money from him and then pretending that it were a salary, but continued to humiliate and insult him.

The smartest of the four salesmen was Ricky Roma, though sleek and easily the winner was never off guard as was obvious in his treatment of the timid Lingk when he was alone and sure that he had the attention of Lingk, he delivered a long monologue about morality and how each man is a master of his own will and destiny. This monologue does not compare to Willy’s day dreaming who mostly talked to his dead brother Ben or his lost father. Roma was a great judge of character who understood when and where to strike to get the most out of people’s vulnerabilities. Roma had a way of smooth talking with the smart and the meek at the same time. He convinced Lingk to buy the Glengarry Highlands Development using Lingk’s personality contriving him into believing he was unable to make his own decisions as a man of the house, because he was afraid of his wife. After having sold the property Roma lies to Lingk as if talking to a client Dr. Ray Morton, so that Lingk would not be able to cancel the deal. He evades everything about the deal and gives a speech about marriage instead. Roma openly scammed people telling white lies selling them worthless properties, lying, pretending to be what they are not. He sold them castles in the air and made them believe.

THEORIES OF CAPITALISM

Edley and Wetherell state that capitalism creates an inevitable conflict of interest between owners and workers, or between workers and managers who act as the representatives of owners. The office manager Williamson bears the brunt of all the four salesman all of them insult him because he was salaried and gives them orders, they feel he could never fully understand what it was like to be a salesman getting commissions from deal to deal. Barbara and John Ehrenreich say that “salaried mental workers do not own the means of production whose major function in the social division of labour maybe described broadly as the reproduction of capitalistic culture and capitalistic class relations. The boundaries separating it from the ruling class above and the working class below are fuzzy.” The salesmen consider themselves the true men- manly men who worked from one day to the next unlike Williamson who just took orders from Mitch and Murray. They felt an exhilarating sense of adventure, the trials and the tribulations of their chosen professions gave them a thrill meant only for real men. Ironically at one moment the salesmen refer to themselves as a group and a team whereas they were all working individually, trying to accomplish their means by what they felt was right. The profanity which characterises Levene’s tirade against Williamson at the point, heedless to the brotherhood and communality that binds the workforce, ruins Roma’s business prospect through his irresponsible intervention. Post Fordism, neo liberal capitalism, and politics were introduced in the workplace, Peck and Tickell argue “ is the politics of the crisis, a kind of jungle law which tends to break out along with financial instability, accelerated labour exploitation and self destructive dynamic of the un-

fettered market- when economic growth slows and when social compromises collapse.”

Levene was a shifty character who displayed all emotions changing from one situation to another, showing how easily he could be manipulated, but others couldn't be manipulated that easily. This is seen best in the first act and the second act of the play where Levene tried all tactics from requesting, bragging, begging, threatening, challenging and finally to bribing Williamson. In the first act Levene was trying to convince Williamson to give him better leads, whereas in the second act he was trying to save himself from being turned in to the police for being an accomplice to Moss in the office theft. When Williamson wanted to go to detective Baylen, Levene breaks down and confessed that he sold the leads to Graff. Levene tries to change the situation in his favour saying he was a more confident person and could be an excellent salesman just as he used to be. Levene again tries to bribe Williamson the 2,500 dollars he got from Graff plus fifty percent of his commission from his future deal profits from Nyborgs which turns out to be a worthless deal. Even Williamson measures out what he could and couldn't profit from Levene, and he saw nothing profitable he turned Levene in, Williamson uses his administrative power, and wielding his power told Levene that he never liked him. The confrontation was similar to that of when Willy had gone to his boss Howard to request an office job in New York and Howard had declined as no longer Willy was no longer energetic to increase the profits and so was dismissed.

CONCLUSION

In his book 'The Sane Society' Erich Fromm shrewdly draws out the nearby relationship between Capitalism, Darwinism and Freudian theories. Darwin gave the expression to the rule of competition and common hostility in the sphere of biology with his hypothesis of a focused battle for survival. Later Freud under the impact of the anthropological premises was to claim it for the sphere of carnal desires. Sales people are portrayed as predators and persuasive. The spoken obscenities are not intended to be an unwavering proliferation of the dialect of the frustrated American salesman. It draws attention to its inward realism more than its outer realism. Its genuine topic is the plight of the human spirit brought about by the industrialist reasoning which is similar to its anthropological and mental counter parts, alienates himself. The ruthless components of the industrialist venture which Mamet satires Glengarry Glen Ross maybe seen as in direct descent to those instilled in the philosophies of Darwin or Freud.

What merchandise Willy Loman sells we don't know and the author never said, its only known that he was a travelling salesman with two cases. The reader can add any merchandise they relate to. Glengarry Glen Ross it is known that it was a real estate office they sold land in Glengarry Highlands and Glen Ross Farms. The lands were important as they are the title of the play, and they were worth four salesmen. In order to cut back on the employees instead of firing any two a competition was introduced to bring out their animal instinct, which maybe the employers believed had gone dormant as

they were all aging. Where as to the four salesmen signify the competition of the modern age, living on the edge, having something extra can only lead to success. It shows the futility of being a worker not in control of their own destinies where they are controlled by someone who maybe less competent then they are. Shelley Levene says "We're a dying breed", sorrowful that the men who did real work are not valued. His first name is suggestive of the British rebel poet Percy Byshe Shelly who was well endowed in family, aristocracy and intellectual capacities threw everything away just because he believed in his right to freedom of expression writing a pamphlet titled 'The Necessity of Atheism' only to be expelled from university and dying in exile at the age of twenty nine. The character of Shelley Levene is one who blows hot and cold in the same breath, it was this fluctuation in his character that makes him the most open target by his fellow salesmen, Roma who uses him and his easy vulnerability makes him fall prey to Moss. In reality all the salesmen were interested in themselves alone, though they might have been working together for sometime there was no social bonding structure in their working, yet nothing mattered. They often used personal details of each other and their clients to capitalise on and to advance their own ambitions. Just like Willy Loman, Levene is a liar who tried to brag, his tragic flaw was his big mouth and he realised that in the end when it was too late. They were all working but someone was the best and the others were just not good enough.

Willy Loman was in pursuit of happiness, self delusional to realities. Spindler points out about Willy's suicide, firstly only after his death could he own a property, secondly, because he is a failed and discarded salesman in 'the distribution system', he turns out to be a worthy dead instead of being a valueless alive. As he has only ever obtained financial prize at the expense of 'self negation' there is a 'perverse logic' in his receipt of the utmost amount of money for his most intense action of 'self negation'. Whereas Mamet's salesmen were both realistic and materialistic, they fit in well in the capitalistic individualistic society so encouraged in America. The only reality they knew was themselves, it was self created and not living in the real life literally acting one part from the other playing with their mind. The ones who were depressed and emotional are considered a liability and fit to be trodden upon. This disillusionment can be seen in all the interactions and relations in both the plays the husband and wife, parent and child, friend and neighbour, client and salesman, boss and subordinate and also the team this momentum builds up so much so that it comprises the education system, professions and inevitably all of society.

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