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Entropy of a Salesman: Ecological Decay in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Willy Loman, the tragic hero of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is destroyed by his wrong dreams. His unwavering faith in the dictum of "Be liked, be successful" is often seen as an uncanny amalgamation of "humanitarian" and "materialistic" values. A closer look at Willy's tragedy, however, foregrounds implicit motif of ecological decay, which goes hand in hand with Willy's psychological degeneration. Anthropocentric approach of contemporary materialistic society ruthlessly demolishes age-old bonding of man and nature, and brings humanity on the brink of entropic doom, foreshadowed by Miller in Willy Loman's ecological angst.

The tragedy of Willy Loman has found an echo in the hearts of many readers since the time of its inception. Willy, the symbol of common man, wages an ineffective war against the materialistic American society where "it's all cut and dried" and no chance for "respect, and comradeship, and gratitude" (Miller 63). Incidentally, Willy's psychological deterioration in the play goes hand in hand with the surrounding ecological decay. His tragic flaw is his unrealistic desire of mixing "natural" and "civilised" world together. Though almost all of Miller's plays deal with "the dialectic of enclosure and freedom, nowhere is this theme so dominant than in *Death of a Salesman*, in which Willy Loman dreams of the open road as urban confinement encroaches ineluctably upon his world" (Aronson 90). The claustrophobic setting of the salesman's house right at the beginning gives ample suggestion of his torpid psyche.

Willy's house is surrounded from all directions by "towering, angular shapes" that seems to be suffocating the very impulse to live and breathe freely (Miller 7). The "angry glow of orange" that pervades the apartment houses casts a demonic influence on Willy's psyche (Miller 7). His frustration and anger erupts every now and then for being "boxed" amidst "bricks and windows, windows and bricks" (Miller 12). In his wrathful vituperative he curses the apartment house culture that has transformed the cities into veritable pigeonholes, where "there's not a breath of fresh air" where "grass don't grow" and where one "can't raise a carrot in the backyard" (Miller 12). Throughout the play, Miller "juxtaposes an imploding urban landscape of time present . . . with Willy's longings for a pastoral landscape, one necessarily reconstructed only in time past" (Roudane 69). Willy nostalgically remembers the time when he had two "beautiful elm trees" in front of the house and many fragrant flowers blossomed in the courtyard across the year. The symbiotic ambience of the house in the past is in utter contrast with the entropic environment of the present, which aggravates the tragedy of the salesman manifold.

The burgeoning cities, inflated by the growing number of people with each passing day, hardly leave any scope for idyllic harmony of human and natural world. Willy hits at the root of the problem when he asserts that growing population is ruining the country and leading to maddening competition (Miller 12). Willy's son Biff is equally a lover of nature, an outdoor person, who loves to be on a farm all the time. But in the capitalistic society where there is cut throat competition "to get ahead of the next fella," Biff finds himself a failure (Miller 16). He expresses his disgust at the claustrophobic environ of a typical office job where one has "to

suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when all you really desire is to be outdoors, with your shirt off” (Miller 16).

Biff prefers to dwell in his Green paradise herding cattle, growing vegetables at the lush green pastoral farms of Nebraska, Dakotas, Arizona, and Texas. But his pastoral stupor is shattered as soon as spring season comes. He confesses to Happy that he cannot bear to be on a farm in spring season. Like the soul-seeking narrator of T S Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, “April is the cruelest month” for Biff, as it reminds him of his own mental, physical, and economical stagnation amidst all around growth and development. Spring season admonishes him for “not getting anywhere” even at the age of thirty-four (Miller 16). Nevertheless, Biff is not the only one who is dissatisfied with his life, his younger brother Happy, seemingly more settled and successful than Biff, is as disconcerted as him. Happy avouches his dissatisfaction at the meagerly existence of a money monger, whose thirst for making money is insatiable and who can stoop to any depth of perdition to get ahead in this rat-race.

Biff’s suggestion to Happy of “buying a ranch, raising cattle” is yet another attempt at reviving the idyllic world of a peasant. Both Biff and Happy are man of Muscles, meant to work in the open, not in the cluttered city offices. When Happy admonishes Biff for whistling in elevator while working for Bob Harrison and leaving a bad impression on him, Biff retorts by saying that he does not care what others think, since they “don’t belong in this nuthouse of a city”; they are better suited to do some manual work like “mixing cement on some open plain” or become a “carpenter” (Miller 48). Nevertheless, materialistic American society does not allow him to work in the close proximity of nature.

Making profit is the sole motto of contemporary society, which splits both Willy and Biff into two. They are compelled to go against their natural instinct of working in the open. Willy’s deteriorating mental condition does not leave much option before Biff, but to come back to New York and start a business by borrowing money from one of his previous employers, Bill Oliver. The prospect of Biff making a fresh start fills Willy yet again with optimism. He starts dreaming for better future and once again plans to “buy some seeds” while his way home that night (Miller 55). When Linda reminds him that nothing will grow in their backyard, since “not enough sun gets back there,” Willy expresses his long nurtured desire of getting a “little place out in the country” and raising “vegetables” and “a couple of chickens” (Miller 55-56). The soul of a “workman” in Willy longs to build “a little guest house” only if he could get a “little lumber and some peace of mind” (Miller 56). Throughout the play Willy on many occasions exhibits his leanings towards manual work right in the vicinity of nature. Indeed, it is surprising why he chose to become a salesman, instead of becoming an explorer like his elder brother Ben. Willy himself acknowledges that life changing moment when he met Dave Singleman, a salesman in the Parker House, who made him believe that “selling was the greatest career a man could want” because it offers an opportunity to “be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people” (Miller 63). Between Ben and Singleman, Willy prefers the latter since he “achieved a success that presented him with a world of loyalty, aid, and love” (Jacobson 250). Moreover, Dave Singleman achieves a queer amalgamation of “nature” and “culture” something which Willy always aspires but fails to achieve:

Singleman had explored and imposed his will (through selling) upon a vast territory, as Father Loman had, but Dave Singleman had managed it in a civilized and comfortable way: in a train rather than a wagon, a hotel room rather than

around a fire, and with the Green World transformed into the ease of the green velvet slippers, which he wore even in his death in the smoker of a train. (Stanton 124)

Willy, nevertheless, soon realises that juxtaposing “nature” and “culture” is not feasible in the modern capitalistic society where making money is all that matters. And in this New World, Willy is a complete misfit, a substantial failure. His mental condition worsens with each passing day and in his recurring fits of hallucination he revisits all those crucial moments of his life which led him to present state of degeneration. He often imagines talking to his brother Ben, who proves to be more sensible and successful between the two in following his natural instinct for adventure and exploration, inheriting it from their father. Though there is a marked difference between Ben and senior Loman’s approach towards nature: “Father Loman was a creative figure, moving in harmony with nature by making and disseminating music, Ben is an exploiter and despoiler of nature” (Stanton 120-21). Ben’s offering him to work in his “timberland in Alaska” is a prospect that momentarily fills Willy with thrill and excitement—“Me and my boys in those grand outdoors!” (Miller 66). But soon the hankering image of Dave Singleman brings Willy’s faith back into the supremacy of his job of a salesman:

It’s contacts, Ben, contacts! The whole wealth of Alaska passes over the lunch table at the Commodore Hotel, and that’s the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked! (Miller 68)

Willy’s conviction, however, ultimately offers him nothing but ridicule and scorn of the whole world including his own sons. Willy Loman, a man who always lived for his ideals of love and comradeship, makes one last desperate attempt to revive his image in the eyes of his sons—particularly in the eyes of his elder son Biff, in whom he sees his own image of a failed sibling—by killing himself in a car accident thereby making his sons eligible for getting twenty thousand dollars worth of Life Insurance amount. It is quite remarkable that just before his death, Willy is seen once again sowing some seeds in his backyard and in his hallucination discussing the prospect of suicide with Ben. Evidently, these seeds are the promise of a better future, which get stifled in the entropic surrounding of apartment house culture, a by-product of Capitalistic society. Further, Willy’s dialogue with Ben, contemplating upon the pros and cons of committing suicide is a psychological endeavour to redeem his entropic psyche. But as the seeds which Willy was trying to sow fail to grow in the absence of sunlight, similarly Willy’s life instinct fails to revive in the absence of love and warmth of his kith and kin. Thus, entropy of the environment goes hand in hand with the entropy of the salesman, whose tragedy gets complete when his funeral is attended only by his wife, two sons, and close friend Charley. The ideal life of Dave Singleman eluded Willy and so did his death—“the death of a salesman” whose funeral was attended by “hundreds of buyers and salesmen” (Miller 63).

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