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Women in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman

Ebru Gökdağ*

State Conservatory, Performing Arts Department, ANADOLU University,
Yunusemre Kampüsü, 26470 Eskişehir, Turkey,
egokdag@anadolu.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

This paper will examines how women are portrayed in modern American theatre. To narrow the subject, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is studied since the author is recognized as the father of contemporary American drama. *Death of a Salesman* is not only very popular in Unites States of America to the point that it is institutionalized in the public school systems but also in most parts of the world even today. Since theatre not only entertains but also educates it is worth looking into how women are portrayed in the world through this particular play. The popularity of this play unfortunately point out that the audience still considers the roles of women in this play to be a true and ideal representation of woman. Thus by producing this play especially in the public schools keeps reinforcing the negative image about women and teaches female audience male perception of how a women should be.

Keyword:, Arthur Miller, Women in Drama, Death of a Salesman

Introduction

This paper examines how women are portrayed in modern American theatre. To narrow the subject, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is studied here, since the author is not only recognized as the father of contemporary American drama but also as the most important playwright of the world. Of all his plays, *Death of a Salesman* is considered as the masterpiece of the modern drama and his best play. The play opened in 1949 on Broadway. After its opening, it achieved great critical and popular success. It won Arthur Miller both a Pulitzer Prize and the Drama Critic's Award, and was performed all over the World. Ramon E. Romero states that Miller was one of the most popular playwrights in England, Germany, France and Spain "almost theatrically colonized European stages of the late 1940s and 1950s" (487). In one of his articles, Arthur Miller claims that since the Second World War America is the leader of Modern plays in the world: "it is often admitted that if there is a leadership in the contemporary play since the Second World War, at least in terms of International public appeal, America has it. Put simply, we have spontaneously created methods of reaching this great mass of the people whose effectiveness and exportability...are not equalled anywhere else" (Martin, 89-90). If looked at the American drama in the 1940s and 1950s the 'spontaneously created method' Arthur Miller stating is when simply put about realism in most elements and naturalism in acting which created American naturalism carried to world mostly by Arthur Miller's and Tennessee Williams' plays.

Subject of *Death of a Salesman*

The subject of the play is a classic one. A basic family structure: a father, Willy Loman; an unsuccessful businessman who believes in the American Dream, a mother, Linda Loman; and two sons, Biff and Happy, who are very different from each other yet until the end of the play both also believe in the American Dream which is forced upon them by their father.

Dreaming of American dream and persisting to realize this myth carries the father Willy Loman to such an obsession that he believes “he is not worthy of love if he is not materially successful. Only when he recognizes that his son loves him, despite his failure, is change possible though never fully realized, since Willy commits suicide so his family will receive his insurance”(Brockett, 336). After the successful opening of *Death of Salesman* in Philadelphia, Arthur Miller faces two kinds of criticism. One perception claims that Miller was too shy in truly criticizing the Capitalist system and the other perception defends that the play was blaming the system rather than the individual. Stephen A. Lawrence puts one good example of these criticisms forward through questions one after another in his article titled “The Right Dream in Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*.” In his inquiry Lawrence asks:

If Willy is responsible for his own downfall, what are we to make of all the suggestions of a sick and distorted society? And more important, why need we pay any attention to a man so deluded and unwilling to face up to his limitations that he destroys the potential of his family? If, on the other hand, society is responsible for planting the seeds of corruption and misplaced values in Willy...What is wrong with the American success myth. ... We are aware at the close of the play that happy is as deluded as ever about his father’s worth, even though Biff has reached the point of self-awareness. When Biff, at the funeral, says that his father “had the wrong dreams” and “never knew who he was” we are all relieved to see that perhaps someone can be salvaged from the wreckage. When Happy declares that he is going to take over where his father left off, we share with Biff what Miller refers to as “a hopeless glance at Happy.” (547)

As so many experts, theatre people, researchers and academicians kept discussing *Death of a Salesman* from the window of Willy Loman and his two sons’ dreams and individual versus the system, women characters of *Death of a Salesman* were scarcely mentioned. It was with the inquiry of feminist researchers stereotype statements about women in American Drama began studied. Darlene Larson and Patricia Wright state that “A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization which appears again and again”(70) and state the importance of teaching students to search and comprehend why and how stereotypes created in literature to help female students value themselves as active subjects of their lives, as individuals and as active citizens.

Looking at *Death of a Salesman* from this perspective the first problem encountered, which is common to many plays with the same subject is the absence of a daughter role. For so many feminists this is not surprising since playwriting is dominated by males. In *Death of a Salesman* there are thirteen characters, and only five of them are females. The only female role within the family is LINDA, a mother and a wife. The other four females are little characterized to a point as if they are one-dimensional and with very few lines.

The first female character to step onto the stage, other than the mother is THE WOMAN. Stage directions for this unnamed character are as follows “From the darkness is heard the laughter of a woman. Willy doesn’t turn to it, but continues through Linda’s lines. ...Music is heard as behind a screen, to the left of the house, THE WOMAN, dimly seen, is dressing” (29). This unnamed character is placed in one of Willy’s flashback scenes. She is just an image a shadow; the only information the audience learns about her is that she is a receptionist and is having an affair with Willy in a hotel in Boston. Compared to the other female characters in the play THE WOMAN has more lines and has a more important function in the structure of the play. In Act Two, Willy’s youngest son Biff discovers this affair, and this discovery brings the climax of the play and starts the downfall for both father and son. The dialog in the discovery scene is as follows:

BIFF: Why didn’t you answer?

WILLY: Biff! What are you doing in Boston?

BIFF: Why didn't you answer! I have been knocking for five minutes, I called you on the phone-

WILLY: I just heard you. I was in the bathroom and had the door shut. Did anything happen home?

...

WILLY: Hurry downstairs and-

BIFF: Somebody in there?

WILLY: No, that was next door.

(THE WOMAN laughs offstage)

BIFF: Somebody got in your bathroom!

WILLY: No, It's the next room, there's a party-

THE WOMAN: *(enters laughing. She lisps this):* Can I come in? There's something in the bathtub, Willy, and it's moving! *(Willy looks at Biff, who is staring open-mouthed and horrified at THE WOMAN)*

...

WILLY: Ah- you better go back to your room They must be finished painting by now. They're painting her room, so I let her take a shower here. Go back, go back... *(He pushes her.)*

THE WOMAN *(resisting):* But I've gotto get dressed, Willy, I can't –

WILLY: Get out of here! Go back, go back. *(Suddenly striving for the ordinary)* This is Miss Francis, Biff, she's a buyer. They're painting her room. Go back, Miss Francis, go back...

THE WOMAN: But my clothes, I can't go out naked in the hall!

WILLY *(Pushing her offstage):* Get outa here! Go back, go back!

THE WOMAN: Where's my stockings? You promised me stockings, Willy!

...

You had two boxes of size nine sheers for me, and I want them!

WILLY: Here, for God's sake, will you get outa here!

...

BIFF *(his weeping breaking from him):* Dad...

WILLY: She is nothing to me, Biff. I was lonely, I was terribly lonely.

BIFF: You-you gave her mama's stockings! *(His tears break through and he rises to go)*
(94-95)

THE WOMAN character in this play was written as a sexual object and a sexual stereotype that can be pushed around; Willy or any male can humiliate her. She has no feelings, no intellect and no ability to respond to comprehend the situation. She does not react at all when physically pushed around by Willy. Even only being a sex subject she is dangerous because she causes Willy to be alienated from his son and Billy to hate his father. Thus using the character THE WOMAN, Arthur Miller tells his audiences how dangerous the women can be. In the second act of the play, we learn that his cheap affair with the woman in Boston destroys the ambition in Biff to continue with his education.

The second female character the audience meets is JENNY. This character has less than ten lines throughout the play.

WILLY *(entering):* Touchdown! Touch- *(He sees Jenny.)* Jenny, Jenny, good to see you. How're ya? Workin'? Or still honest?

JENNY: Fine. How've you been feeling?

WILLY: Not much any more, Jenny. Ha, Ha! (71)

The occupation Arthur Miller chose for this female character is secretary. She is Willy's friend Charley's secretary. Miller's only purpose for this female character in the play is that she be impatient with Willy and be a sexual object for him.

The last two female characters to appear on the stage are GIRL and LETTA. The audience meets Girl in act two. We learn a little more about Girl in a conversation between Happy, Willy's oldest son and Girl, namely that her last name is MISS FORSYTHE; which gives her a little bit more identity.

HAPPY: Wait a minute. I've got to see that old confidence again. Do you want her? She is on call.

BIFF: Oh, no. (*He turns and looks at her*)

HAPPY: I'm telling you. Watch this. (*Turning to the Girl*) Honey? (*She turns to him*) Are you busy?

GIRL: Well, I am...but I could make a phone call.

HAPPY: Do that, will you, honey? And see if you can get a friend. We'll be here for a while. Biff is one of the greatest football players in the country.

GIRL (*standing up*): Well, I'm certainly happy to meet you.

HAPPY: Come back soon.

GIRL: I'll try.

HAPPY: Don't try, honey, try hard. (*The Girl exits*) Isn't that a shame now? A beautiful girl like that? That's why I can't get married. There is no good woman in a thousand. New York is loaded with them kid! (81)

Just reading this short dialog shows how the Girl has no power. Like Letta, she is a whore. Even as whores, they have no characterization. They are put into a scene so they can obey whatever the man says and so we can hear all the humiliating ideas Happy and other men have towards women. In act one when talking about women

HAPPY: ...But take those two we had tonight. Now weren't they gorgeous creatures?

...

HAPPY: I get that any time I want, Biff. Whenever I feel disgusted. The only trouble is, it gets like bowling or something. I just keep knockin' them over and it doesn't mean anything. You still run around a lot?

BIFF: Naa. I'd like to find a girl-steady, somebody with substance.

...

HAPPY: ...I don't know what gets into me, maybe I just have an over-developed sense of competition or something, but I went and ruined her, and furthermore I can't get rid of her. ...You know how honest I am, but it's like this girl, see. I hate myself for it. Because I don't want the girl, and, still, I take it and -I love it! (18-19).

The most important female character in the play is Linda. Even though Linda is the wife and mother, she has little importance in the main action of the script because the structure of the play is built around Willy and his two sons, Biff and Happy. The stage directions at the very beginning of the play tell us how Arthur Miller limited Linda as a character:

... Most often jovial, she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to Willy's behaviour- she more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties, served her only as sharp reminders of the turbulent longings within him, longings which she shares but lacks the temperament to utter and follow to their end. (8)

It is obvious that she cannot act on her own behalf. She cannot take an active role in the play since she has no “temperament” to change the things happening around her. From the very opening of the play, Arthur Miller has made Linda an object instead of a subject. That is why the entire play pays attention only to Willy and his troubles. But what about Linda or the other female characters in the play? What about their lives, feelings, desires, struggles and problems? Why all women in the play are objects? Each woman in the play works out of her house to make money, but she is still dependent upon a man. As Gayle Austin states all of the female characters are used as objects of trade by and among men. For example, several times in the play, Happy “gets” a girl for his brother or offers him one in order to win his brother’s favour; Biff accepts these “gifts” from his brother. “My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women.” Happy talks about the objects he can afford, and clearly, woman is another object his money can buy. The only time Happy talks a little more positively about women or seems to be talking positively is when he says, “I’m getting married, Pop, don’t forget it. I’m changing everything. I’m gonna run that department before the year is up. You’ll see, Mom. (He kisses her)” (106). Even here, women are treated as objects because he is bringing woman to his house to gain his father’s approval.

Conclusion

Gale Austin remind us to question, ‘Is that how woman was generally portrayed in 1949? Is that how woman was thought off?’ At least we can say that woman is portrayed that way today; *Death of a Salesman* is still very popular and has been an inspiration for a lot of playwrights, which is why in many plays women have these negative characteristics and presented as sexual stereotypes. Many plays still lack active female subjects; females are still restricted in the hands of male playwrights who dominate playwriting. Since *Death of a Salesman* is still very popular in America and in most parts of the world, one can see that the audience still considers the roles of women in this play to be a true and ideal representation of woman. That is how man wants a woman to act. Since in the theatre world, males dominate playwriting, it does not seem there will be a big change in the portrayal of women anytime soon.

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