



Narcissism and the American Dream in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

Narcissism och den amerikanska drömmen i Arthur Millers *en handelsresandes död*.

Fredrik Artan

Faculty of Arts and Education

Subject: English

Points:15.0

Supervisor: Magnus Ullén

Examiner: Anna Swärdh

2014-06-18

Serial number

Abstract

This essay focuses on the theme of the American Dream in relation to narcissism in Miller's *Death of a salesman*. The purpose is to demonstrate that a close reading of the main protagonist, Willy Loman, suggests that his notion of success in relation to the American Dream can be regarded as narcissistic.

This essay will examine this by first observing how Willy's notion of success is represented in the play, then look at how his understanding of it can be viewed from a narcissistic standpoint. The results I have found in my analysis show that there is a connection between Willy's understanding of success and his narcissistic behavior. He displays traits such as grandiosity, arrogance, need of specialness and denial of emotions. His relationship with other characters reveals his lack of empathy, manipulation and exploitation of others as well as his need of superiority and fear of inferiority. The conclusion is that Willy and his notion of success could be considered as narcissistic.

Contents

Introduction	1
The American Dream	2
Narcissism	3
The American Dream and narcissism in <i>Death of a salesman</i>	5
Conclusion	17
Bibliography	19

Introduction

Arthur Miller is one of the most renowned American playwrights in the history of American literature. He was a prominent figure in American theatre and many of his plays are considered classics. One of his most famous plays, the critically acclaimed *Death of a Salesman*, is considered by many critics to be one of the greatest representation of the American Dream in American theatre. Brenda Murphy proclaims that the play is perhaps the greatest dramatic work by an American (Murphy, *Death of a Salesman* 3) and with this play, Miller created “an attack on some of the basic values of American business culture” (Murphy, *Arthur Miller* 3). The American Dream lies at the heart of the play and serves as an underlying theme. However, the way that Willy Loman represents the American Dream might also suggest that his notion may be inherently narcissistic.

The aim of this essay is to show that the motivation of the main character’s struggle for wealth makes sense not only in relation to the American Dream, but can also be explained in terms of narcissism. I will attempt to demonstrate that a close reading of the play suggests that Willy’s notion of success in relation to the American Dream can be regarded as narcissistic. To support this thesis, the essay is divided into two main parts. The first part will be an introduction to the American Dream as a concept followed by an introduction to narcissism and the second part will consist of an analysis of how Willy’s notion of success can be looked upon from a narcissistic perspective. However, before delving into the American Dream and narcissism, a short synopsis of the play has been included as a complement to the essay.

Set in Brooklyn during the late 1940s, *Death of a Salesman* follows the last day of the old, unsuccessful salesman Willy Loman’s life and his struggle to achieve success. The play opens with Willy returning from a failed business trip late at night. He has reached the point of exhaustion where he not only is

unable to continue his work, but also vacillates between the present and the past. He and his wife, Linda, talk about the visit of his oldest son Biff who has been working as a farm worker in the West. Biff and his younger brother Happy, who is also visiting, overhear their father talking to himself in the kitchen. Linda tells her two sons about Willy's deteriorating mental health and suicide attempts. Biff decides to help his father. Biff and Happy come up with a business plan and ask Biff's former employer for a loan to make it a reality. Inspired, Willy decides at the same time to ask his boss for local job. Both of them are unsuccessful. Willy's request was rejected and he was fired and Biff's former employer did not even recognize him. Willy asks his neighbor Charley to loan him money. Charley offers him a job instead but Willy rejects the offer. The climax comes when Biff reveals the truth about himself as a failure to his father. He begs him to give up his dream of him. In anguish, Willy decides to commit suicide so that Biff can collect his life insurance money.

The American Dream

The general notion of the American Dream centers on the belief that anything is possible through hard work. However, there are several definitions of the American Dream. Therefore, this essay will focus on the definition popularized by the historian James Truslow Adams in his book *Epic of America*. His definition is as follows:

But there has been also the *American Dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (Adams 404).

As one can see, there is an apparent emphasis on a particular theme in Adams's definition of the American Dream— self-fulfillment. This is divided into two parts: firstly, every man and woman has the opportunity “to become richer and better”. Secondly, the success one may achieve is according to one's “ability or achievement“. In other words, Adams advocates that everyone has the opportunity of achieving success, but also stresses that one can only attain the success equivalent to one's own ability and achievement.

Narcissism

Narcissism is a concept in psychoanalytic theory that originates from the myth of Narcissus in Greek mythology. Narcissus falls in love and becomes obsessed with the captivating beauty of his own reflection in the water (Lowen 26). Narcissism as a concept was introduced in 1914 by Sigmund Freud in his work “*On Narcissism: An introduction*“ (Lowen 11). However, for the purpose of this essay, Freud's work on narcissism will not be used as it is considered to be too complex for a literary essay of this scale.

Drawing on Freud and others, the two French psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis defines narcissism as the state of being captivated by and obsessed with one's personal image and ego in their book *The Language of Psycho-analysis* (Laplanche, Pontalis 255-257). The American psychotherapist, Alexander Lowen, advances a similar definition of narcissism as that of Laplanche and Pontalis. He writes in *Narcissism* that “[he] would define the narcissist as a person whose behavior is not motivated by feeling” (Lowen 8). Narcissism signifies a personality disturbance characterized by excessive investment in one's own image at the cost of the self. Consequently, narcissists are more concerned with their appearance than their feelings. They deny emotions that would contradict the image

they seek to achieve. Narcissists are egocentric, solely focused on achieving their own interests but they lack the true values of the self, such as self-awareness, honesty, dignity, and self-possession (Lowen ix).

Narcissism is a large and complex psychoanalytic theory that can be daunting to grasp without any prior knowledge in psychology. Therefore, for this essay, only a few aspects of narcissism that are relevant to the thesis statement will be considered. These aspects are: (1) the feeling of specialness, (2) grandiosity, (3) denial of emotions, (4) the need of superiority and fear of inferiority, (5) lying and (6) the inability to feel empathy (Lowen 47, 49, 54-55, 75, 105-106). Furthermore, a short summary of the common traits of narcissism and an explanation of how these aspects are expressed in general terms will be given below.

According to Lowen, the narcissistic personality is generally identified by their most common traits: an overt and striking feeling of grandiosity, arrogance, insensitivity to others and denial of emotions.

Narcissists have grand fantasies of success, brilliance and act with an arrogant and egoistical attitude. They consider themselves as innately superior to others. This is intertwined with a feeling of specialness, a central aspect of the narcissistic personality. Narcissists believe that they are special, unique, perfect, and thereby better than “common people”. Their pursuit for perfection leads to a need for superiority and power; however, it also leads to a dread of inferiority. This strive for power stems from the belief that, power gives them control over their weaknesses, it serves to deny it. For to accept their weaknesses is to acknowledge it which would conflict with their flawless and grandiose image. To maintain or achieve such an image, narcissists deny emotions that could conflict with it. What is more, the inclination to lie without guilt and hesitation as well as the deception of others, even themselves, comes naturally for narcissists. They are analogous to imposters in the sense that both mask their real identity in a shroud of lies and false grandiose claims to project an image that contradicts the truth. Though the vital distinction between the two is that unlike narcissists, imposters are well aware of his façade and uses it for the purpose of deception. On the other hand, narcissists cannot distinguish between lies and truths. The

façade becomes a part of their identity. From a social standpoint, narcissists are loners and incapable of healthy relationships. Ruthless, exploitative and manipulative characterize their behavior towards other people since they use them for their own benefit (Lowen 47, 49, 54-55, 75, 105-106). These characteristics described above will be used in the analysis of Willy's notion of the American Dream.

Applying the concepts presented above on literature is known as psychoanalytic literary criticism. It is a method that entails analyzing and interpreting literature from a psychoanalytic perspective, which I am aiming to do in this essay. However, Lois Tyson remarks in her book *Critical Theory Today* that there is disagreement amongst literary critics concerning the application of psychoanalytic theories on literature. Some critics have objected to the idea of using psychoanalysis to study the behavior of literary characters as they are not actual human beings. That is, it is not possible to psychoanalyze them since they do not possess any psyches that can be analyzed. Nevertheless, Tyson responds to the criticism by stating that "Psychoanalyzing the behavior of literary characters is probably the best way to use the theory" (Tyson 35). To support this claim, she presents two points: Firstly, when psychoanalyzing literary characters, the characters are not so called "real people" but are representations of psychological experience of humans in general. Secondly, she states that it is just as appropriate to psychoanalyze the character's behavior as it is to analyze their behavior from a Feminist, Marxist, or African American perspective, or from any critical theory that analyzes literary representations as illustrations of real-life issues (Tyson 11-12, 34-35).

The American Dream and narcissism in *Death of a salesman*

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, the American Dream has a fundamental role in the play. Amy Sickels proclaims that Miller "critically examines the myth of the American Dream" (Sickels 79).

Despite the fact that the American Dream is not openly expressed, defined or mentioned in the play, it is well-known that Arthur Miller took inspiration from the American society (Page 102-103). This is

brought to light through the characters. According to Chester E. Eisinger, there are various renditions of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*, in which “Willy Loman himself gives us the corrupt version of the [American] [D]ream” (Eisinger 98). Zheng Dan-qing also supports Eisinger’s claim, highlighting that it can be considered as the cause of his demise (Dan-qing 27). Indeed, Willy Loman is an unsuccessful salesman, considering the fact that he misunderstood the basic concept of the American Dream, namely that hard work equals success. If he had a more realistic understanding, he would have accepted Charley’s job offer (76) and worked his way up the ranks instead of chasing his unrealistic vision of wealth and success until his death.

Willy’s concept of success hinges on his own idea of success: “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it—because personality always wins the day” (51). That is, as Eisinger clarifies, Willy’s dream rests on the cult of personality. It is necessary, he holds, to make a good appearance and to be well liked, “Appearance is a key concept” in his notion of success (Eisinger 98). In other words, Willy believes that personal attractiveness is the only necessary ingredient to attain wealth and success. For the route to success is not paved with hard work but by having a charismatic personality.

In the play, Willy’s understanding of success is primarily conveyed through his words and actions. One of his most famous quotes that is related his conception of it is when Willy gives his opinion on Charley’s business: “[b]igger than Uncle Charley! Because Charley is not – liked. He’s liked, but he’s not – well liked” (Miller 23). The concept of being well liked is the essence of his notion of success. What is more, Willy makes another prominent statement which gives more details of his view and the entailment of being well liked: “[b]ecause the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want” (25-26). As one can see, these quotes give an insight on the emphasis placed on being well liked by Willy. In his mind, it is the key to achieve success. On the other hand, Willy’s fixation on this concept also lends

itself to express one of the main characteristics found in all narcissists: arrogance (Lowen 24). As Pamela Loos clarifies, “[w]hile many would agree that likability may be an ingredient for success in the world at large. For Willy, [being well liked] takes on enormous proportions at the expense of other key characteristics or skills” (Loos 21). Indeed, Willy’s exaggerated emphasis on being well liked has severe consequences on his career; it has made him the laughingstock of the business world (28). Even so, as exhibited by his opinion on Charley, Willy still clings to his arrogant belief that being well liked is the most essential criteria for success and therefore provides him with superiority over other salesmen regardless of his lacking expertise. That is, with this statement, Willy implies that regardless of the obvious disparity in success, he is still superior to Charley since he, unlike himself, is not well liked. This shows that he considers his view of being successful as better than others.

Adrian Page states that Willy could be considered a hypocrite. He is a man of empty words and values that are liable to sudden change. In one of his hallucinations, Willy remarks to Biff about not getting too involved with women because they are gullible. In these remarks, he is essentially trying to lecture Biff on a moral fault of which he is guilty of himself as it is later revealed in the story that he has a mistress. In addition, shortly after giving him life advice about women, Willy then rejoices in the fact that his son is so popular that women pay money to date him, which arguably suggests that he deceives and exploits them for money. This illustrates that when necessary, Willy is willing to deceive himself into reinterpreting things differently and change his values to suit his vision (Page 62-63). Lying, hypocrisy and self-deception are recurring traits in narcissism due to the use of a false image in conjunction with the inability to distinguish between lies and truth. (Lowen 54-55). In other words, Willy’s alleged successful career as a well liked salesman is a façade that he created in order to hide the truth that he is a lousy salesman. He started to exaggerate and lie about his professional accomplishments to appear successful, so often and convincingly that it became the truth

Early on in the story, it becomes clear that Willy has difficulties with relationships, although he frequently boasts about his reputation and success in the business world. One of many examples is when he tells his sons that “they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring you fellas up, there’ll be open sesame for all of us, ‘cause one thing, boys: I have friends” (23-24). This unquestionably suggests that Willy is quite socially capable, but the truth is that he is lonely (29). He does not have any friends besides Charley (77). Loneliness is common characteristic amongst narcissists. As Lowen writes, “[t]he denial of feeling characteristic of all narcissists is most manifest in their behavior towards others. They can be ruthless, exploitative, sadistic, or destructive to another person [. . .] This insensitivity derives from an insensitivity to one’s own feelings [. . .] When we deny our feelings, we deny that others feel” (Lowen 49). Put differently, the denial of feelings not only makes narcissists insensitive to their own emotions but to other people’s emotions as well since they also become incapable of empathy.

Apart from Willy himself, several other characters also display a similar conception of success. One of these characters is Happy. During his conversation with Biff about his brother’s chances of working for his old acquaintance he says: “I bet he’d back you. ‘Cause he thought highly of you, Biff. I mean, they all do. You’re well liked, Biff” (20). In conformity with Willy’s values, Happy suggests that it is highly likely that Biff will get the job based on the fact that he is well liked and thereby a great salesman. This suggests that Willy’s values are not only limited to himself but are also represented through his sons. Loos explains that Willy has been plagued for years by Biff’s inability to find a steady job or become the great salesman that he would like him to be. Willy replays earlier years that he considers as successful during which he gave his sons advice on how to achieve success: “[a]s a salesman, Willy believes that success does not come just from being liked but from being well liked, and he instills this belief in his sons” (Loos 20-21). This means that Willy transfers his values to his sons. A great example of this

indoctrination can be seen when Willy reminisces about the time his sons asked him of his opinion on their neighbor, Charley. While he does not deny his neighbor's success, he does not approve of it by claiming that unlike himself, he is not well liked (23). With this, Willy implies that Charley's way of business is misguided. In this manner, he instills his values in his sons by belittling Charley's success while enlarging his own, thus inspiring them to adopt his view. Therefore, to get the complete picture of Willy's conception of success, it is important to observe how it is represented through Willy's sons as well.

When examining Willy's sons, it becomes apparent that between the two, Biff was the one influenced the most by him. He is an important part of his father's vision of success and narcissism. It is painfully obvious that Biff is put on a pedestal by Willy. In his eyes, he is the "the son of promise", the epitome of success (Loos 21). They had a very close relationship in the past. To Biff, Willy was his role model; he inspired him to adopt his values and strive to succeed his dream. An example of how Willy's influence is expressed through Biff can be seen during Willy and Bernard's discussion about Biff's situation in school (25). In this scene, he shows similar signs of arrogance as his father. He expresses no signs of concern over his upcoming regent test. He is far more concerned with his appearance than passing the math test, which is made evident when he flamboyantly shows off his new custom imprinted shoes since they connote being well liked. The university insignia clearly signifies his bright future prospects. Additionally, shortly after Bernard leaves, Biff states that he is not well liked (25) because he prioritizes studying above other matters that signifies being well liked. This is identical to Willy's statement about Charley (23). These similarities between Willy and Biff demonstrate how Willy's narcissism is portrayed through his son. As Loos clarifies, when Willy's beliefs are applied to his sons, it means that being well liked becomes more important than studying hard (Loos 21).

However, in the present, it quickly becomes clear that Biff does not share his father's view any longer. Their once close relationship is no more. This does not come as a surprise from a narcissistic perspective, for their relationship is a clear testament of Willy's lack of empathy. It is based on manipulation and exploitation. Willy forces his views onto Biff without any care for his feelings, which is not uncommon for narcissistic parents. They commonly turn to and exploit their child to satisfy the desires that they themselves cannot satisfy (Lowen, 105). In other words, through manipulation, Willy attempts to use Biff to compensate for his own failure of achieving his dream. The underlying cause for this sudden change in their relationship is revealed in Willy's flashback of Biff's visit in Boston, where he discovers his father affair with another woman (92). This act of adultery ultimately causes Biff's image of his role model to shatter. He realizes that Willy is no longer the great man he once knew who would certainly be able to persuade his math teacher, he was never a great man to begin with (95). Thus, Biff no longer desires to follow Willy's footsteps, for he realizes that his father and his dream is anything but true.

In addition, during this scene, Willy manifests the denial of emotions that is characteristic for all narcissists. Rather than falling into despair, he remains calm, cool and collected. He orders Biff, who is suffering from a mental breakdown, to ignore the incident or else he will "whip him" (95). Moreover, Willy tries to shift the focus from himself to Biff's situation in school: "[w]ell, better get going. I want to get to the school first thing in the morning [. . .] you mustn't over-emphasize a thing like this. I'll see Birnbaum first thing in the morning [. . .] You need those points for U. of Virginia" (94-95). Willy's unusual behavior can be explained in terms of narcissism. The ability of being able to shut down emotions is the most distinctive yet basic characteristic of narcissism (Lowen 46). Willy is able to maintain his calm in this situation because he denies the problematic and unbearable emotions caused by his infidelity, as they would undoubtedly affect his ability to maintain his image. This also allows Willy to divert his focus to Biff's situation rather than his terrible act, since it is connected to his narcissistic

goal of Biff becoming a well liked salesman. The topic change functions as a way of denying it ever taking place; it is Willy's method of dealing with the guilt of his act. Hence, when Bernard asks Willy about why Biff suddenly changed after his visits to Boston he says: "Why? Why? Bernard, that question has been trailing me like a ghost for the last fifteen years. [. . .] was it my fault? [. . .] Why did he lay down?" (73). In other words, Willy has repressed the fact that he was the cause behind Biff's failure since it would be too painful for him. This illustrates that Willy displays the narcissistic trait of denying emotions in this vital event of the story.

At first glance, when examining Happy, it would be easy to assume that he has simply inherited Willy's dream, judging from his declaration in front of his father's grave: "I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have – to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him" (Requiem 3). This speech serves as a strong indication of Happy's devotion to his father's vision, especially when one highlights the fact that he claims "it's the only dream you can have" and vows that he is "gonna win it for him". Therefore, one could argue that Happy functions as an embodiment of Willy's image of success and his narcissism. This is further supported by Page's claim that between the two brothers, Happy is more likely to replicate Willy's characteristics, such as during the Loman brothers' double date with the two women in the restaurant. As he attempts to charm the women, Happy displays the same capacity to overemphasize and exaggerate personal attractiveness similar to his father (Page 67-69). He is quick to mention and magnify his job and Biff's football career since they convey their personal attractiveness: "[d]on't mention it. It's all company money [. . .] His name is Biff. You might've heard of him. Great football player. [. . .] That's my name. Hap. It's really Harold, but at West Point they called me Happy. [. . .] Biff is one of the greatest football players in the country" (80-81). As one can see, statements such as "it's all company money" and "at West point they called

me Happy” gives the implication of success. Likewise, the same can be also seen when he exaggerates Biff football career. Happy’s inclination to exaggerate and lie stems from his father. In Willy’s mind, under the pressure to succeed, it is necessary to delude everyone, even oneself, because “the appearance of things is always more important than the reality and the truth about one’s accomplishments are never impressive enough” (Eisinger 100). In other words, Happy intentionally fabricates a lie about his name, job and exaggerates Biff’s high school football career because he was taught that it is necessary to give the impression of being more renowned and successful than one truly is to appeal to others. Likewise, Willy frequently lies about his alleged successful career as a well liked salesman to give the impression of greatness to his sons, such as when he claims that he never has to wait in line for his customers and that he “[k]nocked ‘em cold in Providence, slaughtered ‘em in Boston” (26), when in reality he barely managed to get by (27). This demonstrates that Happy’s lies serve the same purpose as those of Willy, which is to give the impression of being greater than they actually are.

While it is difficult to deny that Happy and Willy’s views of success are alike, there are several differences that sets them apart; one of them being their understanding of competitiveness. Willy considers himself a great salesman. He competes with other salesmen by ranking them based on their personal attractiveness and professional achievements. His accomplishments as a salesman e.g. “I did five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston” (27), are essential to him because they serve as vital evidence of his prowess as a well liked salesman in comparison to the other “liked” salesmen. Happy on the other hand, does not see himself as a great salesman and feels like he has to prove himself to his “pompous executives” (18). However, unable to compete on his own terms in the business world, Happy instead competes physically (Jacobson 253):

That's what I dream about Biff. Sometimes I wanna just rip my clothes off in the middle of the store and outbox that goddamned merchandise manager. I mean I can outbox, outrun and outlift anybody in that store, and I have to take orders from those petty, common sons of bitches till I can't stand it anymore. (18).

As one can see, this remark can be viewed as signaling his need to feel superior and fear of feeling inferior. As Key Stanton points out, he feels frustrated because he refuses to acknowledge his inferiority to them. Happy sees himself as superior to them because he can “outbox, outrun and outlift anybody in that store”, which is why he cannot stand to take orders from “those common, petty sons-of-bitches”. The strength of his masculinity should overcome all competitors. However, instilling the belief that sports success assures financial success is the worst mistake Willy makes with his sons, since selling merchandise obviously has little to do with displays of physical prowess (Stanton 133). Happy's demeaning of others can be explained by his narcissism, for a need of power and superiority is characteristic of all narcissists. The relationship between narcissism and power is that narcissists strive to project an image of superiority, perfection and invulnerability. This could thus be seen as yet another example confirming that the narcissist's grandiose image is only a façade to hide their weakness. To accommodate to this lack of validity, narcissists need power to energize and validate their image. Power serves to control and deny their vulnerabilities. (Lowen 75-77). In other words, one could argue that competitiveness comes naturally for narcissists since it is the most efficient way of gaining power.

In addition, another important aspect to highlight in Happy's statement is that he refers to his executives as “common sons of bitches” (18), which suggests that he differs from them. Happy regards himself as special and different from the rest. He views himself as a well liked salesman and as such better than the other “common” salesmen. This is another trait that stems from his father's narcissism. As shown earlier, Willy has always considered himself unique and better than

the other “liked” salesmen because he is a so called “well liked” salesman. This is exposed during his final confrontation with Biff before his demise:

Biff. Pop! I’m a dime a dozen, and so are you!

Willy. I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman! (105).

This sudden outburst of rage could be connected to narcissism, for all narcissists have a need of being special. It bestows them with an ascribed status of superiority above the “commonness” (Lowen 107). Hence, Willy becomes infuriated when Biff calls him and himself “a dime a dozen” (105) and insists that they are unique because this proclamation jeopardizes their specialness and its ascribed status of superiority.

Charley and Willy’s relationship play an important role in the representation of the American Dream in the play, for if Willy’s conception of success represents the “corrupt” notion of the American Dream, Charley’s conception represents “its ideal form” (Eisinger 97). In stark contrast to Willy, Charley is realistic, has a good business sense, and above all, has an ideal grasp of what it takes to achieve wealth and success. Through hard work, he has found a stable way of life and financial security in his own successful business (Eisinger 97). In other words, Charley is the living proof that one has to work hard to attain wealth and success (Page 76) and symbolizes the man Willy should have striven to become. Thus, their relationship lends itself to reveal the fallacy of Willy’s understanding of success. For example, baffled by his dismissal, Willy asks Charley how Howard, his boss, could fire the man who gave him his name, he responds: “Willy, when’re you gonna realize that them things don’t mean anything? You named him Howard, but you can’t sell that. The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you’re a salesman, and you don’t know that” (76-77). By clarifying this, Charley attempts to make Willy realize that he was fired because his values are misguided. He has misunderstood the most

significant aspect of being a salesman — selling merchandise: “Why must everybody like you? Who liked J.P. Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he’d look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was very well liked” (77). Additionally, Charley tells Willy to grow up (76), implying that his view is naïve in the sense that it is unrealistic.

In light of this, Willy and Charley’s relationship takes on the role of exposing Willy’s need of superiority. Willy envies Charley’s success but refuses to acknowledge it. Doing so would mean to admit his inferiority to him. Thus, to underline his superiority, Willy acts with an arrogant attitude towards Charley. He frequently makes him appear stupid and incompetent in comparison to himself such as during the time they play cards. During this scene, Charley gives Willy the advice to let Biff go back to Texas; he is old enough to take care of himself. Willy responds by ignoring his advice and insulting him. Furthermore, when Charley gives him credit for his work on the ceiling in the living room, Willy calls him “disgusting” for his lack of masculinity, that is, his lack of handiness, “a man who can’t handle tools is not a man” (34). This makes Charley appear incompetent in contrast to Willy, who has put up the ceiling in his living room himself.

On the other hand, Willy’s superiority complex lends itself to express his fear inferiority. Charley tries to make Willy face reality. He is the only one who attempts to give him some sense of reason by questioning his values but to no avail. Whenever Charley endeavors to help him, Willy pushes him away by either insulting, rejecting or ignoring him (Page 76). For example, when Charley offers him a job and criticizes his naïve notion of the success Willy angrily rejects his offer and tells the blatant lie that he already has a job despite being unemployed with debts in order to not appear to be dependent on him: “I’ve got a job [. . .] What’s the matter with you? I’ve got job [. . .] I don’t want your goddamn job! [. . .] You big ignoramus, if you say that to me again I’ll rap you one! I don’t care how big you are!” (76). Due to his fear of inferiority, Willy argues back and

threatens Charley despite knowing that he is right, “I’ve always tried to think otherwise, I guess. I always felt that if a man was impressive, and well liked, that nothing—” (77). In other words, his sudden outburst is an expression of his inferiority complex. Working for, let alone receiving a lesson from Charley, is absolutely unacceptable. Willy has claimed for years that he is far superior to him; accepting his criticism would be a sign of weakness and admitting his inferiority to him. Willy cannot imagine himself being helpless and dependent on Charley. He does everything in his power to avoid it, even if it means lying about being unemployed with debts. However, helplessness and dependency are part of human nature and narcissists are not an exception of this rule, but they refuse to acknowledge it. In their mind, being helpless and dependent on someone gives the other person control over them (Lowen 98). This would explain Willy’s continuous returns to Charley every week to ask for money, only to insult and push him away. He is aware of his helpless dependence on him but refuses to admit it. Hence, he remarks that he is “keeping accounts” and that he is going to “pay every penny back” (76).

Willy’s long lost brother, Ben, and his tale of success in Africa has a huge impact on Willy. Both Eisinger (98) and Dan-qing (3-4) acknowledge that Ben’s success contributes significantly to his notion of success. As Willy declares: “Ben! That man was a genius, that man was *success incarnate!*” (32, emphasis added). Ben was the embodiment of Willy’s idea of success. Ben managed to attain the success of his dreams — becoming a rich, assertive and well liked salesman. Therefore, Willy and his extreme obsession with Ben may perhaps be considered as secondary narcissism. By secondary narcissism, one means that the narcissist is drawing his ego from an object (Laplanche, Pontalis 256). In other words, Willy substitutes his own self-image with his image of Ben because he is the embodiment of his dream. However, contrary to Willy’s assumption that impersonating Ben would translate into becoming a successful and rich salesman, he ends up unsuccessful. The secret behind Ben’s mysterious success in Africa is never revealed; it

is a question that haunts Willy. He asks him to reveal the secret of his success whenever he appears in his hallucinations: “Ben! I’ve been waiting for you so long! What’s the answer? How did you do it?” (36). But it is a question left unanswered, or rather, Ben cannot answer Willy’s question since he is based on his memories. As a result, this causes Willy to resort to self-deception. He convinces himself that his brother’s key to success was his distinctive character, or as he calls it, being well liked. This is further stressed by his endeavors to pass it on to his sons: “Ben, how should I teach them? [. . .] That’s just the spirit I want to imbue them with! To walk into a jungle! I was right! I was right!” (40-41). The so called “spirit to walk into the jungle” refers to Ben’s extravagant confidence and charisma.

Conclusion

There is a clear connection between Willy’s notion of success in relation to the American Dream and his narcissistic behavior. It is possible to interpret his conception as narcissistic. He believes that success is not attained through hard work but from being well liked. However, this fixation and glorification of being well liked clearly expresses the main characteristic of narcissism, arrogance. When Willy’s affair with the woman is exposed, he manifests a narcissistic denial of emotion as he manages to stay calm and collected in order to focus on the goal of Biff achieving his dream. Furthermore, Willy’s relations with the other characters serves as further testimony of his narcissism because the representation of his view of success is not limited to himself. His relationship with Biff exposes the lack of empathy and exploitation of others. Happy is essentially the embodiment of his father’s view, thus further emphasizes the narcissism caused by it. This is evident by their shared traits that could be regarded as narcissistic. Consequently, he displays many similar traits of narcissism seen in Willy. Willy and Charley’s relationship affirms his superiority and inferiority complex respectively by exhibiting his assertion of being better than him. Ben’s success in Africa serves as the epitome of Willy’s image of success. However, he makes the grave mistake of assuming that his brother’s key to success was being well liked. As a

result, this becomes the focal point of Willy's narcissism. Perhaps Biff was right all along, Willy is truly nothing more than a dime a dozen.

Bibliography

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts, and a Requiem*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961. Print.

Dan-qing ZHENG. "Who is to Blame for Willy Loman's Death? — on Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman." *Canadian Social Science*.4 (2007): 25-29. Print.

Eisinger, Chester E. "Focus on Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman: The Wrong Dreams". *Critical insights: Death of a Salesman*. Ed. Brenda Murphy. California: Salem Press, 2010. 95-105. Print.

Jacobson, Irving. "Family Dreams in Death of a Salesman." *American Literature*.2 (1975): 247-259. Print.

Lowen, Alexander. *Narcissism: Denial of the True Self*. New York: Touchstone, (1997). Print.

Laplanche, J, Pontails, J-B. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac books, (1988). Print

Murphy, Brenda. Ed. *Critical insights: Arthur Miller*. California: Salem Press, 2011. Print.

---. *Critical insights: Death of a Salesman*. California: Salem Press, 2010. Print.

Page, Adrian. *York Notes Advanced on "Death of a Salesman" by Arthur Miller*. Edinburgh: Pearson education limited, 2003. Print

Sickels, Amy. "Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman: History of criticism." *Critical insights: Death of a Salesman*. Ed. Brenda Murphy. California: Salem Press, 2010. 76-91. Print.

Stanton, Kay. "Women and the American Dream of Death of a Salesman." *Critical insights: Death of a Salesman*. Ed. Brenda Murphy. California: Salem Press, 2010. 121-160. Print.

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. London: Routledge, 2006. Print

Truslow, James. *The Epic of America*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1931. Print

Loos, Pamela. "Best Intentions Far Awry: The Family Dynamic in Miller's *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*." *Critical insights: Arthur Miller*. Ed. Brenda Murphy. California: Salem Press, 2011. 19-32. Print.