

Willy Loman in Bad-Faith: A Study of Death of a Salesman in Sartrean Terms



Vaibhav Dutt Sharma

**Assistant Professor, National Institute of Technology,
Kurukshetra, (Haryana) - 136118**

Arthur Miller was one of the leading American playwrights of the twentieth century. Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and transformed Miller into a national sensation. Many critics described *Death of a Salesman* as the first great American tragedy, and Miller gained eminence as a man who understood the deep essence of the United States. *Death of a Salesman* was first produced on Broadway on Feb 10, 1949. The play has been studied generally in terms of a commentary on the failure of the American Dream. Willy Loman has generally been regarded as a victim of the American society. But this paper attempts to study Willy Loman's character not as a victim either of American dream or of the society but as a man who himself is responsible for his failure for not realizing his own nature as well as the nature of his dreams. He deceives himself and lives in 'bad-faith'.

Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher and playwright, in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* defines 'bad-faith' as a false reflection on man's own mental states; a systematic self-deception about the nature of the pre-reflective basis for reflection. 'Bad-faith' is identified with falsehood, the irony of it being that the person living in 'bad-faith', akin to lying, lies to himself which again means

that he is conscious of what he is doing, though he tries to convince himself that he is telling the truth. Willy Loman is one such man who is a complete failure in life but he believes or makes himself believe that he is a successful salesman and more importantly he is well liked. Throughout the play, Willy Loman does not take a good, honest look at himself.

Willy is a rather insecure guy. He tries to make himself feel better by lying to himself and his family. In his world of delusion, Willy is a hugely successful salesman but he is a whopping case of self-deception paired with misguided life goals. A salesman for his entire career, Willy thinks the goal of life is to be well liked and gain material success. He disguises his profound anxiety and self-doubt with extreme arrogance. Periodically unable to maintain this image of strength, Willy despairs and pleads with successful people around him for guidance and support. Despite his efforts, it becomes clear that Willy Loman is not popular, well liked, or even good at his job. In fact, he was never was. In all likelihood, he never will be. Now an older man, Willy can no longer drive competently, pay his bills, or sell anything.

Willy is almost obsessed with the idea of being well-liked. He believes that he is loved and respected and have lot of friends. He says, "And 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." (CP: 145) Willy Loman desires to be treated as a celebrity in the society. He wants to make the outside world his home. Willy is so much obsessed with the American success-myth that he even praises Biff for his stealing acts. Willy is of the view that theft is committed by a man who has personality, guts, good looks and who, because of these qualities, is well-liked. Willy is deceiving himself without even knowing it. He creates a false 'self-image' of himself, and tries to make his family members believe in this very false 'self-image'. This is a characteristic overture of bad faith, a self-lie. He remains blind to reality – clinging to illusions. Thus, the identity of the deceiver and the deceived does not take place here. In 'bad-faith' man "takes a stable position and represents himself according to his definite framework and thereby deceives himself." (Roy: 30)

Willy knows only one thing in life, i.e. he is a salesman. Society has labelled him and Willy

has accepted the label, so he becomes 'the salesman'. As a proper salesman Willy does not and cannot think in terms other than those of selling. Before he can sell anything, he must sell himself, his own personality. Willy becomes the other, he judges himself according to the norms which are set by the society. He cannot define himself in terms other than this. He is so much a product of his society that almost unconsciously he is stuffing Linda, Biff, Happy and even himself with promises that are never going to be fulfilled. Early in the play he emphasizes personal attractiveness of Biff and says that Biff can be big in no time. He has similar opinion about himself. He dreams having his own business he will surpass Charley because Charley is liked but not well-liked. But reality is just opposite. He follows his dreams in bad faith, and lives fake life. He does not want to face the reality and continue to live in the dream world of deception, i.e. living in 'bad faith'. Biff even tries to show his father that personality has nothing to do with a person's success. He wants his father to accept the truth that neither Willy nor Biff is a success and they are never going to be successful in life. But Willy does not want to see the reality and wishes to live with his dreams, in a state suitable for his survival. He asserts:

I'm not a dime a dozen – I am Willy Loman and you are Biff Loman. (CP: 217) The problem of the modern society is that it has found it difficult to accommodate the 'whole man' as its citizen. Society wants only a specialized portion of an individual's personality. Willy refuses to become a cog in the wheel. Willy is not satisfied with his present position in the society and wants to be accepted as a whole. Willy cries out: You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of orange. (CP: 181)

This, however, does not take away the blame from Willy, his responsibility to understand the society in which he lives. Willy's own responsibility for his tragedy is by no means negligible. His unquestioning belief in the American dream of success and his own fake dreams has made it impossible for him to develop any high moral ideas. Willy's problem is that he has excessive concern for what he has, not what he is. The play shows quite clearly from the beginning of his career that he has lied about his size of his sales, the warmth of reception he gets and the number of friends. Willy is a frustrated man and he postpones his anguish by transferring his ambitions to his sons. He has fine sons but he always evaluates them in terms of their success in society.

Willy and his family try to put the blame of Willy's frustration and failure on the American society but no one realizes that Willy and in fact every human being is free in his choice. It is Willy who decided to be a salesman "when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want" (CP: 180), and it is he who put his faith in 'the American dream'. According to Sartre, man "is hiding from himself the consciousness of his freedom; he is in bad faith and his bad faith aims at presenting himself to his own eyes as a consequence; everything is a consequence for him, and there is never any beginning." (741) Though Willy knows that he is neither successful nor well-liked, he wants his family members as well as himself to believe that he is successful and well-liked. Frequently 'bad faith' is identified with falsehood, the irony of it being that the person living in 'bad faith', akin to lying, lies to himself which again means that he is conscious of what he is doing but tries to convince himself that he is telling the truth. Thus, the identity of the deceiver and the deceived does not take place here.

When Willy dies with his illusions intact, Biff realizes how foolish the dreams of his father were. At Willy's funeral, Biff says that his father had the wrong dreams, and he speaks of the real worth of his father by saying that:

There was more of him in the front stoop than in all the sales he ever made. (CP: 221)

In the end Biff remarks that it is his father who has filled his head with extravagant notions which have not allowed him to rise high in life. He even blames his mother and brother for having adopted Willy's foolish ideas. Linda plays a major role in allowing Willy to live in the world of his fake, self-created dreams. She never tries to make him aware of truth and reality. Though she knows that Willy's sales and love which he boasts of are his lies but she does not want to rob him of his lies as she knows their importance for Willy. She says:

I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.... (CP: 162)

Despite Willy's evident failure to meet his (poorly chosen) life goals, he clings to a fierce belief in the American Dream and the promise that anyone attractive and well liked can make it big. He has deceived himself his entire life and tries to live vicariously through his unwilling son, Biff. But Biff knows what he is and does not want to live, unlike his father, in dreams and says:

Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What I am doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am! Why can't I say that, Willy? (CP: 217)

Biff is convinced and somewhat comfortable with the knowledge that he is "a dime a dozen," as this escape from his father's delusions allows him to follow his true nature and align his life with his own dreams. Whereas Willy cannot understand any notion of distinctiveness outside of the confines of the material success and "well liked"-ness guaranteed by the American Dream, Biff realizes that he can be contented only outside these confines. Though his attempt to cure Willy's delusion fails, Biff frees himself from Willy's expectations for him.

But Willy was clearly still harbouring misguided hopes about success for Biff. But Biff uncovers Willy's lies when he finds out that Willy has been cheating on Linda. Choosing to alienate his son rather than face reality, and tormented by his failures, Willy spirals downward. Because his life, by his standards, sucks, Willy escapes into the past and also conveniently gives us, the reader or audience, the background information we need. "Escape" becomes Willy's middle name – not unlike his own father, who abandoned him and his brother when they were young. All this escape business brings us to Willy's mistress. 'The woman' gives Willy everything he needs: an alternate world and an ego-boost. Miller makes sure we are able to understand these reasons for why Willy has the affair. If we, the reader/audience, hated Willy for being a cheating jerk, we wouldn't be so upset at his death. But we don't hate Willy and we don't even call him a cheater. He simply tries to escape. Past and dreams are the best means to escape the reality. As Willy always thinks of Dave Singleman, the mythic salesman who died the noble "death of a salesman" that Willy himself covets, and defers his anguish and frustration that "what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different

cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people?" (CP: 180)

Willy Loman goes through his life blindly, never realizing the full truth of himself. Willy refuses to admit that he's a failure. Despite his desperate searching through his past, Willy does not achieve the self-realization or self-knowledge typical of the tragic hero. In the absence of any real degree of self-knowledge or truth, Willy is able to achieve a tangible result. In some respect, Willy does experience a sort of revelation, as he finally comes to understand that the product he sells is himself, as Charley brings up an interesting point at the funeral: part of being a salesman is having a dream. Part of being a salesman is about selling yourself. We'll let you take it from here. Through the imaginary advice of Ben, Willy ends up fully believing his earlier assertion to Charley that "after all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive." (CP: 192)

The quasi-resolution that his suicide offers him represents only a partial discovery of the truth. While he achieves a professional understanding of himself and the fundamental nature of the sales profession, Willy fails to realize his personal failure and betrayal of his soul and family through the meticulously constructed artifice of his life. Willy commits suicide not only to provide his sons with the insurance money but also to die with a belief that he was worthy of love and respect, not 'a dime a dozen'. As Leonard Moso observes that he commits suicide as "a last attempt to re-establish his own self-confidence and his family's integrity." (32) He cannot grasp the true personal, emotional, spiritual understanding of himself as a literal "loman" or "low man." Willy is too driven by his own "willy"-ness or perverse "willfulness" to recognize the slanted reality that his desperate mind has forged. So it can be said that Willy Loman does not know the reality and whenever he is made to accept it, he is not willing to do so. He is happy with his dreams and illusory 'well-likedness' which are must for his survival.

REFERENCES

- Miller, Arthur. Collected Plays. New Delhi: Allied Pub. Pvt. Ltd., 1973.
- Moso, Leonard. qtd. in Irving Jacobson, "Family Dreams in Death of a Salesman" in

Critical Essays on Arthur Miller, ed. Matthew C. Roundane. Mississippi: University Press, 1987.

- Roy, Nabanita. Jean-Paul Sartre on Literature, Freedom and Commitment. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Limited, 1997.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology, Hazel E. Barnes, trans. New York: Washington Square Press, 1956.

