

The Present-Past Interaction in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

Malek J. Zuraikat^{1*}, Moneer Alawneh², Nansy Ahmad Mosleh³

^{1,2}Department of English, Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan

³Department of Translation, Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan

<https://doi.org/10.35516/hum.v49i4.2100>

Received: 24/3/2021

Revised: 29/4/2021

Accepted: 30/5/2021

Published: 30/7/2022

Abstract

Written in 1949, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1998) is a cornerstone piece that tackles capitalism in the postmodern world, showcasing how people's money and assets are influential to their life. Thus, our paper divulges how such a social background connects with characters' experience of nostalgia as a means of escaping reality. Considering Lina Hutcheon and Mario Valdes's viewpoint (1998) regarding the dialogue between irony, nostalgia, and the postmodern, the paper emphasizes how Willy Loman keeps switching between the past and the present attempting to escape his depressing present. We argue that nostalgia does not always revolve around escaping a reality to retain a much-pleasant past; rather, it is deployed by Willy Loman as a reminder of the pain and suffering experienced by him and his family, which suggests that nostalgia in this specific play is ironically used to crystallize and mock the past by stressing its inescapability.

Keywords: Arthur Miller; American drama; Death of a Salesman; nostalgia; postmodernism.

التفاعل بين الماضي والحاضر في مسرحية آرثر ميللر "موت بائع متجول"

مالك زريقات^{1*}، منير علانة²، نانسي أحمد مصليح³

¹ قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، جامعة اليرموك، كلية الآداب، إربد، الأردن

² قسم الترجمة، جامعة اليرموك، كلية الآداب، إربد، الأردن

ملخص

تتناول مسرحية آرثر ميللر "موت بائع متجول" (1949) الرأسمالية في عالم ما بعد الحداثة. وتعرض مدى تأثير أموال الناس وأصولهم في طبيعة حياتهم. وعليه، تسعى هذه الدراسة للكشف عن كيفية ارتباط هذه الخلفية الاجتماعية بتجربة الشخصيات وحنينهم إلى الماضي كطريقة للهروب من الواقع المؤلم. وتشرح الدراسة كيف يستمر لومان في التنقل بين الماضي والحاضر، مما يتسبب في خلق لحظات من الشوق والحنين لأوقات معينة. واعتماداً على نظرية لينا هوتشون وماريو فالديس فيما يرتبط بالعلاقة بين السخرية والحنين للماضي وما بعد الحداثة، تؤكد الدراسة أن الحنين إلى الماضي لا يدور دائماً حول الهروب من الواقع للتأكيد على ماضٍ ممتع، وإنما يمكن أن يكون ذلك تذكيراً بالألم والمعاناة التي يعاني منها الشخص وعائلته. تخلص الدراسة إلى أن الحنين إلى الماضي في هذه المسرحية بالذات قد تم تقديمه لبلورة الماضي والاستهزاء به من خلال التأكيد على أنه لا مفر منه.

الكلمات الدالة: آرثر ملر، المسرحية الأمريكية، "موت بائع متجول"، الحنين إلى الماضي، ما بعد الحداثة.

* Corresponding author:

m.zuraikat@yu.edu.jo

Introduction

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1998) is a play of strife and suffering that expresses a pessimistic outlook towards the corporate reality. Through Willy Loman, one of the play's main characters, Miller displays how age is any working individual's worst fears and how an individual in a capitalistic world is usually haunted by the scary feeling of being fired due to old age or deteriorating health, which is the realistic portrayal that dominates most of Miller's works. Thus, *Death of a Salesman* is classified by several critics as a universal reflection of reality that does not only "express characters' psychological and subjective world, but also convey the real complex social situation" (Zhao, 2016, 403). As Robert A. Martin (1996) writes,

Miller's achievement as a playwright allows us to see and understand particular characters of groups or characters as possessing universal, human traits, even as we also see how their lives illuminate, by association, our own lives as individuals and as members of our larger society. (97)

Martin (1996) acknowledges that Miller's portraits of characters allow the audience to experience a version of reality and get the opportunity to sympathize with them. Regarding *Death of a Salesman*, "The play succeeds in making social drama acquire the intensity and the universal cathartic effect of tragedy and this is perhaps the magic that lies behind its perennial appeal to audiences identifying with the experience of its hero" (Bayouli and Sammali, 2019, 47).

Obviously, Willy Loman is set in a realistic world of currency, which resembles ours, thus, causing the audience to get involved in the overall plot of the play and probably feel the pain experienced by Willy and other characters. Benjamin J. Becker (1987) explains that the play is gripping and can affect the audience since Willy is not simply an insulated individual, but a man whose problems are quite universal (197). In Bayouli and Sammali's words, "The element of identification and cathartic effect are ensured by the fact that Willy's tragic end is brought about by feelings that are fully human and universal" (2019, 47). Thus, it is sensible to assume that Willy's troubled life provides the audience with the opportunity to scrutinize their own existence and reconsider their own problems in a capitalistic world *through the eyes of others*. Ironically, Willy does not address the audience directly; rather, he keeps talking to himself focusing on hallucinatory past events that merge with present ones. Becker (1987) views this mergence as an unintentional retreat through which Willy escapes the present to relive his supposedly *pleasant* past (209). It seems that the man generates "a state of mind in which victims escape from real life by turning their minds to an invented reality [represented by past memories]" (Noras, 2020, 5). Thus, Willy Loman is an undisputedly troubled being in the sense that his mind keeps shifting from reality to fantasy as a pendulum, a process that is better viewed, according to Becker (1987), as a struggle against reality through which Willy keeps seeking for answers (208).

Becker's insightful reading of the play touches on Willy's visiting of the past to alleviate the present's harshness; yet, it does not conclude the characterisation behind this shifting or emphasize the significance of memories for one's reality. Therefore, this paper relies on Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdes' "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern: A Dialogue" (1998) to cement pieces of evidence regarding the influential role of memories in forming Willy Loman's personality. It is true that Willy seeks solace in mocking the past, but he ultimately fails due to how painful that past is, thus finishing his own life at the end of the play. The paper concludes that nostalgia is not always a completely viable method to escape harsh realities or undesired truths; rather, it sometimes engrains pain and ensues pessimism.

Literature Review:

Written on the multidimensional verge of postmodernism, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1998) is addressed by many critics from different perspectives in terms of postmodernism, capitalism, and nostalgia. B.S. Field (1972), for instance, discusses the Greek orientation of the play, arguing that Willy Loman is miserable because of his *hamartia* (19). Field attests that Willy "simply cannot make anything happen" (23); therefore, he has caused himself and his sons to get "morally and socially castrated" (1972, 24). This viewpoint is accurate, considering that Willy is a man who brings his own downfall by forcing his children to be like him at the cost of giving up their own dreams and aspirations. Nonetheless, it does not explain the reason behind this dearth of goal-actualising.

Similarly, Harold Bloom (2007) associates Willy Loman's catastrophic downfall with his expectations of his own family. Bloom asserts that Willy "wants only to earn and to deserve the love of his wife and of his sons". He is "self-slain not by the salesman's dream of America, but by the universal desire to be loved by one's own" (38). In the same vein, Jinying Zhao (2016) attributes Willy's downfall to his inappropriate demeanour and inability to convey his love towards his own family. Zhao writes, "His love for his two sons with incorrect approaches ruined their life. His final suicide, a sacrifice for his family, especially for the future of his elder son, Biff, however, he could not fully convey his love for his family members" (2016, 403). A similar viewpoint is introduced by Jessica L. Tracy and Richard W. Robins (2003) who contend that "Willy's search for the 'American Dream' of fame, fortune, and admiration is the hallmark of his identity, but like many of his generation he is unable to meet the unrealistic goals he has set out for himself" (57). In short, critics of *Death of a Salesman* view Willy Loman as the responsible figure for his own as well as family's downfall, which implies that his suicide is very *anticipated* in a materialistic society that abhors and suppresses the unsuccessful.

For a different angle, Niklas Eklöf (2020) claims that Willy's suppression is the consequence of his family's inability to properly deal with him as well as some other issues related to his belief in the American Dream. In fact, his wife and kids never meet his expectations, which causes him to suspect his significance to their life and success. Eklöf writes, "The members of the Loman family are no longer happy with their lives. It becomes evident that the family members were not always acting rationally and never took appropriate measures to improve their happiness. They do not know why they are feeling the way they feel and act as they do" (2020, Abstract). This state of uncertainty experienced by Willy and his family causes Willy to feel that he does not belong to the present and that his existence means almost nothing to the society of the American Dream. Consequently, the man "is torn between rural nostalgia and his need for solid achievement and is tormented by the knowledge of personal failure" (Hadomi, 2007, 18).

Elaborating on this issue, Irving Jacobson's "Family Dreams in Death of a Salesman" (1975) explains that Willy "moves one not with his mediocrity and failure but with the frustrated energies of his outreach beyond mediocrity and failure toward a relationship to society constantly denied him" (247). Willy lives in a very materialistic society that does not esteem social relations or humans' feelings, but associates everything with material possession. Tackling the same issue from a similar perspective, Leah Hadomi (1988) writes, "When reality becomes too painful, Willy retreats into a dream world consisting of his roseate recollections of the past and of fantasies in which he fulfils the aspirations the attainment of which has eluded him in life" (158). The man is torn for living in a society "where human values are being devastated and material success alone is prioritized. People run for monetary achievements in any possible way and dreams of maximum enjoyment of life acquiring more and more facilities, without concerning righteousness" (Aparna, 2017, 108). In other words, Willy's psychological and existential conflict stems from his suffering of nothingness, which seems to be the inevitable consequence of the American Dream. This explains why Willy Loman pertains more to his hallucinations than reality and swerves between reality and imagination despite the latter's immediacy and the former's distance. He is potentially trying to create a continuum of both timelines: the past and the present (Hadomi, 1988, 158).

Several scenes of the play clearly display Willy's interest in recalling the image of his deceased father, his older brother Ben, and the old Dave Singleman whom he views as his idols. Willy declares,

Father was a very great and wild-hearted man. We would start in Boston, and he'd toss the whole family into the wagon, and then he'd drive the team right across the country: through Ohio, and Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and all the Western states. And we'd stop in the towns and sell flutes that he'd make on the way. Great inventor, Father.

The speaker is trying to reconstruct his dead father's approach and way of thinking, which reflects his desire of having the chance and ability to imitate that father, but in vain. Willy is "waiting for his father's return, living a temporary life until the time when meaning would arrive along with the person who abandoned him, as Vladimir and Estragon would await the arrival of Godot ... Meaning is deferred until some indefinite future. Meanwhile he is a salesman, traveling but never arriving" (Bigsby, 1998, xiii). Obviously, Willy's father embodies the past as well as ruralism to which Willy yearns. That father "not only illustrates the autonomy of preindustrial work, to be contrasted with the alienation of the industrial worker, but also recapitulates the geographical expansion of the nation" (Fix, 2008, para. 5). Ironically, Willy's wish to have his

father back is unattainable, and he seems to be unable to resemble that idol in anything, which results in his descent from being a father into becoming a simple man who is unable to bear that the images and visions by which he lives are exposed (Ribkoff, 2000, 52).

This understanding holds some truth in the sense that Willy may have been revisiting the past to escape undesired realities or to beautify the present's miserable image. Nevertheless, it does not quite answer the question of whether such a strategy has been fruitful for Willy. Therefore, this paper argues that despite revisiting the past, Willy does not attain his dreams of either success or happiness. He fails to achieve anything and finds it strenuous to keep himself attached to living in the present; consequently, he loathes the exposure of his fake dream-like ideals, and his fatherly image collapses in front of his family. Thus, Willy's suicide resembles, as we believe, his failure to meet his goals, namely escaping reality through nostalgia and hallucinations and raising his children to be the best. We believe that Willy's present-based dilemma and past-oriented techniques of escaping or resolving that dilemma represent the main components of Willy's personality and melancholic life experience. Accordingly, this paper relies on Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdes's "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern: A Dialogue" (1998) to examine the present-past interaction in *Death of a Salesman* emphasizing how memories, hallucinations, and dreams shape Willy's postmodern dilemma, which seems to be inevitable and unescapable.

Methodology:

To answer its main question, that is whether Willy succeeds in resolving his present-based misery represented by living in a materialistic society that estimates individuals in terms of capitalism rather than emotions or heritage, this paper reads *Death of a Salesman* in terms of nostalgia, irony, and postmodernism, as introduced by Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdes (1998). The paper explores whether Willy Loman fits into the mould proposed by Hutcheon and Valdes or whether he is portrayed by Miller to represent a completely different mould. Thus, it is noteworthy here to provide a summary of what Hutcheon and Valdes (1998) say about nostalgia, irony, and postmodernism, and then decipher Willy's portrait accordingly.

Regarding nostalgia, Hutcheon and Valdes (1998) propose that it is a dimension or phase of postmodern culture that is essential to people's life experience due to its fusion of irony and nostalgia and bringing them into the public spectacle (18). They suggest that it is through the word "postmodernism", "(the derogatory word 'dated') has been taken over by 'nostalgic', 'a word that has been used to signal both praise and blame (19). This implies that decoding nostalgia is essential to understanding postmodernism's everlasting effect upon cultures by either changing or completely upheaving certain elements within them. However, Hutcheon and Valdes (1998) explain that the experience of nostalgia is like "the return home, or sometimes merely the promise of it" (19). They illustrate,

With its Greek roots—nostos, meaning "to return home" and algos, meaning "pain" this word sounds so familiar to us that we may forget that it is a relatively new word, as words go. It was coined in 1688 by a 19-year old Swiss student, Johannes Hofer, in his medical dissertation as a sophisticated (or perhaps pedantic) way to talk about a literally lethal kind of severe homesickness (of Swiss mercenaries far from their mountainous home). (Hutcheon and Valdes, 1998, 19)

This definition emphasizes how nostalgia is formed by revisiting a place or a memory that holds a sentimental value in the individual's heart or mind. Such revisits are conducted because one thinks that he/she pertains to another world other than the present one. Thus, Willy's postmodern image and life experience constitute a state of "sentimentalized nostalgia" (Hutcheon and Valdes, 1998, 19), considering that nostalgia indicates one's *painful* return home.

Relying on Immanuel Kant's viewpoint that "people who did return home were usually disappointed because, in fact, they did not want to return to a place, but to a time, a time of youth" (qtd in Hutcheon and Valdes 19), Hutcheon and Valdes (1998) confirm that nostalgia over the years has ceased to be a physical experience but becomes a psychological one. This perspective describes Willy Loman who strives to *remember* his past because his present is absolutely failing: his work is leading nowhere, his children are not as he hopes them to be, and his marriage is marred by his unfaithfulness. In this regard, Willy perfectly fits into the *Hutcheonian* mould, as he deploys nostalgia to yearn and revisit his past, which implies that the past is an idealisation made by memory and desire. Hutcheon and Valdes (1998) write,

The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in

conjunction with the present—which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational... The aesthetics of nostalgia might, therefore, be less a matter of simple memory than of complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealized history merges with a dissatisfaction with the present. (20)

The past is something desired due to its completeness and harmony, unlike the present which provokes feelings of desolation and fatigue. As a result, nostalgia becomes an effective strategy to project a seamless world devoid of any heartache or pain, whereby satisfaction is attainable.

Moreover, Hutcheon and Valdes (1998) point out that nostalgia has been remodified due to the conditions of the postmodern era. They argue that *postmodern nostalgia* has seen a rise under the influence of information technology; simultaneously, they discuss the decline of historical memory in the postmodern era, considering how such memories are stored in data banks that cause cultural amnesia, which makes the past and present simultaneous (Hutcheon and Valdes, 1998, 20). Elaborating on this, they view nostalgia as a device that "does not simply repeat or duplicate memory" (21), but also has the tendency towards bulking it. This viewpoint implies that postmodern memories may get devalued due to their multiplicity, which ironically makes nostalgia an ideal method to save memories through revisitation.

Emphasizing such irony behind nostalgia, Hutcheon and Valdes (1998) point to the doubleness of these words. They state that nostalgia bridges the present with the past and vice-versa, whereas irony holds two meanings: the said and the unsaid (21). They write:

Irony is not something in an object that you either "get" or fail to "get": irony "happens" for you (or, better, you make it "happen") when two meanings, one said and the other unsaid, come together, usually with a certain critical edge. Likewise, nostalgia is not something you "perceive" in an object; it is what you "feel" when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight. (Hutcheon and Valdes, 1998, 21)

This description suggests that irony and nostalgia are not characteristics in objects, but sensational experiences whose meaning is projected onto the said objects. In other words, objects, places, and memories cannot be *nostalgic or ironic* by themselves; rather, they strike the sensation of nostalgia or irony connected with experiences.

Discussion:

Throughout *Death of a Salesman* (1998), Willy Loman is introduced as a man living in a house with his family members. He is a family man who tries hard to succeed in his life and function as a model for his children, Biff and Happy. He plays the role of the father, husband, and workingman, which makes him "not a case to be argued for or defended, but a representative character to be felt and experienced" (Martin, 1996, 98). The setting of act one portrays Willy Loman thus,

Willy Loman, the Salesman, enters, carrying two large sample cases. The flute plays on. He hears but is not aware of it. He is past sixty years of age, dressed quietly. Even as he crosses the stage to the doorway of the house, his exhaustion is apparent. He unlocks the door, comes into the kitchen, and thankfully lets his burden down, feeling the soreness of his palms. A word-sigh escapes his lips—it might be 'Oh, boy, oh, boy'.

Willy seems to represent humans' life experience in the postmodern era stressing that such an experience is saturated with melancholy and suffering. He is exhausted and has nothing to say. He sighs: "Oh, boy, oh, boy". This utterance potentially suggests that Willy's life is not going easy and that his present suffers several problems or challenges, which foreshadows the man's coming attempt to escape that misery in a way or another.

This atmosphere of misery and exhaustion is emphasized in Willy's first contact with his wife, Linda. Responding to her exclamation, "Willy!", the man says, "It's all right. I came back". Willy's indirectly points at a problem he has had either at work or on the road, which causes Linda to directly ask, "Why? What happened? ... You didn't smash the car, did you?" This series of questions implies that Linda is concerned about the family car, which reflects the woman's involvement in the principles of their capitalistic society as well as American Dream. Ironically, that dream is the product Americans buy "as the primary myth by the means of which they mold their interpersonal relations to resemble relations of capitalist production, which are relations among commodities" (Tyson, 1994, 7). Linda is not asking about her husband's health or work; rather, she is concerned about the car because it is one of "fundamental components of the new identity kit for middle class status"

(Hanlon, 2009, 12). The woman reflects the main principles of the American Dream, which noticeably devalues emotions and therefore causes individuals mental as well as psychological instabilities.

Defining the American Dream, James Truslow Adams (1941) states that it is "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (404). The principles of the American Dream demand that individuals are valued in terms of "ability or achievement"; therefore, its dominant presence in Willy's society and life experience functions as a consistent threat against Willy's existence or humane principles. Willy is an ambitious character who dreams of success and wealth and who wants everyone around to acknowledge his uniqueness (Noras, 2020, 13), but his dreams and ambitions are completely restricted by the principles of the American Dream. He does not have the position, ability, or power to cope with the principles of that dream, which explains why Willy "wants, beyond anything, to be 'well liked,' for, without that, he fears he will be nothing at all" (Bigsby, 1998, ix).

However, responding to his wife's questions, Willy states that he is too tired and that he could not make it to work as the car kept swerving. She then suggests that perhaps the steering wheel needs some balancing, but Willy says, "I'm—I can't seem to—keep my mind to it". This answer shows that Willy is not fine and is not sure of anything. He suffers probably physical fatigue, mental disorder, depression, etc. Elaborating on this scene, Benjamin Becker (1987) writes, "We are aware in the play that Loman has been breaking down for some time. He falls into a dreamy daze in his car, until he finds himself driving off the road" (208). Willy's "break down" does not happen suddenly; rather, it is possibly associated with growing old and losing touch with reality more and more. According to the psychiatrists consulted by Robert Falls, the director of the 1998 production of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy suffers Manic-Depressive Disorder, which has several hallucinatory features (Mckinley, 1999).

This viewpoint departs from Arthur Miller's statement that "Willy Loman is not a depressive. He is weighed down by life. There are social reasons for why he is where he is" (Mckinley, 1999). While this *authoritative* belief is probably motivated by the author's attentiveness not to undermine the main character's plausibility before the audience, it is undeniable that losing touch with reality and hallucinating about certain past incidents with massive emotional weight reflect a state of depression. According to Mayo Clinic, depression incorporates "feelings of worthlessness or guilt, fixating on past failures or self-blame ... Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions and remembering things ... Frequent or recurrent thoughts of death, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts or suicide" (Hall-Flavin, 2017). Considering that all these symptoms dominate Willy's thoughts, words, and deeds, it is unquestionable that the man's present life experience is saturated with depression.

Responding to his wife's remark regarding the car, "Maybe it was the steering again. I don't think Angelo knows the Studebaker", Willy declares, "No, it's me, it's me. Suddenly I realize I'm goin' sixty miles an hour and I don't remember the last five minutes. I'm—I can't seem to—keep my mind to it." The verb "realize" suggests that the speaker has been unaware of his speed at a certain point and that his mind is unintentionally swerving between reality and somewhere else. He does not remember what has happened in "the last five minutes", and he is unable to focus on either the present or the past. Ironically, Linda seems to understand her husband's physical, mental, and psychological status; therefore, she recommends, "Well, you'll just have to take a rest, Willy, you can't continue this way ... Your mind is overactive, and the mind is what counts, dear." The woman's recommendation emphasizes Willy's trouble thinking, lack of concentration, inability to make decisions, and failure to remember the past, which are the main symptoms of depression.

In another conversation with Linda, Willy exclaims, "Why am I always being contradicted?" The man feels that he is not normal and that he is getting to a point where he does not understand himself. Yet, he is conscious of the circumstances that have created such a depressing atmosphere. He explains, "The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks ... The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood. The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the back yard." The several manifestations, components, and principles of the capitalistic society do not comply with Willy's standards of happiness. It seems that he does not belong to that capitalistic society; therefore, he is in a continuous search in the past, present, and future "for meaning and absolution" (Bigsby, 1998, vii).

Willy starts recalling certain past moments of happiness, simplicity, ruralism, and love, thinking that memories have the power to mitigate the present's calamities. Addressing his wife, Willy says, "Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them?" This excerpt displays the disparity between the *now* and *then* from Willy's perceptive. He hearkens back to a timeline when things were simpler, more beautiful, purer, and more natural. It seems natural for him to miss that past, where growing crops in the backyard is doable. Considering this scene, Robert Martin (1996) notices that Willy carries a negative outlook towards the present, which makes him a pathetic figure whose love of nature and the fresh air resonates his thwarted dreams (103). Willy prefers remembering the trees and the swing over having to deal with the fact that he cannot grow anything in his backyard. He is, in Hutcheon and Valdes' words, "a *distant being*" who loses connection with the present to return to the glory of the idealised past (1998, 20).

The longing for the past and elm trees continues. Upon preparing dinner of the cheese bought by Linda, Willy starts advising Biff about being careful with girls and never leaving a job until it is finished. At the end of his speech, he tells Biff,

Biff, up in Albany I saw a beautiful hammock. I think I'll buy it next trip, and we'll hang it right between those two elms. Wouldn't that be something? Just swingin' there under those branches. Boy, that would be . . . (43)

Willy longs for a rural experience of life, where the trees and leaves are the prominent stage effects (Hadomi, 1988, 165). In terms of approximation and distancing, nostalgia effectively exiles the present through imagining a near past (Hutcheon and Valdes, 1998, 20). Complicating this viewpoint, Bigsby (1998) writes, "As a character in another Miller play (*After the Fall*) remarks, the past is holy. Why? Not merely because the present contains the past, but because a moral world depends on an acceptance of the notion of causality, on an acknowledgment that we are responsible for, and a product of, our actions" (xi). Motivated by the depressing conditions of the present, Willy withdraws to a timeline when his son used to respect him and look up to him as a mentor. This reflects Hutcheon and Valdes's belief that when the present becomes challenging, the past becomes livelier, thus revisiting it becomes pleasanter (1998, 25).

In his conversation with Linda about Biff, Loman recalls his son's high school days when he was the tallest student of the team and when Willy was the master of the house and probably the idol of his children. The dialogue goes thus,

WILLY: Like a young god. Hercules—something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him. Remember how he waved to me? Right up from the field, with the representatives of three colleges standing by? And the buyers I brought, and the cheers when he came out—Loman, Loman, Loman! God Almighty, he'll be great yet. A star like that, magnificent, can never really fade away!

[The light on WILLY is fading. The gas heater begins to glow through the kitchen wall, near the stairs, a blue flame beneath red coils.]

LINDA [timidly]: Willy dear, what has he got against you?

WILLY: I'm so tired. Don't talk any more.

Instead of focusing on Biff's miserable reality, thirty-four years old without a job and without any apparent goals for the future, Willy retreats to the past and reminisces over his son's prime days. It seems that he is idealizing a past to which he keeps escaping to materialise the goals that are unattainable in his present. In Hutcheon and Valdes's words (1998), Willy tries to revisit the past by idealistically ironizing it, as such recollections of the family's past may nourish the man's strongest fantasies and dreams (Hadomi, 1988, 170).

Ironically, Willy grows tired of talking about that past and directly stops talking about that memory when Biff comes home. The development of the play reveals that the most potential reason of Willy's disinterest in continuing talking about Biff's high school days is the fact that Willy remembers that Biff now is a reminder of his infidelity, thus capitalising on his son's prime days does not palliate his own guilt represented by cheating on Linda. In fact, Willy's sexual affair in Boston gets exposed by Biff; therefore, their father-son relationship gets deteriorated. As Niklas Eklöf (2020) says, "Here Biff found that his father, arguably his biggest role model and one of the shapers of his superego, was betraying his other role model and shaper of the superego: his mother" (14). Consequently, Biff refers to his own father as a "liar!" a "fake," and a "phony little fake!" This implies that Willy's nostalgia gets riddled with disjointed emotions and pain, as recalling the past inevitably incorporates experiencing and contemplating certain past failures more and more. In fact, "the very structure of the play

reflects his anxious search for the moment his life took a wrong turn, for the moment of betrayal that undermined his relationship to his wife and destroyed his relationship with [his] son" (Bigsby, 1998, xi).

Instead of providing him with repose and comfort, Willy's recollection of past-based memories emphasizes the interconnectedness of his culpable past and depressive present, which makes revisiting that *pleasant* past as strenuous and painful as living present conditions. The man's fondness of his past does not bring back any remote satisfaction. Eventually, he realizes that neither accepting the present nor recalling the past can help him accept the capitalistic principles of the present. Exchanging some words with Bernard and Charley, Willy agrees that "Sometimes...it's better for a man just to walk away. But if you can't walk away? I guess that's when it's tough". Willy cannot ignore the fact that his present is replete with failures and that his past is not different in this regard, which implies that memories-based nostalgia does not quite serve the Hutcheonian purpose, escaping into a better timeline. Painful memories reverse the traditional role of nostalgia in modifying the depressive calamities of the present; therefore, Willy tries to substitute nostalgia by dreaming and hallucinating about the future.

Several scenes of the play show how Willy's memories get concerned with the image and status of his children in the future rather than childhood memories. In his interaction with his neighbour Charley while playing cards, Willy tells the man about what agitates him concerning Biff. The dialogue runs thus,

WILLY [after a pause, withering]: I can't understand it. He's going back to Texas again. What the hell is that?

CHARLEY: Let him go.

WILLY: I got nothin' to give him, Charley, I'm clean, I'm clean.

CHARLEY: He won't starve. None of them starve. Forget about him.

WILLY: Then what have I got to remember?

Charley tries to lessen Willy's concerns about his children by telling him that he should not be worried too much about any of his children since they are adults and will not starve to death. Yet, Willy insists that all he has got to remember is his children's future and whether they can succeed in their life. Losing almost every possible opportunity to succeed in a society to which he does not belong, it is "no wonder he [Willy] looks to the next generation to give him back that life by achieving what had slipped so unaccountably through his own fingers" (Bigsby, 1998, vii-viii). Emphasizing the future of the children implies that *nostalgia-filled memories* are useless in terms of reminding Willy that his children are his priority, as such memories neither resolve the man's current problems nor inspire his children to achieve his own *optimistic* dreams.

Describing his status and ongoing conditions before his brother, Happy, and pathetic father, Willy, Biff declares "[at the peak of his fury]: Pop, I'm nothing! I'm nothing, Pop. Can't you understand that? There's no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all". Biff understands that Willy is trying to get some hope through his children's success, but it seems that he is not different from his father. They both are worthless in the capitalistic society of the American Dream. Biff tells his father that he is unable to fulfil the expectations of the family and that his future is not more promising than his depressed father's. Biff yells loudly before Willy, "Will you let me go, for Christ's sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?" Biff acknowledges his father's dream, but his capabilities do not meet his father's expectations.

Like Biff, Happy is not satisfied with living in terms of the capitalistic society, and he is not certain of what he is working for. In one of his expressive dialogues with his brother, Biff, Happy describes his life thus,

All I can do now is wait for the merchandise manager to die. And suppose I get to be merchandise manager? He's a good friend of mine, and he just built a terrific estate on Long Island. And he lived there about two months and sold it, and now he's building another one. He can't enjoy it once it's finished. And I know that's just what I would do. I don't know what the hell I'm workin' for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment—all alone. And I think of the rent I'm paying. And it's crazy. But then, it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I'm lonely.

The young man does have "an apartment, a car, and plenty of women", but he feels that his life is empty and pointless. It is true that Happy "had more fully than Biff accepted his father's dreams" (Gao, 2006); yet, his dissatisfaction with what he is doing implies that he is one of the many depressing factors that destroy Willy's life and disappoint his expectations.

The discrepancy between Willy's expectations and his children's incapability to meet those expectations constitutes the

main reason of Willy's suicide. The man dies suffering loneliness, emptiness, and pointlessness. Once, he said to Charley, "After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive." This implies that Willy's suffering is not necessarily the result of only the paradoxical association between postmodernism and nostalgia, where postmodernism incorporates nostalgia by invoking, exploiting, and mocking it, as Hutcheon and Valdes (1998) suggest. It is not exclusive to the fact that postmodern nostalgia merges between the beauty of looking back at the fond past whilst distancing individuals from those times. Rather, it is related to several reasons among which outstands the man's realization that neither nostalgic memories nor futuristic dreams or hallucinations can resolve the problems of the present or mitigate their depressing atmosphere.

Conclusion

Considering that Willy's nostalgia fuses different timelines, it is not farfetched to believe that the man fails to use nostalgia to escape the present's miseries. Yet, the play shows that nostalgia functions as a gateway of reliving pain rather than escaping it or avoiding its recurrence in the present or the future. In fact, Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1998) shows how nostalgia does not necessarily retain to a beautiful past, as suggested by Hutcheon and Valdes (1998). It may sometimes involve harsh experiences and fatigue, which does not certainly succeed in mitigating the harshness of the present. Nostalgia is not always ideal; it is ironically paradoxical, as it may lead into a hollow cycle of events devoid of achievements.

Again, revisiting the past to find answers that may help him in resolving his troubling present, Willy Loman gains no satisfaction. His pain is deepened, as such nostalgic memories mostly remind him of his failures as a father, a husband, and a salesman. When the man grows nostalgic towards his past, memories themselves act as triggers to shapeshift his reality into fantasy and vice-versa. Thus, Willy remembers chronic events that intermingle with the flow of his time until he can no longer differentiate between imagination and reality. This implies that while Hutcheon and Valdes's paradigm of nostalgia seems insightful, it does not leave room for *the undesired phase of nostalgia*. They (1998) think that nostalgia is a desire to visit a better past than the present ignoring how Willy's past and present provide him with no solace whatsoever. Realizing that he is failing almost everything, Willy surmises that suicide is the only available option for a person like him.

References

- Adams, J.T. (1941). *The Epic of America*. Garden City, NY: Blue Ribbon Books.
- Aparna, R. (2017). *Death of a Salesman*: Story of a man who lacked the sense of reality. *International Journal of Science, Technology and Management*, 6(2), 108-113. http://www.ijstm.com/images/short_pdf/1486119068_S171_IJSTM.pdf
- Bayouli, T. and Imed, S. (2019). Tragedy and social drama in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. *AWEJ for Translation & Literary Studies*, 3(2), 37-48. <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejlts/vol3no2.4>
- Becker, B. J. (1987). 'Death of a Salesman': Arthur Miller's play in the light of psychoanalysis. *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 47(3), 195-209. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01250339>
- Bigsby, C. (1998). Introduction. *Death of a Salesman*, (pp. vii-xxvii). New York: Penguin Books.
- Bloom, H. (n.d.). (2007). *Modern Critical Views: Arthur Miller*. New York: Chelsea House Publishing.
- Eklöf, N. (2020). *The Loman Family's State of Mind: A Psychoanalytical Reading of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman*. Thesis. Sweden: University of Gävle. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1395123/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Field, B. S. (1972). Hamartia in *Death of a Salesman*. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 18(1), 19-24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/440691>
- Fix, C. (2008). The lost father in *Death of a Salesman*. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, XLVII (3). <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0047.312>
- Gao, H.Y. (2006). On the disillusionment of Willy Loman's dream in *Death of a Salesman*. *US-China Education Review*, 3, 77-81. <https://www.airitilibrary.com/Publication/alDetailedMesh?docid=15486613-200603-3-3-77-81-a>
- Hadomi, L. (1988). Fantasy and reality: dramatic rhythm in *Death of a Salesman*. *Modern Drama*, 31(2), 157-174. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1988.0041>
- Hadomi, L. (2007). *Rhythm between fathers and sons: Death of a Salesman*. In Harold Bloom (ed.) *Modern Critical Views: Arthur*

- Miller, (pp. 13-24). New York: Chelsea House Publishing.
- Hall-Flavin, D. K. (2017). Clinical depression: What does that mean? *Mayo Clinic*. Retrieved from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/expert-answers/clinical-depression/faq-20057770>
- Hanlon, B. (2009). *Once the American Dream: Inner-Ring Suburbs of the Metropolitan United States*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Hutcheon, L., and Mario J. Valdes. (1998). Irony, nostalgia, and the postmodern: A dialogue. *Poligrafías. Revista de teoría literariay literatura comparada*, 3, 18-41.
- Jacobson, I. (1975). *Family dreams in Death of a Salesman*. *American Literature*, 247-258. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2925484>
- Martin, R. A. (1996). The nature of tragedy in Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Salesman'. *South Atlantic Review*, 61(4), 97-106. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3201170>
- Mckinley, J. (1999). Ideas & Trends: Get That Man Some Prozac; If the Dramatic Tension is All in His Head. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/28/weekinreview/ideas-trends-get-that-man-some-prozac-if-the-dramatic-tension-is-all-in-his-head.html>
- Miller, A. (1998). *Death of a Salesman* (1949). New York: Penguin Books.
- Noras, M. (2020). *The Role of Defense Mechanisms in Willy Loman's Character: A Freudian and Marxist Analysis of Death of a Salesman*. Thesis. Sweden: University of Gävle. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1412711/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Ribkoff, F. (2000). Shame, guilt, empathy, and the search for identity in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. *Modern Drama*, 43(1), 48-55. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.2000.0068>
- Tracy, J.L. and Robins, R.W. (2003). Death of a (Narcissistic) Salesman: An integrative model of fragile self-esteem. *Psychological Inquiry*, 14(1), 57-62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1449043>
- Tyson, L. (1994). *Psychological Politics of the American Dream: The Commodification of Subjectivity in Twentieth-Century American Literature*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Zhao, J. (2016). *An Analysis of Willy Loman's Tragedy in Death of a Salesman*. *Proceedings of International Conference on Electronics, Mechanics, Culture and Medicine*. Atlantis Press, 403-406. <https://doi.org/10.2991/emcm-15.2016.59>