Arthur Miller: A Transformation Of American Theatre

A comparative study of how the playwright follows the rules of classical tragedy by using a flawed main character to convey important ideas about the individual and the society which surrounds them in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman and Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire. The rebirth of tragedy in the 20th century was very different from how Aristotle first explored and interpreted it, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams write their central characters as a common man. This being one of the most significant changes and developments which therefore resulted in modern tragedy being born, and both Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams being referred to as 'two great pillars of 20th century American playwriting'[footnoteRef:1] In Death of a Salesman and A Streetcar Named Desire, the playwrights explore how a flawed character can be used to convey important ideas about the individual themselves and the society which surrounds them. The texts share a common central theme, how we play a part in society and how society contributes to our characteristics. Miller and Williams are able to skilfully explore this through their use of dramatic structure and characterisation, with a focus on how both Willy Loman and Stanley Kowalski's expectations of society and society's expectations of them that result, to what is in Willy's opinion, a meaningless life.

Willy Loman believes that a man's success is dependent on only two things in life; how much wealth a man has and his popularity. Ultimately, it is this belief that leads Willy to his own downfall. In Death of a Salesman, Willy Loman is described as being someone who has 'massive dreams'[footnoteRef:2] but likes to indulge in life's 'little cruelties'[footnoteRef:3]. Although there is no question as to whether Willy Loman is flawed, he has a number of faults but undoubtedly they all stem from one fundamental flaw, his perception of a successful man and his stubbornness to achieve it. This idea tracks back all the way to classical tragedy, from Greek times onwards the idea of a hero style character, who normally holds a high status, often royal, with a fatal flaw known as their hamartia. During the time of writing the play Miller also published an essay which stated that "the commonest of men may take on that stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest, the battle to secure his rightful place in his world."[footnoteRef:4] Proving that Miller himself argues that Willy Loman fits this description for a classical tragedy hero. The ability to entertain and make others believe in them is what a salesman lives by, and in Willy Loman's case this also applies to his personal life. He believes that masculinity, popularity and competitiveness are the characteristics of success, as many men did during the time of writing, 1949. Ultimately Willy Loman believed in the American Dream, "the belief that everyone in the US has the chance to be successful and happy if they work hard."[footnoteRef:5] Throughout the 20th century it was understood that if you failed to achieve the American Dream it was a reflection on the failure of your personality. Arthur Miller states in his autobiography "it has often been said that what kept the United States from revolution in the depths of the Great Depression was the readiness of Americans to blame themselves rather than the system for their downfall."[footnoteRef:6] This attitude, of blaming yourself when things go wrong is portrayed clearly through the character of Willy Loman, as far as Willy is concerned he is to blame for everything and so he believes that his suicide is justified, as his insurance will pay out helping his wife with their financial struggles.

Within A Streetcar Named Desire Williams puts emphasis on Stanley's impact on the people

around him. Stanley is a creature of habit his main desires in life are simply to maintain the stereotypical gender roles within the household, spend time with his friends and have a good relationship with his wife, in particular a good sexual relationship. At the very core of his personality is his excessive masculinity and his strong awareness of his sexual magnetism. Stanley Kowalski is portrayed as 'the gaudy seed-bearer'[footnoteRef:7] he is confident and is used to being a leader. His tasteless bowling shirt and silk wedding night pyjamas are his feathers, he is a "richly feathered male bird among hens".[footnoteRef:8] He is confident in his superiority and so is at ease with the other men in his life and so Stanley bullies them and as a result they reply with loyalty and respect. Stanley makes sure he asserts his dominance and masculinity throughout the play within his first piece of dialogue he is insisting the bet is on his terms, "Naw! We gotta have odds!" [footnoteRef:9] The poker game in scene three shows Stanley's need to dominate, and this continues throughout the play during scene eight he asserts his dominant position while on the phone "I'm the team captain, ain't I? All right, then, we're not gonna bowl at Riley's."[footnoteRef:10] Stanley is adamant that he will bowl where he wants. Stanley's masculinity is precious to him the play is set in New Orleans in 1947, after the Second World War. Once men returned home from fighting in the war, naturally, they took back their jobs that they had left behind. This meant that women were once again only considered to be homemakers while the men provided, it is possible that Stanley holds a stereotypical view of gender role because it was all that surrounded him. This stereotypical view of gender is confirmed in Stanley's dialogue when he says "you hens cut out that conversation in there"[footnoteRef:11] Stanley wants Stella and Blanche to sit in silence and out of sight. His stereotypical view of gender roles makes Stanley come across as cocky and self-centred.

Similarly, Willy Loman is also self-centred which he is branded by the woman in the hotel, as well he can come across as egotistical, this can be seen when he is telling his sons that he can park his car on any street in the city and the police will protect it, as well as bragging about how popular he is with his clients. It turn outs that Willy is lying when he makes these statements. Willy's need for admiration is rooted in the belief that "the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead." [footnoteRef:12] Yet, despite his clearly apparent self confidence, Willy Loman speaks freely to his wife about his biggest fears and weakness, he is aware that people talk about him and mock him. He is able to see that others who say less are actually better salesman Willy says himself "a man oughta come in with a few words. One thing about Charley. He's a man of few words, and they respect him."[footnoteRef:13] Therefore in order for Willy to boost his self-confidence, which is crucial to being a salesman, he needs to exaggerate, to persuade himself and others he can be a good salesman. It is Linda, his wife's reassurance that highlights just how fragile Willy's self respect is. He depends solely on her for support, most importantly she assures him that he is "idolised"[footnoteRef:14] by his sons as a reader we know this isn't true, but this is what Willy needs to hear, without such a statement he might not face the next day. This is a perfect example of how the society and community around Willy has shaped him, he ties to be society's perception of a good salesman rather than being himself.

This is one of the biggest differences between Willy Loman and Stanley Kowalski, both plays are set in the late 1940's and yet both men have a different view or interpretation of gender roles. Stanley Kowalski believes that his wife should be seen and not heard, whereas it can be easily argued that without Linda Loman, Willy Loman would crumble. The society's which surround the two are very similar both Miller and Williams tried to be accurate and truthful in their portrayals of Brooklyn and New Orleans during the 1940's. Yet both men have different view's and each have interpreted their surrounding differently.

Linda’s clear and strong support of Willy does not stop him from having an affair. Willy Loman told his wife that he wanted to “kiss the life outa you”[footnoteRef:15] while he was on the road travelling. Despite this while on the road it is another woman he kisses when he is home sick, this is his reason for the affair-being lonely. However this is soon shown to be untrue yet there is an element of truth as he struggles to communicate with his own family and often feels lonely. The silk stockings become a symbol for the affair, they constantly remind him of it, but also highlights the financial strain the family is suffering from. However, there is also a vulnerable side to Stanley that is often overlooked. At the end of scene three Stanley regrets hitting Stella we see a sensitive side that we haven’t seen before in the stage directions we are told that he speaks “humbly”[footnoteRef:16] to Eunice although he then calls for Stella “with heaven-splitting violence.”[footnoteRef:17] Therefore it can be debated whether or not Stanley actually is genuinely sorry in this scene or if he is just insisting on demonstrating his dominance over Stella while receiving what he perceives as his rights. We see a full turn around in his character, from an abusive drunk to a sweet loving husband, in scene three. He shouts “My baby doll’s left me!”[footnoteRef:18] whiled he “breaks into sobs”[footnoteRef:19] this is something that takes the reader by surprise as it is a complete contrast in character. Followed by a touching moment when Stella and Stanley meet at the bottom of the stairs before Stella goes on to tell us that “He was as good as a lamb when I came back, and he’s really very, very ashamed of himself.”

This all confirms that despite Stanley’s strong masculine outlook he is actually devoted to Stella at heart. This also links to Stanley’s treatment of women he doesn’t show it but there are moments when he too, much like Willy, couldn’t live without his wife.

While Stanley Kowalski’s behaviour is very self aware as he often takes control of the situation that he is in, this is shown when he says “What do you two think you are? A pair of queens? Remember what Huey Long said- “Every Man is a King!” And I am the king around here, so don’t forget it!”[footnoteRef:21] The rhetorical question at the beginning suggests that Stanley believes he is superior to Stella and Blanche, although this is his attitude to everyone, in the second poker game Stanley tells Pablo “you know what luck is? Luck is believing your lucky…To hold front position in this rat-race you’ve got to believe you are lucky.”[footnoteRef:22] This is a definitive moment for Stanley, as it states his self confidence and self worth and he paints a picture for himself to believe. In life, no one is lucky or unlucky, although Stanley’s belief in himself and his luck inevitably gives him an advantage over others. Stanley is not lucky in the sense that he has a successful career, and yet he perceives himself as leading in the “rat race” that others call life.

On the other hand, Willy Loman lacks self-awareness which is shown when his son Biff decides to visit his former employer to ask for a loan to start a business. At the end of act one the whole family agrees with the business plan that was proposed, and finally the future looks bright for the Loman family. During this, Willy stresses that it is always the salesman’s manner and his behaviour that will make the day successful: “don’t be so modest. You always started too low. Walk in with a big laugh. Don’t look worried. Start off with a couple of your good stories to lighten things up. It’s not what you say, its how you say it- because personality always wins the day.” [footnoteRef:23] Unlike Stanley who feels at ease being in control of situations it is often the case that Willy starts off too low when negotiating and always looks worried while doing so because he cant handle being in control, and so Willy finds this stressful and so hides behind a front that he has created for himself, a joker.

Putting on a front is a characteristic that both men share Willy often plays on what he knows, that everyone loves to laugh and so he is a joker, although despite this effort people don't lend him money. Therefore Willy failed to see that his appearance and popularity are not the only things that contribute to success. In Stanley's case he wants to be perceived as knowledgable as knowledgeable people are respected there is a clear example of Stanley stating his authority in such a way in scene two, during a conversation with Stella. "Let me enlighten you on a point or two, baby… In the state of Louisiana we have the Napoleonic code according to which what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband and vice versa"[footnoteRef:24]. However, men putting on a font, hiding behind a popular masculine character was a common trait at the time, since men had just returned home from fighting in the war to find women replacing them in their jobs and roles, men created a strong authoritative front, to take back their roles and regain their position in society, which they believed could not be so easily replaced by women.

While reading the play, Death of a Salesman it becomes clear that Willy Loman can be perceived as misguided. Ultimately, many of the mistakes that Willy makes stem from his own ideas or beliefs, and others from what he perceives to be the right thing to do. His son, Biff, describes him as having "the wrong dreams"[footnoteRef:25] which, through reading, we realise is true, although he dreams about providing for his family and works hard to make it a reality. One of the rules for a classical tragedy is that the character is not responsible for their error or weakness To blame Willy Loman outright for his own downfall is as much of a mistake as saying that he is not responsible for it at all. Using Biff's view of respectable, Willy Loman was no longer a respectable man. Biff became aware of his father's habit to exaggerate or lie about situations and no longer played into them. As he grew older he became less productive resulting in the company, which he helped to build, firing him. It is apparent that Willy regrets cheating on his wife, but will never admit to her that he had an affair. Because he already feels the pressure and judgment of society and doesn't want to add to it. All of this becomes too much for Willy feeling overwhelmed and unable to forget his failures he finds his escape in suicide. What is most heartbreaking is that we see Willy truly believing that if life insurance policy will make it up to Linda for his affair.

In A Streetcar Named Desire Stanley's escape is very different. At the end of the play Stanley rapes Blanche, his sister in law, and as unjustifiable as it is Stanley believes that there are reasons which make it acceptable. When considering Stanley's view, I realised that he had in fact endured quite a lot. Blanche had never been sympathetic towards him but instead ridiculed him. It is even the case that Blanche flirts with him and so when Stanley learns about how many men she has slept with, he thought she would not object to one more. Therefore he rapes her out of revenge but also as he believes one more man won't make a difference although he also rapes her to make her his own in the only way he understands, physically. The rape just cements Stanley's natural instincts if he is threatened he fights back in order to survive. Stanley believes that life is survival of the fittest and he is the strongest. Once again showing that the society, surround him suggesting that men had to be masculine and in charge, played a role in Stanley's decision making.

Both Willy Loman and Stanley Kowalski have their own problems, not only with themselves but also with society, although both are alike in the respect that they act tough or well put together and in control, whether that is because they aim to be very manly or they are hiding behind a masculine character. Each have their own and very different solutions. Both playwrights, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams created and brought to life characters that are vulnerable and yet have a confidence about them, however misguided. Stanley Kowalski and Willy Loman are

characters that reflect men in society at the time of writing, the self-confidence, that Stanley has naturally and that Willy hides behind. A trait that many men had as they returned from war, believing that they were invincible and the vulnerability men experienced as they felt replaceable when they witnessed women stepping into the stereotypical role of men.

Bibliography

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