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Relationships between Father and Son in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Annotation

The aim of this thesis is to analyze relationships between father and sons in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. It focuses on historical and cultural events before and after World Wars, which influenced American economy and families. These pieces of information are further incorporated in the analysis itself and serve as foundations for evaluating father-son relations in the play.

Keywords

family relations, father, son, American Dream, US economy

Anotace

Cílem této práce je analyzovat vztahy mezi otcem a synem v díle Artura Millera *Smrt obchodního cestujícího*. Práce se zaměřuje na historické a kulturní události před světovými válkami a také na události po nich, které ovlivnily americkou ekonomiku a americké rodiny. Tyto informace dále slouží jako podklady pro hodnocení vztahů mezi otcem a synem a jsou zahrnuty v samotné analýze hry.

Klíčová slova

rodinné vztahy, otec, syn, americký sen, americká ekonomika

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INTRODUCTION

Death of a Salesman “really, is a love story between a man and his son, and in a crazy way between both of them and America”

-Arthur Miller

This bachelor thesis examines relationships between father and son, taking into consideration the influence of American culture, history and economy, which is crucial for understanding the acts of Miller’s characters.

The first part of this paper deals with economic, cultural and historical events from the beginning of the World War I to the years following the end of the Second World War. In more detail the prosperous era of the 1920s is discussed, than the Great Depression of the 1930s and its solution in form of F.D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. Another period, which is analyzed, is the Second World War, whose impact on the American economy and lifestyle of common people was remarkable. At the end of this chapter are mentioned terms such as the *American Dream*, *consumerism* and *materialism*, which are crucial for following parts of this thesis.

Further, changes taking place in American families, which were caused by events on which is commented in the previous section, are described. These changes concern the number of family members, their financial situation and their commonly held believes. In the next part of this paper, the same economic, cultural and historical issues are discussed, however, this time they are incorporated in the context of the play *Death of a Salesman*. Especially the character of Willy Loman is examined as a member of American society, who is under the influence of capitalist system.

The main section of this bachelor thesis is the analysis of relationships between fathers and sons in Loman’s family. Firstly, the personality of Willy Loman is described, as he is the protagonist of the play. Following chapters, dealing with the relations between Willy and his father, Willy and Biff, Willy and his younger son Happy and finally Charley and his son Ben, are to be found in the text. All these relationships are discussed in both general and economic terms. For greater credibility and vividness, theories and conclusions included in the text are supported by extracts from the play.

The very last part of this paper consists of comparisons of *Death of a Salesman* with several plays by other famous American playwrights writing roughly in the same period of time, such as Tennessee Williams, Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson and others. This section emphasizes the shared features and topics of some of the plays by the above mentioned authors.

1. CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ISSUES BEFORE AND AFTER THE WORLD WARS

When on April 6, 1917 President Woodrow Wilson declared war on Germany, many things in the US economy changed. America went through a great industrial boom. Factories had to keep production up to the pace needed to support war and in order to produce more goods in a shorter amount of time, new technologies were developed to meet the needs of government and people in the period of war (Horne 562). Moreover, more working opportunities were given to women and Afro-Americans who at that time had to work in the factories instead of men who fought in the war. This not only influenced the decision to give women the right to vote afterwards, but it also contributed to the later economic failure known as the Great Depression (McDonald 187). However, there was an era of a significant economic growth preceding the Depression of the 1930s.

The end of the enormous costs spent on the World War I allowed both the national debt and federal taxes to be reduced. The return to isolationism meant increased protective tariffs which aided American manufactures in making money. Mass production came into its own, to turn out such new products as radios, refrigerators, automobiles or airplanes (...) (Lawson 5).

Isolationism also reduced the number of immigrants so that there were more jobs available for American citizens (Whitfield 223). New skyscrapers in cities were erected and new homes appeared where barren fields were before. Homes in these subdivisions were equipped with all of the new 'modern conveniences' and most families had their first cars (Foner 286). This period of great economic prosperity in the 1920s came to known as the Roaring Twenties and it is in the play *Death of a Salesman* referred to by Willy Loman saying ". . . Your father—in 1928 I had a big year. I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commission" (62). While there was seemingly more of everything for everybody, less poverty, less slum housing and more freedom, farming areas did not relish this period as much as the urban areas. American farmers produced record food supplies for their country during the War, but the need for these crops abruptly ended when the War was over—this caused a huge amount of surpluses glutting the American market. With so many superfluous supplies, prices of for example wheat, eggs, corn, oats or butter fell drastically (Lawson 2). In the 1920s, farmers made up almost a half of American population and it meant that the half of US population could not sell all of its goods and because of that, they could not afford buy the machinery they needed. As a result, factories making these apparatuses soon

closed and mass unemployment began (Foner 140). Whereas farmers and their families suffered, rest of the American society lived mostly a wealthy life enjoying the period of the post-war prosperity and peace (Lauter 87).

At that time Americans desired to get rich quickly (one of the reasons was to be able to afford all the ‘modern conveniences’) and therefore the stock market mania swept the nation. As the market continued to climb, “the United States Federal Reserve Board did issue occasional warnings against the dangerous activities of the stock, but these warning were usually unheeded.” (Lawson 10). People were surprised when in September 1929 prices on the New York Stock Exchange began to slide, but the market has always recovered. Bigger shock and financial disaster came on Black Thursday, October 24 when prices fell sharply on the market and it seemed nothing would stop them. Unfortunately, Tuesday, October 29, was equally catastrophic and black. This Stock Market Crash together with the poverty of farmers, unemployment and closing of the manufactures ended the prosperous decade and brought about the Great Depression of the 1930s (Schlesinger 234).

The Depression era was the time for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal. This economic depression did not happen immediately after the crash in Wall Street, but it did not take much time. As Lawson suggests, some people still had some money to spend but they refused to do it and it lead to further closure of factories because there was no market for all of the goods produced (12). These cuts on jobs opportunities caused another closing of plants and by the year 1932 there were more than twelve million unemployed people. The situation in rural areas was equally terrible and it remained the same till the year 1933 when Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected (Foner 152).

His New Deal for The United States begun slowly but greatly brighten up America’s economy. In the first 100 days of New Deal’s existence, Roosevelt and his Cabinet passed fifteen major emergency acts, which helped the United States to stand on its feet again. First, the Emergency Banking Act was enacted forbidding people to keep gold or gold certificates—they should have been returned to the banks when they reopen. This act was so successful that more than one hundred American banks were able to reopen just four days after the Emergency Banking Act was presented (Lawson 46). Another act to be proposed was the Economy Act which regulated federal expenses and balanced the budget. With this act, salaries of state employees as well as payments to war veterans were reduced and the budget used for nation’s recovery increased significantly (Fitzgerald 35). The next aim

of the bill was to provide young people with jobs and to protect America's natural resources. So the Civilian Conservation Corps Reforestation Relief Act (CCC) was declared. Members of the CCC camps worked mostly with forestry services and were given a salary to financially support their families. Some of these camps worked also in the Great Plains area where they planted trees to eliminate the erosion causing dust storms and destroying whole farming regions (Lawson 49). This was one of the biggest successes of Roosevelt's New Deal. Another important act was the Federal Emergency Relief Act. This act directly administered millions of dollars for the unemployed citizens. It helped with creating new job programs for the poor and later it originated into other long-range programs such as Public Works Association (PWA, non-profit association of public work agencies) (Fitzgerald 42). Answer to the farm problem was the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) that controlled crop production. As Lawson mentions in his FDR's New Deal, farmers were paid for not planting certain plants, which allowed them to take proper care of their families, but what is more, the prices of corn, wheat and other products grew rapidly (51). Furthermore, a huge hydroelectric plant was built during the World War I, but it stood idle until the authors of the Tennessee Valley Authority Act (TVA) decided that the plant should be owned by state to provide people with cheap electricity. The TVA became popular also for building dams and other useful facilities and it heavily contributed to the development of the main region (Hamen 28). Not less important was the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) which shortened the work week from about sixty to thirty hours to provide employment to twice as much people. The NIRA also established the number of minimum wage (Fitzgerald 54). The final piece of legislation enacted during the first hundred days of New Deal's existence that Lawson addresses was the Banking Act of 1933 that formed the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) (55). The FDIC placed a federal guarantee behind deposits in member banks. The act was so effective that the annual bank failures lowered since the beginning of the 1930s from average one thousand to about four (Lawson 56).

Although the New Deal was and still is widely celebrated for the successful economic recovery in the US, it was something else that completely ended the Great Depression of the 1930s. "It took World War II to do that by creating full employment in wartime factories . . . and creating an Allied demand for all the food American farmers could produce." (Lawson 133) People were given jobs in several industrial sectors. The biggest growth noticed the food, vehicle, ship and arm manufacturing (Whitfield 99). Thousands of young men and women became military employees and that is one of the reasons why

there were enough working opportunities for the rest of American citizens. What is more, the war time required much more goods to be produced to be able to face the war enemies. Even though there was a great amount of unskilled workers, factories simplified their production to furnish these unqualified men with some working positions (Foner 169). Another solution for unskilled people was to move to a different part of the United States to find the job suitable for them. Moreover, the period of economic weakness taught people to scrimp and preserve, which was a good preparation for future years. Last but not least, what Richard Overy claims to generously contribute to the economic wealth during and after the World War II, were the flows of gold from the Europe. Hitler's aggression frightened the European citizens so much that they wanted to put their capital somewhere safer. And because the United States stayed for a several months neutral, it was a great place to invest property in (1).

When the war ended, America was a really affluent nation. The economy was truly strong, albeit thanks to the wartime products needed, market did not offer anything that would appeal to a common post-war citizen (Jones 302). But this changed in quite a short time. New modern products, which were the result of the war technological development, were soon introduced. Americans now had goods and services to choose from but they also had the necessary finances for purchasing them (May 58–59). Another importance was the bonuses for war veterans. They were given a large sum of money, thus allowing them to buy houses and start families. This rewards for the war heroes together with the overall well-being lead to the baby and housing boom (Foner 299).

Furthermore, the United States were at the top of the world's prosperous and influential countries. People started to realize their freedom and the position on the Earth, which could be easily broken by another world 'superpower'—the communist Soviet Union (Glickman 161). This was the breaking point when people did everything to "keep the world safe for democracy" (Woodrow Wilson) and to prove that capitalist individualism was much better than eastern communism. They started to purchase a huge number of the mass-produced goods to demonstrate the wealth of lives in the capitalist world and to compensate the war suffering (Jones 320). It was the first time when people more often bought goods (especially cars and house equipment) on credit than with cash. The possibility to use the long-term credit, such as home mortgages (as in Loman family), allowed people to surround themselves with material comforts, which quickly became a shared desire for most of the Americans (Glickman 172). This new dream—to acquire anything you wish—was typical for the Cold

War era. In *The Lonely Crowd*, David Reisman argues that prior to this period, Americans were motivated by strict morals and rules of conduct, but following World War II they became more motivated by others' perceptions of them, and altered their behavior according to the acceptable societal standards (8). Reisman also classified the pre-Cold War behavior as “*inner-directed*”, and the postwar behavioral pattern as “*other-directed*”, maintaining that “*other-directed*” people lost their sense of identity because they were too much concerned about how they appear to others (9). In conclusion, to attain a dominant position on the US market, producers started to use the power of advertisement. People were not only more involved in the buying process but were also more desperate when there was something they could not afford (Whitfield 354). Consumption became a way of life and purchasing things was kind of a ritual. What is more, the above mentioned desire to prove the meaninglessness of Soviet communism was another element that contributed to the existence of a new ideology—*consumerism*. To specify the term *consumerism*, the definition from Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary can be used. It is following: “the buying and using of goods and services; the belief that it is good for a society or an individual person to buy and use a large quantity of goods and services . . .”¹.

There was, in addition, another commonly held belief during the years after the World War II. Devastated by the crisis preceding the war and by the war itself, majority of middle and upper class people sought consolation in physical comforts rather than in any spiritual values. They began to spend more money on goods and services and their possession was the biggest concern (Whitfield 356). American citizens were chasing highly-paid jobs, to have money to be spent on products they wished for, conversely the demanding jobs sometimes did not provide them with enough free time to enjoy these newly bought gadgets. Still, material comforts were perceived as the key to successful lives. For this idea that money, possessions or physical comforts are more important than any other values, the term *materialism* was applied (Jones 324).

From the first years when the United States came to its existence, people were desperate to know the meaning of their new destinies in the New World. They wanted to see the essential core and the meaning of their and their children's lives. With a genuine desire to be capable of defining the American society, a national ethos begun to be formed (Schlesinger 244).

¹ „consumerism“; cit. in:

<http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/consumerism?q=consumerism>; Accessed 6 March 2017

Nowadays, this ethos is commonly known as the American Dream but its definitions differed throughout the years. The first official answer to what is the American Dream could be found in the Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence of 1776 "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness . . .". This explanation developed over a number of years. America went through great changes (mentioned in the previous pages), which were not only a good ones, and the character of this country and of its citizens was shaped. With growing economic prosperity, personal values changed, the substance of the American Dream did not remain the same. These days, there are several ideas referring to the concept of the dream of America. For example, Mark R. Rank, Professor of Social Welfare and the author of several renowned books claims that the American Dream is the idea of what we stand for and what we represent—the idea of being able to pursue what you are passionate about and to have a valuable life. He also believes that "The hopes and optimism that Americans possess pertain not only to their own lives, but to their children's lives as well. A fundamental aspect of the American Dream has always been the expectation that the next generation should do better than the previous generation." (49) Another famous author, writing about American History, James Truslow Adams argued that ". . . [American dream is] dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. . . . 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." (214–215). Although Arthur Miller himself admitted that the American Dream served more as an idea than a real actuality and that the whole concept more than affluence and material wealth represents hope and the opportunity to live freely (Sterling 37), 20th century perception of this Dream can be easily described through one sentence used by Steven Centola in Eric J. Sterling's *Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman* "Work hard, save a little, send kids to college so they can do better than you did, and retire happily to a warmer climate." (37) To conclude, there are many theories on the American Dream and they sharply differ, but some features they do have in common—the importance of younger generation, equality and personal happiness. However, the question is how Willy Loman did perceive his American Dream.

1.1.Cultural and historical influence on American families

However the Great Depression era is preceded by several important historical events that influenced a later character of the United States, the affairs happening from the 1930s to the 1950s are those, which contributed to the changes in a family arrangement appearing in the play *Death of a Salesman* which sets in the late 1940s.

After the World War I ended, there was a period of a considerable economic wealth across the country. American families went through great times and have 1-3 children on the average. Women were discouraged from working and their full-time job was their household (Chafe 75). Later on, this slightly changed owing to the Great Depression which made some women find jobs to be able to literally feed their families. As Elaine Tyler May describes in her book, yet it was still perceived as unusual for mothers to earn money, the public view has lightly changed—people realized there is no other way to provide the family with all the necessities (12–13). A common family living in the Depression era dreamt of sending their sons to college to secure his future career and life. On the other hand, girls were usually kept at home taking care of their house and family members—in a way, they substituted their working mothers and their only hope was to find a well-secured man (May 32). This generation of Americans is also known for not being teenagers because of the duties they had to their poor families.

When the US entered the World War II, the need to keep American economy stable provided women with more working opportunities and the wide spread opinion on female employees changed drastically. They started to be seen as a working force of a great value (Chafe 82). Although the war years were rough and many people lost their lives, it was an era of numerous marriages and baby boom. Young couples got married in an early age and had babies about twenty years of age. This phenomenon of young emancipated mothers continued and even more expanded in the years following the war (Lawson 88).

In the 1940s when the war was over, hundreds of veterans came back home to their partners. Partly thanks to the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (also known as the G.I. Bill) which provided war veterans with education, payments, low-cost mortgages and other benefits, many young couples started new families (Olson 111). To have children was

publicly promoted achievement among the US citizens and fatherhood was propagated as a new feature of men's masculinity (May 125). Boys and men returning from war lasted for comfortable homes where they could bring up their offspring. They felt that raising children is a new way of a self fulfilment. They wanted to reach that time's American Dream—have a loving wife, taking care of their children, have a spacious house in a pleasant suburb which would be furnished with all the new equipment (Van Ells 38). “In the five years after the World War II, consumer spending increased 60 percent, but the amount spent on household furnishing and appliances rose 240 percent.” (May 157). During this year American purchased 21.4 million cars, 20 million refrigerators, 11.6 million televisions and moved into over 1 million new housing units in the suburbians, which were the locale for consumerism (May 156). Buying all the new products offered on the market was the goal of American families. The problem was that some people (such as the play protagonist Willy Loman) simply could not have afforded some appliances, which was perceived as awkward at that time, and fell into depressions. This life style based on material satisfaction and *pronatalism*—the policy or practice of encouraging the bearing of children², extended into the 1950s when the economic prosperity and desire for the American Dream spread even more.

1.2. Cultural and historical events in *Death of a Salesman*

The play, “first produced in 1949, was written at the height of the consumer boom that followed the recession of the 1930s and the war years” (Benziman 20). By this time the American economy had become consumption-oriented and society was turning more and more materialistic. Cultural and historical events, which led to this economic arrangement, are discussed in the first chapter, yet only from the general point of view. More importantly, context of the play and its relations to the drama are to be further analyzed.

Owing to the New Deal and World War II, America became a rich country, crowded with people who were willing to spend their money on more than just basic needs, such as food and clothes. A desire to own cars, televisions and other property spread across the country. The American Dream started to be a synonym to the financial success (Jones 320). Nevertheless, the capitalist system was (and still is) based on the idea similar to the Darwin's

² „pronatalism“; cit. in; <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/pronatalism>; Accessed 6 March 2017

Theory of Evolution—survival of the fittest. Unfortunately, not everybody was able to keep up with this scheme. A great example is Willy Loman, who struggles to bear the burden of being a fruitful salesman amongst others businessmen. He aspires to be a respected tradesman, earning enough money to feed and financially support his family, thus to be also admired by his sons and wife. “He fights for recognition, for attention, for respect, for dignity, for love, and for immortality.” (Sterling 55) But the capitalist system requires more effort than Willy obviously puts into his job. Many authors, such as Bert Cardullo, indicate that *Death of a Salesman* is criticism of capitalism (*Death of a Salesman, life of a Jew* 587), nonetheless, Sterling suggests that

Miller’s play is perhaps not an indictment of capitalism because Willy does not deserve to succeed if he is incompetent. Moreover, if Miller sincerely intended to write a play that attack capitalism, he . . . would not have portrayed the failure of an incompetent worker, but rather the failure of a skillful and talented salesman who deserves great success. (6)

Willy’s incompetence clearly manifests, for example, his belief that Bernard will not be successful in business because he lacks charm.

Bernard can get the best marks in school, y’understand, but when he gets out into the business world, y’understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That’s why I thank Almighty God you’re both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. (20-21)

Furthermore, another proof that offers the idea of capitalism not being that unjust and harmful is the character of Willy’s neighbor Charley, who functions well within the capitalistic system, but still remains extremely patient and generous. As Sterling explains, “despite his evident success, he has not lost his capacity to feel, help and sympathize with those who have not succeeded . . .” (65). But in the highly consumerist society, which is depicted in the play, is very common the feeling of envy, which feels Willy Loman when he complains to Linda about Charley’s refrigerator which has been working fine for twenty years, while theirs keeps breaking down, even though it is rather new and still being paid for on credit (54). This commodity from everyday life metaphorically points at the gap between both neighbors: everything in Willy’s life seems to break down all the time while Charley’s life seems to be perfect as well his ability to be at ease with capitalist society, which Willy does not manage to find a comfortable place in.

With the new way of living, having more money to spend and more products to buy, new generation of businessmen appeared. These entrepreneurs embodied an innovative way of

trading which simply refused to waste time with sentiment or with personal questions. An excellent example is young Howard whose values are those of business. “He is a man for whom time is money, who has no time for the man who served the company for most of his life and has little time left” (Bigsby 133–134). That is why Howard is indifferent to Willy’s increasing despair during the interview, provided that “the impersonal business world no longer has any room for personality” (Porter 34–35). Presuming Willy told truth during this conversation, when Howard’s father ran the company, affairs were not conducted in such an impersonal and cold fashion, but in the postwar society “Willy’s memories no longer mean anything to his employer” (Bigsby 115). Howard shows no regrets firing an old man who worked for this company almost as long as he lives. In his new business ethics, Willy’s desperate attempts to recall his friendship with Frank Wagner are doomed to fail. Therefore it is not surprising that Willy nostalgically looks back to the golden age when business supposedly had a different structure. “In those days there was personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it’s all cut and dried, and there’s no chance for bringing friendship to bear” (61). Willy Loman is stuck in the old outlook of doing business and consequently he must be fired, even though he is already sixty-three years old and about to retire. But it is a personal fact that capitalist ethics no longer takes into consideration. In his anger, Willy finds the courage to make a remark to the principle that “business is business”: “You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit!” (61). These words refer to the youthful idealism of 1930s when employees were treated as human beings and not only as company’s commodities (Sterling 70). What is more, from the very beginning of their meeting, Howard shows far more interest in his new toy—the tape recorded—than in the desperate human being who tries to communicate with him in person. Again, this is a sign of the new era, when electronic devices started doing the work of employees and render them less important. Howard is more concerned with listening to the voices from recorded than to the present voice asking for help. He repeatedly interrupts Willy or even openly tells him to be quiet so that the recorded can be heard. After witnessing Howard’s self-interested behavior, there is no wonder that after all the years Willy works for Howard, he even did not attend his funeral.

Apart from the attack on Howard Wagner’s selfish attitude, the most powerful statement on capitalism incorporated in *Death of a Salesman* concerns the growing alienation that the capitalist machinery requires in order to run smoothly. People are supposed not to think too much and they should also tell themselves that they need the very thing that others need to

sell them (Jones 285). This is not a problem for most individuals, such as Bernard and Charley, who does realize that advertising does not exactly operates with truths, however, some individuals do listen to these recommendations and thus are part of this “show” and become alienated. This is precisely what happened to Willy, the salesman who was caught by this machinery and then lost his identity.

Furthermore, Willy is not the only one who is trapped by the American system. After the World War II, a huge number of advertising agencies promoting new goods appeared. And Linda Loman is the embodiment of trusting and blind American consumer, relying on the advertisement. As well as Willy, Linda is also devoted to the American Dream characterized by material comforts, and she faithfully buys “American-type cheese” believing to be the best on the market. Committed to the consumer culture, Linda defends the purchase of the often-broken Hastings refrigerators because “[t]hey got the biggest ads of any of them!” (23). A complaint of mass production of poor quality goods could be also detected in the following speech:

Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it's broken! I'm always in a race with the junkyard! I just finished paying for the car and it's on its last legs. The refrigerator consumes belts like a goddam maniac. They time those things. They time them so when you finally paid for them, they're used up. (54)

Reisman's theory that people's behavior changed from the “*inner-directed*” to the “*other-directed*” over a period of years, is also to be found in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Above mentioned, people begun concern about others' opinions on themselves and their identities slowly disappeared. An argument could be made, that Willy Loman is an exemplary man without identity. Trying to commit suicide, being unfaithful to his wife, arguing with his sons about false principles of capitalist system are, hopefully, sufficient evidence of his chaotic character, which is dependent on his weak position among successful individuals. He actually adopts the illusion that he is a victim of society, of the competitive business world of the culture that „makes it imperative for a man in American society to feel driven by the need to prosper, provide for family, and succeed in attaining the forever elusive, unquestionably mythic American Dream“ (Bloom 54)

2. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FATHER AND SON IN *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

To analyze relations between father and sons in *Death of a Salesman*, it is necessary to first describe the main character of this play—Willy Loman, who is a father to two young men; Happy and Biff and who is the epicenter of both positive and negative actions in Loman’s family. An argument, that Willy is mentally insane, could be easily made based on his vivid imagination related to the past, on his discussions with his older brother who is already dead, and on abrupt changes of his opinions. Nevertheless, let presume that his unusual behavior is caused by events which took place in his life and not by his poor mental condition.

“Attention must be paid!” (Miller 40) is one of the most popular quotes from the play, however, the question is: Attention must be payed to what, exactly? “Is it to Willy the casualty of capitalism? Or to Willy the emblem of a middle crisis? To Willy who ‘had the wrong dreams’ . . .? Or to Willy who lived the life of a salesman ‘way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and shoeshine’ as Charley . . . describes him?” (Siegel 28). Thus, a few following pages further examine Willy Loman’s personality.

In age of 63 years, Willy Loman is not any longer able to “maintain a foothold in the upward-striving American middle class” (Isherwood 1) and although his career has never been very spectacular, it is on the decline now. The reason might be that he is under constant pressure to live up to his own demands of what he considers to be the American Dream—if you are not a “great success”, you are worth nothing. With his egocentric personality, absorption in himself and the inability to see anything between success and failure, he is certain that “he is at the center of attention, either as everybody’s favorite or as everybody’s laughingstock” (Benziman 31). On the contrary, Bloom believes, that the reason of his inability to continue in his work as a salesman is Willy’s belief that charm and being “well-liked” rather than working hard is the key to success (31). The exact opposite to Willy is his neighbor Charley who, according to Arthur Miller, “unlike Willy, operates successfully within the capitalist system.” (qtd. in Sterling 63). The two extracts below support the theory on Willy being lost in the capitalist world.

WILLY: Charley, I’m strapped. I’m strapped. I don’t know what to go. I just fired.

CHARLEY: Howard fired you?

WILLY: That snotnose. Imagine that? I named him. I named him Howard.

CHARLEY: Willy, when're you gonna realize that them things don't 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. (75)

WILLY: I'm talking about your father! There were promises made across this desk! You mustn't tell me you've got people to see—I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit! . . . Now pay attention. Your father—in 1928 I had a big year. I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commissions. (61)

Willy clearly does not manage to keep up the pace with the business world in which he lives now. He refers to the prosperous year of the Roaring Twenties and does not understand that present days are those that matter. Moreover, Willy argued that he was the one who named Howard when he was born, however, in the play Howard is thirty-six years old and Willy mentions that he works in this company for thirty-four years only. That means either that Willy's age reveals his poor memory, or that he lies intentionally to influence Howard's decision. He lies not only to his boss but also to his family. He tells imaginary stories about the police officers protecting his car like their own and buyers waving him right into their offices, but the play later reveals that he had to bribe secretaries to sell his products (Benziman 26). What is more, Willy lies also to himself when talking about his great career and the future funeral.

WILLY: Because he thinks I'm nothing, see, and so he spites me. But the funeral – Ben, that funeral will be massive! They'll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire! All the old-times with the strange license plates-that boy will be thunderstruck, Ben, because he never realized-I am known! Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey-I am known, Ben... (100)

Further, Willy's flashbacks might not only be attempts to remember his and his family's past, these flashbacks might also be Willy's attempts to fictionalize some parts of his past. As Cardullo explains, "no character in the play, except Willy, uses Ben's name or refers to the elder brother's South African business ventures, nor does any character besides Willy refer to his wagon-travels West, as a boy, with his flute-carving father . . ." (Death of a Salesman, life of a Jew 593). Most of these references occur in flashbacks or during conversations with Ben, which makes them, in fact, untrustworthy. Moreover, Willy's memories of past conversations as well as his present performances produce certain inconsistencies. He excused Biff's stealing a football by arguing "Sure, he's gotta practice with a regulation ball, doesn't he? Coach'll probably congratulate you on your initiative!" (18). But Willy soon forgets this

excuse saying “He’s giving it back, isn’t he? Why is he stealing? What did I tell him? I never in my life told him anything but decent things” (27). At one moment Willy claims that “Chevrolet, Linda, is the greatest car ever built” (21) and the next moment says “That goddamn Chevrolet, they ought to prohibit the manufacture of that car.” (23). Willy mentions that “Biff is a lazy bum!” (5) and almost immediately thereafter declares “And such a hard worker. There’s one thing about Biff—he’s not lazy.” (6). The only factor, that influences Willy’s current feelings about his son Biff is the story, which is at that moment circulating in his head.

Willy’s attempts to kill himself are other proves of his mental instability, the reason is not only that he is barely able to earn enough money to feed his family, but as Bert Cardullo suggests, he also believes he is the sufferer of society which does not allow him to succeed (Death of a Salesman, life of a Jew 588). What is more, Willy experiences the pathos of being a salesman—he has neither the sufficient freedom of action nor any public significance (Siegel 29). In fact, the commodity, that Willy sells, is never identified and his character is as universal as his last name “low-man” (Benziman 591), in a sense, Willy is selling himself rather than the the products. Nonetheless, as Ronald Hayman states, Willy is not a passive victim of society—he is given a choice to become “William” but he opts to stay where he is and be just “Willy” (87). The truth is Willy would be capable of having a promising career if he has chosen a different profession. Sterling explains that “during the play, Willy’s carpentry talents are applauded several times” (86) and Linda remembering Willy, recalls “He was so wonderful with his hands.” (110). Charley also compliments Willy on his expertise in installing his living room ceiling and Willy indicates that the job was not that difficult (30). Despite all these admiration, Willy considers the career of a physical laborer to be demeaning. He thinks it is beneath his dignity to be a carpenter (Sterling 87). In the play he reminds Biff that even his grandfather was better than a carpenter (Miller 44). But the thing that Willy forgot is that his father was not only a salesman but also made flutes he sold with his own hands.

Too proud to work with his hands and too proud to confess his failure, Willy even refuses his neighbor’s help, although “he was unsuccessful to the extent that he cannot make a living . . . and unpopular to the extent that almost nobody attends his funeral . . .” (Benziman 32). Willy’s last conversation with Charley before his death reveals another sad aspect of his life. He makes a painful confession to his neighbor: “Charley, you’re the only friend I got. Isn’t

that a remarkable thing?" (76). This statement was really accurate because in the entire play no reference is ever made to any other friends of his; he is isolated in the middle of all towering buildings that surround their little house and is on a lonely road for most of his time (Sterling 66).

On top of that, Willy's career as a father is also not so fruitful and his failure becomes more apparent throughout the play, when all the flaws of his sons come to light. His dream to bring up two thriving and prosperous men did not come true. He is self-centered and obsessed with the idea of the American dream, which prevents him from seeing his sons' behavioral difficulties (Phelps 239). Bloom reminds of the conversation between Bernard and Willy when Bernard reports that Biff is not studying and is driving without a license (5). Linda also recalls that Biff has not returned the football and that he is too rough with the girls, which causes that all the mothers are afraid of him (Miller 26). Furthermore, when Charley warns Willy that Biff is stealing lumber and could end up in jail if caught, Willy excuses himself by saying "I gave them hell, understand. But I got a couple of fearless characters there." (Miller 35). While Charley insists that jails are full of fearless characters, Ben, on the other hand, claps Willy on the back and replies "And the stock exchange, friend!" (35).

Influenced by older and successful brother, Willy ignores Biff's and Happy's misbehavior believing in their physical attractiveness, which is, Willy believes, critical. In the first act, Willy compares his sons to a mythological figure Adonises and hereby shows his poor knowledge of the classical myth that he refers to. The goddess Aphrodite, who loved the young handsome Adonises, tried to educate her paramour and provide him with her intellect and insight (Burkert 109–112) "However, the youthful Adonis was invariably headstrong and arrogant, proud and impetuous . . . , risk-taker by nature, he especially enjoyed the thrill of the chase and violence of the hunt" (Thompson 162). He ignored advice of his guide, suggesting carefulness because his charms have no effect upon lions or boars. On his very next hunt, his carelessness and superfluous courage brought him to a violent end—he was gored by a wild boar. In grief of the tragic death of one so young and promising, Aphrodite sprinkled Adonis's freshly spilled blood onto the fertile Greek soil where, as Publius Ovidius Naso describes,

within an hour, a flower sprung up, the colour of blood, and an appearance like that of the pomegranate. (...) But the enjoyment of this flower is of brief duration; for it is so fragile, its petals so lightly attached, that it quickly falls, shaken from its stem by those same winds that give it its name, anemone. (qtd. in Thompson 163)

In a sense, Willy's attempt at flattering mythological allusion turns out to be just as inadequate as his business advice. Thompson explains that it goes hand in hand with his inability to see deeply into anything, be it ancient myth, salesman's job or even the fatherhood (163). Yet ironically, both of his sons are like flowers, attractive when young, but like anemone—blood-fertilized with a temporary bloom. Although Happy and Biff are not killed by a wild animal, their lives come to nothing because, like Adonises, they believed that their physical beauty and charm would carry them through lives. And now, in their thirties, Biff and Happy Loman remain as immature as they were in high school, when they spent their time cheating on exams, stealing from neighbors, roughing up girls and lying at every occasion.

Moreover, Willy's ideal self-image is as fragmented as his real personality (Martin 100). Rather than consisting of one individual, Willy seems to be comprised of several contradictory selves, which together make up an unstable person that him, at the end of the play, costs his life. Willy is torn between his need to be in a direct connection with nature and manual labor, on the one hand, and his wish to maintain his place in society and be loved and admired by others, on the other (Sterling 84). As already mentioned, Willy wants more than material prosperity; he wants to retrieve the love and respect of his family and the self-esteem which he has lost. Yet he does not know that the way he tries to achieve these goals is wrong because he made himself think that the values of the family he cherishes are inextricably linked with the values of the business world in which he operates (Ribkoff 3). He confuses the two parts of his life creating nothing but chaos and pain for everyone around him. Willy does not fail only in sales career, he unfortunately fails also in gardening at his back yard, however, the emotional seeds Willy plants into his sons seem to flourish, producing corrupt values and character features that can bring nothing else than failure for the next generation of Lomans (Sterling 9). This could be seen in the scenes where Willy congratulates Biff on his initiative for borrowing a regulation football to practice with, or encouraging boys to steal sand from the apartment house, or advising his sons to be well liked and make a good appearance in order to get ahead in the world. Both sons are lost and confused. They have inherited their father's powerful dreams but have no true understanding of how to attain them (Jacobson 249). Biff is more troubled than Happy because he is more conscious of this problem. He knows that he does not belong in the business world but still feels obligated to build his future this way since that is what his father expects of him (Bloom 45). He would prefer to work on a farm, performing manual labor, but he has learned from Willy not to respect such a work. In Willy's

mind, physical labor is said to be something demeaning. And with a thought like this in his head, Biff never feels completely satisfied working as a farmhand and tortures himself with guilt over his failure to satisfy his father's demand (Jacobson 248).

Biff is not the only one who appropriates someone else's dream. Willy, in fact, chooses material achievement as his standard for success when he observes the popularity of an older salesman, Dave Singleman. Hearing of Singleman's remarkable skills in working the phone from his hotel room, Willy comes to believe that if he continues as a salesman, he will eventually receive the same level of popularity and respect (Sterling 81). Singleman's popularity is demonstrated by the huge turnout at his funeral, while Willy's business failure is reflected in the turnout at his own funeral of only his immediate family and neighbors. Willy does not manage to achieve success as a salesman because his career choice is based on Dave Singleman's success and not on his own dreams and natural inclinations (Martin 104). Since Willy was abandoned by his father in an early age, he feels „temporary“ about himself (Miller 36) and does not really understand his own personality. Therefore copies other's people desires. In the end, Dave Singleman dies happy and without regrets because he has chosen a job, which he loves, conversely to Willy who followed someone else's business dream.

Furthermore, the value that Willy ascribes to his role as a father is evident throughout the play in numerous passages which reveal his obsession with the image of being a father. Sadly, thinking about the many years he has spent driving from New York City to New England to sell his products, Willy wonders why he has worked „a lifetime to pay off [his] house . . . and there's nobody to live in it“ (4). Obviously, Willy feels as though he has invested all of his life in his family and is not getting the return he expected. This makes him think whether he has failed also as a father.

2.1. Relations between Willy and his father

Compared to his older brother, Willy is more “rooted in an ethic oriented to the family and to society” (Benziman 22), which probably caused his financial and business failures. Apparently unlike Willy, Ben needed neither society's positive response nor the family environment. His actions are related more to material things and numbers rather than people. Cardullo states that even his seven sons seemed more like commodities than family members

(Death of a Salesman 31). These facts indicate that Ben's sense for business was probably already inherited and he is, in comparison with Willy, more likely to succeed financially.

Abandoned at the age of three by his father, Willy lasts for the family unity and the person, who represents his missing father, is his fruitful brother Ben. But his brother later leaves as well and Willy's self-confidence and sense of his own identity as a man is getting lost. He not only looks up to him as to the example of a thriving businessman but "Ben [also] becomes the measure of success and manhood for his sons to live up to." (Ribkoff 1). In the play, he appeals to Ben: "You're just what I need, Ben, because I—I have a fine position here, but I—well, Dad left when I was such a baby, and I never had a chance to talk to him and I still feel—kind of temporary about myself." (36) or "Can't you stay a few day? You're just what I need." (36). Regretting his poor childhood in terms of having no male model to follow, Willy wants his flawless brother to educate the boys about their grandfather. In his eyes, Ben and his father are fantastic figures not only because they are present only in his visions and memories and therefore seem to be perfect, but they also remind of mythical heroes with all their fantastic experience (Benziman 34). "[W]hen I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. . . . And by God I was rich!" (Miller 37). What is more, Ben clearly embodies more than just the image of success and an example he or his sons should copy. In Willy's mind "he also represents the road not taken" (Bloom 29). In other words, he is, in many ways, Willy's alter ego. Ben is the other person which Willy could have become if he had chosen to live by a different code of ethics. Therefore, his presence in Willy's head gives us insight into Willy's character allowing us to see not only what Willy's values are, but also what kinds of choices he has (as a result of those values). For Willy is Ben undoubtedly the embodiment of one kind of American dream. And although "the dashing, mustache-sporting older brother is also the only character in the entire play who respectfully addresses Willy by his formal name—'So you're William'—and not by the childish diminutive . . ." (Thompson 245), he actually shows a little interest in him "And good luck with your—what do you do? " (Miller 35).

As much as Willy is attentive to the presence of the absent brother, so is he blind to the existence of the reliable neighbor, and fails to see him as a possible model to follow. Whereas Ben does not give Willy anything but dreams to feed on, and does not even mention him in his will (Cardullo, Death of a Salesman, life of a Jew 587), Charley keeps supporting the failing salesman financially without even being thanked. Both Charley and Ben offer Willy a job, and yet there is a difference in the feeling behind the offer. As Benziman explains "Ben,

although a brother, does not seem genuinely willing to give Willy anything. The model of success that he represents—heroic, manly, colonialistic—is also extremely self-seeking, and is removed from society not only geographically, but emotionally as well.” (35) On the other hand, the play shows Charley counting money and indicates that he sits with his accountant, but he never tells tales like Ben and does not mention his diamonds. Despite this fact, Willy, who still did not fill the empty space his father left in him, rejects Charley’s generous offer as well as the thought of Charley being the ideal man to look up to. Moreover, the very first encounter of Charley and Willy which is described in the play, already gives evidence of their relations. Charley, in fact, came to Willy’s house to have a play of cards. And the sense of competition between these two characters is obvious throughout the whole play. Willy’s desperation to succeed as a salesman makes him compare himself with the kindest man of the drama—Charley. He apparently fails to be as fruitful as his neighbor, and does not hesitate to humiliate Charley in any other way possible (Sterling 64). Probably the only area in which Willy outdoes Charley is carpentry and with this fact he tries to attack his manhood and question his physical skills. “A man who can’t handle tools is not a man. You’re disgusting” (Miller 30). Willy feels the need to defeat him not only in cards but also in a business life and does not see that Charley is perhaps the only one who helps him unconditionally.

2.2. Relations between Willy and Happy Loman

In the play, there are only a few pieces of information about Willy’s younger son, yet even with him being the simplest character, he is possibly the least likable one. Without any emotional conflicts or inner dramas, Happy Loman, compared to his father and brother, is perceived as a straightforward man, who is not oppressed by the materialist culture as Willy and Biff are. “Happy is portrayed as a less complicated but much more consistent voice of misogyny and greed, thereby making sympathy for him as a potential ‘victim of his culture’ less likely” (Sterling 30). Bearing this in mind, Happy’s comments and thoughts toward women are not received with any compassion or understanding that his brother and father earn. If Happy is considered as an uncomplicated character, it is highly probable that Arthur Miller intended him not be dealt with in a way that Willy and Biff are, so that this chapter will be rather short compared to the ones about Willy’s relations between his father and his older son Biff.

Although in the whole play, there is not many lines about (or by) Happy, it is possible to state, that his relationship with his father is not equal. In fact “Happy is . . . seeking his father’s attention and approval, hoping to stop his internal demons by fulfilling his father’s capitalistic dream of being the number one in the business world.” (Sterling 89). For he has never been the sole focus of his father’s attention, he tries to be ‘the number one’, which Biff in Willy’s eyes already is. He chases his father’s dream hoping to appropriate his attention. But then he confides to Biff “But then, it’s what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I’m lonely” (12). Emotionally abandoned like his father, Happy follows his father’s path of “least resistance by continuing to accept another person’s materialistic goals of success and happiness” (Sterling 90).

In comparison to Happy’s admiration for his father, Willy does not share the same feelings for him. In Willy’s flashbacks, we see Happy constantly attempting to receive Willy’s attention for example by repeating “I’m losing weight, you notice, Pop?” (17). However, Willy never acknowledges Happy’s efforts to gain his attention. In reality, Willy calls Biff, but never Happy by name. As a matter of fact, Happy’s name is filled with irony because he symbolizes Willy’s [and his own] unhappiness derived from trying to acquire other people’s business dreams and financial success (Phelps 239).

Although Happy is himself wedded to money values and assures his father to retire him, Willy scoffs at his promise to be a successful capitalist capable of taking financial care of him.

HAPPY: Pop, I told you I’m gonna retire you for life

WILLY: You’ll retire me for life on seventy goddam dollars a week? And your women and your car and your apartment, and you’ll retire me for life! (Miller 28)

On the contrary, Happy trusts Willy so much that “[he] does whatever it takes to gain approval from his father” (Bloom 122). He believes that being well-liked is truly the only way to be successful. In a certain way Happy ends up following in his father’s footsteps (Cardullo, *Death of a Salesman* 30). At Willy’s funeral, again, Happy promises that he is going to reach the dream Willy had: “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” (111)

Despite all these differences in their relationship, they both are of the same opinion on women. Happy once indicates to Biff that women are either “pig[s]” (Miller 9) “to be had and

consumed, mere bowling balls that make him feel good when he is ‘knockin’ them over” (Miller 13), or alternatively the mysterious, undefined woman “with character, with resistance” (Miller 13) who is supposedly not sexually available but uncompromisingly dutiful. Happy divides women into two groups—the asexual ones who one marries (like his mother) or “sexual objects to be had and discarded [such as Miss Forsythe]” (Sterling 30). Willy seems to hold the same belief when cheating on his devoted wife with a woman with no name. What is more, he is not ashamed to send her along to the corridor with her wearing no clothes, which proves his zero respect to this “sexual object”. On the other hand, he declares his deep admiration for Linda, the woman who keeps an eye on house expenses and who supports Willy in every possible way, saying: “You’re the best there is, Linda, you’re a pal, you know that? On the road—on the road I want to grab you sometimes and just kiss the life outa you.” (25) Another, and probably the last feature that Willy and Happy share is their tendency to tell lies. Willy exaggerates when talking about his selling success and Happy does the same when he tries to convince Miss Forsythe that Biff is one of the greatest football players in America. Clearly, both sons have been raised to see lies as merely exaggerations that can harm no one. And Happy, on top of that, inherited his father’s urge to treat women as not equal.

2.3. Relations between Willy and Biff Loman

In contrast to Willy’s inattention to Happy, Willy showers Biff with careful attention, causing Biff to think that he is above society’s rules. Willy shows his obvious favoritism by praising Biff’s physical abilities and rationalizing Biff’s stealing tendencies. Moreover, he negotiates the seriousness of the theft by joking about it (Sterling 87).

WILLY [*examining the ball*]: Where’d you get a new ball?

BIFF: The coach told me to practice my passing.

WILLY: That so? And he gave you the ball, heh?

BIFF: Well, I borrowed it from the locker room. [*He laughs confidentially.*]

(...)

WILLY [*stopping the incipient argument, to HAPPY*]: Sure he’s gotta practice with a regulation ball, doesn’t he? [*To BIFF*] Coach’ll probably congratulate you on your initiative! (Miller 17-18)

However, later on in the play, Biff confesses that he stole himself out of every good job (Miller 105) and responds to his father: “And whose fault is that? . . . And I never got

anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is" (105).

What is more, when Bernard reports that Biff is failing math, Willy defends Biff again by attacking Bernard as smart but not well-liked. And although Biff really does not live up to his father's dream, he is still the one to whom Willy relates the most (Bloom 143). Considering the ignorance which is Willy showing to his younger son, the only way to achieve his success in the business world is through athletically talented Biff. This is perhaps the reason why is Willy even a few years later so concerned about Biff's career. "How can he find himself on a farm? Is that a life? A farmland? . . . Not finding yourself at the age of thirty-four is a disgrace! . . . The trouble is he's lazy, goddammit! . . . Biff is a Lazy bum!" (5)

Yet from number of Willy's flashbacks it might seem that his relationship with his older son is idyllic, there is actually considerable dispute between these two characters. The conflict is apparent even to Linda and Happy. But none of them knows the real reason of their disagreement.

BIFF: Why does Dad mock me all the time?

HAPPY: He's not mocking you, he— [Biff interrupts]

BIFF: Everything I say there's a twist of mockery on his face. I can't get near him.

HAPPY: He just wants you to make good, that's all (10)

Happy's reply indicates that all he knows about Willy and Biff's disagreement is that Willy just wants Biff to be successful in his life (Bloom 27). Linda, on the other hand, observes that both share the responsibility for their dispute. She thinks that Willy and Biff are angry with each other because Willy criticizes Biff for being unsettled. She tells Willy: "You shouldn't have criticized him, Willy, especially after he just got off the train. You mustn't lose your temper with him." (5). And she tries to justify Willy's attitude towards Biff by saying:

When you write you're coming, he's all smiles, and talks about the future, and— he's just wonderful. And then the closer you seem to come, the more shaky he gets, and then, by the time you get here, he's arguing, and he seems angry at you. I think it's just that maybe he can't bring himself to—to open up for you. (38)

There are de facto two reasons for their conflict. The first one is caused by Biff's unexpected visit in Boston's hotel room. "The strength of Willy and Biff's disordered relationship is tested and broken when Willy introduces Miss Francis to him at the Boston hotel." (Bloom 84). This moment was very crucial for Biff, even though he has never told anyone about what he saw that day. In his eyes Willy was no longer a respectable and exemplary man. He

became a “phony little fake” (Miller 95). Until this moment, Biff shared the same values as his father. He wanted to build a future and be respected by others. But when he discovers his God-like father with a woman in the hotel room, he runs and attempts to hide because he feels that Willy’s shame is partly his own shame, and the ideal identity of successful and fair man gets lost (Benziman 21). He realizes that to what he lived up to was a “fake” and does not have the same dreams any longer. Very interesting is the fact that in this scene Biff still proves a certain resemblance to his father in terms of being materialistic. When he sees Willy with another woman, he accuses him of giving his mother’s stockings to her. The thing is that “Biff focuses on the material object, but on an emotional level, Biff accuses Willy of stealing from his mother through his marital infidelity.” (Sterling 90).

The second reason for their conflict is the difference in their values. Excluding Biff’s materialistic point of view on his father’s affair, his code is completely different. While Willy believes that financial success is the answer to all problems (Thompson 246), Biff later realizes that finding your true identity is the core of life and is shaped by your own beliefs and no universal method to live your life exists (Ribkoff 2). Nevertheless, he also used to have wrong dreams and was naïve (for example when he thought that someone he once worked for at a menial job will lend him a large sum of money) but his eyes opened up after the Boston-hotel-room scene.

However, Willy’s materialistic attitude is one big problem in the relationship with his son. Willy is sure that because “Ben went into jungle at seventeen and came out rich at twenty-one, Ben can provide him with the answers to his emotional and psychological problems” and Willy takes his advices to heart (Sterling 90). Unfortunately, Biff does no longer share his point of view on their lives.

WILLY: Ben, my boys—can’t we talk? They’d goin to the jaws of hell for me, see, but I—

BEN: William, you’re being first-rate with your boys. Outstanding, manly chaps!

WILLY [*hanging onto his words*]: Oh, Ben, that’s good to hear! Because sometimes I’m afraid that I’m not teaching them the right kind of—Ben, how should I teach them?

BEN: William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!

WILLY: ...was rich! That’s just the spirit I want to imbue them with! To walk into a jungle! I was right! I was right! I was right! (36–37)

Willy exudes he was right but he is missing the point that healthy human relationships are based on honesty rather than material prosperity. And although Biff realizes the false sense of

success that Willy is ingraining into them, he still feels obligated to become someone in the business world for the sake of his father (Isherwood 1). Biff is in fact torn between the desire to live a simple rural life and his need for solid achievement and is also influenced by the knowledge of personal failure.

BIFF: Hap, I've had twenty or thirty different kinds of job since I left home before the war, and it always turns out the same. I just realized it lately. . . . It's why I came home now, I guess, because I realized it. . . . There's nothing more inspiring or – beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt. . . . And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get thee feeling, my God, I'm getting' anywhere! What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I'm thirty-four years old, I oughta be makin' my future. That's when I come running home. And now, I get here, and I don't know what to do with myself. [*After a pause*] I've always made a point of not wasting my life, and everytime I come back here I know that all I've done is to waste my life. (11)

Although the relationships between Biff and his father now seem really tragic, it was not that way all the time. As well as in the past, at the end of the play their attitudes change dramatically. Biff's final break with his father begins after Biff attempts in vain to have a business meeting with Bill Oliver. "When Oliver doesn't even remember him, Biff begins to realize what a sham his life and business dreams have been. Biff's delusions of grandeur are burst, allowing him to honestly and ruthlessly examine his life." (Sterling 92).

After has Biff stolen Oliver's pen he tries to explain his revelation to his father:

I ran down eleven flights with a pen in my hand today. And suddenly I stopped, you hear me? And in the middle of that office building, do you hear this? I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw – the sky. I saw the things that I love in this world. The work and the food and time to sit and smoke. And I looked at the pen and said to myself, what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What am I 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? (105)

At that moment Biff realized that he cannot fulfill his father's failed business dream but he still feels to be obligated to share with him his epiphany.

BIFF: 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'm, that's all. [*BIFF'S fury has spent itself, and he breaks down, sobbing, holding on to WILLY, who dumbly fumbles for BIFF'S face.*]

WILLY: [*astonished*]: What're you doing? What're you doing? [*To LINDA*] Why is he crying?

BIFF [*crying, broken*]: Will you let me go, for Christ's sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?

...

WILLY: Isn't that – isn't that remarkable? Biff – he likes me!

LINDA: He loves you, Willy!

...

WILLY: Oh, Biff! He cried! He cried to me! [*He is choking with his love, and now cries out his promise.*] That boy – that boy is going to be magnificent! (106)

According to Centola, Biff comprehends that his dreams have nothing to do with Willy's own success (4). He gradually seems to break free from the delusions on which he has been raised. He is able to embrace his father and understand who he is and stop living a lie. At Willy's graveside, Biff affirmed aloud his father's greatest mistake: "He never knew who we was" and then added: "I know who I am" (Miller 111). He declares that he had all wrong dreams. Since Biff realizes that his father dies unfulfilled because he has chosen the dreams and values of an amoral capitalistic system, he is able to open his eyes and to start his new life with values, he truly believes in.

As a matter of interest, what Biff might have not known is the reason why Willy committed a suicide. Bloom explains that Willy has been ever fully conscious of his motives but he feels that his sacrifice will purge him of his guilt and make him worthy of Biff's love (32). When he realizes that he never lost Biff's love, Willy decides that he must die to preserve the love between them and to provide Biff with the legacy several thousand dollars to safe his damaged offspring (Bloom 33). Ironically, Willy's sacrifice for Biff denies the one thing Biff has been longing for—his father's blessing to lead a simple life.

Willy is not the only one who made a certain sacrifice. Biff returns to the city, which manifests his willingness to suffer for the sake of his father's happiness and demonstrates the love between these two characters. As Harold Bloom points out, "Biff's offer to stay home, get a job, and support his parents is a painful sacrifice of a dutiful son but it is bizarre sacrifice—and almost doomed not to succeed—because Biff is an adult and has more appropriate task to perform" (43). Thus, as Biff gains insight through the "more appropriate task" of self-scrutiny, he sees his father sink deeper into delusion (Martin 103). The pain of this sight compels Biff into making another sacrifice, one that, according to Fred Ribkoff, suggests a new level of responsibility in Biff's love: "Biff demonstrates that he does in fact love his father, but, at the same time, this love is balanced by the recognition that if there is any chance of saving himself and his father he must leave home for good" (98).

There are more features, besides the willingness to make sacrifice, that Willy and Biff Loman share. To be more precise, there are more traits and values that Willy instilled into Biff. The first similarity between father and son appears in their lyric praise of nature. In the very first scene of the play, Willy recounts “. . . it’s so beautiful up there, Linda, the trees are so thick, and the sun is warm. I opened the windshield and just let the warm air bathe over me” (3). A little further on in the conversation he continues “More and more I think of those days, Linda. This time of year it was lilac and wisteria. And then the peonies would come out, and the daffodils. What fragrance in this room!” (6–7). Biff, in his first conversation, also celebrates the beauty of nature: “This farm I work on, it’s spring there now, see? And they’ve got about fifteen new colts. There’s nothing more inspiring or—beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt” (11). As Biff grows more and more insistent about his desire to be outdoors working with his hands, his father is increasingly more fixated on planting a garden, thus deepening the father-son parallel (Phelps 588). For instance, as Willy dresses for his interview with Howard, he looks out to the back yard which he had earlier condemned as barren and comments quite inappropriately: “Maybe beets would grow out there” (56). Later on, after the disastrous dinner at which Biff makes his first attempt to be honest with his father, Willy asks for the nearest seed store, mumbling: “Oh, I’d better hurry. I’ve got to get some seeds (...) I’ve got to get some seeds, right away. Nothing’s planted. I don’t have a thing in the ground” (96). It is as though he is responding to Biff’s evident distaste for the city by talking about the one occupation he knows will please him, or as if he knew that nature, and specifically gardening, is the “safe place” for him (Sterling 140).

Biff’s second inherited trait from Willy is his immaturity. Willy’s own immaturity is demonstrated in the first scene by his reliance on Linda’s mothering concern as she struggles to feed him and get him to bed. In Act II she makes sure that he has his glasses, his handkerchief and saccharine before he leaves home to meet with Howard. Another action that proves the immaturity of both Willy and Biff involves the act of making fun of his teacher, mimicking his speech and defect, which Willy finds really amusing since he bursts out laughing. Another evidence proving their adolescent behavior is the tendency to lie at every occasion to avoid unpleasant situations or conversations. Further, Miller suggests that Willy is a father who inflates his own ego and accomplishments by lying, and Biff welcomes his dad’s untruthful exaggeration of his own abilities (qtd. in Sterling 125). Thus, there is no surprise that Biff become a practicing liar himself. “The acorn does not fall far from the tree.” Nevertheless, at the end of the play, Biff goes under a great breakthrough and says to Willy: “We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!” (Miller 104).

2.4. Relations between Charley and Bernard

Even when the boys become adults, “Willy is no closer deciphering why Bernard is rewarded as a prominent lawyer, while Biff and Happy struggle to find lucrative or even decent-paying jobs.” (Sterling 91). The reason is that Bernard has never been pushed by his father to do something he does not want to, but still he follows his father’s footsteps and behaves kindly towards people around him (qtd. in Bloom 87). He helps Biff with his studies and like his father, never thanked, continues in doing these things. Charley has never directed him towards a particular career, yet Bernard is a successful lawyer. When Willy found out that Bernard will be arguing a case before the Supreme Court, he asked Charley: “And you never told him what to do, did you? You never any interest in him” (74). Charley said that he never took any interest in anything (74).

Arthur Miller explains that Charley has never leaned on his son and never forced him to do what the son might not have chosen to do. “He was not living through his sons as much as Willy was living through his children. That’s what that means, really. ” (1995)

In other words, in comparison to Willy, Charley is naturally interested in Bernard, but he is still willing to let Bernard live his own life rather than pushing him to become a fruitful capitalist.

As Galia Benziman suggests in his work, values such as human rights, equality and democracy may still be preserved in a such society as is the capitalist one is. Though, the presence of individuals like Charley and later Bernard is necessary (24). In *Death of a Salesman* they function as a strong contrast for Willy and his sons. They are unselfish, generous, responsible and manifest professional and financial achievements Loman’s last for.

3. AMERICAN DRAMA

In the 20th century, more plays than just *Death of a Salesman* were published concerning the same historical and cultural events which contributed to changes in American society and particularly in American families. Moreover, these plays have something more in common with *Death of a Salesman*—they, in a certain way, touch the same topics.

Firstly, a play by Lorraine Hansberry *A Raisin in the Sun* is to be compared with Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. The mutual theme of both these dramas is the economic effect on individuals; why one manages to be successful and rich and others struggle to live an ordinary life and are poor. Set around the same time, both plays depict the immoral capitalist system and its influence on personal lives. The two protagonists—Willy Loman and Walter Lee—struggle for a social recognition, economic prosperity and peaceful family life. However, with their effort to achieve these goals, they suffer from constant dissatisfaction and false dreams connected to the American economic system. On the other hand, Hansberry and Miller show the inability of these two characters to ascribe their incompetence to themselves rather than to society and economic arrangement. These plays not only more or less describe the capitalist system as evil, but they also study the family relations and struggles. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter's need for economic wealth clearly surpasses his family members. Several times in the play, Mama criticizes Walter's frustration with his life and Ruth does the same when she denounces his desire for money, however, she secretly negotiates with Mama to persuade her to grant Walter's attempt to start a liquor store, which indicates her craving for material comforts as well. Even mama, who proclaims to be happy the most, expresses her greed for buying a new house. In both plays, economy and family finances are the crucial topics, which affect the human morality and actions degrading family values.

Another play, which shares a number of similarities, is *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. To start with, both plays depict the inability to live in the present world. In *Death of a Salesman* it is Willy, who desperately recalls his fruitful years as a businessman which, in fact, was not that prosperous realizing his present financial situation and the number of people who attended his funeral. Further, he mentions early successes of his son Biff and is incapable of seeing the current situation. As well as Willy, Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* is also caught in the trap of past and imagination. She talks about her callers, who were amazed by her wit and beauty, yet she ends up being abandoned by her husband who gave preference to his job than to his family. What is more, when Jim comes to Amanda's house for dinner, she wears her old dress and talks to him in a way she did talk to her callers several years ago.

Another theme these two renowned plays explore is the belief in offspring's perfection. In *Death of a Salesman* Willy believes in Biff's God-like abilities and is blind to facts opposing his omnipotence. He is blind to his stealing tendencies and his lack of interest in school, which he believes is not important for Biff because he has been already accepted to three universities. Similar to this behavioral pattern is Amanda's attitude towards her daughter Laura. In *The Glass Menagerie*, there are several references to Laura as being crippled. Even Laura's brother Tom uses this term when talking about Laura with their mother. Yet, Amanda refuses to admit that her daughter actually has some kind of handicap. She thinks so much of her children as ideal that she does not see the real flaws they have. Moreover, both Willy and Amanda think they know what is best for their children—for Biff it is a great job earning him enough money, for Laura it is integration into society. Nevertheless, neither Biff, neither Laura, share the same values and images of happy life and as a matter of fact, they try to escape the reality they are forced to live in. Biff feels happy out in nature taking care of new colts, and Laura feels safe hidden with her collection of glass animals. And she is not the only one who tries to escape in this play; it is also her brother Tom who plans to leave his family and live his life somewhere else. Another play by Williams Tennessee which has something in common with *Death of a Salesman* is *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. What connects these two plays together is, before anything else, the desire for American Dream. The character of Big Daddy in Tennessee's work is the one, who lasted for financial success (so did Willy) and he worked his way up from being poor to owing a large sum of money, for which he now lives. Like Willy, Big Daddy also worships his older son Brick. This is not the only thing that both Brick and Biff Loman experience throughout the play. These two young men lost their desires to make up their lives thriving after a certain event—Biff lost his interest in math when he discovered his father with a mistress and Brick turned to drinking when he lost his close friend, or possible lover, Skipper. Last but not least, both plays are linked by communication deficiency and dishonesty among family members.

The last play by the same author, which has a number of similarities with *Death of a Salesman* is *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Besides *A Streetcar Named Desire* another drama deals with the same topic—it is Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*. Each of these three plays protagonists works as a salesman. In these dramas, Willy, Stanley and Hickey are common men who sell really ordinary things (in Willy's case things such as ordinary that they are not mentioned at all). "And the vagueness of their products underlines the allegorical nature of their selling; each is an American everyman, in an America where what is produced becomes ever less tangible, ever more removed from reality." (Cardullo, *Death of a Salesman*

29). They, in fact, sell illusions or even themselves. However, compared to Willy and Hickey, Stanley is more animalistic salesman and does believe in the theory that being well-liked is the key to succeed. On the other hand, he is not so thriving in comparison to Hickey, who holds this belief, but is still able to operate within the system and sell his goods. The biggest failure of these three men is, albeit kind and not as violent as Stanley, Willy Loman.

The final piece of art to be compared with Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is a play by August Wilson *Fences*. Not only that both protagonists are fathers of two sons, whom they try to secure well in their lives, they both are also unhappy with their lives and sticking to the materialistic world. Both Willy and Troy face problems in their careers and perhaps compensate these deficiencies by cheating on their loving wives. Having a carrying partner is another feature Willy and Troy have in common. Both Linda and Rose are worried about their hard-working husbands, but at the same time they try to understand the mysterious relations between their husbands and sons, whom they defend against their father—Willy and Troy. What Linda and Rose do not know is that their sons are deeply affected by their fathers' behavior towards women. What is more, Willy's son Biff and Troy's son Cory are outstanding football players but they both quit this career for various reasons. For Cory it is his father, who does not allow him to do sports, he wishes him to follow his path and to see the American Dream as he sees it. This behavior is applicable also for Willy who wants Biff to be "someone" but his opinion on happy live differs from the one Biff's appropriates.

CONCLUSION

Although Arthur Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman* in 1948, in a society with significant cultural differences compared to the one in which we live now, his play still has some resonance with today's people who embark on their journey in pursuit of their American Dreams. *Death of a Salesman*, one of the most popular plays in the entire history of the United States, reveals relationships in an average family, which are influenced by American economy and by the desire of individuals to succeed. The play shows how can be these fragile relations destroyed owing to differences in values the family members hold. However, to analyze the relationships in Loman's family, it is necessary to first examine the history of American culture and economy, to be able to see the connections between the play and demands, which the American society created at that time.

The beginning of this thesis contained a description of the economic prosperity brought about by the First World War, which continued up to the end of the prosperous years of the 1920s. Then the causes which led to the Great Depression of the 1930s were mentioned, its impact on American families and then F. D. Roosevelt's New Deal, which contributed to the reconstruction of the US economy. The political acts of Roosevelt and his cabinet were described in more detail, as they had a great influence on the future development of the country. As the American economy begun to slowly heal its wounds received in the 1930s, another tremendous shock in form of the World War II came. The Second World War was a great disaster for the population but on the other hand, it completely took the United States out of the crisis. The thesis also mentioned how the war helped the US economy and how the financial prosperity influenced American families and its perception of a happy life. The overall wealth of American citizens contributed to the desire for material comforts and the concept of the American Dream started to be shaped and seen as an ultimate lifetime goal. Further, the impact which all the above mentioned events had on American families, was described. The changes, which average American families went through, were mentioned as well as the commonly held believes and aspirations of parents and children. This chapter then examined the links between the play and the American culture and economy. Especially Willy Loman was discussed in the connection with the capitalist system and as a person, who is unable to "survive" in such a competitive society.

The following chapter analyzed the relationships between fathers and sons in Loman's family. The prime focus was put on the relations between Willy and his father, Willy and his younger son Happy and Willy and his older son Biff. In this analysis, there were mentioned the solely interpersonal issues, but mainly the conflicts caused by the high influence of capitalist and consumerist society. This section described Willy as a lost salesman whose dream is to be a fruitful salesman and respected father. Nevertheless, his inability to succeed and pride to work with his hands drives him mad. What is more, his lack of success in business sphere is not the only failure in Willy's life. His career as a father is also tragic, as he believes the only true dream is that of a successful man, who earns large sums of money. Not respecting both manual work and his younger son Happy, Loman's family is about to collapse. The end of this chapter dealt with the exact opposite to Willy and his attitude towards his sons—it dealt with Charley and Bernard, whose personal lives and careers flourish.

To explore the American drama scene even more, the very last chapter in this thesis concerned another plays by famous American playwrights, who wrote their works around the same years as Arthur Miller wrote his *Death of a Salesman*. It commented on the similarities among Miller's play and a few plays by Tennessee Williams, Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson or Eugene O'Neill. All these plays are as much interesting as *Death of a Salesman* is, and therefore could be further analyzed and examined.

"*Death of a Salesman* is a love story involving capitalism." (Sterling 93). And this thesis hopefully proves this quotation is truthful. Willy Loman really tries to be both loving father and a great salesman. However, his struggle seems to be desperate with no desired results.

RESUMÉ

Smrt obchodního cestujícího je jedním z nejznámějších dramát amerického spisovatele Arthura Millera a řadí se také mezi nejznámější americké hry vůbec. Stěžejním tématem je honba za americkým snem a komplikované mezigenerační vztahy hlavních postav, které jsou v této bakalářské práci analyzovány. Jak již bylo zmíněno, jednou z otázek, kterou se Arthur Miller v této hře zabývá, je touha po dosažení finančních a materiálních úspěchů, která je pro Willyho Lomana ztělesněním právě onoho bájného amerického snu. Před samotnou analýzou vztahů mezi otcem a synem je třeba poskytnout stručný přehled kulturně-historického pozadí, které je nezbytné pro pochopení myšlení Willyho Lomana a pro ucelení představy o tehdejší americké společnosti.

Po skončení první světové války úroveň americké ekonomiky značně vzrostla. K tomu přispělo rozšíření výroby produktů, které byly ve válečných časech nezbytné. Dalším důležitým faktorem bylo zaměstnání žen a Afro-Američanů v továrnách, ve kterých dříve pracovali muži, kteří byli nyní ve válce. Po jejím skončení se muži do továren sice vrátili, ale Amerika se uchýlila k izolacionismu a přestala na čas přijímat imigranty, což poskytlo více pracovních příležitostí pro americké občany. Zatímco si obyvatelé měst a jejich periferií užívali poválečné prosperity, vybavovali své domovy moderními zařízeními, lidé na venkově vnímali konec války zcela jinak. Farmáři během války vyprodukovali rekordní množství surovin, které po válce neměly odbyt. Tyto ohromné nadbytky potravin způsobily razantní pokles cen, který vedl k chudobě zemědělců, kteří v té době tvořili zhruba padesát procent amerických občanů. Tito farmáři, kteří nebyli schopni prodat své zboží, přestali kupovat modernější stroje, což vedlo k uzavření mnoha továren a tím započala masová nezaměstnanost. Ve stejné chvíli se lidé v městských částech pokoušeli co nejrychleji zbohatnout a spolu s tím propukla mánie kupování akcií na burze. Ačkoliv tento fenomén pomohl některým občanům zbohatnout, neměl dlouhého trvání. V úterý 29. října, 1929 přišel krach americké burzy, který spolu s nezaměstnaností lidí z venkova odstartoval velkou ekonomickou krizi 30. let.

Tato krize otřásla celými Spojenými státy a zhoršovala se až do roku 1933, kdy byl Franklin Delano Roosevelt zvolen prezidentem a vyhlásil plán nového údělu, tzv. New Deal. V prvních sto dnech existence nového údělu F. D. Roosevelt zavedl několik opatření, která pomohla postavit americkou ekonomiku zpět na nohy. I když je Rooseveltův New Deal považován za

jeden z nejdůležitějších a nejúčinnějších dokumentů americké historie, byla to paradoxně další světová válka, která pomohla ke kompletnímu zotavení americké ekonomiky. Mnoho továren se znovu otevřelo, aby poskytlo výrobky potřebné k účasti ve válce, a tímto poskytlo pracovní místa velkému procentu obyvatelstva. Kromě toho mladí muži odešli do boje a jejich místa se uvolnila nezaměstnaným. To vše posílilo americký trh, který i po válce zůstal stabilním a zajistil Americe první místo v žebříčku mocných zemí.

Ačkoliv se produkce amerických továren zaměřovala na položky sloužící k válečným účelům, vše se brzy změnilo a díky modernizaci výroby během války se továrny rychle přeorientovaly na jiného konečného spotřebitele – obyčejného amerického občana. Vyrábět se začalo všemožné moderní vybavení, které si řadový občan mohl v této chvíli i dovolit. Všeobecný blahobyt, baby-boom, pestré nabídky na trhu a možnost pořizovat zboží na splátky přispěly ke vzniku *konzumerismu*, který je charakteristický tím, že nabádá člověka ke koupi věcí s příslibem lepšího života a společenské prosperity. Tento nový pohled na moderní společnost zapříčinil i to, že lidé začali více vnímat své okolí a více se zaobírali názory jiných. Kromě konzumerismu se Amerikou šířila i nová teorie, která stavěla pořizování nových věcí na vrchol lidských hodnot a tím si vysloužila název *materialismus*. Již od počátku vzniku Spojených států amerických se lidé snažili pochopit svůj úděl v tomto novém světě. Horoucně toužili poznat podstatu svého života a i života svých potomků, což dále vedlo k vytvoření národního étosu – amerického snu. Ačkoliv se definice tohoto snu napříč desetiletími měnily, dnes je za splnění amerického snu považována především úspěšná kariéra umožňující spokojený rodinný život bez finanční nouze. Důležité je, že tuto definici uznává a bezmezně následuje hlavní hrdina Smrti obchodního cestujícího – Willy Loman.

Podstatné je si uvědomit, jak se tyto historické a kulturní události promítly právě v Millerově díle, zejména v rodině Willyho Lomana. I když byla většina amerických občanů spokojena se svými životy, s prosperující ekonomikou a poválečným mírem (vyjímaje studenou válku s Ruskem), někteří jedinci nebyli schopni udržet krok s ostatními a nevybudovali si své místo v kapitalistickém světě. Ideálním příkladem je právě Willy Loman, který nese břemeno svého snu, kterým je snaha být úspěšným obchodním cestujícím, respektovaným mužem a otcem. Bohužel jeho snaha uspět není dostačující a jeho život je jeden velký nezdar. Mnozí literární kritici jsou zastánci toho názoru, že Arthur Miller v této hře kritizuje kapitalistický systém, ale z kontextu hry se dá snadno usoudit, že tomu tak není. Willy je sice neúspěšný obchodník, avšak jeho soused Charley se pohybuje v kapitalistické společnosti bez jakýchkoliv problémů. Stejně je na tom i jeho syn Bernard, legendární Dave Singleman nebo Willyho bratr Ben,

kterému je ve hře připisováno značné finanční zázemí. Tudíž není obtížné vyvodit závěr, že Arthur Miller spíše než kapitalismus odsuzuje Willyho naivní víru v to, že být oblíbený je tím pravým klíčem k úspěchu. Kromě Willyho neschopnosti prosadit se ve světě, Miller také zmiňuje změnu vztahů na pracovišti. Zatímco za Willyho mládí byla každá pracovní síla respektována, s příchodem moderního světa se tento model hroutí. Howard Wagner se při rozhovoru se zoufalým Willym více soustředí na svůj nový přístroj než na živého člověka sedícího ve stejné místnosti. Howard Willyho sice bere jako pracovní sílu, ale už ne jako někoho, kdo je ve společnosti nenahraditelný a ke komu má jakoukoliv zodpovědnost. Dalším pojítkem mezi hrou jako takovou a uvedeným historickým pozadím je kritika nekvalitních domácích spotřebičů, která je několikrát vyřčena z Willyho a Lindin úst. Lomanovi jsou totiž obětmi lživých reklam, které propagují výrobky nízké kvality, jež slouží pouze k zisku dané společnosti, ale ne k dlouhému používání. Jak už bylo zmíněno, s příchodem materialismu, konzumerismu a vírou v americký sen se lidé začali více obávat o dojem, který dělají na ostatní a tím částečně ztratili svou jedinečnost a identitu. Přesně tak je na tom i Willy Loman, který je ztracen v kapitalistickém světě, věří v nepravé ideje, podvádí svou ženu, nerozumí svým synům a navíc se pokouší o sebevraždu.

Znát postavu Willy Lomana je stěžejní pro kompletní analýzu jeho vztahu se syny Biffem a Happyem a také jeho vztahu s otcem. Kromě výše zmíněného je důležité si uvědomit, že Willy je 63letý muž, který neváhá zalhat při jakékoliv příležitosti, a který má pravděpodobně zkreslené vzpomínky na minulost, a i vnímání přítomnosti mu dělá značný problém, když neváhá během chvíle říct dva naprosto protikladné názory. Willyho dalším nedostatkem je jeho tendence opovrhovat manuální prací, která je podle něj podřadná, ale pro jeho postavu by byla nejspíš řešením všech problémů, jelikož jeho tesařské schopnosti jsou několikrát v průběhu hry opěvovány. Co pravděpodobně ovlivnilo Willyho život natolik, že má tyto nedokonalosti, je nejspíš absence otce v jeho dětství, která ještě více rozpoltila Willyho osobnost a donutila ho vzhlízet ke svému staršímu bratru Benovi, který byl dravým kapitalistou. Ben je jeho vzorem v podstatě až do Willyho smrti, i když ve svém životě má i jiné muže, kterými se může nechat inspirovat. Tím je zejména jeho soused Charley, který je také úspěšný, ale na rozdíl od Bena ke své kariéře přišel pravděpodobně méně agresivní cestou a hlavně jeví o Willyho opravdový zájem – pomáhá mu bez jakéhokoliv očekávání náhrad.

Willyho názor na šťastný život se značně liší od názorů jeho synů, zejména pak Biffa. A i když je interakce těchto dvou postav podmíněna i jinými událostmi (např. scénou v hotelovém

pokoji v Bostonu, kde Biff odhalí Willyho nevěru), jedním z hlavních důvodů pro jejich neharmonický vztah jsou právě rozdílné hodnoty a pohledy na svět. Biff na rozdíl od Willyho chápe, že jediná práce, která ho může udělat spokojeným je práce venku, na svěžím vzduchu, práce rukama, kterou Willy tolik odsuzuje. A ačkoliv Biff takto prozře až po zmiňovaném konfliktu v Bostonu (do té doby slepě následuje Willyho nereálné sny, krade, je hrubý k děvčatům a lže), není možné, aby udělal šťastným sebe i svého otce, který věří v jeho zářnou budoucnost, jelikož na střední škole byl Biff úspěšným sportovcem a jedním z nejoblíbenějších chlapců. Přes všechny spory a neshody, kterými si Willy a Biff prošli, konec hry odhaluje, že jejich láska jednoho k druhému je opravdu bezedná a že oba dva jsou schopni přinést nemalé oběti, aby tento vztah zachránili.

Na rozdíl od Biffa, který později pochopí podstatu svého života, mladší syn Happy věří otcovým vizím až do jeho smrti. A i když mu Willyho pozornost stále uniká, Happy ho považuje za svůj absolutní vzor a podle toho se také v průběhu hry chová – lže, přibarvuje si svá vyprávění, ženy vnímá jako méněcenné a marně honí americký sen, který je stále v nedohlednu.

Silným kontrastem k Willyho vztahu s Biffem a Happyem je jejich soused Charley se synem Bernardem. Ten byl totiž vychován zcela jinak než mladí Lomanovi a už si ve svém životě našel tu správnou cestu. Má před sebou úspěšnou kariéru, je skromný a jeho vztah s otcem také není tak bouřlivý jako vztahy jeho sousedů. Principem Charleyho výchovy bylo totiž ponechání prostoru pro to, aby si Bernard sám uvědomil, co chce v životě dělat a za tím si šel.

Smrt obchodního cestujícího není jediným americkým dramatem, které řeší vztahy mezi rodiči a dětmi. Dalším takovým dílem, které je zmíněno v této bakalářské práci, je Williamsova hra Skleněný zvěřinec, ve které má matka Amanda zkreslené představy o své dceři, stejně jako má Willy Loman o Biffovi. Dále jsou se Smrtí obchodního cestujícího porovnávána díla jako například Kočka na rozpálené plechové střeše, Tramvaj do stanice Touha a další významná dramata amerických spisovatelů, která se dotýkají stejných témat jako Arthur Miller ve své hře.

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