***UNIT II***

***DEATH OF A SALESMAN- ARTHUR MILLER***

Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* addresses loss of identity and a man's inability to accept change within himself and society. The play is a montage of memories, dreams, confrontations, and arguments, all of which make up the last 24 hours of Willy Loman's life. The play concludes with Willy's suicide and subsequent funeral.

Miller uses the Loman family — Willy, Linda, Biff, and Happy — to construct a self-perpetuating cycle of denial, contradiction, and order versus disorder. Willy had an affair over 15 years earlier than the real time within the play, and Miller focuses on the affair and its aftermath to reveal how individuals can be defined by a single event and their subsequent attempts to disguise or eradicate the event. For example, prior to discovering the affair, Willy's son Biff adored Willy, believed all Willy's stories, and even subscribed to Willy's philosophy that anything is possible as long as a person is "well-liked." The realization that Willy is unfaithful to Linda forces Biff to reevaluate Willy and Willy's perception of the world. Biff realizes that Willy has created a false image of himself for his family, society, and even for himself.

Willy is not an invincible father or a loyal husband or a fantastically successful salesman like he wants everyone to believe. He is self-centered. He fails to appreciate his wife. And he cannot acknowledge the fact that he is only marginally successful. Hence, Willy fantasizes about lost opportunities for wealth, fame, and notoriety. Even so, it would be incorrect to state that Miller solely criticizes Willy. Instead, Miller demonstrates how one individual can create a self-perpetuating cycle that expands to include other individuals. This is certainly the case within the Loman family. Until the end of the play, Willy effectively blocks the affair out of his memory and commits himself to a life of denial. He cannot remember what happened, so naturally he does not understand why his relationship with Biff has changed. Willy wants Biff's affection and adoration as before, but instead the two constantly argue. Willy vacillates, sometimes criticizing Biff's laziness and ineptitude, other times praising his physical abilities and ambition.

Linda and Happy are also drawn into the cycle of denial. Linda is aware of Willy's habit of reconstructing reality; however, she also recognizes that Willy may not be able to accept reality, as shown through his numerous suicide attempts prior to the beginning of the play. As a result, Linda chooses to protect Willy's illusions by treating them as truth, even if she must ignore reality or alienate her children in doing so. Happy is also a product of Willy's philosophy. Like Willy, he manipulates the truth to create a more favorable reality for himself. For example, when Happy tells everyone that he is the assistant buyer, even though he is only the assistant to the assistant, he proves that he has incorporated Willy's practice of editing facts.

Miller based Willy's character on his uncles, Manny Newman and Lee Balsam, who were salesmen. Miller saw his uncles as independent explorers, charting new territories across America. It is noteworthy that Miller does not disclose what type of salesman Willy is. Rather than drawing the audience's attention to "what" Willy sells, Miller chooses to focus on the fact that Willy is a "salesman." As a result, Miller expands the import of Willy's situation. Willy is an explorer — conqueror of the New England territory — and a dreamer, and this allows the audience to connect with him because everyone has aspirations, dreams, and goals.

Willy's despair results from his failure to achieve his American dream of success. At one point, Willy was a moderately successful salesman opening new territory in New England, and Biff and Happy viewed him as a model father. Once Biff discovers the affair, however, he loses respect for Willy as well as his own motivation to succeed. As Willy grows older, making sales is more difficult for him, so he attempts to draw on past success by reliving old memories. Willy loses the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, and this behavior alienates him from others, thereby diminishing his ability to survive in the present. As the play progresses, Willy's life becomes more disordered, and he is forced to withdraw almost completely to the past, where order exists because he can reconstruct events or relive old memories.

The play continues to affect audiences because it allows them to hold a mirror up to themselves. Willy's self-deprecation, sense of failure, and overwhelming regret are emotions that an audience can relate to because everyone has experienced them at one time or another. Although most do not commit suicide in the face of adversity, people connect with Willy because he is a man driven to extreme action. An audience may react with sympathy toward Willy because he believes he is left with no other alternative but to commit suicide. On the other hand, an audience may react with disgust and anger toward Willy, believing he has deserted his family and taken the easy way out.

Either way, individuals continue to react to *Death of a Salesman* because Willy's situation is not unique: He made a mistake — one that irrevocably changed his relationship with the people he loves most — and when all of his attempts to eradicate his mistake fail, he makes one grand attempt to correct the mistake. Willy vehemently denies Biff's claim that they are both common, ordinary people, but ironically, it is the universality of the play that makes it so enduring. Biff's statement, "I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you" is true after all.