

CONFLICTING WORLDS: THE POSSIBLE SUB-WORLDS OF THE LOMAN FAMILY IN *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

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Abstract: *Possible worlds are manifested at various propositional attitudes of the dramatic agents who speak through certain states of affairs. The verbal indicators pertaining to the varying constructed hypothetical worlds of the characters can be examined in any dramatic work of art. This paper deals with conflicting sub-worlds of the members of the Loman Family in Arthur Miller's Death of A Salesman. The play is considered to be a challenge between fantasy world and real world, for it presents the characters' ambition to achieve the so-called American Dream in reality and the fantasy world that initially captures them and eventually disappoints their expectations. This paper, therefore, focuses, firstly, on Willy Loman who seeks to be a 'well-liked', successful salesman and his sub-worlds set upon his ideals, secondly Linda Loman, who finds herself living in and supporting the fantasy world that her husband, Willy, creates; thirdly, Happy Loman, who obeys the rules of the fantasy world his father creates although he knows things are different in reality, and lastly Biff Loman, the only member of the Loman Family who rejects living in that fantasy world and awakens the other family members with the expense of his father's death.*

Keywords: *Death of a Salesman, Possible Worlds, Dramatic Logic, Arthur Miller, Well-Liked*

Introduction

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* was often analysed, under many conceptual frameworks, such as modern tragedy theory (A. Miller's own

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“Tragedy and the Common Man”¹, or Raymond Williams’ *Modern Tragedy*²) which place the common man’s struggle to maintain personal dignity and identity as a social tragedy.

American Dream critique, combined with Marxist socio-economic analysis³, or psychoanalytic interpretations, combined with narratology or memory structure analysis⁴ were other fruitful approaches to Miller’s work. The framework within which we chose to analyze the play is based on M.L. Ryan’s narratology and possible worlds theory. Ryan’s view that fictional worlds are mentally constructed environments with structured accessibility relations applies both to drama and fiction, and is complemented by philosopher David Lewis’ doctrine of modal realism, which asserts that all possible worlds are as real as the actual world.⁵

The theatrical frame constitutes a literary context that remains inherently vulnerable to projections and interpretive assertions by both characters and spectators, insofar as dramatic worlds, as fictional constructs, are structurally incomplete and thus open to multiple determinations. Moreover, a model reader or theatrical audience necessarily “updates the codes and sub-codes of the fictional text according to the typology of its generic involvement in the text.”⁶

The types of these worlds, on the other hand, are also subdivided into categories to suggest a clear understanding of the various aspects of possible worlds. These are worlds of wishes, knowledge, fantasy, obligation and intention created by the on-stage characters in alternative possible worlds in actual textual world⁷. The dramatic attribute of incompleteness creates conflicting sub-worlds in drama since knowledge, wishes, beliefs, fantasies and commands possibly change for each and any character, and spectator’s own conventions in the actual world. While the predictions and projections made by the spectator are called “propositions,” those of the dramatic

¹ Miller says: “... if it is true to say that in essence the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality, and if this struggle must be total and without reservation, then it automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity. The possibility of victory must be there in tragedy.”, in “Tragedy and the Common Man”, in Robert A. Martin, ed., *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*, New York, Viking Press, 1978, p. 7.

² R. Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1966, pp. 87-106

³ See Christopher Bigsby’s *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005

⁴ See Brenda Murphy, *Miller: Death of a Salesman - Plays in Production*, Cambridge University Press, 1995

⁵ D. K. Lewis, *Counterfactuals*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1973.

⁶ C. Nicolaescu, I. Waniek, “The Contemporary Literary Cultures beyond the Readable Text”, in *Cogito Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, Vol. XIV, No. 4, 2024 (204-213), p. 206

⁷ M.-L. Ryan, “Possible Worlds and Accessibility Relations: A Semantic Typology of Fiction.” *Poetics Today* 12, no. 3 (1991): 553–576, p. 554.

persona are named as “propositional attitudes” for they are rather performed on the stage⁸. These “world-creating” “propositional attitudes” are termed as epistemic world (speaker’s knowledge), doxastic world (the world of his/her beliefs), boulomaic worlds (hopes, wishes or fears), oneiric worlds (the worlds of his/her dreams and fantasies), deontic worlds (permission/obligation)⁹. The utterances of the characters, their states of affairs in other words, create possible sub-worlds in which things could have been different. The various ways that the characters see things are what bring the very dramatic worlds into being since “the drama is structured on the conflict between such sub-worlds”¹⁰.

Possible world theory analysis provides a prism through which to view Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman's* examination of different futures and the conflict between Willy Loman's ambitions and his harsh reality. Willy's view of the universe can be explained by the possible world theory, which postulates the existence of several distinct realities at the same time. Willy alternates between his romanticized vision of success and the somber reality of his existing circumstances throughout the play, envisioning a life of luxury and prestige that stands in stark contrast to his actual circumstances. His incessant daydreams and flashbacks show how he creates alternate realities in which he is the prosperous, well-liked man he aspires to be. Nevertheless, these conceptualized realms function to obscure his comprehension of the present, resulting in choices that progressively estrange him from both his familial connections and the objective reality.

The theoretical framework illuminates the significant psychological discord present in the play, wherein Willy's divergent interpretations of achievement and defeat become indistinct, highlighting his internal conflict and the tragedy encapsulated in his unaccomplished aspirations. Willy Loman frequently engages in introspection regarding the potential divergences in his life trajectory, pondering alternative decisions and their consequent ramifications: “I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Berenice Loman!”¹¹

In addition, Willy maintains an idealistic view of money and success, constructing a different reality in which he is not a failure. “The man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead.”¹² Despite the fact that he falls short

⁸ B. Russell, "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism." *The Monist* 29, no. 1 (1919): 32–63, p. 47

⁹ K. Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London: Taylor & Francis, 1980, p. 70

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.104

¹¹ All quotes from the play are from the edition: Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*. New York: Viking Press, 1949, p.98

¹² Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*. New York: Viking Press, 1949, p. 21

these expectations in real life, Willy here imagines a universe in which his charm and personality are sufficient to propel him to success.

Willy's son Biff finds himself torn between his own identity and the expectation of achievement. Though they are far different from Willy's lofty vision for him, he does have dreams. "I am not a leader of men, Willy, and I don't want to be a leader of men! I don't want a million dollars!"¹³. Here, Biff rejects the dream world Willy has attempted to force upon him and acknowledges a potential future in which he is not pursuing his father's idea of success. He understands that he will not achieve the success his father envisions for him. A "potential world" of the past, where Willy could have lived a different life and made wiser decisions, is where he frequently withdraws. "You know, Biff, if I had just been there, I'd've been in with the right crowd. You know? If I had been able to talk to Howard, or had a better deal, I could've—" (Act 2) Willy imagines that if he had made different choices, his destiny might have been different. This illustrates his "possible worlds" theory, in which he imagines a new reality in which he was successful or faced other challenges.

Clash of Worlds: Willy's Oneiric, Boulomaic and Doxastic Worlds

The whole series of action in *Death of A Salesman* develops around Willy's last two days before his death. He is the protagonist of the play who manipulates the truths and is at the same time stuck between his affairs of past and present. Willy keeps talking to himself and at the end he doesn't know which world he lives in, the actual one or the imaginary one. As the core of the idea of the possible worlds is the other ways that things could have been, Willy, when things go bad, takes a journey back to his memories in order to change the past and make his wishes come true. The scene in Act I, where Willy creates one of his sub-worlds, is of great importance in that both the actual world with Linda and the possible world with The Woman (Willy's mistress) are staged at the same time. This is depicted as:

THE WOMAN (slaps him gently and laughs): You just kill me, Willy. (He suddenly grabs her and kisses her roughly.) You kill me. And thanks for the stockings. I love a lot of stockings. Well, good night.

(The Woman bursts out laughing, and Linda's laughter blends in. The Woman disappears into the dark. Now the area at the kitchen table brightens. Linda is sitting where she was at the kitchen table, but now is mending a pair of her silk stockings.)

LINDA: You are, Willy. The handsomest man. You've got no reason to feel that...

¹³ *ibid*, p. 98

WILLY (coming out of The Woman's dimming area and going over to Linda): I'll make it all up to you, Linda, I'll...

LINDA: There's nothing to make up, dear. You're doing fine, better than...

WILLY (noticing her mending): What's that?

LINDA: Just mending my stockings. They're so expensive...

WILLY (angrily, taking them from her): I won't have you mending stockings in this house! Now throw them out! (Linda puts the stockings in her pocket.) (Act 2, scene 1)

The above excerpt from the play indicates the dual world in which Willy lives after realising that he might not, indeed, have achieved his ambition to be 'well-liked'. While Willy argues with his wife, Linda, about his competence for preparing a future for the Loman Family, Willy's years ago mistress (The Woman) shows up on the other corner of the stage and Willy heads towards the visionary woman. Although he talks to Linda, all of a sudden, the audience finds Willy in conversation with the mysterious woman on the same stage. Willy struggles but manages to respond to both Linda and the Woman simultaneously. The conversation with Linda, surely, is the actual world of the play, whereas the visionary Willy has is his 'oneiric world' in which he fantasizes with his mistress and this is a world of his dreams. It is evident that the actual world and Willy's oneiric world are juxtaposed in his mind, yet, he is happier in the oneiric one. Such coexistence of both worlds is also apparent when Linda's and the Woman's laughs blend. Nevertheless, the laugh is not the only common symbol in Willy's dual world. The luxury stockings Willy bought for the Woman stands for a deeper meaning to which one can attribute the existence of another sub-world. However, this time, the world creation is not staged but it is rather proposed through Willy's attitudes.

To articulate, Willy seems to be content with his oneiric world in which he has the Woman, whereas he pursues a depressed and troubled life in the actual world in which he is with Linda. Although Willy comments on the mistress's stockings to suit well on her, he yells at Linda when he notices that she tries to repair them. Apparently, Willy, either wishes that he was married with the Woman instead of Linda, or he wishes he was as rich and perfect partner as in his dream world. In the first occasion, the Woman is a complete opposite portrayal of Linda. That is, she is seductive, well clothed and pleased with her affair with Willy. In the second occasion, Willy feels guilty for giving the Woman luxury stockings as a gift, while he finds out that Linda repairs the worn stockings. In both occasions, it is probable to assert that Willy creates another possible sub-world in which he hopes or wishes that things could have been different. In this particular instance,

Willy designs a boulomaic world of hopes and wishes. Willy's self-created boulomaic world and the actual dramatic world are in conflict with one another. Indeed, as stated before, the dramatic structure in *Death of A Salesman* is grounded on Willy's conflicting worlds, which eventually include the sub-worlds of the other family members.

The main concern in Willy's actual world is the achievement of the American Dream fed by the idea of being 'well-liked'. We see in most of the scenes, in which Willy tries to describe other characters, that his first comment is if he/she is well-liked. Thus, all the other possible sub-worlds are obviously designed on this source of being well-liked. What is more, he mostly tries to motivate his sons with the importance of this source. Willy illustrates the opportunities of being well liked by saying:

WILLY: You and Hap and I, and I'll show you all the towns. America is full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people. And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring you fellas up, there'll be open sesame for all of us, 'cause one thing, boys: I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own. This summer, heh? (Act 2, scene 1)¹⁴

When analysed thoroughly, the creation of Willy's boulomaic world is not a mere result of his hopes or wishes. Willy has the fear of not being well-liked as well, which he thinks is the only cause of a possible failure. Uncle Ben is another character from Willy's fantasies and memories that intervenes with Willy's actual world. In the scene where Willy gambles with Charley, Uncle Ben suddenly appears on the stage and Willy begins asking questions about how he has been rich and whether he has been well-liked. However, Uncle Ben completely ignores the state of being well-liked and puts the "he was rich by God". If looked closely, one can easily allege that Willy's 'doxastic world', in which he believes being well-liked brings success and wealth, is in a firm conflict with the actual world in which Uncle Ben becomes rich without even caring about being well-liked.

There has been a common understanding among critics that "what we appear to be presented with is a scene that occurs only in Willy's mind, The Woman exists at a different physical location on the stage where Willy moves into with apparent ease, this, therefore, creates the effect of the scene with The Woman being a projection of Willy's imagination or inner life"¹⁵. Yet, contrary to common belief, Willy does not solely have recurring memories, but in fact, he lives in these sub-worlds, and not only does he

¹⁴ A. Miller, *Death of a Salesman*. New York: Viking Press, 1949.

¹⁵ D. McIntyre, *Point of View in Plays: A Cognitive Stylistic Approach to Viewpoint in Drama and Other Text-Types*. John Benjamin's Publishing Company, 2006, p. 64

interact with The Woman, but also he acts on the so-called truths of his sub-worlds. This unique possible world, from another perspective, completely challenges the idea that “literary worlds are possible not in the sense that they can be viewed as possible alternatives to the actual state of affairs, but in the sense that they ‘actualize’ the world which is analogous with, derivative of, or contradictory to the world we live in”¹⁶. Therefore, Willy’s oneiric and boulomaic worlds shouldn’t be taken as counterfactuals, since Willy’s fantasy world is such a dynamic one that he is capable of living within.

The fact that Miller creates a split scene where Willy’s past and present are enacted at the same time reveals the playwright’s intention to play around the traditional rule of theatre, the unity of time, place and action. In this sense, rather than investigating the statements of the character for making inferences, the audience are provided with a detailed scene about Willy’s inner world. Such a practise in the play reminds the dramatic aspect that “a play, that is, a play as performed, is not a pretended representation of a state of affairs but the pretended state of affairs itself” (Searle, 1985, p. 69)¹⁷, while, on the other hand, connotes that any state of affair in a character’s inner world is a possible world which is also a separate dramatic world in itself.

Linda’s Adopted Sub-World

Linda, Willy’s wife, seems to be the most obedient character in the Loman Family that lives in her husband’s actual and possible sub-worlds. Whatever Willy proposes or commands is unquestionably admitted by Linda. Such a conformism might be the consequence of the patriarchal codes of then society. Though it is known to be this obedience causing the collapse of the family. While Linda’s characteral view represents the most realistic stance of the play, she still lacks the ability to create her own sub-world in which she can predict other possible ways that things could have been. In numerous tries, Linda sets by saying “may be things are beginning to...” in order to create a possible world of herself, but each time she attempts to envisage a potential world, she is silenced by the omnipotent husband, Willy. She always has the faith that “there is still a possibility of better things”, yet she hardly strives to be an active part of such a possibility.

The only sub-world that Linda is able to create is a double-sided boulomaic world in which firstly she sets her hopes on paying all of the family’s debts and finding decent jobs for her sons, Biff and Happy, secondly, she fears losing her husband out of his suicidal tendency. Linda’s

¹⁶ R. Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*. Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 51.

¹⁷ J.R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 69.

both devotion to and fear of losing Willy and her such created boulomaic world has the most diverse impacts on the family's wellbeing. It is Linda's boulomaic world that leads the destruction of the Loman Family. Although she always serves as a mediator between Biff and Willy, she further supports her husband and silences Biff when he voices the truth. Linda, out of the fear, lives in Willy's sub-world and prevents all the attacks to this world, for she reckons being loyal and devoted to Willy requires similar loyalty and devotion to Willy's fantasy worlds. This way, Linda imposes Willy's fantasy world on Biff and Happy, which at the end leads to the downfall of the family. Linda's realistic stance stems from her epistemic world through which she knows how things in reality are. But this epistemic world hangs up at a devised stage, Linda doesn't create or let Biff or Happy to create this epistemic world. Therefore, she cannot compete with Willy's fantasy world since Willy lives in that world. She rather chooses to live in Willy's world and forces anyone else to adapt to that world.

Happy to Inherit Willy's Boulomaic Sub-World

Being the youngest son of the Loman Family, Happy is quite content with his life and affairs with girls. He is completely out the conflicting worlds of his family. He neither questions nor rebels against the active fantasy world that his father creates and his mother obeys. Happy Loman is an exact duplicate of his father, Willy. Since, like Linda, he prefers to live in Willy's world, Hap naturally possesses the same characteristics as his father. He also builds his hopes on being well liked, this is the sole argument that all the family members care about. Hap tries to soothe and convince Biff to return back home by saying: "You're well liked, Biff. That's why I say to come back here, and we both have the apartment. And I'm tellin' you, Biff, any babe you want..." (Act 2, scene 1)¹⁸.

While Happy lives in his father's fantasy world, he manages to create one of his own with the same references to that of his father. In other words, Hap creates a boulomaic world of his hopes and wishes in which, like his father, he chooses to live within. Although he is an assistant to the assistant, Hap shows off to say he is actually the assistant to the merchandise manager. A thorough womaniser, Hap believes in the manipulations he makes in his life and accredits his so-called honesty like:

HAPPY: Manufacturers offer me a hundred-dollar bill now and then to throw an order their way. You know how honest I am, but it's like this girl, see. I hate myself for it. Because I don't want the girl, and still, I take it and — I love it! (Act 2, scene 4).¹⁹

¹⁸ A. Miller, *Death of a Salesman*. New York: Viking Press, 1949.

¹⁹ Ibid

In fact, Happy doesn't think about questioning what has been wrong so far even after his father's suicide. His first comment upon Willy's death is to appreciate his father's irrational actions in the actual world that come from his dream world. Happy is so attached to his father's fantasy world that he is determined to maintain Willy's boulomaeic world. He goes on to announce:

HAPPY: 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 (Act 2, scene 4)²⁰.

It is evident from this extract that Happy will carry on pursuing the fantasy life just as Willy did. Therefore, rather than designing a fresh boulomaeic world, Hap inherits Willy's one and insists on living as such. In a sense Happy represents Willy's alter ego, he represents Willy's disillusionment with the American dream. That's why the world of as if presented by Happy, actually, is close to disappointing realities and is boulomaeic to some degree. It is a boulomaeic world as Happy is a one dimensional and static character with whom it is difficult sympathize with. Vanity of wishes is embodied in his character. The fact that he exaggerates his status indicates his delusions of grandeur. It is implied that he shares the delusions of American dream, a fantasy world. The interplay between reality and fantasy throughout the play is revealed by means of Happy's troubled world. As the shadow of his father Happy engages in futile ambitions, wishes, fears and hopes.

Biff's Existential Episteme

The conflict between Willy and Biff arises from that Biff refuses to conform to a deluded world represented by his father. Biff's self-knowledge and philosophical stance mark a central theme in the play. Biff's simplicity and self-sufficiency remind us of the fact that one can live without delusions and still achieve to be happy. In one of his dialogues with his father Biff tackles the problems of the American Dream and reveals that he is conscious of the illusions created by this dream:

BIFF: Well, I spent six or seven years after high school trying to work myself up. Shipping clerk, salesman, business of one kind or another. And it's a measly manner of existence. To get on that subway on the hot mornings in summer. To devote your whole life to keeping stock, or making phone calls, or selling or buying. To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when all you really desire is to be outdoors with your shirt off. And always to have to get

²⁰ Ibid

ahead of the next fella. And still—that's how you build a future. (Act 2, scene 4)²¹

An episteme, in the narrowest sense, represents a condition of possibility in which knowledge can be constructed. Biff can construct an epistemological understanding of the world that he is surrounded by. Actually, Biff also had a perception regarding ideal in the beginning. He was thinking that his father was an ideal family man who could represent the American Dream. But, upon learning that his father has an affair with another woman, he comes to understand that he lived in a fantasy world. This is why he develops an epistemological stance to perceive the reality from a different and more accurate perspective.

Although Biff is enlightened, he still has some difficulties to change the world around him. Willy still his father and Happy remains his brother. Therefore, he is desperate and cannot understand why the American society represented by his family is not happy with a simple life. He understands that he lives in a lie but knows that he cannot change it. The possible worlds envisaged by Biff revolve around several epistemes. These epistemes push Biff to a conflict. Self-realization is postponed and Biff builds a realistic world of fantasies. Biff's fantasy and alternative world springs from harsh realities and internal struggles. "The philosophy of as if" employed by Biff causes him to reveal his inner world through philosophical monologues:

"You know why I had no address for three months? I stole a suit in Kansas City and I was jailed. I stole myself out of every good job since high school. And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is! It's goddamn time you heard that! I had to be boss big shot in two weeks, and I'm through with it! Willy! 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 the world. The work and the food and the 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!" (Act 2, scene 4)²²

Biff's contemplation takes place in a world where epistemological understanding of individual occupies a central place. He is a realist and

²¹ A. Miller, *Death of a Salesman*. New York: Viking Press, 1949.

²² Ibid

simple man so his fantasy world is at odds with ideal and delusional worlds fabricated by the American Dream.

Conclusion

To conclude, characters of drama tend to propose various inner worlds through their statements or onstage actions. In the case of the play, *Death of A Salesman*, the audience are presented with multiple sub-worlds via the actions of the members of the Loman Family. In the play, Willy's Oneiric, Boulomaic and Doxastic Worlds are introduced mostly through his staged inner conflicts. On the other hand, Linda's and Happy's boulomaic worlds are inherited from Willy and thus they live as the shadows of the father. On the contrary, Biff seems to be the only member of the Loman Family to strive for a real life instead of choosing the fantasy world Willy creates. All in all, *Death of A Salesman* is not only structured on the conflicting sub-worlds of each character but also on the multiple conflicting sub-worlds of the same characters. The notion of subworlds and possible worlds is essential to exposing the complexity of Willy Loman's psychology in the play. The term "subworlds" describes Willy's daydreams and flashbacks, which are other realities in which he relives the past or envisions better futures, reflecting his need for approval and achievement. The hard realities of his current existence stand in stark contrast to his mental escapes, resulting in a multi-layered story that conflates place and time. The play's "potential worlds" illustrate Willy's fervent desire for a better existence in spite of his growing setbacks by symbolizing the various futures he imagines for himself and his family. Miller examines memory, illusion, and the elusiveness of the American Dream through various subworlds and alternative worlds, providing a moving critique of identity and self-delusion.

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