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Fall 2015 First Prize Essay

LOST IN TRANSLATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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In his introduction to Arthur Miller's, *Death of a Salesman*, Christopher Bigsby describes the intrinsic hope and the stereotypically high aspirations of the American people, even and especially on the heels of the stock market crash of 1929: "The Depression of the 1930s seemed to break promises America had made to its citizens...The American dream faded. And yet, not so" (vii). According to Bigsby, this is the central theme of Miller's tragic play; the play emphasizes the death of the *reality* of achieving the Dream, and the tension that arose in the following decades as a national *belief* in the plausibility of the Dream lived on. Despite a knowledge of the unlikely probability of achieving the social mobility that characterizes the American Dream, the characters Miller crafts in *Death of a Salesman* continue in the pursuit of their unattainable goals to the point where it becomes a detriment to their wellbeing. Commenting on this pursuit, Bigsby explains, "faith in the future is not a matter of choice" (vii). Miller purposefully crafts characters who embody this resiliency and hope; however, the Red Masquers' interpretation neglects to recreate the degree of steadfastness inherent in the original characters, and in doing so, creates characters that seem ignorant of their fate, rather than submissive to it.

In the Red Masquers' production of *Death of a Salesman*, Miller's tragic hero, Willy Lohman, seems more like a man degraded by the years, on the brink of senility, rather than regretful and mentally ill. This representation of Willy as simply an old man creates a character that, instead of representing the resiliency of the human spirit in achieving the unachievable against all odds, seems beaten by them. In the opening scene, Willy walks on stage, "carrying two large sample cases" (Miller 2), and "his exhaustion is apparent" (Miller 2). These first few stage notes set an almost desperate tone, crafting a man that is obviously exhausted as well as defeated and "has been defeated his entire life" (Palmer 127). Despite his exhaustion, Willy continues to pursue salesmanship, the perfect example career of the American Dream. Although Willy loves being "well-liked", the written play does not explicitly suggest that Willy loves being a salesman. Rather, he remains faithful to his career because of the illustrious promise of being "known" (Miller 100). As critic David Palmer notes, "Willy's inability to engage with the opportunity he feels America promises is the source of the confusion at the center of his life" (127). This confusion propels him to persevere. Willy is determined to achieve what he perceives he has been promised. When Willy walked on stage in the Genesis Theater, he not only seemed tired, but decrepit, hunched over and appearing to be well beyond his purported age of sixty-three. The Red Masquers' casting and interpretation of Willy's character seems to suggest that Willy remained with his company out of pride, rather than genuine hope for the future. The Red Masquers created a Willy that pities himself, rather than one who resents his transgressions and continues to work to ameliorate them. The Red Masquers' representation of Willy sets an apathetic tone for the play. The weariness of Willy's character on the Genesis Theater stage made the once tragic hero seem only tragic.

The weariness of Willy's character in the Red Masquers' performance also serves to characterize Willy as a man who pities himself; the written play makes Willy seemed determined to a fault to preserve in his career, yet the stage performance crafted a man who sees himself in need of retirement. Wherein the written text, the exasperated "Oh boy!" (Miller 2) is the utterance of a man tired from a long day

and even longer career, actor Mark Yochum, practically whimpered the line as he sat down at the kitchen table (Lane Act I). In the written play, Miller purposefully crafted a version of Willy that defines resilience to a fault; in the original drama, Willy overworks himself to the point of absolute fatigue and yet continues, only being persuaded, and even then not completely, to take a step back from his job at the begging of his wife, Linda (Miller 4). In *The Red Masquers'* production, however, Willy seems like a man who has worked very hard, and considers himself ready to relent, but is prevented by a certain pride. He does not want to quit or be forced out of his job by his boss, explaining his protestation in Howard's office despite an apparent need for retirement (Miller 60-62). Yet the degree of passivity with which he agrees to Linda's suggestion that he tell Howard "[he] simply has to work in New York" (Miller 4) reveals how eager he is to get off the road. In the written play, Willy does not seem to notice the severity of his condition (he seems to be afflicted with a serious depression and is prone to psychotic episodes), contributing to the overall ability of the play to convey the idea that the individual pursuing the American Dream believes it cannot have adverse effects; any strides made in the name of achieving the Dream *must* be good and the result of such strides even better. The pursuit of the Dream in many cases *is* the reward. However, Willy never realizes this, finally serving to justify his suicide. In "The Painful Collapse of Empire: How the 'American Dream' and American Exceptionalism Wreck Havoc on the World", Robert Jensen calls attention to the detriment of this blind faith: "Is the American Dream so much a part of the fabric of American society that we fail to question it?" (Jensen qtd. in Bush and Bush 91). The characters in Miller's original work do not, like so many Americans of the era and today (Bush and Bush 91-92), question the morals of the Dream, aiding Miller's commentary on the submissiveness of the American to the Dream. But when Willy was brought to life on *The Red Masquers'* stage, he seemed unwilling to commit to this blind faith. In the stage production, he moves away from the purpose of his original invention, and instead of representing both a fundamental belief and fundamental crisis of a nation, begins to represent its reciprocal, as someone who recognizes the futility of the Dream and ultimately longs to abandon it. *The Red Masquers'* portrayal of Willy therefore changes the nature of the drama itself, emphasizing how integral Willy's pursuit of salesmanship even in the face of suffering is to the commentary the play offers on the American Dream. Willy's perseverance, *despite* his suffering, is important for Miller's criticism of the American Dream; with his suffering the play forces the audience to consider whether or not the dream is worth pursuing, whether or not to pursue it is a choice, or if, as Americans, the choice is made for us. When in the stage performance Willy no longer blindly follows the Dream, the audience is given the illusion that there is a choice, ultimately changing Miller's original commentary on the duality of how the Dream both supplies Americans with meaning and ultimately leads them to meaningless, mundane lives.

Although Biff seems to represent the antithesis of Willy, and consequently the antithesis of the typical American, by appearing to reject the American Dream altogether, both the written play and the stage performance of *Death of a Salesman* reiterate that Willy's eldest son cannot escape the Dream either. However, while in the written text Biff displays an ambivalence toward the corporate life his father wants for him, Curt Wootton portrayed a man furious at the Dream itself, convinced, as the play unfolds, that he will live apart from it, again portraying a character ignorant of the inevitability of the American Dream. In the final confrontation he has with his father, Biff recognizes the futility in pursuing an office career, knowing that what he truly wants is to be out in the open, embracing the freedom of making a living off of the land (Miller 105). This scene in the written play represents a revolutionary moment for Biff, when he rejects the pursuit of a corporate career, and embraces an attainable future for himself for the first time. Biff, trying to leave, begs his father, "will you let me out of it, will you just let me out of it?" (Miller 85). Where this can be read as an exhausted plea for the freedom to make his own choices,

Wootton's Biff instead seemed to be yelling at his father, an expression of the spite Willy accuses Biff of having throughout the drama. The anger emulated in the stage performance acts as an accusation; Biff blames his father for him being tied to the American Dream, rather than recognizing the inevitability of pursuing it. While he might seem to reject the Dream, Biff only recognizes a different version of it – being able to live off the land is still a subset of achievement based on personal merit and skill –reiterating Bigsby's idea that “faith in the future is not a matter of choice” (vii) no matter how badly an individual wants to reject the Dream.

In the text, Biff's exhausted tone and surrender to his father (Miller 106) suggest that he recognizes that he still must chase at least some version of the Dream, while his angered and accusatory tone employed in the stage production portray a Biff that believes by moving away he can escape the Dream. However, this is not the case; it is only the ambiguity of the what the Dream is that supplies the audience with this sentiment: “Whether celebrated or condemned, the American Dream endures, though always ambiguously...and with each attempt to clarify, the idea of an American Dream grows more incoherent yet entrenched” (Hanson and White 91). Despite Biff's efforts to escape the Dream by choosing a different lifestyle for himself, he ultimately is only successful in redefining what the Dream is for him. In the text, he notes this, and willingly submits himself to it, perceiving that he will at least be happier in a different setting: “And suddenly I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw – the sky. I saw the things I love in this world...and said to myself...What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there” (Miller 105). In the play, Biff seems ignorant of the fact that his new life is still rooted in the pursuit of the Dream. This evokes pity from the audience rather than reverence. Where Willy's suffering is integral to the overall message of the play, so is Biff's acceptance of his future. By noting that he cannot escape the Dream and willingly submitting himself to it, Biff supplies the other end of the aforementioned duality of the play: although the pursuit of the Dream has, until his revelation, caused Biff to live a meaningless and mundane life, it also ultimately leads him to a life of meaning.

The interplay of the characters of Willy and Biff in the written text of *Death of a Salesman* serve to supply the reader with the sense that one has choice in *where* he plays out the American Dream, although the capitalist society ultimately makes the choice that he must pursue it, while the performance gave the audience the illusion of choice in both matters. In the written play, the characters are aware of their fate, rendering it more effective in criticizing the American Dream than in the stage performance, where characters' ignorance of their fate presents the possibility of choice in a matter that has already been predetermined for Americans. The inevitability of the American Dream persists today. The ambiguity of what Willy sells allows the reader to impose his own industry onto the play; for members of the modern capitalist society, the Dream continues to be inescapable. Although deprived of the choice to pursue the Dream or not to, the definition of personal success continues to belong to the individual, as long as he recognizes that the avenue to such success is inevitably aligned with the path of the American Dream. Willy Lohman, having never truly achieved that which he perceives the Dream enabled him to, grasps to the Dream as a medium for leaving his mark on the world, mimicking the plight of the man who has always chased the glorified, unattainable dream associated with America's endless possibilities.

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