



IRAQI  
Academic Scientific Journals



العراقية  
المجلات الأكاديمية العلمية

ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)

**Journal of Language Studies**

Contents available at: <http://www.iasj.net/iasj/journal/356/about>



## **Alienation and Capitalist Society in Arthur Miller's “Death of a Salesman”: A Marxist Reading**

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**Received: 1\4\2023, Accepted: 16\5\2023, Online Published: 30 / 9/ 2024**

### **ABSTRACT**

The present paper deals with one of the top three most notable tragedies in American history is considered to be “Death of a Salesman”. It premiered in 1949, vividly demonstrating an instinctive insight into society. Arthur Miller, the playwright, emphasized that the play should reflect not just the psychological and subjective world of the characters but also the actual, complex social reality. It has effectively captured the pathos of a typical American salesman. The study aim to shed light on Loman's private drama by examining it through the lens of societal issues, thereby illuminating the play's economic context and inner history. This method is timely because it addresses the

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central contradictions and inequalities that sustain and deepen under capitalism. The study seeks to enrich our understanding of the dangerous impact of the capitalist system on the working class and how it affects them and makes them alienated. This study depends on the original play script rather than others' ideas and recognizes the fusion of Marxism's effect on the play through closely reading the text. The findings that reached after studying Miller's play is that the materialistic world can be seen as the dominating one and its negative impact mentally and physically on the Lomans.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Capitalism, Marxism, Death of Salesman, Working Class , Arther Miller

الاغتراب والمجتمع الرأسمالي في مسرحية آرثر ميلر "وفاة بائع متجول": قراءة ماركسية

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### المستخلص

تتناول هذه الورقة واحدة من أهم ثلاث مآسي في التاريخ الأمريكي : موت بائع متجول. تم عرض موت بائع متجول لأول مرة في عام 1949 ، يظهر بوضوح نظرة غريزية ثاقبة في المجتمع. أكد الكاتب المسرحي آرثر ميلر أن موت بائع متجول يجب أن يعكس ليس فقط العالم النفسي والذاتي للشخصيات ولكن أيضًا الواقع الاجتماعي المعقد الفعلي. لقد استولت بشكل فعال على شفقة بائع أمريكي نموذجي. تهدف الدراسة إلى إلقاء الضوء على دراما لومان الخاصة من خلال فحصها من خلال عدسة القضايا المجتمعية ، وبالتالي إلقاء الضوء على السياق الاقتصادي و التاريخي للمسرحية. تأتي هذه الطريقة في الوقت المناسب لأنها تعالج التناقضات وعدم المساواة المركزية التي تدعم وتعمق في ظل الرأسمالية. تسعى الدراسة إلى إثراء فهمنا للتأثير الخطير للنظام الرأسمالي على الطبقة العاملة وكيف يؤثر عليهم ويجعلهم معزولين. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على نص المسرحية الأصلي بدلاً من أفكار الآخرين وتعرف على اندماج تأثير الماركسية على المسرحية من خلال قراءة النص عن كثب. النتائج التي تم التوصل إليها بعد دراسة مسرحية ميلر هي أن العالم المادي يمكن اعتباره العالم المسيطر وتأثيره السلبي عقليًا وجسديًا على لومان.

الكلمات الدالة: الاغتراب, الرأسمالية, الماركسية, موت بائع متجول, الطبقة العاملة.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Arthur Miller was one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most consequential American playwrights. He was born to Jewish parents from Poland in New York in 1915. Before 1929, life for the Miller family, where Miller's father worked in the clothing industry, appeared typical. However, many Americans were impacted by the Wall Street crash, and global poverty has persisted for decades. The Millers had to uproot like the rest of the country when the economy tanked and made the trek to Brooklyn. For the next decade, the entire world experienced what is now known as The Great Depression. People's mental health took a hit during the Great Depression, in addition to their financial well-being. In recent years, people in the United States have begun to question the American dream and the emphasis on the material success it promotes. Americans had a chance to reflect on their way of life and their perspective of the American dream during the Great Depression because of the profound shifts in people's values and beliefs (Oikawa, 2016).

Miller's unique description of the American dream may be traced back to this pivotal moment when he went from living comfortably to struggling mightily. The Great Depression eased toward the decade's end, but any rebound from the economic crisis was cut short by the outbreak of World War II in 1939 and its subsequent five-year duration. Following World War II, the United States experienced a period of social and economic complexity due to the surplus of goods caused by the wartime production of goods (Stone, 2016).

### **1.1 Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study is to analyze Miller's play through a Marxist lens, focusing on the themes of alienation and the impact of capitalist society on individual identity and relationships. By examining the socio-economic forces that shape the lives of the characters, particularly Willy Loman, the study seeks to uncover how capitalism perpetuates a sense of alienation and disillusionment, ultimately leading to personal and familial tragedy. The objectives of the paper are:

- 1- To Explore Themes of Alienation by investigating how capitalist ideology contributes to the alienation of individuals in *Death of a Salesman*, particularly in relation to work, family dynamics, and personal identity.
- 2- To Analyze Socio-Economic Influences and analyzing how socio-economic factors depicted in the play reflect the broader capitalist society and its effects on the characters' aspirations, motivations, and failures.
- 3- To Highlight Class Struggle by highlighting the class struggles illustrated in the narrative, focusing on Willy Loman's pursuit of the American Dream and its consequences on his mental health and his relationships with his family.
- 4- To Examine the Role of Consumerism by examining how consumer culture impacts the characters' perceptions of success and worth, contributing to their sense of alienation and discontent.
- 5- To Assess the Consequences of Capitalism by assessing the consequences of a capitalist framework on the individual's quest for meaning and fulfillment, exploring the intersection of personal dreams and systemic barriers.

### **1.2 Questions**

- 1- How does Miller portray the theme of alienation in *Death of a Salesman*, and what role does capitalist society play in this alienation?

- 2- In what ways do the characters' aspirations and failures reflect the pressures of a capitalist economy?
- 3- How does the pursuit of the American Dream manifest in Willy Loman's life, and what does this reveal about the nature of success in a capitalist society?
- 4- What role does consumerism play in shaping the characters' identities and their relationships with one another?
- 5- How can Willy Loman's tragic end be understood as a critique of the capitalist system and its impact on individuals?
- 6- In what ways does the play illustrate the disparity between personal values and societal expectations within a capitalist framework?

By addressing these aims and questions, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of Miller's critique of capitalism and its profound effects on human experience in *Death of a Salesman*.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Almaarroof, & Jamal, (2024) study entitled "Objectification and Dehumanisation in *Animals Farm: A Marxist Study*", Almaarroof & Mohammed (2023) article, "Death of a Salesman as a Bipolar disorder Study Case", Hussein, Abdullah & Jasim (2021), "Man's Continuous Search for Salvation in Beckett's plays: From Arrival in *Waiting For Godot* to Departure in *Endgame*", and Abdullah & Khalaf (2021), "Eugene O'Neill's Selected Plays: A Feminist Reading" are all reviewed studies collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of alienation and capitalist society as presented in *Death of a Salesman* and *American Theatre*. Employing various theoretical lenses, including existentialism, feminism, and psychological analysis, these works highlight the systemic exploitation and personal struggles faced by individuals in a capitalist framework. Each study underscores the enduring relevance of Miller's work in critiquing the impacts of capitalism on human experience, emphasizing how these interwoven themes of alienation resonate across different literary contexts.

## **3. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This paper adopts the qualitative approach. Textual analysis will be used, and the Marxist theory is to be followed. The preeminent socioeconomic systems of the time, capitalism and Marxism, are heavily criticized in Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman". Let us first make sure we truly comprehend what those concepts represent before we move on to how they are portrayed in the play. Individual citizens are in charge of several aspects of the economy in capitalism. Despite closely tied to economic theories like socialism and communism, Marxism is more of a social philosophy than an economic one. Marxism prefers to view society and history through the eyes of various economic classes. Marxism strongly emphasizes the interaction between different socioeconomic classes, while other historical perspectives could examine how other nations or even genders are handled. According to a Marxist perspective, if a person is in the incorrect class, their labor will only help the capitalist class, including those who control enterprises and factories (*Capitalism & Marxism in "Death of a Salesman"*, 2016).

Marxist critics have focused on alienation in the play and its relevance to contemporary society. They argue that the play reflects the Marxist critique of capitalism and its impact on the working class. The play's protagonist, Willy Loman, is portrayed as a victim of the capitalist system, which reduces human beings to mere commodities. His

alienation from his work, his family, and himself is a direct result of the dehumanizing effects of capitalism. Miller's play has been a subject to extensive literary criticism since its publication in 1949. It has been analysed through various lenses, including psychoanalytic, feminist, and postmodern approaches. However, Marxist literary analysis has proven to be a fruitful lens through which to examine the play. The Marxist approach is concerned with the socioeconomic context of the text and how it reflects and critiques capitalist ideology.

The Marxist approach to literature emphasizes the relationship between literature and society and how literature reflects and critiques social and economic systems. Through the lens of Marxist literary analysis, "Death of a Salesman" can be read as a critique of capitalist society and its effects on the working class. The play raises important questions about the human cost of capitalist expansion and the dehumanizing effects of a system that reduces individuals to mere commodities.

Marxism's ultimate goal is to abolish the existence of classes in society. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the founders of this school of thought, argue that the disparities between the rich and the poor could be eliminated if the state owned all industries, companies, and other economic institutions (Marxism 1-2). Karl Marx is one of the most well-known thinkers who attempted to explain how capitalism affects society's functioning. Marx thought that society always splits into two categories, the affluent, or the bourgeoisie, and people with low incomes, or the proletarians, in order to characterize human behavior and the motivations behind their acts effectively. Proletarians and the bourgeoisie were two groups that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels studied and concluded that they would always be at odds if there were no economic equality between them. Marx and Friedrich Engels founded the communist school of thought by holding such thoughts and viewpoints. Their major argument was that the capitalist system must be replaced before a fully human existence is conceivable (Bertsen, 2016). Marxism is a broad school of thought that derives from the writings of Karl Marx and his critique of capitalism. A strong egalitarian ideology, Marxism seeks to transform society so that economic resources, profits, and political influence are distributed more evenly among all citizens rather than benefiting a select few. According to Marxism, the disparities in wealth and status that characterise modern society are the direct result of different forms of property ownership. Moreover, class distinctions are bound to exist whenever there are disparities in property ownership according to Barry (1999):

*Materialist philosophy: that is, it tries to explain things without assuming the existence of a world or forces beyond the natural world around us and our society. It looks for concrete, scientific, logical explanations of the world of observable fact [...]. In contrast, Marxism (as Marx famously said) seeks to change the world, while other philosophies merely seek to understand the world. (p.150)*

Marxists argue that the working and lower classes, known as proletarians, are the only ones capable of bringing about change by rebelling against the capitalist system (Barry, 1999, p.151). It is related to another major issue that Marxists seek to address: the upper class's exploitation of the lower classes. For them, exploitation is intrinsic to the capitalist system. One of the main factors leading to class differences is the disparity

between the capitalists' profits and the worker's share of the product's profits. As a result, the product's final value exceeds the worker's actual salary. To paraphrase Karl Marx, "No capitalist hires somebody to work for him unless that worker gets paid less than the value of what he produces" is the bedrock of capitalism because it generates profits for the capitalist class (Manicas, 1999, p. 3).

Another central feature of capitalism that Marxists criticise is alienation. It has four uses, each involving a different way in which the worker is estranged from essential parts of his or her identity: self, work, product, and colleagues (Heywood, 2012). Workers, according to Marx, become estranged from the goods they create under capitalism because they are not paid for their labour and cannot decide what goes into production. "Alienated from the process of labour," workers also say they feel (Manicas, 1999, p.119). Employees under supervision need help to take pride in and benefit from their work. Marx argues that workers' alienation from their coworkers and the emphasis on individualism make the workplace inherently unsocial. Finally, Marx argues that workers are alienated from themselves because capitalists have depersonalized work by using them to create other tools rather than encouraging workers to enjoy their work and use their creativity and talents (Manicas, 1999).

To reiterate, Marxists hold that workers are constantly exploited and alienated because they are seen as nothing more than things and tools used by capitalists. They claim capitalists and other powerful actors manipulate the working class into believing and adhering to their ideologies. All ideologies, whether religious or secular, are seen by Marxists through the same lens: as artificial illusions (Bersten, 2016).

#### **Discussion: The Alienation and Capitalist Society in "Death of a Salesman"**

Many charges against capitalism and Marxism in Miller's play were prescient. Under a capitalist system, private citizens manage many aspects of the economy. If you possess a mountain of gold, you may unload it and pocket the cash. If you have the intellect to manipulate other people's brains, you can do it for money. As it is in the interest of each given individual to have a thriving economy, the individual must be considered the most powerful economic entity. For example, since many people no longer want to buy VCRs, only a few spend time working where VCRs are made. In short, individual effort and individual choice are the basis of capitalism (Gailan, 2016).

While Marxism is tied to economic ideas like socialism and communism, it is more appropriately classified as a social philosophy. Conversely, Marxism prefers to analyse past events and current society through the prism of social and economic stratification. Marxism emphasises the interaction between socioeconomic classes, whereas other historical views may examine the treatment of various nations or sexes. According to Marxist theory, the only people whose efforts pay off are the wealthy capitalists who control the firms and industries. In "Death of a Salesman", Willy faces out against those of a higher class (Gailan, 2016).

Many themes, including the American Dream, alienation and disappointment, are set up in Miller's play. For Marxists, the play is a damning indictment of the consumerist values and corporate power that underpin the American Dream. The protagonist, Willy Loman, a successful middle-class man who works hard and does his best to achieve the American Dream, becomes disillusioned and depressed when he realises that his goals cannot be achieved through mere hard work, the play examines how the pursuit of money affects the average American family and how this has become a national ideal, provoking

thought about our country's economic success. The play reveals the proletariat's reliance on bourgeois employment and pay and the working class's adherence to neoclassical principles, such as the belief that money equals power (Segal, 1966).

The events raise issues that have plagued humankind from the beginning: Is there a definition of joy? How do you quantify triumph or ignominy? Is it possible to achieve the American Dream? There is more connection between these issues than at first meets the eye. Working hard in the United States will pay off in the end and make you wealthy and successful; this is the promise of the American Dream. In Miller's play, Willy's brother Ben Loman comments on his sudden climb to fortune by telling his nephews, "Why, boys, when I was seventeen, I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one, I walked out," reflecting on his own experience at the age of twenty-one. He chuckles. And thank God for my wealth (Miller, 1948, p. 37). Ben implies casually accumulating wealth, but the text never reveals his precise activities in the jungle. Because of this, there is an underlying tone of mockery directed at Willy and his fruitless efforts as a travelling salesman.

From a Marxist point of view, the American Dream is no longer a tangible ideal but rather a widely held but delusional set of beliefs. The American Dream has duped the working class. Willy Loman represents the average American working hard to achieve The American Dream while the bourgeoisie reaps the rewards of his efforts. The proletariat seeks easy wealth, while the privileged enjoy the fruits of the working class's labour. Willy's efforts benefit those already prosperous, even if he never becomes wealthy. In Miller's work, Willy Loman is not the only person who represents the disappointment of the American Dream and capitalist society. Willy Loman has two kids, Happy and Biff, each striving for their version of success. Contrast Happy's materialistic lifestyle with Biff's hopes for a more modest, spiritual one. Lomans, who reflect the grim reality of American working-class families, have it all on the exterior but break apart on the inside due to their idealistic work ethic, ultimately leading to dismal failure. The bourgeoisie and the proletariat live with the same harsh reality: the former profit from progress while the latter exploit it (Sun, 2022).

The authors of Manifesto of the Communist Party, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, write, "A corresponding political advance of that class accompanied each step in the development of the bourgeoisie." In the play, this idea is encapsulated in Willy's dismissal. Willy tells his boss Howard that he would prefer to work in New York because he is sick of constantly being on the road. For his part, Howard has responded by letting him go. According to Howard, Willy's weekly commissions have been at most \$170. Willy is let go (Miller, 1948, p.62), for no reason other than he wanted more money and a position closer to home, which benefits Howard.

Willy's choice of a salesman as a career path stands in stark contrast to that of his son Biff. Biff's goals and interests are very different from those of his father. Willy is disappointed in his son's decision and suggests that the kind of work that Biff wants to do on a farm does not constitute "a life". On the other hand, Biff is content simply contemplating an outdoor workout. However, as a salesman, Willy's career leads to emptiness and disappointment. Willy seems to need to remember the joy that work can bring because he is too preoccupied with the soulless selling process. Biff finds fulfillment in his work. Karl Marx used the term "alienation" to describe this situation. Marx's Concept of Man is where Erich Fromm defines this term. If a person is alienated

from the world, it is because he does not feel he has any control over it (Fromm, 1961, p. 44). In other words, Willy no longer cares about the product he is selling and sees the act of selling itself as an end. The fact that Arthur Miller never mentions Willy's wares is an interesting indicator of this. Miller may be trying to imply that the product is unimportant to Willy by not naming it, even though it is a crucial part of the sales process.

The character of Willy Loman represents the typical middle-class American who is preoccupied with making ends meet but cannot break out of their rut because they cannot make enough money from their sales. Whereas Willy strives for material success and comfort, Biff longs to spend his time in the wild, where he feels most at ease. Willy is struggling to provide for his family, but in doing so, he is locking Biff into the same kind of alienated work he is. Even though it brings him joy, Biff's insecurity in his career path is a result of his father's capitalist logic. Biff asks his brother Happy, "What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week!" Because I am now 34 years old, I should be planning my future. Every time that happens, I rush home. Moreover, now that I'm here, I have no idea what to do with my time (Miller, 1948, p.16). Biff does not understand what is happening and is aware of his dad's disappointment. On the other hand, he is cognizant of the joy it affords him and the beauty it affords him that his father can no longer appreciate.

An essential theme is the pursuit of the American Dream. It could happen if you put in the effort, but the same effort could also make someone else successful. The success of the Wagner Company can be directly attributed to Willy's efforts. According to Marxist theory, Willy and his family were exploited because his efforts benefited only a small group of bourgeois elites. The play disproves the ideals of the American Dream, which holds that everyone has the same opportunities regardless of socioeconomic status. It is absurd to compare the Lomans to the Wagners as they are on the same level. Willy is forced to put in significantly more time and effort than his boss Howard, yet Howard is the one who is ultimately let go and benefits financially. It is a capitalist society. If helping those in need is a part of the American Dream, then why does Howard not help Willy when he complains about his hard work and energy being exploited? Everyone from Howard to the Wagner Company to his sons neglect Willy's mental health. He ultimately commits suicide so his family can collect on his health insurance.

The effects of Willy's mental illness throughout the play intensify in the final act. Willy is suddenly urged to buy seeds after his two sons abandon him in a restaurant while drunk and consumed by his delusions. Immediate seed procurement is required (Miller, 1948). There are a few possible interpretations of Miller's use of seeds as a symbol for Willy. From a Marxist point of view, a single seed can become the source of an entire empire. Willy is lacking in these departments. Willy has no tangible legacy to leave behind for his sons because they need more resources. Willy's desperation to plant seeds after a disappointing meal with his sons foreshadows his own demise. Willy has no choice but to reflect on the legacy he is leaving behind. Willy has few choices when he realizes that his work has yielded little legacy. Willy does not feel good about the legacy he will leave behind until his brother appears to him in a dream and tells him about his health insurance policy money. Willy leaves his family believing his passing will bring prosperity and contentment to his loved ones (Marxist Lens for "Death of a Salesman", 2018).



Looking at it through the Marxist lens, Willy's suicide is a statement against the capitalist system that reduces people to "dime in a dozen" statistics. Willy plans to take his own life to prove to his loved ones that he can still make a difference. His life may not have turned out how he had hoped, but at least he could secure \$20,000 in insurance benefits for Biff and his loved ones. Last but not least, Willy manages to escape his mundane existence by making his family's dreams come true. Linda, Willy's wife, says at the end of the play that they are free and clear, even though she has no idea why Willy did what he did. "My mortgage is completely paid off today. Today, my love. Nobody will be there to greet you [... ] The coast is clear for us" (Miller, 1948, p.112). Willy's death must not have been in vain, Linda thinks. While she is aware that he must have had a good reason for going away on business, she cannot help but feel that this is just another routine trip for him. This ambiguity may be seen as a correlation by Marxists. Willy's death has not changed him much in his family's eyes; he is still just a dedicated salesman to them. It is almost as if Willy has been reduced to nothing more than a pawn or a piece of fruit in the capitalist game between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Marxist Lens for "Death of a Salesman", 2018).

In the play, money is the root of all evil. The Lomans' downfall can be traced to the proletariat's reliance on the bourgeoisie and their toxic relationship of taking without giving. To be sure, the Lomans' downfall cannot be placed solely on the shoulders of the ills of capitalism and the unfulfilled promise of the American Dream. An individual's accountability is also essential, as avoiding personal responsibility and instead interfering with the capitalist nature of business and selling will make you a sock puppet for the bourgeoisie to exploit. Money and status are the ultimate goals of the working class, even if it means taking advantage of those lower on the totem pole to get there. For Marxists, there is no moral distinction between the upper and middle classes because they both exploit the working class. Willy is a travelling salesman who lives off the promise of the American Dream until he realises that his employers are treating him like a piece of fruit and not paying him what he is worth. When considering the full scope of the play, we must ask ourselves what kind of toll wealth takes on middle-class households and what lengths we are willing to go to provide for our loved ones. Yet, we also need to acknowledge that getting away from the capitalist system we currently reside in is no easy feat. Being an outsider means constantly feeling like an outsider if you choose to reside outside of it. Miller advocates for many messages to the American people, one of the most crucial being that we should question how free we are to pursue the unattainable "American Dream"(Sun, 2022).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The utilization of Marxist theory to scrutinize and investigate the concept of alienation in Miller's play, is firmly rooted in the socio-political milieu of the play. The central character, Willy Loman, is deeply entrenched in a distinct societal framework crafted by the playwright. Miller's work demonstrates a series of tragic conflicts through the interconnection of characters within the societal framework and Willy. Willy's inability to make an accurate self-evaluation stems from his uncritical reliance on the societal norms that he has internalized, which constitutes his blind spot. The character, who is tragically misguided, ultimately meets his demise at the hands of the community in which he resides. In essence, Willy Loman conforms to the Marxist standard of a prototypical character situated within a typical circumstance. Arthur Miller generally

employs a Marxist approach while also adjusting to the evolving literary and artistic landscape of his era. The author successfully attained the pinnacle of complete harmony between the literary work's structure and substance in the play.

The family presents a facade of contentment to external observers, however, in reality, they are experiencing internal turmoil. This particular family serves as an exemplar of the common experience of working-class families in the United States, wherein a robust commitment to labor yields only disappointment and distress. Willy Loman harbors a self-perception of being a prosperous salesman, however, this perception is incongruent with his actuality. The individual in question exhibits traits of pretense, performance, and idealism, which are in conflict with their actual circumstances due to a lack of introspection. Willy's paradox lies in his lack of awareness regarding his predicament and psychological disposition. Despite his belief in his significance and elevated social status, he is, in actuality, an average working-class individual in pursuit of both self-actualization and financial autonomy. From a Marxist perspective, the individual in question can be classified as a genuine member of the working class, yet is hindered by an unrealistic and romanticized worldview. The individual in question is a manifestation of the capitalist framework, persistently striving to ascend the social ladder while maintaining their current position.

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