

«ATTENTION, ATTENTION MUST BE
FINALLY PAID TO SUCH A PERSON:»
A MEN'S STUDIES REREADING
OF ARTHUR MILLER'S
*DEATH OF A SALESMAN*¹

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Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* [is] still the most eloquently profound single statement of mainstream contemporary American male dilemmas.

HARRY BROD, *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies* (1987)

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) may be the most compelling portrait of the pathos of middle-class manhood and its consequences in literary history.

MICHAEL S. KIMMEL, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996)

DE-ESSENTIALIZING TRAGEDY THROUGH MEN'S STUDIES

Some of the most relevant critical approaches to tragedy may be said to be (at least partly) flawed by their reliance upon a number of influential essentialist notions

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that have long pervaded drama criticism.² Indeed, much drama criticism neglects tragedy's specific sexual politics, repeatedly equating the tragic hero's masculinity with notions such as *human* nature and universality.³ Not surprisingly, of course. After all, as Judith Butler stresses, in Western patriarchal discourse «the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated, thereby defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body-transcendent personhood» (9).

Women's studies have already shown how the patriarchal elevation of *man* as male to *Man* as generic human has often led to the dismissal of women's specific experiences and opinions within an eminently androcentric society. However, it is equally important to note that «the implications of this fallacy for our understanding of men have gone largely unrecognized» (Brod, «The Case» 40). And yet it is a fact that just as the erroneous assumption that male experience equals human experience has affected literary criticism's treatment of women as characters and authors, «so has it restricted our perceptions about men in literature» (Riemer 289). That is why a (re)reading of gender in (American) tragedy might benefit from the so-called Men's Studies, which Harry Brod defines as

The study of masculinities and male experiences as specific and varying social-historical-cultural formations. Such studies situate masculinities as objects of study on a par with femininities, instead of elevating them to universal norms. («The Case» 40)

In fact, Men's Studies is a small, though growing, and relatively recent field of study, which analyzes masculinities as socially constructed (and as such liable to be socially de-constructed and changed), context-specific, and culture-bound. So Men's Studies no longer treats masculinity as the universal and unchangeable «referent against which standards are assessed but as a problematic gender construct» itself (Kimmel, *Changing Men* 10).

Indeed, Men's Studies has shown how, while *seemingly* about men, traditional treatment of generic man as the human norm «in fact systematically excludes from consideration what is unique to men *qua* men» (Brod, «The Case» 40). In other words, not only does it distort «our understanding of what, if anything, is truly generic to humanity» but also, and more importantly, it precludes the analysis of masculinity as a «*specific male* experience, rather than a universal paradigm for *human* experience» (Brod, «The Case» 40). Therefore, Men's Studies can help broaden our analysis of masculinity in literature as it examines our culturally defined ideals of the concept and how they affect men's lives, thus transforming supposedly universal «human experiences into ones that are distinctly masculine» (Riemer 289).

² For an excellent summary (and critique) of a number of recurrent essentialist (mis)interpretations of tragedy, see Drakakis.

³ One should not forget, though, that tragedy, as Drakakis insists, has traditionally been a masculine genre, inscribed within an eminently patriarchal system of values.

REREADING ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* FROM A MEN'S STUDIES PERSPECTIVE: SOME IMPLICATIONS

Rereading *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Arthur Miller's best-known tragedy, from a Men's Studies perspective may prove beneficial for several reasons.⁴ It is true that Miller's tragedies have not been so recurrently essentialized as Greek or Shakespearean tragedies. Indeed, he is one of the playwrights most consistently classified into the so-called tradition of «social drama» (Murphy, «The Tradition»)⁵ Moreover, Miller himself has always taken for granted, both in his plays⁶/

⁴ One should be reminded, however, that there is still an ongoing debate around the best generic classification for *Death of a Salesman*. More specifically, opinions are divided as to whether Miller's play can actually be classified as a tragedy or not. Throughout this essay, I shall be assuming, despite a number of differing views, that Miller's play may be considered a tragedy, with Willy Loman as its tragic hero. As Miller first argued in his well-known essay «Tragedy and the Common Man» (1949) –and as several other scholars have subsequently ratified elsewhere– *Death* may be seen as a tragedy because the average man is «as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were» as long as he is willing to «lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing –his sense of personal dignity» (143-144). Even though it is doubtful if Willy's death is necessary, and if it secures «dignity,» it is clear that he dies to secure *his sense of* personal dignity, and may thus be seen as a tragic hero.

⁵ It is necessary to stress, however, that apart from being socially committed, Miller is also interested in the psychological aspects of identity (see, for example, Rodríguez Celada). In fact, the individual vs. society dichotomy or the private/public dilemma has been one of the main critical axes around which much work on Miller has consistently revolved. Miller himself has repeatedly talked about this question. For instance, in his «Introduction to *Collected Plays*» (1957), Miller referred to society as «a power and a mystery of custom and inside the man and surrounding him, as the fish is in the sea and the sea inside the fish, his birthplace and burial ground, promise and threat» (164). And in another of his essays, «On Social Plays,» which served as an introduction to the 1955 edition of *A View from the Bridge*, Miller sees the integration of the personal/psychological and the public/social as one of the greatest achievements of classical Greek tragedy. Writing in the «context of a theatre that was preoccupied, in the United States particularly, with the individual, and with psychological analysis divorced from the social context beyond the domestic confines of the family» (Murphy, «The Tradition» 11), Miller put forward the idea that drama improves if it deals with more and more of the whole man, not either his subjective or his social life alone, and the Greek could not conceive of man or anything else except as a whole (Miller, «On Social»).

⁶ It is beyond the scope of this work to specify the numerous and varied social aspects dealt with in each of Miller's plays. Suffice to say that they are anything but monothematic. In other words, they are not just *about* this or that, but rather they tend to thematize more than one (social) issue at once. However, it is also true that a number of main social concerns, often in conjunction with other «minor» ones, tends to recur in Miller's plays (Coy, «Las constantes»). Among these, one can talk about Jewishness/anti-Semitism (*Focus*, *Incident at Vichy*, *Playing for Time*, *Broken Glass*), the Depression (*A Memory of Two Mondays*, *The Price*, *The American Clock*), the problems of the working-class community in America (*The Hook*), the War (*The Story of G. I. Joe*, *Situation Normal*), artistic freedom/censorship (*The Archbishop's Ceiling*), social responsibility beyond individual/familial needs (*All My Sons*), the individuality vs community/kinship dichotomy (*A View from the Bridge*, *After the Fall*), or McCarthyism (*The Crucible*, *An Enemy of the People*). In this last respect, it may be noteworthy that in 1956 Miller was obliged to testify before the House of Un-American Activities Committee, though he refused to name other people attending meetings organized by Communist sympathizers.

essays⁷ and in his own «private» life,⁸ the eminently social function of the playwright.⁹ And, in fact, his plays have been already approached from a number of innovative materialist/anti-essentialist critical perspectives focusing on different race, class, and (a few) gender issues.

However, there are two main reasons for which I wish to argue that Miller's *Death of a Salesman* might benefit from a Men's Studies rereading. First, because I think it is important to contest the widely held assumption that gender is not an essential category in Miller's (early) plays. Second, because I believe essentialism is still especially recurrent in the widely shared critical assumption of Willy Loman as representative of a universal and timeless human essence. As David Savran suggests in this latter respect:

Although attempts have been made in recent years to historicize their work, most notably by C. W. E. Bigsby, theatrical and critical fashion continues to champion the ostensibly universal qualities of plays such as *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). (6)

GENDERING MILLER

While nobody would deny that the issues of race (especially Jewishness) and class (particularly the conflicts of the working class) have been all pervasive in his plays, Miller has usually been said to marginalize gender and sexual concerns within his works. Unlike Tennessee Williams,⁷ for instance, Arthur Miller's plays have usually been accused of lacking in the sensual (see, for example, Corrigan).

⁷ Of course, his constant worry about social issues is nowhere better expressed than in his autobiography, *Timebends*. There are, however, four key essays that are also worth considering in this respect: «On Social Plays»; «The Family in Modern Drama,» originally a lecture given at Harvard (April 1956); «Introduction to the *Collected Plays*»; «The Shadows of the Gods» (August 1958). Most, if not all, of these essays can be found in Martin's *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*. His second collection of essays, *Echoes Down the Corridor* (2000), also expresses his perennial social commitment. In other words, what all these works suggest is that, despite significant changes and evolution in Miller's drama/poetics, he «does not back away from the individual in society or separate individual desire from societal responsibility» (Porter 107). For an interesting analysis of this question, see Coy («Arthur Miller»).

⁸ Miller has publicly supported several causes. His social commitment was manifest, for instance, when he attacked Ezra Pound in 1945 for his pro-Fascist activities; when he became the President of PEN in 1965 and defended imprisoned writers worldwide, or when he helped win the release of Brazilian director/playwright Augusto Boal in 1971, to name but a few social/literary activities in which he has been actively/politically involved.

⁹ Little wonder Miller was awarded the «Premio Príncipe de Asturias de las Letras» (Spain, 2002) for his «critical realism.» As the playwright himself has always insisted:

I do think that in a very small way, probably historically of no importance, what one writes can *change* people in the sense that it gives them a new idea of themselves [...] you will shift the consciousness of a certain number of people. (Miller Interview; emphasis added)

Actually, it could be argued that Miller's avoidance of the issues of gender and sexuality in his plays is no different from the dominant fictional patterns in American literary history. D. H. Lawrence talked about an obvious presence of «masterless men» in American fiction (5), and Ambrose Bierce and Leslie Fiedler (*Love and Death*) also suggested that American authors are either evasive or perverse in their treatment of sexuality. Strongly influenced by Puritan ideals, American (literary) men seem to much prefer the frontier, the West, and male comradeship, to women. As Andre Le Vot puts it:

From *Moby Dick* to *Huckleberry Finn*, from James Fenimore Cooper to Jack London, the American imagination rejected women and the subtleties of amorous intrigue. Rootlessness and violence were the only legitimate ways for its solitary heroes to know and affirm themselves. (9)

None the less, Ann Massa's edition of *American Declarations of Love* (1990) contests «Fiedler's arresting assertion that American writing is either evasive or perverse in its treatment of love; or both» (4). Massa suggests that although Miller initially avoided dealing with adult heterosexual love and women (in fact, she argues that in his early plays characters seem to stand for «embodiment of issues,» aspects of the human condition, or parts of the social structure [126]), things appeared to have changed by the 1960s, especially after Miller wrote *After the Fall* (1964). This scholar suggests, therefore, that from the 1960s onwards there is in Miller an increasing treatment of heterosexual love and women, the only exception being, in her opinion, *Incident at Vichy* (1964), a play in which women are obviously marginalized. Massa also hints at the fact that Marilyn Monroe, the woman who in all likelihood inspired the creation of the Maggie character in *After the Fall*, was perhaps «the catalyst in his work,» the one who «caused the shift in the Miller oeuvre from studies of representational relatedness to the exploration of adult heterosexual relationships» (9). Indeed, this feminist critic shows how with *After the Fall* Miller could finally «acknowledge indirectly that a Maggie (especially in her 'masculine' longings for success) or a Marilyn, a woman, can be as significant and tragic a figure in(his plays) as Willy Loman and company» (134).

Like Massa, Thomas E. Porter (1996) has argued that, in his plays of the 70s and thereafter, Miller enters into a «major new phase» of creative activity. This change, as Bigsby describes it in his «Afterword» to *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, is a fascination with «the problematic status of the real» (93). As Porter stresses, an important aspect of the problematic real, «foreshadowed in the nightmare vision of family in the early dramas, is the role of sexuality in family life» (95). According to this critic, then, Miller's (later) plays present an unresolved conflict between the individual's sexual desire and the need to control it (108).

Finally, Iska Alter has also suggested that, in Miller's later plays, men, «bundles of unresolved Oedipal paradoxes,» turn first to duty and responsibility and then to

female sexuality –despite its anarchic potential– as a «redemptive, even sanctifying» force (117).

So all these scholars appear to contend that sexuality and gender, often exclusively equated with femininity, is only/especially relevant to the analysis of Miller's later plays. Unlike them, I will try to show that *Death of a Salesman* already presents a number of important sexual and gender concerns worth discussing in depth, concerns that involve questions on both femininity and masculinity.

DECONSTRUCTING ESSENTIALIST CONCEPTIONS OF MASCULINITY IN MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

As has been suggested, apart from gendering Miller's plays, Men's Studies, may also challenge a number of essentialist approaches to *Death of a Salesman*. In fact, essentialism has been especially recurrent, as has also been pointed out, in the widespread view of Willy Loman as representative of a universal and timeless human essence. Soon after the play's first performance, Robert Garland, for example, already argued that «in Arthur Miller's salesman there's much of *Everyman*» (200; emphasis added). Similarly, William Hawkins underlined that «the failure of a great potential could never be so moving or so *universally understandable* as is the fate of Willy Loman» (202; emphasis added). John Mason Brown, in an essay (significantly) entitled «Even As You and I» (1963), also referred to *Death of a Salesman* as «the most poignant statement of *man* as he must face himself to have come out of our theatre» (207; emphasis added). Moreover, he added that Miller's «rightful concern is with the dilemmas which are *timeless* in the drama because they are timeless in life» (207; emphasis added). With an equally telling title, A. Howard Fuller's «A Salesman Is Everybody» (1949) described Willy Loman as «*symbolic of the true spirit at large*» (241; emphasis added), arguing that «in the deeper, psychological sense, he is *Everyman*» who, obsessed with material success, «has lost *his essential –his real– nature*» (243; emphasis added).

For his part, Allan Seager views as one of Miller's main concerns his anxiety «spent in the gap between man as he is and man as he could be. (That it is *man*, and not people from Brooklyn or Americans, is clear from the success of his plays abroad)» (337). Ann Massa has also argued that Miller's play «focuses not on society but on *an American Everyman*» (122; emphasis added) and that the playwright's general perspective in his early plays is «so broadly and deeply and ambitiously *philosophical and metaphysical* that at times it becomes depersonalising» (127; emphasis added). As she explains:

He is concerned with *abstractions*. [...] It is less this imaginary man and that imaginary woman and their relationship that concerns him; it is *Man*. [...] When he writes in his essay of 'man' and when he creates plays which focus on fathers,

sons and brothers, he is writing of figures and relationships which are *emblematic of the whole human race*. (127; emphasis added)

Finally, Miller himself has sometimes fallen prey to essentialist biases, too. For instance, he has suggested that as Willy's tragedy extends beyond the family unit into society, it broadens its vision out of the «merely particular toward *the fate of the generality of men*.» (Martin, *The Theater* 74; emphasis added)

Though essentialism is still pervasive in much criticism on the play, the belief in Willy Loman as the tragic embodiment of a universal and timeless human essence can be, and has been, questioned in a number of ways. It is true that Willy's tragic fate seems to traverse intercultural borders. Indeed, since its premiere, there has never been a time when the play was not being performed somewhere in the world and, certainly, «many audience members watching the 1990 Vienna production wept, as did the Chinese audience after seeing the 1983 Beijing run» (Roudané, «*Death*» 63). Moreover, the play has even been performed before a native audience in a small Arctic village «with the same villagers returning night after night to witness the performance in a language they did not understand» (Murphy, *Miller* 106).

None the less, one should not forget that the play is popular in many countries worldwide not because Willy embodies a human essence unaffected by social and historical conditioning, but rather because of the growing internationalization of capitalism. In other words, the critique of the capitalist system that the play so forcefully conveys is no doubt sympathetically understood in many different nations all over the world, especially as capitalism –though originally American/Western– is becoming the hegemonic economic system worldwide.

Second, and even more importantly, perhaps, if the play also appears to be well-liked in many pre-industrial countries, then this is probably so because it «brings audiences back to the edges of prehistory itself:»

Postmodern in texture, reifying a world in which experience is 'always ready' for the Lomans, the play gains its theatrical power from ancient echoes, its Hellenic mixture of pity and fear stirring primal emotions. (Roudané, «*Death*» 63)

As Miller himself has put it:

It's a well-told, paradoxical story. It seems to catch the paradoxes of being alive in a technological civilization. In one way or another, different kinds of people [...] apparently feel that they're *in* the play [...]. It seems to have more or less the same effect everywhere there is a dominating technology. Although it's also popular in places where life is far more pretechnological. Maybe it involves some of the most rudimentary elements in the civilizing process: family cohesion, death and dying, parricide, rebirth, and so on. The elements, I guess, are rather

fundamental. People *feel* these themes no matter where they are. (Roudané, *Conversations* 360-361)

Moreover, Miller has also said that the best way to present a universal in drama is in terms of a «really specific story» (Miller, «Morality» 177). So in *Death of a Salesman* universal feelings may be seen to derive from a particular tragic conflict, too.

Finally, it must be stressed that even if everyone «feels» the play, irrespective of his/her specific social background, it is not always *equally* felt everywhere. As Ann Massa has suggested, «if *Death of a Salesman* is a play that works in England, Spain, Norway and Beijing, it does so because it has somehow allowed itself to be read in a bewildering variety of ways.» so that one even ends up wondering whether Willy's suicide is «a triumph or a tragedy» (123).¹⁰

Another (innovative) way of challenging widespread beliefs in Willy Loman as representative of a universal and timeless human essence may be through a Men's Studies approach. Indeed, Men's Studies radically contests, as has been suggested, essentialist assumptions of *human* universality and timelessness. In what follows, therefore, I shall be rereading Miller's play not in terms of a universal and timeless human tragedy, but rather as a work dealing with a specifically masculine (or *human*) conflict, which has unremittingly affected American men ever since the time of the Revolution in the eighteenth century.

DEATH OF A SALESMAN AS A HUMAN TRAGEDY

Traditionally, *Death of a Salesman* has been read as Miller's harshest critique of the American Dream of success. In this respect, Matthew C. Roudané suggests, for example, that Miller's play challenges «a rich matrix of enabling fables that define the myth of the American Dream.» Indeed, the principles Willy Loman values («consumerism, economic salvation, competition, the frontier, self-sufficiency, public recognition, personal fulfillment,» etc.) are all constitutive, according to Roudané («*Death*» 60), of the definition of the American Dream. For his part, Gerald Weales has also shown how Willy Loman has «completely embraced the American myth,» suggesting that «his continuing self-delusion and his occasional self-awareness serve the same purpose; they keep him from questioning the assumptions that lie beneath his failure and his pretense of success» («Arthur Miller: Man» 356-357). In his «Introduction to the *Collected Plays*,» Miller himself put forward the idea that whereas Biff Loman seems to believe in a new «system of love,» his father Willy is ruled by the «law of success,» that is, by the pursuit of «power, [...] success and its tokens» (169).

¹⁰ For an excellent analysis of Miller's influence on the Spanish stage, see Espejo.

While it seems undeniable –and it is generally accepted– that Miller’s play subverts the so-called American Dream of unlimited access to wealth and business success, it is equally true –though seldom argued–¹¹ that in subverting the Dream, Miller was also inevitably undermining the dominant ideal of American self-made masculinity upon which the Dream invariably rests. That the relationship between the American Dream of success and the ideal of self-made masculinity in *Death of a Salesman* has not often been emphasized is particularly unusual if one bears in mind that self-made masculinity has been defined as a typically American model of manhood that «derives identity from a man’s activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth and status, by geographic and social mobility» (Kimmel, *Manhood* 17).¹² Granted that a fortune is «as easily unmade as it is made,» the self-made man is «uncomfortably linked to the volatile marketplace,» and depends heavily upon «continued mobility.» As American sociologist Michael S. Kimmel explains:

Of course, Self-Made Men were not unique to America; as the natural outcome of capitalist economic life, they were known as *nouveaux riches* in revolutionary France (and also known as *noblesse de robe*, as well as other, less pleasant terms, in the preceding century), and they had their counterparts in every European country. But in America, the land of immigrants and democratic ideals, the land without hereditary titles, they were present from the start, and they came to dominate much sooner than in Europe. (*Manhood* 17)

In the «growing commercial and, soon, industrial society of the newly independent America,» the self-made man was born at the same time as his country. «Mobile, competitive, aggressive in business,» the self-made man has always been «temperamentally restless, chronically insecure, and desperate to achieve a solid grounding for a masculine identity» (Kimmel, *Manhood* 17). Last but not least, the self-made man’s desire for success is indissolubly linked to an individualistic conception of masculinity. That is logical enough: after all, self-made men are the direct byproduct of the emerging capitalist market in the early nineteenth-century democratic America. So American self-made men, unlike

¹¹ There are, of course, some notable recent exceptions. See, for instance, Beyer (230), Bierman, Hart, and Johnson (269), Ben-Zvi, Kimmel (*Manhood*), Savran, and Babcock. This chapter is indebted to all of them.

¹² This (almost total) lack of masculinity-oriented analyses of Miller’s tragedy is (even more) shocking if Iska Alter’s, Kay Stanton’s, or Jan Balakian’s opinions are taken into account. As Stanton argues, for instance:

Careful analysis reveals that the American Dream as presented in *Death of a Salesman* is male-oriented. The play is heavily masculine. Willy Loman is the tragic protagonist, and the effects of his tragic flaws are clearly engraved upon his sons. The roots of Willy’s tragedy seem to be in his lack of attention from his father and his perceived inadequacy to his brother, Ben. All conflicts seem to be male-male-Willy versus Biff, Willy versus Howard, Willy versus Charley. (67)

their counterparts in the European aristocracy, must derive their masculine identity from their own «economic autonomy»¹³ and «individual achievement» in an independent country based on the principles of «political autonomy» (Kimmel, *Manhood* 22-23).

THE LOMANS AS A FAMILY OF SELF-MADE MEN

In *Death of a Salesman*, the Lomans seem to exemplify four main generations of American self-made men. In effect, Father Loman is a travelling flute-maker and seller representative of a «pioneer generation of westering, as he lights out for the territory at about the time the frontier closed, in the early 1890s» (Hurt 139). Ben Loman, on the other hand, walked into the African jungle and walked out again, very rich, four years later, in the late 1890s, «at the height of America's imperialist and colonialist ventures» (Hurt 139). Willy's dream of salesmanship, fuelled by his 1915 encounter with Dave Singleman, is *not* so much a rejection of self-made man's «heritage –the opposite of going to Alaska» as «a *transformation* of it, a dream of the lone wolf» (Hurt 139; emphasis added). Finally, Biff and Happy seem to act out in the 1940s the inherently contradictory and ambivalent strains in the self-made man's tradition, «acquisitiveness becoming compulsive theft and personal charm becoming compulsive womanizing» (Hurt 139).

The Loman men, then, seem utterly unable to do away with an ideal of self-made masculinity which has greatly influenced their lives. Both Willy's and his sons' failed lives are the direct consequence of their utter inability/unwillingness to live up to the expectations raised by the American self-made masculinity ideal. The play's critique of the self-made man becomes equally, though perhaps initially less obviously, apparent if the characters of Father and Ben Loman are carefully analyzed. In effect, despite Willy Loman's idealized (mis)representation of the masculinities embodied by his father and his brother Ben, a closer look at Miller's text does reveal that the masculine ideals these two men represent are anything but unproblematical.

THE SELF-MADE (LO)MAN AND THE AMERICAN MYTH OF THE FRONTIER

Indeed, both Father and Ben Loman appear to re-enact one of the oldest myths shaping the self-made masculinity ideal in American culture –namely, the myth of

¹³ Of course, the «flip side of this economic autonomy is» competitiveness, «anxiety, restlessness, loneliness» (Kimmel, *Manhood* 23).

the frontier (see, for instance, Fiedler, *Love and Death*; Kolodny; Slotkin; Ben-Zvi; Kimmel, *Manhood*; Savran). As Linda Ben-Zvi explains:

«What is American about American Drama?» One answer to that question is the repeated use playwrights have made of the frontier, both as a theme and structuring principle in modern American drama. [...] American playwrights usually invoke the *myth of the frontier* that subsumed, altered, and embellished [...] historical facts after the closing of the geographic west, at the beginning of the century. (217; emphasis added)

According to Ben-Zvi (219-220), there are three main constitutive elements in the myth. First, the frontier myth is a patriarchal story, it is *his* story, as the concept of the continent has always been encoded as a male adventure. «The land itself,» Ben-Zvi suggests, «is metaphorically identified as feminine, 'she,' with man wishing to merge with it –to return to the sexually undifferentiated, pastoral state of infancy and the body of the mother, at the same time desiring to conquer, penetrate and defile it, become its lover, its owner, its husbandman» (219). So the myth of the frontier becomes «not only the historical account of conquest,» but also, and above all, «the psychological tale of masculine individuation, separation, and schism» (219). Second, this male is *of a particular kind*. D. H. Lawrence was the first to describe him in terms of Cooper's Leatherstocking hero, who is «hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer, it has never yet melted» (92). Even though the hero's soul, as Lawrence rightly noted, «often breaks into disintegration, [...] what true myth concerns itself with is not disintegration» (92). So despite the fact that the historical accounts of the actual frontier experience are all imbued with contradictory feelings (the desire to escape civilization, the compulsion to recreate it; the yearning for the primitive wilderness, the need to conquer and settle it; the fear of the unknown, the challenge of the new), the mythic hero transforms all those dichotomies into a univocal and monolithic set of «positive» values: independence, individuality, courage, coldness, acquisitiveness, violence (Ben-Zvi 220). Third, like the mythic hero, woman is also conventionalized and *Other*. As Ben-Zvi puts it, «if he is actor, she is passive recipient of his action; if he breaks new frontiers, she secures familiar ground; if he seeks adventure, she seeks security» (220). More than anything else, woman often becomes an impediment, what stands in his way and must be overcome at all costs:

Hers is a double bind; she is the female who keeps him from the land, and she is the female embodiment of the land. Metonymically she becomes home and mother; metaphorically she stands for all he fears and all he desires. In either manifestation, she can't win. (Ben-Zvi 220)

From what has been said so far, it stands to reason that both Father and Ben Loman re-enact, in Willy's mind at least, the myth of the self-made frontiersman. In

Death of a Salesman, however, the myth appears to be invoked only to be subsequently undermined. In other words, Miller shows us the darker side of the myth, which he represents as a myth of escape and freedom apart from wife and family, to assert masculine control through violence and sex, to make a new home, alone and unencumbered by the past. As Ben-Zvi points out in this respect, «Arthur Miller's plays are also read as reenactments of the frontier story. Particularly in *Death of a Salesman*, he clearly inscribes the frontier myth within the play, showing its gradual demise» (222).

Father Loman, for instance, the wandering flute-maker and seller who went off to seek adventure in Alaska, is idealized by Willy as an «adventurous man» with «quite a little streak of self-reliance» (Miller, *Death* 81),¹⁴ while Ben also mythologizes his father as a «very great and a very wild-hearted man» who with «one gadget» (i.e. the flute) supposedly «made more in a week» than a man like Willy «could make in a lifetime» (49). However, the sons' idealizations of their father is undermined in different ways. First, Babcock has suggested that, given the mercantile economy in which Miller locates Willy's father, it is unlikely that he could have produced a «gadget» that earned him more in a week than Willy earns in his lifetime:

This type of event was more common (*but still relatively* isolated) in the period of capital Ben represents (monopoly capital) when «great inventors» like Edison and Goodrich did earn more money in a week (by producing technology for an emergent industrial economy) than a salesman could earn in thirty-five years. (69; emphasis added)

Second, we also learn that Father Loman, who once lived in Nebraska, South Dakota, and Alaska («names that resonate with the frontier, especially for a man who lives in Brooklyn» [Ben-Zvi 222]), and who sold hand-made flutes crisscrossing the country in a wagon, seems to tire of his familial duties and leaves his family alone to seek adventure in Alaska. Though the music of his father's flute still haunts Willy's troubled thoughts, thus often bringing to it idealized memories of an actually inexistent fatherhood, he admits to his brother Ben that because «Dad left when» he «was such a baby and [...] never had a chance to talk to him,» he still feels «kind of temporary» about himself (51).

Similarly, Ben Loman is portrayed as the quintessentially American self-made frontiersman. Actually, he is the one who has made it; the one who, following in his father's steps, set out into the wilderness to become «a genius, [...] success incarnate» (41); the one who «started with the clothes on his back and ended up with diamond mines» (p. 41). Notwithstanding Willy's intense idealization of his brother, careful textual analysis reveals that the myth of the self-made frontiersman as embodied by Ben Loman is also powerfully challenged in *Death of a Salesman*. Indeed, we

¹⁴ All subsequent references to the play are to the 1996 Viking Penguin edition, which keeps the original 1949 Viking Press edition pagination.

know that because Ben decided to emulate his father's «heroic» actions, he ran off when he was just seventeen, thus leaving his mother to raise Willy alone. Moreover, one should remember that although Ben has been «man» enough to marry and have seven children, it is doubtful whether he has had much time to take care of them, for, after all, he is portrayed as an intrinsically adventurous self-made frontiersman who is constantly on the move. Indeed, Ben repeatedly reminds his own brother that, unfortunately, he does not have much time to talk to him, as he always has to catch a train or leave «in a few minutes» (45). In fact, Ben does not even seem to have learnt that his own mother, as Willy tells him, «died a long time ago» (46). Willy's idealization of his brother is further undermined when Ben advises his nephew Biff to «never fight fair with a stranger» as «you'll never get out of the jungle that way» (49). To all this one must add that although his «first desire of manhood is reunion with the father» (Stanton 69), Ben seems to have a «very faulty view of geography» (48), ending up in Africa instead of Alaska. We are told, however, that he «discovered after a few days that» he «was heading due south» (48). So it seems that he could have changed direction but did not. As Kay Stanton concludes in this respect,¹⁵ Ben, «instead of joining his father, obviously decided to beat him» (69). What Ben seems to be looking forward to, then, is simply material wealth rather than paternal affection. One should not overlook the fact that Ben is dead at the time of the present action. On this, Susan Harris Smith argues:

The one figure who moves between past and present in Willy's head is a figure of death as well as the embodiment of an unrealistic dream. Miller deliberately weighs the argument against Ben; there is no ambiguity about opportunism, cheating, or cruelty as «success incarnate.» Ben does not appear at the Requiem, as he might have if Miller had thought his position worth debating. (30)

Willy Loman's salesmanship, on the other hand, is merely a different version of the myth of the (would-be) self-made frontiersman.¹⁶ Indeed, if Willy is not a self-made

¹⁵ Despite its general critical accuracy, Stanton's article finally becomes (at least in part) flawed by its heavy reliance upon a number of essentialist gendered conceptions. Indeed, she tries to claim back the (unacknowledged) importance and significance of a number of very traditional women's roles in Miller's text, such as woman as the «creator-sustainer of life» in the Green World, woman as the «determiner of value» in the Business World, or woman as the «measure of human dignity and the accountant of worth» in the Home (77). Stanton even ends up talking about the inherent «femininity of nature» (68).

¹⁶ That the figure of the salesman may be regarded as a subversive re-enactment of the self-made frontiersman is further supported by Miller's own recollections in *Timebends*, when he talks about his teenage encounters with his «two pioneer uncles» (121; emphasis added), Manny Newman and Lee Balsam, both of whom were salesmen. As Roudané explains:

Tellingly enough, Miller regarded Uncle Manny and Uncle Lee, like Ben and Willy's father, as *pioneering* men. It was Manny Newman, especially, who entranced Miller for years, and whose contradictions shaped Miller's conception of Willy Loman and his family. («*Death*» 68; emphasis added)

frontiersman, then it is not because he does not try hard to become one, or because he has really questioned, let alone rejected, the ideological assumptions underlying the ideal of self-made masculinity. On the contrary, he idolizes the model of masculinity that his brother Ben embodies: «What a man! There was a man worth talking to» (53), «There was the only man I ever met who knew the answers» (45), Willy exclaims after his first vision of Ben. «That's just the spirit I want to imbue them [Biff and Happy] with! To walk into a jungle!» (52) For Willy, therefore, Ben embodies an imperialist, «rugged and heroic virility [...] that the failing salesman keenly desires» (Savran 34). Even when he was «eighteen, nineteen» and he was already «on the road,» he still had a «yearning to go to Alaska» (80-81) as there were «three gold strikes in one month in Alaska, and I felt like going out» (81). In fact, though Willy devotes his whole life to salesmanship, he never stops fantasizing about going to Alaska, away from the «angry glow of orange» of the «solid vault of apartment houses around» his «small, fragile-seeming house» (11). As David Savran comments in this respect:

Willy's utopian fantasy [...] hearkens back to a less competitive phase of capitalism in which it was more plausible that individual initiative and acts of daring would bring wealth and success. This fantasy romanticizes the [...] self-made man so prized by American liberalism, both in Ben's achievements and in the melody of the solitary flute that pervades Willy's consciousness and evokes his flute-playing father. (34)

Indeed, the idea that Willy's dream of escape to Alaska is typically that of the self-made frontiersman is given support for two main reasons. First, because it is an exclusively male dream that does not include women: «God, timberland! *Me and my boys* in those grand outdoors!» (85; emphasis added) Second, because it is Linda Loman –that is, a woman– who prevents him from leaving when he is offered the job in Alaska by his brother Ben. «Why must everybody conquer the world?» (85), Linda asks her husband. In this sense, Willy's wife typically replays the role of frontier woman «as encumbrance for the harried spouse» (Ben-Zvi 223), seeking to draw him into what Leslie Fiedler called «the facts of wooing, marriage, and childbearing» («The Novel» 133). In effect, Linda «encourages Willy's dream yet she will not let him leave for the new continent» (Gordon 105) and so she becomes «the wife keeping the adventuring husband from his dream of the frontier or, as Nina Baym has ironically labeled such tales, 'melodramas of beset manhood'» (Ben-Zvi 223).¹⁷

¹⁷ In fact, Ben-Zvi notes that some critics blame Linda for «spoiling» Willy's dreams of self-made masculinity. Mason, for instance, argues that Linda Loman dominates the situation that «engulfs» Willy. As Ben-Zvi suggests, Mason «does not say that Willy sees her this way, or that Miller has Willy see her this way, or that Miller sees her this way, but that she *is* this way» (224). Such a reading recreates, of course, «the very biases of the play, making the critic one more who falls prey to the generalized script of the myth» (Ben-Zvi 224). Hence the imperious need, Ben-Zvi concludes, to «return to the historical evidence, and to rehistoricize our [mythical] heritage on a less fanciful, tangled, and gendered path» (224). For further evidence of the dangers involved in a dehistoricized reading of our gendered mythology, see Armengol.

Even though Linda prevents Willy from travelling to Alaska, his ideal of adventurous self-made manhood never completely disappears, as it is soon transformed into that of salesmanship. In fact, when the adolescent Willy had «almost decided to go» to find his father in Alaska, he met eighty-four-year-old Dave Singleman, a salesman who had «drummed merchandise in thirty-one states» and who could now simply make a living by picking up the phone and calling his buyers «without ever leaving his room» or taking off his «green velvet slippers» (81). So Willy realised that «selling was the greatest career a man could want» (81). Moreover, when Singleman died, «he died the death of a salesman» as «hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral» and «things were sad on a lotta trains for months after that» (81). So rather than reject the myth of the self-made frontiersman, Willy Loman re-presents a *transformation* or a different *version* of it. As Ben-Zvi suggests, Willy just has «a less open frontier, riding in a car up and down the New England territory, selling what others make, leaving his family behind» (222).

BIFF'S AND HAPPY'S PATERNAL HERITAGE

Perhaps more tragic than anything else, though, is Willy's desperate and obsessive effort to pass on his masculine/ist ideological heritage to his two sons. In effect, he is determined to «imbue» them with Ben's spirit, the spirit of a self-made man who «knew what he wanted and went out and got it.» In this way, Happy and Biff Loman are fated to perpetuate the values instilled by his father, they are characters, that is, «who carry within them modern versions of an Aristotelian fatal flaw, the moral fissure, the *hubris*, that foretells their tragedy:»

Willy trains his sons well. Minor errors must be heaped upon larger sins, extending a terrible replicating process and ensuring that a tragic paternal heritage will be passed on to all descendants. For each character there is no escape from this family's tabooed ancestral history. (Roudané, «*Death*» 69)

Indeed, in trying to provide his sons with the «key» to success, Willy ends up encouraging their use of such practices as cheating or theft. In this sense, one should be reminded, for instance, that as Willy is convinced taking care of one's appearance and image is essential to be «well-liked» and successful, he asks his two sons to start to rebuild the front steps of the house, as he does not want people to think he is just a down-on-his-luck salesman. However, instead of giving his sons the materials to rebuild the steps, Willy tells them to «go right over to where they're building the apartment house and get some sand» (50). Furthermore, we know that it is not just an occasional theft: «You shoulda seen the lumber they brought home last week. At least a dozen six-by-tens worth all kinds of money» (50), Willy tells his brother proudly.

On the other hand, we also learn that Biff «borrows» a football from the school locker room so that he can practise with a «regulation ball,» and that his father laughs with him at the theft and rewards the action by saying, «Coach'll probably congratulate you on your initiative» (29-30). As Babcock suggests in this respect, «initiative, even in Franklin's day, is one of the key elements of masculine autonomy, and here Miller insists that initiative is a form of theft» (76).

Finally, one could also be reminded that later in the same scene Biff tells his father, «This Saturday, Pop, this Saturday –just for you, I'm going to break through for a touchdown» (32). Though Happy reminds Biff that he is «supposed to pass» (32), Biff ignores his brother's warning and says, «I'm takin' one play for Pop» (32). «What is lost in Biff's taking,» though, «is the team.» Actually, Biff's initiative, and his desire to place himself above the rest of the team, «jeopardizes the collective goal of the team –to win the City Championship» (Babcock 76). As Babcock insists:

Miller problematizes Willy's pedagogy by suggesting that even sanctioned expressions of masculinity involve theft. [...] This, of course, is a parody of Ben's logging operations in Alaska, but it also suggests that the individualism that the success ideology sanctions legitimates theft, just as that ideology legitimates the expropriation of foreign land and mineral resources. (75)

In fact, even Bill Oliver is stolen from Biff twice. In attempting to deflect their father's fury at learning that Biff plans to leave the business world and return to the West, Biff is convinced by Happy that he should pay a visit to Oliver, with a view to staking this man in a new business venture, «The Loman Brothers.» Happy's «feasible» idea is to have Biff borrow money from Oliver, to start a line of sporting goods with his brother. Obviously, the idea is doomed to failure from the very beginning, not only because Biff has not seen Oliver for fifteen years but also because he stole merchandise while he worked for him as a shipping clerk. Oliver, of course, refuses to give him any money. And his decision, one is led to conclude, may be an intelligent one, for, after all, Biff cannot refrain himself from stealing from Oliver once again during their interview, this time his fountain pen. As he confesses to his father at the close of the play, «You know why I had no address for three months? I stole a suit in Kansas city and I was in jail. [...] I stole myself out of every good job since high school!» (131) So although Miller himself intended Biff Loman to represent the «law of love» against the «law of success» that his father embodies, it is not finally clear at all whether he is, in fact, as positive a model as is traditionally assumed.

THE SELF-MADE (LO)MAN'S SEXUALITY

Besides that, and even more importantly, perhaps, is the question of whether Biff Loman's sexual politics can lay a claim to a really new pattern of masculinity.

Indeed, it is doubtful whether he will eventually succeed in getting rid of his family's sexist/masculinist heritage. Though Frederik L. Rusch has claimed, for example, that Biff «represents the matriarchal society» that subverts his father's more «patriarchal order» (98-99),¹⁸ I believe patriarchal values are engraved both upon the father and the son. In fact, Biff's masculinist biases become apparent in two ways: first, through his openly derogatory opinions on effeminate men; and second, through his various misogynist drives.

Indeed, hegemonic masculinity, as originally defined by Bob Connell, is not only based on the subordination of women but of *some* men as well. In particular, effeminate men must be disdained according to this canonical definition of masculinity. Biff, for instance, tells his brother that rather than devote their lives to the effete business world, «men built like we are should be» using «our muscles» and «working out in the open» (23). Endowed with the muscularity and, in fact, some other ideals of the heroic artisan, Biff wishes, in other words, «to be outdoors, with your shirt off,» among cattle herders and farmhands» (22). Happy is equally frustrated with his effeminate boss: «Sometimes I want to just rip my clothes off in the middle of the store and outbox that goddam merchandise manager» (24). As Savran suggests:

Both Biff and Happy dream of a male world whose boundaries –unlike those of the unruly female body– are clearly defined, on that opposes hard muscle to a pregnable natural world. At the same time, they envision a male community whose borders are clearly demarcated, one that uses ritualized combat as a form of social control (to express and contain aggressive impulses) and pointedly excludes both women and effeminate men. (40)

Actually, both Biff and Happy regard Bernard as «an anemic» and «a worm» (33, 40) because, despite his intellectual abilities, he lacks athletic prowess. Willy has told his sons that in order to succeed and become a self-made man, one has to be loved and «well-liked.» That is why they look down on Bernard, just as Willy despises Charley (remember that in act 1 Willy describes Charley as «disgusting,» «not a man,» because he «can't handle tools» [44]). In their opinion, Bernard is simply a failure, since he is no good at sports and is not «well-liked.»

None the less, the Lomans' belief in athletic prowess and appearance as conducive to success and self-made masculinity proves illusory. As Charley warns

¹⁸ Rusch's argument presents, or so it seems to me, two main problems. First, it fails to acknowledge Biff's masculinist biases. Second, it is based on monolithic conceptions of patriarchy and, especially, matriarchy. In fact, he believes patriarchy to be based on the power of the state, man-made laws, and obedience to them, while he associates matriarchy with love, unity, and peace (98-99). Of course, this view not only fails to account for the culturally-specific variety (and strength) of patriarchal regimes, but also, and more importantly, it neglects the existence of a number of matriarchies with goddesses and women warriors. So Rusch's argument proves ultimately simplistic and essentialist. In fact, at times he seems to equate matriarchy with patriarchal and reductionist notions of femininity.

his friend Willy, «Why must everybody like you? Who liked J. P. Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he'd look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was very well liked» (97). Linda Kintz rightly notes that in here Charley gives Willy «the key to 'reading,' or deciphering, publicity and appearance,» which, of course, Willy misses

its implications. In talking about J. P. Morgan, Charley deconstructs the notion of being liked and locates the 'real' within the image. [...] Money, as Charley knows but Willy does not, is the site where value is established. (111)

So by the end of the play, Biff and Happy, despite their muscles and being «well-liked,» are still unsuccessful, whereas Bernard's intellect has made him rich, successful, and (apparently) happy. Indeed, he finally appears before the Supreme Court as a respectable citizen as well as a happy father of two sons. In this way, then, Miller clearly shows that believing the bluster does not lead to the success one is promised.¹⁹

As regards effeminate men, one should also refer to Mr. Birnbaum, the math teacher who supposedly hates Biff because «one day he was late for class so I got up at the blackboard and imitated him. I crossed my eyes and talked with a lithp» (118). In fact, the play establishes a significant connection between (The) Woman and Mr. Birnbaum (Savran 40-42) In effect, as Willy bursts out laughing at his son's imitation of the teacher, «The Woman joins in offstage» and she enters, lisping like Mr. Birnbaum (118). As Savran suggests, the scene «explicitly thematizes a symmetry between the two lisping individuals who barge in unexpectedly and sabotage the hopes of Loman father and son: The Woman and Mr. Birnbaum.» Furthermore, Mr. Birnbaum and Biff are also linked «(as an original is to its imitation)» to become «a sign of the fear that the feminine always inheres inside the male subject» (41). Savran concludes, therefore, that for Biff, an oral transgression, the imitation of his math teacher, signals his «attempt to rescue his athletic achievements and embattled manhood by impersonating and casting off the feminized man,» though the possibility that this scapegoating ritual will not succeed, that «his effeminacy will suddenly burst forth [...] is the unacknowledged nightmare» lurking behind these «masculine myths» (42).

The masculinist heritage Biff Loman has been bequeathed does not only become apparent, however, in his disdain for effeminate men. As has been suggested, it is also evident in his treatment of women in the play.²⁰ Indeed, Biff has had several

¹⁹ It might also be Miller's way –as a liberal intellectual himself– of allowing the nerds to get their revenge.

²⁰ It is true that the burden of this Ibsenesque «big secret» has taken hold of Biff. Unlike his brother Happy, to whom «sexuality» clings «like a visible color.» Biff has a «worn air» (19). When questioned by Happy, he denies that he «still run[s] around a lot» with women and adds, «I don't know-what I'm supposed to want» (25, 22). However, that his sexual activity appears to have decreased

occasional affairs –if we are to take Happy’s word for it–, although he, like his brother, appears to have failed to get on with any woman for more than one night. In effect, he is already thirty-four years old and remains single, and one can by no means rest assured, given his typically masculine/ist fantasies of escape to the West, that he will soon stop being a bachelor.

In fact, Biff’s sexual politics can only be fully understood if one takes into consideration the fact that he has been brought up in a tradition of (would-be) self-made frontiersmen, for whom important relationships are always homosocial (Savran 35-42), whereas heterosexual relationships, if present at all, are invariably based on the disparagement, subordination, and exploitation of women. Indeed, Father and Ben Loman seem to much prefer Alaska or the African jungle to their wives; Willy keeps interrupting Linda when she talks and is unfaithful to her (though, as he tells Biff, *The Woman in Boston* means «nothing» to him, he was just feeling «terribly lonely» [p. 120]);²¹ and Happy, like his brother, has also been socialized into the self-made man’s sexual paradigm.

Indeed, a central requirement set out by the self-made masculinity ideal (and one which Happy seems to fulfill perfectly) is, as has been suggested, the masculine disparagement of women. Indeed, although Happy repeatedly voices his firm decision to marry, he is already thirty-two years old and, like his brother, still single. Not surprisingly, of course. After all, he can just describe the first pickup as a «strudel» with «binoculars» (100), and, as one of Jan Balakian’s students skilfully notes, «Happy says he wants somebody with character like his mother, but for him that means somebody who will cook and clean and mend. Remember, Biff says, ‘They broke the mold when they made her. She’s a saint for putting up with Willy’» (Balakian 122). Rather than marry, establish a serious relationship, and settle down, Happy seems to prefer to fantasize along with his brother about a future masculine dream of escape to the West and, meanwhile, taking his business competitors’ girls. As he tells his brother:

That girl Charlotte I was with tonight is engaged to be married in five weeks. [...] the guy is in line for the vice-presidency of the store. I don’t know what gets into me, maybe I just have an overdeveloped sense of competition or something, but I went and ruined her [...]. And he’s the third executive I’ve done that to. [...] And to top it all, I go to their weddings! (25)

after the Boston scene should not lead us to conclude, of course, that his masculinist assumptions as regards women have proportionally shifted. Indeed, his «post-Bostonian» relationships with women such as Letta and Miss Forsythe seem to suggest otherwise.

²¹ Though Willy Loman strives to convince his son that *The Woman* means nothing to him, she never disappears completely from Willy’s (or Biff’s) mind, and so she certainly plays a crucial role as the Ibsenesque «big secret» within the play, which seems to contradict (at least in part) Jan Balakian’s contention that «*The Woman*, like Miss Forsythe and Letta, has *no power* and almost no characterization» (117; emphasis added).

«The only trouble» is, of course, «it gets like bowling or something. I just keep knockin' them over and it doesn't mean anything» (25). As Happy confesses to his brother:

«I don't know what the hell I'm workin' for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment –all alone. And I think of the rent I'm paying. And it's crazy. But then, it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and *plenty of women*. And still, goddammit, I'm lonely.» (23; emphasis added)

Through (Un)Happy Loman, then, we can clearly see how the success ideal is invariably associated with a sense of fierce competition that usually ends up engulfing men and, above all, objectifying women.

So it seems, as David Savran (35-42) argues, that both Biff and Happy Loman have been brought up in what French theorist Luce Irigaray would call an eminently *hom(m)o-sexual* environment. In Irigaray's terms, *hom(m)o-sexuality* describes a system of exchange under patriarchy always referring to the «production of women, signs and commodities [...] back to men.»²² Insisting further, she suggests that it is a social monopoly in which «wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men.» In this system, «man begets man as his own likeness» and women function simply as conduits, esteemed only insofar as they articulate male homosocial relations, relations between men (Irigaray, 170-172).²³ Applying Irigaray's ideas to the analysis of Miller's play, Savran argues:

Throughout the play, women are associated with a chaotic and disruptive natural realm that must be [...] controlled so that it cannot undermine the three cardinal masculine characteristics: achievement, responsibility, and authority. Like Ben's jungle or the mare and colt that Biff finds so thrilling, women [...] are rendered sources of inspiration and beauty only when subdued by the conquering male. (36)

²² Indeed, *hom(m)o-sexuality* often turns women into commodities. In *Death of a Salesman*, for example, The Woman is clearly objectified by Willy, and Miss Forsythe and Letta, the call girls in the restaurant, are also regarded by Biff and Happy as «objects that can be traded» (Balakian 117). Only apparently, of course. As these women are not wives, they are not totally under men's control: «They can 'tempt' sons to desert their father in a restaurant or, worse, cause a father to alienate his son. Women are indeed property of a dangerous sort» (Austin 63). All this seems to lend further support, of course, to the subversive power/potential of Miller's play in terms of sexual politics.

²³ Gayle Austin makes a similar point. Starting off from Gayle Rubin's seminal study «The Traffic in Women» (1975) –an essay that synthesizes in turn the theories of Marx, Lévi-Strauss, and Freud (via Lacan) to offer a model of feminist anthropology (Austin suggests) as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Between Men*) did in relation to other major literary works– that in Miller's play women are represented as objects to be exchanged among men. As *Death of a Salesman* is central to modern American drama, it constitutes, Austin contends, an important obstacle to the inclusion of women's experience in serious theatre. See also Balakian (119-121) in this respect.

Indeed, it appears that throughout Miller's work the female body is «constantly in danger of overflowing its limits.» It is often «unstable and unfixed» and

its boundaries [are] always in dispute. Its interior –constituted indifferently of speech, sexual desire, or partially digested food– [is] always threatening to erupt and engulf men in a sea of laughter, chaos, and stink. (Savran 38)

Savran adds that, because of that, men in *Death of a Salesman* must always be on guard, to repress the female body: Masculinity in Miller's play is, therefore, both aggressively heterosexual and homosocial.²⁴ However, even if men are required to police «the feminine» within them, they have all been tainted by it: The Woman in Boston is not only the symbol of Willy's adulterous liaison, threatening both his «own masculine self-sufficiency and the very stability and durability of the patrilineal economy,» but since that fatal day Biff has also become a compulsive liar and a thief, «declining in initiative, feeling 'mixed up very bad' (p. 23), the prey of despair and 'self-loathing' (p. 124)» (Savran 40). Moreover, as Victor Seidler and others have suggested, since the sixteenth century the male desire to regulate others (most notably women) has led to masculine self-discipline, self-control, and, ultimately, to men's estrangement from their own bodies. «When this self-control is extended to the control of others,» Savran concludes, it is called «masculinity:»

It is the power –always striven for but only fitfully attained– that enables the men in Miller's work to master and regulate women's promiscuous desires and to stem the vomit, to keep the female body from spilling over and, like a sewer, contaminating the self-controlled, self-contained, and self-reliant male subject. (39)

CONCLUSIONS

From what has been argued so far, it seems necessary to draw a number of general conclusions. First, it appears that although materialism has insistently challenged its main critical assumptions, essentialism is still recurrent in much criticism on tragedy. Essentialist views are also identifiable in much criticism on Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, especially in the widely shared critical assumption of Willy Loman as representative of a timeless and universal human essence.

Second, though essentialist views on Willy Loman can be, and have been, challenged in a number of ways, Men's Studies may prove particularly helpful in this respect. Indeed, Men's Studies analyzes masculinities and male experiences as

²⁴ Though the play does not openly describe any homosexual or homoerotic relationship, Miller's description of Biff's and Happy's muscularity and physical prowess is certainly charged with (homo)erotic undertones.

specific and changing social-historical-cultural formations, and, therefore, situates masculinities as objects of study on a par with femininities, instead of elevating them to universal paradigms (Brod, «The Case» 40). So rereading Miller's play from a Men's Studies perspective can help us (en)gender Willy's tragedy as a specifically masculine, rather than timeless and universal, conflict.

In effect, in subverting the American Dream of success, *Death of a Salesman* may also be seen to undermine the American ideal of self-made masculinity to which the Dream is indissolubly linked. An in-depth analysis of the play suggests, in fact, that the critique of this masculine ideal is vividly conveyed through most of Willy Loman's daydreams and self-delusions.

Although the play's indictment of the self-made masculinity ideal is nowhere better expressed than in Miller's portrait of Willy's failed life and tragic death, as well as in his sons' inability/unwillingness to live up to his father's expectations, there are other (self-made) men in the play, such as Father Loman and Ben, who, despite Willy's idealization of them, also become the target of Miller's critique.

It also seems right to conclude that, notwithstanding Miller's severe critique of the American self-made man, he fails, ultimately, to provide any alternative, consistently positive models of masculinity. Indeed, despite Biff Loman's rejection of (*some of* the elements informing) his father's dream of self-made masculinity, Willy's influence on his son is still all pervasive. Moreover, his treatment of women (and men) throughout the play is unabashedly masculinist, which shows the pervasive influence of his familial patriarchal heritage.

That the male characters in the play prove both homophobic and misogynist does not mean, though, that Miller's play advocates such attitudes.²⁵ Indeed, the whole argument underlying this essay suggests otherwise. If Miller's play is readable as a critique of the American Dream of success, and therefore as a powerful indictment of the self-made masculinity ideal on which the Dream invariably rests, then the play may also be seen to (at least implicitly) undermine the masculinist and misogynist biases on which this ideal of self-made masculinity is based. As Balakian has suggested in this respect (and I would agree):

Death of a Salesman does not condone the locker-room treatment of women any more than it approves of a dehumanizing capitalism, any more than *A Streetcar Named Desire* approves of Stanley Kowalski's brash chauvinism or David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* approves of sleazy real-estate salesmen. Instead, the play asks us to question whether the dichotomized image of woman as either mother or whore is a desirable cultural value. (124)

As a general concluding remark, it might not be too fanciful to insist on the usefulness of (re-)reading Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (and his other classical plays)

²⁵ Indeed, Savran's text is seriously jeopardized because it keeps mistaking *description* for *prescription*.

from a Men's Studies perspective. After all, an in-depth analysis of the play's central concern with gender issues and (self-made) masculinity is long overdue. This work aims at contributing to filling in this gap. It is high time that we, as critics/readers, began to take seriously Linda Loman's famous (though long-ignored) plea, for, after all, Willy Loman is a «human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. [...] Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person» (56; emphasis added).

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