Eros Repression and Assault Instinct in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*

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**Abstract:** As one of the greatest playwrights, Arthur Miller was honored by people as the conscience of America in the twentieth century for he bravely faced the problems of society and gave sharp criticism to the issues about humanity, morality and justice. By using two of Marcuse’s critical theories—Eros repression and assault instinct, this paper holds that Willy and his family, who are living in a morbid society, suffered from Eros repression and as a consequence, their assault instinct is stimulated, which leads to his tragedy.

**Keywords:** Eros repression, Assault instinct, Death of a Salesman.

Marcuse states the repression in industrial capitalistic society is surplus repression, which is imposed on human in order to maintain its domination. By using human’s endless desire for material and money, the society continuously provides them with various commodities. However, for those ordinary people like Willy, the desire and satisfaction of material life gradually become the pressure on him. Actually, the distorted American dream is actually a tool of domination of new totalitarian society. Although the American dream provides materialism with cultural rationality, it represses common humanity of people. Willy and his family members are under great pressure.

Marcuse deems that the larger the gap between human’s possible situation and the real one, the stronger the need for surplus repression. The great gap between Willy’s dream and his reality is the trigger for his repression, which can be divided into three aspects: his job, sons and Charley. But all these aspects can be summarized to one point: Willy’s dream for money. His job fails to satisfy his aspiration for richness and fame; his sons also disappoint him for doing nothing and his neighbor Charley, who is rich, forms a sharp contrast to him. All these become a great pressure on Willy. In the beginning of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy’s first appearance reveals a repressed image:

From the right, Willy Loman, the salesman, enters, carrying two large sample cases. The flute plays on. *He hears but is not aware of it…* Even as he crosses the stage to the doorway of the house, *his exhaustion is apparent…* A word—sigh escapes his lips—it might be ‘Oh, boy, oh, boy.’

The underline phrases describe his successive body movements when he goes back from work. One can feel how much pressure he shoulders and what a losing person he is. Just like Roudane addresses “Head bowed, dress hat on, he carries his sample cases, the image of an exhausted if not defeated man.” It is absolutely tough for a sixty-three years man to raise a family on one small salary. Time has changed; he suffers a huge decline of his career. He can earn one hundred and seventy dollars a week before, but now even seventy dollars is refused by his boss. The boring and lonely trip of his job also brings pressure on him. As Eisinger believes:

He is lonely on the road, and his loneliness is intensified by his fear of business failure. When he fails to measure up to the model which he believes society to have constructed and which he accepts—the American businessman as rugged, independent, and successful—then he seeks comfort in his sordid little sin and wrecks his sentimental hope for familial bliss.

He seeks comforts from mistress in order to relieve from his repressed work, at the same time, he wishes he can get some customers through her. However, in fact the mistress brings him more pressure for every time he backs home, he feels a crushing sense of guilt to his family. Miller presents no fewer than twenty-five scenes in which Willy’s body language and dialogue creates images of the fall for the suffering of pressure. Willy often seeks relief by collapsing into a chair, where he “lies back, exhausted”. He also sits down in a chair after Howard fires him.

Willy’s pressure also comes from his failure as a father. He places all his hopes on them but gets nothing. He can even get few respects from them, let alone other things. Biff always quarrels with him without understanding. Throughout the play, Happy’s comments reveal his lack of respect for his father. Happy’s lack of love for Willy reaches its climax at the restaurant, when Happy denies that Willy is his father: “No, that’s not my father. He’s just a guy.” The huge gap between Willy’s anticipation and reality of his sons as well as the bad relationship between them brings great pressure to Willy.

Furthermore, Charley is the source of Willy’s pressure. As the close neighbor and best friend of Willy, Charley’s situation is much better than Willy. Charley is a successful example of American capitalistic society and often financially helps Willy. But Willy, who is a strong self—esteemed person, regards Charley’s sincere help as an insult. Charley’s money will never help Willy relieve from his pressure but aggravates it. As Siegel asserts:

The $50 he gives Willy out of charity every week is more like a pusher’s fix of heroin that keeps Willy addicted to his desperation and failure.

He also refuses Charley’s recommendation of job after he was fired. The wide gap between them brings much pressure to Willy. Under such a huge pressure, one cannot recognize himself clearly. He prefers to live in his ideal dreams forever. That’s why he is always indulged in the illusions. Just like
Hooti and Azizpour believe:

Willy’s depression leads to his self-indulgence and denial, two key aspects to a problem play. Willy, as well, lived a life of restrictions on his work, constantly wanting to be promoted, and seriously thinking that his popularity outnumbered anyone else’s.

Except Willy, his sons and wife are also the repressed individuals. Unlike Willy, who shows his anxiety and exhaustion clearly, his two sons have already become numb and indifferent. Miller describes their first appearance like this:

He (Happy), like his brother (Biff), is lost, but in a different way, for he has never allowed himself to turn his face toward defeat and is thus more confused and hard-skinned, although seemingly more content.

The underlined words show their reaction to the pressure. Actually they can feel the same pressure as their father, but they choose to ignore and escape from it. Biff’s pressure comes from his work, his conflicts between Willy; Happy’s pressure is from his being neglected by Willy because he is “always a poor second to Biff.” In Happy’s heart, he can feel the abandonment both from society and family. Jacobson deems:

He seems always to be merely present in the Loman household, an adjunct. At several points he makes an open bid for his father’s attention, asking whether Loman has noticed how much weight he has lost; but his father never answers.

As for Willy’s wife Linda, who completely conforms to her husband, her pressure is Willy’s pressure. From the beginning to the end of the play, she is always in a state of worry and nervousness about Willy and the hostile atmosphere of the father and children.

Marcuse states that human become the subject and the object of assault not for his physical capacity but the psychological one. That is to say, in the new totalitarian society, the influence of assault instinct has already penetrated into human’s mental aspect. As it has been studied before, assault instinct is a broadened expression of death instinct, which exists in the capitalist society. Marcuse calls it “the eternal struggle against suffering and repression.” For the ordinary people like Willy, whose material desire is hard to achieve, the frustration and repression he suffers will stimulate his assault instinct to others, and as long as he fails to relieve it, this assault instinct will turn to himself and give rise to self-harm or suicide. Therefore Marcuse calls the society “a suicidal one.”

In Death of a Salesman, Willy is arrogant, impractical and eager for quick success and instant benefits. In the whole story, he seems to be filled up with hostility to others for he is under great repression from all sides. He feels overwhelmed by his work; he cannot get along with his son. He craves for the power to handle his life like before but he fails. Actually, what he really resent is the life itself. However, as a common person who is filled with unrealistic ambition, he loses focus on his life but incapable of action. As a salesman, he hopes other people will buy his “products”, no matter the real one or invisible one: his life philosophy — “Personality wins the day”. He longs for the power to control his own work and other people, but neither of them succeeds. He becomes the one with strong assault instinct. He becomes easy to get angry especially when things go amiss with him. As Abbotson says:

The American value of competition often encourages Americans to work against each other. It sometimes encourages a spirit of mutual suspicion of the motives of others, and leads to cases that obtaining of wealth begins to outweigh all other moral considerations.

He is under so great repression that the tension of his life almost breaks his back. For Willy, only rank, power and victory are real. Eisinger believes that “the erosion of Willy’s character under the pressure to succeed eats away the moral center of the Loman family.” Every time when he encounters setbacks, his assault instinct will turn to the eternal world, and the conflict arises.

Linda: When you write you’re coming, he’s all smiles, and talks about the future and—he’s just wonderful. And then the closer you seem to come, the shaker he gets, and then, by the time you get here, he is arguing, and he seems angry at you. I think it’s just that he can’t bring himself to— to open up to you. Why are you so hateful to each other? Why is that?

Biff (evasively): I’m not hateful, Mom.

Linda: But you no sooner come in the door than you’re fighting!

The reason why Biff quarrels most with Willy is that Biff’s self-realization always brings the sense of frustration to Willy, and this is the taboo of Willy who enjoys the power to conquer. He forces Biff to buy his experience and do the way he tells him. But Biff is old enough to have his own idea and at last refuses to buy his “products”. He cannot bear objections. Biff is the trigger of his assault instinct. That’s why every talk between them will end up with bitter quarrel. And the more quarrel occurs, the stronger Willy’s assault instinct will become.

He always wants to hold the discourse power when talking to others and refuses to listen to them, and just immerse himself in his own world and hopes other people will respond or do what he thinks. When somebody goes against him, the loss of power intensifies his assault instinct.

Linda: Oliver always thought the highest of him—

Willy: Will you let me talk?

Biff: Don’t yell at her, Pop, will ya?

Willy (angrily): I was talking, wasn’t I?

Biff: I don’t like you yelling at her all the time, and I’m telling you, that’s all.

Willy: What’re you takin’ over this house?

Linda: Willy—

Willy (turning on her): Don’t take his side all the time, goddammit!

Biff (furiously): Stop yelling at her!

This is another severe conflict between Willy and Biff. Biff is going to see his ex-boss Oliver and wants to borrow some money from him in order to set up his own business. Willy
continues telling him how to leave a good impression, what to do and how much money should he borrow. He wants to control the whole thing and keeps talking by himself, and every time when Biff and Linda begin to talk, he just severely interrupts them and continues talking. He enjoys the feeling of power and other’s interruption stimulates his hatred. Then the conflict arises.

He is under so much pressure that he finally fails to bear the ever-growing tension of his life. At last, he realizes that Biff still loves him. He also feels sorry to his wife: “the woman has suffered.” His assault instinct turns to the internal world and the guiltiness and self-reproach fill in his heart because he cannot create a good life for his family. He also feels tired of his repressed life and wants to go back to peace. So, he chooses to kill himself in order to leave the last twenty dollars to his family.

In Death of a Salesman, Miller displays a mixture of the flashback of the past and the reality. Willy gets into memories for several times. And these memories are basically his happy experiences before, which form a sharp contrast to the reality. Marcuse asserts that “the orientation on the past tends toward an orientation on the future.” Willy’s reminiscence of the past can’t relieve him from the repression. Every time when Willy recalls the past, he has to face the future and the reality at the same time. Therefore, this temporary escape of reality will intensify his mental depression and aggravate his assault instinct. Actually, it is a failed escape from repression.

Hooti and Azizpour believe that “the past is the burden they bear in a play in which the past threatens at every moment to break through into an increasingly desperate present.” In his early life, Willy was a successful salesman and lived in a beautiful and natural area. He got well along with his family members. His wife and two sons worshiped and respected him. Their words were full of love, trust and warmth. However, now everything changed. He is under a series of pressure of stressful environment, poverty and disappointing sons, he has to seek the way of escape by losing himself in good memories. Writing in Fortune magazine, A. Howard Fuller argues that “Willy is essentially a self-deluded man who has lost the power to distinguish between reality and the obsessions that come to dominate his life.” Losing himself in the past is the only temporary comfort for Willy to move on. That’s why he always immerses himself in his past when suffering setbacks.

Willy [with pity and resolve]: I’ll see him in the morning; I’ll have a nice talk with him. I’ll get him a job selling. He could be big in no time. My God! Remember how they used to follow him around in high school? When he smiled at one of them their face lit up. When he walked down the street… [ He loses himself in reminiscences.]

This is the first time Willy recalls the past. He gets back home from work and almost “tired to the death”. Linda talks about the quarrel in the morning between him and his son Biff. Willy begins to rebuke Biff for his idleness. He feels extremely angry but helpless because Biff hasn’t got a job at the age of thirty-five. He always believes Biff can be big, but the reality runs in the opposite direction. He refuses to accept the cruel reality and escapes from it by recalling Biff’s brilliant past. Through this self-comfort, he can hold the last hope of Biff and his life.

Willy and Biff love each other but every time when they meet, there will be a fierce quarrel. For Willy, Biff used to be an excellent student with high grades, and should be a brilliant person in the future by his good education. Biff used to adore him so much that he would never go against him. He always believes that his education to Biff can be the right one. However, the truth proves that his education of “Personality wins the day” is completely a huge failure in the present society. He cannot figure out why Biff is always against him now. He is not willing to admit his failure of education. Even he knows the world has changed, he still refuses to face the reality. So he keeps reminding himself of those days when his sons are obedient ones, when they worshiped him and took everything he said as important. However, every time he recalls the brilliant past, the serious conflict between him and Biff will bring him back to the cruel reality, which made him more depressed.

Besides, Willy always recalls the natural environment that he used to live in. “They massacred the neighbourhood. [Lost] More and more I think of those days, Linda. This time of year it was lilac and wisteria. And then the ponies would come out, and the daffodils. What a fragrance in this room!” The stressful environment is one of the reasons of Willy’s repression. He continues fantasizing about the farm in the west. Hooti and Azizpour deem that

This idea allows Willy to have the freedom of love and will allow him to break free from the restrictions and inhibitions that he has working as a salesman.

Surrounded by the high and dark buildings every day, Willy’s pressure cannot get released. He feels alienated from the outside world. The beautiful nature which used to be an important part of his happy life is gone. He hates the repressed environment now and wants to find a way out. However, as a common person, he has no power to change the situation, all he can do is to immerse himself in the past, and only through this can he shortly forget the unpleasant things and free himself from it, “remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them?” However, dark shadow of his surroundings can only be a trigger of his repression, and the memories is just a failed escape from reality.

He also always recalls his brilliant work before. As Hooti and Azizpour assert

Willy’s memories of the business for which he has worked throughout his life is that it had once been a family, connected at a human level.

In the past, he could earn hundreds of dollars one week and he’s still full of energy. However, now he is sixty-three years old, and can hardly meet the end every week. He can no longer bear the pressure of his job. He is often lost in the memories of the other jobs he gave up, and the good conditions of salesman before. At last, he decides to go to see his boss Howard and begs him to offer a job in town, which Howard used to promise him. However, Howard just ignores him and refuses to fulfill his promises. This is such a terrible strike that Willy
can hardly bear it. So he keeps reminding Howard of the early years when he helped Howard’s father to run the business, the close relationship of them and the brilliant experiences of salesman.

Willy recalls the past for a very long time, and keeps forcing Howard to buy the happy memories because he is afraid of facing the reality. Shockley explicates:

The entire play is basically a struggle within Willy’s mind between his vision of himself and the painful reality of facts intruding upon his “dream.” Perhaps the most painful and poignant moment in the play comes when his son Biff tries to tell Willy that he’s not now and will never be the “success” Willy imagines for him. Willy cannot hear him. Actually, in denying basic facts each man was trying to create himself from myth. One was of course more successful at doing this than the other.

He immerses himself in the past when “personality wins the day”, and hopes these warm pasts will awake Howard’s sympathy for him. However, as a calculable businessman, Howard will never feel the same way as Willy does. Although Willy knows things are different today, saying, “Today, it’s all cut and dried, and there’s no chance for bringing friendship to bear – or personality”, he still wants to grasp the last hope by recalling the past. However, these are only Willy’s way of escaping from the reality.

Generally speaking, Willy’s reminiscence of the past is the failed way of him to escape from the repressions of reality. Just as Abottson says, “Willy recalls his idealized past as both an escape and an attempt to discover what went wrong.” Those good memories show a strong desire which can hardly come true. The severer he suffers in reality, the clearer and longer his reminiscence is. When he looks back, he has to face the reality and future, for the reality can only be an irony of his past. The more he looks back, the severer repression he suffers. It is not a way of freedom but only a failed escape from the reality.

References