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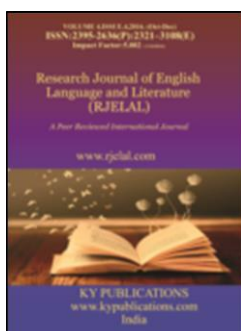
## ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*: A NEW HISTORICIST APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT



This study aims to analyze Arthur Miller's greatest tragedy *Death of a Salesman*, utilizing the new historicist approach as the main methodology. The study chiefly examines the outside contexts regarding the biographical, historical, political, social and cultural contexts, making special reference to the characters, themes and events of the play. The findings of the study show that Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is a product of its time, place, circumstances and the playwright's biography. The play is a social commentary on certain values, beliefs and morals that were common in the American society in the 1930s. Despite Miller's artistic creativity, he was affected by particular historical events such as the Great Depression (1929-1939), World War II, The Cold War, the wide spread of capitalism and the economic boom of the late 1940s. Finally, the themes of the play are drawn from his society such as the failure of the American dream, the family theme, father-son relationship and mother-son relationship.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

New historicism is a literary movement concerned with the historical, social and cultural contexts of the author in the period of time his literary work is produced. According to its principles, literature should be considered as a product of the author's time, place and historical circumstances. Therefore, a literary work should be dealt with as a reflection of the life and time of its author. This school of criticism assumes that beside analyzing the content of the literary text, the main task of a critic is to understand the history of the writer, that is why history is an integral part of the text. Advocates of new historicism believe that themes and characterizations developed in any text are those which were common in that given society in a given period of time.

Arthur Miller is one of the most important figures in the American drama. He was born in

Harlem in New York City in 1915. His Jewish father Isidore was an Austrian immigrant, and his mother was an educator. His father, who owned a woman's clothing manufacturing business, was damaged financially because of the Great Depression. This period was significant in Miller's life, for he did many common jobs such as truck driver, warehouse clerk and these jobs actually brought Miller closer to the masses whom he depicted in his later plays. Miller wrote many plays during his life the most popular of which are *All My Sons* (1947), *The Crucible* (1953), and *A View from the Bridge* (1955). *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is Miller's most sophisticated play both in terms of dramaturgy and content. It won many awards like the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award for best play. Miller died in February 10, 2005 at the age of eighty-nine, leaving behind him works of extraordinarily literary quality. Miller's *Death of a Salesman* can be deemed one of most prominent

plays in American contemporary drama. It has been long argued that the playwright depends on his historical and social experiences in writing the play's many details. In fact Miller's memories of his family during his Brooklyn boyhood serve as sources for many of his fictional characters. First of all, it is known that Miller designed Willy Loman's character based on the character of his uncle Manny Newman who was a salesman. He also represented the character of Biff Loman as a likable character who is more of an athlete than a scholar. This representation is basically based on Miller's cousin who was also an athlete. However, what is more significant is that the characterization of Willy Loman, Biff Loman and Happy Loman is intended to represent the lowest-paid people in the American society throughout the Great Depression era. These lowest-paid people who did not benefit from the economic prosperity of America after World War II chose to await the material comforts offered by the modern America as they thought. The themes abstracted from the events of the play especially the failure of the American dream are drawn from the American culture of that period. Accordingly, the major problem the present study deals with is that Arthur Miller was notably influenced by historical and cultural aspects in his life which inspired him to write his most successful play, *Death of a Salesman*. New historicism is a literary school concerned with the historical and biographical contexts of the author. This study searches for the historical, biographical, cultural and social background in which *Death of a Salesman* was written, linking it to the related details of the play. Thus, it offers an interpretation of the play in light of the new historicist theory.

## 2. Literature Review

To study a literary text making special references to the historical, biographical, social and cultural background of the author means that this text is dealt with from a new historicist perspective. New historicism is a literary movement that has been theoretically defined by many scholars, one of them is (Wayne 793) who argues that new historicism deals principally with the importance of local, political and social contexts for the understanding of literary texts. In line with this,

(Pietruszynski 20) points out that "New historical theories maintain that it is not the text itself, but the social and historical context in which the work is created that determine the importance and meaning of a literary work." He also adds that new historicism is a way to explore how literature can bring some understanding to current social problems. The context of a text interprets the meaning of the text and the society in which it is written. (Greenblatt 3-6) outlines the following four tenets of new historicism: First, literature is history-oriented which means that all literary works are the products of many social and cultural circumstances and forces. Second, literature constitutes another vision of history. Third, literature cannot transcend history and is continually shaped by social and political forces. Literary texts are the products of the ideology of the age in which they are written. Fourth, literature should be interpreted in terms of its historicity since history shapes all literature. According to (Muller 3-4), the main principles of the new historicist approach are: (1) new historicists attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of its production, its meanings, its effects, and also of its later critical interpretations and evaluations. (2) new historicists see texts as agents and makers of history. (3) history is textual: distinction between literature and history is artificial and flawed. (4) for new historicists literature is history, and history is literature. (5) new historicists contextualize literature within other cultural texts. (6) new historicism is also interested in the contextualization of literary production and consumption, and the ideologies that govern these acts. (7) the aim of new historicism is to examine how literature contributes to, replicates, and/or challenges other cultural discourses, of the same or other periods.

(Wiedenmann 3) perceives the aim of new historicism as revealing power relations that are reflected but hidden in a text. This critic also argues that all texts are considered as products of certain historical conditions and therefore imbued with cultural, political and social elements. (Colebrook 26) argues that new historicism studies the relation between text and history. However, the interaction between the text and the world, between the

materiality of the text and its produced meaning and between art and history should be the object of investigation in any critical practice. The relation between the text and its historical context is described as dynamic, since not only is history itself accessible as a text, but the text itself is also the result of certain non-discursive forces. Greenblatt, the founder of new historicism, sees that this critical practice should concentrate on the negotiation and exchange by which the representation of history becomes possible. Advocates of new historicism focuses on the material effects and circumstances produced by the text and in which the text is produced. This critical practice is against any theory of meaning in which the text determinates its semantic context and moves toward the idea of the text itself.

### 3. Discussion

As the study deals with Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* from new historicist angles, or from its historical, biographical, cultural, social and political contexts, the discussion concentrates on the contexts of the play linking them to the new historicist principles. It probes into the outside factors that contributed to writing the play.

#### Historical and Biographical Context

By referring to the chronological events that happened in America since the birth of Arthur Miller in 1915 in Manhattan until he wrote *Death of a Salesman* in 1949. One of the notable events in the history of the new America which Miller witnessed was the Great Depression. It started in 1929 and continued throughout the 1930s as Miller and his family had a change in life that transformed them from a bourgeois family into a middle class one. This period of time was of great significance on Miller's views, inspiring him not only in writing *Death of a Salesman*, but also in writing other plays as well. In 1931, Miller's father had a successful coat-manufacturing factory where Miller used to help him in his business. This experience made Miller realize the ill-mannered way customers treated salesmen and he came closer to the nature of the life of salesmen and other low-paid jobs. In the aftermath of the Depression America enjoyed one of the largest economic booms in history. At the time Miller was writing his play, America was not sure of

its expectedly upcoming success of a long-term recovery. Miller is still stuck in the mentality of the Depression; therefore, he depicts the failure of Willy Loman as a result of it. In this respect, Miller himself quotes a memorable statement about the influence of the Depression on him and on his career as a playwright, "I wrote salesman at the beginning of the greatest boom in world history but I felt that the reality was Depression, the whole thing coming down in a heap of ashes. There was still the feel of Depression, the fear that everything would disappear". (Elliott 42) pays attention to the effect of the Depression on Arthur Miller, arguing that Miller was marginalized by the economics of the Depression which was his politics rather than anything else. Miller himself considered the Depression as "a moral catastrophe, a violent revelation of the hypocrisies behind the facade of American society". Elliott describes Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman* as universally revered American classics that both offer searing critiques of the normative value systems of midcentury America. (Rollyson 8) sheds light on the effect of the Depression on Miller. He claims that Miller believed that the American society had to be fair to the masses who had been ruined by the Depression as the case of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*.

In an attempt to interpret the historical context of the play, many scholars believe that Miller's "In Memoriam" was the first effort that inspired him to write about a salesman. It has been thought that the story was written while Miller was at the age of seventeen, exactly while the Great Depression was affecting the economy of the country. The story is about a salesman who seems a romantic figure, but he is not. Although the story did not achieve great success, but what is important in it is that it was the first attempt for Miller to figure out his own perception of the life of a salesman. Later in his career as a dramatist Miller developed his ideas about the salesman in his best ever play *Death of a Salesman*. In Miller's short story a salesman who does not seem to sell anything, must borrow change for the subway from the narrator.

Another historical event Miller witnessed before writing *Death of a Salesman* is The World

War II. In 1945 the war ended and the American service men returned home. The family therefore became very important in the American society. *Death of a Salesman* highlights the importance of the family in advancing society, for it addresses the conflicts in only one American family, mirroring the larger conflicts within society as a whole. The period that falls between the first premiere of the play and the victory of America in the war is of great importance on the context of the play. The United States of America witnessed a time of economic prosperity in the industrial markets which offered a huge amount of goods and services. Unlike the richest class who benefited from the new economic situation, the low-paid workers were not financially improved from this prosperity. They faced, to some degrees, hard times in America. Those who did underpay jobs like a salesman, a clerk, or a farm worker were not able to afford the cost of the development of the new America. The Loman family including Willy, Biff and Happy are represented by Arthur Miller as samples from the working class in the American society after World War II.

The biographical context of *Death of a Salesman* is not very different from the historical one. However it deals with people and places that inspired Miller to write his Pulitzer Award winning play. The protagonist in the play Willy Loman is with no doubt modeled relying on Miller's uncle Manny Newman who worked as a salesman. Miller is a dramatist who unravels the contradictions in his society while alluring to its values. Willy Loman resembles Miller's uncle in the sense that Newman insisted on maintaining the appearance of complete confidence, entirely rejecting any kind of failure. Miller compiled the qualities of his uncle who is an ordinary American man with the myth principle drawn from the ancient Greek theatre in which myth governs the society by claiming the lives of its common people. In the play, Willy describes his feeling toward the physical appearance as the key to success in his society. Willy believes that the popularity and the attractiveness of his two sons will bring them financial success.

Not only is Miller affected by people from his society, but also he keeps track of his contemporaries. Miller shares Tennessee Williams'

sense of alienation. While Williams felt alienated by his homosexuality as is represented in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Miller felt alienated by a sense of morality which was seemingly inconsistent with the materialistic society. In his autobiography, Miller demonstrates that his *Death of a Salesman* which came after two years from the success of Tennessee's *A Streetcar Named Desire* was affected by this play in the sense that Williams' play is amazing of its librating use of words. Miller saw Williams' use of language which had a lyrical quality, as a kind of poeticized realism that produced an everyday speech for his characters. Similarly, (Cardullo 29-33) believes that Miller's *Salesman* and other most important plays in the 1940s like Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* draw on the cultural archetype of a salesman in the time America was emerging as the most powerful and richest country in the world. Miller, O'Neill and Williams intended to expose the contradictions underlying the success of America. In those days, it was most vague as to what the salesmen were actually selling. The vagueness of Willy's products underlines the allegorical nature of their selling; Willy is an American everyman in an America where what was produced became ever less tangible, ever more removed from reality. Willy does not sell stuff, but he sells illusion.

It comes as no surprise that Miller was influenced by the classical tragedy and Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. Aristotle's *Poetics* introduced to the world the features of a tragedy and the tragic hero. After writing *Death of a Salesman*, it became obvious that although Miller was affected by the classical mood of writing a tragedy, he wanted to propose his own theory of a tragedy and a tragic hero. Miller believes that a common man like Willy can be a tragic hero, and the tragedy is not only devoted to high stature people. Miller expressed his view in his famous article entitled "Tragedy and the Common Man" published in *The New York Times* on February 27, 1949. Miller writes:

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry which bases its analysis upon classic formulations, such as the Oedipus

and Orestes complexes, for instance, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations. (1)

Even though Miller breaks one of the rules of the tragic hero who must be noble, but it cannot be denied that he was affected by this mood of writing in the case that he makes the failure of the American dream an error (hamartia) in the personality of his tragic hero Willy Loman, which causes his ultimate downfall. In fact, Willy Loman is ready to lie and cheat on his wife to achieve the American dream. He has an illicit relationship with a prostitute in the Boston hotel to help him sell his commodities. This love affair with a prostitute seems to be the cause of Biff's failure in high school. Having seen his the prostitute with his father in the hotel, Biff gives away his studies and flunks the math exam. Willy is aware that his infidelity has ruined Biff's future.

#### Political Context

After the victory America gained in the Second World War, the ideology of capitalism, which was strongly adopted by Americans, prevailed in the American society and the world. Democratic capitalism is a political, economic and social system that is primarily based on the free market, the private ownership of means of production, the production of commodities for sale, wage labor, and private property. In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller hints his critical attitude toward the materialistic capitalism as his play discusses capitalism and business as integral thematic concerns. Willy's being fired from the Wagner Company caused by the capitalist society is a strong evidence that Miller implicitly criticizes the abuses of capitalism. Most apparently, the impersonal inhumane nature of capitalism is the reason why he is fired. In the dismissal scene, Willy tells Howard that: "you can't eat the orange and throw the peel away a man is not a piece of fruit" In this memorable quotation, it is definite that Miller indicates the faults of capitalistic private ownership which rely on the workers to work as long as they are fit. Once they get older or become physically unable to bring money for the owners, they are simply replaced with others without being awarded or provided with

financial security. Willy Loman becomes unable to sell at the age of 63, so he is simply fired to be replaced by another salesman who is physically and mentally fitter. What Miller wants to criticize is not Howard's unfair firing, but the capitalistic system which does not make any consideration to Willy's 34 years as a committed worker in the Wagner Company.

In Act One, Linda suggests that Willy asks the manager of his company for a non-travelling job in New York City. That is because Willy is at the age of sixty-three, and he is not able to travel for selling. In one of selling trips, Willy is about to hit a boy and he recurrently made many accidents as a result of his deteriorating psychological state of mind. Willy declares that his employer Howard is totally different from his father whom Willy describes as a prince and a masterful man. On the contrary his son Howard is a person who does not appreciate the hard work of his employees. In this distinction, it can be seen the big transformations in the American business society after the economic boom that changed the employers' vision toward their employees. They only seek profit without appreciating their employees regardless of the time and effort these employees exerted for the advantage of their employers. Willy Loman is making a distinction in which he shows the circumstances before the boom represented in the case of Wagner, compared to the new circumstances after the boom represented by Howard.

Another reference in the play that proves the changes brought by the free market and private property in America is Happy's suggestion that the family starts a new business of selling sporting goods using the money of the loan Biff intends to take. Having heard the suggestion, the Loman family is amazed of the idea, simply because they live in time the country is changing into a big market. Those who can make a success are the ones who have private business. At the beginning of the Act Two, it can be seen that promoting the goods in America was increasing as a consequence of the turning change in America. People preferred to buy the well-advertised products and brands were also invading the T.V by their advertisements. These aspects are the new features that come after the economic

boom in the American market. Another aspect is the loan the family is enthusiastic to gain from Bill Oliver which is expectedly to be ten to fifteen thousand dollars. By this, Miller discloses that people in his time started getting a long term payment of mortgages and loans with more profit for the lenders.

The Post World War II era is a very important period when America was experiencing the Cold War against the Soviet Union. The Cold War was not a war of fighting between the two sides. It was a war of tension, a war of prevailing the political and economic dominance, or a war of imposing the superpower of a nation's ideology. The tension resulting from the Cold War definitely influenced Miller as a playwright in particular, and the American society in general. It has been argued that the Cold War made the Americans feel the need to prove capitalism over communism. Americans were obliged to achieve financial success as a way of defeating the Soviets as well as a way to show their privilege for freedom and democracy.

#### **Social Context**

Like his predecessors, Henrik Ibsen, Eugene O'Neal, Tennessee Williams and other contemporary playwrights, Miller was concerned with portraying the social life in his community. Miller wrote his greatest tragedy *Death of a Salesman* to tackle social morals and values in the American society in the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II. The play is actually a social commentary that reflects the society and its problems. Although the play depicts problems and conflicts in one family, yet it seeks to depict the whole society. The family theme is central to *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman is an aging man who represents the common man from the middle class in the American society during the Depression era. In this regard, (Abbotson 36) argues that in writing his play Miller aimed to write a social drama confronting the problems of an ordinary man in a capitalistic social system. Miller wanted his play to be a modern tragedy which adapted older tragic theories to allow for a common man as an ill-fated protagonist. *Death of a Salesman* represents the conflict between the individuals and society. The conflicts in the play mirror the large conflicts in society, and the characters are to be

seen as prototypes rather than particular individuals. Willy is as solid as the society in which he sells himself rather than sells commodities. The play is a drama about how an ordinary man is misled to conflict between social structures and individual desires.

Moreover, the family theme can be notable in the father-son relationship, and also in the mother-son relationship. In the case of father-son relationship, it appears in many parts in the play represented by Willy's relationship with his two sons Biff and Happy. Throughout Act One, the audience becomes aware of the fights between Willy and Biff. Willy is not satisfied with what Biff has done for his future. Willy is not complacent that his son is working in a farm. Like fathers of his time, Willy is worried about his sons since the country is under the tension of the Cold War, which makes Americans worry about the future of the country. Willy as a father is a man who witnessed the social life in America before and after the World War. First, he witnessed the economic crisis caused by the Depression. He also witnessed the country experiencing this Depression and participating in the World War II. Therefore, he is worried about his sons who have not yet benefited from the material prosperity the country is experiencing. From another point of view, father-son relationship is also figured out in the confrontation in the restaurant between Willy and Biff. Biff and Happy leave Willy in the washing room seeming carelessly cold-hearted while their father is desperately depressed because of Biff's failure to get a loan from Bill Oliver in order to start new business. Before that, this relationship is demonstrated at the end of Act One. As Willy is worried about his son's achievements, Biff pays less respect to his father. In his conversation with Linda and Happy, Biff appears angry at his father describing him as a man who has got no personality in comparison with Charley. The less respect from a guy who gets older toward his father is not inevitably intended to depict all sons and fathers in society. Linda reproaches Biff for being disrespectful in treating his father and asks him to pay attention to him since he attempted to commit suicide. It is clear in this scene that Linda has become Miller's spokesperson. She informs Biff that Willy Loman is

not a man of a noble stature but he is rather a common man and something terrible is happening to him. She asks Biff to show some concern for his father and help support him financially and to pay attention to his deteriorating mental state. Linda seems to reiterate Miller's words in his newspaper article "Tragedy and the Common Man." Miller writes, "I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were." (1) Miller believes that a layman experiencing a tragedy, just like an Aristotelian tragic hero, can evoke in the audience sad feelings. Miller elaborates, "I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing-his sense of personal dignity." (1)

Charley and Bernard represent the good relationship between a father and a son. However, in the case of Biff and Willy, their relationship is awkward in that it is based on spite and hatred. That is to say, once a guy becomes mature, he tends to become liberated from his family. Happy at first expresses his willingness to live in his own apartment. Furthermore, the conversation between Linda, Biff and Happy reveals that Biff comes as a visitor to the house of his family, because he lives where he works on a farm. (Loos 19) refers to the days when *Death of a Salesman* and *All my sons* were written. He points out that the relationship between fathers and sons are important in these two plays since they emphasize the entire family dynamic as fathers near the end of their working lives and look to their sons to take up their work and become successful business men.

Another social aspect in the play appears in the mother-son relationship represented by Linda Loman and her two sons Biff and Happy. Linda loves her sons, and she is worried about Biff's toughness with girls. She expresses her worry that mothers are afraid of Biff since he is reckless with their daughters and he might tarnish their reputation. In fact, Willy as a father, and Linda as a mother show the audience certain social aspects related to the family life in America in their time. Mothers and fathers were always worried about their sons' future. They are worried that they might go astray from their dreams, and at the same time they seriously think of

the finances of their sons. Linda Loman who seems as the caring woman is represented as the positive side of the family whose duty is only to support her husband and sons. This evidence proves the assumption that *Death of a Salesman* is a social drama intended to reflect the real society of its time, the main conflict between fathers and sons. This conflict is caused by the worries Willy feels about the failure of his son. Those who watched the play in the Broadway's premiers shared a feeling of sympathy with Willy's tragedy because they saw themselves, their fathers or even the ones they know in Willy's personality, and in Willy's conflicts with Biff

#### **Through the Eyes of Historicism**

The primary methodology used in this study of Arthur Miller's *Death of a salesman* is the new historicist methodology which is basically based on the outside context of a literary text in analyzing it. One of the main tenets of new historicism is that a literary text is a reflection of the material and cultural context in which it was written. Miller's *Death of a Salesman* has been hailed as the first modern tragedy that criticizes the fatal consequences of pursuing the fake American dream. Miller acquaints the audience with certain beliefs, morals and values the Americans witness in their daily life. Another principle of new historicism is that there is a relation between the text and history, and between the text and the world. The text is the fruit of certain circumstances. In fact, the relation between *Death of a Salesman* and the history of America can be proved by the nature of the play as a reflection of the economic boom which followed World War II. The Great Depression is the play's core historical event. Miller's family was badly affected by the crisis of the Depression which brought him close to the middle class in his society. Miller depicts the problems the middle class suffered as a result of the Great Depression, and later as a result of the economic boom that was only fruitful to high class in society. In Addition, new historicism asserts that circumstances influence the production of texts. The audiences who watched the tragedy of Willy Loman, his conflict with his son Biff, his attitude toward keys of success, and his dismissal from the company after thirty-six years of hard work as a salesman, felt

excessively sympathetic toward this tragedy. They felt that they were watching themselves or ones they knew. Miller reflects many aspects of life in America in his play, and his play reflects the same aspects presenting them in a tragedy of a salesman. Miller mirrors the circumstances of life in America in that period of time in conflicts within one family in his play. Moreover, one of the principles of new historicism applicable to *Death of a Salesman* is that themes and characterizations developed in any text are those which were common in that given society in a given period of time. The escapist characters who prefer to live in illusion rather than face reality serve Miller's purposes of reflecting integral issues that concern almost every individual in society. Willy, Biff and Happy are common people who work in low-paid jobs. They represent how this middle class was treated in America in their time. They are the ones who are not financially improved by the prosperity, so they keep pursuing a false dream that causes more troubles for them. Willy and his sons are victimized by the capitalistic system that dominated social life and business in America after the war. Charley and Bernard represent honest and rich people who did not pursue the fake American dream but rather became successful through work hard. These two characters represent successful, rich Americans who achieved material prosperity and success in a highly capitalist country through hard work, ability and achievement. Besides, Howard and Wagner as characterized in the play are two different persons belonging to two different generations. Howard represents the economic boom in the American market showing the change in the employer's vision toward more profit and less appreciation to social relations. He is a pragmatic person who makes no consideration to anything except his company. His father Wagner was totally different from his son Howard in that the son has become a ruthless capitalist during the Depression. When Willy's sales figures become less, he does not hesitate to cut off his livelihood and give him only a commission. Wagner promised Willy a better position because he served in the company for many years. This indicates that the social relations between employers and employees were stronger

before the Depression and they only changed because of the Capitalistic system.

As for the themes in the play, they are also drawn from the American society in that given period of time. The disintegration of the family, the father-son relationship and mother-son relationship, consumerism, the American dream and many other themes in the play are meant to show the importance of the family after the World War II. Fathers and mothers are always worried about the future of their sons, while their sons are busy in their dreams of having the luxuries of life and getting more liberation from the restrictions of the family. The American dream which is central in *Death of a Salesman* and many other twentieth-century literary works is without doubt drawn from the cultural life in America of the people in that period of time. The Lomans and many others like them believed in the American dream in which it is thought that the new America will bring prosperity and materialistic comfort to every man.

Finally, new historicism is considered to be a method of exploring how literature brings some understanding to current social problems, and it makes critics talk about politics, power and class divisions while talking about the text. Actually, once a critic analyzes *Death of a Salesman*, he will get closer to the social problems in the American society. He will realize the tension the country was under as a result of the Cold War which made Americans more interested in practicing democracy and principles of capitalism. He will see how Americans were trying to make use of the new economic boom when the American market became free and open. Brands and advertisements were invading the T.V, and the use of the credit card is increasing to buy commodities like houses and cars. These facts show that *Death of a Salesman* tackles politics, economy, family, and social classes in the American society in general. That is why the play is rich with references to American politics like the law of the apartment houses which allowed extending the constructions that transformed Brooklyn from a rural city into an industrial one.

#### 4. Conclusions

Starting with the historical and biographical contexts of *Death of a Salesman*, the discussion



indicates that the Great Depression affected the life of all Americans in general and Miller as a playwright in particular. The Depression had damaged the business of his father. Therefore, Miller was obliged to do many menial jobs that brought him close to the low-paid workers and to the problems they faced. This experience made Miller realize how those workers including salesmen were treated in his society. In addition, the main characters in the play including Linda, Willy, Ben, Charley and Howard's father have all grown up in the period of Depression. In the period of Depression, Miller wrote a short story entitled "In Memoriam". This story is considered to be the first attempt to figure out the life of a salesman since the story deals with a salesman who sells nothing.

World War II is another historical event in Miller's life as a playwright. This war that preceded the writing of *Death of a Salesman* changed the lifestyle of all Americans. After the war America became the greatest country in the world; therefore Americans reacted against communism by practicing the capitalistic principles more and more. The period after the war created a boom in the American market which transformed the country into a private ownership market. This boom brought prosperity for the high class, while the middle class, the Loman family belongs to, did not benefit from this richness. Furthermore, the discussion indicates that Miller depended on real characters from his biography in developing the characters of his plays. Willy Loman is modeled on Miller's uncle Manny Newman who like Willy insisted on attractive physical appearances. Manny's two sons Buddy and Abby are also a main source to develop Happy and Biff Loman. As it has been argued, Manny always kept looking to his two sons as if they are competing with Miller himself. Like Bernard, Miller was a studious successful person.

Not only was Miller affected by real persons in his biography, but he was also affected by many writers including Eugene O'Neill, Henrik Ibsen, Tennessee Williams and others. All of them tackled social issues in their plays. Miller is affected by the Aristotelian concept of tragedy and Sophocles' *King Oedipus*. Although *Death of a Salesman* is a social commentary on certain values in society, but still it

is a tragedy of a common man caused by a myth belief similar to that in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.

As for the political and social contexts of *Death of a Salesman*. The discussion of the political contexts indicates that the play is intended, to some degrees, to criticize capitalism. Miller depicts the dismissal and the failure of Willy Loman as a result of the unfair capitalistic system which does not appreciate the long time Willy served in the Wagner Company. Once Willy reveals that he is not able to travel to sell, he is fired. The Cold War is another political context that affected Miller in writing *Death of a Salesman*. This war as discussed was not a war of fighting, but it was a war of tension, and a war of imposing the power of a nation's ideology. Thus, Americans were obliged to achieve financial success to assure their privilege for freedom and democracy. The social context of the play indicates that *Death of a Salesman* is a reflection of the American society, and a depiction of its morals and values. The play which was originally entitled as *The Inside of his Head* is a social drama represented in the conflicts within one American family. The social aspects of the play can be seen in its themes including the family theme, father-son relationship, and mother-son relationship. The country's economy, the technological advancements, and the lifestyles of characters are also important social aspects in the play. The play shows how people are obsessed with brands that are well-advertised.

Last but not least, the major concern in the study is the extent to which the main theories of new historicism are applicable to *Death of a Salesman*. The findings of the discussion show that the play is a product of Miller's biographical life. It is a product of the circumstances Miller witnessed including the Depression, World War II, economic boom and Cold War. It can be concluded that the play is a context of the cultural aspects of the American society, and it is a reflection of the effects and circumstances in which it was written. The play shows that its themes and characterizations are the same as those which were common in its society. The family theme, the failure of the American dream, father-son relationship and mother-son relationship are all clearly shown in the play. Furthermore, relating *Death of a Salesman* to new

historicism principles shows that reading the play is a path to understand the politics, class and power of the country in which the events take place. The reader of *Death of a salesman* can enrich his knowledge about the United States of America, its history, its culture, its economy, its politics and its social life.

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