

## The Effects of The Great Depression Reflected in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman

Irwan Sumarsono<sup>1</sup>, Ima Masofa<sup>2</sup>, Abu Fanani<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Politeknik Elektronika Negeri Surabaya

<sup>2</sup>SMP Unggulan Amanatul Ummah Surabaya

<sup>3</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya

\*Correspondence: [Irwan@pens.ac.id](mailto:Irwan@pens.ac.id)

### ABSTRACT

*This study focused to analyze the effects of the Great Depression on the main character in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, especially on how he tried to survive, whether he succeeded or not, and the effects on his life and family. In analyzing the study, the writers used sociological and historical points of view. The writers also used the qualitative method in analyzing this study. Data were collected by doing library research. The main data were derived from the work, while the supporting data were derived from sources such as English literature journals, e-books, and other sources. The collected data were classified and analyzed before they were presented in an article. The writers used sociological and historical approaches to see the social and historical background of the play. From this study, the writers found out that Willy Loman was affected badly by the Great Depression in which he experienced difficulties both in his career as a salesman and in his life. The Great Depression had been his obstacle in gaining his dream of being a successful salesman; and having a happier, fuller, and richer family. His failure brought a serious effect that he liked to withdraw himself from the real world and lived in his illusion. The worst effect was that he could not face reality and committed suicide.*

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Published June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2023



### KEYWORDS

American Dream; Death of a Salesman; Escapism; Illusion; Suicide.

### ARTICLE LICENCE

© 2023 Universitas Hasanuddin  
Under the license CC BY-SA  
4.0



### 1. Introduction

The term "Great Depression" is defined as the greatest and longest economic recession in modern world history that took place between 1929 and 1941, when the United States entered World War II 1941. Several economic contractions, including the stock market crash of 1929 and banking panics occurred in 1930 and 1931 (Segal, 2022). While a recession is defined as a significant decline in general economic activity in a designated region and is recognized as two consecutive quarters of economic decline, with monthly indicators such as a rise in unemployment (Anderson, 2022). Hause states that during the recession, in the history of Western civilization, prices on the New York Stock Exchange began to drop very quickly, causing fear and panic in the business world, people bought and sold their stocks, and unemployment went up everywhere (Masofa, 2018).

The Great Depression caused drastic declines in output, severe unemployment, and acute deflation, and its social and cultural effects were no less staggering. The Great Depression represented the harshest adversity faced by Americans since the Civil War (Romer & Pells, 2003). The effects of the great depression were very serious for every aspect of life; a decline in economic stability, an increase in the number of unemployment, and a decrease in people purchasing power (Gordon, 2017; Rahman & Amir, 2019). People had difficulty getting jobs and earning a living. Everything was getting more expensive. Many people got depressed and committed suicide.

The Great Depression, also known as Black Thursday, which took place in America in the 1930s influenced very much in all sectors of America at that time. The business investment decreased rapidly since the investors panicked and sold their shares. Unemployment increased very much, and their salary fell dramatically (D'Apice et al., 2010; Sahib et al., 2019). The effects also took place on agriculture. People got depressed, and many of them could not stand to face their reality. People were frustrated and many committed suicides.

Before the Great Depression, American society lived a prosperous life. People moved from any place to search for a better, wealthier, and happier life. This dream is called the American dream. People who could have the same

opportunity and were willing to work hard would get success. Success was counted based on how much material wealth someone could accumulate. When the Great Depression took place, it caused people to have nightmares. They could not gain their American dream. Everything got expensive and difficult to get. People got difficulties in gaining their American dream, and more and more people were defeated. People started to live in their illusions and failed to face reality (Cervantes et al., 2021; Andini, 2017). Some who could not survive decided to commit suicide.

The Great Depression also caused many writers to use it as the background of their works. Arthur Miller was one of the authors who wrote about the social and economic conditions in his works. He wrote about the reality that he saw in his life. He was considered one of the best playwrights at that time and had the same influence as the Great Depression. He was born in 1915 in New York City. His mother was the owner of a women's clothing company. He had a difficult life in her youth and had to struggle to survive. His father lost his business and made the family must move to a smaller home in Brooklyn. From this difficult condition, he learned how hard it was to earn a living at that time. This social and historical background influenced him very much in writing his literary works. He wrote about the difficult time that people had to face, and how people had to survive. He started writing plays when he studied at the University of Michigan. He wrote his first Broadway play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* in 1944. He got the Drama Critics' Circle Award for his *All My Sons*

Arthur Miller wrote what he saw in his life. He transformed it into literary works. Most of his works deal with the fragility of human relationships, the morality and responsibility people had, and the compassion that people had. In other words, we can say that almost all of his works relate very much to his real life. He wrote not only drama but also some articles. We can mention some of his works such as *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944), *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953), *A View from the Bridge* (1956), *Incident at Vichy* (1964), *After the Fall* (1964), *The Price* (1968), *The Creation of the World and Other Business* (1972), *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991). Arthur Miller is known as one of the three masters of American drama in the 20th century besides Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams. Miller's legacy continues to live on internationally and his drama has been adapted into some films such as *The Crucible*, *The Misfits*, and *Death of a Salesman*.

For Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* displays the personal effects of the Great Depression. Miller succeeded in reflecting the shattered dreams of his family, and most of the American people's using the character of Willy Loman. As the main character of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy fails to obtain his financial or emotional stability, although he has been a salesman for a long time, and he also fails to gain his emotional stability although he has got married to a faithful and devoted wife (Coursehero, 2016).

*Death of a Salesman* was one of the famous dramas that he wrote based on his own uncle's life. His uncle was a salesman who had to struggle for life in difficult conditions and situations. His uncle inspired him in writing *Death of a Salesman*. Waincoat stated that through *Death of a Salesman*, he won not only the Pulitzer and Tony awards; but was also awarded as the best playwright (Sumarsono, 2019). *Death of a Salesman* is about a traveling salesman, Willie Loman, who consoles himself and his sons, Biff and Happy, with lies about the American Dream and about capitalism, masculinity, and the rotten foundations of modern society that became the blueprint for the American stage tragedy (Marino, 2017).

*Death of a Salesman* was a "tragedy of the common man." Willy Loman is a regular, aging, traveling salesman who finds it increasingly difficult to cover his territory in searching for big orders. He always believes that he has charm and optimism that will make him rich. The reality is different. His business is different from years ago when he was younger. He fails to get big orders. He fails to be a successful salesman, a father, and a husband. He is not a faithful husband since he has an affair with another woman, and he fails to build a good relationship with his sons. The effect is he begins to turn to his old memories and illusions to cover his failure. He begins to withdraw himself from reality. Besides he is brought to ruin by his weaknesses, the Great Depression also brings a lot of difficulties for him.

To get a better understanding of the focus of the study, the writers read some related studies done by different writers. The first related study that the writers read is a paper written by Megawati. They concluded that Willy Loman, the main character, has big ambitions and dreams to get material satisfaction greatly affects his life, but he failed to make his ambitions and dream come true. The effects of his failure make him must commit suicide (Megawati, 2017).

Liu and Gao stated that *Death of a Salesman* is a classic tragic work in contemporary America, that discusses some social factors that cause Willy Loman to commit suicide. According to them, the American Dream, the Great Depression, and his misguided social values take important roles in making the character of Willy Loman commit suicide (Liu & Gao, 2021).

Alshareef stated that Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman* wanted to say that American society in the 20th century live in a downturn in economics as a result of the dark side of capitalism causing the middle class more affected by this system. At the same time, most of society wanted to achieve and be successful, but without realizing the way of dreaming, and the occurrence of the dark side of Capitalism that causes recession for the economy. He also mentioned that Willy Loman is a naive man who wanted to lead his family to a prosperous life but his age, illusion, pride and the dark side of Capitalism made him be a failure and put the end of his life (Alshareef, 2016).

## **2. Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to analyze how the Great Depression affects the characters of *Death of a Salesman*. The writers collected the related data from different sources. The main data were taken from the play written by Arthur Miller entitled *Death of a Salesman*, while the supporting data were collected from articles, journals of literature, e-books, and other related sources. The writers conducted data collecting by reading both the main and supporting sources intensively, taking notes, classifying data, interpreting the data, discussing the data, and the final step displaying the data. The method used in this study is the descriptive qualitative method through library research.

## **3. Result and Discussion**

Arthur Miller, in *Death of a Salesman*, presents the life of a salesman, Willy Loman who fails to obtain his dreams to be a good and successful salesman, father, and husband. He fails to face the reality that happens to him and his family. Willy Loman, at a young age, was a successful salesman who could get big orders and had a good reputation for his work. He was a responsible husband and a good father who always gave good attention to his family and his children. When he is facing his retirement time, he experiences some difficulties, such as a decreasing income, and a worsening relationship with his two children. The difficulties that he has to face come from internal and external factors. From the internal factor, it is his own weaknesses that he cannot overcome, and the external one is the Great Depression that the whole country experiences.

Willy Loman at his younger age was a successful salesman. He could travel anywhere to cover his territory and make big orders. He could earn his family life and live in luxury, but when he was at the golden time in his career, he had a love affair with another woman. By having this love affair, he had to share his income not only with his wife and children but of course with his lover. He could not finance his family and his children's education, and he could not have a deposit for his retirement. This love affair is finally found out by his wife and children and makes them disrespect him and have a bad father-children relationship. Finding the love affair of their father with another woman makes Biff Loman and Happy Loman lose their love and respect for their father. The worse thing that happened after that is their ambition to be successful businessmen was fading.

Willy Loman actually loves his sons very much and is proud of them. He always believes that Biff and Happy are better and more well-liked by people than the other boys. He likes to underestimate the other boys in the neighborhood. His being so proud of his sons makes him forget and fail to see the reality that his sons are not really better and more well-liked than the others. He fails to recognize the bad thing that will happen to his son when Biff fails his mathematics test. By ignoring this reality, he does not realize that it will drive his sons to failure.

The other thing that makes Willy Loman not be able to face the changing situation is that he still believes that to be a successful man, someone must be well-liked and have an attractive personality. To be a leading businessman, someone must be able to create good personal interest and appearance in the business. Having a charming personality is the key to success, that is what he believes. For him, hard work and innovation are not important. The important thing is we have to be well-liked by others. That is what he always says to his sons, Biff and Happy. That is why when Biff compresses about making fun of his teacher, Willy is not angry with Biff. He thinks that how Biff reacts is more important than morality.

Willy hopes that both his sons can be successful men in the future, but they fail. Willy Loman believes that people not only like him but also his sons. Willy believes that he is a great salesman who will make any good orders at any time, but he is not a well-liked and a great salesman anymore. He is not a young traveling salesman who can make big orders. What he could do at his younger age cannot be repeated now. He is getting too old to travel every day to make money to support his life. He gets real difficulties caused by his own weaknesses.

The external factor that causes him to fail to be a great salesman at his age is the situation at that time, namely the Great Depression. During the Great Depression, the world country experienced a difficult life. The economy got down. Many businesses failed to develop. Unemployment increased, and the people's power to buy was decreasing because

they could not get a good salary. When the economy gets down, people tend to hold their money and try not to buy anything that is not so necessary. Sellers get the negative effect that they cannot sell their products, and Willy Loman who works as a salesman cannot get a big commission since his salary is dependent on the sales that he makes. Everything is getting difficult to get and more expensive while it gets difficult to earn a living.

Willy Loman at his age and not young anymore gets his difficulties in selling his products and making big orders. He is not young and attractive anymore. He fails to make people buy his product, so he fails to make big money. The worsening economic situation makes people try not to buy something if it is not very necessary and urgent. This situation makes Willy get difficulties in selling his products. The effects of the Great Depression caused difficulties in any sector not only in the economic one. Many people got depressed and failed to face reality. They withdraw themselves from the real world to the world of illusion. That is what Willy Loman has to do. He gets depressed and fails to face reality and starts to live in his illusion. He fails to make his dream come true to be a successful salesman and live a better, happier, and wealthier life with his family. He also fails to make his sons successful people and finds out the reality that his sons failed to fulfill his dream.

Feeling guilty for making his family shattered and crashing his sons' dream to be successful persons makes Willy Loman gets distressed. He knows that his teaching to his sons is a failure since he cannot be a raw model for them, especially in being a faithful husband and father to his sons. His sons' failure in obtaining their dream is mainly caused by his mistakes. He fails to be a good husband and father. He fails to make his son proud of him, and he fails to motivate them to reach their dream because they do not believe in him anymore, and they have lost their respect for him. Being distressed makes him unable to face reality, and not only makes him live in illusion but also drives him to commit suicide.

He thinks and believes that committing suicide will make his difficulties or problems solved, and proves to the world that he is really a well-liked and attractive person, but he is not. At his funeral, not many people come to give their last honor to him. Only his family comes to his funeral. It is evidence that Willy is not really the well-liked person that he is used to thinking about.

The Great Depression brings negative effects not only to Willy Loman but also to his sons, Biff and Happy. The Great Depression causes economic problems and difficulties making them unable to develop themselves. The difficult economic situation makes them fail to develop their business or get proper jobs with proper salaries. The Great Depression makes both Willy Loman and his two children fail to obtain their dreams to be successful people. After they finish their study, they cannot get jobs or run their business. Both Biff and Happy have to come home and live with their parents. The difficult situation forces them to forget about their dreams to be successful people just like their father's dreams.

#### 4. Conclusion

Death of a Salesman presents the effects of the Great Depression on the characters, and society in general. Willy Loman and his sons are the representation of the society who experiences a difficult life during the Great Depression. Willy Loman's failure was caused by two different factors, internal and external. The internal factor that causes his failure is his own weaknesses and the mistakes that he did when he was younger and successful. The love affair that he did cause his relationship with his sons broken. They cannot make him a raw model and make their dreams fade. The external factor is the difficult economic condition caused by the Great Depression. The Great Depression causes him unable to make big orders and get big amounts of commission. Facing this difficult situation makes him distressed and unable to face the reality and causes him to commit suicide as his escape.

#### References

- Alshareef, H. A. (2016). *Analytical study of the American Dream and Capitalism in Arthur Miller's play "Death of a Salesman"* (Doctoral dissertation, Sudan University of Science and Technology). <http://repository.sustech.edu/bitstream/handle/123456789/13983/Analytical%20study%20of%20....pdf?sequence=1>
- Anderson, S. (2022). *What is a Recession?*. Available on March 2023. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/r/recession.asp>
- Andini, C. (2017). *Children Emotion in The Movie "Big Hero 6"* (Doctoral dissertation, Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar).
- Course Hero. (2016). *Death of a Salesman Study Guide*. In Course Hero. Retrieved June 1, 2022, Available on February

2023. <https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Death-of-a-Salesman/>

- D'Apice, V., Ferri, G., D'Apice, V., & Ferri, G. (2010). The Great Depression of the 1930s. *Financial Instability: Toolkit for Interpreting Boom and Bust Cycles*, 39-44.
- Gordon, R. (2017). *The rise and fall of American growth: The US standard of living since the civil war*. Princeton University Press.
- Liu, Y., & Gao, M. (2021). The Analysis of the Causes of Willy's Death in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. *Review of Educational Theory*, 4(2), 32-35. doi:<https://doi.org/10.30564/ret.v4i2.3109>
- Marino, S. (Ed.). (2017). *Arthur Miller's Century: Essays Celebrating the 100th Birthday of America's Great Playwright*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Masofa, I. (2018). United States' Recession In 1930 Reflected in John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath. *Wacana Didaktika*, 6(01), 63-67. <https://journal.uim.ac.id/index.php/wacanadidaktika/article/view/187>
- Megawati, S. (2017). The Desperation Of Father In Great Depression Era As Seen In Arthur Miller's The Death Of Salesman. *Jurnal Ilmiah Langue and Parole*, 1(1), 117-124.
- Rahman, F., & Amir, P. (2019). Trends in Reading Literary Fiction in Print and Cyber Media by Undergraduate Students of Hasanuddin University. *International Journal of Education and Practice*, 7(2), 66-77.
- Romer, C. D., & Pells, R. H. (2003). Great depression. *Forthcoming in Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved, 4(5), 11.
- Sahib, H., Rahman, F., Duli, A., & Asba, A. R. (2019, May). Customary Forest Conservation through Informal Knowledge System of Ammatowa Community. In *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* (Vol. 270, No. 1, p. 012042). IOP Publishing.
- Segal, T. (2022). *Depression? What Was the Great Depression?*. Available on March 2023. [https://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/great\\_depression.asp](https://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/great_depression.asp)
- Sumarsono, I. (2019). The Illusion of Willy Loman'S in Arthur Miller'S Death of A Salesman. *Dinamika: Jurnal Sastra dan Budaya*, 7(2), 770-777.