



## Research Article

# The psychological perspective on social alienation in Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman playwright in the framework of Fromm's perspective of social alienation of the laborer in the communities through the main character of the play, Willy Loman. Besides, it examines the social norms of American society during the Great Depression period and its effects on society. The psychology of the main character and his family is discussed and analyzed with specific instances which are dominantly emphasized by the author. It gives a broad understanding of the psychology of the laborer community in light of Erich Fromm's alienation theory.

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## Introduction

### About the Author

With his contribution to American Literature and Drama, Arthur Miller is a well-known playwright, essayist, and significant figure in the 20th century who focuses on social and political topics dominantly in his works. Miller's most-known plays can be listed as *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, *A View from the Bridge*, and *All My Sons*. He contributes to American Theatre with many plays which address sociological subjects such as; alienation, economic crisis, and its effect on society. The essential themes of those works are the dynamics of the family, morality, and the outcomes of social expectations.

### Social Alienation Theory of Erich Fromm

According to Fromm's point of view on social alienation, it can be explained as the consequence of modernization and industrialization and their impacts on individuals in the modern period. Research conducted by Kaori Miyamoto states Fromm contends that because it speaks to the most fundamental aspect of current personality, the idea of alienation serves as the starting point for analysis of contemporary social character (Miyamoto, 2014). Hence, it can be interpreted that the modern period changes the human psyche in the meantime. Followingly, the protagonist of Death of a Salesman is a representation of a person who is changed by the necessities of the capitalist system. At that point, the alienation theory can apply to Miller's Death of a Salesman and the character Willy Loman in the aspect

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of Eric Fromm's theory. The protagonist's life as a laborer in the capitalist society leads to many problems in his life, and his feelings and psychology start to change over time. The play emphasizes the main characters' wishes and dreams of being wealthy as the representation of the American Dream in the United States during the Great Depression period in the 1930s. Therefore, the capitalist system impacted both Willy Loman and his family, and this paper proposes the examination of many symbols, elements, and perspectives which should be analyzed in the play.

Eric Fromm is a psychologist and psychoanalyst who improved a theory on alienation shaped by the framework of the essence, interpersonal relationships, a distraction from work, a detachment from nature, and experiencing fulfillment. Social alienation can depend on many reasons which stem from the capitalist society, consumerism, machinery, and other sociological problems. Followingly, his understanding is mostly based on the psychoanalysis of alienated individuals in the modern period.

### **Aim of Study**

This study aims to examine one of Miller's plays *Death of a Salesman*, which accepted his masterpiece and won numerous awards, in terms of social alienation and the consequences of social expectations of the main character and his feelings. The quantitative research method is utilized in this study to show the readers his inner life and the transformation of his feelings depending on his environment and the harsh conditions of his life. In this sense, Erich Fromm's theory is utilized to enhance the knowledge of what social alienation is and what are the impacts of a capitalist environment on the protagonist's and his family's life from a psychological perspective.

### **Research Method**

The protagonist of the play is examined in this paper to show how social alienation is interpreted in terms of Eric Fromm's idea of social alienation by utilizing the quantitative research method. This study may lead the readers to grasp the impact of the capitalistic system on labor's life in *Death of a Salesman*, with the understanding of the ideology behind alienation. The resources utilized in this study are selected concerning the subject matter of Fromm's theory of alienation and its criticism in different sources.

### **Findings**

The first key aspect of Fromm's perspective of alienation is about the essence which is related to inner fulfillment and capacity for growth. However, individuals often experience a sense of disruption from their essence in modern capitalist societies. It shows up in the communities when materialistic values, social norms, and external pressures inhibit the improvement of authentic selves. According to research on *Erich Fromm's theory on alienation* conducted by Miyamoto, it is stated Fromm asserts that modern science and technology, however, have eradicated these aspects of human nature as well as human connections to nature and spirituality (Miyamoto, 1911). The second key aspect of Fromm's understanding can be explained by the estrangement of others which emphasizes the significance of genuine human connection. It highlights the meaningful relationships of human beings with other people in society. The capitalist system can cause the destruction and decrease of deep emotional bonds. The idea of competitiveness is promoted in the modern economy and educational system, which can compete with and even sever traditional relationships like familial connections by raising the concept of achievement. (Miyamoto, 1911) In this sense, it refers to societal problems of society which cause many psychological side effects on human beings. The third aspect is described as the alienation from the work which is the cornerstone of the realization of self and the existence of human beings. However, many individuals experience alienation from their work in terms of exploitation, division of labor, and monotony. The division of labor means the separation of tasks, and each person can focus on a specific part of the production. He never sees the final part of the production since he works in the condition of division, and that leads to "dehumanization". Given the information from Marx's own work *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844* (1988), it is argued that the social dimension of labor inside the alienation is expressed in political economy

through the division of labor. The division of labor is therefore nothing more than the estranged, alienated positing human activity as a real activity of the species or as activity of man as a species being, since labor is only an expression of human activity within alienation, of the living of life as the alienating of life. (Marx & Engels, 1988:128) In this sense, it is possible to refer that the division of labor is a problematic issue according to Marx. On the other hand, Fromm suggested the ideal society can be shaped by the communities which are constructed by people who are alienated from society. (Miyamoto, 1987:41) The fourth aspect can be explained by alienation from nature which means the separation of the human being from his own nature and environment. Modern societies lead to the disconnection from nature in which the societies are driven by consumerism and industrialization. This alienation can cause detrimental impacts on human beings and they feel isolation and loneliness. The last aspect of Fromm's perspective on alienation is the escape mechanism which is exemplified as the way of fleeing from the problems of a modern society driven by authoritarianism, destructiveness, and a focus on material possessions. These mechanisms give temporary relief and prevent people from true fulfillment. According to the research given *Erich Fromm's theory on alienation* (2014), it is argued only in his ideal environment, where the "new Han" is willing to renounce "all forms of having," i.e., material possessions, where he is trying to "reduce greed," or is "not a bundle of greedy desires," is necessary for this become actuality (Miyamoto, 1911).

From all the collected information, it can be understood that Fromm's perspective on alienation is dominantly about the psychological aspect of the capitalist society. It depicts the significance of finding meaning in business life, being harmonious with nature, and nurturing the human soul in terms of relationships. In this sense, it is essential to focus on the feelings of human beings. The next part of this paper aims to analyze the psychology of the protagonist of Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* in the aspect of Fromm's alienation theory. In the play, the main character is represented as an average man who struggles with the harsh conditions of the capitalist society and suffers from alienation. This alienation impacts the protagonist's life and transforms his feelings during the period of the Great Depression in the United States. Erich Fromm's theory can be summarized under the terms such as; existence and essence, estrangement from others, alienation work, alienation from nature, and escape mechanism. Modern society can change human psychology in a negative way that it contains capitalism, consumerism, individuality, and division itself. The conducted researches given in this part show that alienation created itself within the society where capitalism exists.

The well-known play by Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, is about a man who suffers from a capitalist society, and psychological transformations brought by modernism. Arthur Miller, as a successful playwright, emphasizes the themes of identity, morality, American Dream. The main character, Willy Loman, experiences a deep sense of alienation and struggles with the problems of capitalist society. As a salesman, Willy Loman is challenged with the loss of identity, estrangement from family, escapism, and fantasies, mental health-psychological fragility, and social alienation and rejection. In this sense, Erich Fromm's theory can be applied to the text in terms of the alienation of the protagonist. Willy Loman as a salesman had a deteriorating mental state and fading career. The story is about a man who wants to be a successful salesman in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. The story revolves around Willy Loman, his wife Linda, and his sons Biff and Happy. Willy is a character who is obsessed with the idea of success and he believes being well-liked is needed for that. However, Willy Loman starts to decline and he becomes disappointed with his life.

As a salesman in a capitalist society, it is hard to cling to life, however, the harsh condition of the modern period. Throughout the play, Willy Loman's inner voice is emphasized and represented as an imaginary character called Billy. Billy always reminds him to be more wealthy and prestigious in business life, and this is the consequence of living in a capitalist society. However, Loman feels insufficient as a worker because of his age in the further period of his life. From the text: "I was fired, and I'm looking for a little good news to tell your mother because the woman has waited, and the woman suffered. The gist of it is that I haven't got a story left in my head, Biff." (Miller, A., & Bigsby, C.,

1998:83) It can be understood that the author highlights the brutal side of work life in the modern period where people reduce their capacity and feel alienated and isolated from society. In this sense, the main character's emotions are full of feeling lonely and not being emphasized by people.

When focusing on his relationship with his family, shows us that communication between them revolves around a nervous atmosphere. For instance, his sons and Willy Loman have a strained connection which is caused by capitalist systems' needs, such as; being successful in work life, adapting to modern society, and the need for good conditions in their lives. The text contains escapism, alienation from work, failure to connect with nature, estrangement from others, and alienation from essence. Firstly, the protagonist has material expectations from life which leads to his isolation from the self. Given in the play, Willy Loman has some illusions to escape from his miserable reality and fill them with past successful memories and ideals. It causes his destructive psychological behavior to cope with alienation. The urban environment in the play is driven by materialism and consumerism alienates him from nature. However, it is not given directly in the play, and it emphasizes the theme of dehumanization and disconnection from the environment in the modern world.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be interpreted themes of alienation are utilized mostly in the play to demonstrate the reader's protagonist's inner-self in the capitalist system. Although this psychological statement of Willy Loman does not directly relate to Erich Fromm's theory, it can be said that the themes and the characterization are compatible with each other in terms of alienation. Together with the elements of the play, social alienation is a result of the capitalist environment. In modern societies, social alienation becomes more common and impacts communication among people. Hence, the main character of *Death of a Salesman* is the reflection of an average man in modern societies who are forced to adapt and stand behind the production. For Erich Fromm, this alienation can be prevented with the help of connecting to nature, being more integrated with what they produce, and finding their essence in themselves. The modernization of society during the Great Depression period in America impacted the average class of communities, specifically the workers. Willy Loman is the model of the average man who tries to survive many economical problems. His isolation and suicide given in the play are exemplified by the author, through the real-life clips. In this sense, Erich Fromm's alienation theory shows significant relation with the main character's psychological statement in *Death of a Salesman*. Research findings show that alienation can be caused by capitalism, a sense of inadequacy, and being posterior to the new age. All the troubles that the main character has experienced in the process of adapting to his environment have led to his psychological collapse.

The protagonist feels lonely and defenseless within the harsh conditions of the business environment, and his family is also challenged by his attitude. Since the main character felt separated and alienated, another character formed in his mind to realize what he wanted to do. With his hallucinations and imaginary characters in his mind, it can be seen that the author wants to emphasize his alienation and its results in the main character's life. On the other hand, Erich Fromm suggests the solution to this alienation is; the ideal society can be formed by marginalized individuals. When implementing Fromm's theory in *Death of a Salesman*, it can be claimed that people can be marginalized and isolated from the capitalist society since they are challenged with timely sociological issues. This study examines the psychology of the alienated individual regarding its theoretical framework suggested by Erich Fromm and highlights both the problems of the working class and their solutions in communities. This paper can help the readers to understand how social alienation affects the psychology of individuals as well as the thematic background of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

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