

# Conflict, Disorder, Failed Repair – Interpretation of *Death of a Salesman* Through Trauma Theory

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## Abstract

*Death of a Salesman* is the representative work of American playwright Arthur Miller. The author used superb writing skills to showcase the protagonist's almost crazy inner world. In recent years, research on this drama has mostly focused on perspectives such as tragedy, loss of value, and the disillusionment of the American Dream, with few people conducting research and analysis from the perspective of trauma theory. This article will be based on trauma theory to explore the true cause of Willie Lohmann's death from conflict, disorder, and failed repair which are the three general laws in the development of trauma.

**Keywords:** trauma theory, conflict, disorder, failed repair

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction of the Book

*Death of a Salesman* is a script written by Arthur Miller, one of the three great American playwrights of the 20th century. The protagonist Willie Lohmann, an old salesman, once had had a brilliant career and a happy family but at that time he was impoverished and had intense conflicts with his son Biff. The situation went even worse: Biff brought no money for his business; Willie was also fired by the company. In the end, Willie committed suicide in order to provide benefits for his family through insurance compensation after his death. The book portrays the tragic life of a small character and exposes the deceptive nature of the American Dream.

### 1.2 Introduction of Trauma Theory

Willie Lohmann was completely unaware of the real reason for his destruction until his death, but we later generations could analyze a few. From the perspective of trauma theory, it was trauma that caused his destruction.

The term *trauma* contains two meanings: physiological trauma and psychological trauma. Physiological trauma can be healed over time, but "psychological trauma can be transformed into painful experiences, directly creating a lingering haze in the patient's mind without appropriate intervention" (Wang Luchen, 2017: 41).

Kathy Carus, one of the representative figures of contemporary trauma theory, believes that trauma is "an unavoidable experience of a sudden and catastrophic event, in which the response to this event is often delayed,

uncontrollable, and repeated through hallucinations or other intrusive ways". This definition not only focuses on the psychological state of patients after trauma, but also places the events that lead to trauma in a crucial position.

The events that cause trauma may be personal, such as family conflicts or sexual assault; It may also be collective, such as wars, epidemics, financial crises, etc.

After trauma occurs, the main manifestations of patients are stress disorders, such as speech disorders and memory disorders. The victims often have communication difficulties and memory flashbacks. They are unable to accept real-life stimuli, choosing to indulge in past memories.

The repair of trauma requires first establishing a sense of security towards reality, followed by a positive narrative and review of the traumatic experience, and finally rebuilding the connection with real life. If one step is not completed, the repair will fail and the patient will fall into the abyss.

In *The Death of a Salesman*, Willie Lohmann suffered from trauma in successive conflicts, resulting in stress disorders. He repeatedly attempted to repair the trauma but ended in failure. Therefore, it was the trauma that led to Willie's ultimate demise.

Now let's analyze Willie's death in detail through trauma theory.

## 2. Causes of Trauma—Conflict

The generation of trauma is always related to conflict, so the root cause of Willie Lohmann's trauma cannot be separated from repeated "conflict" events.

### 2.1 Conflict Between Individuals

#### 2.1.1 Conflict with Employers—Causing Career Trauma

Willie always firmly believed that "the key to success lies in one's personal charisma, and having good connections can realize one's dreams" (Chen Shuaiqi, 2021: 4). He once had a brilliant career as a salesperson based on his popularity, but with the development of industrialization, the success of business no longer depended on personal connections, but on high-quality products. Willie's ideas did not change with the times, so his career plummeted. He wanted to seek the help from his employer Howard based on his personal connections.

Howard believed that "kinship is kinship, wealth is wealth" and "everyone must depend on their own abilities" (Arthur Miller, 1998: 62), so he refused Willie's request and fired him like throwing away an orange peel, causing great trauma to Willie's career.

#### 2.1.2 Conflict with Son—Causing Family Trauma

Willie also pinned his dreams on his two sons, Biff and Happy, hoping that they would both become excellent salesmen. The youngest son, Happy, followed the trajectory envisioned by his father and was a member of the sales department, so his conflict with his father was not significant. But to the elder son Biff, after witnessing Willie's affair, he believed that his father was a "hypocritical and despicable double faced" (Arthur Miller, 1998: 95). The father's heroic image collapsed, and Biff was unwilling to follow his imagined trajectory. He ran to the ranch to herd cattle, earning a meager salary, hoping to become an idealist who wasted his life. This of course caused Willie's dissatisfaction. He believed that Biff should have a successful career and a happy family now, but it was nothing that happened. The father and son erupted into a fierce conflict. The conflict was beyond words and without a heated argument; The conflict was not in the body, but in silence and tranquility, spreading throughout the house, devouring the hearts of both father and son like a raging beast.

Willie's own ideas and hopes were not realized in his son, but instead exacerbated the conflict, causing great trauma to his family relationships.

#### 2.1.3 Conflict with Brother "Ben"—Causing Childhood Trauma

Freud believed that a person's early experiences have a significant impact on their future personality formation. Therefore, the psychological trauma that a person suffered in his early years, that is, the childhood trauma, will leave traces in his subconscious, accompany and even affect his life. "Childhood experiences are like shadows hovering around human nature, and at the right time, the suppressed consciousness inside will explode like a mine" (Mao Qiao, 2018: 55).

In Willie's childhood, the family was incomplete. His father and brother left home to pursue the "American Dream", so his was interdependent with his mother. This childhood experience caused great trauma to Willie: he did not receive

his father's love, and his mother passed away early, making his original family quite unhappy. Ben's appearance once again traumatized Willie: he achieved success in his career and returned home in glory; But Willie was impoverished and his son turned against him. Compared to his brother, Willie not only failed to gain some missing warmth from his family, but also exacerbated his childhood trauma.

### 2.2 Conflict Between Individual and Society

The trauma also came from Willie's personal conflict with the society that was passionately pursuing the "American Dream".

In American society, with the rapid development of industrialization, people had developed a fervent pursuit of wealth and status, which had also become the driving force for business development.

Holes and his son, Ben and his father, Charlie and his son all evaluated the situation, changed their development direction and finally achieved success, wealth and status. While Willie remained complacent and always believed that having good popularity with others would accomplish everything. But relying solely on popularity was no longer feasible in contemporary society, so he was eliminated without any surprise.

Willie's American dream of becoming rich and successful was shattered in this conflict, causing great trauma to his ideals.

In short, Willie suffered immense trauma in series of conflicts between individuals and the society.

## 3. Posttraumatic Manifestations—Disorder

After suffering such traumas, the victim's manifestations are mainly stress disorders, such as speech disorders and memory disorders. Willie's manifestations were:

### 3.1 Memory Disorders—Inevitable Retrospection and Intrusive Recollection

Unlike normal recollection, this kind of recollection can bring stress and anxiety. "In addition to the traumatic events themselves, the impact of traumatic memory on patients is even greater, including memories of events experienced in early childhood, memories of events experienced after adolescence, and memories of early events triggered by later experiences" (Mao Qiao, 2018: 57). Willie Lohmann often inevitably recalled:

### 3.1.1 Memories of Events Experienced in Early Childhood

In the illusioned dialogue with Ben, Willie recalled the scene of his childhood when his father and brother left, leaving him and his mother to rely on each other. This was the source of his childhood trauma, so this memory brought him pain and anxiety.

"Willie: I remember sitting under the greenhouse car, that's Nebraska, right?"

Ben: It's South Dakota. I gave you a handful of wild flowers.

Willie: I remember you walked along an open road.

Ben: (laughing) I was going to Alaska to find my father.

Ben: Does Mom live with you?

Willie: No. She passed away long ago.

Ben: Unfortunately, she was a good mother back then." (Arthur Miller, 1998: 35)

### 3.1.2 Memories of Events Experienced After Adolescence

"Biff, when I went to Albany this time, I saw a very beautiful hammock. Next time, I want to buy one. Let's hang it between these two big elm trees. Isn't that interesting? Shake it under the branches, hey, children, that's what it's called..." (Arthur Miller, 1998: 20)

"In 1928, I averaged 170 yuan per week! Your father found me—not right! It was in this office—on either side of this desk—his hand was on my shoulder..." (Arthur Miller, 1998: 63)

Willie often recalled the harmonious scenes he had with his sons when he was young, as well as his glorious moments as a salesman. Compared to the sharp conflict with his son and the sharp decline in his career, these memories had had a huge impact on him.

Later experiences such as Ben and father's rise to fame, mother's death, son's failure to achieve anything, and his own dismissal had all triggered these memories, making Willie indulged in the memories of the past.

### 3.2 Speech Disorders—Sudden Crying, Anger, and Panic

When Willie was fired by Howard, he clearly wanted to have a serious conversation with him, but couldn't control himself and became hysterical.

"Willie: Control yourself! What the fuck did I

say to him? God, I yelled at him! How could I!

Willie: (Jumping away in fear, shouting) Ah! Howard! Howard! Howard! Turn it off! Turn it off" (Arthur Miller, 1998: 64)

### 3.3 Avoiding Traumatic Memories

"Willie: (Discovered she was sewing) What is this?

Linda: Patching socks. Now buy a pair of valuable ones—

Willie: (angry, grabbing socks) I won't let you mend socks in this house! Throw it away" (Arthur Miller, 1998: 29)

Willie didn't allow Linda to mend her socks to avoid the trauma of infidelity. He gave his mistress two new boxes of socks, but his wife sewed the old socks at home. He begged her not to mend them. "The 'sock' became a 'trigger point' that sparked Willie's traumatic memory, which can awaken memories and experiences of traumatic events" (Pang Wei, 2016: 76). In his heart, the "stock" was a stark satire on him, a reminder of his conscience, and a reinforcement of this trauma.

### 3.4 Suicide Desire

One severe manifestation after trauma is the desire to commit suicide, unfortunately, Willie had developed the desire.

"Linda: It seems like she happened to pass by and saw his car. She said the car was not driving at all fast and did not slip. She said that when it reached the bridge, he deliberately hit the railing, but luckily the water was shallow and he didn't drown

Linda: I was looking for a fuse that day. The electric light suddenly went out, and I went to the cellar to find it. Just behind the electrical cabinet, which accidentally fell out, was a short rubber tube.

Happi: Really?

Linda: There is a joint installed at one end of the pipe. I understood at a glance that he was planning to commit suicide with gas." (Arthur Miller, 1998: 45)

In summary, through these series of representations, we can see that Willie had indeed suffered trauma greatly.

## 4. Outcome of Trauma—Failed Repair

After enduring a series of conflicts, traumas, and experiencing a series of memories and hallucinations, which were the symptoms of

trauma, Willie also launched an active self-rescue effort to repair these traumas, but unfortunately, they all failed.

### 4.1 Repair Career Trauma

He actively requested employer Howard to transfer him to work in New York but failed. What's worse, he was even dismissed by the employer.

His son asked Oliver for financial support to start his own business, but in the end, he didn't even see Oliver in person.

Neither the father nor the son's efforts to repair the trauma had been rewarded.

### 4.2 Repair Family Trauma

In order to ease the conflict between father and son, Biff decided to seek Oliver's help and start his own business. For this reason, he even booked a restaurant in advance and wanted to invite his father Willie to celebrate together. But when the two of them arrived at the restaurant, one couldn't find the funds and the other was dismissed, what else could they celebrate? The father and son suffered setbacks in their careers, leading to even more intense arguments that were not repaired, and exacerbated the trauma. Under these series of blows, Willie ultimately went to death in order to obtain an insurance premium of 20000 dollars.

### 4.3 Deep Causes of Failed Repair

Was it only the failed repair of trauma combined with insurance premiums that pushed Willie to commit suicide? This was just a superficial reason. From a deeper perspective, Willie's suicide was due to his "loss of security" and "failure to narrate experiences" (Pang Wei, 2016: 77).

Trauma researcher Judith Herman believes that in the process of trauma repair, the injured must first establish a sense of security. He argues that the injured cannot face the trauma alone, and if they want to get rid of the trauma, they must establish a security relationship with others or the external society.

Willie not only failed to establish a security relationship with the outside world, but also avoided his closest people all the time, leaving himself in a state of isolation and loss of security. After the company stopped paying wages, he didn't tell his wife and family to find a solution together, but instead borrowed fifty dollars from Charlie every month to deceive and cover up.

Every borrowing, every concealment, was a deepening of trauma and a further loss of security.

Freud believed that the method of “speech therapy” can be used to repair trauma. That is to say, encouraging patients to express the interference, stimulation, or injury they have encountered, no matter how far in the past, how difficult to express. “The purpose of ‘speech therapy’ is to enable the victim to externalize the traumatic event through verbal narration in order to overcome the shadow” (Pang Wei, 2016: 77).

Willie did not use the method of “speech therapy” at all. He was extremely face conscious and never willing to tell others about his failure experiences and trauma. He even dared not face up to and admit his mistakes, always stubbornly believing that success in business can be achieved through popularity. In addition to refusing to confess to his wife that he did not have a salary, he also refused the job opportunity offered by Charlie and pretended that he was still a decent salesman. Watching his son’s childhood playmate Bernard rising to fame and fortune, he also refused to show weakness and defended his son, saying that Biff was “preparing a big deal”. Willie never said a word about his own trauma, so he was unable to externalize it to get out of the shadows.

In short, Willie appeared to be attempted to repair the trauma, but in reality, his personality determined that he could not obtain a sense of security from the inside out and could not confide the traumatic events to the outside world for healing. In this way, his trauma was destined to fail to repair and he was destined to embark on the path of destruction.

## 5. Conclusion

Through *Death of a Salesman*, we have seen an ordinary little figure in 20th century American society who, in the pursuit of the American Dream, stubbornly held his own views, failed to assess the situation and change his mind. Ultimately his career as well as his family relationship broke, and he led to the tragedy of suicide. From the perspective of trauma theory, this drama explores the protagonist Willie Lohmann’s death through three stages of trauma development: the causes of trauma, the post-traumatic manifestations, and the failure of trauma repair. To conclude, it is believed that trauma led to Willie Lohmann’s death.

Willie stubbornly believed that relying on social popularities could make things well, and forced his son to replicate his own path of development. He could only hide the trauma he suffered. His personality was like this, so such an outcome was also inevitable. It was a tragedy of the times, and more importantly, a tragedy of his character.

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