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SONG OF THE UNSUNG ANTIHERO: HOW ARTHUR MILLER’S DEATH OF A SALESMAN FLATTERS US

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Abstract

The sober treatment of a lowly, unheroic protagonist in Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman flatters the audience. The more obvious way that it flatters us is by alienating us from the protagonist in his downfall so that we watch his destruction from a secure vantage point. Less obviously, the form of the play, like other modern tragedies of its kind, romanticizes the protagonist with whom we identify, romanticizes him through what I call the audience’s paradox, that tension created when a serious work or literature employs an obscure, lowly character as protagonist and so makes that obscure person the centre of our attention, makes him famous.

Many nineteenth and twentieth century writers seek to convey the experience of a lowly character chafing against his obscurity. But how can an author convey such an experience when the very attention of a readership confers upon the character social significance and dignity, even fame? Exactly how obscure can Jude be when he has a four hundred page novel written about him, and written by Thomas Hardy no less? This is a problem I call the audience’s paradox, a special form of the observer’s paradox. In essence, the audience’s paradox is the tension created when a lowly character, chafing against his obscurity, serves as the protagonist of a work of literature and so becomes the centre of the audience’s attention, becomes famous. The paradox is endemic only to post-Enlightenment tragic literature. Pride stands as a pivotal human imperfection in both the Ancient Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions; in contrast, the metaphysics of a debased form of romanticism valorizes pride, both hubris and narcissism, while denigrating humility. In America, the roots of this tendency can be seen at least as early as Walt Whitman. The title of his ‘Song of Myself’ signals a poem unblushing in its swelling praise of the poem’s speaker, and even if we insist that the speaker is not Whitman the man but a cosmic Whitman joined to all humanity by
a boundless love, the contempt for humility evinced by the poem is hard to ignore. Narcissism, in another form, also rears its head in the dark romanticism of Edgar Allen Poe. In both his poetry and his short stories we repeatedly encounter personas who seek narcissistic fulfilment in child brides, a romantic tendency critiqued with savage clarity in Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita. And on the other side of the Atlantic, Percy Bysshe Shelley already had created a poetry of unparalleled humourlessness, the need for comic deflation crowded out by the poet’s swelling humanism.

But in the next century modern American tragedy would do even more to valorize pride at the expense of humility. Indeed, such literature reinforces the audience’s own pride by way of flattery—both by implying in various ways that the audience is superior to the flawed protagonists and, paradoxically, by causing the audience to identify with an artificially elevated protagonist.

Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman starkly illustrates this process, and his stated poetic illuminates for us why this is the case, though we need to distinguish his stated poetic from the poetic actually evidenced in his tragedies. If in creating his greatest drama, Miller actually had followed the advice he offers in ‘Tragedy and the Common Man’, we long ago would have consigned Death of a Salesman to the second echelon of American theatre. Fortunately, the sterile poetic we find in ‘Tragedy’ merely infects the drama; it does not govern it.

In that oft-reprinted 1949 essay, Miller tells us ‘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 ... his sense of personal dignity’. So far, Miller’s poetic seems in harmony with the history of tragedy. And it continues to seem so when he adds, ‘From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his “rightful” position in his society.’ Do the quotation marks around rightful constitute censure of the hero’s attitude, or are they an effort to pass on to the reader the attitude of the tragic hero free of Miller’s opinion? The ambiguity that Miller adroitly creates here strikes to the heart of tragedy.

Did Oedipus, through his hubris, deserve, even hasten his downfall? Or was he simply a noble man unjustly crushed by amoral fate? Which is the more precise characterization of Oedipus: ‘he commits a tragic error,’ or ‘he possesses a tragic flaw’? How should we translate Aristotle’s term hamartia? Or more to the point, how should we read Sophocles? If we see in Oedipus’s tragic flaw an ingrained sin rather than merely an error or a misstep, are we reading into Sophocles’ ancient Greek Weltanschauung a Renaissance and Christian view of the world? I find the debate invigorating, and yet to insist on an either/or is to miss an ambiguity inherent to tragedy. Oedipus sums
up the ambiguity well when the chorus-leader asks him what god incited him to blind himself; Oedipus replies:

It was Apollo, friends, Apollo.

He decreed that I should suffer what I suffer;

But the hand that struck, alas! was my own,

And not another's.²

The ambiguity is deepened rather than rejected by Shakespeare, who needed to reach no further than his own religious tradition for the paradox of man as both free and predestined, simultaneously guilty of choosing sin and doomed to sin by original sin. This paradox resonates through his major tragedies, works in which omen and error, vanity and plain bad luck combine to annihilate the protagonists.

Miller, sensitive to the fate/freedom tension in the great tragedies, is committed to walking the fine line between a facile individualism and a facile fatalism. But then he steps off that line, arguing instead for a definition of tragedy akin to its debased, journalistic meaning, as when a news anchor speaks of a woman tragically killed by a drunk driver. This shift is easy to miss. ‘The wound from which the inevitable events spiral is the wound of indignity,’ Miller writes, ‘and its dominant force is indignation. Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly.’³ Here, I first took Miller to mean that the tragic hero, for all his pride, ruthlessly searches out the truth about himself, even if it means facing some monstrous ugliness in himself—patricide (Oedipus), incest (Oedipus), vanity (Oedipus, Lear, Macbeth), murderous ambition (Macbeth).

But Miller’s subsequent elaboration precludes such an interpretation. He goes on to write that the hero’s flaw ‘is really nothing—and need be nothing, but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status’. Having neutralized the flaw, Miller goes on to exalt it as that quality separating the hero from the common man: ‘Only the passive, only those who accept their lot without active retaliation, are “flawless”. Most of us are in that category.’ When Miller has finished defining it, that category, although supposedly flawless, seems a pretty pathetic place to be. The other category, the category of the flawed but active hero, clearly seems preferable. There the tragic hero battles a world bent on degrading him, and in so doing forces the torpid masses to examine ‘everything we have accepted out of fear or insensitivity or ignorance’.⁴
Willy Loman as Prometheus. The world as jealous god.

Or, as Miller explains, 'The tragic hero's destruction in the attempt to evaluate himself justly posits a wrong or an evil in his environment.' Thus, Willy Loman's attempt to reject Biff's view of both of them as 'a dime-a-dozen' is not vanity or egotism, but rather the salesman's noble effort to secure his dignity, his nobility. In other words, it is noble to believe that one is noble. To believe that one is better than others is to be better than others. Vanity is the greatest virtue, humility the greatest sin.

To be humble, etymologically, to be close to the ground, a condition that Anthony Bloom describes as 'silent and accepting ... transforming corruption itself into a power of life and a new possibility of creativeness', or what Mikhail Bakhtin could have been speaking of when he described 'the reproductive lower stratum' found in the comedy of grotesque realism. But in Willy Loman's mind being humble, being close to the earth, means being a human doormat for a universe bent on wiping its feet on him, bent on robbing him of his rightful status.

Thankfully, Miller's most famous drama offers us a vision of human pride more complex than a strict adherence to his stated poetic would have allowed. If Death prompts us to admire Willy's tenacity, however misdirected, it also forces us to see how his dubious notion of personal dignity, his narrow dedication to being well-liked, has made him grotesque. Such a reading has from the first been well attested to by critics, but a brief analysis of the precise nature of Willy's conception of personal dignity will explain the play's fundamental weakness more probingly than does the conventional wisdom on this matter, which holds that Willy's foolishness robs him of that air of personal dignity fundamental to the great tragic heroes of our tradition.

Christopher Lasch, in The Culture of Narcissism, describes 'a way of life that is dying—the culture of competitive individualism, which in its decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all, the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self'. It is in such a world that Willy struggles for both success and love, goals that under the rubric of Willy's personal philosophy are at times synonymous, at times mutually inimical.

Willy's confusion, though by no means unique to our age, is a characteristically modern one. Jürgen Habermas might have been describing Willy Loman and his situation when he spoke on the subject of modernity. Habermas writes that the modernist understands that seemingly settled modes of life often turn out to be mere unstable conventions without rational foundation. Consequently, modern man dares not base his self image on the particular roles and norms he presently fills and fulfills. Instead, he seeks to establish it upon 'the abstract ability to present himself credibly in any situation as someone who can satisfy the requirements of consistency even in the face
of incompatible role expectations and in the passage through a sequence of contradictory periods of life'. In short, ego identity supplants role identity. This is Willy Loman in a nutshell. Confused about what direction he should take, early in his adult life he retreated behind the hope that if he could cultivate an impressive manner, he would never want for admiration or material success, regardless of the direction he took.

But the play forcefully dramatizes the distasteful and ultimately unsuccessful result of such a narcissistic tack. When the family discusses Biff’s idea to ask his old boss for a loan, Willy repeatedly interrupts his wife and then viciously castigates her for interjecting enthusiastic support for Willy’s position, even though she does so at perfectly appropriate moments. Are we to admire Willy’s behaviour here, view it as another example of ‘his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status’?10

Or consider an earlier scene when Willy, unable to keep his mind on his driving, has returned home prematurely from a sales trip. Here, when he’s not shouting at his family, he’s conversing enthusiastically with the ghosts of his past. His next door neighbour Charley comes over to see what the racket is all about and lulls Willy into a card game to calm him down

WILLY: Did you see the ceiling I put up in the living-room?
CHARLEY: Yeah, that’s a piece of work. To put up a ceiling is a mystery to me. How do you do it?
WILLY: What’s the difference?
CHARLEY: Well, talk about it.
WILLY: You gonna put up a ceiling?
CHARLEY: How could I put up a ceiling?
WILLY: Then what the hell are you bothering me for?
CHARLEY: You’re insulted again.
WILLY: A man who can’t handle tools is not a man. You’re disgusting.11

Here, as when he repeatedly cuts off his well-meaning wife during his conversations with Biff, Willy is fighting for what he conceives to be his rightful status, fighting, as Happy phrases it at the funeral, ‘to be number-one man’.12 But in his treatment of his wife and Charley we see the ugly, inhuman behaviour to which this personal philosophy leads. This little man is the king of his castle, and he tears down his wife to prove it. He senses that Charley is the better man—the better businessman and the better father—so he ruthlessly belittles him.
For Willy to be happy, ‘attention must be paid’ as Linda puts it in making a different but not unrelated point. He and his son Biff must not merely be liked, but be ‘well-liked’—admired by a throng of cheering fans, so to speak—and not because they earned it, but because ‘I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman’.

This philosophy seems warm and humane beside Charley’s belief that ‘the only thing you got in this world is what you can sell’; but the problem with it is that in the economy of attentiveness, demand for attention inevitably outstrips supply. If being well-liked means having a throng of adoring fans, à la Biff when he was captain of the football team, then precious few people will be able to achieve this. For every number—one man, there are many who must settle for sitting in the stands and cheering. When few do settle for the job of cheering for Willy Loman, life for this failed drummer becomes a game of king of the hill in which rather than climbing mountains he climbs sand piles and beats down every one else, if not in fact, then in his imagination.

And so Willy, having failed to succeed through an impressive manner, pretends that he is well liked, that he is the king of his castle, that his carpentry skills place him on a higher plateau than Charley, that his sexual conquest of The Woman makes him more of a man. Biff tries and fails to make his father face reality, but only Biff realizes that the phallic pen of egotism, which he clutches at in Oliver’s office, is worthless. Only he comes to understand that the pursuit of egotism is as absurd, as irrational, as the theft of the pen itself. Willy Loman’s personal philosophy—like the Hastings refrigerator that had ‘the biggest ads of any of them!’—just doesn’t work. If Arthur Miller the critic misses this point, Arthur Miller the dramatist does not.

And yet the form of Miller’s drama suggests that something of Miller the critic did indeed infect Miller the dramatist. Although Death forcefully censures the very narcissism Miller applauds in ‘Tragedy and the Common Man’, the play nevertheless flatters its audiences. It manages this in two ways.

The more obvious way becomes most apparent in the play’s climax. During the course of the play I come to sympathize with Willy Loman, despite his lack of wisdom. But, to paraphrase Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto’s argument, because Willy Loman appears even more foolish than usual in his ‘exaltation’, it is more difficult for us to identify with him in his death than with a royal figure such as Lear.

When Willy exclaims, ‘Can you imagine [Biff’s] magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket?’ and ‘When the mail comes he’ll be ahead of Bernard again!’, we are effectively protected from participating in his death. His glaring foolishness at the play’s climax kills my identification with him precisely when identification is most essential.

There is a similar foolishness in Lear, but it comes early. At the moment of his death we are in sympathy with this wiser, better Lear and so can
participate in his ultimate humiliation, death. Miller employs the tragic form to gain some measure of sympathy for his common man, but then he politely shields us from that deepest of poverties, that greatest of indignities, death.

In a less extreme form we have in Death the same technique that makes the formulaic horror movie ultimately so reassuring. In such movies, all but one or two characters are obviously victims, idiots who insist on backing into dusty, cobwebbed rooms while a heavy-handed score positively shouts warning. While these obvious victims are dropping like flies, the audience is encouraged to identify principally with the common-sensical hero who is marked from the beginning as a survivor.

Happily, Miller rejects this emotional gimmick through the bulk of the play, drawing us into the foolish Willy Loman’s psyche through a variety of experimental techniques and through the ardour of Willy’s pursuit of what The Great Gatsby’s Nick Carraway called ‘the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us’. But Miller’s brand of humanism finds no value in slaying either the protagonist’s or the audience’s ego as do the great Classic and Renaissance tragedies. Rather, Miller’s humanism values giving man ‘his whole due as a personality’, and so it values reinforcing the audience’s ‘sense of personal dignity’. Consequently, Miller chooses not to press Willy into a complete recognition of his littleness and, more significantly, chooses not to press the audience into an identification with a protagonist in his ultimate confrontation with his littleness.

How different this modern-romantic attitude is from that attitude evinced in the great tragedies of Sophocles and Shakespeare. In her essay ‘Tragedy and Self Sufficiency’, Martha Nussbaum explains that the Athenian valued pity as evidence of a non-hubristic disposition, as acknowledging ‘true facts about one’s own possibilities’. When audiences feel this pity, they draw near to the sufferer and acknowledge that something akin to the hero’s suffering could happen to them, that both hero and audience live in a world of tragic reversals ‘in which the difference between pitier and pitied is a matter far more of luck than of deliberate action’. From such a view fear arises: ‘If this happened to the hero, it could happen to anybody,’ the pitier reasons. ‘And if it could happen to anybody, it could happen to me.’ Aristotle went so far as to argue that pity, by definition, demands that the pitier witness in the pitied a pain ‘which one may himself expect to endure, or that someone connected with him will’. 22

The pity evoked in most modern tragedy fails to ruffle us in this way because we can reason that our greater wisdom protects us from the sort of tragedy which befalls a foolish person like Willy Loman. But hardly any such comfort existed for the Athenian who witnessed the fall of Oedipus. Even if our hypothetical Athenian views Oedipus as rash, he sees that fault in a character who is admirable in all other important respects. The doomed king
is courageous, honest, intelligent, strong, sympathetic to the plight of his citizens, skillful in combat, in virtually every respect a model man and king. Perhaps Oedipus’s rashness is partially to blame for his tragedy, but who is perfect? If fate can trip up and trample under foot such a fine, strong individual, it certainly can trip up and trample an average one.

Shakespeare’s great tragedies evoke in me a similar response. Even that murderous usurper, Macbeth, elicits from me a certain measure of Aristotle’s brand of pity, for because of Macbeth’s many noble qualities I am less tempted than I might be to pity Macbeth condescendingly. In his study of villain-heroes in Elizabethan drama, Clarence Valentine Boyer underscores the fact that Macbeth possesses a highly sensitive nature and a poetic imagination, which together make him capable of extraordinarily deep feeling and cause him to suffer more intensely than anyone else in the play. Not only this, but Macbeth demonstrates extraordinary courage, aspires to extraordinary accomplishments, and both loves deeply and is deeply loved.

Thus, despite his villainy in violently usurping the throne of a good king, we pity Macbeth in his agonizing internal struggle, pity a man who is highly suited to reign but who can reign only through crime, a tragic situation. Finally, we are further spurred to Aristotelian pity by the play’s supernatural aura, which, as Boyer puts it, produces ‘in us a feeling that there are strange mysterious forces in nature tending to evil, which sweep a man away with them to his destruction once he exposes himself to their power’.

Instead of cultivating and deepening our sense of Aristotelian pity for his protagonist, Miller, in contrast, alienates us from Willy and transfers the recognition to Biff, whose greatest humiliation—the scene in which he waits in Oliver’s office for six hours only to find that Oliver, when he arrives, does not even recognize him—appears offstage, preventing me from internalizing Biff’s dime-a-dozen status as Biff does. What’s more, having been abandoned by the original protagonist, at the conclusion of the play I am tempted to seize upon Biff as a surrogate hero. He possesses a nobility of spirit, a courage in the face of cold reality, that makes him genuinely admirable. But Biff’s nobility is not the nobility we feel in an Oedipus gouging out his eyes, in a Macbeth recoiling from his spiritual poverty, or in a Lear weeping himself to death. It is the relatively static nobility of a Tiresias, an Edgar, persons who strike us as basically good from the first, as the salt of the earth. We have experienced no fall and redemption, no death, burial, and resurrection. We have received redemption on the cheap, our facile dignity, typical of the pre-fallen tragic hero, neatly intact.

But Death of a Salesman flatters its audience by another, more subtle means, a means that has been overlooked. Earlier I referred to the Hastings refrigerator that Willy bought because it had the biggest ads, and credited Miller with critiquing the personal philosophy that lay behind such a foolish method of
choosing a major appliance. Ironically, though, Miller himself has created a very big ad for the dysfunctional Willy Loman and its effect is not altogether unlike the effect of the Hastings refrigerator ad on Willy Loman. For Miller manages to create an audience for a man who does nothing to earn an audience beyond monumentally fouling up his life, manages to make us pay attention to a man we might otherwise have ignored, impresses us with the life of a relatively unimpressive man—in short, gives Willy Loman ‘the biggest ads of any of them.’ In effect, Death brings to the failed salesman’s funeral not the handful of kith and kin that his life warranted, but thousands upon thousands of mourners, outdoing even the funeral of the eighty-four year-old salesman Willy so admired. Certainly, the fumbling tenacity with which Willy follows his misguided philosophy ennobles him to a degree, but are we actually ready to insist that this characteristic alone elevates him to a level consistent with his fame?

So here is where we stand: Within the fiction of Death we meet Willy Loman, a low man on the totem pole chafing against his obscurity, a man discarded by the sales company for whom he has worked for thirty-five years not because he is loathed but because he is useless. Willy Loman, a man whose highest aspiration in life is to be well-liked, is not even well disliked. He achieves only the status of nuisance. In sum, Willy Loman belongs to that group referred to by Flannery O’Connor’s Mrs McIntyre as ‘all the extra people in the world’.

And even when Loman recognizes his status as an extra person, and takes that most drastic of measures to remedy the situation, he fails. He fails to impress his son and, we can assume, fails even to make his suicide appear an accident and so garner the $20,000 that supposedly will launch his alter ego, Biff, into a successful business career.

But viewed from the outside, as a character in a play, Willy Loman is not an extra. He is the leading man, the protagonist, the tragic hero, a character who looms large in the audience’s imagination. Consequently, his position as dramatic centre tends to misshape our identification with him, a phenomenon overlooked by Miller in his bracing but at times facile attack on the Aristotelian notion that tragic heroes are necessarily persons of rank and importance.

When I insist that a lowly character’s position as dramatic centre tends to misshape my identification with that character, some readers will skip over my explicit contention and quarrel with what they perceive as my unstated assumptions, that a work should encourage an audience to identify with its protagonist, or that an audience should strive to achieve such an identification. If, as some advise, I cultivate a rigorous aesthetic distance throughout an engagement, the analytical part of my brain assiduously churning away in Brechtian fashion, the empathetic part remaining dutifully inert, I hardly identify at all. I say ‘hardly’ because even in a work committed to minimizing identification, such as Brecht’s The Good Woman of Setzuan, it must prod its
audience into some degree of identification before it can alienate them, must draw them in before it can distance them. If one has felt, even briefly, any empathy for the good woman of Setzuan, then one has identified with her.

Or, if I follow an older conventional wisdom and surrender my awareness of the work as a formed object, as a fiction, I become absorbed into the life of the protagonist. But there exists a third alternative to which I suspect most serious auditors aspire. Under this alternative, the reader or viewer, together with Coleridge’s ideal poet, brings his or her whole soul into activity, energetically joining the author in the creative process, shuttling between intuition and logic, feeling and thought, empathy and critique, identification and analysis.

But whether critics are advocating a primarily logical, intuitive, or critically imaginative approach to literary engagement, nothing in us, so the unstated assumption goes, need prevent our imaginations from translating the protagonist of dramatic theatre (as opposed to epic or absurdist theatre) off page or stage and into the mind—or recreating him, at least—and then identifying with him.

I disagree.

As we observe Willy Loman playing out his tragedy or, to take other examples, as we follow Rodion Raskolnikov’s fall and redemption, or Stephen Dedalus’s search for a calling that will exalt him to the sun, or Jude Fawley’s struggle against loneliness and obscurity, or Blanche DuBois’s search for love and dignity, at some level we are aware of these figures as the centres of their respective worlds, as the focal points of audiences hanging on their every available thought and action. Thus, even when I disappear into a character as small and lowly as Willy Loman, I participate in the romance of the stage. I am caught up in the audience’s paradox. Although I feel Willy’s obscurity, his insignificance, his failures, these qualities have been transfigured by his role as protagonist. You see, although lowly Willy Loman is oblivious to his status as dramatic centre, I cannot be, am not oblivious to it even in those moments when, slack-jawed, like a boy become his action hero, my identification with him occurs effortlessly.

As Willy Loman, I lead a double life and, in so doing, create a second Willy Loman. I am a second-rate travelling salesman struggling to maintain my dignity. I also am a self among other selves identifying with Willy Loman. The collective imagination of the audience has joined itself to the life playing itself out on the stage. But like a quanta of light fired into the theatre of the subatomic, that collective identification has altered the thing observed.

And here, I speak not of the alterations that inevitably occur when a story moves from author to auditor. Rather, I mean that transformation which only an audience—or better still, an audience among audiences stretched across time—can generate.

Willy Loman is obscure.
Willy Loman is famous.

My mind, the whole of it, right and left, conscious and unconscious, is stuck with the paradox of these opposing realities, two realities inextricably mingled. Certainly, we may posit a Willy Loman who exists in some hypothetical realm as a thoroughly unrenowned failure, stripped of the egotist's supreme fantasy of a rapt audience unto eternity. But that Willy Loman remains stubbornly hypothetical, permanently unknowable, for if we the audience come to know him, he is no longer obscure. Our Willy Loman, for all his failures, for all his obscurity within the world of the fiction, remains to patrons of American theatre a household name.

It would be easy enough to argue that this tension enriches the drama, that Miller, through the magic of the stage, has redeemed life from its stubborn shabbiness. Within the scope of American literature, the work is canonical. But the work misses entry into the canon of the ages, seems out of place beside such tragedies as Oedipus, Lear, Hamlet. This is hardly to damn the work. But under the pressures of that pseudo-democratic spirit which takes the phrase 'all men are created equal' as a refutation of the traditional concept of nobility, Miller's drama participates in that seamier work of Lasch's capitalism, providing not only life and liberty but narcissistic escape for all, even for the common man. For protagonist and audience alike, the movement is away from the ground of reality, a movement that can be compared illuminatingly to the notion of evil propounded by St Basil, and further developed by Augustine, Boethius and Thomas Aquinas—as a movement toward darkness, toward negation. As noted, the modern root of the glorification of such a rebellious impulse can be traced to romanticism.

I do not mean to imply that the movement that began in Germany and moved into the literature of our language principally through Wordsworth and Coleridge is without merit. But like any set of ideas and attitudes, it was and is vulnerable to corruption through excess. Thus, while Goethe gives us glorious Faust and while Whitman gives us an all-embracing cosmic self, modern Americans writers give us Of Mice and Men's Lennie and Streetcar's Blanche DuBois—give us, to put it crudely, idiots and lunatics. If Goethe and Whitman privilege boldness and creativity over humility, realism, and consistency, the heirs of O'Neill and Fitzgerald romanticize narcissism, solipsism, and psychosis even while dramatizing their tragic consequences.

That second generation romantic, Percy Bysshe Shelley, in a long tradition of moral philosophers, insists that love is the secret to living morally, or as Shelley puts it, 'A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own.' He then goes beyond this to declare that literature, far from serving to demoralize, exercises this crucial empathetic faculty. Now, whereas we may agree with
Shelley that literature can exercise our powers of empathy, we still can ask how well a particular work actually succeeds in doing this. As for *Death of a Salesman*, how well does its well-attended Willy Loman enlarge our powers of empathy for anyone of flesh and blood? What I have been arguing suggests that our identification with this protagonist does not benefit us as much as it initially might seem. There is a human type, however individuated its members, the beaten and obscure casualty of the rat race, shattered by failure, whom we may encounter again and again in the world beyond page and stage. But we have not been given such a figure in *Death of Salesman*. Instead, we have been given a synthetic figure sprung from the audience's paradox, an obscure loser paradoxically famous.

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