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“Born Losers”: American Salesmen as Anti-Heroes

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The paper is an investigation of the anti-hero problem in Eudora Welty’s short story *Death of a Traveling Salesman* (1936) and Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Apart from the fact that they are both (traveling) salesmen, the two characters share in a number of features that may describe them as “born losers” (a phrase from a critical book title), basically in relation (and especially in the second case) with the American Dream. The paper also includes a commentary on the problem of tragedy (in its classical and modern meanings) and a rather idiosyncratic one on the mathematical “Traveling Salesman Problem”. Otherwise, both literary pieces are viewed as examples of imaginative treatments of failure in the heydays of modernism (and of “the death of tragedy”).

***Keywords*: anti-hero; Eudora Welty; Arthur Miller; failure; tragedy; American Dream.**

Our title – though the phrase “born losers” may have become, or even may have always been, of everyday use – partially comes from the book by Professor Scott A. Sandage (cultural history) of Rutgers University, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* published in 2005, the year of Arthur Miller’s death (from whose “salesman” play Sandage quotes a pivotal line in his epilogue – see *infra*); however, Miller seems to have had enough time and curiosity to read it (at the age of ninety) and also give an insightful comment: “I found *Born Losers* a confirmation of an old belief, [at least as old as his *Death of a Salesman*, i.e. 1949], that in American history there is a crash in every generation sufficient to mark us with a kind of congenital fear of failure, the main theme of this and other plays. This is a bright light on a buried strain in the evolution of the United States” (Scott Sandage – web page).

Sandage’s book meets us with a cover showing seven forlorn white-collar workers – suits, ties, hats –, in a row, each holding a large poster with one of the letters of F-A-I-L-U-R-E on it. This a history of long forgotten real-life R. J. Bowmans and Willy Lomans (we will never know if they were really *born* losers or made losers), from the panics of 1819 to 1893, then into the several monetary troubles of the 20th century, all of them bound by desperation and regret, reflected in hundreds of scripts of failure (that Sandage copiously quotes from), caused by extravagance, recklessness or lack of character; a history of distrust among success-chasing men (never – or very seldom – women) in an unstable, panic-prone entrepreneurial society created by the credit-rating (see last part of *Death*...) business. One easily concludes from the book that 19th and 20th century American failure is mostly about having no public attention paid to the individual person (see Miller’s ending); in a social Darwinist free-market system failure is as indispensable as success to the perpetuation of the American Dream (a major paradox in both “salesman” pieces we have in mind); two literary works – a story and a play – that have, basically, the same title (the one-word difference between them is annihilated in the Romanian translation of Miller’s play, which became *Moartea unui comis voiajor*, rather than *Moartea unui vînzător ambulant*, because, probably, of the more sophisticated ring to “comis” and “voiajor”) may always seem to require a comparative/contrastive approach, even though – as far as our research “journey” could go – there has not been any such treatment as yet. One explanation may come from the fact that *Death* *of a Traveling Salesman* was an unknown short story by an unknown writer (at the time) when the greatest play of a famous dramatist was produced on Broadway in 1949. Interestingly enough, Miller's *Death*… has been later seen as a possible parallel for Welty's "A Worn Path" in the same volume (with Granny's old well-worn path or itinerary, her illusions/delusions, fatigue and dementia clearly anticipating those of Willy Loman).

We thus propose to look at Eudora Welty's *Death of a Traveling Salesman* (1936/1941) and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) with a view to showing how the "accident" – itself a significant event as a car accident in both works – of choosing a very similar title may involve other accidents of literary-imaginative construction. So our assumption is that in 1949, in New York, Arthur Miller had no idea of Eudora Welty's story (published in the – again – unknown Manuscript literary magazine in 1936 and in the 1941 volume *A Curtain of Green*, prefaced by Katherine Anne Porter) and wrote his world-renowned play in complete ignorance of another salesman's (tragedy and) death, way out in Mississippi. And so, ignoring ourselves the question of whether Miller had or had not read Welty's story, we can still expect a number of similarities and parallelisms, even though very much aware that not all (American) salesmen are alike – nor are their lives, and dreams, and failures, and frustrations, and deaths alike (well, deaths may be all alike, to a great extent, but their causes generally are not – or may not be); anyway, "the end of the road" in both pieces is another basic theme. And this all invites a few other literary-historical "journeys".

Often regarded as a regional writer (though she considered regionalism as not restrictive, but a means to universality), Mississippian Eudora Welty (1909-2001) worked first as a journalist, publicity agent and photographer (several exhibits and at least two volumes to her credit), so she could know the rural and small town people of the nation's poorest state in the Great Depression and immediately after. No wonder Mississippi would become the setting of most of her over forty short stories (in fourteen collections) – many of them adapted (n.b.) for the Broadway stages – and six novels (one of them the 1942 *The Robber Bridegroom*, announcing her constant interest in fairy-tales). Her often expressed belief was that place is what makes fiction seem real, and with place also come customs, feelings and all sorts of associations (also mythical), language, gestures and moods. As her work had included collecting folk stories (much like Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus* ones), conducting interviews and taking photographs of daily life in Mississippi, much of her fiction is based upon the treatment of poverty, loss and pain with a respectful and discrete lightness. Individuals and their community (or lack of it, as in *Death*...), the formers' struggle to attain identity while aware of the paradoxes of human relationships and human mystery, combined with the theme of love and separateness are all presented in an elusive, lyrical style.

Most of these features are illustrated in her very first short story, *Death of a Traveling Salesman*, and it is at this "traveling salesman" that we intend to look more closely, while unable to avoid the background knowledge of a later "salesman" – both of whom are seen as anti-heroes. Thus not minor characters (as opposed to central ones), nor flat ones (as compared to round ones), nor antagonists (as opposed to the protagonists of the stories), but anti-heroes, i.e. some sort of variation on the hero, at least in its classical sense; and that was a character with such special qualities as beauty, precocity, resourcefulness or skillfulness, bravery, strength, while the (modern) anti-hero (Don Quijote, Milton's Satan, Fielding's Tom Jones, Emily Bronte's Heathcliff, Braine's Lampton, Sillitoe's Seaton) is generally lacking in such heroic qualities, and appears as incompetent, ugly, clownish and ridiculous, dumb or unlucky...; he is not necessarily evil and not a villainous character, but often one that tends to reflect the author's/authoress's belief that "modern" life no longer tolerates or produces individuals capable of genuine heroism; we can simply mention here that such great American authors as Faulkner and Hemingway created no real heroes.

In other words, the anti-hero is the embodiment of failure and, in American terms, failure is most often measured by the character's relationship with the American Dream. This is "an idea that shaped a nation" and is, more or less, as old as America itself; it has gradually become a national ethos of the United States, i.e. a set of ideals in which freedom (*Declaration of Independence*, and the *US Constitution*) includes the opportunity for success, prosperity (home ownership first of all – see Linda's final words in Miller), and a better life through hard work, the opportunity for one's children to grow up and receive a good (college) education and career, the freedom of making individual choices (including suicide?) without any restrictions. The American Dream was dreamt by the Puritans ("the city upon a hill"), by Franklin's Poor Richard, Horatio Alger's "Ragged Dick", Twain's Huck, Cather's Antonia, Fitzgerald's Gatsby (where we already witness the American Dream's demise), Steinbeck's George and Lennie (similarly). The closer we come to the present, the more we see this as a fruitless pursuit, and referring more to spiritual happiness than to material goods: Theodore Dreiser, Langston Hughes, Arthur Miller, Hunter S. Thompson (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey into the Heart of the American Dream*), Edward Albee, Toni Morrison (*Song of Solomon*); a fuller description of the American Dream can be found in James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America* (where the concept first appears in this form) of 1931.

Naturally, one does not expect a salesman to be a great hero, so Welty's R. J. Bowman ("bow"+man, while Miller's Willy is Loman, i.e. "low"+man) still has his quest (the journey – as the archetypal myth for all stories – being part of his "traveling"), only it is, again like Willy's, for his own death at the end of an unfulfilled life; on his way he encounters his Proppian obstacles as he gets lost ("Where am I?" and "How lonely I am...") in Mississippi in his rusty car along a rutted dirt path (without signposts) to the end of which he drives ("no car had been along this way ahead of him") toward Beulah, i.e. "bride" or promised land in Hebrew. As he arrived at the house perched on the hill (see *supra*), Bowman "stooped and laid his big black hat over the handle on his bag. It was a humble motion, almost a *bow* (our emphases), that instantly struck him as absurd and betraying of all his *weakness*". The "helpers" also come in here as he takes refuge with a farm couple, who seem to hold "some ancient promise of food and warmth and *light*".

Appropriately enough, his journey takes place in winter (the season of irony and satire in Frye's mythopoeic typology), during a January afternoon and evening, and is generally one from (day)light to dark night (darkness and mystery are more important in the story than light, as the nameless woman "stood there in the dark and did not light the lamp" she never finished cleaning from beginning to end of the story), from illness to death, but from ignorance to discovery (anagnorisis) and understanding (painful though it is, as "he had not known yet how slowly he understood" – that the woman was not old, but only pregnant, and "young, still young", that Sonny was her husband not her son, and that this was "a marriage, a fruitful marriage"), from a civilization we are told nothing about to a "wilderness" (after fourteen years on the road) controlled by his helpers (a "big... stupid" woman with a dark passage behind her and her son (sic) in a Confederate coat and with a wide filthy black hat, a strong, heavy, dignified man in fact, a brown mule and their two dogs, one of whom is having a dream while asleep – a possible irony on George Carlin's famous joke that "It's called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it..."), from the confusion of the strange road to the "mysterious, quiet, cool danger" of a cold, dark house ("There was something like guilt in such stillness and silence..." notices the protagonist, who had been off work for some time due to a bad bout of influenza that has damaged his heart...). So he sleeps overnight at their house (after "another excursion into the dark" to dig out a buried jug of whiskey from the garden cellar and after Sonny's one-mile journey to get the Promethean fire) and leaves in the morning ("This time tomorrow he would be somewhere on a good graveled road, driving his car past things that happened to people" – had been a sort of unfulfilled dream) on his meaningless journey, with the feeling that "some sort of joke had certainly been played upon him" and he "had been cheated"; back to the road before he is fully recovered and without enough words in his mind for what is wrong with him, R. J. Bowman, the unmarried salesman, ashamed to have been trespassing upon a fullness of life he cannot share or understand, flees even as he sought human connection, again unfulfilled, empty, and absurd, but with his "dignity to remember," as his heart literally bursts and he dies.

Stylistically, Welty's story of unrealized dream and ambition, incommunication, and dislocation caused by the human costs related to Southerners' growing attachment to modernity is characterized mostly by her use of unexpected, shocking figures that slow down the reader's movement onwards with the plot and direct him to sources of other types of values; here are some of them (reminiscent of other Southern authors like Flannery O'Connor – 1925-1964, or Katherine Anne Porter herself – 1890-1980): "The cloud floated there to one side like the bolster on his grandmother's bed"; the grapevines "rocked [the car] like a grotesque child in a dark cradle"; the darkness of the house "touched him like a professional hand of the doctor's"; Sonny "could throw his sight out like a rope"; Bowman's "heart leapt... like a little colt invited out of a pen"; her voice was "like a sound across a lake...".

Such metaphorical constructions – and others, reminding one of Eliot's burglar who takes a biscuit for the dog – are certainly meant to show the reader that language can take you along a great variety of routes/itineraries in order to remind you that it is words that are on the pages, and not people, or characters, or heroes/anti-heroes, or failures, tragedies, accidents, deaths.

And the process may become even more word-focused in literary pieces where "showing" rather than "telling" occupies almost the whole "stage" – as in plays, for example. Thus, the telling in *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller (1915-2005 – 35 stage plays, 16 radio plays, screen plays, short stories and novellas, one novel and several volumes of non-fiction; suspected of Un-American activities during the McCarthy age; married to Marilyn Monroe between 1956 and 1961; best remembered for *All My Sons* – 1947, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible* – 1953, *After the Fall* –1964) is confined to the author's stage directions (if we decide to ignore what characters tell one another, plus the occasional asides); we can have a look at some of these (with our emphases).

First, the subtitle of the play – *Certain private conversations in two acts and a requiem*; the salesman's house is described as a "*fragile*-seeming home"; and "only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an *angry glow* of orange"; "an air of the *dream* clings to the place, *a dream rising out of reality*"; "the entire setting is wholly or, in some places, *partially transparent*... Before the house lies an apron... This forward area serves as the back yard as well as the locale of all Willy's *Imaginings* and of his city scenes. Whenever the action is in the *present* the actors observe the *imaginary* wall-lines... But in the scenes of the *past* these *boundaries are broken* and characters enter or leave a room by stepping *'through' a wall* onto the forestage". And Linda is introduced: "Most often jovial, she has developed an *iron repression* of her exceptions to Willy's behavior – she more than loves him, she *admires him*, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his *massive dreams* and *little cruelties*, served her only as sharp reminders of the turbulent *longings* with him, longings which she shares but *lacks the temperament to utter* and follow to their end"; and one certainly wonders about *her* dream.

And other qualifications follow in the *Requiem*: Biff (about his father): "He had *the wrong dreams*. All, all wrong"; (basic theme) and "*He never knew who he was*". Then Charley: "...for a salesman, there is *no rock bottom to the life*. He is a *man out there in the blue*, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start *not smiling back* /biggest problem of all – in America at least –that's an earthquake... A Salesman is *got to dream*, boy. It comes with the territory". And, finally, Happy (Willy's second son): "...I'm gonna show you and everybody else that *Willy Loman did not die in vain*. He had a *good dream*. It's the only dream you can have – *to come out number-one man*. He fought it out here, and this is where *I'm gonna win it for him*". The last words of the play are Linda's: "...Forgive me, dear. I can't cry... I made the last payment *on the house* today. Today, dear... *We're free*… (supreme irony)... We're free...".

Having read the play, reading this again you feel you may not have read it at all, as the author gives you here almost everything. Almost. Begun when Miller was seventeen, i.e. in 1932/33, as a short story about an aging salesman unable to sell anything and who consequently throws himself under a subway train (Miller's uncle, Manny Newman was a salesman with two sons, Buddy and Abby, Miller's cousins), *Death of a Salesman*, originally set by Miller inside Willy's skull and with a working title as "Inside of His Head," premiered on Broadway in 1949 under the direction of Elia Kazan and ran for 742 performances (until 1950); it was then revived several times, until

2012, with such actors as George C. Scott, Brian Dennehy, Phillip Seymour Hoffman, Dustin Hoffman or John Malkovich as Willy (plus the films of 1951 – Fredric March, 1966 – Rod Steiger, 1985 – Hoffman, 2000).

Since the problem of its being a tragedy or not will occupy our attention next, let us remember Miller's confession that he laughed throughout its composition at Willy's contradictions and was then taken aback when audiences greeted the play as a profoundly sad one. Still, later, in his essays *Tragedy and the Common Man* and *The Nature of Tragedy*, as well as in his 1987 *Timebends: A Life*, taking part himself in the long critical debate over whether a common man could properly be the subject of a true tragedy (Aristotle's tragic hero had to be a person of power or some eminence – a king, a prince, general, so that his fall should be more shocking and have greater repercussions – pity and fear, i.e. catharsis – on the society he lives in) Miller thought differently. Also, in 1961 comes George Steiner's book on *The Death of Tragedy*, with this author's conviction that when modern life becomes essentially meaningless, the writing of tragedy is inhibited. And Miller was less categorical, showing that "the idea of tragedy is constantly changing" and, moreover, "will never be finally defined":

> I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character [hero or anti-hero] who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity [which both Bowman and Loman had to a great degree]. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea and Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his 'rightful' position in his society. (...) Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly. (...) [It] requires a nicer balance between what is possible and what is impossible. (2000: 132)

And, in *The Nature of Tragedy*: "To my mind the essential difference (...) between tragedy and pathos is that tragedy brings us not only sadness, sympathy, identification and even fear; it also, unlike pathos, brings us knowledge of enlightenment. (...) Tragedy, therefore, is inseparable from a certain modest hope regarding the human animal. And it is the glimpse of this brighter possibility that raises sadness out of the pathetic toward the tragic".

So the question for us is not whether Willy Loman (or R. J. Bowman, for that matter) is a hero or anti-hero, but, more importantly, if we can have both a tragic hero and a tragic anti-hero – and nobody seems to deny the anti-hero this possibility. And so the protagonists of modern tragedies are mostly middle-class, or eminent in their integrity, or in their self-realization; the possibility of tragedy comes for them from the fact that they are out of step with their contemporary world. Opinions still differ, however; Eric Bentley, for instance, insists that Willy is a "little man" who has "no tragic stature"; he is "too little and too passive [not in his imagination] to play the tragic hero [or anti-hero?]", and his death, despite Miller's own view, is pathetic rather than tragic. Other critics (John Mason Brown among them) would counter that Willy does attain tragic dimensions by virtue of what Miller terms the tragic hero's "total compulsion" to preserve his humanity and dignity; Willy is "a little man sentenced to discover his smallness rather than a big man undone by his greatness" (*apud* Corrigan, 1969: 72).

Whatever the case, Willy Loman is a 63-year old anti-hero, a little salesman from Brooklyn who "refuses to settle for half", and thus carries a luminous dream to his grave after killing himself intentionally so that his son Biff can use the life insurance money to start his own business. In his partial dementia (like Bowman's to some extent), he tends to imagine events from the past as if they are real and thus vacillates between different perceptions of his life (he feels "kind of temporary" about himself); no wonder he is deteriorating mentally (and physically) throughout the play, toward his suicide, when he is still clinging to the false ideal of human achievement (for himself and his sons) as a mere matter of money and getting ahead. He is thus, after all, a guy who does "hit rock bottom".

Willy's tragedy fundamentally comes from the fact that he had outlived his usefulness to the company (and to himself?) and is fired after thirty-six years by the wealthy and supercilious son (Howard Wagner) of the man (Frank Wagner) who had hired him all those many years ago; and this becomes more tragic as it reflects the plight of millions of white-collar workers who had outlived their usefulness to their companies, from whom they derived their sense of self – and their dream; when Happy looks at his father, he does not so much see a man who was destroyed by his dream, as he sees a man who failed at achieving his dream; thus, failure, delusion ("He's liked, but not well-liked"), lack of identity and self-worth ("a person is worth more dead than alive"). So what we are given is an anti-hero that is flawed to the bottom as it were: lack of self-knowledge, refusal to follow his natural instincts, constant self-doubt, confusion, lack of confidence, stubborn determination to do things his own way, mediocrity after all, plus the very bad influence he has on his two sons; Willy cannot live with the reality and so hangs on to the delusion and dies with it.

The play's moral conscience is Willy's wife, Linda, an "enabler" who allows Willy to continue his delusion of grand sales and many friends; though she seems to have a good knowledge of what is really going on and supports Willy lovingly, in actuality she knows Willy very little, is unaware of his self-esteem crisis and is thus bewildered by his suicide, despite the clues that are dropped everywhere along the play. All Willy needs, she thinks, is attention: "I don't say he is a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the first character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall in his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person..." – the line quoted by Scott Sandage.

While this strong, decent, intuitive (to some extent) woman (who, however, unwittingly feeds Willy's problem) is fixated on a reconciliation between her husband and her sons, their elder son Biff (the play is also about the central American relationship father-son/s), at thirty-four, is tall and strong, a former football star, can be decent, gentle and sensitive, but also antagonistic to Willy as he realizes "what a ridiculous lie [his] whole life has been" (Act II), i.e. his impossible falsehood (he steals); Happy/Harold is two years younger and a shadow of his older brother – a puerile, mindless, self-gratifying womanizer who also cheats and takes bribes and has a turbulent relationship with his mother. So two other anti-heroes who fail very much like their father; strictly speaking, the Lomans do not develop in the play and seem stuck each with his/her character flaws.

The rest of the cast (either "real" or imaginary) includes Willy's dead older brother Ben and his role model in terms of the American dream and success story (a ruthless diamond tycoon who walked into the African jungle and came out rich); Howard – the new boss who has a new "wire recorder" and is a liability for the company founded by his father; Charley – Willy's wise-cracking neighbor and friend; his son Bernard – a successful lawyer, married, with (almost) two sons (a counterpart in Willy's mind to his own Biff and Happy); then Miss Francis with whom Willy cheats on Linda in a Boston hotel, Charley's secretary Jenny, a waiter, and two girls picked up by Happy.

As the central theme of this quintessential drama/tragedy on the American Dream is the main character's problem, we find it fit to remember, as a curiosity, that in the 1940s the "Traveling Salesman Problem" appeared as a major mathematical problem, involving the finding of the most efficient route between a list of geographical points – which was to become a key concept in applied efficiency research (used to direct telescopes, manufacture customized computer chips, route school buses, map genomes, speed up videogames, minimize wallpaper waste, etc.); again, Willy is quite explicit about this/his problem: "After all the highways, and the trains, [and the hotels!], and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive" (Act II). Described first in the 19th century (as a problem without a name), the "Traveling Salesman Problem" was first approached as such in 1949 – another accident! – by mathematician Julia Robinson; much later, an operation researcher and mathematician at Georgia Institute of Technology, William John Cook (b. 1957) – also a professor of combinatorics and optimization – publishes *The Traveling*

Salesman Problem: A Computational Study (2006), followed by *In Pursuit of the Traveling Salesman: Mathematics at the Limits of Computation* (2012). In both, his object is to study how to find the shortest possible route for a traveling salesman, i.e. generating an optimal itinerary and a TSP ("Traveling Salesman Problem", of course) algorithm. While wondering if this was really Willy Loman's problem as he followed his route between New York and New England (R. J. Bowman also had his "adventure" because he had lost his way), and which he found punishing enough so that early in the play he mulls a transfer, we can also quote mathematician Jordan Ellenberg, who thinks that the "Traveling Salesman Problem" cannot be fully solved at all, and it remains "the biggest open problem in complexity theory". As a matter of fact, this is a "problem" that has always given Americans "a vague dread" and "constantly tormented them lest they should not have chosen *the shortest path which may lead to their own welfare*" (our emphasis) – Alexis de Tocqueville in 1940; so there is a "Traveling/Dreaming American Problem" after all.

William J. Cook's own comment is that "the salesman may defeat us in the end, but not without a good fight". In fact, both our salesmen seem to defeat us all (even though we have tried to pay as much *attention* to them as possible) in their deathless careers as literary anti-heroes, whose firmer grip on the "Traveling Salesman Problem" might have saved at least some of their exhaustion (and dementia generating stress). Still, we also remember that the problem was not theirs but their authors', who had known all along, without the help of sophisticated mathematicians, that the shortest possible route to world renown for frustrated traveling salesmen is to be anti-heroes in successful stories or plays.

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