

Shame, Guilt, Empathy, and the Search for Identity in Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman*

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Among other things, tragedy dramatizes identity crises. At the root of such crises lie feelings of shame. You might ask: what about guilt? There is no question that guilt plays a major role in tragedy, but tragedy also dramatizes the way in which feelings of shame shape an individual's sense of identity, and thus propel him or her into wrongdoing and guilt. In fact, Bernard Williams examines the relation and distinction between shame and guilt in his study of ancient Greek tragedy and ethics, *Shame and Necessity*. He "claim[s] that if we can come to understand the ethical concepts of the Greeks, we shall recognise them in ourselves."¹ In the process of establishing a kinship between the Greeks and ourselves, Williams provides an excellent foundation upon which to build an argument on the dynamics of shame, guilt, empathy, and the search for identity in Arthur Miller's modern tragedy *Death of A Salesman*. Williams states that

We can feel both guilt and shame towards the same action. In a moment of cowardice, we let someone down; we feel guilty because we have let them down, ashamed because we have contemptibly fallen short of what we might have hoped of ourselves....

... It [guilt] can direct one towards those who have been wronged or damaged, and demand reparation in the name, simply, of what has happened to them. But it cannot by itself help one to understand one's relations to those happenings, or to rebuild the self that has done these things and the world in which that self has to live. Only shame can do that, because it embodies conceptions of what one is and of how one is related to others.²

In order to understand the identity crises of Miller's tragic characters in *Death of A Salesman*, and especially the late, climactic scene in which Biff confronts Willy with the truth, it is necessary to understand shame's relation to guilt and

identity. It is the confrontation with feelings of shame that enables Biff to find himself, separate his sense of identity from that of his father, and empathize with his father. Moreover, it is the denial of such feelings that cripples Willy and the rest of the Loman family.

Until Biff stops to examine who he is, while in the process of stealing the fountain pen of his old boss, Bill Oliver, feelings of shame determine his self-perception as well as his conduct. Even before discovering his father with "The Woman" in Boston, Biff's sense of self-worth, like that of his brother Happy, is dependent on his father's conception of success and manhood and on his father's approval. In fact, because Willy is abandoned at the age of three by his father, his elder brother, Ben, becomes the measure of success and manhood for his sons to live up to. Ben is, in Willy's own words, "a great man!" "the only man I ever met who knew the answers."³ "That's just the way I'm bringing them up, Ben – rugged, well liked, all-around," says Willy while reliving Ben's visit in the past (49). Early in the play, we see Biff through the proud memory of his father. Willy asks Biff, "Bernard is not well liked, is he?" and Biff replies, "He's liked, but he's not well liked" (33). Biff inherits from his father an extremely fragile sense of self-worth dependent on the perceptions of others. "Be liked and you will never want," says the proud father of two sons who are, in his own words, "both built like Adonises" (33). But according to the true Loman heroic creed, it is not good enough simply to be "liked." As Willy points out to Happy earlier, "Charley is ... liked, but he's not – well liked" (30).

Shame, together with the sense of inadequacy and inferiority manifest in the need to prove oneself to others, is evident in both Loman sons, and of course, in the fatherless father, Willy. The Loman men's shame propels them into wrongdoing and guilt.⁴ In Act One, Willy begs Ben to stay "a few days" more, and, in the process of doing so, reveals the degree to which he feels incomplete and inadequate:

WILLY, *longingly*: Can't you stay a few days? You're just what I need, Ben, because I – I have a fine position here, but I – well, Dad left when I was such a baby and I never had a chance to talk to him and I still feel – kind of temporary about myself. (51)

The fact that Willy feels "kind of temporary about" himself is reflected in his inability to complete a thought after he has raised the issue of his identity – the "I." This confession is riddled with dashes – or, in other words, uncomfortable, self-conscious pauses. While in the presence of his god-like brother, Ben, Willy, out of shame, constantly attempts to cover up the sense of failure and inferiority that threatens to expose his sense of inadequacy and weakness every time he is about to say what the "I" really feels.

Willy is driven to commit his greatest wrong by feelings of shame that arise

out of his sense of inadequacy as a man. His adulterous affair with "The Woman" in Boston, which haunts both him and his son Biff, is a desperate attempt to confirm and maintain his self-esteem.⁵ In the middle of Act One, while reliving the past, Willy confesses to his wife that "people don't seem to take to me" (36), that he "talk[s] too much. A man oughta come in with a few words. One thing about Charley. He's a man of few words, and they respect him" (37). After this confession, "The Woman" appears "*behind a scrim*" as his feelings of guilt for betraying his wife surface in his words to her. Just prior to "The Woman's" first spoken words and interruption, Willy attempts to make sense of his betrayal without mentioning it:

WILLY, *with great feeling*: You're the best there is, Linda, you're a pal, you know that? On the road – on the road I want to grab you sometimes and just kiss the life outa you. (38)

"*The Woman has come from behind the scrim [...] laughing,*" and Willy continues:

'Cause I get so lonely – especially when business is bad and there's nobody to talk to. I get the feeling that I'll never sell anything again, that I won't make a living for you, or a business, a business for the boys. (38)

Willy believes that he turns to another woman out of loneliness for his wife, Linda. But at the root of his loneliness and his need of a woman are feelings of shame he cannot face. He is driven by feelings of inadequacy and failure to seek himself outside of himself, in the eyes of others. "The Woman" makes him feel that he is an important salesman and a powerful man. After she interrupts Willy with the words, "I picked you," Willy immediately asks, "*pleased,*" "You picked me?" (38). Again, on the same page, after she says, "And I think you're a wonderful man." Willy asks, "You picked me, heh?" (38). Just prior to leaving, "The Woman" makes a point of saying exactly what Willy wants to hear. "I'll put you right through to the buyers," she says, and, feeling full of masculine power, "*slapping her bottom,*" Willy responds, "Right. Well, bottoms up!" (39).

The father's bravado is the son's shame. At the root of Biff's wrongdoing and feelings of guilt lie shame and feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. But, unlike his father, he faces, and learns from, his shame. Consequently, the play suggests that he can rebuild his sense of self-worth and re-establish his relation to others on healthier grounds. He makes sense of his guilt by confronting the shame buried deep in his sense of identity. Ultimately, the ability to do so enables him to empathize with his father.

Biff's inherited sense of inadequacy and inferiority send him "running home" (22) in springtime from the outdoor life out West – a life that reflects

his own desires and needs. And yet, it is his father's wrong, a shameful act of adultery, coupled with Biff's failure to pass math and go to university to become a football star (as he and his father had hoped), that shatters Biff's already fragile sense of identity and sends him out West in the first place. His own desires and needs cannot hold him still. He is plagued by his father's, and his society's, measure of a person – the mighty dollar, the dream of "building a future" (22). Until Biff discovers his father with "The Woman" in Boston, Willy is as good as a god to him. So, rather than expose his father's shame, which, at some level, he experiences as his own, Biff runs, and attempts to hide, from the collapse of the ideal, invulnerable, infallible image of his father. Thus the source of his sense of identity in shame goes unquestioned. He continues to steal and to move from job to job, not so much because he feels guilty but because he feels ashamed of himself for not living up to an image of success that has already been proven to be a "fake." After he witnesses his father give "The Woman" in Boston "Mama's stockings!" Biff calls his father a "liar!" a "fake!" and a "phony little fake!" (121). He does not, however, reconcile this image of his father with his sense of himself. Not, that is, until he is in the process of stealing a fountain pen belonging his old boss, Bill Oliver. As he says to his father, "I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw – the sky" (132) – the same sky that is obscured from view by the "towering, angular shapes [...] surrounding" the Loman home "on all sides" (11), and which also forms part of the "inspiring" outdoor world Biff has left behind (22). Biff goes to see Oliver in a futile attempt to fit his, if you will, circular self into an "angular" world – a world in the process of crushing both the son and the father, men far more adept at using their hands than at using a pen. Biff reveals to his father that he has taken Oliver's pen, and that he cannot face Oliver again, but Willy accuses him of not "want[ing] to be anything," and Biff, "now angry at Willy for not crediting his sympathy," exclaims, "Don't take it that way! You think it was easy walking into that office after what I'd done to him? A team of horses couldn't have dragged me back to Bill Oliver!" (112–13). There is no question that Biff feels guilty for what he has "done to" Oliver, first, by stealing "that carton of basketballs" (26) years ago, and second, by stealing his fountain pen. On the other hand, he also feels extremely ashamed of himself.

Biff's inherited sense of shame drives him to steal and to perform for his father. The fact that he steals does not, however, bother his father too much. Guilt can be concealed and, perhaps, forgiven and forgotten. Willy suggests as much when he advises Biff to say to Oliver: "You were doing a crossword puzzle and accidentally used his pen!" (112). But Biff's sense of himself is at stake, and he knows it. He knows that he cannot bear to be seen (the classic sign of shame) by Oliver. He can no longer separate his sense of himself from the act of stealing. Biff says to his father: "I stole myself out of every good job since high school!" (131). But, in essence, as Biff now realizes, his self was

stolen by his inherited, shame-ridden sense of identity. He never had a chance to see himself outside his father's point of view. Willy feels attacked by Biff's confession that he "stole" himself "out of every good job," and responds: "And whose fault is that?" Biff continues: "And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is!" (131).

Biff understands his relation to others, notably his father, only after he literally goes unnoticed and unidentified by someone he thought would recognize him: Bill Oliver. Biff comes to the realization that there is no reason why Oliver should have recognized him, given that he couldn't recognize himself. That is, as Biff says to Happy, "I even believed myself that I'd been a salesman for him! And then he gave me one look and – I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been! We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk" (104). Unlike his father's true self, which is immersed in shame and guilt, Biff's self surfaces and stays afloat because he learns about his guilt from his shame.

Willy's insistence that Biff is "spiting" him by not going to see Oliver prompts Biff to voice what he sees as the meaning behind his theft and his inability to face his old boss again: "I'm no good, can't you see what I am?" (113). In this case, it is not simply Biff's wrongdoing that makes him identify himself as "no good"; he has now grasped the fact that behind his habit of breaking the law lie feelings of shame. This question, "can't you see what I am?" represents the beginnings of Biff's separation of his own identity from that of his father. By the end of Act Two, Biff is certain, as he says to his brother, that "[t]he man don't know who we are!" At this point he is determined to force his father to "hear the truth – what you are and what I am!" (131, 130). He knows who he thought he was and, thus, why he stole Oliver's pen. As he reveals to his whole family.

I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw – the sky. I saw the things that I love in this world. The work and the food and time to sit and smoke. And I looked at the pen and said to myself, what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am! Why can't I say that, Willy? *He tries to make Willy face him, but Willy pulls away and moves to the left.* (132)

"Willy," the father who has been transformed from "Dad" into simply a man in his son's eyes, cannot bear to have his dreams, and his heroic vision of his son, himself, and his own brother and father – the vision by which he lives and dies – exposed. Therefore, he "*pulls away*" in shame, before standing his ground and yelling, "*with hatred, threateningly,*" "The door of your life is wide open!" (132). Unlike the scene in the restaurant, in which Biff presents

Happy with “*the rolled-up hose*” with which Willy intends to commit suicide and tells his brother that he “can’t bear to look at his [father’s] face!” out of shame (115), this time Biff does not turn away from his father. He insists on the truth being truly heard by his father. It is only after he realizes that this is an impossibility that “*he pulls away*” (133): “There’s no spite in it any more. I’m just what I am, that’s all” (133), says the son to his father. He now knows that he is “nothing” only under the umbrella of his father’s destructive vision.

By the end of Act Two, Biff has a relatively clear understanding of who he is or, at the very least, who he is not. “I am not a leader of men,” he says to his father in a “*fury*,” before “*he breaks down, sobbing*” (132–33). But his father cannot empathize with him because he is incapable of facing his own feelings of guilt and shame. To Willy, Biff’s tears symbolize simply his son’s love, and not, in any way, the struggle to separate from him. Biff demonstrates that he does in fact love his father, but, at the same time, this love is balanced by the recognition that if there is any chance of saving himself and his father he must leave home for good. The complexity of his feelings for his father goes unrecognized, however. Willy’s response to Biff’s breakdown is, “Oh, Biff! *Staring wildly*: He cried! Cried to me. *He is choking with his love, and now cries out his promise*: That boy – that boy is going to be magnificent!” (133).

What Biff wants from his father he ends up giving, without getting it back. He wants not only love, but empathy. Moreover, after confronting his own shame and discovering who he is not – that is, not the “boy” his father believes him to be – Biff demonstrates his ability to separate from his father and, consequently, his ability to empathize with him. In his dictionary of psychoanalysis, Charles Rycroft defines empathy as “[t]he capacity to put oneself into the other’s shoes. The concept implies that one is both feeling oneself into the object and remaining aware of one’s own identity as another person.”⁶ Biff does exactly this. In tears, he asks his father, “Will you let me go, for Christ’s sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?” (133). He is not simply asking for his own freedom from the shame produced by not living up to the dream of success and being “well liked”; he is asking for his father’s freedom from shame and guilt as well. He feels for his father and recognizes how “that phony dream” tortures him, at the same time that he retains his own sense of identity. But nothing can save Willy from his inability to accept the failure to live up to his own expectations – not even his son’s empathy and forgiveness. Both are powerless in the face of shame.

In “Requiem,” the final moments of Miller’s tragedy, Biff is alone in his empathic understanding. Even Charley does not understand the meaning of Biff’s final words about his father: “He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong. [...] He never knew who he was” (138, intervening dialogue omitted). Happy

is "ready to fight" after these words, and Charley responds by saying to Biff, "Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman." But, as Linda suggests prior to this statement by Charley, "He was so wonderful with his hands," and it is this very suggestion that triggers Biff's final words about his father (138). Willy Loman was more himself, relatively free of guilt and shame, when he worked with his hands than at any other time in his life.

Driven by shame, he kills himself in order to preserve his dream of being "well liked" and a successful father and salesman. Of course, the irony is that because of his suicide the odds are very good that neither of his sons will benefit from his sacrifice, and nobody from his world of sales comes to his funeral. Linda's words at the end of the play, and especially the words, "We're free and clear" (139), reveal the degree to which she and her husband lived in denial, in fear of exposing the man who hid in shame behind the idea of being a successful salesman and father. To be "free and clear" is, ultimately, an impossibility for Willy Loman. His vision of success perpetuates crippling feelings of inferiority and inadequacy that drive him to destroy himself.

Unlike Biff, Willy does not confront and come to terms with his shame, and therefore he can never understand his guilt, nor his son's pain and his own responsibility for it. In "Tragedy and the Common Man," Miller states that "In [tragedies], and in them alone, lies the belief – optimistic, if you will, in the perfectibility of man."⁷ In *Death of A Salesman*, he suggests, perhaps unintentionally, that the path to "perfection" lies in a confrontation with feelings of shame that enable one to understand guilt and arrive at a clearer sense of identity, as well as to empathize with others.

NOTES

- 1 Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1993), 10.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 92–94.
- 3 Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversations and a Requiem* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 48, 45. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
- 4 In addition to *Shame and Necessity*, Helen Merrell Lynd's *On Shame and the Search for Identity* has been influential in shaping my understanding of the distinction and relation between guilt and shame. Lynd states that "[a] sense of guilt arises from a feeling of wrongdoing, a sense of shame from a feeling of inferiority. Inferiority feelings in shame are rooted in a deeper conflict in the personality than the sense of wrongdoing in guilt." Helen Merrell Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity* (New York: Harcourt, 1967), 22.
- 5 In *On Shame and the Search for Identity*, Lynd defines shame as "a wound to one's

self-esteem, a painful feeling or sense of degradation excited by the consciousness of having done something unworthy of one's previous idea of one's own excellence" (23–24). See note 4.

6 Charles Rycroft, *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin 1988), 42.

7 Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," in *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*, ed. Robert A. Martin (New York: Viking, 1978), 7.

