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Writing II

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Against the God of Capitalism: *Death of a Salesman*

“Tragedy has died” has been a popular notion among scholars and critics in the early 20th century. Traditional tragedy is begotten when a human being endeavors to move beyond the overarching structure, prevalent ideology or system of beliefs that circumscribe human’s free will, such as Gods and fate. In other words, tragedy is a procedure through which one’s autonomy, buried in the overarching structure, is reclaimed or at least attempted to be regained. In the past, such overpowering structure was depicted as God. However, after the restoration period and 18th to 19th century, represented by the statement of Descartes “I think, therefore I am,” humanism and capitalism were cultivated based on human’s rational capacity. Subsequently, human’s free will surmounted the overarching structure that limited humans, and hence no tragedy was made. Nonetheless, Volker Schlöndorff’s *Death of a Salesman*, the film adaptation of the play written by Arthur Miller, defies the idea that the components of tragedy are absent in modern dramas. Entering the 20th century, humanity suffered from the ramifications of humanism and capitalism, the so called fruit of human’s free will and reason, leading to a demoralization of human society to which the survival of the fittest applies; the weak and incapable are rendered a failure in such a society. Thus, *Death of a Salesman* defines capitalism not as a child of human’s mighty reason but as a new overarching structure that shackles people. Hence, the film delineates how human beings are restricted and coerced into submission by harsh reality of capitalism. **The protagonist’s effort to prevail notwithstanding, tragedy revolves around the idea of infallible structure. By portraying Willy’s preordained fall and pain in neoliberal structure to which “there is no**

alternative,” *Death of a Salesman*, produced in the 1980s when neoliberalism was prevailing, engenders an ever more pungent criticism of modern capitalist society as the film presents the plot, signs, syntaxes, and flashbacks that conspire to be the manifestation of absolute capitalist empire whose imperium over Willy forces him to gradually, but surely, perish and lose his free will, thereby addressing the underlying question, “can an assault on life and free will of a man be a sacrifice to which there is no alternative?”

To start with the plot, the external conflict is central to the film. Through the external conflict, the film denounces contemporary capitalist society where one’s free will, represented by the American Dream, is powerless. Tragedy, as was said, is created through the conflict between a human and an overarching structure. In the same sense, the plot of *Death of a Salesman* portrays the conflict of Willy, the human entity, and the overarching structure, capitalist society. The nature of the external conflict, however, is complicated. That is, Willy’s external conflict is not simply with society or fate respectively but with society and fate simultaneously. Then, how do society and fate go together? The answer is the collapse of the American Dream. Amidst the Great Depression in the 1930s, James Truslow Adams, addressing that the American Dream is in danger, explained what the American Dream is:

Dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability of achievement... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are. (qtd. in “The American Dream”)

Adapted in film in 1985, *Death of a Salesman* depicts a pessimistic view toward the American dream in a capitalist society. The film implies that capitalism has preordained the

fate of people, a fate that marginal and mediocre individuals ought to fail and cannot succeed. Hence, the concepts of society and fate are no longer discrete but merged into one structure which eliminates the American Dream, free will. The finality and certainty with which capitalism asserts its presence in people's lives reflect neoliberal policies as the rising pivot around the world, especially in the United States and United Kingdom in the 1980s. Around 1975, Soviet Union started to deteriorate within as it entered "a period of economic stagnation from which it would never emerge" (Castellano) with an unreformed and regressing industrial base. Having massively increased the military spending and taken the infamous Strategic Defensive Initiative, President Reagan employed an aggressive policy, moving against détente, and established an openly adversarial stance towards the Soviet Union with his potent rhetoric about the "evil empire." On the other side of Atlantic, Prime Minister Thatcher deployed her famous slogan "there is no alternative" which signifies that there is no alternative to neoliberalism in economics and politics. Hence, in the 1980s, the remnants of the Cold War were fading as the neoliberal structure started to prevail. The world started to accept that "globalized capitalism, so called free-markets and free trade were the best ways to build wealth, distribute services and grow a society's economy. Deregulation's good, if not God," (Flanders); capitalism has, indeed, become God. In Schlöndorff's *Death of a Salesman*, produced in the 1980s, the absolute reign of capitalism is revealed when Linda responds to Willy's complaint that people work a lifetime to pay a house off until they die by saying, "well, dear, life is casting off. It's always that way." Linda, without the conflict Willy has with the structure as a protagonist of tragedy, accepts the evanescence and meaninglessness of an incompetent man's life in the capitalist structure as the unchallengeable truth. Willy, on the other hand, shows faith towards achievement through one's free will by saying "No, no, some people, some people accomplish something." His staunch determination to exercise his autonomy becomes much more noteworthy when Willy

even refuses a neighbor Charley's offer of a comfortable office job that guarantees a stable income. Willy replies "I, I just can't work for you, Charley... I can't work for you. That's all, don't ask me why," which evidently underscores Willy Loman's free will not to succumb to mechanisms of the capitalist world; an absence of explanation from Willy renders his autonomy more striking and vivid. Willy's will is the driving force of his conflict with society and fate. For Willy, what he desired was not simply motor cars and high wages but to attain to the fullest stature of whom he is. Hence, the conflict of Willy with society and fate not only reconstructs the component of tragedy but also critiques contemporary capitalism in which American Dream became an old myth, society in which daring to dream bigger can never lead people to achieve "something" under harsh competitions and reality of God-like neoliberal structure. Willy's odd and abrupt outburst of anger following Linda's offer of American cheese instead of Swiss cheese is ironic, perhaps implying that the American Dream is no longer feasible. As Willy angrily bawls, "Why you did American, I like Swiss... Why am I always being contradicted," his dream and free will, indeed, were contradicted, a tragedy of the American Dream.

While the external conflict of Willy, the society, and fate is a driving force of the film, the internal conflict of Willy is crucial in development of Willy as a tragic hero.

Willy's internal conflict with the self is symbolized through his sons, Biff and Happy.

The two sons represent the split self of Willy. Happy is a symbol of Willy's free will while Biff symbolizes the overarching structure that restricts Willy's free will. Happy, throughout the movie, never submits himself to defeat or to harsh reality. Despite merely being an assistant to an assistant buyer in a department store, Happy presents himself to be significant and successful as if he asserts that the strata to which people belong cannot be a yardstick of success and importance. Thus, he directly challenges the axiom of capitalism, a formula that more money and higher status equal success. Even after Willy committed suicide, Happy

talks to himself, "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." Biff, on the other hand, said fiercely to Willy "Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!" Biff, by bluntly forcing his father to see his reality as a petty salesman, forces Willy to conform to the mechanisms of capitalism. As Biff tries to have a conversation with Willy in the house, the tension between the two builds up. Biff rolls up his sleeve and Willy reorganizes his watch and fountain pen, creating an atmosphere that any decision will be irrevocable. Reaching the climax, the argument between the two grows into a scuffle. Implying a gloomy foreboding, film shots change frequently and rapidly. The code of short and hectic changes in shots, most popularly exemplified in *Psycho* by Alfred Hitchcock, delivers a sense of the frenzies, restlessness, and insanity; Schlöndorff adapts such a code by directing the scuffle with constantly shifting shots while minimizing the sound. The scene, therefore, manifests Willy's fiercest inner battle to secure his free will, which renders the preceding vagueness and ambivalence of the protagonist significant in that his external uncertainty exploded into an intensive conflict that represents the identity of Willy. Furthermore, the insanity of the killer in *Psycho* runs parallel with the lunacy Willy exhibits. The film portrays several occasions in which the protagonist goes outside in slippers, rolls a tire at the yard for no reason and shows behavior one would expect from a deranged person. Made apparent not only to the characters but also to the audience who has been tamed by capitalism, the degradation of Willy into a crazy man suggests that standing against the fate in capitalist society is and will be seen as insanity. A semiotic interpretation of Biff's name implies that Biff figuratively strikes a blow to Willy's free will not only during the scuffle but throughout the storyline of the film. Happy, on the other hand, represents Willy's happiness that cannot be achieved. After an explosion of emotions, however, the son and father's fight culminates at once in a quiet and emotionally

charged conversation, like firewood that catches fire, burns fiercely, dies down and goes out. Crying, Biff hugs his father and sobs “will you let me go, please? Will you take that phony dream and burn it? Before something happens?” Hence, in the climax, the audience sees that the very existence of Happy and Biff manifests Willy’s ambivalence in his dualistic conflict of free will and conformity. Unfortunately, Willy and Biff could not reconcile, for Willy did not give an answer to Biff’s question.

By providing the emotionally loaded climax without resolution as the result of the conflict, the film foreshadows the inevitable tragic ending of the film. Willy’s free will and Biff, symbolizing the overarching structure, are indeed two diametrically opposed elements that can never be combined, thus rendering *Death of a Salesman* as a modern tragedy in which a happy ending can never be achieved through reconciliation. Not having received an answer from his father, Biff kisses Willy on the neck and leaves. Willy, entranced, mumbles to himself, “oh Biff, he, he cried, cried to me. Oh that boy, that boy, he’s going to be magnificent.” Right after, Willy’s auditory hallucination of the dead brother Ben’s voice chimes in by saying, “yes, outstanding with 20, 000 behind him.” At the end, Willy commits suicide while driving so that Biff can receive insurance money of 20,000 dollars. The capitalist reality, represented by Biff, could not at last resolve the conflict with Willy and even drives him to commit suicide. Revealing a poignancy of how Willy fought a fight that he could not win no matter what, Biff’s kiss and frank confession induced Willy’s death. The film does not have a resolution as tragic recognition is absent at the end of the movie; Willy dies without knowing that his free will has led him to his death. Nonetheless, he never subjected himself to the authority and power of capitalism and chose his own end, demise with which viewers, as a part of capitalist society, cannot help but empathically identify.

In addition to conflicts Willy experiences, the film is noteworthy in its constant use of a metonymy of color and synecdoche to situate the reign of capitalism as a main

setting of the play. The film's setting is mainly a dark and urban city. The grayness and gloominess of buildings and houses are contrasted with a setting in Willy's delusions. Only when Willy falls in delusions of the idyllic past in which a pastoral setting gives no room for an urban and capitalist atmosphere to interfere does the bright color of nature return. As opposed to those of bright colors, the typical qualities of gray and drabness offer the audience a sense of tragic oppression imposed upon characters, a metonymy of color. The metonymic color in the film is also prevalent in office scenes. When Willy visits Howard's office to demand a sedentary position and stops by Charley's office to borrow money, the atmosphere of offices are dominated in hues of dark crimson red. Unconsciously, Willy's vulnerability and danger at the heart of a capitalist stronghold are metonymically associated, for "red carries the meaning of failure in achievement contexts, warning that a dangerous possibility is at hand" (Elliot and Maier 251). Furthermore, the director employs a synecdoche to represent a whole through parts. Willy bawls petulantly in the beginning of the film, "the way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks!" Hence, the presence of bricks and windows insinuates that capitalism has boxed in humanity. In addition, throughout the film, electronic machines often break down, which pressures and infuriates Willy because of their repair costs. These oddly frequent references to mechanical products establish the existence of capitalism deep in the life of the protagonist. Hence, the machines as a whole symbolize capitalism. The spite Willy holds against machines is his defiance of the overarching capitalist structure. The machine's role as a channel through which capitalism exerts its dominance over Willy is palpable during Willy's demand for a sedentary position; as Willy walks into Howard's office, Howard was marveling at a tape recorder. Howard's obsession with the recorder obstructs communication as he consistently cuts off Willy's demand because of his preoccupation with the machine. Hence, the recorder lies at the heart of the miscommunication between "Howard and Willy [who] show two sides of American

progress: one is failure and the other success” (Cohn 43) and allows Howard to digress from Willy’s uncomfortable demand, signifying the capitalism’s role in depriving a rebellious and hence suffering Willy of free will while safeguarding Howard, who represents the archetype of capitalist society. After Howard, adamant not to comply with the request, leaves, devastated Willy is left alone and inadvertently strikes the recorder, which causes the recorder to utter ready-made phrases which Willy fails to stop; through synecdoche, Willy’s attack on capitalism and an unwavering response from the overarching structure accentuate a tragic fate of Willy.

Such a cinematic language of signs is amplified by the syntax of the film via mise-en-scène as the film modifies the space to be theatrical so that a fabricated stage conveys a lack of autonomy in characters. During the course of adaptation, the director decided to maintain the stage setting of the play in the film, and theatrical properties are noticeably fake; buildings are rid of roofs to cover them and walls disjoined. In harmony with characters, shot proxemics and framing, the presence of stage setting renders the voice of the film vivid and trenchant. The stage and theatrical property, which remind the viewers of a play, highlight that characters are physically confined as to where they can move and what they can do; they are restricted within the domain the stage permits. No distant off-screen space is allowed in such a setting. The overtly fabricated stage as an obvious fiction, not “as an authentic re-construction of reality” (“Mise-en-scene”) for which most films actually aim, eliminates the hope of possibility and coincidence, for the viewers are reaffirmed that Willy is merely a character in the film whose agency as a human being is wanting. Hence, an effect of the stage maximizes the passiveness and paucity of human agency in this predestined stage in which characters are merely puppets of the inevitable plot. Unlike other films, which attempt to imbue their characters with a sense of reality as much as possible, *Death of a Salesman* intentionally exploits a limited space and fabricated sense of reality.

Not only does the physical setting of the film underscore the oppression, but also the film's shot proxemics point up such restrictions imposed upon human beings through paradigmatic connotations. As the theatrical properties and stage deprive the characters of freedom, the camera also tends to follow Willy faithfully and hence, the limitation that the frame imposes is very strict; Willy cannot leave the frame and reenter freely. This closed form again highlights that Willy is trapped. The composition of the image within such a frame is also closely connected to the tragic elements hitherto discussed. The film is notable for frequent use of medium to long high-angle shots from the top of buildings and shots taken outside looking in through a window. In the same sense, these shots maximize the effects of confinement. Buildings and windows, as was said, symbolize capitalism and imprisonment. Thus, when characters are portrayed as being inside buildings and windows, the association that they are helplessly entangled in capitalism is established. Moreover, the film frequently employs over-the-shoulder shots when Willy is facing other characters in the film. By eliminating the "eye contact [which] provides a foundation of communication and social interaction" (Senju and Johnson 127) and by having one of characters' backs turned away from the camera, the director creates scenes in which characters seem like they are in a conflict. The association with a conflict accentuates Willy's struggle to reject conformity, represented by complacent characters he is facing, to capitalism. Observing the powerlessness and struggles of the characters from diverse point of views and with strict limitation of the frame imposed upon them, viewers become immersed in the tragic fate of characters. The deliberate representation of Willy as a puppet without agency through the syntax even though he struggles to achieve free will serves as a critique of modern capitalist society in which people are shackled by the rules of capitalism, which we now deem as an inevitable course of nature.

Lastly, although the film generally proceeds with a linear narrative, starting at

the middle of the story and reaching a climax, *Death of a Salesman* also employs flashbacks to convey how people are longing for a society without brutal rules and the mechanisms of capitalism. The flashbacks are used through Willy's delusions about the past in which he and Biff were on good terms and when Willy was more recognized by others. Whenever Willy falls into delusions, a nostalgic and halcyon tune of a flute is played in the background. The flashbacks and flute are accompanied by Willy's deceased brother Ben, who acquired a fortune in Africa by mining gold. In the delusions, Willy is obsessed with how rich Ben was and how much he regrets rejecting his brother's offer to go to Africa with him. Ben's presence in flashbacks signifies Willy's aspiration for a natural world untainted by capitalism. Africa, for Willy, is a land of opportunity where he believes the American Dream, ironically, is possible. This idea is accentuated by the role of the flute and a verdant environment in the delusions. During the flashbacks, a scene is very bucolic; in contrast to the reality fraught with buildings, the surroundings in the delusions are rich with trees and grasses. Accompanied by the halcyon melody of the flute, Willy's delusions drag even the viewers into an illusion that they, hiding behind a tree, are peeping through Willy's life in the peaceful countryside. Thus, the combination of the presence of Ben, the environment and the flute represents a "link Willy has with his father and the natural world" (Krause) where the overarching structure of capitalism is not in reign. However, the indirectness of the link is important to note; the link is portrayed through the flashbacks, which then again are presented as the delusions of Willy in the present. These multi-layered relationships convey that the connection is very faint. In other words, the film implies that Willy's hope for such a world is unlikely to be attained, thus poignantly pointing out that perhaps the current capitalist society has come too far, that to think of an innocent world is to fall into a delusion.

In conclusion, Willy Loman is an incarnation of victims who have been excluded and fallen low in the structure called capitalism. The film constantly implies Willy's eventual

surrender as he struggles to achieve his free will. Nonetheless, the businessman named Willy Loman semiotically reminds us that even a low man has free will. Willy did not die in vain, but rather he died a tragic hero, for until the end he denied the necessary consequence of capitalism and chose his end with his own hands. Having been adapted into film in the 1980s when the capitalist structure started to be established on a global scale and the Soviet Union began crumbling, *Death of a Salesman* puts the breaks on a relentless spread of and blind faith in capitalism, posing a question through its plot, signs, syntaxes and flashbacks. Just like the traditional tragedy, Oedipus, which cast a doubt towards the God-oriented Athenian society, *Death of a Salesman* shrewdly and poignantly questions capitalist society to create a society where a tragedy of next Willy Loman will not have to be told.

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