

An Analysis of Willy's Trauma in Death of a Salesman Based on Trauma Theory

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Abstract: *Death of a Salesman* is the culmination of Miller's playwriting. Many scholars and critics have studied this play from many perspectives, such as the American Dream, tragedy theory, and the ecological view of nature. However, few have studied this play from the perspective of trauma theory. Therefore, this thesis adopts a textual analysis approach to study Willy's trauma symptoms, trauma causes and failure in trauma recovery based on trauma theory. From the content of the storyline, this study analyzes the causes of Willy's trauma from society, family and individuals, and explores the reasons for Willy's ultimate failure to recover from trauma through a careful reading and analysis. It has been found that Willy's trauma symptoms are complex and diverse. The most representative ones are flashback and avoidance. The series of psychological traumas suffered by Willy reveal the tragic lives of ordinary people in American society who have been traumatized against the backdrop of the illusory American Dream. They drown in trauma and eventually have to end their lives by committing suicide. This thesis provides a new perspective on the study of *Death of a Salesman*, which helps to raise readers' awareness of trauma, and warns people to deal with trauma positively instead of indulging in it.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Arthur Miller is one of the most distinguished American playwrights of the 20th century and has enjoyed a high reputation in the drama field for decades. He wrote a variety of plays that had been well performed and highly praised around the world. The combination of realism and expressionism, which skillfully expresses personal emotions and social concerns, is the most distinctive feature of Miller's plays. Unlike other works that focus on prominent figures, Miller tended to focus on ordinary individuals. Most of his works focused on depicting the lives of people at the bottom of society, showing his humanistic concern and profound thinking about the plight of modern people. The characters were often those at the bottom, whose struggles and confusion about the future were put on stage.

As a prolific writer, Miller published 35 works during his lifetime. Among them, *Death of a Salesman*, which was first performed in 1949, was his crowning achievement. This play won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the New York Drama Critics Circle Awards. It was a social tragedy about the disillusionment of personal ideals. The main character, Willy Loman, has been a salesman

for over 30 years, but is fired in his later years. To make matters worse, neither of his sons has a job. Willy's expectations on his two sons are completely shattered. There is a huge contrast between reality and Willy's dream. This contrast and the pressure of life overwhelm him, eventually leading to his suicide.

Willy's experience is like a mirror reflecting the changes in American society and the lives of American ordinary people in the 1920s and 1930s. For most Americans, the story of Willy and his family members is a true reflection of their own. Even today, people from different countries can find some commonalities between the main character and themselves.

Scholars in China and abroad have already studied *Death of a Salesman* from different perspectives. So far, the academic results achieved by foreign scholars on this work are mainly divided into textual studies and cultural studies. Textual research findings include studies of linguistic style, the structure of the work and textual imagery. Cultural studies include interpretations of the American Dream, tragedy theory, Jewishness, symbolism and so on. Compared to foreign studies, domestic research on this work began later, at the end of the 20th century. In addition, there is some overlap between the perspectives of domestic and foreign studies. Domestic research mainly covers the interpretation of the American Dream, tragedy theory, ecological view of nature, comparative studies.

Most previous studies of this great work have focused on American Dream, tragedy, Jewishness, feminism, ecocriticism, and comparison of Chinese and American cultures, but few have analyzed this play from the perspective of trauma theory. Therefore, the research applies trauma theory to analyze the trauma of the main character in *Death of a Salesman* and intends to interpret from a perspective in order to acquire a deep understanding to this great play.

1.2 Research Objectives

This thesis aims to use trauma theory to analyze Willy's trauma experiences, so as to provide readers with a new perspective on *Death of a Salesman* and help them get a deeper understanding of this play.

Based on trauma theory, this thesis analyzes Willy's various behaviors to find out the key causes of his trauma. In that particular era of the Great Depression, Willy is a representative of most Americans. In the context of rapid accumulation of material wealth in society, individuals are often unable to make the most appropriate responses when facing new changes and challenges. This thesis intends to depict the spiritual plight of most Americans of that era. In addition, the symptoms, causes, and recovery process of trauma are provided. In the modern world of extreme stress, it is important for people to face their traumas with brave attitude and live positively.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Previous Studies on *Death of a Salesman*

Death of a Salesman has been the subject of attention by many scholars from many different perspectives for decades. The general studies in recent years at home and abroad are as follows.

2.1.1 Previous studies on *Death of a Salesman* abroad

When mentioning this play, the first impression it gives seems to be tragedy. Regarding the tragedy itself, many critics hold different views. Martin^[1] believes that the play is not only the shattering of the American dream, but also the shattering of the dreams of ordinary people like Willy. Willy's inner loneliness, estrangement from his son and social elimination are universal. It expresses Miller's tragic

attitude towards the sick social values of American society.

Some scholars discuss this work from the perspective of the American Dream. They propose the American Dream as the main cause of Willy's tragic fate. The misunderstanding of the American Dream and the conflict between the idealized American dream and the American reality leads to the tragic ending of the play. Willy creates a fantasy world around him, just to convince himself and his family of his dreams^[2].

In addition, many critics and scholars have studied this play's expressionism. They explored Miller's mastery of combining realism and expressionism in this play. Masal^[3] points out that Ben is not only a part of Willy's memory, but also a part of Willy's thought.

Arthur Miller is Jewish. Therefore, many scholars have used Miller's Jewish background as a basis to study this work. Gottlieb^[4] analyzes Willy's Jewish background, revealing Willy's uncomfortable and permanent adaptation to American identity.

Many scholars have analyzed this work from a feminist perspective. They believed that society treats women as second-class citizens. Linda experienced tremendous gender discrimination. She was a victim under a patriarchal society.

2.1.2 Previous studies on *Death of a Salesman* in China

In 1983, *Death of a Salesman* was staged in China. This play was a huge success and was well received by the Chinese people. Over time, many scholars have turned their attention to this play, analyzing it from different perspectives.

When discussing this play, the American Dream is obviously a necessary topic. Image of the salesman is the epitome and symbol of an era in America. Gone are the days when bold risk-taking and hard work were all that was needed to create a good life. The poetic American dream had become cold and hopeless. People were no longer the masters of their dreams, but slaves to money. Wang^[5] believes that the destruction of Willy's American Dream is caused by the distortion of values. The domestic study of the American Dream about this work reveals the plight of ordinary people in American society.

Like most Western critics and scholars, some Chinese scholars have focused on the tragedy itself. The tragic fate of Willy is not only his personal tragedy, but also the tragedy of his family relationships. Moreover, this is a tragedy of American society. Miller profoundly exposes the deceptive nature of the American myth and the negative impact of modern business culture on the values of ordinary Americans.

In addition, Chen^[6] reinterprets this classic play from the perspective of ecocritical theory, believing that Miller shows the ecological crisis of modern human existence in the play.

There are other scholars who choose to study this work in terms of the contrast between Chinese and Western cultures. For example, Wu^[7] has a comparative study of the Chinese Dream and the American Dream through the analysis of *Nirvana of Gouerye* and *Death of a Salesman*. The conclusion is that the two works have similarities in ideas, characters, plot patterns and staging styles, but express different meanings. Despite the similarity in plot and character arrangement, when we carefully distinguish the meaning of the broken dream in the two plays, we find that the Chinese dream and the American dream are very different.

To sum up, domestic and foreign scholars have studied *Death of a Salesman* from many perspectives, such as American Dream, tragedy, Jewishness, feminism, ecocriticism, and comparison of Chinese and American cultures. These studies have given us insight into this great work and allowed us to understand it from different aspects. But few scholars have analyzed this play from the perspective of trauma theory. Therefore, this thesis will analyze the trauma of the main character in *Death of a Salesman* based on trauma theory in order to interpret this great play from a new perspective and acquire a new understanding.

2.2 Theoretical framework

Trauma theory has been developed for more than a century. As an interdisciplinary discipline, trauma theory covers a wide range of fields, including medicine, psychology, philosophy, sociology, literature, and cultural studies. The following section is an introduction to trauma theory, including its origin and development, as well as the concept of trauma symptoms and trauma recovery.

2.2.1 The origin of trauma theory

Trauma means the ordinary human response to danger, which is a complex, integrated system of reactions, encompassing both body and mind. The study of trauma is considered traumatology. Early trauma research was in the medical sense. Etymologically, trauma, the central keyword of trauma theory, can be traced back to the ancient Greek word “traumatizo”, which was originally used as a surgical term for injuries caused by the penetration of a blunt instrument into the human body.

2.2.2 The development of trauma theory

Trauma theory is a psychological and literary theory. In psychological field, it explores the effects of trauma events on individuals and their subsequent behaviors and emotions. In literary field, it focuses on the themes and experiences of trauma in literature and explores the impact of these themes and experiences on individuals and society. As the world’s political, economic, and social environment changes, trauma theory has evolved and can be broadly divided into the following three stages.

The first period emphasized the pathological study of trauma at the end of the 19th century. With the development of the Western Enlightenment and social progress, a group of scholars specializing in the study of psychological trauma arose, and modern trauma theory began to emerge.

The Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, has made great progress. He used psychoanalysis for the first time in psychology and medicine to explore the origins and treatment of trauma. Hysteria is related to the original trauma experiences of childhood and is the result of the persistent surfacing of latent memories. Under expert guidance, the subconscious can be transformed into consciousness. The traumatized person could bravely express his or her traumatic memories in order to weaken the symptoms of hysteria. This is not only a major breakthrough in trauma theory, but also advances the development and practice of psychology.

The second period was after the World War II. The outbreak of the two world wars prompted significant progress in revisiting psychological trauma. Herman^[8], a leading American psychiatrist and psychologist, believes that traumatized people can only seek safety in society and recover from trauma by establishing normal connections with external society. Caruth^[9] not only gave the classical definitions of trauma trauma, but also described the characteristics of trauma, the expression of traumatic experiences, the characteristics of traumatic memories, and the types of trauma. Trauma was described as “the response to an unexpected or overming violent events that are not fully grasped as they occur but return later in repeated flashbacks and other repetitive phenomena”^[9]. Her outstanding contribution to trauma research is an extension of the core content.

The third phase of trauma research applies trauma theory to a multidisciplinary field of study. For example, Jeffery C. Alexander has been involved in the field of cultural trauma. Alexander introduced the concept of “cultural trauma” in his research on cultural trauma theory. Cultural trauma belongs to the individual or to a specific group, and therefore it has an impact not only on the growth of the individual but also on the development of the group.

Many researchers have analyzed trauma in terms of political consciousness, cultural patterns, and media communication, reflecting the diversity of theories. Most of the existing studies are grounded

in the psychological and psychiatric disciplines of trauma theory and lack the necessary literary perspective as a reference, which means that the literary construction of trauma theory is still a research area that needs to be urgently explored. Thus, from a literary perspective, the study of trauma in literature can help advance research related to trauma theory.

2.2.3 Symptoms of trauma

Various factors such as age, gender, personality and educational background have an impact on trauma victims, leading to varied symptoms. Despite individual differences in response to traumatic events, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the commonly accepted standard for trauma symptoms.

Herman classified the symptoms of PTSD into three primary categories: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. Hyperarousal refers to the ongoing anticipation of danger^[8]. After a traumatic experience, the human self-protection system enters a state of alertness in which the person is easily frightened. Intrusion refers to the ineradicable influence of the traumatic events returning unbidden^[8]. The most common uncontrolled repetition of trauma events is flashback, which is intrusive and repetitive in nature. Constriction means the numbing response of surrender^[8]. Traumatized people often try to avoid everything related to the trauma event in order to get rid of the painful memories.

2.2.4 Recovery of trauma

People who have experienced trauma events are often extremely insecure. Trauma cannot heal alone; rather, it recovers through connection. The foundation of recovering from trauma is establishing connections with the external world.

Trauma recovery can be divided into three stages of recovery. The first stage is “safety and stabilization”. Traumatized people need to learn step-by-step how to acquire a sense of security and mastery over their physical and emotional states, as well as their surroundings. They should recognize their lost selves and receive appropriate treatment to help rebuild safety and regulate emotions and behaviors.

The second stage is “remembrance and mourning”. Remembrance and mourning are transformative processes that allow victims to gradually gain psychological balance and alleviate negative emotions such as revenge, grief, and fear. In this stage, trauma memories are integrated into the victim’s ordinary experiences. After the repeat of trauma, the influence of the perpetrator wanes and the sadness of trauma memory fades. The traumatized person can regain hope and energy for life.

The third stage is “reconnection and integration”. After processing trauma experience, the traumatized person should work towards developing a new self by establishing new relationships with the outside world. Reconstruction can help traumatized people feel less helpless and isolated, face danger consciously, and affirm their identity.

In summary, trauma has become an important way of research that includes different disciplines and fields. It can help study literature, re-examine ourselves, and examine our spiritual and cultural world.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research materials

The research materials for this thesis include the script of *Death of a Salesman*, articles and books related to this play, and materials related trauma theory.

3.2 Research questions

The research questions for this thesis are as follows:

What are Willy's symptoms of trauma?

What did lead to Willy's trauma?

What are the results of Willy's trauma recovery?

3.3 Research methods

This thesis uses textual analysis research method to study Willy's trauma in *Death of a Salesman*. Textual analysis is a qualitative research method that uses an in-depth analysis of a text to understand the meaning and themes in the text.

This thesis takes trauma theory as the primary framework for analysis, combining a close reading and analysis of the play with a review of relevant academic literature to explore the trauma experienced by Willy. It includes the causes, symptoms, and effects of trauma.

3.4 Research tools

The research tools used in this thesis include laptop computers, video players, literature, and literature management software.

3.5 Research procedures

The research procedure includes the following steps. Firstly, this play is read. Next, academic literature related to trauma theory and literary analysis are reviewed in order to establish a theoretical framework. Then trauma theory is applied to analyze Willy's trauma experiences and symptoms, and explores the causes and recovery of Willy's trauma. Finally, a thesis is written to summarize the research findings.

4. Research Findings and Analysis

4.1 Symptoms of Willy's trauma

Trauma caused by various misfortunes has different symptoms, which manifest differently in various victims. Trauma disrupts a sophisticated self-defense mechanism that typically functions cohesively^[8]. The effect of trauma on people is not the trauma event itself, but people's reaction to the encounter. That is, the effects of trauma on the traumatized person are continuous. They cannot be fully understood by the conscious mind immediately, but appear in the daily life of the traumatized person in the form of trauma symptoms. In *Death of a salesman*, the symptoms of Willy's trauma include flashbacks and avoidance.

4.1.1 Flashbacks

In the context of psychology, flashbacks are a psychological occurrence where individuals experience sudden and involuntary recurring memories of past events. These memories are often linked to various emotions or feelings, such as fear, happiness, excitement, sadness, surprise, and so on. In some cases, the emotions associated with past memories can be so intense that the individual cannot fully shift his or her attention from the past memory to the current reality.

Willy's frequent flashbacks are typical symptoms of trauma. In the opening scene of the play, when Willy returns home physically and emotionally exhausted, his consciousness has flashed back to the

past. His mind flashes back to his two sons washing the Chevrolet car frequently and meticulously:

Willy: ...The way Biff used to simonize that car? The dealer refused to believe there was eighty thousand miles on it. ... You gonna wash the engine, Biff? ... Don't get your sweater dirty, Biff! ... What a simonizing job! ...Happy, use newspaper on the windows, it's the easiest thing. Show him how to do it, Biff! ...That's it, that's it, good work. You're don't, all right, Hap. ...^[10].

In Willy's memory, he is a respectable person with a promising and ambitious future. His sons are like vibrant angels, all glowing with light. The reality is the opposite, however, and the current state of affairs forces Willy to flash back to the past in an attempt to paralyze himself.

When Biff tells Willy that they don't have money to turn around their sports equipment, Willy realizes that their last hope has been dashed. He falls back into flashbacks, remembering when young Biff failed math and ran to Boston to find him, only to discover he has an affair with a woman. This brief experience makes Willy's mind completely fragmented between the past and the present. The knocking on the door, the woman's laughter, and Biff's crying constitute one of his most painful flashbacks. Willy's trauma makes him constantly shuttle between reality and memory, and brings his psychological state from uncertainty to despair.

4.1.2 Avoidance

Another symptom of Willy's trauma is avoidance. The primary manifestation of post-traumatic stress disorder is chronic avoidance of stimuli associated with that trauma. The traumatized person will persistently avoid stimuli associated with the trauma. Willy's adultery is a turning point in the relationship between Willy and his son Biff. In the hotel, a woman asks Willy for his socks. For Willy, "socks" become something that induces traumatic memories, which can evoke memories and experiences of traumatic events. So he tries to avoid "socks" in his life. Whenever his wife Linda mended socks, Willy would shout angrily and ask her to stop mending them. In short, the imagery of socks is like an untimely bomb weighing on Willy's nerves, and he wants to escape from the fact that he is cheating on his wife. However, the more he avoided what caused the traumatic event, the deeper the trauma became embedded in him. The external manifestations of the trauma caused him to try to avoid the stimulus, but this avoidance failed to free him from the torment.

4.2 Causes of Willy's trauma

There are multiple causes behind trauma experiences and symptoms. According to sociologist Alexander^[11], trauma is ubiquitous, embedded in everyday life and verbal expression (p. 2). To put it differently, when an event significantly undermines the fundamental human requirements of order, security, affection, and connection, individuals will inevitably experience psychological distress.

Trauma always has a cause. It can be caused by a variety of factors and experiences. From the moment a person is born, everything that happens has an impact on a person's life in one way or another. Those horrible events that haunt people's minds often cause trauma. Therefore, all systems by which human interact with others should be considered when analyzing the causes of trauma.

The causes of Willy's trauma can be summarized in the following three areas: social, family, and personal causes.

4.2.1 Social Causes

Trauma events never occur in a social vacuum, which are related to the social context in which they occur^[12]. The occurrence of individual and collective trauma is closely intertwined with the social context. Society plays a significant role in shaping individual tragedies. LaCapra^[13] suggests that the trauma experienced by the main character in a traumatic novel is heavily influenced by the cultural and historical context of the story (p. 21). This implies that the suffering of characters in

trauma literature can reflect the fate of individuals during that particular era. The trauma of the main character in the story may serve as a representation of the shared experiences suffered by a specific group of people at a specific historical time. Therefore, when studying the reasons behind trauma, it is necessary to delve into the social context. The social causes of Willy's trauma are mainly the Great Depression and the distorted American Dream.

The Great Depression originated in the United States in the 1930s and was the most severe, longest-lasting, and far-reaching economic depression of the 20th century on a global scale. It was triggered by the collapse of the New York stock market in October 1929, which had a negative effect on the entire capitalist world and beyond. The devastating consequences of this economic crisis persisted until the outbreak of World War II.

Miller, the author of this play, experienced this Great Depression when he was a child. He saw his father's business go from prosperity to near bankruptcy, and his family's life from wealth to decline. The main plot of *Death of a Salesman* bears a striking resemblance to this experience. Although Miller does not specify the exact time of this drama, based on the events in this drama, the audience or the reader could easily infer that these stories are set against the backdrop of the Great Depression. Thus, Miller presents his memories and feelings about his early life through Willy.

The Great Depression had varying degrees of impact on both Willy's family status and his self-personality. Economic changes in economically damaged families can have a profound effect on the maintenance of family bread and the psychological well-being of family members.

Willy: I was thinking of the Chevvy. Nineteen twenty-eight ... when I had that red Chevvy. That funny? I could sworn I was driving that Chevvy today...^[10]

Willy: ...You mustn't tell me you've got people to see - I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! ...Now pay attention. Your father - in 1928 I had a big year. I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commissions.

Howard: Now, Willy, you never averaged.

Willy: I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in the year of 1928^[10]!

Based on the above description, we know that before the Great Depression, Willy was able to receive a generous salary. After the Great Depression, he even had to reduce his salary from 65 dollars to 40 dollars, but his boss fired him mercilessly. Clearly, the Great Depression had a major impact on Willy's financial income. In terms of family status, it was somewhat closely related to one's financial income. With the onset of the Great Depression, Willy's income became worse and worse, especially after being fired by Howard. Therefore, as Willy lost his job, his family's status gradually declined, which caused a great psychological burden to him.

The Great Depression, which caused the vast majority of Americans to feel tremendous employment pressure and a sharp decline in their standard of living, also had an impact on Willy's ego personality. During the Great Depression, his social sensitivity increases as his family status increasingly declines, leading to strong emotional reactions. The instability of social status can lead to significant psychological stress, which may be evident through low self-esteem and unhappiness in social situations. "They seem to laugh at me...I'm fat. I'm very foolish to look at, Linda^[10]". Willy feels that people around him are mocking him and harboring negative feelings towards him, which indicates his sensitivity, lack of self-assurance, and potentially low self-esteem.

Another social cause of Willy's trauma is the distorted American Dream. The American Dream is a universal belief of Americans, an epitome of the American cultural spirit, and a fundamental element of the American social value system. The origin and development of the American Dream is closely linked to the initial history, economic progress and industrial expansion of the United States. Though the American Dream has been interpreted differently in different historical periods, in general, it is a belief that every individual in the United States has an equal chance to attain success through their persistent hard work and determination.

However, after World War I, American society was impacted by an overwhelming emphasis on consumerism and utilitarianism, gradually leading to the belief that accumulating material possessions was the key to achieving personal success and happiness. For some individuals, the pursuit of fortune by speculation became a necessary means of realizing the American Dream. In this materialistic commodity society, the American Dream gradually lost its holy glory and became a vulgar pursuit of material.

In this drama, Willy has worked diligently and painstakingly for Wigner for over thirty years. When he can no longer provide benefits for the company, he is unceremoniously fired. His experience reflects the unjust treatment of ordinary people in American society and the denial of people's own value. In this ruthless society, the ordinary workers, represented by Willy, are just tools for the exploiting class to make money. They treat people as commodities, and when the commodities lose their use value and can no longer create value for them, these exploiters expel them mercilessly and exclude them from the mainstream society. The ordinary people represented by Willy were not given the most basic respect and material security of life, and they became social outcasts.

The dominant culture in American society, represented by the American Dream, has also done great harm to human development and survival. For centuries, generations of Americans have believed that success and a good life can be achieved through persistent effort and struggle. Under the lure of this myth, countless people have gone ahead and held fast to this belief, both materially and spiritually, paying a huge price for their dreams, but in fact most of them ended up in failure, and eventually could only be immersed in their own woven dreams.

Willy is a typical example of a victim of this distorted American dream. He devoted his life to struggle and believed that he would one day become a great man and realize his dream. But until he is exhausted and can no longer do anything about his dream, he still does not realize the deceitfulness and illusion of the American dream he has always believed in and dreamed about. Even in the end, he is willing to sacrifice his own life for 20,000 dollars so that his son Biff can continue to realize this dream of becoming rich. In this sense, Willy is deeply deceived and hurt by the mainstream culture that advocates the American dream. He is deeply trapped in it and eventually become a victim of American society.

4.2.2 Family Causes

Individuals are born into families, and most of them remain attached to their forms of family throughout their lives. The growth and behavior of a family member is inextricably linked to the other members of the family. Corey^[14] insists that the symptoms of a particular individual are usually seen as an expression of a set of habits and patterns within a family (p. 404). In this way, individuals could be better understood by assessing the interactions between family members. Families influence personal growth and psychology, and family conflict can lead to harm for each family member. Therefore, it is inevitable to consider family causes when analyzing a character's trauma experiences. The family causes of Willy's trauma are mainly his infidelity to his marriage and the discordant father-son relationship.

One of the family causes of Willy's trauma is Willy's infidelity to marriage. In most countries, monogamy and marriage laws confer many rights and obligations on both parties to a marriage. Marital fidelity is a crucial aspect of the marital relationship between spouses, serving as both an ethical principle and a fundamental prerequisite. Therefore, adultery is considered morally, legally, socially, and culturally offensive and intolerable.

Adultery is primarily defined as consensual sexual relations between a married person and someone other than his or her current spouse or partner. Willy was under a lot of psychological stress due to his declining financial capacity. As a result, he desperately needed release. So he had an extramarital affair with a woman in Boston, which was cathartic for him.

At the hotel in Boston, Willy's comical stories caught the woman's attention and interested her. "But you've got such a sense of humor, and we do have such a good time together, don't we?"^[10]. She was impressed by Willy's humor and looks up to him, which boosts Willy's self-assurance. As a token of appreciation, Willy generously gifted her a set of stockings to showcase his financial prowess. Thus, for Willy, who was sensitive, lacked self-confidence and even had low self-esteem, having an affair became a way for him to seek confidence and approval. Willy has an illicit sexual relationship with the woman in Boston, which is accidentally discovered by his son Biff. This is a huge blow and an irreversible failure to Willy's fatherhood. He feels guilty and ashamed of his wife Linda and his sons.

Another family cause of Willy's trauma is discordant father-son relationship. The relationship between Willy and his son is not harmonious. The first reason is that Biff stumbled upon Willy's adultery. The second reason is that Biff has become an adult and has his own judgment about things. No longer does he follow his father's words in everything.

Having stumbled upon Willy's adulterous affair with that woman, Biff's hostility became particularly strong and pronounced. Biff lost trust in Willy, and his unwillingness to engage in conversation with his father was undoubtedly one of the causes of Willy's trauma.

Willy always pinned his unrealistic and far-reaching hopes on Biff, and he never realized the impact of his hurtful words on Biff. As time went on, Biff stopped being a meek child. He stopped obeying his father's orders. Biff has become a 34-year-old adult who begins to question Willy's social philosophy.

Biff: 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! ...

Willy: You vengeful, spiteful mut!

Biff: Pop, I'm nothing! I'm nothing, Pop. Can't you understand that? There's no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all^[10].

Biff begins to realize that Willy's words are illusory, and he resolves to be a man with his feet on the ground. However, Willy has not yet realized his own shortcomings. They are unable to communicate with each other as equals and truly understand each other. The communication barrier and mutual lack of understanding apparently lead to an uneasy father-son relationship between Willy and Biff, which in turn leads to Willy's mental trauma.

4.2.3 Personal causes

4.2.3.1 Wrong view of life

On the personal side, Willy has wrong view of life. He lacks correct judgment of things, has high self-esteem and insists on unrealistic dreams.

First of all, in our society, there is a preference for individuals who work hard and possess a mastery of specific knowledge and skills. As a salesman, Willy never realized the significance and necessity of hard work, but saw good interpersonal relationship as the way to success. The wrong approach to the goal, no matter how hard you work, is futile. The fact that Willy is going further and further down the road of trying to be a people person means that he cannot achieve career success.

Secondly, Willy's self-esteem is strong. He is too stubborn and has immature thinking. After he was kicked out of the company, Charley kindly tried to help him, and admonished him some truth. However, Willy turned down Charley's job offer out of over-sensitive pride. He believes that he deserves to do better than Charley and that accepting Charley's help is the same as admitting that Charley's philosophy of life is correct. This is Willy would rather die than accept the recognition.

Lastly, his strong pride directly led to his arrogance and blind confidence. Willy pretentiously believes that he and his son are better than others. Decent people all recognize him.

4.2.3.2 Unrealistic pursuit of dreams

Willy, like many Americans, has his own version of the American dream. He desires a contented marriage, a harmonious and peaceful family life, his sons' success, and a higher status in his family and society.

However, things did not go as planned. An adulterous relationship with a woman in Boston left him to deal with guilt and self-recrimination. He and Biff had frequent fights. He was fired by his boss and his family was in a financial crisis. His sons, though in their thirties, have accomplished nothing. Throughout, Willy firmly dreamed of becoming a great salesman. After being fired from his job, he pinned his ambitious dream on Biff. But Biff, who had become a rational adult, occasionally started to question Willy's social philosophy. As a result, Willy's dream was crumbled. The vast disparity between his aspirations and reality has left Willy feeling despondent. He offers his life in exchange for life insurance premiums, imagining that his sons can achieve great success with the help of this money.

From the above analysis, it could conclude that the social causes mainly include the Great Depression and the distorted American Dream. Family causes are mainly Willy's infidelity to marriage and the disharmonious father-son relationship. Personal causes are mainly related to Willy's wrong outlook on life and unrealistic dreams.

4.3 Failure to recover from trauma

Recovery is essential for individuals who have experienced trauma. By successfully treating the adverse effects of trauma, people can be able to reconnect with the outside world and gain a new life. Herman proposes three stages of trauma recovery. In the first stage, the traumatized person needs to re-establish a sense of safety. In the second stage, the victim should try to share his or her personal experiences and emotions related to traumatic events with others, which means recalling and mourning the trauma story. In the third stage, the victim should re-establish contact with the outside world and resume a social life to rebuild herself. Willy was unable to successfully recover from the trauma through these three stages, which ultimately led to his suicide.

4.3.1 Failure to establish safety

Trauma can leave victims feeling powerless and helpless, stripping away their sense of control. So victims do not feel safe with themselves and their environment. They often prefer to alienate others because they believe that ordinary people cannot understand them. They believe that they are the few outcasts who deserve to be punished. Therefore, establishing safety has become an urgent priority.

Apparently, Willy did not establish a sense of security in this play. We can learn from this play that Willy is very tired. In fact, this physical exhaustion is one of the symptoms of his trauma. However, his wife Linda only focuses on his physical fatigue without realizing the mental exhaustion. Instead of delving deeper and identify the underlying root cause of Willy's physical exhaustion, she simply attributed the cause to his old age and some external factors, such as the car's steering wheel not being fixed. Willy attributed his physical fatigue to the cup of coffee he had consumed. Neither of them realized that Willy's fatigue, daydreaming, distractions, avoidance and irritability were actually classic symptoms of trauma.

For Willy, he was unaware of his trauma and had no treatment, so there was no way to stabilize his symptoms, except by taking aspirin to relieve his physical symptoms. It was difficult for him to control his body and to control his surroundings. As a result, he was unable to establish a sense of security, much less a safe environment with the help of others. The first stage of trauma recovery was destined to end in failure.

4.3.2 Failure to share trauma experience

Sharing trauma experiences helps victims heal from their pain. It has an important role in recovery from trauma by releasing negative emotions. When traumatized people feel confused and depressed, it is necessary for them to find someone to talk about their grief instead of blindly remaining silent. The purpose of telling is to get emotional solace and support from others. Once the traumatized person has experienced mourning over the trauma event, he or she can discover his or her indestructible inner life. Otherwise, the negative situation will deteriorate further. Without effective treatment, trauma sufferers will live with a nightmare that never ends^[15].

Survivors need the help of others to overcome their shame and to make a fair assessment of their behavior. In this regard, the attitudes of his or her closest are important. Realistic judgments will reduce shame and guilt. In contrast, harsh criticism or ignorant, blind acceptance can greatly increase the survivor's self-blame and isolation^[8]. It is very important for helpless people to find someone to confide in and rely on. Also, confiding is an effective way for them to deal with their trauma. The response and comfort of the listener are very critical.

Due to communication barriers and discordant father-son relationship, Willy barely told his sons of his grievances and disappointments. As adults, Biff and Happy rarely obeyed their father's commands or voice. Linda seemed to be the only one who cared about Willy. But unfortunately, her love for Willy was irrational and blind. She failed to encourage him to face reality and abandon his unrealistic and impossible dreams. Instead, she devoted herself to please and cater to Willy. As a result, Willy loses the opportunity to talk about his traumatic experiences. He resides in his own world, full of unattainable and unrealistic dreams. He is unable to understand the real world and is constantly immersed in his traumatic experiences. His symptoms of trauma slowly became severe, which led to the failure of his narrative of the traumatic experience.

4.3.3 Failure in reconstruction

Reconstruction is the third stage of trauma recovery. In this stage, the traumatized person is faced with the task of rebuilding a new self and establishing new relationships with others. It is important to accomplish these tasks because building new relationships can help them recover from traumatic events. Through a variety of new relationships, traumatized people can regain confidence and become more optimistic participants in the world. Survivors need the help of others to rebuild a positive view of themselves. Intimacy and aggression regulation that have been damaged by trauma must be restored^[8].

Obviously, Willy's self-reconstruction is a failure. Without the realization of his unrealistic dreams, he could not reconcile with himself. He clung to his life philosophy and always dwelt on his past experiences. He was unable to open up and reconnect with others. He was so immersed in his own world that he could not take that step outward. Eventually, he chose to commit suicide.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Research findings

With a heavy writing style, Arthur Miller successfully tells the moving story of *Death of a Salesman*, creating a distinct image of Willy that remains in the hearts of many people. The main character, Willy, suffers from various traumas and fails to complete the stage of trauma recovery, which leads to his suicide.

In this play, the causes of Willy's trauma come from three main aspects: social, family and personal. The social causes mainly include the Great Depression and the distorted American Dream. Family

causes are mainly Willy's infidelity to marriage and the disharmonious father-son relationship. Personal causes are mainly related to Willy's wrong outlook on life and unrealistic dream. Willy's death can be attributed to some extent to his failure to recover from trauma.

After suffering from trauma, Willy showed some typical trauma symptoms, such as daydreaming, fatigue, distraction, flashbacks, avoidance, tension, and irritability. Willy was not aware of his trauma symptoms, so he did not seek professional psychotherapists to make a diagnosis and treatment. He failed to establish a sense of security. In addition, he was unable to talk to others about his trauma and mourn the loss of his trauma. He did not turn to others or rely on collective strength to rebuild. His reconstruction failed. Having failed to establish safety, to talk about his traumatic experience and to complete his self-reconstruction, he did not recover from his trauma and eventually chose to commit suicide. His tragedy reflects the tragic life of ordinary people in American society at that time. Under the harsh environment, many people like Willy became the victims of the American dream and went to a tragic ending step by step. This also warns people in contemporary society that after suffering from trauma, they should look at trauma correctly, relieve pressure in time, and actively seek help from family and friends to make effective recovery from the trauma.

5.2 Research significances

This thesis applies trauma theory to analyze Willy's in *Death of a Salesman*, providing a new perspective on the study of this play that promises to be useful in the study of the great playwright Arthur Miller. By analyzing the causes of Willy's trauma, readers can understand exactly what makes people feel traumatized, what kinds of symptoms indicate trauma and how to recover from it. It warns people in contemporary society that after suffering from trauma, they should look at trauma correctly, relieve pressure in time, and actively seek help from family and friends to make effective recovery from the trauma. This can help raise public awareness of trauma and provide some guidance for the mental health of the general population.

5.3 Research limitations

However, there are still some limitations of the research in this thesis that need to be considered. As an emerging field, trauma theory is still in the process of development, and there is still a long way to go. Because trauma theory is an interdisciplinary discipline involving many psychological factors, the understanding of trauma theory in this thesis may not be fully adequate. The findings may be not deep enough. Meanwhile, this thesis only uses trauma theory to analyze Willy's trauma. Other characters are not given enough attention.

5.4 Research recommendations

To address these limitations, future research may include using trauma theory to analyze other characters in depth, and study more literary works. This will achieve a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of this play and broaden the application of trauma theory. In addition, it would be valuable to explore potential avenues of trauma healing and recovery. While this thesis highlights the failure of the main character to recover from trauma, it is important to acknowledge that recovery is possible. By examining potential treatment strategies, we could gain insight into how trauma could be addressed and overcome.

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