

# Analysis on *Death of a Salesman*: An Ecofeminist Perspective

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**Abstract:** With industrialization further accelerating in the mid and late 20th century, man has devastated nature while seeking ease and comfort in modern life. Associating women's movement and environmental movement, ecofeminism emerged at the historical moment when the contradictions between human and nature are increasingly intensified. Focusing on the relationship between patriarchal oppression of women and human domination of non-human nature, ecofeminism criticizes all the practices of domination within culture: racism, sexism, class oppression and the exploitation of nature. Arthur Miller's famous tragic play *Death of a Salesman* convey ecofeminist thoughts ranging from men's domination over women and nature, the oppressed weak to the harmony between women and nature. By using the method of exemplification, this paper intends to analyze *Death of a Salesman* from the perspective of ecofeminism, and thereby to explore the ecofeminist thoughts reflected. Thus, this paper found that *Death of a Salesman* shows the tensions between women and men, human and nature and implies domination within them.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller

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## 1. Introduction

While enjoying the colorful and abundant life brought by scientific achievements and technical innovations, human beings are, at the same time, facing the unprecedented environmental and ecological crises. The relation between human and nature goes increasingly tenser. In order to prevent environmental degradation, some special organizations have proposed to make a balance between human activities and nature. Women are the first to notice the harmful effects of environmental problems, so they launch campaigns to call to more people to save the earth. Regardless of their races, ages and classes, women come to realize that women who under the patriarchal oppression and nature under the human domination share the same future, thus environment is a feminist agenda in their struggle against environmental deterioration.

Ecofeminism is a term that links feminism with ecology. It was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1947 as a part of her call to women to save the planet, then, was developed by Ynestra King, and became a movement in 1980. After about 30 years' development, ecofeminism

ripened into maturity. It's not the simple amount of feminism and ecologism, but the sublimation of the above two fields. Focusing on the relationship between patriarchal oppression of women and human domination of non-human nature, ecofeminism criticizes all the practices of domination within culture: racism, sexism, class oppression and the exploitation of nature. [1]

Ecofeminism is not about denying the differences among human beings or those between human beings and the natural world. Conversely, it advocates building community and envisioning new ways of living on the planet. Their main concepts are: first, ecofeminists seek to make visible the interconnections—historical, conceptual, and experiential—between the domination of women and the domination of nature; second and closely related to the first, ecofeminists seek to overcome hierarchical dualisms and to subvert the logic of domination that supports them; third, ecofeminists seek to illuminate the interconnections between and among various forms of oppression. To sum up, in the ecofeminist worldview, rather than addressing only the inequity of the gender relations, feminism must eradicate this whole habit of mind and embrace the ideal of egalitarianism.

Came into being in 1949, this year, Americans had gone

through the Depression and World War II. American Dream, that is through hard work, thrift, and determination, people can surely achieve a better life and live a comfortable life, was disillusioned. Grown up in the age of turbulence, inspired by his own experiences, Arthur Miller wrote down the famous tragic play- *Death of a Salesman*, which told readers a mournful story of the breakup of American dream. Willy Loman, a salesman, suffers a drastic decrease in sales work, a dissatisfying marriage, and a turbulent relationship with his sons which inexorably leads to his suicide.

What's more, the exploited nature and the oppressed weak is mirrored in this play. As the industrialization further accelerating in the mid and late 20th century, man has devastated nature while seeking ease and comfort in modern life. For instance, Willy once complains about workers cut off trees to build houses. Similar to the exploited nature, women are oppressed by the patriarchal structure in which men have power over women. And this kind of oppression is reflected in marriage relation and social status, which is obviously in this play.

## 2. Literature Review

Literary criticisms have thoroughly investigated *Death of a Salesman* from various perspectives, such as sociological, tragic and so on. Shi Qingjing (2012) explores the role of "Nature" as the internal structure to the development of drama, finding that behind the tragedy is the contradiction between the two opposite ecological thoughts that represent the city and nature. [2] Dong Zhen (2015) discusses the roots of human tragedy in *Death of a Salesman*, suggesting that the tragedy caused by the social environment living environment. [3] Xu Fuling, (2016) analyses *Death of a Salesman* from the perspective of Trauma theory, finding that this play reveals the spiritual crisis of ordinary people in American society and criticize the social system and behavior of Western society in the 1930s. [4] Thompson (2018) examines the subtext of the play regarding the American West, suggesting that the opportunity and redemption associated with the region is reflected in the characters of the Loman family. [5] In addition, he (2016) examines the Greek mythological icons that evoke in the character of traveling salesman Willy Loman, who believes that her two sons are destined for success in their endeavors because of their good looks and charisma. [6] Based on Aristotle's part theory of tragedy, Liu (2013) made a detailed analysis on the tragedy of *Death of a Salesman*. [7]

Except for these literary criticisms, feminist perspective is a new approach to *Death of a Salesman*. The feminist analysis of this play mainly focus on the patriarchal suppression to women and their moral dilemma within family. Li Tingting (2018) takes the heroine Linda Loman as the research object, analyzes her image, suggesting that this play is not only Willy Loman's tragedy but Linda's tragedy. [8] Lu Haixia (2017) examines the women image in this play finding that these women have no right to speak, are marginalized subordinates under male hegemony, are aphasias who lack subjective consciousness, or are silent absentees and detainees. [9] Shao

li (2008) studies *Death of a Salesman* from the perspective of ecofeminism, but she only examines the relationships between women and men, human and nature. [10] Yao (2008) explained the life and character of heroine of the play, Linda, he found that she is the real and direct victim of American Dream. [11] Gao Junli (2010) analyzed woman image in *Death of a Salesman* found that Arthur Miller tends to depict women either as "angels" or as "monsters", which is criticized by some critics as reflecting the male writers' prejudice and unfair attitude towards women. [12] Nevertheless, it is still a relatively new realm of study to interpret *Death of a Salesman* from the ecofeminist perspective. To gain a new insight into the famous play, the paper intends to use the method of exemplification to analyze some images and plots and thereby to explore the ecofeminist thoughts embodied.

## 3. The Destroyed Earth: Human's Domination over Nature

Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* points out: "Either she (refers to 'nature') appears simply as a purely impersonal opposition, she is an obstacle and remains a stranger; or she submits passively to man's will and permits assimilation, so that he (refers to 'man') takes possession of her only through consuming her—that is, through destroying her." [13]

After World War II, the U.S. became one of the strongest countries in the world. Thus, the Americans embraced numerous new techniques, as well as the modern facilities. For instance, Willy's family has a vacuum cleaner, a washing machine and a refrigerator. However, the modern life that Americans enjoyed was obtained at the cost of nature. They occupied and destroyed the land to build roads; they cut trees to construct houses. In a word, they consumed nature to build an iron-steel city.

In Act I, Willy complains that: "The way they boxed us in there. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks." [14] A vivid picture of city life was painted by these words. Citizens like Willy are trapped in the little "boxes" which are consisting of bricks, accessing to the nature only by the windows. However, is it a real natural world outside the windows? Definitely not. "The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood." [14] It is no doubt that cars bring people some convenience, but also the pollution. When these exhaust gases are cleared out of the cylinders, it becomes a part of air that we breath. Actually, compare to the amount of industrial waste air, the exhaust gas released by cars only accounts for a tiny part of air pollution. There is polluted air everywhere, as a result, humans have no fresh air to breath. "box-liked" houses and bad air are the products of urbanization, also industrialization. Due to these industrial products, "the grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the back yard." [14] What Willy complains are the evidences that human exploited the nature by dismantling natural orders and establishing human's rules.

Nature, as a good wife who feeds, nurtures and provides,

also gives comfort to the weak. Willy, the tragic protagonist, when was hurt by the cruel reality, tried to embrace the nature to get comfort. When he was driving along his way from Florida to New York, he believed he saw a beautiful scenery, though it proved to be his illusion. He said: “the trees are so thick, and the sun is warm. I opened the windshield and just let the warm air bathe over me.” [14] As a salesman, Willy was frustrated. He kept travelling every week to sell stockings, however, with the maddening competition and the development of advertisements, he cannot be regarded as a good salesman anymore. He can only make seventy dollars a week. Thus, he is so nervous about being old and unsuccessful. His illusion of the beautiful scenery reflects his yearn for pastoral life and his wish for taking a rest.

What’s more, at the very beginning of this play, there is a sentence: “A melody is heard, played upon a flute”. [14] In fact, Willy has auditory hallucination, and the melody is played in his mind. A melody played upon a flute can be usually heard in the countryside. The desire to embrace nature is buried in Willy’s subconscious.

Willy’s eldest son, Biff, is lost. He was hurt by Willy’s betrayal of his mother, as a result, he gave up the chance to go to University of Virginia, became a farm-hand in the West. Although his father wanted him to be a salesman, he still wanted to be a farmer. After he came back from the West, he told his brother the life in Texas: “This farm I work on, it’s spring there now, see? And they’ve got about fifteen new colts. There’s nothing more inspiring or — beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt.” [14] When was hurt, Biff chose the same way to his father to heal himself. Nature is their therapy.

Above all, nature plays an important role in *Death of a Salesman*. On the one hand, it was exploited hardly by human beings, on the other hand, it provides protection for human souls. Nature is tolerable and great in this play.

#### 4. The Battered Woman: Men’s Domination over Women

In patriarchal world, there is an assumption that humans are more valuable than animal or nature, men than women, the rich than the poor, whites than blacks, etc. The terms “more valuable” mean not simply more powerful but intrinsically more worthwhile, deserving power and privilege. “More valuable” men show the obvious sexist bias in patriarchy society.

According to May, in the years following World War II, Americans rushed into family life. Growing families mean more housewives. [15] Willy’s loyal and loving wife Linda is one of these “family angels” in the patriarchal society of the United States. Linda is a kind, gentle and selfless woman, and she devoted herself to her husband and two sons. Wife and mother, the dual role put heavy commitments on Linda Loman.

As a wife, also a mother, acting obediently according to the mode of traditional women, Linda had to endure her husband’s temper and little cruelties. She had to comfort her husband

when his massive dream didn’t come true. She had to relieve tensions between her husband and her sons. She had to worry about the future of her sons. Living in the patriarchal ideology, acting as a good wife and mother, she inevitably suffered from aphasia.

When Linda tried to bring Willy from unhappy memories, she told Willy that she got a new kind of American –type cheese. When hearing that, Willy was suddenly angry, said: “Why do you get American when I like Swiss? I don’t want a change! I want Swiss cheese.” [14] Changing cheese is so common, while Willy’s acute response is uncommon. It shows Linda’s family status. Instead of a hostess, she is more likely a housekeeper. Worse than all, Willy had an affair with “the woman” in Boston. When Biff discovered this secret, Willy explained that “he is terrible lonely”. Linda definitely knew what happened in Boston, but, in order to maintain the steady of their family, she bore it in silence. To conclude, Willy’s cruelties and betrayal caused many psychological injuries to Linda. Even Willy admit that Linda has suffered. Linda is a victim of patriarchal society, a broken family angel.

Outside the family, women are regarded as sexual tool. In Boston, Willy slept with “the women” for the sake of drive away his loneliness. “The woman” is seems like a financially independent woman, since she has a job, also a spiritual independence woman, because she considers that she picked Willy in this affair. However, the audiences finally know that “the woman” get together with Willy for some economic benefits, because she asked Willy where’s her stockings which he promised her. Stocking, in the 1940s, even in high price, has sparked lots of women followers. Getting stockings at the cost of her own body mirrors “the woman’s” economic dilemma. The economic dilemma pushes her to the powerful masculine protection, which in turn oppressed her and caused her economic dilemma. In the patriarchal society, she draws on a vicious circle.

Willy’s second son Happy is a man of pleasure, who has given himself up to the relentless pursuit of sensual pleasure. He seduced Charlotte, the fiancée of vice-president of the store, given his overdeveloped sense of competition. When talking about that, Happy said: “I went and ruined her, and furthermore I can’t get rid of her. And he’s the third executive I’ve done that so”. [14] The word “ruin” reflects female status in the patriarchal society. In the eyes of men, women are just like stuffs which belong to them. They can ruin them, they can humiliate them, they can do anything to them just because their subordinated position. As for that two girls who go out with Biff and Happy, they are just regarded them as “easy girls”, with whom they can easily have sex.

To sum up, in *Death of a Salesman*, the “family angel” Linda is trapped by the traditional feminine value, which demands women to be good wife and good mother. The “devils”—The Woman, Charlotte and other two girls, though not confined by the traditional value, are submit to men.

#### 5. Conclusion

*Death of a Salesman* is a typical tragedy, it deals with the

business and domestic problems of a common American family and shows the abnormal relationship between children and parents.

Combining ecology and feminism, ecofeminism provides a new research perspective. From ecofeminist perspective, this paper analyzes some images and plots in *Death of a Salesman*, concluded:

*Death of a Salesman* is a great literary practice of ecofeminism. From the perspective of Willy, this play accuses industrialization and urbanization. Trees are cut down; population are getting out of control, stinks come out of the apartment house; street is lined with cars; grass don't grow anymore and etc. The conversations of different characters reflected the patriarchal oppression of women, not only physical, also psychological one. Linda is regarded as a model of good woman, submitted to her husband, devoted her life to their family. "The woman" becomes Willy's mistress for stockings, and she means nothing to Willy. Charlotte and other girls are just victim of Happy's lust. They are oppressed just as the nature is exploited. In a word, this paper proves that *Death of a Salesman*, with full of ecofeminist thoughts, shows the real living conditions and female position of New York to us audiences.

*Death of a Salesman* is the special product of current American social system and historical background. In 1949, the year that the play had its premiere, people were still struggled out of the Great Depression with the process of industrialization. In 1949, after the end of Second-World War, people, especially adults, were got lost in the complex society. The year of 1949 also played the important role in the rising of female consciousness, since more and more women were coming out of the narrow family and entering into the workplace. These social realities mingled with Miller's personal experiences, created this great play of American dream and ecofeminism.

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