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Class

March 13, 2018

Linda Loman and Gender Inequality

Although Linda Loman is a relatively minor character in *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, her words, thoughts, and actions form the basis of some of the most important lessons imparted by the play. As Willy's wife, Linda's primary purpose is to protect her husband against any form of criticism and unhappiness, facilitate communication between her husband and sons, and prevent her husband from committing suicide—all without losing her temper or focusing on her own needs as a woman and a human being. Linda does not have the luxury of enjoying life; instead, she is sentenced to a life of fear, sadness, and anxiety. Even though she fears that Willy will commit adultery, Linda still refuses to leave her husband or at least insist that he take more of an interest in their marriage. Based on the historical context of the play, her behavior is not unusual; however, it demonstrates the need for a movement dedicated to advancing women's rights. Therefore, Linda Loman is actually a symbol for the gender inequalities that sparked the feminist movement.

Analyzing the historical context of *Death of a Salesman* provides insight into the events that may have influenced Miller's view of feminism. When World War II started, women played an important role on the battlefield and at home, with approximately 350,000 women filling positions in the Marine Corps Women's Reserve, Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, Coast Guard Women's Reserve, and Navy Women's Reserve ("Women in WWII"). Historical context also influences the way audiences perceive plays and films. In 1949, the same year Miller published

Death of a Salesman, Simone de Beauvoir released *The Second Sex*, a book dealing with the treatment of women. According to de Beauvoir, every problem that affects women “has always been a problem of men,” indicating that men’s behavior and attitudes are responsible for the issues addressed by feminism (Thurman). Examining the relationship between Linda and Willy Loman reveals that de Beauvoir’s bold claim is fairly accurate. Linda is not faultless, but it is Willy’s behavior that creates so much turmoil in the Loman household. His wife is consumed with doing everything possible to shield him from criticism and protect his fragile ego. Linda is so obsessed with protecting her husband that she actually tells her sons to leave the house; she fears that any additional conflict between Willy and one of their children will make things even worse. Linda’s deference to her husband’s needs and desires is an excellent example of the gender inequality that was so pervasive in the 1940s.

Linda Loman’s behavior also demonstrates the negative consequences of living in a patriarchal society—a society in which women are nothing more than supporting characters. In a patriarchal system, men hold all of the power in the workplace and in their personal relationships, leaving women to handle mundane tasks such as cooking meals, folding laundry, and raising children. When women are included in important conversations, they are often included solely for the purpose of pumping up men’s egos or providing emotional support for men who feel that they have failed at work or in life. Throughout the play, Linda Loman is nothing more than a prop for her husband. A scene at the beginning of Act I solidifies her status as a supporting character in Willy’s life. Willy returns home and complains that he is “tired to the death” (Miller 5). When he says he could not continue driving, Linda makes several excuses for his behavior, suggesting that he could not drive because the steering went out on the Studebaker or because he never went to get eyeglasses with a new prescription. Linda takes off

Willy's shoes, suggests that he take an aspirin for his headache, hangs up his jacket, and offers to make him a sandwich. Nowhere in the scene does Willy ask Linda about her day or show any sort of affection toward her. He expects his wife to sympathize with him, offer solutions to his problems, and do everything she can to alleviate his concerns.

Several interactions make it clear that Linda Loman has internalized patriarchal messages. These messages—often in the form of stereotypes or outright lies—tell women that they are not as important as men, that they do not have the same skills and talents as men, and that they have no capacity for high-powered or intellectually demanding careers. The more girls and women hear these messages, the more likely they are to internalize them, perpetuating a sexist system that treats men as intelligent individuals and women as objects who exist solely to meet the needs of men (“Internalized Sexism”). When Linda tells Willy she purchased a new type of cheese, Willy is incensed. He asks Linda why she would dare purchase another type of cheese when she knows that he likes the Swiss variety. Instead of telling Willy that she wanted to try something new, she laughs nervously and tells him she was trying to surprise him (Miller 8). After reprimanding his wife for buying whipped American cheese instead of Swiss cheese, Willy tells Linda she is his “foundation and support” (Miller 9). It is clear Linda has internalized the patriarchal message that women exist solely to support their husbands or fathers, as she tells Willy to relax and continually reassures him that his problems are not as bad as he makes them out to be. What she does not do is ask him for the same level of support, confide in him when she is upset or anxious, or tell him to work out any problems he has with their sons. Although she lives with three other people, Linda is essentially alone with her fear, anxiety, and sadness.

Death of a Salesman contains many examples of gender inequality, but the relationship between Linda and Willy is the best example of how inequality affects the lives of millions of

women. In an equal partnership, each partner is supposed to provide emotional support and contribute to the household in some way. Linda and Willy's marriage is clearly not an equal partnership, as evidenced by the way Willy treats his wife. He expects Linda to cater to his every whim and provide unconditional support, even when she may not agree with his statements or actions. In fact, Linda does not play the role of a wife; she plays the role of Willy's mother. When Biff and Happy are arguing about whistling in an elevator, Willy does not respond in a mature way. Linda intervenes, playing the role of referee as Willy argues with Biff. As Willy's wife, she should not have to take sides when there is conflict between her husband and her sons; however, Willy is a needy man with a fragile ego, so Linda is forced to treat him as a mother would treat a child. Her role as a mother figure for Willy is evident in several scenes, particularly the one where Willy reveals he was unable to continue driving. A grown man should certainly be capable of taking off his own shoes or deciding if he needs an aspirin, but Linda fusses over Willy and makes sure he does not have to do anything too taxing (Miller 6). By assuming the role of Willy's mother, Linda ignores her own needs and focuses all of her attention on her husband. Her behavior is a reflection of the gender inequality that was so widespread when Jason Miller was writing the play.

One of the consequences of widespread gender inequality is the oppression of women in the workplace and in their homes. Willy does not physically abuse his wife, but he engages in subtler forms of abuse: yelling at her, disregarding her opinion, demanding that she do everything the way he thinks it should be done, and managing all of the tasks necessary to raise their children and keep the household running. Linda contributes to her own oppression by rationalizing Willy's behavior and refusing to ignore his petty complaints; however, Willy is the greatest contributor to Linda's oppressive environment. Tyson (117) also argues that Miller

portrays Willy and Linda in a way that reinforces oppressive patriarchal messages. By portraying Willy as a sympathetic character and Linda as a doting wife, Miller demonstrates that the 1940s was a decade in which women were expected to sacrifice their own desires. Every scene involving Linda centers around Willy's needs, making Linda nearly disappear into the background of her husband's life. Miller provides no insight into Linda's hopes, dreams, or desires, making it difficult for readers to interpret her actions. Throughout the play, Linda acts as a wife or mother, but she never does anything to cement her status as an individual human being. In a sense, Linda is an extension of Willy, as she serves as his sounding board and confidant. Unfortunately, Willy does not extend her the same courtesy, leaving Linda trapped in her own mind. She may worry about Willy having an affair or committing suicide, but she does not focus on how it would affect her life; instead, she does everything she can to make Willy feel better about his professional failures.

Linda Loman is not the focus of *Death of a Salesman*, but she does have an important role: demonstrating the consequences of living in a patriarchal society. When Linda soothes Willy and tries to spare his feelings, she is not playing the role of a spouse who has an equal say in the relationship; instead, she is assuming the role of Willy's mother. As a mother figure, she is responsible for protecting Willy from criticism and mediating conflicts between Willy and Biff. Willy often ignores Linda's opinions, yells at Linda when he is upset about his own shortcomings, and demands that Linda do everything exactly the way he wants it done. By accepting his behavior, Linda demonstrates that women often internalize patriarchal messages, allowing men to retain positions of power even when they clearly do not have the temperament necessary to succeed. These internalized messages contribute to the oppression of women,

trapping some people in relationships that are marked by inequality. Therefore, Linda Loman serves as a symbol of the gender inequality that was so pervasive in the 1940s.



Works Cited

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