

GABRIELLA VARRÓ

THE FIGURE OF THE SALESMAN IN AMERICAN DRAMA

Introduction

The figure of the salesman has continuously been present in American drama ever since the 1940s, and this typically American character keeps haunting the imagination of the most prominent American playwrights even today. Sam Shepard's new, 2005 drama, *The God of Hell* is a recent proof that the character is far from being outdated and that he lingers on in literature, although is a bit reshaped from time to time fitted to contemporary reality. Shepard's play provided me with a good enough apropos to reexamine the diverse cultural roles and functions this figure has assumed over the years, and it also prompted me to briefly reconsider American theatrical history through this special focus. Why did salesman figures flood American literature in the first half of the 20th century, did this character have any prototypes; what social, political and cultural paradigm shifts might explain his rise to prominence; are there any general clichés through which we can approach these characters; and finally what ideological considerations and ethic motivations drive them (or to put it differently what kinds of social criticism is exerted on the American reality through their characters). These are some of the questions I seek to address in this essay.

History and Backgrounds

Salesmen figures have long been around in American literature roughly from the turn of the 20th century onward. One of the first incarnations of the type was Theodore Dreiser's Charles Drouet, the charming but irresponsible drummer from 1900, but the first really

prototypical, as well as memorable representation of the type came with the character, whom Richard Wright calls in his *Black Boy* “a mythical man” (273), George F. Babbitt. Babbitt, “the happy hypocrite,” “the Big Operator in Small Operations” (Virágos 122) took American culture by storm. He entered American cultural consciousness and dictionaries with a resounding bang, and from thereon his influence was indelible. The trick was not only that Babbitt was a character too close to reality and thus easily recognizable and identifiable (as the true middle-American, the conniving businessman), but that he registered/signaled a crucial paradigm shift that occurred in America after WWI. Babbitt marked a cultural, social as well as economic transformation from the cult of the tycoons and robber barons (like the Carnegies, Rockefellers and Vanderbilts) [represented in such memorable works as Dreiser’s Cowperwood trilogy¹ or Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*], and pointed to a new cultural icon and paragon, that of the little businessman. Clearly the antitrust and anti-corporation maneuvers of the progressive era fostered the rise of this novel type of culture hero, and the diagnostic novels of Sinclair Lewis did not take long reacting to the change.

The Salesmen of American Drama

Though the figure of the salesman conquered American fiction almost parallel to the large-scale appearance of the profession in real life, the character’s dramatic and theatrical counterparts lagged behind for more than two decades. The first really memorable occurrence of the drummer in American drama came with Eugene O’Neill’s Theodore Hickman, better known as Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh* (subsequently *Iceman*) in 1946, and shortly afterwards Arthur Miller’s classic *The Death of a Salesman* (henceforth *Death*) presented the unforgettable Willy Loman as the epitome of tragic humanism, deemed essential to the figure from thereon. That the fascination with salesmanship was far from being an isolated preoccupation in Miller was proved by his 1968 drama, *The Price*, where the Jewish furniture salesman, the 89 year-old Solomon took central stage. After a short pause the 1980s again provided new versions of the proverbial salesman with David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and following scattered representations of minor businessman figures,

¹ Novels belonging to Dreiser’s trilogy are *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and *The Stoic* (1947).

finally in *The God of Hell*, Sam Shepard too came to address the archetypal/prototypical American dilemma of consumerism through the figure of his mysterious protagonist, Welch.

In what follows I will look into three central thematic concerns along which the protagonists of the above dramas will be compared and contrasted to one another. These are: 1. the salesman's relationships, 2. the connections between salesmanship and acting, the theatrical dimension of the profession; and finally, 3. the ideologies of success and moral choices involved.

1. The Salesman's Relationships

In most of these dramas salesmanship is depicted not simply as a male prerogative, but also as a profession passed down from father to son. Hickey says of his father: "My old man used to whale salvation into my heinie with a birch rod. He was a preacher in the sticks of Indiana, (...) I got my knack of sales gab from him, too. He was the boy who could sell those Hoosier hayseeds building lots along the Golden Street" (610). Similarly in *Death* Ben remembers his and Willy's father as both an artist and a salesman, who traded with flutes which he made on their journey through the country in a wagon. Salesmanship is often depicted then as something that runs in the family and is passed down from fathers to sons, and which creates intimate bondage and understanding between generations. It is not accidental that Willy both respects and is concerned about Biff more than he is about Happy, because it is Biff who is supposed to continue the family line in the trade. In return Willy's sons too make a bitter attempt at fulfilling and realizing their father's dream, but to no avail. The grandfather's inventiveness and initiative is no longer available to the coming generations. The story of the great Father, who "[w]ith one gadget made more in a week than a man [...] would in a lifetime" (38), remains just another legend, altogether unbelievable and certainly unrealizable in the present. This idea of salesmanship being heredity and linked to the familial also recurs in Mamet's play, where Roma, having come to understand the need for human bondage by the end of the play, appoints Levene as his father, when he says: "There's things I could learn from you" (105). The concept of salesmanship thus is intricately tied to concepts and definitions of masculinity, articulating a peculiar kind of male descent and bonding through the common, inherited trade.

Contrary to the above notions (bondage, heredity, ties), however, salesmanship when practiced professionally is almost invariably depicted as a vocation that denies the possibility of establishing meaningful human relations. Babbitt, the prototype is described in the criticism as one who “with the supremacy of public relations, (...) abolishes human relations” (Virágos 122). Clearly both Hickey and Willy oppose the core stereotype here, since they attempt to show genuine care for others, and are not represented as completely selfish beings. On the other hand, Mamet’s real estate agents and Shepard’s Welch seem to recreate the original prototypes’ utter disregard for human concerns. Their monomaniacal pursuit of their obsessions, such as making it to the top of the board (i.e. beating each other in sales records), or creating machine-like automatons worshipping the “system,” is already encoded in the prototype they are molded after.

Despite their capacity for love the early representatives of the salesman fail in their private missions, and by the end of the day they too stand isolated from their families, their customers, indeed from the rest of the world. Salesmen are a lonely branch of people, whose trade depends on establishing human connections, but who in their private lives are ironically denied these. They approve and worship the sanctity of their marriage, but they keep getting involved in chance relationships in one-night stands. Willy states: “Cause I get so lonely—especially when business is bad and there’s nobody to talk to” (29). Hickey, in his final confession to the barflies also talks to this effect: “But you know how it is, traveling around. The damned hotel rooms. I’d get seeing things in the wall paper. I’d get bored as hell. Lonely and homesick” (696).

2. Salesmanship and Acting

One possible explanation for the massive presence and popularity of the salesman in American drama might be located in the theatrical nature of the salesman profession itself. The livelihood of the drummer depends largely upon his skill as actor and performer, his persuasiveness in delivering his act. The salesman plays a prescribed role, and along with the commodity he is selling his own personality as well. The salesman thus is continuously wearing a mask in order to match a certain cliché, in order to satisfy a particular public image. His speech, appearance, and gestures are carefully planned from first to last, from bottom to top. The role is circumscribed along well-recognizable guidelines that the

salesman learns and reenacts from time to time. In fact his whole life is an unending performance. The mask and the self are never one, and since much time is spent in the performative realm, the salesman can never be sure of his real self.

Hickey himself often compares his own actions and speeches to that of a preacher, identifying himself with a public role rather than revealing his private self. Indeed his inner self is so plastic that he is unable to confront it throughout the play, a fact that completely undermines his mission of self-revelation. Willy Loman too comes to face the issue of mask and self, although his individual dilemma echoes larger questions linked to the illusion vs. reality controversy vital to the drama as a whole. The mask in Willy's case is that of a successful businessman, and at times he truly believes that someday he will have his own business. In his more honest moments, though, Willy confesses: "I still feel kind of temporary about myself" (40). This temporariness speaks to the essence of the profession: always being on the road, having a home but not being able to use it as a safe shelter, having a wife but keeping several lovers, playing, conniving, entertaining the customers, but in fact burning up and falling apart inside, are only some of the clichés both Hickey and Willy go by.

Shepard's Welch, the mysterious government agent masking as drummer says early in the play: "I must have crossed the border by now" (9), meaning the Wisconsin–Minnesota border (but also implying the west-east, civilized-rural, corrupt-primitive/innocent, etc. dualities). The allusion suggested, however is wider. Drummers are indeed managing borders: they are both within and without the consumer community. They move in and out of their public and private roles, the professional and the intimate, the manipulative and the honest with astonishing frequency, as the situation may require. No wonder that when this limbo is pushed to the extreme even the best representatives of the trade falter. For Willy the private fantasy life is gradually consuming the space of the real, rendering it virtually impossible for him to extend his existence in the present. Hickey, on the other hand, commits homicide, and reports upon himself to be taken away by the police.

Especially the early instances of the drummer are infiltrated with this concept of psychosis. For Hickey the inside-outside, reality-illusion paradigms get so mixed up that he comes to imagine the murder of his wife as a deed of charity. Willy, on the other hand gets gradually enveloped in his fantasy life, talks to himself and finally drives himself to suicide. By the time we reach the later representations of the type we are

left with the mania and psychosis minus the human appeal: the mask sticks, the act remains without the ethical weight or the concern about the human casualties of consumerism.

3. Ideologies of Success

All the salesmen figures in American drama market, along with their respective commodities, a particular reading of the current social, political reality, ideologies of success symptomatic of the age they were born in. The early representations typically idolize salesmen, and although we see the dream of success shatter in both *Iceman* and *Death*, the missionaries/emissaries of the ideology are pictured either as God-like figures, or painful human victims of a wrong cause.

Hickey as salesman sells both the by-now overused and abused American myth of success and he also literarily markets himself as God for the people at the bar, often-time posing as a savior, who can sell the drunks their own salvation. On one level then he is religion commercialized, a secularized representation of hope and redemption long awaited. Success in Hickey's interpretation equals honesty and *facing reality*, the undoing of pipe dreams, which, by the way, he can excellently teach but fails to practice. For the people at the bar, on the other hand, Hickey is the personification of success. He is the man with "the blessed *bourgeois long green*" (586, emphasis added), the means to buy more liquor with and postpone the confrontation with the real world out there. At the end of the day, strangely enough, Hickey's and the barflies' understanding of success is one: it will come to mean making it in the real world, which finally neither Hickey nor his disciples will be able to realize.

For Willy success translates into big money, recognition and respect, but it is also something entirely out of his reach, amounting to no more than merely a privately cherished fantasy. His pursuit of success remains uninterrupted because he fails to see the limits of success encoded in the economy. He quite firmly believes that he only has to try hard enough and he too would get a slice of that great American cake for the happy and successful. It is in this spirit he keeps searching for clues: "What's the mystery?" (23) "Oh, Ben, how did you do it? What is the answer?" (66). The epitome of success, his brother, Ben, who went into the jungle at 21, and when he walked out he was rich, fails to point out the right direction. The other idolized models of success (Charley, Bernard or the 84 year-old

salesman), are also silent about the route to fame, and even if they do share their secrets, Willy is not ready to decode their wisdom. When Charley says “The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell” (77), turns around the familiar cliché, everything’s for sale, claiming that your whole existence depends upon the things that you can put up for sale. Such equation of the definition of identity and consumption also suggests that identity as such can no longer be conceived of in romantic, individualistic terms, but strictly along the impersonal and inhumane codes and rules of the market.

By the time we reach the 1980s all human concerns for morals, respect, recognition, are taken out of the picture of the salesman business. Selling and success become a heartless soulless race not so much for the favors of the customers, but rather for some big price (which in the case of *Glengarry* happens to be a Cadillac). Mamet is pushing his portrayal of the real estate business, and his own social critique a little too far when he sketches the Cadillac vs. your job (or your life) scenario. His mockery of the dream becomes especially biting when the actual success stories related (those of Levene and Roma) turn out to be deals going down the gutter, the former made with a couple registered in a psychiatric ward, the latter foiled by the top guy at the agency.

In Sam Shepard’s *The God of Hell* small town America gets invaded by agents of the faceless government, and this aggressive inner conquest of the Heartland gets sold as the most benevolent dissemination of national ideologies. If the enslavement marketed as democracy and self-protection scheme sounds all too familiar it is clearly not accidental. Shepard’s portrayal of the drummer-turned political activist, however, becomes interesting exactly where it moves beyond the flat political commentary.

The play takes the figure of the salesman to the ultimate level, as we move from the humanitarian to the government agent, from the innocent American Everyman to Everyman as an under-cover criminal allegedly “serving the nation.” Shepard’s Welch sells pure violence and totalitarianism in the sweet disguise of an initially friendly (though prying) cookie agent. Welch represents the ultimate and also the most extreme stage the salesman might reach in our time. The seeds of this development (or rather decline) have already been planted all over American literature, and Shepard merely detects the symptoms and points out the consequences. That Welch as the superb salesman is an unfeeling instrument of torture whose task it is to create similar automatons

dedicated to the 'cause' is not all that surprising. Hickey's religious tinge and Willy's humanitarian bend are clearly sentenced to death as their monotonous job involving a selfish war for financial, social and personal control is updated for the present. The real news is, and this bears Shepard's innovative stampage, that *The God of Hell* does not simply reinvent the salesman as "government henchman" (Wren, C07), but portrays the country itself "as commodity, to be advertised, sold and consumed" (Brantley, Internet). Welch is equipped with all the necessary paraphernalia of the one-time peddler [including "the Proud Patriot package for twelve fifty (...) whistles, parade equipment, fireworks (...) complete with a brand new remixed CD of Pat Boone singing 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic'" (14)], but this time around he advertises governmental interference as benevolent 'infiltration.' The free sampling of the national "dream," symbolically sold to the drama's innocent Midwestern couple in the form of a rectangular "cookie frosted in stars and stripes of red, white and blue" (Brantley, Internet), turns out to be a tough course in American colonizing methods, brutality, xenophobia and brainwashing. The salesman as epitome of American democracy is reversed in Shepard as an epitome of fascism, who makes fun of and belittles the once so precious national values such as patriotism, idealism, and the American common man.

Shepard's achievement is all the more remarkable because he manages to take the allusion to political propaganda involved in the core cliché to the level of literal fusion between type and the underlying message by the creation of the politician as drummer. The manipulative shape-shifter who markets his own twisted "ideology (...) as patriotism and concern for national security" (Rooney-Internet) to the innocent people in the Heartland, becomes the ultimate translation of what the once great American Dream and its paragon, the salesman as culture hero has finally come to by the beginning of the 21st century.

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