

A Selected Modern American Play in the Frame of Ecocriticism and (Un)Sustainability:

***Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller**

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Abstract

Death of a Salesman (1949) by Arthur Miller is a play presenting the complicated interaction between humans and nature. In this complicated relation, Willy Loman is a character trapped in society's fixation with financial good fortune and consumption-oriented attitudes. His dilemma between the financial securities of his family and his own psychology rejects not just personal mistakes but also society's wild and lavish use of nature and its disregard for the environment. Willy's visions and illusions are sustainable in the Modern age society. Yet, except for Willy's wishes, everything in the work is unsustainable.

Intersections between domestic issues and interpersonal connections as environmental conservation are the main themes in the play. While Miller challenges the relationship between inner conflicts and environmental conservation, he also discloses the harmful impacts of the human system on individuals from the ecological perspective. He defines the disparities between human dreams and reality deeply, as well as the effects of a huge gap by nature.

Willy and his life story is a little bit of an example of anyone who has a sense of the future. His struggle with nature cannot catch up with the fast-changing rhythm of social life. He cannot sustain his fight against the big monster, nature. In this study, it is aimed at highlighting the significance of natural issues within the frame of qualitative research in a literary dimension. Willy Loman is a man of each contemporary who presents ecological unsustainability within the frame of familial issues as a specific issue from specific to the general.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Sustainability, Unsustainability, Literature and Drama

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Introduction

Miller had a vision into human nature and the threads that make us all one species—not literally, biologically, but as thinking, feeling creatures pursuing meaning. He tapped that so deeply and profoundly that audiences/readers respond often viscerally when encountering his works. That is the magic of Miller (*Why Arthur Miller is important*, 2015, p.88).

American playwright Arthur Miller (1915-2005), is a modern-age person describing the individual's nature by analysing the outer nature and making a connection between them. The effects of complex nature are seen in the characters of the playwright as social, psychological and economic dimensions. All three reflections are given through realist characters in his plays. *The Death of A Salesman* (1949) is one of those plays presenting the reflection of nature onto the psychological and economic situations. Its results on specific characters of the century such as Willy the hardworking father and his irresponsible sons, Biff and Happy, are not pleasant.

In the contemporary literary period, Arthur Miller, is handled as Modern and Postmodern with his style and the eras. In the play, Sustainability is one of the management objectives that focuses on reducing negative environmental consequences of the Modern era. The term itself means and aspires to offer a healthy, clean, fair and prosperous life for current and future generations. Indeed, it especially occurred in the 18th century when the nature started to spoil because of industrialization and the growing population caused by. It tries to find a way to create well-being in the limited circumstances of nature (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010). It is primarily concerned with the economic and environmental aspects of a location, phrase, or situation. It alludes to future fears and creating healthy conditions by eliminating those anxieties as scientific, economic, and technological sustainability are the most popular issues of the current era in terms of living a more comfortable life in the future and it ensures that resources are used efficiently and responsibly. They promote innovation that reduce environmental impact, and foster social equity to create a balanced ecosystem in which both people and nature are able to prosper.

The fast rising population, culture, and ecology are in a hurry, in a state of confusion, and even have a heritage that cannot be passed down to future generations due to a detachment from history. Correspondingly, in the work *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by Arthur Miller, a family of four living in a modest house surrounded by tall and massive structures foreshadows the difficulties and it is seen at the beginning of the play: A scene at which the growing individuals are settled not side by side, but high up in such huge structures. The Lomans can only see the sky from their small modest flat in those buildings. In fact, it could be said that this introduction serves as an outline for the entire research. The reason for this search is the limited reproduction of natural things such as soil, water, clean air and food. The growing population of the world makes the circumstances less qualified and it shows that these natural sources are endangered. As well as natural sources, it brings hazardous limitations to ecology and culture. Miller's tragedy *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is an example of monitor all these issues to the reader in the frame of ecology, economy, technology and reproduction through literature and its dramatic dimension.

Literature Review

The Compound Frame of Sustainability and Ecocriticism

Gerald Farca mentions in his article *Ecology in the Postapocalypse: Regenerative Play in the Metro Series and the Critical Dystopia* (2024) that the future of humans is almost to turn into a dystopic land or a wasteland that includes a damaged discourse in terms of environmental analysis. Anything on the earth is about to go extinct and regenerating is almost impossible, and that picture can be named as an unsustainable system. It means that there is an ecological force following human beings as a frightening future. The game *Metro 2033*, in Farca's article, is presented as the possible end of the future with dystopic elements such as wearing gas masks, dark weather, and tunnels. In addition,

when a bridge is built between *Death of a Salesman* as a literary server and today's conditions, the play can be shown as the first implications of an unsustainable world. In the work, the ecological mismanagement is implied, and the planet has been suffering from catastrophic ecological surroundings such as displating, building, and inorganic consumption.

When it comes to the origin of the idea sustainability and the word's meaning, "The meaning of sustainability is usually conceived of as survival which is widely used for living systems, and sometimes as long-term viability, health or integrity" (Panagiotakopoulos, 2005, p.59). Sustainability is to maintain the conditions of living in nature in a better way and provide better natural sources and conditions to the next generations. It aims to provide an ecological circle durably. The survival segment of the system is the first; viability and health follow it in terms of completing a biological, ecological, technological, economic, and social atmosphere for the society. And, when it comes to the literary dimension of sustainability; literature is a vital field to take attention to environmental issues, as human and their relation with nature are presented through specific works; and the characters' perception of a (n) (un)sustainable nature and future leads a way to find solutions in social and economic lives of them by presenting us. Literature is a reflective dimension where the reader can evaluate some specific issues and integrate them into their lives socially, economically and psychologically.

The theory of Ecocriticism is the literary dimension of an ecological or 'sustainable' approach to human and nature relation. In literary works, nature is like a specific character, which affects the work and directs it negatively or positively. Especially, the concern about is much and the work does not have a pleasant rotation. It evokes an anxiety in the reader and leaves a responsibility about future. Nature and its effects of it are like a pastoral work, presenting the one in literature. While pastoral works deal with real nature such as mountains, rivers or fields, ecocritical works present the nature of the individual as the surrounding atmosphere. Glen A. Love (1992) explains that the term pastoral has existed since the age of Theocritus and Virgil as a concern of relationship between human and nature and it is the source of today's pollution, despoliation and diminishment. Ecocriticism is a kind of analytical depiction of pastoral perspective that aims to show the relationship between the physical nature and literary works in the frame of literature (Schliephake et al., 2018, p.1). The basic approach of criticism especially shows the social issues and nature's interaction in a literary work such as a novel, poem, short story, and play.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore and explain the correlation between literature and nature in the frame of ecocriticism and sustainability. The study focuses on the connections of the terms with literature and reflects a specific literary work written in the Modern Age to present how literature concerns human nature and reflects it to the reader on the stage. The effects of nature in the function of a literary tool and as a qualitative research method, the content analysis, thematic approach, and critical reading are searched and conveyed into literary narration. The results aim to provide readers with a deep understanding of the place of literature in the theory of sustainability and its potential in making calls for the future of nature protection.

Data Collection

The data will be collected from specific articles, books and literary works related to the subject of this study. They are from different fields' journal, books and specific works to support the approach in the frame of literary study.

Analysis

In this study, the correlation between ecocriticism and sustainability is criticised through a literary work *Death of a Salesman* to reflect an issue through a small picture literature as a contemporary

issue still has its validate. It means that literary dimension of an issue has its various effects on social, economic, health, and psychological studies. Multidimensional assessment of a literary work provides that the reader could find the sources of some specific subjects.

Willy Loman is a man of his century, representing non-recyclable situations in the environment. The character represents the results of the 20th century's capitalist system, in fact. Yet, one of the various effects of the system is to promote an ecological and sustainable life for the people in their harsh conditions. Willy, the protagonist, is facing the economic and ecological reality of the surroundings. Thus, he struggles with those realities in his family by not being enough to be a real image of a father and husband figure.

Willy is a bridge between literature and the environment, as he is the reflection exploring identity, success, and sustainability in this context. The father figure of his cannot reach an ideal dimension for his future generations. Therefore, this unsuccessful pursuit leads him and the people around him to downfall. The industrial race does not let human power take over, and ecological balance or circulation does not improve, nor does Willy Loman. He is just caught in a circulation of debts and uneasy dreams. His ecocritical discourse has no meaning in the destroyed surroundings.

The worsening issue is Willy and his family are becoming a part of the consuming culture and economy. Hence, it makes them a kind of people who are fond of materialism and just think about their own selfish lives. In fact, the anxiety of Willy is for the future of all people in this century, as there would be a struggle for a sustainable perception in any field of society. This negative idea has already spread over the relations of people in terms of finding a welfare just for themselves, and this creates that selfish perception more than a totalitarian type of living. The disconnected relations make the people separated from each other and their own previous genes and roots. Thus, an alienated generation means an alienated future for the descendants. Willy is aware of the seriousness of the issue, and his anxiety is about this subject. The anxiety of the father figure Willy makes him obsessed with having something in life in terms of success at work and at home. This obsession destroys his mental health in terms of focusing on the issue of pastoral life while being disconnected with it as well.

Willy is us, in fact; he presents us to us. The ambitious seconds of our minds cost the lives of ours and the people around us. The obsessed attitudes of ours make it so that we are in a world that converts us into machines pursuing something unsustainable. While being in that divergence, we become alienated from our genes, roots, and ancestors that are really unsustainable perceptions. "The position of Willy Loman desperately believing in the idea that he is 'well liked' secures his place in the society because this is the only way out that he can be accepted as an individual having some value" (Erkan, 2021, p. 105). While being in that divergence, or just focusing on being liked, we become alienated from our children genes, roots and ancestors mentally that are really unsustainable perceptions. Also, his ignored identity in social life drives him to be a successful mind and to be 'the example' for his descendants. Yet, the dreams of his are not achieved. Thus, he cannot be a real figure for the people around him. In conclusion, the obsession of Willy, the salesman, creates troubles for him, and everything in his life turns into catastrophes or unsustainable issues. These issues alienate him from his family, social life, and even his work.

Procedure

In this study, various books, journals, and literary works will be used as primary data. As the field of study has a qualitative approach, the sources that are given will be enough to provide literary samples to enlarge, explain, and support the study.

Findings

As a literary work, the play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by Arthur Miller, is being handled in the Ecocritical frame within sustainable approach and it presents the modern age anxieties because of nature and its human-made bringing. Willy Loman's dream or anxiety of being admired and idealised person while he is alive and of being buried with a crowded funeral even after his death shows to him and his family that he is dreaming in vain. Because it is impossible for him to live as he used to because of his current social, economic and environmental conditions. Without accepting these, it causes psychological discomfort to the family in the small house among high buildings, which is no longer suitable even for growing plants. Because Willy himself doubts the sustainability of the current situation and tries to compete with nature. This fight is won by the undefeatable nature, and Willy cannot bear to accept it, and in his last battle, while he thinks that he has withdrawn himself from nature, he leaves it again to nature, that is, to the soil. Moreover, he dies like a seed falling into the soil.

When sustainability deals with any field of life in the frame of reproducing something not to risk the future of the coming generation, Ecocriticism deals with literary dimension of sustainability. It is the combination of the term ecology and criticism; the relationship between living organisms and their interactions with their natural or developed environment are handled in the context of a literary work. The characters of those works are especially people and their surroundings such as forests, seas, rivers and developed environments such as buildings, gardens, parks, pools and schools. There is a negative or positive relationship between human and his environments which affects physically and psychologically. This relationship is like a circle as human affects nature as well as nature affects human.

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996).

Sustainability and Ecocriticism have a direct effect on society and the quality of the individual in that society. On the condition that the individual finds welfare, the possibility of reproduction can find a platform for the future of general social conditions. "I don't know what the future is. I don't know what I'm supposed to want (Miller, 1949, p.12)". Willy tries to produce something by working yet, as a new generation of individuals, Biff and Happy do not contribute to that sustainability. Their emotional unsustainability with their father, disrupts their value system, does not provide a generational learning and creates conflicts in terms of family collaboration among family members.

When sustainability is asked for its meaning, in *A Culture of Sustainability*, Felix Wagner and Marcus Andreas (2012) bring a cultural explanation for it as it is a way of finding new ways to live in a life or a society, which is the cause and result of social values and provides a productive circulation in that group of people. When its nutritional dimension is handled, María García Maldonado, Rosario García Meza, and Emily Yates-Doerr (2020) explain as the concern of future in terms of climate change, improving health and, the most significant, harvesting for mothers and their babies feeding. Yet, there is a sustainable globalization and unsustainable nutrition resulted from it. Because of this relationship, there is a great wall between human and nature. In the article, *Urban Sustainability* (2020), which completes the play *Death of A Salesman* as the third element and the issue of city planning and causing an unplanned urbanization referring to ecocritical frame is defined as:

Our analysis [below] covers contemporary concepts and terms related to urban climate mitigation, climate adaptation and resilience, environmental justice, and equitable development. It also relies on

a synthesis of the academic, policy, and practice literature that spans sustainability and legacy cities covering (Schilling, & Velasco, p.13, 2020).

It serves as a reminder of the strong relationship between personal sustainability and the environment. The statement argues that an evaluation of our society's structures and aspirations, along with a shift toward more equitable and sustainable approaches to urban development and personal development. However, Willy does not really search for the urbanization aspect because it progressively reminds him of being separated from nature. It is also a means of improving the economy at the expense of health. Thus, it creates a desire for nature and natural life as a result of population in country life. Willy rejects this way of life by having social and individual despair. He tries to sustain anything in his life against modern life and its issues. In the end, it only becomes as an individual tragedy as he cannot keep pace with a rapidly changing world.

WILLY: The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the back yard. They should've had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them? [...] There's more people! That's what's ruining this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening! Smell the stink from that apartment house! And another one on the other side... [...] (Miller, 1949, p.8-9).

Willy wants to live in a better future as they were in the old days. Although the doors of their house are open, they cannot breathe easily. The modern age's high and crowded construction does not let people even inhale clean air. Missing old days as well as looking for beautiful days in the future are together. The sustainability of construction is not a possible circle. Ecology's balance is ruined by it. To gain something in life in Will's days is more and more difficult. To earn his life, he has to visit different places to get money and he is dissatisfied with the present, in which urbanization and industrialisation have displaced the natural beauty he formerly valued. It emphasises the play's themes of disillusionment and the desire for identity in a changing world. The Cultural and ecological unsustainability of the character Willy does not let social sustainability occur in the play. There is a circulation between his job and home yet it is not sustainable as in a healthy way. It makes Willy tired and makes him lose his motivation day by day.

At the beginning of this study, it is said that there is a mutual relationship between humans and nature. Both sides may affect each other positively and negatively. As Willy's neighbourhood affects nature negatively by constructing massive buildings around; nature takes its revenge by not letting fresh air and sun through the houses. Even carrots do not grow in his garden. Nature effects them negatively. Unfortunately, Willy is aware of that issue. Yet, he cannot do anything and he gets angry and thinks that they should have had a law against apartment buildings. It has a chained situation with people and it is a vicious circle. BIFF: [...] And always to have to get ahead of the next fella. And still — that's how you build a future (Miller, 1949, p.12). Biff is missing the nature and natural atmosphere, which he had in different states before. He cannot breathe now. He thinks there may be a sustainability of that life if he goes back and if he marries. Because he will have children and this will be his familial sustainability, unlike his relationship with his father, Willy.

The play is a piece of drama and his dramatic life is general picture of the Modern and the Post-modern century. In addition, some absurd elements are seen through the scenes and there cannot be sustainability of logical reading such as the scene between Ben, Willy, Charley, Linda, Biff and Happy). Willy never hears Linda, Biff, and Happy's sentences. His logical unsustainability occurs at that time. Although the characters try to sustain the familial relations, it does not occur and a tight cannot be created through the family members. The only character is his wife Linda, yet, it is not enough to keep everyone together.

Discussion

Ecocriticism and sustainability themes handle relations of the individuals with nature and the effects of these relations on social structures deeply in *Death of a Salesman*. In *Death of a Salesman*, the themes of ecocriticism and sustainability, the relationship of individuals to nature and the effects of this relationship on social structures are explored in depth. Through the lives and choices of the characters, the work emphasises the damage caused to nature by the consumer society and how individual ambitions and economic systems exploit nature. For example, Willy Loman's failures and disappointments are not only a personal tragedy, but also symbolise the unhealthy relationship between modern man and nature. In this context, while the concept of sustainability refers to the efforts of individuals and societies to live in harmony with nature, ecocriticism questions how these efforts are expressed through art and literature. By revealing man's dependence on nature and the responsibilities brought about by this dependence, the work tells readers about the importance of protecting nature and adopting a sustainable lifestyle. In conclusion, *Death of a Salesman* can be read from an ecocritical perspective as a text that aims to create ecological awareness at the individual and social level.

In *Death of a Salesman*, the themes of ecocriticism and sustainability are explored through the relationship between individuals and nature and the effects of this relationship on social structures. Through the lives and choices of the characters, the work emphasises the damage caused to nature by the consumer society and how individual ambitions and economic systems exploit nature. For example, Willy Loman's failures and disappointments are not only a personal tragedy but also symbolise the unhealthy relationship between modern man and nature. In this context, while the concept of sustainability refers to the efforts of individuals and societies to live in harmony with nature, ecocriticism questions how these efforts are expressed through art and literature.

Willy's dreams, as a reflection of the American dream, are based on individual success and material gain. However, while pursuing these dreams, how he consumes the resources of nature and his insensitivity to his environment constitute one of the main conflicts of the work. Also, it is revealed that the bonds between the financial problems of Loman family, the exploitation of nature and individual and social crises cannot find resolutions. The dependence of human on nature and the responsibilities brought about explains the importance of protecting nature and adopting a sustainable lifestyle.

In terms of ecocritical approach, the play presents the challenge between the nature and human life while also questioning man's responsibilities towards nature. The nature is always the active side as it circulates its normal process. Yet, human takes it as a challenge and fights against life. In this context, his inner conflicts and social pressures depict how the changes necessary for a sustainable future have become imperative. *Death of a Salesman* allows the reader to read it from an ecocritical perspective as a text that aims to create ecological awareness at the individual and social circumstances. By arguing that both individuals and societies need to re-evaluate their relationship with nature, the play encourages the reader to think about the levels that need to be taken for a sustainable future.

Conclusion

Willy cannot find a sustainable point after his 60s; he cannot sustain his job, he cannot sustain happiness for his children, and his children cannot sustain their father's success as a father of a family. He cannot succeed in his life; he cannot sustain a real relationship with society, and he cannot sustain a green circle in his nature, as he cannot grow his vegetables in his garden. There is no sustainability as he dies, and nothing can find any sustainable process. Neither ecology nor economy can find a circulation in a positive way.

There are many “will”s and “going”s in their sentences. They are adapted to the future and nature. Yet, it is a question whether nature and the future “WILL” let them achieve their goals. Willy is on the side of the ones who cannot be successful in that regard because he cannot adapt himself to the world as he lives in the past in his mind. The name of the salesman is “Will-y,” referring to the future. Will-y Lo-man turns into a “No-man,” having no ‘will’s about the future overnight. Although American lands are young places compared to the other continents, this motherland cannot let him find a nest in her backyard.

Willy and his fight against nature, the economy, society, buildings in that society, his sons, his friends, and his job, etc. are all his ecological circumstances that have a dominance over him. Thus, nature and Willy’s relationship is negative, and it is not on behalf of Willy. During his fight, the only human next to him is Linda, and she loses everything towards life.

Towards the end of the play, Biff and Happy ask Linda where Willy is. She says that he was in the backyard. He was trying to do gardening, such as digging for carrots. Yet, it can be said that after all the stressful and bad news about a new job dream. He drops dealing with life and tries to dig a cemetery for himself. He couldn’t get any fertility from the soil. Thus, he will put himself into nature, and all trouble will be gone. He dreams about his funeral and the crowd after him. When he visits his friend’s son’s office, he mentions even the beauty of the previous times. Willy desires to be connected with nature; nature is not as optimistic as much as Willy dreams. His schizophrenic dreams draw him to go into that jungle ‘full of diamonds.’ After his several tries for a car crash, in the end he achieves it. His wife, Linda, says that she paid their last payment for the house, and they are free now. Willy and his family could move on with their lives to live anywhere. Yet, they could not.

The death of Willy is not like a hero’s in the nature who fights against monsters, animals, villains, or the nature. He dies in his room silently, and no one comes to his funeral except for his family. Because even the death of a person is left alone by the industrialized atmosphere, unlike his dream for a crowded funeral. He lost against his unsustainable life. To grow something, the seeds must be put into the soil, and they must die in the soil to become new trees. It is the only thing that Willy would love to see one day. Willy is the seed who is buried, and new trees may (not) grow because of the unsustainability of his era’s nature. This is the only way he can help sustainability with his body.

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