O'Neill's "Death of a Salesman"

Richard Hornby

The salesman is an archetype in American literature, found repeatedly in novels and plays no less than in jokes and stories. The social historian J. C. Furnas notes:

> The Yankee as comic countryman . . . came early to pass in [Royall] Tyler's *The Contrast.* He persisted in various elaborations for almost 150 years. But the other Yankee stereotype--as swindler, weasel-keen at a trade, all opportunist, pious spoken--that developed a generation later was spread far and wide by the ingenuity of the Yankee peddler. (244)

Folklore abounded with tales of the Yankee peddler's virtuosity in swindling naive farmers--those same "comic countrymen" of the earlier, alternative archetype--by selling them wooden nutmegs, or clocks that did not work more than a few days. Sexual jokes had the peddlers seducing the farmers' wives or daughters at the same time they were bilking the farmers themselves. Traveling salesman jokes are so standard in America that we can even laugh at the following: A salesman stops at a farmhouse and says to the farmer, "Can you help me? My car has broken down and I need a place to stay for the night." "I haven't got a spare bed," replies the farmer, "I'm afraid you'll have to sleep with my son." "Wait a minute," exclaims the salesman indignantly, "I'm in the wrong joke!"

Two things are notable about this archetypal figure that are common with archetypes, but often overlooked: First, archetypes often come paired with opposite, counter-archetypes. Hero and villain, lover and beloved, master and servant, are typically found together, and help to define each other. In this instance, the city slicker salesman needs his opposite, the rube, the hick, the hayseed, who gets

Richard Hornby's latest book is *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (Bucknell). He is theatre critic for the *Hudson Review* and is currently acting in New York City.

sold the wooden nutmeg or the Brooklyn Bridge, or who stupidly puts the salesman into his daughter's bed; one never finds the salesman without his customer sucker. Second, an archetype does not trigger a simple emotional response in us, but rather is capable of evoking a broad range of potential responses. The salesman is an ambivalent figure. We theoretically disapprove of the salesman's immoral behavior, but at the same time can't help but admire it. The salesman himself is so carefree, energetic, successful, and unselfconscious that we identify with him. We may have misgivings, but the salesman himself doesn't even have second thoughts, much less self doubt. In Freudian terms, he is the personification of our own id, unencumbered by the superego censor who is always spoiling our fun in real life.

These two types of polarities, one in the story or joke or play itself and the other in ourselves as we respond to it, make archetypal figures richly dramatic; they are a means for authors to expose conflicts and contradictions in society itself. They are not so much realistic reflections of what exists in life as they are means for gauging it, just as those longitude and latitude lines on a map are not really on the ground being depicted, but are instead imaginary constructs that enable us to measure and describe it. No one believes that a city slicker really once did sell the Brooklyn Bridge to some unsuspecting rube; instead, the ludicrous deal provides a model for thinking about commercial and social interaction in American life. With the growing commercialization of American life in the nineteenth century, stories like this enabled us to ponder the social change by which we were transformed from the simple countrymen of Royall Tyler's day into a nation of salesmen.

The three most important American plays of the nineteen forties, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Tennessee William's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (the stage, not the film, version), and Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, all have salesmen as principal figures. Drawing on the traditional archetype at a time when America was proudly emerging as the richest and most powerful country on earth, the playwrights exposed the contradictions underlying our apparent success, and in the process developed the archetype itself beyond the previous, simpler versions. It is interesting to compare and contrast how they did this.

In all three plays, it is at most vague as to what the salesmen are actually selling. As is well known, we never find out what Willy Loman is selling at all. Stanley Kowalski travels for an unnamed firm that apparently manufactures and markets some kind of machinery, since we hear that Mitch works "on the precision bench in the spare parts department, in the plant Stanley travels for" (49), which is all we ever hear of it. Hickey is described as a "hardware drummer" but

we never hear anything about this hardware, which seems more to have to do with sex or death ("hardware" is a slang term for, among other things, a gun) than with any real product. In earlier versions of the archetype, the products being sold, specious or not, were always very concrete--a clock, a nutmeg, a bridge. In Tennessee Williams's excellent short play, *The Last of My Solid Gold Watches*, also written in the forties, the 78-year-old salesman protagonist, Mr. Charlie, is selling something very tangible, shoes. "Bob," he says to a young salesman visiting in his hotel room, "I want you t'look at this Cuban heel, shawl-tongue, perforated toe, calfskin Misses' sport-oxford! . . . Ain't that a piece of *real* merchandise, you squirrel?" (97-98). But the younger salesman, the "squirrel," is bored with the older's remarks; and, in contrast, we don't know what the younger salesman is selling. It doesn't matter. Quality doesn't sell any more, complains Mr. Charlie, "Maybe stores don't *sell* stuff any more! Maybe I'm living in a world of illusion!" (101).

Willy Loman, Stanley Kowalski, and Hickey, then, are like young Bob the squirrel here, disassociated from the merchandise they sell. The vagueness of their products underlines the allegorical nature of their selling; each is an American Everyman, in an America where what is produced becomes ever less tangible, more removed from reality. They don't sell "stuff," they sell illusion.

Oddly enough, however, these three salesmen don't see themselves that way. All three consider themselves as clear-eyed realists, devoted to a reality that seems as tangible to them as the Brooklyn Bridge. The traditional salesmen of the jokes and stories were realists too, out for all they could get and having no scruples about how they got it; their amorality was the very source of their charm. But these three salesmen of the nineteen-forties are not amoral; they all have a similar moral code, which consists of a stern belief in the necessity of rejecting illusion and facing up to reality. They not only are realists, they preach realism too--sell it, if you will. Unfortunately for themselves and those around them, however, their "reality" is an imaginary one, in the end as treacherous as the illusions they are out to destroy.

Stanley Kowalski seems cruder than the other two salesmen (especially in the film version, which coarsens the part even further). His animal nature is much remarked upon; he drinks beer, copulates, plays games, smashes light bulbs, paws through Blanche's wardrobe, throws plates on the floor, even commits rape. Yet he doesn't just do these things aimlessly or impulsively. Always his objective is to deflate pretense: "Look at these feathers and furs that she come here to preen herself in!" (35). He is proud of having pulled Stella "down off them columns" (112) of Belle Reve, and wants to pull Blanche down

off them too. He is also proud of being Polish, being American, being a Louisianian under the Napoleonic code. "What do you two think you are? A pair of queens? Remember what Huey Long said--'Every Man is a King!'" (107). Even the rape seems motivated more by a desire to pierce Blanche's illusions than her body.

Blanche herself, then, is a variation on the rube or hayseed archetype. She comes from the country; she is naive and idealistic; she is old-fashioned. Stanley is a dark version of the salesman, selling her a harsh reality on the specious grounds that it is somehow good for her, and willing to use force, if necessary, to make the sale. At the same time, she is also a variation of the farmer's daughter. Belle Reve was a plantation, and her father presumably a gentleman farmer, but more important, she exhibits the sexual promiscuity characteristic of the archetype, admitting "many intimacies with strangers" (118), including her accusers, "Kiefaber, Stanley and Shaw," and the rest of the dreary succession of salesmen in her sad life.

Willy Loman is a more sympathetic figure than Stanley Kowalski, but ultimately even more destructive. His vision of reality is that simply being "well liked" is the key to all worldly and spiritual success:

> It's not what you do, Ben. It's who you know and the smile on your face! It's contacts, Ben, contacts! . . . That's the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked! (86)

On the face of it, this is a remarkably cynical philosophy, glorifying personal contacts, while scorning traditional values like education or hard work. The odd thing about Willy, however, is that he does not think of these views as cynical, but rather as something fine, "the wonder of this country." In other words, like Stanley, and, as we shall see shortly, Hickey, he is another idealistic realist.

Another odd thing about Willy is that his views don't seem to convince anybody else in the play, any more than they do the audience. Charley, for example, counters Willy's modern view with a more traditional cynicism:

> Why must everybody like you? Who liked J.P. Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he'd look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was very well liked. (97)

Furthermore, Willy's philosophy is proved wrong over and over again in the play, with his sons Biff and Happy, with Bernard, the boy next

door, and with Willy himself, who ends up feeling lonely and not well liked by anybody. "You are the saddest, self-centeredest soul I ever did see," says the Woman in the hotel room, Miller's version of the farmer's daughter, "Come on inside, drummer boy" (116).

Conspicuously lacking in the play, apparently, is the counter-archetype to the traveling salesman, the hayseed sucker--until we realize that the sucker is Willy himself. Willy's gardening, his ability to make things with his hands, his nostalgia for his rural neighborhood that has been taken over by the expanding city, all connect him with the countryman archetype of the traditional American past, who lived in a world of tangibility, like Willy's father, a salesman who sold flutes. More important, we see Willy's recurrent objective of trying to convince himself, but failing: Biff is a hard worker--no, he's a lazy bum; the Chevrolet is the greatest car ever built--no, it breaks down all the time and is expensive to fix; being well liked is more important than studying hard in school--no, Bernard, who was not well liked but studied hard, became a success where Willy's sons failed; Willy himself is well liked--no, he feels so lonely. Finally, despite all evidence to the contrary, Willy buys his warped reality for good, by killing himself, foolishly convinced that Biff will benefit from his death. He has sold the biggest wooden nutmeg of all time--to himself.

Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh* is another idealistic realist, who has a lot in common with Willy. He too believes that the key to success is in being well liked:

> I'd met a lot of drummers around the hotel and liked 'em. They were always telling jokes. They were sports. They kept moving. I liked their life. And I knew I could kid people and sell things. (233)

And sell he did, by playing on people's pipedreams and making them like him. Yet, like Willy, Hickey repeatedly complains of being lonely. Like Willy, he has taken up with prostitutes, the successors to the farmers' daughters of the archetype, which also hovers around the play in the form of the sex joke that is never actually told, but which nonetheless gives *The Iceman Cometh* its title. Scholars have unearthed several versions of this joke, one of which goes like this: a man comes home and calls upstairs to his wife, "Honey, did the iceman come yet?" "Not yet," she calls back, "but he's breathing hard." The iceman is a salesman, who beds the farmer's daughter, or his wife, and who sells--ice, a symbol of coldness, hardness, and death. He is another "realist." In a popular slang, to "ice" someone is to kill him, and ultimately Hickey is an iceman too, icing his wife, and icing

himself.

Like Willy, then, Hickey is ultimately selling death. Who then are the suckers who are buying? Certainly the *Lumpenproletariat* in the bar form a group of them, and Hickey, like Stanley, is trying to sell them a harsh reality, puncturing their "pipe-dreams" the way that Stanley brutally punctured Blanche's illusions. In the end, however, the people in the bar aren't buying Hickey's vision, going back to the pipedreams that sustain them. In a sense, they are salesmen too, trying desperately to sell their dreams to anyone who will listen, and to themselves. Their pipedreams are not just pleasant reveries to sustain them through the pains of life; they are ideals that they must repeat, over and over; each sale quickly wears off, creating a challenge to sell it yet again.

A notable difference between Hickey and Willy is that Hickey is a *successful* salesman. That is, he *has* been one, until he takes up trying to sell the reality ideal. Selling was easy for him, so that, unlike Willy, he seems to have unlimited money, and he certainly has not lost his job. He really was "well liked"; his customer suckers who were so easy to sell did not drop him as he got older--instead, he has dropped them. And, of course, the biggest sucker of all was his wife, who always bought his slick tales, and who always forgave him even when he brought her home a case of venereal disease. In the end, Hickey came to hate all the suckers, including his wife Evelyn, and he killed her. It is as if the city slicker threw the hayseed off the Brooklyn Bridge after having sold it to him, in contempt for his having been such an easy mark, and then dove in after him, in contempt for himself.

Iceman is a greater play that *Death of a Salesman*, because O'Neill realized, as he did in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, that the tragedy of America is not a tragedy of failure but rather one of success. Willy clings to his foolish ideal until the very end, despite its obviously having failed him; Hickey rejects that very ideal, of fitting in and being liked, because it has succeeded for him too easily and too well. Unfortunately, he substitutes for this ideal another one, all the more insidious because it seems so concrete and obvious. In the end, it is just as manipulative and condescending to destroy people's illusions as it is to feed them. A realism that ignores human suffering is no true realism at all.

America in the nineteen-forties had reached a peak of success. The wars that had brought disaster to much of the world did relatively little damage to us; in fact, they made us stronger and wealthier than ever. At the same time, there was a growing unease in the country. As with Hickey, our success seemed easy, yet hollow and frustrating. Why wasn't American success recognized as the solid,

realistic achievement it obviously was? Why did alien philosophies like Communism appeal to others with foolish pipedreams? Why did traditional societies not abandon their elaborate social structures, their customs and conventions, their myths and rituals--all foolish pipedreams also--in favor of the new Capitalist order in which everyone was equal in his ability to maximize his gain? Americans, the great pragmatists, would sell their brand of realism to the rest of the world for its own good.

This realism, called Capitalism or Free Enterprise, certainly looked solid. What could be more "realistic" than appealing to human acquisitiveness? A society that rejected traditions and culture, and turned everyone into a seller or a buyer instead, was tough, strong, genuine, even moral in its way. The rest of the world were suckers--rural, old-fashioned, idealistic. We would sell them our view, and destroy their illusions. We weren't suckers, we were city slickers, traveling salesmen to the whole world. Ultimately, we would try to sell our brand of realism to the Vietnamese, to the Nicaraguans, to the Salvadoreans, maybe someday even to the Russians, never realizing, like Stanley and Hickey and Willy, that what we are actually selling is death.

Florida State University

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