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Laurence Raw

- 1 As in other countries, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* has become a popular text in the Turkish theater, as well as being taught on many university courses in American Literature. It has received at least twelve productions in Ankara and Istanbul; and has been translated at least twice – the first appearing in 1952 under the title *Satıcının Ölümü*, published by the Ministry of Education and translated by Orhan Burian, a major figure in Turkish translation who was responsible for bringing many western dramas (especially those of Shakespeare) to Turkish audiences. The second translation (using the same title) was published commercially in Ankara in 1994. *Death of a Salesman* was first included in literature syllabi in Turkish universities as long ago as the late 50s, although the first departments of American Literature were not established until 1982. Necla Aytür attributes this to the fact that, throughout the 60s, there was a steady flow of Fulbright scholars coming to teach in Turkey, many of whom it appears were preoccupied with Arthur Miller (Aytür 60). Nowadays, the play is regularly taught, both in departments of American Literature and in literature survey courses provided for trainee teachers of English in education departments.
- 2 Why should the play have remained so popular? As in other parts of the world, it has become a staple part of the American literature canon; however, this article will suggest that there are other more country-specific explanations for its popularity, relating specifically to the idea of the American Dream. I will begin with a short historical introduction showing how Turkey was introduced to the idea after 1945, both as a result of a rapid increase in American imports and an expansion in educational exchanges. I will subsequently discuss how these factors contributed towards the formation of a Turcocentric view of American culture from the mid-50s onwards, which in turn shaped the way in which *Death of a Salesman* was performed and/or studied. America was regarded as the land of opportunity, where individuals would be rewarded

for creative effort; if such notions could be transplanted into Turkish culture, then perhaps the process of creating a secular republic based on western models – as envisaged by Kemal Atatürk three decades earlier – could be expedited. On this view, *Death of a Salesman* was viewed as an example of what was best in the American theater, in spite of its cynical take on the American Dream. Once students and/or audiences had been exposed to it, then perhaps they might acquire a deeper understanding of western social and moral values and thereby make a more fruitful contribution to the development of the Turkish Republic.

- 3 The second section of the article will show how attitudes towards Miller's play changed in the 70s and 80s. Partly, this could be attributed to social and economic transformation in America itself, which led to a fragmentation of the American Dream. The popular image of America within the Turkish Republic also changed, as the domestic economy gradually adopted free market principles. People still regarded it as a land of opportunity, but one where the distinctions between rich and poor were painfully apparent. If Turkey continued to embrace the free market, then perhaps the same thing might happen. In this context, *Death of a Salesman* was interpreted as a cautionary tale of a small-time loser; a modern-day Everyman destroyed by a dog-eat-dog world in which only the fittest survived. This view of the play still prevails today, especially amongst those who have to cope with dwindling funds from the state while witnessing the private sector undergoing rapid expansion (with financial assistance from successive governments). On this view, *Death of a Salesman* can be seen as a requiem for the American Dream – not only in America itself, but also in the Turkish Republic. The optimism experienced by those growing up in the 50s and early 60s proved a false dawn: Turkey might have become more westernized (by adopting free market principles) but it had also created the kind of social inequalities that prevented rather than enabled individuals to fulfill their aspirations.
- 4 Susan Harris Smith argues in a 1995 essay that, when she taught *Death of a Salesman* to her students at the University of Pittsburgh, she asked them initially to focus on the issues that inevitably arise in the initial discussion of the play:

America as a geographical, concrete reality [...]. America as a political construct [...].
America as the embodiment of abstractions and values [...]. America as the site of
the American dream of unrestrained individualism and assured material success
(Smith 27-8).

- 5 She subsequently discovered that most of her students – who came from blue-collar and middle-management families in which the mother stays home and the father struggles to “make it” – responded strongly “to the obvious thematic concerns of *Salesman*, usually feeling torn between Willy's corrupted Franklinian urges and Biff's poorly realized Jeffersonian ones” (29). This interpretation is very different, for instance, from that adopted by Soviet theater directors in the late 1950s, who approached the play as “a step-by-step exposure of the faulty, inhuman American economic system, which relentlessly destroyed Willy Loman's dreams” This was typical in a context “where art was expected to advance the cause of socialism” (Murphy 117-9).
- 6 In the Turkish Republic, in the 50s, the play was perceived, interestingly enough, as an ideal occasion for expanding cultural awareness of western – particularly American – values amongst local readers. Partly, this could be attributed to favorable political conditions as Turkey and America's strategic relations converged following the

emergence of the United States as a superpower and the beginnings of the Cold War. A symbolic event often cited as signaling the beginning of this relationship occurred in April 1946 when the U.S. warship Missouri visited Istanbul. The 1947 Truman Doctrine followed soon after, funneling \$400m towards strengthening Turkey and Greece against Soviet aggression. The Marshall Plan, announced in June of that year, provided additional support. Following the Turkish contribution to the Korean War in the early 1950s, NATO offered membership to the country in 1952, and formally included it in the western defense bloc (Prager 6).

- 7 Turco-American diplomatic relations were also strengthened at the educational level as USIS (as it was known then) brought over American lecturers to teach in Turkish universities; the first of these, Sidney Burks, gave lectures at Ankara University in 1953-4. In the same year, Robert Hamilton Ball, coauthor of *A Short View of Elizabethan Drama* (1943), was appointed to teach American literature in the same institution (Aytür 60). The Fulbright Commission also arranged for Turkish academics to complete their education in American universities. New universities were created in Ankara (Middle East Technical University) and the eastern Turkish city of Erzurum (Atatürk University) according to American models.
- 8 Perhaps most significantly, American goods and cultural products became more and more available to general consumers: Coca-Cola and Seven-Up appeared in aluminum cans rather than bottles, while fast food outlets were opened selling hamburgers (Aylin Yalçın remarks that such eating habits were entirely foreign to Turkish traditions, where people normally spent long hours over meals (Yalçın 44)). American music became more widely accessible both through local and American services radio. Many songs were written in praise of Turco-American relations: one published in 1954 contained the following lines: “Ankara and Washington/ My İzmir and your San Francisco/ Are said to resemble one another/ In their beauty” (Yalçın 47). Popular musicians such as Cem Karaca and Erkin Koray created ‘Anatolian Rock’ – a synthesis of American music and Turkish lyrics. Koray performed his first concert at Galatasaray College, Istanbul, in 1957; his repertory consisted of five songs, of which two were by Elvis Presley – “Hound Dog” and “Don’t Be Cruel” (Bulut).
- 9 Such developments helped to create an overwhelmingly positive image of America in the Turkish Republic as a place which not only provided educational opportunities but also offered new possibilities – economic, musical and intellectual – for everyone, even if they were not fortunate enough to be able to visit the United States. University English departments responded by incorporating recent American works like *Death of a Salesman* or *A Streetcar Named Desire* into their curricula. The rationale behind this move was clear; if students could be exposed to what was perceived as the best recent works of American literature, they could not only understand what the country was like, but by doing so would make a positive contribution to the Republic’s policy of westernization. They would become what Matthew Arnold described a century earlier as “a class of the educated – a class that could be definable and thought of as essentially and unequivocally that” (Leavis, *Literature* 44), discovering new possibilities for themselves, or applying their minds “to the problems of [western] civilization, and eagerly continu[ing] to improve its equipment and explore fresh approaches” (Leavis, *Education* 59). Stephanie Palmer – an American scholar who spent several years working in Turkish universities – recalls the enthusiasm expressed by many scholars (and their students) for American literary texts: “they enjoyed the sensibility of the naïf or the

upstart; a group of faculty members wanted to be independent of their university department administration; one scholar found the Peace Corps teachers [many of whom acted as teaching assistants in university English departments] enthusiastic and glamorous” (Palmer).

- 10 Theater scholars and practitioners of the time expressed equal enthusiasm for Miller’s play. Orhan Burian’s preface to the 1952 translation explains that the reason for publishing it so rapidly in Turkey – only three years after its Broadway premiere – was to make people aware of recent developments in American theater, and thereby set an example to anyone seeking to create similar material in the Turkish context, whether on the stage or in printed form. *Death of a Salesman* had attained the status of a “classic” (i.e. a western classic) within three years, and deserved to be brought to the attention of Turkish readers (Burian 3). An American critic passing through Turkey in 1953 acquired a copy of the translation and observed that
it [*Death of a Salesman*] is a very effective means of promoting in this country a sound appreciation of North America’s values which extend beyond technology or purely material advantages and comforts (Dalton 16).
- 11 The play received its Ankara premiere in 1957; one critic - who saw the production as a student - recalled the play provided a unique insight into contemporary American values (Yüksel).
- 12 When *Death of a Salesman* was first performed on the American stage in 1949, some critics saw it either as the study of a failure, or as a challenge to the American Dream. Harold Clurman, in one of the most overtly Marxist analyses he produced, observed that the play showed how
the ideals of hard work and courage had been replaced in the United States by salesmanship, the ability to put over or sell a commodity regardless of its intrinsic usefulness (qtd. In Murphy 65).
- 13 The Turkish interpretation was considerably more optimistic: Miller’s play reinforced the American Dream in the sense that it could promote American values in a culture seeking to align itself closer to the west (and the United States in particular) both politically and intellectually. In an ideal world, both students and theater audiences could use their experience of the play to create their own pathways to personal success, similar to that expressed by Happy at the end of Miller’s play:
He [Willy] had a good dream. It’s the only dream you can have – to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I’m gonna win it for him (Miller 111).
- 14 Such messages recalled the Depression Era in the United States, when advertisers responded to the economic crisis by reaffirming and reinterpreting the success ethic. The Erwin, Wasey and Company agency took the lead in 1929 with a full-page ad taken out in a number of newspapers. “All right, Mister!” it challenged the reader. “Now that the headache’s over, Let’s Go To Work!” The Outdoor Advertising Association of America initiated a campaign in which a woman in flowing robes with a torch proclaimed “Forward America! Business is good - keep it good” (Marchand 256). This is precisely what the citizens of the Turkish Republic hoped to achieve two decades later.
- 15 By the late 80s and early 90s, the academic and theatrical climate had changed. On the one hand, the older generation of academics - those who had been trained in Departments of English during the 50s and early 60s, when the first Fulbrighters came to teach - interpreted the play in much the same way as it had always been, as a text

which help to train students' and academics' minds in western - particularly American values, and thereby help to fortify the educated middle or upper class (Aytür 60). This task became even more important as a means of establishing a new consensus encompassing academics, politicians and industrialists, which could help the Republic become could become a 'better' (i.e. more westernized) society by resisting the growth of political Islam (Rumford 140). On the other hand, there were several younger academics emerging from Departments of American Literature rather than English Literature (the first of these had been established in Ankara in 1982), who viewed this approach as fundamentally reactionary. Not only did it remain "fixated on literature and oblivious and immune to all other developments" in literary, critical and cultural theory (Pultar 13), but it remained fundamentally oblivious to contemporary political realities, both in Turkey and the United States. They preferred instead to interpret *Death of a Salesman* as a critique of capitalism, which often seemed indifferent to the needs of individual people, only favoring those with sufficient financial muscle to be able to profit at other people's expense. Such an approach, as we have seen, is very reminiscent of what critics such as Harold Clurman wrote some three decades earlier when the play made its Broadway debut.

- 16 To an extent, this approach had been inspired by the work of a new generation of Americans (both Fulbrighters and lecturers contracted to private universities) who came to Turkey with completely new interpretations of their culture. Instead of unity they favored diversity, seeking to tell the stories of hitherto oppressed socio-economic groups, as well as of the dominant majority. The term 'Gen X' became the new buzzword, as Turkish students heard for the first time about their American counterparts growing up in a polychrome society that included Latino and East and South Asians, a world in which continuing immigration constantly changed ethnic and social realities. They heard about the conservative reaction to such developments, as rock music and teen films were blamed for encouraging teen suicide, promoting desensitization to violence and sexual exploitation, and advocating devil worship. Having already spent one year at Bilkent University, David Landrey worked as a Fulbrighter at Hacettepe University and discovered that a focus on the margins of American culture - in films and literature - generated

the kind of excitement which generates the best of exchanges, the richest human dialogue. Rarely did a day pass without some discussion of the issue; ideas circulated in the corridors as do glasses of tea [...]. [I]f this kind of argument prevailed in Bosnia-Herzegovina or South Africa or Northern Ireland, etc., then perhaps politics itself would be poetry (Landrey 1).

- 17 Randall Ward introduced an interdisciplinary method of teaching at Başkent University, Ankara, in an attempt to create "a fair and balanced view of [...] [American] culture." He sought to question "the dominant conceptual models of that culture at the time of the formation of its government," as well as in more recent times, and by doing so sought to "tell the whole story" about American culture, "especially the stories of the oppressed" (Ward 30).
- 18 More importantly, however, there was a feeling amongst local academics and their students that, while the 1980s and early 90s had led to a period of economic prosperity in Turkey, it had also sharpened the distinctions between rich and poor. President Turgut Ozal had come to power after the 1980 military coup, and immediately set about increasing exports: Turkey increased its trade with the Middle East, but business to the European Community increased as well. This encompassed a wide variety of products:

whereas, in 1979, 60 per cent of Turkish exports were agricultural products, by 1988 80 per cent came from industry. Textiles in particular proved an outstanding success. At the same time, however, many honest hard-working people who would once have enjoyed a relatively prosperous standard of living were crushed by rampant capitalism. In the major cities, the contrast between the conspicuous consumption of the rich in their glass office high-rises, suburban single family dwellings, and the poor whose cement block and plaster dwellings with tin roofs stood sometimes just a few blocks away, was perpetually evident.

- 19 The 80s and early 90s also witnessed a change in educational policy. Students now had the chance to attend private universities, if their families had the wherewithal to pay for them; the first of these, Bilkent University, was opened in Ankara in 1985. At the same time, it was widely believed that private enterprise might threaten the unity of the Turkish state, in the sense that it favored diversity, difference and choice. Instead of official state policy, it encouraged freedom of choice – something which, if left unchecked, could lead to the revival of political Islam as an alternative to westernization. Chris Rumford remarks that, in the 90s, the Turkish Republic was

located in a contradictory position between homogeneity and heterogeneity; between the decline of the official [pro-western] Turkey and the ‘return of the repressed’ (Rumford 143).

- 20 Such developments exerted a profound influence over the way in which Miller’s plays were interpreted both in the theater and the academy. In a preview article published to accompany the Istanbul State Theater’s production of *Orchestra* (1997), Leman Yilmaz portrayed the dramatist as an implacable opponent of capitalism, concerned for the future of the working classes in a world preoccupied with wealth and self-advancement (Yilmaz 47). Anyone who had experienced the social upheavals in Istanbul could identify with his work. Many Turks from Willy Loman’s socioeconomic background became so disillusioned with government policy that they rejected westernization and turned instead to political Islam. As Douglas A. Howard observes, parties such as the Refah Partisi (Welfare Party)

articulated a vision of the just society in Turkey through the use of a commonly understood Islamic religious idiom [...]. It had been supported by a rising group of newly urbanized laborers, shopkeepers, small businessmen, and industrialists who did not fit the traditional Kemalist mold (Howard 177-8).

- 21 In the 1995 general election, it became the first religious party to obtain a majority of seats. In this context, plays such as *Death of a Salesman* acquired a renewed political significance. The opening stage-direction of *Death of a Salesman* seems especially relevant, as Willy’s old-fashioned cottage, lit by a soft blue light, is surrounded and dwarfed by a “solid vault” of apartment blocks illuminated by “an angry glow of orange” (Miller 7). Linda Loman’s description of her husband sums up the experiences of many Turkish workers in the mid-90s:

When he [Willy] brought them business, when he was young, they [the customers] were glad to see him. But now his old friends, the old buyers that loved him so and always found some order to hand him in a pinch – they’re all dead, retired. He used to be able to make six, seven calls a day in Boston. Now he takes his valises out of the car and puts them back and takes them out again and he’s exhausted. Instead of walking he talks now. He drives seven hundred miles, and when he gets there no one knows him any more, no one welcomes him. And what goes through a man’s mind, driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent? (Miller 44-5).

- 22 Within a decade, attitudes towards the play had shifted once again. In the wake of 9/11, and the subsequent efforts by the American government to introduce democracy in Iraq, many people have come to view Miller's work as a critique of American politics, focusing specifically on the links between the personal and the political. The entire Loman family's faith in the American Dream blinds them to the truth about their lives; they would rather sustain themselves with fantasies of success. Biff refuses to talk about his criminal record in Kansas City, preferring instead to create a western myth about his life. Linda hides her doubts about Willy's effectiveness and her denial of her own needs behind a screen of wifely supportiveness, while Happy conceals his self-doubts about being only "one of two assistants to the assistant" (Miller 104). Such fantasies are not only restricted to one family; they may be shared by contemporary politicians - especially those interested in 'freedom' or 'democracy' in the Middle East. At least, that is the view expressed by many students in contemporary Turkey as a reaction to current events: like Willy Loman, America seeks to sell the American Dream abroad, but as time passes, fewer and fewer people seem prepared to buy into it. For them, Linda Loman's final speech may appear particularly ironic: "We're free and clear. (*Sobbing more fully, relaxed*). We're free (*BIFF comes slowly toward her.*) We're free. ... We're free. ..." (Miller 112).
- 23 The glory days of the 80s and early 90s have passed: while privatization continues to flourish in the Turkish Republic, the number of job opportunities in both the private and public sectors has gradually dwindled. Growing economic inequalities threaten to disenfranchise an increasingly urban and youthful population from the rights of citizenship. Many literature students believe that the American Dream of wealth and prosperity no longer applies to them. Biff's speech assumes a chilling significance for them:
- How the hell did I ever get the idea I was a salesman there [in Bill Oliver's office]? I even believed myself that I'd been a salesman for him! And then he [Bill] gave me one look and - I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been! We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk (Miller 82).
- 24 As a result, they are "torn between the hopes of constructing a more participatory public sphere and disillusionment with the nation-state as the embodiment of modernity" (Neyzi 112). The old liberal humanist ideal of studying texts like *Death of a Salesman* to acquire a knowledge of western values and thereby make a positive contribution to the development of the Republic seems dead and buried. Instead, the play tends to be taught on a much more personal level, with greater emphasis placed on its analysis of human relationships, especially Miller's concern with the difficulties experienced between fathers and sons. The academic Suat Karantay likened the dramatist's technique to that of Henrik Ibsen, as he focuses relentlessly on how Willy's obsession with material success renders him oblivious to his son's inadequacies (Karantay 23). As Biff emphasizes at one point, Willy's relentless belief in the American Dream leads to disaster:
- The man don't know who we are! The man is gonna know! [*To Willy*] We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house! [...] I never got anywhere because you [*Willy*] blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! Think whose fault it is! (Miller 104).
- 25 No real bond exists between father and son; Biff becomes just a pawn in Willy's visions of success. However, once Biff tells his father the truth about their relationship, Willy discovers - perhaps for the first time - that his son has always loved him:

Oh, Biff! [*Staring wildly*] He cried! Cried to me. [*He is choking with his love, and now cries out his promise*] That boy - that boy is going to be magnificent! (Miller 106).

- 26 The word 'magnificent' has nothing to do with material success, but rather emotional feeling. Karantay remarks that, in speeches like this, Willy discovers his own personal American Dream – to be able to communicate on the same level with his son (Karantay 25).

- 27 Other Turkish readers have sought to focus on Miller's *exposé* of the cultural stereotypes that dominate Willy's and his sons' view of women, particularly Linda (Yılmaz 47). Happy likens his sexual relationships to bowling: "I just keep knockin' them over and it doesn't mean anything." Nonetheless, he longs to "find a girl - steady, somebody with substance [...] somebody with character, with resistance! Like Mom, y'know!" (Miller 18-19). Willy is so preoccupied with the dream of material success that he cannot stand any interruptions from his wife:

BIFF: He [Bill Oliver] did like me. Always liked me.

LINDA: He loved you!

WILLY [*to Linda*] Will you stop? [*To Biff*] Walk in very serious. You are not applying for a boy's job. Money is to pass. Be quiet, fine and serious. Everybody likes a kidder, but nobody lends him money [...].

LINDA: Oliver always thought the highest of him --

WILLY: Will you let me talk? (Miller 31).

- 28 As the action unfolds, Miller shows that it is Linda, not Willy, who possesses true strength of character, as she vigorously protects her husband from her sons:

Get out of here, both of you, and don't come back! I don't want you tormenting him any more. Go on now, get your things together! [*To BIFF*] You can sleep in his apartment. [*She starts to pick up the flowers and stops herself*] Pick up this stuff, I'm not your maid any more. Pick it up, you bum, you! (Miller 98).

- 29 She may only be a housewife by profession, but she knows how to manage her siblings. Perhaps she should be regarded as the true head of the Loman family (Yılmaz 47). Such issues are of particular interest to contemporary Turkish students, many of whom experience similar familial conflicts. Like Biff, they seek to pursue lives of their own, even if that means defying their parents' wishes. Women in particular are no longer satisfied with the traditional career paths of marriage, home and family, with the consequent expectation that they should accept their male partner's wishes. The sociologist Leyla Neyzi cites the example of one literature student - a female from İstanbul - who experienced considerable pressure from her family to marry as soon as possible and reject what was perceived as the 'unnecessary' option of postgraduate work. The student observed with some justification that "despite their image as presented on TV ads, I don't believe young people today are free at all" (Neyzi 113).

- 30 Using this observation as a starting-point, I asked one class of eight undergraduate students of American Literature at Başkent University (who were studying *Death of a Salesman* during the 2004-5 academic year) to complete a free-writing project speculating on how the play might have continued after Willy's death. The results were particularly intriguing, as most of the class – six females, two males – focused on Linda Loman as she considered the prospect of life without her husband. In their opinion, Linda would have commented on how an overwhelmingly patriarchal American society of the mid-20th century silenced people – not just women, but also children – while placing unreasonable expectations on them of what an ideal family life should be like. The American Dream was not something positive; on the contrary, Willy's obsession

with it encouraged both him and his sons to believe that patriarchy and capitalism were 'natural' ways of life, if you wanted to advance in the world and be somebody. They sustained "a kind of false consciousness about how happiness could be gained in a system that was built only to tear [them] down" (Fuchs 223). The only way to challenge such expectations was to repudiate the dream of financial success altogether and live according to one's own inclinations. Perhaps then, everyone might achieve a more permanent and more satisfying American Dream As one student wrote, for a person like Linda Loman (or anyone else) to achieve this, they must "dig beneath all the lies and dreams we lived by, and our families taught us, and make a life for ourselves. We must choose to think and to live, this time."

- 31 What this article has sought to prove is that the changing fortunes of *Death of a Salesman* in Turkish academic and theatrical culture over the last half-century tells us less about the United States and more about the Turkish Republic; how it sought to foster relations with America in the 1950s, how the growth of capitalism led to significant social and economic changes in the 80s and early 90s, and how Miller's play in the contemporary context can now be viewed as a critique of the whole idea of the American Dream, particularly when it is concerned with the notion of wealth and social advancement. The varying interpretations of *Death* also reflect generational changes: while older Turkish academics trained in English departments sought to imitate the example of their American counterparts, in the hope of inculcating western values into their students, this objective no longer has much significance either for teachers or students. A more fruitful course of action for them seems to be to pursue their own American Dreams, which may have little or nothing to do with appreciating American (or western) values, or obtaining financial rewards, and to focus instead on the notion of happiness and self-fulfillment. In today's Turkey, *Death of a Salesman* is seen as a text that may persuade people to reject the American example and pursue their own ambitions. Matthew C.Roudané's introduction to a 1995 collection *Approaches to Teaching Death of a Salesman* suggests that

the plight of the Lomans raises important aesthetic and cultural issues that [...] invite students and teachers to test multivocal critical attitudes regarding literary and cultural essentialism (Roudané 23).

- 32 This survey, I think, proves the truth of this statement; it is impossible to define the experience of studying the play in essentialist terms, especially when taught in different contexts and in different historical periods.

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