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Ordinary People's Tragedy: Comparative Study of Plays of Arthur Miller and Beomsuk Cha

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The main concern of the study is the playwrights' perspectives toward the relationship between society and individuals rather than specific cultural or social circumstances. This study is justified in that the similarities of both playwrights not only provide an opportunity to bridge two different cultures, but they also help readers understand another culture and deepen the understanding of their own culture in the map of international literature. In their plays, both Miller and Cha express an individual's or a family's frustration, conflict, pleasure, and hope as reflected in the social circumstances. The characters take ideas and values from their social world and thrive or fail. Specifically, I have focused on three elements--obsession, generational value systems, and alienation. With three common features, I examine how closely Miller and Cha deal with ordinary people's tragedies.

[comparative drama/modern tragedy/obsession/generational gaps/alienation, 비교 드라마/현대 비극/집착/세대차/소외]

I. INTRODUCTION

There have been many studies done about Arthur Miller in Korea; however, it is rare to compare Miller's work with that of any Korean playwright. Among

his many brilliant plays, *Death of a Salesman* is one of the most popularly performed works on Korean theatre stage, which implies that this particular western work tells something to Korean audience. By using the comparative method, this paper attempts to examine how much Arthur Miller's work influenced a Korean playwright, Beomsuk Cha, in terms of depicting ordinary people's tragedy.

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) and Beomsuk Cha (1924-2006) are prominent contemporary playwrights who established themselves after World War II. When asked in a phone interview about the likeness between some of his own work and that of Miller, Cha personally admitted some similarities. He mentioned that "I really like Miller's plays. Despite some severe criticisms about his plays, I like *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* and *A View from the Bridge*. It's because he describes persons under certain social systems and circumstances, not persons who belong nowhere."

Beyond Cha's acknowledgement, these two playwrights share recognition as social dramatists, and they lived during roughly the same historical period. This coincidence suggests that both men might dramatize similar social situations, and they might also use similar approaches to enlighten their societies. In particular, World War II, a war that both playwrights experienced, created a great deal of confusion and led to a shift of value systems in both American and Korean culture. By looking at shifts in value systems that both dramatists witnessed, it is hypothesized that both Miller and Cha share comparative perspective toward their societies.

It is this comparison that I consider a crucial aspect both for establishing the clear relationship with or influence by/on other countries' literature and for building a history of our own literature. According to Jingi Cho (2006), comparative literature has developed rapidly in a short time. Now that our concept of literature has come to embrace the literature of all ages and countries. it cannot be explained by studying only about literary works of one' own country. Thus, a comparative study offers an opportunity to recognize one's own literature in relations to that of other countries and to establish the uniqueness of the literature of one's own (p. 18-19). Jung-ok Im (2001) underlies effects[1] of comparative literature in education of national literature as

1) In addition to effects that Im mentions, comparative study fosters students to expand

follows:

> 1. We can let younger generation understand the concept of literature as comparative in various viewpoints. 2. We can let younger generation understand broadly world literature and phenomena of international literature, and then can recognize the real appearance and place of the Korean literature. 3. We can let younger generation recreate our national literature as international point of view. (p. 283)

By placing literature of periphery — in this paper, Korean literature — in the map of the international literature, comparative study as a method contributes to "the international cultural diplomacy" (Im, 2001, p. 283) and challenges Euro-centered literature world. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the relationship between two plays by elucidating similar aspects that show in both plays, and to locate Cha's work in relation to Miller's work.

II. ORDINARY PEOPLE'S TRAGEDIES OF WEST AND EAST: DEATH OF A SALESMAN AND THE BARREN

Despite many arguments among literary critics about the existence of real tragedy in modern times, Miller (1987) declares that in fact modern tragedy can exist:

> There are among us today...those who act against the scheme of things that degrades them, and in the process of action everything we have accepted out of fear or insensitivity or ignorance is shaken before us and examined. [F]rom this total examination of the unchangeable environment — comes the terror and the fear that is classically associated with tragedy. (p. 4)

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the spectrum of their knowledge by being exposed to various viewpoints. Youngju Bang (2006) argues that a learner will enrich his/her knowledge through interactions with others and through experiencing various perspectives (p. 191).

Miller thinks contemporary playwrights can find sources of tragedy from conflicts between humans and their social surroundings. Since modern man is no more able to escape his surroundings than a fish can leave the water, the surroundings function as either a "promise" or a "threat" in his life (Miller, 1987, p. 43). Taking specific circumstances in Korean society, Cha also comments about the interrelationship between individuals and society:

> We are influenced by the change of surroundings such as political or cultural or social elements. Especially, in the mid 1900s, [Korean] society was under strong political control. Besides, the process from an agricultural society, to an individual society, so to speak, the change of circumstance, causes many conflicts among human beings. (Phone interview with Cha, Feb 13, 1999)

In particular, Cha's dramas deal with the struggle between the traditional Korean view of family and the Western view of family, especially the American idea of individualism within the family. When an individual feels threatened by his social surroundings, conflicts between him and society are formed; depending on his relationship to family, the family will either act as a buffer against the threat or as part of the threat itself.

To show the conflicts between humans and their social surroundings, and present how individuals behave under certain conditions, both Miller and Cha use the basic social unit, the family. Hogan (1964) states that "the larger society is reflected by the little society of the family. That little society, that microcosm, Miller knew intimately and revealingly documented" (p. 15). According to Welland (1985), Miller "relates the frictions of family life to those of the macrocosm outside: his families live in a recognizably real world" (p. 12-3). By projecting a family into a society, Miller closely studies the individual's strife with society, which is evident in Cha's play as well. Cha specifically remarked on the similar aspect of social drama between *The Barren* and *Death of a Salesman* on the interview.

> Lee: So there is not a big conflict between family members in *The Barren* [...], right?

> Cha: Right. It's like Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. This play talks about one American family so we may say it's a home drama. But contradictions of a highly developed capitalistic society are projected into this family; therefore, this play should be called a social play. (Phone interview with Cha, Feb 13, 1999)

Cha depicts the process of the collapse of a family, a private space, as resulting from the encroachment of society, an outer space which encompasses the family (Kim, 1997, p. 72) and eventually becomes part of the family.

The protagonists of *Death of a Salesman* and *The Barren*, Willy Loman and Mr. Choi, both fathers, share common tragic elements. Their lives in society manifest the power of their social circumstances. They are alienated from the community or society to which they either belong or wish to belong. Their obsessions with something, such as family, success, name, or tradition, reflects the influential social surroundings of their lives. These obsessions generate conflicts with their children because the value systems of the different generations also conflict. Finally, the two fathers bring a tragic ending upon themselves and tragedy to their family via their alienation from both family and society.

To make comparisons manifest, I will focus on three common elements which affect these two families: first, obsession; second, the different generational value systems held by fathers and children; and third, alienation from each family member and alienation of whole family from their society. These three elements clarify the similarities in how Miller and Cha illustrate the tragedies of ordinary people.

1. Obsession

Willy Loman is obsessed with success and his favorite son, Biff. While his obsession with success grows out of the "American Dream" and relates to his strong belief in past values in society, the obsession with Biff originally comes from Willy's memories of his own childhood.

After observing the success of an elderly salesman, David Singleman, Willy was so impressed that he decided to become a salesman himself. For Willy,

Singleman's life demonstrated "the co-operative and benevolent nature of capitalism" (Carson, 1982, p. 51). Thus, Willy tenaciously hangs on to values such as respect, camaraderies, and gratitude in the world of the salesman in a world that rapidly discounts these traits. He is captivated with the American success syndrome, and furthermore, has tried to imbue this ideal to his beloved son, Biff.

Willy demonstrates his obsession with success in a materialistic society by his perception of his own name, Loman (low-man). Willy refuses "to think of himself, or [to] allow others to consider him, as 'little.' The dream of being Number One propels him, and the tenacity with which he pursues the dream in itself makes him nonordinary" (Adler, 1987, p. 101). When Willy hears that in society he and his son are not as great and "well-liked" as he has thought, Willy firmly refuses to believe it, stating, "I am not a dime! I am Willy Loman and you are Biff Loman" (p. 132). In his life, Willy clings to the fame and honor that comes from his perception of the social respectability of being a salesman and a father to his family.

Willy's infatuation with the fame and honor is driven by his obsession with success. Specifically, Willy thinks the best key to success is to be "well-liked" (p. 36). When he has an affair with The Woman, his likeability proves to be the way to success. His likeability makes her pick him up among the other salesmen and she "put [him] right through to the buyers" (p. 38). In addition to The Woman's case, Willy uses, as a key to success, being "well-liked" as a father by his children. When Willy feels stressed out because of the travel associated with his job, his wife Linda consoles him by saying, "[f]ew men are idolized by their children the way you are" (p. 37). Through the love of his sons and The Woman, Willy positively prides himself on his being "well-liked," and this value has, in his view, proved a key to his success. This is the reason Willy is so strongly obsessed with being likeable.

In addition to his obsession with the external values of success, Willy is preoccupied with his desire to see his son as a successful man who would replace him in society. This obsession stems from Willy's emptiness because of his father's abandonment. Deprived of his father's love, Willy tries to compensate by showering his sons with excessive attention. Willy expresses this incomplete feeling in himself when he explains that, "I never had a chance

to talk to [my father] and I still feel — kind of temporary about myself" (p. 51). Carson (1982) points out that Willy's "temporary" feeling prevents him from guiding his sons to success: "[t]he quintessential boy-man, Willy is the eternal adolescent arrested at an early stage of development and because of it unable to help his own son to a healthy maturity" (p. 49). Willy's surfeit of love for his sons proves not to be the key to success in society; rather it is the source of his sons' failure.

Willy's decision in the end of the play is caused by his obsession with his dream of success and love for his son. Since Willy realizes that Biff still loves him, he decides to take out a life insurance policy in order to bestow some money on his beloved son. As a failed salesman, Willy has the only one thing (his life) left that can bring in money. Even when Willy makes up his mind to kill himself, he never gives up his dream of being a "winner," saying, "Imagine? When the mail comes [Biff]'ll be ahead of Bernard again!" (p. 135). Willy thinks that the money he can leave to Biff from his life insurance will enable his son to regain the 'Number One' status he had once enjoyed as a promising young football player. As for Willy, success in society means to earn much money and to enjoy materialistic wealth. Therefore, Willy believes that the insurance money can restore hope to Biff's future. This idea shows how deeply Willy is influenced by the materialist version of the "American Dream." In addition to his dream about being number One, Willy's sense of competition toward everything and everyone is also a by-product of the "American Dream." Nelson (1970) describes Willy's decision to kill himself as an inescapable consequence of social circumstance: "Unable to break the shackles of commercialism that have both defined and limited his life, Willy apparently seeks death as the most feasible resolution to an increasingly desperate dilemma" (p. 127). Willy's obsession with the success syndrome works as the agent of his death.

Likewise, Choi, the protagonist in *The Barren*, presents the aspects of strong obsession which lead his tragedy. The first sign of obsession is seen in the family business, a wedding store. Choi owns a traditional wedding equipment store in the 1950s, when people began to prefer Western-style weddings. This traditional wedding store becomes a relic of the past, and represents Choi's obsession with tradition. His complaints that "everyone is crazy about new and

Westernized things" (p. 6) highlight the change in social value systems. Like Willy Loman, Choi refuses to accept these changes and is obsessed with his past ideals, such as compassion for and intimacy with others, based on Confucian morality. These past ideals do not fit the social circumstances of the 1950s, so his values are destined to disappear with the advent of the new generation.

Choi's obsession with his traditional value systems is also seen in his obsession with the old house. The house symbolizes the disappearing tradition of the old generation and even Choi himself. Surrounded by changed and developed tall buildings, this house is "like a dwarf among normal people" (p. 16). In spite of changes in the neighborhood, Choi insists on keeping this house. Amidst the waves of social changes, the old house is the only thing he has. His dead father had bought it for him as a wedding present, so Choi firmly believes as much in the great value of the house as he believes in the great value of tradition. For 47 years, the Chois have lived in the old house, since Choi, who is over 60, "grew up, got married, and [had] children" (p. 3) there. The old house represents his whole life, and he is obsessive about the house in spite of other family members' suggestions to sell it.

His fixation with the old house produces conflicts with the rest of his family who want to move to a different house for their own convenience. According to the Choi's children, despite its good location, the family house is too antiquated to have a water supply at home. They have to go to the Civil Water (public water) to procure the water they need. When Kyoungjae complains about drawing water every day and asks his father to move out, Choi obstinately refuses and emphasizes the relationship between him and the old house which share their lives: "I was born here, therefore I will die in this house" (p. 5).

The fact that Choi is "strongly obsessed with disappearing traditional value systems," according to Sunghee Kim (1997), "closing himself off from the advent of new value systems" (p. 72) is shown when he complains about his neighbors who "only think for themselves and don't care for others" (p. 7-8), dumping dirty water. Choi thinks "these days people become shameless" (p. 7-8). Compared with the past when people cared for each other like a big family, the current society has become selfish and indifferent in Choi's eyes. He believes that the modern development represented by the buildings surrounding

his house is a cause of dehumanization in society. These buildings block his house from the sun, so "the flowers and vegetables don't grow" (p. 4). The flowers and vegetables symbolize a life or birth and his children, especially, Kyoungsoo and Kyoungae who are choked off by modernized society. This life or birth does not exist in this house because of "ghostly buildings" (p. 4) that surround it and represent modernization. Choi curses that "the world will become barren" (p. 4) at this rate. The older generation, as represented by Choi, sees the development of technology and industrialization negatively, and believes this modernization will destroy human life rather than improve it. This negative attitude toward changed society provokes the conflicts with his children in the play, which I will address in the next section.

2. Generational Value Systems

Willy's obsession with Biff and his success generates the conflicts with Biff. Biff is deeply influenced by Willy's teaching before discovering his own self-identity. Since Biff was young, he has been affected by Willy's values, especially Willy's obsession with likeability. However, in reality Biff "never got anywhere because [Willy] blew [him] so full of hot air" (p. 131), and he realizes his father's value system is impractical for achieving success in society. After discovering the truth about himself, Biff thinks he knows what he wants to do and who he is. But these discoveries are the opposite of what Willy has believed concerning himself and his son. While Biff dismisses his petty position in society as a "dime a dozen" (p. 132), Willy strongly rejects it, saying, "I am Willy Loman and you are Biff Loman" (p. 132). Willy's obsession with his values for success prevents him from accepting Biff's true realization about both of them and ultimately severs their relationships.

In *The Barren*, the aspects of different generational value systems are even more clearly shown. Compared with Choi's traditional view of society, his children's attitudes toward social circumstances are different and various. The oldest son, Kyoungsoo, thinks of himself as a victim of society and takes a pessimistic view of new society. Kyoungae, the oldest daughter and the second child, pursues her dream of success which a changed society provides; she takes an optimistic view of life. Kyoungwoon and Kyoungjae, the youngest

daughter and son, see society very realistically. They understand wrongs and rights in the modern society. For instance, when Choi complains about the changed neighborhood and praises the past, Kyoungjae, who is a high school student, explains that the past is of no use, "Today is today. Someone who realizes this fact clearly can seek his future" (p. 4). Kyoungjae faces up to modern reality; he knows the advantages and disadvantages to human life resulting from the development of technology. Kyoungjae neither praises the social changes nor blames them. He just accepts the reality which Choi continues to fight.

This realistic attitude is also shown by Kyoungwoon, the youngest daughter. When Choi complains about Kyoungsoo's joblessness and laziness in spite of his position in the family, as the eldest child, Kyoungwoon tries to make her father understand the current unemployment situation. Kyoungsoo's joblessness is because "the society doesn't offer him one. [Thus] it's not his fault" (p. 6). She realistically perceives the changes in social circumstances, and in her family functions as a buffer in the generational conflict. For example, in front of Choi, Kyoungwoon makes her father understand and sympathize with Kyoungsoo's inevitable situation in society, but to the listless Kyoungsoo, she sharply expresses her realistic opinion about how to survive in this society. Kyoungwoon realizes that it will take each person carrying out his/her role faithfully and tirelessly for them to survive in their modern society.

Cha shows the new generation in a positive light by depicting the perspectives of Kyoungwoon and Kyoungjae toward their surroundings. At the same time, and in the same family, Kyoungsoo and Kyoungae represent a negative image of the new generation that is confused and wandering as a result of westernization. The society that Kyoungsoo and Kyoungae belong to is neither traditional nor westernized, and they are trapped in a no man's land, a DMZ, without any support. As the eldest son, Kyoungsoo recognizes his responsibility for the family and his father's expectations of him. Reality, however, turns out to be crueler to him. Through his mounting frustration in unsuccessfully trying to get a job, he loses his self-confidence, his hope for the future and his faith in others, and eventually he becomes wretched. His wretchedness is similar to that of Biff Loman. Both are elder sons in families where the father is overly invested in their success. However, neither Biff nor

Kyoungsoo can survive in modern society. Biff is imbued with Willy's misguided and outdated values that no longer work in a changed society. Likewise, Kyoungsoo is directly influenced by circumstances that deny him a job while inflicting wrongs. Kyoungsoo's burden as the eldest son and his despair about himself and society cause him to commit a crime, thus ruining what little remains of his hope.

In the meantime, Choi cannot understand his son's pessimism about the world around him. He criticizes Kyoungsoo's inability to survive in society after the war. Comparing Kyoungsoo, who thinks the war ruins his life, with other discharged soldiers who made money by any means, Choi believes Kyoungsoo's joblessness results from his laziness and his blaming of the war is "just a foolish excuse" (p. 21). This is similar to Willy Loman's complaint about Biff. The fathers expect their eldest sons to succeed and take charge of their families, but in the same terms that they themselves had sought success. In particular, Choi depends on his eldest son's responsibility to succeed him as the chief family support, the traditionally expected role of the eldest son in a Korean family. Despite their best efforts to live up to these faded ideals, Biff and Kyoungsoo both disappoint their fathers. Because neither father has a realistic understanding of his son's true situation, conflicts inevitably arise between them. Choi expects Kyoungsoo to play a traditional role of an eldest son, but Kyoungsoo's weakness in a changed society after the war cannot satisfy his father's wishes. Even though they care for each other, they cannot help failing to understand each other and this serves to make Kyoungsoo out of sinc with both his family and society.

Kyoungae, the second child and the oldest daughter of Choi, indulges herself in the materialist view of the "American Dream." She strongly believes that she will quickly become rich after being cast as a new starlet, and brags that if she should, "succeed to be selected as a new face today, everything is gonna be okay" (p. 10). She will "afford a better house and car" (p. 10) and give Kyoungsoo a job, too. Kyoungae is obsessed with materialistic success, and is as deluded by this view of the "American Dream" as Willy and Happy Loman are. She cannot see reality clearly and sacrifices the traditional values of family; instead, she follows her compassion for greed. A materialistic "American" individualism seduces her away from the traditional world her father offers and

in which she lives. Predictably, Choi cannot understand Kyoungae's vain optimistic attitude toward society. When Kyoungae rattles on about her promise to buy new Western-style wedding veils for Choi's store, he rebuffs her and says that he could "grow a tail in the time it would take me to wait for you to become a star" (p. 6). Choi does not believe his daughter's empty dreams for success.

Through Kyoungae, Cha censures a younger generation that pursues empty dreams or ideals without evaluating them. In a transitional period, the younger generation that does not have a firm identity is liable to waver aimlessly. Western value systems affect this generation, and make it confused and in conflict with the traditional one before it establishes its self-identity. Therefore, the younger generation is easily swept away by the new waves in society. Kyoungbok Lee (1987) comments that Kyoungae is "the character that represents a woman of the new generation who chooses the easiest and the most secular way to make a fortune at one stroke" (p. 43). In the end, Kyoungae is deceived by fake movie businessmen and kills herself because of the disgrace of her losses, especially that of her virginity. On the one hand, Kyoungae is unlike a traditional woman whose goal in life centers on marriage. On the other hand, her suicide shows that she still clings to the traditional values of honor that she has until then sought to evade. Cha depicts Kyoungae as a woman of the new generation who sacrifices her traditional duty as a daughter in the family in order to pursue a dream that has not been realistically thought out. According to Sunghee Kim (1997), Kyoungsoo and Kyoungae cannot help "failing because they do not play the [traditional] roles as a son and a daughter in a strict patriarchal society" (p. 71).

3. Alienation

Willy's obsession with past values alienates him and his family from their potential for success in modern society. If he had been satisfied with his carpentry ability or with living in Alaska, Willy would probably not have killed himself for materialistic success. However, Willy's fixation on success as salesman in a city, which equates human worth with financial standing, leads to the alienation of himself and his family from their community. This alienation of

the Lomans is visible through the stage direction of their house. The Lomans' house is surrounded by *"a solid vault of apartment houses"* (p. 11). Their house is the small, fragile-seeming home which is dwarfed by images of greatness and superiority. It represents the Lomans' ineptness in the successful community surrounded by them. Likewise, the Chois' alienation from their community is symbolized by their house.

Much like the house of the Loman, the old house in *The Barren* at both sides is surrounded by *"three- or four-story buildings"* (p. 1). These skyscrapers look like that *"they are superior to the old house"* (p. 1). This indicates that the Chois do not belong to their community, and it also represents gradual disappearance of the tradition with the creation of the new. Choi condemns society for withering his two children in the same way he blames the buildings around him for the lack of sunshine that kills his plants. Through Choi's tragic grievance, Cha presents the irresistible force of social forces on individuals' lives. Bongseung Shin (1965) comments about the environmental force on human life, saying that

> the old house represents the cultural climate of Korean traditional society; the buildings which block the growth of flowers from the sun, and the neighboring café which makes the house poles rotten by dumping dirty water are the representatives of the gigantic mechanism and political authority which interfere with and control human beings. (p. 482)

In addition to alienation from their community, the Lomans and the Chois are alienated within their own families. In part, of course, this alienation is caused by the lack of true conversation. According to the stage direction, Biff and Happy are described as distracted characters:

> *Biff...bears a worn air and seems less self-assured. [H]is dreams are stronger and less acceptable than Happy's. Happy...like his brother, is lost, but in a different way.* (p. 19)

Because Willy and Linda have been preoccupied with Biff, their first son, Happy has grown up with the sense of being less valued in his home. In the

play, whenever Happy attempts to attract his parents' attentions, he fails. For instance, the young Happy says to Willy, "I'm losing weight, you notice, Pop?" (p. 29) and grown-up Happy says to Linda, "I'm gonna get married, Mom. I wanted to tell you" (p. 68). Every effort is brushed aside because of his parents' indifference and their preference for Biff. Thus, when Happy confesses about his life to Biff, he expresses an emptiness, and makes excuses about why he hunts aimlessly for women: "I don't know what the hell I'm working for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment—all alone. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, I'm lonely" (p. 23). His family and society cannot replace his desolation, and mostly his parents' obsession with their elder son causes Happy's alienation in his family.

Biff's alienation comes from Willy's obsession with making a success out of him. When he works in an office, Biff feels he is "making a contemptuous [and] begging fool of [himself]" (p. 132), so he feels isolated in the business world, but he keeps trying to get a job as an office worker. This is because Willy's selfish desire is to make Biff a successful white-collar man. Biff accuses his family of not confronting the truth, that the Lomans have lived an empty dream: "We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years" (p. 104), and "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house" (p. 131). Although Biff sees the truth, or thinks he does, Happy and Linda even interrupt Biff to prevent him from facing Willy with the truth. Thus, Biff's efforts to make his family view their situation realistically fail, leaving him feeling alienated. Linda demonstrates her lack of understanding in the "requiem" ending of the play. She keeps saying that she could not understand why Willy killed himself, even though they finally have their own house. Linda's lamentation reflects the capitalistic view that if a materialistic problem is solved, then there is no need to experience suffering. According to Nelson (1970), her comments over Willy's grave illustrate "how much she has emphasized this materialism and how little, for all her insight, she really knew the man to whom she was married" (p. 113). Even though Linda is a faithful and devoted wife and mother, she remains unable to communicate with her husband on a human level.

Willy's alienation from his family is clearly seen when he is deserted by his beloved sons. Willy feels the futility of what he has really cared for throughout his life. Thus, in compensation, Willy desperately tries to plant seeds which will

yield something tangible. When Willy says, "Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground" (p. 122), he realizes that in his life there is no reward for his devotion. Willy's sense of futility increases when Biff claims that he is nothing, and so is Willy. Willy thinks Biff's spite for him results from the fact that Willy has nothing to give his sons. Here, Willy does not truly understand what Biff really wants from him and this lack of understanding causes alienation between Willy and Biff. Willy's fixated thought on materialistic success inhibits him from giving what his son really needs from him.

Willy's alienation reaches a crisis point with his dismissal. To a salesman in a capitalistic society, dismissal means death. Willy expresses his distress about bad days during his travel:

> 'Cause I get so lonely—especially when business is bad and there's nobody to talk to. I get the feeling that I'll never sell anything again, that I won't making a living for [Linda], or a business, a business for the boys. (p. 38)

He is afraid of becoming a useless salesman kicked out of successful salesmen's society and, furthermore, being isolated from where he wishes to belong. In a capitalistic society, the worth of an individual is measured by materialistic wealth, thus work alienation is a serious problem for an individual in society. "Miller notes," according to Griffin (1996) that "Willy has broken the law which says that a failure in society and in business has no right to live...to fail is no longer to belong to society" (p. 36). Willy fails to become a successful salesman, and to make up his alienation from work and to cover his inability as a bread-giver of family, Willy sells himself, through death, to earn money for his family.

While Willy's fixation on the values and successes of his past alienates him from society and from his family members, Choi's stubbornness and ignorance are the causes of his alienation from his family. He is described as a patriarchal father who usually ignores what other family members say. Like Willy, he is unable to listen. When he talks with the realtor about the house, the other family members do not know what Choi is really trying to do because he has not shared with them his real intention to lease the house. As a patriarchal father, Choi takes it for granted that he will make all the big decision for all of

his family members, yet he does not ask others' opinions or share his intention with others. His dogmatism stems from extreme patriarchy, and it causes him to be alienated from his family.

Kyoungsoo and Kyoungae are described as isolated victims in a changed society. Kyoungsoo drinks to escape from reality and alienates himself from the society and his family. He blames society and others for his joblessness. Like Willy Loman's work-alienation, no having work means that, as a fully matured man, he is useless in a materialistic society. Neither Kyoungsoo nor Willy can adjust to low-class jobs, and neither is able to bear his denigrated social status as a jobless man. Instead, Kyoungsoo criticizes those who get jobs, cling to their jobs desperately, and fear being fired (p. 13); Willy can see no alternative to his joblessness but death. In the abstract, such social circumstances cause many wrongs, such as mammonism, dehumanization, injustice, and immorality. He bitterly criticizes the current society where "everyone becomes selfish" (p. 13). He explains that "if a guy is in need, he treats us nicely, but after grabbing what he wants from us, he treats us like dogs" (p. 13). Through Kyoungsoo's bitterness, Cha presents Korean society in the 1950s, which had been adversely influenced by American individualism which was in conflict with the traditional Confucianism. Cha depicts Kyoungsoo as a victim in a confusing transition stage.

Kyoungae is a victim caught between the traditional and the Western value systems. Being deceived by the society that she trusts explicitly, she feels alienated and betrayed. After realizing her failure, Kyoungae regards herself as a worthless and indecent woman in view of the traditional value systems of both societies. Thus, her alienation from society caused by indecency is total, and leads her to commit suicide.

III. CONCLUSION

I have studied Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and Cha's *The Barren*, in terms of obsession, generational value systems, and alienation. Although each play illustrates a different downfall for each family, there are several similarities with respect to inevitable relationship among individuals, family, and society.

First, the two protagonists, Willy Loman and Choi have obsessions with success, fame/name, family, or tradition which cause their tragic endings. The values with which the two protagonists obsess reflect particular social circumstances. Willy's obsession with success comes from the materialist vision of the "American Dream," which makes people think that everyone can be successful materially and therefore personally. His blindness to human alternatives leads to his demise. Likewise, Choi is strongly obsessed with disappearing traditional value systems and does not negotiate with new empowering values. In addition, both characters persists in trying to justify their acts as benefiting their families.

The second similarity between these two plays is that each father's obsession collides with the will of his children. Because Willy has so thoroughly immersed himself in materialistic values shaped by the "American Dream," he insists that his sons follow these same values. Choi's stubborn insistence on the old traditional value system causes parallel conflicts with his children. However, as society changes, each son realizes the inadequacy of his father's values to contemporary problems. The sons are also impacted by their own social circumstances. Through the conflicts between fathers and sons/daughter in terms of their plays' respective generational value systems, Miller and Cha show vividly that human beings are subject to their social circumstances.

The third similarity lies in the main characters' alienation from society. Each father attempts to secure his status in a particular surrounding. However, after failing in their attempts to secure their societal positions, they feel isolated from where they belong. Each family's isolation from society is symbolized by stage directions concerning their house. The house of the Lomans is dwarfed by tall and solid apartment houses, which signifies that the Lomans do not belong to their successful community despite Willy's attempts. Likewise, Choi's house is surrounded by newly-built skyscrapers.

By examining three common elements in *Death of a Salesman* and *The Barren*, I have shown that these two plays exhibit interesting similarities that transcend the obvious cultural differences between American and Korean society. The comparative method "fosters the study of literature undertaken from an international point of view" (Im, 2001, p. 288) and deepens the understanding of Korean literature and its status in the map of international

literature. In short, *Death of a Salesman* and *The Barren* show universal figures of father and his children between two countries and illustrate ordinary people's tragedies that use similar tragic elements.

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