

THE DEATH OF A SALESMAN

by Arthur Miller

Humanities 101

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A+

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THE DEATH OF A SALESMAN
By Arthur Miller

I: First Impression:

At first impression the Willie Loman family seems quite an ordinary family. A 63 year old traveling salesman, his wife, Linda and two sons. A family that can be found in almost any city anywhere. One might wonder how an interesting play can be written around such a common, every-day family, not to mention a tragedy. Therein lies the genius of the author. Miller takes the common place and weaves around it a play of such suspense and of such diverse ramifications that I have been trying for a week to decide just what aspect of the play to write about in this report. If this report is incoherent and disconnected, it is just that it is very difficult to sort out ideas and opinions about it. Certainly Miller proves with "The Death of a Salesman" that there is drama in the "ordinary". Probably more so because all of us are "ordinary" and all of us subject to "tragedy" in our own lives.

II: CONSCIOUS ANALYSIS:

1. Plot: The plot revolves around a 64 year-old traveling salesman, who faced with failure in his business and failure in his family, (because his sons are failures, too, according to Willy's definition of success,) has decided to commit suicide. His wife, aware of this, is doing everything in her power to stop him. His older son, Biff 34, has arrived in town and the other son, two years younger than Biff, has left his apartment to come and stay with Biff in the family home in their old room.

Chronologically ^{Willy is} the play takes place in two time periods. The present (63 years of age) time and what is presently happening to Willy and his family, and flashbacks into the period of Willy's life when his sons were in High School. The flashbacks and the present-day dialogue explain the situation in which Willy finds himself, and the reasons for his sons' apparent failure in life. The whole sets the stage for his "escape" from what he just cannot face and still live--that he has dedicated his life in a fruitless chase after false Gods in the form of "success" in business. Even worse, his apparent failure as a father as pertaining to the instilling of character and integrity in his sons.

The play reveals that he enjoys "puttering" around the house and that he has a deep basic need for open space, and sunshine and "green things" all of which has disappeared in the encroachment of the growing city, and in his failure to buy the lot next door. Not only have his sons not settled down professionally, but they have neither one of them married, so there is no sense of the continuing of the generations.

a. Exposition: The first act is largely exposition. Defining the characters, their personalities, and the reasons for the situations they find themselves in currently. But not completely so. The first act leaves several pertinent and tantalizing questions unanswered and sets the stage for the intense drama of the second act.

b. Inciting moments: To list all the inciting moments would be to copy the play verbatim. All of Miller's scenes are inciting--none of them are superfluous. I doubt if you could cut the play and not leave out something pertinent. The inciting moments leading up to the dramatic question might be: *(In the first act)*

1. Willy has been taken off "salary" and, at 63 years, when a man would normally be looking very shortly to "retirement", has been put back on straight commission selling. This is obviously and understandingly so, demoralizing to him.

2. During the year when his son Biff was assenior in High school, he was having an affair with another woman in Boston. *(or at least a strong intimation that such was the case) (proved in Act II)*

3. His only friend is a neighbor, Charlie, who puts up with insulting behavior from Charlie, and who offers him a job which Willy refuses. He is borrowing money from Charlie and representing the borrowed funds as "commissions" to his wife.

4. His son, Biff, a popular high school football hero is stealing, cheating, and "using" his friends. He is not studying as he should. *(Flashback to earlier life period.)*

5. Wille has tried several times during the past year to commit suicide and that he is still trying to do so is evidenced by his tampering with the hot water heater.

6. He has been idolized by his boys, but something has happened between Biff and his father to destroy this relationship and there is obvious tension between them. What has happened?

The dramatic question emerges at this stage in the first act. Linda is trying to get her sons to be more considerate of their father and to realize the strain that he is under. It is very close to the end of the first act, and she reveals that she has found the rubber hose attachment he has fixed up on the hot water heater--that she lives from day to day afraid that he will take his life.

Dramatic Question: Can a person go on living in the face of the total failure of his success patterns? *

total breakdown or If one has lived in a dream world perpetually, can he go on living when faced with Reality? *

Either dramatic question would emerge about at this point in the play. *a better one!*

c: Complications: Biff and Hap decide to go into an unrealistic scheme called the "Loman Brothers" if Biff can get backing financially from an old employer.

During the second act of the play the inciting moments lead up rapidly to the crisis.

1. Wille asks his boss to put him in the home office. Instead he is fired outright--not even allowed to go on selling on commission.

* The one I used

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2. During the year when his son Biff was a senior in high school, he was having an affair with another woman in Boston. (or at least a strong intimation that such was the case) *Handwritten note: This is the case!*

3. His only friend is a neighbor, Charlie, who puts up with insulting behavior from Willy, and who offers him a job which Willy refuses. He is borrowing money from Charlie and representing the borrowed funds as "commissions" to his wife.

4. His son, Biff, a popular high school football hero is stealing, cheating, and "using" his friends. He is not studying as he should. (Flashback to earlier life period.)

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Dramatic Question: Can a person go on living in the face of the total failure of his success patterns?

If one has lived in a dream world forever, can he do on living when faced with Reality?

Either dramatic question would emerge about at this point in the play.

c. Complications: Biff and his father decide to go into an unrealistic scheme called the "Loman Brothers," if Biff can get backing financially from an old employer.

During the second act of the play the inciting moments lead up to the dramatic question.

There is a revelation in the town

1. Willy asks his boss to put him in the home office. Instead he is fired outright--not even allowed to go on selling on commission.

2. Stunned, Willy goes to his friend Charlie to borrow money to pay his life insurance premium.

3. Charlie again offers him a job. Willy refuses. Charlie accuses him of being jealous--"always have been jealous", but he gives him the money. Sensing that Willy intends to take his life he tells him that "No one is anygood to anyone, dead."

4. Bernard, Charlie's son is revealed to now be a successful lawyer. In a dialogue (painful to Willy because of his own sons' lack of material success) between Willy and Bernard, Bernard asks Willy what happened back in Boston years ago that made Biff just "give up". Willy, annoyed, snaps back that Nothing happened--"what do you mean-- what happened?"

5. Back at the restaurant, Hap shallowly sets up a meeting with a call girl, showing his lack of concern for his father's situation. Biff arrives and tells Hap that he has failed (miserably) to get the loan. Not only that, but he has stolen a gold pen from Mr. Oliver.

6. Willy arrives at the restaurant almost in a state of shock. He wants desperately to know that Biff has succeeded--"looking for a crumb to take to Linda". The tension mounts between Biff and Willy. Biff has faced himself--he wants to tell the truth. When he realizes the bottom has fallen out for his father, he tries to lie--to paint a rosy picture. Finally, he realizes he MUST tell the truth, and when Willy refuses to let him--desperately rationalizing--Biff rushes out of the restaurant to walk the streets and "think".

7. In a flashback to the boys' high school days, it is revealed why there is tension between Biff and his father. Biff flunks math, and following the usual path of least resistance, goes to Boston to get his father to come back and "talk" the teacher into enough points to graduate him. He finds his father with another woman. It is a shattering experience for both of them, but especially for Biff who has idolized his father. He comes home, burns his track shoes, and spends the next 14 years drifting.

THE CRISIS:

Symbolic of 2 ...
The crisis emerges when Willy comes back from the flash-back and finds the boys have deserted him, and left him alone in the restroom of the restaurant. Totally disoriented, completely defeated, he goes out to buy "seeds" to plant. At this point we know there is no turning back--~~either Willy will commit suicide or something must happen~~ (and soon) to change his mind in the face of almost overwhelming odds.

There is further brief complication where Linda faces the boys upon their return home. "You're a pair of animals. Not one, not another living soul would have had the cruelty to walk out on that man in a restaurant!" Biff accepts his responsibility in the situation--Hap doesn't "Ah, Mom, we were having a good time." Biff indicates that he is going to have it "out" with his father. Linda, afraid, tells him to "leave him alone.". Biff is shocked to know that his father is out in the garden trying to plant seeds by flashlight.

Willy (in the garden) seeks reinforcement in what he is intending to do from his dead brother, Ben, who he reincarnates from time to time to back his rationalizing. His brother tells him he will "think about it" and leaves.

In a tense scene between Willy and Biff, Bill indicates that HE has faced reality--that he is going to start from here, etc. He tries to get Willy to admit to reality(unsuccesfully) The scene ends with Willy realizing that Biff really loves him, (in spite of everything) and always has. Hap tells his mother he is going to get married and settle down.(?) Linda seems to feel that Willy's ^{imminent} danger is gone, and lets him put her off into "joining her in a second." (My reaction was to want to yell, "Don't leave him alone--make him go with you!")

The Climax: The climax follows the scene above, when Ben comes in and tells Willy that he thinks his proposition is a good thing. Willy says : "Loves me. (Wonderingly:) Always loved me. Isn't that a remarkable thing? (and indicating he is still intent on self destruction:) Ben, he'll worship me for it!""Can you imagine that magnificance with twenty-thousand dollars."..... "Oh, Ben, I knew one way or another we were going to make it, Biff and I!" Linda calls to him to come up and Willy rushes off the stage and the family, suddenly, fearful, come running to stop him, but he roars off in the car! (And to what the audience realizes is his death.)

Denouement:

At the cemetery: The only ones who are at the funeral are Linda, the two boys and Charley. Linda can't understand why no one came to the funeral. She says that for the first time in their life they were almost out of debt. She makes the last payment on the house the day of the funeral--even the dentist is paid off. "He only needed a little salary."

Charlie: "No man only needs a little salary"

Hap: "He had no right to do that. There was no necessity for it. We would've helped him." (?)

Throughout the Requiem scene it is established that Hap hasn't changed. He is the same old dreamer--like his father--"tomorrow will come the pot at the end of the rainbow."

Biff shows concern and love for his mother and indicates his love for his father. "You know, Charley there's more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made."

There are still unanswered questions: Does Biff stay and care for his mother or does he leave "where's there's sun and space and time for a smoke?"

And of course, Did the insurance company pay off?

Characters: Willy. I guess there is a little of Willy in all of us. We all have a tendency to excuse ourselves for our failures and inconsistencies. There is an old saying: You can fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time." Willy tried to fool himself all of the time. There were moments of truth throughout the play when he realized that

things were not as he represented them to be. When he had to. When Linda needed the actual cash to pay a bill and he had to admit that the sales were not adequate to meet the payments. *But he would immediately resort to rationalizing & fantasizing.*

Willy probably had a talent for carpentry or masonry, and through Biff's dialogue here and there and other remarks you realize that he probably would have been happy if he had chosen to enter some other field than "selling". Thinking that he could get rich, he becomes a salesman. His entire life is based on "bluff",--on being "well-liked", never coming to grips with reality, and trying to win his way with "personality" and "talk".

partly Ben's fault?

The flashbacks revealed that he deeply loved his sons and had a good relationship with them. Instead of using this relationship to teach them integrity, he rationalized their mistakes. He taught them by example and precept that they could get things the "easy" way, that they did not need to use discipline and effort to succeed, and laughed at Charley's son Bernard, who was industrious and studious. Bernard idolizes Biff and helps him with his studies--but cannot get Biff to "settle down and study".

yes

Willy: "Bernard can get the best marks in school, 'y understand, but when he gets out in the business world, 'y understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank God almighty that you're both built like Adonises--because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. BE LIKED AND YOU WILL NEVER WANT."

the irony of that view against his tragic blindness!

This was his creed. Even when his boys failed and Bernard succeeded he did not abandon this attitude. Just before Willy commits suicide he says "When the mail comes (with the insurance check) he'll be ahead of Bernard again."

the good way, that unconditional love is

Linda: Linda truly loved Willy. She was not strong enough to counteract the effect that Willy had on his sons, even though her own integrity seems strong. She loves him even when he "treats her like dirt" according to Biff. in this way she is truly "blind". She, though, realizes that Hap is wasting his life running after "women", but she rationalizes a little with Biff, "he just hasn't found himself!" Linda would have been satisfied with Willy as he "was"--not as he represented himself to be. He and the boys were enough for her--but Willy HAD to be successful.

Biff: Biff seems to be the typical "big man on campus", football star type. He might have survived the high school adulation of his peers if his father had exercised a moderating effect on him. Instead, his father reinforced his false standards. He is popular, has a good personality, and apparently could have succeeded in his scholastic efforts if he had put forth the effort. His subsequent disillusionment with his father, when he finds that his father has been unfaithful to his mother, results in his total rejection of all his father stood for without any positive substitution of other values. He drifts for 14 years from job to job--ending up in jail for stealing a suit for three years before the play opens and he returns home. He has represented to his mother that he was working on a ranch in Texas while he was in prison.

excellent point, but the value is it opened his eyes to other realities

(Biff, cont.) When he fails to get the loan from Oliver, he runs down eleven flights of stairs after stealing a gold pen. Then he suddenly realizes what he has become and what his life has been. He determines to tell his father the truth and get him to face the facts about himself (Biff) and also he thinks if he can get Willy to face the facts, too, he will forget about killing himself. He seems to come to this realization between the time he leaves the restaurant and comes home.

B Biff: No! Nobody's hanging himself, Willy! I ran down eleven flights with a pen in my hands today. And suddenly I stopped, you hear me? And in the middle of that building do you hear this? I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw--the sky. I saw the things that I love in this world. The work and the food and time to sit and smoke. And I looked at the pen and said to myself, what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? ~~What am I trying to become what I don't want to be?~~ What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am! Why can't I say that, Willy?"

When Willy and Biff are quarreling, it seems that Willy is always accusing Biff of doing what he does for "spite", revealing that Willy is blaming himself for Biff's problems. He keeps saying, To Biff To Linda,--To Bernard: "That's not my fault". Before Biff can get over to his father that he is not going to seek the kind of success which his father wants him to, he has to get over the fact that he is not trying to "spite" him. This comes when Willy finally gets the message that Biff really loves him--and always has in spite of what has happened in the past.

Willy: I suppose that's my fault!
Biff: I stole myself out of every good job since high school.
Willy: And whose fault is that?
Biff: And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking order from anybody.
That's whose fault it is.
Willy: I hear that!
Biff: Its time you heard that! I had to be boss big shot in two weeks, and I'm through with it.
Willy: Then hang yourself. For spite hang yourself.
(followed about The speech above.)

Even after this Willy thinks all Biff needs is enough money--and he can make it.

The two boys seem to represent the two sides to Willy's nature. Biff, the love of the simple, the love of sunshine, and growing things, of working with his hands, etc. *Hap, the other side.*

Hap: Hap represents the other side of Willy's nature. The flamboyant "personality" kid", whose fortune is "just over the Hill", Hap's only success experience, though, comes through his sexual conquests. He delights in "conquering" girls, especially those engaged to or going with those who are his "superiors" in the company where he works. "You know how honest I am" (He isn't) but it's like this girl, see. I hate myself for it. Because I don't want the girl and, still, I take

(He doesn't)

yes
Just pt.

yes!

it and I love it." He berates himself, but he really is proud of it. He represents himself as a more important man in the business than he really is--echoes Biff's dishonesty in that he is willing to take a bribe to get other salesman into the boss. He, like Wille, never sees the light. Even at the end he says he is going to stay here in New York City and "Make" it. Whenever he does something wrong he tries to make it up in a superfluous way. He brings roses to his mother after leaving his father in a restaurant to pursue a call girl. He tries to smooth things over for his father by saying "I'm going to settle down and get married, you'll see--and I'll be running that department before a year is out!" The answer, for Hap, is always to avoid facing the truth of a situation--that is never the right answer for him.

Charley: Charley is Willy's neighbor. A successful business man himself. Willy thinks he is successful in making Bernard successful because he thinks Charley doesn't "give a damn". Charley is Willy's only friend. He, like Linda, keeps coming back in the face of insults, and ill treatment. He, too, tries to get Willy to face the truth. Kindly, and in a helpful manner--never berating Willy, like Willy does him. He tries to tell Willy that he doesn't need to be "well-liked" to be successful--was ~~Hap~~ Morgan ever well-liked?"

Willy never seems to realize that in order to "sell" you don't need to spend so much time "selling" yourself." Charley is the only one who really sees Charley as a "salesman".

"You don't understand. Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman there is no rock bottom to life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back--that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."

He is the kind of a man who would never have told Linda where the money came to pay the insurance premium.

Bernard: Bernard is the opposite example of Biff and Hap. He is the epitome of virtue. (and it bothers Willy) For he is not the charming, attractive, popular boy as is Biff and Hap, and he rides (and happily) on the coat-tails of Biff's popularity. But he is serious, and studious, and modest. He has both feet on the ground. And it is he who becomes successful. Willy seems unable to understand his modesty: "Before the supreme court--and he didn't say a word!" Bernard is the vehicle that the author uses to point out some of the deficiencies in the boys and in Willy through the dialogue, etc.

Ben: Ben is an older brother (now dead) of Willy. When Willy is in doubt of himself, he seems to bring Ben back to reinforce his attitudes and mores. Ben is the ideal of success. "He walked into the jungle at 17 and walked out three years later, a successful man." he is Willy's "if-only" man. "If only I had gone with Ben that time. I should have gone to Alaska with Ben." etc. He could not really have known Ben that well, as he left when Willy was small. It is through Ben that the past family life of Willy is exposed. His father was a flute maker who went from one place to another--apparently always looking for the "pot," too. He finally leaves his family to seek for gold in Alaska.

Ben seems a little unreal--perhaps because he was "unreal" to Ben. He was what ^{Willy} Ben wanted him to be. Ben was the solution to all of Willy's problems--but the solutions were Willy's own solutions. Some examples of how he reinforced Willy's ideas, helping Willy to live with his failures and reinforcing Willy's rationalization of those failures:

If only: Willy: Sure! Sure! If I'd gone with him to Alaska that time, everything would've been totally different!

Ben: Opportunity is tremendous in Alaska, William. Surprised you're not up there.

Wille: There was the only man I ever met who knew all the answers.

(Ben)
Answers:

Willy: Ben! I've been waiting for you so long! What's the answer? How did you do it?

Willy: That's just the way I'm bringing them up, Ben--Rugged, well-liked, all-around.

(and when Ben gets Biff on the floor with an umbrella pointed at his eye)

Ben: Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way.

(Ben's insertions of reinforcement in a "stealing" scene of the boys)

Willy: Shut up! He's not stealing anything. (Willy had sent him after construction sand at the apartment building site.)

Willy: There's nothing wrong. What's the matter with you?

Ben: Nervy boy! Good!

Willy: (laughing) Oh nerves of Iron, that Biff!

Just before Ben leaves:

Willy: Ben, my boys--can't we talk? They'd go into the jaws of hell for me, see, but I--

Ben: William, you're being first rate with your boys. Outstanding manly chaps.

Willy: (hanging on to his words) Oh, Ben, that's good to hear. Because sometimes I'm afraid that I'm not teaching them the right kind of --Ben, how should I teach them?

(When it comes right down to an answer Ben always backs out--leaving the decision to Willy.)

Ben: William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty one. And I was rich!"

Willy: ...was rich!" That's just the spirit I want to imbue them with. To walk into a jungle! I was right! I was right! I was right!"

Ben is the final answer to whether he should commit suicide.

Willy: Loves me. (wonderingly) Always loved me. Isn't that a remarkable thing? Ben, he'll worship me for it!

Ben: (with promise) It's dark there, but full of diamonds.

Willy: Can you imagine that magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket.

Linda: Willy! Come up!

Willy" (calling into the kitchen.) Yes! Yes! Coming! It's very smart, you realize that, don't you sweetheart? Even Ben sees it. I gotta go, baby. By! By! (Going over to Ben--almost dancing.) Imagine? When the mail comes he'll be ahead of Bernard again."

When he leaves he goes out to catch the boat--as if he is leaving to go with Ben. And he is. Ben is dead.

SETTING: The setting is in Brooklyn. Willy and his family moved there when there was still light and sunshine and space. Apparently (another failure) Willy failed to buy the lot next door (although they had used it as if it were their own) and so the city grew in close around them until they were overshadowed with large apartment buildings. They were perpetually in shade. Nothing would grow--grass, flowers, or vegetables. This may be why Biff can't stand the city--he wants light and space--and Willy longs for the old days when they had just that. Willy is hemmed in by the city like he is hemmed in by the business situation. With the use of lights, and music the scene is made to recede and close in and in the final scene the city seems right in their back yard. The scene seems as "oppressive" as Willy's moods.

SYMBOLISM: Willy's two sons are symbolic of his "split" personality. Biff, struggling to face reality, loving the simplicity of work, and sunshine, and Hap, the bragging, unrealistic dreamer, always looking for the pot at the end of the rainbow, type.

The stockings that Linda always mending is symbolic of Willy's infidelity--he paid off his mistress with boxes of nylons. When Linda tried to save money by mending hers it made Willy feel guilty. They were always there--even when he tells her "There will be no mending of stockings in this house."

another female wing

Willy said his boys were built like "Adonises." Adonis was loved by two Goddesses--fought over for love. Hap seems to find his only real success in seducing women--he goes from one to another.

(x)

Another symbolic thing is the flute which plays during the play and which largely sets the "mood" of the scenes. (Miller calls for a different musical theme for Willy, for the Boys, and for Ben) This could certainly be symbolic of Willy's background. His father played the flute and was a drifter who took his family from place to place, earning money by selling flutes which he made along the way.

Pan's pipe? (lecher?)

"There's that music again," my daughter, who accompanied me to the performance, kept saying.

Then there's the symbolism of the jungle, into which Ben enters and comes out a "rich" man. Men refer to their professions as "jungles". How a man accomplishes in that "jungle" determines his "success" or "failure". And Willy's world was a jungle with which he couldn't cope adequately, and which in the end overcame him.

Summation: "Death of a Salesman" is certainly a provoking play. There are all kinds of "messages" that can be read into it. I suppose that everyone would see something just a little different according to his own experience. I could not help but think of the difference in Willy's life if he had had the gospel. But then there would have been no "Death of a Salesman."

Arthur Miller, in your handout "Tragedy and the Common Man" says that "the possibility of victory must be there in Tragedy." And it was. Up until the very last of act II the audience is hopeful that someone or something will get to Willie and change his mind. There was even a brief moment when I thought Biff had succeeded--that his love would change Willy. But then his warped mind turned his suicidal ideas into making it ~~possible~~ *a miracle* for his loved son to be "successful". Can a man live in the face of total failure of his success patterns? Willy couldn't.

David O McKay said that no success could compensate for failure in the family. Conversely, if Willy had been able to feel success in his family, perhaps that would have carried him through the failure in his vocation.

Miller's play could be interpreted to be a protest against our overemphasis of material, dollar-and-cent success values in America. Certainly it is true that my own generation has over-emphasized "success", "getting ahead", etc. more than we should have. The present generation has partially rejected this philosophy as reflected in the "hippy culture" and the "back to nature" communes. But, then, everyone does not want "the simple life", to "work with his hands", or "to have time to think" and "smoke". There are those who like a challenge such as the "jungle" offers. Although I regret the "dog eat dog" mores of that "jungle", it IS possible to achieve success in it and even maintain fundamental christian integrity. Certainly the "jungle" is going to be with us for some time to come. Each person must cope on an individual basis. As Miller suggests, we have to cling to "the belief, optimistic, if you will-- in the perfectability of man--" which of course, as Latter Day Saints, is our goal.

*A superb paper with
Some stunning insights —*

Hats off!

*(May I make a Xerox
copy?)*