

It's Not About The Salesman
A Critique of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman"



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English Composition II
Fall 2007

This story is not about Willy Loman. It's not about a broken relationship between a father and son, nor is it about career choices of the middle-class. In my eyes, this story is about the easily shattered idealistic image of the 'American Dream'. People shaping their lives out of this ideal that regardless of race, gender or creed, hard work and constant perseverance will procure a happy and prospect laden future for one's self and thy family. It's not so much a suburbia home with a white picket fence as it is the desire to have enough abundance in life to be secure and stable. To be able to give your children a bountiful and boundless future, in which they will inherit the same opportunities.

However, we get to a point in life where the work is not nearly as fulfilling or rewarding as we would like it to be, and we feel like we have failed ourselves and our family, both monetarily and intangibly. We begin to lose our faith in society, God and work ethic. As it slips away, so does our iron foundation. You see, it's not the material things that we give our family that makes it worthy of being called a dream, but the insurmountable happiness and values in which we instill in them. That is what the 'American Dream' is all about, and that is the thing in which we lose sight of most of all in our attempt to fulfill it.

Willy Loman is definitely the obvious victim of this fractured dream. He is a very admirable character from the outside, hard working for the good of his family. Even upon the age of retirement, he refuses to admit that perhaps he's getting a little too old to submit to the same physical demands of his job of 34 years. He's a modest man, even though he occasionally builds himself up with words to ensure his family's faith in him.

Occasionally he breaks down to his wife and admits failure, not in an attempt to get sympathy, but to confess to both her and the universe that he's not quite as capable as he'd like to be.

Willy does his best to hide his weakness from his sons, whom he tries his best to be an inspiration and role model for. Biff is the obvious favorite, even despite all of the years of perpetual disappointment in which he brought his father. However, Willy still sees a light in him, despite everything. He sees Biff's potential, and cannot help but push him from the moment he comes home to visit. Willy sees no problem with this sort of tough love, even if it may not be the exact sort of leadership in which Biff needs to get off his lazy ass.

Willy is a provider, and while he certainly doesn't feel like he has all the answers, until the moment of his death, his concern is for his family and their well being. Though his affair approximately sixteen years prior did not seem like an action that a man who loves his family would necessarily take, I don't believe that it was Willy's intention to do anything which would have detrimental effects. It's hard to explain, especially coming from a girl, but sometimes men do things out of simple urge or reaction. While these actions are not always the most honorable or respectable, they are not fully thought through. I find that constant consciousness of consequence is not a trait in which most men have. Due to this factor, I cannot hold Willy fully accountable for his actions, and Biff's subsequent mental breakdown.

It's difficult for me to not rip Biff apart, but I need to remember that just because you try your best to instill good qualities in your child doesn't mean that they're going to understand the value of any of it. I'm not blaming him for his father's death by any stretch of the imagination, but he definitely seems to have the least of savory qualities of all the characters involved in the play. He's spent a decade and a half using his father's actions as an excuse to not be responsible. I knew a young man exactly like this, and he used the same exact excuse as Biff for why he was "a screw up". The only difference was that his father had been cheating with the same woman for almost a decade. Regardless though, it's an awfully poor excuse to never even attempt to pretend to be a real man. At least Happy, though he's relatively useless, has a job, dreams and aspirations. Biff seems to have none of these qualities, and refuses to grow up.

Linda Loman, the devoted wife and mother is the last topic that I wish to touch on. Her vocabulary seemed to be over inflated, which could just be Arthur Miller's general style of writing, but the fact that her use of words stuck out to me in the text was intriguing. I don't care if it's supposed to be the 1950s, housewives rarely used words such as "crestfallen", "imbue" and "remiss". Perhaps this was Arthur's way of illuminating her character a bit, painting her as smarter than your average housewife. I admire her strength, and I believe chances are good that in the fictional realm, Linda probably knew about whatever affairs Willy took part in over the years. Strong women tend to know these things, even the seemingly quiet and demure ones. The only time in which she seems truly lost is during the requiem at the end, where she tells Willy that she doesn't understand why he gave it all up.

To Willy, killing himself was not a way out. It was just another means of taking care of his family. This was his flaw until death, missing the big picture of his own dream. He wanted so much to give them everything, when he never realized that he had it all within himself. The American dream isn't just about giving as much as you can to your loved ones, but also about enjoying the fruits of your labor with them. Willy never allowed himself to settle. He persevered until his death, and he certainly did not die in vain.

I remain that the play was not about Willy Loman. It was in fact about the idealistic 'dream' that caused the series of events which played out. It was that same idealism that caused Biff to have his mental breakdown, with the image of his perfect family in this perfect world with his perfect role model becoming damaged beyond repair. It was the dream which caused the rifts between Willy and Biff, as neither could see the whole principle of life eye to eye. It was the dream that caused Willy to end his own life in the pursuit of happiness for his family. We hold this dream so precious, in a perfect little frame upon our shelves. We gaze at it every day and compare our current situations to it as a standard. It's so hard to step back and realize that reality will never look exactly like that. Reality is much more contorted and misconstrued, the colors all wrong. When you go through life comparing everything to something which does not exist, you're bound to end up desperate and at the end of your rope. How could you possibly compare to such a marvelous fantasy? Though such is life, and this is the American Dream; a fantasy in which we fool ourselves into dreaming. In the end, isn't what we have much more grand anyway?