

## Tragedy of the Common Man

The play, *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller is rather depressing to read. Watching the unavoidable demise of a man, mentally and physically, as his family struggles hopelessly by his side is not a “first date” kind of thing. All this said, I still love this play. Miller creates, in this story of Willy Loman, a gripping example of how the “American Dream” can cause great ruin along with inspiration. His play discusses what it means to be a human being, with faults and strengths, emotions and aspirations, in a world that only few can rise to the top. He also discusses family dynamics and how influential the father-son relationship is, as well as the role of the mother. All in all, *Death of a Salesman* is quite the read.

As Miller introduces the characters to us, I almost immediately disliked Willy. And when the play is finished, I still disliked him. I empathize with the pressure he felt to be successful and rich but I want to criticize him for not realizing money is not the only determining factor of wealth. Willy’s preoccupation with financial success, which he says is won by a good personality and being well liked, pisses me off. I want to shake him and tell him there is more to life than that. Willy, clearly, is blinded by his desire to be like his brother Ben that he fails to appreciate the life he has with his wife and kids. Instead, he pushes his children to put faith in their masculine traits and likable personalities to be successful. He doesn’t teach his kids about hard work and the value in being honest. Willy creates in his mind a dream world ( an altered reality)where he is a successful salesman, his kids are top notch and the best, and his life is the best there is, when in reality none of those things are true. Also, the occupation of Willy as a salesman is ironic and a symbol in itself. Willy is constantly having to not only sell his product but also sell himself to gain success. He has to be well liked and admired, but as his life nears end Willy is slowly faced with the reality that he isn’t the salesman (or man for that matter) he imagines himself to be. He is financially struggling though too proud to admit it and his two children lack any sense of a moral compass; Biff impulsively steals from jobs and stores and Happy is a man-whore.

Biff is just as disillusioned as his father, but in a different sense. Willy is caught up in trying to attain the idealized “American Dream” whereas Biff is struggling to grasp onto life since all of his understanding of it was destroyed when he caught his father having an affair. His impulsive stealing, to me, is due to him not being taught the difference between right and wrong by Willy, but instead he was told that its ok to steal as long as it helps you in the long run. Biff rejects the “American Dream” and instead wants to go out west to a place uncorrupted with financial success. I like Biff a whole lot more than I like Willy, though his character is greatly flawed. I relate to Biff in the sense that he is disappointed with his father, yet at the same time cares for him deeply. Biff, wounded as a child, has been unable to heal himself from the pain of realizing his father is not the man he had disillusioned himself to be.

Happy, in my opinion, and his womanizing ways are a result of Willy raising him to believe that success can be measured in a man’s luck with the ladies. Also, he has very little respect for his job and is willing to take bribes and sleep with the bosses girlfriends. He mingles with prostitutes and fast women in hopes to fill the void which I imagine is there due to him being second to his brother in his father’s eyes. Happy struggles to get Willy’s attention, also

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throwing out random things to gain his affection, such as when he tells Willy he has lost some weight. Happy, also, is willing to lie to himself like Willy does into believing he is living a successful life.

One of the biggest things that kills me in this play, is the non-stop lying each character in the Loman family is willing to do in order to make believe everything is alright. And every time one of them, mainly Biff, comes close to exclaiming the truth they are immediately hushed up or scorned or ignored. The fault is not all Willy's for the families disillusionment and failure, all of them are instigators. My favorite parts of the play took place in the middle and in the end. The first one is when Linda tells Biff and Happy that they need to respect their father and find compassion for him and for what he is going through. Her line; "I don't say he is a great man... But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid"(Act 1) is probably the best line in the play in my opinion. Linda is scolding her boys for dismissing Willy's mental breakdown. What she means is that a man's success in the world should not determine the care he receives nor should it determine his worth as a person. In her eyes Willy is a human being and deserves as much attention and consideration as the next man. I love this quotes so much because in its few lines Linda breaks down all characteristics (such as wealth, popularity, beauty) that people judge one another by and says that is is the mere fact this man is alive that entitles him to equal treatment and equal respect.

In my mind, Linda is the glue that holds this family together. She is Willy's rock and the boys buffer to their father. She puts her family before herself and her love for them above acknowledging how much truly her family is crumbling. She also delivers my second favorite line at the end of the play at Willy's grave side; "we're free". I love the irony in that line. That with Willy's insurance money they are finally out of debt and own their home. A home in which a family is broken. I love the question this play brings to my mind, is it Willy's fault (due to his obsession with success and character flaws) that his sons are lousy in the business world and that his wife can't afford new stockings? Or is fault of the pressure of the "American Dream" which Willy was hopelessly brought into and drowned in? I believe Biff is right when he say's Willy had "all the wrong dreams" but I can't place fault solely on Willy or on the influential american ideas of success. I believe it is a combination of the two. Willy is just a regular guy trying to make it in a world where only few rise and become legends; and that is the tragedy of the common man.