

Themes in a death of a salesman by arthur miller

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



One dreams, through the use of imagination, of what will become of them as life progresses. In some cases that person lives passionately with desires of self fulfillment, eventually reaching their goals in an ever so content way. At other times one remains lost, underappreciated, and ultimately carries with them a perilous, loathing attitude. Willy Loman drives his life to the point of no return where images of his past become his contorted reality. Amanda Wingfield slips on the white dress of her adolescence and is suddenly thrown back in time, living as if she were the young girl she once was at Blue Mountain.

Death of the Salesman by Arthur Miller was published in 1949, only four years preceding Tennessee Williams play of The Glass Menagerie. Interestingly enough, both plays begin with a glimpse of tragedy and end with self inflicted remorse. Although Death of the Salesman and The Glass Menagerie appear coincidentally similar at first glance. Upon a closer examination, it becomes evident that the similarities stretch beyond just the time of publication, but into analogous themes as well.

In particular, both plays battle with the distinction between illusion and reality, the incapability of living in the present, and the desire for escape.

One uses their thoughts in times of vulnerability to manoeuvre through situations. This may result in even the reversion to the influence of narcotics to numb oneself from what is truly taking place. In both plays it is perceived that the characters have trouble with distinguishing what is a figment of their imagination and what is reality. Amanda and Willy both deny their childrens underachievement and faults and believe that the fate of their

children lies within their hands. Thus, they imagine their children as being something they are not, in an attempt to hide their children's failures. Such illusions allow Amanda and Willy to feel successful in forming Laura and Biff's lives. Amanda denies Laura as a cripple and corrects anyone who believes her to be so, throughout the play. Willy influenced Biff's belief that he had been a salesman for Bill Oliver. Biff begins to question this after the meeting that never occurred. How the hell did I ever get the idea that I was a salesman there? I even believed myself that I was a salesman for him! And then he gave me one look and- I realised what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been! I was a shipping clerk (Miller 104). In an effort to guide their children's lives, both Amanda and Willy believe they know what is best for their children.

Amanda imagines that Laura couldn't be satisfied with just sitting at home (Williams, 85). Yet Laura wanted to stay at home, evident as she creates excuses for doing so and would rather play with the glass menagerie. Willy, like Amanda imagines he is doing the right thing as well. When Biff was in high school, Willy felt Biff need not study even though Bernard advised them that he heard Mr. Birnbaum say- (Miller 33). Willy thought to himself that with scholarships to three universities they're going to flunk him? don't be a pest Bernard (Miller 33)! Willy's thought on this situation was delusional and unrealistic.

The characters are further illusive in what their position is in society as they climb the corporate ladder and follow the American dream. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom believes that Jim won't fall short of the White House. In reality, a factory worker such as Jim, becoming the next Roosevelt is

preposterous. Biff's younger brother Happy presumed he was making something of himself and following the American dream of success and money. Happy believed himself to be an assistant buyer. Yet Biff makes his illusions fade and reality set in. You big blow, are you the assistant buyer? You're one of the two assistants to the assistant buyer, aren't you (Miller 131)? Furthermore through the use of illusion, the characters see themselves larger than reality.

Amanda always brags of her seventeen gentlemen callers (Williams 32) yet she was left by her husband. Willy believes himself to be popular and a well-known salesman to the extent that when he arrives [he] never [has] to wait in line to see a buyer. Willy Loman is here! That's all they have to know and [he goes] right through (Miller 33). Yet his sales do not justify this claim. I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commissions, Willy argued. Now, Willy, you never averaged- (Miller 82). The characters could not determine what was an illusion, and which, a reality. Often, other characters attempted to give hints of reality to the delusional others. These cues were constantly denied. Amanda was sure the gentleman caller Tom had invited for dinner was going to fall in love, marry and save Laura all within a matter of a dinner. Tom tries to explain to his mother that Jim is not aware of Laura's existence and thus the chances of Jim saving his sister were slim.

Yet, Amanda brushes off Tom's leeway into reality and continues to believe Jim is the one without ever having met him. As a result, Jim ends up engaged to a girl named Betty. Willy has the same attitude as Amanda, unaware of any hints coming in his direction. Near the end of the play, Willy insists [his]

funeral will be massive! Theyll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire! Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey- [he is] known. Yet Ben continuously warns Willy that he [has] got to be sure [hes] not making a fool of [himself] (Miller 127). Willy pays no attention to this frame of reality. In the end, no one shows up to Willys funeral, portrayed as Linda asks, why didnt anyone come? as it was simply Charley, Bernard, Biff, Happy and Linda (Miller 137) and Willy looks like a fool. Both plays depict the characters using illusions to better their realities.

In both plays, the characters become dependant and obsessed with memories of the past. As a result, both Miller and Williams characters have the incapability of living in the present time. The characters resort to the past to compensate for what they presently lack. Amanda always reminds Tom and Laura of the one Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain (Williams 32). Amanda constantly makes reference to her one special day as it is seen through many of her following actions. When Jim is due to arrive for dinner, Amanda wears the same white dress she wore as a young girl. She then entertains Jim as she would have entertained one of her gentlemen callers years ago. Amanda is kind, sweet and her face glows, proving reliving her past allows for her happiness. Willy acts in the same way as Amanda.

He relives the past by replaying it in his mind. Willy especially recognizes times where the relationship between him and his sons were at its peak. Willy enjoyed the time he spent with his sons the day they were washing his car. I been wondering why you polish the car so careful. Ha! Dont leave the hubcaps, boys. Happy, use newspaper on the windows, its the easiest thing. Thats it, thats it, good work (Miller 28). Willy makes reference to this past

memory as it is a time that he is teaching his sons, as a true American father would, while also spending quality time. In the present, Willy's sons no longer hold the same respect and eagerness to be like him, as they once had had for their father. Willy also remembers the time that Biff [wore] a sweater with a block S, [and carried] a football (Miller 28) as it was a time where Willy's success as a father showed, raising his eldest son as a star football player. This memory compensates for Biff's present failure of unemployment. Willy's memory is much like that of Jim's. Jim spends time with Tom as he is the only one that can justify what used to be Jim.

Through Tom, Jim is able to relive his triumphant past as a star football player and a god to the other high school students. The characters also place the onus of the present, on past events. What occurred in the past is often used as an excuse for the poor outcome of the present time. The photograph of Mr. Wingfield dominates the living room space. It is a constant reminder of his abandonment sixteen years ago and of Amanda's mistake much like Linda's stockings are a constant reminder to Willy of his mistake. Willy becomes angry at the sight of Linda's stockings as [he] won't have [her] mending stockings in this house! Now throw them out (Miller 39) he would demand. Mr. Wingfield's abandonment and Linda's stockings are reasons that add to Amanda and Willy's life difficulties. Willy also blames Biff's unemployment and loss of identity on if [Biff] hadn't flunked math (Miller 110) as he brings it up in conversation with Biff. Willy also believes that if he had gone to Alaska, he would have been doing much better than he was. In those days I had a yearning to go to Alaska (Miller 80).

In Willys mind, he should have lived a life like his brother Ben, who walked into a jungle, and comes out, the age of twenty-one, and hes rich (Miller 41)! Since Willy did not go to Alaska, he blames his misfortune and poverty on things that he should have done. Willy also blames small things that often represent the big picture of his life. Such minor details include, I told you we shouldve bought a well-advertised machine. Charley bought a general electric and its twenty years old and its still good(Miller 73).

In both plays the past has an even larger impact as past actions come back to haunt the characters. The pasts influence is so strong that it affects the characters abilities to function in their present time. Willy often hears the mocking voice of a woman[s] [laugh] offstage (Miller 118). He then replays Biff knocking on the hotel room door, his entrance and what he witnessed. At this point Willy puts blames himself for ruining everything. This makes Willy lose his sanity as he questions whether he is at fault for Biffs failure. Tom, much like Willy, becomes haunted by his past up on leaving the Wingfield house. Tom explains that he can not stop thinking about his sister, Laura. These thoughts stop Tom from being able to live as he is in constant repentance.

When living through pain, detriment, and agony there is no reason for one to remain. In both plays it is evident that the characters yearn to escape from their unbearable lives. They elude their realities through various routes. In The Glass Menagerie, Toms only immediate escape is the fire escape, where he goes to have time away from his psychotic mother. Yet Toms true escape is the movies where he visits every night. At the movies, Tom is able to identify with the heroes of the film. The film plot is Toms only source of

adventure from his boring home life. The characters also use the power of their minds to leave. Willy's immediate escape is that he talks to himself (Miller 21). Willy talks to himself to leave his life and create his own atmosphere in which he is more comfortable. Willy's favourite atmosphere is one that involves Ben. Willy often holds conversations with Ben in hopes of useful advice from his brother. Although Willy believes Ben to exist, no one else can actually see him.

Late one night, when Willy and Charley are playing cards, Willy says, 'I'm getting awfully tired, Ben.' As a stunned Charley asks, 'Did you just call me Ben?' (Miller 44). Willy was speaking to Ben as if Charley was not even there. Yet Charley, who can not see the fragment of Willy's imagination, questions if he has misheard. Laura's escape is just as easily accessible as Willy's imagination. Laura escapes into the lives of her glass menagerie through her mind, like Willy, in which she keeps on display in the living room.

Laura, like the beauty and fragility of the glass, must be protected from the harshness of reality. She sees herself as the unicorn glass figurine. She escapes by allowing it to symbolise what she stands for, different and freakish in comparison to the other horses. Biff's escape is further from the mind. For Biff, his route is out West where he is happier than ever. There they've got about fifteen new colts. There's nothing more inspiring or beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt (Miller 22). Biff depicts the West as something inspiring that influences him as a person. Out west is where Biff is comfortable and relaxed, as all the characters are in their places of escape.

Williams and Miller both wrote plays that run parallel to one another. Death of the Salesman and The Glass Menagerie appear coincidentally similar at first glance, upon a closer examination, it becomes evident that the plays have analogous themes. In particular, both plays battle with the distinction between illusion and reality, the incapability of living in the present, and the desire for escape. Willy and Amanda both battle for control over not only their own lives, but the outcome of the lives of their children. Tom and Biff wander around aimlessly, looking for who they are and what they stand for. Laura and Happy see themselves as something that others do not. In both plays, the characters are able to control what is the most significant of all their powers and that is their imaginations.

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