

A comparison of
materialism,
communication, and
connection in death
of a travelin...



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Joint critiques of modern materialism and the resulting void in the life of the everyday man, Willa Cather's *Neighbor Rosicky* and Eudora Welty's *Death of a Traveling Salesman* illuminate the modernist dilemma of isolation through the characters of Rosicky and R. J. Bowman, exploring themes such as communication, familial bond, simplicity in life. While both stories ultimately agree that materialism is a direct source of disconnect, leading to isolation and alienation, only *Death of a Traveling Salesman* negotiates the consequences of materialism and the absence of social, particularly familial, bond as a result of inaction and the inability to communicate. *Neighbor Rosicky*, in contrast, explores the antithesis: a life lived without regard to material goods, in which happiness is achieved through family life despite poverty. It embodies themes of action and communication as tools to happiness. Harsh and unforgiving descriptions of city life effectively position the city as a metaphor for materialism, or the chief source of emptiness in modern life. Cather and Welty's stories have a nearly parabol-like quality to them, reading almost as guides on how to live a happy, fulfilled life.

The opening line of *Death of a Traveling Salesman* reveals Bowman to be essentially homeless: " R. J. Bowman, who for fourteen years had traveled for a shoe company though Mississippi, drove his Ford along a rutten dirt path," (Welty, 1480.) For fourteen years, he lived out of hotels that were " stuffy in summer and drafty in winter," (Welty, 1480) accompanied only by an array of nameless, meaningless women that now only remind him of " the worn loneliness that the furniture of that room," (Welty, 1480.) The image of a worn, lonely room is a succinct metaphor for the quality of Bowman's life and the isolation he feels in it, and this image is later revisited by Bowman as he

observes the woman “ waiting silently by the cold hearth, of the man’s stubborn journey... how they finally brought out their food and drink and filled the room proudly with all they had to show,” (Welty, 1487.) The jealousy that Bowman feels is overt. The room embodies the life these people have created, connection they have forged together “ that he could not see,” initially (Welty, 1485.) That the women can say with quiet pride “ He makes it,” (Welty, 1487) referring to drink is reminiscent of the quiet pride of Rosicky and his family.

That Bowman feels “ hopefully secure,” (Welty, 1482) when he enters the couple’s house speaks to the natural human desire for connection. However, we see that Bowman is unable to communicate meaningfully despite this years as a salesman, a career notorious for small-talk. He is only able to muster, “ I have a line of women’s low-priced shoes,” (Welty, 1483) and later “ Do you two live here alone?” (Welty, 1483) which he himself admits that he doesn’t care to know. He is unable to explain his situation to Sonny. This sense of alienation from the very people who are helping him is amplified when Bowman realizes that his heart “ should be full...should be holding love like other hearts,” (Welty, 1484.) The shame that he feels for having nearly communicated this to the woman brings the theme of disconnection back to the forefront; he knows what he wants to do, what he should have done all along, but this inability to communicate is revealed to be lifelong, a flaw that always “ just escaped him,” (Welty, 1484.)

Much of Rosicky’s success, in contrast, stems from not only his ability to communicate effectively, but the manner in which he uses communication to help the people he loves. When his sons protest that they don’t want to give <https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-materialism-communication-and-connection-in-death-of-a-traveling-salesman-and-neighbor-rosicky/>

up the car to Rudolph and Polly, Rosicky clearly articulates his rational, “ I don’t want no trouble to start in Rudolph’s family... An American girl don’t git used to our ways all at once,” (Cather, 971.) Rosicky demonstrates logic and empathy for Polly in his justification to the boys, and his kindness is later rewarded when Polly is able to save him after he falls ill. The bond between the two is strengthened, and in a triumphant moment, city-girl-cum-country-wife Polly says, “ Lean on me, Father!” (Welty, 980) after Rosicky had specifically noted that she never referred to him as such.

He later recounts the story of his troubles in London, which he recalls as “ the only part of his youth he didn’t like to remember,” (Cather, 969) in order to warn his sons of the inherent hardships of city living. Nothing in life matters more to Rosicky than that his sons understand the value of simple living, for “ to be a landless man was to be... a slave... to have nothing, to be nothing,” (Cather, 973.) Rosicky rejects the city life and the utter emptiness of “ stone and asphalt with nothing going on,” (Cather, 970.) This societal critique is reinforced by his declaration to the boys that that “ don’t know what hard times is,” (Cather 974.) It is implied that the boys associate hard times with financial distress, but Rosicky denies that hard times can be had when one has a strong family. His happiness and purity of character is rooted in the connections that he holds, particularly with his wife, Mary, because he knows “ they could bear what they had to bear... they would always pull through somehow,” (Cather, 978.)

The opening line of Neighbor Rosicky is similarly revealing of protagonistic character like that of Death of a Traveling Salesman. When told of his illness, “ Rosicky protested,” (Cather, 962,) the narrator notes, immediately <https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-materialism-communication-and-connection-in-death-of-a-traveling-salesman-and-neighbor-rosicky/>

establishing Rosicky's will to live. While he does not go out of his way to endanger himself, Rosicky refuses to be victimized by his illness, choosing rather to continue to live his life at an easy place, or to "Chust to take it easy like," (Cather, 968.) Contrasted with Rosicky, Bowman resents his illness, feeling "angry and helpless" at being feverish, a metaphor for a materialistic society's fixation on productivity and the helplessness an individual feels when they are unable to effectively produce. Bowman, who has dedicated the last fourteen years of his life to work over family, "distrust[s] illness," (Welty, 1480) because it is a direct threat to his productivity. He even deludedly attempts to remove its power by giving "the nurse a really expensive bracelet," (Welty, 1480.) This fear of inproductivity extends to "guilty in...stillness and silence," (Welty 1485,) tying Bowman's sickness to capitalistic guilt and also the inability to communicate.

Although Rosicky is not pleased with his declining health, he views it as an inevitable part of life. During "the first snow of the season," a metaphor for the natural progression into old age, Rosicky passes by his future graveyard, and remarks that it's "a nice graveyard... sort of homelike... not mournful... it was so near home," (Cather 967.) He does not wish to die, but Rosicky feels prepared for death, and the graveyard symbolizes a life well lived. Bowman, despite his illness, does not contemplate his own mortality until the car crash. In this instance, "all his anger drifted away" (Welty, 1481) and he is left passively asking himself "Where am I? Why didn't I do something?" (Welty, 1481.) Although the questions are meant in reference to his own stubborn refusal to "admit he was simply lost and turn around," both the questions and the refusal to ask for help are understood to serve as

metaphors for his inaction throughout life, which he can only clearly see when taunted by death.

Throughout *Death of a Traveling Salesman*, Bowman's mysterious illness also creates an extended metaphor of inaction; he repeatedly refers back to this illness as an unfair, frustrating excuse for why he is unable to help himself. Rosicky's life is full of action: he leaves Czechoslovakia for England, then for New York, and then the Omaha, constantly searching for a way to better his life and "try his fortune in another part of the world," (Cather, 971.) Although Rosicky was admittedly "city-bred" (Cather, 968) he realized the emptiness of this life style and the "temporary illusion of freedom" they provided (Cather, 970) and reverted back to a life of simplicity.

After realizing that his life of inaction and adherence to materialism has left him with no meaningful connections, Bowman flees the couple's house in attempt to "get back to where he had been before," (Welty, 1488.) He wishes to return to the ignorance of the material society, one which claims to reward hard work over connection. The lamp which the woman had been cleaning when he arrived is symbolic of her life and the effort to maintain it. The money that Bowman leaves below the lamp is his shallow attempt to connect one last time with the couple in the only way he knows how: financially. When his illness returns and his heart gives out, Bowman attempts to cover "his heart... to keep anyone from hearing the noise it made," (Welty, 1488.) Even in his last moments, he rejects communication. However, as a result of his avoidance of communication, no one is around to witness his death, thus rendering the action pointless. He dies alone, and there is no one left behind. The image of Rosicky's beautiful grave returns <https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-materialism-communication-and-connection-in-death-of-a-traveling-salesman-and-neighbor-rosicky/>

after his death, and Dr. Ed contrasts it with “ city cemeteries...cities of the forgotten,” (Cather, 982.) It is clear that due to his inability to communicate and his life dedicated to materialism, Bowman will reside in this city of the forgotten in his death.