

# The yellow wallpaper or death of a salesman, your choice essay examples

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Explore the use of consumerism and the race with the junkyard in Willy's destruction in *Death of a Salesman*. How do various things – the Studebaker, the refrigerator – become symbols, and what do they symbolize?

In the first flashback into the past, once Willy has returned from a selling trip and spoken to Biff and Happy, he and Linda discuss their finances. It turns out that the refrigerator needs a repair – the fan belt has broken. The washing machine and the vacuum cleaner also need repairs or perhaps they have been bought on credit: either way the point is clear – Willy whole life has been a race with the junkyard. This is part of Miller's critique of consumer society and it was certainly true that in the past, some machines, especially automobiles, were constructed with built-in obsolescence. If they had been built to last forever, then the automobile manufacturers would never sell another car. Capitalism works on consumer demand. Ironically, Linda says of the refrigerator manufacturer, " They got the biggest ads of any of them!" (27) – which Miller uses to re-enforce his point because capitalism depends on advertising.

Miller uses this exchange in other ways too. It is clear that even in what Willy now likes to present as his hey-day, he struggled financially. This is not helped by his tendency to exaggerate the number of sales he has made. At first he tells Linda in the flashback, " I did five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston" (27). But this is not true: Willy has a tendency to be rather delusional. The automobile has just had a new carburettor fitted and he owes money for that. His reaction – " That goddamn Chevrolet, they ought to prohibit the manufacture of that car!" (28) – throws into sharp perspective his earlier nostalgia about the Chevy –

the feel of having the windshield own and the memories of Biff and Happy simonizing it so carefully. Here, the object functions as an excuse for a general nostalgia about the past – one that can never be recaptured because Biff and Happy are grown up and, more pertinently, Biff has discovered Willy with another woman in the hotel room in Boston which is the unspoken reason for his failure in life. Willy's reaction to the tape recorder that Howard shows him, just before he fires Willy, shows Willy's self-delusional yet aspirational nature again. He says to Howard, " I think I'll get one myself" (61), which is ironic since we know that he relies on handouts from Charlie which he pretends to Linda are his wages. Therefore, material objects and the consumer lifestyle are used by Miller to show the financial difficulties Willy has had and the emptiness of the dreams that capitalism sells us. Miller (Timebends 184) comments on this aspect of the play in his autobiography: On the play's opening night a woman who shall not be named was outraged, calling it " a time-bomb under American capitalism"; I hoped it was, or at least under the bullshit of capitalism, this pseudo life that thought to touch the clouds by standing on top of a refrigerator, waving a paid-up mortgage at the moon, victorious at last.

Willy believes what Miller calls " the bullshit of capitalism", which is ironic: comments such as Biff's – " there's more of him in that front stoop than in any of the sales he ever made" (110) – suggest that Willy was in the wrong job, pursuing business success but denying what he was good at and enjoyed – working with his hands. According to Biff, he had the " wrong dreams (110) – and those dreams were created by the " bullshit of capitalism". In contrast to all the consumer products that Willy has struggled

to pay for, Biff (110) speaks lovingly in the Requiem of the objects that Willy actually made – the stoop, the cellar, the new porch, the extra bathroom, the garage – all things he made with his hands rather than bought with money. The material consumer products also have a symbolic function. Their obsolescence symbolizes Willy. Once they are no good, they are thrown away, just as Howard throws Willy away in Act Two. Willy is no more than an object to his employer and now that he is no longer useful, he is redundant. His firing is vital to the rhythm of the play: Willy's mind is already disintegrating, but Howard's letting him go is the catalyst that leads to the flashback to Boston with Biff (where it all went wrong) and then proceeds quickly to his suicide.

It should be mentioned that we could construct another list of objects in the play – the cement and the lumber that Biff and Happy steal from the building site, the football Biff brings home from school, the carton of basketballs and Bill Oliver's pen. Biff's attitude to the products of society is to steal what he cannot afford. Towards the end of the play he reveals that he was not in touch for three months because he was in jail – convicted of stealing a suit. Miller's attitude to the “bullshit of capitalism” is shown through his use of consumer products and his characters' attitudes to them.

## **Work Cited**

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. 1948. London: Penguin. Print.

Miller, Arthur. *A Life: Timebends*. 1987. London: Methuen. Print.