

The death of dave singleman: a survey of difference

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Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* actually makes reference to the deaths of two salesmen: protagonist Willy Loman and an admired yet never-seen character named Dave Singleman. It can be argued that the most obvious difference in the deaths of Dave Singleman and Willy Loman can be found in the numbers of people that attended their respective funerals. While Singleman's funeral was attended by people from all over New England, Willy's was only attended by a small number of friends and family, a fact which shocks his wife, Linda ("where are all the people he knew?"). By crafting Linda's words this way, Miller not only creates pathos and catharsis, but generates dramatic irony as the audience see that Linda has unwittingly highlighted one of Willy's larger failures.

As a salesman, Singleman had many contacts and was "well-liked" in the business – something Willy saw as vital to the success of a salesman, due to the people-oriented nature of business in pre-1940s America. It could be seen as strange then that Linda would be shocked at the small number of attendees at Willy's funeral, as she already knew he wasn't a successful salesman. This ties in with the play's status as a domestic tragedy, as Willy's exaggerations of his achievements and character have led to his family holding a false, distorted perception of him. Moreover, Miller successfully uses this line to reinforce Willy as the play's tragic hero; he wanted his family to be proud of him, but due to his hamartia of exaggeration, their view of him deteriorated after his death. Singleman's funeral was extremely different to this, as the number of people attending only served to confirm his success as a salesman, juxtaposing and highlighting Willy's own failure.

It can also be argued that the deaths of Singleman and Willy differ in nature. While Willy commits suicide, it is implied that Singleman died of old age, being eighty-four. Likewise, their deaths are contrasted by the level of wealth held by the two men, as highlighted by Willy when he says Singleman died “in his green velvet slippers”. This imagery is strongly linked to the “green” colour of dollars and presents an affluent picture, further serving to highlight Willy’s desire for material wealth and his admiration for those who have it. In characterising Willy this way, Miller ties Willy to the materialistic nature of the mid-twentieth century, which may be the only part of Willy’s life in which he is ‘up to date’. Dramatic irony can be found in Willy’s description of the “green velvet” slippers. We are told that he only met Singleman once, so it is unlikely that he knew the intimate details of the man’s death enough to know what he was wearing. Therefore, the audience can clearly see Willy’s idolisation of Singleman and can infer that Willy is projecting his own dreams and wishes onto the image of a man he deems to have been truly successful. By building up this ideal of opulence, Miller builds the foundations for the great amount of pathos at the end of the play, when the audience sees that, unlike Singleman, Willy died a poor man who did not achieve his dream.

Despite all this, it is plausible that the deaths of the two men were similar in that they both died without having wholly achieved the American Dream. As most of the play is viewed through Willy’s eyes, Miller places more emphasis on the materialistic side of the Dream than the familial aspects. While Willy’s blind admiration makes it seem that Singleman achieved everything, Willy’s

description and even Singleman's own name suggest that he died a bachelor, meaning he did not achieve the familial aspect of the American Dream. This creates further contrast between the two characters as Willy did indeed achieve this, but neglected to acknowledge the achievement of his family in his endless search for materialistic success, strongly alligning Death with the genre of domestic tragedy. Willy's blindness to the importance of family creates a great amount of dramatic irony throughout that play, as the audience can see that he would probably be happier if he focussed on that aspect of his life, perhaps preventing the tragedy of his early death.

By implementing the juxtaposition of two characters in the same field of work in this way, Miller pushes the argument that you can never hope to fully achieve the American Dream, regardless of your career or life choices. It seems that the play as a whole is a warning of blind faith in the Dream, and the failure of both Willy and Singleman to achieve it by their deaths shows that it is a fallacy with a inevitably dark ending.