

# Alienation in death of a salesman by arthur miller



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For a post World War II America, the only constant, ironically enough, was change. Families were torn apart by the death and deprivation of the war, and some others were embarking on a new life, wishing to put the past firmly behind them.

In either case, there was an intense desire to break from the society that ruled their lives before the war, took the life of some during the war, and changed life for all that survived the war. Thus, alienation can fairly be seen as the rule, rather than the exception, in late 1940s American life. An encapsulation of that alienation is ideally expressed in “Death of a Salesman”, penned by legendary playwright Arthur Miller and introduced in 1949.

In this research, the presence of alienation in Miller’s pivotal work will be analyzed, not only from the viewpoint of the main characters of the play, but also as a common thread that weaves its way through the play itself.

#### Alienation as Seen in the Main Characters

From the beginning of Miller’s play, alienation can in fact be found in each character as their mindset is revealed. For the main character, Willy Loman, alienation began from an early age. Having grown up without having known his father, he is deprived of both a sense of heritage and a financial legacy.

As a result, Willy grows up in a world of his own making, where he acknowledges the facts of life that he chooses to acknowledge and either modifying reality to suit his emotional needs or ignoring it altogether when it gets to be too intense.

Willy Loman's alienation extends to his personal relationships as well. Aside from his relationships with his wife and children, Loman laments that his next door neighbor, Charley is his only friend. However, it would be more precise to say that Charley is Willy's only living friend, as Willy uses his penchant for daydreaming to continue a relationship with his dead brother Ben, further straining his faltering grasp on reality.

Linda Loman, Willy's wife, in some ways must purposely alienate herself from the real world as a means of being able to deal with it on her own terms. In Linda's mind, it would seem that she equates financial security and the acquisition of impressive material possessions with a secure life.

Because neither of these criteria is fully realized for the Loman family, Linda must disconnect herself from what she knows to be the truth so that she can feel better about her life.

Biff and Happy, the two sons of Willy and Linda, carry on the family tradition of alienation with quite well. Biff was once the kind of person that one would say was most likely to succeed, as he was a talented athlete in high school and had many female admirers.

All of this was taken away, however, once Biff failed to graduate from high school because of his inability to pass a mathematics course that he needed in order to complete his high school education.

At that point, Biff became alienated from his peers who went on to college in some cases or successful careers in others and instead ventured into an artificial world, where he becomes a kleptomaniac as a means of soothing his damaged ego.

This leads to chronic unemployment on his part which only increases his alienation from the “ normal” world. The extent of his detachment can be fully appreciated when this quote from Biff is considered:

“ I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been” (Miller, Act II).

Happy Loman is Biff’s younger brother who never seems able to emerge from his older brother’s shadow, even when Biff falters. His self perception of inadequacy compels him to become disconnected from others, alienating him without limit, even when the facts indicate that he is more than adequate in many ways.

#### Willy Loman’s Life of Alienation

The individual statements and actions of Willy Loman, when woven together, are indicative of his lifelong pattern of seeking to disconnect himself from the reality in which he is forced to live. As Willy’s mind flashes from past to present and back again smoothly throughout the play, it becomes evident that many of these flashbacks are strictly idealized products of his imagination rather than those types of recollections that are based in fact and reality.

As an example, Willy reflects on the days when his children, and indeed Willy himself, were much younger as a time when his children were happy and carefree and he was as well. However, the reality is that Willy was often too preoccupied with the pursuit of excellence in his career and his seeming obsession with being well liked by co-workers and potential customers than in working on building a better relationship with his children.

Fast forwarding to a 63 year old Willy and his fully grown children, we see a father who cannot understand where he did or failed to do whatever it was that deprived him of the adulation and fortune that he always thought he would gain because he always tried to be likeable.