

# Death of a salesman: the death of the american dream

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The American Dream has often been linked with the long-lasting belief and philosophy of “ Manifest Destiny”, which, while originally the process of civilizing the untamed West U. S. at the time, translated to an overarching ideal of seizing the opportunity for a better life than one currently held.

Death of a Salesman is a tragedy that illustrates the “ death” of the American Dream, which can be defined as one’s development into the self-made man or woman, successful in fiscal, familial, and personal matters. By using various literary devices such as anachronism, flashbacks, and dramatic irony, Arthur Miller exhibits Willy Loman’s unravelling dream, which, at the end, displays how the dream itself had already crumbled long before the events of the present play ever occurred, giving a dismal outlook on the consequences of aiming for this vision.

Author Miller grew up in New York. He was born on October 17, 1915. He began writing the play “ A Death of A Salesman” as a short story at the age of 17. Miller grew up in the lower edge of Harlem, he graduated out of Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn. After graduating he started working for over 2 years as a stock clerk in an automobile parts warehouse. Over time working as a stock clerk he saved enough money to attend the University of Michigan. Through the National Youth Administration, he was able to obtain financial aid to help him pay for school. He also worked as a nightly newspaper editor for the Michigan Daily newspaper. Through that job he got the niche of writing plays and ended up achieving awards for his work he had done. Later on, in his life he was married to Marilyn Monroe. He had divorced his first wife for Monroe. They had two kids Jane and Robert Ellen. Shortly after Marilyn Monroe and Miller got married. He had first met the

actress at a Hollywood party in 1951. This marriage really put Miller's play writes in the spotlight. Monroe died after her and Miller divorced in 1964. After her death he moved to another wife and also wrote other works such as *A View From the Bridge*

Anachronism presents itself most obviously in two places: Willy's house, and in Willy himself. His house, placed in Brooklyn, New York, remains as the only suburban building in what is now becoming an urban landscape. Apartment buildings surround and tower over the little house, showcasing the anachronistic quality of how the house remains trapped in time, trapped in the past. This exemplifies a reflective quality in its owner as well, as Willy is continuously shown to reminisce on better and more promising times: the majority of his flashbacks display the Loman family back in the boys' high-school days, with Happy pushed aside, despite his best efforts - overshadowed by Biff's prowess and achievements, bolstered by both Willy and Linda's constant praise and projections of his promising future. The essential theme of the tragedy is the American Dream and its effect on those who try to achieve it - it particularly focuses on the effects of the single most important unit of society: the family. Some adjectives used to describe salespeople are deceptive, sneaky, talkative, and knowledgeable. Various techniques are implemented to ensure a sale is closed at the present, or a possibility opened up in the not-too-distant future. Most often, what separates a great salesman from other mediocre or incompetent colleagues is their influence over their clients and the knowledge they have of their wares. Moreover, the actions that great salespeople take to win over their

clients is what can garner them more business, more referrals, and hence, more sales. However, Willy has disregarded this notion for his entire time as a salesman, as his conversation with Charley in Act II shows. Charley explains to Willy, “ The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you’re a salesman, and you don’t know that.” To which Willy responds, “ I’ve always tried to think otherwise, I guess. I always felt that if a man was impressive, and well liked..” and the implication of personality alone being what defines a successful salesman is put forth. While this may be true to a degree, the overwhelming majority of the time, actions are what propel a person to the success they strive for. Having neglected this reality, Willy, in a delusional state, continuously cites his achievements and popularity throughout the play in an attempt to fool others and gain favor, deluding himself more-so than anyone else.

Willy consistently has flashbacks through the play, focused on the exaggeration of the Loman family’s successes – the old quote applies here: “ Don’t count your chickens before they’ve hatched.” Every one of the flashbacks contains this exaggeration or manipulation of success – no matter the situation, whether it be at home with the family, or with his mistress in Boston, Willy always takes the chance to bolster his own self-perceived accomplishments. While these flashbacks exhibit the anachronistic quality of Willy’s psyche, it shows his obsession with a dream, an unattainable dream, at least by his standards, that he still continually strives for in mind, yet not in action. The recollections often have Ben, who is Willy’s dead brother, a successful business-man who set up post in Alaska, and represents Willy’s

desire for instant riches and fame. A metaphor often alluded to is the “jungle” that Ben had to go through – the play states that he went into the jungle at eighteen, and came out at twenty-one, rich. That mindset appears to have captivated Willy, simply perceiving the end product as the means. He believes that personality and being well-liked is the key to success in the business world, as that is the end result that he and everyone else sees. Similarly, many people attribute success to being well-liked and simply having connections, when in fact, that was the result of the hard work put into reaching that peak of success. Charley alludes to this, questioning Willy, “ Why must everybody like you? Who liked J. P. Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he’d look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was very well liked”. In many senses, Willy’s nostalgia over what could have been and what passed him by are what lead to his eventual death and suicide, as even to the end he deludes himself with the thought of Ben, as Ben said [with promise] “ It’s dark there, but full of diamonds,” referring to the metaphorical jungle which a person would have to go through to achieve that American Dream (82). At the end, Willy continues to delude himself, not even facing the reality that Biff would rather be a simple worker than strive for what appears to be an unachievable dream, based on his own surroundings and his own attempts to reach it; consequently, in trying to avoid that reality and keep himself in this hallucinogenic state, he kills himself in his reliable Chevy, his own primary work tool. In summation, these flashbacks serve to metaphorically and literally drive Willy off the road to success, and only to remain there in the jungle without any diamonds to show for it.

Dramatic irony is by far the most utilized literary and dramatic device throughout the play. As the disjunct between what the character and reader know, its constant use ties back events that happen in the first and second acts, as well as tying together the futility of Willy's actions and his influence on his two sons, potentially dooming them to a similar lackluster life. One example of this irony comes from a disparaging remark that Willy says to Charley during their game of cards, as Willy talks about how he put up the ceiling in his house. "A man who can't handle tools is not a man." The further the play progresses, the more we see that Willy is truly unable to handle these "tools" he speaks of. The primary tool of a salesman is himself, his actions, and his influence over others, and being unable to handle these tools, he proves to many people, especially Biff, that he is the least likely candidate of manhood. With the typical view of a man, he is meant to be the head of the household: the supplier, the leader, the mentor. Linda's passing line to him near the start of Act I, "You're too accommodating, dear," runs more deeply than initially shown. One primary trait of a salesperson is that they cannot fold to their client - after all, they are the ones more knowledgeable about their product, and cannot simply accommodate whatever the client wishes; a compromise often must be made. A quote from the movie "Boiler Room" by Jim Young illustrates the attitude a successful salesperson must take: "Either you sell the client some stock or he sells you a reason he can't." Lacking this motivation or drive to fulfill this dream of his, Willy is consistently unable to supply for his family fiscally, as is shown at the start of the play with him being unable to pay off the expenses of the house. As a leader, Willy also fails, as his constant praise of Biff and disregard for

Happy leads them both down similarly unsuccessful paths: Happy, with his persistent attempts for his father's appreciation and recognition, ends up blinding himself to his father's flaws, leading to the end, where he plans to continue this flawed plan of Willy's; Biff, learning of his father's infidelity, ruins his drive to achieve anything great in his life, as he drops his pursuit in fixing his math grade or attending university, finding out that this mentorship that his father provided was a lie on many transcendental levels. Various occasions of this dramatic irony are present, all tying together the theme of a failed dream, and its long-lasting ramifications on those involved, whether it be Willy himself or his family, particularly the ones meant to pass on his legacy.

Slated as a tragedy, this play highlights many events and causes that led to this great American Dream being led astray – however, all these literary devices tie together the theme of lies and illusion. The anachronism of Willy and his house, as well as those of Biff and Happy with their idea of selling sporting goods show their deluded thinking that they are ahead of the curve, when in reality, they are much behind this curve. The flashbacks serve a similar purpose, with Willy's lies to himself not only affecting his mental, physical, and fiscal state, but also his family's, deluding Linda, Biff, and Happy that they are, in fact, living this fabricated American Dream. The dramatic irony wraps all these elements together, tying together many of the lies and deceitful events, and showcasing the ultimate consequences that many of the characters themselves are unaware of.

“ Gee, on the way home tonight I’d like to buy some seeds.” Willy told his wife this line, to which Linda responded “ That’d be wonderful. But not enough sun gets back there. Nothing’ll grow any more”. Perhaps the most impactful example of dramatic irony, Willy seeks to plant these seeds, metaphorically leaving his legacy in a place and time where he could no longer cultivate anything meaningful. This leaves the tragic ending of this play, a disheartening display that literally and metaphorically, Willy’s time was up, leaving behind the unsuccessful mentality of quick riches and the lack of growth that his seeds, or his two boys, had endured and would continue to experience, failing to convey the message that America is not the land of the spoon-fed.