

Is death of a salesman a modern tragedy?

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



In “Death of a Salesman”, the main character Willy Loman is epitome of a tragic hero as he is surrounded by various elements of tragedy. These elements strip him of his dignity as he struggles to clinch his rightful position in the world. Arthur Miller uses corrupted society, a bad view of success, and delusional dreams, to create a path to Willy’s downfall. Willy’s destruction is calamitous, and did not have to happen. He had many opportunities to live a good life that he just failed to grasp, and he would get lost in a moment of joy.

The intensity of this tragedy comes from the actual viewing of these failed attempts in finding happiness and a good life. One of the main forces that destroyed Willy Loman, is Willy Loman himself. Despite all other elements of tragedy in the story, Willy ultimately destroys himself, as his tragic flaw slowly kills his existence. Willy enormously cogitates the concept that connections, and linked pasts can provide him with the future, as he as a salesman desires.

Willy’s perception of what he could be, or should be, contradicts what he actually is. He sees himself as a success.

However, we see Willy as a tired old salesman with a vintage view of society. Willy’s entire identity is tied up with an image of what a salesman should be. One of the most important causes of Willy’s suffering is the great villain of most modern writing in the realist vein – Society. Willy Loman is constantly trying to find the key to progressing into a genuine success, but the society prohibits his discovery. He suffers from the obsession of how he is observed by other people, and he blames his lack of victory, and a diversity of shallow

personal traits like his weight: “ I’m fat.... a salesman I know, as I was going to see a buyer, I heard him say something about walrus.” The fact that people do not take him seriously: “ I know it, when I walk in, they seem to laugh at me.” His wardrobe: “ I know I got to overcome it. I am not dressing to advantage maybe. The control of the amount of talking he does: “ I don’t know why – I can’t stop my self – I talk too much. A man ought to come in a few words.

One thing about Charley, he is a man of a few words, and they respect him. ” He uses all those excuses to explain his failure. In all reality, much of his failure results from his inability to recognise the world for what it really is – the professional world no longer dependant on contacts, or smooth talking, but focuses on specially skilled knowledgeable citizens. Willy Loman is a dreamer caught in a society ruled by machinery, rivalry, and the standard of getting ahead at any cost. In Willy’s early years as a salesman, success could be achieved by personality, kindness, and honesty alone. In a later years of his career, a salesman’s success comes to all those who are equipped with training and specialty. This is what Willy claims. Because Willy does not recognise these changes in terms of success, and it is at loss for those qualities, he is doomed to a failure in a world that demands such qualities. For his customers he struggles to be jovial yet dignified salesman.

For his sons he tries to be the firm, yet indulgent and protective father. For his wife, he wishes to be ever dependable breadwinner. He feels that in order to make success, he must be responsive to the demands of others, and make a good impression. He longs to be not just liked, but well liked, and he thinks this is a key to success in America. He longs to be like Ben, his

brother, who has a life story that consists of: “ I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And by God, I was rich.” Willy looks up to Ben a lot, but this might be another one of his illusions, which he has created in his head. We never find that out.

One of the saddest aspects of this play is even as we know Willy’s view of success is twisted, and distorted. Willy feels betrayed because he can not achieve the goals society has set for him. We see that especially in his younger years. Willy has never been able to achieve these goals and become successful. Linda tells us this as she reveals: “ I don’t say he is a great man. Willy has never made a lot of money. His name was never in the papers. He is not the finest character that ever lived..... A small man can just be as exhausted as a great man. Willy simply does not realise that personality and friendship are not enough to become who he dreams. This is evident as he is fired by his boss, and receives the information with disbelief: “ I was just fired.... Imagine that.... I named him. Willy convinces Biff that anyone confident enough, gorgeous, and born leader, such as Biff himself has the right to set the rules in life. Willy is convinced that he is famous because of his career.

He talks of going to New England on a summer trip and explains to his boys that: “ they know me up and down in new England. I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own.” When he refers to his yet to come funeral, he proudly insists: “ That funeral will be massive. They’ll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire. All the old timers with the strange licence plates – that boy will be struck. He has never realised – I am known.”

The truth is that nobody showed up for his funeral, but his family and two friends. Willy even gets caught in a delusion of forming his own business one day: “ Someday, I’ll have my own business, and I’ll never have to leave home any more.” For a disillusioned salesman in his sixties who can hardly complete simple tasks such as driving the mile down the road, this dream is on a brink of impossible. Willy refuses to realise that his sons are not all he has envisaged. Even as Biff tries to tell his father that he has failed miserably at an interview with Bill Oliver, Willy refuses to believe him, and even conjures up an imaginary lunch date to finalise Biff’s “ success.”

Eventually it is Biff who develops a keen understanding of his father, and urges Willy to drop the dreams which are holding him back, and threatening to destroy his life as he cries: “ Willy you take that phoney dream, and burn it before something happens!” Willy is broken by what is false within him. He has been betrayed by the dreams that he invented for himself, but can not achieve. Every dream he has ever made for himself seems to have been pulled out from underneath him, leaving him floored and desperate. He longs for something to hold on to in life. He longs for something to make his life worth living. Willy spends much of his life dreaming, and though he brings much of his terror on himself by his dreams, a piercing sympathy rips through one’s heart as he completely lets go of life.

After his death, Charley attempts to justify Willy’s constant and unrealistic dreaming by remarking “ Nobody dast blame this man. You don’t understand: Willy was a salesman. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory” In the end, Willy’s tragedy lies as much in the bringing down of his dreams as in the bringing down of the man. In some curious way,

his dreams just might have been the best part of the man. Willy's other son, Happy, determines to make his father's dreams come true one way or the other as he boldly states that " I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have – to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him".

There is a bit of truth to this statement: Willy Loman did not die in vain – not completely anyway. Even though Willy was truly ready to lay down his own life, his death is seen as a triumphant revenge upon the dreams that have broken him. On his funeral, those who loved Willy, take a moment to pay a tribute to him. Biff proclaims the mistakenness of Willy's ambitions. Having learned from his father's sacrifice, he decides to head west again. Happy, as feeling in duty to his father, will stay behind in the hope of licking the system on its own terms. Charley rhapsodises the meaning and value that survives the defeat; and Linda utters the simple human grief of one who, without thought, loved. Linda is traumatized by Willy's death. His suicide has baffled her; She cannot understand why he ended his own life.

Just as Willy, she has struggled in life as she continuously attempted to keep the family together with what little money Willy brought home. She spends much time and effort adding up bills, encouraging Willy to ask for a " well-deserved" raise, and overall making ends meet. She has finally managed to pay off the house payments as the play draws to a close.

" Help me, Willy, I can't cry. It seems to me that you're just on another trip. I keep expecting you. Willy, dear, I can't cry. Why did you do it? I search and search and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house

today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. We're free and clear. We're free. We're free... We're free...". It seems that Linda, like the reader, understands that Willy's disintegration did not have to happen. She realizes that the downfall has been tragic, just as Willy's life. She knows that the joy and the promise of the right way of life were there for Willy, and she knows that he just missed it.

But, despite the grieving done by his family, Willy finally achieves one of his numerous dreams as he is remembered, loved, and a guide for people. Though Willy's life was a life of frustrated hopes and unfulfilled dreams, it is why we revere this tragedy in the highest. Tragedy is the most accurately balanced portrayal of the human being in his struggle for happiness, and that is why tragedies truly portray us. And that is why tragedy must not be diminished: It is the most perfect means we have of showing us who and what we are. As we watch Willy struggle for himself throughout this tragedy, we come to understand what we must strive to become.