

## 'Death of a Salesman': A Tragedy with a Difference

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### **Abstract.**

Death of a Salesman is regarded as one of the top three important tragedies in American literature. Playwright Arthur Miller argued that a play should capture both the inner thoughts of its characters and the complex societal issues of the era. The drama convincingly depicts the misfortune of a typical salesman in the United States. Examining the factors that led to Willy's suicide is essential. The following examination will look into the elements leading to Willy Loman's downfall, with a particular emphasis on three main aspects: domestic tragedy, family tragedy, and social tragedy. The society Willy lived in is very similar to our world today, where people still encounter challenges similar to the ones Willy faced. Hence, examining Willy's demise can reveal deep-seated societal problems (such as the American Dream) leading to individual and family calamities in that community, urging us to contemplate the ethical and moral consequences of a society focused on monetary pursuits. Ultimately, it is crucial to develop a more profound understanding of ourselves.

**Keywords:** Domestic Tragedy, Social Tragedy, American Dream

Alongside Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller emerged as one of the most prominent American playwrights following the Second World War. His play, *Death of a Salesman*, created a significant impact upon its debut in 1949, solidifying his status as one of the leading playwrights in the United States. Set against the backdrop of New York and Boston in the late 1940s, the narrative centers on the tragic figure of Willy Loman, an ordinary traveling salesman in his sixties who struggles to grasp the concept of the "American Dream" and fails to navigate the harsh realities of the commercial world. He remains fixated on an unrealistic future for his two sons, and his misguided affection ultimately leads to their downfall. Willy's tragic end, a sacrifice intended to benefit his family—particularly his eldest son, Biff—fails to fully express his love for them. Numerous scholars, both domestically and internationally, have extensively analyzed *Death of a Salesman* from various viewpoints. Many have concentrated on the familial tragedy and the conflicts between father and son. A few noted that Willy Loman's tragedy stems from the clash between the ethical aspirations of the 'American Dream' and the harsh realities of a morally compromised society. This perspective, while insightful, does not capture the full complexity of the tragedy. In contrast, some other emphasize on the play's realistic elements, including character development, stage design, and language, without centering on the protagonist's demise. Consequently, this paper aims to delve deeper into the underlying causes of Willy Loman's death, positing that it represents not only a personal tragedy but also a familial and societal one.

Willy Loman, an ordinary man, yearned for the respect of those around him, including his family, neighbours, and brother. However, he felt compelled to resort to deception to mask his failures. This

dishonesty was a significant flaw in his character. He fabricated stories about his popularity and importance in the community, seeking admiration from his sons, despite the reality of his unremarkable standing. When Willy approached Charley for a loan and encountered Bernard, Bernard inquired about Biff's well-being. Willy, once again, was untruthful. In reality, Biff was preoccupied with his job and struggling to find his place in society. Willy's self-absorption and quick temper prevented him from considering others' perspectives. He showed little respect for Linda and Biff, insisting that Biff pursue a career as a successful salesman, a path Biff did not desire. Willy attributed his failures to his inadequate attire, failing to recognize the deeper reasons behind his shortcomings. After losing his job, Willy sought insurance money from the benevolent Charley, who offered him employment. Nevertheless, Willy declined Charley's offer, preferring the meagre income of a salesman over the opportunity to earn fifty dollars a week working for his neighbour. In his role as a salesman, Willy prioritized personal relationships over tangible measures of success, convinced that charisma, rather than substantial profits, was the key to achieving success in the business realm.

Willy: the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want.

Willy: Because you got a greatness in you, Biff, remember that. You got all kinds a greatness. [1]

Willy ingrained misguided values in the minds of his sons. He placed unwavering trust in Biff's charisma, neglecting to emphasize the importance of talent and hard work. It is undeniable that Willy's personal shortcomings contributed to his tragic circumstances, as he clung to outdated and unacceptable traditional values. Biff and Happy were cherished sons; however, the primary conflict between father and son arose between Willy and Biff. Numerous factors contributed to their disputes. The theme of father-son betrayal is prominent. In Biff's eyes, Willy represented an all-powerful hero whom he idolized. Conversely, Willy viewed Biff as a source of pride, akin to the character of Apollo. Willy envisioned Biff adhering to his aspirations, gaining admission to a university, or pursuing a business career. Unfortunately, Biff's failure in his graduation exam was not merely a personal setback; he perceived it as a disappointment to his father. In an effort to seek his father's assistance, Biff traveled to Boston, only to uncover a shocking truth about Willy—his father was involved in an affair with a woman at a hotel. This revelation incited Biff's anger and disillusionment, shattering the idealized image he held of Willy. The realization that his father was a hypocrite and a "liar" led to Biff's emotional collapse. In a symbolic act of defiance, he destroyed his cherished football shoes from the University of Virginia and chose to forgo the summer session, ultimately abandoning his university aspirations and charting a different path. Had it not been for Willy's betrayal, Biff's fate might have been markedly different. In contrast, Happy, Willy's second son, was an attractive and ambitious young man who sought his father's approval. Despite his efforts to gain Willy's attention, he found himself overshadowed by Biff, leading to a neglect of his own feelings. It is a common occurrence for fathers to favour one son over another, resulting in social conflicts for the less-favored child. Typically, when the elder son receives preferential

treatment, the younger son is often overlooked. It is crucial for parents to impart to their children the notion that theft is an unacceptable behavior. Nevertheless, Willy did not deter Biff from engaging in criminal activities; rather, he even supported Biff's act of taking a football from the school without permission. This flawed upbringing and set of values led Biff to become involved in petty crimes. Had Willy taken the initiative to guide him appropriately, the results might have been different. In a society driven by materialism, an individual's success is not solely based on their popularity. Willy's misguided approach to parenting caused Biff to prioritize superficial charm over the recognition and development of his own talents. As a result, his failure seems unavoidable. Thus, the influence of family education on a child's growth and development is significant. Willy, in many respects, did not fulfill his role as a good father. He instilled a distorted vision of success as a salesman in his sons, neglecting to teach them essential values and the importance of education. The differing interpretations of the 'American Dream' are evident. In his youth, Willy was shaped by the principle of the "American Dream," which emphasized hard work to achieve one's aspirations. He admired the diligence and success of his father and brother Ben in their pursuits, while he sought to attain success in the urban landscape. As Eugene O'Neill remarked, "We talk much about the American Dream and propagate it across the world. For the majority, does it not signify the pursuit of material success?" Willy possessed ambition but failed to grasp the realities of business and his genuine needs. He believed that his amiable personality and the respect of others would open doors for him. Consequently, Willy aspired for his sons to lead prosperous and respectable lives, yet their dreams were at odds, representing the conflict between urban aspirations and rural realities, as well as idealism versus practicality.

The crux of the matter was their inability to face the truth. Biff, an optimistic young man, recognized that he was out of place in the corporate environment. He felt a sense of revulsion towards the business community, favoring a more organic way of living. Biff perceived the urban lifestyle as devoid of value. Upon returning home to find his footing, Willy interpreted this as a sign of defeat. The ensuing dialogue represented Biff's internal monologue.

Biff:(with rising agitation): Hap, I've had twenty or thirty different kinds of jobs since I left home before the war, and it always turns out the same..... I suddenly get the feeling, my God, I'm not get in anywhere! What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I'm thirty-four years old, I ought to be make my future. That's when I come running home. And now, I get here, and I don't know what to do with myself. (After a pause) I've always made a point of not wasting my life, and every time I come back here, I know that all I've done is to waste my life. (1)

Happy had not completely acknowledged the insincere aspects of his father's character and aspirations. Furthermore, he had embraced his father's dreams to a greater extent than Biff. He succeeded in his pursuit of the 'American Dream'. By the conclusion of the play, he remained oblivious to his own identity, yet resolute in his decision to remain in the city and fulfill his father's ambition of becoming a successful businessman. Linda held deep affection for Willy. Despite Willy's disrespect and betrayal

towards her, she remained entirely submissive, refraining from engaging in conversation with him.

Biff: Did you have it taken off?

Linda: I'm—I'm ashamed to. How can I mention it to him? Every day I go down and take away that little rubber pipe. But, when he comes home, I put it back where it was. How can I insult him that way? I don't know what to do. I live from day to day, boys. I tell you; I know every thought in his mind. It sounds so old—fashioned and silly, but I tell you he put his whole life into you and you've turned your backs on him. [1]

On the surface, there appeared to be no discord between Willy, the troubled and irritable husband, and Linda, the devoted and understanding wife. However, beneath this facade lay a significant conflict that contributed to the family's difficulties. Their communication was severely lacking. Willy endured considerable physical and emotional strain due to his work, yet his patient and empathetic wife was unable to alleviate his burdens. She merely mentioned the bills they needed to settle and attempted to navigate the tensions between father and son. Linda did not endeavour to alter her husband's distorted values, nor did she take steps to avert the eventual disintegration of the family. This situation encapsulated the tragedy of love and familial bonds. Willy was shaped by Darwin's theory of "The Origin of Species," which emphasizes the survival of the fittest. Nevertheless, the reality of society was far from equitable, particularly for those belonging to the lower middle class. Howard remarked, "We have only got a half-dozen salesmen on the floor here."---: No, but it is business, kid, and every body's got to pull his own weight.

Willy: I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away— a man is not a piece of fruit![1]

Willy epitomized the plight of individuals within a society that is often unforgiving, particularly under a stringent economic framework that initially utilized him and ultimately discarded him. During this period, influenced by a culture that venerates wealth and various aspirations, individuals—especially capitalists—resorted to any means necessary to ensure their survival and prosperity. Employers tended to be exploitative, viewing their employees as mere commodities, consuming their labor and discarding them once they were no longer useful. Despite Willy's considerable sacrifices for the company, his employer was solely concerned with Willy's present worth and refused to offer him another opportunity.

This play marks a significant achievement in Miller's literary career, as he invested considerable effort into crafting this narrative, which intertwines social consciousness with profound insights into the personal flaws of his characters. This analysis primarily explores the factors contributing to Willy's demise from three perspectives: personal tragedy, familial tragedy, and societal tragedy. Willy remained oblivious to the fact that he existed within a realm of illusions and aspirations. The vast disparity between his dreams and reality exacerbated his situation, ultimately culminating in his tragic end. For Willy, social status, power, and a sense of achievement are paramount. He perceived the brilliant light reflected from the urban skyline as the brightest stars in the heavens. Willy's distorted perception of dreams and values not only led to his own downfall but also adversely affected his family. His situation evokes not just pity but also a call for reflection and self-examination.

## References

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