

Death of a Salesman: Characters

Willy Loman

Willy is the salesman around whom the play is constructed. He is sixty-three years old, desperate to achieve even a small measure of the success to which he has always aspired, and cannot face the reality that he has misdirected his energies and talents chasing a dream that never had any chance of materializing. However, after thirty-five years working as a traveling salesman throughout New England, Willy Loman feels defeated by his lack of success and difficult family life. Although he has a dutiful wife, his relationship with his oldest son, Biff, is strained by Biff's continual failures. As a salesman, Willy Loman focuses on personal details over actual measures of success, believing that it is personality and not high returns that garner success in the business world. Willy's flashbacks and fantasies comprise a large part of the play and inform the audience about his past, the histories of the other characters, how he has become what he is in the present, and perhaps most importantly, his ideal self. In the scenes which take place in present time, Willy is highly emotional, unstable, uncertain at times, highly contradictory, and seems worn down by life. In his flashbacks and fantasies, however, Willy is a more loving father and husband, a more capable provider; he is cheerful, light-hearted, and self-assured. Ultimately, because he cannot live with the realization that he has failed to live up to his unrealistic expectations, and because he believes he will finally be able, with his death, to leave his family with a sizable amount of cash, namely a \$20,000 life insurance payoff, Willy commits suicide. In an imagined conversation, Willy responds to his brother Ben's admonition that suicide is a "cowardly thing," by asking: "Why? Does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up a zero? ... And twenty thousand—that is something one can feel with the hand, it is there." Many critics have asserted that Willy is a modern tragic hero, and that his tragedy lies in his belief in an illusory American Dream.

Biff Loman

Biff is Willy's eldest son; once a high school football idol, he has grown into a man who, in his mid-thirties, displays only a small measure of his youthful confidence, enthusiasm, and affection, and more often appears as a troubled, frustrated, deeply sad man with a tendency to escape into dreams all times. Biff was betrayed by his father at a very young age when he discovered that Willy was having an affair. Biff, who steals things as an adult, blames his father for not giving him the proper guidance when he was caught stealing as a child. Biff also blames his father for instilling in him the belief that success lies in the accumulation of wealth; it is because his father programmed him to think this way, Biff believes, that he is so unhappy and cannot enjoy doing the outdoor labor for which he has a talent. Biff is tortured by his disillusionment with Willy, by his failure to live up to his own standards, by his failure to achieve the greatness that Willy dreamed he would, by his desire to get back at his father for what he believes has been done to him, and by his great love for Willy, which creates in him tremendous confusion and emotional turmoil. Biff ultimately decides to try to show Willy that his dreams and fantasies are false, telling his father: "You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! ... I'm nothing, Pop. Can't you understand that? There is no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all." In the Requiem scene at the play's end, Biff illustrates that he has truly come to an understanding of his father's failure to achieve success, observing that Willy "never knew who he was" and that he "had the wrong dreams."

Linda Loman

Linda is Willy's long-suffering, devoted wife, who desperately loves her husband and resents the fact that his sons do not love and appreciate their father as much as she believes they should. She speaks carefully, and has a quiet manner that belies her inner strength. She treads cautiously around Willy, taking care not to raise his temper, and

continuously presents a cheerful, hopeful appearance. Linda has tremendous patience, and serves as the family peacemaker. Linda sees through her husbands and sons; she knows that they are deluded, but she continues to bolster their fantasies, believing that she is doing the best, most loving thing for her family. Linda is the foundation that has allowed the Loman men to build themselves up, if only in dreams, and she is the support that enables them to continue despite their failures. She represents human dignity and values: cooperative, moral, human behavior as opposed to lawless assertion of self over all others through assumed superiority.

Happy Loman

The younger of the two Loman sons, Happy Loman is seemingly content and successful, with a steady career and none of the obvious marks of failure that his older brother displays. Happy, however, is not content with his more stable life, because he has never risked failure or striven for any real measure of success. Happy is a compulsive womanizer who treats women purely as sex objects and has little respect for the many women whom he seduces. Happy is a young version of Willy. He incorporates his father's habit of manipulating reality in order to create situations that are more favorable to him. Happy grew up listening to Willy embellish the truth, so it is not surprising that Happy exaggerates his position in order to create the illusion of success. Instead of admitting he is an assistant to the assistant, Happy lies and tells everyone he is the assistant buyer. This is Willy's philosophy all over again.

Ben Lowman

Ben is Willy's older brother, and is, to Willy, the embodiment of true success. Although Ben died several weeks before the time at which the play is set, he appears in scenes which take place in Willy's imagination, and appears larger-than-life, all-knowing, powerful, a great adventurer; he is everything Willy dreams of becoming. In the play, Ben's primary role is to serve as a sounding board for Willy; Willy conducts imaginary conversations with his brother, who owns timberlands in Alaska and diamond mines

in Africa, and it is through these conversations that the audience gains a better understanding of what drives Willy and of his inner thoughts. Ben also represents for Willy the kind of life he dreams of for his sons. Ben remarks: "William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!" Willy, excited by his brother's stories of adventure, responds enthusiastically: "That's just the spirit I want to imbue them [Biff and Happy] with! To walk into a jungle!"

Charley

Charley is Willy's only friend, and eventually he becomes Willy's sole financial support, "loaning" him fifty dollars a week knowing all the while that his money will never be repaid. Charley is a successful businessman, and is exasperated by Willy's lack of respect for him and his ideals, and by Willy's inability to separate reality and fantasy. Charley tries in vain to dispel Willy's delusions and attempts to save him from financial ruin by offering him a job, and when Willy refuses his offer, Charley exclaims, "You been jealous of me all your life, you damned fool!" When Willy conveys to Charley his disbelief that Howard Wagner has failed to display the gratitude that Willy feels he deserves and has fired him, Charley asks: "Willy, when're you gonna realize that them things don't mean anything? You named him Howard, but you can't sell that. 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." Although Willy claims that Charley is a man who is "liked, but not well-liked," he owns his own business and is respected and admired. Despite his continued arguments with Willy, and despite the feelings of frustration and exasperation Willy arouses in him, Charley cares about his friend and offers him compassion and support.

Bernard

Bernard is Charley's only son. He is intelligent and industrious but lacks the sociable personality of either of the Loman sons. As a young man he is quiet, dependable,

pensive, and a top student; as an adult Bernard remains sensitive and genuine, and displays the intelligence, self-confidence, and perception that have helped him become a successful attorney. Bernard contrasts sharply with Biff and Happy, in a sense serving as the embodiment of the success to which they always aspired but never achieved. It is his absence of spirit that makes Willy believe that Bernard will never be a true success in the business world, but Bernard proves himself to be far more successful than Willy imagined. As a grown-up, he is a lawyer preparing to argue a case in front of the Supreme Court.

Howard Wagner

Willy's boss and the son of Frank Wagner, who founded the company for which Willy works. A cold, selfish man, he inherits his success without building anything himself. He refuses to take the personal association between Willy and his father into account when he tells Willy there is no place for him at the New York office. He represents the new, impersonal face of the sales business.

Death of a Salesman: Plot Summary

Act One

Death of a Salesman takes place in New York and Boston. The action begins in the home of Willy Loman, an aging salesman who has just returned from a road trip. Willy is having difficulty remembering events, as well as distinguishing the present from his memories of the past. His wife, Linda, suggests that he request a job in New York rather than travel each week. Linda and Willy argue about their oldest son Biff. Biff and Happy, their adult sons, are on a rare trip home. The relationship between Biff and his father is strained. Willy thinks Biff is a 'lazy bum' (p.11): he has not found himself a career at the age of thirty-four. Upstairs in their bedroom, Biff talks to his brother, Happy, about his own inability to settle and his anger at his father's criticism of him.

Biff and his brother, Happy, overhear Willy talking to himself. Biff learns that Willy is usually talking to him (Biff) during these private reveries. Biff and Happy discuss women and the future. Both are dissatisfied with their jobs: Biff is discontent working for someone else, and Happy cannot be promoted until the merchandise manager dies. They contemplate buying a ranch and working together.

Alone in the kitchen, Willy retreats into his memory: remembering the boys as teenagers, imagining Biff being a top-class footballer and reliving conversations with his successful brother, Ben. Within these memories are also hints of where things started to go wrong for Willy – where he exaggerates his success, dismisses Biff's stealing and lies to his wife. The past and present continue to mingle in Willy's mind throughout a visit by his friend Charley, who offers him a job, which Willy proudly rejects. During the play, Willy frequently drifts in and out of the present, interacting with characters from his past.

At this point, Willy relives several scenes from his past, including the time when, during high school, Biff admits to stealing a football and promises to throw a pass for Willy during the game. Willy also remembers his old dream of the boys visiting him in Boston during a road trip. Finally in his reverie, he relives the time that Bernard, son of the next-door neighbor Charley, informs Willy that Biff is failing math and will not graduate unless his scores improve. In this last scene, Willy listens but dismisses the important news because Biff is "well-liked," and Bernard is not.

Willy remembers a conversation with Linda in which he inflates his earnings but is then forced to admit he exaggerated when Linda calculates his commission. Willy recalls complaining about his appearance and remembers Linda assuring him that he is attractive. At this point, Willy's memories begin to blend together. While he is reliving his conversation with Linda, he begins to remember his conversation with the Woman (a woman with whom he had an affair). He is unable to separate memories of Linda from the Woman.

The play continues in the present with his neighbor Charley coming over to play cards. However, Uncle Ben appears to Willy while he is playing cards with Charley, and Willy relives an old conversation with Ben while simultaneously talking with Charley. As a result, Willy becomes confused by the two different "discussions" he is having — one in the present, one in the past — and he accuses Charley of cheating. After Charley leaves, Willy relives Ben's visit and asks Ben for advice because he feels insecure since he did not really know his own father. Willy also remembers instructing Biff and Happy to steal some supplies from the construction site in order to remodel the porch so that he can impress Ben.

The play once again returns to the present, in which Biff and Happy talk with Linda about Willy. Biff and Happy learn that Willy is on straight commission and has been borrowing money from Charley in order to pay bills. Linda criticizes her

sons for abandoning their father in order to pursue their own selfish desires, and she gives Biff a choice: Respect your father or do not come home. Biff decides to stay in New York, but he reminds Linda that Willy threw him out of the house. He also tells Linda that Willy is a "fake." It is at this point that Linda informs her sons that Willy is suicidal.

Willy overhears his wife and sons talking, and he and Biff argue. Willy remembers Biff's football games. Before Linda and Willy go to bed, Linda questions Willy: She wants to know what Biff is holding against him, but Willy refuses to answer. Biff removes the rubber tubing Willy hid behind the heater.

The brothers and Linda discuss Willy – Linda defends him and attacks her sons for their treatment of him. She tells them of her fear that Willy is trying to kill himself. When Willy irritably rejoins them, Biff tries to placate him by saying he will go and see an old employer, Oliver, and ask for a job. This escalates into a plan for the brothers to set up a business together. Willy is delighted and the whole family is drawn into this daydream. When Happy describes Biff's plan to open his own business, Willy directs Biff on what to do during his interview with Bill Oliver. At the end of the act, however, Biff finds a length of rubber tubing that Willy has hidden to use to commit suicide

Act Two

Act Two occurs the following day. At breakfast, Linda assures Willy that Biff had left in a good mood, confident that Bill Oliver will respond to him favorably. She also says that their sons want Willy to meet them for dinner. Willy prepares to visit his boss Howard to ask him for a job in New York. During the meeting, Willy talks to his boss, Howard, asking him for a position in New York rather than on the road. Howard declines, claiming to have no position available. Willy reminds Howard that he named him, and he was a very successful salesman

when he worked for Howard's father. Willy begins shouting, citing his early success which exasperates Howard, probably because Willy exaggerates his earlier abilities. By the end of the conversation, Howard has fired Willy entirely.

Upon being fired, Willy begins freefalling into his memories of the past. Willy recalls Ben's visit once again. This time, Willy asks for advice because things are not going as he planned. He remembers Ben offering him a job in Alaska. He accepts, but Linda intervenes and reminds him of Dave Singleman. Willy shifts from his memory of Ben to Biff's last football game. Willy recalls Charley pretending he is unaware of Biff's game, and this infuriates Willy. Willy's daydream ends when he arrives at Charley's office.

Bernard is waiting for Charley in his office. Willy speaks with Bernard, who has grown into a successful and responsible man. Willy and Bernard discuss Biff and consider possible reasons for his lack of motivation and success. Bernard says Biff changed right after high school when he visited Willy in Boston. Bernard questions Willy about what happened when Biff went to visit him. Willy becomes defensive. Bernard is on his way to present a case before the Supreme Court. Bernard's success both pleases and upsets Willy. As he frequently has, Charley offers Willy a job, but Willy is too proud to accept. Although he is disgusted, Charley continues to lend Willy money for his insurance payment.

At a restaurant where Willy, Biff, and Happy are to meet, Happy flirts with a young girl, and Biff is upset because Oliver, who kept him waiting all day, did not even remember him. Then Biff realizes that he was never a salesman for Oliver; instead, he was a shipping clerk. Willy tells his sons that he has been fired. Although Biff attempts to have a frank conversation with Willy, both Happy and Willy subvert this effort, cooperating instead with the family's desire to ignore the truth in favor of a mythologized past. Biff attempts to explain what happened with Oliver (after seeing Oliver, Biff sneaked back into his office and stole Oliver's pen). However, Willy is reliving the past, recalling Bernard informing Linda that Biff has

failed math and will not graduate. Willy then remembers Bernard telling her Biff has taken a train to Boston.

When Biff had failed math, he had gone to Boston to persuade Willy to intervene with the teacher. Willy relives the time when Biff finds out about Willy's affair with the Woman: Biff comes to Willy's hotel room in Boston to tell Willy that he will not graduate unless Willy can convince Mr. Birnbaum to pass him. Instead, he discovered Willy in a hotel with another woman and became profoundly disillusioned with both Willy and his own life's possibilities. Willy recalls his own desperate attempts to hide the Woman in the bathroom. When the Woman comes out of the bathroom with Biff in the room, Willy's plan to conceal the affair is ruined. Willy's final memory is of Biff calling him a "fake" before walking out the door. It was after this discovery, apparently, that Biff refused to attend summer school and hence relinquished his opportunity for an athletic scholarship and a college education.

Biff and Happy leave Willy in the restaurant in order to accompany the girl Happy had met earlier. The play continues in the present when Stanley, the waiter, reappears, and Willy realizes he is actually still in the restaurant. Willy returns home and begins building a garden, even though it is night. Linda throws Happy and Biff out of the house. Ben appears to Willy while he is planting seeds. At this point, Willy does not remember a previous conversation with Ben, as he does several times earlier in the play. Instead, he and Ben discuss his plan to commit suicide. Willy and Ben converse in the present, but they are talking about the future. Ben warns Willy that the insurance company might refuse to pay a settlement and Biff might never forgive him.

Biff approaches Willy in the garden to tell him he is leaving home for good. Biff and Willy argue, and Biff confronts Willy with the rubber hose, saying he will not pity him if he commits suicide. According to Biff, the Lomans have never been

truthful with one another or themselves. Biff believes that he and Willy are ordinary people who can easily be replaced. Biff and Willy reconcile. Ben reappears to Willy and reminds him of the insurance policy. The Act ends with Willy speeding off in his car. The Lomans, Charley, and Bernard gather at Willy's grave.

Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman: Themes

The American Dream

Miller is able to place before his audience Willy Loman, a man who shares many of their ideals, ones which have been summed up by the phrase 'the American Dream.' The American Dream is a combination of beliefs in the unity of the family, the healthiness of competition in society, the need for success and money, and the view that America is the great land in which free opportunity for all exists. Some of these are connected: America seems at one stage in history to offer alternatives to the European way of life; it seems to be the New World, vast, having plenty of land and riches for all its people, all of whom could share in the wealth of the nation. America is a land of opportunity. This belief is still apparent, even in twentieth century America, with its large urban population, and Miller uses it in his plays, in order to state something significant about American society. In such a land, where all people have a great deal of opportunity, success should come fairly easily, so unsuccessful man could feel bitter about his failure, excluded as he is from the success around him. To become successful in the American Dream means to believe in competition, to reach the top as quickly as possible by proving oneself better than others. Success is judged by the amount of wealth which can be acquired by an individual. Success is external and visible, shown in material wealth and encouraged. Money and success mean stability; and stability can be seen in the family unit. The family is a guideline to success. It also provides emotional stability, and a good family shares its hopes and belief. These ideas should always be kept in mind when *Death of a Salesman*; is considered.

Willy believes wholeheartedly in what he considers the promise of the *American Dream*—that a “well liked” and “personally attractive” man in business will indubitably and deservedly acquire the material comforts offered by modern American life. Oddly, his fixation with the superficial qualities of attractiveness and likeability is at odds with a more gritty, more rewarding understanding of the American Dream that identifies hard work without complaint as the key to success. Willy's interpretation of likeability is superficial—he childishly dislikes Bernard because he considers Bernard a nerd. Willy's blind faith in his stunted version of the

American Dream leads to his rapid psychological decline when he is unable to accept the disparity between the Dream and his own life.

Abandonment

Willy's life charts a course from one *abandonment* to the next, leaving him in greater despair each time. Willy's father leaves him and Ben when Willy is very young, leaving Willy neither a tangible (money) nor an intangible (history) legacy. Ben eventually departs for Alaska, leaving Willy to lose himself in a warped vision of the American Dream. Likely a result of these early experiences, Willy develops a fear of abandonment, which makes him want his family to conform to the American Dream. His efforts to raise perfect sons, however, reflect his inability to understand reality. The young Biff, whom Willy considers the embodiment of promise, drops Willy and Willy's zealous ambitions for him when he finds out about Willy's adultery. Biff's ongoing inability to succeed in business furthers his estrangement from Willy. When, at Frank's Chop House, Willy finally believes that Biff is on the cusp of greatness, Biff shatters Willy's illusions and, along with Happy, abandons the deluded, babbling Willy in the washroom.

Betrayal

Willy's primary obsession throughout the play is what he considers to be Biff's *betrayal* of his ambitions for him. Willy believes that he has every right to expect Biff to fulfill the promise inherent in him. When Biff walks out on Willy's ambitions for him, Willy takes this rejection as a personal affront (he associates it with "insult" and "spite"). Willy, after all, is a salesman, and Biff's ego-crushing rebuff ultimately reflects Willy's inability to sell him on the American Dream—the product in which Willy himself believes most faithfully. Willy assumes that Biff's betrayal stems from Biff's discovery of Willy's affair with The Woman—a betrayal of Linda's love. Whereas Willy feels that Biff has betrayed him, Biff feels that Willy, a "phony little fake," has betrayed him with his unending stream of ego-stroking lies.

Denial, Contradiction, and Order versus Disorder

Death of a Salesman addresses loss of identity and a man's inability to accept change within himself and society. The play is a montage of memories, dreams, confrontations, and

arguments, all of which make up the last 24 hours of Willy Loman's life. The three major themes within the play are denial, contradiction, and order versus disorder.

Denial, contradiction, and the quest for order versus disorder comprise the three major themes of *Death of a Salesman*. All three themes work together to create a dreamlike atmosphere in which the audience watches a man's identity and mental stability slip away. The play continues to affect audiences because it allows them to hold a mirror up to themselves. Willy's self-deprecation, sense of failure, and overwhelming regret are emotions that an audience can relate to because everyone has experienced them at one time or another. Individuals continue to react to *Death of a Salesman* because Willy's situation is not unique: He made a mistake — a mistake that irrevocably changed his relationship with the people he loves most — and when all of his attempts to eradicate his mistake fail, he makes one grand attempt to correct the mistake. Willy vehemently denies Biff's claim that they are both common, ordinary people, but ironically, it is the universality of the play which makes it so enduring. Biff's statement, "I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you" is true after all.

Denial

Each member of the Loman family is living in *denial* or perpetuating a cycle of denial for others. Willy Loman is incapable of accepting the fact that he is a mediocre salesman. Instead Willy strives for his version of the American dream — success and notoriety — even if he is forced to deny reality in order to achieve it. Instead of acknowledging that he is not a well-known success, Willy retreats into the past and chooses to relive past memories and events in which he is perceived as successful.

For example, Willy's favorite memory is of Biff's last football game because Biff vows to make a touchdown just for him. In this scene in the past, Willy can hardly wait to tell the story to his buyers. He considers himself famous as a result of his son's pride in him. Willy's sons, Biff and Happy, adopt Willy's habit of denying or manipulating reality and practice it all of their lives, much to their detriment. It is only at the end of the play that Biff admits he has been a "phony" too, just like Willy. Linda is the only character that recognizes the Loman family lives in denial; however, she goes along with Willy's fantasies in order to preserve his fragile mental state.

Contradiction

Another major theme of the play is *contradiction*. Throughout the play, Willy's behavior is riddled with inconsistencies. In fact, the only thing consistent about Willy is his inconsistency. From the very beginning of Act I, Scene 1, Willy reveals this tendency. He labels Biff a "lazy bum" but then contradicts himself two lines later when he states, "And such a hard worker. There's one thing about Biff — he's not lazy." Willy's contradictions often confuse audiences at the beginning of the play; however, they soon become a trademark of his character. Willy's inconsistent behavior is the result of his inability to accept reality and his tendency to manipulate or re-create the past in an attempt to escape the present. For example, Willy cannot resign himself to the fact that Biff no longer respects him because of Willy's affair. Rather than admit that their relationship is irreconcilable, Willy retreats to a previous time when Biff admired and respected him. As the play continues, Willy disassociates himself more and more from the present as his problems become too numerous to deal with.

Order versus Disorder

The theme of *order versus disorder* results from Willy's retreats into the past. Each time Willy loses himself in the past, he does so in order to deny the present, especially if the present is too difficult to accept. As the play progresses, Willy spends more and more time in the past as a means of reestablishing order in his life. The more fragmented and disastrous reality becomes, the more necessary it is for Willy to create an alternative reality, even if it requires him to live solely in the past. This is demonstrated immediately after Willy is fired. Ben appears, and Willy confides "nothing's working out. I don't know what to do." Ben quickly shifts the conversation to Alaska and offers Willy a job. Linda appears and convinces Willy that he should stay in sales, just like Dave Singleman. Willy's confidence quickly resurfaces, and he is confident that he has made the right decision by turning down Ben's offer; he is certain he will be a success like Singleman. Thus, Willy's memory has distracted him from the reality of losing his job.

Gender Relations

In *Death of a Salesman*, women are sharply divided into two categories: Linda and others. The men display a distinct Madonna/whore complex, as they are only able to classify their nurturing and virtuous mother against the other, easier women available (the woman with whom Willy has an affair and Miss Forsythe being two examples). The men curse themselves for

being attracted to the whore-like women but is still drawn to them - and, in an Oedipal moment, Happy laments that he cannot find a woman like his mother. Women themselves are two-dimensional characters in this play. They remain firmly outside the male sphere of business, and seem to have no thoughts or desires other than those pertaining to men. Even Linda, the strongest female character, is only fixated on a reconciliation between her husband and her sons, selflessly subordinating herself to serve to assist them in their problems.

Fathers and Sons

The central conflict of the play is between Willy and his elder son Biff, who showed great promise as a young athlete and ladies' man, but in adulthood has become a thief and drifter with no clear direction. Willy's other son, Happy, while on a more secure career path, is superficial and seems to have no loyalty to anyone.

By delving into Willy's memories, the play is able to trace how the values Willy instilled in his sons—luck over hard work, likability over expertise—led them to disappoint both him and themselves as adults. The dream of grand, easy success that Willy passed on to his sons is both barren and overwhelming, and so Biff and Happy are aimless, producing nothing, and it is Willy who is still working, trying to plant seeds in the middle of the night, in order to give his family sustenance. Biff realizes, at the play's climax, that only by escaping from the dream that Willy has instilled in him will father and son be free to pursue fulfilling lives. Happy never realizes this, and at the end of the play he vows to continue in his father's footsteps, pursuing an American Dream that will leave him empty and alone.