

Death of a Salesman

Arthur Miller

Plot Summary

As a flute melody plays, Willy Loman returns to his home in Brooklyn one night, exhausted from a failed sales trip. His wife, Linda, tries to persuade him to ask his boss, Howard Wagner, to let him work in New York so that he won't have to travel. Willy says that he will talk to Howard the next day. Willy complains that Biff, his older son who has come back home to visit, has yet to make something of himself. Linda scolds Willy for being so critical, and Willy goes to the kitchen for a snack.

As Willy talks to himself in the kitchen, Biff and his younger brother, Happy, who is also visiting, reminisce about their adolescence and discuss their father's babbling, which often includes criticism of Biff's failure to live up to Willy's expectations. As Biff and Happy, dissatisfied with their lives, fantasize about buying a ranch out West, Willy becomes immersed in a daydream. He praises his sons, now younger, who are washing his car. The young Biff, a high school football star, and the young Happy appear. They interact affectionately with their father, who has just returned from a business trip. Willy confides in Biff and Happy that he is going to open his own business one day, bigger than that owned by his neighbor, Charley. Charley's son, Bernard, enters looking for Biff, who must study for math class in order to avoid failing. Willy points out to his sons that although Bernard is smart, he is not "well liked," which will hurt him in the long run.

A younger Linda enters, and the boys leave to do some chores. Willy boasts of a phenomenally successful sales trip, but Linda coaxes him into revealing that his trip was actually only meagerly successful. Willy complains that he soon won't be able to make all of the payments on their appliances and car. He complains that people don't like him and that he's not good at his job. As Linda consoles him, he hears the laughter of his mistress. He approaches The Woman, who is still laughing, and engages in another reminiscent daydream. Willy and The Woman flirt, and she thanks him for giving him stockings.

The Woman disappears, and Willy fades back into his prior daydream, in the kitchen. Linda, now mending stockings, reassures him. He scolds her mending and orders her to throw the stockings out. Bernard bursts in, again looking for Biff. Linda reminds Willy that Biff has to return a football that he stole, and she adds that Biff is too rough with the neighborhood girls. Willy hears The Woman laugh and explodes at Bernard and Linda. Both leave, and though the daydream ends, Willy continues to mutter to himself. The older Happy comes downstairs and tries to quiet Willy. Agitated, Willy shouts his regret about not going to Alaska with his brother, Ben, who eventually found a diamond mine in Africa and became rich. Charley, having heard the commotion, enters. Happy goes off to bed, and Willy and Charley begin to play cards. Charley offers Willy a job, but Willy, insulted, refuses it. As they argue, Willy imagines that Ben enters. Willy accidentally calls Charley Ben. Ben inspects Willy's house and tells him that he has to catch a train soon to look at properties in Alaska. As Willy talks to Ben about the prospect of going to Alaska, Charley, seeing no one there, gets confused and questions Willy. Willy yells at Charley, who leaves. The younger Linda enters and Ben meets her. Willy asks Ben impatiently about his life. Ben recounts his travels and talks about their father. As Ben is about to leave, Willy daydreams further, and Charley and Bernard rush in to tell him that Biff and Happy are stealing lumber. Although Ben eventually leaves, Willy continues to talk to him.

Back in the present, the older Linda enters to find Willy outside. Biff and Happy come downstairs and discuss Willy's condition with their mother. Linda scolds Biff for judging Willy harshly. Biff tells her that he knows Willy is a fake, but he refuses to elaborate. Linda mentions that Willy has tried to commit suicide. Happy grows angry and rebukes Biff for his failure in the business world. Willy enters and yells at Biff. Happy intervenes and eventually proposes that he and Biff go into the sporting goods business together. Willy immediately brightens and gives Biff a host of tips about asking for a loan from one of Biff's old employers, Bill Oliver. After more arguing and reconciliation, everyone finally goes to bed.

Act II opens with Willy enjoying the breakfast that Linda has made for him. Willy ponders the bright-seeming future before getting angry again about his expensive appliances. Linda informs Willy that Biff and Happy are taking him out to dinner that night. Excited, Willy announces that he is going to make Howard Wagner give him a New York job. The phone rings, and Linda chats with Biff, reminding him to be nice to his father at the restaurant that night.

As the lights fade on Linda, they come up on Howard playing with a wire recorder in his office. Willy tries to broach the subject of working in New York, but Howard interrupts him and makes him listen to his kids and wife on the wire recorder. When Willy finally gets a word in, Howard rejects his plea. Willy launches into a lengthy recalling of how a legendary salesman named Dave Singleman inspired him to go into sales. Howard leaves and Willy gets angry. Howard soon re-enters and tells Willy to take some time off. Howard leaves and Ben enters, inviting Willy to join him in Alaska. The younger Linda enters and reminds Willy of his sons and job. The young Biff enters, and Willy praises Biff's prospects and the fact that he is well liked.

Ben leaves and Bernard rushes in, eagerly awaiting Biff's big football game. Willy speaks optimistically to Biff about the game. Charley enters and teases Willy about the game. As Willy chases Charley off, the lights rise on a different part of the stage. Willy continues yelling from offstage, and Jenny, Charley's secretary, asks a grown-up Bernard to quiet him down. Willy enters and prattles on about a "very big deal" that Biff is working on. Daunted by Bernard's success (he mentions to Willy that he is going to Washington to fight a case), Willy asks Bernard why Biff turned out to be such a failure. Bernard asks Willy what happened in Boston that made Biff decide not to go to summer school. Willy defensively tells Bernard not to blame him.

Charley enters and sees Bernard off. When Willy asks for more money than Charley usually loans him, Charley again offers Willy a job. Willy again refuses and eventually tells Charley that he was fired. Charley scolds Willy for always needing to be liked and angrily gives him the money. Calling Charley his only friend, Willy exits on the verge of tears.

At Frank's Chop House, Happy helps Stanley, a waiter, prepare a table. They ogle and chat up a girl, Miss Forsythe, who enters the restaurant. Biff enters, and Happy introduces him to Miss Forsythe, continuing to flirt with her. Miss Forsythe, a call girl, leaves to telephone another call girl (at Happy's request), and Biff spills out that he waited six hours for Bill Oliver and Oliver didn't even recognize him. Upset at his father's unrelenting misconception that he, Biff, was a salesman for Oliver, Biff plans to relieve Willy of his illusions. Willy enters, and Biff tries gently, at first, to tell him what happened at Oliver's office. Willy blurts out that he was fired. Stunned, Biff again tries to let Willy down easily. Happy cuts in with remarks suggesting Biff's success, and Willy eagerly awaits the good news.

Biff finally explodes at Willy for being unwilling to listen. The young Bernard runs in shouting for Linda, and Biff, Happy, and Willy start to argue. As Biff explains what happened, their conversation recedes into the background. The young Bernard tells Linda that Biff failed math. The restaurant conversation comes back into focus and Willy criticizes Biff for failing math. Willy then hears the voice of the hotel operator in Boston and shouts that he is not in his room. Biff scrambles to quiet Willy and claims that Oliver is talking to his partner about giving Biff the money. Willy's renewed interest and probing questions irk Biff more, and he screams at Willy. Willy hears The Woman laugh and he shouts back at Biff, hitting him and staggering. Miss Forsythe enters with another call girl, Letta. Biff helps Willy to the washroom and, finding Happy flirting with the girls, argues with him about Willy. Biff storms out, and Happy follows with the girls.

Willy and The Woman enter, dressing themselves and flirting. The door knocks and Willy hurries The Woman into the bathroom. Willy answers the door; the young Biff enters and tells Willy that he failed math. Willy tries to usher him out of the room, but Biff imitates his math teacher's lisp, which elicits laughter from Willy and The Woman. Willy tries to cover up his indiscretion, but Biff refuses to believe his stories and storms out, dejected, calling Willy a "phony little fake." Back in the restaurant, Stanley helps Willy up. Willy asks him where he can find a seed store. Stanley gives him directions to one, and Willy hurries off.

The light comes up on the Loman kitchen, where Happy enters looking for Willy. He moves into the living room and sees Linda. Biff comes inside and Linda scolds the boys and slaps away the flowers in Happy's hand. She yells at them for abandoning Willy. Happy attempts to appease her, but Biff goes in search of Willy. He finds Willy planting seeds in the garden with a flashlight. Willy is consulting Ben about a \$20,000 proposition. Biff approaches him to say goodbye and tries to bring him inside. Willy moves into the house, followed by Biff, and becomes angry again about Biff's failure. Happy tries to calm Biff, but Biff and Willy erupt in fury at each other. Biff starts to sob, which touches Willy. Everyone goes to bed except Willy, who renews his conversation with Ben, elated at how great Biff will be with \$20,000 of insurance money. Linda soon calls out for Willy but gets no response. Biff and Happy listen as well. They hear Willy's car speed away.

In the requiem, Linda and Happy stand in shock after Willy's poorly attended funeral. Biff states that Willy had the wrong dreams. Charley defends Willy as a victim of his profession. Ready to leave, Biff invites Happy to go back out West with him. Happy declares that he will stick it out in New York to validate Willy's death. Linda asks Willy for forgiveness for being unable to cry. She begins to sob, repeating "We're free. . . ." All exit, and the flute melody is heard as the curtain falls.

Characters

- **Willy Loman** - An insecure, self-deluded traveling salesman. Willy believes wholeheartedly in the American Dream of easy success and wealth, but he never achieves it. Nor do his sons fulfill his hope that they will succeed where he has failed. When Willy's illusions begin to fail under the pressing realities of his life, his mental health begins to unravel. The overwhelming tensions caused by this disparity, as well as those caused by the societal imperatives that drive Willy, form the essential conflict of *Death of a Salesman*.
- **Biff Loman** - Willy's thirty-four-year-old elder son. Biff led a charmed life in high school as a football star with scholarship prospects, good male friends, and fawning female admirers. He failed math, however, and did not have enough credits to graduate. Since then, his kleptomania has gotten him fired from every job that he has held. Biff represents Willy's vulnerable, poetic, tragic side. He cannot ignore his instincts, which tell him to abandon Willy's paralyzing dreams and move out West to work with his hands. He ultimately fails to reconcile his life with Willy's expectations of him.

- **Linda Loman** - Willy's loyal, loving wife. Linda suffers through Willy's grandiose dreams and self-delusions. Occasionally, she seems to be taken in by Willy's self-deluded hopes for future glory and success, but at other times, she seems far more realistic and less fragile than her husband. She has nurtured the family through all of Willy's misguided attempts at success, and her emotional strength and perseverance support Willy until his collapse.
- **Happy Loman** - Willy's thirty-two-year-old younger son. Happy has lived in Biff's shadow all of his life, but he compensates by nurturing his relentless sex drive and professional ambition. Happy represents Willy's sense of self-importance, ambition, and blind servitude to societal expectations. Although he works as an assistant to an assistant buyer in a department store, Happy presents himself as supremely important. Additionally, he practices bad business ethics and sleeps with the girlfriends of his superiors.
- **Charley** - Willy's next-door neighbor. Charley owns a successful business and his son, Bernard, is a wealthy, important lawyer. Willy is jealous of Charley's success. Charley gives Willy money to pay his bills, and Willy reveals at one point, choking back tears, that Charley is his only friend

- **Bernard** - Bernard is Charley's son and an important, successful lawyer. Although Willy used to mock Bernard for studying hard, Bernard always loved Willy's sons dearly and regarded Biff as a hero. Bernard's success is difficult for Willy to accept because his own sons' lives do not measure up.
- **Ben** - Willy's wealthy older brother. Ben has recently died and appears only in Willy's "daydreams." Willy regards Ben as a symbol of the success that he so desperately craves for himself and his sons.
- **The Woman** - Willy's mistress when Happy and Biff were in high school. The Woman's attention and admiration boost Willy's fragile ego. When Biff catches Willy in his hotel room with The Woman, he loses faith in his father, and his dream of passing math and going to college dies.
- **Howard Wagner** - Willy's boss. Howard inherited the company from his father, whom Willy regarded as "a masterful man" and "a prince." Though much younger than Willy, Howard treats Willy with condescension and eventually fires him, despite Willy's wounded assertions that he named Howard at his birth

- **Stanley** - A waiter at Frank's Chop House. Stanley and Happy seem to be friends, or at least acquaintances, and they banter about and ogle Miss Forsythe together before Biff and Willy arrive at the restaurant.
- **Miss Forsythe and Letta** - Two young women whom Happy and Biff meet at Frank's Chop House. It seems likely that Miss Forsythe and Letta are prostitutes, judging from Happy's repeated comments about their moral character and the fact that they are “on call.”
- **Jenny** - Charley's secretary.

Analysis of Major Characters

Willy Loman - Despite his desperate searching through his past, Willy does not achieve the self-realization or self-knowledge typical of the tragic hero. The quasi-resolution that his suicide offers him represents only a partial discovery of the truth. While he achieves a professional understanding of himself and the fundamental nature of the sales profession, Willy fails to realize his personal failure and betrayal of his soul and family through the meticulously constructed artifice of his life. He cannot grasp the true personal, emotional, spiritual understanding of himself as a literal “loman” or “low man.” Willy is too driven by his own “willy”-ness or perverse “willfulness” to recognize the slanted reality that his desperate mind has forged. Still, many critics, focusing on Willy's entrenchment in a quagmire of lies, delusions, and self-deceptions, ignore the significant accomplishment of his partial self-realization. Willy's failure to recognize the anguished love offered to him by his family is crucial to the climax of his torturous day, and the play presents this incapacity as the real tragedy. Despite this failure, Willy makes the most extreme sacrifice in his attempt to leave an inheritance that will allow Biff to fulfill the American Dream.

Ben's final mantra—"The jungle is dark, but full of diamonds"—turns Willy's suicide into a metaphorical moral struggle, a final skewed ambition to realize his full commercial and material capacity. His final act, according to Ben, is "not like an appointment at all" but like a "diamond . . . rough and hard to the touch." In the absence of any real degree of self-knowledge or truth, Willy is able to achieve a tangible result. In some respect, Willy does experience a sort of revelation, as he finally comes to understand that the product he sells is himself. Through the imaginary advice of Ben, Willy ends up fully believing his earlier assertion to Charley that "after all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive."

Biff Loman - Unlike Willy and Happy, Biff feels compelled to seek the truth about himself. While his father and brother are unable to accept the miserable reality of their respective lives, Biff acknowledges his failure and eventually manages to confront it. Even the difference between his name and theirs reflects this polarity: whereas Willy and Happy willfully and happily delude themselves, Biff bristles stiffly at self-deception. Biff's discovery that Willy has a mistress strips him of his faith in Willy and Willy's ambitions for him. Consequently, Willy sees Biff as an underachiever, while Biff sees himself as trapped in Willy's grandiose fantasies. After his epiphany in Bill Oliver's office, Biff determines to break through the lies surrounding the Loman family in order to come to realistic terms with his own life. Intent on revealing the simple and humble truth behind Willy's fantasy, Biff longs for the territory (the symbolically free West) obscured by his father's blind faith in a skewed, materialist version of the American Dream. Biff's identity crisis is a function of his and his father's disillusionment, which, in order to reclaim his identity, he must expose.

Happy Loman - Happy shares none of the poetry that erupts from Biff and that is buried in Willy—he is the stunted incarnation of Willy's worst traits and the embodiment of the lie of the happy American Dream. As such, Happy is a difficult character with whom to empathize. He is one-dimensional and static throughout the play. His empty vow to avenge Willy's death by finally “beat[ing] this racket” provides evidence of his critical condition: for Happy, who has lived in the shadow of the inflated expectations of his brother, there is no escape from the Dream's indoctrinated lies. Happy's diseased condition is irreparable—he lacks even the tiniest spark of self-knowledge or capacity for self-analysis. He does share Willy's capacity for self-delusion, trumpeting himself as the assistant buyer at his store, when, in reality, he is only an assistant to the assistant buyer. He does not possess a hint of the latent thirst for knowledge that proves Biff's salvation. Happy is a doomed, utterly duped figure, destined to be swallowed up by the force of blind ambition that fuels his insatiable sex drive.

Linda Loman & Charley - Linda and Charley serve as forces of reason throughout the play. Linda is probably the most enigmatic and complex character in *Death of a Salesman*, or even in all of Miller's work. Linda views freedom as an escape from debt, the reward of total ownership of the material goods that symbolize success and stability. Willy's prolonged obsession with the American Dream seems, over the long years of his marriage, to have left Linda internally conflicted. Nevertheless, Linda, by far the toughest, most realistic, and most levelheaded character in the play, appears to have kept her emotional life intact. As such, she represents the emotional core of the drama.

If Linda is a sort of emotional prophet, overcome by the inevitable end that she foresees with startling clarity, then Charley functions as a sort of poetic prophet or sage. Miller portrays Charley as ambiguously gendered or effeminate, much like Tiresias, the mythological seer in Sophocles' *Oedipus* plays. Whereas Linda's lucid diagnosis of Willy's rapid decline is made possible by her emotional sanity, Charley's prognosis of the situation is logical, grounded firmly in practical reasoned analysis. He recognizes Willy's financial failure, and the job offer that he extends to Willy constitutes a commonsense solution. Though he is not terribly fond of Willy, Charley understands his plight and shields him from blame.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

Themes

- The American dream - 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.

Motifs

- **Mythic Figures** - Willy's tendency to mythologize people contributes to his deluded understanding of the world. He speaks of Dave Singleman as a legend and imagines that his death must have been beautifully noble. Willy compares Biff and Happy to the mythic Greek figures Adonis and Hercules because he believes that his sons are pinnacles of “personal attractiveness” and power through “well liked”-ness; to him, they seem the very incarnation of the American Dream.

Willy's mythologizing proves quite nearsighted, however. Willy fails to realize the hopelessness of Singleman's lonely, on-the-job, on-the-road death. Trying to achieve what he considers to be Singleman's heroic status, Willy commits himself to a pathetic death and meaningless legacy (even if Willy's life insurance policy ends up paying off, Biff wants nothing to do with Willy's ambition for him). Similarly, neither Biff nor Happy ends up leading an ideal, godlike life; while Happy does believe in the American Dream, it seems likely that he will end up no better off than the decidedly ungodlike Willy.

- The American west, Alaska, and the African jungle - These regions represent the potential of instinct to Biff and Willy. Willy's father found success in Alaska and his brother, Ben, became rich in Africa; these exotic locales, especially when compared to Willy's banal Brooklyn neighborhood, crystallize how Willy's obsession with the commercial world of the city has trapped him in an unpleasant reality. Whereas Alaska and the African jungle symbolize Willy's failure, the American West, on the other hand, symbolizes Biff's potential. Biff realizes that he has been content only when working on farms, out in the open. His westward escape from both Willy's delusions and the commercial world of the eastern United States suggests a nineteenth-century pioneer mentality—Biff, unlike Willy, recognizes the importance of the individual.

Symbols

- **Seeds** - Seeds represent for Willy the opportunity to prove the worth of his labor, both as a salesman and a father. His desperate, nocturnal attempt to grow vegetables signifies his shame about barely being able to put food on the table and having nothing to leave his children when he passes. Willy feels that he has worked hard but fears that he will not be able to help his offspring any more than his own abandoning father helped him. The seeds also symbolize Willy's sense of failure with Biff. Despite the American Dream's formula for success, which Willy considers infallible, Willy's efforts to cultivate and nurture Biff went awry. Realizing that his all-American football star has turned into a lazy bum, Willy takes Biff's failure and lack of ambition as a reflection of his abilities as a father.
- **Diamonds** - To Willy, diamonds represent tangible wealth and, hence, both validation of one's labor (and life) and the ability to pass material goods on to one's offspring, two things that Willy desperately craves. Correlatively, diamonds, the discovery of which made Ben a fortune, symbolize Willy's failure as a salesman. Despite Willy's belief in the American Dream, a belief unwavering to the extent that he passed up the opportunity to go with Ben to Alaska, the Dream's promise of financial security has eluded Willy. At the end of the play, Ben encourages Willy to enter the “jungle” finally and retrieve this elusive diamond—that is, to kill himself for insurance money in order to make his life meaningful.

- Linda's and The Woman's stockings - Willy's strange obsession with the condition of Linda's stockings foreshadows his later flashback to Biff's discovery of him and The Woman in their Boston hotel room. The teenage Biff accuses Willy of giving away Linda's stockings to The Woman. Stockings assume a metaphorical weight as the symbol of betrayal and sexual infidelity. New stockings are important for both Willy's pride in being financially successful and thus able to provide for his family and for Willy's ability to ease his guilt about, and suppress the memory of, his betrayal of Linda and Biff.
- The rubber hose - The rubber hose is a stage prop that reminds the audience of Willy's desperate attempts at suicide. He has apparently attempted to kill himself by inhaling gas, which is, ironically, the very substance essential to one of the most basic elements with which he must equip his home for his family's health and comfort—heat. Literal death by inhaling gas parallels the metaphorical death that Willy feels in his struggle to afford such a basic necessity.