

Willy Loman: Never Waking Up From His Dream

Baseball and fast cars. White picket fences and apple pie. Everything that surrounds American culture; the materialism, the pipe dreams, and the insatiable hunger for more, are the elements composing the American Dream. Arthur Miller, author of Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Death of a Salesman*, depicts a salesman fallen victim to blind his faith in capitalism and his failure to realize that the American Dream is nothing but a dream.

Willy Loman, the struggling salesman of Miller's drama, devoted his life, with no avail, to coming out on top. Exhausted by his efforts of realizing the American Dream, Willy often fooled himself and his family by appearing to be successful. He had once told his wife that he made "five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston."(p.35) In reality, he had only made two hundred gross in the combined trip. Willy put all of his efforts into selling, yet continually fell into debt. In the second act of the play, Willy found himself planting a garden. The scene symbolized the fruitless efforts in becoming a success.

Conversely, and somewhat paradoxically, Willy Loman had strived to attain success without working hard. He admired one particular salesman who had made his living over the telephone. "...he'd go up to his room, y'understand, put on his velvet slippers—I'll never forget—and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living."(p.81) However, Willy exhausted himself with a job unlike the one he described. Willy's belief that a man who is well liked would always be successful was often reflected by his attitude toward Bernard, the hardworking schoolmate of his son Biff. "Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him...Be liked and you will never want."(p.33) Years later, just before Bernard was arguing a case in front of the Supreme Court, his father Charley commented that Bernard did not need to flash his success. "He don't have to—he's gonna do it."(p.95)

Bringing him deeper into the trap of the American Dream, Willy refused to realize that he could not get ahead in society. Willy often dreamt unreasonable dreams for his sons, such as beginning their own sporting goods line. "Lick the world! You guys

together could absolutely lick the civilized world.”(p.64) His blind belief that the two sons could accomplish anything would only add to his disappointment in life. Yet his stubborn refusal to acknowledge failure continued to show throughout his last days. When Willy noticed his wife, Linda, mending her stockings, he reacted angrily by saying, “I won’t have you mending stockings in this house! Now throw them out!”(p.39) The fact that Willy sold stockings for a living, and that he could not afford to buy them for Linda, hurt his pride even more. A flaw of the capitalist system was evident with the irony that the seller could not afford his own product.

Willy’s false impression that capitalism offered opportunity for wealth to everybody led him to follow a broken path toward destruction. Capitalism promoted greed in him, and the want to have everything by using his personality alone. His greed made him lose sight of the jobs he enjoyed doing. Biff realized at the funeral that Willy was happiest when he was working with his two hands. “You know something, Charley, there’s more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made.”(p.138) But Willy had never followed his passion for building, partly because he had idolized and looked up to his largely successful deceased brother, Ben. Appearing throughout the play in flashbacks and as an imaginary consultant, Ben contributed to Willy’s demise with success stories and reminders of missed opportunities. “Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich.”(p.48)

Willy Loman did not have the big funeral he had always wanted. The death of a working-class man passed nearly unnoticed. The victim of ambition and a frazzled American Dream was missed only by his family. His end was not tragic because of his death. His end was tragic because he had suffered during his life, and the cause of that suffering was his misguided belief in the American system.