

Full Play Analysis

Arthur Miller's 1949 play, *Death of a Salesman*, explores the promises and perils of the American Dream. As the Loman family struggles with what it means to be successful and happy in post-war America, its members serve as symbolic representations of the struggle to define that dream. The play ends with the death of one salesman's Sisyphean hope for wealth and universal acclaim, yet it glimmers with hope for his son, who finally turns toward a life of meaningful work and self-realization.

As the play opens, Willy Loman—heavy with physical weight and the weighted burden of serving as a breadwinner—has recently returned home to Brooklyn after an unsuccessful sales trip. His two sons, Biff and Happy, are visiting. However, the play constantly shifts between past and present, creating a disorientation of time that is reflected in dialogue. These shifts emphasize the role of memory and draw attention to one of the main character's internal conflicts: Willy struggles against his own false hopes for his children. He often contradicts himself as he remembers his sons' childhoods through a nostalgic lens, infusing the past with an idealism that did not necessarily exist. His own childhood family had been a broken one mired with abandonment—first by his father and then by his brother. Willy's desperate longing for material success and universal acceptance may stem from the insecurities he developed as a result of this childhood abandonment. Even Willy's





Willy puts an enormous amount of pressure on his children to fulfill that which he himself could not. He is neither a good salesman nor is he "well-liked," and he plays the role of salesman with his wife and children by peddling the fantasy that

he is more successful and appreciated than he really is. Willy futilely compares his success to that of his neighbor, Uncle Charley, by measuring his boys up to Charley's son, Bernard. In contrast to the elusiveness of the American Dream that Willy will never achieve, Charley and Bernard are financially secure their whole lives, achieving success as a result of hard work, not physical appearance or popularity.

The play's inciting incident draws attention to Willy's struggle to accept the truth about himself. When Willy goes to see his younger boss, Howard, to ask for a non-traveling job with a steadier paycheck, Howard patronizes and belittles him. Willy falls into the role of an "office boy," attending to the menial task of retrieving





As the rising action drives events toward the play's climax, Willy is forced to confront the truth that he denies. He has failed to understand or achieve the American Dream, and that failure has affected his sons. He heads to Frank's Chop House to discuss "the Florida idea"—a publicity campaign concocted by his two sons—with Biff and Happy. Biff has continuously jumped from job to job, and, after a promising football career in school, is a disappointment. Happy has a steady job but does not enjoy the rat race, living an immoral life of dalliances with his supervisors' partners and taking bribes to climb the corporate ladder. Willy has passed along his false notion of the American Dream to his sons, and the climax of the play occurs when Biff attempts to confront his father about his delusions. Willy, still deluded, is abandoned by his sons at the restaurant

During the play's falling action, Miller suggests that Willy's central misunderstanding has been that he has ignored certain values inherent in a more complete sense of the American Dream. Back home, Willy's frantic hunt for seeds leads him to his garden where he claims that "Nothing's planted" and that he doesn't "have a thing in the ground." Willy's lack of physical and familial roots are metaphors for his unfulfilled dreams, and their home, once symbolic of growth and expansion, is now surrounded by the congestion of apartment buildings. Willy is unable to separate the professional from the personal, and he does not understand the more important foundations of

