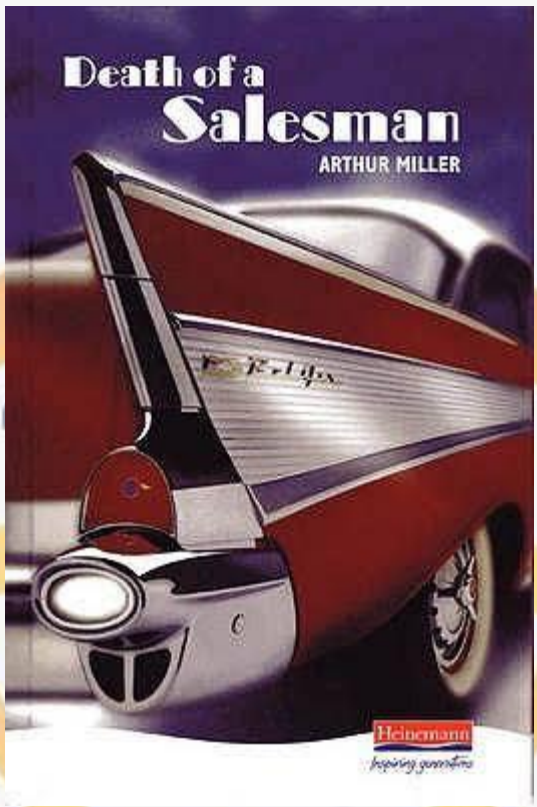
Death of a Salesman

By Arthur Miller



Revision Notes

Summary and Analysis of the play

Act I - Opening scene to Willy's first daydream

Summary

The play begins on a Monday evening at the Loman family home in Brooklyn. After some light changes on stage and ambient flute music (the first instance of a motif connected to Willy Loman's faint memory of his father, who was once a flute-maker and salesman), Willy, a sixty-three-year-old travelling salesman, returns home early from a trip, apparently exhausted. His wife, Linda, gets out of bed to greet him. She asks if he had an automobile accident, since he once drove off a bridge into a river. Irritated, he replies that nothing happened. Willy explains that he kept falling into a trance while driving—he reveals later that he almost hit a boy. Linda urges him to ask his employer, Howard Wagner, for a non-travelling job in New York City. Willy's two adult sons, Biff and Happy, are visiting. Before he left that morning, Willy criticized Biff for working at manual labour on farms and horse ranches in the West. The argument that ensued was left unresolved. Willy says that his thirty-four-year-old son is a lazy bum. Shortly thereafter, he declares that Biff is anything but lazy. Willy's habit of contradicting himself becomes quickly apparent in his conversation with Linda.

Willy's loud rambling wakes his sons. They speculate that he had another accident. Linda returns to bed while Willy goes to the kitchen to get something to eat. Happy and Biff reminisce about the good old days when they were young. Although Happy, thirty-two, is younger than Biff, he is more confident and more successful. Biff seems worn, apprehensive, and confused. Happy is worried about Willy's habit of talking to himself. Most of the time, Happy observes, Willy talks to the absent Biff about his disappointment in Biff's unsteadiness. Biff hopped from job to job after high school and is concerned that he has "waste[d] his life." He is disappointed in himself and in the disparity between his life and the notions of value and success with which Willy indoctrinated him as a boy. Happy has a steady job in New York, but the rat race does not satisfy him. He and Biff fantasize briefly about going out west together. However, Happy still longs to become an important executive. He sleeps with the girlfriends and fiancées of his superiors and often takes bribes in an attempt to climb the corporate ladder from his position as an assistant to the assistant buyer in a department store.

Biff plans to ask Bill Oliver, an old employer, for a loan to buy a ranch. He remembers that Oliver thought highly of him and offered to help him anytime. He wonders if Oliver still thinks that he stole a carton of basketballs while he was working at his store. Happy encourages his brother, commenting that Biff is "well liked"—a sure predictor of success in the Loman household. The boys are disgusted to hear Willy talking to himself downstairs. They try to go to sleep.

Analysis

It is important to note that much of the play's action takes place in Willy's home. In the past, the Brooklyn neighbourhood in which the Lomans live was nicely removed from the bustle of New York City. There was space within the neighbourhood for expansion and for a garden. When Willy and Linda purchased it, it represented the ultimate expression of Willy's hopes for the future. Now, however, the house is hemmed in by apartment buildings on all sides, and sunlight barely reaches their yard. Their abode has come to represent the reduction of Willy's hopes, even though, ironically, his mortgage payments are almost complete. Just as the house is besieged by apartment buildings, Willy's ego is besieged by doubts and mounting evidence that he will never experience the fame and fortune promised by the American Dream.

Willy's reality profoundly conflicts with his hopes. Throughout his life, he has constructed elaborate fantasies to deny the mounting evidence of his failure to fulfil his desires and expectations. By the time the play opens, Willy suffers from crippling self-delusion. His consciousness is so fractured that he cannot even maintain a consistent fantasy. In one moment, he calls Biff a lazy bum. In the next, he says that Biff is anything but lazy. His later assessment of the family car is similarly contradictory—one moment he calls it a piece of trash, the next "the finest car ever built." Labelling Biff a lazy bum allows Willy to deflect Linda's criticism of his harangue against Biff's lack of material success, ambition, and focus. Denying Biff's laziness enables Willy to hold onto the hope that Biff will someday, in some capacity, fulfil his expectations of him. Willy changes his interpretation of reality according to his psychological needs at the moment. He is likewise able to reimagine decisive moments in his past in his later daydreams. Ironically, he asks Linda angrily why he is "always being contradicted," when it is usually he who contradicts himself from moment to moment.

The opening pages of the play introduce the strangely affected and stilted tone of the dialogue, which transcends the 1950S idiom of nonspecific pet names (an ungendered "pal" or "kid" for adult and child alike) and dated metaphors, vocabulary, and slang. Some critics cite the driving, emphatic, repetitive diction ("Maybe it's your glasses. You never went for your new glasses"; "I'm the New England man. I'm vital in New England") and persistent vexed questioning ("Why do you get American when I like Swiss?" "How can they whip cheese?") as a particularly Jewish-American idiom, but the stylization of the speech serves a much more immediate end than stereotype or bigotry. Miller intended the singsong melodies of his often miserable and conflicted characters to parallel the complex struggle of a family with a skewed version of the American Dream trying to support itself. The dialogue's crooked, blunt lyricism of stuttering diction occasionally rises even to the level of the grotesque and inarticulate, as do the characters themselves. Miller himself claims in his autobiography that the characters in Death of a Salesman speak in a stylized manner "to lift the experience into emergency speech of an unabashedly open kind rather than to proceed by the crabbed dramatic hints and pretexts of the 'natural.' "

Willy's first daydream to the first appearance of The Woman

Summary

Willy is lost in his memories. Suddenly, the memories of his sons' childhood come alive. Young Biff and Happy wash and wax their father's car after he has just returned from a sales trip. Biff informs Willy that he "borrowed" a football from the locker room to practice. Willy laughs knowingly. Happy tries to get his father's attention, but Willy's preference for Biff is obvious. Willy whispers that he will soon open a bigger business than his successful neighbour Uncle Charley because Charley is not as "well liked" as he is. Charley's son, Bernard, arrives to beg Biff to study math with him. Biff is close to failing math, which would prevent him from graduating. Willy orders Biff to study. Biff distracts him by showing him that he printed the insignia of the University of Virginia on his sneakers, impressing Willy. Bernard states that the sneakers do not mean Biff will graduate. After Bernard leaves, Willy asks if Bernard is liked. The boys reply that he is liked but not "well liked." Willy tells them that Bernard may make good grades, but Happy and Biff will be more successful in business because they are "well liked."

Still in his daydream of fifteen years ago, Willy brags to Linda that he made $1200 in sales that week. Linda quickly figures his commission at over $200. Willy then hedges his estimation. Under questioning, he admits that he grossed only $200. The $70 commission is barely adequate to cover the family's expenses. In a rare moment of lucidity and self-criticism, Willy moans that he cannot move ahead because people do not seem to like him. Linda tells him that he is successful enough. Willy complains that he talks and jokes too much. He explains that Charley earns respect because he

is a man of few words. His jealousy of his neighbour becomes painfully clear. Willy thinks people laugh at him for being too fat; he once punched a man for joking about his “walrus” physique. As Linda assures him that he is the handsomest man ever, Willy replies that she is his best friend in the world. Just as he tells her that he misses her terribly when he is on the road, The Woman’s laughter sounds from the darkness.

Analysis

One of the most interesting aspects of Death of a Salesman is its fluid treatment of time: past and present flow into one another seamlessly and simultaneously as various stimuli induce in Willy a rambling stream-of-consciousness. It is important to remember that the idyllic past that Willy recalls is one that he reinvents; one should not, therefore, take these seeming flashbacks entirely as truth. The idyllic past functions as an escape from the present reality or a retrospective reconstruction of past events and blunders. Even when he retreats to this idyllic past, however, Willy cannot completely deny his real situation. He retreats into his daydreams not only to escape the present but also to examine the past. He searches for the mistake that he made that frustrated his hopes for fame and fortune and destroyed his relationship with Biff. Willy’s treatment of his life as a story to be edited and rewritten enables him to avoid confronting its depressing reality.

It is important to examine the evolution of Willy’s relationship with his family, as the solid family is one of the most prominent elements of the American Dream. In the present, Willy’s relationship with his family is fraught with tension. In his memories, on the other hand, Willy sees his family as happy and secure. But even Willy’s conception of the past is not as idyllic as it seems on the surface, as his split consciousness, the profound rift in his psyche, shows through. No matter how much he wants to remember his past as all-American and blissful, Willy cannot completely erase the evidence to the contrary. He wants to remember Biff as the bright hope for the future. In the midst of his memories, however, we find that Willy does nothing to discourage Biff’s compulsive thieving habit. In fact, he subtly encourages it by laughing at Biff’s theft of the football.

As an adult, Biff has never held a steady job, and his habitual stealing from employers seems largely to be the reason for this failing. Over the years, Biff and Willy have come to a mutual antagonism. Willy is unable to let go of his commitment to the American Dream, and he places tremendous pressure on Biff to fulfil it for him. Biff feels a deep sense of inadequacy because Willy wants him to pursue a career that conflicts with his natural inclinations and instincts. He would rather work in the open air on a ranch than enter business and make a fortune, and he believes that Willy’s natural inclination is the same, like his father’s before him.

Willy’s relationship with Happy is also less than perfect in Willy’s reconstruction of the past, and it is clear that he favours Biff. Happy tries several times to gain Willy’s attention and approval but fails. The course of Happy’s adult life clearly bears the marks of this favouritism. Happy doesn’t express resentment toward Biff; rather, he emulates the behaviour of the high-school-aged Biff. In the past, Willy expressed admiration for Biff’s success with the girls and his ability to get away with theft. As an adult, Happy competes with more successful men by sleeping with their women—he thus performs a sort of theft and achieves sexual prowess.

Willy’s relationship with Linda is even more complex and interesting. In one of his moments of self-doubt, she assures him that he is a good provider and that he is handsome. She also sees through his lie when he tries to inflate his commission from his latest trip. Although she does not buy his pitch to her, she still loves him. His failure to make her believe his fantasy of himself does not lead her to reject him—she does not measure Willy’s worth in terms of his professional success. Willy, however, needs more than love, which accepts character flaws, doubts, and insecurity—he seeks desperately

to be “well liked.” As such, he ignores the opportunity that Linda presents to him: to view himself more honestly, to acknowledge the reality of his life, and to accept himself for what he is without feeling like a failure. Instead, he tries to play the salesman with her and their sons.

After The Woman’s laughter through Ben’s first appearance in Willy’s daydream

Summary

The Woman is Willy’s mistress and a secretary for one of his buyers. In Willy’s daydream, they sit in a hotel room. She tells him that she picked him because he is so funny and sweet. Willy loves the praise. She thanks Willy for giving her stockings and promises to put him right through to the buyers when she sees him next. The Woman fades into the darkness as Willy returns to his conversation with Linda in the present. He notices Linda mending stockings and angrily demands that she throw them out—he is too proud to let his wife wear an old pair (Biff later discovers that Willy has been buying new stockings for The Woman instead of for Linda). Bernard returns to the Loman house to beg Biff to study math. Willy orders him to give Biff the answers. Bernard replies that he cannot do so during a state exam. Bernard insists that Biff return the football. Linda comments that some mothers fear that Biff is “too rough” with their daughters. Willy, enraged by the unglamorous truth of his son’s behavior, plunges into a state of distraction and shouts at them to shut up. Bernard leaves the house, and Linda leaves the room, holding back tears.

The memory fades. Willy laments to himself and Happy that he did not go to Alaska with his brother, Ben, who acquired a fortune at the age of twenty-one upon discovering an African diamond mine. Charley, having heard the shouts, visits to check on Willy. They play cards. Charley, concerned about Willy, offers him a job, but Willy is insulted by the offer. He asks Charley if he saw the ceiling he put in his living room, but he becomes surly when Charley expresses interest, insisting that Charley’s lack of skill with tools proves his lack of masculinity. Ben appears on the stage in a semi-daydream. He cuts a dignified, utterly confident figure. Willy tells Charley that Ben’s wife wrote from Africa to tell them Ben had died. He alternates between conversing with Charley and his dead brother. Willy gets angry when Charley wins a hand, so Charley takes his cards and leaves. He is disturbed that Willy is so disoriented that he talks to a dead brother as if he were present. Willy immerses himself in the memory of a visit from his brother. Ben and Willy’s father abandoned the family when Willy was three or four years old and Ben was seventeen. Ben left home to look for their father in Alaska but never found him. At Willy’s request, Ben tells young Biff and Happy about their grandfather. Among an assortment of other jobs, Willy and Ben’s father made flutes and sold them as a travelling salesman before following a gold rush to Alaska. Ben proceeds to wrestle the young Biff to the ground in a demonstration of unbridled machismo, wielding his umbrella threateningly over Biff’s eye. Willy begs Ben to stay longer, but Ben hurries to catch his train.

Analysis

Just as the product that Willy sells is never specified, so too does The Woman, with whom Willy commits adultery, remain nameless. Miller offers no description of her looks or character because such details are irrelevant; The Woman merely represents Willy’s discontent in life. Indeed, she is more a symbol than an actual human being: she regards herself as a means for Willy to get to the buyers more efficiently, and Willy uses her as a tool to feel well liked. Biff sees her as a sign that Willy and his ambitions are not as great as Willy claims.

Willy’s compulsive need to be “well liked” contributes to his descent into self-delusion. Whereas Linda loves Willy despite his considerable imperfections, Willy’s mistress, on the other hand, merely likes him. She buys his sales pitch, which boosts his ego, but does not care for him deeply the way Linda does. Linda regards Willy’s job merely as a source of income; she draws a clear line between

Willy as a salesman and Willy as her husband. Willy is unable to do so and thus fails to accept the love that Linda and his sons offer him.

Willy was first abandoned by his father and later by his older brother, Ben. Willy's father was a salesman as well, but he actually produced what he sold and was successful, according to Ben, at least. Ben presents their father as both an independent thinker and a masculine man skilled with his hands. In a sense, Willy's father, not Willy himself, represents the male ideal to Biff, a pioneer spirit and rugged individualist. Unlike his father, Willy does not attain personal satisfaction from the things that he sells because they are not the products of his personal efforts—what he sells is himself, and he is severely damaged and psychically ruptured. His professional persona is the only thing that he has produced himself. In a roundabout manner, Willy seeks approval from his professional contacts by trying to be "well liked"—a coping strategy to deal with his abandonment by the two most important male figures in his life.

Willy's efforts to create the perfect family of the American Dream seem to constitute an attempt to rebuild the pieces of the broken family of his childhood. One can interpret his decision to become a salesman as the manifestation of his desperate desire to be the good father and provider that his own salesman father failed to be. Willy despairs about leaving his sons nothing in the form of a material inheritance, acutely aware that his own father abandoned him and left him with nothing.

Willy's obsession with being well liked seems to be rooted in his reaction to his father's and brother's abandoning of him—he takes their rejection of him as a sign of their not liking him enough. Willy's memory of Ben's visit to his home is saturated with fears of abandonment and a need for approval. When Ben declares that he must leave soon in order to catch his train, Willy desperately tries to find some way to make him stay a little longer. He proudly shows his sons to Ben, practically begging for a word of approval. Additionally, he pleads with Ben to tell Biff and Happy about their grandfather, as he realizes that he has no significant family history to give to his sons as an inheritance; the ability to pass such a chronicle on to one's offspring is an important part of the American Dream that Willy so highly esteems.

From Ben's departure through the closing scene

Summary

Willy's shouts wake Linda and Biff, who find Willy outside in his slippers. Biff asks Linda how long he has been talking to himself, and Happy joins them outside. Linda explains that Willy's mental unbalance results from his having lost his salary (he now works only on commission). Linda knows that Willy borrows fifty dollars a week from Charley and pretends it is his salary. Linda claims that Biff and Happy are ungrateful. She calls Happy a "philandering bum." Angry and guilt-ridden, Biff offers to stay home and get a job to help with expenses. Linda says that he cannot fight with Willy all the time. She explains that all of his automobile accidents are actually failed suicide attempts. She adds that she found a rubber hose behind the fuse box and a new nipple on the water heater's gas pipe—a sign that Willy attempted to asphyxiate himself. Willy overhears Biff, Happy, and Linda arguing about him. When Biff jokes with his father to snap him out of his trance, Willy misunderstands and thinks that Biff is calling him crazy. They argue, and Willy maintains that he is a "big shot" in the sales world.

Happy mentions that Biff plans to ask Bill Oliver for a business loan. Willy brightens immediately. Happy outlines a publicity campaign to sell sporting goods; the business proposal, which revolves around the brothers using their natural physical abilities to lead publicity displays of sporting events, is thenceforth referred to as the "Florida idea." Everyone loves the idea of Happy and Biff going into

business together. Willy begins offering dubious and somewhat unhelpful advice for Biff's loan interview. One moment, he tells Biff not to crack any jokes; the next, he tells him to lighten things up with a couple of funny stories. Linda tries to offer support, but Willy tells her several times to be quiet. He orders Biff not to pick up anything that falls off Oliver's desk because doing so is an office boy's job. Before they fall asleep, Linda again begs Willy to ask his boss for a non-traveling job. Biff removes the rubber hose from behind the fuse box before he retires to bed.

Analysis

One reason for Willy's reluctance to criticize Biff for his youthful thefts and his careless attitude toward his classes seems to be that he fears doing damage to Biff's ego. Thus, he offers endless praise, hoping that Biff will fulfil the promise of that praise in his adulthood. It is also likely that Willy refuses to criticize the young Biff because he fears that, if he does so, Biff will not like him. This disapproval represents the ultimate personal and professional (the two spheres are conflated in Willy's mind) insult and failure. Because Willy's consciousness is split between despair and hope, it is probable that both considerations are behind Willy's decision not to criticize Biff's youthful indiscretions. In any case, his relationship with Biff is fraught, on Willy's side, with the childhood emotional trauma of abandonment and, on Biff's side, with the struggle between fulfilling societal expectations and personal expectations.

The myth of the American Dream has its strongest pull on the individuals who do not enjoy the happiness and prosperity that it promises. Willy pursues the fruits of that dream as a panacea for the disappointments and the hurts of his own youth. He is a true believer in the myth that any "well liked" young man possessing a certain degree of physical faculty and "personal attractiveness" can achieve the Dream if he journeys forth in the world with a can-do attitude of confidence. The men who should have offered him the affirmation that he needed to build a healthy concept of self-worth—his father and Ben—left him. Therefore, Willy tries to measure his self-worth by the standards of an American myth that hardly corresponds to reality, while ignoring the more important foundations of family love, unconditional support, and the freedom of choice inherent to the American Dream. Unfortunately, Willy has a corrupted interpretation of the American Dream that clashes with that set forth by the country's founding fathers; he is preoccupied with the material facets of American success and national identity.

In his obsession with being "well liked," Willy ignores the love that his family can offer him. Linda is far more realistic and grounded than Willy, and she is satisfied with what he can give her. She sees through his facade and still loves and accepts the man behind the facade. She likewise loves her adult sons, and she recognizes their bluster as transparent as well. She knows in her heart that Biff is irresponsible and that Happy is a "philandering bum," but she loves them without always having to like or condone their behaviour. The emotional core of the family, Linda demands their full cooperation in dealing with Willy's mental decline. If Willy were content finally to relinquish the gnarled and grotesquely caricatured American tragic myth that he has fed with his fear, insecurity, and profound anxiety and that has possessed his soul, he could be more content. Instead, he continues to chase the fame and fortune that outruns him. He has built his concept of himself not on human relationships that fulfil human needs but on the unrealistic myth of the American hero. That myth has preyed on his all-too-common male weaknesses, until the fantasy that he has constructed about his life becomes intolerable to Biff. Willy's diseased mind is almost ready to explode by the end of Act I. The false hope offered by the "Florida idea" is a placebo, and the empty confidence it instils in Willy makes his final fall all the more crushing.

Act II - Opening scene through scene in Howard's office

Summary

When Willy awakes the next morning, Biff and Happy have already left, Biff to see Bill Oliver and Happy to mull over the "Florida idea" and go to work. Willy, in high spirits with the prospect of the "Florida idea," mentions that he would like to get some seeds and plant a small garden in the yard. Linda, pleased with her husband's hopeful mood, points out that there is not enough sun. Willy replies that they will have to get a house in the country. Linda reminds Willy to ask his boss, Howard, for a non-travelling job as well as an advance to pay the insurance premium. They have one last payment on both the refrigerator and the house, and they have just finished paying for the car. Linda informs Willy that Biff and Happy want to take him to dinner at Frank's Chop House at six o'clock. As Willy departs, moved and excited by his sons' dinner invitation, he notices a stocking that Linda is mending and, guilt-ridden with the latent memory of his adultery with The Woman, admonishes her to throw the stocking away.

Willy timidly enters Howard's office. Howard is playing with a wire recorder he has just purchased for dictation. He plays the recorded voices of his family: his cloyingly enthusiastic children (a whistling daughter and a son who recites the state capitals in alphabetical order) and his shy wife. As Willy tries to express admiration, Howard repeatedly shushes him. Willy asks for a non-traveling job at $65 a week. Howard replies that there is no opening available. He looks for his lighter. Willy finds it and hands it to him, unconsciously ignoring, in his nervous and pathetically humble distraction, his own advice never to handle or tend to objects in a superior's office, since that is the responsibility of "office boys." Willy keeps lowering his salary request, explaining his financial situation in unusually candid detail, but Howard remains resistant. Howard keeps calling him "kid" and assumes a condescending tone despite his younger age and Willy's reminders that he helped Howard's father name him.

Desperate, Willy tries to relate an anecdote about Dave Singleman, an eighty-four-year-old salesman who phoned his buyers and made his sales without ever leaving his hotel room. After he died the noble "death of a salesman" that eludes Willy, hundreds of salesmen and buyers attended his funeral. Willy reveals that his acquaintance with this venerable paragon of salesmanship convinced him to become a salesman himself rather than join his brother, Ben, on his newly purchased plot of timberland in Alaska. Singleman's dignified success and graceful, respected position as an older man deluded Willy into believing that "selling was the greatest career a man could want" because of its limitless potential and its honourable nature. Willy laments the loss of friendship and personality in the business, and he complains that no one knows him anymore. An uninterested Howard leaves the office to attend to other people, and he returns when Willy begins shouting frantically after accidentally switching on the wire recorder. Eventually, Willy becomes so distraught that Howard informs him that he does not want Willy to represent his company anymore. Howard essentially fires Willy, with the vague implication of reemployment after a period of "rest." He suggests that Willy turn to his sons (who he understandably assumes are successful given Willy's loud bragging) for financial support, but Willy is horrified at the thought of depending on his children and reversing the expected familial roles. He is far too proud to admit defeat, and Howard must insist repeatedly on the cessation of Willy's employment before it sinks in.

Analysis

Biff's decision to seek a business loan raises Willy's spirits, and the way in which Willy expresses his optimism is quite revealing. The first thing Willy thinks about is planting a garden in his yard; he then muses to Linda that they should buy a house in the country, so that he could build guesthouses for Biff and Happy when they have families of their own. These hopeful plans seem to illustrate how ill-suited Willy is to his profession, as it stifles his natural inclinations. Indeed, the competitive, hyper-

capitalist world of sales seems no more appropriate for Willy than for Biff. Willy seems happiest when he dreams of building things with his own hands, and when his instincts in this direction surface, he seems whole again, able to see a glimmer of truth in himself and his abilities.

Willy's wistful fantasy of living in the forests of Alaska strengthens the implication that he chose the wrong profession. He does not seem to like living in an urban setting. However, his fascination with the frontier is also intimately connected to his obsession with the American Dream. In nineteenth-century America, the concept of the intrepid explorer entering the unknown, uncharted wilderness and striking gold was deeply imbedded in the national consciousness. With the post-war surge of consumerism in America, this "wilderness" became the bustling market of consumer goods, and the capitalist replaced the pioneer as the American hero. These new intrepid explorers plunged into the jungle of business transactions in order to find a niche to exploit. Ben, whose success involved a literal jungle in Africa, represents one version of the frontier narrative. Dave Singleman represents another. Willy chose to follow Singleman's path, convinced that it was the modern version and future of the American Dream of success through hard work.

While Willy's dissatisfaction with his life seems due in part to choosing a profession that conflicts with his interests, it seems also due in part to comparing all aspects, professional and private alike, of his own life to those of a mythic standard. He fails to realize that Ben's wealth is the result of a blind stroke of luck rather than a long-deserved reward for hard work and personal merit. Similarly, Willy misses the tragic aspect of Singleman's story of success—that Singleman was still working at the age of eighty-four and died on the job. Mourning for him was limited to the sphere of salesmen and train passengers who happened to be there at his death—the ephemeral world of transience, travel, and money, as opposed to the meaningful realm of loved ones.

Willy's humiliating interview with Howard sheds some light on his advice for Biff's interview with Oliver. This advice clearly has its roots in Willy's relationship with his boss. Despite being much younger than Willy, Howard patronizes Willy by repeatedly calling him "kid." Willy proves entirely subservient to Howard, as evidenced by the fact that he picks up Howard's lighter and hands it to him, unable to follow his own advice about such office boy jobs.

Willy's repeated reminders to Howard that he helped his father name Howard illustrate his psychological reliance on outmoded and insubstantial concepts of chivalry and nobility. Like his emphasis on being "well liked," Willy's harping upon the honour of bestowing Howard's name—one can draw a parallel between this naming and the sanctity and dignity of medieval concepts of christening and the dubbing of knights—is anachronistically incompatible with the reality of the modern business world.

Willy seems to transfer his familial anxieties to his professional life. His brother and father did not like him enough to stay, so he endeavours to be "well liked" in his profession. He heard the story of Dave Singleman's success and exaggerated it to heroic, mythical proportions. Hundreds of people attended Singleman's funeral—obviously, he was a man who was "well liked." Dave Singleman's story hooked Willy as the key to emotional and psychological fulfilment. However, the inappropriateness of Willy's ideals reveals itself in his lament about the loss of friendship and camaraderie in his profession. Willy fantasizes about such things, and he used to tell his sons about all of his friends in various cities; as Willy's hard experience evidences, however, such camaraderie belongs only to the realm of his delusion.

Willy's daydream involving Ben through Willy's conversation with Charley in his office

Summary

After Howard leaves, Willy immerses himself in memories of a visit from Ben. Ben asks Willy to go to Alaska and manage a tract of timberland he has purchased. Linda, slightly afraid of Ben, says that Willy already has a nice job. Ben departs as Willy tries desperately to gain a word of approval from him, comparing the intangible success of the honourable Dave Singleman to the concrete possibilities of timber. Bernard arrives to accompany the Lomans to the big football game at Ebbets Field. He begs Biff to allow him to carry his helmet. Happy snaps and insists on carrying it. Biff generously allows Bernard to carry his shoulder pads. Charley ambles over to tease Willy a little about the immature importance he is placing on the football game, and Willy grows furious.

In the present, the grown-up Bernard is sitting in his father's reception room when his father's secretary, Jenny, enters to beg him to deal with Willy. Outside, Willy, still immersed in his memory, argues with an invisible Charley from the past about Biff's football game. Bernard converses with Willy and mentions that he has a case to argue in Washington, D.C. Willy replies that Biff is working on a very big deal in town. Willy breaks down and asks Bernard why Biff's life seemed to end after his big football game. Bernard mentions that Biff failed math but was determined to go to summer school and pass. He adds that Biff went to see Willy in Boston, but after he came back, he burned his sneakers with the University of Virginia's insignia. Attempting a candid conversation with the wounded Willy, Bernard asks him what happened in Boston that changed Biff's intentions and drained his motivation. Willy becomes angry and resentful and demands to know if Bernard blames him for Biff's failure. Charley exits his office to say goodbye to Bernard. He mentions that Bernard is arguing a case before the Supreme Court. Willy, simultaneously jealous and proud of Bernard, is astounded that Bernard did not mention it.

In his office, Charley counts out fifty dollars. With difficulty, Willy asks for over a hundred this time to pay his insurance fees. After a moment, Charley states that he has offered Willy a non-traveling job with a weekly salary of fifty dollars and scolds Willy for insulting him. Willy refuses the job again, insisting that he already has one, despite Charley's reminder that Willy earns no money at his job. Broken, he admits that Howard fired him. Outraged and incredulous, he again mentions that he chose Howard's name when he was born. Charley replies that Willy cannot sell that sort of thing. Willy retorts that he has always thought the key to success was being well liked. Exasperated, Charley asks who liked J. P. Morgan. He angrily gives Willy the money for his insurance. Willy shuffles out of the office in tears.

Analysis

Willy's conversation with Bernard revives Willy's attempt to understand why Biff never made a material success of his life despite his bright and promising youth. He wants to understand why the "well liked" teenage football player became an insecure man unable to hold a steady job. He assumes there is some secret to success that is not readily apparent. If he were not wearing the rose-colored glasses of the myth of the American Dream, he would see that Charley and his son are successful because of lifelong hard work and not because of the illusions of social popularity and physical appearances.

Biff's failure in math is symbolic of his failure to live up to his father's calculated plan for him. Willy believes so blindly in his interpretation of the American Dream that he has constructed a veritable formula by which he expects Biff to achieve success. The unshakeable strength of Willy's belief in this blueprint for success is evidenced later when he attempts to plant the vegetable seeds. Reading

the instructions on the seed packets, Willy mutters, as he measures out the garden plot, “carrots . . . quarter-inch apart. Rows . . . one-foot rows.” He has applied the same regimented approach to the cultivation of his sons. Biff struggles with this formula in the same way that he struggles with the formulas in his textbook.

Charley tries to bring Willy down to earth by explaining that Willy’s fantasies about the way the business world functions conflict with the reality of a consumer economy. Charley refuses to relate to Willy through blustering fantasy; instead, he makes a point of being frank. He states that the bottom line of business is selling and buying, not being liked. Ironically, Charley is the only person to offer Willy a business opportunity on the strength of a personal bond; Howard, in contrast, fires Willy despite the strong friendship that Willy shared with Howard’s father. However, the relationship between Willy and Charley is shaped by an ongoing competition between their respective families, at least from Willy’s point of view. Willy’s rejection of Charley’s job offer stems partly from jealousy of Charley’s success. Additionally, Willy knows that Charley does not like him much—his offer of a job thus fails to conform to Willy’s idealistic notions about business relationships. Willy chooses to reject a well-paying, secure job rather than let go of the myth of the American business world and its ever-receding possibilities for success and redemption.

For Willy, the American Dream has become a kind of Holy Grail—his childish longing for acceptance and material proof of success in an attempt to align his life with a mythic standard has assumed the dimensions of a religious crusade. He places his faith in the elusive American Dream because he seeks salvation, and he blindly expects to achieve material, emotional, and even spiritual satisfaction through “personal attractiveness” and being “well liked.” Willy forces Biff and Happy into the framework of this mythic quest for secular salvation—he even calls them “Adonis” and “Hercules,” envisioning them as legendary figures whose greatness has destined them to succeed in according to the American Dream.

The scene in Frank’s Chop House

Summary

Happy banters with the waiter, Stanley. Happy is flirting with a pretty girl named Miss Forsythe when Biff arrives to join him. After she responds to his pick-up line by claiming that she is, in fact, a cover girl, Happy tells her that he is a successful champagne salesman and that Biff is a famous football player. Judging from Happy’s repeated comments on her moral character and his description of her as “on call,” Miss Forsythe is probably a prostitute. Happy invites her to join them. She exits to make a phone call to cancel her previous plans and to invite a girlfriend to join them. Biff explains to Happy that he waited six hours to see Oliver, only to have Oliver not even remember him. Biff asks where he got the idea that he was a salesman for Oliver. He had actually been only a lowly shipping clerk, but somehow Willy’s exaggerations and lies had transformed him into a salesman in the Loman family’s collective memory. After Oliver and the secretary left, Biff recounts, he ran into Oliver’s office and stole his fountain pen.

Happy advises Biff to tell Willy that Oliver is thinking over his business proposition, claiming that eventually the whole situation will fade away from their father’s memory. When Willy arrives, he reveals that he has been fired and states that he wants some good news to tell Linda. Despite this pressure, Biff attempts to tell the truth. Disoriented, Willy shouts that Biff cannot blame everything on him because Biff is the one who failed math after all. Confused at his father’s crazed emphasis on his high school math failure, Biff steels himself to forge ahead with the truth, but the situation reaches crisis proportions when Willy absolutely refuses to listen to Biff’s story. In a frenzy as the perilous truth closes in on him, Willy enters a semi-daydream state, reliving Biff’s discovery of him and The Woman in their Boston hotel room. A desperate Biff backs down and begins to lie to

assuage his frantic father. Miss Forsythe returns with her friend, Letta. Willy, insulted at Biff's "spite," furiously lashes out at his son's attempts to explain himself and the impossibility of returning to Oliver. Willy wanders into the restroom, talking to himself, and an embarrassed Happy informs the women that he is not, in fact, their father. Biff angrily tells Happy to help Willy, accusing him of not caring about their father. He hurries out of the restaurant in a vortex of guilt and anguish. Happy frantically asks Stanley for the bill; when the waiter doesn't respond immediately, Happy rushes after Biff, pushing Miss Forsythe and Letta along in front of him and leaving Willy babbling alone in the restroom.

Analysis

Willy's encounters with Howard, Bernard, and Charley constitute serious blows to the fantasy through which he views his life; his constructed reality is falling apart. Biff has also experienced a moment of truth, but he regards his epiphany as a liberating experience from a lifetime of stifling and distorting lies. He wishes to leave behind the facade of the Loman family tradition so that he and his father can begin to relate to one another honestly. Willy, on the other hand, wants his sons to aid him in rebuilding the elaborate fantasies that deny his reality as a defeated man. Willy drives Biff to produce a falsely positive report of his interview with Oliver, and Happy is all too willing to comply. When Biff fails to produce the expected glowing report, Happy, who has not had the same revelation as Biff, chimes in with false information about the interview.

Willy's greatest fear is realized during his ill-fated dinner with Biff and Happy. In his moment of weakness and defeat, he asks for their help in rebuilding his shattered concept of his life; he is not very likable, and he is well aware of it. Biff and Happy's neglect of him fits into a pattern of abandonment. Like Willy's father, then Ben, then Howard, Biff and Happy erode Willy's fantasy world. The scene in Frank's Chop House is pivotal to Willy's unravelling and to Biff's disillusionment. Biff's epiphany in Oliver's office regarding Willy's exaggeration of Biff's position at Oliver's store puts him on a quest to break through the thick cloud of lies surrounding his father at any cost. Just as Willy refuses to hear what he doesn't want to accept, Biff refuses to subject himself further to his father's delusions.

Willy's pseudo-religious quest for success is founded on a complex, multilayered delusion, and Biff believes that for his father to die well (in the medieval, Christian sense of the word—much of the play smacks of the anachronistic absurdity of the medieval values of chivalry and blind faith), he must break through the heavy sediment of lies to the truth of his personal degradation. Both Willy and Biff are conscious of the disparity between Dave Singleman's mythic "death of a salesman" and the pathetic nature of Willy's impending death. Willy clings to the hope that the "death of a salesman" is necessarily noble by the very nature of the profession, whereas Biff understands that behind the veneer of the American Dream's empty promises lies a devastatingly lonely death diametrically opposed to the one that Singleman represents and that the Dream itself posits. Happy and Linda wish to allow Willy to die covered by the diminishing comfort of his delusions, but Biff feels a moral responsibility to try to reveal the truth.

Boston hotel room daydream through Willy's departure from Frank's Chop House

Summary

Upon his sons' departure from Frank's Chop House, Willy is immersed in the memory of the teenage Biff's visit to see him in Boston. In his daydream it is night and he is in a hotel room with his mistress, while in the present he is presumably still in the restroom of Frank's Chop House. Biff is outside knocking on the hotel room door, after telephoning the room repeatedly with no result. The Woman, who is dressing, pesters Willy to answer the door. She flirtatiously describes how he has

“ruined” her, and she offers to send him straight through to the buyers whom she represents the next time he visits Boston on business. Willy, who is clearly nervous about his surprise visitor, finally consents to her appeals to answer the door. He orders her to stay in the bathroom and be quiet, believing it may be a nosy hotel clerk investigating their affair.

Willy answers the door, and Biff reports that he failed math. He asks Willy to persuade the teacher, Mr. Birnbaum, to pass him. Willy tries to get Biff out of the room quickly with promises of a malted drink and a rapid trip home to talk to the math teacher. When Biff mockingly imitates his teacher’s lisp, The Woman laughs from the bathroom. She exits the bathroom, wearing only a negligee, and Willy pushes her out into the hallway. He tries to pass her off as a buyer staying in the room next door who needed to shower in Willy’s bathroom because her room was being painted. Biff sits on his suitcase, crying silently, not buying his father’s lies. Willy promises to talk to the math teacher, but Biff tells him to forget it because no one will listen to a phony liar. He resolves not to make up the math test and not to attend college, effectively negating his contracted role in Willy’s inflated version of the American Dream. He deals the most serious blow by accusing Willy of giving Linda’s stockings away to his mistress. Biff leaves, with Willy kneeling and yelling after him.

Stanley pulls Willy out of his daydream. Willy is on his knees in the restaurant ordering the teenage Biff to come back. Stanley explains his sons’ absence, and Willy attempts to tip him, but Stanley stealthily slips the dollar bill back into Willy’s coat as he turns. Willy asks him to direct him to a seed store, and he rushes out, frantically explaining that he must plant immediately, as he does not “have a thing in the ground.”

Analysis

Willy settles on Biff’s discovery of his adultery as the reason for Biff’s failure to fulfil Willy’s ambitions for him. Before he discovers the affair, Biff believes in Willy’s meticulously constructed persona. Afterward, he calls Willy out as a “phony little fake.” He sees beneath Willy’s facade and rejects the man behind it; to be exposed in this way as a charlatan is the salesman’s worst nightmare. Assuming a characteristically simplistic cause-and-effect relationship, Willy decides that Biff’s failure to succeed is a direct result of the disillusionment that he experiences as a result of Willy’s infidelity. Despising Willy for his affair, Biff must also have come to despise Willy’s ambitions for him.

In this reckoning, Willy again conflates the personal with the professional. His understanding of the American Dream as constituting professional success and material gain precludes the idea that one can derive happiness without these things. Ironically, in Willy’s daydream this desired tangible proof of success is acquired by means of the immaterial and ephemeral concepts of “personal attractiveness” and being “well liked.” Willy believes that Biff, no longer able to respect him as a father or a person, automatically gave up all hopes for achieving the American Dream, since he could not separate Willy’s expectations of him from his damaged emotional state. In a sense, Willy is right this time—Biff’s knowledge of Willy’s adultery tarnishes the package deal of the total Dream, and Biff rejects the flawed product that Willy is so desperately trying to sell him.

Willy’s earlier preoccupation with the state of Linda’s stockings and her mending them foreshadows the exposure and fall that the Boston incident represents. Until the climactic scene in the restaurant, when Biff first attempts to dispel the myths and lies sinking the Loman household, the only subconscious trace of Willy’s adultery is his insistence that Linda throw her old stockings out. The stockings’ power as a symbol of his betrayal overcomes Willy when Biff’s assault on his increasingly delicate shield of lies forces him to confront his guilt about his affair with The Woman. When Biff, the incarnation of Willy’s ambition, rejects the delusion that Willy offers, Willy’s faith in the American Dream, which he vested in his son, begins to dissolve as well.

Willy's delirious interest in a seed shop reveals his insecurity about his legacy. Poor and now unemployed, Willy has no means to pass anything on to his sons. Indeed, he has just given Stanley a dollar in a feeble attempt to prove to himself, by being able to give, that he does indeed possess something. The act of giving also requires someone to whom to give, and Stanley becomes, momentarily, a surrogate son to Willy, since Biff and Happy have abandoned him. Similarly, in desperately seeking to grow vegetables, Willy desires tangible proof of the value of his labor, and hence, life. Additionally, the successful growth of vegetables would redeem Willy's failure to cultivate Biff properly. In declaring "Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground," Willy acknowledges that Biff has broken free from the roots of the long-standing Loman delusion. Finally, Willy's use of gardening as a metaphor for success and failure indicates that he subconsciously acknowledges that, given his natural inclinations toward working with his hands and creating, going into sales was a poor career choice.

The boys' confrontation with Linda, Biff's final confrontation with Willy, and Willy's decision to take a late-night drive

Summary

Biff and Happy return home later that night with a bouquet of roses for Linda. She knocks the roses to the ground and shouts at them to pack and never come back. Happy claims that Willy had a great time at dinner. Linda calls her sons a variety of names and accuses them of abandoning their sick father in a restaurant bathroom. Happy, incredulous and defensive, denies everything, but Biff accepts the judgment and wholeheartedly endorses his own degradation and status as "scum of the earth." After searching the house for Willy, Biff hears him outside, and Linda explains that he is maniacally planting a garden regardless of the darkness. Outside, Willy discusses a guaranteed $20,000 proposition with Ben. Ben warns that the insurance company might not honour the policy. Willy retorts that since he has always paid the premium, the company cannot refuse. He says that Biff will realize how important he is once he sees the number of people who attend his funeral. Ben warns that Biff will call him a coward and hate him. Willy is, of course, contemplating suicide, which would allow his family to cash in on his life insurance policy.

Biff tells Willy that he is leaving for good and that he will not keep in touch. Biff wants Willy to forget him. Willy curses his son and declares that Biff is throwing his life away and blaming his failures on him out of spite. Biff confronts Willy with the rubber hose. Biff states that he has stolen himself out of every job since high school and that during the three-month period when he was completely out of touch with his family he was, in fact, in prison for stealing a suit. He reproaches Willy for having filled him with so much hot air about how important he, Biff, was that he was unable to take orders from anyone. Further, he accuses the family of never telling the truth "for ten minutes in this house." He exposes Happy's exaggeration of his position—Happy is not the assistant buyer, as he claims, but rather one of two assistants to the assistant buyer—and he says that he does not want to do anything but work in the open air. Biff is determined to know who he is and for his father to know likewise who he is. He urges Willy to accept their own commonness—they are both "a dime a dozen," not destined for leadership or worthy of prizes. Crying and exhausted, Biff trudges upstairs to bed. Suddenly happy, Willy mutters that Biff must like him because he cried, and his own delusions of his son's success are restored in light of this meagre proof. Linda and Happy tell him that Biff has always loved him, and even Happy seems genuinely moved by the encounter. Everyone retires to bed, except Willy. He urges Linda to sleep and promises that he will join her soon. Willy converses with Ben, predicting that Biff will go far with $20,000 in his pocket. Suddenly, Willy realizes he is alone; Ben has disappeared. Linda calls from upstairs for him to come to bed, but he does not. Happy and Biff listen. They hear the car start and speed away.

Analysis

Willy's final confrontation with Biff exposes the essential gridlock of their relationship. Biff wants Willy to forget him as a useless bum. Once Willy finally lets go of him, Biff can be free to be himself and lead his life without having to carry the weight of his father's dreams. But Willy cannot let go of the myth around which he has built his life. He has no hopes of achieving the American Dream himself, so he has transferred his hopes to Biff. Fulfilling Biff's request would involve discarding his dreams and ambitions forever and admitting that he has long believed in the American Dream for naught. Each man is struggling with the other in a desperate battle for his own identity.

During the confrontation, Biff makes no attempt to blame anyone for the course that his life has taken. He doesn't even mention the affair with The Woman, which Willy imagines as the sole reason for his son's lack of material success. After so many years, Biff doesn't consider his disillusionment a function of either Willy's adultery or the inherent foolishness of Willy's ambitions. Ironically, Biff blames Willy's fantastic success in selling him on the American Dream of easy success as the reason for his failure to hold a steady job. Biff's faith in Willy's dreams is the real reason that he could not advance in the business world. He could not start from the bottom and work his way up because he believed that success would magically descend upon him at any moment, regardless of his own efforts or ambitions.

Willy's happy reaction to Biff's frustrated tears demonstrates that Willy has again missed an opportunity to take refuge in the love of his family. He responds to Biff's tears as material evidence that Biff "likes" him. Linda corrects him with the words "loves you." Willy's failure to recognize the anguished love offered to him by his family is crucial to the climax of his tortured day. Because Willy has long conflated successful salesmanship with being well liked, one can even argue that Willy's imagining that Biff likes him boosts his confidence in his ability to sell and thus perversely enables his final sale—his life.

In Willy's mind, his imminent suicide takes on epic proportions. Not only does it validate his salesmanship, as argued above, but it also renders him a martyr, since he believes that the insurance money from his sacrifice will allow Biff to fulfill the American Dream. Additionally, Ben's final mantra of "The jungle is dark, but full of diamonds" turns Willy's suicide into a metaphorical moral struggle. Suicide, for Willy, constitutes both a final ambition to realize the Dream and the ultimate selfless act of giving to his sons. According to Ben, the noble death that Willy seeks is "not like an appointment at all" but like a "diamond . . . rough and hard to the touch." In the absence of any true self-knowledge, Willy is able, at least, to achieve a tangible result with his suicide. In this way, Willy does experience a sort of revelation: he understands that the product he sells is himself and that his final sale is his own life. Through the imaginary advice of Ben, Willy ultimately believes 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."

In an analysis of Willy's obsession with the American Dream as a religious crusade, his suicide represents the ultimate apotheosis into the Dream itself, the final expiation for the sins of conflated professional and personal failure. A kind of perverse, American working-class Christ-figure, Willy dies not only for his own sins but also for the sins of his sons, who have failed to achieve their potential within the American Dream.

Requiem

To Linda's considerable chagrin and bewilderment, Willy's family, Charley, and Bernard are the only mourners who attend Willy's funeral. She wonders where all his supposed business friends are and how he could have killed himself when they were so close to paying off all of their bills. Biff recalls that Willy seemed happier working on the house than he did as a salesman. He states that Willy had all the wrong dreams and that he didn't know who he was in the way that Biff now knows who he is. Charley replies that a salesman has to dream or he is lost, and he explains the salesman's undaunted optimism in the face of certain defeat as a function of his irrepressible dreams of selling himself. Happy becomes increasingly angry at Biff's observations. He resolves to stay in the city and carry out his father's dream by becoming a top businessman, convinced he can still "beat this racket." Linda requests some privacy. She reports to Willy that she made the last payment on the house. She apologizes for her inability to cry, since it seems as if Willy is just "on another trip." She begins to sob, repeating, "We're free. . . ." Biff helps her up and all exit. The flute music is heard and the high-rise apartments surrounding the Loman house come into focus.

Analysis

Charley's speech about the nature of the salesman's dreams is one of the most memorable passages in the play. His words serve as a kind of respectful eulogy that removes blame from Willy as an individual by explaining the grueling expectations and absurd demands of his profession. The odd, anachronistic, spiritual formality of his remarks ("Nobody dast blame this man") echo the religious quality of Willy's quest to sell himself. One can argue that, to a certain extent, Willy Loman is the postwar American equivalent of the medieval crusader, battling desperately for the survival of his own besieged faith.

Charley solemnly observes that a salesman's life is a constant upward struggle to sell himself—he supports his dreams on the ephemeral power of his own image, on "a smile and a shoeshine." He suggests that the salesman's condition is an aggravated enlargement of a discreet facet of the general human condition. Just as Willy is blind to the totality of the American Dream, concentrating on the aspects related to material success, so is the salesman, in general, lacking, blinded to the total human experience by his conflation of the professional and the personal. Like Charley says, "No man only needs a little salary"—no man can sustain himself on money and materiality without an emotional or spiritual life to provide meaning.

When the salesman's advertising self-image fails to inspire smiles from customers, he is "finished" psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. According to Charley, "a salesman is got to dream." The curious and lyrical slang substitution of "is" for "has" indicates a destined necessity for the salesman—not only must the salesman follow the imperative of his dreams during his life, but Miller suggests that he is literally begotten with the sole purpose of dreaming.

In many ways, Willy has done everything that the myth of the American Dream outlines as the key path to success. He acquired a home and the range of modern appliances. He raised a family and journeyed forth into the business world full of hope and ambition. Nevertheless, Willy has failed to receive the fruits that the American Dream promises. His primary problem is that he continues to believe in the myth rather than restructuring his conception of his life and his identity to meet more realistic standards. The values that the myth espouses are not designed to assuage human insecurities and doubts; rather, the myth unrealistically ignores the existence of such weaknesses. Willy bought the sales pitch that America uses to advertise itself, and the price of his faith is death.

Linda's initial feeling that Willy is just "on another trip" suggests that Willy's hope for Biff to succeed with the insurance money will not be fulfilled. To an extent, Linda's comparison debases Willy's death, stripping it of any possibility of the dignity that Willy imagined. It seems inevitable that the trip toward meaningful death that Willy now takes will end just as fruitlessly as the trip from which he has just returned as the play opens. Indeed, the recurrence of the haunting flute music, symbolic of Willy's futile pursuit of the American Dream, and the final visual imprint of the overwhelming apartment buildings reinforce the fact that Willy dies as deluded as he lived.

Character Analysis – Willy Loman

Death of a Salesman is Willy's play. Everything revolves around his actions during the last 24 hours of his life. All of the characters act in response to Willy, whether in the present or in Willy's recollection of the past. Willy's character, emotions, motivations, and destiny are developed through his interactions with others. The problem arises, however, because Willy reacts to characters in the present, while simultaneously responding to different characters and different situations in the past. The result is Willy's trademark behaviour: contradictory, somewhat angry, and often obsessive.

Willy is an individual who craves attention and is governed by a desire for success. He constantly refers to his older brother Ben, who made a fortune in diamond mining in Africa, because he represents all the things Willy desires for himself and his sons. Willy is forced to work for Howard, the son of his old boss, who fails to appreciate Willy's previous sales experience and expertise. Ben, on the other hand, simply abandoned the city, explored the American and African continents, and went to work for himself. As a result, after four years in the jungle, Ben was a rich man at the age of 21, while Willy must struggle to convince Howard to let him work in New York for a reduced salary after working for the company for 34 years. Willy does not envy Ben, but looks to him as model of success.

The play begins and ends in the present, and the plot occurs during the last two days of Willy's life; however, a large portion of the play consists of Willy's fragmented memories, recollections, and re-creations of the past, which are spliced in between scenes taking place in the present. Willy not only remembers an event but also relives it, engaging himself in the situation as if it is happening for the first time. As the play progresses, Willy becomes more irrational and is not able to transition between his memory of the past and the reality of the present.

Willy's memories are key to understanding his character. He carefully selects memories or re-creates past events in order to devise situations in which he is successful or to justify his current lack of prosperity. For example, Willy recalls Ben and the job he offered to Willy after being fired by Howard. Willy is unable to cope with the idea that he has failed, so he relives Ben's visit. The memory allows Willy to deny the truth and its consequences — facing Linda and the boys after being fired — and to establish temporary order in his disrupted life. At other times, Willy proudly recalls memories of Biff's last football game because it is more pleasant to re-create the past in which Biff adored him and wanted to score a touchdown in his name, rather than face the present where he is at odds with his own son.

Willy's constant movement from the present to the past results in his contradictory nature. Although he fondly remembers Biff as a teenager, he is unable to communicate with Biff in the present. As a result, he praises Biff in one breath, while criticizing him in the next. The cause of Willy's inconsistent behaviour is his unbidden memories of a long-ago affair, which he forgets or chooses not to remember until the end of Act II. It is difficult enough for Willy to deal with Howard, his buyers (or lack of buyers), and the everyday reminders that he is not a great salesman like Dave Singleman; however, it is even more insufferable for Willy to accept the idea that he is a failure in his son's eyes.

Prior to the Boston trip, Biff, more than anyone, sincerely believes in Willy's success, potential, and inevitable greatness. Willy is able to achieve the success and notoriety he desires only through Biff, but this changes when Biff learns of the affair. After the Boston trip, Willy tries to regain the success he once had by focusing on memories or events prior to the discovery of the affair. It is not surprising that Willy contradicts himself when speaking in the present about Biff or to him, for although Willy chooses to remember Biff as he used to be, he cannot eradicate the words Biff spoke to him in Boston: "You fake! You phony little fake!"

Willy perceives himself as a failure: He is not Dave Singleman. He is just a mediocre salesman who has only made monumental sales in his imagination. Now that he is growing old and less productive, the company he helped to build fires him. He regrets being unfaithful to his wife, even though he will never admit the affair to her. He is no longer a respectable man in Biff's eyes. Biff recognizes Willy's tendency to exaggerate or reconstruct reality and is no longer a willing participant in Willy's fantasy. By the end of the play, Willy is overwhelmed; he can no longer deny his failures when they become too many to deal with. Instead, he seeks a solution in suicide. Willy reasons he can finally be a success because his life insurance policy will in some way compensate Linda for his affair. Additionally, Biff will consider him a martyr and respect him after witnessing the large funeral and many mourners Willy is sure will attend.

Themes

- Dreams: The American Dream; hopes and ambitions; daydreams and fantasies
- Parents and children / Fathers and sons
- Popularity and success
- Consumer society and the dangers of capitalism
- The world of business
- Masculinity
- Illusion
- Responsibility
- Depression
- Memory
- The past
- The family
- The role of women
- Competition
- Technology
- Failure to adapt to modern society
- Disillusionment

"Death of a Salesman" by Arthur Miller

Characterisation

Willy Loman

Willy represents the **mistaken American Dream**. He has the **wrong set of values** – personal attractiveness and being well-liked are more important to him than hard work and honesty.

He has spent his whole life living a mistaken dream of being able to be successful by copying his ideal salesman – Dave Singleman – a man who seemed to be rich and successful by selling over the telephone because he was so well-liked. At his funeral crowds attended. Ironically there are few who attend Willy's funeral. Even Willy's intention of committing suicide to provide for his family might be a failure as the insurance company might not pay out.

Willy as a tragic hero is different from Shakespearean tragic heroes. He is unimportant not an important figure. He is a **low man** – a dime a dozen. "He was so wonderful with his hands" – he could build a porch, garage, bathroom, cellar. But as a salesman "He's a man way out there in the blue on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back – that's an earthquake."

His **tragic flaw** could be "He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong." Consequently instead of working with his hands like his own father who made flutes, he is a victim of the American capitalist society – "as business is business" and as he no longer makes any sales, he cannot provide for his family by working on commission.

The question arises whether Willy is a pathetic, tragic **victim** of a capitalist society or has he done anything to bring on his own downfall? Do we feel sorry for Willy? Probably yes because we see how he became mistaken in his dreams and he did try to be altruistic in looking after his wife, Linda and sons, Biff and Happy.

The capitalist society of Howard Wagner and Charley does not consist of unsympathetic, insensitive, dishonest people. Instead they are hard working, honest reliable family men who have spent a long time trying to sort Willy out and advise him well. Willy has chosen not to work for Charley because he would be admitting the failure of his values and dreams.

Comparisons with other characters bring out Willy's flaws. There is a **father – son relationship** which seems to have failed with his own father. The flute theme reminds him of the father who left home but was good with his hands. Perhaps, Willy would have done better working with his hands – he still believes in the importance of the pioneering spirit and is good with his hands.

As a father himself, Willy provides a poor role model for his sons although early on in the flashbacks to the past he was **idolised** by both Biff and Happy. But he provided them with the values of personal attractiveness and being well-liked which Willy mistakenly thought were more important than honesty and hard work. Thus the influence of Ben who **apparently** walked into the forest and came out rich (whether it was Alaska or Africa) has misled Willy into ignoring the importance of the values Charley passed on to his son, Bernard and the family values of Howard and indeed his father who had given Willy his job.

Thus key scenes which show Willy's mistakes are the early flashback where Biff is praised at the expense of Bernard and Happy is left out as not being as attractive or physically as strong as Biff. The result is that Biff learns that stealing is acceptable e.g. stealing a football from the coach and Happy becomes a womaniser and cheat.

After the key scene at **Boston** when Willy is discovered with the other Woman by Biff, then this idolisation collapses. Biff feels betrayed and Willy thinks Biff acts in a way to spite him personally. Linda unwittingly is betrayed but is unaware. As a result when Linda is mending her stockings, Willy remembers giving silk stockings to the Woman and feels guilty. The stockings become a symbol of Willy's **guilt.**

The recording scene, when Willy finally tries to ask for a job in the main office from Howard is the turning point of the play and a key scene in the characterisation of Willy. The wrong values going round inside Willy's head bring him to the point of a nervous breakdown. He is then symbolically tortured by bumping into the recorder to set it off and hearing the words of Howard's children. This reminds him of his own betrayal and failings as a father and brings him to a crisis point.

Even then there is a chance for Willy if he were to take a job with Charley but that would be an admission that Bernard and Charley did have the right values and Willy could never accept that.

Finally **the restaurant scene** brings out the actual breakdown. Although Biff tries to reassure Willy by lying that Bill Oliver would sponsor The Loman Brothers. In fact the sons end up leaving Willy a nervous wreck and he rushes off to buy some **seeds** to plant and then commit suicide.

By **the Requiem**, Willy's tragedy has been realised by his sons and Charley who does not blame him. The naïve Linda, however, cannot understand that now everything has been paid off in their house and they owe nothing, she has lost Willy.

Death of a Salesman

Important Quotations

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but will give you a degree of focus as to which quotations you should learn for the exam.

Act I

'We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides…the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange.'

He is past sixty years of age, dressed quietly…his exhaustion is apparent.'

'She more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties, served her only as sharp reminders of the turbulent longings within him.'

Willy: It's all right. I came back

Willy: I just couldn't make it. I just couldn't make it, Linda.

Linda: You never went for your new glasses.

Willy: Biff is a lazy bum!

Willy: There's one thing about Biff – he's not lazy.

Willy: The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood. The grass don't grow anymore, you can't raise a carrot in the back yard… Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there?

Willy: You're my foundation and my support, Linda.

Linda: You make mountains out of molehills.

Thinking about the Chevvy:

Willy: Me? I didn't. (*He stops.)* Now isn't that peculiar! Isn't that a remarkable – (*He breaks off in amazement and fright as the flute is heard distantly*.)

Biff and Happy

Biff: Yeah. Lotta dreams and plans

Biff: To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when all you really desire is to be outdoors, with your shirt off. And always to have to get ahead of the next fella. And still – that's how you build a future.

Happy: I don't know what the hell I'm workin' for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment – all alone. And I think of the rent I'm paying. And it's crazy. But then, it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I'm lonely.

Happy: …everybody around me is so false…

Happy: I gotta show some of those pompous, self-important executives over there that Hap Loman can make the grade.

On women:

Happy: I just keep knockin' them over and it doesn't mean anything.

The football theft:

Biff: Well, I borrowed it from the locker room. (*He laughs confidentially*.)

Willy: Sure, he's gotta practice with a regulation ball, doesn't he? (*To Biff*.) Coach'll probably congratulate you on your initiative!

Willy: That's because he likes you.

Willy: And when I bring you fellas up, there'll be open sesame for all of us… I have friends.

Willy: That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because the man who can make 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.

To Linda:

Willy: …they just pass me by. I'm not noticed.

Willy: I'm fat. I'm very – foolish to look at, Linda.

Willy: 'Cause I get so lonely – especially when business is bad and there's nobody to talk to.

Introduction of the Woman:

The Woman: And thanks for the stockings. I love a lot of stockings. Well good night.

'The Woman bursts out laughing, and Linda's laughter blends in…Linda is sitting where she was at the kitchen table, but now is mending a pair of her silk stockings.'

Willy: I won't have you mending stockings in this house! Now throw them out!

Willy: Why is he stealing? He's giving it back, isn't he? Why is he stealing? I never in my life told him anything but decent things.

Willy: The woods are burning!

Montage:

Willy: A man who can't handle tools is not a man. You're disgusting.

Uncle Ben – *'He is a stolid man, in his sixties, with a moustache and an authoritative air. He is utterly certain of his destiny…'*

Willy: There's just one opportunity I had with that man…If I'd gone to Alaska that time , everything would've been totally different.

Charley: All right! Next time I'll bring a deck with five aces.

Ben: Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. (He laughs.) And by God I was rich.

Ben: Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way.

Willy: Go right over there to where they're building the apartment house and get some sand.

Linda and Biff

Biff: Dye it again, will ya? I don't want my pal looking old.

Linda: He's the dearest man in the world to me, and I won't have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue.

Linda: But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him.

Linda: Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.

Linda: A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man.

Biff: Because I know he's a fake and he doesn't like anybody around who knows.

Linda: There's more good in him than in many other people.

Linda: I tell you he put his whole life into you and you've turned your backs on him.

Willy's advice to Biff

Willy: You never grew up. Bernard does not whistle in the elevator, I assure you.

Willy: Everybody likes a kidder, but nobody lends him money.

Willy: …because personality always wins the day.

Willy: You got a greatness in you, Biff, remember that. You got all kinds a greatness…

'Biff...comes downstage into a golden pool of light.'

Willy: Like a young god. Hercules – something like that.

Willy: Gee, look at the moon moving between the buildings…

Act II

'Music is hear, gay and bright…Willy in shirt sleeves.'

Linda: He's so handsome in that suit. He could be anything in that suit.

Willy: Gee, on the way home tonight, I'd like to buy some seeds.

Willy: I'm always in a race with the junkyard! I just finished paying for the car and it's on its last legs. They time them so when you finally pay for them, they're used up.

Willy: Will you stop mending stockings? At least while I'm in the house. It gets me nervous.

***Howard**:*

Howard: Sh, for God's sake!

Howard: You didn't crack up again did you?

Howard: 'Cause you gotta admit, business is business.

Willy: You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit!

Linda: Why must everybody conquer the world?

Willy: a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked.

Bernard

Bernard – sits whistling to himself. A pair of tennis rackets and an overnight bag are on the floor beside him.

Willy: Bernard…what's the secret?

***Restaurant Scene**:*

Raucous music is heard, and a red glow rises behind the screen at right.

Happy: I sell champagne, and I'd like you to try my brand.

Biff: I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been! We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years.

The Woman laughs

Biff: You've just seen a prince walk by. A fine, troubled prince. A hardworking underappreciated prince.

Happy: No, that's not my father. He's just a guy.

Scene with The Woman

Biff: If he just saw the kind of man you are, and you just talked to him in your way, I'm sure he'd come through for me.

Biff: You fake! You phony little fake! You fake!

Willy: I gave you an order! Biff, come back here or I'll beat you! Come back here! I'll whip you!

Willy: I've got to get some seeds, right away. Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground.

End of Act II

Biff: I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody.

Biff: Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be...all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am

Biff: I am not a leader of men Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash-can like all the rest of them.

Requiem

Linda: Why didn't anybody come?

Biff: He had the wrong dream. All, all wrong...He never knew who he was.