The American Dream in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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**On Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller**  
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*Death of a Salesman* is centrally concerned with dreams and dreaming. What are the dreams of its protagonist, Willy Loman? What is their worth? This question occupies the surviving characters at the play's conclusion. Son Biff, the most lucid among the Loman men and thus the most despairing, cries to his father, as things are falling apart: "Will you let me go, for Christ's sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?" (133).

Willy, typically, misses the point, reading Biff's outcry not as a call to become wiser but as a confession of love. And in the Requiem, standing at Willy's grave, younger son Happy insists:

> All right, boy. I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have—to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him. (138-39)

Willy is dreaming, in a literal sense, throughout much of the play. Explaining to his wife Linda why he has returned early, and empty-handed, from his selling trip, he acknowledges that his mind wanders too much for driving:

> I was driving along, you understand? And I was fine. I was even observing the scenery. You can imagine, me looking at scenery, on the road every week of my life. But it's so beautiful up there, Linda, the trees are so thick, and the sun is warm. I opened the windshield and just let the warm air bathe over me. And all of a sudden I'm goin' off the road! I'm tellin' ya, I absolutely forgot I was driving. If I'd've gone the other way over the white line I might've killed somebody. So I went on again—and five minutes later I'm dreamin' again, and I nearly—*He presses two fingers against his eyes.* I have such thoughts, I have such strange thoughts. (14)

This is an important passage in setting up the way the tragedy will unfold. It is the audience's first indication that Willy is unable to continue his job as a traveling salesman, which he has followed for many years. Linda suggests in response that he ask the company to let him work in town; Willy, still proud at this point ("I'm vital in New England"), declines. Later, when he makes just this request, he is spurned on the basis of pure business calculations.

Willy is drawn to death. We learn later that he has attached a little hose to the gas line in his basement and is flirting with the idea of suicide. At the end of the play he carries through with it, apparently by crashing his car. Though he tells Linda that by crossing the center line he might have killed "somebody," rather than himself, it is himself that he eventually kills. Perhaps it is his suicide fantasies that Willy refers to in his "strange thoughts."

One reason that Willy can no longer be a functioning salesman—aside from age, exhaustion, and the death or retirement of his old friends in the territory—is his increasing inability to remain psychologically in the here and now. Throughout the play he slips his moorings, comes unstuck in time, and is living through a past event while, in some cases, still interacting with those who are in his present. A small glimpse of this phenomenon is visible in the passage above, when he tells Linda that he opened the windshield to enjoy the warm air. Later, when she refers to opening the windshield, Willy corrects her—"the windshields don't open on the new cars"—and realizes that he was "thinking of the Chevvy" that he had in 1928. But it is more than thinking of it: "I coulda sworn I was driving that Chevvy today." (19). Everyone thinks of the past, but Willy involuntarily *relives* it. Whether we consider these events daydreams or reveries, they are a crucial part of the play. Increasingly they erupt at moments of crisis, and they are most often related to Willy's troubled relations with his male relatives, particularly his older brother Ben and his older son Biff.
If we read the reveries as Willy reliving the past, then we must grant them the status of authentic events that have happened. Miller has sometimes suggested that this is what they are: "There are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present ..." (Miller, "Introduction" 26). So are the past moments supposed to be entirely believable? When Willy "relives" a scene starring Biff, in which Linda tells Biff "the cellar is full of boys. They don't know what to do with themselves" (34), and Biff decides to have his adoring followers sweep out the furnace room, there is reason to believe that Willy's mind has edited and revised his past. And why not? Everybody revises the past, and Willy, especially, is a dishonest man in his ordinary interactions. Even in his own reveries, we see him lying to his wife and sons. In real time, he edits and revises reality. He claims "I was sellin' thousands and thousands, but I had to come home"; then, "I did five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston"; then, when Linda eagerly begins to compute his commission, "Well, I—I did—about a hundred and eighty gross in Providence. Well, no—it came to—roughly two hundred gross on the whole trip" (35). When Biff insists, near the end of the play, "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!" (131) the audience is prepared, for it has seen Willy's routine dishonesty, which has helped to make his sons dishonest as well. (Biff is as given to fantasizing and dishonest bragadocio as Willy, until the end, and Happy has the same traits, on a mundane level, mostly about his sexual conquests.)

There has been a great deal of discussion about the question of tragedy in Death of a Salesman, most of it focusing on the unadmirable protagonist, Willy Loman. It is not necessary to worry about whether Willy is a tragic hero in the Aristotelian sense (he is not), or whether the pity and fear aroused through the play's action are properly purged or clarified. It is enough to realize that Willy Loman is delivered to catastrophe by aspects of his character that move him inexorably in that direction.

The scene at Willy's burial, which Miller called "Requiem," provides a chorus of comments on his death. Linda is simply baffled. Neighbor Charlie, who has been a sympathetic friend to Willy through his deterioration—and, it seems, a model of how to succeed in business and in child-rearing where Willy failed—delivers a mawkish testimony to the salesman's risky profession. Happy, a superficial thinker at all times, reaffirms Willy's dream to be number one in the terms quoted earlier. Only Biff seems to judge adequately:

    Biff: He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong.
    Happy, almost ready to fight Biff: Don't say that!
    Biff: He never knew who he was. (138)

What were Willy's dreams? And were they, in some real sense, "wrong"? Or was he wrong in his way of going about realizing them?

Willy does indeed dream of business success, though "the meaning of that need extends beyond the accumulation of wealth, security, goods, and status" (Jacobson 247). Willy would like to have his refrigerator paid for and be freed from nagging financial worries, but except for wistful reflections on his brother Ben, he never seems to aspire to great wealth. He wants to "succeed" in business by being recognized as a success and being admired, like legendary salesman Dave Singleman. He likes the idea of many people coming to his funeral (in the end there are five in attendance). His business dreams are based on the idea of being "well liked." In part he insists on this because of his own self-doubts. He frets to Linda, "They seem to laugh at me ... I don't know the reason for it, but they just pass me by. I'm not noticed.... I joke too much ... I'm fat. I'm very—foolish to look at, Linda ... I'm not dressing to advantage, maybe" (37).

He stifles his doubts, though, submerging them in his dream that business success comes from personalitv. In reverie, he tells the boys:

    You and Hap and I, and I'll show you all the towns. America is full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people. And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring you fellas up, there'll be open sesame for all of us, 'cause one thing, boys: I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like
Willy's dreams of success based on being liked are linked to his obsession with his brother Ben, a mysterious business tycoon (who in some interpretations of the play is a product of Willy's anxious imagination) and his son Biff. Ben and Biff are both older brothers; each has an under-prized younger brother, Willy himself—and Happy, who struggles unsuccessfully to get his share of his father's attention.

Biff is popular (that cellar full of admirers), handsome, and athletic. The high point of his life was playing a football game at Ebbets Field. Since that time he has been a loser and a petty criminal (he was actually a petty criminal before, as Willy laughingly encouraged him to steal footballs from school and lumber from construction sites). Willy cannot understand it: "In the greatest country in the world a young man with such—personal attractiveness, gets lost. And such a hard worker. There's one thing about Biff—he's not lazy" (16). At other times Willy accuses Biff of being a lazy bum who fails in life only to spite his father.

Willy's accusations against Biff are incoherent. The larger problem for him is that his dreams are incoherent. He wishes to be a successful salesman (Happy's "number-one man") on the basis of being liked by everyone. He believes that salesmanship is based on "sterling traits of character" and "a pleasing personality" (Murphy 9). But Willy does not have the requisite sterling traits of character; people simply do not like him as much as he thinks is necessary for success. In any case, business success does not actually come from being a nice man whom others respect. The models of business success provided in the play all argue against Willy's personality theory. One is Charley, Willy's neighbor and apparently only friend. Charley has no time for Willy's theories of business, but he provides for his family and is in a position to offer Willy a do-nothing job to keep him bringing home a salary. Howard, Willy's present-day boss and the son of the man who originally hired Willy, is a heedless man with no time for personal relations, who spurns Willy's appeal to family friendship. Howard not only denies Willy the easier position that Willy believes he's due, (based on their long personal relationship) but fires him from his selling job. Ben—a ruthless, hard man—is the richest figure in the play. As he tells Biff and Happy, "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" (48). Willy's semi-legendary older brother, who appears to him in reveries, Ben is the very opposite of the idea of business success based on being nice. Ben demonstrates his "personality" by tripping his nephew Biff, threatening his eye with an umbrella point and advising "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way" (49).

It is true that Willy and Ben's father seems to have had business success, in a rather hard-to-imagine career as an itinerant flute salesman and inventor, taking his family across the country in a covered wagon. He abandoned his family before Willy could ever learn his secret, and the days of that kind of life are past by the time Willy has settled in Brooklyn. But he longs for them anyway, and his pride in his ability to use tools, as well as his pathetic plans to grow a garden (he is putting seeds in the stony, sunless ground the night before he dies), are part of his nostalgic dream of an entirely different way of life.

No one Willy knows, except for the old salesman, Dave Singleman, (whose career Willy seems to have misunderstood) has "succeeded" by the force of personality, a nice suit, a good line of jokes, and being well-liked. Willy's capacity for believing in this possibility leads critics to invoke "the American dream." In an influential early review of Miller's play, Harold Clurman staked out this critical position:

_Death of a Salesman_ is a challenge to the American dream. Lest this be misunderstood, I hasten to add that there are two versions of the American dream. The historical American dream is the promise of a land of freedom with opportunity and equality for all. This dream needs no challenge, only fulfillment. But since the Civil War, and particularly since 1900, the American dream has become distorted to the dream of business success. A distinction must be made even in this. The original premise of our dream of success—popularly represented in the original boy parables of Horatio Alger—was that enterprise, courage and hard work were the keys to success. Since the end of the First World War this too has changed. Instead of the ideals of hard work and courage,
we have salesmanship. Salesmanship implies a certain element of fraud: the ability to put over or sell a commodity regardless of its intrinsic usefulness. The goal of salesmanship is to make a deal, to earn a profit—the accumulation of profit being an unquestioned end in itself. (212-13)

Before there were any Horatio Alger stories there was Benjamin Franklin, maybe the best embodiment of the classic stereotype of "the American dream": a self-made man, starting in Philadelphia with nothing and making his way by sheer hard work and ingenuity, Franklin was a rich retiree by age 40. His well-known aphorisms, published periodically in "Poor Richard's Almanac," were collected in a volume with the telling title The Way to Wealth.

The more one tries to understand and name "the American dream," though, the more slippery it becomes. Likewise, we wonder if Willy is at fault for believing at all in the American dream, called by Susan Harris Smith "possibly a driving delusion that many Americans actively participate in and promote" (32) or for his faulty way of trying to actualize it, when it is reachable only by radically different approaches, such as Ben's ruthlessness.

But Willy's incoherent longing extends beyond his confusion about the route to success. Joseph A. Hynes has provided a compelling analysis:

When we solicit more precise information about the "dream" we find it composed, by Willy and Biff, of several elements: Ben's hard-fisted independent acquisition of vast wealth; the geographical and economic freedom enjoyed by Willy's father, an improbable flute-hawking salesman of the plains, who "made more in a week than a man like [Willy] could make in a lifetime"; the mixed idea that Dave Singleman's ability to sell his product by telephone somehow revealed the pregnant power and value of being "well-liked"; the longing for sufficient peace of mind to enjoy his considerable manual skill and to raise chickens in the open air; the defensive insistence that he is popular and financially successful; and, to come full circle, the theory that Biff's high school popularity and athletic prowess will (must) inevitably make him as "successful" as Willy. (287)

We should add one more dream, though it is never precisely articulated: that of family life. Willy's father abandoned his family (Willy never mentions his mother, though she must have brought him up after his father left when he was not yet four; his lack of interest in her is echoed in his frequent condescension or cruelty toward his long-suffering wife). When Ben offers Willy the chance to go to Alaska with him—and become wealthy—he cannot go because he has a family. In his almost certainly "improved" reveries, Biff and Happy idolize him. In turn he idolizes Biff—caring for him, certainly, in a way his own father had never cared for him. Willy's problem is that the incoherence and inconsistency of his various dreams complicate his relationship with Biff, whom he looks to as the one who can live those dreams. Biff should succeed because people like him. He should impose his will on the world by sheer magnetic masculinity—being well-built and athletic. But when Biff lives an outdoor life in the West (a modern, reduced version of old Mr. Loman's romantic life) he fails Willy because he isn't making a name for himself or a lot of money.

It is true that Biff has rejected Willy because of his discovery that Willy is a "fake"—that is, an unfaithful husband—but in a broader sense Biff has seen through the illusions. Biff is an aging high school football star, too lazy to make his way up and casually criminal. Happy is a bum. Willy is a minimally successful salesman, now no longer able to sell. Willy's dream, never relinquished, fuels his end—he kills himself for the insurance money so Biff can make a great business success. The climax of the play comes not because Willy has been victimized by fate, or capitalism, or some implacable abstraction. It comes not because he has seen through the illusion of his manifold dreams, and the sobering truth makes life no longer livable. It comes because of the irreconcilable conflict between those dreams and reality, a reality that Biff—and the audience—perceive at that bleak funeral. Biff tries to shine the light of reality on Willy when he tells him "Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you! ... 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! I'm one dollar an hour, Willy!" (132)

Is there something heroic about refusing to abandon one's dreams? And does it matter if those dreams are false, or "wrong"? Willy Loman goes to his grave holding some version of the American Dream—some romantic insistence that every man can be extraordinary.