Death of a Salesman

Date: 1949
Author: Arthur Miller

Although it did not receive a universally positive response from New York reviewers when it opened on February 10, 1949, Death of a Salesman went on to win the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, and the Tony Award. In the more than 50 years since its premiere, it has continued to elicit debate and controversy, but it also has become perhaps the best-known and most popular American play worldwide; and two very successful Broadway revivals within the past 25 years (in 1984, with Dustin Hoffman and John Malkovich, and in 1998, with Brian Dennehy and Elizabeth Franz), in addition to a much-publicized 1983 production in Beijing, among many others, have proven its enduring power to affect audiences.

On the surface, the play depicts the last two days in the life of Willy Loman, a 60-year-old over-the-hill traveling salesman, and his family—his wife Linda and their two sons Biff and Happy. But Miller has said that his first image in conceiving the play was "an enormous face the height of the proscenium arch which would appear and then open up, and we would see the inside of a man's head" (in fact, his first title for the play was "The Inside of His Head"); the concepts behind the play's structure are that "nothing in life comes 'next' but that everything exists together and at the same time within us" and that a human being "is his past at every moment" (Weales 155–156). Thus, while Willy and his family proceed through these final days, we also see scenes from their past, scenes that the playwright insists are not flashbacks but rather "a mobile concurrency of past and present" (Weales 158–159) and, as such, are representations of Willy's confusions, contradictions, and disorientations and of his inability to distinguish between "then and now."

The play opens as Willy returns to his Brooklyn home from a sales trip, which he had to cut short because "[t]he car kept going off onto the shoulder." When Linda tells him he should ask his boss to take him off the road and give him a job in New York, he replies, "I'm the New England man. I'm vital in New England." Their older son Biff has returned home after drifting around the country from job to job for the past 10 years; their younger son Happy, meanwhile, has a steady job, a car, an apartment, and all the girls he wants. On this day, they are back in the bedroom they shared growing up, worried about their father and admitting to one another that they would both like to find a nice girl and settle down. Biff decides to go the next day and ask businessman Bill Oliver, for whom he once worked, for a job. At this point, Willy's mind drifts back to a time when Biff was a high school football star promising to score a touchdown for his father in the big game, but, as that scene plays out, we also see Bernard, Biff's brainy classmate, trying unsuccessfully to get Biff to study. Willy tells his sons that, although Bernard gets "the best marks in school," the "man who makes 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." Willy has "knocked them dead" in New England because he is "well liked," and, as his family reassures him of this, he fleetingly thinks of The Woman he has seduced on the road because he was lonely. When his mind returns to Biff's senior year in high school, it turns out that Biff has stolen a football and is driving a car without a license; but Willy maintains, "There's nothing the matter with him!... He's got spirit, personality."

Back in the present, Willy's friend and next-door neighbor and Bernard's father, Charley, who is a successful businessman, enters and, hearing of Willy's aborted trip, offers him a job—to which Willy replies, "Don't insult me. I got a good job." During this scene, Willy thinks of his older brother Ben, who has recently died and who made a fortune in African diamond mines, and of
their father, a flute-maker who took his family all over the country before abandoning them when Willy was very young. In the present, while Willy goes out for a walk, Linda chastises her sons for not being more attentive to their father, especially Biff, who always seems to quarrel with Willy: "He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid." She tells them that Willy has been trying to kill himself by deliberately crashing his car and by attaching a rubber hose to the gas pipe. When Willy returns, Biff tells him that he's going to see Bill Oliver about a job; Willy, in turn, says he will see his boss about getting off the road.

Act 2 begins the next day with Willy and Linda full of hope for Biff's new start with Bill Oliver and for Willy's meeting with his boss, Howard. Linda tells him that his sons want to take him to dinner to celebrate after the two meetings. But when he goes to see Howard, the latter fires him, explaining, "there just is no spot here for you." Willy thinks of a moment in the past when he refused Ben's offer of a job in Alaska by saying, "The whole wealth of Alaska passes over the lunch table at the Commodore Hotel, and that's the wonder... of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked." In the present, Willy wanders into Charley's office, where he meets Bernard, now a successful lawyer, who asks Willy why Biff didn't go to summer school after he flunked math so that he could attend the University of Virginia on the football scholarship they had offered him. He recalls that Biff was ready to do this, but after Biff got back from visiting Willy in Boston, he burned his sneakers and, as Bernard explains, "I knew he'd given up his life." He asks Willy what happened in Boston; Willy replies, "Nothing." When Charley again offers Willy a job, he again refuses: "I just can't work for you."

Happy and Biff arrive at the restaurant, and Biff tells his brother that, after waiting six hours to see Bill Oliver, the latter did not remember him, saw him for one minute, and had no job for him. "I realized," Biff says, "what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been!" He admits that, after Oliver left, he stole a fountain pen from his desk. Happy begs Biff not to tell Willy what happened, but when their father arrives, he tries to tell him the truth. Simultaneously, we see a scene from the past in which Bernard tells Willy that Biff has flunked math and then a scene in a Boston hotel room where Biff has gone to get his father to intercede with his teacher —"Because if he saw the kind of man you are, and you talked to him in your way, I'm sure he'd come through for me"—only to find Willy with The Woman. Back in the restaurant, Biff and Happy leave Willy to go off with two women Happy has found for them.

When Biff and Happy return home, Linda is furious with them for abandoning their father in the restaurant and kicks them both out of the house. Biff insists on one last conversation with his father, who is planting seeds in his backyard and having an imaginary conversation with Ben about killing himself so that Biff can collect his $20,000 life insurance policy. When Ben says that suicide would be cowardly, Willy replies, "Does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up a zero?" and promises to give Biff "something and not have him hate me." Biff enters, puts the rubber hose he has detached from the gas pipe on the table, and tells his father, "I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody" and "I'm a dime a dozen and so are you!" When Willy responds, "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman and you are Biff Loman!" Biff breaks down in tears and Willy says to Linda, "Isn't that remarkable? Biff—he likes me... that boy is going to be magnificent." Happy and Linda assure him that he's right; after they go to bed, Willy drives off in his car.

The play ends with a brief "Requiem," as Charley, Bernard, Linda, Biff, and Happy gather at Willy's grave. Biff says, "He had the wrong dreams." Happy declares that he's going to show everyone that Willy "had a great dream... to come out number one man" and that he's "gonna win it for him"; Linda can't understand why Willy killed himself just as she made the last payment on the house: "We're free."

A good deal of the critical wrangling about Death of a Salesman has centered on whether or not Willy Loman is a tragic figure or merely a pitiful man with the wrong dreams. He has been
called a "loud-mouthed dolt and emotional babe-in-the-woods," a "poor, flashy, self-deceiving little man," and a schizophrenic (Weales xvi). Miller, in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man," published shortly after the play opened and clearly intended as a statement about his intention in writing it, provided his own definition of tragedy, a definition that certainly does fit Willy: "I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure... his sense of personal dignity" (Theater Essays 4). By this standard, Willy surely is tragic; he gives up his life to maintain his sense of himself as a provider for a son who can be "magnificent."

The play has also been seen by many as an indictment of American capitalism and materialism. C. W. E. Bigsby articulates this view when he calls Willy "an ageing [sic] salesman, baffled by a lifetime of failure in a society which apparently values only success" and a distillation of "the anxieties of a culture which had exchanged an existential world of physical and moral possibility for the determinisms of modern commercial and industrial life" (174). We can find added support for this perspective in Willy's continual raging against the towering apartment buildings that surround his small house and against the lack of fresh air and of grass, as well as in the figure of Ben, who obviously represents the triumph of capitalism. Seen this way, Death of a Salesman belongs in the American dramatic tradition of Eugene O'Neill's The Hairy Ape (1922), Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine (1923), Clif Ford Odet's Awake and Sing! (1935), and other plays that criticize the dehumanization of American life.

But, ultimately, Death of a Salesman resists such easy categorization: Willy's problem is both personal and social. If his were simply a social and economic quandary, he would take the job Charley offers him; he cannot because to do so would be to falsify his own view of himself. On the other hand, to maintain that Willy's predicament is in no way related to the capitalist system in which the salesman epitomizes the American Dream of success (significantly, we never learn what Willy sells, because, in American culture, the salesman sells himself, not the product—hence Willy's reliance on being "well liked") is equally wrong. But that viewpoint is also complicated, as Miller and others have pointed out, by the fact that Charley, "the most decent man in the play," is also a capitalist "whose aims are not different from Willy's." But key here is Miller's explanation of what distinguishes Willy from Charley: Charley "is not a fanatic.... [H]e has learned to live without that frenzy, that ecstasy of spirit which Willy chases to his end" (Theater Essays 150).

It is that fanaticism, that frenzy, which, in Miller's eyes, makes Willy a tragic figure. Unlike Biff, whom many critics see as a classically tragic figure because he seems to have a moment of recognition about himself at the end of the play, Willy cannot have such a moment, because it would be antithetical to the playwright's perception of what makes him tragic. As Miller asserted in the introduction to his Collected Plays (1957), "the less capable a man is of walking away from the central conflict of the play, the closer he approaches a tragic existence. In turn, this implies that the closer a man approaches tragedy... the closer he approaches what in life we call fanaticism" (Theater Essays 118). Thus, when Bernard says to Willy, "sometimes... it's better just to walk away," Willy's reply, "But if you can't walk away?" makes him worthy of tragic stature.

**Further Information**

