

Death of a Salesman

by Arthur Miller · Language: EN

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Overview

Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" is a landmark American play that dissects the myth of the American Dream through the tragic story of Willy Loman, a sixty-something traveling salesman who is losing his grip on reality. The play unfolds over a single day and night in Brooklyn, but it weaves in and out of Willy's memories, revealing the hopes, failures, and betrayals that have shaped his life. Willy believes that being well-liked and personally attractive are the keys to success, and he has pinned all his dreams on his son Biff, a former high school football star who has never lived up to his father's expectations. As Willy's mind fractures, the play exposes the corrosive gap between his idealized past and the harsh present, where he is being pushed out of his job and his sons are drifting and disillusioned.

The play's structure is a powerful blend of realism and expressionism, using Willy's flashbacks to show how his choices—especially his affair with a woman in Boston, which Biff accidentally discovered—shattered his family's future. The climax comes when Biff confronts his father with the truth: they are both ordinary men, not destined for greatness. Unable to accept this, Willy commits suicide, believing that his life insurance payout will give Biff the capital to start a business and finally achieve the success that eluded him. The play ends with his funeral, attended only by his family and his loyal neighbor Charley, who delivers the famous eulogy: "A salesman has got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."

"Death of a Salesman" matters because it challenges the foundational American belief that success is available to anyone who tries hard enough. Miller's portrayal of Willy Loman as a tragic everyman—flawed, deluded, but deeply human—resonates across generations. The play asks uncomfortable questions about identity, self-worth, and the price of chasing a dream that may not be our own. It remains a staple of theater and literature, a searing critique of capitalism and the emotional toll it takes on those who cannot adapt. Its themes of family conflict, the pressure to succeed, and the search for meaning continue to speak to modern audiences, making it a timeless and essential work.

Key Takeaways

- The American Dream is a fragile and often deceptive promise; success is not guaranteed by hard work or being well-liked, and chasing it can destroy a person.
- Willy Loman's tragedy stems from his inability to distinguish between reality and the idealized version of his life, showing how self-deception can be fatal.

- The play highlights the generational conflict between fathers and sons, where unfulfilled parental expectations can cripple a child's sense of identity.
- Biff's realization that he is 'a dime a dozen' is a moment of painful clarity, suggesting that self-acceptance is more valuable than chasing a false dream.
- Willy's suicide is a misguided act of love, as he believes his insurance money will give Biff the start he never had, but it ultimately leaves his family with nothing but grief.
- The play critiques the dehumanizing nature of capitalism, where a man's worth is measured by his sales numbers and his usefulness is discarded when he is no longer productive.
- Loyalty and genuine human connection, as shown by Charley's friendship, are more sustaining than the superficial popularity Willy craves.
- The past is not a safe refuge; Willy's memories are selective and distorted, and his inability to move forward traps him in a cycle of regret and fantasy.

Chapter Summaries

Act I (Part 1)

The play opens in Willy Loman's Brooklyn home, where he returns exhausted from a sales trip. His wife Linda tries to soothe him, but Willy is agitated, muttering about his inability to drive and his failing business. His sons, Biff and Happy, are home, and Willy's mind begins to drift into memories of their childhood, when Biff was a star athlete and the family's pride. The present is bleak: Biff is a ranch hand who has drifted from job to job, and Happy is a womanizing assistant in a department store. Willy's flashbacks reveal his belief in the power of personal attractiveness and his admiration for his brother Ben, who struck it rich in Africa. Linda reveals that Willy has been contemplating suicide, and the family's financial troubles are mounting.

Act I (Part 2)

Willy's memories intensify as he relives a moment when Biff borrowed a football from his coach, and Willy encourages him to be 'well-liked' rather than honest. The scene shifts to the present where Biff and Happy discuss their father's decline. Biff decides to ask his former employer, Bill Oliver, for a loan to start a sporting goods business, hoping to finally impress his father. Willy, overhearing, becomes excited and begins to relive his own past successes, but his joy is short-lived. He argues with Biff about his life choices, and the tension escalates. Willy's memory of his brother Ben becomes more vivid, and he imagines Ben offering him a job in Alaska, a path he never took. The act ends with Willy's mind spiraling, and Linda's plea for her sons to respect their father.

Act II (Part 1)

The next morning, Willy is in high spirits, planning to ask his boss, Howard Wagner, for a non-traveling job in New York. He also hopes that Biff will secure the loan from Bill Oliver. At

Howard's office, Willy is dismissed; Howard, more interested in his new tape recorder, tells Willy he can no longer afford him and fires him. Willy is devastated, and his mind flashes back to a time when he was young and successful, meeting his brother Ben. He also recalls the woman he had an affair with in Boston, a memory that haunts him. Meanwhile, Biff waits for Bill Oliver, but Oliver never sees him; Biff realizes he is a nobody to Oliver. Happy and Biff take two women to dinner, and Biff confesses that he has been living a lie, stealing and drifting.

Act II (Part 2)

Willy, desperate, goes to his neighbor Charley for a loan to pay his insurance premium. Charley offers him a job, but Willy refuses, prideful and stubborn. Charley gives him the money and delivers a speech about how a salesman's life is a dream. Willy's memories of Ben become more intense, and he imagines Ben telling him that he could have been great in Alaska. Willy's mind then flashes to the Boston hotel room where Biff discovered his affair. Biff confronts Willy with the rubber hose he found, accusing him of planning suicide. The family gathers at Frank's Chop House, but the dinner is a disaster. Biff tries to tell Willy the truth about his failure with Oliver, but Willy is lost in his fantasies. The act builds to a climax as Biff breaks down, sobbing and begging his father to let go of the dream.

Requiem

The final scene is Willy's funeral, a sparse gathering of family and friends. Linda, Biff, Happy, Charley, and Bernard (Charley's son) are present. Biff reflects on his father's delusions, saying that Willy had the wrong dreams. Happy vows to carry on his father's legacy, while Charley delivers a poignant eulogy, noting that a salesman has to dream. Linda, in a heart-wrenching moment, says she can't cry because she has just paid off the mortgage, and now there is no one to live in the house. She asks Willy's grave for forgiveness, unable to understand why he did it. The play ends with the family walking away, leaving Willy's grave, a stark symbol of the cost of his unfulfilled dreams.

Themes

- The American Dream
- Reality vs. illusion
- Father-son relationships
- Betrayal and guilt
- Capitalism and dehumanization
- The cost of pride

Notable Quotes

- "Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person." — Linda Loman says this to her sons, defending Willy and demanding that someone acknowledge his suffering and humanity.
- "A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory." — Charley says this at Willy's funeral, explaining that the life of a salesman is built on dreams and illusions.
- "You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit!" — Willy says this to his boss Howard, protesting his firing and the dehumanizing way he is being discarded.
- "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!" — Willy shouts this at Biff during their confrontation, desperately clinging to his sense of identity and worth.
- "The woods are burning, boys. Can you grasp that?" — Willy says this to his sons, using a metaphor for the impending disaster of his life and career.
- "He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine." — Charley says this in his eulogy, describing the salesman's precarious existence.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is *Death of a Salesman* about?

Death of a Salesman is a play about Willy Loman, a struggling salesman who believes in the American Dream of success through being well-liked. Over the course of one day, his delusions unravel as he faces job loss, his son's failures, and his own past betrayals. The play explores themes of identity, family, and the destructive nature of chasing a false dream.

Is *Death of a Salesman* worth reading?

Yes, it is a masterpiece of American theater. Its exploration of the American Dream, family dynamics, and personal failure is timeless. The play's emotional depth and complex characters make it a powerful and thought-provoking read. It is often studied in schools, but it resonates with adults as well, offering new insights with each reading.

How does *Death of a Salesman* end?

Spoiler: Willy Loman commits suicide by crashing his car, hoping his life insurance payout will give his son Biff a fresh start. The play ends with his funeral, attended only by his family and neighbor Charley. Linda, his wife, is left bewildered, having just paid off the mortgage, and she cannot understand why Willy chose to die when they were finally free of debt.

Who should read *Death of a Salesman*?

Anyone interested in classic American literature, drama, or social critique should read it. Students, theater enthusiasts, and those who enjoy character-driven stories will find it compelling. It is also a great read for people who have ever questioned the meaning of success.

or felt the pressure to live up to expectations.

How long does it take to read *Death of a Salesman*?

The play is about 110 pages long, and the average reader can finish it in about 2 to 3 hours. At a pace of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 2 hours and 20 minutes of reading time. However, because it is a play, you might want to read it slowly to appreciate the dialogue and stage directions.