

**Reading Questions: Steven R. Centola,
"Family Values in *Death of a Salesman*"**

Answer in complete sentences with reference to the essay.

1. What is the "timeless human dilemma" the play portrays?
2. For what four reasons are analyzing Willy's values important?
3. What undercuts Willy's belief in the value of a good personal appearance?
4. Why is Willy's attachment to such platitudes as "personality always wins the day" a problem?
5. What two value systems does Willy confuse?
6. According to Centola, why is financial prosperity important to Willy?
7. Give two examples that Centola uses to identify Willy's preoccupation with his role as a father.
8. Besides providing an ideal of success, how else is Ben important to Willy?
9. How are the different characters representative of elements of Willy's psyche?
10. What does Ben's "drive for self-fulfillment" require?
11. How do Biff and Happy embody Willy's fears of his failure as a father?
12. According to Centola, what is the importance of the insurance payout that will result from Willy's suicide?
13. Why must we appreciate Willy? Do you agree with Centola's claim?
14. Identify three different transitions in this essay and explain how they work (what do they connect with what?).
15. In your own words, state the essay's thesis.

STEVEN R. CENTOLA

Family Values in Death of a Salesman

Studies of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* invariably discuss Willy Loman's self-delusion and moral confusion in relation to Miller's indictment of the competitive, capitalistic society that is responsible for dehumanizing the individual and transforming the once promising agrarian American dream into an urban nightmare.¹ While Miller clearly uses Willy's collapse to attack the false values of a venal American society, the play ultimately captures the audience's attention not because of its blistering attack on social injustice but because of its powerful portrayal of a timeless human dilemma. Simply put, Miller's play tells the story of a man who, on the verge of death, wants desperately to justify his life. As he struggles to fit the jagged pieces of his broken life together, Willy Loman discovers that to assuage his guilt, he must face the consequences of past choices and question the values inherent in the life he has constructed for himself and his family. Willy's painful struggle "to evaluate himself justly"² is finally what grips the play's audiences around the world, for everyone, not just people who are culturally or ideologically predisposed to embrace the American dream, can understand the anguish that derives from "being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world" ("Tragedy" 5).

One can appreciate the intensity of Willy's struggle only after isolating the things that Willy values and after understanding how the complex

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interrelationship of opposed loyalties and ideals in Willy's mind motivates every facet of his speech and behavior in the play. By identifying and analyzing Willy Loman's values, we can uncover the intrinsic nature of Willy and Biff's conflict. Discussion of Willy's values specifically clarifies questions pertaining to Willy's infidelity and singular effort both to seek and escape from conscious recognition of the role he played in Biff's failure. Moreover, discussion of Willy's values helps us understand why Willy feels compelled to commit suicide. Ultimately, an analysis of Willy's values even helps to explain why *Death of a Salesman* is a tragedy, for in Willy Loman's drama of frustration, anguish, and alienation, we see a human struggle that is rooted in metaphysical as well as social and psychological concerns.

Throughout the play, Willy exhibits several important personality traits. Thoroughly convinced that "the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead,"³ Willy is ever conscious of his appearance before others. Quite literally, Willy is probably obsessed with personal appearance because, in his mind, he was convinced himself that since he is destined for success, he must constantly dress the part. However, such fastidiousness also betrays his insecurity, something which often surfaces in his contradictory statements and emotional outbursts—these, of course, being a constant embarrassment for his family as well as a painful reminder to Willy of his ridiculous appearance before others. Beneath the surface optimism, therefore, lurk his frustration and keen sense of failure. That is why he can be sly, amusing, and cheerful one moment and then suddenly become quarrelsome, insulting, and sullen the next. Through Willy's incongruous behavior, Miller makes us sharply aware of the subterranean tensions dividing Willy.

Perhaps just as important as this, though, is the realization that with all of his seemingly absurd antics, and with his humor, quick intelligence, and warmth, Willy becomes likable, if not well liked. Even if we disagree with his actions, we still understand his anguish, share his suffering, and even come to admire him for his relentless pursuit of his impossible dream. With Miller, we come to see Willy as "extraordinary in one sense at least—he is driven to commit what to him is a consummate act of love through which he can hand down his selfhood, his identity. Perversely, perhaps, this has a certain noble claim if only in his having totally believed, and dreamed himself to death."⁴

Willy's quirky speech rhythms, his spontaneous utterance of successful formula platitudes, and his incessant contradictions flesh out his character and reveal his complex and troubled state of mind. More importantly, though, the poverty of his language exposes the conflict in his values that gives rise to all of his troubles in the play. The disparity between the hollowness of Willy's words and the passion with which he utters them

underscore the tremendous variance between his deep feelings about and inadequate understanding of fatherhood, salesmanship, and success in one's personal life as well as in the business world in American society. For example, when Willy recites one of his stock phrases—such as "personality always wins the day" (*Salesman* 151)—he is expressing a long-held belief that has taken on the sanctity of a religious doctrine for him. The source of such success formulas may very well be books by Dale Carnegie and Russell Conwell—writers who popularized myths of the self-made man in the early twentieth century.⁵ But without attributing such views to any particular influence, we can see that, in Willy's mind, such maxims are weighted with great authority; to him they represent nothing short of magical formulas for instant success. Like so many others in his society, he fails to see the banality in such clichés and is actually using bromidic language to bolster his own faltering self-confidence. By passionately repeating hackneyed phrases, Willy simultaneously tries to assure himself that he has made the right choices and has not wasted his life while he also prevents himself from questioning his conduct and its effect on his relations with others. Ironically, though, his speech says much more to anyone carefully listening.

Without knowing it, Willy cries out for help and denounces the life-lie that has destroyed his family. Even while yearning for success, Willy wants more than material prosperity; he wants to retrieve the love and respect of his family and the self-esteem which he has lost. Yet he goes about striving to achieve these goals in the wrong way because he has deceived himself into thinking that the values of the family he cherishes are inextricably linked with the values of the business world in which he works. He confuses the two and futilely tries to transfer one value system to the other's domain, creating nothing but chaos for himself and pain or embarrassment for everyone around him.

Willy's confusion has much to do with his own feelings of inadequacy as a father. His stubborn denial of these feelings, coupled with his misguided effort to measure his self-worth by the expression of love he thinks he can purchase in his family, only serves to aggravate his condition. Willy unwittingly hastens his own destruction by clinging fiercely to values that perpetually enforce his withdrawal from reality.

This problem is particularly evident in the way Willy approaches the profession of salesmanship. Instead of approaching his profession in the manner of one who understands the demands of the business world, Willy instead convinces himself that his success or failure in business has significance only in that it affects others'—particularly his family's—perception of him. He does not seek wealth for any value it has in itself;

financial prosperity is simply the visible sign that he is a good provider for his family.

The confluence of the personal and the professional in Willy's mind is evident as Willy tells Howard Wagner about a time when a salesman could earn a living and appreciate the importance of "respect," "comradeship," "gratitude," "friendship," and "personality" (*Salesman* 180-81)—terms that are repeatedly used by various members of the Loman family. Also significant is the fact that when explaining to his boss how he was introduced to the career of salesmanship, Willy does not use his brother's language or refer to the kinds of survival techniques which Ben undoubtedly would have employed to make his fortune in the jungle. Willy's speech to Howard suggests that Willy chooses to be a salesman because he wants to sell himself, more than any specific product, to others—a point underscored by the obvious omission in the play of any reference to the specific products that Willy carries around in his valises.

The value that Willy attaches to his role as a father is evident throughout the play in numerous passages that reveal his obsession with this image. Soon after the play begins, Willy's concern over his duty to "accomplish something" (*Salesman* 133) is evident. Thinking about the many years which he has spent driving from New York City to New England to sell his products, Willy ruefully wonders why he has worked "a lifetime to pay off [his] house ... and there's nobody to live in it" (*Salesman* 133). Obviously, Willy feels as though he has invested all of his life in his family and is not getting the kind of return he always expected. This feeling of futility makes him wonder whether he has failed as a father and impels him to explore his past—a psychological journey made effective theatrically by Miller's expressionistic use of lighting, music, and violation of wall-line boundaries. In almost every scene from his past, Willy's dialogue either comments on his role in his sons' development or shows his need to win Ben's approval of how he is rearing Biff and Happy. In scenes where he is congratulating Biff on his initiative for borrowing a regulation football to practice with (*Salesman* 144), or encouraging the boys to steal sand from the apartment house so that he can rebuild the front stoop (*Salesman* 158), or advising his sons to be well liked and make a good appearance in order to get ahead in the world (*Salesman* 146), Willy is unknowingly instilling values in his sons that will have a definite impact on their future development. He also does the same when he counsels Biff to "watch [his] schooling" (*Salesman* 142), tells his sons "Never leave a job till you're finished" (*Salesman* 143), or sentimentally praises America as "full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people" (*Salesman* 145). Even in scenes where he is troubled by Biff's stealing, failure of math, and renunciation of his love and authority after discovering his

infidelity in Boston, Willy is probing only that part of his past that in some way calls into question his effectiveness as a father.

A look at the memory scenes also helps to explain why Willy values his family more than anything else in his life. Abandoned at an early age by his father, Willy has tried all his life to compensate for this painful loss. When Willy also suffers the sudden disappearance of his older brother, he nearly completely loses his self-confidence and a sense of his own identity as a male. His insecurity about his identity and role as a father is evident in the memory scene where he confesses to Ben that he feels "kind of temporary" (*Salesman* 159) about himself and seeks his brother's assurance that he is doing a good job of bringing up his sons:

WILLY: Ben, my boys—can't we talk? They'd go into the jaws of hell for me, see, but I—

BEN: William, you're being first-rate with your boys.

Outstanding, manly chaps!

WILLY, *hanging on to his words*: Oh, Ben, that's good to hear!

Because sometimes I'm afraid that I'm not teaching them the right kind of—Ben, how should I teach them? (*Salesman* 159)

However, although Willy idolizes Ben and treasures his advice and opinions, Willy rarely does what Ben suggests and never imitates his pattern of behavior. In fact, until the end of Act II, when Ben appears entirely as a figment of Willy's imagination in a scene that has nothing to do with any remembered episode from his past, Willy implicitly rejects Ben's lifestyle and approach to business. There can be no doubt that in Willy's mind Ben's image stands for "success incarnate" (*Salesman* 152). Likewise, enshrined in Willy's memory, Ben's cryptic words magically ring "*with a certain vicious audacity*: William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!" (*Salesman* 160). And there is always the tone of remorse in Willy's voice whenever he mentions Ben, for he associates his brother with his own missed opportunity: the Alaska deal which Willy turns down and with it the chance to make a fortune.

Clearly, then, Ben embodies more than just the image of success in Willy's mind; he also represents the road not taken. In other words, he is, in many ways, Willy's alter ego. Ben is the other self which Willy could have become had he chosen to live by a different code of ethics. Therefore, his presence in Willy's mind gives us insight into Willy's character by letting us see not only what Willy values but also what kinds of choices he has made in his life as a result of those values. For while Ben is undoubtedly the embodiment of one kind of American dream to Willy, so too is Dave

Singleman representative of another kind—and that is part of Willy's confusion: both men symbolize the American dream, yet in his mind they represent value systems that are diametrically opposed to each other. The memory scenes are important in bringing out this contrast and showing what Willy's perception of Ben reflects about Willy's own conflicting values.

In every memory scene in which Ben appears, his viewpoint is always contrasted with the perspective of another character. This counterbalancing occurs because, while Ben has had a significant impact on Willy's past that continues to remain alive in the present in his imagination, Ben's influence on Willy has actually been no stronger than that which has been exerted upon him by people like Linda and Dave Singleman—the latter actually having the strongest effect, possibly because he exists in Willy's mind only as an idealized image.

The characters' contrasting views, in essence, externalize warring factions within Willy's fractured psyche. Each character represents a different aspect of Willy's personality: Linda most often takes the part of his conscience; Charley generally expresses the voice of reason; and Ben seems to personify Willy's drive toward self-assertion and personal fulfillment. These forces compete against each other, struggling for dominance, but although one might temporarily gain an advantage over the others, no one maintains control indefinitely. All remain active in Willy, leaving him divided, disturbed, and confused.

Linda and Charley are the most conspicuous contrasts to Ben in the memory scenes. They represent that side of Willy that has deliberately chosen not to follow in his brother's footsteps. Yet their views are not remembered as being superior to Ben's, for the image of Ben remains shrouded in mystery and splendor in Willy's memory and serves as a reminder not only of lost opportunity but also of the possibility of transforming dreams into reality. Ben's apparition haunts Willy and prods him to question his choices in life. However, since Willy both wants answers and dreads finding them, tension, not resolution, prevails in these scenes.

Such tension is evident, for example, in the scene where Charley and Ben disagree over Willy's handling of the boys' stealing:

CHARLEY: Listen, if they steal any more from that building the watchman'll put the cops on them!

LINDA, to Willy: Don't let Biff ...

Ben laughs lustily.

WILLY: You shoulda seen the lumber they brought home last week. At least a dozen six-by-tens worth all kinds a money.

CHARLEY: Listen, if that watchman—

WILLY: I gave them hell, understand. But I got a couple of fearless characters there.

CHARLEY: Willy, the jails are full of fearless characters.

BEN, clapping Willy on the back, with a laugh at Charley: And the stock exchange, friend! (*Salesman* 158)

Tension is also clearly present when Ben suddenly trips Biff while they are sparring and consequently receives a cold, disapproving stare from Linda (*Salesman* 158). Linda's opposition is even more apparent as she diminishes Ben's influence over Willy during their conversation about the Alaska deal, by reminding Willy of the successful Dave Singleman, she rekindles within him his love of the profession that he associates with family values and the unlimited possibilities inherent within the American dream (*Salesman* 183–84). Ironically, Linda could actually be said to have hurt Willy by upholding his illusions. Nevertheless, she is instrumental in helping him reject Ben's business ethics, even though Willy does not recognize the value inherent in his choice and foolishly torments himself only with the memory of missed opportunity.

Unlike Willy, Ben functions comfortably in the modern business world. His life history provides confirmation of Howard Wagner's pronouncement that "business is business" (*Salesman* 180), and like Charley, he is a realist who has no illusions about what it takes to be a success. He is a survivor who undoubtedly made a fortune in the jungle through the kinds of ruthless acts which he performs in his sparring session with Biff. He suggests as much when he warns Biff: "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way" (*Salesman* 158). Ben's drive for self-fulfillment is undoubtedly predicated upon his denial of any responsibility for others and his repudiation of the values which Willy cherishes and associates with his romanticized view of family life and the past.

In dramatic contrast to the image of this ruthless capitalist stands the idealized figure of Dave Singleman. In Willy's mind, the image of Dave Singleman reflects Willy's unflinching conviction that personal salvation can be linked with success, that business transactions can be made by people who respect and admire each other. Willy practically worships this legendary salesman who, at the age of eighty-four, "drummed merchandise in thirty-one states" by picking up a phone in his hotel room and calling buyers who remembered and loved him (*Salesman* 180). The legend of Dave Singleman so strongly impresses Willy that he decides that success results from "who you know and the smile on your face! It's contacts ... being liked" (*Salesman* 184) that guarantee a profitable business. Willy clings to the illusion that he

can become another Dave Singleman—in itself an impossible task since no one can become another person, a fact underscored by the name *Singleman*, which obviously calls attention to the individual's uniqueness—even though Willy knows he lives in an era when business is “all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear—or personality” (*Salesman* 180–81). He fails to see the folly of his dream and ends up passing on not only his dream but also his confusion to Biff and Happy.

Their dilemma not only mirrors Willy's identity crisis but also indicts him for his ineptitude as a father. Moreover, seeing his failure reflected in the lives of his sons further intensifies Willy's guilt and hastens his decline.

Both sons are “lost” and “confused” (*Salesman* 136). They have inherited their father's powerful dreams but have no true understanding of how to attain them. Biff is more troubled than Happy because he is more conscious of this problem. Biff knows that he does not belong in the business world but still feels obligated to build his future there since that is what his father expects of him. He would prefer to work on a farm, performing manual labor, but he has learned from Willy not to respect such work. In Willy's mind, physical labor is tainted with the suggestion of something demeaning. When Biff suggests that they work as carpenters, Willy reproachfully shouts: “Even your grandfather was better than a carpenter... Go back to the West! Be a carpenter, a cowboy, enjoy yourself!” (*Salesman* 166). With gibes like this in mind, Biff never feels completely satisfied working as a farmhand and tortures himself with guilt over his failure to satisfy Willy's demand that he do something extraordinary with his life.

In the harrowing climactic scene, however, Biff puts an end to his self-deception and tries to force his family to face the truth about him and themselves. He shatters the illusion of his magnificence by firmly telling Willy: “I'm not bringing home any prizes any more, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home!” (*Salesman* 217). Knowing that his days of glory are past and that his dreams have nothing to do with Willy's vision of success for him, Biff embraces his life and stops living a lie. At the play's end, Biff confidently asserts: “I know who I am ...” (*Salesman* 222). However, while he manages to succeed in his own quest for certitude, he fails to prevent Willy's self-destruction.

Willy commits suicide because he “cannot settle for half but must pursue his dream of himself to the end.”⁶ He convinces himself that only his death can restore his prominence in his family's eyes and retrieve for him his lost sense of honor. Perhaps without ever being fully conscious of his motives, Willy feels that his sacrifice will purge him of his guilt and make him worthy of Biff's love. When he realizes that he never lost Biff's love, Willy decides that he must die immediately so that he can preserve that love

and not jeopardize it with further altercations. In his desperation to perform one extraordinary feat for his son so that he can once and for all verify his greatness and confirm his chosen image of himself in Biff's eyes, Willy turns to what he knows best: selling. He literally fixes a cash value on his life and, in killing himself, tries to complete his biggest sale. Willy thinks that by bequeathing Biff twenty thousand dollars, he will provide conclusive proof of his immutable essence as a good father, a goal that has obsessed him ever since the day Biff discovered Willy's infidelity in Boston.

When Biff finds Willy with Miss Francis, Biff is horrified to see the face behind the mask that Willy wears. This sudden revelation of the naked soul in all its weakness and imperfection is more than Biff can bear because he has been trained to elude reality and substitute lies for truth. Beneath Biff's scornful gaze, Willy becomes nothing more than a “liar,” a “phony little fake” (*Salesman* 208). Such condemnation leaves Willy feeling disgraced and alienated, so he retreats into the sanctuary of the past in a frantic effort to recapture there what is irretrievably lost in the present: his innocence and chosen identity. He opts for self-deception as a way of maintaining his distorted image of himself—a costly decision that eventually causes his psychological disorientation and death. He goes to his grave, as Biff puts it, without ever knowing “who he was” (*Salesman* 221).

However, Biff is only partially right when he says: Willy “had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong ...” (*Salesman* 221). Willy does deny a valuable part of his existence—his aptitude for manual labor—and spends most of his life mistakenly believing that values associated with the family open the door to success in the business world. He also transfers his confusion to his sons. Yet, in spite of his failings, Willy must ultimately be appreciated for valuing so highly the family and his role as a father. Even though he has misconceptions about this role, his inspiring pursuit of his forever elusive identity as the perfect father makes him a tragic figure. That is why Miller writes: “There is a nobility ... in Willy's struggle. Maybe it comes from his refusal ever to relent, to give up” (*Beijing* 27). Against all odds, Willy Loman demands that his life have “meaning and significance and honor” (*Beijing* 49).

Of course, in many ways, Willy ultimately fails to fulfill his dream. The Requiem clearly shows that he is not immortalized in death. His funeral is certainly not like the grand one he had imagined, and he still remains misunderstood by his family. But death does not defeat Willy Loman. The Requiem proves that his memory will continue to live on in those who truly mattered to him while he was alive. He might not have won their respect, but he is definitely loved—and perhaps that is all that Willy ever really hoped to achieve. Miller says that what Willy wanted “was to excel, to win out over anonymity and meaninglessness, to love and be loved, and above all, perhaps,

to *count*.”⁷ After considering the importance of family values to Willy Loman, we are decidedly more inclined to say that he does, indeed, *count*—and we can perhaps better understand why his struggle and death make Miller’s drama a tragedy of lasting and universal significance.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Henry Popkin, “Arthur Miller: The Strange Encounter,” *Sewanee Review* 68 (Winter 1960): 48–54; Barry Edward Gross, “Peddler and Pioneer in *Death of a Salesman*,” *Modern Drama* 7 (February 1965): 405–10; Thomas E. Porter, *Myth and Modern American Drama* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1969) 127–52; Ronald Hayman, *Arthur Miller* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972); Christopher Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) II, 135–248; and Kay Stanton, “Women and the American Dream of *Death of a Salesman*,” *Feminist Rereadings of Modern American Drama*, ed. June Schlueter (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1989) 67–102.
2. Arthur Miller, “Tragedy and the Common Man,” *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*, ed. Robert A. Martin (New York: Penguin Books, 1978) 4. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as “Tragedy.”
3. Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, *Arthur Miller’s Collected Plays* (New York: Viking, 1957) I. 146. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Salesman*.
4. Arthur Miller, *Salesman in Beijing* (New York: Viking, 1984) 190. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Beijing*.
5. See Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936); and Russell H. Conwell, *Acres of Diamonds* (New York: Harper, 1905). Discussion of these texts and other works which popularized the success myth can be found in Porter, pp. 127–52.
6. Arthur Miller, *Introd.*, *Arthur Miller’s Collected Plays* I, 34.
7. Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (New York: Grove, 1987) 184.