

Character Analysis:

1. 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 behavior: 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 behavior 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.

2. Biff Loman

Biff is a catalyst. He drives Willy's actions and thoughts, particularly his memories, throughout the play. Whenever Willy is unable to accept the present, he retreats to the past, and Biff is usually there. Prior to his Boston trip, Biff adored Willy. He believed his father's stories and accepted his father's philosophy that a person will be successful, provided that he is "well-liked." Biff never questioned Willy, even when it was obvious that Willy was breaking the rules. As a result, Biff grew up believing that he was not bound by social rules or expectations because Willy did not have to abide by them, nor did Willy expect Biff to. It is not surprising that Biff's penchant for stealing continued throughout his adult life because Willy encouraged Biff's "little thefts" while he was growing up. For example, instead of disciplining Biff for stealing the football, Willy praised his initiative.

Biff's perception of Willy as the ideal father is destroyed after Biff's trip to Boston. Once he learns that Willy is having an affair, Biff rejects Willy and his philosophy. Biff considers Willy to be a "fake," and he no longer believes in, or goes along with, Willy's grand fantasies of success. Instead, Biff despises his father and everything he represents.

Biff's problem lies in the fact that, even though he does not want to associate with Willy, he cannot change the fact that he is his son. And as a result, he cannot change the fact that his father has inevitably affected him. It is true that Biff is not a

womanizer like his brother Happy, but he has incorporated Willy's tendency to exaggerate and manipulate reality in his favor. For example, Biff truly believes he was a salesman for Oliver, rather than a shipping clerk. It is only when he confronts Oliver that Biff realizes how wrong he was.

Biff is different from Willy because he does finally accept and embrace the fact that he has been living a lie all of his life. Biff is relieved once he realizes who he is and what he wants, as opposed to who Willy thinks he should be and who Biff needs to pretend to be in order to please him. Once Biff states that "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house," he severs himself from Willy because he openly refuses to live by Willy's philosophy any longer. Ironically, Biff reconciles with Willy almost immediately following this statement. Since he acknowledges that he, too, is a "fake," Biff can no longer hold a grudge against Willy.

3.Linda Loman

Linda is a woman in an awkward situation. She knows that Willy is suicidal, irrational, and difficult to deal with; however, she goes along with Willy's fantasies in order to protect him from the criticism of others, as well as his own self-criticism. Linda is Willy's champion. She gently prods him when it comes to paying the bills and communicating with Biff, and she does not lose her temper when he becomes irate. Linda knows that Willy is secretly borrowing money from Charley to pay the life insurance and other bills. She has discovered the rubber hose behind the heater and lives in fear that Willy will try to asphyxiate himself. She is also aware that he has attempted to kill himself several times before. Despite all this, Linda does nothing, afraid to aggravate Willy's fragile mental condition. In fact, she even throws Biff and Happy out when their behavior threatens to upset Willy. In many ways Willy is like a small child, and Linda is like a mother who anxiously protects him from Biff, Happy, and the rest of the world.

Linda is a character driven by desperation and fear. Even though Willy is often rude to her and there is the possibility that Linda suspects Willy may have had an affair, she protects him at all costs. According to Linda, Willy is "only a little boat looking for a harbor." She loves Willy, and more importantly, she accepts all of his shortcomings. She would rather play along with his fantasies of grandeur, or the simple ones like building a garden and growing fresh vegetables, than face the possibility of losing him.

4.Happy Loman

Happy is a young version of Willy. He incorporates his father's habit of manipulating reality in order to create situations that are more favorable to him. Happy grew up listening to Willy embellish the truth, so it is not surprising that Happy exaggerates his position in order to create the illusion of success. Instead of admitting he is an assistant to the assistant, Happy lies and tells everyone he is the assistant buyer. This is Willy's philosophy all over again.

Happy also relishes the fact that "respectable" women cannot resist him. He has seduced the fiancées of three executives just to gain a perception of pleasure and

power. He thrives on sexual gratification, but even more than that, Happy savors the knowledge that he has "ruined" women engaged to men he works for and also despises. He states, "I hate myself for it. Because I don't want the girl, and, still, I take it and — I love it!" Happy is similar to Willy in two ways. Both deny their positions and exaggerate details in order to aggrandize themselves, and sexual interludes are the defining moments of both of their lives. Willy's life revolves around his attempt to forget his affair with the Woman, while Happy's life revolves around an active pursuit of affairs with many women.

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