

Twentieth Century American Drama
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Lecture - 10
Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman - Part 5

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American Dream



- Anyone can achieve financial success and material comfort
 - Any man who is charismatic and well-liked will naturally achieve success – Willy seems to believe so?
- The Dream could be achieved in different ways
- Ben (Willy's brother) – to the wilderness of Alaska and Africa, discovery of a diamond mine
- Howard Wagner – inherits his Dream - his father's company
- Bernard – studious boring child, but becomes a lawyer
- Willy Loman – believes in the Dream, falls short of the standards, but also ignores the other little things such as family, children's individual ambitions
- Two sides of the American Dream – Inspiring + turns human beings into commodities. Value of human life = measured in terms of material worth



Hello, and welcome to today's session of the course. We are continuing to discuss the iconic play *Death of a Salesman*. In the last session, we looked at some of the predominant themes and how the structure of the play is designed that the mood and tone of the entire setting reflects in it.

Today, we begin by taking a closer look at the idea of the American dream and how it gets represented and reflected in the various characters of the play, particularly in Willy Loman, and how certain markers are predominantly found to convey how this dreaming manifests itself.

The American dream is built on this fundamental notion that anyone, irrespective of their status, background, the privileges they have access to or not access to, can achieve financial success and material comfort. The way Willy Loman approaches the notion of American dream is also about believing in a man who is charismatic enough, well-liked and thinks that success will naturally come to him.

It seems like something organically built into a man's persona, and we continue to use 'man' here because the play hardly talks about how success defines a woman. So, we will stick to what the play talks about at the moment. Willy seems to believe strongly in the inherent quality of being well-liked, and being well-liked should ideally translate into material success, according to him.

This is very much evident in the way he evaluates his sons when they were well-liked in high school. He also believes that they will grow up into successful adults and thinks that success is entirely defined in terms of the material comforts and financial rewards they are capable of garnering.

There is no one way in which this dream could be achieved and the beauty of this dream as Willy Loman believes is that it could be achieved through any route. There is no one set formula to achieve this as long as one is in possession of this well-liked persona and as long as one is charismatic enough to impress the others, then the route to success becomes easy.

There is an instance in the play where Willy talks about his brother Ben who went into the wilderness of Alaska and Africa and made a huge fortune after the discovery of a diamond mine. So, this is something that Willy, at some level, regrets since he chose to settle down for a lesser dream of becoming a salesman and achieving success through that.


Going into the wilderness and doing whatever it takes to reap material success becomes his idealised version of achieving the American dream. There are certain contrasting images and figures whom he encounters in life, such as Howard Wagner, who had inherited his father's business and thereby inherited the dream as well.


That does not go down very well with Willy because of his attitude and because of the way he was treated by the new boss. We find that this is in stark contrast to what the American dream projects since Willy believes that anyone can achieve financial success.

Howard Wagner is presented as a contrast to Willy, who is in denial about Howard's inheritance of success, and he chooses to believe that his sons could be better off than that. He makes certain juvenile comparisons as well.

This is evident in one of those episodes when a time switch happens, and we are taken back along with Willy to the high school situation when his sons were in high school, and comparisons were being made with Bernard, who was very studious but a boring child, according to Willy. But eventually, Bernard becomes a very successful lawyer.

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ACT ONE

olution. A fine city. And a couple of other towns in Mass., and on to Portland and Bangor and straight home!

BIFF: Gee, I'd love to go with you sometime, Dad.

WILLY: Soon as summer comes.

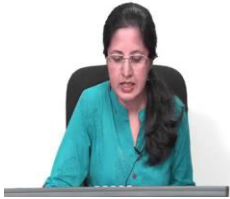
HAPPY: Promise?


WILLY: 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 their own. This summer, heh?

BIFF and HAPPY *[together]*: Yeah! You bet!

Let us take a look at an instance from Act One.

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own. This summer, heh?

BIFF and HAPPY *[together]*: Yeah! You bet!

WILLY: We'll take our bathing suits.

HAPPY: We'll carry your bags, Pop!

WILLY: Oh, won't that be something! Me comin' into the Boston stores with you boys carryin' my bags. What a sensation!

[BIFF is prancing around, practicing passing the ball.]

WILLY: You nervous, Biff, about the game?

BIFF: Not if you're gonna be there.

WILLY: What do they say about you **in school**, now that they made you captain?

HAPPY: There's a crowd of girls behind him every time the classes change.

BIFF *[taking WILLY's hand]*: This Saturday, Pop, this Saturday—just for you, I'm going to break through for a touchdown.

HAPPY: You're supposed to pass.

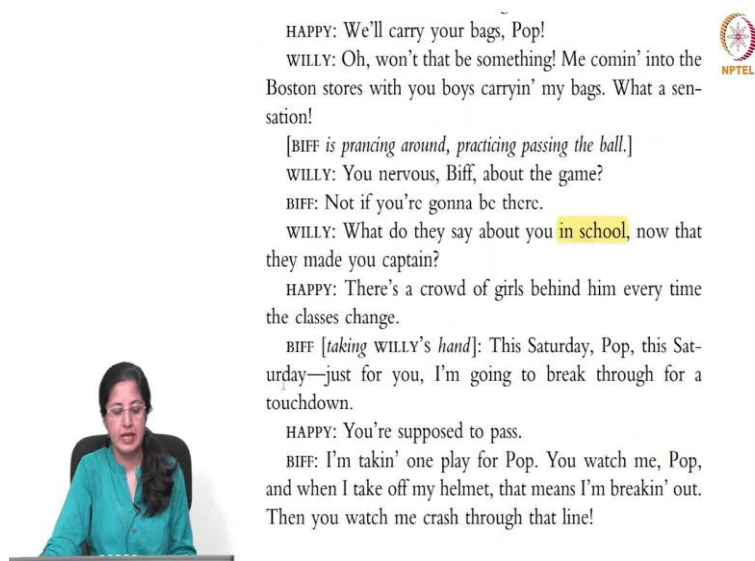
In one of these times switches, when he is with his sons who were young, Willy Loman himself was also young, and this is how he talks about America at that time. “America is

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..."


This is the kind of attitude that he has towards success and a fortune. He treats success as a fortune that will befall him. "Cause one thing, boys: I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own."

This is the value system which Willy Loman believes in and this is a value system based on which he raises his children to and as we progress further down in the play, we can see that he has an extensive discussion about how Biff and Happy are seen in school. He asks the boys, "what do they say about you in school, now that they made you captain?"

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HAPPY: We'll carry your bags, Pop!
WILLY: Oh, won't that be something! Me comin' into the Boston stores with you boys carryin' my bags. What a sensation!
[BIFF is prancing around, practicing passing the ball.]
WILLY: You nervous, Biff, about the game?
BIFF: Not if you're gonna be there.
WILLY: What do they say about you **in school**, now that they made you captain?
HAPPY: There's a crowd of girls behind him every time the classes change.
BIFF [taking WILLY's hand]: This Saturday, Pop, this Saturday—just for you, I'm going to break through for a touchdown.
HAPPY: You're supposed to pass.
BIFF: I'm takin' one play for Pop. You watch me, Pop, and when I take off my helmet, that means I'm breakin' out. Then you watch me crash through that line!



"There's a crowd of girls behind him every time the classes change." - this is about Biff. This corroborates well with Willy Loman's concern as well as his hopes for his sons, particularly for Biff.

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[BERNARD enters in knickers. He is younger than BIFF, earnest and loyal, a worried boy.]

BERNARD: Biff, where are you? You're supposed to study with me today.

WILLY: Hey, looka Bernard. What're you lookin' so anemic about, Bernard?

BERNARD: He's gotta study, Uncle Willy. He's got Regents next week.

HAPPY [tauntingly, spinning BERNARD around]: Let's box, Bernard!

BERNARD: Biff! [He gets away from HAPPY.] Listen, Biff, I heard Mr. Birnbaum say that if you don't start studyin' math he's gonna flunk you, and you won't graduate. I heard him!

WILLY: You better study with him, Biff. Go ahead now.

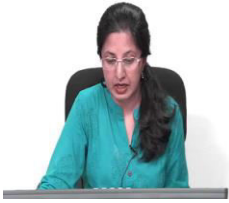
BERNARD: I heard him!

Next, we see Bernard making an entrance. In the present, in 1948, Bernard is a successful lawyer. So, this is how Willy remembers him from his son's childhood. Bernard is described as younger than Biff, earnest and loyal, a worried boy, in stark contrast to Biff, who is very well-liked, charismatic and is followed by girls at that point.

“Bernard: Biff, where are you? You're supposed to study with me today.

Willy: Hey, looka Bernard. What're you lookin' so anemic about, Bernard?”

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he's gonna flunk you, and you won't graduate. I heard him!

WILLY: You better study with him, Biff. Go ahead now.

BERNARD: I heard him!

BIFF: Oh, Pop, you didn't see my sneakers! [He holds up a foot for WILLY to look at.]

WILLY: Hey, that's a beautiful job of printing!

BERNARD [wiping his glasses]: Just because he printed University of Virginia on his sneakers doesn't mean they've got to graduate him, Uncle Willy!

WILLY [angrily]: What're you talking about? With scholarships to three universities they're gonna flunk him?

BERNARD: But I heard Mr. Birnbaum say—

WILLY: Don't be a pest, Bernard! [To his boys] What an anemic!

BERNARD: Okay, I'm waiting for you in my house, Biff.

[BERNARD goes off. The LOMANS laugh.]

WILLY: Bernard is not well liked, is he?

BIFF: He's liked, but he's not well liked.

“Bernard: He’s gotta study, Uncle Willy. He’s got Regents next week.” But Happy is in a different mood altogether; he wants to box and we find that Willy Loman had just got his sons a punching bag.

“Bernard: Listen, Biff, I heard Mr. Birnbaum say that if you don’t start studyin’ math he’s gonna flunk you, and you won’t graduate.”

Willy does not want to believe in the warnings and is not even allowing his son to take the warning seriously. He dismisses the notion that, there is a possibility of Biff flunking in math.

“Willy [angrily]:What’re you talking about? With scholarships to three universities they’re gonna flunk him?

Bernard: But I heard Mr. Birnbaum say —

Willy: Don’t be a pest, Bernard! [To his boys] What an anemic!”

This is the kind of impression that Willy Loman has on his sons will eventually have a lot of bearing on the kind of people they grow up to become. They also believe that when they are well-liked and charismatic figures in high school, no matter what kind of work they put in, regardless of the hard work required to succeed, things are going to be fine for them.

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BERNARD [wiping his glasses]: Just because he picked University of Virginia on his sneakers doesn’t mean they’ve got to graduate him, Uncle Willy!



WILLY [angrily]: What’re you talking about? With scholarships to three universities they’re gonna flunk him?

BERNARD: But I heard Mr. Birnbaum say—

WILLY: Don’t be a pest, Bernard! [To his boys] What an anemic!

BERNARD: Okay, I’m waiting for you in my house, Biff.

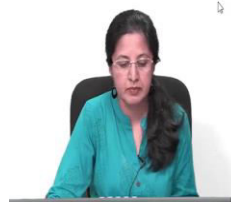
[BERNARD goes off. The LOMANS laugh.]

WILLY: Bernard is not well liked, is he?

BIFF: He’s liked, but he’s not well liked.

HAPPY: That’s right, Pop.

WILLY: That’s just what I mean, Bernard can get the best marks in school, y’understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y’understand, you are going to be five times



Bernard is seen as a boring, pestering boy who will never make it in life, and the unfortunate thing is that Willy seems to not just believe in it, but he also articulates that in very clear terms to his sons. He discusses about Bernard with his sons after he leaves, and notice the description given within the brackets, “[Bernard goes off. The Lomans laugh.]”

The Loman family laughs at Bernard together because they think that whatever Bernard suggested did not make sense as it was in stark contrast with the value system that they believe in, the dreams that they have and the promises they think the American dream holds forth for them.

“Willy: Bernard is not well liked, is he?”

Biffy: He’s liked, but he’s not well liked.

Happy: That’s right, Pop.

Willy: That’s just what I mean...”

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ACT ONE 21

ahead of him. That’s why I thank Almighty God you’re both built like Adonises. Because 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. You take me, for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. “Willy Loman is here!” That’s all they have to know, and I go right through.

BIFF: Did you knock them dead, Pop?

WILLY: Knocked ’em cold in Providence, slaughtered ’em in Boston.

HAPPY [*on his back, pedaling again*]: I’m losing weight, you notice. Pon?



“Bernard can get the best marks in school, y’understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y’understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That’s why I thank Almighty God you’re both built like Adonises. Because 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. You take me, for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. "Willy Loman is here!" That's all they have to know, and I go right through."

So, this is how he projects himself to his sons, and he thinks that because they are blessed with Greek god kind of looks and are well-liked and because of their personality, which he thinks is impressive because the girls are chasing them up in school.

He thinks that his sons are going to make it big in the business world, way bigger than Bernard, who is working very hard. Willy prioritizes being liked for one's charisma, and that is something he is inadvertently doing wrong while pursuing his dream in a slightly lopsided manner.

While Willy Loman continues to believe in this dream and continues to stay infectiously optimistic in his pursuit, at a later point, as his sons grow up and as he himself grows old without becoming anyone worth noticing, he realises that he has fallen short of the standards that he believed in.

At some level, we find that these are the kind of standards that he had set for his family, for his sons, for measuring his success and for measuring the success, worth and value of his family itself. We realize that this was the result of the skewed standards that he had set for himself and his family.

Because of how he has failed himself and how he thinks his family and his sons have failed himself, he also tends to ignore many other tangible things around him and little things that he is blessed with. He has his own house, but he fails to see the happiness which is there, inside the domestic bliss. Instead, he complains that they were forced to live boxed lives.

He has a good car, but he is nostalgic about his old car. There is always a sense of loss about what he could have had over the things that he could not have, and about what he could not achieve, despite the potential that he and his sons used to show.

He seems to ignore the domestic bliss that he has. He seems to take no notice of his wife Linda, who seems to be very forgiving, accommodating and positive. She is a positive

presence throughout this play encouraging Loman, but he seems to be dismissive about her. He also ignores his children's individual ambitions.

There is something fundamentally wrong in the way he prioritises the standards way above the little tangible things in life that he is blessed with. We find the two sides of the American dream are getting exposed here. As the play unfolds, we find that the American dream, essentially has two different sides.

On the one hand, it could be seen as a vehicle of inspiration. It urges people to move forward in life, to achieve material success and happiness through a successful career. But, on the other hand, it also turns human beings into commodities because what is very important here is that till the end of the play, we never get to see the product that Willy Loman has been selling.

As a salesman, what he sells is of less importance than how he does it. Because his failure to sell a commodity is not the failure of that commodity, but it is a failure of himself. It is more about human skills than human life becoming commodified increasingly.

Willy Loman and his family seem to be, by an extension, stuck in the in-betweenness in the pursuit of the American dream. As the play unfolds, through Willy Loman and the other characters in the play, we find that the value of human life is measured entirely in terms of the material worth.

For instance, when Willy Loman feels proud about his sons' looks and the charismatic presence they have in school, he expects all of that to get translated into success in business. That is how a person's worth, even his sons' worth, is measured. At the beginning of the play, we notice him lamenting about the kind of money he makes.

He laments that he is still not making sufficient money since that continues to be important in taking their life forward. He is unable to see values and other things that are happening within his house. This evaluation of human life in terms of material worth is not something that Willy Loman does of his own accord; he was forced to do that.

The pressure on Willy is frightening because there is no way Willy Loman can pull himself out or help his family come out of the box either. The boxed life that he talks

about, whether it is within his apartment or his car, we find that there is very little choice for Willy and his family, and they are forced to remain in the boxed life.

Because that is how the system works, and this is also a critique of the systemic failure of the American dream to incorporate certain human values in the pursuit of material success. While it may not be entirely practical to take such a high handed critiquing the American dream, the play is perhaps trying to foreground the psychological trauma that Willy Loman is undergoing.

As we mentioned in the previous class, the time switches become very important. Out of all of the four family members, Willy seems to be the only one lapsing into the past, and in that process, he also drags his family along with him into the past which will never come back when we do not even know whether the memories are entirely trustworthy.

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Some pointers in the Act 1



- Home ownership
- Salesman selling himself – the product is never revealed in the play
- The windshield – Willy's connection to nature – steers him away from his city life and job
- The former boss's son who 'inherits' success – almost like a betrayal
- Willy's self-delusion – evident in his contrasting statements on Biff's work
- Willy's car accidents – his increasing age and physical fragility



There are some pointers in Act one, which we have to consider to understand the play better. These pointers are not just about the American dream or how it manifests, but it also tells us a lot about the kind of life that Willy Loman and his family are leading. We get to know that he owns a home, which is one of the major markers of the American dream. Willy Loman is unable to feel happy about his achievement. So, the contrast here is very evident in the way that he seems to have ticked one major box in pursuing and achieving the American dream. But, he is unable to feel happy because he sees himself

as living a boxed and limited life in contrast to the more the freer life that he could have had in the middle of nature.

His inability to sell is accentuated in so many forms throughout the play, and what becomes significant here is it is never about the product. The product is immaterial. It is never about the product, which also makes it difficult for Willy Loman to place the blame on it.

There is something about the structure that we need to notice. The system seems to be infallible, and the fault could never be associated with the product, but it is about the skill of the salesman himself. The system continued to remain very tactful and flawless, and if at all the blame falls on anyone, it will only be on the individual.

Here, we find that there is a system which evolves as part of the new capitalist structure where, all structures and institutions will remain intact irrespective of the kind of people who are chosen to play different roles. That becomes evident even when the company goes through a transition, which we get to know through Willy Loman's laments that the former boss' son inherited the business.

It comes down like a betrayal to Willy Loman because he does not receive the respect that he used to in his company. But, it is never the fault of the system. It always boils down to individuals, which also makes it easy in some form, for the structure to continue existing with the same kind of rigour and force.

Willy's connection to nature is evident when he wishes that he had chosen this bigger dream of leaving for the wilderness and making a life for himself, when he lowers the windshield and, temporarily, mentally connects with nature. We find an inherent desire in him to move away from the urban setting and the busy city life.

But at the same time, we find that this connection is not enabling him in any way. This connection seems fatal to him. It keeps steering him away from the road while he is driving the car. It also acts as a trigger and makes him forget that he is driving.

It makes him forget the car that he was driving at the moment, and it literally and metaphorically steers him away from his city life and his job and becomes almost fatal to

such an extent that the car crashes are quite frequent; his car accidents are recurrent throughout the play.

Even when the play begins, his wife Linda and his sons wonder whether he had returned after the sales trip after having had another accident. Willy is constantly in a mode of self-delusion, which is evident in numerous instances, right from the beginning, where we find him making contrasting statements about Biff.

Biff is seen as lazy at one point, and immediately, Willy says that it is such a shame that such a hardworking, good looking and charismatic person had not made it big in life. The quality of self-delusion and the state of denial is also something that makes it psychologically more and more difficult for him.

The car accidents literally and metaphorically showcased his increasing age and physical fragility, and he is also in denial about the fragile state of his body and mind. While his entire family is worried about it, Willy Loman seems to be entirely in denial about the car accidents, which are a result of his deteriorating mental as well as physical health.

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The notion of being well-liked guaranteeing success remains at the heart of this play, complicating many notions that Willy Loman has about himself and his sons. So, this is an extension of his self-delusion, of him preferring an idealistic memory over reality.

We find that Willy, at some level, continues to favour Biff over Happy. So, Happy seems to be more or less sorted in what he is doing, but Willy's concern, disappointment, and high hopes are entirely about Biff. There is a lopsided quality bordering on dysfunctionality here as an individual, as a family.

Willy also constantly lies to his family about a lot of things, about how he was very well-liked and the way his work is seen. There is a sort of a blame game going on while he chooses to lie to his family to project himself well.

It is evident in the way he is teaching his sons; the value system that he injects them with for the sake of outward projections is very important for Willy Loman. He genuinely values outward projections much more than inner characteristics.

It becomes slightly problematic when he fails to see the worth of his wife who seems to be genuinely concerned, very forgiving and comes across as extremely supporting. She is more like a character in the background, who ensures that things are alright, but Willy Loman seems to be overlooking her contributions to the family.

For Willy, the outward projections, not just in terms of success but also one's personality becomes more important. As I mentioned before, this becomes very evident perhaps in a juvenile manner when he dismisses Bernard's hard working character and encourages Biff's charismatic quality and good looks.

Willy thinks that his son's good looks and charismatic qualities are to be valued and prioritized much more than Bernard's hardworking character, and he finds it difficult to even presume that hard work can yield success. There is something problematic about the notion of success, the guarantee of success that Willy Loman believes.

I use the word 'guarantee' quite advisedly because Willy Loman's discomfort and disappointment indicated that something was guaranteed to go wrong. This is also a reflection of the material systems that he is getting used to, the institutional infrastructure that he hopes to get reflected in his own life about a product to guarantee something. So, for him at so many levels, his two sons are also like the products.

They are displaying certain characteristics and outward projections which under ideal circumstances, according to him, should guarantee success. But when that does not happen, it leads to massive disappointment and even leads to a deterioration of his mental health.

For Willy, more than anything, material comfort and financial success are very important, and it also becomes difficult to justify as we find that his family is not really after this sort of success. Even Happy and Biff, when having a conversation, begin to wonder whether they were taught to make money.

In some sense, he fails his family. He is conscious about the nature of his failure, but he would rather blame it on the system which somehow failed to guarantee success and failed to give him the expected result despite having the desired ingredients to it being well-liked. These elements become extremely important in the way he defines success. In his road to success, more than anything, that becomes the underscoring point that will help him as well as his children to make it big. Whenever Willy is getting lost in memories, we find that it almost borders on a feeling of regret.

That is why it becomes hard for him. The journey becomes really hard for him because he thinks that he has settled for a lesser dream when he could have pursued a better dream. That is why he takes it out on his sons as well as his wife because of the level of expectations that he has and the kind of promise and guarantee that they all seemed to showcase to him a few decades ago.

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[*They move onto the forestage.*]
LINDA: Oh, don't be foolish.
WILLY: I know it when I walk in. They seem to laugh at me.
LINDA: Why? Why would they laugh at you? Don't talk that way, Willy.
[*WILLY moves to the edge of the stage. LINDA goes into the kitchen and starts to darn stockings.*]
WILLY: I don't know the reason for it, but they just pass me by. I'm not noticed.
LINDA: But you're doing wonderful, dear. You're making seventy to a hundred dollars a week.



In the 24 hours that we witness in Willy Loman's life, we find that Linda continues to be a supporting presence, playing the role of the supporting wife well. She constantly encourages him and tries to make him believe in himself, and sometimes when things go wrong, she tries to project the figures that would cheer him up.

“But, you're doing wonderful, dear. You're making seventy to hundred dollars a week.” This is a recollection from the past, and towards the end of Act 1, we also find the entry of another woman who remains unnamed throughout the play.

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me by. I'm not noticed.

LINDA: But you're doing wonderful, dear. You're making seventy to a hundred dollars a week.



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DEATH OF A SALESMAN

WILLY: But I gotta be at it ten, twelve hours a day. Other men—I don't know—they do it easier. I don't know why—I can't stop myself—I talk too much. A man oughta come in with a few words. One thing about Charley. He's a man of few words, and they respect him.

LINDA: You don't talk too much, you're just lively.

WILLY [*smiling*]: Well, I figure, what the hell, life is short,



In the next session, we will begin looking at some of the decisions that he makes where we find that he has betrayed his wife in certain ways and how he devalues himself, reflects on the choices he had made. We will end the session with this today. I encourage you to continue to do a close reading of the play.

I thank you for your time today, and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.