

Twentieth Century American Drama
Prof. Merin Simi Raj
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture - 14
Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman - Part 9

Hello, and welcome to today's session. So, we are continuing to look at Arthur Miller's play Death of a Salesman, and we are coming towards the end of this play we are reaching the final segments of this play.

And we also saw how after Willy gets fired after you know, he gets fired from his job as a salesman, that is almost like the culmination point and it also begins to signal his deterioration, his mental deterioration, his physical deterioration.

And also how he begins to crumble down as a person, as a family man as a professional. We begin to see that in more tangible ways after that moment, and he is still in denial. He does not want to accept what has befallen him and the reality that his family is facing.

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Willy's Meeting with Bernard and Charley



- Biff Vs Bernard
- Idea of Success Vs Actual Success
- within the constraints of the American Dream
- Willy to Bernard: "How—how did you? Why didn't he ever catch on?"*
- Flashbacks and Foreshadowing
 - recurring techniques to indicate the strong hold the past has over the characters' present and future
- Willy's infidelity that unintentionally caused Biff's academic failure
 - "What happened in Boston"?



So, this meeting that Willy has with Bernard and Charley that serves as a, it gives us an insight into the kind of denial and the depth of the denial with which Willy Loman has always been living. So, this comparison between Biff and Bernard that it is very painful for Willy Loman to accept, and this also sort of challenges the ideas of success that Willy Loman has in mind.

The romantic way in which he is been looking at the American Dream, the notions of success about, material wealth, fame and, more importantly about the likeability about how you know a personality when once you know once a person has a personality which is very well-liked by everyone he equates that with success.

But Bernard is also now Bernard's life is also living testimony of how that notion is not entirely reliable; this ideal notion of success is not entirely reliable because actual success is something very, very different. So, here we find a set of characters trying to operate within the constraints of the American Dream, and we find them negotiating with this dream in different ways.

Of course, Willy Loman is a very extreme case over here and his entire family they were invested in a lot of things which were largely they were at the level of idealism. It was just a dream and for the dream to transition into a reality, they also had to stay in touch with you know, the actual sense of what success is, the actual sense of you know, how one had to go through this material world that is where you know that the family loses touch with reality.

So, Willy, when Willy is asking Bernard how did you, why did not he ever catch on. That is one of the most painful scenes in this entire play where Willy Loman is he is forced to accept that the boy his son's classmate whom he thought will never make it and who was not seen as someone with you know very likeable personality he never came across as attractive in an intellectual way.

You know, or in any way you know, his personality was emerging as a being very you know, attractive. So, he finds that, you know this is one hard-hitting moment for Willy Loman, and still you know, there is a way in which he continues to tamper that reality with a sense of denial a sense of dream-like sequence.

So, we find a lot of enough flashbacks and foreshadowing over here and this is one recurring technique as we see in the play until Willy Loman disappears from the play until you know we see the end of Willy Loman we find that these are techniques of flashbacks and foreshadowing are used recurrently to indicate the stronghold the past has over the characters present as well as the future.

So, we find that you know the past keeps coming back in very recursive ways and sometimes in very unhelpful ways too and it is not really allowing Willy Loman to move ahead. He is still

stuck with the image that he has of himself about his sons and that image is something he is more heavily invested in than what is happening in the contemporary in his present.

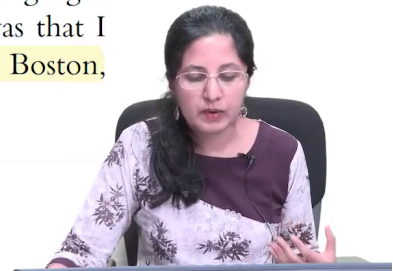
And this also brings us to another co-point about how Willy Loman also you know knowingly and inadvertently had caused Biff, Biff's academic failure. You know this what happened in Boston though that unspeakable thing about you know what happened in Boston which Bernard keeps asking Willy about what happened there because Biff seems to have changed radically after you know Biff visited Willy Loman in Boston and that remains at one unspeakable thing. Which obviously, is a reference to Willy's infidelity. So, this scene is very poignant this meeting that Willy Loman has with Bernard and Charley and these encounters with reality and his continuing insistence its continuing denial of this reality almost signals it almost helps the audience or to foreshadow the kind of ending that Willy Loman is bound to meet with.

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forget this, it always mystifies me. Because I'd thought so well of Biff, even though he'd always taken advantage of me. I loved him, Willy, y'know? And he came back after that month and took his sneakers—remember those sneakers with “University of Virginia” printed on them? He was so proud of those, wore them every day. And he took them down in the cellar, and burned them up in the furnace. We had a fist fight. It lasted at least half an hour. Just the two of us, punching each other down the cellar, and crying right through it. I've often thought of how strange it was that I knew he'd given up his life. What happened in Boston, Willy?

[WILLY looks at him as at an intruder.]



So, if we also quickly take a look at yeah. So, here is where you know they have this encounter Bernard is asking what happened in Boston Willy and Willy takes great offence at that and he you know, he finds that question offensive and he is very angry with Bernard.

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WILLY: I d draw it from my bank but Linda would know, and I . . .

CHARLEY: Sit down, Willy.

WILLY [*moving toward the chair*]: I'm keeping an account of everything, remember. I'll pay every penny back. [*He sits.*]

CHARLEY: Now listen to me, Willy.

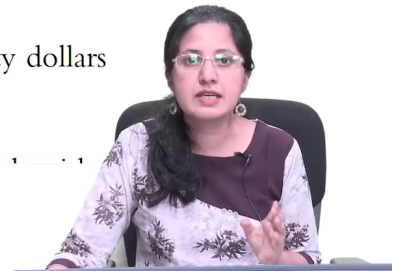
WILLY: I want you to know I appreciate . . .

CHARLEY [*sitting down on the table*]: Willy, what're you doin'? What the hell is goin' on in your head?

WILLY: Why? I'm simply . . .

CHARLEY: I offered you a job. You can make fifty dollars a week. And I won't send you on the road.

WILLY: I've got a job.



But at the same time, he also needs help. So, he is asking Charley right after Bernard leaves you know for help and he promises to pay every penny back. But, he is also the kind of person who cannot touch the face with reality even when things are going really wrong.

So, Charley offers him a job, Charley offers Willy Loman a job and that is something that he is unable to take. He was just fired and Charley is also asking why he is not realizing how grave this situation is and he offers him a job.

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CHARLEY. **Why must everybody like you; who liked J. P. Morgan?** Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he'd look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was very well liked. Now listen, Willy, I know you don't like me, and nobody can say I'm in love with you, but I'll give you a job because—just for the hell of it, put it that way. Now what do you say?

WILLY: I—I just can't work for you, Charley.



I just cannot work for you. So, that is how Charley is responding to this situation.

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CHARLEY. **What do you, jealous of me?**

WILLY: I can't work for you, that's all, don't ask me why.

CHARLEY [*angered, takes out more bills*]: You been jealous of me all your life, you damned fool! Here, pay your insurance. [*He puts the money in WILLY'S hand.*]

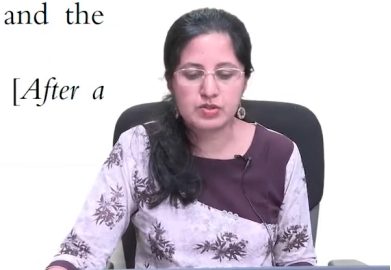
WILLY: I'm keeping strict accounts.

CHARLEY: I've got some work to do. Take care of yourself. And pay your insurance.

WILLY [*moving to the right*]: Funny, y'know? After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, **you end up worth more dead than alive.**

CHARLEY: Willy, nobody's worth nothin' dead. [*After a slight pause*] Did you hear what I said?

[*WILLY stands still, dreaming.*]



And he continues to insist that he is keeping strict accounts and this is the moment when you

know Charley reminds him of the insurance and this again is another turning point though we will get to know about this only much later.

Where Willy realizes this maybe you know this was always there at the back of his mind which is why perhaps he was also you know trying to kill himself as we get to know right at the outset of the play when Linda is sharing that with her sons.

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CHARLEY: WHAT DO YOU, JEALOUS OF ME?

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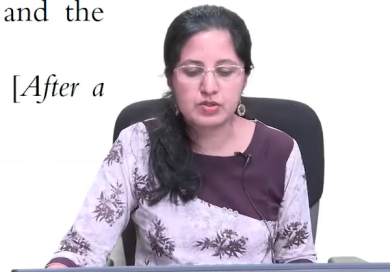
WILLY: I'm keeping strict accounts.

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WILLY [*moving to the right*]: Funny, y'know? After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive.

CHARLEY: Willy, nobody's worth nothin' dead. [*After a slight pause*] Did you hear what I said?

[*WILLY stands still, dreaming.*]



Funny, you know, after all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive.

And that is exactly what happens at the end, yeah he is you know for the insurance money he thinks that you know it is best for him to kill himself, but the ironic thing is that the family does not get that money either.

So, in his life and his death, there seems to be this disillusionment which is continuing to follow him. So, when Act Two is progressing we find that Willy Loman's this you know the oscillation between the real world and the past memories and his you know investment in the past that continues to grow in that you know. It progressively continues to grow in a way that almost becomes fatal for him.

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- Willy's Self-delusion and Pride
- He is too proud to work for Charley but needs his help making his insurance policy payments
- He refuses to take responsibility for the change in Biff's behaviour
- Reacts angrily to Bernard's implications



So, we find that Willy is not just a self-delusional, but he is also very proud, he is very proud in an unhealthy way, and he is proud to work for, you know to keep himself afloat, yeah. His family needs the money, he needs the money, and he also needs the money for making the insurance policy payments which will become, you know, useful for him in the future too.

But, he just refuses to take into account the reality that he is sinking into. And more importantly, he is refusing to take responsibility for the change in Biff's behaviour. This becomes all the more pertinent in the following scene when he meets with the boys in a restaurant.

So, his reaction is that of anger whenever he is being forced to encounter reality, to accept reality his response is always that of frustration and anger. This is something again you know find, we find his recursive pattern from the beginning of the play.

When he returns from one of his business trips, one of his salesmen trips when Linda is trying to you know, even out of concern trying to find out you know, what went wrong or how things were on the road. His response, his immediate response is always that of a frustrated you know, angry person this has a heavy impact on his family life.

And more importantly, it has an even more severe impact on the way he deals with reality and his mental deterioration becomes all the more you know grave because he refuses to acknowledge the many realities which are around him.

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- Willy's tragedy is both personal and social as seen in this exchange with Charley which foreshadows his final decision:
 - *"Funny, y'know? After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive."*
 - *"Willy, nobody's worth nothin' dead".*



So, Willy's tragedy in that sense is both personal as well as social and that is what he realizes in this exchange that we noticed between him and Charley, and this also foreshadows his final decision in so many ways.

So, though you know Charley Charley comes across as very pragmatic yeah. He also knows the you know the way these things work, but he as well as Bernard come across as being more pragmatic, and that seems to be doing the trick for them in terms of finding their way you know negotiating with this American Dream.

So, one is not exactly sure whether you know the problem where exactly the problem lies. But, you know a host of things might have gone wrong in the way Willy Loman planned his life, the way he raised his kids, in terms of, you know certain misplaced value systems yeah, all that is there.

But more importantly, what goes completely what works completely against his disadvantage is his difficulty to come to terms with what is happening on the ground, you know, what happens in this in reality that is the tragedy of what he is facing. So, on the one hand, there is a nation

perhaps you know it is also a commentary on at least certain segments of the nation which is also you know trying to recover after the great depression after the 1930s.

So, there are multiple ways in which different segments of the nation are trying to negotiate with this reality too. So, this denial is you know in some form it is a very complimentary feeling too. So, we find Willy Loman the kind of person who is unable to you know come out of that state and in some form, you know in so many ways stuck in a glorious past which again you know we are not even sure whether that was glorious enough or whether again you know it is a creation of his own imagination.

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ACT 2: Biff and Happy meet Willy at a Restaurant

- Disillusionment about Biff's prospects
 - "I was never a salesman for Bill Oliver"
- Willy is unable to accept reality
- Biff moves closer to self-awareness
- Biff Vs Happy
- Breaking Vs Maintaining Willy's Illusions
- Flunking math, stealing Oliver's pen



So, again the following scene in Act 2 itself is when Biff and Happy meet Willy at a restaurant. There are again a lot of more things are being revealed, and we will not go into the details of their conversations, but what gets foregrounded even at the end of this exchange is how Willy's inability to accept reality affects all of them collectively.

So, that is a huge disillusionment about Biff's prospects and Biff also because you know Biff was also raised in such a way that he also thought he is going to make it really big. So, he is on the one hand Biff wants to stay, Biff wants to continue to keep up that image, but on the other hand he also wants Willy Loman to wake up to the reality wake up to you know what Biff really is and have a real conversation.

So, he says you know I was never a salesman for Bill Oliver, that is something you know there we find that in the play, they continue to have this conversation. So, even in the play, they continue to have this conversation, where you know, Biff is expected to meet Bill Oliver. But, you know he cannot because he is still unsure about his prospects and Willy thinks that if he meets or you know first Willy they even the conversation when we go through that it is quite a difficult.

Because they are both in their own worlds even when they are trying to convince each other. They are both stuck in their notions about what Biff is capable of doing, and they are unable to take that conversation in a fruitful way.

So, Willy continues to be in this state where he does not want to accept reality, but we find that Biff is moving closer to self-awareness, Biff is moving closer to this reality and he also you know tries to convince Willy Loman that he was only a shipping clerk there and he was never a salesman and his prospects are not looking that great it is perhaps you know going to you know continuing to be a bit limited in so many ways.

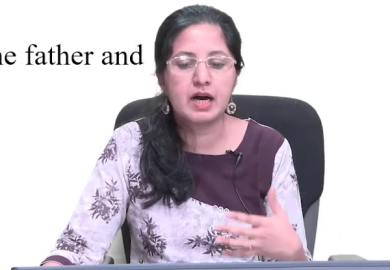
So, we find that you know this is a very very fine line between you know breaking Willy's illusions and about you know trying to maintain his illusions. It is important to maintain his illusions for his mental health, but it is also important to break out of it for pragmatic reasons which again you know is a very vicious cycle which again will contribute, which again will affect his mental health yeah

So, because there are number of other minor instances too which are being you know referred to here about how Biff flunked math and that is being seen partly as Biff's fault and mostly the instructor's fault and about him stealing Oliver's pen and refusing to take responsibility for that. So, this is a very complicated you know timeline it is a very complicated emotionally entangled series of things where all these characters at some point or the other fail to take responsibility for their actions. And what makes it worse is they continue to live in this state of denial.

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- The boundary between past and present breaks down almost completely as the play draws to an end
- Willy is haunted in the restaurant by Biff calling him a “fake” years ago
- The motif of the Stockings
- Willy’s infidelity and his façade of affluence
- Abandonment and Betrayal
 - Willy’s father abandoned him
 - his sons leave him behind at the restaurant
 - he has been unfaithful to his wife Linda
- the recurring betrayal of the American Dream in the lives of the father and his sons



So, here as a play is drawing to an end we find that this boundary between past and present breaks down almost completely. When Willy is meeting with Biff and Happy in the restaurant and in the same breath like he has always been doing throughout the play in between he slips into a time and he is having a conversation with Linda about the kids and the kids are there they are in high school.

So, this movement across time segments, these time switches they become more and more frequent as the play draws to an end. And Willy is haunted also you know by this memory of Biff calling him a fake number of years ago and there are these constant illusions about his infidelity. The motif of the stockings keeps coming back and this facade of affluence that Willy wants to project.

He wants to show it to the world that you know he is doing well, his sons are doing well and he seems to be drawing much in terms of his identity, in terms of his personality, in terms of his mental health from that facade. But, on the other hand, there is also this infidelity he is been trying to deal with. So, we find that you know it is very complicated not just in terms of the socio-economic and that the changes that he is trying to deal with in an external way in a way which is outside of his family.

Even within the family, there are these you know, the memories the past incidents that he is trying to negotiate with. So, the theme of abandonment and betrayal is something that gets foregrounded in the most central ways as we draw towards the end of the play.

We realize you know in one of these reminiscences when one of his this time switches we realize how Willy was abandoned by his father, and perhaps that had an implication on the kind of insecurities and these projected qualities that he sees in himself as well as on the rest of his family.

And later you know when in the middle of this conversation we find that his sons also leave him behind at the restaurant and he also has not been living up to the expectations you know as a family man and he is been unfaithful to his wife, Linda. So, this is a very thin line between the expectations that he has from his family and what he has been offering to them as a father, as a husband.

So, this on some level you know is also mirroring how the American Dream gets played out in the lives of these different characters you know personified here by you know played here by Willy and his sons. So, there is also this recurrence, there is a promise on the one hand, but there is also a recurring betrayal of the American Dream in all of their lives.

So, we find that all characters are disillusioned at so many different levels. So, Linda knows Linda, perhaps you know does not know yet about the betrayal, the act of betrayal, the infidelity which Willy Loman had you know, committed.

Now, but at the same time, there is a sense of disillusionment in her mind about her husband and her sons. The sons are equally disillusioned and disappointed by what their parents are and how they were raised and about the kind of psychological as well as the societal trauma that they had been facing, the peer pressure.

And how you know, this thing about you know having to deal with this reality that perhaps you know things are really not working out for them. And we find that you know all of these things get replicated they they get mirror in their lives and in Charley and Bernard's life. We saw we see the you know, dream getting played out in a different way altogether maybe, you know, we do not get an insight into the kind of memories that Bernard has about his childhood.

Maybe you know it is equally traumatic trying to you know manage this world of reality and dream and now that you know in the present when we are meeting them Bernard comes across as more successful than the you know the the Loman boys.

And perhaps you know one way to do a time switch and get into what Bernard and Charley had been facing; it might reveal another side of the American Dream, another struggle with which another family is going through. So, this becomes typical in some sense, it is very unique and typical at the same time.

And that also again and again you know foregrounds the need to look at this notion of wealth, of success, of you know the material aspects of life, fame and all of this you know in more critical terms which is what Arthur Miller also continues to do in the next play that we shall be reading which is *All my sons*.

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ACT 2: The Final Confrontation

- Hallucinations and Desperation
- Willy cannot stop imagining himself in a conversation with Ben
- his mental breakdown is triggered by the rejection and trivialization he experiences as an aging man of 'reduced utility' in a marketplace of buyers and sellers



So, as the play draws to an end there is this final confrontation where he is torn between Willy Loman is torn between hallucinations and desperation, and Willy just cannot stop imagining this conversation with Ben.

If you remember right from the beginning of this you know the play there were these constant time switches which were taking him back to Ben and we find that you know this, his mental breakdown is massively triggered by this feeling of rejection which is real in some sense and also you know the trivialization he experiences as an ageing man of reduced utility he is being trivialized.

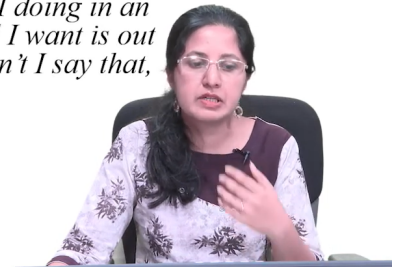
In some sense infantilized not just by his family but also by Howard, who also, you know, fires him, and by Charley, who thinks you know he needs to be attended to physically, mentally, financially. So, he thinks that you know he is being his utility. His sense of utility is getting increasingly diminished not just in his professional space but in all the other spaces, including the domestic space.

So, this continues to get triggered out there. There are hardly any events that happen, which is reassuring to Willy Loman. Nothing you know reassures him, and nothing is able to affirm or reaffirm his faith in what he is as a person, what he is as a professional, and what he is as a family man.

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- Ben represents the tantalizing possibility of succeeding in a capitalist framework– the hope to which Willy is fatefully wedded.
- Ben is alternately the voice of affirmation and doubt.
“The jungle is dark but full of diamonds, Willy.”
- Biff’s self-awareness in the face of familial pressure is starkly contrasted with the comforting lies that Happy continues to hide behind at the end of the play.
“Why am I trying to become what I don’t want to be? What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am! Why can’t I say that, Willy?”



And then we also realize how this recursive this recurrence of Ben in his hallucinations. And this needs to go back and you know anchor himself on what could have happened if he had been with Ben, that also represents this tantalizing possibility of succeeding in a capitalist framework. And this is Willy Loman also knows that this is something that he could perhaps never have become, but he also knows that their possibility was offered to him.

So, he is it is this hope, it is his dream to which he seems to be constantly connected with, and he seems to be unable to take him or, you know, in some sense, his son's away from that, they are all in pursuit of that dream though in various forms. So, Ben in that sense you know gets foregrounded as that voice which is at the same time very reassuring, but it is also a bit skeptical.

So, like he says, the jungle is dark but full of diamonds, Willy. So, it is not a world, it is not a picture-perfect, the promising world that Ben is offering, Ben had offered to Willy Loman, but that is how he promised, that is how he chooses to see it yeah. It is the dark side of it perhaps, you know, that is what scared Willy Loman as a person and which is why perhaps he never ventured into it.

But, now, when he is looking back, he is only seeing the prospect of diamonds which he did not pursue at all. So, this you know, this is also, you know, could be usefully contrasted with Biff. When Biff says why am I trying to become what I do not want to be, what am I doing in an office making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am, why cannot I say that, Willy yeah.

So, we find that you know all of these characters are facing their own dilemmas in some form or the other. But towards the end, it is just Willy whose life gets sacrificed in this process.

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ACT 3: Requiem

- Linda, her sons, Charley and Bernard are the only ones at Willy's grave
- Willy's funeral is nothing like that of the salesman David Singleman
- Willy had claimed that it was Singleman's life and the large gathering at his funeral that had inspired him to become a salesman
- His death is obviously seen as a suicide
- the tragic irony is that his family does not receive the insurance money.



So, in we will quickly move to the Requiem in Act 3, where Linda, and her sons, Charley and Bernard, are the only ones attending Willy's funeral.

And this funeral is very interesting to note, it is nothing like that of the salesman David Singleman who Willy says you know it was Singleman's life it was which inspired him to

become a salesman looking at the kind of large gathering at the funeral you know the large gathering who had come in awe of the kind of life that Singleman had led.

So, it is nothing close to what you know Willy's life and Willy's death both are like you know no way close to what David Singleman had lived or you know David Singleman's funeral had witnessed. And his death is; obviously, we get to know it was a suicide, and we see this impending, we see this imminent thing right from the beginning.

And the tragic irony is that though Willy realizes this very tragically somewhere in between that maybe his worth is more after his death, his family does not receive the insurance money.

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- Linda's soliloquy ends with the paradoxical notion of freedom.

"I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. We're free and clear. We're free."



So, Linda's soliloquy in that sense Linda also emerges as this figure who deserves a lot of compassion yeah, her tragedy becomes more accentuated towards the end, and it ends with this paradoxical notion of freedom. "I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear, and there will be nobody home, we are free and clear we are free. "

So, this is something you know it accentuates the notion of a tragedy like Willy Loman had been working towards this moment all his life and now that you know he loses his life again you know for nothing and then the crisis that the family had been facing that also seems to be at the end of resolution.

So, it no matter when which way one tries to negotiate it, then never seems to be a happy ending for this. And this is perhaps you know what this play is also trying to foreground that no matter in which way you negotiate with it, once you begin to pursue this dream, there is bound to be disillusionment, and there is bound to be these tragic failures at different points of time yeah. So, even when, even after, in material terms, things seem to be resolved, it does not entirely, you know, entail freedom in that sense.

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- Each character has a different perception of the kind of man Willy Loman was.
- Charley's sympathetic view seems to more an indictment of the system rather than the individual.



So, each character at the end, we realize that you know they have a very different perception of the kind of man Willy Loman was. So, Charley's sympathetic view, you know, we will wrap up today's session with that view Charley's view seems to be more of an indictment of the system, you know, than the individual, and this is perhaps, you know, the one point the players also trying to have a home.

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- *“Nobody dast blame this man. You don’t understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don’t put a bolt to a nut, he don’t tell you the law or give you medicine. He’s a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back—that’s an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you’re finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.”*



“Nobody does blame this man, you do not understand. Willy was a salesman and for a salesman there is no rock bottom to the life. He do not pull put a bolt to a nut, he do not tell you the law or give you medicine. He is a man out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. When they start not smiling back, that is an earthquake and then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat and you are finished. Nobody does blame this man. A salesman is got a dream, boy. It comes with the territory.”

So, thank you for your time, and I will look forward to see you in the next session.