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# Being Towards Death of a Salesman

Amre L. Klimchak

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Being Towards *Death of a Salesman*

by

Amre Klimchak

Under the Direction of Matthew Roudané

ABSTRACT

In *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller depicts Willy Loman's gradual loss of identity as a thriving salesman who is well known, has many friends, and is idolized by his family. These identity issues stem from his relationship to time, as his present does not match the aspirations he had for his future some fifteen years earlier, which triggers his existential crisis. His continual daydream sequences, in which he returns to the past, are juxtaposed with his present failures, and these incongruities between the past and the present shatter Willy's image of himself as a success. In this thesis, I explore the manner in which Martin Heidegger's existential philosophy, as it relates to the temporal nature of existence and the necessity of understanding one's past and present in order to project oneself into the future, is salient to Willy Loman's collapse in *Death of a Salesman*.

Index Words: Existential, Heidegger, being, time, identity, crisis, Willy Loman, *Death of a Salesman*

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Amre Klimchak

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller depicts Willy Loman's gradual loss of identity as a thriving salesman who is well known, has many friends, and is idolized by his family. These identity issues stem from his relationship to time, as his present does not match the aspirations he had for his future some fifteen years earlier, which triggers his existential crisis. His continual daydream sequences, in which he returns to the past – the proverbial “good old days” when he was full of hope – are juxtaposed with his present failures, and these incongruities between the past and the present shatter Willy's image of himself as a success. These punctures in his consciousness begin a tug-of-war within Willy between his past, where he believed he was on the path to a profitable career, and his present, where he is faced with the reality that he is able to make few sales. He enters a downward spiral in which he cannot accept his present and feels he has no future, except as a cashed-in life insurance policy.

Willy undergoes an existential crisis because he lacks a vision of his future. The philosopher Martin Heidegger explains the importance of this vision in his existentialist writings. Heidegger's conception of existential being is intimately tied to time, and it is in relation to temporality that one creates an identity, according to Heidegger. As William Barrett states in *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*, for Heidegger, an individual's idea of his future shapes his being:

Heidegger's theory of time is novel, in that, unlike earlier philosophers with their “nows,” he gives priority to the future tense. The future, according to him, is primary because it is the region toward which man projects and in which he defines his own being ... Man looks forward, toward the open region of the

future, and in so looking he takes upon himself the burden of the past (or of what out of the past he selects as his inheritance) and thereby orients himself in a certain way to his present and actual situation in life. (228)

If an individual has no concept of his future, he falls into an existential crisis, and in Willy's case, it is a crisis from which he does not escape, as evidenced in his decision to commit suicide by the end of the play. Willy's "burden of the past" is apparent in his frequent daydreams, which demonstrate Willy's false hopes as well as the initial phases of his growing awareness that his vision of himself as a successful businessman is inconsistent with his actual experiences. However, he is reluctant to take on this burden, and thereby "orient himself ... to his present and actual situation in life." Though many critics, from Christopher Bigsby to Matthew Roudané to Steven Centola, have addressed the centrality of time to *Death of a Salesman* and some its existential aspects, none has explicitly explored the way in which Willy's relationship to time defines his identity, particularly in relation to a Heideggerian interpretation of existential consciousness.

As Miller states in his "Introduction to the Collected Plays," *Death of a Salesman* occurs during a convergence of past and present, "at that terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present ... The past and present are ... openly and vocally intertwined" (26). The facts and fictions of Willy's history become tangled with his current situation because he is forced to confront the many failures he has fobbed off previously through lying, both to his family and to himself. Willy is unable to reconcile his past and present, and he ultimately decides that any future life is without value. As he confides in Ben, his mythical brother, just before he commits suicide, Willy feels that continuing on with his life would be the equivalent of "stand[ing] here the rest of my life ringing up zero" (97). Within



this context, Willy's relationship to and conception of time play an essential role in the destruction of his identity.

The play includes seven daydream sequences that are integral to advancing the depiction of Willy as a man who has lost his grip on the present and "the story proceeds in two dimensions – real time and remembered time" (Carson 46). These interludes provide the foundation for the play's expression of Willy's spiraling despair. Miller works to reveal Willy's interior condition by creating the reveries that Willy falls into throughout the play, particularly when he must confront his failures as a businessman. These daydreams send him back in time, to earlier days when he perceived that he would succeed as a salesman. This approach to time allows the audience to better understand the anguish Willy suffers and its sources. The emphasis on the past – past history, past memories, past experiences – exists as a central aspect of Miller's work, and it reaches its height in *Death of a Salesman*. Miller rallies all of his narrative powers to present a play that moves between the past and the present with the ease of lived experience, in which Willy remembers and acknowledges instances from his entire history at any given moment.

While some critics have called Willy's flights into memory "flashbacks," Miller insists that "[t]here are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present, and this, again, because in his desperation to justify his life Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between then and now" ("Introduction to the Collected Plays" 26). While flashbacks typically require a pause in the current action of a narrative, Miller's daydream sequences intermingle current and previous events from Willy's life so seamlessly that the "stage production shows past and present existing simultaneously. The result is an enlargement of the scope of the dramatic form to include the world of subjective experience normally excluded from the stage" (Carson 46). Miller manages to encapsulate Willy's entire existence by simply

displaying the continuous unedited flow of his conscious experience, which moves fluidly back and forth in time from the present to decades ago, during the last day of his life. In the essay “*Death of a Salesman* and the Poetics of Arthur Miller,” Roudané explains that the play “ignores the linear, chronocentric unfolding of time” (72). The scenes Willy experiences in the present and the past are often divided by vast gaps of chronological time, but in his mind, they happen within moments of each other: “the drama privileges the time of Willy’s inner awareness. Time filters through daydreams. Miller conflates time. And it is a time that measures the intensity of felt experience, not the monotony of nine-to-five routines” (72).

In “Salesman at Fifty,” the preface to the fiftieth anniversary edition of *Death of a Salesman*, Miller begins by concentrating on the issue of time and the human experience of it, emphasizing the importance of the concept of time in relation to the play. Miller writes, “As far as I know, nobody has figured out time. Not chronological time, of course – that’s merely what the calendar tells – but real time, the kind that baffles the human mind” (ix). In response to this statement, Bigsby asserts that, although Miller makes the comment in relation to his wonder at the fact that 50 years have passed since he penned the play, “it goes a good deal deeper than that in so far as time is a recurring concern, device, paradox, metaphysic in his work, the mechanism of causality, the source of reproach, irony metaphor” (“Time Traveller” 2). In addition to being a structural device in *Death of a Salesman*, time practically becomes another character in the play, lurking in every corner of Willy’s consciousness. It is a specter that disturbs him in his car, his garden, and in the bathroom of the restaurant where he meets his sons for the dinner that is ultimately his last. While Willy wants to alter his past to prop up his contrived identity as a thriving businessman, he cannot evade the falsity of his revisions. He attempts to retreat into a self-imposed amnesia so that he can ignore the negative aspects of his current condition, but his

own mind, like an enemy within, will not allow it. And thus, the truth of his past prevents him from maintaining his false vision of himself. Miller does not permit Willy to ignore his shortcomings and continue with his fantasy, as Bigsby explains: “In a country where eyes are resolutely fixed on tomorrow, on the green light across the bay, the orgiastic future, [Miller] insists on the authority of a past which can be denied only at the price of true identity” (“Time Traveller” 2). While Willy has spent much of his life denying his past, Miller provides a window into the existential moment in which Willy must face his history in order to have any hope of moving into the future. In the end, Willy refuses to accept that he has created a false identity based on the dictates and empty promises of society.

In many of his plays, Miller includes characters who grapple with the past as a means of shaping their identities: “The past, actual, distorted, re-invented, is crucial to Miller’s work” (Bigsby, “Time Traveller” 14). In Willy’s case, he appears to fall into his reveries as an escape from his nightmarish present. But despite the positive beginnings of all of his daydreams, each one eventually reveals the manner in which Willy has denied his shortcomings in order to maintain the contrived identity of the consummate salesman. This capacity to reveal what his characters would rather disregard permeates Miller’s work, as Bigsby notes: “The denial, of which so many of his characters are guilty, is in essence a denial of the past and of its secrets ... A denial of the past is, in effect, a denial of identity and of reality” (“Time Traveller” 14). Willy retreats to the past apparently in an attempt to find solace. But the ugly truths that he has ostensibly avoided until the present continually surface. Willy’s rejection of “identity and reality” stems from his fear of recognizing that he has failed to live the mythic American dream in which one puts in a 40-hour week of work and reaps the rewards of this effort throughout one’s life.

Miller explains in *Timebends*, his autobiography, that the manner in which individuals experience time and its effect upon the psyche are central issues he wanted to explore in *Death of a Salesman*. Miller was inspired to write the play based on a brief interaction with an uncle of his, Manny, who was a salesman with two sons – all of them with failed dreams. In Miller's chance meeting with Manny, he noticed the way his uncle switched from talking about himself to the subject of one of his sons without the slightest transition. This moment was the impetus for a play in which time has no firm boundaries: "[H]ow wonderful, I thought, to do a play without any transitions at all, dialogue that would simply leap from bone to bone of a skeleton that would not for an instant cease being added to, an organism as strictly economic as a leaf, as trim as an ant" (131). To portray Willy's descent into crisis, Miller chose to present the play primarily from Willy's point of view, letting his constant flow of thoughts, which span great leaps in time and place, spill out in a continuous rush. Without a doubt, Miller's uncle's occupation and his familial makeup were influential to the development of *Death of a Salesman* as well. But Miller ultimately hoped to convey a sense of how a conversation can switch from one topic to the next, while at the same time, one's own mind wanders in a stream of consciousness to other thoughts of the past only tenuously related to the matter at hand:

The past, I saw, is a formality, merely a dimmer present, for everything we are is at every moment alive in us. How fantastic a play would be that did not still the mind's simultaneity, did not allow a man to "forget" and turned him to see present through past and past through present, a form that in itself, quite apart from its content and meaning, would be inescapable as a psychological process and as a collecting point for all that life in his society had poured into him. (131)

In Willy's case, his past is a "dimmer present" at the beginning of the play but gradually becomes so alive to him that it outshines his present. By the end of the play, he is no longer able to pretend that his failings do not exist.

## BEING IN TIME

Various critics have pointed out that Miller's work includes an existential thread – the title of *Death of a Salesman* alone makes it obvious that Miller will address issues related to human existence in the play. Often, critics point to the social pressures from the capitalist culture that bear down on Willy as the source of his struggle with identity. Some view the play as attributing Willy's faults to both his circumstances and his internal motivation:

In many ways the play is split between a recognition of the falsity of the dream of individual salvation, with the implication that the society that fosters such dreams is at fault, and a view that is itself fundamentally individualistic, that human beings have to work out their own salvation and choose the right life for themselves (Hawthorn 95).

But while Miller clearly highlights the societal forces that Willy faces as an aging salesman and the lack of concern for those who cannot compete in the business world, it becomes clear that Willy's devotion to a system that places greater emphasis on what one can sell than on one's humanity leads to his undoing. And Willy's acquiescence in devaluing his own life as he becomes more obsolete as a salesman, in the end, brings about his demise. Thus, as Neil Carson writes in *Arthur Miller*, "The most fruitful approach to the play ... is to see it... as a drama about self-delusion. Miller's central preoccupation is not social, not psychological, but existential. ... At its core, *Death of a Salesman* is about the destructive nature of dreams" (55). The existentialist interpretation places the final responsibility for choice and behavior on the individual, thus holding Willy ultimately culpable for his flights from reality: "according to an existential model, social factors may largely establish our initial identity, but ... they do not

freeze us at that stage without our daily consent” (Tyson 262). If Willy’s issues stem originally from the larger society’s push for material wealth, his complicity in attempting to live up to an ideal crafted by forces outside of himself springs from his own volition.

Centola is the main critic who has explored the existential components of *Death of a Salesman* at great length, but he has focused primarily on the work of Jean-Paul Sartre to examine the play’s existential aspects. In “The Will to Live,” an interview with Miller, Centola characterizes the “underlying continuity” of Miller’s work as a “kind of existential humanism – a vision that emphasizes self-determinism and social responsibility and that is optimistic and affirms life by acknowledging man’s possibilities in the face of his limitations and even sometimes in the dramatization of his failures,” which Miller agrees is an accurate assessment of his work (345). Centola’s appraisal puts Miller’s work squarely between the worlds of social responsibility and personal accountability. Because Sartre was heavily influenced by Heidegger, many of the observations Centola makes in his article “A Sartrean Reading of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*” about the Sartrean aspects of Willy’s condition and relationship to his memories of the past correspond to Heidegger’s discussion of human existence as it connects to time. In either assessment, Willy avoids the confrontations with his history that would enable him to develop an identity that has a foundation in values of his own making versus the values of the society: Willy “wants to, but cannot, repudiate the identity thrust upon him by others” (Centola, “Sartrean” 298). Instead, he continues to delude himself and hold onto the dream that the salesman’s profession is a noble one with inherent worth. He also attempts to preserve a self-image that is consistent with the capitalist definition of achievement: “In Sartre’s terms, Willy acts in bad faith. He opts for self-deception as the means of maintaining his distorted image of himself and avoiding painful disclosures and revelations” (Centola, “Sartrean” 297). Thus, he

cannot come to grips with the reality of his situation – he has been following a false dream. He would rather hold onto the fantasy and die trying to fulfill it than discard it and attempt to live authentically by different standards of his own creation.

Through exploring Willy's memories, Miller uses a subjective approach to reveal the ways in which Willy grapples with his identity. By creating this kind of back-and-forth movement through time, Miller "formulate[s] a dramatic structure that ... allow[s] the play textually and theatrically to capture the simultaneity of the human mind as that mind registers outer experience through its own inner subjectivity" ("Death," Roudané 72). Though Willy glimpses several tears in the fabric of his constructed selfhood, he opts not to move toward an authentic identity. Miller's depiction of Willy's struggles with time exposes the nucleus of Willy's difficulty in defining himself. As Hans Myeroff explains in *Time in Literature*, an individual's examination of his past via the depiction of memories provides the basis for any portrait of selfhood in literature: "What may be called a 'literary reconstruction' of man has always used, in addition to the objective, historical data, the pattern of significant associations in the stream of consciousness and in memory as the most important clue to the structure of the personality or the identity of the self" (27). Willy returns to memories that involve his aspirations for greatness in the business world, and they each end in some exposure of his failure to obtain it due to his own inadequacy. Willy's relationship to time, then, provides the foundation for his identity.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger declares that individuals develop their being and an authentic existence through their relationship to time. This relationship functions as the core for the development of one's identity: "Time, according to Heidegger, is the basic category of existence – time as it is experienced by the individual himself, not as it is recorded by the natural



scientist or by the historian” (Meyerhoff 27). Just as Miller focuses on the lived experience of time, so also does Heidegger emphasize the internal temporality of individuals. Heidegger states, in *Being and Time*, that the future is the fundamental aspect of time that allows individuals to discover their authentic identity: “The primary meaning of existentiality is the future” (376). The way in which individuals view themselves with respect to the future, and particularly towards death, molds their identity: “Dasein’s self-projection towards fulfillment, that motion-towards implicit in caring-for, postulates futurity” (Steiner 106). Heidegger’s philosophy of existentialism postulates that for Dasein – a human being who can understand the nature of his being – the creation of one’s self and identity arises from one’s aspirations as well as one’s efforts to realize the limitless potential of each human being. Since existentialism is patently anti-essentialist, the only way to fashion an identity is to look toward the future and work to become what one hopes to be instead of being defined by the past. Heidegger’s term for this future focus is the “potentiality-for Being,” and the awareness of this future possibility is not nearly enough: “The future makes ontologically possible an entity which is in such a way that it exists understandingly in its potentiality-for-Being. Projection is basically futural; it does not primarily grasp the projected possibility thematically just by having it in view, but throws itself into it as a possibility” (385-386). One must hurl oneself forward into the possibilities of the future in order to achieve any kind of authentic being.

Just as necessary as projecting oneself towards the future is the ability to understand one’s past, according to Heidegger:

As authentically futural, Dasein is authentically as ‘having been.’ Anticipation of one’s uttermost and ownmost possibility is coming back understandingly to one’s ownmost ‘been.’ Only so far as it is futural can Dasein be authentically as having

been. The character of 'having been' arises, in a certain way, from the future.

(373)

According to this view, one must understand one's past and its implications in order to move into the future of possibilities. As George Steiner writes, "Heidegger is expounding the psychological truism that past events are altered, are given meaning by, what happens now and will happen tomorrow; that the past is rendered either significant or empty by what is yet to be" (107). Willy clearly lacks the ability to use his past to inform his present and future, since the only decision he arrives at after revisiting his past is that he has no future. Or, as Centola writes, "[h]e tries to relive the past, or transform into reality his hazy memory of a certain segment of it, and escape from the demands of time which force him to deal with the present reality and responsibility for his fate" ("Sartrean" 298). Instead of using the knowledge he gains by retreating into the past to formulate a new conception of his identity and move forward with it into the future, he becomes so overwhelmed by his failure to achieve the dream he fostered of being well liked, well-known, and well-to-do, that he gives up entirely on his life.

In Willy's case, he attempts to stop or turn back the clock by reverting to the past, and hopes to halt the march of time. Since he believes that his present situation, in which he strives to maintain his grasp on the dream of success, does not offer the opportunity to improve his lot, Willy searches the past for clues about how to return to a previous state of being when he was on top of the sales game: "Willy loses himself in time and tries to dissociate himself from the life he must experience in the present ... He longs not only to secure his identity, but also to transcend the bounds of his existence as a finite being who exists only in flux" (Centola, "Sartrean" 299). But as he returns to the past, his memories betray him and reveal that he never achieved the level of success that he had hoped. When he realizes his efforts to return to a past state of achievement

are futile, since it never existed, he abandons all of his hopes and aspirations for the future, and so he decides to end his life prematurely in an effort to enable his family to cash in on his life insurance policy. He discards any belief in his future value.

Willy recedes into the past because he is unable to accept his current situation. However, it becomes clear that he never reached the heights he believed he should in order to be considered a “success” in the estimation of his peers. But he holds desperately to the ideals thrust upon him instead of recognizing the inherent fantasy in them. In one of the pivotal moments of the play, when Willy utters the now famous lines “You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit!” to Howard, his young boss, Willy hearkens back to a moment before the Great Depression when he “averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in the year of 1928” (60). He uses this example, of twenty years prior, to illustrate that he has long been an asset to the company; but by his own admission, the height of his career occurred two decades before he faces Howard, and yet he does not acknowledge that he has been sliding downward in sales since then. He refuses to recognize his own part in precipitating his downfall, and he retreats to an imaginary world, his remembered past, that he desperately wants to believe offers an accurate reflection of his previous achievements: “the pattern formed by his responses to regression reveals a systematic, if only partly conscious, effort on Willy’s part to eschew the existential inwardness increasingly pressed upon him by the accumulated refuse of his psyche” (Tyson 265). Despite the evidence of his inability to meet society’s standards, which emerges in each of his daydreams, Willy does not apprehend the way in which he could change his situation if he were to reevaluate his notions of success. He is defined by others, and instead of attempting to forge a new identity apart from the perceived expectations of society, he endeavors to return to the past, a time when he believed that he lived up to these external standards.

## BEING FOR OTHERS

As he had planned to do, Miller renders Willy as the embodiment of the pressure of life in a hyper-capitalized society, with its emphasis on achievement and ever-greater ambitions for the future and its inherent anxieties. Willy's failure to achieve the level of financial and social achievements for which he had hoped forms the basis of his dilemma, and he allows his ideas about what "success" means to be determined by the relentlessly capitalist mentality that defined the United States by the early twentieth century. As Christopher Bigsby explains in "Arthur Miller," an essay from *Willy Loman*: "Miller's achievement lay in his ability to distil in the person of Willy Loman the anxieties of a culture which had exchanged an existential world of physical and moral possibility for the determinisms of modern commercial and industrial life" (100). Willy has absorbed the capitalist mentality, which only values men according to how they can contribute to the market and fuel consumerism. He does not question the validity and machinations of the system, and instead he attempts to abide by its work ethic: "In *Death of a Salesman* the victim is not the nonconformist, the heroic but defeated liberator; he is, rather, the conformist, the type of the society itself" (Williams 104). Like many, he does not comprehend what he sacrifices to join the army of salesman in a system where everything can be bought and sold: his individual self-worth.

Willy adheres to the belief that if he works hard enough, he will be rewarded. And it is tempting to see him as wholly demarcated by external forces, as many critics have. Porter writes in *Myth and Modern American Drama* that "Arthur Miller's salesman is a personification of the success myth; he is committed to its objectives and defined by its characteristics" (128). Throughout his assessment of *Death of a Salesman*, Porter offers a common view of the play,

which places the burden of culpability on societal forces that impinge on Willy, rather than assigning the blame to Willy and his own lack of self-awareness. While Miller clearly offers a critique of the capitalist system that shapes Willy's life, the play also offers an indictment of Willy, particularly his complicity in swallowing the myth whole and refusing to see its flaws. As Miller asserts in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man," which he published in defense of the work as a tragedy shortly after *Death of a Salesman* premiered, Willy's troubles are caused neither by society's expectations nor by his own failings alone. If Willy was completely determined by either of these, *Death of a Salesman* would not be a tragic play, Miller stresses:

If all our miseries, our indignities, are born and bred within our minds, then all action ... is obviously impossible. And if society alone is responsible for the cramping of our lives, then the protagonist must needs be so pure and faultless as to force us to deny his validity as a character. From neither of these views can tragedy derive, simply because neither represents a balanced concept of life.

("Tragedy" 5-6)

Instead, it is the confluence of these dual aspects that brings Willy to his crisis.

Willy not only treats selling as his occupation but also elevates it to the overarching force driving all of his actions. He does not separate his personal life from his professional life and allows the concept of selling to permeate his entire being. Throughout the play, the audience is never sure exactly what wares Willy has to offer his buyers, and as the narrative progresses the conspicuous absence of this information serves to emphasize that Willy, like every salesman, must sell himself before he offers his product. Miller states that "the salesman idea is a metaphor; it is the whole process of selling oneself, making oneself valuable, finding an identity through whatever people think of you" (Parks A-18). While the opinions of others – the society

as a whole, his buyers, Howard, the Woman, and his family – could function as guides to certain components of Willy’s character, they become so important to Willy that he becomes engulfed in his need to meet their expectations. As a result of his emphasis on external approval, he transforms himself into another good that can only have value in terms of its saleable attributes. Therefore, he loses his uniqueness as an individual human being and makes himself disposable: “Willy Loman is a man who from selling things has passed to selling himself, and has become, in effect, a commodity which like other commodities will at a certain point be discarded by the laws of economy. He brings tragedy down on himself, not by opposing the lie, but by living it” (Williams 104).

Willy equates salesmanship with integrity and other positive virtues, and he does not realize that selling is not an inherently honorable vocation. As he speaks to Howard while trying to find a spot for himself in the New York office so that he will not have to travel any longer, he explains that he associates the business of selling with Dave Singleman, his ideal salesman, whom Willy met when he was eighteen or nineteen and Dave was eighty-four: “he’d go up to his room ... and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want” (59). To emphasize his point, Willy elaborates on the merits of salesmanship in the early part of the century in America: “In those days there was personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it” (60). Then he laments that it does not hold this kind of value any longer, and that he, as a salesman, cannot command the kind of attention that Dave could. Willy adheres to the capitalist values of American society, despite the fact that they stand in direct contrast to the aspects of human relationships that he openly celebrates: “Willy, under the weight of social pressure, deluded himself into thinking that

‘selling was the greatest career,’ when what he really admired were intangible virtues and qualities – like love, respect, friendship, and personality – that often go unrewarded and unrecognized by society” (Feldman 33). Because Willy embraces these commercial values, he lives inauthentically, particularly with respect to Heidegger’s definition of authentic being.

Heidegger’s conception of inauthenticity involves living by values that have been inflicted by others, not by one’s own values:

Inauthentic Dasein lives not as itself but as ‘they’ live. Strictly considered, it scarcely lives at all. It ‘is lived’ in a hollow scaffolding of imposed, anonymous values. In inauthentic existence we are constantly afraid (of other men’s opinion, of what ‘they’ will decide for us, of not coming up to the standards of material or psychological success though we ourselves have done nothing to establish or verify such standards). (Steiner 91-92)

Willy’s condition mirrors the one Steiner outlines, since Willy simply gloms on to the ideals that have been externally established. Because he fails to re-examine the standards by which he judges his success or lack thereof, Willy becomes consumed by the anxiety that he has not reached the expectations that society has laid out for him. For Willy, the decrees of the larger culture, which emanate from the faceless, unfathomable mass of the ‘they,’ hold more weight than his individual concerns. This fixation on external precepts stands as a hallmark of inauthenticity, according to Heidegger, since one’s individuality evaporates as one is subsumed into the desires and demands of the multitude:

[I]n this environment which lies closest to us, the public ‘environment’ already is ready-to-hand and is also a matter of concern ... This Being-with-one-another dissolves one’s own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of ‘the Others,’ in

such a way, indeed that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the 'they' is unfolded. (164)

This "dictatorship," in Willy's context, is the societal pressure to succeed in material terms.

Because of his attempt to adhere to the edicts of the society at large and his growing awareness that his current state of affairs does not measure up, Willy becomes lost in time. While he aims to rebuild his dignity via his flights into the past, he becomes alienated from himself and those around him as his tenuous grasp on the present begins to slip away: "anomie and alienation occur in the context of the memory of a previous, better state of things, real or imagined" (Barker 86). These reversions only widen the gap between Willy and those closest to him, his family and friends.

Although Willy worries at times about the status of his family, he focuses a great deal more energy on concerns related to his image of himself as a businessman. Because Willy's most impressive years in this arena are far behind him, he hearkens back to them. Miller writes that characters like Willy resonate because they are emblematic of the profound sense of loss that many feel in relation to the past: "It is as though both playwright and audience believed that they once had an identity, a being somewhere in the past, which in the present has lost its completeness, its definitiveness, so that the central force ... is the paradox which Time bequeaths to us all: we cannot go home again, and the world we live in is an alien place" ("Family" 224). Willy searches the past for pieces of his selfhood and by doing so he removes himself from his current circumstances, becoming disconnected from everyone around him in the process.

Willy believes his only possible identity lies in his occupation, and he does not consider



the other aspects of his life – his family, community, or religion – to be important in shaping his sense of self. By focusing solely on one aspect of himself, he does not allow his other facets to give his existence meaning. Bigsby interprets this to be yet another factor that contributes to his alienation, stating that Willy is “stranded in time and space and stripped of an identity that could only have come from acknowledging the authority of the past and the necessities of the present rather than the seductive light of a golden future” (“Time Traveller” 5). The first half of Bigsby’s assertion rings true, because Willy refuses to acknowledge his past failings as a salesman, which are revealed in his memories. If he had done so, he might have been able to understand that he held aspirations that were never realistic, which would inform his present aspirations and perhaps motivate him to create different goals for the future. Bigsby’s additional statement about Willy looking to the “seductive light of the golden future” is open to dispute, however, since Willy’s prospects for the future are reduced to nothingness by the end of the play.

In Heidegger’s terms, Willy lives for others and not for himself. Because he permits external forces to mold his identity, Willy struggles to live up to the standards that have been impressed upon him, which leads to his attempts to escape into the past. These efforts only serve to further erode his sense of self, so that finally, he casts off the opportunity for authentic being and its infinite possibilities altogether.

## THE LOMAN FAMILY AND THE WOMAN

While Willy spends the play attempting to live up to the success myth, his real and imagined interactions with his family, the Woman, and Ben highlight his desire for approval from those around him. Early on, Willy's comments to his family reveal his faltering sense of himself and his identity. Later, he is compelled to look to additional sources outside his family for reassurance, since his family begins to see his failings, despite his endeavors to mask them: "Willy constantly tries, in the present action of the play as well as in the remembered past, to hide his professional failure from his sons, his wife, and the outside world" (Burgard 341). Willy's existential issues derive from the fact that he attempts to substantiate his selfhood through external standards, and he aims to validate his identity through the esteem of those around him.

*Death of a Salesman* seamlessly integrates a double-layered timeline that emphasizes the distance between Willy's contrived self and the actuality of his circumstances. But both narrative paths exemplify Willy's move from a largely self-deluded state to one in which he has been forced, on some level, to reckon with aspects of himself he would rather ignore. Miller "creates two parallel chronologies. The chronological progression in Willy's remembered past from Biff's high school football days to the scene in a Boston hotel room mirrors the progression in the chronology of the present time from exposition through complication to crisis" (Burgard 347). The double chronology also calls attention to the duality of Willy's behavior, since it juxtaposes Willy's confrontations with the deterioration of his life in the present and his journeys into the past. This structure draws attention to Willy's burgeoning awareness that his dreams are

crashing down around him:

In the chronological present of the play Willy's fortunes are at low ebb. His faith in the myth is tested by harsh realities which he alternately faces and flees. He fights to hold on to his identity ... When he momentarily faces reality – his inability to drive to Boston, the mounting bills and the dwindling income – he has to flee to the past ... The salesman cannot abandon the myth without reducing himself to zero. (Porter 137)

He chooses a line of thinking that privileges the power of the myth over all other concerns, even at the expense of his life. Despite the increasing evidence to the contrary, Willy clings to his conviction that his lifelong devotion to the business world has not been in vain.

Willy cannot accept that he has not lived up to past aspirations and retreats into the past for some semblance of succor. Even in his daydreams, however, he remembers a past in which he made untrue assertions and false promises to his sons and his wife, which ultimately exposes to the audience the fact that most of the story of Willy's life has been a fabrication. However, Willy himself avoids this conclusion by holding fast to his fantasies: "Willy's many contradictions reflect his inability to distinguish between the dream of success and the reality of the world around him" (Griffin 43). These two worlds are analogous to the past and present for Willy, and his reveries represent his efforts to try to return to a time when his dreams of success seemed possible to achieve. These daydreams arise because Willy is unable to cope with his lack of accomplishment in the present, and they underscore Willy's growing sense of panic and the eventual dissolution of his identity.

Willy's remembrances of the past do not provide respite, since in each case they turn dark at the end when he remembers his real failures. He begins to see that even his best moments were

not without problems, thus rendering his identity weaker: “Willy retreats to the sanctuary of the past in a futile effort to recapture what is irretrievably lost in the present: his ... chosen identity” (Centola, “Sartrean” 301). Willy fights harder to maintain his vision of himself by misrepresenting his prosperity to his family and turning to figures like the Woman and Ben for reinforcement. He fails to address the uncertainty that comes from his lack of purpose or ideals, and “[i]nstead of facing the bitter reality he has wrought, Willy steadfastly chooses to elude it as long as possible by deluding himself into believing that he can preserve the image of the self he has fabricated and attempted to confirm in the eyes of others.” (Centola, “Sartrean” 297). Because he refuses to reevaluate his aspirations, his daydreams become his only chance of escaping the reality that encroaches on him from every side.

As the play opens, the stage directions offer an inkling of the integral nature of dreams and dreaming in Willy’s life. Miller offers a scene in which the atmosphere of fantasy permeates even the buildings: “*Before us is the SALESMAN’s house ... As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small fragile-seeming home. An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality*” (1). Miller imbues the entire set with Willy’s perspective and the daydreams that follow develop out of the “air of the dream.” While Miller does not specify here what “the dream” is at this point, he alludes to its main characteristic – material wealth – by linking it to the house. Miller’s set also illustrates his decision to have the actors ignore certain physical barriers in the house, which emphasizes the fluidity with which Willy transfers from past to present when he falls into his reveries. As noted in the stage directions,

*The entire setting is wholly or, in some places, partially transparent... Whenever the action is in the present the actors observe the imaginary wall-lines, entering*

*the house only through its door at the left. But in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping 'through' a wall on the forestage. (1)*

The impact of the characters “stepping ‘through’ a wall” is that the audience follows the path of Willy’s thinking, which is not constrained by the normal tangible impediments of physical space. The play accentuates Willy’s interior life by employing a set that enables the audience to see the manifestations of Willy’s mind.

Willy’s developing crisis becomes apparent from the very beginning of *Death of a Salesman* and is introduced through the metaphor of driving and Willy’s increasing inability to do so. Willy’s automobile stands as but one symbol of his acceptance of consumerist values, and his powerlessness in using it as a vehicle for selling himself and his wares provides one of the first indicators of his impending collapse. As Act I opens, he has just returned from an unsuccessful attempt to fulfill his usual workday on the road. Linda questions his early return home, asking if he has had an accident and insinuating that it is not uncommon for him to have such problems. But he reveals that he was not able to work for other reasons:

WILLY (after a pause): I suddenly couldn’t drive anymore. The car kept going off onto the shoulder, y’know?

LINDA (helpfully): Oh. Maybe it was the steering again. I don’t think Angelo knows the Studebaker.

WILLY: No, it’s me, it’s me. Suddenly I realize I’m goin’ sixty miles an hour and I don’t remember the last five minutes...I can’t seem to – keep my mind to it. (3)

This deterioration in his ability to drive forward in his car is clearly a metaphor for his general inability to move into the future. His reference to the fact that he cannot “keep [his] mind to it” is

an acknowledgement that he is unable to face what lies before him, both on the road, and in his day-to-day life. His subsequent retreats into reflections of the past exemplify his failure to address his future and show that he is stuck in an endless loop between his past and his present. Later in this conversation, Linda asks him about taking a drive in the country and opening the windshield on the car. But Willy is bewildered and believes the windshield does not open. He confuses his current car with one from twenty-one years ago: “I was thinking of the Chevvy. *(Slight pause.)* Nineteen twenty-eight ... when I had that red Chevvy – *(Breaks off.)* That funny? I coulda sworn I was driving the Chevvy today” (7). Although his family interprets his perplexed behavior as a sign of growing senility, it is clearly symptomatic of an existential crisis that is climbing to its apex. Willy’s world is unraveling, and past is flowing into the present, with the boundaries between them disappearing.

Willy’s memories of the more than sixty years prior to the present time of the play, which include discussions with his then-teenaged sons as well as Linda, expose the attitudes he held about his prospects as a salesman; these memories are interweaved with current moments in order to show the mounting disconnection between Willy’s past aspirations and present realities. When Willy falls into one of his daydreams, the set changes to reflect a past time in which the surrounding neighborhood did not impinge on the Loman house and trees grew plentifully. Early in Act I, Willy slips into a reverie in the kitchen, which begins while he is looking in the refrigerator, and his face glows under its light as he begins to hear his sons’ voices outside as they “simonize” the car: “*He opens the refrigerator, searches in there, and takes out a bottle of milk. The apartment houses are fading out, and the entire house and surroundings become covered with leaves*” (15). This image of a little-populated, verdant environment stands in direct

contrast to the current state of Willy's neighborhood, where apartment houses rise on all sides and so little light reaches the earth around his house that no kind of plant life can grow there.

In this first daydream, Willy walks outside, where the sun shines brightly, and he steps back into the past some sixteen years earlier to a moment when he is about to offer the high-school aged boys a gift – a punching bag – after returning home from a sales trip. Biff wants to quit waxing the car since he is anxious to see the gift, but Willy tells Biff: “No, you finish first. Never leave a job till you're finished – remember that” (16). Viewed in the context of Willy's current employment difficulties, the word “finished” takes on new meaning. As opposed to signaling that a job is complete, for Willy, “till you're finished” becomes a description of the individual and not the job, with the individual being “finished” or ruined, incapable of further work. Willy's identity is so tied up with his professional role as a salesman that for him, life is simply over if he is not capable of working any longer, and he passes on this idea to his sons. He also reveals in this reverie an aspiration that did not come to fruition – running his own business: “Tell you a secret, boys. Don't breathe it to a soul. Someday I'll have my own business, and I'll never have to leave home anymore” (17). This wish clearly was never realized, and his current situation stands in polar opposition to this fantasy: instead of owning a business, he has become the lowest man on the corporate ladder, as expendable and disposable as any mailroom employee.

As reality intrudes on the life he yearns for, Willy lapses more and more into daydreams where he reconfigures his past to match his wishes: “Bewildered by such spiraling decline, by the eclipse of youthful dreams, struck by the irony which is underscored by the now permeable membrane between past and present, he retreats not so much into a real past as a ... past charged with nostalgia” (Biggsby, “Time Traveller” 11). In his memory of this discussion with the boys,

both his sons show their adoration for Willy, particularly Biff, who says, “Where’d you go this time, Dad? Gee we were lonesome for you” (17). Despite their obvious affection, Willy wants to emphasize his importance by impressing the boys with his reputation as a businessman. He creates a vivid portrait of his popularity in various cities and promises to take his sons on a trip to demonstrate just how well-known and well liked he is:

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. (18)

He revisits a past in which he was, at least in his mind, a popular man whose arrival was heralded by people in towns far and wide. Because he perceived himself as a flourishing salesman who received the approval of others, he was more secure in his identity. But the fact that he is not capable of selling as much as he once did is an indicator that these friends, if they ever existed, did not endure, as they are not opening the doors for Willy any longer. He defines himself based on the impressions of others then and in the present, and as his perceived status wanes, he becomes dejected. The past becomes a refuge into which he flees when consciousness of his current ineptitude threatens to overwhelm him: “Unable to change his present, he re-imagines the past which becomes simultaneously pregnant with possibility and the prelude to despair” (Bigsby, “Time Traveller” 10).

Bigsby’s mention of the “prelude to despair” relates to the negative aspects of Willy’s recollections. Even in the midst of his positive memories, Willy recalls times in which he was not achieving his goals. These remembrances illustrate that his troubles with reconciling his



image of himself with his actual existence are not new. These retreats into the past become more frequent and intertwined with the present as his crisis swells. Shortly after his reverie about wishing to travel with his sons, he remembers another incident in which he discusses his sales for the week with Linda, first claiming that he did “five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston” (21). However, as the conversation progresses, Willy finally discloses his hyperbole – in truth, he had only sold two hundred gross that week. He reveals to Linda his feelings of inadequacy that result from his sense that his buyers now reject him. Linda assures him that he’ll do better the next week, to which he replies,

WILLY: Oh, I’ll knock ‘em dead next week. I’ll go to Hartford. I’m very well liked in Hartford. You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don’t seem to take to me.

LINDA: Oh, don’t be foolish.

WILLY: I know it when I walk in. They seem to laugh at me. (22)

Later in the daydream he worries about his appearance, in addition to questioning whether he commands respect as a salesman. He first worries that he talks and jokes too much, and then he tells Linda that his weight is an issue: “I’m fat. I’m very – foolish to look at, Linda. I didn’t tell you, but Christmas time I happened to be calling on F.H. Stewarts, and a salesman I know, as I was going in to see the buyer I heard him say something about – walrus” (23), and he responded by punching the salesman. Willy is driven to violence to protect his image of himself as a success, as he is unable to tolerate such blows to his ego. His admission in the daydream that he is not the man he pretends to be demonstrates that the breakdown in his identity had begun years ago, but he was able to fend it off until the present time, when these fissures in his consciousness are becoming wider with each disappointment.

Because he eventually is no longer able to find the approbation he needs from his family due to the fact that he is on the road a great deal, Willy turns to the Woman for support, and she appears in two of his daydreams. She is a symbol both of his need to find others who will increase his flagging self-esteem as well as his failure to find the support he so desperately wants. In a continuation of his earliest daydream, Willy moves in time from his own kitchen to a hotel room in Boston – the scene of his affair with the Woman – in the span of a few seconds. He starts inside the kitchen where his wife Linda sits, and then he recalls an interaction with the Woman while he tells Linda, “I get so lonely – especially when business is bad and there’s nobody to talk to. I get the feeling that I’ll never sell anything again, that I won’t make a living for you, or a business, a business for the boys” (24). At this point, he hears high-pitched, echoing laughter, and Willy walks past Linda to the next room, which transforms into the Boston hotel room where the Woman, his mistress, stands.

This scene provides the first indication that he had an affair at some point in his past. It also sets the tone for Willy’s relations with the Woman, who appears to be a secretary of some kind. Her first words to Willy in the daydream convey that she “picked” Willy from all the other salesmen who walk past her desk because he has “such a good sense of humor,” and is “so sweet” and “such a kidder” (24). Before she leaves him, she says she will “put [him] right through to the buyers,” which shows that she represents to Willy simply another opportunity to thrive in the business world. The Woman thanks him for the many stockings he has given her, and then Willy returns to the kitchen of his daydream. Back in the kitchen, though Linda tells him he is “the handsomest man,” she is mending stockings, and he becomes angry at the reminder that he does not have the material wealth to supply Linda with new stockings when her old ones wear out. In an infuriated manner he shouts, “I won’t have you mending stockings in

this house! Now throw them out!” (25). While he may have once had enough money to provide stockings for his wife, he has sunk to a level in which his wife must repair her stockings, since he apparently cannot afford to buy both his mistress and his wife replacements.

Willy seeks the attention of the Woman to help him avoid the truth that he is not able to fulfill the hopes he has for himself in the world of commerce. Because he strives to maintain the persona of an enterprising salesman, he resorts to his mistress for comfort. Although he thinks that their relationship emerges out of his isolation, she signifies his inability to find validation of his occupation and pursuits in life within himself: “Willy believes that he turns to another woman out of loneliness for his wife, Linda. But at the root of his loneliness and his need of a woman are feelings of shame he cannot face. He is driven by feelings of inadequacy and failure to seek himself outside of himself, in the eyes of others” (Ribkoff 50). Willy’s relationship with the Woman underscores his need to obtain affirmation of his sales abilities from an exterior source.

The last daydream that includes the Woman occurs as a result of Willy’s encounter with Bernard, his friend Charley’s son, who has achieved the level of greatness that Willy had hoped would transpire in the lives of his own sons. Although the daydream does not ensue until Willy meets his sons at Frank’s Chop House hours later, Willy’s discussion with Bernard clearly triggers the subsequent lapse into the past. Willy runs into Bernard in Charley’s office and in the course of conversation Willy questions him candidly about Biff’s lack of success. Willy is overwhelmed by the truth that Bernard reveals – that Biff gave up on his dreams after he caught Willy with the Woman in Boston. Willy wonders aloud why Biff “didn’t ever catch on”: he says to Bernard, in an almost pleading manner, “You were his friend, his boyhood friend. There’s something I don’t understand about it. His life ended after that Ebbets Field game. From the age

of seventeen nothing good ever happened to him” (69). Then Bernard mentions the math class Biff flunked, and he inquires about whether or not Willy encouraged Biff to go to summer school, to which Willy replies “Me? I begged him to go. I ordered him to go!” (70). While Willy attempts to blame Biff’s teacher for Biff’s failure to go back and retake his math class, Bernard points out that “[Biff] wasn’t beaten by that at all. But then, Willy, he disappeared from the block for almost a month. And I got the idea that he’d gone up to New England to see you. Did he have a talk with you then? ... What happened in Boston, Willy?” (71). Willy exclaims, “What are you trying to do, blame it on me? If a boy lays down is that my fault?”. When finally confronted with his failings, and the very real possibility that his infidelity – which is driven by his need for others to sustain his contrived vision of himself as a viable businessman – led to his son’s downfall, Willy is infuriated. He refuses to believe it. But shortly after his discussion with Bernard, he meets his sons at Frank’s, falls into the daydream about Biff finding him with the woman in the hotel, and then only hours later he takes his own life. Clearly, the realization that he has not provided the best possible guidance nor been the best model for his sons delivers a fatal blow to his identity.

The last daydream that includes the Woman reveals the moment at which Biff discovers his father is not the image he projects to his family. After Howard fires Willy, the final strike to Willy’s dreams and identity occurs when he meets Biff and Happy at Frank’s Chop House to discuss their prospects of opening a store, and Biff must tell his father that he did not get the necessary loan, and thus, the plan cannot come to fruition. Soon after arriving to meet his sons, Willy launches into the daydream featuring the Woman. As Willy drifts away from his conversation with his sons and into the past, he flows into a daydream in which Linda and Bernard talk to Willy about Biff failing math, a class Biff needs in order to graduate and obtain a

football scholarship from University of Virginia. Then Willy hears the voice of the Woman and a knocking sound as he begins a different daydream, and he leaves his sons with the excuse that he must go into the bathroom at the restaurant. Willy enters the washroom at Frank's, looks into the mirror, and is transported back to the encounter with Biff at the moment when he catches Willy unawares with the Woman in Boston. The conjunction of the past and present is brought about in a smooth and uninterrupted fashion that brings the audience into Willy's experience. Willy's mind slides from present to past due to his disappointment with his current situation, both his own failure and his sons'.

However, in this daydream, Willy must confront the action that brought Biff to his current condition – 34, unemployed, an ex-convict, and unable to obtain funding for a business venture. As the reverie unfolds, it becomes clear that Biff had come to his father's hotel for help regarding his failing grade. Though Willy attempts to keep the Woman hidden in the bathroom, she emerges. Willy rushes her out of the room, pawning her off with stockings, and Biff begins to weep, crestfallen at his father's indignity. In their exchange after the Woman leaves, Biff's changed attitude towards his father is palpable:

WILLY: She's nothing to me, Biff. I was lonely, I was terribly lonely.

BIFF: You –you gave her Mama's stockings! [His tears break through and he rises to go.]

WILLY: [grabbing for BIFF]: I gave you an order!

BIFF: Don't touch me, you – liar!

WILLY: Apologize for that!

BIFF: You fake! You phony little fake! You fake! (92)

Despite all of Willy's efforts to maintain the appearance of a devoted and hard-working father, this indiscretion causes Biff to discard all of his positive views of Willy in this moment. His

father has been reduced to a sham, and this event marks a downturn in Willy's ability to sustain his identity. His desire to put forth the impression that he is the consummate business man leads to his downfall, since he eventually goes astray in looking for support and compromises his integrity in the process.

## BEN

Willy's identity is further damaged by his belief that his brother, Ben, made a fortune by following the same dream of success that Willy pursued and failed to attain. This damage becomes evident in Willy's many recollections of Ben throughout *Death of a Salesman*. During a conversation in Act I with Happy related to his difficulty driving, Willy admits that thoughts of his older brother's success were what forced him off the road: "I got an awful scare. Nearly hit a kid in Yonkers. God! Why didn't I go to Alaska with my brother Ben that time! Ben! That man was a genius, that man was success incarnate! What a mistake! He begged me to go" (26). This is Willy's first mention of his envy of his brother's success, but it is indicative of his attitude toward Ben, as well as his negative view of himself in relation to Ben, throughout the play.

When Ben enters the story, he arrives as a radical counterpoint to Willy. He represents everything Willy wishes he was, but is not: "*He is a stolid man, in his sixties, with a mustache and an authoritative air. He is utterly certain of his destiny, and there is an aura of far places about him*" (29). Willy's image of Ben, despite the fact that Ben was nearly twenty years Willy's senior, is a man "*in his sixties*" – Willy's current age as he daydreams. All of Ben's characteristics are presented from Willy's viewpoint, since Ben only appears in Willy's daydreams: "He is the one character in the play who is never revealed in an objective manner; that is, Ben is never viewed by the audience apart from Willy's imaginative reconstruction of him" (Murray 36). Willy reformulates Ben as a largely unfathomable individual who speaks in code and rarely supplies a straight reply to an inquiry. Willy's version of Ben "refuses to answer questions about himself and communicates cryptically" (Carson 52). Because Ben is portrayed completely from Willy's perspective, some critics have asserted that Ben may simply be a

construct of Willy's overactive mind: "the character seems almost a two-dimensional projection of Willy's imagination. Ben is the only character who appears to Willy out of historical context, and he seems at times to be more like a ghost or alter ego" (Carson 52). If he is an alter ego, Ben represents the embodiment of Willy's wish for victory in the capitalist system.

Willy's visions of Ben cause his present and past worlds to merge in various incidents in the play, particularly as Willy becomes increasingly uncertain about how to proceed into the future. A short time after the first daydream, Willy's neighbor Charley arrives to play cards, and Willy carries on a conversation both with Charley and Willy's fantasy of Ben, whom he views as the ultimately triumphant businessman. The scenario begins with Willy remarking that Charley reminds him of Ben. Then the ghostly figure of Ben, whom Willy has not seen in years and who died several weeks prior to the current time of the play, walks in from an adjacent room and speaks to Willy, standing behind Charley's back. Willy does not see Ben approach and only hears his voice as Ben mentions the properties he is "looking at in Alaska" (30), attempting to entice Willy to join him there. As Willy becomes drawn into his reverie, he loses track of the game he plays with Charley, who eventually leaves, disgusted that Willy is unable to stay grounded in the present long enough to finish a game of cards. Then Willy meets Ben face to face, and Willy expresses his need for guidance from his brother, saying "I've been waiting for you so long! What's the answer? How did you do it?" (31). Ben hints that he will provide an answer, responding vaguely with "Oh, there's a story in that."

In an instant, the daydream merges with another, which includes Linda as well as Willy's sons and reveals the darker aspects of Ben's pursuit of fortune. Willy attempts to obtain guidance about his future from Ben and encourages his sons to pay attention to Ben's views on business, which amount to "when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I



walked out ... And by God I was rich,” Ben’s oft-repeated, ambiguous refrain throughout the play (32). Ben explains how his father made a great deal of money from one gadget, insinuating that being a “great inventor” is the key to prosperity. In the midst of this, Biff and Ben begin a heated exchange as Ben challenges Biff to punch him in the stomach “as hard as you can” (33) to prove that Willy has brought up his sons “rugged.” As the two spar, Ben trips Biff, pinning him to the ground under the tip of his umbrella, and his bit of wisdom for Biff is “Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You’ll never get out of the jungle that way” (33). This stands as the only piece of advice Willy acquires before Ben hurries off, fading back into the shadows. Despite Linda’s alarm at Ben’s aggressive behavior – she asks Willy “Why must he fight, dear?” – Willy does not question or prohibit his brother’s actions. Similarly, Willy accepts Ben’s cutthroat proclamations about business, even the one about not fighting “fair” because Willy craves material wealth more than anything: “Willy’s failure to see the obvious unscrupulous underside of Ben’s financial success, like the rest of his apparent moral confusion concerning his and his sons’ success-oriented ethics, is not the result of innocence or ignorance, but of selective perception” (Tyson 264). The reverie highlights Willy’s overwhelming longing to receive direction from Ben that he can translate into a business plan, as well as the increasing intensity of the collision of past and present in Willy’s mind.

This scene segues into another daydream about a past meeting with Ben, in which he has come to visit Willy and he is about to leave for Africa on a business trip, and Willy again looks to Ben for affirmation. Willy asks him to stay: “You’re just what I need, Ben, because I – I have a fine position here, but I – well, Dad left when I was such a baby and I never had a chance to talk to him and I still feel – kind of temporary about myself” (35). Willy’s use of the word “temporary” in this case reveals not only that he feels that he is limited, but also that he senses

his temporality. As several critics have noted, this passage is particularly telling in terms of Willy's uncertainty about his identity and future. The very format of his speech reveals a great deal about his anxieties: "The fact that Willy feels 'kind of temporary about' himself is reflected in his inability to complete a thought after he has raised the issue of his identity – the 'I.' This confession is riddled with dashes – or, in other words, uncomfortable, self-conscious pauses" (Ribkoff 49). His insecurity clearly arises out of comparing himself to the idealized Ben. In this memory, his brother is a strong, confident businessman ready to stride into the jungle and bring back a diamond, while Willy has, even in this daydream, already begun to doubt his future as he struggles to move beyond the anguish of his fatherless youth:

He summons into existence a brother who is an embodiment of his own needs and ambitions, who will retrospectively validate past decisions no less than his present plan to ride to glory, but whose very existence is, in his own mind, a measure of his failure. He gradually loses control of the past as he has of the present, darker memories beginning to seep through. And where is Willy at this time, his mind flooded with memories of the past, his eyes still bright with visions of a possible future? He feels "kind of temporary," in other words he feels effectively out of time, caught between a suspect past and an ever-receding future. (Bigsby, "Time Traveller" 11)

As Willy becomes less certain about his prospects as a salesman, he turns more and more to his imagined version of Ben to save him from the descent into inconsequentiality that he feels destined to carry out.

Although Willy is stuck between the worlds of the past and the present and is unsure how to move forward into the future, he continues to believe Ben can show him the way. In Act II,

Willy becomes engrossed in a reverie about Ben while in his boss Howard's office. After Willy arrives at Howard's office, he explains that he hopes to obtain an in-town position that will allow him to stop traveling. However, Howard symbolizes the entire capitalist system in the United States that devalues individuals and raises profits up as the highest goal to be attained. As such, he is completely uninterested in what Willy has to say, and instead he fixates on the sound of his children whistling and then reciting the capitals of each state via a recording machine. The machine becomes much more important than Willy's concerns. "Business is business," Howard says as he refuses to permit Willy to work in the New York office (59). Willy replies with. "[i]n those days, there was personality ... respect, and comradeship... A man is not a piece of fruit" (60). In other words, a man is not a disposable commodity. Here, Willy's concerns about his status as a businessman escalate since Howard has unfeelingly fired him. He sits in a chair, clearly broken up about it and remorseful as he attempts to come to grips with what has happened, and he leans against the desk and "*accidentally switches on the recorder,*" which starts spewing out the voice of Howard's son (61). Willy calls frantically for Howard to "Shut it off!" and Willy's frustration with the machine represents his anguish over the increased importance of machines and the decreased significance of humans in the capitalist society that surrounds him. Willy is dehumanized by his interaction with Howard, who now values his machine more than Willy.

Immediately after Howard leaves his office to give Willy time to pull himself together, Willy launches into a daydream. In it, Willy asks Ben for additional guidance and acknowledges that his life isn't progressing as he had expected: "Ben, nothing's working out. I don't know what to do" (62). Ben suggests that Willy move to Alaska with his family to look after Ben's timberland, but Linda maintains that Willy is doing fine where he is. Willy wants to agree with

her, saying, “sure, sure, I am building something with this firm, Ben, and if a man is building something he must be on the right track, mustn’t he?” (63). But when Ben presses him to name what it is that Willy’s building, Willy struggles to find an answer and ends with the idea that he is following in the footsteps of other great salesmen who have created businesses for themselves. Willy believes at this past time that he is building a future, but his present situation, in which he has been unceremoniously fired after thirty-four years of service to the firm, make it clear that he has not been constructing anything close to what he had hoped.

Willy never understands that holding on to the dream of material success means that individuals will always be determined by the assessment of others, and self-determination is impossible. In the article “Search for Self-Identity in *Death of a Salesman*,” P.P. Sharma writes that “[i]nstead of looking within himself, he looks outside to others” (77) in reference to Willy’s questioning of Ben during the daydream when Willy is in Howard’s office: “Oh, Ben, how did you do it? What is the answer?” (62). Willy asks almost the identical question of Ben in his earlier reverie, and in neither case does Ben give Willy a suitable answer. Ben twice tries to lure Willy to Alaska to take care of his timberland, and he discounts the occupation that Willy has chosen, asking Willy, “What are you building? Lay your hand on it. Where is it?” (63). Ben stresses the material aspects of Willy’s accomplishments, and because Willy cannot “lay [his] hand on it,” Ben believe it may as well not exist which is a reflection of the larger culture’s attitude. Willy accepts societal dictates, as handed down by Ben, wholesale instead of crafting his own conception of a meaningful life, and he thereby abdicates the ability to reject the negative aspects, the dark underbelly, of the dream. He sees only the glorious aspects and fails to recognize that the dream turns men into “a piece of fruit,” as much as he would like to reject this notion. He never comprehends that he cannot have one without the other – they exist as two sides

of the same coin: “Although Willy is aware, maybe dimly and imperfectly, that he is not cut out for success in the world of trade and commerce, he nevertheless nurses the dream of getting the better of everybody else. And this leads him into alienation from himself, obscuring his real identity” (Sharma 75).

After his run in with Howard, who callously fires him, Willy goes to Charley’s office to ask for another “loan,” at which point Charley attempts to show Willy the folly in his thinking. As he has throughout the rest of the play, Willy refuses to listen. Willy bemoans the fact that despite his long history with the company, so long that he named Howard when he was born, Howard let him go. But Charley points out the flaw in Willy’s line of reasoning:

CHARLEY: Willy, when’re you gonna realize that them things don’t mean anything? You named him Howard, but you can’t sell that. The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you’re a salesman, and you don’t know that.

WILLY: I’ve always tried to think otherwise, I guess. I always felt that if a man was impressive, and well liked, that nothing –

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. (73)

Charley shows Willy that if he is going to chase the dream, the opinions of those around him will be swayed by his success or lack thereof, not vice versa. Willy cannot ingratiate himself with people and find success that way. The process works in reverse, in that people who are impressed by material wealth with flock to those who have it. Before he leaves Charley’s office, Willy lets his belief that he is worthless slip into his conversation with Charley. Willy complains,

“After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive” (74). Although Charley chastises him for stating this, Willy’s assertion becomes the kernel of the idea for his suicide.

Again, the painful reality that Willy is reduced to that of a commodity in this system instigates another daydream sequence soon after, when Willy meets his sons at Frank’s and then later when he makes his final journey to the Loman residence. After Willy returns home from his aborted dinner, alone and dispirited, he has another vision of Ben in which he tells Ben of his plan to commit suicide and enable his family to cash in on his life insurance policy. Willy views this as the only option, since he believes that any hope for future success as a salesman has been destroyed. During their discussion of Willy’s scheme, Ben explains that this course of action would be cowardly. Willy questions him, asking “Why? Does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up zero?” (97). At this point, Willy’s identity has been reduced, in his estimation, to nothingness, a “zero” that, despite his best efforts to succeed, will remain valueless. However, he measures the value based on his society’s view of achievement, which revolves around tangible assets, and he refuses to evaluate the validity of this gauge. After Willy finds out both that he has lost his job and his sons are unable to procure a loan to start a new business, his loss of identity is complete. He neither is a successful salesman nor has passed down the necessary skills for the attainment of capitalist rewards to his sons.

## BEING TOWARDS DEATH

Willy's crisis has reached its summit through his inability, or perhaps refusal, to negotiate his past transgressions so that he can develop the realistic self-image in the present that would facilitate the creation of a vision for the future. He cannot reconcile his devolution from such promise to his current impotent state and chooses death as his only answer:

Time haunts Willy Loman. The memory of what was collides with knowledge of what is. He is supremely conscious of what is ... For Willy, yesterday's open country has become today's oppressive urban reality. Yesterday's dreams have deferred to today's disillusionment. Then the family would climb into the car to ride to Ebbets Field and glory; now he prepares to ride to his death alone.

(Bigsby, "Time Traveller" 10)

He gives up on his struggle with time and opts instead to end his suffering not through enlightenment but by making one last feeble attempt to be the material success he dreams of being, calling his death a "guaranteed twenty-thousand-dollar proposition" (96). In his last daydream with Ben, Ben affirms Willy's misguided track toward tangible assets, saying that "twenty thousand – that is something one can feel with the hand, it is there" (97). To the last, Willy clings to the fantasy that he can undo the economic decline that has characterized the latter part of his life.

Willy's decision to take his own life represents the most profound turning away from individual authenticity possible. Instead of grappling with his identity and the impact of his actions on his identity, he repudiates his own life. Lois Tyson, in her essay "The Psychological Politics of the American Dream: *Death of a Salesman* and the Case for an Existential Dialectics,"

calls Willy's suicide the "ultimate act of denial... Unable to face the day's accumulated disappointments, Willy is frantically seeking a way out of his despair, and he thinks he has found one" (267). He denies all the possibilities for a different value system based on his own inherent worth as opposed to the measurements of a society that insists on reducing everything to a numeric equation based on supply versus demand.

Willy's final relationship to death, in which he hurls himself headlong into its actuality, stands in direct opposition to Heidegger's concept of Being-towards-death. If one is to find authentic being and live within the constraints of time with an eye towards the future, one must always be aware that death – without the padding of an afterlife – is the ultimate end of each being, according to Heidegger. However, this informs one's manner of living more so than one's view of death. One must live in accordance with the idea that death is inevitable but must not actively seek that end through perilous behavior:

Manifestly Being-towards-death, which is now in question, cannot have the character of concernfully Being out to get itself actualized. ... to concern oneself with actualizing what is thus possible would have to signify, 'bringing about one's own demise'. But if this were done, Dasein would deprive itself of the very ground for an existing Being-towards-death. (Heidegger 305)

Willy's death falls into the category of "concernfully Being out to get itself actualized," since he brought it upon himself in an effort to help his family profit from it. In Heidegger's estimation, an authentic Being-towards-death involves addressing each day as if it were one's last, but only in the sense that each day offers limitless possibilities for change of growth to any person who acknowledges the possibilities. For Willy, he steadfastly followed one path, the only path he believed was valid, throughout his life, and when it became apparent that he could not succeed



on this path, instead of changing course, he abandoned the journey altogether. If Willy had pursued a more authentic Being-towards-death, he could have gleaned valuable insights from all of his flights into the past and their collisions with the present and used them to transform his current situation and his future possibilities. For authenticity requires effort and exertion from each individual, and cannot be attained through the kind of escapism that Willy engages in; rather, “an authentic death has to be striven for. A true being-towards-the-end is one which labors consciously towards fulfillment and refuses inertia” (Steiner 102). Willy’s life became marked by inertia and although Willy believed his suicide was an effort to end that condition, it inevitably led to the most final and irreversible state of inertia.

Authentic Being-towards-death entails opening oneself up to the multiplicity of options for action and the rejection of the sort of stasis that stems from the idea that one must “be” one thing or another. In Heidegger’s estimation, “being” cannot be conceived of as any sort of permanent state and is only a manner of becoming, with a continuous effort to move into the future and allow oneself to evolve according to the opportunities that arise. In relation to death, individuals must recognize that the only true permanence they will ever attain comes in the form of death, and thus, in the process of living, individuals have no fixed limitations on their possibilities or their ability to change:

Death, as possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be ‘actualized’, nothing which Dasein, as actual, could itself *be*. It is the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself towards anything, of every way of existing. In the anticipation of this possibility, it becomes ‘greater and greater’; that is to say, the possibility reveals itself to be such that it knows no measure at all, no more or less, but signifies the possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence.

(Heidegger 307)

This consciousness of the finitude of death opens up the infinitude of life for Heidegger. In Willy's case, he became so focused on "being" a salesman that when it became clear he was not a prosperous salesman and may never have been, he was unable to recognize the infinite possibilities open to him for new value systems of his own creation.

Some critics contend that by the end of Willy's life, he has come to some self-knowledge, but his resolution to take his own life indicates the contrary. Esther Merle Jackson asserts that Willy finds "value" through his experiences in the play, but her statement is puzzling:

Miller, like the existentialists, defines virtue, heroism, and nobility in anti-Aristotelian terms; that is to say, Loman's character is not a static arrangement of fixed virtues. On the contrary, the protagonist gains ultimate value in the universe at the same instant when he commits himself to the search for truth, in the "existential moment" which the play itself represents. (36)

In contrast to her view that Willy's existential moment is the equivalent of a search for truth, it seems that Willy instead spends the length of the play evading the truth, and this is the cause of his existential moment. Although Jackson asserts that Willy arrives at some kind of self-knowledge, it is questionable whether a decision to commit suicide can be considered to be gaining "ultimate value." Instead, Willy is unable to understand the value of his life to the very end, and he dies with the misconception that he can have worth in monetary terms. As Peter Burgard contends, "Willy's suicide does not resolve the problem of (self-) deception apparent throughout the play; rather, he carries that deception with him to the grave" (344).

Willy's suicide has at times been interpreted much as Willy himself views the act, as a selfless deed intended to help his family, particularly Biff. Carson maintains that "[t]he terrible

irony of the play is that Willy's struggles, sacrifice and final suicide are not for his own material advancement, but for his sons" (Carson 53). While this may be true in practical terms, it ignores Willy's interest in committing a final act that will establish his image as a man capable of acquiring a large amount of money, by any means necessary. Even in his death, Willy lives for others, since he wants to validate himself in the eyes of his sons. He wants to substantiate his own identity as a success by providing for his family, but he does not simply want to provide for them out of unselfish motives. Underlying his good intentions is self-interest in the form of a positive legacy. His last effort to fulfill the myth of success mirrors many of his behaviors throughout *Death of a Salesman* in that he has some positive aims, but he lacks the ability to be selfless. He wants to provide for his family and be a good husband ostensibly, but he cheats on his wife. He wishes to be a loving father to Biff and Happy, but he never confronts his own failings or Biff, so that Biff spends his adult years being angry and frustrated at his father and unable to engage in any meaningful career. And Willy wants his sons to succeed so that he can view himself as a successful father. All of his interactions with them reveal the darker side of his need for affirmation from external sources.

Throughout the play, Biff's efforts to stop chasing Willy's dream serve as a counterpoint to Willy's decision to die trying. Biff is freed by his awareness that his father's dream is false and that he has the power to stop pursuing it. And if any hope exists in the play, it rests in the character of Biff, since he appears to be the only member of the family who breaks free of the success myth and endeavors to establish his own criteria for achievement.

Early on, Biff reveals in a conversation with Happy that he, like his father, is uncertain about his future. But instead of abandoning hope for any sort of accomplishment, he struggles to

understand how he can avoid the trap of a meaningless day job that leaves him feeling empty while still achieving an acceptable level of income:

BIFF: I tell ya, Hap, I don't know what the future is. I don't know – what I'm supposed to want.

HAPPY: What do you mean?

BIFF: Well, I spent six or seven years after high school trying to work myself up. Shipping clerk, salesman, business of one kind or another. And it's a measly manner of existence. ... To devote your whole life to keeping stock, or making phone calls, or selling or buying. To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when you really desire to be outdoors, with your shirt off. And always to have to get ahead of the next fella. And still – that's how you build a future. (10)

Biff realizes the path that Willy has laid out for himself and for his sons, one that involves buying into the capitalist fantasy, is based on an illusion in which a career in selling actually pays off. Biff understands if he wishes to live an authentic life, then he must pursue his own dreams of seeking a more rustic line of work that may have fewer monetary rewards but will allow him to find more personal satisfaction with his existence. But at this point, he still grapples with the fact that his father's dream conflicts with this view, and in some ways still believes that Willy's conception of the way to live is "how you build a future." By the end of the play, however, Biff will embrace his own revelations and will cast off his father's dreams to pursue a more fulfilling lifestyle.

Later on, Biff tells Happy about the thrill of working in the West on ranches in Nebraska, the Dakotas, Arizona, and Texas, and working with animals. He says, "There's nothing more

inspiring or – beautiful than the sight of a mare or a new colt” (11). But then he’s overcome by his father’s perception of his way of life, and Biff says, “whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my God. I’m not getting’ anywhere! What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week!” (11). He admits that he feels the need to return home at these moments, but being around Willy only serves to reinforce his feelings of inadequacy instead of ameliorating them: “I get here, and I don’t know what to do with myself. [After a pause] I’ve always made a point of not wasting my life, and everytime I come back here I know that all I’ve done is to waste my life” (11). Here, he still vacillates between his own vision of a meaningful life working outdoors and his father’s expectations that he climb a corporate ladder.

Biff comes to the final realization that Willy’s aspirations for him are misguided after a failed attempt to solicit start-up funds for a sporting goods business from Bill Oliver. While Willy had assured Biff that Oliver would be thrilled to see him based on the fact that Biff used to work for him as a salesman, the reality of Biff’s encounter with Oliver erases the dazzling surface of the fantasy: “He walked away. I saw him for one minute ... How the hell did I ever get the idea I was a salesman there? And then he gave me one look and – I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been. We’ve been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk” (79). Biff acknowledges that his family’s belief that he could get the loan was based on a shared myth regarding his relationship to Oliver and Oliver’s company. From this point on, Biff aims to dispel the myths that plague his household so that he can move onto a truer, more authentic understanding of himself and his capabilities. He also works to be more honest with himself about what his aspirations are, and he adamantly opposes the path of becoming an office drone. In his final confrontation with Willy, he divulges his revelation

regarding his complete disinterest in going into the sporting goods business: “I .... said to myself ... 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!” (102). In contrast to Willy, who despite all of the confrontations with past and present indiscretions cannot stop making a “contemptuous, begging fool” of himself, Biff declares that he will not make the same mistake by following a hollow dream of material wealth. Biff’s cognizance of his existential possibilities becomes obvious when finally he shouts, “Pop, I’m nothing! I’m nothing, Pop. Can’t you understand that? There’s no spite in it anymore. I’m just what I am, that’s all” (103). Although Willy interprets “nothing” to mean that Biff is without substance or identity, Biff seems to mean that he does not fit into any externally imposed set of standards, and wishes to be “what I am,” a being with the ability to create his own identity.

In the Requiem section of the play, as Biff, Happy, Linda, and Charley stand around Willy’s grave lamenting his death, Biff makes no secret of his feelings about his father’s life path. Biff extols the virtues of the days in which Willy focused on working on the house, which seemed to make him the happiest, by Biff’s account: “There were a lot of nice days. When he’d come home from a trip; or on Sundays, making the stoop; finishing the cellar; putting on the new porch; when he built the extra bathroom; and put on the garage ... there’s more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made” (107). And Biff follows up his fond remembrances of Willy’s non-business related activities with the pronouncements that he “had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong” (107) and “never knew who he was” (108). Biff’s assessment of Willy’s situation at the end of the play provides the greatest insight into Willy’s condition of any in the play. They underscore Biff’s determination to forge a new direction for himself that focuses on the pursuit of a more authentic life that adheres to his goals.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout *Death of a Salesman*, depictions of Willy's daydreams and their juxtaposition with key current moments underscore Willy's failure to reconcile his past with his present situation, which causes his existential crisis and the destruction of his identity. He can find no meaning in his exploration of the past, and thus he is unable to understand how his present is informed by the past. As Bigsby states, time "operates" in Miller's work by showing the complex interrelationship of the past and the present and their ability to affect an individual's perception of himself: "It is not only that the present interrogates the past for meaning which only becomes apparent with the passage of time but that the present already contains the past whose shape and form it tries to measure" ("Time Traveller" 4). Because he either refuses or lacks the ability to question the capitalist dream, Willy ultimately decides that he cannot begin anew, free from the burdens and illusions of the past, and he believes that a future does not exist for him.

Throughout *Death of a Salesman*, Willy both escapes to the past in hope of finding refuge from his spiraling decline in the business world and unearths certain negative aspects of his history that he has been suppressing for decades. Willy "retreats to his memory world in part to confront the truth that lies there and in part to escape the consequences of the past exposed by the linear present" (Schroeder 91). Willy becomes imprisoned in a cycle of rotating from the present to the past and back again that proves futile in terms of his search for solutions to his dilemma. With each of his flights into daydreams, he "moves toward and retreats from the discovery of his identity. Drifting back and forth between the past and the present, Willy desperately gropes for answers to the questions that have tormented him all his life" (Centola, "Sartrean" 297). He does

not find answers because he refuses to reevaluate the basis for his assumptions about success, which center on a myth that places personality and charm above all other requirements.

In addition, Willy seeks to be defined by others, and he evaluates his entire life in terms of his material wealth. His occupation becomes the central aspect of his existence, and he allows selling to become his identity instead of his occupation. He fails to keep the two separated, and the persona of salesman, prosperous or not, becomes an inextricable part of Willy's identity, on and off the road: "Willy's problem is not that he is divided, but that he cannot keep his separate identities apart ... Willy's mistake is, as Charley points out at the end of the play, that he allows the dreams necessary to his work to take over his whole person" (Hawthorn 94). When it becomes evident that Willy cannot pay the bills through work as a salesman, his world crumbles because he allows his job title to mold his being.

In all of these areas, Willy falls into the trap of inauthentic being, from a Heideggerian perspective: his relationship to time becomes problematic when, instead of looking toward aspirations in the future, he begins to revert ever more to the past until he has no sense of any future; he is a being for others because he allows the opinions of the society as a whole as well as the individuals around him to define what achievement looks like; and he does not engage in authentic Being-towards-death, since he commits suicide and immediately ceases his possibilities for the future.

At the end of *Death of a Salesman*, the reflections of Willy's family, as well as his best friend Charley, illuminate the troubled existence that Willy endured. The last lines of the play are those of Linda, who calls out to Willy, crying "We're free... we're free" (109), which serves to emphasize the existential quandary Willy faced. He was free to change his life and his goals, but he did not know it. Although he thought that the opinions of others were the driving force in his



achievements or lack thereof, he never realized that he was at the center of all of his successes and failures. Charley explains that the nature of Willy's job turned him into a dreamer, and he gives some legitimacy to Willy's concern for the views of others:

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. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory. (108)

Charley points out that Willy allows his work and its concerns to engulf him so that when Willy makes few sales, he feels the sting of rejection. Perhaps the salesman's job, with its emphasis on convincing others to part with their money, requires a man to put his entire self into his work. If this is the case, Willy sacrificed himself at the altar of capitalism for a thankless, and ultimately dead-end, job.

Although Willy does not find meaning, refuses to resolve his past and its incongruity with the present, and ultimately rejects life, it is impossible to deny that his actions are understandable. The difficulties of comprehending one's relationship to the past and one's society, and the existential repercussions of such an understanding, deter even the most determined individuals from discovering meaning and implementing any meaningfulness they might find in their lives. As Miller writes in the last lines of his preface to the fiftieth anniversary edition of *Death of a Salesman*:

Being human ... is something most of us fail at most of the time, and a little mercy is eminently in order given the societies we live in, which purport to be

stable and sound as mountains when in fact they are trembling in a fast wind  
blowing mindlessly around the earth.(xiii)

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