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Willy's American Dream

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is an American play that focuses on the life of an average man trying to achieve the American Dream. Willy Loman's life is seemingly perfect – he has two sons, Biff and Happy, and a wife, Linda, who all love him dearly. His sons are growing older as he grows tired. Willy's been a travelling salesman for 35 years and is ready to stay local, but Howard, his boss, won't let him because there aren't any positions available. This leads Willy to go into one of his many flash backs that only he can see. This is only one of the many events that show how Willy's life is not how he imagined it. Willy Loman is living an illusion of the American Dream. Though he remains committed to the ideals of the dream, there are many external and internal forces that sabotage and reinforce them.

Willy Loman's life revolves about the ideals he sets for his own American Dream. He first and foremost wants his sons to be successful. This is evident in the first scene where Willy and Linda are discussing the lives of their sons. Willy complains about Biff to Linda, "Not finding yourself at the age of thirty-four is a disgrace!" Biff is still trying to figure out what kind of life he is going to live, but Willy thinks that he should have planned this earlier.

Willy's second goal is to have a woman by his side when he is lonely. While his wife Linda is his rock who stands by him at all times, Willy is a *travelling* salesman. When he is on the road, Linda can't be there. But he still feels lonely on the road. His solution to this was to find a woman to keep him company, so he has an affair. In the beginning of the play, Willy flashes back to a memory with someone that Miller calls The Woman and reflects on how lonely he is on the road: "Cause I get so lonely — especially when business is bad and there's nobody to talk

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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." Willy talks to The Woman about how he lonely he is and how he wants to leave something behind for his sons after he dies. It's interesting that while he's with his mistress, he talks about his sons. It solidifies the fact that Willy really wants his sons to have some kind of success, even if he won't be alive to see it.

The final goal Willy wants is to pay off all of his debts. The things he has to pay off like his refrigerator, insurance premiums, and mortgage are forcing him to work into retirement. He has borrowed money from his neighbor, Charley, and doesn't want to have to borrow money again. He asks Howard to stay local and to have a stable income that travelling isn't providing him, but, as stated before, that doesn't work out for him.

This outline of Willy's goals is important because these ideals are what are being sabotaged and reinforced. To give more detail: Willy has an affair to stop being lonely, but Biff catches him in the act. This weighs really heavy on Biff's shoulders because he used to look at his father as someone who was invincible as most people do look at their fathers. But when a father makes a mistake, it can be traumatizing. Biff starts crying after The Woman leaves and realizes what his father is doing, but Willy tries to calm him down: "Now stop crying and do as I say. I gave you an order. Biff, I gave you an order! Is that what you do when I give you an order? How dare you cry!" This was a life changing experience for Biff. This is an external event that sabotages Willy's American Dream. After he sees The Woman in his father's hotel room, Biff declines a full ride football scholarship for college. This devastates Willy because all he wanted with The Woman was company; it wasn't supposed to ruin Biff's relationship with his father. Every time Willy talks about Biff, he mentions how good he is at football. This is the root of why Biff isn't

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successful in Willy's eyes. He wants his son to be successful so bad, that anything less than perfection (i.e. accepting the scholarship and becoming a famous football player) is not good enough for Willy.

This leads into why Willy needs a job that can provide for him. Howard suggests that Willy's sons are supposed to take care of his finances when he needs money, "Where are your sons? Why don't your sons give you a hand?" Willy would agree that his sons should take care of his finances when he needs it, but he knows that his sons aren't financially stable enough to care for him. Biff doesn't have a stable job or a clear direction to riches. Happy, who has been neglected in his essay as much as he was in the play, is just that – neglected. He has a career similar to his father's, but doesn't make enough money to support anyone except himself. Willy doesn't think about asking him for money because he is unhappy that Biff can't be the one to provide for him when he needs it. This is why he goes to Howard and asks for a local job with a steady pay (instead of living off of commissions) to pay off all of his debts. When Howard tells Willy to live off of his sons' income, he becomes an external force that sabotages Willy's American Dream.

The external forces that impact Willy's success are parallel to his goals. But which ones are reinforcing his faith in the American Dream while others hinder him? Linda Loman plays a huge role in the reason Willy is so grounded to his goals. She is first introduced as a caring wife who wants to make her husband some food. She takes care of Willy: "Take an aspirin. Should I get you an aspirin? It'll soothe you." She wants Willy to be as comfortable as possible because she knows that his life has not been kind to him. She is even seen blaming his bad driving on the steering wheel of the car. This behavior reinforces Willy's American Dream because he just wants to be happy. Linda makes him happy, but he isn't satisfied because there are so many

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other events preventing him from his American Dream. Linda reinforces the ideals because she makes him believe that he can still accomplish goals that aren't in his hands like Biff playing football or Howard giving him a local job.

The internal forces that impact Willy's American Dream are presented as flash backs. For the most part, the flash backs both reinforce and sabotage Willy's success. These flash backs always bring Willy back to a time where he was happy, whether it be that his sons are successful in high school or Howard's father (Willy's past boss) promising him whatever position he wants in the future. These flash backs blur the lines between reality and illusion to the point that Willy believes they are reality.

The flash backs reinforce Willy's American Dream because he believes them. When he remembers how successful his sons used to be, the flash back reaffirms his hopes that they will not disappoint him in the future. He doesn't have the time to reflect on the flash back to fully process how important it is to separate it from reality because he dives into a card game with Charley right after. He immediately jumps back into a new flash back about his brother who has just passed. This scene sabotages Willy's American Dream because Biff later comes downstairs to see who Willy was talking to. "Why didn't you ever write me about this, Mom?" implies that Willy's mental health has been deteriorating and that he didn't used to have these vivid flash backs.

Willy merges a flash back into reality later when Howard denies him a local job. Willy goes into a flash back after Howard tells him that he can't have the local job. He hallucinates that his brother, Ben, is there with him and he is asking him for advice. But Ben has to leave to discover

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a new continent. This internal struggle both sabotages and reinforces his American Dream. It sabotages it because Howard thinks less of Willy because he can't handle his own emotions. It reinforces the Dream because Willy thinks that he can reach out to his dead brother whenever he wants. But this thought is problematic because it is further blurs the line of reality for him.

While Willy has many internal and external forces affecting his American Dream, he still hangs on to the ideals that his sons will be successful, he will never be lonely, and Howard will give him a local job. However, these ideals are not accessible. So many forces are sabotaging Willy's American Dream that he can't hold on to reality anymore. The internal forces that reinforce his Dream cannot be trusted because they are basically hallucinations. But one might say that Willy is to blame for all of this heartache he has. When he has the affair, it alters the dynamics of the relationship between him and Biff because Biff finds out about the affair. If Willy never had the affair, maybe Biff would have accepted the scholarship to college for playing football. Willy would have sons who are successful, a wife to look forward to coming home to, and the ability to reach out to his successful sons for money when he needs it. These ideals are unfortunately untrue. Willy dies while having a flash back before he decides to realize that Biff was as successful as he wanted to be, Linda has always been happy to serve him no matter what their past is, and travelling for work was still paying the bills. Here I've explored what forces reinforce and sabotage Willy's American Dream. From the internal conflict of not being able to tell reality apart from hallucinations to the external force of Biff not accepting the scholarship that would have made him successful, Willy does not achieve his American Dream.