

Enduring Values in *Death of a Salesman*

BIFF. Are you content?

HAPPY. Hell, no! (23)

WILLY, *small and alone*. What—what's the secret? (92)

LINDA. Just try to relax, dear. You make mountains out of molehills. (18)

The protagonists in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* confront a problem modern audiences can relate to, namely the question of how to live in a free, affluent, and changing society. The men demonstrate how a lack of time-tested tradition leads them to embrace a value system which harms them. Linda, on the other hand, represents tradition, in the form of female submission to male dominance, facing the destruction of its ecosystem as the men in her life leave her nothing to devote herself to. Audiences experiencing displacement of traditional lifeways by a liberal culture can relate to these challenges. While the failure of the Lomans to prosper is partly an indictment of their way of life, below the surface of failure appear values that could help the Lomans to thrive. Miller states that his play depicts an absence of values, thereby provoking the audience to consider what the Loman family is missing ("Morality" 172). However, enduring principles are in fact modeled in *Salesman*.

One reason audiences are motivated to consider why the Lomans fail is that the Lomans' lives resemble their own. As Miller recounts, "I received visits from men over sixty from as far away as California who had come across the country to have me write the stories of their lives, because the story of Willy Loman was exactly like theirs. The letters from women made it clear that the central character of the play was Linda; sons saw the entire action revolving around Biff or Happy" ("Introduction" 161). Daniel Schneider, referring both to Willy and to Happy, identifies the play as "the dream of a younger, unpreferred son" (258). One critic writes of his father's identification with Willy: "[My father] frequently complained about the continued separation of our family and constantly wished for all of us to be together" (Bleich 39). Audiences find themselves and their own struggles portrayed in *Salesman* in a manner that is both realistic and iconic. A. Howard Fuller, president of the Fuller Brush Company, suggests such strong identification "cannot be duplicated by a modern audience when viewing the classical tragedies of the Greeks and Elizabethans" (243).

The problems audiences identify with in *Salesman* are caused by social forces as active now as they were fifty-six years ago. These problems include: living in a world that becomes more ugly and less responsive the longer one lives in it, just as the fields and trees around the Loman home are replaced by pavement, cars, and apartment blocks, and as the sons and employer Willy had faith in desert him; disconnection with the non-human natural world, which is what Biff would have to accept were he to remain in the city; living with people who encourage neither love nor honesty, and being one of those persons oneself; seeing little possibility of becoming a respected member of society by doing personally meaningful work, or even work that is merely not harmful

to oneself or to others; and trying to maintain appearances and attitudes of success and happiness, because if one doesn't, he cannot bear living, and others cannot bear him. As one critic writes, "[Willy], even as you and I, builds himself a shaky shelter of illusion" (Garland 200). These are aspects of the Lomans' lives audiences relate to that are caused or exacerbated by social change.

Living has never been easy or without change, and societies develop traditions that help them negotiate challenges. In *Salesman*, audiences see a world like theirs where autochthonous and religious practices have been neglected or lost. In their place is a dream of the financial freedom (or devotion to a husband with the freedom) to support a personal vision of happiness:

WILLY. You wait, kid, before it's all over we're gonna get a little place out in the country, and I'll raise some vegetables, a couple of chickens . . .

LINDA. You'll do it yet, dear. (72)

In this tradition, which is founded upon belief in the independence and self-reliance of the individual, it is individual success, not community or family visioning, planning, and development, that is the means of resolving the problems of life.

*Salesman* portrays the effects of this success tradition. It works for some, but not for the Lomans, led by Willy, who has been sold a particular view of individual success: success is being wealthy and having a family; it can be accomplished by being the best salesman, which he will achieve by being well-liked. Willy gets a family, a career, and a house, but only scrapes by as a salesman. He dreams his eldest son will achieve at a level he has not, by being well-liked. It is Willy's devotion to this vision of success, to the neglect of other more helpful values, that harms the Loman family.

The damage Willy causes assisted psychologist Erik Erikson in formulating the first psychoanalytic theory of identity that addresses developmental tasks occurring from adolescence onward (Rapaport 14). Biff is Erikson's example of "identity diffusion," which occurs prior to or instead of achieving "ego identity" in adolescence (91). Willy demonstrates a lack of "ego integrity" in late adulthood characterized by "disgust and despair"; he "expresses the feeling that the time is short, too short for the attempt to start another life and to try out alternate roads to integrity" (Erikson 98). Happy has made a solid career commitment, but fails, for the most part, to achieve the intimacy described in Erikson's first stage of adulthood (Erikson 95). This diversity of identity conflicts helps to account for the broad appeal of *Salesman*.

More poignant, though, is that audiences identify strongly with characters who fail to achieve individual success. This suggests U.S. audiences share Willy's combination of self-doubt and obsession with image. As one critic describes this characteristic: "[S]ince [Willy] is destined for success, he must constantly dress the part," but "beneath the surface optimism . . . lurk his frustration and keen sense of failure" (Centola 30-31). It turns out Willy would rather die than accept failure. In his own words, "the man who makes an appearance . . . , the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead" (33). More than any other aspect of U.S. culture, it is the value of "dressing the part," of maintaining an appearance and attitude of success regardless of reality, that is

examined and rejected in *Salesman*. This concern with image before substance is related to what author Steven Covey calls the *personality ethic*:

[S]hortly after World War I the basic view of success shifted from the Character Ethic to what we might call the *Personality Ethic*. Success became more a function of personality, of public image, of attitudes and behaviors, skills and techniques, that lubricate the processes of human interaction. This personality ethic essentially took two paths: one was human and public relations techniques, and the other was positive mental attitude (PMA). Some of this philosophy was expressed in inspiring and sometimes valid maxims such as “Your attitude determines your altitude,” “Smiling wins more friends than frowning,” and “Whatever the mind of man can conceive and believe it can achieve.”

Other parts of the personality approach were clearly manipulative, even deceptive, encouraging people to use techniques to get other people to like them, or to fake interest in the hobbies of others to get out of them what they wanted, or to use the “power look,” or to intimidate their way through life. (19)

Covey does not reject the personality ethic out of hand but believes its application must be based on and secondary to “deep integrity and fundamental character strength” (22).

The acclaim of Covey’s work was foreshadowed by the success of *Salesman*—both address the same psychological hunger. The reason audiences were left silent and motionless or in tears “at the final curtain fall” may be that audiences see themselves in the play as they are, rather than as they are trying to be (Garland 199; Worsley 224). In their daily lives, among friends, family, and other workers, they dog themselves to maintain appearances of success. *Salesman* gives them leave and means to see and to talk about their failures and their falsity and to question images of success. *Salesman* helps the audience to step back and consider what kind of life *they* want to have instead of how they can achieve an image that had been sold to them. This is what Willy did not do and what Biff succeeded in doing.

In addition to facilitating a release from trying to maintain an appearance of success, *Salesman* models values which could help individuals and families to thrive. These values include honesty, respect for diversity, and freedom from concern with social prominence. Together they facilitate what Miller calls “a kind of civilized sharing of what we would like to see occur within us and in the world” (“Morality” 172). In the best example of such sharing, when Happy and Biff discuss their successes and failures, we also find the values of physicality, connection with nature, family work, respect for women “with substance,” and life examination (25). In addition, Linda advocates nonviolence, Happy exemplifies optimism, Charlie, compassion, and Biff and Willy show the importance of a having a dream appropriate to one’s nature. The presence of these values demonstrates that what Willy and his family are missing is within them or nearby. They already have many “values that endure” (“Introduction” 168).

The most fundamental of these values is honesty.

Honesty is an effort to understand and to express oneself in relation to others and to the world. This can be seen in the hand of the playwright, who “feel[s] better when [his] work is reflecting a balance of the truth as it exists” (“Introduction” 171). Miller uses the differing perspectives of his characters to approximate truth: he thought of *Salesman* as “having the density of the novel form it its interchange of viewpoints” (“Introduction” 163). An example of Miller’s realism is Bernard’s inner integrity and outward success that contrasts the varying levels of integrity and success of the other characters. An author wishing to present a simple anti-capitalist perspective might not have created a wholly honest, humane, and financially and socially successful character such as Bernard. Honesty is also found within the characters of play, most notably in the struggle of Biff to escape from the “phony dream” (133). Honesty, as a commitment to attempt to understand things as they are, is also at the root of the other enduring values of the play.

One of these values is respect for diversity, manifest both in the playwright’s presentation of multiple viewpoints and in Biff. Biff, by the end of the play, comes to respect that what is the best path for him is different from anything he has been taught and different from the kind of success accepted in the community in which he was raised. This challenge is comparable to what a homosexual who has been raised in a community unsupportive of homosexuality faces in coming to respect his own desire (cf. Peri Rossi). As the play closes, however, Biff’s “hopeless glance at Happy” shows he is not yet able to accept that views different from his might also be valid (139). On the other hand, Bernard demonstrates a respect for diversity in others when he suggests to Willy that “sometimes . . . it’s better for a man just to walk away [from what he continues to fail at]” (95).

Contrasting Willy’s focus on maintaining an appearance of success is Biff’s embrace of freedom from concern with social prominence. This quality is not a reflex, so it is appropriate to recognize it as a value rather than an absence of a value, along the lines of Ram Dass’ struggle to “become nobody being somebody” (Schwartz 69). Biff expresses this when he declares, “I’m nothing! I’m nothing . . . I’m just what I am, that’s all” (133). Linda appeals to this value when she tries to dissuade Willy from following Ben: “You’re doing well enough, Willy! . . . Why must everybody conquer the world?” (85). There is also a subtext to Ben’s speeches that supports this value: if we take “the jungle” as equivalent to “the rat race,” Ben is emphasizing that he was rich when he walked out of competitive society. “Rich” in this reading can be understood as “living a richly meaningful life.”

Freedom from concern with social prominence might be interpreted more broadly as “freedom from seeking power over others,” although “social prominence” emphasizes a non-coercive power, a sort of leadership through example and suggestion. “Social prominence” is also different from but related to Willy’s concern with being loved or well-liked, since “prominence” connotes respect by others, not necessarily liking (cf. Jacobson 249). It also suggests a degree of sociability and conformance to whatever is required of those who are prominent. In any event, at the end of the play what Biff is renouncing is the desire to become someone of high social

status—he is “reconcile[d] . . . to his life of simple work, food, and leisure without expectations of prominence” (Jacobson 254).

When the characters are free from concern with social prominence and have respect for diversity and a commitment to honesty, they are able to engage in what Miller refers to as “civilized sharing of what we would like to see occur within us and in the world” (“Morality” 172). Miller’s concept of civilized sharing is similar to what philosopher Jürgen Habermas calls *communicative action*: “action oriented to mutual understanding” (Braaten 57). Communicative action is central to the project of the Enlightenment, which is “to achieve emancipation and thereby the good life by founding society on rational principles rather than tradition” (Braaten 73). Communicative action is supported by the structure of the play and it is modeled by the characters. *Salesman* draws the audience into communicative action because “by showing what happens when there are no values . . . the audience will be compelled and propelled toward a more intense quest for values that are missing” (“Morality” 172) (Miller later clarifies that the problem is harmful values or “separation from values that endure” rather than an absence of values [“Morality” 175; “Introduction” 168]). The most notable modeling of communicative action occurs in the first conversation between Biff and Happy. Both Biff and Happy actively try to understand each other as they talk about success and failure, and within their dialogue several other enduring values come to the fore that recur throughout *Salesman*. These values include: physicality, connection with nature, family work, respect for strong women, and life examination.

Physical and sensual exuberance conflict throughout the play with a society that values office work in the city over manual labor in the country. Biff introduces the issue early in the play: “Men built like we are should be working out in the open” (23), but “he has learned from Willy not to respect such work” (Centola 39). Bernard’s success at integrating this value into his life is symbolized by the tennis rackets he is taking with him to Washington, DC. The characters that whistle without reproach (almost everyone but the Lomans) have also been able to integrate some physical exuberance into their city lives. This physicality is related to the desire for connection with nature that male members of the Loman family demonstrate so fervently. In fact, the most beautiful descriptions in the play are of nature imagery: the stage directions for the flute “telling of grass and trees and the horizon” (11); Willy on the scenery of his drive, and on the elm trees and the spring fragrance in the house in the old days; Biff on the new colts on the farm and on “mixing cement on some open plain” (61); Willy’s closing line of act one, looking into the moonlight: “Gee, look at the moon moving between the buildings” (69); Willy remembering sleigh-riding in winter; and when Biff sees, looking at the sky, “all the things that I love in the world” (132). Less idyllic, but emphasizing the same value, are Ben’s jungle exploration and Willy’s repeated efforts to plant a garden.

The best dreams of the Lomans integrate the values of physicality and connection with nature with the value of family work. We see this in Biff and Happy’s dream for a

family ranch and in Willy’s dream of a cottage in the country with chickens and a garden where he’d build a little guest house for his sons and their wives. Family work may be defined as family members acting for their mutual benefit in each other’s presence. Some of the most endearing moments of the play are about family work: Linda remembering Happy and Biff shaving together; Happy and Biff remembering the dreams they shared in their old bedroom; Willy working on the car and the yard with his sons, and the thought of having his boys help him on his business trips; Willy’s dream of making “a business for the boys” (38); Biff talking with Willy on the phone every night; Howard working in and taking over the business started by his father; Bernard stopping by to see his father before his train leaves; Stanley elaborating how a family business is the best; and Willy’s memory of the “great times . . . so full of light and comradeship” (127). Even though some of those moments, like when the sons are polishing the car, are what the playwright calls “images of futility” (“Introduction” 162), for the most part the value of family work is emphasized without qualification. The absence of family work in Biff’s new vision for himself and in Ben’s desertion of his mother and brother are reasons why their success seems less than complete (cf. Lawrence 548; Jacobson 248).

Respect for women “with substance” is another value the characters proclaim, albeit in an ironic way. Biff is first to mention it, and Happy affirms the value:

HAPPY. You still run around a lot?

BIFF. Naa. I’d like to find a girl—steady, somebody with substance.

HAPPY. That’s what I long for.

BIFF. Go on! You’d never come home.

HAPPY. I would! Somebody with character, with resistance! Like Mom, y’know?” (25)

Ben speaks of his mother as a “fine specimen of a lady” (46), and Linda is universally recognized as a great wife: for example, Happy says, “They broke the mold when they made her” (66). However, the men’s attitudes toward the women belie this professed respect. Even Biff, who objects to his father’s yelling at Linda, asks her to dye her hair because he doesn’t want her looking old. Further, there is an undercurrent in the play suggesting that women are partly responsible for the debt slavery of men and the failure of the men to follow the dreams they should be following. This is stated most directly in Willy’s advice to Biff:

Just wanna be careful with those girls, Biff, that’s all. Don’t make any promises. No promises of any kind. Because a girl, y’know, they always believe what you tell ‘em, and you’re very young, Biff, you’re too young to be talking seriously to girls. . . . You want to watch your schooling first. Then when you’re all set, there’ll be plenty of girls for a boy like you. (27-28)

This sentiment is also found in the opening conversation of the play when Willy attempts to analyze his situation and Linda, according to stage directions, is “trying to bring him out of it” with a discussion of a new type of cheese (17). Her most pointed remark is “Go down, try it. And be quiet” (18). On the other hand, as Willy (“ . . . they always believe what you tell ‘em . . .”) and Miller (“ . . . [Linda] having been made by him though he did not know

it . . ." ["Introduction" 163]) suggest, there is the sense that the men by their treatment of women are trapping themselves. The married men who seem to be doing fine are the ones who are successful in traditional ways: Bernard, Howard, and Charlie. The other men either found success before making promises to a woman or renounced women to follow their dreams. Ben appears to have married and fathered seven sons only after achieving his success. Ben and Willy's father left his wife and sons. Biff, who had once considered, "Maybe I oughta get married. Maybe I oughta get stuck into something" (23), may be headed to the relatively woman-free life of a cowboy or farmhand.

Overall, the play presents a conflicted view of women and does not offer a clear vision of a strong woman. For example, Linda is called a strong woman by one of the least truthful characters in the play, and while the initial stage directions say that Linda shares Willy's longings, they are longings that Linda lacks "the temperament to utter and follow to their end" (12). Furthermore, Linda is willing to excoriate her sons, but she fails to confront Willy about his suicide plans. Happy gives us another hint when he says that good women are not like the ones he finds so easy to seduce. Yet the strongest woman in the play, the one who does not believe or do whatever she is told, is "The Woman," who may live with her sisters and who tells her lover, "You didn't make me, Willy. I picked you" (38). So, while glimpses of a strong woman occur, and a desire for a woman with substance is expressed, she and her nature remain unknown.

There is, however, at least one value that Linda expresses in opposition to the other characters in the play that is central to civilized sharing or communicative action: nonviolence. She states this strongly when Ben comes to visit and begins to spar with Biff. To Willy she asks, "Why must he fight, dear?" and to Ben and Biff, "Why are you fighting?" while Happy and Willy cheer on the fight (49). This is a significant contrast to Willy's belligerence and to the violence used in colloquial expressions by almost every other character in the play to refer to action as diverse as kissing, selling, and making someone laugh. This does not mean that Linda does not use force on occasion, as when she shouts at Biff and Happy when they return from the evening they deserted their father. Overall, though, one of Linda's main roles is as peacemaker between Willy and Biff, and she is committed to nonviolent living and communication.

Even Happy has an enduring value to teach us: that of the positive attitude, though he takes this attitude so far as to be blinded to reality. And Howard, lacking in compassion though he may be, serves as a caution to any who would trust a company to care for them in their old age, and to anyone who looks to a company to be like a family (cf. Jacobson 252). Charlie, in spite of his cynicism, shows compassion for Willy, though also a bit of arrogance at being the one with the upper hand. The importance of a dream and vision consistent with one's own desire is emphasized particularly by Biff and by Willy, as is the value of the examined life. An aspect of Willy's failure is that he was unable to completely examine his life—in his effort to maintain prominence, he stopped short of confronting truth.

While *Salesman* concerns "separation from values

that endure," enduring values are present in the play as are successful role models. By suspending our focus on the obvious failures, it is possible to see that enduring values are not absent but neglected. The Lomans remind us that dreams and identities should develop to fit our own senses, and that we should be watchful for our tendency to attempt to fit our desire into a vision of life that was not built by us, gradually, through interaction with the world. The Lomans also show us the danger of imposing our dreams on others.

More remarkable than the healthy values modeled in *Salesman* is the role of the play in the historical process of identifying rational principles which help societies thrive. It is important to note that in Habermas' conceptualization, *rationality* consists of making valid claims not just about "a state of affairs" (objective reality, truth), but also about a subjective reality (the speaker's truthfulness or sincerity), and an intersubjective or social reality (the appropriateness, or normative or moral correctness of the communication) (Fultner xvii; Howe 20). In other words, enduring principles address not only physics, but human motivation and social justice. The role of *Salesman* in the progression toward "increasing cultural complexity and toward ever more liberated forms of social interaction and integration" is apparent both in the the reaction of its audience and in the play's relation to the work of Erikson and Covey (Braaten 76). *Salesman* invites society to see itself and to develop a better vision for the future.

#### Works Cited

- Braaten, Jane. *Habermas's Critical Theory of Society*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1991.
- Centola, Steven R. "Family Values in *Death of a Salesman*." *College Language Association Journal* 37 (1993): 29-41.
- Covey, Stephen R. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*. New York: Fireside, 1990.
- Erikson, Erik H. "Growth and Crises of the Healthy Personality." 1950. *Psychological Issues* 1.1 (1959): 50-100.
- Fuller, Howard A. "A Salesman is Everybody." *Fortune* May 1949: 79-80. Rpt. in Weales 240-43.
- Fultner, Barbara. Translator's Introduction. *Truth and Justification*. By Jürgen Habermas. Cambridge: MIT P, 2003.
- Garland, Robert. "Audience Spellbound by Prize Play of 1949." *The New York Journal-American* 11 Feb. 1949: 24. Rpt. in Weales 199-201.
- Howe, Leslie. *On Habermas*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000.
- Jacobson, Irving. "Family Dreams in *Death of a Salesman*." *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 47 (1975): 247-58.
- Lawrence, Stephen A. "The Right Dream in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*." *College English* 25 (1964): 547-49.
- Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. Weales 1-140.
- . Introduction. *Collected Plays*. New York: Viking, 1957. 23-38. Partial rpt. in Weales 155-71.
- . "Morality and Modern Drama: Interview With Phillip Gelb." *Education Theatre Journal* 10 (1958): 190-202. Rpt. in Weales 172-86.

- Peri Rossi, Cristina. "El culpable." *Aproximaciones al estudio de la literatura hispánica*. Eds. Carmelo Virgillio, L. Teresa Valdivieso, and Edward H. Friedman. 4th ed. Boston: McGraw, 1999. 80-82.
- Rapaport, David. "A Historical Survey of Psychoanalytic Ego Psychology." *Psychological Issues* 1.1 (1959): 5-17.
- Schneider, Daniel E. *The Psychoanalyst and the Artist*. New York: Farrar, Straus, 1950. 246-55. Rpt. in Weales 250-58.
- Schwartz, Tony. *What Really Matters: Searching for Wisdom in America*. New York: Bantam, 1995.
- Weales, Gerald, ed. *Death of a Salesman: Text and Criticism*. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- Worsley, T.C. "Poetry Without Words." *New Statesman & Nation* 6 Aug. 1949: 146-47. Rpt. in Weales 224-227.
- Works Consulted
- Cernuda, Luis. "No decía palabras." 1932. *Un Río, un Amor – Los Placeres Prohibidos*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1999. 93.