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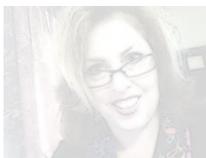
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The Plight of the Common Man

by Alexandra Wagner



[Arthur Miller](#) , in his [play Death of a Salesman](#) , told the story of Willy Loman--the "little guy," an exhausted traveling salesman searching for his place in the world. The play is a journey through the life of Willy and his beloved sons Biff and Happy. A journey the reader experiences first-hand through Willy's haphazard and frantic-feeling "flashbacks" and "daydreams." A journey revealing the heartbreaks, the disappointments, and the regrets Willy had experienced and endured. Miller used the mental and physical death and ungluing of Willy to depict how a [capitalistic society](#) and how the disillusionment of the American Dream affects the dignity and choices of the common man.

In the play, Willy wanted nothing more than for his two boys to be given the chance he never had to succeed. Willy mentioned to his friend Charlie that "a man is worth more dead than alive," foreshadowing Willy's death. Willy's death--his physical disassembly--shows just how desperate Willy



was to provide for his seed. Just before he took his own life, Willy had an epiphany during one of his dreams with his brother [Ben](#) . Willy realized that the insurance money resulting from his death would be enough to give Biff and Happy--his two beloved although lost sons--a jump start to a life Willy himself never had--a life with no bills, a life with appliances that worked, a life filled with dignity and honor. Willy literally sold himself in an act of sheer love and despair for his family, an act that showed just how little Willy valued life and love when compared to money. In Willy's eyes, money was always supreme, an ideal that led to his death and thus his sons' provision and hope for a new life.

[The death and funeral of Dave Singleman](#) served as a foil to Willy's own [death and funeral](#). Countless people--some from near, some from far--convened at the funeral of Dave Singleman to pay his or her own individual respects. Singleman had obviously been well-liked, respected, and even adored. With his green slippers and successful career, Singleman was the embodiment of everything Willy wanted. Willy, on the other hand, was



the embodiment of everything Willy wanted. Willy, on the other hand, was not well-liked. Neither was he successful nor great nor a number-one salesman. He was simply a common man, great at nothing and only average in everything, including sales. Miller used this inadequacy found in his protagonist to question the place of the average person in society; where does the every day man fit in a world that only honors first place? Willy was driven to desperation and even death by this question and the resulting lack of identity, dignity, and purpose he battled with.



with Willy's death and insanity, Miller unpacked the bitter and empty promise of the [American Dream](#), an ideal Willy had worked, sweat, bled, and eventually died for. If he worked hard in sales, if he was loyal to the company, if he taught his boys to be well-liked, then he would have success in his job and happiness in his life. Unfortunately, after a life of hard work, Willy did not have the wealth he had sought or even the house or car he desired. Willy was instead left utterly disappointed and even betrayed by a society that taught if he followed a [specific formula](#) --nice car, nice house, nice job, nice family--that he would find meaning and purpose in his life when instead the contrary was true. This American Dream Willy had been working for had been nothing more than a lie. It was certainly not available to every man. It was reserved exclusively for the [greedy](#), [power-hungry "firsts"](#) honored in America's capitalistic economy. This promise had been instilled in Willy's heart and need for something to work for and hold onto and had been further developed by society itself. The American Dream turned out to be a bitter misrepresentation of the true happiness he wanted to experience.

Finally, Miller used the very literal death of Willy to depict the literal death of the [traveling salesman position](#) and therefore the results and effects of Capitalism on an everyday man. The day Willy went to Howard's office to ask to be given a permanent position in the city, Howard could not listen to Willy; instead, the entirety of Howard's attention was on the [recording device](#) rather than on his loyal employee. Willy was less important to his boss than an instrument, a mere piece of technology. Miller used this scene to again show that man had been replaced by this very technology. Man's place was below that of machine. This realization crushed the fragile Willy; he was no longer needed nor even glanced at. Willy seemed almost less than human: his feelings, ideals, and dignity--everything that made him human--had been obliterated by the new gadgets and the capitalistic society that saw him as a burden and as useless rather than as an asset or as a living, breathing person. Willy's place in society and his job had been taken away from him by this technology, leaving him humiliated to death--literally. He, and the common man in general, was now merely a "piece of fruit," an "orange peel" with the "orange all eaten up."

To conclude, Arthur Miller illustrated the tragedy of the common man in the supposed Land of Opportunities through the life and death of Willy Loman. The American Dream, in reality, is not available to every man but is reserved strictly for the elite--those that are [perpetually](#) in first place. Miller revealed that the common man's place in the world had been shoved aside, replaced by advancing technology. Willy's dignity was

stolen from him as a result of his shattered American Dream and as a result of his unemployment. The slow deconstruction of Willy's mental and physical health eventually led to his death--the final and most dramatic representation of the effects of capitalism on a man that could no longer provide for his family, a man that was too common--too "low"--to achieve his dreams.



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