Ben’s Lead Role in Willy Loman’s Suicidal Mind

Exploring *Death of a Salesman* via Freud

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ABSTRACT

As is evident from the title of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949), the protagonist of the play, the salesman Willy Loman, will die. This essay will investigate what role Ben, Willy’s deceased brother, plays in Willy’s suicide. The thesis is that Willy needs Ben’s support in order to commit suicide and therefore needs to bring Ben’s values, at the possible expense of his wife Linda’s, into his superego. Ben is, to Willy, a true example of the American Dream, as he was a very successful businessman. Willy’s ego (or rational mind) seems to realize that his superego (or conscience) needs to replace the humane values of Linda with the economic values of Ben, in order to justify his motivation of an “economically beneficial” suicide. When Willy arrives at his final conclusion of how his favorite son Biff would financially benefit from his “accidental” suicide and thereby be able to attain Willy’s version of the American Dream, the evidence brought forth may suggest that Willy, at that point, allows Ben full access into his mind.

Willy’s mind will be investigated via Freud’s triple model of the psyche; the id, the ego and the superego.

Keywords: Willy Loman, Ben, Death of a Salesman, suicide, id, ego, superego, Freud, conscious, preconscious, unconscious
# ABSTRACT

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1. INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman*, published in 1949, is still performed on many stages throughout the world today. According to John Lahr, in his article “Walking with Arthur Miller”, Miller originally wanted to name it “The Inside Of His Head”. This would have been an equally fitting title, as the play attempts to dissect and “show” how the mind of the main character, Willy Loman, works. To further accentuate this theme, Lahr, in the same article, says that Miller thought about having the stage set as a gigantic interior of Willy’s skull but eventually decided against it. Instead he went for the “realistic” and metaphorical setting of Willy’s house being overpowered and almost swallowed by the surrounding skyscrapers. This setting supported the way Miller chose to write the play, realism mixed with expressionistic elements. The writing style also enabled Miller to fulfill his task of exposing Willy’s mind. As a result, when the audience watches Willy physically participating in the events on stage, it is often his troubled mind that is seen and heard. This troubled mind of Willy’s will be further investigated in this essay as the thesis is, that Willy needs his deceased brother Ben’s support in order to commit suicide.

In regards to Ben, some critics see him only as a construction of Willy’s mind. Sister Bettina, for example, voices this view in her article “*Willy Loman’s Brother Ben: Tragic Insight in Death of a Salesman*”, where she writes that: “…when closely observed”, Ben “takes shape less as a person external to Willy than as a projection of his personality”. This essay, however, keeps Ben as a separate being. The evidence brought forth could possibly suggest that the two beings merge at the very final moment of the play. This process will be investigated via Freud’s three levels of the psyche; id, ego and superego as well as his three levels of awareness; conscious, preconscious and unconscious. Some more modern concepts of the Freudian model will also be discussed.
2. FREUD’S PSYCHOANALYTICAL THEORY OF PERSONALITY

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical *theory of personality* is extremely complex and large. Two aspects of it will be discussed here, namely: the *structural model of personality* and the *topographical model*.

2.1. Freud’s structural model of personality – the id, the ego, and the superego

In the structural model, according to Christopher Heffner, Freud claims that the interactions between the tripartite of the mind, the *id*, the *ego* and the *superego*, determines human behavior (“Freud’s Structural and Topographical Model”). Heffner further explains that the interactions between the tripartite are supposed to develop through five psychosexual stages of development (“Freud’s Stages of Psychosexual Development”). Heffner also states that Freud believed that the id is present from birth, the ego develops during the first three years of life and finally the superego starts to manifest itself when the child turns five (“Freud’s Structural and Topographical Model”).

Looking further into the id, ego and superego, Freud, in his book *The Ego and the Id*, describes *the id* as the primitive part of personality. Furthermore, it is the impulsive and unconscious part of the psyche which responds directly and immediately to ”the passions” (Freud 15). It includes the inherited parts and contains two major instincts: *the sexual instinct* (Eros), motivating pleasure activities, and *the death instinct*, motivating aggressive behavior (30). The id operates through the pleasure principle, meaning it looks for pleasure and avoids pain (15). The id is non-moral and, as it only functions within the unconscious mind, has no perception of reality (44, 46). The libido provides all the energy for the id’s actions as the ”...libido is employed in the service of the pleasure principle...” (34).
As Freud continues with the ego, he writes that: “…the ego is the part of the id that has been modified by the direct influence of the external world…” (15). It develops to negotiate between the id and the real, external, world and it represents “reason” and “common sense” (15). Furthermore, it functions within the “reality principle” (15). This principle satisfies both the id's desire to feel good and the ego's desire to function appropriately in the world. Freud likens the ego’s role towards the id as: “…a man on horse back, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse…” (15). The ego also has to obey the superego: “…as the child was once under a compulsion to obey its parents, so the ego submits to the categorical imperative of its superego” (38). The ego therefore needs to contemplate social rules and norms when deciding how to behave. Furthermore, the ego strives to be moral and has the power of the “process of thinking”, which enables the ego to: “…submit them [the mental processes] an order in time and submits them to reality-testing” (44-45). In this role, it becomes the decision making part of the personality. However, the ego does not understand right from wrong, it only operates by trying to satisfy the needs without causing any harm to itself or the id (46). As the ego has three masters (the external world, the id and the superego) it operates to disguise: “the id’s conflicts with reality and, if possible, its conflicts with the superego too” (46). Given this difficult job, it is therefore understandable that the ego also serves as: “…the actual seat of anxiety” (47). Thus, if the ego fails in its attempts to satisfy the id, anxiety will appear and the unconscious defense mechanisms will be put into motion (47). These mechanisms will help the individual feel better.

The final part of the tripartite of the psyche is the superego, which the ego forms out of the id (Freud, 28). This contains the values and morals of society, where parents’ teachings play an important and large part (25). Freud says that it gives: “…permanent expression to the influence of the parents…” (25). Its purpose is to control the id’s needs, specifically the needs that society forbids (e.g. immediately satisfying a sexual
wish). The superego strives for perfection and pushes to convince the ego to strive for “super moral” goals, as opposed to merely realistic ones (44). The superego is composed of two parts: the conscience and the ego-ideal (27). According to Freud, these two systems come about as: “…the child grows up, the role of the father is carried on by teachers and others in authority: their … prohibitions remain powerful in the ego ideal and continue, in the form of conscience, to exercise the moral censorship” (27). The conscience may punish the ego via guilt feelings, whereas the ego ideal self represents an image of how a person ought to be and behave. Freud adds that: “Social feelings rest on identifications with other people, on the basis of having the same ego ideal” (27). The superego may develop an: “…extraordinary harshness and severity towards the ego” (43). This may lead to depression and therefore: “…the super-ego can become a kind of a gathering place for the death instincts” (44). Moreover: “…it often enough succeeds in driving the ego into death…” (43).

2.1.1. Freud’s defense mechanisms

According to Lois Tyson, in her book Critical Theory Today, an individual’s behavior, feelings and thoughts are products of the interaction between the id, the ego and the superego (25). Whenever there is a malfunction in their communication or in their ability to control each other, the conflict will create anxiety. In order to ease this anxiety (keeping the repressed repressed for our own good) defense mechanisms, such as denial, selective perception, selective memory, projection and regression will be created (15). As Tyson explains these mechanisms further, she describes denial as when a person believes that a problem or an unpleasant incident never occurred, selective perception as a mechanism that enables a person to only hear and see things he trusts he can handle, selective memory as something used in order to modify or completely forget painful incidents, projection as attributing one’s own fears or problems onto
someone else and finally regression which is a temporary relived return to an earlier experience (15).

2.1.2. Freud’s neuroses and core issues

Defense mechanisms are a normal way of handling and maintaining a consistent ego. However, according to Tyson, when our defenses break down, we experience anxiety (16). This anxiety may lead to neuroses, such as: depression, personality disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Tyson further explains that behind these neuroses there may be core issues such as: fear of intimacy (fearing to get emotionally close with others, as this closeness will hurt or destroy us), fear of betrayal (believing that friends and loved ones cannot be trusted), low self-esteem (seeing ourselves as less worthy than other people), and finally insecure or unstable sense of self (being incapable of sustaining a sense of personal identity, a sense of knowing ourselves) (15-16).

2.2. Freud’s topographical model of personality- three levels of awareness

Freud’s topographical model contains three different levels of awareness: the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious (The Ego and the Id 5).

Freud explains that the conscious mind consists of everything that we are aware of at the current moment, the preconscious mind includes thoughts that we are not paying attention to at the moment but which can rapidly be brought to consciousness, and finally the unconscious mind “…which is not in itself and without more ado, capable of becoming conscious” (5). The unconscious mind consists of e.g. feelings, urges, and memories, of which many are unpleasant or unacceptable. Freud believed that the unconscious strongly guides our behavior although we are unaware of the influence.
3. FREUD’S ICEBERG THEORY

The Iceberg Theory merges the structural and the topographical model. As pictured below the id is regarded as entirely unconscious while the ego and superego have conscious, preconscious, and unconscious parts¹.

4. THE LEGACY OF FREUD’S IDEAS

Freud’s *psychoanalysis therapy* is based on his personality theory. According to Matthew Gullo, in his article “A dangerous method? In defence of Freud’s psychoanalysis”, it emerged from his clinical work with patients and general observation of human behavior.

Elizabeth Landau, in her CNN article “Do psychologists still listen to Freud?”, says that psychoanalysis as a therapy today, has been somewhat sidelined by newer approaches (e.g. biological and behavioral). However, Landau further explains that many mental health professionals still practice variations of it and, in addition, many of Freud’s ideas are still pivotal in a vast range of today’s therapies.

¹ Image retrieved from: http://www.simplypsychology.org/psyche.html
Eric Kandel, a neuroscientist and a Nobel prize winner in medicine in 2000, is convinced of the benefits of psychoanalysis. He claims that: “…at the very least, a biologically based psychoanalysis would redefine the usefulness of psychoanalysis as an effective perspective on certain specific disorders. At its best, psychoanalysis could live up to its initial promise and help revolutionize our understanding of mind and brain” (“A New Intellectual Framework for Psychiatry” 468).

However, many may be more in agreement with Stanley Hall when he proclaims in his preface to Freud’s A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis, that Freud’s legacy may instead be that: “his views have attracted and inspired a brilliant group of minds not only in psychiatry but in many other fields, who have altogether given the world of culture more new and pregnant appercus [sic] than those which have come from any other source within the wide domain of humanism” (V). In addition, Hall says that:

Few, especially in this country, realize that while Freudian themes have rarely found a place on the programs of the American Psychological Association, they have attracted great and growing attention and found frequent elaboration by students of literature, history, biography, sociology, morals and aesthetics, anthropology, education, and religion. They have given the world a new conception of both infancy and adolescence, and shed much new light upon characterology… (V)

5. THE AMERICAN DREAM

Arthur Miller places the American Dream under a microscope in his play. A quick review of what this vision entails is therefore necessary. As the meaning of the
American dream has changed over the course of social changes and history, a few different time periods will therefore be further explored.

5.1 The roots of the American Dream

According to Anup Dey in his article: “American Dream and Arthur Miller: A Study of The Price” the concept of the American dream dates very far back. It originated in the 1600’s with the early immigrants from various European countries who came to the “new” continent in search of something better (315). Mostly they dreamed of possessing land and to set up trade, which presumably, would bring them “happiness” (315). As these immigrants/Americans continued moving west in America, [the] Royal Governor of Virginia in 1744, concluded that the Americans: "…for ever imagine the Lands further off are still better than those upon which they are already settled…if they attained Paradise, they would move on if they heard of a better place farther west" (qtd. in Dey 315).

Another American Dream “truth” was that if you worked hard, wealth would find you. These views were expressed by Benjamin Franklin in his essay The Way to Wealth (1752), when he wrote that: “Early to Bed, and early to rise, makes a Man healthy, wealthy and wise” (qtd. in Dey 316).

These views of the American Dream lived on and when the Declaration of Independence was written in 1776, much of the American Dream can be seen imbibed in it as it says: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (US 1776).

Thus, the pursuit of happiness is an important ”right” and everyone has a different idea of what this happiness entails. A further exploration of how the American Dream was interpreted comes from M. G. J. de Crèvecoeur in his Letters from an American
Farmer (1782): "Here [in America] the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labor. His labor is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest — can it want a stronger allurement?" (4). The appeal of the American Dream is therefore evident; it is all up to you - you make your own future (including the economic) in your chosen field.

In 1849, the California gold rush created the California dream of overnight success. H. W. Brands explores this subject further in his book The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream. Brands writes that soon after the gold rush had started, the California dream spread across the nation and:

The old American dream, the dream inherited from 10 generations of ancestors, was the dream of the Puritans, of Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard, of Thomas Jefferson's yeoman farmers: of men and women content to accumulate their modest fortunes a little at a time, year by year by year. The new dream was the dream of instant wealth, won in a twinkling by audacity and good luck."

[This] golden dream ... became a prominent part of the American psyche only after Sutter's Mill. (442)

In the latter part of the 19th century, industrialization had landed many Americans in dire straits. Therefore tales of overcoming adversity via perseverance, self-reliance, and self-discipline were soon created. Novelist Horatio Alger, Jr, created over 200 books with the theme of young boys going from "rags to riches", thereby maintaining and endorsing the "classic" American Dream success story, that: "anyone could succeed and achieve material prosperity through hard work" (Dey 316).
5.2. The American Dream: 1900 - 1950

The beginning of the 20th century, with its economic wealth enabling the spreading of consumerism, focused primarily on the economic, materialistic aspect of the American Dream. American President Herbert Hoover said, during his presidential campaign in 1928, the following: “A chicken in every pot, and a car in every garage” (qtd. in Dey 317).

In 1931, historian James Truslow Adams in his book, *The Epic of America*, defines the American Dream as:

> the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

(214-215)

The Great Depression, lasting between 1929 - 1939, made a serious dent into people’s belief in the attainability of the American Dream. The reality of the stock market crash in 1929, created chaos as well as many changes in the American society’s structure (Dey 321).

Charles Hearn therefore became interested in what the consequences were on the American people as the American Dream is seemingly ingrained in the American psyche. In his book, *The American Dream in the Great Depression*, he writes:
The American myth of success has had remarkable vitality and persistence, especially on the popular level. The essential question underlying… is this: What happened to this deeply ingrained and wonderfully compelling dream of success during the Depression of the 1930s when the stark reality of an economic crisis seemed to belie the assumption that, in America, anyone who possessed the proper personal virtues (initiatives, perseverance, frugality, industry, reliability) could raise himself from poverty to wealth? Historically, the myth of success has been identified with our most cherished cultural values, focusing, dramatizing, and supporting the very ideals that we consider most distinctively “American.” (4)

The great depression deeply affected a culture that was, if not completely founded on the American Dream, at least had many vital parts of it embedded into it. In order to further explore how the American people were touched by this major event, many writers during this period (and thereafter), began penning their stories in this subject matter. John Dos Passos, James Agee, John Steinbeck and Arthur Miller are all prominent writers who famously examined the psyche of the American people in the aftermath of the great depression.

In Death of a Salesman, Miller does expose a people greatly influenced by the American Dream and the Great Depression. In his own words, Miller explains that: “I was trying …to set forth what happens when a man does not have a grip on the forces of life and has no sense of the values which will lead him to that kind of a grip” (Death of a Salesman: A Symposium 68).
6. THE AMERICAN SALESMAN

As important as the concept of the American Dream is to Death of a Salesman, so is the image of the American salesman. According to Walter Friedman in his book Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America, the history of sales and the salespeople tell “a uniquely American story” (4). Friedman also explains that what differed in the growth of capitalism in America versus the other countries, was the extreme effort the Americans put into standardizing salesmanship (4).

After the American revolution (1765 – 1783), it became popular among unmarried men to travel and sell. The job did not carry much prestige but, on the other hand, it did not require much capital to get started (Friedman 15). Therefore many Americans took to the road in order to learn the trading rules as well as explore the country (15).

A few centuries later, in the late 19th century, being a salesman still seemed like a lucrative career. If someone had true talents in salesmanship, that person had a chance of making it big (Friedman 5). In the beginning of 20th century, the lure of sales continued and the Americans started reading “how-to-sell books” (5). The book The Man Nobody Knows (1925), by Bruce Barton, depicted Jesus as a very successful sales executive. As many Americans now were intrigued by sales, Barton’s book turned into a bestseller (5).

When Arthur Miller wrote his book Salesman in Beijing, he described the 1920’s (and earlier) salesman as:

…a vital force in building the trade and commercial network of the country. The salesman needed little or no education, but an engaging personality and a faith in the inevitability of next week’s upswing. Every salesman knew some other man who had hit it big, opened his own business, and died respected and
rich. The myth of the salesman exemplified the open ranks of a society where practically overnight a man could leap to the head of the line. (130)

This type of salesman, someone who mainly got by on their personality and perseverance, might have needed (as Miller suggests) to find his motivation by interpreting the American Dream with economic success. In essence, this salesman kept on motivating himself with the hope of finding that perfect client (who buys everything) tomorrow. He knew well that if he only persevered and worked hard, he would succeed. Such was his understanding of his “right” to wealth (happiness). However, by the late 1940’s, the salesman whose only qualification was his selling personality, became an old dinosaur.

According to the U.S. Department of State’s “Outline of the U.S. Economy”, as the career of the salesman continued into the mid 20th century (the time of the play), things began to change. The profession that previously did not require any education, slowly changed into a job where the salesman needed to be technologically advanced in order to succeed. The old job requirement of a “selling personality” still had its merits but the education of the salesman suddenly became the most important factor.

7. SHORT SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

As parts of the play exist in the mind and memory of Willy, the synopsis will not be a summary of the plot. Instead it will mostly be an outline of some major events, including one flashback, albeit not necessarily in the order they are presented in the play. The action of the play roughly spans from 1928-1949.

Willy Loman, is a 63-year old travelling salesman for almost 36 years. Fairly recently Willy was in a car accident and his wife Linda, is worried about his state of
mind. Linda therefore urges him to ask his boss, if he can offer Willy a desk job in the city instead.

Biff, their oldest son, has unexpectedly returned home from the West for a visit. Biff, once a popular star athlete in high school, has not been able to amount to the things Willy thought he would be capable of. Biff has just been wandering about, getting by (for about 14 years), with various odd jobs. His younger brother Happy lives in Manhattan and works as a salesman. Both boys are staying with their parents during Biff’s visit.

Mostly in order to please Willy, his sons concur that the two of them should start a business together in the city. Biff agrees to go see an old employer the next day and ask him for a loan to start up the business. Later, when Linda is alone with the boys, she confides that Willy might be suicidal. She shows them a gas hose connector he has placed by the gas heater in the basement.

The next day, Willy asks his boss for a desk job and Biff asks his former employer for a loan. Both men fail. In addition, Willy is fired. Willy, Biff and Happy had previously decided to meet up at a restaurant to celebrate all the new developments. When they meet, Willy tells them he got fired. Biff then tries to tell him that he did not get the loan. This Willy refuses to understand and instead slips into a flashback. The flashback reveals why Biff never had a career in football: Biff flunked his high school senior year math class and was therefore not eligible for the college football scholarship he had been offered. Frustrated, Biff visited his father in Boston, where he discovered Willy had an affair. The event made Biff reject the choice of going to summer school in order to pass math and consequently being able to accept the scholarship. As the flashback weakens, Willy gets back to reality in the restaurant. He goes to the bathroom and while there, Biff and Happy leave the restaurant.
Later that night, when Biff and Happy return home, Linda angrily confronts them for leaving their father in the restaurant. Biff tries to reconcile with Willy but instead it turns into another argument. Their argument reaches its climax when Biff cries and hugs Willy, in a final attempt to convince him that his expectations of him are completely unrealistic. Willy seems to understand Biff’s tears as a sign of forgiveness and, consequently, love.

Linda and the sons eventually go inside the house. Once alone, Willy starts a “conversation” with Ben, his older, deceased brother. “They” decide that Willy committing suicide would be a great idea, because Willy’s life insurance would then pay out $20 000. This money would get Biff started in his own business and would enabling him in becoming the successful, great person Willy always knew he would be.

8. THE PLAY – THE EVIDENCE

Before beginning the task of analyzing, it is necessary to discuss the role of the original stage directions, penned by Miller. These directions are a further hint (by the author) of how he understood the psychological lives of his characters. As the directions play a pivotal part in many scenes, this analysis will therefore often include them.

From the very beginning of the play, Willy’s fragile mind is introduced. He says that he is “tired to the death” and that he “couldn’t make it” (Miller 2). The latter statement is in reference to the fact that he was supposed to drive to his sales district in New England but failed because he just “couldn’t drive anymore” (3). He therefore turned around and came home to his house in Brooklyn. When he explains himself further to his loving wife Linda, he says that he has “such strange thoughts” (4). It also becomes evident how much he depends on his wife: “You’re my foundation and my support, Linda” (7). Willy’s fragile mind also shines through in that as soon as he is left alone, his mind starts talking out loud. Sometimes these “conversations” are flashbacks
from Willy’s construed memories of “real” events and sometimes Willy’s “conversations” are pure products of his imagination. Most of his flashbacks concern Biff, his favorite and oldest son, with whom he has placed all his hopes and dreams. As Willy plays back his role as a father, it becomes evident that he has failed Biff throughout his life, simply by avoiding taking in reality. For example, when various people point out that Biff has some problems, e.g. stealing, possibly flunking math and that he is too rough with the girls, Willy responds with: “There’s nothing the matter with him! …He’s got spirit, personality” (26-27). He thereby shows signs of selective perception as well as denial. These defense mechanisms may possibly indicate that Willy has had a problem for much of his life with keeping an inner balance. This seems evident as he needs to depend on these mechanisms quite often, in order to keep his anxieties at bay.

Ben, Willy’s deceased older brother, first “walks” into the play as a physical person (to the audience), during a card game that Willy has with his neighbor Charley. During this card game, Willy believes he is being insulted by Charley, a fairly successful sales/businessman, which translates into feelings of anxiety. Willy therefore calls for Ben (30). Conversing with a non-existing person is not part of the defense mechanism system and may therefore be seen as a neurosis. Since neuroses occur when the defense system breaks down, Willy can then possibly be labeled as having a personality disorder. Willy needs Ben often (and most importantly at the end) during the “actual” timespan (a day and a half) of the play. As Ben, in Willy’s mind, is the strong, successful businessman he always strives to be, (including Ben’s values that Willy seems to admire and currently need) Willy is in desperate need of his support.

Ben is not always shown (to the audience) as a physical person, Miller helps clarify when Ben is “present” by introducing him with special music in his stage directions: “BEN’S music is heard” (30). This “trick” enables the audience (by the specific music)
to immediately understand who Willy is conversing with. Miller furthermore describes Ben as: “a stolid man, in his sixties” (30). This is interesting, as he is supposedly more than 10 years older than Willy. This may be seen as Miller’s way of sharing how Willy sees Ben – possibly as a vision of himself, trying to merge with, and resemble his brother in any way possible. It is further disclosed that Ben passed away a few weeks before the supposed, actual time of the play (31). This may also be quite an important factor in Willy’s willingness to commit suicide, as he may see death as a complete merge with Ben.

As the play progresses and Willy reveals more of and about himself, we also learn that he feels “kind of temporary” about himself (36). This could translate into the core issue of having an: insecure or unstable sense of self. In Willy’s case, his neurosis of conversing with an imaginary Ben, may therefore occur due to his above mentioned core issue.

Willy’s incapability of sustaining a sense of identity may stem from his experience in childhood. During the crucial, younger years of forming an identity as well as building up self-knowledge, most of his family abruptly walked out on him. First his father left him (and Ben) with their mother, as the father went looking for a better life in the new frontier Alaska. Willy was then about two or three (32). A year or so later, when Willy was four, Ben left Willy and their mother to go find and join their father in Alaska (32-33). The “advice” and “help” he got from his father and brother would be equal to the lofty promises of the American dream. If part of Willy’s identity was formed on these dreams then this may help explain why indeed he feels temporary about himself. It may also explain Willy’s obsession with the American dream as he may have internalized it. In addition, Willy probably experienced feelings of abandonment. These feelings may have translated into Willy’s omnipresent preaches on
the importance of being well-liked (18, 20, 21). This may stem from a belief that well-liked people will not easily be abandoned by others.

Ben visits Willy and his family in Brooklyn twice (32, 64). During his visits it is evident that Willy worships Ben and his American dream successes. Although it turns out that Ben did not go to Alaska (he got on the wrong boat) he did strike it big in Africa (albeit it is a paradox that the American dream was attained in Africa). Willy, in his efforts to “educate” his sons with the American dream values, asks Ben to tell his sons how he made it big. Ben replies: “Why boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, And when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich” (33).

When Willy some moments later asks Ben how he should raise his sons, Ben answers him with the same three sentences (36-37). As these “words of wisdom” are repeated (in Willy’s memory) throughout the play, it may therefore be argued that they made a profound impact on Willy and added on to his already distorted understanding of what the American dream stood for. Willy, by Ben’s successes, finally had real evidence that the dream was attainable and therefore something to continue striving for.

Another person who may be “responsible” for Willy’s interpretation of the American dream, is a man named David Singleman. He was an 84-year old salesman that a young, impressionable Willy bumped into when he was deciding what career road to take. Singleman sold merchandise in 31 states and could just pick up the phone (from his hotel room, while wearing slippers) and call the buyers. After that chance encounter, Willy realized that: “selling was the greatest career a man could want” (60-61).

In some ways, Linda has also helped maintain Willy’s way of interpreting the American dream. For example, during Ben’s second visit, Ben tries to lure Willy (and his family) to Alaska. Linda then tells Ben that Willy has “got a beautiful job here” and that “…old man Wagner told him just the other day that if he keeps it up he’ll be a member of the firm, didn’t he, Willy?” (64-65). In addition, she reminds Willy, in front
of Ben, of Singleman and his successes (65). Perhaps Linda uses these examples because she does not agree with Alaska being a future for them, but whatever her reasons may be, by focusing on Willy’s dreams and his early idol Singleman’s successes, she helps Willy maintain his interpretation of the American dream.

In addition, the American media’s selling of the American dream, helps maintain and keep Willy’s dream alive. As Willy has understood society’s values in terms of success in pure economical terms only, he has thereby internalized the myth of society valuing money more than love and personal relationships. This belief creates a society that is inhumane and Willy therefore needs to hide, and compartmentalize, his real, human needs.

Willy’s flashbacks often concern Biff, with Willy’s all-time favorite memory seemingly being the time when Biff wins an important football game. However, the loving relationship that Willy and Biff seems to have enjoyed in the past, stands in stark contrast to their status quo of bitterness and disrespect. It is evident some major event has created and shaped this current state. Also evident is that this incident has remained a secret between Willy and Biff:

BIFF: What’s he [Willy] say about me?

HAPPY: I think the fact that you are not settled, that you’re still kind of up in the air….

BIFF: There’s one or two other things depressing him, Happy.

HAPPY: What do you mean?

BIFF: Never mind. Just don’t lay it all to me. (10)

and

BIFF: He [Willy] threw me out of the house, remember that.
LINDA: Why did he do that? I never knew why.

BIFF: Because I know he's a fake.

LINDA: Why a fake? In what way? What do you mean?

BIFF: Just don’t lay it all at my feet. It’s between me and him – that’s all I have to say. (41-42)

As is evident from the two examples above, neither Happy nor Linda are aware of what Biff is hiding or referring to; namely his discovery of his father’s adultery. This major revelation occurs at a crucial time for Biff. He has just flunked math, which he needs to pass, in order to obtain his high school diploma and graduate. If not, his continuous higher education at a university, via a football scholarship, will not be possible. Biff, at this moment, more than ever, needs his father’s support in order to get through, and pass, his math course. He therefore goes looking for the person he trusts the most but instead Biff finds a father he no longer knows.

From this point on, the relationship between father and son is forever changed. It is devastating for both men. In Willy’s case, his endless well of regret and self-blame slowly begins its task of creating holes in the few, more solid parts of Willy’s identity. In order to continue, Willy needs to rely, and function, mainly via his defense mechanisms. For Biff, the deception of his father leads to the inevitable destruction of his own identity. As Biff has solidly built his identity on the teachings and understandings of his father, the moment he discovers the lies behind his father’s supposed belief system, he is at a complete loss. Biff no longer knows who he is and what he can believe in. He only knows negatives, namely what he does not want, which is anything that Willy may suggest or may want him to do: e.g., Biff decides not to enroll in summer school in order to graduate from high school, although he had been ready to do so prior to seeing his father in Boston (72). He thereby forgoes a future
Willy desperately wanted him to have, as that future would also validate Willy’s belief in the American Dream.

It is evident that Biff’s discovery of the affair is too painful for Willy to remember. He therefore blocks out certain aspects of it and trivializes the effects it has had on his son. These defense mechanisms are prominently displayed when, for example, Bernard (Willy’s neighbor’s son) recalls the day when their grades came out, showing that Biff had flunked math:

WILLY: That [teacher] son-of-bitch!

BERNARD: No…Biff just got very angry, I remember he was ready to enroll in summer school.

WILLY: (surprised): He was? (72)

And two sentences later:

WILLY: (with a strong edge of resentment in his voice): Yeah, he came to Boston. What about it?

BERNARD: Well, just that when he came back – I’ll never forget this, it always mystifies me….I’ve often thought of how strange it was that I knew he’d given up his life. What happened in Boston, Willy?

(WILLY looks at him as at an intruder.) (72)

In the first example, Willy’s defense mechanisms of selective memory and denial, have created a soft cushion for Willy in regards to how devastating the effects of his affair was on Biff. This can be seen in Willy’s reaction of surprise when Bernard tells him Biff was ready to enroll in summer school before heading up to see Willy in
Boston. In the second example, it is evident that Bernard’s pruning makes Willy anxious. At the end, Bernard seems to knock on, and may even be close to entering, Willy’s subconscious, which Willy is beyond terrified to open up and expose. The evidence for this claim would be Willy’s reaction of looking at Bernard as an intruder.

Today (the time of the actual play), about 17 years after the disastrous event, it is still extremely hard for Willy and Biff to face each other. Linda knows this (but not why). As she is very concerned with Willy’s current state of mind, she tells her sons that Willy always gets worse when Biff arrives. Although he gets excited upon hearing that Biff is coming for a visit, the arguments that invariably follow, soon after Biff arrives, are very hard on Willy (38). Linda also informs Biff and Happy that Willy is suicidal. He has connected a rubber pipe to the gas heater in their basement (43). In addition, she continues, Willy’s many car crashes as of lately, may not be accidents at all. According to investigations by the insurance company, they have evidence that the collisions have been intentional (42). Upon these news, Biff promises to get a job in the city and help out in any which way suitable (43-44).

During the “actual” timespan (one night and one day) of the play, the final “real” events prove to further trigger Willy’s unwillingness and inability to remain within reality. The first incident to occur in this deadly “final chain of events” is that Willy gets fired from his sales firm. He has dedicated almost 36 years of his life to this firm (40). As he presently was working on a commission-only basis, his dismissal was even more humiliating (41). After this devastating experience, he meets with his sons for dinner at a restaurant. However, Biff also has bad news to share; his old employer did not give him the start-up loan he had hoped for. When Biff explains this, Willy refuses to understand. Biff’s frustration over Willy’s complete denial finally makes him dash out of the restaurant (Happy quickly follows him) while Willy is in the bathroom.
When Willy finally makes it home on his own, he is in an emotional turmoil. He has just relived (at the restaurant) the moment when Biff discovered him with the mistress. This memory has long been stored in the very back of Willy’s preconscious mind but tonight it was retrieved. The retrieval of this most painful event, might have been triggered by the many deeply emotional events that occurred in the past 24 hours. Willy is therefore in excruciating pain. Instead of going inside his house, where he would meet Linda, he heads straight for the garden to plant the seeds he purchased on his way back. Soon enough, he brings on a “conversation” with Ben. Being riddled with guilt, he tells Ben that: “…the woman has suffered” (99). Worth noticing is that he names Linda first, not Biff. The guilt he feels toward his son is still hidden from him.

On the assertion of Linda’s suffering, he brings up his proposition to Ben: killing himself in an “accident”, so that his family would receive $20 000 from his life insurance policy (99). He motivates this with: “A man can’t go out the way he came in, Ben…” (99). Ben answers that: “They might not honor the policy” and also that it is a bit “cowardly” (100). Willy replies that he has paid every premium, so they should honor it and, in regards to being a coward, he defends his line of thinking with: “does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up a zero?” (100). This argument seems to motivate Ben into being more favorable of the plan. As Willy then gets very excited, he also braves getting into some further reasons behind this scheme. He explains how all of his clients and friends will come to the funeral. This will make Biff realize what a major character Willy has been and how well-liked he really was: “That boy will be thunderstruck Ben, because he never realized-I am known! […] and he’ll see it with his eyes once and for all. He’ll see what I am, Ben!” (100). Ben replies that Biff will call him a coward. Willy breaks down and says: “Why, why can’t I give him something and not have him hate me?” (101). This statement seems to indicate that Willy, at this point, clearly believes that money (used to attain the American Dream) is
more valuable to Biff, than the love of a father. He therefore desperately needs Ben (Linda’s voice would of course oppose) to “tell him” that this conviction is true. Therefore when Ben, right before he leaves, says: “Let me think about it”, it definitely gives Willy some hope (101).

Meanwhile, the two sons have arrived home to find a furious Linda awaiting them. Linda and Biff get into an argument and he announces he will be leaving the house for good. He locates Willy, who is still out in the garden, and tells him his plans. He asks Willy to come inside so that he can bid farewell to Willy together with the rest of the family. Willy, being ashamed of his secret “conversations” with Ben regarding his proposition of suicide, does not want to face Linda. Biff, of course, does not understand Willy’s unwillingness to see her. Eventually though, Willy comes with him. As Biff says his farewell, Willy refuses to shake his hand and tells him that he has cut down his life for spite (103). Willy: “You’re trying to put a knife in me – don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing!” (103). Biff tries to explain that he is just an ordinary man, not a leader or hero, who, in addition, is not cut out for sales (105). Willy, in his denial mode, is not capable of understanding this and Biff, in his complete frustration breaks down. He starts sobbing and holds on to Willy (106). Willy does not understand what is going on and is flabbergasted. As Biff goes to his room, Willy, after a long pause says: “Isn’t that – isn’t that remarkable? Biff – he likes me!” (106). Instead of making this discovery motivate Willy to stay alive, it further supports his belief that Biff may finally achieve the American Dream, if only he receives some money that he could use in order to start up a company.

Linda and Happy go upstairs, while Willy, still downstairs, is (stage direction) “choking with his love” after Biff’s tears (106). Willy immediately turns to Ben and tells him that the boy will be “magnificent” which Ben hastily fills in with: “Yes, outstanding, with twenty thousand behind him” (106). In Willy’s mind, it may now be
interpreted as if Ben from now on, starts gaining the center stage, which may previously have been held mostly by Linda. Although Willy still hears what Linda is actually saying, he is able to ignore her real and concrete demands. At this point the conversation may suggest that Ben’s voice within Willy’s head is as strong (or possibly even stronger in that he is telling her no) as Linda’s actual voice:

   LINDA:  Come dear.
   BEN:     One must go in to fetch a diamond out.
   WILLY:   I just want to get settled down, Linda. Let me sit alone for a while.
   LINDA:  I want you upstairs.
   WILLY:   In a few minutes Linda. I couldn’t sleep right now. Go on you look awfully tired [He kisses her].
   BEN:     Not like an appointment at all. A diamond is rough and hard to the touch.
   WILLY:   Go on now. I’ll be right up. (107)

   The final exchange between him and Linda is as follows:

   LINDA:  Willy! Come up!
   WILLY:   Yes! Yes. Coming! It’s very smart, you realize that, don’t you, sweetheart? Even Ben sees it. I gotta go, baby.
            ‘Bye! ‘Bye!, (108)

   As the final exchange between Linda and Willy occurs, Willy’s mind has now allowed Ben’s voice to override the real voice of Linda. This can be seen in how he uses Ben’s argument in his final attempt to convince Linda about the correctness of his decision, when he addresses her. At this moment and on, Willy is therefore creating his
own reality, where Ben takes center stage. As Ben, who already lives on “the other side”, now serves as Willy’s guide, the disaster is just around the corner.

Willy quickly runs out of the house, while reliving his favorite memory of Biff’s big football game. Ben is first with him, but shortly thereafter he disappears. As Willy suddenly realizes he is alone, all kinds of voices start moving in on him. He is in agony and flickers at these voices. However, faint music stops him. As Ben always appears with music, it could therefore be interpreted as if it is Ben’s “voice”, via the music, that Willy hears and thereafter follows, when he rushes towards his car (108-109).

9. CONCLUSION

In Willy’s interpretation of the American Dream, where society mainly judges successes in monetary terms, more basic human needs are disregarded. As this “understanding” never leaves Willy, (it also serves as a motivator in his suicide), it could therefore be argued that it goes very deep within his mind; possibly all the way into his id (unconscious). Willy’s background, of having been abandoned by both his father and brother for this societal myth of the American Dream, may have put Willy on the same path. However, whereas definitely Ben, and possibly the father, could thrive in a cut throat business world, Willy’s superego (or conscience) stopped him cold. His superego, first possibly primarily developed by his mother and then later by Linda (in his complete dependency on her), seems to have left him with a decent degree of sensitivity.

Given that Willy’s id and superego from early on, might have been at very different paths, it seems inevitable that Willy’s ego (or rational mind), at some later point, would experience problems. Indeed, Willy might have been aware of some of his difficulties as he tells his brother that he feels “kind of temporary” about himself. This statement could indicate an unstable sense of self.
The beginning of the breakdown of Willy’s defense mechanisms may be traced back to when Biff discovers Willy’s adultery. The actual discovery of his affair forces Willy to confront himself and the consequences of his actions. This is something he is incapable of. Up till this point, Willy has been in “control” of the situation. Whatever guilt he experiences, he seems to be able to keep in check via his various defense systems, most commonly denial. However, by involving Biff, (albeit involuntarily) the secret and the guilt now revealed, will be shared and carried by his beloved son as well. Willy also well understands how from this moment on, Biff will look at him with different eyes. As Willy knows Biff, he also assumes that Biff will not reveal this secret, neither to Linda nor to his brother. This assumption is correct, which, consequently, forever brings a quality of repression into Biff’s relationships with his mother and brother as well. In addition, as Biff in the aftermath of the “discovery” becomes a “drifter”, as opposed to a successful American football player, Willy’s dream of Biff attaining the American Dream, slowly disintegrates.

Probably fairly soon after his affair is discovered, Willy’s mental downward spiral begins its eager pace and Linda becomes his sole support. When Willy’s defense system finally breaks down, he seems to develop neuroses in the forms of a personality disorder and depression. The depression can be seen, for example, in his suicidal thoughts. The personality disorder appears to manifest itself in Willy’s many “conversations” with his deceased brother Ben. As both of his neuroses gain strength, his “solution” of easing his pain via suicide seems to intensify. He has possibly tried before, albeit unsuccessfully, (maybe because at that time he was not completely convinced) and he therefore needs to find a way in how to motivate himself further into this final act. When Willy realizes that his suicide would also financially provide for his family (specifically his beloved son), he seems to have found his real motivator. From this time on then, it is therefore
possible that Willy tries to build up the devious businessman’s voice of Ben, in his superego. Where, in addition, the death instinct is situated, according to Freud.

As things unfold in the play, many events (e.g. he gets fired, he relives the moment when Biff finds him with the mistress) may contribute to how Willy’s mental health quickly deteriorates. When all these circumstances are brought together, they seem to enlarge what he believes to have been his failures, economically and personally as well as strengthen Willy’s conviction in his version of the American Dream. At the end, when Biff tries to tell Willy (between the lines) that he loves him, Willy’s love for his son reaches the highest levels. Willy then once again becomes so fully convinced of Biff’s magnificence and leadership qualities, enabling him to very willingly and eagerly “understand” how Biff would be able to finally attain the American Dream if he, as a father, could just provide Biff with start-up capital for a business. When Willy presents this argument (what Biff would use Willy’s life insurance money for) to Ben, he finally “gives” his stamp of approval to Willy. By getting Ben’s consent, Willy can finally believe that the decision is correct. As Willy’s final words to Linda echo: “Even Ben sees it. I gotta go, baby. ‘Bye! ‘Bye!’”, it could therefore possibly be interpreted as Ben’s victory over Linda in Willy’s superego. In addition, Miller might even take it one step further as he, via his stage directions, introduces music (possibly indicating the voice of Ben) in order to “help” Willy stop flicking against “the faces and voices” he believes are surrounding him, and instead take action and run off to his car. Both of these arguments, Ben overriding Linda in Willy’s superego as well as the final music being the voice of Ben, could therefore support the thesis of Willy needing to bring Ben’s values (at the possible expense of Linda’s) into his superego. It is also of importance that this occurs in Willy’s superego as, according to Freud, the superego: “…often enough succeeds in driving the ego into death”.

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