The Loman Family’s State of Mind

A Psychoanalytical Reading of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract

This essay will analyse the members of the Loman family of *Death of a Salesman* from a Freudian psychoanalytical perspective. The purpose is to understand what goes on inside the mind of these characters through Freud’s structural model of personality, the Id, Ego and Superego. The members of the Loman family are no longer happy with their lives. It becomes evident that the family members were not always acting rationally and never took appropriate measures to improve their happiness. They do not know why they are feeling the way they feel and act as they do. The thesis is that by looking at the Loman family through Freudian psychoanalysis of the personality and its defence mechanics, we will get an explanation as to why the family is acting the way that they are, and what might have led them to this point.

Keywords: Loman Family, Willy Loman, Biff Loman, Happy Loman, Linda Loman, Death of a Salesman, Psychoanalysis, Model of personality, Id, Ego, Superego, Freud, Defence mechanisms
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Introduction

In an article published in 2005 in The Guardian, Arthur Miller has been called: "One of the greatest playwrights of the 20th century, whose work explored the dilemmas of the American dream". His drama The Death of a Salesman, published in 1949, lets us follow the life of Willy and his family: the Loman family. The play takes place during the last 24 or so hours of Willy’s life, with flashbacks of memories from throughout Willy’s life. The play focuses primarily on Willy and his oldest son Biff, but the Loman family also feature his wife Linda, and his youngest son, Happy. The Loman family seems like an average American family, trying to reach the famous ‘American Dream’.

The ‘American Dream’ at the time was described as freedom, mutual respect and equality of opportunity (Shiller). It was a dream of living in a land that would be better for every man and with opportunities for everyone according to their ability or achievement; a dream where every man and woman should be able to attain their fullest stature which they are capable of and be recognised by others for it (Shiller). However, the Lomans never achieved it, despite being so close.

Even though Willy and Linda live in a nice house, own a nice car, only have one payment left of the mortgage and have two healthy sons, Willy does not stop and rest, never feeling content with what he has. Linda does not appear to be fully happy either, choosing what appears to be a passive role in the household instead of an active one. The two sons, Biff and Happy, tell each other how neither are satisfied with their lives. Happy seems stuck in his life, confessing that he is not happy with his lifestyle and actions. Biff, on the other hand, has found happiness in working at farms in the west, but he still comes back home now and again not knowing what to do and feeling like he has wasted his life. The members of the Loman family have issues that they are unable
to deal with properly, but the question that comes to mind is: what are their issues and how and why are they dealing with them the way they do?

One way to look at it is through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. Freudian psychoanalysis involves looking at the structure of personality, the id, ego and superego, and seeing if they are working and cooperating appropriately. When a person is not acting in what could be considered a normal or rational way, it could point to an issue in the mind or personality. What causes abnormalities could be part of the mind’s defence, keeping the person from becoming overcome with feelings of guilt or sadness. The thesis is that by looking at the Loman family through Freudian psychoanalysis of the personality and its defence mechanics, we will get an explanation as to why the family acts the way that they do, and what might have led them to this point.

Freud’s Psychoanalytical Theory

Freud’s Topographical model of the mind – The conscious and the unconscious mind

While Freud was not the man who thought of the idea of a conscious and unconscious mind, he was the man that popularised the idea (McLeod “Unconscious Mind”). Freud believed that the mind was made up of three levels, the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious level (S. Freud, The Ego 12). In the conscious level, we find all the mental processes that we are aware of. For example, if we feel thirsty, we think that we should get some water to quench that thirst. The preconscious is the part of the mind that contains thoughts and feelings which we are not actively thinking about but is standing by, ready to get into the conscious mind. Freud describes the preconscious as “unconsciousness in the descriptive and not in the dynamic sense” (The Ego 12). An example of how it works would be how someone is currently not thinking about their home address, but when it is brought up, they can see it clearly in their mind. Lastly, the
unconscious mind is what compromises all the mental processes which are inaccessible to the conscious mind, that is all the inner workings of the mind which we do not know exist, but still influence the mind with feelings and behaviour (The Ego 11-12). Freud believed that the unconscious mind governed the behaviour of the human mind to a greater degree than people suspected.

Freud’s structural model of personality – The Id, Ego and Superego

According to Freud, the human psyche is composed of three parts, and each part controls a different aspect of it, the id, ego and the superego. This is what is called the structural model of personality. The id is the first and most primal part of our personality, our instincts (The Ego 30). The id is based on the pleasure principle, which means that the id wants whatever it believes can make it feel good and has no consideration for the situation it is in, or the people around it (S. Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 6). So when looking at a child for instance, if the child is hungry, the id wants food to please itself, and therefore it cries to get the attention it needs for getting food. If the child wants attention, the id once again makes the child cry to get the child the attention it wants. Once the child, or the id, is satisfied it will stop screaming and be calm once again. Freud states that the id does not care about reality or anyone else, only itself for in the id the “pleasure-principle . . . reigns supreme” (The Ego 30). For example, a baby does not care about his or her parent’s feelings. If it is three a.m. and the baby is hungry, it will not wait until the morning to be fed, it will scream until it is satisfied.

The ego is then developed sometime later. This development happens as the child begins interacting more with the world and the people around it, the external world (The Ego 20). The ego is then shaped around this new reality the child has discovered, where
it realises that the other people around it also have their own needs and desires. Freud states that the ego then realises that being impulsive or as selfish as the id wants to be, can have bad consequences for itself in the long run. This is what is known as the reality principle, where the ego takes account of the reality of its situation and might offer delayed or diminished pleasure, but in doing so makes sure it can happen again (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 6). For instance, if the id wants food and the closest food source is someone else’s food, the ego might suggest going to the store instead, as taking someone else’s food might get the person fired from work, and it will hurt the person in the long run. So the ego works together with the id to try and meet the id’s needs but also to take into consideration the reality of its situation. Freud states that the ego “represents what we call reason and sanity, in contrast to the id which contains the passions” (The Ego 30). It should be noted, however, that reason or sanity, in this case, has nothing to do with conscience. The ego has no concept of its own if something are good or bad; it simply strives to protect itself and the id. Let us imagine that someone is stuck in class and is becoming very hungry. While the id wants food and might try to make them leave the classroom and get food, the ego is what makes them stay seated and wait until class is over, and then lets them go get something to eat. This is because if they had just stood up and left the classroom, it might have had ramifications down the line. They could have missed important information, or the teacher might have become angry and punished them. However, the ego is weak and cannot overpower the id with its strength alone. Freud likens this to a rider controlling his horse:

Thus in its relation to the id it is like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse; with this difference, that the rider seeks to do so with his own strength while the ego uses borrowed forces. The illustration may be carried further. Often a rider, if he is not to be parted from his horse, is obliged to guide it where it wants to go; so in the same way the ego
constantly carries into action the wishes of the id as if they were its own. (*The Ego* 30)

This means that the ego cannot just say no to the id when the id wants something. It can, however, guide the id to what it wants, in a way that can keep both the id and the ego satisfied. Continuing with the example of being hungry in class, the way the ego might keep the id from making them get out of the class is to offer something better. If they stay in class, instead of just eating a sandwich, maybe they could go eat a hamburger or a pizza. However, the ego does not only have the id to contend with, it must also deal with the superego.

The superego is the region of the mind that contains the moral part of us. According to Freud, the superego is what can be described as the origin of our conscience (*New Introductory Lectures* 88). The superego is formed by the actions of parental authority (*New Introductory Lectures* 89). They have the influence that dominates a child by giving the child proof of affection by rewarding the child with love or even gifts. But they can also threaten to punish the child, which to the child means a loss for love and affection and that is something to fear on its own (*New Introductory Lectures* 89). This is shaped as a child in early childhood by a parental figure, but it also continues to be shaped as the child grows up. “As a child grows up, the office of father is carried on by masters and by others in authority; the power of their injunctions and prohibitions remains vested in the ego-ideal and continues, in the form of conscience, to exercise the censorship of morals” (*The Ego* 49). This means that not only are parents, guardians or caregivers the shapers of a person’s superego but also other people who can be considered people of authority like older siblings, teachers and police officers, people whom a child would both respect and want affection from but also fearing their punishment.
The superego itself consists of two systems: the conscience and the ideal self (The Ego 34). The conscience is the part that punishes the ego with feelings of guilt, for example, when it gives in to the id in such a way that the superego’s other part, the ideal self, is not satisfied (The Ego 71). The other part is the ideal self, also known as the ego-ideal. The ideal self is the image of how someone as a person should be and it represents how they treat other people, how to be a productive member of society and what type of career they would want (The Ego 48-49). If the ego conducts behaviour which is not part of the ideal self, the conscience punishes it with guilt, to try and deter such behaviour, and rewards it when it does good (The Ego 49). When a parental figure shapes a child’s superego, they are therefore shaping the ideal-self of the child.

These three parts together form Sigmund Freud’s structural model of the psyche. The id forms the instinctual drives of a person, based on the pleasure principle. The superego tries to uphold the morals which it believes a person should uphold, based on what a person was taught at a younger age. And lastly, the ego has the task of trying to manage to give the id what it wants, without self-sabotaging itself meanwhile also trying to not cross the superego to avoid being punished with feelings of guilt. In a healthy psyche, the ego is in charge, trying to satisfy the id’s needs, keeping within the superegos ideal-self to avoid it becoming upset and takes into consideration the reality of its current situation. An unhealthy psyche would be if either the id or the super-ego takes too much control. If the id takes too much control, the instincts of a person would be overbearing, so impulses and feelings of self-gratification would take over. This could result in the person not thinking things through and doing what they want when they want it. It could result in stealing, eating too much junk food, or other things which would please the id. On the other hand, if the superego takes too much control, it would result in a person with a very strict and rigid set of morals who would be very judgemental and unbending in their interaction with the world around them. Any
deviation from the self-ideal would result in heavy feelings of guilt. If the id or the superego starts to become too demanding of the ego, the ego can employ defence mechanisms to alleviate the feelings of guilt.

Defence mechanisms

Defence mechanisms are what the ego uses to protect the psyche at an unconscious level, where it tries to ward off unpleasant feelings and make the psyche feel content and safe (McLeod, “Defense Mechanisms”). While Sigmund Freud wrote about defence mechanisms in his work, his daughter, Anna Freud, developed these ideas further and elaborated on them in her book *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*. The defence mechanism is the concept of the ego utilizing different mechanisms to alleviate feelings of guilt and pain, which may arise, for example, from pressure applied by the demands of the id or superego. As Anna Freud puts it: “Ultimately, all such measures are designed to secure the ego and to save it from experiencing ‘pain’” (73-74). McLeod states that defence mechanisms are however a common occurrence and something that naturally happens. However, it is when these defence mechanisms start becoming more frequent, and in the end, get out of proportion, that neuroses can develop, such as anxiety states, phobias, obsessions and hysteria (A. Freud *The Ego and the Mechanisms* 73-74). The most common defence mechanisms include denial, projection, repression, regression, and displacement. Denial is the simple act of blocking external events from awareness, for example, a smoker refusing to believe smoking is bad for their health (McLeod “Defense Mechanisms”). Freud states that children often use this to trick themselves, for example telling themselves and people around them that ‘Mommy coming soon’ after the mother has left because it makes them feel better believing so, even if it might not be true (90). Projection is the result of the superego telling the ego
that what it is doing is not ok, for example hating someone. The ego then projects those feelings onto the person it dislikes, making the superego believe that the person hates them, which in return makes their feelings towards that person acceptable (McLeod “Defense Mechanisms”). Freud states that projection is the result of taking an objectional idea, like hating someone, and displacing it to the outside world (132). On the other hand, repression is when the ego takes any disturbing thoughts and pushes them back into the id and the unconsciousness, to keep it from entering the mind and becoming something which it actively thinks about (A. Freud The Ego and the Mechanisms 132). Regression is when the psyche feels stressed out or attacked, so it decides to go back in time to a time when it was not feeling as stressed out (McLeod “Defense Mechanisms”). One could pick up old habits, for example sucking the thumb or wetting the bed. It could quite possibly also affect a psyche in such a large way that it takes the person back to the same mental state they had when they were a child, making them unable to walk outside alone unless accompanied by someone they can trust, or not going too far away from their house (S. Freud Inhibitions 89). Displacement is the concept of taking out one’s feelings on something with a substitute object (McLeod “Defense Mechanisms”). Displacement works in a way that if the mind gets angry at someone in a position of power over them it might want to hurt them but cannot do it due to the ego protecting itself from doing something that will hurt it in the long run. It might then displace that aggression onto someone else, for example, a subordinate, their family or even pet.

Previous Psychoanalytic Readings of Death of a Salesman

Psychoanalysis is a popular field of theory for critics to use, and Death of a Salesman is a classic play with greatly written characters, making it a prime text for psychoanalysis.
One such analysis was done by Mauricio Cortina and Barbara Lenkerd. In their analysis, they look at how the idea of the American dream influenced Willy Loman and, in the end, caused his despair and suicide (Cortina and Lenkerd 247). Cortina and Lenkerd bring up that another death was mentioned in the play, by a man nicknamed ‘Old Dave’. Old Dave was a salesman like Willy, and he had ‘made it’. He was 84 years old, but he was still earning his living by calling buyers on the phone, never having to leave his room (Cortina and Lenkerd 250). And Willy points out that Old Dave’s funeral was attended by hundreds of salesmen and buyers. Cortina and Lenkerd point out that just like many other things Willy says, this is possibly just another exaggeration from him (250). When Willy met Old Dave, it made quite an impression on Willy, capturing his imagination and melding together the ideals of reaching success and being liked and admired (Cortina and Lenkerd 250). This could have been the catalyst for Willy’s beliefs in that personality is what counts, and a good salesman that can sell anything must be able to sell himself (Cortina and Lenkerd 251). This belief is evidenced when Willy tells his sons that a man who makes an appearance in the business world and creates personal interest is the man that gets ahead (Cortina and Lenkerd 251). His dreams, however, are quite the opposite of reality. Willy never reaches his dreams and unlike Old Dave, who had a massive funeral with plenty of guests, Willy’s funeral is quite empty with barely anyone outside his family and neighbours attending.

Benjamin Becker looks in more depth at the characters and their actions, what causes them and what the results are. Becker brings up how Willy has distorted values by twisting facts and refusing to admit wrong, such as when he tries to take possession of the neighbouring houses sand and lumber (202). As Becker puts it, the sand and lumber were there and he needed it, so he felt entitled to it (202). There is also an example of how Willy transforms the actions of Biff stealing a football from school into a virtue,
which in turn makes Biff unable to stop stealing (Becker 202). However, these actions are not only limited to Willy, but the whole family is guilty of self-deception as well. Becker brings up the fact that the whole family swallows the idea that Biff can just walk into his old job and borrow 10,000 dollars from his old boss when he quit that job because he had stolen a carton of basketballs and wanted to leave before he could be accused of the crime (202). He also adds that Biff was too far removed from reality, that even if he had attended summer school and managed to get into college, he would still have snapped sooner or later from the increased competition there (Becker 205).

Georgios Patsiaouras, James Fitchett and Andrea Davies also take an in-depth look at Willy’s denial in their article “Beyond the couch: Psychoanalytic consumer character readings into narcissism and denial”. They state that a defence mechanism like denial can assist an individual in balancing their inner conflicts and therefore enhance social relationships, for Willy’s psyche it was just used to help him refuse to understand and taking on an objective reality with its unpleasant effects (Patsiaouras et al. 67). They go on, stating that even his death was an example of denial. When Willy stops remembering the good times of the past at the end of the play, he is unable to deal with the accumulation of disappointments. So he aims to enhance his idealised personal image of success by believing that when he dies, at least there will be a well-attended funeral which will re-establish the iconic paternal status in Biff’s eyes (Patsiaouras et al. 68).

Analysis of the Loman family

Biff

Biff, the oldest son of Willy, is also the son that Willy believes will be the success that Willy never was. But after a certain point, Willy spends his time lamenting that Biff will
never be the successful man he was supposed to be. Biff grows up believing he will be a very successful businessman. However, this turns out not to be the case. At the start of the play, we are told that Biff is now 34 years old and has spent more than 10 years working as a farmhand (Miller 5). Willy is angry that he still does not earn more than 35 dollars a week and considers Biff a “lazy bum” (Miller 5). Biff himself is feeling fractured. As he explains to his brother Happy; he has worked at many different farms throughout the years and when he sees new colts with a mare he believes there is nothing more inspiring or beautiful than that (Miller 11). But he then states that whenever spring comes, he suddenly gets a feeling that he is not getting anywhere in life, questioning why he is playing around with horses for 28 dollars a week (Miller 11). He confesses he feels like he should by now be making his future. (Miller 11).

This shows that something around spring is triggering Biff’s superego to give him feelings of guilt for working at a farm for just 28 dollars a week. And in his attempt to rid himself of this guilt, he comes home to his parents, which seems to somewhat alleviate his guilt. But it also leaves him with the feeling of not knowing what to do next. Considering that the superego is shaped in large part by the parents and that Willy is not happy with Biff’s salary, an assumption can already be made that Willy has raised Biff in such a way that Biff does feel guilty about not earning 35 dollars a week yet or making his future with a career in perhaps business or selling like his father. Even though it appears Biff otherwise is happy with the work he does at the farms, this feeling of guilt removes his ability to enjoy living the life he wants to live.

It is important to look at what caused Biff to suffer from this guilt, which Miller allows the reader to do through the numerous flashbacks in the play. In a flashback to a point in time when Biff was still in high school, we see Biff talking to Willy about a football he recently stole from school:
BIFF: Did you see the new football I got?

WILLY [examining the ball]: Where’d you get a new ball?

BIFF: The coach told me to practice my passing.

WILLY: That so? And he gave you the ball, heh?

BIFF: Well, I borrowed it from the locker room. [He laughs confidentially.]

WILLY [laughing with him at the theft]: I want you to return that.

HAPPY: I told you he wouldn’t like it!

BIFF [angrily]: Well, I’m bringing it back!

WILLY [stopping the incipient argument, to HAPPY]: Sure, he’s gotta practice with a regulation ball, doesn’t he? [To BIFF] Coach’ll probably congratulate you on your initiative!

BIFF: Oh, he keeps congratulating my initiative all the time, Pop.

WILLY: That’s because he likes you. If somebody else took that ball there’d be an uproar. (Miller 17-18)

This conversation exemplifies Biff and Willy’s relationship while Biff was young. Biff has stolen the ball from school, which Happy appeared to have pointed out at the time that it was wrong. However, Willy does not reprimand Biff properly by telling him that it is wrong to steal and that he could get in trouble. Instead, Willy decides to laugh along with Biff, while telling him to return it. Because Willy decides to not take this matter seriously, treating it as a fun joke just like Biff, he does not teach his son that what he is doing is wrong. To Biff, this comes off as a funny thing, something he can do again and would probably be met with a similar result. The superego is shaped by parents, and most parents would teach their kids that stealing like this is wrong, therefore shaping their superego to understand that it should be punished with feelings of guilt. Willy is now telling Biff that stealing the ball was a positive thing, teaching the
superego that it could even be something to be proud of, something that he could build his ideal self on.

In another flashback we see this behaviour reinforced again when Willy asks Biff to go to the neighbouring construction site and take some sand (Miller 35). When the neighbour boy comes shouting that the watchman is chasing Biff, Willy is angrily shouting to him to shut up and that Biff is not stealing anything (Miller 36). This has the effect of Willy teaching Biff’s superego it was not wrong to take something from someone else. The superego would typically punish the ego for trying to do something wrong, like stealing. But since the superego is now being taught it is not wrong, it makes it easy for the ego to satisfy the id’s wants of taking something, without the superego’s punishing feelings of guilt. This also explains Biff’s stealing, like when he stole a carton of basketballs which had the result of him quitting his job (Miller 14-15), stole a suit in Kansas City (Miller 104) or stole a fountain pen from his old boss that he was supposed to ask for a loan (Miller 86).

We can read several times throughout the flashbacks that Biff was always Willy’s favourite son, and he gave him most of his attention and barely any to his other son Happy. By giving Biff all his attention however, Willy was not only shaping his superego with morals, but also his ego. The ego is based on the reality principle and strives to keep a person from receiving negative consequences from society. So Willy’s determination to support Biff no matter what, had the effect of Willy sheltering him from these negative consequences. By protecting him and making excuses for him to other people when he did something wrong, he did not let Biff learn anything by being the receiver of these negative consequences. He defended Biff against stealing, he intended to talk to his math teacher to try and get him to pass Biff in math and even told the kid next-door that he expects him to cheat and give Biff answers on tests (Miller
An argument can be made that Biff quite possibly at this point in his life had never experienced failure or negative consequences for anything. This explains his inflated ego, making him appear, for example, stuck-up to his teachers (Miller 27). The combination of Biff’s inflated ego and his superego that excused bad behaviour gives a clear explanation as to why Biff’s id was in control in his youth. If he wanted to take something, he could, because none of his peers would protest and his father would congratulate him for his initiative if he could give a reason for it.

Then something happened that changed Biff. When making a surprise visit to his father to talk about his failing math grade, Biff caught his father having an affair with a woman. This discovery fractured Biff’s mind. Here Biff found that his father, arguably his biggest role model and one of the shapers of his superego, was betraying his other role model and shaper of the superego: his mother. This caused Biff to realise that much of what his father had said and claimed throughout his life is a lie. He still tried to please his father’s wishes by working in ‘the business’ as a shipping clerk, salesman and other business jobs (10). But his id no longer wants to satisfy his father’s wishes, since it no longer believed in him. In response, Biff took on the defence mechanism of regression. The ego regressed to a happier time, when his id and superego were still cooperating, which was when he was stealing things. Stealing things satisfied Biff’s id, because it gave the id what it wanted when it wanted it, and his superego, as his father was always proud of his stealing, which Willy called ‘initiative’. However, his stealing seemingly escalated to the point that it made him unable to keep a job, as he stated when confronting his father as an adult; “I stole myself out of every good job since highschool!” (Miller 105).

The turning point appears to have been reached when he stole a suit in Kansas City for a job interview and got caught (Miller 104). Biff had to sit in jail for three months.
This could have been the first time Biff realised that his actions had consequences. The jail time could have two effects on Biff that helped him grow as a person. The first is the act of self-preservation of the ego. The ego should have learned from this experience that stealing can have negative societal repercussions for him. The ego, therefore, will work more actively to stop him from stealing to protect him. The second is the fact that the superego learned from the authorities that arrested him and put him in jail that what he was doing was also morally wrong. That just because he needed a suit, and it was there to be taken, it was not his right to take it as his father had implied in Biff’s youth. It may have been after this point that Biff started working at the ranches and started to feel content. No longer feeling the stress of having to be successful, and his ego and superego more careful of not stealing anything had helped him to grow into a more responsible adult. However, when spring comes he is reminded of his father. This is probably because Biff has tried to repress the thought of catching his father with a lover, which happened in spring. So every spring he is reminded of this unresolved trauma.

And with these memories comes everything his father told him makes a successful man, making Biff feel guilty that he is not successful in the way his father defines it. Biff had an epiphany and realised this as he stole a pen from the man he was going to meet for a loan. He realised he was trying to become someone he does not want to be (Miller 105). He remembered that he had always believed he was so great so he could never take orders from anyone and that he had to become “boss big shot in two weeks” (Miller 105). But now he has realised that he is nothing special, despite his father’s protests. He is just a ‘dime a dozen’ and; “all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am! Why can’t I say that, Willy?” (Miller 105). Biff now knows that his father made him who he is, and if he can get his father to understand that Biff is just an average man, it will remove the pressure from Biff, and he can finally be content with who he is.
Willy

Willy is a tragic character who aspires to greatness, and while he has reached what could be described as the ‘American Dream’, he is not satisfied. Willy has his own house with its mortgage almost paid off, a car, a wife and two children who are strong and healthy. Despite this, Willy is not happy with what he has and strives for more, meanwhile performing less and less at his job. He suffers from a sense of entitlement and believes he is better than other people and that his hard work and perseverance will lead him to success, despite his lack of talent as a salesman. This is a typical feature of an over-developed id. Just like a child cries when it wants to eat, a grown man might not cry but become impatient or angry. And Willy gets angry at many points throughout the play when he does not get what he wants. The id is supposed to be held back and controlled by the power of the superego, but it does not appear to be a superego holding Willy and his id in check.

The reason for this is made clear when the reader learns that he did not have a father when he grew up. His father appears to have abandoned Willy and his big brother Ben when they were little and travelled to Alaska (Miller 33). Willy does not even remember much about his father. This becomes evident as he had an imagined conversation with Ben where he stated that: “Dad left when I was such a baby and I never had a chance to talk to him” (Miller 36) and “All I remember is a man with a big beard” (Miller 33). Without a father figure, it is quite possible that Willy never truly formed a ‘normal’ superego and in turn did not help form one for his son Biff.

During the time of the play, Willy is now 63 years old. His mind is now actively defending itself with regression in the form of daydreams and flashbacks when under pressure. At the start of the text, after Willy gets home from work, he starts feeling trapped and confined. He bemoans how the streets are full of cars, there is no breath of
fresh air in the area, the grass does not grow, the population is growing out of control
and how the apartment houses surrounding his home smells horrible (Miller 6-7). After
he goes to the kitchen, he starts talking to himself, living inside his memory of another
happier time. Another example is when he has self-doubts about his appearance, his
mind goes back to the time he had an affair with another woman who gave him the self-
confidence he wanted by telling him that she picked him because of how handsome he
is (Miller 24-25). This is the act of displacement, as Willy’s id wants to feel wanted and
validated, which did not feel wanted at the time. So, he turned to a woman who showed
interest in him to get the feeling of being wanted instead of just being satisfied with
what Linda gave him.

While Willy is regressing throughout the play, he also exhibits other defence
mechanisms throughout his life. He is both projecting and displacing his failures on Biff
without Biff or himself even knowing about it. Because Willy has never been satisfied
with what he has, he was always projecting his wishes for a better life on Biff when he
was young. He proclaimed Biff would be the next ‘Red Grange’ and earn over 25
thousand dollars a year (Miller 68) and later told an adult Biff that he should ask for a
big loan of 15 thousand dollars instead of a small loan (Miller 47-48). He reminisces
about an old football game when Biff looked like a young god, like Hercules, and there
were three college representatives there just for him; how the crowd was cheering his
name, and that Biff was such a magnificent star that could never fade away (Miller 51).
But now when Biff is grown up and has failed to live up to Willy’s expectations, he has
displaced his failures onto Biff instead. For example, when Biff got off the train when
he came home to visit, Willy immediately criticized him for not earning enough money
(Miller 5), although Willy himself borrows money from his neighbour to pretend that he
earns money himself (Miller 41). Deep down Willy considers himself a failure now in
his old age. He claims he could have overseen New York for his company if his old
boss was still alive. But now it is the old boss’s son Howard who is in charge, and he
does not appreciate Willy. This becomes evident later as Howard lets him go.

He also refuses to acknowledge that he had anything to do with Biff turning out the
‘wrong way’. When Biff tells him to his face at the end of the play that all the pressure
and the empty talk that Willy convinced him of what was caused him to be unable to
hold down a steady job, Willy just says that Biff is doing everything out of spite (Miller
104-105). Biff is however not doing what he does out of spite; Biff just wants to be
happy. Willy is incapable of imagining a person being happy with just doing what they
want and not earning what he would consider a good salary. This is shown by the
imaginary conversations that Willy has with Ben. Since Ben took over the role of role-
model for Willy after his father left, Willy often wishes he would have done the same
things as Ben did. Willy laments he did not follow his brother when he was young,
saying; “Why didn’t I go to Alaska with my brother Ben that time! Ben! That man was
a genius, that man was success incarnate! What a mistake!” (Miller 27). He repeats this
sentiment later when talking with Charley, stating that he only had one opportunity for
earning money with him (Miller 31). But Willy was barely four years old at the time
when Ben left to find their father, so Willy could not have followed Ben even if he
wanted (Miller 32). But Ben did make it, even though he travelled by accident to Africa
instead of Alaska, Ben became rich. Ben describes his success shortly but effectively by
stating that “when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one
I walked out. [He laughs.] And by God I was rich” (Miller 33). The fact that Ben can
walk into the jungle and put in some hard work and come out rich is what gave Willy
the idea that if you put your mind into something, you will succeed. Ben did it, despite
travelling in the wrong direction of where he was headed. So when Biff does not
become successful like Ben, Willy feels like it is because Biff is not trying.
Willy is in denial that Biff just wants to be an average man, a ‘dime a dozen’, because in his mind they are Willy Loman and Biff Loman! By being in this state of denial, he thinks Biff is just spiteful and wants to hurt him. But at least that is something that Willy can comprehend, he knows himself that he has at times been too hard on Biff so the fact that Biff would want to be cruel and spiteful to Willy is more plausible than wanting to be an average man. Even after Biff has broken down, crying in Willy’s lap that he wants Willy to let his dreams for Biff go and let him be, Willy does not understand what it is that Biff tries to say. He is more shocked that Biff cried and how it proved that Biff loves him than understanding that Biff just wanted to be accepted for who he is. This is evident as of right after Biff cried and then went upstairs, Willy stated: “that boy is going to be magnificent!” (Miller 106). In his denial, Willy talks to an imaginary Ben regarding how they can help Biff become magnificent, ending with Willy taking his life so Biff can use the money from his life insurance.

Happy

Happy is the youngest son of Willy and is most of the time overlooked by his father. While they were young, Willy only had his eyes on Biff, dreaming of how great and successful Biff was and would be. As adults, Willy still focuses on Biff, although now lamenting how Biff became a failure. Happy as an adult is described as a 32-year-old tall, powerfully built man, whose sexuality is like a colour on him or a scent that women have discovered (Miller 8).

Early in the play Biff and Happy are having a heart to heart about their adult lives since they have not seen each other for a while. After Biff tells Happy about his life and doubts living life as a farmhand, Biff asks Happy if he is content. Happy quickly states “Hell, no!” (Miller 11). Biff wonders why and says that he is surely making money,
mirroring the way that their father thinks earning money means happiness. Happy tells Biff he is stuck and that all he can do now is wait for the merchandise manager to die so Happy can take his job. But Happy confesses that the thought of that scares him too. The merchandise manager is not content either, as Happy tells Biff that the man had built a new terrific estate but just lived there for two months before selling it and starting to build another one. And Happy knows that he would do the same thing and is not sure what it is that he is working for. Just like Biff, Happy knows subconsciously that this is not the life that he wanted. He states that his current life is what he always wanted; an apartment, a car and plenty of women. However, it is not what his id wants to do, it wants to do something else. But his superego tells him that this is the career path he must take so that he can earn money. But the superego is not shaped by what Happy wants but what his father, Willy, wants. And so Happy continues with his current career, despite not fully knowing why.

Happy says that sometimes he just wants to rip his clothes off and outbox the merchandise manager right in the middle of the store. He is stronger and faster than everyone else there and having to take their orders is something he feels he cannot stand (Miller 12). He has the same feelings that Biff has had. But unlike Biff, who always had his father’s favour and then suddenly lost his trust in his father, Happy has always tried his best to gain his father’s favour and will not take the risk of losing it. Biff asks Happy to go with him to start a ranch of their own, but Happy declines because he does not know what one can make out there (Miller 13). This is Happy’s superego telling him that he cannot go out and do something which does not earn him a good salary. Happy states that his boss parts waves of people in front of him when he walks through the door because he makes 52 thousand dollars a year (Miller 13). Happy believes that he is a better man than his boss and that he must prove himself to the executives that he has
what it takes. Only when Happy can walk into the store and part waves just like his boss, is he willing to go with Biff.

This is because Happy’s mind is using the defence mechanic of projection. Happy always came second to Biff no matter what Happy did, he could never get the same amount of attention as his brother. He always tries to get his father’s attention and compliments by asking questions such as “I’m losing weight, you notice, Pop?” (Miller 17) and repeating it if he does not get an answer (Miller 21). His father does not give Happy much attention. One example is when Biff asked his father if they can follow him in his travels sometimes, which Willy answers; “Soon as summer comes” (Miller 19). When Happy asks if he promises this, Willy does not shift his attention from Biff, answering: “You and Hap and I” (Miller 19). Even though Happy asks the question, Willy answers by addressing Biff over Happy. Happy deals with this in his adult life, by projecting not being appreciated as a child towards not being appreciated at work. Happy cannot imagine his father not appreciating him and putting him second, and he is unable to dislike his father for this. So, to be able to cope with it, he projects these feelings onto something else. Therefore, he instead projects his feelings of not being appreciated towards work instead. He can dislike, or even hate, his bosses for not appreciating him. Having the urge to strip down and box the managers is something he can fantasize about, but not his father. This solves any feelings of anxiety he might have gotten from not feeling appreciated by his father. In his youth, he projected these feelings to Biff, by sometimes being passive-aggressive towards him and dropping in comments such as that he is supposed to pass the ball in football and not try to score touchdowns (Miller 19) and sometimes towards the neighbour boy Bernard, trying to box with him (Miller 20).
In his adult life, Happy’s id takes a lot of control where it can, since the superego keeps him stuck with his job. Happy confesses to sleeping with a lot of women. In his conversation at the start of the play with Biff, he asks Biff if he agreed that the women they had met earlier were gorgeous creatures (Miller 13). After Biff agrees, Happy says that he could get such women anytime he wants to, whenever he feels “disgusted” (Miller 13). Happy does not specify what he means when he says he feels disgusted, but it is implied that it is whenever he feels particularly unhappy with himself. It could be for example whenever he gets upset about his career not moving forward. Happy states that a girl he was with earlier the same day was soon to be wed with one of his executives (Miller 13). He continues stating that this is the third executive he had done this to, and he believes this could be because he has an overdeveloped sense of competition (Miller 13).

This could be his psyche’s way of taking revenge on the executives for not appreciating him, by taking the persons they appreciate the most, their beloved, and ‘ruining’ them. It could stem from his odd views of his mother, the wife of his father who has not appreciated him either. Happy says that if he ever gets married, he wants to marry: “[s]omebody with character, with resistance! Like Mom, y’know?” (Miller 13) and later commenting: “What a woman! They broke the mold when they made her” (Miller 48). Just like Happy who projects his feelings of not being appreciated by his father to his executives, he might project his apparent attraction to his mother towards the executive’s wives or girlfriends. Since his superego keeps him from resigning and finding a job that makes him happy, his id wants him to do something else that makes him temporarily happy to get back in a good mood again, which would be to sleep with a woman. Just like how Biff developed a habit of stealing things to satisfy his id, Happy sleeps with women to satisfy his.
Linda

Linda is the wife of Willy and the mother of their two children Biff and Happy. While Linda does not take up as much space in the play as some of the other characters, she is nevertheless a key part of the play and the family. While the other members of the family appear to be primarily driven by their id and superego, Linda appears to be calmer than the rest of the family and tries to mediate between them to try and keep them all happy. She fulfilled the role of the family’s ego, trying to keep a balance between the ids of the family that makes them do whatever they want and the superego that restrains them. In one of the flashbacks when Biff has stolen the football, Linda says: “he’d better give back that football, Willy, it's not nice” (Miller 26). She also tells Willy that he is too rough with girls (Miller 26), and agrees with the neighbour boy, Bernard, that Biff needs to take his math grade seriously (Miller 27). However, Willy does not appear to listen to her. Often when he feels pressured, he explodes in angry outbursts at her. For example, when she agreed with Bernard about maths (Miller 27) or when she interjects when the family is talking about the meeting with Oliver, Willy tells her to stop interrupting until they all start yelling at each other (Miller 47-48). Despite this, Linda continuously defends and supports Willy, even if Biff is justified in being angry or frustrated at Willy. This might be because, as Linda says, whenever Biff is around and talking positively to Willy, he seems to be much sweeter and happier (Miller 48).

At the beginning of the play, she shows great concern over Willy. After he came back home late from a work-trip she asks him if he is feeling well, if he has crashed the car and states that he does look terrible (Miller 2). We find out later this is because Willy has smashed the car before. But when Willy tries to explain where he has been and what has happened, Linda keeps interjecting with excuses for Willy. When Willy says he had problems driving and it kept going off to the shoulder, Linda interjects she
thinks it might be something wrong with the car and that she believes their mechanic does not quite know the car (Miller 3). Willy corrects her by stating it was him, that he realised he was suddenly going 60 miles per hour and had no recollection of the last five minutes. Linda interjects again, saying that perhaps it was because he still wears old glasses and has not picked up the new ones yet (Miller 3).

Linda knows that something is wrong with Willy, but instead of facing the problems head-on, she decides that the best way to take care of Willy is trying to keep him pleased. She does not allow him to fault himself for stopping his work-trip but instead makes up excuses for why he did, eventually settling on the fact that his mind is overactive and needs rest. But Linda knows that Willy is actively trying to kill himself. She later tells her sons that she knows that his car accidents were not accidents but were intentional crashes according to witnesses (Miller 42-43). And Willy has tried other methods of suicide as well. She also found a length of rubber pipe hidden away in the cellar that appears to fit the nipple of the water heater’s gas pipe (Miller 43). Linda states that she takes the rubber pipe away every day but always puts it back when Willy gets home. Even when it is apparent that suicide is a real and probable action for Willy, Linda still does not want to confront him. This is possibly because Linda is afraid that removing Willy’s agency is more likely to push him away and nudge him closer to committing suicide.

Linda is determined to mediate between Biff and Will because she knows that Willy feels happier whenever he and Biff get along. Linda used the defence mechanics of regression on Willy. She knows that Willy was much happier when the boys were young and loved their father. They had so much potential in them to become what Willy himself could not be, which is partly what kept him happy then. Now when Biff has failed Willy’s expectations it makes Willy feel stressed out and full of guilt. This is the
reason that Linda is so invested in Biff coming back and making up with his father and why she also wants him to go back into the business world just like Willy and Happy. In her mind, this could be a way to save Willy from taking his own life.

But in doing this, Linda herself was in denial. While she knew and understood that Willy has tried to take his own life multiple times, she did not take any direct actions to stop it from happening again. She refused to take any direct actions against this behaviour, by either talking to him about it or even removing the tools available to him. By believing that if she ignored it and just tried to keep him happy, everything would go back the way it before Willy became suicidal. And this is unfortunately where Linda was wrong because, despite her attempts, it did not appear that Willy and Biff were going to make up. During the family argument close to the end of the play when Biff states that he is leaving and will not write to them anymore, Linda says: “I think that’s the best way, dear. ’Cause there’s no use drawing it out, you’ll just never get along” (Miller 103). However, just as Linda gave up hope of them ever getting along again, they go through a cathartic argument where Willy realises that Biff does love him because he cried before him. While Linda’s plan might have seemed to finally work out, it has the opposite effect. Spurred by the thought that Biff loves Willy and that Biff is going to back into the business world and just needs a little financial boost, Willy decides to once again try to take his life. But this time, he succeeds. While Linda hoped that reconciling Biff and Willy would make everyone happy again and stop Willy from his suicide attempts, but it had the opposite effect and ultimately led to Willy’s demise.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Freudian psychoanalysis of the character’s personality and the defence mechanics they employ helps greatly to understand how and why the characters act the
way they do. Understanding how the id works and how it correlates to a character’s actions might help the reader understand why Biff was stealing or why Happy was sleeping around with different women. An understanding of the superego explains why the members of the family stuck with working or acting the way they did, despite it bringing them no joy. While Happy might have come off as a greedy man, just working to get money while not truly understanding why the knowledge of the superego helps explain that it is not because of greed that Happy puts himself in the misery of his job. But it is the fact that his superego tells him that it is the right thing to do, even if he does not understand it. It is also clear that looking at how the psyche copes with these situations by employing defence mechanisms to excuse their behaviour of stealing and sleeping around, or not dealing with situations directly by repressing them even existing or denying its importance or urgency.

Understanding what it is that guilts Biff into coming home, helps explain why he is at home in the first place. It also explains his stealing, his shift from loving and adoring his father to disliking and looking down upon him. It can also explain why it is that Biff changed, how and why he went from a selfish young man who believed the world was his for the taking, to a man that just enjoyed working in peace on a ranch. Happy’s situation makes sense when it is understood why he keeps working a job he dislikes because he believes he is proving himself to his father by proving himself to the executives. It also explains why he likes to sleep with women, even the ones soon to be married to the previously mentioned executives. Freudian psychoanalysis also explains Willy’s highly erratic behaviour, giving an understanding as to why he is erratic and what motivates him to say and do the things he does. And it even gives an understanding as to why Linda puts up with the bad way Willy treats her at times, not only because she loves him as she says, but because she also believes she can help him get better and stop him from trying to take his own life. It can also explain how the
Lomans’ could be so close to realising the American dream, yet still be so far away. Realising the American dream is not just reaching a material goal, but also a state of mind. While they had the material things, their own house, car and healthy children, they were not in the right mind to appreciate what they had and be satisfied.

While Freudian psychoanalysis might not be able to answer every question and it is also possible to dive deeper into the character’s minds for explanations and answers, such as the Oedipus complex. A basic understanding of it can give a reader a wide number of tools for understanding the actions and motivations of a character. When an author has characters act in a way and does not describe literally what their thought processes might be, an understanding of psychoanalysis can help a reader understand the motivations without words. By using Freudian psychoanalysis to understand the Loman family and their behaviour, a deeper understanding of the characters has been achieved. It also explains why they do act the way that they do and what led them to this point. It is undeniable that the characters of this play are subject to the states of the human psyche.
Sources


