Abandonment, Loss and a Yearning for Love
A Psychoanalytical Interpretation of Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s play Death of a Salesman

Övergivande, förlust och en längtan efter kärlek: En psykoanalytisk tolkning utav Willy Loman i Arthur Millers pjäs En handelsresandes död

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Abstract

*Death of a Salesman* is a play written by Arthur Miller that evolves around the salesman Willy Loman and his family. Willy is abandoned by his father at a very young age and the main focus and aim of the essay is to show how Willy being abandoned has led to several consequences in Willy’s adult life. Furthermore the essay shows how this has affected his family and how it ultimately leads to Willy committing suicide. Willy is also a man with a very complex mind that uses several different defense mechanisms in order to cope with his reality and this insecurity. In this essay I have tried to define these defense mechanisms and by drawing on psychoanalytical theories I try to map out how he uses these to cope with reality. In addition to psychoanalysis, John Bowlby’s attachment theory, which is interconnected to psychoanalysis, is used in the essay. The reason for this is that Bowlby’s theory deals with the subject of loss, something that Willy has experienced with both his father and older brother. The defense mechanisms that are dealt with in the essay are; regression, repression, displacement, denial and selective memory, all of which lead to Willy having a hallucination that furthermore leads to his death. Furthermore I take a closer look at how Willy’s behaviour and values have affected his sons and wife and how this is interconnected with his own lack of a father figure. The claim that this essay tries to support is that because his father abandoned Willy at a very young age Willy’s adult life has been governed by consequences of this loss.
Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is considered by many to be his most successful play. It evolves around a salesman and his family, a man who was abandoned by his father at a very young age and which has led to him struggling and trudging through life. Willy Loman is a salesman who struggles in his life as well as within himself, a man that “is self-slain, not by the salesman’s dream of America, but by the universal desire to be loved by one’s own, and to be loved beyond what one believes one deserves” (Bloom 5). This is Willy’s version of the American dream. Arthur Miller has said: “Willy is not a depressive .... He is weighed down by life. There are social reasons for why he is where he is” (qtd. in Lewis 159). However, lending Willy to a psychoanalytical interpretation, one will realise that Miller, consciously or unconsciously, has made Willy a character with a very complex mind. This essay will use psychoanalytical theories and I will also touch upon John Bowlby’s attachment theory to analyse Willy’s mind and behaviour. To cope with reality one’s ego can use different defense mechanisms to make one’s life more bearable. Willy uses several defense mechanisms all of which are connected to feelings of anxiety, depression and stress, and these feelings can lead to hallucinations (Barnes et al 371). This is what happens to Willy at the end of the play before Willy dies. I claim that Willy being abandoned by his father at a young age has led to him being insecure and this has in turn led to consequences in Willy’s adult life that govern his whole existence. The consequences of the abandonment are that Willy is a very insecure man that does not trust his own judgement, he searches for a father figure throughout his life, he feels inadequate as a father which consequently has lead to him imprinting values in his sons that are difficult to live up to and he feels unworthy of love. I will show how these different things and his struggle to feel worthy of his family’s love ultimately lead to Willy’s suicide. However Willy’s death is not tragic as he dies as a man who has peace.

Willy’s troublesome life and behaviour can be explained by psychoanalysis and its theories. Sigmund Freud says that psychoanalytical theory “shows that the symptom carries a meaning and is connected with the experience of the patient” (217). Within psychoanalysis the unconscious plays an important role, as it is what governs classical psychoanalysis. The core of psychoanalysis is that: “human beings are motivated, even driven, by desires, fears, needs, and conflicts of which they are unaware – that is, unconscious—” (Tyson 12). A person’s mind is according to the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud divided into three parts; the id, the ego and the superego (Friedman & Schustack
The id is the “undifferentiated core of personality” and it “contains the basic physical energy and motivations, often termed instincts or impulses” (Friedman & Schustack 75). The id operates in infants who still have not been shaped or affected by the external world. Examples of these instincts and impulses can be the baby’s drive to suck or obtain pleasure. The id operates exclusively by the so-called pleasure principle and wants only to satisfy one’s needs and desires (Friedman & Schustack 75). The ego however, operates according to the reality principle. The ego is the part of one’s mind that solves problems. For example a baby’s wish for a cuddle does not automatically bring it about; the baby has to actively get the adult’s attention in order to get it. The ego is the part of the mind that one uses mostly during one’s life, as it is what copes with and sees one’s reality (Friedman & Schustack 75). Finally, the superego is the part of the mind that internalizes social and moral rules that we learn from our parents and society, it can be both conscious and unconscious (Friedman & Schustack 75-76). Also, the superego is the part of the mind that withholds or instincts and thus tells us what is right or wrong according to internalized values. In other words it is the part that tells us what society thinks are right or wrong. The conscious ego has to make sure that neither the pleasure-seeking id or the unconscious super-ego takes over one’s mind (Tyson 25). This essay will focus mostly on the ego as that is what copes with reality and solves one’s problems. One way of solving problems for the ego is to use defense mechanisms. The ego does this because it strives to be as close as possible to the pleasure seeking id without losing control of it (Friedman & Schustack 75) and also, to “protect itself” (Friedman & Schustack 85). Consequently one cannot actively choose to use defense mechanisms but the mind does this unconsciously with the ego as an actor. I will also use John Bowlby’s attachment theory that is interrelated with psychoanalysis but branches out from its mainland. The core of attachment theory is: “when I am close to my loved one I feel good, when I am far away I am anxious, sad or lonely” (Holmes 67) and it deals much with the subject of loss which is an important part of Willy’s life and even more of his childhood. Bowlby says: “there is strong evidence of the relationship between acute loss and increased vulnerability to psychiatric and physical disorder” (qtd. in Holmes 179). The psychoanalytical theories as well as Bowlby’s theory that will be used in this essay complement each other well as psychoanalysis focuses mostly on the inner process of the mind whereas Bowlby’s theory brings in outer circumstances such as loss.
As I said earlier, one of the consequences to Willy being abandoned is his insecurity and he does not trust his own judgement. Willy relives much of his past through something called regressions. This is a term that has been used to describe different mental states throughout history but the overall explanation is described as: “an organism’s reversion functioning in ways characteristic of an earlier period of life, temporarily or permanently” (Mercer 174). The type of regression that I refer to throughout this essay is: “the temporary return to a former psychological state, which is not just imagined but relived” (Tyson 15). Tyson says that: “it is a defense because it carries our thoughts away from some present difficulty” (15). Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud thought that regression could be “spontaneous as well as brought about by environmental factors” and that: “it could permit the removal of psychological barriers that were inhibiting mature mental processes” (qtd. in Mercer 180). Willy’s regressions are a reaction to the loss of his father and they are triggered when his reality becomes unpleasant. One could suggest that his psychological barriers are removed as he in his regressions relives parts of his life that he otherwise does not want to remember or that he remembers in order to try and make sense of where his life went wrong.

In one of the regressions that is triggered after Willy is quarrelling with his neighbour Charley, Willy is reliving a meeting with his older brother Ben where Willy’s insecurity is prominent. At one point during this regression Willy says to Ben: “Can’t you stay a few days? You’re just what I need, Ben, because I – I have a fine position here, but I – well, Dad left when I was such a baby and I never had a chance to talk to him and I feel kind of temporary about myself” (Miller 55). This quote shows us that Willy is very much affected by the fact that he was abandoned by his father when he was very young. Supported by Van De Kolk and Gabbard, Bowlby said that: “early separation can have long-lasting effects on the sensitivity of brain receptors, leading to permanently raised anxiety levels” (qtd. in Holmes 95), and also, that loss and the fantasies that it stirs up cause disturbance (Holmes 6). Willy is affected by losing his father and he is overall very anxious about life and why his life has turned out the way it has, and as Willy says; he feels temporary about himself. As I said earlier, those feelings of inadequacy and insecurity can be traced back to the fact that his father abandoned Willy at a very young age, at “three years and eleven months” (Miller 50), and thus he grew up without a father figure.

Willy has worked in sales his entire life and even though he wants to portray himself as
a good salesman that is well liked the reality is that he is not a particularly good salesman and he does not make enough money for his family to survive without borrowing money each week. This temporariness that Willy describes, which is a consequence of his father’s abandonment, has made him an insecure man that does not trust his own instincts as one can learn from another regression that is triggered when Willy loses his job. Here Willy’s insecurity is prominent and he feels like a failure because he has not only lost his job, he has also failed his family, as he no longer will be able to bring home any money at all. In the regression Willy relives another conversation with his brother Ben and in this scene Willy is offered a job in Alaska but he turns it down because of as, Centola says, his internal value that: “he has a duty to ‘accomplish something’” (qtd. in Bloom 28), and he believes that he can do that as a salesman. Willy supports his strong belief that one can be successful as a salesman by referring to David Singleman, an 84 year-old salesman that was well liked and very successful. As Willy says: “that’s right, Ben, that’s right. When I look at that man I say, what is there to worry about? ... All he has to do is go into any city, pick up the phone, and he’s making a living” (Miller 92). Also he is persuaded by his wife who Linda says that: “he’s got a beautiful job here” (Miller 91) and that he is: “doing well enough” (Miller 91) and when Ben challenges her and asks why, she says:

LINDA (frightened of Ben and angry at him). Don’t say those things to him! Enough to be happy right here, right now.
(To Willy, while Ben laughs.) Why must everybody conquer the world? You’re well liked and the boys love you, and someday — (to Ben) — why, 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? (Miller 91)

I argue that he relives this conversation with Ben because he is wondering if life would have turned out differently for him and his family if he had taken the job in Alaska. This is, arguably, much because Ben represents what Willy is not; Ben is Willy’s alter ego. As Centola says: “Ben is the other self which Willy could have become had he chosen to live by a different code of ethics” (qtd. in Bloom 29). Again, Willy’s lack of a father figure has made him insecure; a claim that is supported by Jones who says that paternal loss can negatively affect “self concept and self esteem” (np). Had he not been insecure he would
have listened to himself instead of being persuaded by his wife and the dreams and values that David Singleman represents. Then at least he would have known that if or when he failed it was his own choice that made him a failure, and not someone else’s choice or impact.

Willy’s lack of a father figure and insecurity has led to him searching for a father figure throughout his life and therefore he idolizes his older brother Ben and the diseased David Singleman. The reason for why Willy idolizes Ben and Singleman is because Willy’s lack of a father figure has led to him needing other people who can represent his father. As a defense mechanism Willy modifies his memories constantly because that is more convenient for him, in other words he does this not to get overwhelmed by his own memories, and his disappointment for his father. This is what he does to the memories of Ben and Singleman because he does not want them to be failures, or in other words he does not want them to fail him like his father did by abandoning him. For example, I believe that the memories of Ben are exaggerated; Willy puts Ben on a pedestal and idolizes him because he thinks that Ben has really accomplished something in his life. The need to accomplish something can also be traced back to his father, who, as Ben describes him: “With one gadget he made more in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime” (Miller 51), something that has made Willy prone to accomplish something in his life even though he does not want to accomplish the same thing as his father.

One thing that keeps coming back into Willy’s mind is when Ben says: “Why, boys, 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 51). This quote is from one of Willy’s regressions, in other words Willy is reliving this. However, one does never find out how rich Ben gets and as one can see from a conversation between Willy and his neighbour Charley one can argue that he did not earn very much money:

WILLY. Didn’t Linda tell you? Couple of weeks ago we got a letter from his wife in Africa. He died.
CHARLEY. That so.
...
CHARLEY. Maybe you’re in for some money
WILLY. Naa, he had seven sons. There’s just one opportunity I had with that man...(Miller 47).
The reason one can argue that Ben didn’t get as rich as Willy wants to portray him to have been is because if he was, Ben could have put him in his will and consequently Willy would have inherited some of his money. This furthermore supports the claim that Willy’s mind modifies and exaggerates his memories because he wants Ben to be a role model who made something out of his life, a version of the American dream that Willy strives after. As Centola says: “Ben is undoubtedly the embodiment of one kind of American Dream to Willy” (qtd. in Bloom 29), and Cortina and Lenkerd refers to Ben’s American dream as: “the dream of the exploiter/Entrepreneur” (251). And as I have said earlier, Willy also strives to fulfil his own version of the American dream and therefore Ben’s achievement becomes important to Willy.

Also, Willy modifies his memories of the salesman David Singleman, who represents a different kind of American dream and role model for Willy. Cortina and Lenkerd call it “the dream of the salesman” (250). Singleman he is also successful but in another way. Consequently Willy sees him as a father figure. Willy idolizes David Singleman as well as Ben as one can see when Willy says:

I met a salesman in the Parker house. His name was David Singleman. And he was eighty-four years old, and he drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, he’d go up to his room, y’understand, put on his green velvet slippers – I’ll never forget – and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without even leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want (Miller 86).

However, David Singleman is only portrayed through Willy’s mind and memories. So one cannot know if he actually was as successful as Willy claims. However, other parts of the play where Willy exaggerates supports the claim that Willy exaggerates about David Singleman as well, as for example when he says to Biff after he has been to see his old boss: “you know why he remembered you, don’t you? Because you impressed him in those days” (Miller 115), when in reality he did not remember Biff at all and when Biff worked there he was never a salesman, but actually a shipping clerk (Miller 111-112). One could arguably claim however, that David Singleman was more successful than
Willy and this is why he idolized him. Willy is so impressed by Singleman and his way of life that in his mind he represents, as Centola says, the “unfaltering conviction that personal salvation can be linked with success, that business transactions can be made by people who respect and admire each other” (qtd. in Bloom 31) and that being successful goes hand in hand with being well liked.

As I said earlier, the reason for why Willy idolizes Ben and Singleman can be traced to his lack of a father figure. Willy idolizes Singleman and Ben and in his mind he modifies the memories because he does not want them to fail him like his father did by abandoning him. Ben and Singleman are emotionally distant, just like Willy’s father, but they have succeeded in life. Something Willy also thinks that his father did as one, again, can see from how Ben describes him: “With one gadget he made more in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime” (Miller 51). Consequently Ben and Singleman who, in contrast to his father, have been present during parts of Willy’s life become his substitute father figures.

Another consequence of Willy’s father abandoning him is that Willy feels inadequate as a father to his own sons, which has consequently led to Willy imprinted values in them that are difficult to live up to. In one of Willy’s regression we can see how the abandonment has affected Willy’s fathering. As Centola says: “abandoned at an early age by his father, Willy has tried all his life to compensate for this painful loss” (qtd. in Bloom 29). He does this by trying to give his sons everything, but Willy’s insecurity affects him here as well. He is giving his sons mixed signals as he says one thing but does another and imprinting values within them. For example he portrays himself as a successful salesman but in reality he is not. In one scene, relived through a regression the family is on their way to see a football game that Biff is playing in. Willy is telling the others “Everybody wave when Biff comes out the field” (Miller 94), and to Biff that: “you’re coming home this afternoon captain of the All-Scholastic Championship Team of the City of New York” (Miller 94). This shows us that he thinks that Biff is a star and that the others should acknowledge this. The value that Willy is installing in Biff is that he is better than others, and that he can do anything he wants. Happy looks up to his brother and wants to be around him and he is happy to carry Biff’s helmet into the clubhouse (Miller 93). The value that Willy imbues Happy with is that if you surround yourself with successful people you will become well liked and successful yourself. However, the fact that Willy is insecure about his fathering because he never had a father figure in his life
and that he has not been able to do what he wanted makes his sons confused. As Centola says: “they have inherited their father’s powerful dreams but have no true understanding of how to attain them” (qtd. in Bloom 32). Willy puts expectations that are too high on his sons and thus they are unable to live up to them. Willy’s and his sons’ inability to live up to each others expectations can be explained as a spiral that keeps spiralling downwards; Willy’s insecurity as a father comes from the fact that he grew up without a father, and this has also made Willy prone not to fail his sons. However, since he is not sure how to be a good father he puts too high expectations on them. Biff and Happy try to live up to their father’s expectations but when they fail to do that Willy is questioning his own fathering, which furthermore leads to, Willy getting angry both at himself and his sons and that makes his sons feel guilty for not living up to their father’s expectations. This spiral keeps going down and around since none of them actually knows how to stop it because these values are internalized within them. One can look at Centola’s quote to support this claim, and he says: “Biff never feels completely satisfied working as a farmhand and tortures himself with guilt over his failure to satisfy Willy’s demand that he do something extraordinary with his life” (qtd. in Bloom 32).

One of the defense mechanisms that Willy uses apart from regression is denial and a reason for Willy being in denial is that the loss of his father has made him insecure which consequently has led to him not knowing how to be a good father himself, because he does not trust his own instincts. Denial is when the mind does not always want to acknowledge everything that one hears or sees. When the mind uses denial it is “refusing to acknowledge anxiety-provoking stimuli” (Friedman & Schustack 91), in other words; one believes “that the problem doesn’t exist or the unpleasant incident never happened” (Tyson 15). In one scene Biff tries to explain to Willy how a meeting went and why. Willy, however, simply does not listen to the thing he does not want to hear (Miller 114-120) because that would lead to Willy having to acknowledge that he has failed as a father.

In the scene Willy is at a restaurant with Biff and Happy. Biff has been to see an old boss that he was going to ask for job. When Biff tries to tell Willy that the meeting did not go well he does not listen. Biff tells him that the man actually did not remember him and that he stole a pen from him. When Willy tells his sons that he has been fired Happy tries to gloss over Biff’s failed meeting and this is where Willy’s denial is evident. He does not listen to what Biff says because that puts him in a negative light. When Willy
however is encouraged by Happy when he says: “I was wondering if he'd remember you. (To Happy.) Imagine, man doesn't see him for ten, twelve years and gives him that kind of a welcome!” (Miller 115) Willy completely stops listening to Biff and only hears Happy's confirmative words.

The reason Willy does not want to acknowledge or hear what Biff wants to say is because he does not want his sons to fail because this makes him feel inadequate as a father. Willy has always tried to give his sons what they need and tried to boost their confidence. The truth however, is that Willy has not given Biff what he needs; instead he has imprinted feelings in Biff that he is better than others. Biff actually understands this and tries to get his father to listen. As Biff says late in Act II: "I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is! “ (Miller 142). But Willy does not want to listen, instead he says: "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman and you are Biff Loman!" (Miller 143). The conversation continues with a speech from Biff:

I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you.
You were never anything but a hard-working drummer
who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them!
I'm a dollar an hour, Willy! I tried seven states and couldn't
raise it. A buck an hour! Do you gather my meaning? I'm not
bringing home any prizes any more, and you're going to
stop waiting for me to bring them home. (Miller 143)

Here one can see how hard Biff struggles to make his father understand and acknowledge the truth about himself.

Willy's other son, Happy, is also affected by Willy but in a different way. As Centola says: "both sons are 'lost' and 'confused'. They have inherited their father's powerful dreams but have no true understanding of how to attain them. Biff is more troubled than Happy because he is more conscious of this problem” (qtd. in Bloom 32). Happy has also inherited Willy's ability to exaggerate and deny things that he does not want to acknowledge. One can see this from the same scene as above where Biff tries to get everyone to acknowledge the truth about their family.

BIFF. (To Happy). The man don't know who we are! The
man is gonna know! *(To Willy.)* We never told the truth for
ten minutes in this house!

HAPPY. We always told the truth!

BIFF *(turning on him).* You big blow, are you the assistant
buyer? You're one of the two assistants to the assistant,
aren't you?

HAPPY. Well, I'm practically -

BIFF. You're practically full of it! We all are! And I'm through
with it. *(To Willy.)* Now hear this Willy, this is me. *(Miller 141)*

As one can see Happy has as much trouble as his father with acknowledging the truth
about himself and the rest of the family. This is something that Willy has imbued in
Happy.

Also, this denial that Willy's mind is using can be traced back to his own father
abandoning him. Since Willy did not have a father who loved him and gave him what he
needed in his childhood he does not want his sons to live through what he did. However,
Willy's low self-esteem, which comes from the lack of a father figure during his
childhood, has made him insecure of how to achieve this and consequently this has
made Willy ashamed of his own fathering. These feelings of low self-esteem and shame
have been internalized in his sons. As Ribkoff notes: "Biff now realizes, his self was
stolen by his inherited, shame-ridden sense of identity" *(qtd. in Bloom 125)*, something
that Willy refuses to acknowledge. He's denies that he has anything to do with Biff's
failures, when in reality his own shame and guilt that come from him feeling inadequate
as a father and husband, is what has made Biff who he is. Willy's mind chooses to deny
things because this is more convenient.

There are several scenes in the play where Willy's inadequacy to feel worthy of love is
evident. In one of the scenes of the play one of Willy's memories that are repressed is
triggered by a regression. Freud has said that: "repression is the ego defense that pushes
threatening thoughts back to the unconscious" *(qtd. in Friedman & Schustack 85)*. Willy
represses different things because they are too painful for him to acknowledge. Again, all
of the things he has repressed can be traced back to the insecurity the loss of his father
has resulted in. The repressed memory that comes through by the regression is
triggered by a conversation between Willy and his neighbour's son Bernard. The
conversation is about Biff and how he failed math and lost his scholarship and one can
see from Willy’s expressions and reactions how upset he actually becomes by this:

BERNARD. He wasn’t beaten by it all. But then, Willy, he disappeared from the block for almost a month. And I got the idea that he’d gone up to New England to see you. Did he have a talk with you then?
(Willy stares in silence)
BERNARD. Willy?
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. Because I’d thought so well of Biff, even though he’d always take advantage of me. I loved him. Willy, y’know?
And he came back after that month and took his sneakers – remember those sneakers with “University of Virginia” printed on them? He was so proud of those, wore them every day. And he took them down in the cellar, and burned them up in the furnace ... What happened in Boston Willy?
What’s that got to do with anything? (Miller 101)

However, this might be what starts the process in Willy’s mind to remember what happened in Boston but the memory does not completely break through until after a fight between Willy and Biff. It is then he actually remembers what happened in Boston. The memory that Willy has repressed is that when Biff failed math he went to see his father in Boston to ask for help and advice and for his father to talk to his math teacher Mr Birnbaum. When Biff turns up at Will’s hotel room he finds that his father is not there alone. Willy is there with a woman. First, Willy tries to elude him and says that the woman has just borrowed his bathroom because they are painting hers. Biff however does not believe his father, as one can understand from the fact that he is crying (Miller 124-129). The reason that Willy’s ego has repressed this memory is because it is too painful to remember what followed this incident. After the woman has left the room Willy and Biff has a conversation:

WILLY. ... You mustn’t – you mustn't overemphasize a
thing like this. I'll see Birnbaum first thing in the morning.
BIFF. Never mind.
WILLY (getting down beside Biff). Never mind! He's going
to give you these points. I'll see to it.
BIFF. He wouldn't listen to you
WILLY. He certainly will listen to me. You need those points
for the U. of Virginia.
BIFF. I'm not going there (Miller 129).

As one can see from the conversation, Biff is disappointed in his father and one can
detect a feeling of indifference in Biff's attitude towards his father and to the future.
Before this incident Biff has always looked up to his father and thought that he is a
person that people listen to, otherwise he would never have gone to Boston to see him.
This changes however after Biff has seen his father with another woman than his
mother. Biff's whole reality is shattered, as one can understand when Biff says: "he
wouldn't listen to you" (Miller 129) and it is here that Willy loses Biff's love, affection
and respect. Also, Jones says: "an emphatic father who provides both mirroring and an
object who can be idealized, is seen as critical in the formation of his children's sense of
inner self " (np). Even though Biff is not a small child he is still affected by Willy's
behaviour and his attitude towards his father has changed from idolizing to indifferent
and despising.

It is after this incident that Biff starts moving around, changing jobs frequently and
earning just enough money to get by. As he says in a later scene: "I'm one dollar an hour,
Willy! I tried seven states and couldn't raise it. A buck an hour!"(Miller 143). This shows
that Biff knows that his father's expectations did not change just because his own
attitude towards his father did. Again, Willy has repressed this memory because
otherwise he would have had to acknowledge that he is the one who is to blame for Biff's
failures. Had Biff not found his father with the woman life might have turned out
differently for him. Then he could have gone to summer school and got his grade and
been able to go to University.

Ultimately, the reason Willy, who has a devoted wife and two loving sons, has an affair
with another woman, and that he represses this memory, can be traced back to the lack
of a father in Willy's childhood. As noted earlier; paternal loss can affect one's self
esteem (Jones np), which according to psychoanalytical theories can make one believe
that one is "less worthy than other people and therefore, don't deserve attention love, or any other of life's rewards" (Tyson 16). Consequently, Willy does not believe that he deserves the love of his family so in a desperate attempt to maintain what self-esteem he seeks affirmation from another woman (Bloom 123). Not only does he seek affirmation from this woman he also receives it as one can see in Act I where Willy re-lives a meeting with the woman and she tells Willy: “You do make me laugh. It's good for me. (She squeezes his arm, kisses him.) And I think you are a wonderful man” (Miller 40).

One can claim that Willy’s mind uses a defense mechanism called displacement when he is condemning his wife for mending her stockings. The defense mechanism is defined by psychoanalysts as when one is "'taking it out' on someone or something less threatening than the person who caused our fear, hurt, frustration or anger" (Tyson 15). An example that is used to explain displacement in an easier way “is the case of a man who, when he is humiliated by his boss, goes home and beats his children and kicks the dog” (Friedman & Schustack 93), because this is less threatening than confronting one’s boss. In this scene one learns that Willy has given his mistress stockings as she says: "and thanks for the stockings. I love a lot of stockings" (Miller 41). Later in the scene Linda is mending her stockings because, as she says: "they're so expensive" (Miller 41). Willy goes absolutely mad and tells her: "I won't have you mending stockings in this house! Now throw them out!"(Miller 41). I claim that Willy is not really angry with Linda but actually at himself for having the affair and not being able to bring home enough money. Also, he is unable to accept Linda’s love and affection for him, as he does not feel worthy of it. However, Linda is devoted to him as one can see from the famous attention must be paid speech:

I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person. (Miller 60)

She thinks that even if “he's not the finest character that ever lived” (Miller 60) he is worth something and attention must be paid to him. So instead of condemning himself
for causing himself frustration and anxiety he condemns Linda because that is less threatening than acknowledging what he has done to his wife. Willy is so ashamed and angry of himself of having the affair and his mind relates stockings with the mistress and therefore he can be mad at Linda instead of at himself or at his mistress for what they have done.

The reason Willy is unable to accept Linda’s love is because he suffers “from a deep sadness: he feels worthless, hopeless and believes his life is a failure” (Lewis 159). All of these feelings are interconnected with him being abandoned by his father. Again, as Jones says: “an emphatic father who provides both mirroring and an object who can be idealized, is seen as critical in the formation of his children’s sense of inner self” (np). Willy’s lack of an inner self has consequently led to Willy being sad and unable to feel that he is worthy of his wife’s love. His father’s abandonment is the main reason for why Willy is sad and anxious and this inadequacy of feeling worthy of love is Willy’s core issue, as Bloom says: “he is a good man that wants only to earn and deserve the love of his wife and his sons” (5) and this is what haunts both him and his family throughout the play. Willy Loman is a very insecure man who lacks self-confidence and who, despite his wife’s devotion to him, cannot have peace in his mind until he knows that his family loves him.

All of Willy’s feelings of inadequacy and his wish to be loved by his family and to be a good father has made Willy a troubled and anxious man that has put a lot of pressure on himself. These things can lead to hallucinations (Barnes et al. 371). This is what happens to Willy at the end of Act II, which can be seen as finale of the whole play and all of his struggles that eventually leads to his suicide. Hallucinations are defined as: “perceptions in the absence of an external stimulus” (Barnes et al. 371). According to studies “depression, anxiety, and stress” (Barnes et al. 371) are factors that can lead to hallucinatory experiences for people that do not have a neurologic disease (Barnes et al. 371).

At the end of Act II Willy has a hallucination where he talks to his brother Ben because he wants his support in taking his own life. The reason Willy wants to take his own life is because he wants to make things right is because he does not want to fail his family as his father failed him when he abandoned him. His plan is to make it look like an accident so that his family will get money from the insurance company through his life insurance. Willy is confused and wants Ben’s help and approval as one can see from the scene.
where Willy says: “now look, Ben, I want you to go through the ins and outs of this thing with me. I’ve got nobody to talk to, Ben and the woman has suffered, you hear me?” (Miller 135). This shows us that Willy does not want to die because he is depressed but because he wants to make it right with Linda.

Later, in the same scene, Willy has a fight with Biff and at the end of this fight Biff says:

Pop, I’m nothing! I’m nothing, Pop. Can’t you understand that?
There’s no spite in it anymore. I’m just what I am, that’s all.
(Biff’s fury has spent itself, and he breaks down, sobbing,
holding on to Willy, who dumbly fumbles for Biff’s face) (Miller 143).

And he continues:

Will you let me go for Christ’s sake? Will you take that phony
dream and burn it before something happens? (Struggling
to contain himself he pulls away and moves to the stairs) I’ll
go in the morning. Put him – put him to bed. (Exhausted, Biff
moves up the stairs to his room) (Miller 145-146).

This is what finally convinces Willy that Biff actually loves him and that he has the love of both his sons and his wife. This revelation is what convinces Willy that the money from his life insurance is what will make his family and especially Biff happy and proud of him. One can see this from when Willy talks to Ben about Biff: “Always loved me, Isn’t that a remarkable thing? Ben, he’ll worship me for it!” (145). Consequently Willy takes his own life, but not because he is overwhelmed by everything but as Miller has said: “Willy resolves to die when ‘he is given his existence ... his fatherhood, for which he has always striven and which until now he could not achieve’” (qtd. in Bloom 5), and also so he could give his family financial security. As one can see from when Willy says at the end of the play: “It’s twenty thousand dollars on the barrelhead. Guaranteed, gilt-edged, you understand? “ (Miller 135). This shows us that Willy has always just wanted the love of his family and for them to have a good life and that the drive for success was just a way for him to try and achieve this. Also, again Willy’s lack of a father and his own strive not to fail his sons is what drives him, and by dying he can close the wound that his father has made whitin him and die as a man who is in peace with both his absent father
and his family.

Finally, as I stated earlier Willy’s behaviour, values and choices are consequences of his father’s abandonment, and this has consequently led to Willy’s wife and sons being affected. This is evident in the requiem of the play where one can see how Willy’s last choice in life affects his sons and his wife. First, Biff acknowledges who Willy really was and when he was actually happy, which was when he built things as he says: “there’s more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made” (Miller 149) and “I know who I am, kid” (Miller 150). I claim, like Centola, that these revelations are what make Biff able to “succeed in his own quest for certitude” (qtd. in Bloom 32) and therefore he can go on doing what he wants in life without being weighed down by his father’s expectations. Happy however has not been able to break free from his father’s expectations and values. As one can see from the requim where Happy says:

all right, boy. I’m gonna show you and everybody else that
Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It’s
the only dream you can have – to come out a number-
one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I’m
gonna win it for him (Miller 150).

This shows us that Happy’s internalized values are very much an effect of Willy’s values and way of life. Lastly, Linda is also very much affected by this choice as she is now left alone with a house that has just been paid off and she is very sad because she does not understand why Willy did what he did. In Linda’s last speech of the play one can really see her despair as she says:

I search and I search, and I can’t understand it, Willy.
I made the last payment on the house today. Today,
dear. And there’ll be nobody home. (A sob rises in her
throat.) We’re free and clear. (Sobbing more fully, released)
We’re free. (Biff comes slowly toward her.) We’re free ...
We’re free ... (Miller 150).

To conclude, lending Willy’s mind to a psychoanalytical interpretation one can see how his father’s abandonment has affected Willy and that his mind uses several different
defense mechanisms in order to cope with the reality leaving him without a father figure. This has consequently made Willy an insecure and troubled man that seeks after a father figure in his brother Ben and the salesman David Singleman. Also, Willy strives to be a good father, in contrast to what his father was for him as he left him. This is however difficult for Willy as he does not know how to achieve this because he has never had a father or a father figure while he was growing up who could teach him this. As a consequence to Willy's insecurity, which comes from him being abandoned, Willy has imprinted values and expectations in his sons that are difficult to live up to, which has led to his sons failing their father over and over again, something that can be explained as a down-going spiral. Also, Willy being abandoned has affected Willy's wife Linda, as this has made him unable to accept love. Consequently he is unable to accept Linda's love because he does not feel worthy of it and instead he has an affair with another woman, something that he unconsciously despises himself for. Willy Loman's life may be troubled and sad but he does not kill himself because he is depressed. He wants his family to get money from his life insurance and he wants to do the right thing by them and give them the life he thinks they deserve, a life he never had, as he always felt temporary about himself after he was abandoned. So despite the fact that Willy's mind has to use defense mechanisms in order to cope with the reality that is anxiety, stress and depression, I believe that Willy dies as a happy man who has peace both with his past and his present.
Works Cited


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<tr>
<th>Student (name, personnummer):</th>
<th>Sandra Ström (880307-2480)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Language proficiency:</td>
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**Grade Criteria for C-essays**

Your essay is evaluated in accordance with how well you perform in terms of language proficiency, scholarly style, and analytical skill. Each of these areas is assessed and graded according to a seven-grade scale:

- **7** – Excellent
- **6** – Very good
- **5** – Good
- **4** – Satisfactory
- **3** – Passable
- **2** – Not satisfactory
- **1** – Very unsatisfactory

To pass (**Godkänd**), your essay must be awarded **no less than 3 in each of the relevant areas**.

To pass with distinction (**Väl godkänd**), your total score must be at least **17**.

A description of the criteria for the different scores in the different areas is given in the table below. Please observe that while the table provides examples of the kind of skills required to obtain a certain score, it cannot be mechanically applied.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Score</th>
<th>Language proficiency</th>
<th>Scholarly style</th>
<th>Analytical skill</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td>The essay is written in excellent English. Mistakes are rare. The vocabulary is rich and varied, and the style is lucid, clear, and engaging.</td>
<td>Meets the requirements for 6. In addition, the amount and/or quality of sources is significantly greater than the minimum requirement of ten relevant sources.</td>
<td>Meets the requirements for 6. In addition, the argument shows considerable sophistication and demonstrates an ability to handle complex issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td>The essay is written in very good English. Mistakes are infrequent. The vocabulary is rich and varied, and the style is lucid and clear.</td>
<td>Meets the requirements for 5. In addition, the thesis is well-researched: the amount and/or quality of sources is greater than the minimum requirement of ten relevant sources.</td>
<td>Meets the requirements for 5. In addition, the argument is convincing, and supported by strong textual and/or historical evidence. The subject of the essay is relatively sophisticated, and dealt with in an interesting manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td>The essay is written in good English. The vocabulary is varied, and the writing is coherent, fluent, and accurate. Mistakes may</td>
<td>Meets the requirements for 4. In addition, sources are critically engaged in a productive dialogue with the thesis of the essay.</td>
<td>Meets the requirements for 4. In addition, the essay demonstrates a firm grasp of relevant theoretical and/or methodological concepts. The</td>
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<td>Description</td>
<td>Essay Quality</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The essay is written in satisfactory English. The vocabulary is varied, and the writing is coherent, and for the most part fluent and accurate. Mistakes may occur, but are relatively infrequent, and do not impede the readability of the essay.</td>
<td>The essay takes the form of an introduction that states its aim, thesis, and procedure; an argument expounding the thesis; and a conclusion that summarizes the results. It contains at least ten relevant sources, cited in accordance with the MLA style. Minor documentation errors may occur, but do not compromise the essay’s accountability to its sources.</td>
<td>The essay displays the writer’s ability to analyze and interpret literature, by containing a thesis and an argument for that thesis. Observations about the studied text are relevant, and supported by textual evidence in the form of citations and examples. It is demonstrated that the writer grasps relevant theoretical and/or methodological concepts.</td>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>The essay is written in passable English. Mistakes are not uncommon, but do not seriously impede the readability of the essay.</td>
<td>The essay takes the form of an introduction that states its aim, thesis, and procedure; an argument expounding the thesis; and a conclusion that summarizes the results. The essay contains roughly ten relevant sources, cited in accordance with the MLA style. Documentation errors may occur, but do not seriously compromise the essay’s accountability to its sources.</td>
<td>The essay displays the writer’s ability to analyze and interpret literature, by containing a thesis and an argument for that thesis. Observations about the studied text are in general relevant, and largely supported by textual evidence in the form of citations and examples. It is demonstrated that the writer grasps, if sometimes with some difficulty, relevant theoretical and/or methodological concepts.</td>
</tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>The English of the essay is not satisfactory. Mistakes are frequent, and at times affect the readability of the essay.</td>
<td>Errors in documentation compromise the essay’s accountability to its sources. AND/OR The essay fails to present a coherent argument. AND/OR The essay fails to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant sources.</td>
<td>The essay lacks a thesis, and/or displays other serious weaknesses, such as: insufficient or non-existent grasp of relevant theoretical and/or methodological concepts; a tendency to state rather than demonstrate the writer’s arguments; an inability to focus on the declared topic; failure to explain the relation between thesis and method; failure to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant material; lapses in logic; etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The English of the essay is very unsatisfactory. Mistakes are frequent and of such an order that the readability of the essay is consistently affected.</td>
<td>Errors in, and/or lack of, documentation, lays the essay open to the charge of plagiarism. AND/OR The essay fails to present a coherent argument.</td>
<td>The essay lacks a thesis, and/or displays a number of other serious weaknesses, as listed under 2.</td>
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