The Lomans: A Sales Industry

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If a work is entitled "Death of a Salesmen," one could naturally assume that selling plays an integral part within it. In Arthur Miller's play, "The Death of a Salesman," selling not only has literal importance but a metaphoric one as well. A principle character of the play, the patriarch Willy Loeman, is a salesmen and selling material goods is how he supplies for his family; however, the impact of selling within this play goes far deeper than simply supplying sustenance and security for a family. The effects of Willy's selling of material objects and his own identity extend cast a layer of superficiality over the family, influencing their relationships and roles. Selling is what is at the very core of these characters' interactions with the world and with each other. Selling intrinsically impacts the Loemans by giving them a center to form roles around: Willy—the salesmen; Linda—the assistant; Happy—the buyer; and Biff—the counter seller; but all of them in part being salesmen themselves.

Willy, the patriarch, the leader of the family, is the center for all of the characters to revolve around. He is the original salesmen, the origin of their interactions and roles that revolve around his sales. Willy, being a practiced salesman, has had decades to formulate his brand; however, as hard as he tries to sell himself as a well-known, successful salesman, the truth constantly emerges from his self-contradictions. There is an important example of this on page 22 where Linda asks Willy if he had sold much on his run. He replies with confidence that he "did five hundred gross in Providence seven hundred gross in Boston." When Linda starts to do the math and the moment becomes more concrete, Willy lowers his total gross to two-hundred for the entire trip. Linda's interaction to this is quite interesting. Willy's fabrication of the truth doesn't even make

her hesitate. This is a clear indication that Willy's exaggeration of his selling abilities is a common event.

Even if Willy's selling abilities and luck are not fantastic, this does not stop him from advertising himself as the perfect salesman. He emphatically tells his children of how well known he is throughout all of New England. He claims, "I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops will protect it like their own" (19). Even to himself, Willy insists on believing he had magnificent clout within his profession, telling himself that his funeral would reveal to Biff his greatness because people would pore in from multiple states of New England. His self-concocted persona as a respected salesman even makes him too proud to accept a job from his neighbor after being fired.

Willy's extreme delusion may be a mixture of huffing toxic chemicals and the compilation of years of falsely portraying his own life. He had a plan for his life, and when it delineated from its set track, he could never admit to this. Instead of searching for himself, owning up to the true person within him (the craftsman that was never happier than when he was working with his hands), he buries himself in a false image that emulates Dave Singleman. Singleman, an extremely successful salesman, served as Willy's aspiration—he was well liked, wealthy, and had a funeral filled with hundreds of salesmen and buyers. Willy's obsession with being as well liked as Singleman (seeking external validation) leads him to become a salesman, but not just a salesman on the road but in every moment of his life as he desperately has to advertise himself as a success in order to not face his failures. Sadly, at Willy's funeral, there are no buyers or sellers and death, his ultimate defeat and release, serves as a moment of revelation—he was not known, and his mark upon the world was quite miniscule. On page 75, Howard tells

Willy, “The only thing you got in this would is what you can sell. And the funny thing is, you’re a salesman and you don’t even know that.” This quote is a perfect example of Willy because he has made himself so obsessed with selling himself that his own perception of himself became so highly deluded that even he can not decipher his sales-pitch lies from reality. Willy is not the only person specializing in sales in this play. In fact, he has an assistant.

Linda does not necessarily sell herself through her interactions with others, but she serves as an accomplice to Willy’s false realities. She can decipher his lies, but she never acknowledges them, but plays along. It is as if she makes herself Willy’s personal ego-booster, playing along with his false sales of success and coining him “the handsomest man in the world” (p. 25). She can’t even confront Willy on his attempts at suicide because it would bruise his precious ego concocted by lies. Instead of removing the tube by the furnace permanently, she removes it when Willy leaves for work—as if to alleviate her conscious—and then replaces it when he returns home. The aspect that makes Linda herself salesmen while still being an assistant is her objective to sell a reality to Willy that would prevent him from committing suicide. By manipulating her children, she tries to build a world that will give Willy hope once more. She tries to make Biff conform to his father’s dreams and constantly warned the children of the dangers that could arise from disappointing their father.

As for the children’s role in selling, they are both receivers of Willy’s sales (lectures and examples that taught that wealth and social dominance were the keys to success and happiness). Happy emulates his father in the sense that he adamantly sold himself as something he was not. Happy, being neglected of attention while he was under

the shadow of Biff during childhood, had to fight for a portrayal of success that would win the external world's—especially his father's—validation. "I'm losing weight, you notice, Pop?" he asks his father several times in memory scenes, pedaling his feet in the air in desperation (p. 17.) This need to sell himself as successful carries into his adult years. Not only would he lie about his profession, but he also gets validation out of external factors that he could sell as success rather than seeking happiness. An example of this is when Biff offers for him to come out to Texas and live a simple life with him. Happy plays along with this fantasy for a moment, but soon interjects—"The only thing is, what can you make out there?" (p. 13). Happy would rather work in a job he despised, hoarding money and women, because they are marks of success in society, something he could sell himself by to others. Throughout the play, Happy is constantly seeking approval by promising to get married, or selling false information. Happy has been very contorted by the need to assert his importance by using the tactics that Willy sold to him—perhaps this is why Happy does not lie about being seller like his father, but an assistant buyer. Because his father had neglected him so, Happy made himself the receptor—the buyer—of Willy's sales-pitches of success in order to prove himself valid in the eyes of his father.

The other son in the play, Biff (William Jr.), may be the most interesting to inspect in terms of how he sells himself to others. This is because Biff serves, in a sense, as the contradictor of selling. His father had sold a life to him, basically outlining him for the future. Willy put his entire hopes in the greatness of his oldest son, almost giving him an identity that was intimately linked to his own—after all, Biff is William Junior. The release of this identity arrives with Biff's revelation of Willy's affair. Biff visits his father

while he is in New England in order to tell his father about how he had failed math. Biff believes that his father, being a great man in his eyes, has the character to talk his math teacher into a deal that would allow him to pass and graduate high school. When Biff discovered Willy's mistress hiding in the bathroom, Biff's idea of Willy is disintegrated. Because the identity Willy has portrayed of himself to Biff is destroyed, the identity that Willy sold to Biff as a continuation of himself, crumbles within Biff as well.

This is why Biff became the counter seller. The discovery of his father's lies are what propels him to refute Willy's sales of identify and search for one of his own. In fact, the conflict between Biff and his father can be boiled down to a seller being disappointed that one would not buy his merchandise because his sales tactics had been proven faulty. It is quite interesting that Biff has a compulsion to steel because this further contributes to his role as the counter to selling. Steeling is the refuting of sales, of buying.

"What a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive," is a famous quote by Sir Walter Fredrick that beautifully reflects the Loeman family. They operate on false sales-pitches with one another, and as they interact, they form a web of lies. This web may be broken by Biff, but even he at moments will cooperate with such falsifications if pressured—for instance when he was coerced into delivering false information about his meeting with Oliver. This web, however, does not entangle and suffocate the family, but instead serves as a security net. In order to keep faith in each other and themselves, the family members sell realities to one another to maintain stability and hope. Those false realities may lead to perils, but they supply momentary survival. The importance of selling within the Loeman family has causes them to operate

like a sales industry, Willy as the salesman; Linda as the assistant; Happy as the buyer; and Biff as the counter seller; and all of them sellers points throughout the play.