

Death of A Salesman Summary

Writer: Arthur Miller | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Plot Summary

Act I

Overview of the Loman Family and Setting: The play *Death of a Salesman* opens in Brooklyn, New York, in the late 1940s. The Loman house is surrounded by tall apartment buildings that symbolize Willy's shrinking world. Willy Loman is a 63-year-old traveling salesman. He returns home late at night, exhausted from a failed trip to New England. His wife, Linda, welcomes him lovingly but worries about his declining health and his strange habit of talking to himself. Willy's career has reached a dead end. He earns only a small commission and depends on loans from his neighbor, Charley, to pay the bills.

Their two sons, Biff and Happy, are visiting home. Biff, the elder son, is 34 and still jobless after years of drifting through farm work in the West. Happy, aged 32, works in a department store. He feels unfulfilled and seeks pleasure in women and material things. The family appears united by love, yet beneath this surface lie frustration, guilt, and unspoken disappointment. Willy represents the ordinary American man chasing the American Dream. He believes that popularity and personal charm guarantee success. He measures success not by hard work but by being "well-liked." His illusion becomes the seed of his downfall.

Willy's Early Memories vs. Present Reality: As Willy talks with Linda, his mind slips into daydreams. He recalls happier times when Biff was a high-school football star admired by all. He brags about his son's potential, imagining Biff's future success as proof of his own worth. In these memories, the Lomans' small home is filled with laughter, sunlight, and hope. Willy teaches his sons that success depends on being attractive and confident, not on study or discipline. He proudly says, **"Be liked and you will never want."** Meanwhile, he mocks his neighbor Charley's son Bernard, a bookish boy who warns Biff to study for his math exam.

Back in the present, everything has changed. The refrigerator and car are breaking down, and the bills keep increasing. Bernard has become a successful lawyer, while Biff never even graduated because he failed math. Willy's belief that charm could replace hard work has collapsed, but he refuses to accept it. Charley, a kind and practical man, offers financial help. He plays cards with Willy, who becomes upset when Charley offers him a job. Willy's pride will

not let him accept it. He borrows money from Charley each week to pretend to Linda that he still earns a steady income.

Linda remains gentle and loyal. She comforts Willy and hides her worry that he is mentally unstable. She confides in the boys that Willy has tried to crash his car several times. The family's emotional bond is tested by guilt, love, and helplessness.

The Return of Ben - The Dream of Success: Willy's fantasies often bring back his dead brother Ben, who left for Alaska and Africa years ago and became rich in the diamond trade. In Willy's mind, Ben represents boldness and the life he never had. Ben's famous line, "When I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out, I was twenty-one. And by God, I was rich!" echoes in Willy's imagination as the symbol of quick success. Willy tells his sons stories of Ben's success, exaggerating his own reputation as a salesman. He sees Ben as proof that luck and charm, not effort, bring fortune. Miller uses these scenes to show Willy's deep insecurity and self-delusion.

In another flashback, Linda sews stockings, a symbol of household poverty. Willy grows angry when he sees her mending them because they remind him of his past affair with another woman to whom he once gave stockings as a gift. The stockings become a painful symbol of guilt and betrayal.

Biff and Happy's Conversation - The Seeds of Conflict: Upstairs, Biff and Happy talk in their shared bedroom. They dream of escaping city life and starting a farm out West. But Biff feels lost and disappointed. He doesn't understand why he cannot stay in one job or why his life feels empty. Although outwardly successful, Happy admits he is lonely and craves attention from women. Their conversation reveals their father's influence. Both brothers inherited Willy's obsession with success, but lack real direction. Happy says he wants to "show those big shots" he can make it, echoing Willy's false ideals.

Meanwhile, Linda enters and scolds her sons for neglecting their father. She tells them Willy has been trying to kill himself. She begs them to be kind to him. Moved by her words, Biff decides to find a steady job and prove himself to his father once again.

The Hope for a New Start - The Bill Oliver Plan: Willy overhears the plan and becomes overjoyed. He believes Biff will finally become successful. Together, they decide that Biff should meet Bill Oliver, a former employer, to ask for a loan to start a sporting goods business. Willy imagines the business will make them wealthy, calling it "The Loman Brothers."

This moment temporarily restores hope. The family laughs, dreams, and plans for the future. Even Linda smiles, though she fears the fragile peace will not last. Before bed, Willy talks again

to the imagined figure of Ben. He asks whether it's foolish to chase new dreams at his age. Ben's ghostly voice encourages him to take risks. Willy floats between illusion and memory, confusing the real with the imagined. His mind blurs the present and the past so completely that he cannot distinguish between them.

The Dream Before the Fall: The act closes on an emotional high tinged with tragedy. The Lomans believe tomorrow will bring success. Willy happily tells Linda, "We're gonna make it, Linda. I'll see great things for Biff." Yet the audience senses doom approaching, for the foundation of their hope is false. As Willy speaks softly to the ghost of Ben, he whispers, "Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground." The line captures the play's central image—that Willy's life is barren of real achievement. The dream is about to collapse.

Act II

Work Crisis and Pride: The second act begins the next morning. Linda happily tells Willy that Biff and Happy will meet Bill Oliver for a business loan. Willy feels new hope. He shaves and plans to ask his boss, Howard Wagner, for a local job. He dreams of working near home. At the Wagner Company, Willy meets Howard, the son of his old boss. Howard shows off his new tape recorder and ignores Willy's request. Willy pleads for less travel, but Howard refuses. He says sales are down and that Willy is no longer needed. When Willy keeps begging, Howard becomes impatient and fires him.

Willy is crushed. He wanders to Charley's office. There, he meets Bernard, now a successful lawyer, going to argue a case before the Supreme Court. Willy is shocked; Bernard, once mocked for being bookish, has achieved the dream his sons never reached.

Willy asks why Biff never succeeded. Bernard gently recalls the moment. Then Biff visited Willy in Boston and returned a broken man. He hints that something terrible happened there. Charley enters and again offers Willy a job. Proud and bitter, Willy refuses. Charley gives him his usual loan instead. Willy murmurs that he is worth more dead than alive.

Bill Oliver Episode: Meanwhile, Biff goes to meet Bill Oliver. He waits for hours, but Oliver barely remembers him. Biff once worked there only as a shipping clerk. Feeling humiliated, Biff steals Oliver's fountain pen and runs out. The act shows his weakness and anger. He realizes he has lived in his father's dream, not his own. He plans to tell his father the truth that he is not made for business life.

Restaurant Breakdown: That evening, Biff and Happy meet Willy at Frank's Chop House. They hope for a pleasant dinner. Happy flirts with Miss Forsythe and Letta, two young women. Biff tries to explain the failure of the meeting, but Willy drifts into daydreams. He talks aloud to

the imagined Ben. Biff insists on truth, but Willy refuses to hear. When Biff's honesty turns to anger, Willy is stunned. Embarrassed, the brothers leave him behind with the women. The waiter Stanley helps the confused old man and showing a moment of simple kindness. The scene exposes the sons' selfishness and Willy's total isolation.

Boston Revelation: In a sudden flashback, the truth behind Biff's despair appears. Years earlier, Biff had gone to Boston to beg Willy to talk to his math teacher. He hoped to pass and win his scholarship. Instead, he found a strange woman in Willy's hotel room. The woman hid in the bathroom, laughing, while Willy tried to explain. Biff's belief in his father's greatness was shattered. Crying, he called Willy a fake and left. Later, he burned his sneakers signed by the football team. That moment destroyed both their dreams.

Seeds and Insurance Plan: Back in the present, Willy returns home alone. It is late and dark. He takes a garden hoe and begins planting seeds in the small yard. The seeds symbolize his wish to grow something real before dying. Biff and Happy come home. A painful confrontation follows. Biff tells his father that they are all ordinary men. He says, "Pop, I'm nothing. I'm not a leader of men." Biff breaks down crying. Willy mistakes the tears for love and victory. He believes Biff will succeed if he has money to start fresh.

After everyone goes to bed, Willy talks again to Ben's ghost. Ben's voice tempts him to take a final risk. Willy decides to kill himself so that his family will get the \$20,000 life-insurance payment. He imagines Biff using the money to build success. Willy whispers, "A man can't go out the way he came in." He gets into his car and drives away into the night. The crash is heard offstage.

The second act shows Willy's complete fall, from hope to despair. His illusions about work, pride, and family finally destroy him. The play now moves to the final part, the Requiem, which reveals the cost of his dream and the truth his death cannot hide.

Requiem - The Final Farewell

Death and Requiem: The final part, called "Requiem," takes place after Willy's funeral. It is a quiet morning at the Loman house. Linda, Biff, Happy, and Charley are present. The mood is heavy and still. There are no crowds, no business friends only the few people who truly cared. Linda stands by the grave, shocked and confused. She cannot understand why Willy killed himself. She says softly, "**Why did you do it?**" Her voice carries grief, love, and disbelief. She tells the others that today she made the last payment on the house. The home is finally paid off, but Willy is gone. Her words show the cruel irony: he worked his whole life to own a home, yet he never lived to enjoy it.

Charley speaks gently in Willy's defense. He says that a salesman's life is hard because he must dream to survive. **"A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."** Charley's simple words reveal compassion and truth. He understands Willy better than anyone. To Charley, Willy's dream was foolish but also deeply human.

Biff, now calm and clear, says that Willy "had the wrong dreams." He finally understands his father's tragedy: Willy pursued popularity instead of honesty. He valued appearance over reality. Biff decides to leave the city and live a simple life in the open West, where he can be free from lies. Happy, however, refuses to accept the truth. He insists that Willy "did not die in vain." He promises to continue his father's dream and prove that the Loman name can still succeed. His words show that he has learned nothing. He remains trapped in the illusion that destroyed his father.

The scene is small and personal, no crowds, no glory, only emptiness. Miller uses this setting to expose the cruel indifference of society toward ordinary people.

Finally, as everyone leaves, Linda remains by the grave. She cannot stop speaking to Willy. She tells him that she made the last house payment. Her last words, **"We're free... We're free..."** are soft and haunting. She begins to cry. The words mean two things: the house is free of debt, and Willy is free of suffering. But her freedom has no joy, only loneliness. The dream of comfort and peace has turned into silence and loss.

Meaning of the Requiem: The Requiem functions as the emotional and moral conclusion of the play. It reveals how Willy Loman's death brings no change to the world. The insurance money does not save the family. His dream of success dies with him. The few mourners show how shallow his imagined popularity was. Through the funeral, Arthur Miller makes a powerful statement about modern life. The tragedy is not just Willy's death but the system that measures human worth by money and fame. The American Dream, once a symbol of hope, becomes a trap for ordinary people like Willy.

Biff's understanding and Linda's sorrow stand as the play's two truths: one accepts reality, the other mourns illusion. The final stage direction, Linda crying as music rises and the lights fade, ends the play with quiet dignity. Death of a Salesman closes not with triumph, but with the sound of a dream dissolving into the night.