“THE WOODS ARE BURNING!”
–THE RESTORATION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM AND EXPRESSIONISM IN ARTHUR MILLER’S DEATH OF A SALESMAN

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1  Introduction

Arthur Miller’s most famous play, *Death of a Salesman*, tells the story of Willy Loman, a travelling salesman, who is utterly lost in his own fantasies about the world as he once knew it – a world where you build your own house, and eat what you grow. However, the society around him, postwar United States, is changing rapidly and mercilessly. Everyone around Willy, his family, neighbors and co-workers, can only helplessly witness his progressing mental breakdown, which finally leads to his inevitable demise suggested by the title. The clashes between city and country, old and new, traditional Christian virtues and modern materialist values, are at the core of the play. *Death of a Salesman*, written in 1949, was only Miller’s third play, but it has been analyzed and commented on over the years probably more than any other of Miller’s works, and it has become one of the essential milestones in the history of 20th century American drama. The tragic story about the deluded salesman and his family struggling to cope with the demands of the changing world has given food for thought for artists and critics alike over the years, and now, in 2012, with the world facing unprecedented crises in our economies, the social themes and comments of the play strike home harder than ever.

1.1 Aims and Methods

Many would agree that there are two different and equally interesting aspects of the play that stand out, regardless of one’s personal opinion of the play. First, it makes a strong comment on society, but what exactly this comment is, is a
more complicated issue. William Heyen puts it nicely: “The play does not mirror, or reflect, or state; it *embodies*, and often puts us at a loss to enunciate the ideas and feelings it calls forth” (47; emphasis original). Despite the elusive nature of these “ideas and feelings,” many have interpreted them to be a statement on – or, more precisely, on the failure of – the American dream. Whether the play renounces the whole concept, or begs for the restoration of the original meaning of the idea, has been subject to heated academic discussion. Be this as it may, based on the number of comments and feelings it has evoked in academic circles, it is evident that the concept of the American dream is one of the most controversial and central themes in the play.

Second, the play blends realism with expressionism in a wonderfully original way. As a dramatic term, *expressionism* means that which “makes visible the symbolic, subjective experience of the characters (or of the dramatist) by distorting objective or literal reality” (*Types of Drama* 1519). In *Death of a Salesman*, these include, for example, the non-linear structure, blending of the past with the present, surreal light and sound effects, the transparent walls of the Loman house, and the use of characters only the protagonist and the audience can see. Furthermore, it could be argued, Miller uses these expressionistic methods mainly, as Brian Parker notes, “as a means of revealing the character of Willy Loman, the values Willy holds and, particularly, the way his mind works” (29). One subtle, yet all the more curious example of such means is Willy’s enigmatic way of shouting “The woods are burning!” (Miller, *Salesman* 815) when crisis is at hand. As we shall see later on in this thesis, this small and seemingly illogical phrase is one of the key elements that link the expressionism of the play inevitably to its tragic protagonist.
In this thesis, I study the ways these two aspects – expressionism and the play’s convoluted attitudes towards the American dream – are linked. Moreover, I shall argue that the play does not merely condemn the American dream, but cries for its redefinition and redemption. I will support my claim by showing that at the heart of the play lies a belief in the benevolent and virtuous values of the traditional American dream as defined by Gayle Porter (541-547), and that the play’s tragic ending actually carries a hopeful message through the character of Biff Loman, hinting at a chance of a better future for him, and thus encouraging us to have faith in the traditional American dream.

To support my argument, I will first survey what other critics have maintained about the play’s expressionism and its attitudes towards the American dream. I will then study the American dream and its evolution in a historical context, and also present some less-explored ideas about the play’s commentary on the concept by concentrating on the main character Willy Loman. In analyzing the ethics behind Willy’s actions and thoughts, I compare my findings with Gayle Porter’s modern interpretations of the traditional American dream ethic and its distortions and exaggerations (541-547).

Next, I will maintain that the expressionistic features of the play ultimately link the characters to each other, and suggest a reading where some of the characters, the immediate Loman family in particular, can be seen partly as extensions or reflections of the protagonist Willy. I base this claim on two key facts that point towards such an interpretation: that Miller’s initial mental image of the play was a giant head onstage within which action would take place, and that the play’s original working title in fact was The Inside of His Head.
(“Introduction” 155). In my analysis of the play’s expressionism, I will focus on the expressionist features of the Loman house, the play’s abundant tree and plant imagery, and the personal relationships between the Loman family members. I will not, however, delve into the expressionism of the characters’ names, except briefly when absolutely necessary, since even though the names are highly symbolical, their expressionist symbolism is not that essential to my thesis, and would be a subject for further study in their own right.

After establishing the expressionistic connection between the characters, I will analyze the Loman family as a whole, focusing on their mutual dynamics. Finally, I study each of the other three family members (Biff, Happy, and Linda Loman) individually, linking their expressionist functions with Willy’s American dream and Porter’s scheme of the traditional work ethic (535-550). In so doing, I will show how Biff’s role as a reflection of Willy is highlighted, and how does it pertain to the restoration of the American dream. But before I begin my own analysis of the play, a short survey of previous criticism is in order.

1.2 A Note On Criticism

Most previous criticism has concentrated on the social aspects of the play, scrutinizing the claims and comments the play seems to make about society and its values. However, a somewhat smaller but nonetheless significant number of critics have turned their attention towards the play’s technical aspects, namely the use of expressionistic techniques. First, I present some views critics have put forth about the play’s societal content.
1.2.1 Social Issues

To begin with the socially-oriented criticism, many existing analyses have concentrated on the notion of the American dream as presented in Death of a Salesman. Despite some disagreement, numerous critics find common ground as regards Willy’s position in society, as they view him first and foremost as a victim of circumstance. Even though most end up sympathizing with the aging salesman, many find it hard to pinpoint the nature of the relationship between the concepts of the American dream, success, and happiness in the play, and therefore are left wondering what the social statement of the play ultimately is.

For example, Ruby Cohn maintains that: “Though Willy is prey to the American dream of success … the dream itself is vague in detail” (41). William Heyen sympathizes with Willy quite strongly: “Whether or not my sympathy condemns me to his sort of hell, I am hurt for the American dream salesman who buys his own dreams, and this is the play’s complex position” (58).

Though not as sentimental in his argumentation as Heyen, Galia Benziman represents a slightly different angle, one that I study further in this paper:

...the play has been mostly construed as a powerful, impassioned attack on ... the 'American dream'. My claim, on the other hand, is that despite Miller’s unmistakable criticism... Salesman is far from renouncing the American dream. Quite the contrary: it should be read as an appeal to reestablish [it]. (21)

In short, whereas many other critics have construed the American dream as a destructive force in the play and a catalyst for Willy’s demise, and therefore have interpreted the play as simply criticizing the idea (see Raine and Saunders
or Danqing), Benziman sees in the play a lament for the beautiful ideal gone awry (21-38). This is an idea I develop further in this paper. In doing so, the technical aspects of the play are key.

1.2.2 Expressionism, Memory and Perspective

The expressionistic movement in drama is considered to have started in Germany immediately after World War I (*Types of Drama* 1519). Originally, the movement was deeply concerned with social criticism, and the idea was to use non-realistic means, in Parker’s words, “to dramatize abstract forces in politics or economics or history” (45). However, once expressionist theatre and film started to expand outside Germany, the form inspired new interpretations and aims in the hands of non-German artists, who were not interested in the movement’s societal emphasis, as much as intrigued by the new and exciting ways of blending realism with the surreal. From its socially aware beginnings, expressionism, as a dramatic term, has developed to mean that which “makes visible the symbolic, subjective experience of the characters (or of the dramatist) by distorting objective or literal reality” (*Types of Drama* 1519). Those who have analyzed the expressionistic techniques used in *Death of a Salesman* have mainly done so in order to explain their motivation: why has Miller made the dramatic decisions he has?

Most critics agree that the play’s expressionism largely contributes to the simultaneous and inseparable existence of past and present onstage, which, in turn, is tightly linked with the notion of memory. For example, Peter Szondi argues that: “[t]he past is no longer forced into open discussion by a dramatic
conflict … Instead, the past achieves representation in the same way it emerges in life itself – on its own accord, in the *mémoire involontaire* (Proust)“(20). Szondi and related critics seem to share some of Miller’s own views, as Miller makes an important point about why he thinks the play failed as a movie: “the dramatic tension of Willy’s memories was destroyed by transferring him, literally, to the locales he had only imagined in the play”, (“Introduction” 159) since, he continues: “[t]here is an inevitable horror in the spectacle of a man losing consciousness of his immediate surroundings” (159).

Another point critics have raised is that Miller’s use of expressionism is pioneering in at least one respect. Although it to some extent echoes Ibsen’s retrospective structure, where tension grows to its climax through gradual revelation of a past event (see Parker and Szondi), Miller takes the technique even further. As Leonard Moss notes, in *Death of a Salesman* expressionism is expanded into scenes where no apparent tension is built: “he [Miller] modifies this [Ibsenesque] principle by interjecting moments of relative calm” (54-55), such as the card game between Willy and Charley, where Willy indifferently chats with his dead brother Ben, who he sees next to Charley.

In addition, some find another innovative aspect in what Miller does. For example, D. L. Hoeleveer sees similarities between Willy and Everyman, or as Angus Fletcher calls the type, the “allegorical hero”, who “generates a number of other characters who react against or with him in a syllogistic manner” (as quoted by Hoelever, 77). To me, Hoelever and Fletcher’s arguments are very interesting, and deserve further investigation. However, instead of pursuing the idea by comparing Willy with Everyman or the heroes of Dante’s and Spenser’s
allegories, I will try to find the grounds for this argument by studying the central element of my analysis, the American dream. But in order to do so, we need to know what that dream is.

1.3 The Ambiguous Dream

Even though the American dream is a concept known throughout the (Western) world, many find it difficult, if not impossible, to really grasp what that dream ultimately is. However, it is widely accepted that whatever the definition, the dream has evolved and shifted in meaning in the course of history, a process that is partly responsible for its ambiguous nature.

1.3.1 A Short History

Surveying the history of the American dream, Gayle Porter traces its foundations back to the days of Martin Luther, who “eliminated the distinction between working and serving God, by stating that each person’s work was the ‘calling’ through which that individual best served God” (537). This European concept, which came to be known as the Protestant work ethic, established the idea that “hard work and success kept alive the potential and the image of imminent heavenly rewards” (537). The notion set up striving for personal success through hard work as a great virtue. Since then, this idea has in many ways been one of the basic assumptions behind the American dream – albeit the phrase “heavenly rewards” (537), the prize for working hard, has gone
through many different meanings, most of which have nothing to do with religion.

The dream was popularized in America in the mid-18th century by Benjamin Franklin, with himself as its prime example. Porter notes that Franklin’s annual publication, *Poor Richard’s Almanack* (see Franklin), contained slogans and aphorisms that became very popular in the nation’s vernacular, and through these writings he popularized virtues such as frugality, justice, humility, and resolution. What is noteworthy is that these virtues did not refer to religious doctrines, but were based on utilitarianism, as for example: “honesty was necessary to establish credibility, the basis on which future business was more likely” (538). As Thomas Porter points out, “[i]t suffices to recall that material success was taken to be the tangible sign of God’s blessing and the reward of virtue” (25).

Once put in motion, the secularization of the ideals behind what was understood as the American dream was inevitable. Thomas E. Porter goes on to argue that, towards the end of the nineteenth century, “…the alliance between religion and business took a curious turn. Business no longer received the benediction of religion, rather religion was described in terms of business” (25) and, furthermore, that “[c]lergymen found no disparity between the acquisition of riches and Christianity; indeed, they were delighted to find they went hand in hand” (25).

In addition, Porter maintains that, ever since the mid-1800s, the idea that anyone can progress from “rags to riches”, in other words, that everyone has a chance for success, which is unquestionably an element of the American
dream, was associated with one’s personality rather than education, special skills, or merely working hard (24-43). When the Baptist preacher Russell H. Conwell travelled around the United States giving his “Acres of Diamonds” speech between 1870 and 1915, his core message was that people “have in their reach … opportunities to get largely wealthy” (as quoted by T. E. Porter, 26). The nation assumed the notion of “pluck and luck” (26-28). Basically, this meant that “The Creator made man a success machine … and failure is as abnormal to him as discord to harmony” (Marsden, as quoted by T. E. Porter, 27). Success is natural to people, and “character” is the prime key to obtaining it. As long as one relies on one’s natural charisma, and seizes opportunities when they present themself, one cannot help but become successful (24-28).

In literature, rags to riches stories also became widely popular. For example, Horatio Alger’s books, with their poor-but-fortune-driven protagonists such as “Ragged Dick” (see Alger), who, according to Porter, “embodied the [success] myth” (26), sold over ten million copies in the United States between 1868 and 1929. In the 1930’s, historian James Truslow Adams put the idea in modern terms, mainly attacking the traditional (European) class society. His formulation became was one of the most popular definitions of the American dream in the first half of the century:

[T]hat dream of a land in which life should be better … for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. ... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are
innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (404)

After World War II, the United States saw an unprecedented boom in the economy and industry. The country started to shake off the war trauma, and days of prosperity and wealth lay ahead. It was also the beginning of an era that Robert W. Corrigan calls “[the] instant age. Everything from the most complex information to … gourmet meals can be produced or made available in a flash” (1). Technology was advancing by leaps and bounds, and new inventions and gadgets from dishwashers to vacuum cleaners quickly took over the average American home as it went through a swift modernization. Society was changing fast, and there was tremendous economic growth. But there was another side to the story. First of all, the rapid development also brought on unprecedented problems – cities were growing at a very fast rate, and those accustomed to the traditional way of life within the realm of agriculture, especially small farmers, soon found themselves in the squeeze of urbanization and industry; the number of small farms, which had been on the rise since the turn of the 17th century, started decreasing drastically. By 1945, the percentage of the total labor force employed in agriculture had dropped from over forty to a mere sixteen percent in less than fifty years (see Dimitri et al.). The gap between urban and rural lifestyles was growing deeper and wider.

However, the urbanization of the society wasn’t the only great change brought on by modernization and growth. Many have noted that, by the post war boom years, something had changed in the American ethos. The American dream had undergone a profound shift in meaning, and had become an internally
contradictory idea. In his 1958 essay Harold Clurman discusses the shift in the ethos of the American dream from the mantra of “land of freedom with opportunity and equality for all” (as quoted by Benziman, 23) into the dream of business success, in which salesmanship is substituted for “enterprise, courage and hard work” (23), and that this salesmanship is always “implied on some element of fraud” (23). The dream had become an intangible contradiction, which defined one’s happiness by the thickness of one’s wallet, and emphasized selfishness and greed as the primary means of pursuing that happiness. This being said, it is now appropriate to analyze what these contradictory elements within the dream might be.

1.3.2 Contradictions and Exaggerations

It would be an understatement to say the American dream is a complex issue, especially given the fact that, as Meri Laitinen states (as do many other critics), “the American Dream has not been open for all: for long [sic], pursuing the American Dream was the sole privilege of white males. The dream has been overshadowed by slavery, segregation, racism, homophobia and insufficient women’s rights” (22-23). For my study, however, more central than these outrageous historical injustices are the more recent and less flamboyant dichotomies within the ideal, which will help us understand Willy’s character.

In her 2010 essay on business ethics, Gayle Porter presents six different “potential distortions of the traditional work ethic in the United States” (542), six key messages conveyed by the American work ethic rhetoric, and how they can be (and have been) contradicted and exaggerated (542-547). Porter uses the
terms “American dream” and “traditional work ethic” interchangeably, and, in my opinion, rightly so. In spite of what anyone precisely understands the American dream to be, it unquestionably deals with bettering one’s quality of life through personal effort, in other words, work. Therefore, the traditional work ethic can be seen as analogical with the traditional American dream ethic, and when referring to Porter’s ideas, we can safely talk about the distortions in the ethics of the American dream. Of the six key messages, I will analyze the four most relevant in more detail. I will analyze how Porter’s ideas link to Willy’s character in chapter 2.1, but first, to understand the connection, we need to explore Porter’s key messages in more detail.

The first, and the most fundamental message, is that “hard work will be rewarded”. But does it not then also mean that more hard work will always be further rewarded? This is the core idea behind the rat race of the modern business world, where nothing is ever enough, and people grossly overwork themselves in order to gain more “rewards” (541). From this phenomenon of overworking also rises a contradiction: instead of always trying to work harder, many concentrate on working smarter. Not a bad thing in itself, but in a situation where one still constantly wants more profits, and doesn’t want to work too hard to gain them, the work ethic is distorted: short term gains and “beating the system” and “getting what you can today and moving along quickly” become the primary goals (542–545).

Another age-old presumption within the dream is that “everyone has a chance of success” (542). However, we constantly see examples, according to Gayle Porter, that “life is not fair, the good guys do not always win” (543). Also, when
promotions are made in working life, usually there is room for only one person to advance. Porter calls this the “pyramid structure” (541). This business model promotes competition as the primary self-testing medium – being good at your job becomes synonymous with being better at it than everyone else; nothing less will suffice. This can also lead to sabotaging others in order to get ahead (543).

Furthermore, the notion that everyone can succeed has “…led to an assumption that each generation must do better than the one before. Parents provide a certain starting base for their children who can step up to new levels, creating a higher starting base for their children and so on” (545). According to Porter, this can lead to “inflated expectations” and a sense of entitlement: people may feel they should not need to start at the bottom or ever go backwards in their career, and may also feel entitled to exploit others in order to realize these expectations (545).

Gayle Porter’s third key message I shall analyze is that “work should be meaningful”. Again, a very respectable ideal in itself, but it is rather close to the exaggerated version, a situation where “work becomes [one’s] only source of identity” (542). Having such a distorted self image can have devastating outcomes if losing a job also means losing one’s identity, and thus, all in all, the purpose of living (542). The other side of the story is that, in the modern world, where the business emphasis has long been on efficiency, jobs are relatively rarely connected with craftsmanship, and “personal investment in work will not [always] elicit organizational loyalty” (542). As a result, there is a growing
number of people whose primary work ethic is that “a job is a job”, and who have no pride in their work or a job well done (542).

The fourth and final key message I will discuss here is that “education is key to betterment” (542). Perhaps not always cherished on all levels of society, it is an idea that has become more and more true as society has modernized, and fewer jobs can be done without some educational background. Naturally, when exaggerated, this notion too confronts the primary idea of only hard work being rewarded. Embracing education can also lead to “disdain for work that can be done without [it]”, and, in the extreme scenario, “respect for others is conditional on classification” (542). The contradictory side of the matter is that, sometimes, people find ways to get rich very fast without any particular education (as happened, for example, during the dotcom bubble), which leads people to “look for today’s shortcut” (542).

The other two of Porter’s messages are “society advances through individual success” and “value [is] placed on innovation and creativity”. All six would be interesting notions to study further, but what do they have to do with Death of a Salesman? Well, just about everything, and especially with the main character, Willy Loman, as we will see by contrasting these key messages with his attitudes, values, and altogether seemingly jumbled reasoning.

2 Willy Loman and His Dreams

Willy Loman is an intriguing character. Throughout the play he says things he does not mean, means things he does not say, claims one thing first, and then
contradicts it in the next sentence, and so forth. In this chapter, I analyze the inner workings of Willy Loman in the light of Porter’s scheme of the “traditional work ethic” (542), synonymous with the traditional ethos of the American dream, and its exaggerations and contradictions. In addition, I will also see how and what the play’s expressionism contributes to an understanding of Willy.

2.1 Willy Loman and the American Dream

Much has been written about Willy’s relationship to the American dream, and if his hopes and dreams actually have anything to do with the concept. Many have seen Willy’s tragic fate as a direct result of the twisted, modern capitalist interpretation of the dream that, allegedly, prevails in today’s North American society. But is the relationship really that straightforward? Contrasting Willy’s curious, and often seemingly illogical behavior with Porter’s modern theoretical framework, we can see that it is not. First, we will concentrate on the first two key messages.

2.1.1 Hard Work and Personality: Two Paths to Success

The first of Gayle Porter’s key messages was that “hard work will be rewarded” (542). Within this presumption lies one of Willy’s most striking and explicitly demonstrated inner contradictions. Even though Willy, according to his own words, works long hours to make ends meet, he does not feel “rewarded”. This is shown, for example, in the first memory scene as he lies to his wife Linda about how much money he has made on his latest business trip:
Willy: I did five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston.

... 

Linda: How much did you do?

Willy, Well, I – I did – about a hundred and eighty gross in Providence. No – well, it came to – roughly two hundred gross on the whole trip. (Miller, *Salesman* 813)

After going through all their bills, Willy gets gloomy over their meager income, and Linda tries to cheer him up:

Linda: But you’re doing wonderfully, dear. You’re making seventy to a hundred dollars a week.

Willy: But I gotta be at it ten, twelve hours a day. Other men – I don’t know – they do it easier. (813)

What can be read between the lines in Willy’s last comment, is that even though he works hard, “other men” work smarter, i.e. get bigger profits with less hard work. In Porter’s terms, what in part seems to agonize Willy, is that even though he is the one who works the hardest, and therefore should be rewarded accordingly, it is others, those who work smarter and therefore contradict the traditional work ethic, who get the bigger rewards. It is Willy’s tragedy that he simply does not know how to “work smarter”. In addition, it seems that Willy seems to have mixed feelings about the key message of working hard. More aptly put, Willy is a walking, talking epitome of the aforementioned dichotomy between the two ideological paths to success: working hard, and relying on your personality. In Willy’s line of work, personality is key. At least this is an idea that
he seems to believe adamantly – for him, the greatest virtue is to be “well-liked” (813). As he tells his boys, “… the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want” (813).

Of course, the tragedy is that Willy is not that well liked – outside the false haven of his own delusions, that is. In his brief moments of clarity, when he sees reality for what it is, he agonizes over the matter. He explains to his wife Linda why people do not buy from him anymore: “I don’t know the reason for it, but they just pass me by. I’m not noticed” (813). Hence, because he does not possess a charismatic enough character to gain success naturally, he is in a way reduced to working hard for the meager rewards he is able to obtain. But still, there is a contradiction between ideal and reality, since the kind of hard work Willy does is not the romanticized kind traditionally related to the American dream: physically demanding manual labor, whose results you can see and be proud of. Examples would be mining or panning for gold during the gold rush, the dangerous and exhausting way of life the settlers took on conquering new frontiers in the West, or boxing your way out of a ghetto and a life of poverty.

Naturally, such things were not the only ways to success in the 20th century America anymore, as Willy, being a salesman, and knowing people who have become successful in the field, well knows. Still, even though Willy’s chosen profession does not entail boxing, building your own ranch on the wild frontier or anything of the sort, we get hints that Willy, in fact, longs to be a man who works with his hands, a craftsman. He is proud of the ceiling he has put up in the living room, and tries to plant carrots in their backyard. In one of his memories, he pretends to box with his son Biff, seemingly happy. At Willy’s
funeral, Biff sums up his father's accomplishments: “making the stoop, finishing the cellar, putting on the new porch … there was more of him in that front stoop then in all the sales he ever made” (842). The Loman’s neighbor Charley instantly agrees: “He was a happy man with a batch of cement” (842).

This dichotomy in Willy’s psyche is a key element in trying to understand his character. His visible incoherence stems partly from his inability to face his miserable situation: he seems to cherish the idea of rewarding hard (manual) work, but has still chosen to go the other way, trying to use his personality to gain success in life as a salesman – an endeavor in which he has more or less failed. This ideological juxtaposition is perhaps best seen in the scene between Willy and Howard, the young executive of the firm Willy works for. Willy goes in to ask for an advance to pay the bills, and a transfer to a desk job, to get off the road, because he is, as he puts it to Howard, “just a little tired” (825). At the end of their meeting, Howard fires Willy after thirty-four years in the company.

In the disturbing and compassion-evoking scene, Willy tells Howard, who is “barely interested” (825), a lengthy story of how he became a salesman:

Willy: When I was a boy … there was a question in my mind as to whether selling had a future to me. Because in those days I had a yearning to go to Alaska. See, there were three gold strikes in one month in Alaska and I felt like going out. (825)

It is natural for a boy or a young man to crave adventure, such as going to find gold in Alaska, but what is more interesting here is that Willy clearly has had second thoughts about his abilities to succeed as a salesman. In addition, he has thought of going to Alaska as a means of becoming rich to the extent that it
would substitute going into the business of selling, as he has evidently seen the
choice as an either-or situation. It seems that Willy has been at a crossroads in
his life: should he strive for success in Alaska through hard physical work
outdoors, or become a salesman, who uses his charisma and personality rather
than his hands to get ahead? He goes on to explain what it was that ultimately
made him choose the latter:

Willy: … I was almost decided to go [to Alaska], when I met a
Salesman … His name was David Singleman. And he was eighty-
four years old … [he would] pick up his phone and call the buyers,
and without ever 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. (825)

Willy rambles on, but finally gets to the main thing that made the old man so
appealing to him: “Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go
… into … different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved
and helped by so many different people?” (825). He then makes a point about
Singleman’s death, which, according to Willy, was “the death of a salesman”
(825), apparently meaning that he met his end during a business trip, and
hundreds of buyers and salesmen came to his funeral, and “[t]hings were sad
on a lotta trains for months after that” (825).

It becomes evident that, for Willy, the primary measure of success or happiness
is how much and how widely one is liked by other people. This ideal overrides
his desire for material success, as he does not care if Singleman was rich or
not, all that matters is that everyone loved him. Willy also regards Singleman’s
old age as some kind of merit, as if it were some sort of testament to his success that he kept on working until his last breath. What Willy fails to see, of course, is that very likely Singleman was struggling to make ends meet just like him. Why else would he have been working himself to death (literally) at such a high age? To be 84 years old and constantly travel on business sounds grotesque, not something people would dream about. Why, then, does Willy?

In my view, what we have here is an example of Willy’s ultimate tragedy, the primary inner conflict in his own American dream from which all the other conflicts arise. For Willy, the means have become more important than the end. For him, the main issue is not to get rich or successful by any means possible, as the alleged, skewed 20th and 21st century American dream supposedly suggests. Regardless of whether he knows it himself, his goal is to live his life the way successful people do according to the American dream, and, in Willy’s logic, this lifestyle would then be somehow rewarded with success and happiness. This idea, when we think of it, is fairly close to Porter’s second key message, that everyone has a chance of success (452). The problem for Willy is that, in his fragile mind, the idea of the American dream, and the guidelines for leading a successful life it entails, have gotten utterly confused due to the mixed messages sent by the society in the ideal’s name, and idolizing Dave Singleman is the direct result of this confusion.

This claim may as yet sound somewhat unfounded, but to clarify my point and further support the argument, I turn once more to the scene between Willy and Howard. When Willy first talks about going to Alaska, he mentions his father, who “was an adventurous man”, had been there for many years. Had Willy left
for Alaska, he would have probably done so with his older brother Ben, together trying to find their father and “settle in the North with the old man” (825). Willy idolizes his adventurous, backwoods father, who has left his family behind in order to go and find gold. Of course we do not really know what Willy’s father had done in Alaska, or whether he ever actually had gone there, and as tempting it would be to play with the idea, for our purposes it suffices to know that Willy thought so.

In my opinion, through his attitudes toward his father, the young Willy, as depicted by his older self, represents a very strong belief in the first of Porter’s key messages, “hard work is rewarded” (542). The father in Willy’s eyes is a self-made man, who risks danger and isn’t afraid to roll up his sleeves to dig his fortune out of the hard, frozen ground. Again, Willy fails to notice, or deliberately dismisses the other side of the story, that their father clearly wasn’t there for Willy or his family when he was growing up. But the fact that Willy does not mention this obvious downside, and only sings Dad’s praises, can be interpreted as further evidence of Willy’s values – success (for men, at least) comes through hard work, and if that means neglecting your family, maybe that is just the price you have to pay for making something of yourself.

On the other hand, the profession of a salesman as the road to success is, as stated before, in line with the second key message, which emphasizes the importance of personality in gaining success. Willy reveals that his initial aspirations leaned towards going into sales, rather than leaving for Alaska. True, he expresses his doubts as to his chances to succeed, which clearly shows he knew he might not have the needed qualities of a successful
salesman, such as charisma. But the fact that he ended up choosing the profession, despite his hesitations, is a strong indicator that his values didn’t contradict the second key message, quite the contrary. The young Willy, planning his future, represents the simultaneous belief in both of the first two key messages: hard work pays off, and everyone can succeed in life, an idea which at the time had been translated into a question of personal appeal by those preaching the gospel of the American dream around the country.

This does not sound too contradictory as such. Most people can believe in both mantras simultaneously without ever running into trouble. Anyone can become successful, but in most cases it takes a lot of hard work, and being a likable person could have a positive effect on the outcome of your efforts. There’s nothing wrong with this logic. But Willy is not “anyone” or “everyone”. As Hoelever points out, he is “Everyman” (77), or close to one at least, a representation of the society around him and, as it happens, a warning example more than anything else. In Willy we see all that can go wrong when the national ethos and ideals trail far behind economic and technical progress.

Here we have, in my view, the first indication that the play actually supports the American dream and pleads for its restoration, as opposed to simply condemning the concept. We have found that, beneath his illogicalities and controversies, Willy firmly believes in the first two key messages, which inarguably are benevolent and virtuous ideas as such. What turns Willy into a tragic character is his inability to adapt these fundamental beliefs to the ways of modern society. He is unable to break away from his impractical ideals, and this leads to his inevitable destruction.
This inability is conveyed through Willy’s desire to achieve both goals simultaneously; he wants to be an outdoors worker, but at the same time, the most likable and successful salesman there is. But how do you call driving a car and talking on the phone “hard work” in the sense Willy’s father perceived the concept? One answer is that a part of Willy still wants to please his father and that he is to some extent ashamed of not going the other way, not leaving for Alaska.

Looking at the way Willy talks about his profession, he seems to think of himself as something of a modern day explorer or conqueror of wild frontiers: “I’m vital in New England … When I went North for the first time, the Wagner Company didn’t know where New England was!” (Miller, *Salesman* 807). The irony is, naturally, that New England is not an unknown territory, and therefore Willy’s romanticized view of the traveling his line of work entails is not a very strong mental image. But it is possibly enough for Willy to restore some pride in his work. And this is where old Singleman enters the picture.

In my view, the reason Willy takes so strongly to his old colleague is that, in him, Willy sees the answer how to relate salesmanship with the kind of hard work his father could be proud of. Ironically, by working himself to death, Singleman proved himself to be a true workman. Because if a job that kills you is not hard work, what is? The fact that he was so well liked that hundreds of clients and colleagues came to his funeral, completes the legend. In Willy’s eyes Singleman had it all, not in spite of, but because of his old age and death on the road.
Willy’s admiration of Singleman represents the culmination of the juxtaposition between the traditional American dream and the changing demands of society. Willy’s failure to fit the two concepts together is conveyed, for example, through his encounters with modern technology, especially with cars: he cannot open the windshield of his new car (808), and when Howard asks does not Willy’s car have a radio, he replies: “Well, yeah, but who ever thinks of turning it on?” (825). In addition, Willy dies in a car crash, and is therefore in a sense killed by modern technology which, by extension, represents the modern society.

In this view, by highlighting the juxtaposition, the play does support the original American dream, asking for its redemption: it is not the American dream that drives Willy to his death, as the concept in its traditional form, that is, in line with Porter’s first two key messages, is very favorable and virtuous in essence. It is the rapidly changing world around him that is ultimately the cause for his regrettable circumstances. The dream encompasses Porter’s benevolent key messages that “hard work pays off” (542) and “everyone has a chance of success” (542) which lie at the core of the concept, and, as I have shown, also at the core Willy’s world view, but have been distorted by the shifting ways and values of the surrounding society.

2.1.2 Identity and Education

Seeing that Willy’s choice of profession is problematic, as he is apparently in a lose-lose situation that finally drives him to his premature destruction, one cannot help but wonder why Willy has not tried his hand at other professions? Why stubbornly stick with the initial choice, when that rocky path is so visibly
unrewarding? One could say that Willy simply suffers from some sort of mental deficiency. But on what grounds would such an argument be plausible? Certainly, there are signs that Willy is unstable, and I myself exploit that fact in my analysis, but to say that his actual mental state would be the cause for his pathetic situation is far-fetched, as we know practically nothing of Willy’s past or medical history. All we see of the past is what Wily imagines it to be. In addition, the argument is not only weak, but would also be devastating to the play’s tragic elements, greatly undermining the sympathy we feel for Willy.

What, then, could be the logic behind Willy’s illogical behavior? In my opinion, this can again be explained by Hoelever’s notion: Willy is a kind of Everyman (77-80). Miller uses Willy’s character to embody dichotomies in society, and to show us the problems they produce. The specific question of why Willy does not try other professions has, to my mind, everything to do with the third of Porter’s key messages, according to which work should be meaningful.

Porter argues that “[t]he idea that work should be meaningful can also be exaggerated into the extreme that work comes to be the only source of personal identity” (546). Willy, I would maintain, is a good example of this worst-case scenario. This is not to be confused with an idea that work would make him happy – for the most part, it does quite the opposite. Furthermore, Willy is even handed an alternative on a silver plate: his neighbor Charley offers him a better-paying job. But Willy refuses to take it. Why? The only possible explanation is that in taking the more lucrative job, he would lose something even greater in the exchange. This something that evidently surpasses all material wellbeing, I claim, can only be his identity.
In the eyes of Willy Loman, there is very little meaning in his existence. As William Aarnes states – referring to Miller’s own words, that “meaning is the ultimate reward for having lived” (In “On Social Plays”, as quoted by Aarnes) – “[i]n Death of a Salesman Miller denies this ‘reward’ to Willy Loman” (95). What once was respect and idolization on the part of his family has turned into pity and concern. He is not liked in the business world. He is not a craftsman, and did not go to Alaska and experience adventures when he had the chance. He only has his 34 years of salesmanship. When he begs Howard for a job, he constantly lowers his salary demands to the point of ridiculousness, showing that money is ultimately of no importance. The job is important, because that is all that is left of him. Even his family, it seems, is of no consequence to him, their love and appreciation mean next to nothing to Willy. Hence, when Charley offers the other position, Willy gets angry. This might be due to his own realization that Charley is offering him everything he wanted from Howard, but is unable to take him up on the offer, because in a way that would mean throwing away the past 34 years, and along with them any sense of belonging or personal identity. It is also arguable that Willy cannot see the reasons behind his inability, since if he did, if he realized that the only thing keeping him from having a steady-paying job that did not include travel, are his own inhibitions, he could overcome them and take a turn for the better in his life. But alas, of course, he does not.

Willy’s and Charley’s discussion also calls forth the contradiction of Porter’s key message, that “personal investment does not elicit organizational loyalty” (542). Expressly represented in Howard firing Willy, the matter troubles Willy greatly, and Charley tries to make him understand:

Charley: Willy, when’re you gonna realize that them things don’t mean anything? You named him Howard, but you can’t sell that. The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you’re a salesman, and you don’t know that.

(Miller, *Salesman* 830)

Charley’s speech sums Willy’s problematic relationship to the key message about meaningful work. He has exaggerated the message to the extreme, to the point that his work is his only source of identity, but fails to see that others might not do the same, that in fact some people’s values might contradict the message altogether, resulting in indifference to personal effort as grounds for organizational loyalty towards employees (G. Porter, 542).

Once again, it is crucial to notice that beneath Willy’s jumbled logic, his belief in the key message is unwavering. As with Porter’s key messages of hard work and equal chances to success (542), it is not Willy’s belief in the message per se that instigates his tragic failure to better his situation, but his inability to adapt his beliefs to the ways of the modern society. Willy wants to believe that the world still works according to the traditional American dream, that is, for example, that one’s “work should be meaningful” (542) and it should, at least to some extent, “elicit organizational loyalty” (542) from the employer’s part, all of which are inarguably respectable notions.

As regards the question of meaningful work, it is again the merciless ways of society that pull the rug from under Willy, not Willy’s belief in the traditional
American dream. To fire someone “past sixty years of age” (Miller, *Salesman* 806) after 34 years of service sounds harsh and unfair, even by today’s standards. Therefore, Willy requesting Howard to let him stay with the company is in no way unreasonable or excessive. Had Howard held the same traditional and virtuous values as Willy, he would probably have let him continue in the company one way or another for the few remaining years before retirement. It is Howard, then, clearly representing the cut-throat business world of today, whose immoral and unethical conduct is the reason for Willy being fired, and Willy is quite entitled to feel betrayed, as his belief in the employer’s responsibility over the employee’s well-being is fair and just, not some delirious fantasy.

Finally, we move on to the last of the four key messages analyzed in the beginning, namely that “education is key to betterment” (542) as opposed to the character of Willy Loman. And as it happens, the dilemma of education versus success is very explicitly dealt with in the play. It is the one motif about which there can be no mistake as to what the play’s attitude is: education pays off. The message is primarily conveyed through two characters, Willy’s son Biff, and their neighbor Charley’s son Bernard. However, Willy is the catalyst between the two, putting things in motion, and ultimately the boys’ underlined differences say more about Willy than about either of the youngsters.

In Willy’s reminiscences, Bernard is a nerdy little kid, “an anemic” (Miller, *Salesman* 812). He idolizes the athletic, outdoorsy Biff, but tries to get him to study for his forthcoming finals in mathematics. Willy and his boys shrug Bernard off as a boring bookworm who does not know anything of the ways of
the world. Willy goes to great lengths in talking Bernard down to his sons:
“Bernard can get the best grades in school, y’understand, but when he gets out
in the business world, y’understand, you are going to be five times ahead of
him. That’s why I thank Almighty God that you’re both built like Adonises” (812).
It later turns out that Willy forced Bernard to give Biff the answers for the
mathematics test. In spite of his father’s efforts, Biff still failed the test, and
therefore never got to go to college. Bernard, on the other hand, became a
successful lawyer.

In the story of Biff and Bernard, Willy and his actions draw a complete picture of
the key message, with both the exaggerations and the contradictions, in the end
validating the original message, “education is key to betterment” (G. Porter
542). It is crucial to keep in mind what is fact and what is fiction here: we only
see Bernard as a kid through Willy, not in actual flashbacks. Therefore, Willy’s
sons’ agreement with him over the unimportance of schooling, and the
condescending attitude towards Bernard all three Loman men express, are
ultimately products of Willy’s mind, and thus compromised in trustworthiness.
But when supported by the events we know to be real – Willy trusting Biff to get
into a college on a sports scholarship, then making Bernard give the test
answers to Biff, who still flunks it (due to his shock over witnessing his father’s
adultery) – the big picture begins to emerge.

Even though Biff is no straight-A student by nature, Willy has been very excited
and proud over the prospect of Biff getting into college. In this light, it seems
that deep down, despite his ranting to the contradictory, Willy understands the
importance of, if not education per se, at least formal qualification in the modern
world, which a college degree would provide. In a convoluted way, Willy thus represents a belief in the exaggeration of the key message, that the “respect for others is conditional on classification” (542). And what does he do to verify the outcome he wants? He makes Bernard give the answers to Biff (Miller, *Salesman* 814). This action further shows Willy’s belief in the exaggeration rather than the core myth: it is the formal qualification that counts, not the actual learning. It is much more important to get his son into college, than to make sure he studies hard enough to get there on his own.

In addition, by getting Biff the answers, Willy acts in perfect accordance with the contradiction of the key message, “looking for today’s shortcut” (542). At the same time, however, Willy acts against his notion of means being more important than the goal. This is another testament to Willy’s contradicted character: even though personally Willy holds a certain life style in higher regard than actual success, when it comes to his son, it seems that the ends justify the means. It is, of course, only natural for a parent to try to provide the best possible circumstances in life for their children, but Willy tries to do so by contradicting his values, which, as we have seen, are linked closely with the traditional American dream. It is crucial to note that nothing good comes out of Willy contradicting his values, as his gimmicks do not pay off: Biff does not go to college, and is instead stuck in a limbo of not knowing what to do with his life. When contrasted with Bernard’s success as a lawyer, a status one arguably achieves only by studying extremely hard, the message is loud and clear: stay in school.
We have now analyzed Willy and his convoluted values and inner conceptualizations of the American dream through the four key messages taken from Gayle Porter’s theory on traditional work ethic. It is time now to summarize our findings and draw some conclusions.

2.2 Conclusions

First of all, it has become painfully clear that the American dream, as an idea, is vague and contradictory, and has shifted in meaning over the centuries. However, as contrasting Willy with G. Porter’s theoretical framework of traditional work ethics shows, some core elements of the dream have persisted through time. What still lays at the heart of what we understand the dream to be – albeit become distorted, contradicted, and exaggerated – are the good and virtuous principles that “hard work is rewarded”, “everyone has a chance for success”, “education is key to betterment”, “and that work should be meaningful” (542).

It is on this basis I have aimed to make my main point, that the play is actually a plea for the restoration of the American dream. All of the above core ideas are, unquestionably, positive and favorable in essence. Finding them to be at the heart of the play, that is, at the heart of its main character’s worldview, strongly suggests that the ultimate attitude of the play towards the American dream is also a positive one. Of course, it is evident that the skewed ways Willy interprets these key messages, partly due to his own contradictory nature, partly due to the distortions the society has imposed on them, cause him torment, and finally drive him to a catastrophic ending. But to leave it at that, to accept that the play
merely condemns the American dream because of Willy’s tragedy, is in itself a distorted view of the dream, and of the play’s commentary on it. This is what I think Linda’s words “Attention, attention must be finally paid to [Willy Loman]” (Miller, *Salesman* 819), try to convey. One cannot always deduct motivation from the outcome, or the cause on the basis of the effect.

By understanding Willy, and finding the logic behind his illogical behavior, we simultaneously and inevitably come to understand the motives behind the play’s critique of the American dream, and find a kind of moral in it: the play shows the ways the distortions of the dream can destroy us and the society we live in. But more than an accusation, it is a cry for help. Willy Loman dies so that the rest of us would realize that what was once good and pure in the American dream has not died or vanished. This moral is just hidden beneath a scattering of ulterior motives, twisted values, and problems brought on by too swift a modernization in society. *Death of a Salesman* is a warning, not a verdict: yes, the woods are burning, but we do not need to be consumed by the fire. We need, however, to take a step back, look through the smoke, and get back to the roots.

We have taken only the first step towards understanding Willy and his dreams. Now it is time to turn our attention towards the other side of our interpretation of the enigmatic protagonist, that is, how he is represented in and by the other Loman family members. But in order to do so, we need to study the role of expressionism more closely.
3 Willy and Expressionism

In the beginning, I set out to show that the expressionism of the play suggests a reading where some of the other characters can be seen on one level as reflecting Willy, helping us to understand him. This is not an altogether revolutionary idea, as some critics have already made similar points. One of the most radical views is put forward by Hoelever, who argues that instead of merely expressing the moods of characters or events, Miller uses expressionism to actively focus attention on the protagonist, to the point where it is difficult to tell when the audience is seeing things through Willy’s eyes and when not, resulting in a situation where “all characters … represent aspects of his splintered mind” (77-78). Although a fascinating idea, we do not need to go quite so far, as the expressionistic connection between some of the key characters and Willy can be found without altogether accepting Hoelever’s ideas. I shall make my analysis of expressionism a sort of journey inwards, starting with the exterior motifs (that is, the staging and stage directions), and work my way toward the inner world of the play and its characters.

3.1 The House and the Trees

The play starts with lengthy stage directions describing the setting. At the center of the stage is the Loman house. It is described as “wholly or, in some places, partially transparent” (Miller, *Salesman* 806), and in front of the house is a “forward area [that] serves as the back yard as well as the locale of all Willy’s imaginings” (806). Hence, the house is expressionistically structured with
transparent elements and a double-functioned front area. This suggests that the house itself carries some symbolic meaning, for it is deliberately differentiated from a regular house, which would serve only as a physical habitat. What, then, could this symbol be? Sigmund Freud’s ideas offer one possible answer.

Freud’s most famous psychoanalytical studies are concerned with the interpretation of dreams and the symbols that occur in them. One of his presumptions is that in dreams, a house most likely represents the human body (385-417). Remembering Miller’s initial ideas for the play, the giant head onstage, and the working title The Inside of His Head, the reference to Freud suddenly does not sound that far-fetched. And whose head could the house represent, if not Willy’s?

The most curious line in the house description reads: “An air of dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality” (806). In my view, even if one is inclined to shrug off the Freudian interpretation of the house, this small bit of vague instruction suggests that, throughout the play, we look at things more or less from Willy’s point of view. This is because of one characteristic no one else in the play but Willy possesses: only his dreams are shown. All of the surreal features of the play representing dreams, memories, or sentiments, are instigated by, or directed at Willy. Thus, if the house, the center setting of all action and constantly visible to the audience, is supposed to have “an air of dream” (806), there is a strong sense of Willy Loman’s perspective as central.

Another aspect that has been often overlooked, but deserves our attention, is the trees. More precisely, there are insinuations of different kinds of trees and other flora that may once have been, but are no more. The very beginning of
the play reads: “A melody is heard, played upon a flute … telling of grass and trees and the horizon” (806). It is worth noting, that the opening scene with its expressionist use of house and tree imagery resembles that of Eugene O’Neill’s 1924 play *Desire under the Elms*, also a powerful family drama, where these expressionist motifs are used to convey the awaiting tragedy. Whether O’Neill’s work in fact inspired Miller in creating *Death of a Salesman* remains a mystery, but the connection is too obvious to let go unnoticed.

The flute, it later becomes clear, refers to Willy’s idolized father who used to sell flutes. The reference to grass and trees, however, is there to emphasize the gap between past and present. The flute is heard before the curtain rises, and when it does, the juxtaposition between the nature-inspired music and the grey, dark urban environment that surrounds the Loman house is revealed. Willy rants in the opening scene: “The way they boxed us in here … The grass don’t grow anymore, you can’t raise a carrot in the back yard … Remember those beautiful elm trees out there?” (808) He goes on to list all kinds of plants that used to grow nearby, clearly missing those old days gone by.

Hence, trees, flowers, and other plants are used to represent the positive aspects in Willy’s imaginings. When Willy falls into happy remembrances, the stage directions state that, “the entire house and surroundings become covered in leaves” (811). References to trees are made throughout the play, and all of them represent positive things to Willy, often in terms of success: Ben has gotten rich “in the jungle” (817), and he asks Willy to go to Alaska to make money on timber (826 -827). The most striking of the tree references is Willy’s habit of shouting “The woods are burning!” when crisis is upon him. This
apparent gibberish only has meaning in the play’s context: for Willy, burning woods are analogical with the destruction of the good, which, in his case, is almost synonymous with modernization and the rapid changing of society. Parker states that the fact that the burning woods are contrasted with the green leaves that appear with Willy’s happy remembrances of the past, “it is obvious that the technique has moved from realistic symbolism to outright expressionism” (43). And, in the middle of it all, is Willy, and the turmoil that goes on inside his head.

3.2 Being Willy Loman

Moving on from the setting and scenery, the next stage of the analysis is to see what these expressionistic features have to do with the characters. To begin with, I think that we have established that the expressionism centers on Willy. What still needs to be made clear, however, is that the expressionistic techniques are not used only in Willy’s memories, but also in scenes that take place in the present. I agree with Parker that “the extension of expressionism into non-memory-scenes means that we see even events that Willy did not experience as though through Willy’s eyes, as he might have experienced them” (47). This interpretation leads to a situation where even characters and their actions in the present reality are filtered through Willy’s point of view, suggesting the action is more or less completely shown from Willy’s perspective. Consequently, this ultimately turns the audience into something of a crowd of Willy Lomans, passing judgment on him not as external judges, looking at things from the outside in the light of objective evidence, but from
within, from, as it were, the point of view of the defendant. However, the audience also receives additional information on the main character’s mindset, thus understanding the movements of his “splintered mind” (Hoelever 78) better than he does himself.

To be sure, I do not claim that every single moment, word and action in the play is categorically interpreted through Willy’s viewpoint, because such an argument would need a line-by-line analysis of the whole play. Suffice it to note that the element of expressionism in the play is on the one hand closely connected with Willy’s thoughts, and on the other hand so intertwined into the structure of the play, that it has a tendency to turn the focus to Willy’s perspective even in moments when the notion is not expressly stated.

Next, we will turn our attention towards the other members of the Loman family, Linda, Biff and Happy, and through analyzing the expressionism of the play and its effects on character interpretation, study how the other member’s of the immediate Loman family can be seen on one level as reflections, representations, or extensions of Willy’s psyche.

4 The Three Other Lomans

Analyzing Willy, Charlotte F. Otten bases her method on the assumption that “if you want to know who a man is, find out who his family is” (86), and I agree. In this chapter, we will first look at the family as a whole on the expressionist level, and then delve deeper into the analysis of each family member one by one, combining the two analytical paths we have trodden; the analysis of the
American dream in the light of Porter’s theoretical scheme, and the study of the play’s expressionism as a joining factor between Willy and the other family members. As a result, we will finally be able to form a more complete conception of the tragic protagonist’s American dream, and, consequently, of the play’s commentary on the American dream in general and its restoration. But before we can study each family member’s respective relation to Willy and his American dream, we need to take a look at the family as a whole, and establish some key aspect of each individual’s personality, as well as of their mutual dynamics.

4.1 The Family Feud

One of the most tragic features of the play is Willy’s indifference towards his family. His boys admire him, or at least have done so in the past, and his wife is the only person in the world who, it seems, loves him unconditionally. Still, even though being well liked by others is, as we have stated, more or less Willy’s primary concern in life, being well liked by his family clearly is not enough to make him happy, or even content with his situation. In this chapter, I will study the role of the immediate Loman family as regards Willy’s personality and his American dream.

According to Bernard F. Dukore, Willy’s negligence of his family is in itself a distortion of sorts of the American dream, since, in his view, one facet of the dream is “that of the family as bedrock of society: whatever Willy’s deficiencies as breadwinner and personal charmer, his wife adores him and until Biff’s discovery of his adultery, he and Happy idolize him” (18). However, this does
not mean that the family is not an important theme in the story. On the contrary, the concept of the family is quite central for the whole play. Irving Jacobson maintains that:

What [Willy] Loman wants, and what success means in *Death of a Salesman*, is intimately related to his own, and the playwright’s, sense of family. Family dreams extend backward in time to interpret the past, reach forward in time to project images of the future, and pressure reality in the present to conform to memory and imagination. (248)

Jacobson’s idea of “family dreams” (248) is interesting, since it is the first step towards an interpretation where the notion of family and the play’s expressionism are tightly intertwined. Let us study this idea further.

On the surface plot level, we already get hints that the other members of Willy’s immediate family, meaning the boys and Linda, have a double-function: they all strive, to an extent, to please Willy, or in Hoelever’s opinion, “Willy … has forced his family to play the parts that he has designed for them. They are all characters in a dream, Willy’s dream of reality” (78). What this means is that they encourage Willy’s delusions, and partly even buy into them, and none more so than his steadfast wife. However, in the reality scenes, interestingly, most of Linda’s lines are directed to the boys. What is more, they mainly argue – Biff criticizing their father in one way or another, Linda standing up for Willy, and Happy somewhere in the middle.

These occasions could be seen as different parts of Willy’s mind struggling with each other. Since, if Linda represents Willy’s inner rejection of reality, the boys
essentially represent the contradicting sides of Willy’s personality: his doubts of himself, contradictory desires, guilt, and falsely positive self-image. In the preface to the play in *Types of Drama*, it says: “… Biff and Happy can be seen as two aspects of Willy. In this view, Biff more or less represents Willy’s spiritual needs, and Happy represents his materialism and his sexuality” (843). This view is far too simplistic, however. It is true that the boys represent different, and in many ways opposite, aspects of Willy, but the division is not so clear-cut. More to the point, their dialogues can, in the expressionistic view, be set in Willy’s head; the tormented man feeling guilty and unsatisfied, but still desperately trying to tell himself otherwise. Let me elaborate.

In their first dialogue, Biff recaps his situation in life after years of odd jobs: “… I suddenly get the feeling, my God! I’m not getting anywhere! … I’ve always made a point of not wasting my life, and every time I come back I know that all I’ve been done is to waste my life” (Miller, *Salesman* 809). This is what Willy must have been going through for years, going on the road and coming back basically empty-handed. During the same conversation, Happy tells Biff about the merchandise manager of the company he works in: “… he just built a beautiful estate … He can’t enjoy it once it’s finished. And I know that’s just what I would do. I don’t know what the hell I’m working for” (810). This strongly implies Willy’s frustration over the fact that his work is by no means productive or otherwise physical or concrete. Biff replies: “Men built like we are should be working out in the open” (810), clearly referring to physically demanding work outdoors, represented, for example, by Willy’s father.
This conversation is a great example of Willy’s inner conflicts: he respects physical work, but has chosen to become a salesman, who doesn’t build anything or produce anything. He could probably live with this, if his career was lucrative. But it is not. Then again, it is the only thing he knows. In addition, it needs to be taken into account that Biff has seen his father’s adultery, and is troubled by it, to the extent that the revelation of what Biff has seen becomes the climatic point of the play. So, a part of the guilt Willy carries from this incident is tied to Biff’s character. Therefore, in my opinion, Biff and Happy do not represent distinct sides of Willy, but more, as a pair, Willy’s overlapping feelings, thoughts, and contradictory nature.

Thus, getting back to the family drama, Linda and the boys arguing over Willy is an analogue of Willy’s inner battle to keep his dream intact by trying to refuse the reality that keeps disturbing the deluded peace inside his mind, from the outside as well as from within. A clear example can be found in Linda’s comment to Biff: “It’s when you come home he’s always the worst” (818). Biff retorts: "Stop making excuses for him!” (819). The remark about Biff coming home is highly symbolical: Willy cannot have peace of mind when his past mistakes and dissatisfaction over his life, the things Biff especially represents, occupy his mind. But there is more to the story with regard to Biff and Willy’s relationship. As we shall see through analyzing the three Lomans, the relationship between Biff and Willy is actually the most central element in the play with regard to restoring the American dream.
4.2 Biff Loman

As stated, the boys, as a pair, work as an analogue for some of Willy’s inner conflicts. However, of the two, Biff proves to be the more central character, as a large part of the play’s drama revolves around Willy’s and Biff’s complex relationship. If Linda is determined to preserve and protect her husband’s peace of mind at all cost, Biff is just as prepared to go as far as needed to make his father see things for what they are, and take responsibility for his actions. Taking into account the expressionist aspects of the play, I claim that the reason for Biff’s confrontational attitude towards his father is that Biff works as the reflection of his father’s actual situation in life, that which Willy cannot or will not acknowledge. To prove this claim, first of all, we need to study the similarities between the two men.

Both Biff and Willy have tried and failed in the business world, and are highly depressed by the fact. What is more, in Porter’s terms, Biff expresses the same stern belief in the first key message as his father: he yearns to gain success through hard work. However, both men have the same kind of hopelessly romanticized vision of what that hard work should be like. Whereas Willy has found some sort of convoluted way of seeing his line of work as such hard, manual labor, gaining new territory for the company (807), Biff has not. He dreams of being able to work outdoors, as is suggested by his remark that he and Happy “should buy a ranch. Raise cattle, use our muscles” (810).

Biff’s comment reveals the same kind of distorted thinking his father represents: the means becoming more important than the goal. Having tried “twenty or thirty different kind of jobs” (809) without any success, Biff has forfeited the idea of
striving for success in the different ways available to him. Instead, he holds a certain kind of lifestyle in highest regard. In Dukore’s view, Biff’s dream of working on a ranch is the stuff of the fundamental American dream, the dream of being “the farmhand and cowboy” (19). It is worth noting, however, that Biff’s dream is quite unrealistic in the same way Willy’s dreams of going to Alaska or being able to work hard at 84 years. For someone with no money of their own, buying a ranch in the “West” (810) and leading some kind of cowboy way of life in the mid-1900’s United States sounds far-fetched.

What is more, he shows no effort to realize his dream during the play. This is, I think, because dreaming of his own farm is for Biff what dreaming of business success or going to Alaska is for Willy: a way of escaping the anguishing reality. Biff is not going to buy a ranch any more than his father is going to join Ben in Alaska. In this respect, both Biff and Willy dream the American dream, but at the same time they know that their dreams are unattainable.

Furthermore, Biff has ruined the job opportunities he has had by stealing, as he tells Willy: “I stole myself out of every good job since high school!” (840). In itself, the stealing is quite a clear-cut representation of two distortions of Porter’s key messages: the contradiction of “hard work will be rewarded” (542) into “get what you can today” and “education is key to betterment” (542) being contradicted with “looking for today’s shortcut” (542). These key message contradictions match those of Willy, who also on one level believes that hard work pays off and that everyone has a chance of success, but still gets the math test answers for Biff, representing the belief in the contradiction “looking for today’s shortcut”. Zhao makes a good point that “Willy and Biff, both failures,
contrast totally to Charley’s and Bernard’s success” (126). Bernard got into college, but Biff did not. Charley does well in business, but Willy does not. So far, it seems, that the apple has not fallen far from the tree. But even if Biff and Willy are remarkably alike as regards their dreams, hopes and anguishes, why does tension rise between the two Loman men? I agree with Zhao that both are in a sense failures, since both have failed in what they have strived for. But the connection is more complex.

First of all, they do have one difference that, in my reading, is the fundamental cause for the ever-building dramatic tension between father and son. Whereas Willy can only dream of combining hard work, success, and being well liked by idolizing Singleman, Biff has intentionally thrown away a life of success: he was the star of his football team, but has dropped football and intentionally spoiled every job opportunity he has had, ever since he witnessed his father’s adultery. Biff has actually lived, at least for a short time, the dream Willy only imagines. Willy remembers Biff looking like “a young god. Hercules – something like that” (Miller, *Salesman* 822) on the football field, everyone cheering “Loman! Loman! Loman!” (822). Furthermore, Dukore notes, that, “Biff worked as hard and successfully at football as Bernard does at academic studies” (18). Suddenly, Biff seems to represent the complete opposite, mirror image of Willy. What can this mean?

What we can deduct from this dichotomy, on the expressionistic level, is that Biff offers us one narrative on Willy’s story in its true form, without delusion or denial blurring the line between causes and effects, reality and fantasy. Before the adultery, Willy was also living the dream in a way, or at least he had all the
makings of the dream in his hands, and most likely the optimism that rises from promising prospects fueling his strive towards it. He had a loving family who looked up to him, and a decent career not to be ashamed of, driving his precious “Chevvy” (Miller, Salesman 813) from town to town “slaughterin’ em” (812) and “knockin’ em cold” (812) business-wise. All in all, Willy was actually living the American dream, living up to Porter’s key messages of hard work paying off, meaningful work, and trusting everyone, including himself, to have a chance of success. This better past is paralleled with, and conveyed through, Biff’s successful football career.

The breaking point has naturally been Willy committing adultery, and Biff seeing it. If we go back to Dukore’s idea of the family being the “bedrock of society” (18) as regards the American dream, it could be said that, by committing adultery, by neglecting his family, Willy destroyed this bedrock, and along with it the American dream and the moral values it entails. Biff’s attempts to ruin his own life by flunking tests, quitting football, and stealing in order to get fired, represent Willy punishing himself for destroying the dream and his family. Through Biff’s expressionistic functions, we find evidence that Willy is aware of what he has done to his family, experiencing guilt and shame to the point of not being able to handle it, feeling, as Benziman states, “paranoid exaggeration of reality’s unpleasant aspects” (30) that rises from “Willy’s fundamental sense of inferiority” (30), which drives him to his delusions.

It is the latter phenomenon, the feeling of inferiority, which is largely represented through Biff. Willy, in a sense, transposes his own paranoid exaggerations onto Biff by conveying completely contradictory messages: first he calls Biff “a lazy
bum” (Miller, *Salesman* 807), and in the next moment states that “[t]here’s one thing about Biff – he’s not lazy” (808). Benziman continues that:

>[A]s much as Biff in his father’s eyes may be either a miserable failure or a tremendous success, so there is no middle state for Willy himself … This dichotomy has to do with the tremendous pressure to live up to the demands of what Willy construes as the American dream: if you are not a great success, you are worth nothing. (30)

Whereas Willy has been detached from reality due to this pressure and feelings of guilt and shame, Biff all but relishes them, using the frustration they have caused him as momentum against his father. The tension breaks only right before the dramatic ending, when Biff finally lets it all out on Willy, bursting with tears. He cries: “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!” (Miller, *Salesman* 840).

After Biff is done, Willy’s reaction is surprising, to say the least: “He cried! Cried to me *(he is choking with his love, and now cries out his promise.)* That boy – that boy is going to be magnificent!” (840). Even at this dire moment, Willy is unable to see the wood for the trees. He is as caught up as ever in the fantasy of Biff becoming a great success – something he himself always wanted to be, more than anything else, but blew his chance. This is the final piece of evidence that Biff and Willy have been on the same road to ruin, the former a spitting image of the latter in many respects, but their difference is that, for Willy, there is no turning back. He is simply too far-gone to ever be able to fully snap out of
his delusions, and we need Biff to show us where Willy had gone wrong. As Ribkoff notes, “[i]t is the confrontation with feelings of shame that enables Biff to find himself, separate his sense of identity from that of his father, and empathize with [him]. Moreover, it is the denial of such feelings that cripples Willy and the rest of the Loman family” (48).

All in all, in my view, Biff’s character works on one level as a window into Willy’s inner workings, partly making visible that which we cannot see by looking at Willy alone. Since, as it is a very difficult to understand Willy’s underlying motives and beliefs through his respective character (especially if watching the play onstage, without the chance to stop and think when needed) due to his mind-boggling behavior, Biff’s character offers us the tools for understanding his illogicalities. He, just as Willy, is torn in two second-guessing his life choices. But where Willy is an introvert who has disappeared into his own fantasies, Biff cries and shouts out the dichotomies and inner conflicts that he and his father share.

This is one thing Biff brings to the table as regards Willy’s American dream. Biff’s character turns our attention towards the problems brought on by the clashing values of the American dream and the society more explicitly than Willy as a character does. Biff highlights the tragic flaw both men share – not being able to accommodate their belief in the traditional values of Porter’s key messages to the demands of the contemporary world. If it were not for Biff, we would more or less just see a deluded man kill himself in order to support his family. Through Biff, we see the tragedy behind the story, the horror of a dream gone awry. However, the relationship between Biff and Willy is not all pain and
anguish. There is also a positive side to the story, one on which I will base claim that the play asks for the restoration, not damnation, of the traditional American dream as portrayed by Porter’s key messages.

As mentioned, even though it becomes clear that for Willy there is no hope for a better tomorrow, for Biff, there is a hint of a brighter future. This idea is conveyed in the final scene at Willy’s funeral. After giving his speech on how “there was more of him [Willy] in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made” (Miller, *Salesman* 842), Biff finally makes the crucial distinction between himself and his father, that they are not one and the same. He says: “He had the wrong dreams. … He never knew who he was” (842), and adds: “I know who I am, kid” (842).

In my view, this is in a sense the climax point of the story between Willy and Biff. Since, as I have explored the similarities between the two both on the expressionist and on the plot level, I think it is arguable to say that, when Biff says his father “never knew who he was” (842), he means that, in a way, neither did he, before now. Both men have struggled with the same demons, but with the difference that, whereas Willy was never able to confront them, Biff has put all his energy into doing exactly that. It could even be argued that Biff’s refusal to close his eyes from the truth – in other words, his refusal to become as deluded as his father – is mainly why he is still alive at the end. They both were on the same tragic path towards destruction, but Biff changed the direction. He could not save his father, but at least he saved himself. He faced the music, and as hard and painful it was, out of the two men, he, in a sense, “c[a]me out number-one man” (842).
Biff’s story is a key element in supporting the claim that the play pleads for the restoration of the American dream. As I have shown, Biff believes in the traditional American dream, that is, in Porter’s key messages, just as strongly as Willy. Still, his beliefs do not drive him to suicide. What is more, out of all the family members at the funeral, Biff seems the most calm and at peace with himself and Willy’s death (Happy still defiantly standing up to their father, and Linda at a loss, overwhelmed by the situation), and most notably, not angry anymore. There is a strong sense that Biff’s burden has somehow been lifted. Of course, on the expressionist level, this can be seen as an analogue to the relief Willy has found through death. But there is another point one should not overlook.

As I have shown, Willy can be seen as a kind of “Everyman” (Hoelever 78), that is to say, more as a representation of the world around him than that of an individual person, as a passive personification of the status quo rather than an active instigator for change. Even the very name Loman, so near to low man, seems to echo this submissive quality. Biff, however, is presented as quite the opposite, given that one of the determining features of his character is that he actively strives to change the existing circumstances. As both Willy and Biff largely share the same problematic worldview, they can be seen as two sides of the same proverbial coin: Willy as a somewhat passive representation of problems, and Biff as an active attempt to do something about them. As it happens, the active character prevails.

This is, in my opinion, a strong message of hope as regards the American dream: even though the traditional American dream (as presented by Porter’s
key messages) can be a problematic concept in the realm of the modern Western society, it is possible to maintain one’s belief in those benevolent values and still make it in the world. Granted, one could ask how do we know that Biff has not simply changed his views and discarded the traditional American dream, thus finding his peace of mind, but I think such an argument is very far-fetched. Since, we simply see no indications of such change in Biff’s thinking. Moreover, at the funeral, he asks Happy enigmatically: “Why don’t you come with me, Happy?” (Miller, *Salesman* 842) indicating that he already has a plan for the future somewhere else than at his childhood home, suggesting hope, purpose, and “a chance for success” (G. Porter, 542) for him in the days to come.

The clash between the traditional American dream and the modern society may have destroyed Willy, the “Everyman” (Hoelever 78), but Biff, the active individual, gives us hope. The traditional American dream can prevail, if we take matters into our own hands and do not let the modern materialist society skew our values completely. If we understand, in Willy’s words, why “the woods are burning” (Miller, *Salesman* 815), and are determined to do something about it, we can start fresh from the ashes and avoid making the same mistakes again. This idea of hope is the ultimate message Biff’s character conveys to us. Now let us turn to his brother, to see what his character can add to the analysis.

### 4.3 Happy Loman

The initial question that springs to mind concerning Biff’s brother Happy is that, if his brother is so central for understanding Willy, what is the dramatic and
thematic function of Happy? The question is fair and just, since Happy has often been somewhat neglected by critics – or more to the point, his role in the bigger scheme of things has been seen as fairly straightforward and simple. Stephen A. Lawrence puts it quite aptly: "One of the few things that most readers have agreed upon is the characterization of … Happy. We are aware at the close of the play that Happy is as deluded as ever about his father’s worth" (547). Nonetheless, from our viewpoint, he is a crucial piece to the puzzle. By giving him the attention he deserves, I claim we will find that there is more to Happy than the majority of critics have given him credit for, playing as a counterpart for Willy with Biff in the middle, and, on the expressionistic level, revealing quite a few things about their father and his dreams.

I agree with Lawrence that Happy does seem to sympathize more with their father’s delusions than Biff. At Willy’s funeral, Happy stands up for him: “He [Willy] had a good dream. It’s the only dream you can have – to come out number-one man” (Miller, *Salesman* 842). With regard to Happy’s relationship with Willy, however, Lois Gordon makes an important point. Happy is not as close with Willy as Biff, partly saving him from the agony of watching their father’s demise: “Hap[py] … has escaped the closeness with his father that destroys Biff in social terms. Thus worshipping his father from afar, Hap has never fully come to realize that phony part of his father and his father’s dreams” (104). Hence, Happy is more an observer than Biff, and not as emotionally attached to Willy. This notion puts Happy in an interesting position. Keeping this in mind, let us see what we can learn by placing Happy in Porter’s theoretical framework.
The first striking feature of Happy in Porter’s terms is his cynical view of the business world – if he is not that emotionally attached to his father, he most certainly has not invested any more of himself into his work. He tells Biff:

All I can do is wait for the merchandise manager to die. And suppose I get to be merchandise manager? He’s a good friend of mine, and he just built a terrific estate … he can’t enjoy it once it’s finished. And I know that’s just what I would do. I don’t know what the hell I’m working for. (Miller, *Salesman* 810)

In addition, he continues, he has also taken bribes every now and then, and has slept with several of his superiors’ wives and girlfriends. He tries to explain his behavior, not least to himself: “maybe I have an overdeveloped sense of competition or something … I hate myself for it. Because I don’t want the girl, and, still, I take it and – I love it!” (810).

In the speech, Happy perfectly describes the contradictions of Porter’s key message that everyone has a chance of success: “Look out for number one”, “get what you can when you can”, and “primary self-test is realized in competition” (542-543). These contradictions are caused by the pyramid structure that prevails in the business world, which elicits fierce competition (542-543). For Happy, the primary way of getting ahead in working life is by sabotaging others, not competing fair and square by doing his job as well as he can. By seducing his colleagues’ women, he also represents an indifferent attitude towards his job. Advancement is the only thing that might bear some interest for him, maybe not even that, and he certainly does not take any real pride in a job well done. In this light, he also represents the contradictions of the
key message that work should be meaningful: “loss of pride in work and a job well done”, “it’s just a job”, and “a day’s work for a day’s pay” (541-543).

It is crucial to note that, in this respect, Happy’s values seem to be completely opposite to Willy’s. Willy has distorted the same key messages in the opposite direction. He has exaggerated the notion that “work should be meaningful” (541) to the extreme that work has become his “only source of identity” (541), and refuses to accept the fact that “personal investment in work will not elicit organizational loyalty” (541). What, then, is the connection between the two here? What does it matter if Happy sees things differently than his father?

We have to keep in mind that Happy is not that emotionally attached to Willy, or to his job. When we think of Willy’s adamant disposition towards his exaggerations of the idea that work should be meaningful, it is arguable that, once again, he is actively blocking out things he knows to be true deep down. In the scene where Willy goes to ridiculous lengths in trying to persuade Howard to let him keep his job, Willy is simply unable to accept the cold, hard facts that Happy has taken to heart. Willy wants to believe that naming an executive’s son and having a long personal history with a company would bear some sentimental meaning. But, as it happens, he is harshly faced with the fact that they do not, something that Happy does not even try to contradict, but has based his whole work ethic on. Suddenly we see Happy as a cold and analytical personality, and his very name seems ironic and full of expressionist insinuation. If one shows no sentiment and allows no emotional attachment to anything or anyone, one cannot get hurt. Maybe one does not ever get to be that happy, but one does not get hurt either.
In this light, Happy is contradictory to both Willy and Biff, who are, to a large extent, driven by feelings and emotions. Happy represents the impassive realization of the ways of the world, something that Willy lacks completely. Biff, for his part, represents the exhausting struggle between the two sides. Now we can see Willy, Biff, and Happy as a kind of layer-structure of Willy’s mind: On the surface, there is Willy himself as a character, representing his conscious level, the one that keeps pushing reality out of the way. Happy, on the other hand, represents the subconscious realization of the facts of life Willy so desperately wants not to face. Biff, then, naturally, represents the clashing of the two layers – the ever-present voice of reality in Willy’s head that keeps trying to break through the barriers of his imaginary delirium.

But getting back to Lawrence’s and Gordon’s points, how does Happy sympathizing with Willy’s dreams fit our reading of him as distant and detached? What we need to remember is that, expressionistically speaking, Happy is not only a character in his own right, but also represents Willy’s mindset in certain ways. Thus, even though through Happy we see the side of things Willy wants to deny, he also bears in his character the same faults and weaknesses as his father. If Happy was characterized as analytical, he would not be very credible, and would add little to the drama and tragedy of the play. Happy’s controversial disposition towards Willy makes him more human, and, as Baruch Hochman notes, “empathy with and experience of characters in literature tend to be, indeed, the means through which we access the pith of the works we choose to read – and a major source of the pleasure we take from them” (92).
The character of Happy and his defensive speech at the funeral also underline the importance of family as a force binding the members together, whether they want it or not. As Hess and Handel argue, “[t]he family’s life together is an endless process of movement in and around consensual understanding, from attachment to conflict and withdrawal … Separateness and connectedness are the underlying conditions of a family’s life, and its common task is to give form to both” (10). In Happy, with his inner juxtapositions and dichotomies, we have the perfect example of this endless movement.

But how does Happy’s character support the restoration of the American dream? Well, in all fairness, it must be stated that he does not in the way that Biff does, but Happy does bear meaning with regard to the idea. Happy’s role in this respect is, in my opinion, to underline and highlight Biff’s success in changing the course of his life, to make it more visible by contrast to Happy’s own failure to learn anything from their father’s death. At the funeral, Happy refuses Biff’s offer to go with him (Miller, Salesman 842), and confronts Biff by declaring that “Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream” (842), and that he, Happy, is “staying right here in this city” (842). In essence, Happy is going to continue in his father’s footsteps, tilting the proverbial windmills: “He fought it out here, and this is where I’m going to win it for him” (842). As with Biff, we get no further hints of what it is he is actually going to do, but to me, that is not the main thing. What is important is that at the close of the play, the audience is left with the strong feeling that Biff has learned something from the ordeals and is moving forward, Happy is staying put, clueless as ever. When Happy’s sentimental and somewhat foolish attitude towards their father’s worth is contrasted with his cold and analytical disposition towards Porter’s key
messages, the dichotomy is striking, and as such, a good example of Hess’s and Handel’s “endless movement” (10) of the family, all the while highlighting Biff as the one with a chance for a better future, since for Happy, it does not seem very feasible, even at the end of the play.

From the boys we move on to the final member of the immediate Loman family, Linda. So far, I have presented Linda as something of a shield protecting Willy’s fragile mind. But as with the other characters, surprising things will be unearthed when we look at the strained mother and devoted wife more closely.

4.4 Linda Loman

Before moving on, it needs to be said that, even though this section concentrates on Linda, we will also have to deal with the Woman to an extent, since the juxtaposition between the two is what largely gives Linda her meaning in terms of my reading of the play. As a character, just like Happy, the critics have often given Linda very little attention, and what is more, those who have taken her into consideration, have, more often than not, been quite judgmental towards her. Bigsby calls her character “profoundly unsatisfactory” (14), and for Popkin, she is “not in the least sexually interesting” (56).

True, it is very easy to get frustrated over Linda’s adamant refusal to say anything negative about her ungrateful husband. Out of all the characters, Linda most drastically represents the tragic juxtaposition between Willy’s dream world and reality. She understands the gravity of Willy’s situation, knowing their financial status, having found out about Willy’s suicidal tendencies and his
adultery, and disliking Biff’s thievery. Still, she is the one who spares no effort to keep Willy’s delusions alive, playing the supportive housewife, and convincing Willy adamantly that he is doing just fine. Whenever Willy is feeling low, Linda is there to cheer him up.

In her defense, though, it must be said that the very same qualities that make her so frustrating as a character — her lack of initiative and unfathomably controlled temper with Willy — actually add crucial momentum to the play, and signify one of the tragic flaws in Willy’s distorted view of the American dream. We will begin the analysis with Gayle Porter’s ideas. True, it might seem odd at first to set Linda, the housewife, in a framework of business ethics. However, therein lies the starting point on the path towards understanding Willy’s American dream from yet another perspective, and it also involves the Woman.

In a conversation with Ben and Willy, Linda reflects Willy’s underlying core values of rewarding hard work and everyone’s equal chances for success, but without his tragic misinterpretations of these benevolent ideas. In other words, she represents a kind of anti-thesis or a counter-weight to the tough world of business in the play, represented in the scene especially by Ben. Trying to prevent Willy from leaving for Alaska on Ben’s suggestion, she asks, “Why must everybody conquer the world?” (Miller, *Salesman* 826), showing, according to Kay Stanton, that “she sees no value in cut-throat competition” (160). In this respect, her values seem to be the opposite of Happy’s, for whom self-testing via competition and elbow tactics are key in business. Linda’s comment echoes belief in the idea that one does not need “to come out number-one man” (842) to become successful, that success is possible without always getting ahead of
everyone else by any means possible. Linda continues, “why, old man Wagner told him ... that if he keeps it up he [Willy] will be a member of the firm” (Miller, \textit{Salesman} 826). This comment, in turn, is a strong statement in favor of Porter’s first key message that hard work pays off (542). Thus, Linda represents the good values Willy holds, but, to his own tragedy, has misinterpreted. However, this is not the whole story. Enter the Woman.

There are two ways in which Linda is juxtaposed to the Woman: the mother and wife versus the whore, and the domestic versus the business world. The Woman is a destructive force in the play, whereas Linda, the mother and wife, is the glue that struggles to keep the family together, as the core drama of the play revolves around Willy’s adultery with the Woman and its devastating effects on him and his family. What is also significant, is how the Woman relates to the world of business, and the way in which she is connected to Willy’s American dream.

It is crucial to note that the Woman is represented, as Stanton argues, as an “access giver” (162) into the business world. She is “watching all the salesmen go by” (Miller, \textit{Salesman} 814), and promises to put Willy “right through to the buyers” (814). What is more, she makes this promise only after Willy has given her the expensive stockings he had bought for Linda (814). Thus, in a sense, Willy uses bribery, an immoral (and illegal) business tactic, to gain success in business. Such an action is in accordance with the distortions of Porter’s key messages Willy struggles with; as we discussed at the beginning, Willy is envious of the other salesmen who seem to gain more success with less hard work (813). This envy, or, as Benziman called it, this “fundamental feeling of
inferiority” (30), sparks Willy’s distortion of Porter’s key message of rewarding hard work (542), and the Woman is there to fuel the flames.

Finally, this entire skullduggery is thrown in the face of Linda, without her knowing it, through the symbolism of the stockings. Throughout the play Linda is mending stockings, but Willy does not want her to. Willy says to Linda: “I won’t have you mending stockings in this house!” (Miller, Salesman 814). On one level, of course, Willy’s attitude symbolizes his refusal to face the family’s poor financial situation and probably not having money for new stockings. On another level, however, the stockings are a physical reminder for Willy of his moral crime, adultery. Thus, they are a painfully poignant symbol for the relationship between Linda and the Woman. By darning the stockings, Linda is trying to mend what is broken: their financial situation, her husband’s values, and the unity of her family, destroyed by the person wearing the new stockings instead of her.

Hence, as a pair, Linda and the Woman stand at the opposite ends of the moral continuum from right to wrong as regards interpreting the American dream, and, consequently, interpreting Porter’s key messages. One can even think of the two as the proverbial angel and demon on Willy’s shoulder, who, of course, wants to please both at the same time – to believe in that which is good and pure within the dream, but not being able to cope with the ways of the changing world, he cannot help but slip on the wrong side in the hopes of quick rewards. Seen this way, Linda’s function in terms of representing Willy’s American dream is quite obvious – she expresses and makes visible (and audible) the virtuous core values that lie at the heart of Willy’s worldview, including those of Porter’s
key messages. Furthermore, the juxtaposition between Linda and the Woman is thus yet another analogue for Willy’s tragic flaw, his inability to fit his value system into the framework of the modern society.

What now remains to be studied, however, is how does Linda as a character work to reinforce the plea for the restoration of the traditional American dream, as opposed to merely representing Willy’s version of it. The key to this analysis lies in looking at the family as a whole one more time. Earlier, I presented the quarreling between Linda, Biff, and Happy as a representation of different sides of Willy’s mind clashing with one another. Now that we have analyzed each family member individually from the American dream perspective, we can take the reading of the family one step further.

As regards restoring the dream, Linda, like Happy, plays a supporting role to Biff, stressing the significance of his personal journey yet from another angle. All along I have maintained that Biff expresses and brings forth Willy’s inner struggles. But he does not do this through monologues, but through his fights with Linda, for whenever Biff tries to confront his father directly, Willy escapes the situation by sinking into delirium, never allowing the argument to continue. Therefore, we need Linda as a kind of a mediator between the two men, fighting Willy’s battles with Biff for him and thus allowing Biff to air his grievances, frustration, and anger. I have shown that Linda represents worthy aspects of the traditional American dream, but so does Biff, resulting in the agonies he shares with his father. Partly mother and son fight because Linda needs to protect Willy from Biff’s accusations, but that is not all. As I will demonstrate, there is unexpected strength, depth and even darkness to Linda as a character.
Even though both Linda and Biff hold a somewhat similar set of values (as regards the American dream), the difference is that whereas Biff still sees hope for his father, and tries to yank him out of his dream world, Linda already knows deep down that Willy will never be able to handle the truth. In a way, Linda has already given up hope for Willy. This idea is conveyed in one of their fights, when Linda “violently” (837) retorts to Biff: “Do you not care whether he [Willy] lives or dies?” (837) This comment reveals Linda’s fear of Biff driving Willy to a premature death with his confrontational attitude. Suddenly, Linda can be seen as a dark and tragic character who has actually given up hope for her husband ever getting better. She seems almost like a nurse at a hospice, trying to ensure peace and quiet for the love of his life, who, essentially, is suffering from an incurable and lethal illness.

Now we have before us the complete picture. The fundamental reason for Biff’s and Linda’s quarreling is that Linda has given up hope, but Biff has not. Moreover, I argue, the reason why Biff has not thrown in the towel with regard to Willy is, as I maintained earlier, that by trying to save his father, he is ultimately trying to save himself. This juxtaposition between Linda and Biff is the final piece to the puzzle of the restoration of the American dream as I see it: the function of Linda, and her submission to fate, is to work as a counterpart for Biff, providing him with the counter-argument against which he can make clear his point about not giving up. In terms of restoring the American dream, Linda’s role is vital, since her character makes it possible for Biff to crystallize his main message – to the extent that it becomes the core message of the whole play: never give up hope.
Thus, we have concluded our investigation of the Loman family. What still needs to be done, however, is to summarize our findings, and draw the final conclusions with regards to the tragic protagonists American dream, how it is portrayed by his family, and, finally, how the play pleads for the restoration of the overall concept of the dream in its traditional form.

5 Conclusions

Analyzing the three other Lomans, and having established the expressionist connection with the protagonist Willy Loman, it is evident that the whole family works as a reflection of Willy’s mindset, that is, his values and worldview. In light of my interpretation, however, the relationship between Biff and Willy arises as the most central theme in the play. Biff’s beliefs in Porter’s key messages match those of Willy’s, and cause him similar problems. What is more, Biff’s seemingly intentional ruining of his own life while daydreaming of a different one makes him a kind of a reflection of Willy, revealing crucial aspects about the causes and effects of Willy’s trajectory from bad to worse. From the American dream perspective, however, his adamant refusal to go down the same path as his father turns, in my view, the core message of the play into a hopeful one – since, for Biff, a chance of a better future is hinted at the close of the play.

The main function of the other two Loman family members, Happy and Linda, then, is to help make visible the underlying reasons for the tension between Biff and Willy. Even though one of Linda’s key roles is to act as a counterpart for the Woman, representing the juxtaposition of benevolent traditional values and the
harsh business ethics of today, her main function is to work as a mediator between the Biff and Willy. Linda helps Biff’s character to reveal the reasons for his anguish and struggles with his father, and, most importantly, himself. Happy, then, through his cynical view of Porter’s key messages and individualist values, works to strengthen the positive endnote of the play. At the end, Happy, through his own failure to learn anything from their father’s tragedy, underlines Biff’s positive learning curve, growth as a character, and his newfound hope for a better future.

Hence, my study of the Loman family has simply taken the idea that I presented in my analysis of Willy even further. Even though the play is tragic, and deals to a large extent with the problems within the concept of the American dream, there is a hopeful undertone to its rough treatment of the ideal. Despite the struggles and misfortunes of the Lomans, I have shown that at the heart the family members’ worldviews (save, maybe, for Happy) lie belief in Porter’s key messages, the good and pure notions that hard work and education pay off, that work should be meaningful, and that everyone has a chance of success. Furthermore, in my opinion, these beliefs prevail in the play through Biff’s suggested chance for something better in the days to come.

It is in this sense that the play ultimately pleads for the restoration of the American dream: just as there is hope for Biff, there is hope for everyone. He sets the example the play asks us all to follow. Believing in the traditional American dream and succeeding in life at the same is still possible. True, selfishness, greed, and a lack of care for other people’s well-being are a part of today’s world, but it does not mean that everyone who is not willing to make
those values the essence of their worldview would automatically be doomed to lead an unrewarding life. It may be difficult to believe in the good in people sometimes, especially in the realm of working life, but it is no excuse to stop trying. If you see a woods burning, you should do everything you can to put the fire out, not throw yourself into the flames.

Even though I have made my point about the restoration of the American dream in *Death of a Salesman* clear by analyzing just the Loman family with regard to the expressionism of the play, there is need for further study: for example, it would be interesting to see what more could the other characters in the play add to the analysis in terms of business ethics and the American Dream. Since, for example, Ben and Charley have not been dealt here in such detail as would be possible, since it simply has not been essential to my particular study. However, thinking in larger terms, even more interesting than expanding the analysis within *Death of a Salesman* would be to study the occurrence of these same themes in Arthur Miller’s other plays. Plays such as *The Crucible*, *All My Sons*, and *View from the Bridge* are, just as *Death of a Salesman*, tragic tales on the plot level, and deal partly with similar questions, that is, the notion of family in contrast to business success, the American dream and its problems, and the failure of the individual to solve the problems these themes provoke. It would be interesting to see if the same glimmer of hope and positive outlook could be found in other tragic plays by Miller.
Works Cited


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