

T The Undergraduate Center

Ethics Reading Assignment:

Excerpt from:

Death of a Salesman

by Arthur Miller, 1949

[The context of this scene is that Willy Loman, a travelling salesman, is exhausted. He has just returned home to his wife Linda from a long car trip without making a single sale. His older grown son Biff is home for a short visit. At first, Willy is very discouraged, but Biff promises his father that he will try to make good in business once again so that his father will be proud of him as someone "worth" something. The beginning of Act Two sees Willy going in to see his boss Howard about Howard's offer to find Willy a place in the office. Willy is full of hope that his life will finally amount to something. This scene has several examples of what Erich Fromm would call "alienation," going from alienation from work, to alienated consumption, to alienated concepts of identity, to alienated ownership and management. What happens after this scene? Willy grows more and more alienated from everything, to the point of having imaginary conversations with his brother Ben about the possibility of being "successful" by killing himself and leaving the insurance money for his wife and sons. He finally decides he is literally "worth" more dead than alive, so he kills himself by driving the car into a tree. The end of the play, in the cemetery, finds Linda unable to cry. The insurance policy does not pay off for suicide, but the last payment on the house was made that same day. She ends the play sobbing, wondering why Willy did it and saying that they were finally "free."]

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Act Two

Music is heard, gay and bright. The curtain rises as the music fades away. Willy, in shirt sleeves, is sitting at the kitchen table, sipping coffee, his hat in his lap. Linda is filling his cup when she can.

WILLY: Wonderful coffee. Meal in itself.

LINDA: Can I make you some eggs?

WILLY: No. Take a breath.

LINDA: You look so rested, dear.

WILLY: I slept like a dead one. First time in months. Imagine, sleeping till ten on a Tuesday morning. Boys left nice and early, heh?

LINDA: They were out of here by eight o'clock.

WILLY: Good work!

LINDA: It was so thrilling to see them leaving together. I can't get over the shaving lotion in this house!

WILLY, *smiling*: Mmm-

LINDA: Biff was very changed this morning. His whole attitude seemed to be hopeful. He couldn't wait to get downtown to, see Oliver.

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WILLY: He's heading for a change. There's no question, there simply are certain men that take longer to get-solidified. How did he dress?

LINDA: His blue suit. He's so handsome in that suit. He could be anything in that suit!

Willy gets up from the table. Linda holds his jacket for him.

WILLY: There's no question, no question at all. Gee, on the way

home tonight I'd like to buy some seeds.

LINDA, *laughing*: That'd be wonderful. But not enough sun gets back there. Nothing'll grow any more.

WILLY: You wait, kid, before it's all over we're gonna get a little place out in the country, and I'll raise some vegetables, a couple of chickens.

LINDA: You'll do it yet, dear.

Willy walks out of his jacket. Linda follows him.

WILLY: And they'll get married, and come for a weekend. I'd build a little guest house. 'Cause I got so many fine tools, all I'd need would be a little lumber and some peace of mind.

LINDA, *joyfully*: I sewed the lining. . .

WILLY: I could build two guest houses, so they'd both come. Did he decide how much he's going to ask Oliver for?

LINDA, *getting him into the jacket*: He didn't mention it, bu I imagine ten or fifteen thousand. You going to talk to Howard today?

WILLY: Yeah. I'll put it to him straight and simple. He'll just have to take me off the road.

LINDA: And Willy, don't forget to ask for a little advance, because we've got the insurance premium. It's the grace period now.

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WILLY: That's a hundred ... ?

LINDA: A hundred and eight, sixty-eight. Because we're a little short again.

WILLY: Why are we short?

LINDA: Well, you had the motor job on the car

WILLY: That goddam Studebaker!

LINDA: And you got one more payment on the refrigerator. . .

WILLY: But it just broke again!

LINDA: Well, it's old, dear.

WILLY: I told you we should've bought a well-advertised machine. Charley bought a General Electric and it's twenty years

old and it's still good, that son-of-a-bitch.

LINDA: But, Willy-

WILLY: Whoever heard of a Hastings refrigerator? Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it's broken! I'm always in a race with the junkyard! I just finished paying for the car and it's on its last legs. The refrigerator consumes belts like a goddam maniac. They time those things. They time them so when you finally paid for them, they're used up.



Reading
Tutorial
Question

How does this discussion of the refrigerator illustrate Erich Fromm's ideas about "alienated consumption in use" and Fromm's claim that we buy labels, not things?

Your name?

LINDA, *buttoning up his jacket as he unbuttons it*: All told, about two hundred dollars would carry us, dear. But that includes the last payment on the mortgage. After this payment, Willy, the house belongs to us.

WILLY: It's twenty-five years!


LINDA: Biff was nine years old when we bought it.

WILLY: Well, that's a great thing. To weather a twenty-five year mortgage is

LINDA: It's an accomplishment.

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WILLY: All the cement, the lumber, the reconstruction I put in this house! There ain't a crack to be found in it any more.



Reading
Tutorial
Question

Does Willy seem to be alienated in every part of his life? Does Willy's skill in working on the house seem as important to Willy as how much income he is able to make? Why do you think Willy doesn't pay more attention to the part of himself that is a good carpenter, but pays so much attention to the part of himself that tries to be a salesman?

Your name?

LINDA: Well, it served its purpose.

WILLY: What purpose? Some stranger'll come along, move in, and that's that. If only Biff would take this house, and raise a family ... *He starts to go*. Good-bye, I'm late.

LINDA, *suddenly remembering*: Oh, I forgot You're supposed to meet them for dinner.

WILLY: Me?

LINDA: At Frank's Chop House on Forty-eighth near Sixth Avenue.

WILLY: Is that so! How about you?

LINDA: No, just the three of you. They're gonna blow you to a big meal!

WILLY: Don't say! Who thought of that?

LINDA: Biff came to me this morning, Willy, and he said, "Tell Dad, we want to blow him to a big meal." Be there six o'clock. You and your two boys are going to have dinner.

WILLY: Gee whiz! That's really somethin'. I'm gonna knock Howard for a loop, kid. I'll get an advance, and I'll come home with a New York job. Goddammit, now I'm gonna do it!

LINDA: Oh, that's the spirit, Willy!

WILLY: I will never get behind a wheel the rest of my life!

LINDA: It's changing, Willy, I can feel it changing!

WILLY: Beyond a question. G'by, -I'm late. *He starts to go again.*

LINDA, *calling after him as she runs to the kitchen table for a handkerchief*: You got your glasses?

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WILLY, *feels for them, then comes back in*: Yeah, yeah, got my glasses.

LINDA, *giving him the handkerchief*: And a handkerchief.

WILLY: Yeah, handkerchief.

LINDA: And your saccharine?

WILLY: Yeah, my saccharine.

LINDA: Be careful on the subway stairs. *She kisses him, and a silk stocking is seen hanging from her hand. Willy notices it.*

WILLY: Will you stop mending stockings? At least while I'm in. the house. It gets me nervous. I can't tell you. Please.

Linda hides the stocking in her hand as she follows Willy across the forestage in front of the house.

LINDA: Remember, Frank's Chop House.

WILLY, *passing the apron*: Maybe beets would grow out there.

LINDA, *laughing*: But you tried so many times.

WILLY: Yeah. Well, don't work hard today. *He disappears around the right corner of the house.*

LINDA: Be careful!

As Willy vanishes, Linda waves to him. Suddenly the phone rings. She runs across the stage and into the kitchen and lifts it. LINDA: Hello? Oh, Biff I I'm so glad you called, I just ... Yes, sure, I just told him. Yes, he'll be there for dinner at six o'clock, I didn't forget. Listen, I was just dying to tell you. You know that little rubber pipe I told you about? That he connected to the gas heater? I finally decided to go down the cellar this morning and take it away and destroy it. But it's gone! Imagine? He took it away himself, it isn't there! *She listens.* When? Oh, then you took it. Oh-nothing, it's just that

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I'd hoped he'd taken it away himself. Oh, I'm not worried, darling, because this morning he left in such high spirits, it was like the old days! I'm not afraid any more. Did Mr. Oliver see you? ... Well, you wait there then. And make a nice impression on him, darling. just

don't perspire too much before you see him. And have a nice time with Dad. He may have big news too ... That's right, a New York job. And be sweet to him tonight, dear. Be loving to him. Because he's only a little boat looking for a harbor. *She is trembling with sorrow and joy.* Oh, that's wonderful, Biff, you'll save his life. Thanks, darling. just put your arm around him when he comes into the restaurant. Give him a smile. That's the boy ... Good-by, dear.... You got your comb? ... That's fine. Good by, Biff dear.

In the middle of her speech, Howard Wagner, thirty-six, wheels on a small typewriter table on which is a wire-recording machine and proceeds to plug it in. This is on the left forestage. Light slowly fades on Linda as it rises on Howard. Howard is intent on threading the machine and only glances over his shoulder as Willy appears.

WILLY: Pst! Pst!

HOWARD: Hello, Willy, come in.

WILLY: Like to have a little talk with you, Howard.

HOWARD: Sorry to keep you waiting. I'll be with you in a minute.

WILLY: What's that, Howard?

HOWARD: Didn't you ever see one of these? Wire recorder.

WILLY: Oh. Can we talk a minute?

HOWARD: Records things. just got delivery yesterday. Been driving me crazy, the most terrific machine I ever saw in my life. I was up all night with it.

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WILLY: What do you do with it?

HOWARD: I bought it for dictation, but you can do anything with it. Listen to this. I had it home last night. Listen to what I picked up. The first one is my daughter. Get this. *He flicks the switch and "Roll out the Barrel" is heard being whistled.* Listen to that kid whistle.

WILLY: That is lifelike, isn't it?

HOWARD: Seven years old. Get that tone.

WILLY: Ts, ts. Like to ask a little favor if you ... *The whistling breaks off, and the voice of Howard's daughter is heard.*

His DAUGHTER: "Now you, Daddy." HOWARD: She's crazy for met *Again the same song is whistled.* That's met Ha! *He winks.*

WILLY: You're very good!

The whistling breaks off again. The machine runs silent for a moment.

HOWARD: Slit Get this now, this is my son.

HIS SON: "The capital of Alabama is Montgomery; the capital of Arizona is Phoenix; the capital of Arkansas is Little Rock; the capital of California is Sacramento. . ." *and on, and on.*

HOWARD, *holding up five fingers*: Five years old, Willy!

WILLY: He'll make an announcer some day!

HIS SON, *continuing*: "The capital . . ."

HOWARD: Get that-alphabetical order! *The machine breaks off suddenly.* Wait a minute. The maid kicked the plug out.

WILLY: It certainly is a --

HOWARD: Sh, for God's sake!

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HIS SON: "It's nine o'clock, Bulova watch time. So I have to go to sleep."

WILLY: That really is-

HOWARD: Wait a minute! The next is my wife.

They wait.

HOWARD'S VOICE: "Go on, say something." Pause. "Well, you gonna talk?"

HIS WIFE: "I can't think of anything."

HOWARD'S VOICE: "Well, talk-it's turning."

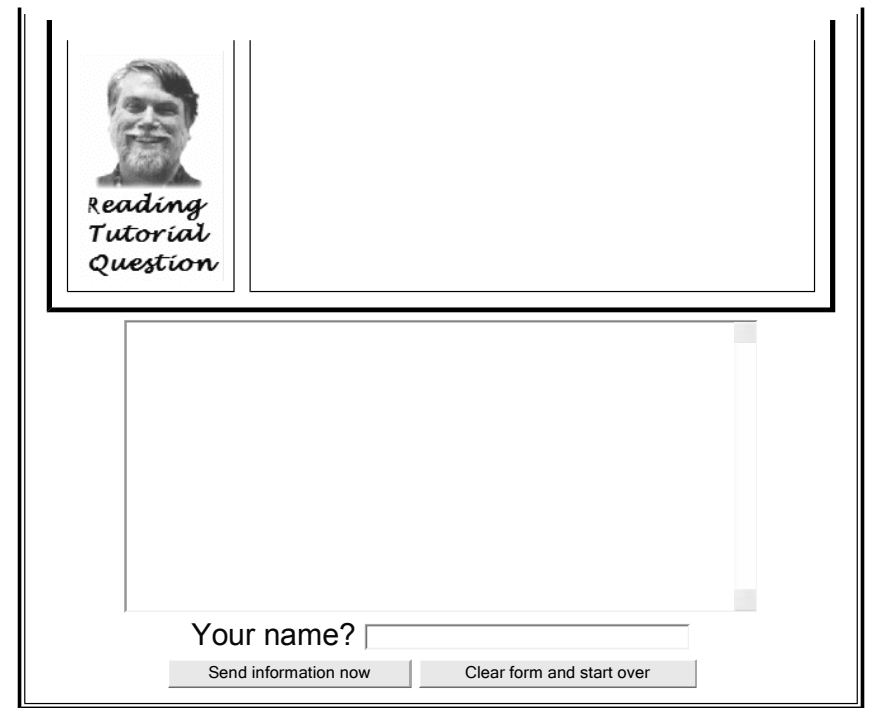
HIS WIFE, *shyly, beaten*: "Hello." *Silence.* "Oh, Howard, I can't talk into this ..."

HOWARD, *snapping the machine off*: That was my wife.

WILLY: That is a wonderful machine. Can we-

HOWARD: I tell you, Willy, I'm gonna take my camera, and my bandsaw, and all my hobbies, ' and out they go. This is the most fascinating relaxation I ever found.

What would Fromm say about the "wire recorder" as an example of alienated consumption? Does Howard buy it for a genuine "need," or just to "have" it?



Reading Tutorial Question

Your name?

Send information now Clear form and start over

WILLY: I think I'll get one myself.

HOWARD: Sure, they're only a hundred and a half. -You can't do without it. Supposing you wanna hear Jack Benny, see? But you can't be at home at that hour. So you tell the maid to turn the radio on when Jack Benny comes on, and this automatically goes on with the radio ...

WILLY: And when you come home you ...

HOWARD: You can come home twelve o'clock, one o'clock, any time you like, and you get yourself a Coke and sit yourself down,

throw the switch, and there's Jack Benny's program in the middle of the night!

WILLY: I'm definitely going to get one. Because lots of time [79]

I'm on the road, and I think to myself, what I must be missing on the radio!

HOWARD: Don't you have a radio in the car?

WILLY: Well, yeah, but who ever thinks of turning it on?

HOWARD: Say, aren't you supposed to be in Boston?

WILLY: That's what I want to talk to you about, Howard. You got a minute? *He draws a chair in from the wing.*

HOWARD: What happened? What're you doing here?

WILLY: Well ...

HOWARD: You didn't crack up again, did you?

WILLY: Oh, no. No.

HOWARD: Geez, you had me worried there for a minute. What's the trouble?

WILLY: Well, tell you the truth, Howard. I've come to the decision that I'd rather not travel any more.

HOWARD: Not travel! Well, what'll you do?

WILLY: Remember, Christmas time, when you had the party here? You said you'd try to think of some spot for me here in town.

HOWARD: With us?

WILLY: Well, sure.

HOWARD: Oh, yeah, yeah. I remember. Well, I couldn't think of anything for you, Willy.

WILLY: I tell ya, Howard. The kids are all grown up, y'know. I don't need much any more. If I could take home-well, sixtyfive dollars a week, I could swing it.

HOWARD: Yeah, but Willy, see I-

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WILLY: I tell ya why, Howard. Speaking frankly and between the two of us, y'know -- I'm just a little tired.

HOWARD: Oh, I could understand that, Willy. But you're road man, Willy, and we do a road business. We've only a half-dozen salesmen on the floor here.

WILLY: God knows, Howard, I never asked a favor of any man. But I was with the firm when your father used to carry you in here in his arms.

HOWARD: I know that, Willy, but-

WILLY: Your father came to me the day you were born and asked me what I thought of the name of Howard, may he rest in peace.

HOWARD: I appreciate that, Willy, but there just is no spot here for you. If I had a spot I'd slam you right in, but I just don't have a single solitary spot.

*He looks for his lighter. Willy has Picked it up and gives it to him.
Pause.*

WILLY, *with increasing anger*: Howard, all I need to set my table is fifty dollars a week.

HOWARD: But where am I going to put you, kid?

WILLY: Look, it isn't a question of whether I can sell merchandise, is it?

HOWARD: No, but it's a business, kid, and everybody's got pull his own weight.

WILLY, *desperately*: just let me tell you a story, Howard-

HOWARD: 'Cause you gotta admit, business is business.

WILLY, *angrily*: Business is definitely business, but just listen for a minute. You don't understand this. When I was a boy -- eighteen, nineteen -- I was already on the road. And there was

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a question in my mind as to whether selling had a future for 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. just for the ride, you might say.

HOWARD, *barely interested*: Don't say.

WILLY: Oh, yeah, my father lived many years in Alaska. He was an adventurous man. We've got quite a little streak of self-reliance in our family. I thought I'd go out with my older brother and try to locate him, and maybe settle in the North with the old man. And I was almost decided to go, when I met a salesman in the Parker House. His name was Dave Singleman. And he was eighty-four years old, and he'd drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, he'd go up to his room, y'understand, put on his green velvet slippers-I'll never forget-and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without 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. 'Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different cities,

and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people? Do you know? when he died-and by the way he died the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven and Hartford, going into Boston-when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral. Things were sad on a lotta trains for months after that. *He stands up. Howard has not looked at him.* In those days there was personality in it,, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear-or personality. You see what I me-an? They don't know me any more.

HOWARD, *moving away, to the right*: That's just the thing, Willy.

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WILLY: If I had forty dollars a week-that's all I'd need.- Forty dollars, Howard.

HOWARD: Kid, I can't take blood from a stone, I--



Reading
Tutorial
Question

How is Howard's telling Willy that he would like to help him but can't because "business is business" an example of alienated ownership and alienated management? If Howard owns the company, why does Howard seem to feel powerless to help Willy?

Your name?

WILLY, *desperation is on him now*: Howard, the year Al Smith was nominated, your father came to me and -

HOWARD, *starting to go off*: I've got to see some people, kid.

WILLY, *stopping him*: I'm talking about your father! There were promises made across this desk! You mustn't tell me you've got people to see -- I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away -- a man is not a piece of fruit! *After a pause*: Now pay attention. Your father-in 1928 I had a big year. I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commissions.

HOWARD, *impatiently*: NOW, Willy, you never averaged-

WILLY, *banging his hand on the desk*: I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in the year of 1928! And your father came to me-or rather, I was in the office here-it was right over this desk- he put his hand on my shoulder

HOWARD, *getting up*: You'll have to excuse Me, Willy, I gotta see some people. Pull yourself together. *Going out*: I'll be back in a little

while.

On Howard's exit, the light on his chair grows very bright and strange.

WILLY: Pull Myself together! What the hell did I say to him? My God, I was yelling at him! How could I! *Willy breaks off, staring at the light, which occupies the chair, animating it. He approaches this chair, standing across the desk from it.* Frank, Frank, don't you remember what you told me that time? How you put your hand on my shoulder, and Frank. . .

He leans on the desk and as he speaks the dead man's name he accidentally switches on the recorder, and instantly

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HOWARD'S SON: ". . .of New York is Albany. The capital of Ohio is Cincinnati, the capital of Rhode Island is. . ." *The recitation continues.*

WILLY, *leaping away with fright, shouting*: Ha! Howard! Howard! Howard!

HOWARD, *rushing in*: What happened?

WILLY, *pointing at the machine, which continues nasally, childishly, with the capital cities*: Shut it off I Shut it off!

HOWARD, *pulling, the plug out*: Look, Willy ...

WILLY, *pressing his hands to his eyes*: I gotta get myself some coffee. I'll get some coffee ...

Willy starts to walk out. Howard stops him.

HOWARD, *rolling up the cord*: Willy, look ...

WILLY: I'll go to Boston.

HOWARD: Willy, you can't go to Boston for us.

WILLY: Why can't I go?

HOWARD: I don't want you to represent us. I've been meaning to tell you for a long time now.

WILLY: Howard, are you firing me?

HOWARD: I think you need a good long rest, Willy.

WILLY: Howard --

HOWARD: And when you feel better, come back, and we'll see if we can work something out.

WILLY: But I gotta earn money, Howard. I'm in no position to --

HOWARD: Where are your sons? Why don't your sons give you a hand?

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WILLY: They're working on a very big deal.

HOWARD: This is no time for false pride, Willy. You go to your sons and you tell them that you're tired. You've got two great boys, haven't you?

WILLY: Oh, no question, no question, but in the meantime .

HOWARD: Then that's that, heh?

WILLY: All right, I'll go to Boston tomorrow.

HOWARD: No, no.

WILLY: I can't throw myself on my sons. I'm not a cripple!

HOWARD: Look, kid, I'm busy this morning.

WILLY, *grasping Howard's arm*: Howard, you've got to let me go to Boston!

HOWARD, *hard, keeping himself under control*: I've got a line of people to see this morning. Sit down, take five minutes, and pull yourself together, and then go home, will ya? I need the office, Willy. *He starts to go, turns, remembering the recorder, starts to push off the table holding the recorder*. Oh. yeah. Whenever you can this week, stop by and drop off the samples. You'll feel better, Willy, and then come back and we'll talk. Pull yourself together, kid, there's people outside.



Reading
Tutorial
Question

What would Fromm say about Willy's sense of self here--Why does Willy only value the part of himself that is a "salesman?" Why do you think Willy worships that part of himself to the exclusion of everything else in him? How does Willy's final suicide fit this view?

Your name?