The Commodity Comes Home to Roost

Repression, Regression, and Death in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*

Since *Death of a Salesman*’s New York premiere in 1949, critics have tended to view Arthur Miller’s remarkable play in one of two ways: as a psychological drama or as a Marxist critique of capitalist culture. Despite the play’s rather obvious psychoanalytic content—the drama is structured by a series of detailed descriptions of the stages in Willy Loman’s psychological breakdown—most critics treat the work’s psychological dimension in terms of its tragic, rather than psychoanalytic, function. The psychological drama, the argument goes, foregrounds the protagonist’s responsibility for his failure as a husband and father and is thematically centered on the scene in which Willy commits adultery in a Boston hotel room. As Giles Mitchell puts it, Willy’s failures are “preeminently personal” (394). Similarly, Leonard Moss argues that “Miller’s technical apparatus—the colloquial language, the symbolic images, and the dramatized recollections—shapes the pride and blindness of a mentality, not the evil influence of a social condition” (36).¹

The play’s Marxist critique of capitalist culture, on the other hand, is said to foreground the protagonist’s victimization by an uncaring society obsessed with material success and to center thematically on the scene in which Willy is cold-bloodedly fired by Howard Wagner.² Those critics who have addressed the coexistence of both dimensions in the play have generally done so in order to show how the two are at odds, observing that the psychological drama and the political critique rest on mutually exclusive assumptions and that each reading depends for its strength on the weakness of the other.³

This polarization of the play’s psychological and political dimensions misunderstands, I believe, the nature of the overarching mythos
that, as everyone ironically acknowledges, informs Miller’s play: the mythos of the American dream. As this chapter will attempt to show, it is in the American dream—specifically, in its relation to commodity psychology—that the play’s psychological and political strands are inextricably entwined. For the American dream serves as the “ore” from which Willy fashions the ideological armor he uses to disguise and deny his psychological problems and those of his family in order to escape the existential inwardness that such a self-awareness would force upon him. This dialectical relationship between the individual psyche and the socius is manifest at those points where the play’s psychological and ideological content intersect most clearly: Willy’s commodification of personal image; his five so-called memory scenes, which, I will argue, are regressive episodes the structural similarities of which underscore their psychological importance; and the Loman family’s sexuality, which is an important, though critically neglected, aspect of this work. In addition, I will suggest that the intersection of psychology and ideology can be observed, in more speculative terms, in the rather one-sided reading of Willy Loman that has dominated the critical literature and in the playwright’s own apparent emotional investment in his protagonist, which is revealed in the interaction of the play’s realist and expressionist episodes.

Certainly, the most obvious example of Willy’s ideological armor, and the one that informs all the psychological events that structure the play, is his commodification of personal image. For him, the road to the American dream is paved with a winning personality: “That’s the wonder, the wonder of this country,” the protagonist tells his young sons, “that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked!” (79; act 2). Because, as Willy observes, a rich man is always well liked, being well liked, he concludes, must be how poor men become wealthy. For this reason, he believes that being well liked is the necessary and sufficient currency for purchasing success in the business world. Of course, Willy’s logic depends on a very superficial view of what it means to be well liked. Because he substitutes form for content—“It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it” (58; act 1)—he mistakes the image of popularity for the reality, ignoring, for example, the obvious fact that, for some rich men, being “well liked” is not the source of their wealth but its effect. (As Charley next door says of the financial scoundrel J. P. Morgan, “with his pockets on he was very well liked” [90; act
2.) But superficial is Willy’s middle name: for him, success and the image of success are one. He “regularly confuses labels with reality,” implying, for example, “that a punching bag is good because, as he says, ‘It’s got Gene Tunney’s signature on it’” (Weales 133). It’s the image of success Willy tries to project by joking with his customers and by exaggerating his sales prowess, and it’s the image of success—the appearance of being well liked—that he teaches his sons is the necessary and sufficient commodity to ensure their future success in the business world, the world that Willy is certain will fulfill his dreams.

As Biff observes, however, Willy “had the wrong dreams” (132; Requiem). We must wonder, although the question is rarely raised, why the protagonist chose—and why, at all costs, he clings to—his dream of business success when his ability and his pleasure clearly lie in working with his hands. The answer can be found in the American dream’s promise to remediate Willy’s ontological insecurity, his lack of “any unquestionable self-validating certainties” (Laing 39), which has apparently plagued him since his abandonment in early childhood by his father and older brother Ben. The early loss of these two role models, with whose idealized memory Willy could never compete, has left him, in his own words, feeling “kind of temporary about [him]self” (46; act 1) or, in psychoanalytic terms, narcissistically wounded—humiliated by his own powerlessness. The resulting need for a reassuring father explains the otherwise mystifying importance for Willy of the Dave Singleman story: the old salesman, whose popularity and resourcefulness allowed him to make a good living even at the age of eighty-four, fits Willy’s idealized image of his own father. The protagonist’s obsession with image throughout the play underscores this insecurity, for it bespeaks the narcissist, the man who must continually bolster the surface of his personality by finding its positive reflection in the world around him because that surface has no firm ground of its own to support it from within.

Narcissism also explains why Willy refuses to relinquish, no matter what the cost to himself or his family, the personal image of the successful salesman he has manufactured from the ideological fabric of the American dream. It is not merely shame he fears, but the loss of a coherent self, for an idealized self-image is the sine qua non of the narcissist’s identity. Such a shaky structure requires the kind of ego reinforcement Willy desires: the admiration of financially successful, powerful men like his brother, the admiration one receives for achieving the American
dream’s rags-to-riches metamorphosis. Thus, Willy’s failure to see the obvious unscrupulous underside of Ben’s financial success, like the rest of his apparent moral confusion concerning his and his sons’ success-oriented ethics, is the result, not of an “ignorance of the world and ... a naïveté so colossal as to amount to a kind of innocence” (Mitchell 406), but of selective perception. The protagonist’s overwhelming psychological need for ontological reassurance doesn’t permit him to see anything that might inhibit his pursuit of the business success that promises to supply that reassurance.

The only place Willy was ever able to market his personal image successfully was in his home. As we see in his memories of his boys’ high-school days, Willy’s young sons, Biff and Happy, adored their father. They believed all his stories about his popularity, his sales achievements, and the business of his own that he would have someday so that he’d be able to stay home with his family instead of spending his workweek on the road as he had done all his life. In their eyes, he was the success he pretended to be, and their belief in him helped him to deny the reality of his small sales commissions. If young Biff and Happy kept their father’s image shining for him, Linda, Willy’s wife, always kept it in good repair by helping her husband deny unpleasant realities. As we can see in the following memory scene, which closely resembles her behavior in the play’s present-tense action as well, Linda refused to acknowledge any of Willy’s weaknesses and wouldn’t let him acknowledge them either:

**Willy:** ... My God, if business don’t pick up I don’t know what I’m gonna do!

**Linda:** Well, next week you’ll do better.

**Willy:** Oh, I’ll knock ‘em dead next week. I’ll go to Hartford. I’m very well liked in Hartford. You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don’t seem to take to me. . . .

**Linda:** Oh, don’t be foolish.

**Willy:** I know it when I walk in. They seem to laugh at me. . . . I talk too much. . . .

**Linda:** You don’t talk too much, you’re just lively.

**Willy,** smiling: Well, I figure, what the hell, life is short, a couple of jokes. . . . (30–31; act 1)

If Linda provides “the spiritual glue that holds together [Willy’s] rickety frame” (Schlueter and Flanagan 59), it’s nevertheless a service of dubious value she performs. By functioning, in effect, as a manic de-
fense against the physical and psychological realities that continually threaten to invade her husband’s awareness, Linda prevents him from challenging his own self-delusions and thereby helps preclude the possibility of his psychological growth.

That we must rely on Willy’s memories for much of what we know of Linda is one of the reasons why she is such a problematic character. Certainly, when she speaks for herself in the present, she reveals that she is aware of her husband’s faults and simply loves him in spite of them. Nevertheless, I think the tendency of some readers to idealize her—to believe, for example, that “she is just too good for Willy and thus too good for the play” (Welland 49)—ignores the role Linda’s own desire may play in her collusion with Willy’s project to escape existential inwardness. At best, of course, she wants to maintain Willy’s self-delusion because she believes it would be more disastrous for him to face the truth about himself; at worst, however, her purpose is to keep the truth about the severity of her husband’s psychological problems hidden from herself so that she, too, can avoid the existential inwardness such a realization might force upon her. In either case, by helping Willy deny the physical and psychological realities of his life, Linda exacerbates her husband’s problems.

It is Willy’s struggle with those realities, brought to the fore by the double trauma of mounting pressures at the office and Biff’s visit home, that constitutes the five expressionistic episodes in which he seems to remember or imagine events from his past. However, these episodes are not a function simply of memory or imagination. They are, rather, psychological regressions, which, in pathological cases like Willy’s, involve “a full hallucinatory cathectic of the perceptive system” (Freud Interpretation of Dreams 496). As D. W. Winnicott explains, regression involves not the imagining but the “reliving of dream and memory situations” (288, my emphasis) which opens the psyche to new possibilities. Although, in the therapeutic encounter, the regressed subject relives early childhood episodes, Winnicott’s description of regression closely parallels, and illuminates, Willy Loman’s behavior.

Like Winnicott’s patients, Willy has developed a “false self” (Winnicott 281)—his successful-salesman persona—to defend against what Winnicott calls an “original environmental-failure situation” (287), in this case, Willy’s childhood loss of father and older brother. The existence of this false self “results in [a] sense of futility” (292),
which the protagonist recurrently manifests throughout the play. Furthermore, regression can involve a return either to a pleasant past experience, such as Willy’s happy times with his young family, or to a painful episode from the past, such as his initial falling-out with Biff in the Boston hotel room. Most important for our understanding of the protagonist, “regression is distinct from the other defence organizations in that it carries with it . . . a new opportunity for an unfreezing of the [failure] situation and a chance for . . . spontaneous recovery” (Winnicott 283). Because regression involves a return to the experience that lies at the bottom of a current conflict, as it does in each of Willy’s five regressive episodes, it allows the regressed person to become aware of the concrete source of a heretofore baffling psychological condition. Recovery, in this context, means the acquisition of a new attitude toward oneself and one’s problems based on the insight gained during the regression. Thus, in offering the opportunity to live an authentic relationship to one’s conflicts, regression always offers the opportunity to acquire or deepen existential inwardness. From this perspective, Willy’s five regressive episodes represent five opportunities for him to alter his course, both psychologically and existentially, and it is significant that his response, in each case, is the same. For, as we shall see, the pattern formed by his responses to regression reveals a systematic, if only partly conscious, effort on Willy’s part to eschew the existential inwardness increasingly pressed upon him by the accumulated refuse of his psyche.

The first three regressive episodes follow roughly the same pattern: each time Willy is confronted with a traumatic reality in the present, he regress to a time when his American-dream fantasies could still convince him and his family that he was the success he wanted to be. Thus, as we see in his first regression, which occurs shortly after his return home from his aborted attempt to drive to New England (20–34; act 1), the protagonist tries to escape the present reality of having been taken off salary and put on straight commission by regressing to a time when his young sons, still in high school, polished his car and hung on his every word, a time when he could still look to the future with hope. In his second regression, which occurs during and after his card game with Charley later that night (38–46; act 1), Willy tries to escape his present pain over Biff’s life as a drifter and his own inability to help his son by regressing to a time when he was able to show off his boys’ high-spiritedness and filial devotion in front of his brother Ben: he imagines
sending the boys off to steal sand from a nearby construction site in order to rebuild the front stoop. In his third regression, which occurs in Howard Wagner’s office (77–83; act 1), the protagonist tries to escape the present trauma of being fired by regressing to a time when he had the opportunity to superintend Ben’s Alaskan timberland: “God, timberland! Me and my boys in those grand outdoors!” (78; act 1).

None of these three visions of the past, however, provides the escape Willy seeks. For it is during such regressive experiences that repressed conflicts tend to erupt. Thus, his first regressive vision of his happy young family is inevitably interrupted by the memory that Biff had been an irresponsible boy and a petty thief whose behavior was often wild and selfish:

**Bernard, entering on the run**: Where is [Biff]? If he doesn’t study!
**Willy, moving to the forestage, with great agitation**: You’ll give him the answers!
**Bernard**: I do, but I can’t on a Regents! That’s a state exam! They’re liable to arrest me!
**Willy**: Where is he? I’ll whip him, I’ll whip him!
**Linda**: And he’d better give back that football, Willy, it’s not nice.
**Willy**: Biff! Where is he? Why is he taking everything?
**Linda**: He’s too rough with the girls, Willy. All the mothers are afraid of him!
**Willy**: I’ll whip him. (33–34; act 1)

Similarly, Willy’s second pleasant regression is interrupted by his fear that he didn’t raise his sons right. He imagines telling Ben, “Sometimes I’m afraid that I’m not teaching them the right kind of—Ben, how should I teach them?” (46; act 1). Finally, Willy’s third regressive episode is interrupted by the memory that he’d refused the opportunity to manage Ben’s Alaskan timberland: Linda’s repetition of his story about the successful Dave Singleman convinced him to keep his job.

In terms of Willy’s psychological experience, readers’ concern over whether or not the past events he recalls are accurately reported according to some standard of objective reality is irrelevant. What matters is that the conflicts’ emergence reveals Willy’s experience of them; it is subjective reality that is revelatory here. For these eruptions of repressed conflicts are a product of Willy’s present psychological state as well as a reflection of his former condition. During a traumatic period, conflicts that have been long buried tend to surface and demand attention or discharge. This is, of course, why regression often functions as a
tool of psychological growth; it brings forward into consciousness, and allows the subject the opportunity to work on, conflicts that have heretofore inhabited the unconscious.

In Willy’s case, however, the opportunity is never taken: the play does not dramatize the protagonist’s “progression to enlightenment” (Jackson 17). Instead of using the knowledge offered by his regressive episodes to achieve what George S. Klein terms “active reversal,” Willy relies on commodity psychology to repress the conflicts anew: he clings to the American-dream myths and fantasies he used to deny and submerge the conflicts in the first place. Thus, when his pleasant picture of his sons’ adoration is interrupted by his memory of Biff’s misconduct, he defines the boy’s behavior as spiritedness, which, we may recall, is the basis upon which Willy believes socioeconomic success is founded: “There’s nothing the matter with [Biff]! . . . He’s got spirit, personality. . . . Loaded with it. Loaded!” (34; act 1). Similarly, when self-doubt about his parenting interrupts his vision of showing off his boys for Ben, he imagines receiving Ben’s reassurance that he was raising them to be “outstanding, manly chaps” (46; act 1), perfectly suited to fulfill their father’s dreams of success. And when the memory of his refusal to accept an outdoor job from Ben interrupts his vision of receiving the job offer, Willy remembers Biff’s Ebbets Field game—evidence that Biff had what it takes to be a success in Willy’s competitive world and that he had therefore made the right decision in turning down Ben’s offer.

Even Willy’s fourth regressive episode, in which he relives the unhappy time young Biff discovered him in a Boston hotel room with another woman (102–14; act 2), does not “ope[n] the salesman’s eyes” (Szondi 23) and force him to recognize “his own responsibility for what has happened to his family” (Welland 47), for the protagonist refuses to accept the painful awakening this regression offers him. As Willy recalls, young Biff flunked his high-school math course and rushed off to Boston to ask his father to pressure the math teacher into giving him the four points he needed to pass. As Bernard later explains to Willy, Biff was ready to make up the credit in summer school, if he had to, so that he could go to college in the fall. It wasn’t until Biff’s ill-fated trip to see his father that he gave up on his own future. Although Bernard doesn’t give Willy this information until later in act 2, it is clear in the fourth regression that Willy’s knowledge of his role in Biff’s failure is the repressed conflict that is erupting here. When Biff first arrived at Willy’s hotel room he was very eager for his father to talk to the math teacher:
“If he saw the kind of man you are, and you just talked to him in your way,” Biff told his father, “I’m sure he’d come through for me” (111; act 2). It wasn’t until Willy’s lover came laughing out of the bathroom in her slip—and Biff realized that his father was having an affair—that the boy stubbornly refused to carry out any of Willy’s plans for him. Willy represses his awareness of his role in Biff’s difficulties, however, telling himself that Biff’s flunking the math course is the source of his son’s problems, an excuse he uses even when the adult Bernard confronts him with the truth. It is noteworthy that Willy’s awareness of the importance of the hotel incident is itself an attempt to sidestep the real issue: his failure as a parent in general. As Biff later admits, his father had so raised his expectations of success—and provided so little real basis for them—that, because instant success didn’t come his way, he “stole [himself] out of every good job since high school” (124; act 2). Willy’s immediate flight from the restaurant where this regression occurs, to buy seeds for the plot of sterile land behind his house—an obvious escape into a time before the hotel episode occurred—underscores his repression of the psychological insight this regression provides.

It is part of the nature of conflict, however, that repression merely increases its force. Therefore, Willy’s conflicts get more out of control with every attempt he makes to deny and resubmerge them. In this context, his decision to kill himself, which occurs during his fifth and final regression at the end of act 2 (119–20, 127–29), is not “an act of affirmation” (Heyen 50), nor an effort to “re-establish his own self-confidence and his family’s integrity” (Moss 24), nor, as many critics would have it, a misguided attempt to secure his son’s future? Rather, Willy’s suicide is his ultimate act of denial. Having bought the seeds he’d run off from the restaurant to get earlier that evening, Willy is now pacing off a garden plot in his backyard. It is noteworthy that planting the garden is an abstract act—not linked, like his behaviors in past regressions, to some significant, specific past event—because Willy wants to avoid the eruptions of repressed content that occurred during his more specific regressions. Unable to face the day’s accumulated disappointments, he frantically seeks a way out of his despair, and commodity psychology provides one: he will kill himself in a way that appears to be an accident—in a car wreck—and Biff will collect twenty thousand dollars in life insurance. With this financial backing, Willy reasons, Biff will achieve the business success of which he believes him capable. In both segments of this regression, Willy imagines himself discussing his idea
with Ben, and the deeper motive for Willy's intended suicide quickly surfaces: he wants to regain Biff's esteem so that he can regain, in his son's eyes, the personal image that used to impress the boy so much. As Willy tells Ben,

This [Willy's death] . . . changes all the aspects. Because he thinks I'm nothing, see, and so he spites me. But the funeral—Straightening up: Ben, that funeral will be massive! They'll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire! . . . that boy will be thunder-struck, Ben, because he never realized—I am known . . . and he'll see it with his eyes once and for all. (119–20; act 2)

The blunt revelations and accusations with which Biff interrupts his father's imaginary conversation with Ben—Biff's claims that Willy raised him to be the thief he is and that he and Happy, like their father, are failures who lie about their success—seem to have no lasting effect on Willy. The only thing the protagonist takes from this experience is the fact that Biff cries to him, that Biff loves him. "That boy . . . is going to be magnificent!" (126; act 2) is Willy's final response to his interaction with Biff, and he returns immediately, his suicide project unchanged, to his conversation with Ben.

"Can you imagine that magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket?" Willy asks Ben during the second half of his final regression (128; act 2). This vision of Biff holds such charm for Willy, as does every success Biff has ever had, because Willy feels it is his own success he is experiencing in Biff's success. This is something other than healthy parental pride in a son who makes good, pride in one's success as a father—Charley's pride in his son, not Willy's, is of this kind. Willy's pride is projection, a very personal and intense form of vicarious experience. And if he can just keep this vision intact until he kills himself, Willy will not have to face the repressed awareness of his failed life that keeps threatening to break through into his consciousness and overwhelm him. Thus, the protagonist's self-destruction is a last-ditch act of repression; the twenty thousand dollars in life-insurance money intended for Biff provides both his excuse for killing himself and the fantasy he needs in order to keep self-knowledge at bay until he can accomplish it. The conflicts that constitute his psyche have come to such an impasse that ordinary forms of denial and avoidance are nothing but ineffective stopgap measures. The only way to shut this psyche off is to kill it. Like all his other defenses, Willy's suicide draws on the same American dream in which personal and financial success are at once wed in and tran-
scended by sign-exchange value. For as we have seen, Willy’s suicide is grounded in his vision of the increased status a showy funeral and a life-insurance legacy will purchase for him in the eyes of Biff, who has long been the repository of his father’s sign-exchange value.

The play’s psychological and political dimensions are fused even more clearly in the Loman family’s sexuality. As Walter Davis puts it, human sexuality is primarily a matter of meanings (Inwardness and Existence 80–87 and passim): through one’s sexuality one enacts one’s conscious and unconscious attitudes and motives toward others and thereby reveals, as Merleau-Ponty put it, one’s “manner of being towards the world” (158). In the Lomans’ case, not only are the family’s sexual attitudes compatible with the commodifying ideology of the American dream, but, like that dream, the family’s sexual mores help them disguise and deny their own psychology and thereby avoid existential inwardness. In order to see how the Lomans’ apparently diverse sexual natures achieve a single, ideologically saturated psychological end, we must first briefly review some key elements in the sexual characterization of each family member.

To begin with, Willy’s extramarital affair, a natural focal point for any consideration of his sexuality, reveals neither “the hollowness of [Willy’s] affection for Linda” (Aarnes 96), nor his unhappiness over “his failure to impress her” (Hayman 51), nor the paucity of Linda’s comprehension of Willy (B. Parker). For the source of the protagonist’s infidelity cannot be circumscribed by his relationship to his wife but lies in the merger of his sexual and professional identities. As we can see in the following scene, Willy’s memory of his inadequacy in business is replaced by the memory of his lover:

Willy [to Linda]: . . . I get so lonely—especially when business is bad and there’s nobody to talk to. I get the feeling that I’ll never sell anything again, that I won’t make a living for you, or a business, a business for the boys. . . . The Woman primps at the “mirror.” There’s so much I want to make for—

The Woman: Me? You didn’t make me, Willy. I picked you.

Willy, pleased: You picked me?

The Woman: . . . I’ve been sitting at that desk watching all the salesmen go by, day in, day out. But you’ve got such a sense of humor, and we do have such a good time together, don’t we?

Willy: Sure, sure. He takes her in his arms. Why do you have to go now? (31–32; act 1)
Clearly, Willy’s strong positive response to The Woman was elicited by her preference for him over the other salesmen who came through her office. Finally, someone in the business world liked him better than his competitors. For Willy, this woman was a commodity the acquisition of which conferred upon him the professional sign-exchange value he was unable to attain otherwise.

For Happy as well, women are commodities used to boost his sign-exchange value. He is not, as Brian Parker suggests, “compulsively competitive in sex and business for no reason at all” (102). Happy uses women to make him feel that he is able to “get” something that he cannot get from his career. Because he covets the attention his father has always lavished on Biff, Happy has invested a good deal of his identity in following in Willy’s footsteps, in achieving the business success his father desired for both boys. Happy lives in the town in which he grew up and works in sales; he’s one of two assistants to the assistant buyer for a local firm. However, although he makes enough money to support his apartment, car, and social life, he has not achieved the big success—the wealth, power, and prestigious title—that Willy’s dreams had reserved for his sons. Therefore, Happy feels disappointed, cheated: a world in which he must take orders from men he “can outbox, outrun, and outlift” (17; act 1) is, he feels, an unjust world. For this reason, he compulsively seduces the fiancées of executives in his firm: he can’t have their jobs, so he’ll have their women.9 We can see the connection between Happy’s feelings of inadequacy in business and his womanizing when he tells Biff about his struggle to compete with his coworkers and follows immediately with, “But take those two we had tonight. Weren’t they gorgeous creatures?” (18; act 1).

For both Willy and Happy, the achievement of financial success is tied to masculine self-image. This is why, as is typical in America, their metaphors for success involve winning fights and killing opponents. “Knocked ‘em cold in Providence, slaughtered ‘em in Boston,” Willy tells his young sons upon returning home from a sales trip (27; act 1), using the same kind of language his brother Ben had used in advising him to go to Alaska: “Screw on your fists and you can fight for a fortune up there” (78; act 2). This link between business success and masculinity is, of course, one reason why both men use women to assuage their egos, to make up for their disappointments in the business world. It is no mere coincidence, then, that Happy abandons his father in the restaurant to pursue women directly upon learning that the plan for a Loman Brothers sporting-goods company is down the drain.
Of course, Happy’s sexual pattern has strong Oedipal overtones as well. Raised within a family dynamic in which all Dad’s attention was focused on Biff, who was an authority figure for the younger child, it is no wonder that Happy’s struggle for identity and recognition early took the form of masculine competitiveness. “I lost weight, Pop, you notice?” (44; act 1) is this character’s pathetic boyhood refrain as he undertakes the impossible task of competing with his-brother-the-football-hero for paternal esteem. While Willy frequently embraces Biff, in flashback as in the present, he never touches Happy. And the younger brother must listen to Dad’s continual boasting about Biff without ever himself being the object of his father’s pride. Happy is, thus, the perpetual bench warmer, the onlooker at the lives of his father and brother, just as Willy had been before him.

The mother’s neglect of the younger son adds insult to injury and fans the flame of an already unhealthy Oedipal situation. While Linda frequently addresses Biff using the same language and tone she uses to address Willy—”I know dear” (47; act 1), “Please, dear” (59; act 1), “Thanks, darling” (69; act 2)—she uses such terms for Happy only to express contempt: “You never asked, my dear!” she responds angrily to Happy’s remark that he was unaware of his father’s demotion to straight commission work (50; act 1). Indeed, Happy barely exists for his mother. She frequently acts as if he were not there, as we see when the brothers return home after the restaurant scene. Although Happy does all of the talking as he and Biff enter the house, Linda ignores him to vent her emotion on Biff: “Linda, cutting Happy off, violently to Biff: ‘Don’t you care whether he lives or dies?’” (116; act 2). Only Biff’s feelings matter. Only Biff’s behavior can change anything. “I’m gonna get married, Mom” (61; act 1) is Happy’s new hopeless bid for attention and approval. And it is in his attitude toward marriage and women that we find his Oedipal symptomatology most clearly expressed.

Happy’s compulsion to seduce the fiancées of executives he works with is a rather obvious enactment of his Oedipal desire: he wants to compete with his father and brother and, especially, punish his mother for ignoring him. For Happy is a psychologically castrated man who has to use his penis to assert his existence and value. The executives he works with are, like his father and brother, authority figures. They’re wealthier and more successful than he is and each has won the (symbolically) exclusive attention of a woman. He can’t compete with these men in the marketplace anymore than he could compete with Biff and Willy in the home. So he punishes them by “ruining” their fiancées.
Happy can’t find a girl “with resistance,” a girl “like Mom” (19; act 1) that he could marry, because he doesn’t want to. By sticking to his pattern of one “easy” woman after another, he can continue to fulfill two conflicting Oedipal needs simultaneously: he can continue, symbolically, to preserve his mother (no woman can take her place), and he can continue, symbolically, to soil her (to seduce a woman is to seduce his mother).

There is in Biff’s psyche, as in his brother’s, an important Oedipal layer. However, for young Biff, the Oedipal object was not Linda but Willy, and the relationship between father and son was a symbiotic one: each fulfilled the other’s narcissistic and masturbatory phallic projection. For Willy, Biff was, of course, the star athlete, admired by the boys and pursued by the girls, as Willy had never been. For Biff, Willy was the successful businessman, universally respected and given “red-carpet treatment” by everyone everywhere he went, as Biff looked forward to being when the time came for him to take his place in the business world. Father and son saw in each other, and became for each other, an idealized phallus.

The love that bound these two characters resembled that of lovers rather than that of father and son. Linda’s reminiscence with Biff certainly sounds like a description of sweethearts: “How you used to talk to him on the phone every night! How lonely he was till he could come home to you!” (51; act 1). Similarly, when Linda reminds young Biff, during Willy’s flashback, that there is a cellar full of boys waiting for him, her son responds, “Ah, when Pop comes home they can wait!” (28; act 1). Biff put his father ahead of his pals, as most seventeen-year-old boys put their girlfriends. In fact, Biff put his father ahead of—or in place of—his girlfriends as well. For it was not the young girls Biff dated who received his chivalrous attentions: as we saw earlier, Biff treated the girls too roughly. As Willy’s Ebbett’s Field flashback reveals, it was Willy who basked in the warmth of Biff’s courtly love:

**Willy:** What do they say about you in school, now that they made you captain?

**Happy:** There’s a crowd of girls behind him every time the classes change.

**Biff,** *taking Willy’s hand:* This Saturday, Pop, this Saturday—just for you, I’m going to break through for a touchdown.

**Happy:** You’re supposed to pass.

**Biff:** I’m takin’ one play for Pop. You watch me, Pop, and when I take off my helmet, that means I’m breakin’ out. (25; act 1)
It was Willy’s hand that Biff took, ignoring Happy’s comment about the girls at school (Willy’s hopeless rivals for Biff’s attention), and it was to Willy that Biff dedicated a special touchdown.

Thus, when Biff found his father in a Boston hotel room with another woman, it was not his mother’s betrayal for which the boy suffered, it was his own. Willy and Biff, in fact, sounded as if they were having a lovers’ quarrel:

- **Biff, his weeping breaking from him:** Dad . . .
- **Willy, infected by it:** Oh, my boy . . .
- **Biff:** Dad . . .
- **Willy:** She’s nothing to me, Biff. I was lonely, I was terribly lonely. . . .
- **grabbing for Biff:** . . .
- **Biff:** Don’t touch me, you—liar!
- **Willy:** Apologize for that!
- **Biff:** You fake! You phony little fake! You fake! *Overcome, he turns quickly and weeping fully goes out with his suitcase. Willy is left on the floor on his knees.* (114; act 2)

Biff’s outrage at Willy’s betrayal of Linda—"You—you gave her Mama’s stockings!" (114; act 1)—was a displacement of his outrage at Willy’s betrayal of himself, Biff. So deep was Biff’s hurt and anger, his sense of personal betrayal, that he rejected the relationship with his father the two had enjoyed until this point. That is, he rejected both his own and Willy’s role as idealized phallus. This does not mean, however, that Biff evolved into a delayed Oedipal relationship with his mother. Psychologically, the young man could not free himself of the idealized image of Willy that had always bolstered his own narcissistic identity—he couldn’t “kill” the father—and this is why Biff, unable to wholly reject the paternal belief that business success is the only success, has remained vaguely dissatisfied with the outdoor ranch life he loves.

Finally, Linda’s sexuality, like her dreams for the family’s future, belongs rather to her husband than herself. She is the devoted, sexless wife that “good” women were required to be in the patriarchal society of her time and place; she is the woman, as we saw Happy put it earlier, “with resistance” (19; act 1). Even her frequent use of “dear” and “darling” in addressing her husband bespeaks a motherly, rather than wifely, affection. For as we have seen, she frequently addresses Biff using the same language and tone she uses to address Willy. This is the same motherly caretaking that shows itself in her concern over Biff’s remembering to take his comb to his interview with Bill Oliver and over Willy’s remembering to take his glasses, handkerchief, and saccharine
to his interview with Howard Wagner. Given the dearth of sexual content in Linda’s behavior throughout the play, the similarity of her dialogue with her husband and her older son does not suggest the eroticization of her relationship with Biff but the desexualization of her marital discourse.

The Lomans’ sexual attitudes intersect in what is known in common parlance as the “good girl/bad girl” view of women. “Good girls” are virgins until marriage; therefore, they are the girls men marry. “Bad girls” do not confine their sexual activity to marriage; therefore, they are the girls men sleep with, hold in contempt, and sooner or later abandon. Obviously, the salesman and his sons enact this attitude in their talk about and behavior toward women. And Linda, who is herself a “good girl” and who calls the women Happy sleeps with his “lousy rotten whores” (117; act 2), certainly concurs with this classification system. The obvious premise underlying “good girl/bad girl” is that sex is “dirty” or evil and that women are marriage commodities whose exchange value is measured by their willingness to put their sexuality in the hands of men. Part of achieving the American dream, from this perspective, must include marriage to a “good girl” like Linda Loman, the kind of girl Willy dreams his sons will bring home—and the kind of girl Happy and Biff are unable to find. This is the pre-1960s sexual attitude associated with the social and political conservatism of post–World War II America, and clearly, it served the patriarchal status quo by maintaining male domination over women physically and psychologically. However, the “good girl/bad girl” classification supports a conservative status quo in a subtler and more powerful manner as well: it masks the psychosexual structures informing relations between the sexes and, in so doing, masks the merger of the psychosexual structures of human consciousness with the ideological structures of the socius.

“Good girl/bad girl” defines Linda’s sexless, mindless devotion to Willy as virtue and thereby permits her to ignore her role in Willy’s self-delusion and in her self-delusion about him. And “good girl/bad girl” offers the Loman men an excuse for their behavior with women without making any of them responsible for their own psychological subtexts. Their sexuality does not express “their resentment of the role society forces them to play” (Hayman 51). On the contrary, their social role provides them with the psychological escape they seek. Willy doesn’t have to ask himself why he cheated on his wife; Happy doesn’t have to probe
too deeply into his motives for stealing other men’s fiancées; Biff
doesn’t have to wonder why he used to be so rough with the girls who
threw themselves at him in high school or why he has always been
rather uninterested in women. The rationalization, as we all know, is
that “bad girls” don’t deserve better treatment—they probably don’t
even want better treatment—and it is “natural” for men to respond to
them as objects to be used. By validating the Loman men’s unexamined
displacements—displacements of ontological insecurity, of career anxi-
ety, of Oedipal desire, of phallic projection—“good girl/bad girl” helps
keep them looking at the surface of their behavior, their motives, the
meaning of their lives.

The conservative era during which Death of a Salesman was written
and in which the play is set is directly related to the sexual attitudes ex-
pressed by the Loman family. For the repression of psychosexual
awareness is a product of the same unconscious desire that informs the
repression of political awareness: the desire to restrict the growth of
critical thinking—thinking that examines motives and subtexts—
which, as Horkheimer and Adorno were the first to observe, is always a
threat to a conservative status quo. A conservative society’s restriction
of psychosexual awareness (which, as the history of the 1950s and 1980s
illustrates, is accompanied by a policy of sexual conservatism on the
part of America’s political leadership) can be seen as an unconscious
symbol of what that society really wants to repress: knowledge of ideol-
ogy, of how the social/political/economic machinery runs. If we can be
kept forever “innocent,” forever ignorant of our own psychology and of
the ways in which that psychology constitutes and is constituted by the
sociopolitical domain, we will remain, like Willy, in childlike awe of the
powers that be, forever seeking access to the realm of the chosen with-
out ever questioning the terms on which that realm exists.

The relationship I have posited between ideology and sexuality
might be termed an Althusserian interrogation of Lacan: the question
isn’t merely, How does psychosexual development mark the indi-
vidual’s programming within the symbolic order? but, How does the
individual’s psychosexual programming within the symbolic order re-
produce the society’s conditions of production? In other words, as
Miller’s play reveals, sexuality hasn’t become public; it has always been
public. As we see in the case of the Loman family, unexamined, repres-
sive attitudes toward sexuality are part of the larger symbiotic relation-
ship between the individual psyche and the socius, which finds its most self-destructive expression in the ideological armor of the American dream, the armor Willy has constructed to hide himself and his family from their own psychology.

Considered as a labor to avoid and deny existential possibility, *Death of a Salesman*’s psychological/ideological content—Willy’s commodification of personal image, his five regressive episodes, and the Loman family’s sexuality—can be seen as a kind of psychological death-work. As a concept applicable to the drama of everyday life, death can be seen as a labor we perform whenever we refuse the Nietzschean daily task of reconquering our humanity. As Walter Davis puts it,

Insofar as we are dramatic beings defined by certain core conflicts, each day presents a task that will involve some expenditure of energy . . . either to confront or avoid oneself. We mobilize our [psychological] energies to move in one of these directions. Such energy is bound to interpretations (selective inattentions) and emotional patterns of behavior which define . . . our field of possible action. Life is the effort to make that situation the emergence of existential possibility. Death is the effort to protect us from same. (*Get the Guests* n.p.)

This is the real death, the most meaningful death, in *Death of a Salesman*: death seen not as an instinct or a drive but as an effort to avoid existential inwardness. From this perspective, the play’s title gains added bite: the death in *Death of a Salesman* no longer refers merely to the way Willy ends his life but to the way he lives it as well.

This kind of death-work should not be wholly unfamiliar to most readers. Few of us can honestly assess our own family histories without seeing the same kind of avoidance and denial we see in Willy. And don’t we ourselves regularly practice the kind of death-work that traps us, perhaps unconsciously but certainly not unwillingly, in static careers and interpersonal relationships? Ironically, I believe it’s the ideological familiarity of Willy’s death-work that informs many readers’ blindness to it. Like Jay Gatsby, Willy Loman is a character whose sympathetic qualities are foregrounded in the criticism, while his weaknesses are often either marginalized or blamed on external forces. And the reason may be, again as in the case of Gatsby, that the protagonist’s psychological/ideological project is compatible with those of his critics. As Esther Merle Jackson notes, “the story of Willy Loman” has an “intimate association with our aspirations” (8).
As Christopher Innes observes, “Brooks Atkinson’s judgment [in 1947] that Willy ‘represents the homely, decent, kindly virtues of middle class society’... was typical” of the critical response of that period (61), and it has remained representative of most of the critical response since that time. Eric Mottram, for example, believes that Willy’s failure to succeed in business is based on his failure “to learn that business ethics... oppose the traditions he assumed were still in action: the personal ethics of honour, the patriarchal nature of a basically benevolent society and family, and neighborhood relations” (30). As Rita Di Giuseppe puts it, the protagonist can’t “follow the praxis of the work ethic” because he is “too noble” (116). These critics don’t seem to notice that Willy’s personal ethics are, at best, very problematical. Similarly, June Schlueter and James K. Flanagan ignore the difficulties involved in any assessment of Willy’s values in their apparent nostalgia for the mythical period they feel the character represents: “Surrounded by high-rise apartment buildings that deflect the sun from the backyard, Willy’s little house in Brooklyn stands as a symbol of time past, when the world still had room for vegetable gardens and for salesmen who carried on their trade on the strength of a smile” (57). Harold Bloom, too, believes that Willy “is a good man, who wants only to earn and to deserve the love of his wife and of his sons” (15).

Even among those critics who see Willy’s life and death as “a continual commitment to illusion” (Bigsby 120), there is a desire to romanticize this commitment. C. W. E. Bigsby, for example, views Willy’s self-delusion as “an attempt to sustain a sense of personal dignity and meaning... in a life which seems to consist of little more than a series of contingent events” (117). Similarly, although William Heyen notes that Willy “die[s] lying” (49), he nevertheless calls the decision to commit suicide rather than face the truth about his life “an act of affirmation,” a choice of “meaning over meaninglessness,” because the character thus chooses, “in effect, to insist that he had lived, to defend his life as it was” (50). And while Gerald Weales observes that much of Willy’s behavior is geared to “keep him from questioning the assumptions that lie beneath his failure and his pretence of success” (134), he believes that the play’s positive possibility lies only in the protagonist: the possibility “that the individual may finally be able to retain his integrity... does not lie in Biff... nor in the alternative suggested by Charley and Bernard. It is in Willy’s vitality, in his perverse commitment to a pointless dream, in his inability simply to walk away” (135–36).
The desire to see Willy Loman in as positive a light as possible has, I think, also led some readers to distort other aspects of the play in order to support the reading they want to have of the protagonist. As a case in point, Bigsby asserts that Charley does not offer a positive alternative to Willy because Charley believes “that human concerns can play no role in business” and “boasts that his son’s success had been a consequence of his own lack of concern” (121). However, Charley does not ignore the role of human concerns in business; he merely rejects the sentimentalization of business—and the trivialization of human concerns—apparent in Willy’s attempt to substitute superficial personal interaction for meaningful business service and productivity. Furthermore, Charley’s claim that he was an uninterested father, to which Dennis Welland also points as an example of this character’s difference from Willy (42), is obviously not to be taken at face value. Charley’s oft-quoted “My salvation is that I never took any interest in anything” (89; act 2) is followed immediately with his gift of fifty dollars to Willy and a job offer. Charley continually underplays his concerns—his love for Bernard, of whom he is clearly very proud, and his interest in Willy’s well-being, which he shows throughout the play—but he has these concerns nonetheless. Behind the attempt to contrast Charley with Willy in this manner is, I think, the desire to canonize Willy as the repository of familial love in order to romanticize his motives. And it is the romanticization of Willy’s motives that leads, for example, Bigsby to say that “Miller’s portrait of Bernard—moral, hard-working, successful, attractive—is perhaps in danger of validating the dreams which Willy had for Biff” (122) without recognizing that Willy’s dreams for Biff involved the image rather than the reality of such values.

Perhaps the most interesting critic to identify with Willy Loman’s dream—and therefore to interpret the play in a way that supports the most positive reading possible of this character—is Arthur Miller himself. For Miller, Willy Loman is “a very brave spirit who cannot settle for half but must pursue his dream of himself to the end” (Essays 147–48). Willy is a tragic hero, Miller believes, largely because of the “tragic victory” of his death (Essays 146):

Willy Loman is filled with a joy, however brokenhearted, as he approaches his end... he has achieved a very powerful piece of knowledge, which is that he is loved by his son and has been embraced by him and forgiven. In this he is given his existence, so to speak—his fatherhood, for which he has always striven and which until now he could not achieve. (Essays 147)
Thus, although Miller sees Willy’s suicide as an error in judgment—due to his obsession with Biff’s financial future—the author considers the protagonist’s death the result of his newly acquired knowledge concerning his relationship with his son. In addition, Miller points out, Willy has an important kind of self-awareness—he is aware “of his separation from values that endure”:

He was agonized by his awareness of being in a false position, so constantly haunted by the hollowness of all he had placed his faith in, so aware, in short, that he must somehow be filled in his spirit or fly apart, that he staked his very life on the ultimate assertion. That he had not the intellectual fluency to verbalize his situation is not the same thing as saying that he lacked awareness, even an overly intensified consciousness that the life he had made was without form and inner meaning. (Essays 148)

Miller is, I think, correct both about Willy’s realization of Biff’s love and about the protagonist’s awareness of the emptiness in his own spiritual life. However, in both cases, the knowledge Willy achieves dissimulates, both for the character and for his creator, the knowledge he refuses. While Loman does realize that his son loves him, this new knowledge is, as I think I have shown, but a veneer, a gloss Willy uses to avoid and deny a deeper and much more important knowledge concerning his own psychology and that of his family. Similarly, while Willy is aware of the hollowness of his values, this is a knowledge he doesn’t want to have. As I have argued, this is an awareness he struggles to repress throughout the play. In fact, it is apparently only Willy’s failure to achieve even a modicum of the success he desired for himself and his family that permitted this awareness to come to the surface to begin with. Had Willy achieved any sort of material success—for example, had he been allowed to work in New York, for however little salary—and had Biff had any sort of a steady job with a future, even a job like Happy’s, Willy would have been able to continue to repress his awareness of the emptiness of his spiritual life. Perhaps he wouldn’t even have found it empty had circumstances allowed him to continue to hope or fantasize or lie about the future.

Miller confesses to his own unawareness of such subtextual elements in the play:

When I saw the devastating force with which [Death of a Salesman] struck its audiences, something within me was shocked and put off. I had thought of myself as rather an optimistic man. I looked at what I had
wrought and was forced to wonder whether I knew myself at all if this play which I had written half in laughter and joy, was as morose and as utterly sad as its audiences found it. (Essays 152)

And the playwright describes his experience of artistic creation in terms that suggest the importance of the author’s unconscious in the creation of a literary work: “Writing in that form was like moving through a corridor in a dream” (Essays 13). The form to which Miller refers is, of course, the almost exclusive use of Willy’s very subjective point of view with its focus on the expressionistic memory sequences; and it is apparently this form, which Miller had never used before and would never use again, that produced the dreamlike creative experience so conducive to unconscious production. His retrospective, a year after the play’s opening, confirms the notion that something other than the playwright’s conscious intention went into the composition of the work: “It may well be that from the moment I read it to my wife and two friends . . . the play cut itself off from me in a way that is incomprehensible. . . . the script suddenly seemed a record of a madness I had passed through, something I ought not admit to at all, let alone read aloud or have produced on the stage” (Essays 12).

That Miller is not consciously aware—and, perhaps, does not want to be aware—of the powerful subtext of his play that I have outlined in this chapter is also evident in his use of setting and in the Requiem with which the play closes. For both devices bespeak an attempt to limit his audience’s response to the protagonist to a much narrower reading than the play, as a whole, permits. This attempt is especially clear in the stage directions Miller includes at the beginning of the play:

* A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon. The curtain rises.

* Before us is the Salesman’s house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange. As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home. (5; act 1)

This description clearly foregrounds Willy’s “underdog” elements: the hero has a fight on his hands, and the enemy is an overwhelming environment. If he loses the battle, it will be the fault of social forces bigger than he is.11 And again, as the curtain falls over Willy’s grave, set-
ting reinforces the author's message: "Only the music of the flute is left on
the darkening stage as over the house the hard towers of the apartment build-
ings rise into sharp focus" (133; Requiem).

This view of Willy as a tiny boat on a big sea is reinforced by
Charley's well-known speech about Willy during the Requiem. Because
the other characters simply reiterate the points of view they've held
throughout the play—Biff's insistence on telling the truth, Happy's re-
fusal to acknowledge that truth, and Linda's blind devotion to her
husband—Charley's apparent change of heart has marked dramatic
impact:

Nobody last blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a sales-
man. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life... He's a
man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And
when they start not smiling back—that's an earthquake. And then you
get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished. Nobody
last blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the
territory. (132; Requiem)

Certainly, Charley's comments at this point in the play contradict his
earlier view of Willy as a stubborn, foolish man, a salesman who
doesn't even know what he can and can't sell (90; act 2). Neil Carson
notes, in fact, that Charley's "inconsisten[t] ... justification for Willy's
romantic hopefulness" helps make the Requiem "something of a dra-
matic non sequitur" (57). Why does Miller put such unexpected words in
Charley's mouth? Welland believes the explanation is that Charley
"doesn't allow his feelings to come through" until Willy's funeral (42). I
think, however, that these are Miller's feelings coming through rather
than Charley's.

While I certainly agree that Willy is an underdog, I think that Miller
uses the setting and the Requiem, not just to make this point, but to cut
off other interpretive possibilities. That is, the author focuses on those
elements in the protagonist's environment, both at home and at work,
that can explain Willy's behavior without recourse to the kind of psy-
chological/ideological subtext revealed, for example, in the regressive
episodes. And this focus can be seen, I think, as a diversionary tactic
that works to disallow the kind of reading of the play I have offered in
this chapter.

It is especially interesting, in this context, to note what seems to be
an incongruity in Miller’s stage directions at the end of act 2. During the present-tense, realist action of the play, the actors are instructed to observe the set’s predrawn wall lines, which indicate the physical boundaries among different rooms and between the house and the yard. When the actors walk through a wall line, it is an indication that they are portraying action occurring in Willy’s memory of the past. These are the expressionist episodes of the play, associated with memory, fantasy, dream, imagination, and, as I have argued, regression. Yet as Linda, Charley, Biff, and Happy prepare, just before the Requiem, to go to the cemetery for Willy’s funeral, they all “move toward the audience, through the wall-line of the kitchen” (130; act 2). Although the Requiem is supposed to take place in real time, as part of the realism of the play’s present-tense action, the actors enter the scene through the wall line as if they were entering one of the play’s expressionist episodes. Even if Miller deliberately violated the wall line at this point in the play—for example, as an emblem of what has happened to the house of Loman—such an intention would not undermine the unconscious symbolism of this act. Because, as we saw Miller himself suggest, the expressionist episodes are largely a product of the author’s unconscious mind, it is especially meaningful that an expressionist stage direction occurs during the realist representation that ushers in the Requiem. And I think it suggests that Miller unconsciously knows the Requiem is a fantasy, his fantasy, in which he, himself, guarantees that Willy dies a tragic hero. Although Miller puts the words in Charley’s mouth, it is the playwright himself, who is telling us that “nobody dares blame this man.”

Thus, just like many of his critics, Miller romanticizes Willy. Or perhaps more to the point, the author mythologizes him, as Willy himself does, focusing, in Barthes’s terms, on the surface of reality, or the appearance of meaning, rather than on its subtext, or the meaning of appearances (143). Perhaps, again like his critics, the author mythologizes his protagonist’s psychological/ideological project out of a desire to mythologize a similar project of his own. It is a testimony to the power of the form, then, and to the power of the playwright’s conflicted unconscious this form tapped, that the play tells the truth about commodity psychology and the American dream despite the desire of Miller and his critics to hide it.