

Twentieth Century American Drama
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Lecture - 13
Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman - Part 8

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HOWARD: THIS IS NO TIME FOR RAISE 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. When-



Hello and welcome to yet another session of the NPTEL course titled Twentieth Century American Drama. So, we are reading through this play Death of a Salesman, by Arthur Miller.

So, in the previous session, we looked at the scene where Willy Loman is being fired by his boss Howard and how he is responding to that, how he is reacting to that and we also began to see how that scene signified his downfall in very tangible ways, his world comes crashing down around him and right after this, from this scene onwards, we find that he is just lapsing into these past memories.

There are a lot of memories overlapping, there are a lot of instances coming together, and just the way it had always been happening, we find that Willy Loman finds it difficult to differentiate his reality from his memories, from his fantasy life and his memory is a very orchestrated manufactured memory.

He chooses not to remember the unpleasant things. He only chooses to remember those set of things which give him a sense of security which boosts his ego, and he chooses to remember only those episodes from his life where through which it is possible for him to have an alternate reality.

So, there are these, there is a double life in a sense that he leads by trimming his memory, by editing his memory in particular ways. Just so, it focuses only on such aspects in which you know he comes across as a very successful person, a successful individual, a successful salesman and a successful family person.

So, right after this scene, where he is getting fired by Howard and how he also exposes himself a bit because of it we get to know that his helplessness becomes more accentuated because it is also combined with a sense of false pride and for which Howard also calls him out.

And soon after this, we find that he very soon the projected memory of Ben begins to invade his mind. And even without much of a transition in between the time switch happens over here and here, Willy is now inhabiting a time slot in his past life, where he is having this conversation with Ben. There is an instance which in Willy's mind, could have been life-changing. There is a proposition which is being offered to Willy from Ben in order to you know, join him in Alaska.

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Full yourself together, kid, there's people outside.

[HOWARD exits, pushing the table off left. WILLY stares into space, exhausted. Now the music is heard—BEN'S music—first distantly, then closer, closer. As WILLY speaks, BEN enters from the right. He carries valise and umbrella.]

WILLY: Oh, Ben, how did you do it? What is the answer? Did you wind up the Alaska deal already?

BEN: Doesn't take much time if you know what you're doing. Just a short business trip. Boarding ship in an hour. Wanted to say good-bye.

WILLY: Ben, I've got to talk to you.

BEN [glancing at his watch]: Haven't the time, William.

WILLY [crossing the apron to BEN]: Ben, nothing's working out. I don't know what to do.

BEN: Now, look here, William. I've bought timberland in Alaska and I need a man to look after things for me.

WILLY: God, timberland! Me and my boys in those grand outdoors!

So, this is how the conversation goes.

“How did you do it? Did you wind up the Alaska deal already?

Does not take much time if you know what you are doing. Just a short business trip. Boarding ship in an hour. Wanted to say goodbye. “

So, there is something very appealing in Ben's way of dealing with his business, dealing with Willy, who Willy finds it extremely appealing and this is; this is a kind of business that, ideally, Willy Loman also wanted to know, and we find that Willy is totally in awe at what Ben is doing and at this point, Ben is also looking for someone to help him in his business. He says I have bought timberland in Alaska, I need a man to look after things for me.

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BEN [*glancing at his watch*]: Haven't the time, William.

WILLY [*crossing the apron to BEN*]: Ben, nothing's working out. I don't know what to do.

BEN: Now, look here, William. I've bought timberland in Alaska and I need a man to look after things for me.

WILLY: God, timberland! Me and my boys in those grand outdoors!

BEN: You've a new continent at your doorstep, William. Get out of these cities, they're full of talk and time payments and courts of law. Screw on your fists and you can fight for a fortune up there.

WILLY: Yes, yes! Linda, Linda!

[LINDA *enters as of old, with the wash.*]

LINDA: Oh, you're back?

BEN: I haven't much time.

WILLY: No, wait! Linda, he's got a proposition for me in Alaska.

LINDA: But you've got—[*To BEN*] He's got a beautiful



“God, timberland! Me and my boys in those grand outdoors! “

So, Willy is fantasizing about this life that he could have had with Ben and Ben also, you know, makes it, Ben stands for a very different kind of a work ethic, a different kind of professional you know, root which Linda does not really approve of.

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BEN [*glancing at his watch*]: Haven't the time, William.

WILLY [*crossing the apron to BEN*]: Ben, nothing's working out. I don't know what to do.

BEN: Now, look here, William. I've bought timberland in Alaska and I need a man to look after things for me.

WILLY: God, timberland! Me and my boys in those grand outdoors!

BEN: You've a new continent at your doorstep, William. Get out of these cities, they're full of talk and time payments and courts of law. Screw on your fists and you can fight for a fortune up there.

WILLY: Yes, yes! Linda, Linda!

[LINDA *enters as of old, with the wash.*]

LINDA: Oh, you're back?

BEN: I haven't much time.

WILLY: No, wait! Linda, he's got a proposition for me in Alaska.

LINDA: But you've got—[*To BEN*] He's got a beautiful



So, Ben says, you have a new continent at your doorstep, William. Get out of these cities, they are full of talk and time payments and courts of law. Screw on your fists, and you can fight for a fortune up there.

So, that is what Ben does in Alaska, and this is how he makes a fortune, and that is something, this is hard work too. But somehow, it's very romantically presented through Willy's eyes, and when Biff also wants to do something which is pretty much the same to move out of the city and make a fortune to fight for things and make it happen. He finds Willy Loman finds it difficult to accept that. So, at this point in Willy's memory, he is totally fascinated with what Ben is doing.

And he is excitedly telling Linda that he is got a proposition for me in Alaska. But Linda always had a practical mind, and we find that even in Willy's memories, she stays very secure, and very grounded, and her responses are very practical too. So, she says, he is got a beautiful job here, yeah.

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WILLY: But in Alaska, kid, I could—
LINDA: You're doing well enough, Willy!



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BEN [*to LINDA*]: Enough for what, my dear?
LINDA [*frightened of BEN and angry at him*]: Don't say those things to him! Enough to be happy right here, right now.
[*To WILLY, while BEN laughs*] Why must everybody conquer the world? You're well liked, and the boys love you, and someday—[*to BEN*]—why, old man Wagner told him just the other day that if he keeps it up he'll be a member of the



And Willy is, of course, you know, arguing, trying to argue with Linda that it's going to be very different over there and when Linda is saying, you are doing well enough, Willy. Ben asked this question, enough for what, my dear?

So, this is a question of priorities; this is a question of what kind of material comforts each person wants out of life and what each system can offer. We are not very sure if Willy Loman would have actually become a success if he had left for Alaska; maybe it is just a fantasy of his, he is just thinking in his mind that he could have made it big, yeah. But Willy's life, Willy's value system, and his ethics are more about how people like him.

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BEN [*to LINDA*]: Enough for what, my dear?

LINDA [*frightened of BEN and angry at him*]: Don't say those things to him! Enough to be happy right here, right now. [*To WILLY, while BEN laughs*] Why must everybody conquer the world? You're well liked, and the boys love you, and someday—[*to BEN*]—why, old man Wagner told him just the other day that if he keeps it up he'll be a member of the firm, didn't he, Willy?



So, look at how Linda is responding to this. Frightened of Ben and angry at him, do not say those things to him. Enough to be Happy right here, right now. Why must everybody conquer the world? You are well-liked, and the boys love you, and someday, why, old man Wagner told him just the other day that if he keeps it up, he will be a member of the firm, did not he, Willy? So, we know that. So, we get to know that none of these promises seems to hold water in the long run.

So, Wagner is unable to keep his promise; Wagner's this happens right after Wagner's son Howard fires Willy. But at the same time, we find that, you know, Linda is also believing in this the in the same thing that Willy upholds very highly about being well-liked, about you know, being everyone's pet, and that seems to that somehow in his mind, should translate to success.

So, the fatal flaw that Willy Loman identifies in his life is that this love and admiration that people seem to have for him and for his sons, they have not really translated into any kind of material comfort; they have not translated into material success.

So, he is forever trying to go back to the past and find those moments which gave him a high at that moment and while remembering those moments, it still gives him a high. It is something which keeps him anchored very strongly in spite of everything that is going wrong with his life in the present.

And Ben is, of course, you know, trying to make a case for the proposition that he has put forward to Willy. But Willy, of course, you know, makes this decision not to go, and Willy is in awe with the kind of life that Ben has made out for him and at the same time, he also wants to pursue his life as a salesman. He wants to make it big as a salesperson as well.

And look at how you know, I mean at this point, Willy is talking about his son, and this almost makes this that is a tragedy of this. It is a very tragic scene in some sense when we think about what happened to Biff later on and the utter helplessness of it, the utter pointlessness of these memories, which really do not mean much in the past or in the present.

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BEN [*picking up his valise*]: I've got to go.
WILLY [*holding BEN back*]: Look at this boy!
[BIFF, *in his high school sweater, enters carrying suitcase.*
HAPPY *carries BIFF'S shoulder guards, gold helmet, and football pants.*]

WILLY: Without a penny to his name, three great universities are begging for him, and from there the sky's the limit, because it's not what you do, Ben. It's who you know and the smile on your face! It's contacts, Ben, contacts! The whole wealth of Alaska passes over the lunch table at the Commodore Hotel, and that's the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the

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So, this is how Willy is talking about Biff.

“Without a penny to his name, three great universities are begging for him, and from there the sky's the limit, because it is not what you do, Ben. It is who you know and the smile on your face. It's contacts, Ben, contacts!”

So, there are a number of scenes that we have already noticed in the play where Willy actually believes that it is all about the kind of personality that you project before others, which is why he also ends up giving these, you know, giving the kind of advice to his sons which had also you know perhaps misled them in some form or the other.

So, that is another scene that we will shortly take a look at in terms of how Willy thinks as well as the others think, somehow you know there was something messed up in the way the boys were brought up in the kind of value system that they were taught to believe in.

The whole wealth of Alaska passes over the lunch table at the Commodore Hotel, and that is a wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked. Yeah.

So, Willy strongly believes that it keeps coming back. So, you find that you have already noticed this in this play that this is something which gets underscored over and over again by Willy's character that a man can achieve anything in this country if he is well-liked and if he has got the right contacts.

That is something that he tries to pull off with Howard and fails to, and that is the irony of it; that is a tragic irony of this as well and when we find that Willy is reliving these memories even after getting fired by Howard. And even after having proven through his own life that that is now how things work, we find that, you know, the tragedy gets more and more accentuated.

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basis of being liked! [*He turns to BIFF.*] And that's why when you get out on that field today it's important. Because thousands of people will be rooting for you and loving you. [*To BEN, who has again begun to leave*] And Ben! when he walks into a business office his name will sound out like a bell and all the doors will open to him! I've seen it, Ben, I've seen it a thousand times! You can't feel it with your hand like timber, but it's there!

BEN: Good-bye, William.

WILLY: Ben, am I right? Don't you think I'm right? I value your advice.

BEN: There's a new continent at your doorstep, William. You could walk out rich. Rich! [*He is gone.*]

WILLY: We'll do it here, Ben! You hear me? We're gonna do it here!



And that is why when you get out on that field today, it's important. Because thousands of people will be rooting for you and loving you. And Ben, when he walks into a business office, his name

will sound out like a bell and all the doors will open to him. I have seen it, Ben. I have seen it a thousand times. You cannot feel it with your hand like timber, but it is there.

He is getting almost defensive over here. He is rejecting the proposition that Ben had uncle Ben had you know, brought forth many years back. But he is also getting defensive about that. He is getting defensive about that, not just by showcasing his own career and his own work but also putting his son in the forefront as a pawn. So, this is, you know, what he is now referring to as this certain school game which you know we will soon be given more details about that.

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thousands of people will be rooting for you and loving you.
[To BEN, who has again begun to leave] And Ben! when he walks into a business office his name will sound out like a bell and all the doors will open to him! I've seen it, Ben, I've seen it a thousand times! You can't feel it with your hand like timber, but it's there!

BEN: Good-bye, William.

WILLY: Ben, am I right? Don't you think I'm right? I value your advice.

BEN: There's a new continent at your doorstep, William. You could walk out rich. Rich! [He is gone.]

WILLY: We'll do it here, Ben! You hear me? We're gonna do it here!

[Young BERNARD rushes in. The gay music of the boys is heard.]

BERNARD: Oh, gee, I was afraid you left already!

WILLY: Why? What time is it?

BERNARD: It's half-past one!



So, Willy is also telling Ben that you know he values Ben's advice much, and there is a new continent at your doorstep, William. You could walk out rich. Rich, yeah.

So, the whole point is the emphasis seems to be on the kind of material success that they could reap, whether in New York City or in Alaska, and Willy is very confident that they will do it here too. We will do it here, Ben. You hear me? We are going to do it here, yeah.

So, now again, there is a time shift we find that you know, he is now reliving this school game for which Biff is also getting prepared for. We are not sure whether these events had happened in the past and such order of succession, just the way Willy is remembering now.

But this is how it plays out in his mind at the moment. So, this is just before the match, and Bernard, Bernard, who was seen as an anaemic child and who was seen as something a kind of person, who was not as liked as Willy's boys are, yeah, and this is Charley's son too. So, Bernard walks in.

And this is the Ebbets field, then the that you know the game at the Ebbets field that they are all talking about.

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[WILLY rushes in with the pennants.]

WILLY [*handing them out*]: Everybody wave when Biff comes out on the field. [HAPPY and BERNARD run off.] You set now, boy?

[*The music has died away.*]

BIFF: Ready to go, Pop. Every muscle is ready.

WILLY [*at the edge of the apron*]: You realize what this means?

BIFF: That's right, Pop.

WILLY [*feeling BIFF's muscles*]: You're comin' home this afternoon captain of the All-Scholastic Championship Team of the City of New York.

BIFF: I got it, Pop. And remember, pal, when I take off my helmet, that touchdown is for you.

WILLY: Let's go! [*He is starting out, with his arm around BIFF, when CHARLEY enters, as of old, in knickers.*] I got no room for you, Charley.

CHARLEY: Room? For what?



So, we will quickly take a look at just a couple of instances over here. So, Willy is very, very confident that Biff is going to win. You are coming home this afternoon, captain of the All-Scholastic Championship Team of the City of New York.

But later on in the play, we get to know that Biff did not quite make it. This also becomes a turning point in Biff's life, after which, in Willy's mind after which, nothing really big happens to him. He is only 17 at this point, and the way in which Willy is talking about this game, he is making a big deal out of it. He is making a big deal in such ways that it also instances a false sense of confidence, a false sense of security in Biff's mind too.

So, this is just a brief time, when the brief moment when Charley pretends that, you know, he forgot about the game, and Willy is entirely, you know, upset about that, and Willy loses his temper about it, yeah.

So, in Willy's mind, this is perhaps the biggest thing that could happen to Biff and which is why you know these sort of memories also continuously play in his mind because he is thinking of a number of events, a number of instances which could have become turning points.

Yeah, for instance, you know when uncle Ben makes his proposition to join him in Alaska and to make a fortune out there or this moment when his son Biff is about to win the game. So, these moments are exaggerated memories in his mind, where things could have taken a different turn altogether.

And right after that, you know, there is a very, very significant scene that would follow over here, where Willy has this brief encounter. This brief discussion with Bernard. And a lot of things have changed in the meantime.

And now, when they are talking in the present, Willy is feeling more and more helpless, and he realizes that he is no longer the kind of figure who could take much pride in his sons.

A lot of things have changed and this is another important scene where he begins to realize that he needs to perhaps have another lens through which he could look at the world and there are a lot of even while he is trying to recall, there are a lot of things that he would willingly forget as well. So, that is something we will take a look at in detail in the following discussion.

So, thank you for your time. I encourage you, you to read through the remaining sessions in order to understand how these memories, these manufactured memories, these edited memories and trimmed memories begin to become almost detrimental to Willy's health, and they keep taking him away from the present. So, it also becomes very, very fatal to him in the next few scenes, as we would be seeing in the next couple of sessions.

So, thank you all for your time, and I will look forward to seeing you in the next session.