

Estrangement and Identity Formation in Arther Miller's *Death of a Salesman* through a Psychoanalytic lens

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Abstract

This study examines estrangement and identity formation in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* through a psychoanalytic lens. The objectives are to explore capitalist materialism's weakening of family values and mental well-being, to investigate repression and inner conflict in Willy Loman's breakdown and isolation, and to analyze the portrayal of tension between family relationships and material success desires in modern society. The research employs a qualitative method of close textual reading. The theoretical framework draws primarily on Sigmund Freud's concepts, including the structural model of the psyche (id, ego, superego), repression and defense mechanisms. Key findings reveal that Willy's identity fragments due to internalized capitalist norms that tie self-worth to popularity and productivity, leading to repression of failures, superego-driven guilt, and ego weakness. His hallucinations and suicidal acts reflect the return of repressed guilt from events like the Boston affair and professional rejection. Family bonds suffer as love becomes conditional on achievement, evident in generational conflicts with Biff and Happy, where material ambitions replace emotional authenticity. Estrangement emerges from this psychic split, turning the home into a site of conditional approval rather than refuge. Implications extend to understanding psychological costs of performance-driven societies. The conclusion affirms that the play portrays identity as precarious when built on illusion.

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Introduction

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller (1949) is considered one of the greatest dramatizations of the psychological and social impact of twentieth-century capitalist ideology. The play portrays the tragic failure of Willy Loman, an aging salesman whose relentless pursuit of material success and social recognition alienates him from his family, rational selfhood, and reality (Miller, 1949). Viewed through psychoanalytic and sociocultural perspectives, the play demonstrates how the internalization of the American Dream the belief that human worth depends on wealth, popularity, and professional success produces psychological conflict, family estrangement, and existential alienation. In postwar America, the American Dream promoted material prosperity and social respect as the ideal way of life (Abbotson, 2007). However, Miller exposes how this ideology defines success in purely economic terms while neglecting integrity, emotional fulfillment, and personal authenticity (Bloom, 2010). Willy's identity is built upon popularity and commercial

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success, and the collapse of these external standards results in an ontological crisis. Freud's psychoanalytic model explains Willy's psychological conflict. His unconscious desire for love and security is repressed by the demands of reality and social expectations, producing fantasies, hallucinations, and defense mechanisms (Freud, 2010). Within the family, Biff's rejection of his father's values represents a generational conflict between emotional authenticity and material achievement (Bloom, 2013). Fromm argues that capitalist societies prioritize having over being, making love and recognition dependent upon status and achievement (Fromm, 1976; Roudane, 1995).

Beyond the family, the play critiques capitalism as a system that reduces human value to productivity. Marxist-psychoanalytic critics argue that capitalism alienates individuals from meaningful work, social relationships, and selfhood (Marcuse, 1964; Eagleton, 2011). Willy's identity is inseparable from his role as a salesman; once he becomes economically useless, he experiences the loss of self (Esslin, 1982). Miller therefore combines psychoanalytic conflict with Marxist criticism to reveal how ideology shapes unconscious desires, identity, and human relationships (Tyson, 2006). The tragedy of Willy Loman is not merely economic failure but psychological fragmentation. His fantasies, hallucinations, and eventual suicide reflect a man whose identity depends entirely upon external measures of success. Critics such as Jameson (1991) argue that capitalist culture fragments subjectivity by forcing individuals to pursue socially constructed standards of success. Willy's inability to reconcile personal desires with social expectations demonstrates how the American Dream becomes both a source of hope and psychological destruction. This study examines *Death of a Salesman* through psychoanalytic and sociocultural perspectives by exploring Willy's repression, fantasies, identity formation, and family relationships while relating them to broader capitalist ideology. Integrating Freud with critics such as Fromm, Marcuse, Eagleton, and Tyson, the study argues that the American Dream functions as a symbolic force that shapes identity, disrupts intimacy, and produces psychological estrangement. Consequently, the play remains highly relevant to contemporary discussions of mental health, work, family, and consumer culture.

Finally, Willy Loman's tragedy lies not in failing to achieve the American Dream but in accepting its standards as the only measure of human worth, making his identity dependent upon the changing values of the capitalist marketplace (Biggsby, 2005; Tyson, 2006).

Estrangement refers to a state of psychological, emotional, and social alienation in which individuals lose their sense of belonging, identity, and meaning under the influence of external forces such as economic systems and social ideologies. In Freudian psychoanalysis, estrangement occurs when unconscious desires are repressed, the ego fails to reconcile inner desires with external reality, and unresolved conflicts emerge through anxiety, hallucinations, and psychological breakdown (Freud, 1923). In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman experiences estrangement at every level. Society rejects him once he is no longer economically productive; his occupation can no longer provide identity or dignity; his family relationships deteriorate; and his self-worth becomes entirely dependent upon success, popularity, and material achievement. Consequently, the collapse of the American Dream destroys not only his career but also his identity. His hallucinations and confusion between past and present reveal a fragmented mind unable to reconcile illusion with reality. As Christopher Biggsby (2005) observes, Willy is unable to find value in a society that no longer recognizes his humanity. Arthur Miller argues in *Tragedy and the*

Common Man (1949) that tragedy arises when an individual's sense of personal dignity is threatened. Willy's death therefore becomes the final consequence of an identity imprisoned within a dehumanizing capitalist ideology.

Research Objectives

- 1) To examine how capitalist materialism weakens family values and harms mental well-being, showing how modern individuals become alienated.
- 2) To analyze how *Death of a Salesman* portrays the conflict between family relationships and the desire for material success in modern society.

Literature Review

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller is widely regarded as a critique of capitalist society, exposing the psychological and familial consequences of materialism. Willy Loman represents a modern individual whose identity is shaped by economic pressures and the false promises of the American Dream. While many studies emphasize the play's economic critique, recent scholarship highlights its deeper exploration of identity and psychological fragmentation (Elhawa, 2018). A psychoanalytic approach is therefore valuable for examining how material ambition replaces genuine human relationships, leading to estrangement and identity crisis.

Willy's obsessive desire to be admired and financially successful demonstrates the internalization of capitalist ideals, where external achievement becomes more important than emotional fulfillment. According to Agha (2017), his identity is constructed around socially accepted definitions of success, causing him to repress feelings of failure through denial and fantasy. From a Freudian perspective, this reflects the conflict between the id, ego, and superego, resulting in psychological instability (Freud, 1923, as cited in Agha, 2017). His dependence on illusion distances him from reality and weakens his relationships with Linda and his sons, particularly Biff.

Scholars argue that Willy's repression and hallucinations symbolize his fractured psyche. Ahmed Jalal et al. (2023) explain that his refusal to accept failure reflects Freudian repression, while Ibrahim (2023) interprets his conversations with Ben as manifestations of unconscious desire and escapism. Miller's non-linear narrative, blending memory, fantasy, and reality, further illustrates Willy's fragmented identity and growing estrangement.

The Loman family reflects the psychological effects of modern capitalism. Sumarsono et al. (2023) argue that post-Depression economic pressures created crises of masculine identity, forcing men to equate self-worth with financial success. Consequently, Willy measures his value through social approval rather than genuine relationships, resulting in emotional isolation and the collapse of family bonds.

Materialism also shapes the conflict between Willy and Biff. While Willy remains committed to the illusion of success, Biff ultimately rejects these false ideals and seeks authenticity. Zuraikat et al. (2023) view this conflict as a struggle between conformity and self-realization. Biff's recognition that his life has been "a ridiculous lie" marks his movement toward identity formation, whereas Willy remains trapped in denial.

Recent studies further argue that Willy's tragedy represents the psychological consequences of capitalist ideology. Almaarroof and Jubair (2024) maintain that the pursuit of wealth destroys peace, identity, and family relationships, while Mizrak (2025) argues that the American Dream creates unrealistic expectations that ultimately produce despair. Similarly, Mocabil (2025) demonstrates how false ideals of success distort both personal identity and family relationships across generations.

Although previous studies have explored capitalism, the American Dream, and social inequality in *Death of a Salesman*, relatively few integrate these issues with psychoanalytic theory to examine how unconscious processes contribute to estrangement and identity formation. This study addresses that gap by investigating how repression, desire, illusion, and psychological conflict transform family devotion into material obsession, ultimately producing the fragmented identity of Willy Loman.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on psychoanalytic theory, primarily drawing on the works of Sigmund Freud to examine estrangement and identity formation in *Death of a Salesman*. Psychoanalytic criticism provides an effective framework for exploring unconscious desires, repression, defense mechanisms, and the conflict between personal desire and social expectations. Through this perspective, the play is understood not only as a social critique but also as a psychological exploration of Willy Loman's fragmented identity under ideological pressure.

Freud's tripartite model of the psyche id, ego, and superego is central to this analysis. The id represents instinctual desires, the superego embodies internalized moral and social values, and the ego mediates between them (Freud, 1923). Willy's desire for admiration, wealth, and effortless success reflects the impulses of the id, while his commitment to the American Dream represents the demands of the superego. The ego's inability to balance these forces results in psychological conflict and eventual collapse.

Repression is another key Freudian concept that explains Willy's psychological condition. According to Freud (1915), repression pushes painful memories and desires into the unconscious. Willy suppresses the reality of his failed career and damaged family relationships, choosing instead to live through fantasies and memories of success. His conversations with Ben illustrate the return of the repressed, revealing his unconscious longing for wealth and achievement. These fantasies distance him from reality and deepen his estrangement.

Dreams and illusions also function as psychological defense mechanisms. Freud (1900) argues that dreams express unconscious wishes. Although Willy's experiences are not literal dreams, his constant retreat into fantasy serves the same purpose by protecting his fragile self-esteem from failure. His belief that being well-liked guarantees success reflects denial, allowing him to preserve an idealized self-image while avoiding painful reality.

The psychoanalytic framework also explains identity formation. Identity is continuously shaped through unconscious processes and social interaction rather than remaining fixed. Willy internalizes capitalist values that equate personal worth with financial success and social recognition. As Tyson (2015) argues, cultural values become embedded within psychological

structures. Consequently, Willy evaluates both himself his sons according to external standards of success, causing his identity to collapse when those expectations remain unfulfilled.

Estrangement in the play is both psychological and emotional. Willy becomes alienated from himself because he cannot accept reality. His conflict with Biff demonstrates projection, as he imposes his unrealized ambitions upon his son. When Biff rejects these expectations, Willy's fragile identity begins to disintegrate. Similarly, Willy's selective memories reconstruct the past to preserve his idealized self-image, preventing self-realization and intensifying emotional isolation (Barry, 2017).

Freud's broader socio-psychological perspective further explains Willy's tragedy. Civilization requires individuals to restrain instinctual desires to satisfy social expectations (Freud, 1930). Within postwar American capitalism, these expectations become ideals of productivity, prosperity, and material success. Willy's inability to achieve these ideals produces both psychological suffering and ideological alienation.

Overall, the psychoanalytic framework demonstrates that Willy's identity is shaped by unconscious desire, repression, social conditioning, and defensive illusions. His reliance on fantasy, denial, and external validation distances him from himself, his family, and reality. His final decision to sacrifice himself for insurance money reflects the tragic irony that the same ideology promising success ultimately destroys him. Freud's theories therefore provide an effective framework for understanding how repression, internal conflict, and internalized cultural values shape Willy Loman's fragmented identity and persistent estrangement, establishing *Death of a Salesman* as both a critique of the American Dream and a psychological tragedy of modern identity.

This study adopts a qualitative approach using Catherine Belsey's (2013) textual analysis as its primary method. Through a close reading of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, this analysis examines linguistic markers of psychological distress to explore the characters' inner experiences and psychological conflicts. By focusing on emotional tension, memory, and identity formation, the study applies psychoanalytic theory to key dialogues, symbolism, and flashbacks. Ultimately, this approach connects the literary text directly to psychological concepts, revealing the unconscious motivations that drive the narrative.

Data Analysis

"A salesman has got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."

Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

Willy Loman is a tragic victim of both a distorted social system and a fragile psyche, and it is precisely at the meeting-point of these two pressures that his estrangement is generated. His death is not merely the failure of a man; it is the collapse of an identity built entirely upon a mirage. Read psychoanalytically, that collapse appears not as accident or misfortune but as the only possible outcome of a life lived in total rejection of reality. The analysis that follows treats the play itself as its evidence its dialogue, its stage directions, and its restless movement between past and present in order to demonstrate how a single mind is shaped and finally broken by forces that are at once deeply private and unmistakably social. The governing argument is that Willy is estranged

both from himself and from those closest to him, and that this estrangement is the structural consequence of an identity anchored in a dream the world will never permit him to reach. Charley's Requiem verdict that a salesman "has got to dream" names the tragedy exactly: dreaming is not Willy's flaw but his occupation, the very condition of his trade, and it is this professionalised fantasy that hollows out the self it was meant to sustain.

The Failing Ego and the Dissolution of Reality

Freud's model of the psyche as a contested field among the id, the ego, and the superego offers a precise instrument for reading Willy's condition, because the play dramatizes the ego's defeat rather than merely reporting it. The ego is the agency that holds inner desire and outer reality in equilibrium, and in Willy that mediating power visibly disintegrates. He can no longer keep memory sealed off from the present; the past returns not as calm recollection but as living scene, spilling onto the stage and overtaking the action. Miller's working title, *The Inside of His Head*, together with a set whose walls the characters cross freely in memory yet respect in the present, converts the stage into a diagram of Willy's own mind. This collapse of the boundary between remembered and real is the first and clearest symptom of a self losing its shape, since a stable identity depends upon the capacity to distinguish what is recalled from what is happening. When Willy cries out, in Act Two, that "the woods are burning," the line operates simultaneously as literal confusion and as an unconscious apprehension that his entire world is being consumed. The same buried dread surfaces in his frantic night-time gardening and his insistence that "nothing's planted," that he does not have "a thing in the ground." The barren soil is the objective correlative of a man convinced that he has grown nothing lasting and left no trace of himself, and the desperate planting becomes a final, doomed attempt to prove that his life has yielded something of value.

Repression and the Return of the Repressed

Beneath this disintegration lies a wound that Willy has driven out of sight. Freud argued that painful material expelled from consciousness does not disappear but returns in disguised form, and the Boston affair behaves in exactly this manner. The play circles the memory for a long time before disclosing it, because it carries the guilt Willy most needs to hide; the very delay of the plot enacts the way a repressed thought is held at the margin of awareness. The recurring image of stockings shows this concealed guilt forcing its way to the surface. When Willy snaps at Linda that he will not have her "mending stockings in this house," his anger is disproportionate until one recalls the new stockings, he once gave the woman in Boston; an ordinary domestic object becomes the exact site at which his shame breaks through, so that a gesture of wifely tenderness reopens the wound. The catastrophe of Willy's life is the moment Biff discovers the affair, and the boy's recoil "You fake! You phony little fake!" marks the instant his admiration collapses. That rupture never heals, and much of Willy's later harshness toward Biff issues from a guilt he can never openly avow: the father punishes the son for knowing a truth the father cannot bear to face. The estrangement between them, in other words, is not a lapse of feeling but the visible symptom of an unmetabolized trauma.

The Ego-Ideal and the Melancholic Structure of Identity

The dream that shapes and finally destroys Willy is best understood as an ego-ideal, the image of the person he feels he ought to become. In the play this ideal is carried by two figures. The first

is the old salesman Dave Singleman, whose comfortable death and well-attended funeral first persuade Willy that a man might be loved by the whole world simply for being liked. The second is his brother Ben, who functions less as memory than as a tempting and punishing voice within the psyche. Ben's account of walking into the jungle poor and emerging rich, sealed with the boast "and by God I was rich," turns success into something magical and effortless, and Willy measures himself against it to the end. Crucially, this ideal is not merely a family inheritance; it is the American Dream itself, internalised so deeply that it operates within Willy as a conscience. His counsel to his sons that a man need only "be liked and you will never want," and his careful distinction between being "liked" and "well liked," reveal a value system in which popularity alone confers worth. Because this ideal is unattainable for a man in Willy's circumstances, the distance between what he is and what he believes he must be never closes; the resulting disappointment turns inward, producing the relentless self-reproach that closely resembles what Freud described as melancholia, in which anger that cannot be discharged against the world is redirected against the self.

Identity as External Value: The Commodified Self

This melancholic structure explains why Willy's sense of identity is so fragile. He does not truly possess a self; he possesses a value, and that value depends wholly upon how others rate him. His identity has been assembled from the outside rather than the inside, and for that reason it can always be marked down or discarded. The strain of preserving any dignity at all is captured in Linda's insistence that "attention must be paid," a plea that quietly concedes how little the world will grant him and how entirely his worth now rests in other hands. When Howard casts him aside, Willy protests that "you can't eat the orange and throw the peel away a man is not a piece of fruit." The protest is moving, yet its very idiom betrays him: he already conceives of himself in the language of goods to be used and discarded, so that even his defence of his humanity is spoken in the market's terms. Charley states the governing rule Willy has obeyed without ever understanding it that "the only thing you got in this world is what you can sell" and the tragedy is that Willy is a salesman who never grasped that he himself was the product on offer. This logic reaches its terrible conclusion when he decides, after "all the highways ... and the years," that he is "worth more dead than alive," Willy Loman, Act 2 and resolves to convert his own death into one last sale, exchanging his life for an insurance payment and pricing his existence as a sum of money.

Estrangement as Personal and Structural

At this juncture the psychological and the social become indistinguishable. Willy's estrangement from himself is not only a private illness; it is the inward shape of a wider condition in which people are severed from their own labour and from any secure sense of their worth. The term estrangement, which belongs equally to psychoanalytic and to social thought, holds both meanings at once. Willy is cut off from his own desires because the self he was taught to build was never his own but a replica of the market's values, so that the nearer he draws to the ideal, the further he drifts from any life he might genuinely have wanted. His neurosis is thus the interior form of an exterior problem, and this is precisely what raises his suffering from private misfortune to genuine tragedy. To read Willy psychologically is not to turn away from society but to see exactly how a social order plants its demands inside a single human mind so effectively that the man ends by policing himself far more harshly than any employer ever could. The home, which

ought to be a refuge from the marketplace, becomes instead its continuation, a second arena of appraisal in which affection is disbursed on condition of success.

The Transmission of Estrangement and Biff's Counter-Movement

This estrangement does not end with Willy but descends to his sons, for a father who does not know himself cannot teach his children who they are. Biff, reared inside his father's flattering fantasies and taught that being liked outweighs any real achievement, reaches adulthood without a firm sense of self, confessing that he still feels "kind of temporary about myself"; his compulsive stealing, which has cost him every post, reveals an identity that cannot hold its own boundaries. Yet Biff is also the single figure who begins to break free. Recovering his own buried longing recalling how he "stopped in the middle of that building and I saw the sky" he grasps that the life he wants is not the one his father imagined for him. He comes to see that the family "never told the truth for ten minutes in this house," and in the Requiem he judges plainly that his father "had the wrong dreams." His willingness to say "I know who I am, kid" is the clearest sign of an identity finally forming on honest ground. When he tells Willy that they are both "a dime a dozen" "Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you" and insists, "I am not a leader of men ... and neither are you," Biff Loman, Act 2, Section 5 he is not degrading himself but releasing himself, choosing an ordinary life over an impossible one. Willy's furious rejoinder, "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!" Willy Loman (Act II) measures the whole distance between the son who has faced reality and the father who never can. Happy, by contrast, clings to the very dream that killed his father, vowing to "come out number-one man" and demonstrating that estrangement, unless it is consciously refused, simply reproduces itself in the next generation.

The Final Sale: Suicide as the Logic of the Mirage

Willy's suicide is the fullest and final expression of the illusion that has governed his life. He dies believing that his death will provide for Biff and prove, through a grand funeral, that he was well liked after all, so that the act of self-destruction is disguised even to himself as an act of love and success. His certainty that "that funeral will be massive," and his conviction that Biff will at last "see what I am," show that even in death he performs for an ideal that never valued him. The delusion is completed by the emptiness of the actual funeral, whose vacant scene delivers the world's final verdict on his worth. The Requiem gathers the play's meaning: Biff's quiet judgement that his father "never knew who he was" names the failure exactly, for Willy performed an identity all his life but never became a self; Charley's defence that "Nobody dast blame this man," since "a salesman is got to dream," widens the indictment from Willy alone to the whole system that promised him what it could never deliver; and Linda's bewildered words at the grave, that the family is now "free and clear," carry the sharpest irony of all, since the debts are settled at the very moment the house stands empty and the man who laboured to pay them is gone.

Synthesis

Read in this way, *Death of a Salesman* dramatizes the collapse of an identity constructed upon a false dream. Willy Loman's estrangement from himself and from his family is not an accident of temperament but the natural issue of measuring his entire worth against an ideal that the market rendered at once compulsory and unreachable. The psychoanalytic lens exposes the inner machinery of his ruin the failing ego, the buried guilt, the punishing ego-ideal, the melancholic

turn of aggression against the self and that machinery proves, on inspection, to have been assembled by the society around him. His deepest tragedy is that he never learns who he is, and this private failure stands as a quiet but severe judgement upon the world that shaped him, for the very qualities it taught him to prize were precisely those that made an authentic self impossible. Against Willy's disintegration the play sets Biff's fragile recovery, and the contrast carries its argument: identity grounded in performance and external validation decays under pressure, whereas identity grounded in self-knowledge, however ordinary, can hold. Estrangement, finally, functions in the play as both symptom and warning the sign that a self has drifted too far from truth and Willy's death confirms that a fantasy, however faithfully served, cannot sustain a life.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* presents estrangement and identity formation as the consequences of psychological conflict and capitalist materialism. Through the application of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the study demonstrates that Willy Loman's repressed desires, unconscious conflicts, and unrealistic belief in the American Dream gradually destroy his sense of identity and emotional well-being. His inability to reconcile reality with his aspirations results in mental disintegration, emotional isolation, and family breakdown. The analysis further reveals that Willy's pursuit of material success and social recognition weakens family relationships and prevents genuine emotional connection. His internal conflicts influence his relationships with Linda and Biff, leading to disappointment, misunderstanding, and estrangement. The study also highlights that capitalist values encourage individuals to measure self-worth through wealth and social status, ultimately creating psychological suffering and identity fragmentation. Overall, the findings establish that *Death of a Salesman* is not only a tragedy of an individual but also a critique of a society that prioritizes material achievement over human values. The play illustrates how the pursuit of unrealistic ideals can lead to alienation, fractured identity, and the collapse of both personal and family life.

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