

SELLING THE SELF: PRECARIOUS WORK, MASCULINITY AND MENTAL HEALTH IN ARTHUR MILLER'S DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Shweta Shilu

Department of English & CLS,

Saurashtra University, Rajkot

Email: shwetashilu1111@gmail.com

Abstract—*Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman presents selling as both an occupation and a model of selfhood. This article argues that Willy Loman's tragedy grows from precarious work that requires him to market his personality while denying him lasting security, recognition, or care. His commission-based labour, constant travel, ageing body, debt, dismissal, and dependence on Charley reveal an employment relation in which risk is shifted from company to worker. Willy responds by turning masculinity into performance: a man must provide, remain independent, command admiration, and hide vulnerability. These demands damage his relations with Linda, Biff, Happy, and himself. The play's expressionistic movement between memory and present time makes psychological crisis visible without reducing it to an individual defect. Read alongside research on job insecurity, emotional labour, workplace mental health, and platform employment, the drama remains strikingly contemporary. Gig workers now sell ratings, availability, and personality through digital systems, but the underlying problem is familiar: when human worth is measured through market performance, failure at work can feel like failure of the self. Miller's play calls for economic dignity and forms of masculinity capable of dependence, truth, and care.*

Keywords: *Arthur Miller; Death of a Salesman; precarious work; masculinity; mental health; emotional labour; gig economy; American Dream; suicide.*

Introduction

Death of a Salesman begins with exhaustion. Willy Loman returns home from a sales trip because he can no longer keep the car on the road or his mind steadily in the present. His work requires movement, confidence, conversation, and the appearance of personal command, yet his body and attention are failing under those demands. The opening establishes the play's central argument before Willy explains it: labour has entered his nerves, memory, marriage, and sense of worth.

Willy is often described as a victim of the American Dream, but that phrase can become too general. His crisis arises from a specific form of work. He sells without producing a durable object, depends on relationships he cannot verify, travels at his own physical cost, and receives income according to performance. When he becomes less profitable, his long service does not protect him. The employer remembers him only as a current expense.

This article uses precarious work to name that insecurity. Precarity includes uncertain income, limited bargaining power, weak social protection, employer control without reciprocal obligation, and the transfer of business risk onto workers. Willy is not identical to a present-day app-based driver or freelance platform worker. His profession belongs to mid-century American commercial culture. Still, his experience clarifies the psychological cost of earning through continuous self-presentation.

The argument also focuses on masculinity and mental health. Willy believes that a man must provide, be admired, remain autonomous, and transmit success to his sons. These ideals prevent him from interpreting exhaustion, shame, and dependence as ordinary human conditions. The play does not offer a clinical diagnosis, and this article will not impose one. It examines how economic insecurity, gender expectation, secrecy, ageing, and family conflict intensify his distress and narrow his ability to seek help.

Selling as Labour and Identity

A salesman markets more than a commodity. He uses voice, appearance, memory, charm, and emotional timing to make a customer trust him. Willy therefore treats personality as productive capital. His repeated faith in being “well liked” makes social approval appear more valuable than skill, study, or patience (Miller 33). Success depends on whether other people respond to the performance of confidence.

Erving Goffman's account of everyday self-presentation helps explain this labour. Social life involves performances through which people manage impressions before audiences. Sales work intensifies the process because an income depends on it (Goffman). Willy cannot easily separate occupational performance from private identity. When buyers stop responding, he does not conclude only that the market has changed. He feels that his person has lost value.

Arlie Hochschild calls the management of feeling for wages emotional labour. Although her study concerns service workers in a later economy, the concept illuminates Willy's dependence on enthusiasm. He must sound confident when afraid, friendly when exhausted, and successful when borrowing money. Emotional performance becomes damaging when the distance between displayed feeling and lived condition grows too large (Hochschild).

At home, Willy continues selling. He markets future success to Linda, Biff, Happy, and himself. His stories of contacts and popularity protect the family from immediate despair, but they also make honest assessment difficult. The seller's voice colonizes domestic speech. Hope becomes a pith, and disagreement sounds like rejection by a customer.

Commission Work and the Transfer of Risk

Willy's employment becomes precarious when his salary is removed and his earnings depend on commission. The company gains flexibility: it pays according to sales and can discard an ageing worker whose numbers decline. Willy bears the cost of travel, fatigue, and uncertainty. His decades of loyalty create no durable claim on the firm. The arrangement separates managerial authority from responsibility for the worker's survival.

This transfer of risk is central to contemporary precarious employment. Temporary contracts, subcontracting, freelancing, zero-hours arrangements, and digital labour platforms vary greatly, but many make income unpredictable while limiting worker control. The International Labour Organization notes that platform work can create earning opportunities while raising concerns about pay, social protection, employment status, bargaining power, and algorithmic management (International Labour Organization).

Willy's dependence on commission also converts time into anxiety. A day without a sale is not simply an unproductive day; it threatens the mortgage, appliances, food, and family status. Because the pressure is continuous, rest can feel like failure. He remains psychologically at work even when he is home. Contemporary workers who must constantly search for tasks, maintain ratings, or remain available encounter a comparable invasion of non-work time.

Precarity is intensified by opacity. Willy knows that his position is weakening but cannot convert experience into security. Today, a platform worker may similarly face changing rates, rankings, or access without clear explanation. The technologies differ, but the moral structure is close: an organization controls the conditions of earning while presenting the worker as independent and personally responsible for every result.

Ageing and the Disposable Worker

Willy's dismissal by Howard is among the play's most severe scenes because it destroys the belief that loyalty produces belonging. Willy reminds Howard of his years of service and of the older employer who once treated salesmanship as a human relationship. Howard responds through business calculation. The past has no binding force. An ageing worker who cannot travel profitably becomes removable.

Willy's protest “You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away”—names the violence of extraction (Miller 82). The company has used his energy and contacts, then treats his diminished capacity as personal failure. The image makes age discrimination bodily: a worker is consumed until only an unwanted remainder is left.

Ageing exposes the false promise of permanent self-reliance. Bodies tire, skills meet new markets, family needs change, and workers sometimes require accommodation. A humane employment system recognizes interdependence across a working life. Willy's employer recognizes only present productivity. His loss of work therefore threatens income and his right to regard his life as continuous and meaningful.

The scene remains relevant in economies that praise flexibility while offering weak protection during illness, disability, caregiving, or later life. Precarious workers may have fewer pensions, benefits, or routes to adjusted duties. Miller's play insists that the treatment of an ageing worker is not a private misfortune. It is a test of whether economic institutions recognize human duration.

Masculinity as Performance

Willy's idea of manhood joins earning, popularity, sexual success, physical vitality, and independence. He praises Biff's appearance and charisma while dismissing Bernard's discipline. The lesson is not simply that success matters; a successful man must seem naturally superior. Effort, uncertainty, and dependence threaten the performance because they expose the labour beneath it.

R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity describes culturally honoured patterns of manhood that organize power even when few men fully embody them. Willy's ideal is hegemonic in this sense. It values competitive provision and authority while subordinating care, emotional openness, and non-commercial forms of achievement (Connell and Messerschmidt). Willy suffers under the norm while also transmitting it to his sons.

Biff and Happy respond differently. Happy repeats his father's pursuit of status, sexual conquest, and promotional confidence. Biff is torn between the desire to please Willy and his recognition that the family's self-image is false. Their conflict shows that masculinity is inherited through expectation rather than biology. The sons learn which feelings can be spoken and which must be converted into boasting or anger.

The play does not suggest that men are naturally unable to ask for help. It shows how a social script makes help feel humiliating. Charley's offer of work could provide stability, but accepting it would require Willy to acknowledge dependence and revise his competitive identity. Masculine pride becomes dangerous when it prevents a person from using the relationships that could sustain him.

Linda and the Labour of Holding the Family Together

Linda's famous demand that "attention must be finally paid" is the moral centre of the play (Miller 56). She sees Willy's exhaustion, failed driving, financial pressure, and suicidal behaviour more clearly than his sons do. Her attention challenges a culture that recognizes workers publicly only when they succeed. She insists that an ordinary and failing man remains worthy of care.

Linda also performs extensive emotional labour. She manages bills, repairs stockings, protects Willy from confrontation, explains his condition to Biff and Happy, and tries to preserve his dignity. Her care keeps the household functioning, but it can also shelter his illusions. Miller gives her moral authority while showing the limited choices available to a wife whose economic security depends on the husband's earning.

A gendered analysis must therefore examine both Willy's provider burden and the unpaid care that supports it. Masculinity appears independent only because domestic labour absorbs fear, debt, and emotional crisis. Linda's work is not recognized through salary or public status, yet the family could not survive without it. The market's measurement of contribution is incomplete.

Contemporary precarious work often transfers instability into households. Unpredictable schedules, fluctuating income, absence of benefits, and constant availability affect partners and children as well as workers. Caregivers adjust meals, transport, debt, childcare, and emotional support around insecure employment. *Death of a Salesman* reveals that job precarity is always also family precarity.

Biff and the Possibility of Another Life

Biff's struggle offers the play's strongest alternative to Willy's model. He is drawn to physical work, open space, and forms of labour whose value he can see. Yet he experiences these desires as failure because they do not match the commercial success expected by his father. He moves between jobs, theft, fantasy, and attempts to return home. His instability is real, but the family's definition of success makes it harder to interpret honestly.

The final confrontation between Biff and Willy is painful because Biff tries to separate love from performance. He wants the family to abandon exaggerated identities and accept ordinary limits. His tears communicate what the household's masculine language has suppressed: dependence, grief, affection, and disappointment can coexist. Truth need not destroy relation.

Biff's alternative should not be romanticized as a simple escape from capitalism into nature. He still needs income, responsibility, and a workable future. What he rejects is the conversion of every vocation into status. Meaningful work may involve skill, bodily engagement, community, and sufficiency rather than endless ascent. The play asks whether such a life can be respected within a culture of competitive success.

This question matters for workers today who are encouraged to turn every interest, relationship, and spare hour into a source of income. The language of entrepreneurship can make uncertainty look like freedom and exhaustion look like ambition. Biff's refusal suggests that not every capacity must be sold and that a life can have value beyond market visibility.

Debt Commodities and Deferred Security

The Loman house is filled with objects bought through instalments and repeatedly repaired. Payments seem to end only when the commodity itself wears out. The refrigerator, car, and other household goods promise middle-class security while producing continuous obligation. Willy's labour is directed toward owning a home and supporting a family, but debt ensures that arrival is always deferred.

The house also becomes trapped by urban development. Buildings rise around it, reducing light, air, and space for the garden. Miller's stage design connects economic pressure with an environment that no longer supports Willy's dream of rooted domestic life. The home is technically owned through payment, yet it does not provide the freedom ownership promised.

Debt deepens precarity because future labour is committed before it is earned. A drop in sales immediately threatens earlier purchases. Willy cannot easily reduce his work because his household depends on payments structured around continued income. Modern workers face different credit systems, but the relationship between uncertain earnings and fixed obligations remains familiar.

The life-insurance policy becomes the most terrible form of deferred value. Willy comes to imagine that his death can achieve what his labour has not. He treats himself as a final asset whose destruction may produce payment. The logic of selling reaches its endpoint: the self becomes more valuable as an insured object than as a living person.

Memory Form and Psychological Crisis

Miller refuses a simple boundary between present action and remembered experience. Ben, the Woman, young Biff, and earlier domestic scenes enter the stage as Willy moves through them. The audience does not merely hear that he is distressed; it experiences a world in which regret, fantasy, and present pressure coexist. Expressionist form gives social crisis a psychological shape.

These scenes should not be used to assign Willy a definite diagnosis. The play supplies evidence of exhaustion, confusion, intrusive memory, despair, shame, and suicidal intent, but drama is not a clinical record. Diagnostic certainty would narrow Miller's social argument. Willy's suffering is personal and requires care, yet it is also intensified by work, debt, ageing, family secrecy, and masculine isolation.

Fred Ribkoff emphasizes the importance of shame, guilt, and empathy in the play. Willy's affair and Biff's discovery produce a wound in their relationship that neither can narrate openly. Shame encourages concealment, while concealment strengthens fantasy. The past returns because it has not been truthfully integrated into family memory (Ribkoff).

The stage form also challenges the idea that a worker leaves private life outside the workplace. Willy carries his family aspirations into sales, and he brings market judgment home. His mind becomes the meeting place of employer, customer, father, son, lover, and debtor. Mental health at work cannot be separated from these overlapping relations.

Suicide and the Dangerous Arithmetic of Worth

Willy's suicide must be read with care. It is not a heroic solution, a successful business decision, or an inevitable result of one cause. The play shows multiple pressures and missed possibilities. Linda recognizes the danger, Biff seeks truth, Charley offers work, and the family remains emotionally connected. Willy's death is tragic partly because alternatives exist but have become difficult for him to imagine.

His reasoning follows a market arithmetic. Insurance money might establish Biff and prove that Willy was significant. A funeral crowd might confirm his popularity. These fantasies convert death into a final sale. The logic is distorted, but it grows from a culture that repeatedly equates male worth with financial provision. Suicide appears to him as the last opportunity to perform successful masculinity.

A responsible mental-health reading should resist both individual blame and social determinism. Economic insecurity and gender norms can increase distress, but they do not mechanically cause suicide. People experience and respond to similar pressures differently. Miller's drama is valuable because it shows how conditions accumulate and how secrecy narrows perception without pretending that one explanation is sufficient.

The Requiem exposes the failure of Willy's calculation. The large public recognition he imagined does not appear. Linda's final speech joins financial completion to unbearable absence: the house is free of debt only when the person who worked for it is gone. Economic security arrives in a form that destroys its purpose.

From the Travelling Salesman to the Platform Worker

The contemporary gig economy gives Willy's experience a new frame. Platform workers may drive passengers, deliver food, complete online tasks, sell products, or provide freelance services through systems that mediate access to customers. Many value flexibility, and conditions differ across sectors and countries. Yet workers can also face uncertain demand, changing rates, unpaid waiting, customer ratings, weak benefits, and limited bargaining power.

Willy's belief in personal likability resembles the rating economy. A worker must complete the task and manage the customer's feeling, because a negative evaluation may affect future access to work. Personality becomes data. The salesman's smile and shoeshine are translated into stars, acceptance rates, response times, and automated rankings. The performance is more measurable but not necessarily more secure.

Algorithmic management can also obscure responsibility. Decisions about task allocation, pay, or deactivation may appear to come from a system rather than a manager. Willy at least confronts Howard, though the meeting is humiliating. A platform worker may struggle to reach a human decision-maker. Digital efficiency can therefore intensify the distance between institutional control and worker appeal.

The comparison has limits. Willy is a white male worker in a particular historical economy, while platform labour is globally diverse and shaped by race, caste, gender, migration status, and regulation. The value of the comparison lies in the recurring demand to act independent while carrying risks determined by larger organizations. Miller exposes the emotional cost of that contradiction.

Precarious Employment and Mental Health

Research supports a cautious connection between insecure employment and poorer mental health. A systematic review by Theo Rönneblad and colleagues found that job insecurity likely has an adverse mental-health effect, while also noting differences in how precarious employment is defined and measured. This qualification matters: precarity is multidimensional, and not every flexible arrangement is experienced in the same way (Rönneblad et al.).

The World Health Organization identifies excessive workloads, low job control, job insecurity, discrimination, and inequality among psychosocial risks at work. Its guidance emphasizes organizational interventions as well as support for individuals. This approach aligns with Miller's play. Willy needs compassionate attention, but care cannot be complete if the employment system continues to treat declining workers as disposable (World Health Organization).

Masculine norms can complicate help-seeking when distress is interpreted as weakness or failed provision. Willy speaks through anger, boasting, contradiction, and advice rather than clearly naming fear. His family often responds to the performance instead of the pain beneath it. A healthier masculinity would permit dependence, emotional vocabulary, and support without requiring a man to surrender dignity.

Workplace mental health should therefore include predictable income, reasonable demands, worker voice, protection from arbitrary dismissal, access to healthcare, accommodation, and routes for appeal. Wellness language alone cannot repair harmful working conditions. *Death of a Salesman* remains contemporary because it dramatizes the failure of care when responsibility is placed entirely on an exhausted individual.

Rethinking Success Work and Care

Miller does not reject ambition, sales, or material comfort in themselves. His criticism is directed at an economy of value in which market recognition becomes the final measure of personhood. Charley and Bernard succeed, but their success is connected to persistence and realism rather than theatrical popularity. Their presence shows that the play's target is not achievement alone; it is the false and destructive story Willy tells about achievement.

A more humane understanding of work would separate dignity from income level while still demanding decent material conditions. Workers deserve security, respect, rest, and social protection because they are people, not because every job

provides personal fulfilment. The romantic promise to “love what you do” can become another demand to hide exploitation. Sometimes dignity means fair pay and predictable time rather than passion.

The play also proposes care as a public value. Linda's attention, Charley's assistance, and Biff's truth-telling are imperfect but necessary. They challenge the isolated provider ideal by showing that survival depends on relations. Institutions should not exploit those relations by assuming families will absorb every economic and psychological cost.

Rethinking success also changes fatherhood. Willy tries to give his sons confidence but gives them a performance they cannot sustain. Biff's final honesty offers another inheritance: a father and son may love one another without proving superiority. Masculinity becomes less destructive when it allows limits to be acknowledged before crisis turns them into shame.

Conclusion

Death of a Salesman is a tragedy of selling because Willy is required to sell both goods and himself. Commission work, travel, debt, ageing, and dismissal make his employment insecure, while the ideology of personal charm converts structural pressure into private inadequacy. He cannot say that the market has failed to honour a worker; he concludes that he has failed to be a man.

Masculinity deepens the crisis by joining worth to provision, popularity, autonomy, and the concealment of vulnerability. Linda's care, Biff's resistance, Happy's imitation, Charley's help, and Howard's indifference reveal competing responses to that norm. Miller's broken chronology shows how work pressure and unresolved shame occupy the mind long after a sales trip ends.

The comparison with contemporary precarious and platform labour confirms the play's continuing relevance without making different historical economies identical. Ratings, algorithmic management, uncertain demand, weak protection, and constant self-presentation can renew the salesman's problem in digital form. The central ethical demand remains Linda's demand for attention: economic systems must recognize workers as lives extended through time, dependence, illness, family, and change. A person should never have to prove his value by disappearing.

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