

ENGLISH: *THE DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

"We create illusions in order to cope with reality"

Despite being written over a century ago, Arthur Miller's portrayal of the tragic everyman, Willy Loman still provides powerful lessons for us today. In an era where we continually consume more in hope that happiness and success will find us, we create illusions in order to cope with reality.

We are told that we have reason to be happier than any other generation before us. Don't get me wrong, I am a fully paid up, card waving member of this reality. I love the double story "McMansions", pools, cars, plasma TVs and access to a cyber buffet offering so much more at just a click of a button. So, why are we so unhappy? Paradoxically, whilst we are connected and cashed up like no other generation before us, we no longer strive to keep up with the Joneses but with the strangers who populate our neighbourhoods - taken by the show or illusion of **"add[ing] up to something"**, whilst never questioning whether it is the real thing. We are the people next door, peering into the houses and lives we covet yet, all the while, remaining on the outside. We ogle the materialistic items that others possess and feel the need to equate ourselves with these products that are **"well advertised"** to realise our self worth. However, if buying these objects does not make us any happier, then why do we do it to ourselves? In a society that denies what social commentator Michael Leunig describes as its **"gently flow[ing] falseness and conformity"**, **individuals compromise themselves in favour of an illusion** manufactured and mass produced by what Miller referred to as **"clean shaven frontiersmen"**; corporate bigwigs who determine what is in, what is hot and what, as they say, is not. As such, **we are forced to buy into this false reality in order to feel accepted or to confirm our worth – a pursuit that ultimately diminishes any weaker reality in favour of the dominant.**

We have confused the meaning of worth with wealth, buying into the lie that we should measure our worth by the amount of 'things' we possess. Ironically, it is a reality that continually confirms our lack of value, as we are never truly able to grasp the **"diamond"** in the jungle or be considered a 'true' success as we become casualties in a struggle where only the fittest survive. In a world where we fear **"ringing up to zero"**, we constantly compare ourselves to our neighbours. In a climate where the **"competition is maddening"**, we buy and spend more in order to project a **"phoney" image of success**. We have been so well **"drilled"** in the **"business of fear"** by these clean shaven advertising frontiersmen, who insist in their latest campaign that we **"can't do without"** the new accessory for our technological or material lives. On a hedonistic treadmill, once that new accessory is bought, we look to what we can buy next, in a sweat to grab the newest fad whilst never really arriving at any authentic destination. As such, we build a fortress around ourselves, **"break[ing] our neck to see the stars"**, whilst our inability to accept the truth leaves us feeling fractured and **"broken"**. As American philosopher, Noam Chomsky confirms, "there is constant pressure to make people feel that they're helpless, that the only role they can have is to ratify decisions and to consume". Sadly, we sound more like machines than living, thinking individuals. So, indebted to the illusion, we trick ourselves into thinking that what we want- or, more accurately, what society tells us we want- is actually what we need. Our material sufficiency tends to be relative. We define our level of satisfaction and success in light of what others around us have, whilst **"desperately impressing"** anyone who cares to look, etching brand names on sneakers and **"dressing to advantage"** to cinch the deal. However, we can find our **authentic selves and celebrate our unique perceptions**, as long as we are mindful of those who seek to railroad our reality.

And our response? We **"slavishly"** conform to society's **"currency of the day"** forfeiting our authentic selves in order to feel accepted or to enjoy our slice of the illusive, corrupted dream. We mindlessly accept that **"the only thing [we have] in this world is what [we] can sell"**, the degree of success that we earn dependant on a willingness to sell ourselves **"in an attempt to win the approval of [our] peers"**. What are a few lies to ensure that our neighbours are impressed by the fake projection of our success and happiness? Of course, we have **"got to dream...it comes with the territory"** but the dream that we pursue is **"all, all wrong"**, tenuously founded on a heap of lies fed to us by those

who possess the power, who can **"eat an orange and throw the peel away"**. But in an urban jungle where only the fittest survives, it is those who **"don't fight fair with a stranger"** or **who embrace the aggressive, competitive society** who secure the **"diamond"** or prize, and prevail. As British philosopher, Bertrand Russell once observed, "it is the preoccupation with possessions, more than anything else that prevents us from living freely and nobly". So, our automatic response is not only to "Keep up with the Joneses" but to supersede them in **order to cope with the harsh nature of our reality** founded on a **"ridiculous lie"** – a lie that is founded on **"the finest people" "know[ing] [us]"**. This response leaves us fearful of what the clean shaven frontiersmen has in store for us next. All I know is that it will come at the expense of our **authenticity**.

After submitting to what Leunig described as men in **"[their] exclusive fiefdoms"**, we are left feeling **"hollow"** and **"kind of temporary"**. Our authentic identities suffocated by brands such as Gucci and Chanel, **"boxed...in"** between our inner and outer selves, trapped in a reality we romanticise by focussing on our **"massive dreams"** whilst denying the **"little cruelties"**. In failing to follow our true calling, we live a pseudo life, half awake and half asleep, never truly embracing our own, unique reality. As pastor and scholar, Eugene Peterson suggests, "we are conditioned to respond to the latest as the best", preferring to buy the branded clothes and be in debt, rather than brave the K-Mart cringe and live comfortably. In this superficial reality, individuals can feel **"like they can't take hold of this kind of life"**, unable to decipher between their authentic and plastic self. It is a symptom that results from a fear of being labelled a **"peculiar mind"**, by those who control the dominant reality. We see the lone voices not as a chance to **"embrace diversity and difference"** but as something to fear, a stranger. Furthermore, when we buy into this reality we become a commodity and, like other commodities, we forget that we will be discarded by the law of economics. It is a callous market that affords no loyalty to those who **"just can't take hold"**. As the walls of our reality rise up around us and clash with differing perspectives, **"nothing'll grow anymore"** – we leave an **"ash heap"** filled with **"broken images"**, broken appliances and shattered dreams. Material things once prized as a means to reach the moon, **"victorious at last"** are a reminder of when we invest too much in image. And in the end, we commit ourselves to a ceaseless **"race with the junkyard"**.

Before you call me sanctimonious, I have an admission. I am a material girl in a material world but...I am not defined or made whole by the brands I wear, the car I drive, or the job I perform. So, let's take **"that phoney dream and burn it"** or, at the very least, be mindful that it isn't the sole path to happiness or success. Salesmanship implies a kind of fraud. When we buy into the fraud or the illusions, we mindlessly surrender our authentic selves. However, we don't need to be consumed by the mechanical act of selling and consuming, impoverishing ourselves in the process. Self knowledge can combat these negative illusions. Things don't make us happy and success driven only by material pursuits that are hollow and fleeting. Miller's "low man" reminds us that like the broken refrigerator or rusted car we will one day be thrown on the **"heap"** like every other commodity. We don't need to be the person next door, ogling the lives of our neighbours. With mindfulness we can find a **place where our authentic selves can conquer the illusions**. Here, we can discover a reality where we are longer just **"salesmen"** or **"customers"** but can flourish with **"the comforts of personal relationships, family and friends, and love."** Perhaps then, we will be happier.