

## ENGLISH

### The truth about the past is always open to question.

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POSTSCRIPT – 1990

Why should you read what I have to tell you? What relevance and importance does it have now, 40 years on?

What I have shown you in these preceding pages is a vision of no more than an ordinary family – and at that, a fictional family! What value could there be in this borderline voyeuristic view into a fictional world from the past which hasn't even taken the trouble to amaze its audiences with fantastical happenings?

The Lomans, had they even existed in reality, would not even have warranted a footnote in the most voluminous work of American history. Nowadays, they seem particularly irrelevant. Entertainment value aside (and, as I wrote above, that might be a particularly voyeuristic form of entertainment), what have the Lomans got to offer us? At the risk of this appearing too much like a defence of my artistic creation, I will argue: a lot.

We live in a society which values truth and objectivity. The heights of human insight and understanding are usually considered to be the achievements of science. This reputation is not entirely undeserved – it is truly a marvel that we can take an insect, dissect it, place it under a microscope, and find out everything we want to know about its inner workings.

We could also apply this objective, scientific view to human history. If we look at the post-war economic miracle and the American Dream through a lens which purely considers the concrete and objective, though, we might lose something important. History is not merely the mechanical listing of events and their causal relationships. It is not merely numbers, names, dates, and statistics. In our society, I think we give too much emphasis to those inhuman aspects of history, and I think we do so because they are objective – because they are generally not open to question.

When we look at the delusions of Willy Loman and his sons, at the desperation of their plight, it is immensely tempting for us to throw up our hands and say “let's not read too much into this – they were probably just crazy and who knows what people thought of the world back then!” But this, too, will lead to us losing something important.

I won't deny that any examination of the past, whether it is through a lens like *Death of a Salesman* or some factual historical chronicle, is inevitably fraught with our subjective interpretations, and that can make it dangerous. When you read Willy's pleas, how do you know that it is his voice you are hearing and not yours or mine? It is no different for a factual work of history: these figures have no power over the forces that shape and document the courses of their lives. They are at the mercy of their own society and the historians of the society chronicling their existence. We cannot remove the social and cultural factors that influence how we view Willy or Biff or any of the hundreds of millions of Americans who once chased the Dream. History must be constructed, and it must be done so with the tools available to us. It is thus immensely tempting to view those places and people and events as belonging to another world – one which is no longer with us and which we can no longer access.

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If we were to place everything we know about America in 1949 into two piles labelled “objective” and “subjective”, no doubt one pile would be much bigger than the other. Perhaps we might be tempted to throw one of those piles out and say that it's not “real knowledge”. But to view history like that would be missing an essential point. Objectivity is a noble goal, and it is one that we should

certainly strive for to remove history from the hands of the political propagandists, but the real power in history is the human element.

Nowadays, most of us accept that we cannot view the past the way we view an insect under a microscope – we cannot hope to attain that level of detail any more than we can hope to accurately predict the future. But I suggest that we don't need to. I suggest that we can gain a profound understanding of human history, a profound insight into the truth of the past if we simply step outside the objective/subjective framework of looking at things.

The real power in works like *Death of a Salesman* and any work that looks at ordinary people of the past is the human element they introduce. We can understand those people because we are all connected through our common humanity. That isn't just some vacuous metaphysical claptrap: what I mean is that through our ability to empathise and sympathise with any other human by virtue only of their humanity, we can attain a level of understanding that is beyond merely numbers in a chart, or even an insect under a microscope. We can gain an understanding of how Willy or Biff or Happy truly felt, not merely what they looked like or what chemical processes were taking place inside them. This is not a scientific view of the past, but it is not without immense value – I believe that in this case, an intuitive view can give us a greater and more profound understanding than a scientific view ever could.

So, yes, when we remember the past there is always a great deal of interpretation involved. And that interpretation involves a great deal of social and cultural baggage which we can't ignore, which of course means that there is an aspect of our chronicles of the past that is always open to question. But through our ability to empathise with other humans, no matter the world they live in, we have a tremendous power to truly understand them. We can understand the Romans; by extension, we can understand the American family from 1949, chasing the dream but never catching it. It is this connection that makes *Death of a Salesman* and any good depiction of people from the past hugely valuable.

Arthur Miller