

Death of a Salesman - Willy Loman's tragedy is due more to his own flawed character than to society's flaws

Advancements in science throughout this century have led to tremendous advancements in industry. Advancements in industry, however, have not always led to advancements in living. For some, society has created mass wealth. For most mass society has created a standard of living unparalleled throughout history. For Willy Loman, however, mass society has created only tremendous grief and hardship, aggravated by the endless promise. For these reasons, his tragedy is due more to society's flaws than to the flaws in his own character.

Willy Loman was host to many flaws and deficiencies ranging from suicidal tendencies to psychotic disorders. However, these shortcomings did not account for his tragic end, not by themselves anyway. Society is to blame. It was society who stripped him of his dignity, piece by piece. It was society who stripped him of his lifestyle, and his own sons who stripped him of hope.

The most obvious flaw in society is greed, the desire to get ahead of the next guy. This malady is present on a national level. It is the philosophy of business and comprises the dreams of man. Sometimes, this can drive man to great things, sometimes it can drive a man to ruin. Willy was driven to the latter. (Not his own greed for he was a simple man with simple dreams, but by the greed of others.) The developers who took away the sun and gave birth to shadows, his boss who reduced him to commission and his sons which reduced him to a failure.

The next largest flaw in society is a lack of compassion. This could be as a result of almost overwhelming greed, the main culprit being big business.

"I'm always in a race with the junkyard! I just finished paying for the car and it's on its last legs. The refrigerator consumes belts like a goddam maniac. They time those things." (Act 2, page 73, lines 16-19)

Willy's belief in this statement drew him to believe that big business lacked compassion. It is because of this that he is abandoned by Biff and disowned by Happy, left babbling in a toilet. It is this flaw which

allowed him to die a slow death and played the greatest role in his eventual downfall.

The third largest flaw in society (particularly American society) is the lack of a social safety net. A net which identifies people in trouble and seeks to remedy their situations. A body identifies people who are a danger to themselves and others and treats or sedates them. Couple this with a pension plan and medical care, and Willy Loman might not have met his premature end. He would have had no reason thanklessly for a company, in a capacity that was "killing" him. Instead, he could have received psychiatric help and recovered from his condition.

It was the direct result of the flaws in society which led Willy to his undoing. It was the greed that was ever-pervasive around him that led to his unhappiness. It was the lack of compassion from society which allowed his unhappiness to flourish and which eventually consumed him. In the end, it was the lack of a social safety net which failed to save him from himself.