One of the primary characteristics of Willy Loman’s character is his penchant for self-contradiction: “Biff is a lazy bum! . . . There’s one thing about Biff—he’s not lazy” (16). One area where this is evident is Willy’s attitude toward business and success. As he tells his boss Howard Wagner, he is aware that in 1948, the “real time” of the play’s action, business is “all cut and dried, and there’s no chance for bringing friendship to bear—or personality” (81), but he still longs for the days when “there was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it” (81). As Brian Dennehy’s performance in the 1999 production of Death of a Salesman reminds his audience, Willy is a “born” salesman. In the scene between Willy and Howard, he nearly sells Howard on the myth of Dave Singleman before he sabotages his sales pitch by losing his temper. Willy Loman is a very confused man, but his confusion about what it means to be a salesman and what it takes to succeed at the job is as much cultural as personal. In the character of Willy Loman, Arthur Miller has established a metonymic representation of the contradictory beliefs and value-systems that were at the heart of American business culture in the decade after World War II. In his own memory and experience, Willy encompasses three generations of American salesmen, that of his father and his hero Dave Singleman, that of Willy, his brother Ben, and his friend (or brother-in-law) Charley, and that of Willy’s sons and his boss, Howard Wagner. In the play, Miller creates a history of the career of the traveling salesman in America.
through the references to these characters, and in doing so, he suggests the extent to which social and cultural forces have figured in Willy’s business failure, and his personal disintegration.

The occupation of traveling salesman began in the United States with the Yankee peddler, in the early nineteenth century. The peddler would buy up cheap, portable manufactured goods in the early industrial centers of the Northeast, pack them in a wagon or peddler’s pack, and set off for the rural South or the frontier villages of the West, where he would travel from small town to small town, selling his wares at a high profit. Peddlers were entrepreneurs, operating completely on their own, free to buy and sell whatever they wanted and to travel wherever they liked. Willy Loman’s father, born in the mid-nineteenth century, is a peddler, a “very wild-hearted man,” according to Ben, who would “toss the whole family in the wagon” and drive right across the country, through Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and all the Western states (49). Miller emphasizes the elder Loman’s independence by indicating that he even manufactured the products that he sold, the flutes that he made along the way. According to Ben, he was also a great inventor, who made more in a week with one gadget than a man like Willy could make in a lifetime (49). It is the elder Loman that Miller evokes with the play’s flute music, “small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon” (11). It expresses nostalgia for a lost age when the traveling salesman was free and independent, living by his wits and his own hard work.

It is significant that Willy’s father traveled west, away from the urban centers of the country, and eventually left his family to go to America’s last frontier, Alaska. During Willy’s childhood in the 1890s, the Yankee peddler was already an outmoded figure, living on the fringes of society. He had been replaced by a figure who served the interests of the larger manufacturers more efficiently, the drummer. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the drummer, usually a young man with a pleasant personality, was sent by a large manufacturing firm or wholesaler to greet small retail merchants who came from outlying areas to the industrial centers in order to buy their stock. The drummers would go to hotels, railroad stations, and boat landings, greet the merchants, help them to make their way around the city, and offer them free entertainment in hopes of securing their orders for
merchandise. As competition between wholesalers intensified, the drummers were sent on the road with sample cases and catalogs, going out to the merchants rather than waiting for them to come to the city. These were the original “commercial travelers” or “traveling salesmen,” and they spent six to nine months a year on the road, living in hotels and sleeping cars.

Dave Singleman, Willy’s hero, is Miller’s example of the drummer. As Willy tells it, he met Dave Singleman when he was young, in the first decade of the twentieth century. Singleman, a salesman who had drummed merchandise in thirty-one states, was eighty-four years old at the time that Willy met him, and still making his living as a salesman. According to Willy, he could go into twenty or thirty different cities, pick up a phone, and call the buyers, who would give him orders. Willy says that he decided then that he wanted to be a traveling salesman because he wanted to become like Singleman, and be “remembered and loved and helped by so many different people” (81). In the early part of the century, it was character that was considered to be the paramount factor in sales success. Aspiring salesmen were urged to develop the qualities of character that would make customers respect and want to buy from them. A prototype for Dave Singleman, James Fenelon, an eighty-nine year veteran of the traveling sales force in 1916, attributed his success to the fact that “he never used tobacco in any form and that he always acted as a gentleman should” (Geyer 53). His virtue was rewarded when he became ill and the president of the company wrote that “he wanted to keep the dean of the force on the pay roll as long as he lived, even if he never made another trip” (Geyer 53). Willy’s generation remembered the time when there was “respect, and comradeship, and gratitude” (81) in business.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, salesmen were urged to improve sales by improving their character, often as a kind of religious exercise. Self-tests to see whether one had the requisite strength of character for the job were common in popular magazines. One expert suggested a self-examination at the end of each day:

The salesman should possess the ability to review carefully his work at the close of each day, and decide just where and how he has been weaker than he should have
been. There is some reason for the loss of every sale. The salesman may not be at fault, but it is safer for him to assume that he is and to endeavor to put his finger upon his weakness. Such a practice will foster in him the habit of holding himself strictly accountable for errors. He should also at the same time review the essential qualifications of a salesman and decide in which of them he is lacking. (Jones 170)

The salesman was urged to be thoroughly honest with himself when performing his “task of introspection,” for “the salesman can develop only by earnestly striving to discover and eliminate his negative qualities, while at the same time he makes every effort to strengthen his positive ones” (Jones 170–71).

Willy’s own career as a salesman begins in the early part of the twentieth century, when it was, as Willy tells his sons, “personality” that was considered the salesman’s greatest asset. His job was to make friends with the buyers and merchants, so they would buy what he was selling. The product itself was not all that important. With the growth of mass production, however, the pressure increased on the salesman to move merchandise in order to keep up the volume of production. Consequently, as Willy’s generation came into its maturity, married, and raised children during the 1920s, there was a good deal of pressure to sell merchandise, but it was relatively easy to do since the American business economy was enjoying one of its greatest periods of prosperity.

Salesmen at this time debated the best approach to selling merchandise. While there were many like Willy, who put all their faith in personality, friendship, and personal loyalty—“Be liked and you will never want” (33)—there was a new way of thinking about salesmanship. The earlier assumption had been that salesmanship was an essential quality, an innate character trait that could be nurtured and developed, but not created by the aspiring salesman. During the teens and twenties, salesmanship was beginning to be treated as a profession to be learned. The new interest in psychology led experts to think about the psychology of the buyer, and how best to manipulate it, as well as the psychological traits that made for the best salesmen. With mass production and increased competition, buyers and merchants began to think more about profit margins and customer satisfaction than
their own personal relationship with the salesman. There was more interest in the quality of the product and the salesman’s knowledge about it. Companies began to train their salesmen in the methods of salesmanship and to educate them about the products they were selling. As one writer put it:

Salesmanship is not trying to persuade people to buy something they do not want. That kind of salesmanship is, indeed, practiced, but not for very long; and no one makes any money out of it. Real salesmanship is demonstrating an article, or whatever it may be, in terms of the person who, it is hoped, will buy it. It is the development of a need, that already exists, into a present want. It is an operation performed first on the intellect and only secondly on the pocketbook of the prospect. (Hopkins 29)

With the stock market crash in 1929, and the Great Depression that followed it, the competition among salesmen became more and more cutthroat. As Willy tells Ben in one of the daydream sequences that takes place in 1931, “business is bad, it’s murderous” (51). Using all of the tricks that Willy has learned in a lifetime of selling, including seducing the buyer’s secretary and bribing her with stockings, Willy is barely able to eke out a living for his family. The salesman was up against an unforgiving business climate that placed the blame for failure squarely on the individual. Business writer J. C. Royle, for example, maintained that all that was needed to increase sales in 1931 was better salesmen: “The sales of the born salesmen have not suffered terribly during the Depression, but the amount of goods handled by the poor salesmen or those who need training has been pitiable.” In 1929, he contended, American salesmen did not sell sufficient goods to justify themselves, and “they are urged to do so now under spur of necessity. They are not being asked the impossible either” (“Wanted” 41-2).

During this period, the prevailing idea was still that, as Willy puts it, “the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead” (33). As J. George Frederick suggested in his 1000 Sales Points: The “Vitamin Concentrates” of Modern Salesmanship (1941), the
first element of good salesmanship was to “Polish Off Your Personality.” A salesman’s personality “must not be rough-hewn. It must feel agreeable and bland to all who contact it, or else it is a handicap. Therefore the first sales fundamental is to present an acceptable personality—in neatness, cleanliness, clothes, manner, deportment, expression, etc.” (17). Once his own personality was attended to, the salesman could concentrate on the psychological manipulation of the customer.

With most of the younger men in the military, middle-aged salesmen like Willy made an adequate living during World War II, despite the fact that the manufacturing of consumer goods was severely restricted. In the post-war period when the real time of the play takes place, there was a pent-up demand for things like new cars, tires, brand-name liquor, and nylon stockings, which had not been available during the war. The enormous American war industry was being retooled to produce consumer goods, and the advertising business was expanding rapidly as Americans were “educated” into desiring things like vacuum cleaners, television sets, and air conditioners, which had not been manufactured in large quantities before the war. The newly invigorated American business sector seized on the youthful and energetic workforce of young men returning from the military, displacing the women and older men who had been employed during the war. Men like Willy Loman, sixty-three years old in 1948, were being displaced by the younger generation everywhere.

Hap Loman and Howard Wagner represent typical members of this younger generation. Hap is not a salesman, but one of two assistants to the assistant buyer of a large department store. His job is more secure than Willy’s, and it carries a regular salary rather than the precarious commission that Willy lives on. Unlike his father, though, Hap does not use his salary to support a family. Instead, he lives a carefree bachelor life, more interested, as Linda tells him, in his apartment and his car and his women than in helping his family, soon to become the ideal consumer of Hugh Hefner’s Playboy. His final response to his father’s death is to proclaim that he is “not licked that easily. I’m staying right in this city, and I’m gonna beat this racket! . . . Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It’s the only dream you can have—to come out number-one man” (138–39). Howard Wagner, who has taken over the business that employs Willy af-
ter the death of his father Frank, is pragmatic and impersonal in his treatment of the aging salesman. When Willy admits that he can't handle the road anymore, Howard refuses to consider finding him something to do in New York as his father might have done, explaining, "it's a business, kid, and everybody's gotta pull his own weight" (80). When Willy loses control, showing his desperation, Howard fires him, telling him that he is not in a fit state to represent the firm.

The profession of selling underwent a tremendous change after the war. In the late forties, a movement to professionalize the salesman began, promoting sales as a career for college graduates. An important part of this movement was to emphasize the salesman's expertise and downplay his personality. Students were taught in business courses that the salesman's job was to learn everything he could about his product, and about the market, to gather all the data he could and analyze it using the most sophisticated statistical methods—in Willy's words, "today, it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear—or personality" (81). A number of books were written about "salesmanship" in the late forties and early fifties, attempting to codify the knowledge that was the fruit of a lifetime of experience for a Willy Loman or a Dave Singleman. Unfortunately for the veteran salesmen, the knowledge was expressed in a new lingo they didn't always understand, and it was based on different values, Howard Wagner's values, where the bottom line was everything.

During the forties and fifties, the professional salesman became increasingly driven by things like market studies and demographics. Willy's plea for loyalty and humane treatment—"you can't eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit!" (82)—is irrelevant to Howard's way of thinking. The prevailing view in the post-war business culture was that a salesman's job was not to sell a product—any product—to a buyer because he was liked and trusted by him, but to learn as much as possible about a particular product, identify its market, and bring the product to the buyer, any buyer. The two human beings, salesman and buyer, were becoming the least important elements of the transaction. Willy's complaint that salesmanship was becoming "cut and dried" is meaningless to a man like Howard, who is interested only in the bottom line of profit and loss. That is exactly the way he wants it to be.
A good example of the popular application of the new ideas about salesmanship is Harry Simmons' *How to Sell Like a Star Salesman* (1953). Simmons' description of the first two necessities for salesmanship are “application to the job—keep everlastingly at it” and

“complete knowledge—knowing not only the rules of the game, but the reasons behind the rules and the smart application of the rules to the situation at hand. This also includes every single bit of knowledge about your product that it is possible to acquire; you never know when the smallest fact will develop into a big factor that will turn the tide in your favor” (Simmons 12).

Simmons' book includes “Twenty-eight pint-size capsules that hold a gallon of helpful sales advice” for the salesman operating in the post-war business environment, several of which speak directly to Willy’s failings. For example: “Reach for the order instead of applause. Many a man mistakes sociability for sales ability. He spends his time being a good-time Charley instead of a brass-tacks salesman. And then he complains about business being slow!” and “Tall tales make funny stories, but sound selling talks its way to the cash register! It’s just a question of whether you want your sales manager to laugh with you or at you” (Simmons 94). The modern salesman, in Simmons’ post-war view, is a serious businessman emphasizing “product information” and “helpmanship”—“helping your customer to buy properly, to use correctly, and to sell efficiently will fill both your pockets with more profits” (Simmons 98).²

The successful representatives of Willy's generation in the play, Charley and Ben, are hard-nosed capitalists, who have never allowed themselves to succumb to the sentimentality of the Dave Singleman myth as Willy has. Ben's creed is “never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You’ll never get out of the jungle that way” (49). Although Charley is a loyal friend to Willy, he understands that the business world operates by different rules than human relations: “You named him Howard, but you can't sell that. The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that” (97). Unlike Willy,
Charley has been able to adapt to the prevailing business culture. Willy’s reaction to his failure in business during the real time of the play is similar to his response to his sense of failure in the other areas of his life. He retreats from present reality into nostalgic daydreams of the past, until he can no longer separate daydream from reality, past from present. His response to Charley’s blunt statement of reality is a nostalgic reference to the bromides of the sales literature of the twenties: “I’ve always felt that if a man was impressive, and well liked, that nothing—” (97).

From the point of view of men like Howard and Charley, Willy’s failure in business is a failure to adapt his old-fashioned sales technique—based on the buyer’s personal loyalty to the salesman—to the new post-war business climate where salesmanship was based on knowledge of the product and service to the customer. Willy is a dinosaur. Howard fires him because “Business is business,” and Charley offers him a job out of charity because he is an old friend, a gesture Willy recognizes and rejects. Through his representation of the three generations of businessmen in the play, however, Miller suggests that Willy’s failure is also due to a deep cultural dissonance in the messages he has heard throughout his life. Willy has heard the hard truth from the capitalists, but he has chosen to believe in the Dave Singleman myth, widely reflected in the popular literature of his day, that it was humanity that mattered—whether it was measured in sterling traits of character, as in the early part of the century, or in a pleasing personality, as in the twenties. Despite the fact that Biff has won the chance to play in Ebbets Field through his accomplishments on the football field, Willy really believes, as he tells Ben, that “three great universities are begging for him, and from there the sky’s the limit, because it’s not what you do, Ben. It’s who you know and the smile on your face! . . . that’s the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked!” (86). The play’s overwhelming message is that this is a lie, and that Willy is a fool to believe it. It is one of the things that destroys him. Willy is not alone, however, as the popular sales literature demonstrates. His belief that innate superiority will win out is the other side of the “strive and thrive” message of the American Protestant success ethic. Willy never
ceases to believe that Biff is "magnificent," that he is one of the elect. It is imagining "that magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket" (135) that Willy goes to his death, destroyed, in one sense, by the salesman's creed of the twenties, from which he has never deviated.

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NOTES

1 See Barry Gross, "Peddler and Pioneer in Death of a Salesman." Modern Drama 7 (Feb. 1965): 405–10 for a discussion of these themes.


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