Willy Couldn’t Find Walden Pond

Poor Willy, the reader bemoans, he just couldn’t get his act together. Willy Loman, Death of a Salesman’s central character, is one of Arthur Miller’s most intriguing personalities. He spends the whole play vacillating between two dreams: his idealistic wish for success and worldly gain, and his unconscious desire for a simple life in the country. This internal conflict results in the destruction of this most unheroic of heros. Miller demonstrates the advantages of simplicity over complex and competitive success. In an earlier era, Henry David Thoreau treated this same theme in his opus work Walden, which recounts his life in the woods. The moral of both works is the same — how we can transcend mere existence and really live — but they teach this lesson in very different ways: Walden is an experiment in successful living, whereas Death of a Salesman is an example of living a failure. Examining how Thoreau independently viewed life’s meaning in a manner synergetic to Miller’s illuminates the truths that Miller presents in his play. In this process Willy’s deterioration transforms into the embodiment of Thoreau’s warnings.

With beautiful mornings, stunning scenery, and revelry in the simple and exotic banalities of life, Walden is an experience in living. Thoreau’s purpose for writing Walden is clearly stated: “As I have said, I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up” (Thoreau 168). Its purpose is to help us to realize what we are missing in our everyday existence, and rise to our potential. Walden provides an ideal for true and simple living that can be juxtaposed against Willy’s artificial and common city life. This contrasting pedagogy is immediately apparent in the settings of the books. Both stories occur in New England, yet in drastically different localities. Walden Pond is a sheltered, wooded chunk of paradise where a philosopher can do his business. Willy’s Brooklyn, with its growing population, seems to tighten a choke hold on him as his dreams evaporate. When Willy started raising his family, their spacious home and garden was on the edge of a city full of opportunities, yet as his crisis approached he found that his city was crushing him. The gradual change is a reflection of Willy’s choices and their effects. Slowly his once beloved garden dies and the
apartment house construction, from which he once pilfered wood and sand, crowd in. Though unable to see the
direct consequences of his actions, Willy recognizes the change in his neighborhood and laments: “The street is lined
with cars. There’s not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don’t grow any more, you can’t raise a
carrot in the back yard. They should’ve had a law against apartment houses” (Miller 17). His city is becoming a
jungle.

Part of the common theme is a need to connect with nature. For Thoreau, nature is a model for almost
everything good. In describing his basic philosophy of life he writes: “Let us spend one day as deliberately as
Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails” (Thoreau, 177).
This type of deliberate living is the secret to Thoreau’s happiness. It can be viewed as Willy Loman’s unspoken
dream. He longs to go to Alaska, or Africa, and to escape the city to live deliberately. In his moment of greatest hope
he confides to Linda his dreams: “You wait, kid, before it’s all over we’re gonna get a little place out in the country,
and I’ll raise some vegetables, a couple of chickens . . .” (Miller 72). Raising vegetables becomes Willy’s obsession.
“Oh, I’d better hurry,” he tells a waiter in a restaurant, “. . . I’ve got to get some seeds, right away. Nothing’s
planted. I don’t have a thing in the ground” (Miller 123). Planting and making things grow, leaving a legacy, is
Willy’s principle goal, and yet his soil is too shady and infertile, causing all the sprouts to wither.

Paralleling one another, both works warn us that material possessions constrain us. Willy longs to be free,
and he dreams of going somewhere that will allow him to be great. Yet he can’t.
His job, his family, and his house all tie him down. Willy slaves to pay for a refrigerator, a car, and everything else
in his “race with the junkyard” (Miller 73). His only possession worth owning is his house, and the accomplishment
of paying that off, of being free and clear, becomes Willy’s only achievement. Gaining your own house after years of
employment becomes a motif in the play. Miller states that weathering a twenty-five year mortgage is an
accomplishment (73). According to Thoreau that accomplishment comes with encumbrances attached that
potentially mitigate its value (Thoreau 129). The empty sum of Willy’s life of work exemplifies Thoreau’s
perspective. Thoreau tells us this precious freedom comes as a product of simplicity. To a man who built his own
house with his hands, a twenty-five year mortgage is dreaming the wrong dream. One is better off improving one’s
mind than taking care of possessions (Thoreau 132).
The need for correct ambitions is a lesson personified in both Willy and Thoreau. Willy is a man caught up in society’s dreams, and they weren’t the right ones. Everything Willy Lowman did or wanted was what someone else told him was good. He really believed that pleasing others was the key to success, as he taught his sons “...the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want” (Miller 33). At Willy’s death Charley was his only friend. This failure at living the dreams of others illustrates Thoreau’s point:

I would not have any one adopt my mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead. (Thoreau 158)

Willy Lowman did not follow that advice. He wanted to build something, but he was never sure what. He wanted to see his firm grow, to build a company, but his confidence was easily shaken when he thought of Ben’s challenge: “What are you building? Lay your hand on it. Where is it?” (Miller 86). Willy didn’t know.

Like Thoreau, for Miller confidence in oneself is essential — Willy’s lack of self-confidence is a mortal weakness. Upon viewing Willy’s story the readers are challenged to examine themselves and find direction. Miller shows Willy analyzing his own personality, trying to understand himself and even admitting to his imaginary Ben, “I still feel — kind of temporary about myself” (Miller 51). Instead of portraying the dangers of such temporariness, Thoreau’s approach is to show himself as the example of personal security. In Walden we learn that “[n]ot till we are lost, in other words not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (Thoreau 232). If we want to be able to confront everything, we need personal moments to deal with our fears, unlike Willy who always ran from them. Willy was so social, such a salesman, that he didn’t know himself.

The danger of giving into societies’ games is commonly treated throughout both works. As a hermit at Walden Pond, Thoreau describes society as an ungrateful master. Thoreau explains that the company of others is rarely uplifting: “Society is commonly too cheap” (Thoreau 206). The capitalist machine dehumanizes people, working them for thirty-five years and then leaving them like an orange peel. As we read in Walden:
men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost. By a
seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures
which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when
they get to the end of it, if not before. (Thoreau 109)

Both author’s want us to look at our lives and examine what we are building, and recognize that “a man is not a
piece of fruit.” (Miller 82)

The message of these two books is the same: they are a call to awakening. They ask us to open our eyes and
see the world around us, to dream good dreams, to live deliberately, and to be great even as common women and
men. Walden is a call to emulation, and Death of a Salesman is a warning of destruction. Willy represents all of us,
and reflects us, allowing us to discover our faults and channel our desires in constructive ways. Thoreau said, “I
found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and
another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good”
(Thoreau 260). If we want to become whole, confident people we must learn to accept ourselves. If we want to
become like Willy we should avoid confronting the truth about ourselves at all costs.

At the end of his play Miller has Charley unmask the core of Willy’s personality, defending his faults in front
of Willy’s boys. Charley says:

Nobody dast blame this man. You don’t understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no
rock bottom to the life. He don’t put a bolt to a nut, he don’t tell you the law or give you medicine. He’s a
man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back –
that’s an earthquake. . . . A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory. (Miller 138)

Thoreau never would have been a salesman.

Works Cited:
