

Willy Loman's Superiority Complex Reflected in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Article History: **Abstract.** The focus of the study is to describe the characteristics of the superiority complex and explain the causes of the superiority complex reflected by Willy Loman in *Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman* using the superiority complex theory proposed by Adler. This study used a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the problems. It employs qualitative research to categorize the evidence in a frequency table. The study shows that Willy exhibits all of the characteristics of aggressiveness expected of the self-accusative type. The most dominant traits Willy suffers from are exaggerated claims about himself and hostility toward the depreciation type. He also undergoes all of the causes of the superiority complex, such as Pampered Lifestyle and Feeling Neglected. So, from the social perspective, The death of Willy Loman reflects the heavy burden of his life in achieving his dream to be a successful parent who educates his sons. His obsession causes him to commit suicide, and he develops a superiority complex to sacrifice for his family.

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INTRODUCTION

Art is one way humans comprehend life (Dissanayake, 2002). Through art, artists try to reflect life and send a message to the audiences. In this case, art refers to literature which is one form of media artists use to channel human character metaphorically and aesthetically. Both literature and psychoanalysis are text-based methods that share the same theories of poiesis, image, symbolism, and

interpretation (Jacobi, 2013). It is possible for the author who consciously or unconsciously expresses an unintended message behind the code and symbolism he uses in making art literature. In such a way, art reflects life, and life reflects art. Individuals relate to art because it consists of human experiences. They connect through experiences and learn from those experiences by studying art.

Jung proposes the term *complex* refers to the feeling-toned groups of representation in the unconscious mind. It refers to a group of memories with a similar tone of feeling (anger, irritation, etc.) (Jacobi, 2013). The unconscious realm has organized mass memories consisting of these complexes. This complex refers to collecting an individual's memories and experiences. Individuals are often unaware of their complexes or how they affect them. It can lead to issues such as not understanding oneself, leaving the matter unresolved, engaging in uncomfortable behavior, making poor decisions, and frequently leading to mental health issues (Singer & Kimbles, 2004). One of them is a superiority complex.

A superiority complex is a condition in which people think they are better than others. Superiority is an exaggerated condition because of the sense of inferiority and the desire to look better. According to (Adler, 2013), Social interests and a striving for success or superiority drive people. Moreover, the nature of humans is moving toward "security" and "social solidarity" (Esteves et al., 2021) because humans are afraid to be dissociated from their social sphere. However, Adler (2013) adds that each individual may feel inferior because of past childhood traumas. Therefore, dependency and acceptance by society play an important role in child development. The lack of acceptance and the fear of rejection trigger inferiority feelings in the child's unconscious mind (Allan N. Schore, 2019). Later, those individuals experience an inferiority complex having low self-esteem; they feel weak, insecure, and helpless (Fennell, 2016).

Moreover, superiority is one way an individual feels more powerful than they think inside (Joseph, 2016). This behavior appears to compensate for the inner weakness that the individual has. Exaggerated facts are the basis for most superiority complexes. This way makes them more prominent than they are. They also tend to have high and unachievable goals because inferiority and irrational thinking drive their goal.

Some characteristics of superiority refer to an inferiority complex, having exaggerated claims about themselves, developing high and unrealistic goals, striving for success, seeing other people as opponents, and having safeguard tendencies (Adler, 2014). (Feist et al., 2018) states that there are two safeguard tendencies. They are unlikely to admit their flaws, mistakes, and aggressiveness. They see themselves as the best version. Their imperfection will damage their image. Thus, they choose to ignore it. They do not want to admit that they have spots. Defects trigger inferiority feelings, and with the inferiority comes vulnerability (feeling weak and unworthy). They do not want to appear vulnerable or weak. Their low self-esteem is rooted in the inferiority feelings that make them feel unwanted or unworthy. Also, individuals with this complex tend to be more aggressive. Adler describes it as *a masculine protest*. It is a term for aggressiveness that demands the power or domination of others (Feist et al., 2018). This aggressive behavior is triggered more easily. It is because their claims and perceptions usually do not have any factual basis. Thus, this condition begins

aggressive behavior because they always need to protect themselves. There are three kinds of aggression: (1) Depreciation, a tendency to underrate or underestimate other people's efforts and boast about theirs. The purpose of this action is to depreciate the other person so that they look superior to the victim. This power exhibition is in the form of bullying. The bully bullies their victims to gain power from the victim. (2) Accusative, a tendency to blame their failure on another person. According to (Adler, Alfred, 2014), these individuals act to hurt others. They also have a dysfunctional mentality and desire for their surroundings to suffer. (3) Self-accusation, a tendency to blame themselves, shown by self-torture and guilt. The purpose of these tendencies is to hurt themselves to hurt people who care for them.

Furthermore, the leading causes of the superiority complex are maladjustments of social interest, external factors, and internal factors. A comfortable lifestyle and the feeling of being neglected are external factors. Spoiled people demand too much love from their surroundings; they only accept the kind of love they want. They get constant exposure given by the caregiver. Hence, when the extreme given love previously given is gone, they might feel neglected, unloved, and mistreated. They desire to satisfy their needs or feel entitled to their surroundings. They always demand more, even though they already receive enough love. Feelings of being neglected also have something to do with the perception of love. As for pampered children, they can also feel neglected even though they receive enough love. They feel unaccepted, left alone, and discarded from their crowd. The feelings left them thinking that there was something wrong with them. It leads to insecurity, or, in other words, inferiority. They find it hard to connect with other people, and with the inferiority, they have less confidence. As they grow up, they separate themselves from their society. They become more apathetic toward other people and more sympathetic toward themselves.

The next is internal factors, low social interest, and physical deficiencies. "Social interest" is an individual's relationship with their society. It is not always synonymous with charity or altruistic behavior but with the act of philanthropy and kindness (Feist et al., 2018). Social interest is also motivated by a sense of community. The lack of understanding can make the individual more self-centered and strive for personal power. Everyone has their deficiencies. As humans, flaws and imperfections are in our nature. However, people are more aware of their weaknesses than others. It refers to what people think about themselves (Cussons, 2014). They become more apathetic toward other people and more sympathetic toward themselves.

This study uses *Death of a Salesman* in the 1998 version, published by Penguin Books. It is a play written by Arthur Miller in 1940. *Death of a Salesman* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the Tony Award for Best Play and is considered the most incredible play of the 20th century. The drama is selected because it portrays damaging unrealistic societal standards and the rising phenomenon of mental health issues. Moreover, this drama is very relatable to this era because social media development, the standard of living, and life goals trend are becoming toxic and unachievable for the younger generation. It also focuses on the influence of capitalist society on someone's mental state.

This study uses several previous studies based on the theory of Complex

Superiority Behavior and the drama itself. The first study is a study of the superiority complex in Chris Gardner’s *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Zarkasy, 2020). The difference between this study and the previous one is the impact of complex superiority behavior. Those studies also use different sources of data. The previous one uses a novel, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, and this current study uses *Death of a Salesman*. The similarities of both studies are employing *Individual Psychology* by Alfred Adler to analyze the causes and the characteristics of complex superiority behavior. The second study is the analysis of *Death of a Salesman*, *Life of a Jew: Ethnicity, Business, and the Character of Willy Loman* (Cardullo, 2007) emphasizes the characterization of Willy Loman as an American Jewish person, but he is vaguely known as he is (a Jew). The third previous research is *An Anti-social Socialist: A Critical Reading of Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman* (Emami, 2011). It criticizes Marxist socialism applied in analyzing the drama.

RESEARCH METHOD

The method of the study is descriptive analysis and employs qualitative research that focuses on the interpretations of the meaning of the data. According to John and Creswell, qualitative research is an approach to understanding and exploring meaning (Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research explores a new concept or current phenomenon. This type of research focuses on exploring the sensation that the study discusses. This type of research allows the researchers to explore the phenomenon's depth, richness, and complexity.

Descriptive analysis is a method that focuses on describing, defining, or categorizing phenomena (Loeb et al., 2017). Descriptive research makes it possible to describe the data related to the superiority complex performed by Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. This method allows the researcher to explain the data and recognize the pattern of the phenomenon that they are analyzing. By recognizing the methodology, they can construct informative studies and hopefully improve their knowledge of this topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part describes the result of the study from the data analysis. The data only focuses on the characteristics and the causes of the superiority complex undergone by Willy Loman. The frequency result of the investigation of the play *Death of a Salesman* is in the form of the table below:

Table1. The Characteristics of Superiority Complex

No	Characteristics of Superiority Complex	Frequency	
1	Inferiority Complex	2	4%
2	Exaggerated Claims about Themselves	9	22%
3	Develops High and Unrealistic Goals	5	12%
4	Striving for Success and See Other People as Opponents	7	17%
	Safe Guarding Tendencies		
5	He is unlikely to Admit his Flaws and Mistakes,	6	14%

	Aggressiveness		
6	Depreciation	9	21%
7	Accusative	5	12%
8	Self-Accusation	0	0%

The findings show that Willy Loman's superiority complex is exaggerated claims about himself and aggressiveness of the depreciation type. Willy exaggerates claims about himself to boast about his confidence. He shows off because he wants to be respected and accepted in his surroundings. Contrary to the inferiority complex, he only shows this characteristic to the people he trusts the most. Therefore, the inferiority complex becomes the least dominant characteristic. He does not want to appear vulnerable in front of everybody.

The presence of the inferiority complex shows that, in his unconscious mind, he has low and even fragile self-esteem. The basis of his claims is fantasies. These claims compensate for his inferiority complex. It causes the safeguard tendencies to appear in the form of aggressiveness of the depreciation type. He depreciates others to protect himself from a potential threat and boasts and gains other people's domination. Consequently, the depreciation type is the most dominant of the different aggressive types to appear.

The other safeguard tendencies are: being unlikely to admit his flaws and mistakes and aggressiveness of the accusative type. These characteristics appear when he gets called out for his behavior. In the play, his behavior does not call it out that often, but when it does, either he shifts the blame on someone else or he blatantly refuses to admit it. He wants his image to be perfect and flawless. Therefore, the characteristic of self-accusative does not appear in the play.

He thinks highly of himself. The basis of this view is facts. It makes him set his goals too high for him to achieve. He wants to be respected and trusted. Thus, he strives for success because he wants to be accepted. In striving for success, his goal is only personal credit, not growth. It leads to a sense of competition, despite no competition. He wants to be the best. It leads to him thinking that other people are his opponents. This part shows that Willy exhibits the characteristics of a superiority complex. The evidence is as follows:

LINDA [trying to bring him out of it]: Willy, dear, I got a new kind of American-type cheese today. It's whipped.

WILLY: Why do you get American when I like Swiss?

LINDA: I just thought you'd like a change—

WILLY: I don't want a change! I want Swiss cheese. *Why am I always being contradicted?*

LINDA [with a covered laugh]: I thought it would be a surprise.

(Miller, 1998: 6)

After arguing about Biff, Willy will make a sandwich when Linda tells him that she is buying a new type of cheese. He responds quickly with anger. They argue a little more because Willy likes Swiss cheese, and Linda wants to surprise him. He does not want it to change. The external conflict of this evidence is that Linda changes the type of cheese they usually have.

The argument shows aggressiveness that quickly rises again from insignificant details such as cheese. People with a superiority complex tend to be more aggressive because aggressiveness is a form of domination over others. This fragile self-esteem makes him feel vulnerable all the time. Thus, this led to the emergence of aggressiveness as a form of an unconscious defensive system. The aggressiveness type that demonstrates in this evidence is accusative. He has accused her of his sensitivity. The cheese is unimportant, but he makes it as if it were a big mistake and blames her despite her intention. Then, they discuss future business plans. Willy is very optimistic about the future business. He feels excited and has high hope for it. Then Linda wants to join the conversation, but he yells at her, saying she interrupts his talk. Biff tries to defend his mother, and it triggers his aggressiveness.

LINDA: Oliver always thought the highest of him—
 WILLY: *Will you let me talk?*
 BIFF: Don't yell at her, Pop, will ya?
 WILLY [angrily]: I was talking, wasn't I?
 BIFF: I don't like you yelling at her all the time, and I'm tellin' you, that's all.
 WILLY: *What're you, takin' over this house?*
 LINDA: Willy—
 WILLY [turning on her]: Don't take his side all the time, goddammit!
 BIFF [furiously]: Stop yelling at her!
 WILLY [suddenly pulling on his cheek, beaten down, guilt-ridden]: Give my best to Bill Oliver—he may remember me. [He exits through the living room doorway.]

(Miller, 1998: 48)

It shows external conflict involves Biff and Willy. This condition can be categorized as safeguard tendencies, namely, the aggressiveness of depreciation type. He depreciates Linda by underrating her opinion. When Biff defends his mother, Willy devalues him as well. He says, *“What're you, takin' over this house.”* It proves the aggressiveness of depreciation type. He tries to undervalue Biff because the house that Biff lives in is his house. It shows that he wants to be respected. Willy wants to make Biff feels slight against him. Thus, he wants to dominate and gain power from his aggressiveness.

There are two factors of the causes behind Willy’s superiority complex. They are external and internal factors. The apparent frequency is as follows:

Table 2. The Causes of Superiority Complex

No	Causes of Superiority Complex		Frequency	
1	External Factors			
	1	Pampered Lifestyle	2	13%
	2	Feeling Neglected	3	20%
2	Internal Factors			
	1	Low Social Interest	5	33%
	2	Physical Deficiencies	5	33%

The most dominant factors in his superiority complex are his low social interest and physical deficiencies (internal factor). He has common social interests and only cares about his well-being. He constantly shows no empathy toward the other people around him. Linda always pampers him. It leads to his high ego and self-importance. It explains his low social interest.

He feels neglected and abandoned by his father figure. His brother and father left him. It scars his unconscious and leads to the longing for acceptance. This longing leads to him wanting to prove himself to be accepted. He thinks something is wrong with himself, which is why his father and brother left him. He blames himself for it. Therefore, he develops some inferiority feelings based on his physical deficiencies or the reason for being neglected.

The internal factor is the dominant factor in the play because it focuses on Willy's psychological journey into madness. It focuses on the effects of his society and high expectations. The space does not focus on his background. So, the dominant cause that appears to be in play is the internal factor.

This part shows that Willy gets the causes of a superiority complex. The causes of the condition are as follows:

BERNARD: What's Biff doing?

WILLY: Well, *he's been doing tremendous things in the West. But he decided to establish himself here. Very big. We're having dinner.* Did I hear your wife had a boy?

BERNARD: That's right. Our second.

WILLY: Two boys! What do you know?

BERNARD: What kind of a deal has Biff got?

WILLY: Well, Bill Oliver—massive sporting goods man—*he wants Biff very badly. Called him in from the West. Long distance, carte blanche, special deliveries.* Do your friends have a private tennis court?

BERNARD: You still with the old firm, Willy?

WILLY [*after a pause*]: I'm—I'm *overjoyed* to see how you made the grade, Bernard, *overjoyed*. It's an encouraging thing to see a young man really—really—*Looks very good for Biff—very—*[*He breaks off, then*] Bernard—[*He is so full of emotion, he breaks off again.*]

(Miller, 1998: 70)

After arguing with his boss, he starts reminiscing about his brother Ben. He talks to him in his head. Then he meets Jenny and Bernard. Bernard greets him and asks him about what he is up to. They are talking about Biff and his job, about his life. But the conversation overwhelms him, and he breaks off in front of Bernard.

The conversation refers to a safeguarding tendency: being unlikely to admit their flaws and mistakes. In this situation, Willy seems to be ashamed of his boy. Bernard is now a successful lawyer, but Biff is unemployed. It makes him lie to Bernard, saying that Biff is working something big in the West, and Bill Oliver calls him to give him some business offers. This action shows that he sees Biff as a flaw in his image; thus, he lies and tries to cover his weaknesses.

The following conflicts reflect the other cause of Willy's superiority complex. The evidence shows the role model of Willy's character.

BEN [*glancing at his watch*]: I have an appointment in Ketchikan Tuesday week.

WILLY: No, Ben! *Please tell me about Dad*. I want my boys to hear. I want them to know the kind of stock they spring from. All I remember is a man with a big beard, and *I was in Mamma's lap*, sitting around a fire, and some kind of high music.

BEN: His flute. He played the flute.

WILLY: Sure, the flute, that's right!

[*New music is heard a high, rollicking tune.*]

BEN: Father was a very great and very wild-hearted man. We would start in Boston, and he'd toss the whole family into the wagon, and then he'd drive the team right across the country; through Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and all the Western states. And we'd stop in the towns and sell the flutes that he'd made on the way. A great inventor, Father. With one gadget he made more in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime.

WILLY: *That's just the way I'm bringing them up, Ben*—rugged, well-liked, all-around.

(Miller, 1998: 33-34)

Willy finally meets Ben after a long time. He cannot wait for Ben to tell the story of his journey, how he finds a diamond mine, and about his dad. Even so, Ben gives an unsatisfactory answer saying their father well-liked man with a wild heart. He always looks up to these two characters (Ben and his father) as a daddy figure and role model. Willy desperately wants a connection to these two characters because Willy sees them as successful and perfect men. He wants to become like them.

The conversation shows that Willy looks up to Ben and his father. He idolizes them. Even though his father is absent, he respects and can only fantasize about him. This and Ben's absence make him feel neglected in his childhood. He says, "Please tell about Dad" This shows that he is desperate for a connection to his role models. The absence of these characters (his big brother and father as a daddy figure) makes him feel neglected as a child in his mother's lap.

The next cause is Willy's disappointment. The reflection of this conflict is in the following situation:

LINDA: But you're doing fantastic, dear. You're making seventy to a hundred dollars a week.

WILLY: But I gotta be at it ten, twelve hours a day. Other men—*I don't know—they do it easier*. I don't know why—I can't stop myself—*I talk too much*. A man ought to *come in with a few words*. One thing about Charley. *He's a man of few words, and they respect him*.

LINDA: You don't talk too much, you're just lively.

WILLY [*smiling*]: Well, I figure, what the hell, life is short, a couple of jokes. [*To himself*] *I joke too much!* [*The smile goes.*]

LINDA: Why? You're—

WILLY: *I'm fat. I'm very—foolish to look at*, Linda. I didn't tell you, but

Christmas time I happened to be calling on F. H. Stewarts, and a salesman I know, as I was going in to see the buyer *I heard him say something about—walrus. And I—I cracked him right across the face. I won't take that. I simply will not take that. But they do laugh at me. I know that.*

LINDA: Darling . . .

WILLY: I gotta overcome it. I know I gotta overcome it. *I'm not dressing to advantage, maybe.*

(Miller, 1998: 23-24)

This situation shows Willy's disappointment with himself. He thinks that people are making fun of him. He thinks no one takes him seriously. No one respects him or notices him. He expresses his vulnerability to Linda. He tries to comprehend what is wrong with him. Is it his clothes? Or the way he talks? Then Linda tries to assure him that he is a good person. He is the most handsome to her.

The conversation shows that Willy's character always thinks he is on the enemy line. He has low self-esteem and fragile confidence. It makes him believe that people always see him differently. He feels unaccepted and ignored. He feels eliminated from his surroundings. His physical deficiencies are the cause. He says, "*I'm fat. I'm very—foolish to look at.*" And "*I talk too much.*" Whether based on fact or not, these deficiencies influence his behavior to exhibit a superiority complex.

The last piece of evidence is the external cause of Willy's superiority complex. The conflicts are as follows.

THE WOMAN: *Whyn't you have another drink, honey, and stop being so damn self-centered?*

WILLY: *I'm so lonely.*

THE WOMAN: You know you ruined me, Willy? From now on, whenever you come to the office, I'll see you go right through to the buyers. No *waiting at my desk anymore, Willy. You ruined me.*

WILLY: *That's nice of you to say that.*

THE WOMAN: Gee, *you are self-centered!* Why so sad? You are *the saddest, most self-centered soul* I ever did see-saw. [*She laughs. He kisses her.*] Come on inside, drummer boy. It's silly to be dressing in the middle of the night. [*As knocking is heard*] Aren't you going to answer the door?

(Miller, 1998: 91-92)

Willy is having an affair with a woman. He sleeps with her in the hotel room when somebody knocks on the door. She tries to make him open the door, but he does not want to. Biff is knocking impatiently on the other side of the door, searching for his father. He goes to Boston to see him because he does not answer his calls. The woman tells him to open the door; he refuses, but then he opens the door.

It shows that the woman repetitively says that Willy is a self-centered man. He is the saddest, most self-centered man that she has ever known. It proves the pampered lifestyle that Willy has. He only thinks about himself and always pities himself. He feels neglected and mistreated if he does not receive the love he

deserves. It proves the pampered lifestyle that always wanted to be cared for and loved. Pampered lifestyle is one of the external causes of the superiority complex.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Willy exhibits seven characteristics of a superiority complex. The most frequent characteristics he undergoes are exaggerating claims about himself and the aggressiveness of the depreciation type. Willy exaggerates claims about himself to be accepted by his surroundings. His claims are not fact-based. Instead, it is because of his fragile self-esteem. He feels like he is constantly being judged and attacked. It triggers the safeguarding tendency to appear. His aggressiveness is in the form of safeguarding proneness. To protect himself, he depreciates other people.

It is also clear that Willy exhibits all of the causes of the superiority complex. The most reasons are internal factors, physical deficiencies, and low social interest. He performs superiority to compensate for the inferiority feeling inside him. Therefore, the most frequent causes he shows are physical deficiencies, as the root of his inferiority feeling and low social interest. These flaws lead to inferiority feelings. He feels like he is less than other people. He feels neglected, unwanted, and unaccepted. Thus, it makes him more sympathetic toward himself and apathetic toward his surroundings. It indicates low social interest.

Thus, the overwhelming need to succeed led to depression. Then Willy has left with mental sickness that leads to his tragic suicide. In contrast to the projection of his funeral, no one comes to his funeral. In the time that they are free of their debt, he is gone. Biff still thinks he is wrong and that what he dreams of is just a dream and fiction.

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