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Drama Analysis: *Death of a Salesman*

While Arthur Miller’s 1949 play *Death of a Salesman* doesn’t fit the traditional recipe for a tragedy, it certainly leaves the reader feeling like they witnessed one. Set in the northeastern cities of Boston and New York, the play is a somber reminder that with good ol’ American capitalism, not everyone wins. The plot follows a salesman named Willy Loman and his family during the late 1940s. This paper will primarily analyze the protagonist, Willy Loman, and his oldest son, Biff Loman.

Willy Loman is used by Miller to convey many of the main themes present in the play. Willy is a character full of flaws. He has the typical salesman mentality, one that reeks of desperation and the willingness to cheat to obtain a goal (which he passes on to his son Biff.) Willy also contradicts himself frequently. For example, in the beginning of the play he calls Biff, “a lazy bum” (Miller 119), and then almost immediately states the opposite. He tells his wife Linda that he opened the windows on the car on the way home and then tells her shortly after that the windows don’t open on the car. Willy’s mental state is incredibly fragile for the duration of the play. He often escapes to the past in order to dull the pains of the present. The past being before Biff lost the football game, flunked math, and found out that Willy was having an affair. His flashbacks become more vivid as the play continues, with him eventually becoming unsuitable to be in public. After Biff and Happy abandon him in the restaurant he has a flashback and is later found by the waiter rambling on the floor of the washroom. Willy cannot accept defeat. When his life’s troubles begin to accumulate, as does his participation in reliving the past. He simply cannot deal with the future. Willy’s relationships with Charley and Bernard are also worth noting. During the flashbacks, Bernard is portrayed as a scholarly, nerdy individual, the opposite of Biff. He is somewhat respected by Biff, but Willy seems to look down on him for his scholarly pursuits and ignores Bernard’s repeated warnings about Biff flunking math. Willy also treats Bernard with a certain level of disrespect even though Charley is quite possibly his only true friend. Later on in the play, the tables are turned as Bernard is preparing to present a case to the Supreme Court and Willy is begging for reason. In Bernard’s office, Willy realizes that it is quite possible that he contributed to Biff’s failures by having that affair. Even so, Willy never has the courage or initiative to kill the issue. Willy is the author’s solemn reminder that not everyone can be happy with the traditional American dream. The Loman’s live better than a lot of Americans and were considered a middle class family. Still, they were seen as failures to themselves because of a lack of notoriety and wealth. As Willy would say it, the Lomans are liked, but not well liked. Biff is the only character able to eventually accept mediocrity, as Happy relentlessly pursues the dream and Willy ultimately gives his life to escape it.

There is a lot revealed about Willy’s son Biff towards the end of the play. Upon inspection, Biff is quite an interesting character. Arguably, he is the character who creates the most curiosity and wonder for the viewer. It is clear that Biff’s willingness to steal has severely limited him in life. In the last scenes of the play, Biff tells his father, “Stole his way out of every good job since high school!” (Miller 1726-1727) He also stole the fountain pen from Bill Oliver. Why did Biff steal? Was it because he lost the game, or was it caused by his father’s encouragement? It is likely a combination of the two. Early on, we are introduced to Willy’s tolerance of Biff’s errors in judgment and character. When it is revealed that Biff stole a football from the school’s locker room, Willy responds with, “Sure he’s gotta practice with a regulation ball, doesn’t he?” (Miller 530-531) It is a common theme throughout the play that Willy tolerates and even encourages his son to steal. Biff is the older of Willy’s two sons and seems to have the dominant personality. It is clear that Biff had more promise than Happy in high school, as he was the star of the football team and was even going to play for the University of Virginia. Overall, it seems that Biff was the redeemer of Willy’s shortfalls. In Willy’s eyes, Biff was going to make it. Due to this belief, Willy tolerated and encouraged Biff to steal or cheat when necessary. In other words, Biff was coached to win at all costs. Ironically, it was his cheater mentality that ultimately kept him from the success his father wanted for him. It is also ironic that Biff was, in a way, “cheated” out of his life’s potential by failing math. Such a failure would not normally be a major contributor to one’s failure in life.

Biff, along with Happy, was a victim of his father’s delusions of grandeur. In one of the final scenes in the play, Biff tells his father “I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That’s whose fault it is!” (Miller 1729-1731) In virtually every career, one must take orders and submit to others before gaining power and seniority. Biff realized that too late. There are a lot of times in life where one must accept defeat in order to facilitate change. At the age of 34, Biff was finally able to realize that he wasn’t all that his father made him out to be. This is one of the defining moments of the play. In Willy’s eyes, Biff’s crying was a signal that he had forgiven him for his extramarital activities and was ready to move on and capture success. Willy thought that the gap between Biff and himself had caused Biff’s failure in life. It is this belief that motivates Willy to end his life, so that Biff could take the life insurance money and start a business and live up to his own dreams. Even in the end, Biff is uninterested in his father’s dream. In fact, quite the opposite occurs, Happy is the one who vows to conquer what his father couldn’t. In the final scene at the cemetery he says, “It’s the only dream you can have – to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I’m gonna win it for him.” (Miller Requiem.52-54) This is a major change of power and legitimizes Happy’s character for the viewer. Happy was never able to accept defeat like Biff did, which makes one wonder if Happy will ever succeed in his newfound dreams or fall victim to his inherited stubbornness.

All in all, *Death of a Salesman* is a somber play that shows the rugged underbelly of American capitalism. It is a play that leaves the viewer thirsty for some kind of success. While Willy does succeed in acquiring the typical white picket fence associated with the American dream, he fails to realize his own dreams of notoriety and wealth. Biff fails at finding his calling and never really amounts to much because he inherited his father’s own brand of stubborn pride. Biff does have a semi-redeeming moment in the end when he is able to break the cycle and tell it like it is. Since Biff is the only one in the family that is able to accept defeat, it is arguable that he wins something that no one else in the Loman family was able to obtain, reality. Will Happy ever be able to fulfill his father’s dreams? As long as he continues to hold on to his father’s mentality of false entitlement, it’s highly unlikely.