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English 2

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An Analysis of Willy Loman from *Death of a Salesman*

The drama, *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, utilizes unique characters to criticize the American Dream that was developed in America after World War 2. The main character he uses to accomplish this is Willy Loman, an old, unsuccessful salesman who lives a tragic life in Brooklyn, New York. The complexity of this character is what leads to his demise. To understand the complexity of Willy Loman and how it conveys the beliefs of Arthur Miller concerning postwar America, one must dive deeper into the culture at the era, the mind of Willy Loman, and his interactions with other people.

To start, in the 1950s, the era where this drama takes place, American society was going through many drastic changes. First, the US prioritized on economic recovery due to the war. In the article, “A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America” by Lizabeth Cohen, Cohen writes “business leaders, labor unions, government agencies, the mass media, advertisers, and many other purveyors of the new postwar order conveyed the message that mass consumption was not a personal indulgence. Rather, it was a civic responsibility designed to improve the living standards of all Americans, a critical part of a prosperity producing cycle of expanded consumer demand fueling greater production, thereby creating more well-paying jobs and in turn more affluent consumers capable of stoking the economy with

their purchases(Cohen 1). As one can see, after the war, society promoted mass consumption so much that they declared it a responsibility of a citizen. Because it held so much importance, mass consumption shaped the stereotypical American Dream that is presented in the drama. Many people, like Willy, started to overvalue new products and new technologies. For example, when Howard shows Willy the tape recorder, Willy says “I'm definitely going to get one. Because lots of time I'm on the road, and I think to myself, what I must be missing on the radio!” (1270).

Even though Willy doesn't have the sufficient income to buy the tape recorder, he says he will buy one. This is due to the agenda the media is trying to push on society back then. Here the audience can infer that Miller thinks that technology and new products are only used as a means to express wealth and maintain social status because in the scene, Willy seems to say that he wants to buy a recorder just to save face and hide the fact that he is poor. In addition to changes in attitudes towards product consumption, the boom in the economy also changed the attitudes people have toward work. People don't appreciate work as much as before whether it is the boss of the worker or a consumer who buys a product. In the drama, this is seen when Willy talks to Howard, his boss, about a new job position, Willy says, “In those days there was personality in it[business], Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear-- or personality” (1271).

According to Willy, business has become a duty, unlike the old days when people developed emotional bonds during work. This is true because like stated above, consumption is now seen as a form of duty. The consumers only value the product they are receiving, not the people who develop it. Therefore, the worker would adapt to this change by being more serious toward work. To end, the play shows that Willy is living at a time when society was changing too fast for him

to keep up. Because of this setting, Miller was able to make Willy a tragic character whose true nature is easily expressed to other people due to his misery.

Due to the changing times, Willy is seen to be a tragic, unsuccessful salesman having a psychological breakdown. The conflicts he faces eventually lead him to consider suicide. First, it is seen that Willy wants to achieve the American Dream, but his persistence is exhausting him. According to his wife, Linda, “He used to be able to make six, seven calls a day in Boston. Now he takes his valises out of the car and puts them back and takes them out again and he's exhausted. ... what goes through a man's mind, driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent?”(1259). Linda's concern reemphasizes that Willy is a hard worker. But his unachievable dreams are what is making him extremely exhausted and develop even more problems. However, an end to his exhaustion comes when he is fired by Howard. But Willy's dismissal doesn't seem fair. In the drama, Linda says, “ He works for a company thirty-six years this March, opens up unheard of territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his salary away”(1259). Despite the amount of work Willy has done, the firm has not rewarded him well enough. This event emphasizes that he has been misled by his dream and adds to the misery Willy faces. It also shows that Willy's American Dream is unobtainable without some back up because Willy has worked his whole life and still has not achieved that dream. To make matters worse, the stress he was getting from work causes him to develop symptoms of psychological disorder.

In the drama, Willy experiences mania, hallucinations, and depression. One can diagnose him with bipolar disorder. The article, “Bipolar disorder”, by Diane Gooding, explains more symptoms and behaviors patients with bipolar disorder have. In the article, she writes, “During a

manic phase, they may overcommit to work projects and meetings, social activities, and family responsibilities in the belief that they can accomplish anything; this is known as manic grandiosity. At times, psychotic symptoms such as delusions, severe paranoia, and hallucinations may accompany a manic episode” (Gooding 2). In the drama, Willy overworks himself because he travels a couple hundred miles just for his work. He also occasionally has hallucinations of his brother, Ben. These points support the fact that Willy has bipolar disorder. Additionally, according to Diane in her article, “positive life events, ... as well as negative life events ... may trigger the onset of episodes in individuals with bipolar disorder Stressful life events and the social rhythm disruptions that they cause can have adverse effects on a person’s circadian rhythms. Circadian rhythms are normal biological rhythms that govern such functions as sleeping and waking, body temperature, and oxygen consumption. Circadian rhythms affect hormonal levels and have significant effects on both emotional and physical well-being (Diane 3)”. In the drama, Willy usually sees illusions of his brother after something bad happens such as getting fired or something good happens like making up after an argument with Biff. This shows that Willy's illusions are caused subconsciously. To figure out why Willy has these onsets, one can assume that in his past, Willy has had many problems before. These emotional shifts caused him to develop this disorder. However, one can infer that his attachment to the American Dream is another reason he hallucinates. This is due to the fact that his hallucinations are all of his dead brother, Ben, a motif Miller uses to represent success and the American Dream.

In his play, Miller uses Ben as a motif for success and the American Dream and establishes him as Willy's idol. One obvious reason is that Willy admires Ben's wealth. In the drama, when Willy gets fired and starts to dream of Ben, he says, “Oh, Ben, how did you do it?

What is the answer? Did you wind up the Alaska deal already?" (1273). Here Willy hallucinates and asks his brother how he became rich, implying that Willy associates his brother with wealth. Willy's association of Ben and wealth comes from the fact that Ben seems successful. Another reason Ben represents success and the American Dream can be seen when Ben fights Biff in the past. When Ben beats Biff, Ben says "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out the jungle that way" (1255). This quote implies that Ben cheated to achieve his wealth. This relates to the American Dream because as shown by the fate of Willy, the American Dream cannot be obtained by conventional means. The American Dream requires one to cheat like Howard, who only became the boss of his firm due to his father's death. Unlike him, Willy doesn't have any privilege, so the American Dream is out of his reach. Finally, in the end of the drama, Willy decides to commit suicide to follow Ben, showing how much Willy admires his brother. Before Willy kills himself, the following occurs in his mind:

BEN: It's dark there, but full of diamonds.

WILLY: Can you imagine that magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his[Biff's] pocket? (1300).

This quote shows the hallucination tempting Willy to suicide to give the family the insurance money and reiterates Willy's dedication toward achieving the American dream, even if he has to die. Miller tries to make it look like Willy is following Ben to symbolize Willy's pursuit of the American Dream. To end, Miller uses Ben to represent the success Willy wants to achieve, which would kill him in the end of the drama. But many other factors besides his brother led to this climatic moment.

Willy faces many conflicts with other characters before arriving to the decision to kill himself. These interactions continue to reveal Willy's personality and exposes the flaws of the American Dream To begin, Biff and Willy had conflicting opinions about work. In the beginning of the drama, Willy complained "How can he[Biff] find himself on a farm? Is that a life? A farmhand? In the beginning, when he was young, I thought, well, a young man, it's good for him to tramp around, take a lot of different jobs. But it's more than ten years now and he has yet to make thirty-five dollars a week!"(1237). The audience sees Willy's rejection for Biff's low pay and career plan. Biff's resistance toward the dream Willy is trying to project onto him shows that the American Dream is not a one size fits all dream. Looking at this situation in the beginning, one might question why Biff and Willy don't easily connect. This is all due the event that occurred when Biff went to request his father, who was at a hotel in Boston, to convince his math teacher to pass him in math. The critical moment of this scene occurs where the drama says, "Willy looks at Biff, who is staring open-mouthed and horrified at The Woman" (1291). To clarify, Biff catches Willy having an affair with another woman. This affair would lead Biff to not go to university and live his life of thievery, which further severs his bonds with his father. This event also reveals Willy's lack of commitment toward his marriage. According to the article, "The Science of a Happy Marriage", "The more committed you are,... the less attractive you find other people who threaten your relationship." "(Parker-Pope 1). So one can conclude the inverse (the less committed one is to a marriage, the more attractive one finds other people who will threaten one's relationship) is true. Applying this to Willy, Willy may be more committed to other goals besides his marriage. For instance, he may be more interested in pursuing the American Dream or having as many consumer products as possible. After his

pursuit of his dream is stopped when he is fired, he meets up with Biff at the restaurant, where he gets extremely disappointed upon hearing that Biff failed his interview. At first, he expected good news from Biff. Willy admits to his sons by saying, “I was fired, and I'm looking for a little good news to tell your mother, because the woman has waited and the woman has suffered. The gist of it is that I haven't got a story left in my head, Biff. So don't give me a lecture about facts and aspects. I am not interested. Now what've you got to say to me?”(1285). Willy expected Biff to have good news , but upon getting hints alluding to bad news, he starts hallucinating chaotically. This can be seen in the following scene:

BIFF: I never intended to do it, Dad!

OPERATOR'S VOICE: Standish Arms, good evening!

WILLY: *(shouting)* I'm not in my room!

BIFF: *(frightened)* Dad, what's the matter? *(He and Happy stand up.)*

OPERATOR: Ringing Mr. Loman for you!

WILLY: I'm not there, stop it!

BIFF: *(horrificed gets down on one knee before Willy)* Dad, I'll make good, I'll make good. *(Willy tries to get to his feet. Biff holds him down.)* Sit down now.

WILLY: No, you're no good , you're no good for anything.

BIFF: I am, Dad, I'll find something else, you understand? Now don't worry about anything. *(He holds up Willy's face.)* Talk to me, Dad.

OPERATOR: Mr. Loman does not answer. Shall I page him?

WILLY: (*attempting to stand, as though to rush and silence the Operator*) No , no, no!

In this scene, Biff sees Willy experiencing a chaotic breakdown due to the bad news. One can conclude that Willy is more attached to fantasy than to reality. If reality doesn't go his way, he doesn't accept it. Fortunately, Biff takes this opportunity to enlighten his dad about the truth of the American Dream and how much he loves him. He says, “Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?(1299)”. Biff tries to convince Willy to stop believing in the American Dream. Willy seems touched because he says “Isn't that remarkable? Biff--he likes me!” (1299). This resolve provides a transition to his suicide, which is intended for Biff. According to the hallucination, “[In response to Willy's complement of Biff] Yes, outstanding, with twenty thousand behind him[Biff]” (1299). So at the end of the drama, the conflicts between Biff and Willy subsided mostly in Biff's favor, but leads to Willy's sacrifice for him. These conflicts expressed the playwright's beliefs about the American Dream and how it toys with people.

To sum it up, the drama, *Death of a Salesman* , exposes the flaws of the American Dream during the postwar era by using Willy as a victim of its trickery. Understanding Willy as a character allows one to understand Miller's viewpoint on the American Dream, progression, and society at the era. In my opinion, the play provides the message that humans are more idealist than realist and this message still applies today. Miller's tendency to allow Willy to relive past events to escape from reality shows that people would rather live in dreams and fantasize in the past. I believe this message still applies today because children are taught to dream about their

goals in elementary and middle schools, but are not allowed to be given an opportunity to work ahead toward that goal until high school, where they struggle to adapt to the rapidly changing environment. Struggles that fail lead to either suicide, like Willy, or a life of crime, like Biff. To summarize, this play's message resonates in today's society as more and more people follow Willy's footsteps toward doom.

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