

Ethical issues in "death of a salesman"



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Undoubtedly, Volker Schlöndorff's (1985) film "Death of a Salesman" is not only a stinging critique on the concept of success in American society but is also a sad reminder of how some people will conveniently shed off their moral and ethical principles in the desperate attempt to fulfill their dreams and ambitions. Adapted from Arthur Miller's (1949) classic play of the same name, the movie shows the story of travelling salesman Willy Loman (Dustin Hoffman) who appears to have come to the end of his career only to realize his failure at achieving both his dreams of success and of a healthy family life.

Instead, he is driven to confront the phantoms of his past, such as his dalliances with other women and having to live in the shadow of his wealthy brother Ben (Louis Zorich). At the same time, Loman is also forced to deal with the consequences of his actions and decisions as reflected in the characters of his sons Biff (John Malkovich) and Happy (Stephen Lang). The most interesting aspect in Loman's narrative, however, is the fact that the pitiful state of his and his family's life result as complications from the skewed ethical beliefs and flawed nature of each character, including Loman's own.

Arguably, the film illustrates a number of ethical issues as exemplified in Loman's life and in his relationships with other people such as his employer, family, and friends. Among the central ethical problems explored in the movie is the lack of character value according to virtue-based ethical theories. Accordingly, Loman's depression is shown to be resulting from his obsession with getting rich that reflects a greedy and envious character.

Loman's envy therefore leads to his condoning and even encouraging his sons to commit anti-social acts such as stealing.

Aside from this, one of Loman's greatest faults is his pride, which prevents him from accepting a generous job offer from his neighbor Charley (Charles Durning) although he badly needs employment. However, it is not only Loman who is shown to be suffering from character flaws which could be considered vices. His wife Linda and son Happy's greatest fault is also pride, which prevents them from acknowledging Loman's failure and encourages them to lie not only to Loman but also to themselves about the reality of their lives.

For instance, Linda constantly attempts to make excuses about Loman and their children's mistakes and in the process deludes herself and her children into believing that their family is intact and ideal. Loman's illusion therefore feeds itself upon the collective denials made by the family and reinforced by his own feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. Another central issue that is apparent in the movie is the conflict between the notions of duty and rights between individuals.

For instance, the behavior of Loman's employer Howard Wagner (Jon Polito), who fires him after he asks to be reassigned, infringes on Loman's right as an employee to job security and fair treatment. Wagner's action also systematically denies the company's obligation to Loman as its employee despite the latter's loyalty to the company. Loman's termination was clearly unfair as there was no sufficient ground to fire him.

In terminating Loman, the company failed to recognize his contribution to its success through years spent in service. In the same manner, the film also establishes how the relationships between individuals are affected as a consequence of the inability to follow the ethical rules of rights and responsibilities. Loman's adultery, for instance, is a violation of his obligation to remain faithful to his wife and at the same time a violation of his wife's right to an honest relationship.

His indiscretions therefore shatter his son Biff's parental respect when Biff chances upon his father with another woman in a motel room. Likewise, Loman's concept of parental obligation, and favoritism of Biff, interfered with Biff's right to decide for himself while depriving Happy of his need for fatherly attention and emotional support. This results in friction between the father-son relationships as Willy constantly attempts to impose his ambitions and dreams on his sons.

The main ethical issue that is pointed out in the story, however, is the unacceptability even of behaviors that seemingly result in beneficial conditions for the majority. This is illustrated in Loman's justification of suicide, wherein he kills himself to ensure his son Biff's prospects through an insurance claim that will be facilitated in his death. Loman's death also results in the payment of their house mortgage, which appears to be a positive outcome of his suicide.

However, it is in taking his own life that Loman commits the biggest and most ethical violation as his insurance expectations compels him to literally and figuratively "sell" his life in order to secure his family's future. Loman's

tragic ending not only reflects his inability to make decisions based on ethical considerations but the faulty value system in a society that puts premium on and measures human beings based on their financial success that pressures individuals like Loman to consider suicide as a correct choice.

Thus, it is in framing the complex interactions between the ethical choices, values, and decisions of individuals that the film succeeds in commenting on contemporary society's notion of success. The movie therefore argues that it is these dreams of financial and economic stability that drive individuals to lose their moral and ethical sense. Consequently, the loss of ethical principles also entails the tragic loss in the meaning and value of life itself.