

Sonsdeath will bring
his downfall upon
himself



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sonsdeath of a SalesmanWilly's Tragic Flaw and the Effect it Has Upon his SonsDeath of a Salesman by Arthur Miller concerns itself with the fall of a simple man perpetually in a steadfast state regarding his own failure in a success-driven society. The protagonist of the play, Willy Loman, will follow a tragic trajectory that will eventually lead to his suicide. Arthur Miller's tragic play is an accurate portrayal of the typical American myth that sustains an extreme craving for success and a belief in the illusion of the American dream, a dream attainable only by a handful of people.

Having chosen a career in sales Willy Loman constantly aspires to become ' great'. Nevertheless, Willy is a poor aging salesman that considers himself to be a failure when comparing himself to his successful father and brother, but he is incapable of consciously admitting it. Consequently, Willy will measure his level of success with the level of success attained by his offspring, particularly his eldest son Biff. Their difficult relationship contribute to the play's main plot. Willy unfolds his deluded perception and recollection of the events as the audience gradually witnesses the tragic downfall of a man shadowed by a mental illness that has already begun to take it's toll on his mind and personality. Willy Loman will bring his downfall upon himself as he entices his own disillusions and the bedrock of his values pertaining to success and how one can achieve it. His failure to recognize the fruitless outcome of his own idealism will seal his fated suicide and have a determining effect on the failures of his two sons that when adolescent, idolized their father as a guide and model.

This misguidance delivered so boldly by their father will lead both sons into believing and adopting Willy's unrealistic and disillusioned perceptions of life.

Although Willy is in reality an unsuccessful salesman he continually speaks of himself and of his two sons in his brash ways, as being part of those whom have affluence and destitution, those whom can become great leaders in the world. Linda, Willy's wife, honourably stands by him even as he start to slowly degenerate into illusion that he cannot differentiate from reality anymore. To some extent Linda is not part of the solution but rather part of the problem with the family's inability to face reality. Linda loves Willy to the extent of accepting her husband's distorted views of reality and falling herself in his world of dreams and aspirations. In doing so, she is telling her sons without a word that their father's destructive direction in life is perfectly viable. Linda also vocalises the main conflict between Biff and his father at the very beginning of the play; " You know how he admires you.

I think if he finds himself, then you'll both be happier and fight no more."(p. 15) This statement implies the level of control Willy wishes to have on his sons, particularly Biff, as well as his unrealistically high expectations towards them; " God Almighty, he'll be great yet. A star like that, magnificent, can never really fade away."(p. 68). However, Biff being a failure ever since he dropped out of school will desperately try to achieve a better knowledge of himself instead of one filtered by his father.

In the end, although the dept of Willy's strive for success sustains a refusal to acknowledge the failure of both himself and his sons, his eldest son Biff will save himself of the alienation of the social forces that destroyed his father, while his younger brother will succumb to his father's tantalizing dream by pledging to achieve where his father has not. Throughout his son's adolescence Willy has unwittingly instilled in them the belief that

appearances are more important than actual achievement or talent, contrasting his athletic and handsome sons with the hardworking yet uncharismatic Bernard: "That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because 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,"(p. 33) Willy values personality over any measurable barometer of achievement, which he dismisses as unimportant in the business world. Ironically, Willy himself fails following his own advice when in the end, he is fired by a man with whom he entertained a life-long relationship. The contrast that Willy makes is between men who are 'liked' and those who are 'well-liked', believing that to be 'well-liked', as defined by charisma and physical appearance, is the major criterion for success. This tragic error will largely contribute to his downfall.. Thus, his sons, particularly Biff, loose interest for academics, valuing athletic achievement instead of their studies.

Happy continually brags that he is losing weight, while Biff, ready to go to college on an athletic scholarship, shows enough disregard for his studies to fail math. Biff's reckless behaviour as an adolescent is addressed by denial from his father that sustains that his son is vowed to a successful life in business. Biff's non reprimanded mistakes as a teenager will foreshadow his later troubles as an adult. As an adolescent he steals from the locker room without reprimand from his father the same way he steals from Bill Oliver as an adult.

This reinforces the values that Willy has instilled in his sons. In the second flashback of the play presenting Biff and Happy together, Happy brags about losing weight again, showing his focus on physical appearance and athleticism, while Biff steals from the nearby construction site. For Willy, this crime is not important.

This demonstrates the insufficiencies of Willy's views on success: he attributes success to luck or immorality and cannot see the virtues of hard work and discipline as shown by Charley and Bernard. Although the American dream that he pursues prescribes hard work to achieve financial success, Willy cannot conceive that hard work and dedication are critical for achieving it. Although Willy does not speak directly to Happy or Biff on how to treat woman, his behaviour will determine Happy's relationship with woman.

Miller indicates that it is from his father that Happy gained his disrespect for women, whom Willy believes should not be taken seriously: " Because a girl, y'know, they always believe what you tell'em..."(p. 27) He displays the same disregard for women that Happy demonstrates as an adult. Happy disregards women with whom he has insubstantial relationships and Willy cheats on the devoted Linda. Hence, Willy's womanizer behaviour on the road will determine Happy's character flaws that gears him towards trouble. Like his father he is a compulsive womanizer, who tells lies to the women he meets. For example, when both sons are at the restaurant waiting for their father, Happy claims that Biff is a professional athlete, to finally forget about his father in favour of seducing Miss Forsythe. In the final, most cruel move that Happy makes, he denies that Willy is his father, thus repudiating his father

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even more than Biff has done by fleeing the Loman house to live a life marked by crime and virtually no gainful employment. Thus, Biff does little out of calculation, but merely continues his pattern of foolish mistakes.

While Biff may have started to fail in order to spite his father, by the time he becomes an adult, his self-destructive behaviour is ingrained. As adults, even though Happy persistently follows his father's footsteps, failing to discern the fine line between Willy's illusions of reality and reality itself, Biff succeeds in breaking the vicious circle of illusion. One can pinpoint a turning point in Biff and Willy's relationship. Biff never wanted to go to summer school and thus graduate high school after visiting his father in New England. In a way, Willy is directly responsible for Biff's failures. Biff's self-destructive behaviour seemingly emerges from a sentiment of spite towards his father.

Willy's hallucination about Young Biff failing math and visiting him in Boston gives a greater indication for the reason why Biff accumulated such animosity towards his father. The profound deception Biff feels towards his father whom he idolized seemingly provides the motivation for Biff's spiteful, self-destructive behaviour. Biff's refusal to take a summer school course and thus pass math, is the critical event that determined his successive failures. It is Willy's infidelity that prompted the change in Biff, as he learned that his father was having an affair. Hence, this revelation for Biff triggers a new sense of perceptiveness and critical awareness towards the image that his father is desperately attempting to uphold.

Willy has in fact carelessly deceived those around him by creating a tantalizing image of himself and thus reflecting it upon his sons that he feels

are breaded from the greatness he attributes himself. The realization or acknowledgement by Biff of his father's falsehood will have a determining impact on the outcome of his life. Several years later, when Biff realizes the full extent of his father's failure and attempts to escape it by the means of suicide, he will fully recognize the amplitude and consequences of his father's disillusion. Biff will therefore confront his father with his long acquired knowledge of himself and acceptance of his own simple mediocrity. Witnessing the despair of his father, a man that in the end, only wishes to die instead of acknowledging his own mistakes, makes Biff change his outlook upon himself, revealing a much truer image, an image undistorted by his father's disillusion; " Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!"(p. 132). However, his father chooses to believe in the tangled lie he has constructed for himself and his family. As Biff pleads his father to " take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?."(p. 133), Willy is deaf to his sons cries until the end; " That boy-that boy is going to be magnificent" (p. 133)The requiem of the play, or the cemetery seen, tells us a lot about how both sons have dealt with their father's fatal flaw.

Happy and Biff interpret Willy's suicide in terms of these business dreams: Happy wishes to stay in the city and succeed where his father failed, while Biff rejects the business dream that destroyed his father and plans to leave New York. Happy decides to follow his father's footsteps having blinded himself, just as his father did, from reality. As he state it himself " I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain.

He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have-to come out number-one man.(...) I'm gonna win for him" (p.

138-139). He thus reinstates that Willy's dream is realistic and attainable. Biff on the other hand, has a firm grasp on reality, and chooses not to make the same mistakes his father made: " He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong."(p. 138). The contrast between Happy and Biff definitely re-emphasises an ongoing gap between reality and illusion throughout the entire play, and brings about a better understanding of the depth of Willy Loman's tragic flaw. Hence, this strive for success as defined by the American dream has only room for a few men.

An impossible dream for the average man that Happy will never attain, a dream rejected by Biff that finally searches within himself for happiness rather than in the eyes of the one that beholds this fallacious dream, his father. Bibliography: