

Symbolism in death of a salesman essay

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“Death of a Salesman” is a play written in 1949 by an American playwright, Arthur Miller. The play is based on both Miller’s personal experiences and the theatrical traditions in which he was instructed in. “Death of a salesman” revolves around the Loman family with Willy Loman, the father, who also works as a salesman as the main character.

Willy Loman has indulged himself in a myth of being well-liked and being attractive to succeed in the business world. He believes that personal talent is not as important and actually uses this myth against his neighbors and friends, Charley and Bernard, who he does not consider to be physically attractive.

Due to this belief implanted in them, the Lomans lead an unpleasant and unfulfilled life while their neighbors enjoyed success. Willy is also in a delusional mental state and is caught in between the past and the present in which he keeps having hallucinations and reveries.

He lives in a flimsy fantasy world which is full of excuses and daydreams as he desperately attempts to make sense of himself, his hopes and the world that once held so much promise.

In the play, Miller uses different styles and devices to bring out Willy’s situation, and what it is all about and symbolism is one of these styles. Here is an analysis of symbolism in the play: Willy Loman’s character, including his salesman career, symbolizes an ordinary man in American society.

He acts as a representation of the ordinary man leading a fruitless life in a flourishing nation. Somehow, Willy reflects the dilemma of the common man

fighting for his survival and trying to pay his bills yet live like everyone else. This is mainly observed when he is caught in a dilemma on how to pay his last mortgage payment.

Besides, Charley, his neighbor constantly gives him money to take home to his wife as if it was his salary as his salesman job is fluttering around him and he does not earn enough from it.

In one of their conversations, he even tells Charley that a gentleman is valuable more when he is departed than when he is living. It's ironical that in the end, he commits suicide so that his family can get his life insurance money to pay for the mortgage.

Contrary, Charley's character symbolizes the voice of reason in Willy's deluded world. Charley who is Willy's neighbor and only friend is a successful man with his own sales business. He tries to offer Willy a job several times and even after Willy is fired, but Willy turns down the offers as he regards it as an insult to his image. However, Charley is only trying to help him out, but Willy couldn't appreciate that.

In one of the scenes, Charley is present during one of Willy's daydream and as he tries to talk to him convincingly, but instead Willy yells back at him. This confuses Charley, and he decides to leave him alone as he does not understand what is going on. Apart from his family, only Charley and Bernard, his son, attend Willy's funeral.

In the play, leaves are often seen to appear around the present setting during Willy's reveries. These leaves are a representation of the leaves from

the two elm trees which were situated next to the house in the early days. This was before Willy cut them down to build a hammock for him to relax with his family.

The trees were also cut down to pave the way for the development of the apartment blocks around their neighborhood. When Willy first moved into the neighborhood, the air was clean and fresh and the atmosphere, serene and quiet. However, in the present day, development and construction of new apartments have taken over, and the atmosphere is no longer the same, it been over-exploited and polluted.

In parts of the flashbacks, Biff and Happy are dressed in high school football sweaters. This is a symbol of the hope they had and the success that seemed so close during that time. Biff was the star of his high school football team and was even invited to attend three universities during his senior year.

Bernard even begs Biff if he could carry his helmet as he goes for the Ebbets Field game in his senior year. (Miller 165) notes that “ In the scene at Frank Chop’s house, Happy goes on to brag to the woman he’s flirting with that Biff is a quarterback with the New York Giants, which is a lie.”

The jungle, which is constantly mentioned in connection to Ben, is symbolic of life. Willy even says “ The woods are burning! I can’t drive a car!” (as cited in Miller, 22) when he has a foreboding sense of his life crashing around him. Ben is Willy’s dead brother who had gone to Africa, discovered a diamond mine in the jungle and became very successful.

Ben says in the play “ When I was seventeen, I walked into the jungle. And by twenty-one, I walked out. And by God, I was rich!” (as cited in Miller, 49). He asked Willy to go with him at the time but he refused, and that became the cause for deep regret for the rest of his life.

In the same context, there is an appearance of diamonds which symbolize success. Willy idolizes Ben as he seems to be living the American dream while he is stuck in a rut he can’t pull himself out of. As the play comes to an end, Uncle Ben refers to the jungle by saying that “ You must go into the jungle and fetch a diamond out” (Miller 65). Willy keeps wishing that he had followed Ben to Alaska and then Africa, then he might have been just as rich.

Stockings are another form of symbolism depicted in the play. They symbolize Willy’s infidelity and his uncaring attitude towards his wife.

Willy gives the stockings that his wife mends, to his mistress as gifts. During one of his flashbacks, Willy hears “ The Woman’s” laughter and becomes agitated. He immediately gets angry and starts shouting at his wife, Linda, and Bernard. He even orders Linda to throw out the stockings and reprimands her for mending them.

His infidelity also costs him his relationship with his son when Biff accidentally found Willy with his mistress. Biff is dejected, and he loses all respect for his father. Consequently, the guilt Willy feels is the cause of his tense relations with Biff and his disconcerted behavior around his wife.

The recorder is another form of symbolism that is used in the play. When Willy goes to his boss, Howard Wagner, to try and get him to relocate him to

the New York office, Wagner does not give him time to talk. (Miller 45) Says that “ Instead, he interrupts him and makes him listen to his wife and kids on the wire recorder. This recorder and the voices in it symbolize the success that Willy has always dreamed of and wished he had.” In all his endeavors, this success seems to elude him even though he never gives up hope.

Willy goes on and tells Wagner that he would get a recorder as well, which is a symbol of his pride since there is no way he could afford to buy one. Eventually, his boss does not listen to him, turns down his plea and ends up firing him.

In the play, tennis rackets have also been used as a form of symbolism. They are a figure of Irony metaphor of Bernard’s success. Bernard is seen going to take part in tennis with an associate of his, who owns a tennis court. This symbolism is seen as ironic because a glimpse from the past projected that the Loman brothers would be the ones to be successful in the sports department.

From the first act, Bernard would continuously be seen trying to intervene in Biff’s academic life, which he did not seem bothered with as he was busy concentrating on his football vocation. In the end, due to neglecting his grades, Biff ends up losing football as well, whereas Bernard, who focused more on his books, becomes successful even in sports.

The flutes and flute music have been used to symbolize the far gone and good times when Willy was a stable person. They bring nostalgia and memories of the old times when he was younger and with great hope for

immense success in the business world, comes the future. For instance, in one of the scenes where Willy goes into a reverie, he is talking with his brother Ben about his father, who used to manufacture and sell flutes.

Ben brags about how their father was a great man and inventor, and it is obvious from this talk that Willy's father was just as successful as his brother is. Willy is therefore left wondering why the same fate did not befall him as he believes that his family is of a thriving heritage.

In the last Act, as the play is about to come to an end, Willy is seen planting seedlings in the garden. (Miller 47) notes that "The seeds symbolize a natural process of growth that prevails in nature and the garden is symbolic of Willy wanting to leave something as a commemoration of him." He hopes to leave something that people will look at and be reminded of him as a great man.

He plants the seeds in the hope that the garden will one day grow into something substantial enough in contrast to his life which he considers a failure.

As he plants the seeds, he has a conversation with Ben about a \$20, 000 deal that would give Biff a good startup boost in his life and his business. In the end, this deal he is talking about ends up being his life insurance.

In conclusion, Miller uses symbolism in the play to bring out the hopelessness in the Loman's family. Through this, the audience can empathize with them and their situation. It becomes evident how the 'American dream' myth can adversely affect a person as they try to pursue it.

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. Oxford, UK: Penguin Classic, 1998. Print.