

Father-son relationship

Literature, Russian Literature



In many literary works, family relationships are the key to the plot. Through a family's interaction with one another, the reader is able to decipher the conflicts of the story. Within a literary family, various characters play different roles in each other's lives. These are usually people that are emotionally and physically connected in one way or another. They can be brother and sister, mother and daughter, or in this case, father and son. In the Arthur Miller's novel, *Death of A Salesman*, the interaction between Willy Loman and his sons, Happy and Biff, allows Miller to comment on father-son relationships and the conflicts that arise from them. During most father-son relationships, there are certain times where the father wants to become more of a "player" in his son's life than his son believes is necessary. The reasons for this are numerous and can be demonstrated in different ways. Miller is able to give an example of this behavior through the actions of Willy Loman. When Biff comes home to recollect himself, Willy perceives it as failure. Since Willy desperately wants his oldest son, Biff, to succeed in every way possible, he tries to take matters into his own hands. "I'll get him a job selling. He could be big in no time" (16). The reason that Biff came home is to find out what he wants in life. Because Willy gets in the way, matters become more complicated. Partly due to Willy's persistence in Biff's life, they have conflicting ideas as to what the American dream is. Willy believes that working on the road by selling is the greatest job a man could have (81). Biff, however, feels the most inspiring job a man could have is working outdoors (22). When their two dreams collide, it becomes frustrating to Willy because he believes that his way is the right way. If a father becomes too involved in his son's life, Miller believes friction will be the resultant factor. As

unfortunate as it is, there are many instances where a father favors one son over another, which leads to social conflicts within the less-favored son. In most cases it is the oldest son that is being favored while the younger son is ignored. Usually the father doesn't even realize what is happening. He simply gets too caught up in the successes of his eldest son and he may even try to live out his life through his son's experiences. Because Willy has dreams of grandeur for Biff, Miller subtly shows how Happy is overlooked. Throughout the novel, Willy makes references to how wonderful Biff is. ". . . You got greatness in you, Biff. . . You got all kinds of greatness" (67). Happy, however, is barely talked to. This kind of favoritism has a profound effect on a child. In order to be acknowledged by his father, Happy believes that he must become Willy's version of a success by acquiring wealth and being popular. He convinces himself that this is the only way he'll ever be truly happy. In the end though, he realizes that he is not happy. ". . . It's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I'm lonely" (23). Happy has been living his entire life in a way that he believes will bring him attention from his father, yet he becomes more miserable than if he had gone his own way. When a father chooses to look favorably upon one son over another, disharmony occurs in the father-son relationship as well as in the son's life. Within a father-son relationship, it is the responsibility of the father to provide sound values and leadership for his sons. In almost every family, the sons will look to their father as a role model and a hero. It is in the father's best interest to use this opportunity to instill qualities that will allow his sons to become responsible individuals. Miller uses the Loman family to show how a father acts when he is more

concerned with appearance than anything else. Willy is obsessed with popularity. He believes that if a person is popular, he has everything. Since Willy was never popular himself, he adores the fact that his sons, and Biff in particular, are. In a sense, Willy idolizes his children more than they idolize him. Because Willy sees that his boys have attained what he deems as important, he forgets to teach them moral values. When Biff steals the football from school, Willy rationalizes the theft, saying that it is alright because he is popular (30). Willy also doesn't take any stock in education. When Bernard chastises Biff for not studying, Willy tries to justify it by saying that a person doesn't need intelligence in the real world if he has good looks. " Bernard can get the best marks in school, . . . but when he gets out into the business world . . . you are going to be five times ahead of him. . . . The man who makes an appearance in the business world . . . is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want" (33). Because Willy's sole belief is that a person should be popular, his sons never learn any genuine values. Miller attempts to show the conflicts that occur as a result of a father not teaching his sons any morals. Willy ingrains in Biff's head that a person can do anything as long as they are popular. Because of this belief, Biff develops an addiction to stealing. The reason he lost his job with Oliver was because he stole basketballs from him. He has trouble all his life because he steals. " I stole myself out of every good job since high school" (131). It is this reason that has caused all his problems with Willy, and Willy is to blame because he never told him differently. Happy also has a sour relationship with Willy because of the lack of values he has. Willy always tells them that being popular is the best quality to have. Happy meets some women at the

restaurant where he and Biff are supposed to meet Willy. When Willy starts to fall apart on them, Happy tries to ignore him so that he won't look bad in front of the women. " No, that's not my father. He's just a guy" (115). Willy never instills family pride in them. It is this reason that a gap exists in their relationship with him. Arthur Miller's ability to have characters interact with one another allows him to comment on father-son relationships and the conflicts involved. A father is the most important thing a boy can have in his life. They relate to one another on a level that cannot be achieved through a mother-son relationship. It is important to have communication in the relationship because talking brings the two closer. A father, though, needs to know when to play an active role in his son's life, and when to be more of an observer. If he mixes the two up, serious repercussions may occur. A father can be the best thing in his son's life, but he needs to care for the right.