

Is biff the true hero of death of a salesman essay sample

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The post war play *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller could be viewed as a contemporary democratic tragedy. The play depicted over two Acts and *Requiem*, takes the audience on an emotional journey of a confused and 'lost' lo-man on the tragic road to suicide. Willy Loman battles with the reality and imagery of the Capitalist American Dream. To be named a tragedy it is important to look at what is meant by 'a tragedy' and then to analyse if the play fits into this category.

I will look at the different characters to analyse Miller's tragic hero 'Willy' and then look to see if Biff, Willy's eldest son is the true hero of *Death of a Salesman*. The definition of tragedy has changed over the course of time with its origins dating back as far as 350BC, when the Greek philosopher Aristotle introduced the concept of hubris, or a man's arrogance and hamartia, a man's fatal flaw.

A tragic hero in the traditional Greek sense is where a king or noble man ultimately dies after making a wrong choice because of his fatal flaw and thus the tragic death of the hero affects not only the noble man, but his people and society too. Shakespeare continued this powerful use of tragedy in his plays such as *King Lear* and *Macbeth* and Miller, although a great fan of these tragedies decided to adapt a new conception, closely linked to its Greek origin in theatre, but with a modern twist that would reach out to his modern day audience.

Miller states "It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time—the heart and spirit of the average man" (the literary link).

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com 30. 01. 12). The tragic hero created for the play is not a king or noble man, but a common man, a low man, reflecting the change of time since the tragedies named by Aristotle and Shakespeare. To Willy Loman's family he was a noble man working hard to achieve success for their family name.

It is his family who are the ones deeply affected by his fatal flaw and his consequential death. Miller reminds us of the close link to the traditional Greek tragedy where Willy Loman is referred to as a prince by his son Biff: "you've just seen a prince walk by. A fine troubled prince. A hard-working unappreciated prince" (Miller, pg 86). Miller sends a message that the modern tragic hero is of great importance, similar to that of a noble man and not to be ignored.

This is cleverly worked to the heartstrings of the audience when Linda, Willy's wife desperately pleads to her boys "He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person". (Pg 38) Willy Loman the main character of the play is a man loyal to the American Dream, a dream that was portrayed to so many Americans by echoing voices of legends such as Benjamin Franklin: "The way to wealth was industry" (Allan. 011. Pg72).

This perception of the American Dream was also influenced by novelists such as Horatio Alger, whom gave the impression that, working hard and being 'well liked' was enough to bring any man success. This ever egocentric

pressure upon the American man was portrayed through Miller's tragic hero Willy, a character that we see has suffered abandonment from his father at the age of three and later by his brother as he was courageous and became a success by 'walking into the jungle'.

This abandonment creates a lonely void in Willy's life where he searches for ways to be loved. We see that Willy's American Dream is fundamentally ignited when he meets Dave Singleman, "cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people?" (pg58). Willy then perceives that this love and admiration of so many, is the total accomplishment of the American Dream.

Willy is unable to grasp the reality of the importance of the love he receives from his family. It is incongruous that Willy does not see the reality of loneliness in Singleman's name, the message that Miller tries to portray that at the age of eighty-four a man had to live in hotels, selling his soul, alone and for what? Ultimately it was this false dream of success and desperate need to be liked that was Willy's fatal flaw, the flaw that led him to fail his family and which led to the Death of a Salesman. Willy becomes trapped by his dream working hard all his life to be liked.

His 'best' year was 1928, an autobiographical reflection of a man (Miller) that was affected by the Great Depression of 1930. Miller portrays the psychological and chaotic roller-coaster of Willy Loman's mind with the use

of realism and expressionism, two completely different dramatic art forms. The pain of reality and facing up to the truth that Willy has not made it as a successful salesman is portrayed in scenes of the present day, through glum staging of the house: "towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides" (pg 1) .

The setting is confined and Miller's use of realistic drama and tense emotion in Willy's angry dialogue is seen frequently directed towards Willy's first born son Biff, "Not finding yourself at the age of thirty-four is a disgrace!" (pg5). This shows the realism that the American Dream has taken over Willy Loman's every reasonable thought and the pressure of his dream is put on the shoulders of all his family too.

We can see early on in the play a sadness in Biff, Willy's first born, due to his father mocking him and a sense that Biff holds something painful, and although there is a desire in Biff to please his father, it seems that Biff is locked in emotional dissonance as he battles with his desire to work in the great outdoors of the west, to use his muscles and live the Spiritual American Dream where new beginnings were possible.

Yet Biff's loyalty towards his family and the promise foretold by his father of easy success in business coming from being 'well liked', means that Biff is drawn back to the claustrophobic and competitive city of New York, a place that Biff comes to recognise as the metropolises of competitive commerce, a place that traps him from leaving to venture on the road of self discovery and of self worth.

Willy expects his sons to follow in his dream of achieving material success and recognition from those in the business world, yet Willy has a buried guilt that Biff has abandoned that dream with the knowledge of his affair in Boston. The pain that Willy tries to forget, the realism of his failings, can no longer be buried and he cannot pretend anymore to be a successful, well liked salesman.

Miller uses the stockings as a symbol of Willy's guilt for the affair he had, whenever he sees Linda his wife mending her stockings, he reverts to remembering the 'woman' and the dialogue towards Linda is very real and harsh " I won't have you mending stockings in this house! Now throw them out! " (pg25). The pressures Willy has put on himself to conform to something he is not, have led to his gradual breakdown and therefore Howard Wagner, the junior of the Wagner Company that Willy has loyally worked for, for 36 years can no longer offer him a position in the company and therefore has to 'sack' Willy.

Quite ironic as Howard is a man much like Willy, in his way of thinking ultimately for his business and for his family, a man whom obeys the American Capitalist Dream. Miller allows Willy to escape from the harsh reality of his failings with the use of expressionism through subjective memories of his past, initially as happy memories and unknown to the audience if reliable or if they have been distorted by Willy, to give comfort to him for his flaw in his dedication to the wrong American Dream.

Laughter from Willy is used throughout the play in memorable scenes, initially focusing on the possibilities and hope of Biff becoming a success for being well liked, and due to his sporting abilities, an undercurrent of the pressure Willy puts on Biff to succeed in the dream that he knows deep down he is not capable of achieving himself. The use of bright and open stage settings of the house show the audience that Willy is escaping through a good memory, an expressionism of his psychological vision of the world, that he has convinced himself and his family that is the true success of being an admirable American.

As the play goes on Willy can no longer escape into the good memories of his past and the reality of his failings creep into the present. Perhaps this is the reason why Willy conjures up a relationship with his older, dead brother Ben. It seems as though Willy has only one true memory of his brother visiting him after becoming a success from walking out of the jungle 'rich', and where we see Linda, threatened by Ben's adventurous and boisterous 'boxing' ways, reinforce the greatness of being a salesman to Willy, locking him into his fatal career.

This relationship with Ben is reinforcement of Willy's unstable mind and of the escapism used to justify his judgement, a subjective way that gives reason to his thinking that suicide and freeing his insurance money to Biff is a clever answer to achieving his materialistic American Dream. There are many tragedies we see in Willy Loman such as his incapacity to recognise the genuine love and acceptance that his family offer him and his unawareness that by his family he is 'well liked'.

Instead he seeks a love and recognition from buyers and people of the business world in an attempt to succeed in the American Capitalist Dream. Willy's desperate need to be recognised as a successful salesman means he neglects his family, the ones that truly recognise his qualities such as his ability to work with his hands and the underlying loyalty that to them he is a hero for fighting so hard for what he believes in.

Fallen foul of his dream and unable to recognise the economic turn of the great depression Willy is a man overworked, unsuccessful and unwilling to recognise and own up to his failings. It is ironic that Willy still has faith in his dream, even at the end of the play after Biff shows that he loves him and tries to set him free from the burden of the American Dream. Willy is blinded and thinks that Biff will worship him once he is dead and receives the insurance payout, and in his disillusioned state, seeks approval from his guardian... is 'dead' brother Ben.

Willy has it in his mind that many would turn up to his funeral continuing his unrealistic thinking that success is to be loved by the many, but it is just his true loved ones that turn up his family and his neighbours, the people, Willy unfortunately was unable to recognise as the most important people in his life. An irony is emphasised in Willy's death in that it could be said that Willy had achieved the American materialistic Dream, as he and Linda had finally paid off the mortgage on the house to own it for themselves.

Here the audience feel the pain of the tragedy as Linda's words echo at the requiem " We're free... We're free... We're free" (pg108). Willy's fatal flaw,

his belief and dedication to the American Dream, not only leads to the death of Willy, but has consequences on everyone in his family. For Biff he does not work hard at school as his father foretold that to succeed you did not have to work hard, also emphasising on the notion that being 'well liked' could lead to success and true accomplishment in life.

We see through Willy's memories that he was a man full of big words and promises to his sons, often putting down the people close to him such as his neighbour Charley and son Bernard, almost laughing at their dedication to hard work and at the same time referring to his son's as if they were like Greek gods " Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises" (pg 20).

Willy's inability to act as a good true role model to his sons also leads to the human flaw in Biff as he was almost encouraged as a boy to steal, when Willy reminiscing in his memory of talking to Ben states " You shoulda seen the lumber they brought home last week. At least a dozen six-by-tens worth all kinds a money. " (pg34). This flaw whereby Biff steals becomes his unknown escapism from the materialistic American Dream. Eventually after realising he has stole his way out of every job in his life, after trying to succumb to the expectations of his father; it is this flaw of stealing that becomes his saviour.

Biff is emotionally torn by the harsh reality of his father's breakdown. In his final and desperate stand to conform to his father's dream, Biff steals a pen

from Bill Oliver's office. Biff has an epiphany, a moment of true clarity for the first time in his life, as he runs down the stairs from Bill Oliver's office with a pen in his hand, " I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been. " (pg78). Biff realises everything he has been trying to concede to, to please those dear to him, has been a total lie.

Biff realises that he is NOT a salesman and that the Loman family are just ordinary men, " I'm a dime a dozen" (pg 102). Men that could be happy if they were just honest about who they were accepted who they were, and who, if they used their true skills and clout, could work hard towards undeniable happiness, embracing their fertile skills in the free outdoors of the west. From the start we can see that the Loman family are locked down by Willy's interpretation of the American Dream, and yet there is a resistance we can see in his son's character Biff throughout the play.

Initially it would seem that this is just a resentment Biff has for his father after discovering that he was ' a phoney and a fake', when caught with the ' woman' in Boston. But later it seems that it will be the death of Willy's first born son to becoming a successful salesman, the end of Willy's true American Dream. Biff becomes the true hero of the play as he displays contemporary heroic qualities of owning up to the truth. The self awareness for his flaw's, and the empathetic forgiveness towards his father for embracing the wrong American Dream, allows Biff to forgive Willy for his failings upon the family.

Biff hopes that with this honesty it will set the whole family free. Biff's epiphany and liberation to conquer the greatness of the American Spiritual Dream of equity, is a strong message from Miller to his audience. Freedom is available to all men whom face up to their flaws, and whom are courageous like Biff. Millers message is that those who are honest and true to themselves, rather than succumbing to conformity from the pressures of society, are the ones who will reach true happiness and contentment, whereby their souls are set free to the spirit of enlightenment.

Death of a Salesman touches on contemporary struggles such as the unreasonable pressure to conform to material and social success. These issues would have been such that most working men and women could relate to at the time the play was produced. Miller a man personally affected by the promises of the capitalist American Dream saw that he could use his play to reach out to his audience as escapism from the realities and pressures of the capitalist world.

Miller also adapting the traditional sense of tragedy wanted his audience to learn a lesson, so he used his play to send out a message that people need to be honest with themselves and not be bound by the pressure of society. People must face up to their realities good or bad, so they can be free to live valued and happy lives. It is for this reason that we can look at Biff as the true hero of the play for his courage and understanding of his father's fatal flaw, thus allowing Biff and his audience to be free to embrace the endless opportunities of self discovery.