

Death of a salesmanquestions essay



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Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Salesman' is regarded as one of the greatest modern day tragedies, however it could be seen that the requiem reduces the overall effect of the tragedy as it breaks the typical conventions of a Shakespearean tragedy which lessens the audience's sympathy. The protagonist Willy Loman has based his entire life upon materialism, therefore sympathy is created when only his family attend his funeral as it highlights his lack of achievements.

Sympathy is also directed to less likely characters such as Happy who is fixated upon following his father's footsteps, and Linda who in particular is a vulnerable victim due to Willy's decisions, although now liberated, it also emphasises how desperately sad and alone she now is. Miller uses the requiem as a structural device to allow Willy's family to reflect upon his life and the external forces of society that they blame which provokes an understanding from the audience. On the other hand the requiem could be considered to be an anti-climax to the overall tragedy, as the protagonist's ignorance to others is highlighted which makes the audience see the tragedy as self-inflicted. However, Biff's realisation of his father's failure and extreme beliefs can be seen to create hope for the future characters. The other characters do discuss the external forces that are to blame for the tragedy, yet they are not as obsessed with the American Dream to the extent that Willy is which shows him as being a minority.

Willy has spent his life attempting to convince himself that he was successful and well liked. He has idolised the successful salesman Dave Singleman his entire life, and aspires to be like him and admires the greatness of his funeral, 'He died a death of a salesman... hundreds of salesmen and buyers

were at his funeral. [1]’ This shows that Willy sees popularity as a measure of success and that he hopes his own funeral will be similar.

Therefore the fact that only his family attend, highlights the reality of his failures. It concludes to the audience that he was not successful in his job. Although not mentioned directly, it is implied through the characters trying to avoid the reason for his death. It was a very nice funeral. [2]’ Charley’s use of ‘ nice’ could almost be seen to be sarcastic, as it is not the usual language that would be associated with a funeral, moreover he emphasises this by saying ‘ very’, which over exaggerates the underlying misery that is felt by all of the characters. Charley says this in reply to Linda who asks ‘ Why didn’t anybody come?’ which accentuates that Charley is attempting to comfort the family by concealing the reality that few attended, and reduce their humiliation of Willy’s failure by not dwelling on it at the funeral.

His funeral is shown as his final humiliation as opposed to his final triumph. Miller creates an image to the audience of Willy’s death as being an ironic end as the sad truth of his existence is finally revealed. The audience feels empathy not only for Willy, but also his family. Willy’s son, Happy could be seen to emphasise the pity that the audience feels towards the family as he wants to follow in his father’s footsteps as a salesman. ‘ I’m gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain[3]. This proves that Happy believes that he can make a success of himself where his father did not, the language used shows the determination of Happy as he feels he can prove the others wrong who did not believe in the American Dream.

However it could also be seen that Happy may not actually believe in the American Dream as strongly as Willy, and this is his wish purely as a way of being respectful to his father as he knew this is what he would have wanted from his sons. Either way, this provokes emotions from the audience for Happy whether it is pity felt for him repeating his Father's mistakes or respect from him commemorating Willy. It could be seen that Linda is particularly exposed as being a victim due to Willy's decisions. Although she has been freed from his struggles, insanity and lies, she is now desperately alone. Miller uses further irony to create sympathy from the audience.

' First time in thirty-five years we were just about free and clear[4]. ' It makes the audience feel pity as Willy's dream of success, has to an extent been granted, as there are no more money troubles for his family, this makes his suicide even more tragic as Linda will now be alone after Willy has worked ' a lifetime to pay off a house.'It is a realisation that the materialistic things are not important without your family. However it could be seen that this dilutes the tragedy in one sense, as less sympathy is felt for Willy because it highlights his ignorance, as if he had been a better husband, and listened to his wife, he would have been aware that their money troubles were in fact not as great as he had thought. Arthur Miller believes that ' the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were[6]' and should possess characteristics of which one can identify with tragedy. However Willy Loman does not possess the stereotypical attitude of the common man as he is both ignorant and delusional, thus making him a difficult character to sympathise with.

Miller continues to create sympathy with Willy's oldest son Biff. Biff pleaded his father to forget him and enable him to pursue his own ambitions as it was apparent he would never be a salesman, however Willy ignores his wishes and attempts to force him into sales. This could show that Willy seems to see himself as of a higher status as he tries to rule Biff's life, therefore the audience struggles to sympathise with his character, thus diluting the overall tragedy, as it brings to light his faults. However the audience can begin to feel sympathy for Biff in the requiem as he analyses his father's life. He realises that he spent much time believing in false promises of wealth and popularity that the life as a salesman would bring when his real talent was working with his hands.

There's more of him in that front stop than in all the sales he ever made[7]', Biff realises that his father wasted his life and was delusional, but is still able to appreciate his true talents. The audience is able to feel sympathy for Biff as he finally understands his father's problem of aspiring to unattainable goals. All those that attend the funeral search for reasons to blame Willy's tragic suicide upon, they discuss the factor of external forces and how Willy was influenced by them easily. Willy aspires to be prosperous through his personality, and truly believes that this idea of the American Dream is achievable. However throughout the play, the other characters are not as obsessed with this ideal as the protagonist himself is, this singles Willy out as being the minority and therefore the tragedy may not have happened to anybody.

This consequently creates an anti-climax, making the audience feel less sympathy for Willy as the intensity that makes an audience feel comfortable

has been taken away. To conclude, the requiem could be seen to enhance the tragedy as it brings to light the harsh realities of Willy's life, provoking sympathy from the audience because reasons for his behaviour are given. It is shown that Willy lived his life delusional due to his belief in the American Dream and he was unable to see what his life was really like. However in some respects highlighting his ignorance and failure could be seen to create an anti-climax, lessening the audience's sympathy. Yet in my opinion this allows the audience's sympathy to be directed to his family which enhances the tragedy similarly to a typical Shakespearean tragedy.