

Death of a salesmen- illusion in an american tragedy assignment

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Sgt. James Wallenstein April 2nd, 2009 Death of a Salesmen EN 102 Illusion in an American Tragedy When the realities of life become too harsh, humankind has a natural tendency to choose the most convenient solution to his problem: illusion. They build dreams and fantasies to conceal the more difficult truths of their lives. In his play Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller portrays the hold of such illusions on individuals and its horrible consequences.

Through the overly average, overly typical Loman family, Miller shows how dreams of a better life become, as Choudhuri put it, “fantasies to the point that the difference between illusion and reality, the Loman’s dreams and the forces of society, becomes blurred” (Choudhuri 70). The Loman family created dreams and illusions that were far better than their reality. In Death of a Salesman, these dreams overwhelm the two characters Willy, the father, and Biff, his favorite son, but the stark reality of life eventually overcomes these illusions and forces them to face the truth.

As Willy and Biff are forced to realize that they have been living in a dream world, this disillusionment becomes a prevalent theme of the play, pointing out how illusions can only hide so much for so long before the truth is unveiled. Wilson explains that The Loman family has such exaggerated, grotesque fictions about each other that the truth is bitterly weak in contrast (Wilson 80). Their illusion are so grand and so full of fantasy that when reality is discovered, they are shocked, devastated.

In Death of a Salesman, Willy and Biff Loman display the shocks and hardships that are experienced when one is forced to face reality and be

disillusioned. Of these two characters, Willy holds the most illusions, and therefore is the most devastated by the destruction of these fantasies. Miller uses several images and literary techniques throughout the play to strengthen the effectiveness of Willy's disillusionment. Choudhuri explains that the mood of the play begins with dreams and longings of the heart, but ends with sorrow and disillusionment (Choudhuri 69).

The play opens with, " A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is a small and fine telling of grass and tress and the horizon...an air of the dream clings to the place" (Miller 1, 1). This set the mood of happiness surrounded by fantasy and illusion. In the end, the mood completely changes with, " Only the music of the flute is left on the darkening stage" (Miller 139, 2). These words complete the play with a darkened environment of disillusionment which perfectly accompanies the disillusionment of the characters.

Choudhuri also points out that a certain irony also sets off the theme of disillusionment, projecting Willy's idealism and then the starkness of his situation (Choudhuri 73). Linda tells Willy, " Will, darling, you're the handsomest man in the world," (Miller 31, 1) but she is interrupted by the laughter of Willy's mistress. Willy gives his mistress stockings, and shortly after, Linda is seen mending some stockings of her own. Yet another example of this irony is in Act II. Willy expresses his opinion that Biff is spiteful and ruining himself, and then Miller shows Biffs' shock at discovering his father's adultery.

The most apparent symbol of Willy's fantasies and his eventual disillusionment is Miller's use of flashback. Choudhuri describes that at first

there is a distinction between reality and illusion (the past), but this blurs until the end when Willy is completely disillusioned to the point that he cannot stand it and commits suicide (Choudhuri 71). These images intertwine the theme of disillusionment with the plot and create the frenzied feeling of building illusion. Willy's greatest of these illusions were of society's qualifications. His failure became worse because he thought he followed all he should do.

Choudhuri defines Willy as one who was hardworking, honest, and had trained his sons to be "well-liked" (Choudhuri 69). Willy told his sons, "...the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead" (Miller 33, 1). He created an image of society completely unrelated to reality. Murray believes that these general fantasies about American society created larger illusions until the end of the play when he realized that his greatest fear was true: he is a failure both as a father and a salesman (Murray 111).

With such horrifying truths of his failure revealed, he finds himself deemed worthless by his own standards. Wellwarth describes Willy, "He is spit out by society as useless and desperately tries to overcome this and his disillusionment by committing suicide so that his son Biff can collect his insurance money and pay his way into the society that Willy had left to face self-realization" (Wellwarth 54). Willy's suicide is the ultimate end to all of his fantasies and is the most direct effect of his disillusionment. Biff becomes one of the main causes of Willy's disillusionment.

Willy refuses to accept his son's failings and convinces himself of Biffs' impending success. These dreams are battered though when he is faced with Biffs' dorky and never "well-liked" childhood friend Bernard. The web page "Death of a Salesman" states, "Bernard had seemed in Willy's mind the perfect opposite of his idea of the most likely to succeed man, but this is shot down when Willy discovers Bernard's success" ("Death"). All of Willy's fantasies of the ideal person were shattered by Bernard's apparent success.

Dusenbury finds that Bernard is a wealthy lawyer to Biffs' poor farm hand, and that this is devastating to Willy's dream of his son's success (Dusenbury 117). Willy is forced to realize that his beliefs of society's values are warped, thus making his images of Biff evaporate as well. Bigsby supports this finding that Willy is forced to realize even more sharply his son's failure when his sons meet him at a restaurant so Biff can tell of his attempt at landing a business deal (Bigsby 129). Biff relates to him how he stole Bill Oliver's pen, how he had never been a salesman for him, and how he will never be a success.

All of these realities come crashing down on Willy as he realizes not only Biffs' failure, but his failure as a father, and his failure in life. This directly leads to his suicide and his ultimate disillusionment. Biff also suffers from the same illusions his father holds. Garrison furthers this idea with his opinion that Willy had always let Biff get away with everything as a child, so later in life, Biff cannot hold a job because he constantly steals things and is unable to take orders (Garrison 3).

His father's confidence in his success had made him willful and headstrong, making his life difficult every step of the way. Bigsby points out, " Eventually he acquires the crucial insight to himself that he had always tried to appease his father through material success instead of doing what made him truly happy" (Bigsby 50). When he realizes this he tells his brother Happy, " I've always made a point of not wasting my life, and every time I come back here (home) I know that all I've done is to waste my life" (Miller 23, 1).

He connects this illusion in his life to others when he is in Bill Oliver's office trying to land a deal for his father. Hoeveler cites some of these connections, " He discovers that he has lived and believed in the fantasy Willy created for him and that he has let Willy shape him in order to become Willy's dream of success (Hoeveler 79). Bigsby says that Biff's meeting with Bill Oliver had also made him discover that he and his family had lied to themselves to think that Oliver would remember him and that he had never been a salesman or Oliver, but a shipping clerk (Bigsby 131). He explains this to Happy, saying, " I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been! We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years" (Miller 104, 2). His entire life had been built into one large fantasy, and his eventual disillusionment was paralyzing. Biff also had several illusions regarding his father. Willy had seemed like a God to Biff. He played his role by " fixing" things when the boys got into trouble in their attempts to follow Willy's warped idea of success (Wilson 80).

This image is destroyed, though, when Biff finds Willy with another woman (Dusenbury 120). He shouts at Willy, " You-you gave her Mama's stockings!

...You fake! You phony little fake” (Miller 121, 2). When Biff finds out about Willy’s cheap philandering, he, one so nurtured by illusion, is incapacitated by the shock of reality (Foster 106). He realizes that his father is not perfect and invincible. He sees that Willy is very human, and this leads him to realize that Willy is really a very average man.

He tells Willy, “ I’m a dime a dozen and so are you” (Miller 132, 2). Biff realizes the ultimate truths about himself and his father after Willy’s suicide at the funeral he comments, “ He had all the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong... the man didn’t know who he was” (Miller 138, Requiem). Biff knows in that instant that his father, and himself in his footsteps, had been living a life of illusion. Works Cited Bigsby, C. W. E. “ Arthur Miller. ” A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Volume 2: Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee. 1984): Choudhuri, A. D. “ Death of a Salesman: A Salesman’s Illusion. ” The Face of Illusion inAmerican Dream. (1979): 94-111. Rpt. in Willy Loman. Ed. Harold Bloom. NewYork: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991. 66-78. Dusenbury, Winifred L. “ Loneliness in Death of a Salesman. ” The Theme of Loneliness in Modern American Drama. (1960): 30-38. Rpt. in Readings on Arthur Miller. Ed. Thomas Siebold. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc. , 1997. 116-24. Foster, Richard. “ Confusion and Tragedy: The Failure of Miller’s Salesman. TwoModern American Tragedies: Reviews and Criticism of Death of a Salesman andA Streetcar Named Desire. (1961): 123-130. Rpt. in Readings on Arthur Miller.Ed. Thomas Siebold. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc. , 1997. 102-9. Garrison, Craig M. “ The System and the American Dream. ” Playwrites. 17 April 2002. Hadomi, Leah. “ Fantasy and Reality: Dramatic Rhythm in <https://assignbuster.com/death-of-a-salesmen-illusion-in-an-american-tragedy-assignment/>

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