

Death of a salesman – character of ben



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The character of Ben in Arthur Millers Death Of A Salesman functions towards the development of his main character, Willy. Miller uses him as the guiding light for Willies character; he provides the backbone for what Willy strives for throughout life. Ben functions as Willies idol, and through exploration into which Ben is, we see who Willy is. By viewing Bens morals, and actions, we are able to see what Willy himself wishes for and believes in. By allowing for our understanding of who Willy is, Ben is also used to contribute to our understanding of the theme of the novel, that you cant allow yourself to get lost in the American dream. Ben appears but three times throughout, first in a flashback, second in a quasi-flashback where Willy has inserted him into a scenario that actually happened, and finally in a complete hallucination. Through the comparison and understanding of each of these occurrences, we are able to gain a vast wealth of knowledge of who Willy Loman actually was. For this is Millers purpose for Ben in this novel, as a device to allow us to understand what is actually going on inside Willy Lomans head.

The first time Ben appears is in a flashback within Willies mind. Miller uses this flashback to interrupt the action of Willies feeling inadequate about his present situation. Willy has returned home from a selling trip, unable to concentrate, and unable to keep his mind in the present. Ben appears as an out for Willy from this situation, a way for him to forget about his present condition and feelings. The flashback with Ben provides us with a large amount of information about himself, and thus about Willy. We learn first that Ben is a lot wealthier than Willy, and that while they are brothers, they did not grow up together. The first main thing we find out is that Willy quite

idolizes him, although they have never been close Ben! Ive been waiting for you so long! Whats the answer? How did you do it? Obviously, Ben has achieved what Willy wishes for. We find out that Ben has made a fortune by walking into Africa. He has prospered by essentially using other people for what they can give him. When I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by god he was rich. We learn a lot about the character of Willy, because he completely believes that this is an excellent way to make money. He obviously does not believe that one need put in hard work to achieve success, and that in fact preferably this is the way to go. The other main thing that Ben shows us occurs during his fight with Biff. He says, Never fight fair with a stranger. This shows us his morals and values, that you cannot trust people, and that you should always take advantage of people you dont know. This demonstrates the essence of the character Ben, that you should take advantage of which you can and use it for your own good in any way possible. Since Willy believes that Ben is a good example of a success, he essentially believes in what he says, and believes that his boys should follow this. We have prior evidence that Willy does believe that you should take advantage of people when he tells Biff not to worry about his math, that Bernard will let him cheat off him. This flashback also provides more then just basic character traits. It reinforces our view of Willy as someone who tends to stretch the truth. He has prior told us that Ben pleaded with him to go to Alaska with him, yet we soon see that this is not at all the case, in fact rather the opposite.

The second quasi-flashback has Ben placed into a scene in Willies mind, when he was never there. Miller leads us to believe before the original flashback that Ben actually only came just once, as evidenced in Charlies

line You never heard from him again, heh? Since that time? However, suddenly he is appearing in another scene, appearing the same as before. This is a demonstration to us as to the way that Willies mind works, how he envisions things as they might have happened, and then comes to actually believe them until forced not to. For example, when he was telling Linda how much he sold, he actually believed that he sold more than he did. In his mind, if certain different things had happened, he would have actually sold that much. However, when forced to confront the truth, he backtracks and realizes the truth. Ben is used in Willies mind again as an out for him. He has just been fired, and Willy cannot deal with the truth. He remembers a flashback that never actually happened, and is in fact talking to Ben as he might if Ben were actually there in the present. Oh Ben, how did you do it? What is the answer? We can see that Willy is looking towards his brother for help, for advice on how to make it in life. He is feeling desperate with his current situation, supposedly in the past, as he is remembering this, yet it makes sense that this conversation with Ben actually be in the present, in his mind, as things he would have wanted to say to Ben. Somehow, Willy has Linda enter this scene. She provides the positive stream, telling Willy that his life is okay, that he's well liked his sons like him and that, someday . . . he'll be a member of the firm. She provides this as a description of what can happen after honest work, unlike Ben's own. Willy catches on and in fact begins to demonstrate that he did once believe in himself, and actually did think he could make it. The immediate switch to a scene that has Willy completely sure of himself and his boys, the day of Biff's big football game further demonstrates this. Miller has used Ben as a device to further the action, to get on with the play. Miller uses him as a way to re-direct the play,

to get Willy out of a situation and into another. We also learn a lot about who Willy is in the prior scene. After the entire flashback sequence, the plot then shifts to Willy in Charley's office. Charley represents everything that Ben is not. He is a decent, hard working family man who has worked hard his life, and has achieved relative success in his older age. The opposite of Ben Yet, Willy still idolizes Ben, the man who achieved immediate wealth. This can be tied to Willy's job of a salesman. A salesman is someone who one specific day could achieve successes, while other days not. Willy believes that this is the better way to do it, as evidenced by his belief in Ben's method.

The third time Ben appears is a complete hallucination of Willy's. He appears completely within Willy's mind, someone Willy is talking to about his decision of suicide. Ben is used to provide support for this decision. Ben, in this last scene, is Willy, and we are able to view through him the final internal struggle that Willy goes through in his own mind, leading up to his suicide. Ben provides justification for Willy within his own mind, that he should actually commit suicide. We see that Willy is struggling with this idea, trying to find some way to provide for his boys. The scene is halted, Willy goes on to find out that Biff loves him, - he likes me! Immediately upon discovering this, Ben re-appears, stating that yes, Biff will be outstanding with twenty thousand behind him. In Willy's mind, it has all been decided at this point, he is going to do it, and he is going to provide his sons with money by killing himself. Through his discussion with Ben we can see the struggle he went through to reach this decision, and yet we see how much he wants this. Willy does not see this as an end to his own life, but rather the only thing he has left to do in his life that can provide for his sons. For right down to the end,

all Willy wanted was for his family to be happy.

Ben is essentially Willies role model throughout the play, and acts as someone who has achieved the true essence, in Willies mind, of the American dream someone who came out of a jungle rich at 21. Ben is also used in a large part to contribute to the overall theme of the novel. Biff states at the end, at his fathers funeral he had all the wrong dreams. And perhaps this is true of Willy Loman. He was so caught up in achieving this American Dream, in achieving Bens life, that he was unable to see that the dream was different for everyone. He was unable to see who he was, and to choose realistic goals for himself. Ben was used by Miller to provide the guiding light for Willy throughout the entire play, and through exploration into which Ben is, we are able to answer questions as to who Willy is. We can see that had Ben never been present, Willies life might have ended different. He would not have idolized this foreign man, perhaps choosing more realistic goals and dreams for him. For that seems to be the theme, that one should not be caught up in the American Dream. Ben is used to further the plot to demonstrate this to us, and is used as a bad influence on Willy.

Arthur Miller as the role model for Willy uses the character of Ben. Through his three appearances in the novel, we learn much about Willies character by viewing his interactions with Ben, and his total belief that Ben is almost a god. He believes that his boys should be like Ben, which thus says to us that he believes in Bens own shady morals about how to get ahead. Ben is such a significant presence in the novel because Willy is constantly chasing him; he is constantly running to catch up to his brother. Even down to the end, when Ben is just in Willies mind, Willy believes him fully. Ben allows for the

development of Willy.

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