

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller (1949)

Summary: Act I, Scene 1

Death of a Salesman begins in the home of Willy Loman. Willy returns home exhausted from his latest sales excursion. He worries because he is having difficulty remembering events, as well as staying focused on the present. His wife, Linda, reassures him that he is only suffering from mental fatigue. Linda suggests that Willy should request a New York assignment rather than travel each week. At first Willy hesitates, complaining that his boss Howard does not respect his contributions to the company and might not listen to him, but Linda encourages Willy to tell Howard of his accomplishments. Willy decides to talk to Howard in the morning.

Willy and Linda argue about their son Biff. Willy calls Biff a "lazy bum," but Linda defends Biff on the premise that he is still trying to "find himself." Willy then contradicts his previous statement by saying that Biff is not lazy, and he decides to get Biff a job as a salesman. Willy drifts back into the past, remembering how everyone admired Biff when he was in high school. He comes out of his reverie and assures Linda that he is fine. He announces that he will no longer argue with Biff about his job. Linda suggests a picnic lunch, and Willy realizes that, all day, he thought he was driving the 1928 Chevy rather than the Studebaker.

Analysis

In Act I, Scene 1, Miller introduces the three major themes of *Death of a Salesman*: denial, contradiction, and order versus disorder. When Willy returns home early from a sales trip, Linda casually asks if he wrecked the car. Linda's question and Willy's annoyed response suggest that this conversation has happened before. He does not make excuses for himself but openly admits that he could not concentrate on his driving. In fact, several times, he forgot that he was driving. Willy realizes something is wrong with him, and he is exhausted both physically and mentally.

Scene 1 establishes the nature of the relationship between Willy and Linda. Although Willy states exactly what happened, Linda provides him with opportunities to deny that anything is wrong with him. In this way, she attempts to protect him from seeing his own shortcomings. She suggests the faulty steering on the Studebaker, as well as Willy's glasses, as possible reasons why he cannot drive properly. Linda continues to support Willy, offering him excuses for his own behavior, as well as Biff's inability to maintain a steady job. In general, Willy takes Linda for granted and does not appreciate her, except in rare moments of clarity, such as at the end of Scene 1 when he asks if she is worried about him. During the majority of the play, Willy freely criticizes Linda and her opinion, unless they are alone together.

As the scene progresses, Willy struggles to reconcile memories from the past with the events of the present. According to Willy, the glory of past events should be precursors

to the reality of the present. In other words, because he recollects such wonderful memories of order and success, these qualities should still exist for him in the present. For example, Willy believes he should be recognized and respected at work because he established the company throughout New England and named his own boss. He is not respected, however, because he has lost the ability to sell merchandise effectively. Things that Willy considers meaningful, such as past sales records and prior friendships, mean nothing in his current world, which is governed by the bottom line.

These contradictions are not inconsistencies in Willy's outlook, but rather a consistent part of his character. He customizes information, facts, and memories to fit his ideal perception of the world. When someone disagrees with Willy, he is insulted and becomes angry. He is tired of "always being contradicted." His son Biff is the character that "contradicts" him the most throughout the play. Willy criticizes Biff because he feels his son is wasting his life working on a farm in Texas, but Linda defends Biff because he is still "finding himself." Willy sees Biff's instability as a sign of laziness and lack of character; however, Willy's opinion of Biff changes as a result of his memories of Biff in high school. At the beginning of the conversation, he labeled Biff "a lazy bum," but later in the same conversation, Willy contradicts himself and describes Biff as a "hard worker." Willy believes Biff's popularity and success in high school make it impossible for Biff to be a disappointment now. He projects his past memories of Biff onto the present, convincing himself that his son will have the same effect on people now — as a salesman or a hired hand on a farm — that he did as a football player in high school. In other words, his son's situation is too difficult to acknowledge, so Willy creates an alternative reality that is much more palatable, denying the facts of the situation. In this way, Willy creates order from disorder because he manipulates facts to produce a better alternative.

Glossary

tired to the death an expression meaning exhausted. Here, the phrase can also be interpreted literally because Willy has attempted suicide several times and is planning to try again.

undercurrent an underlying tendency, opinion, etc., usually one that is kept hidden and not expressed openly.

massacre to kill indiscriminately and mercilessly and in large numbers.

simonize to wax and polish a car.

Summary of Act 2, Scene 8

Willy joins Happy and Biff in the restaurant. Biff says he wants to have a discussion based on facts only. Biff does not know who originally said he was a salesman for Bill Oliver, when he was actually just a shipping clerk. Willy tells the boys that Howard fired him. Biff tries to explain what happened at Oliver's office, but Willy keeps interrupting him. Biff and Willy argue, and Willy accuses Biff of offending Oliver. Biff is exasperated.

Analysis

Scene 8 is significant because it begins to build the tension that erupts in Scene 9, ultimately leading to the final confrontation between Willy and Biff in Scene 13.

For the first time in his life, Biff attempts to address his life as it really is. Waiting for Oliver makes Biff realize he has been living a lie. All this time, Biff has directed his anger and resentment toward Willy because he considers him a "fake." However, Biff is his father's son, just like Happy. He too creates a favorable past for himself — or an unhappy childhood — in order to justify the course his life has taken. As a result, Scene 8 is a turning point for Biff. He consciously chooses reality over fantasy. He would rather deal with the facts, as strange and disturbing as they may be, than reinvent events to suit his purpose.

Scene 8 is important for Willy because he is also truthful about his situation. For once he does not attempt to sugarcoat his job or his success for the boys. However, Willy contradicts his own willingness to accept reality as he continues to force Biff into a lie. Willy cannot allow Biff to fail because that will only magnify his own breakdown. He constantly interrupts Biff while he is talking for two reasons: to prevent Biff from telling the truth and to interpret the events as he wants them to be. Happy contributes to Willy's fantasy by contradicting Biff each time Biff tries to be honest. So as Biff makes an effort to finally achieve order by admitting the truth, Willy and Happy likewise attempt to create order by concealing the truth.

Summary: Final Scene: Requiem

The requiem takes place at Willy's grave. Linda does not understand why none of the people Willy knew bothered to come to the funeral. Happy is angry that Willy committed suicide, while Biff says that Willy "didn't know who he was." Charley tells them that a salesman's life depends upon dreams. Happy is determined to fulfill Willy's dreams, but Biff plans to leave Brooklyn. Linda tells Willy that she keeps waiting for him to come home. She does not understand why he killed himself because of money. According to Linda, they are finally debt-free.

Analysis

It is important to note that Miller begins and ends the play with Linda. The nervous anxiety that Linda feels when calling out for Willy in Act I, Scene 1 parallels the disquieting grief demonstrated at the end when she calls out to him again.

Willy has contradicted his own intentions. Rather than illustrate the fact that he was "well-liked," his unimpressive funeral demonstrates his mediocrity. It is significant that Charley defends Willy's suicide since Willy always felt jealous and threatened by Charley. Charley is Willy's only true friend in the play, and he recognizes Willy's need for acknowledgment and appreciation. Just as he bailed Willy out when he needed money, so Charley bails him out when no one else understands his suicide.

With Charley's assistance, Willy's suicide cannot be justified because it defies his own intentions. Willy believes his suicide will resolve the disorder in his life by assuaging any pain he caused Linda, winning Biff's respect, and demonstrating his popularity as a salesman and individual. In reality, he denies Linda a debt-free husband, Biff a reconciled father, and Happy an improved role model. Thus Willy's refusal to accept life on its own terms results in nothing but disorder and fragmentation for those he loves most.

Glossary

requiem a Mass for one or more deceased persons; any musical service, hymn, or dirge for the dead.

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