A Valued Sacrifice In Death Of A Salesman

It is very well known that if one wishes to succeed, then that one must sacrifice something in their life. Whether it be time, money, family, or virtues, some weight must be lost if they wish to obtain their goal. However there is a point where the sacrifice is not worth the reward, and there is a point where the reward becomes unattainable. In the play, Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller, businessman Willy Loman sacrifices nearly every aspect of his life and family for the sake of business, in hopes that one day he could hit it big and retire rich. However, Willy Loman finds nothing but defeat at the end of his road. Willy sacrifices his family, his time, and his own mental health for his career in the world of selling.

Willy valued his job more than he did his mental health. His work often involved taking very long trips to cities along the entire east coast, and his only way there was by car with him at the wheel. While someone could do this every now and then for major business trips, it would be quite unimaginable to see someone do this day in and day out, just like Willy did. He never took the time to vacation or relax with his family, which ends up exhausting his mind and leaves him confused and ill at a relatively young age. At the trough of his life, Willy seeks the help of an old friend and student named Howard, asking him for a better job, even though he has passed his limits.

Willy’s tragic flaw also stems from the fact that he has misinterpreted the American Dream, the belief that one can rise from rags to riches. For Willy, the success of that dream hinges on appearance rather than on substance, on wearing a white-collar rather than a blue one. It is this snobbery, combined with a lack of practical knowledge, that leads to his downfall. The capitalist nature of the American Dream—the belief that through the pioneer virtues of hard work, perseverance, ingenuity, and fortitude, one might find happiness through wealth. Implicit within this dream, however, is the assumption that money leads to fulfillment, regardless of the type of work that one does in order to attain it. While Willy himself was never successful as a salesman, he remains confident that his son Biff will be able to make it big in business because of his good looks and his past glory as a high school football star. Willy makes the error of celebrating popularity over know-how, style over substance. He taught Biff that being “well-liked” would carry the day, thus ignoring the damaging truth that Biff’s habit of petty theft—whether it was lumber from a nearby construction site or a football from the locker room—would ultimately lead to the boy’s downfall.

The way in which this theme informs the play is also the key to its form since Willy constantly relives the past through a series of flashbacks. These scenes present Biff and Happy as they appeared in high school, providing the audience with a glimpse into the happy past that shaped the unhappy present. Yet, when Biff confronts his father in the final scene, he has an epiphany, a sudden burst of knowledge: Biff realizes that success entails working at an enjoyable job, which for him means working on a farm, outdoors, with his shirt off. The life of business and the city is not for him, and he sees his happiness in day-to-day living rather than in the goals foisted on him by society or by his father. Happy, meanwhile, lacks the courage of honesty and remains caught in the rat race, still under the impression that wealth and status are the keys to fulfillment. In a sense, Death of a Salesman ends on an optimistic note, in that Biff discovers a new sense of himself, stripped of illusion, as he finally becomes a man with self-respect.

Willy, however, remains imprisoned by a set of false ideals. Having devoted his life to a belief in the honor of a career as a salesman, he possessed too much snobbery to admit that his own destiny was in a simple career as a carpenter. Instead, he listened to his brother Ben, that figment of his imagination who told him that money was the true path to happiness. Out of options, Willy decides that suicide is his only exit since Biff will then collect the insurance settlement and be able to launch a career in business. Although Willy remains misguided, he achieves the stature of a tragic hero. Fighting a world pitted against him, he fulfills his destiny and sacrifices himself for his son by paying a debt in blood. The futility of his life and dreams are revealed, however, when only his immediate family attends what Willy has imagined would be a magnificent funeral, thus exposing a legacy of only disappointment and death.