Death Of A Salesman: The Portrait Of The Willy

Throughout the play, Willy has consistently been portrayed as an insecure coward. From these insecurities stems his constant need for positive affirmation from other people. Willy, above all else, seeks to be liked and admired by others. It was Willy's meeting with Dave Singleman that convinced him to become a salesman. Seeing how many people loved Dave gave Willy the hope that he could earn the approval of others by working as a salesman, that through his work he would meet new people and make new friends. When he dies, he seeks to be remembered as a great man who was loved by all, surrounded by countless friends at his funeral, much like Dave was when he passed away.

This passage further emphasizes Willy's insecurities and self-doubt. He constantly seeks the approval of others, the successful Ben in particular, and emphasizes the importance of having friends in the business world. Unlike Ben, Willy is too afraid and lacks the confidence to take a risk and go to Alaska. This conversation also demonstrates the primary problem with capitalism: it's never enough. Once you get a little taste, you're always lusting for more yet can never be satisfied. Linda warns against this mindset, but Willy only cares about what he doesn't have rather than enjoying his blessings. Willy instills a similar and unhealthy mindset in Biff, emphasizing the importance of reputation and the importance of physical charm, all while boosting his ego to unhealthy levels.

Willy has always been more of a talker than a doer. He always speaks of grand plans for the future, yet these are merely the delusions of a pathetic man. His insecurities push him to lie about himself to seem more impressive than he truly is in order to gain the approval of others. He's always boasting about some achievement of his or his sons, though most of the time these are lies. Bernard, on the other hand, has always been comfortable with and sure of himself. He has no need to live up to the expectations of his father or brag about his accomplishments because he knows who he is and is content with that reality.

When Willy mentions that he is "worth more dead than alive," he is referring to the money his family would receive from his life insurance policy were he to die. Like in the film It's a Wonderful Life, this suggests that it's in Willy's best interest to commit suicide so that he can cash in on the life insurance policy and help his struggling family financially. However, Charley makes a good point by mentioning that "no man is worth nothing dead," for Willy would be "selling" his life, the most valuable thing of all. Unfortunately, Willy refuses to heed this advice, foreshadowing Willy's suicide at the end of the play.

Biff explains to Willy his epiphany that he has no desire to enter the business field and live as a wage slave in New York. After some deep introspection, Biff has finally realized what he wants out of life. He has come to terms with his identity and better understands himself, now knowing he wishes to spend his life enjoying nature while working with his hands.

The conflict between Willy and Biff has been stuck in gridlock for years now, with neither party able to understand the other's point of view. Biff has wanted his father to forget about him, begging him to finally see him like the worthless scum that he is. By doing so, Willy would free Biff of his long-held burden, allowing him to pursue the life he chooses free from carrying the

weight of his father’s dreams. Willy, unable to achieve the American Dream for himself, lives vicariously through Biff, passing his goals onto his son. For Willy to truly accept Biff’s plea, he would have to give up on his lifelong dream and admit that he had foolishly believed in it for naught. Biff and Willy struggle with each other in a desperate battle to assert their own identity.

The entirety of the play displays Willy’s struggle with reality and his unwillingness to accept the true nature of his life. He shields himself from this depressing realization with a facade of angry outbursts and hallucinations, delusions designed to rescue him from anything unpleasant. He refuses to own up to his mistakes and constantly shifts the blame for his failures onto others. These defense mechanisms of detachment demonstrate Willy’s dominant character trait is that of cowardice. However, Willy’s final act can be seen as a heroic one. He does not seek to end his own suffering by committing suicide, but rather his motivation for doing so is to help his family. Though this sacrifice earns him the label of a tragic hero, he still remains mostly a coward.