The Significance Of The Role Of The Father Throughout Death Of A Salesman

Imagine a child living only under his father’s obscurity, his ideologies, believes, traits, all but the same, a very depressing way of life isn't it? In the death of a salesman, it describes just that. A grievous play that revolves around an old man rotting in his ideologies, Willy Loman. A man that believed being well-liked is the means to success. There are lots of recurring themes throughout Death of a Salesman but most notably the theme of Father and Son. Willy and Biff, Willy and Happy, and Charley and Bernard are some of the most notable examples of the theme. One thing that is easily noticeable is that the child dependably mirrors their dad. Moreover, Miller's personal experience is also a critical player in the making of the theme. In the play, Miller’s involvement with the great depression reflects upon all the father figures throughout the play, and in Death of a salesman, the father's actions, personality, and traits are reflected upon their children.

The interactions between Willy Loman and his sons represent the epitome of an absent father. Their relationship is considered dysfunctional due to their lack of respect for one another. In more ways than one, they act more like rivals, instead of understanding each other, they went head-on in arguments. Biff embodies this with pure hatred. Willy’s effect on Biff was never good; it never was. Ever since his teenage years, his father always taught him that being well-liked, and having a good personality is the path to success. At one point Biff believes that he had talent, and is worth something. Willy’s effect on him made him realize the flaws in his own life and his fathers. While it is one of the redeeming points, it was already too late for Biff to turn back.

“WILLY: You shoulda seen the lumber they brought home last week. At least a dozen six-by-tens worth all kinds a money.” Pg. 28

The quote above describes Willy’s effect on his sons, rather than reprimanding Biff for stealing; Willy encourages him. The act of stealing was also seen numerous times, until the point that Biff got caught stealing a suit, which got him jailed for three months.

“BIFF: You know why I had no address for three months? I stole a suit in Kansas City and I was in jail.

WILLY: I suppose that’s my fault!

BIFF: I stole myself out of every good job since high school!

WILLY: And whose fault is that?” Pg. 79-80

Hypocrite that’s what Willy is, on page 79-80 Willy stated that Biff’s actions are his own, but clearly, Biff stealing is due to Willy’s incompetence of being a father. Although Willy will never admit it, Biff being a failure is always due to Willy’s evil influence.

While the interactions between Willy and Happy is not far off from Biff’s, the lingering effects

that Willy have on Happy differs. Ever since he was a teen Happy always yearn for his father's attention, which never resulted in anything good. However, similar to Biff, Willy casts in his pursuit of illusory dreams and unrealistic expectations onto Happy. Eventually, Happy's own astray ideologies gave a path for him to follow Willy's beliefs.

"HAPPY: I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have — to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him." Pg. 85

Unlike Biff who starts to take reality seriously, after Willy's death, Happy cannot seem to shake off Willy's influence even after his demise. On page 85, Happy describes just how far he is willing to go to be acknowledged by his father. However, even if Happy continues Willy's dream becoming successful as a salesman, it would have never worked out; in more than one situation it was shown that Happy is better to work off as a laborer rather than as a salesman. Which acquires the inquiry, how far is Happy willing to go before he realizes his father's' imperfections? Clouded by his father's dreams, Happy is not "Happy." Which brings in irony into play, since parents are bestowed upon the right to name their children, Willy named his son in another display of his foolish delusions. Similar to the saddest part of Willy's suicide is his firm belief in his ideology of success, the saddest part of Happy is that he still believe that is father's ideal is a good one. Still driven by conviction on being the number-one man, he sticks to Willy's dreams to the bitter end.

Another fact that could have impacted Willy's demeanor towards his sons was Willy's absence of a father figure when he was a baby. It was mentioned on page 26 that Willy's father abandoned him when he was four years old.

"BEN: Well, I don't know how much you remember.

WILLY: Well, I was just a baby, of course, only three or four years old…" Pg. 26

Due to his dad abandoning him at a young age it may have impacted on how Willy treats his children. Willy's dilemma towards his child is that he is an awful father, but his lack of father figure might have kept him from realizing the proper behavior of a dad. Instead of showing his children good morals and proper etiquette, Willy nourishes them with delusions and misbeliefs. Likewise, as opposed to giving them encouraging words to support them, he scrutinizes them when they are unsuccessful. Due to this tension is created between Willy and Biff. While Happy is still ignored, Willy still recognizes him as a failure.

If Willy is the devil, then Charley is an angel. Both of these fathers are similar yet different in many ways. Similar since they both love their sons, different because of their teachings. Interestingly, Biff and Bernard's relationship parallels Willy and Charley's relationship. Bernard being a good friend helps Biff academically, and Charley helps Willy financially. However, one thing in common is that they are both trying to help Biff and Willy understand reality. In contrast to Willy grieving over his misfortune, Charley never dwells on it; he is a very down-to-earth man, very realistic and practical, which made him into a good role model for Bernard.

"CHARLEY: My salvation is that I never took any interest in anything." Pg. 57

On page 57 it was stated by Charley that he owes his success to reality, he was never a

dreamer, which is one of the positive traits that he passed down to Bernard, leading to his success. Although both of them had tried to implement their ways of success to Biff and Willy, it is only Biff who at the end of the play is forced to face reality.

In the end, all the fathers are influenced by their writer, Arthur Miller. It was also due to the great depression which brought downfall to his father's company, that inspired him to write Death of a Salesman. Eventually, in his autobiography, he admitted that the story was inspired by the life of his uncle, Manny Newman. Miller describes him as ?a competitor at all times, in all things, and at every, moment. ? He said that his uncle saw ?my brother and I running neck and neck with his two sons [Buddy and Abby] in some horse race [for success] that never stopped in his mind. ? Which is very similar to Willy, who thought that Biff must always be better than Bernard in terms of success. Another thing in common is that both of them are living under an illusion. They are both considered to be failures of a father, which brought downfall towards their children. Since similar to Biff, Manny's son failed to study in high school.

While fathers are a significant player in real life, in Death of a salesman that is just not the case, the term "like father like son" can be seen in the play, even from Arthur Miller's inspiration. Since fathers are essential figures throughout their children's lives, some children tend to reflect their father's beliefs or traits, whether it be good or bad. In Death of a Salesman, Biff, Happy, Willy, Bernard and even Miller's cousin are prime examples of this. Each reflecting their father, some in a good way, some in the wrong way. Biff, a son that realized his father's flaws but is still affected by him. Happy, a son blinded by his father's ideology. Willy, a son to a father he never had. Bernard, a son that is realistic and practical. Miller's cousin not so far off from Biff. In the end, father's are significant in their children's lives if they are morally correct, if not then they will be their downfall.