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### Death of a Sales Man: The Theme of Home

The play, 'Death of a Sales Man' is the epitome of an illustration of the extent moral struggle could take a man. Men live in the world according to the ideals they have decided to set for themselves and to a much greater extent, we live according to the long standing ideals set by the societies we find ourselves. Willy is a character who has held on to the American Dream for most of his life. He is close to the age of retirement and suddenly finds himself exhausted, disappointed and overwhelmed by the life he has led. The general story in the play is laden with instances of people living different lives from the ones they have anticipated or from the lives they want for themselves. The American Dream involves securing a good job and then raising kids. Children are raised in a home that is acquired from hard work as dictated by the American Dream. The following paper attempts to utilize the theme of home as it permeates the lives in the play 'Death of a Salesman'. The characters will be used to show they embody the theme of home and their relation to Willy.

In order to demystify metaphoric meanings as well as literal meanings of home both the characters and their relations to Willy will be utilized. The first instance will show how the play exhibits the theme of home in the characters. This will be shown in the lives of the characters and their perceptions of home. Secondly, the second illustration will be of moral struggle. The dilemmas presented in the play will be examined in order to show how the theme permeates the

life of the main character Willy. Further, Willy's character will be used to show how home is a disadvantage and an advantage to overall quality of life.

The American dream promises a comfortable life for hardworking people. However, social activities dictate one's proximity to the dream. At the beginning of the play, we are met by Willy, an almost senior citizen who struggles with everyday work. He has been working most of his life but has nothing to show for it. Willy says, "I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away— a man is not a piece of fruit!" (Miller 15). Willy has been demoted in his job and his sons are not as successful as he thought they would be. The first instance of the home theme is presented by the back-breaking work Willy has had to do in order to maintain his home. However, he feels that most of his effort has been in vain.

Willy thinks about his sons and the lives they lead. In an ideal world, fathers want the best for their children. More than that, fathers want to be proud of their sons' individual successes. However, on a social standing, the fact that Willy's sons are a disappointment shows significant expectations different homes have for their children. The same is enhanced when we realize that each of Willy's sons, Happy and Biff, is doing everything to try and please their father. In an attempt to conform to the expectations they have been brought up with in their home, we see that both parties are forced to live double lives in order to maintain the standards expected of them at home. Willy with a life of constant wishing for more and his sons living lives that they think their father would be proud of. The theme of home and family expectations is clearly expressed.

The other part of home as a theme is illustrated by the entire play in the lives of the characters Willy, Happy, Biff and Linda and how they deal with each other in their home. The

first instance of the struggle is seen when Willy wonders about his sons, he is not sure whether he might have had unreasonably high expectations for them (Hagopian 121). Willy recalls his son's Biff games in high school, he thinks about how his son was constantly followed by recruiters to play for. He wonders whether his sons are too lazy to work or whether their time is yet to come. The mere thinking about his sons cause him to think about the home he has created and also because it forces an examination of the life he has led so far. Essentially, his comparison with his neighbors leaves him depressed about his own home. The play succeeds in showing how the lives people live are intertwined into other minor lives that they live or wish they would be living. In this way, the play shows that maybe people create homes in the pressures of the societies they find themselves occupying and being a part of.

'Death of a Sales Man' also uses small instances to show how Willy's deterioration of the mind is a result of his home lifestyle. Most of the things that Willy thinks about, that is, his mental trips, are in the home motif. Each of the instances are closely tied to his home and the people he has closely interacted with in the course of his life.

The first instance of mental disorder is noted when Willy starts speaking in contradicting terms. Willy mentions his son Biff to be "...a lazy bum" (Miller 7) for not having acquired better employment. Moments later in the same scene, his wife Linda talks to him about Biff's will and he notes that, "There is one thing about Biff—he is not lazy". This is a clear indication that Willy might not have had an idea of his earlier statement about his son Biff. From then on, Willy is observed to be laden with contradictions. He has significant trouble reconciling instances of his own reality. The second instance is observed when Willy starts a chat with his brother Ben. However, we learn that Ben is long dead and Willy is conversing with himself. Ben is Willy's older brother with whom he had made grand plans about life with. In this instance Willy

reminisces about the plans he and his brother had about creating awesome homes for themselves. The conversation he has with Ben while playing cards with Charley shows the extent of their bond. We notice that the interactive creation of Ben by Willy's mind has intruded into his reality and led to a misunderstanding with a friend he has invited into his home. It is the cross between reality and imagination that causes the disagreement between Willy and Charlie (Miller 23). In the eighth scene where Willy is seeing his brother, it is clear to the reader that he has demons from the past. It is the first instance that the reader realizes that the play is an induction into the family life of Willy.

Secondly, Willy's representation of home is also notable through the eyes of other characters. An important party in emphasizing Willy's perception of home is his wife Linda. From the Act one, Linda is observed to be the home maker and is seriously inclined to taking care of most of Willy's domestic needs. In the first instance, she is aware that her husband has been out of it foremost of the time and is increasingly tired as soon as he gets home (Zhang, 4). She knows how hard her husband pushes himself to provide for the family and is appreciative of the fact. It is during the first act that we notice that Linda has been taking an interest on her husband's driving incidences. In addition, Linda also notices the different suicidal mechanism that Willy has set up in his home. The first thing she sees is the hose that she says she removes and puts back when Willy is home. She knows him enough to know that he is contemplating suicide in the home using the gas hose. Linda is an observant woman, it is through her eyes also that we see her awareness of the things the men in her life are going through. A home maker is observed through Linda.

In a very significant way, the reader can notice how Linda plays a major part in Willy's life. She is Willy's anchor in life. She plays a passive part in his life but the reader notices that

she is more aware than anybody else. When Willy starts to show signs of mental deterioration, Linda reminds him of basic household duties and errands that he is supposed to run in order to keep him tied to his importance in the home. In the same way, Linda is a strong force in maintaining her husband's sanity at home. She acts as a source of encouragement and almost makes her husband feel that home will definitely, without a doubt guarantee success. Therefore, Linda seems to be the sole source of inspiration in her house.

On one hand, she is aware that her husband is suffering from something owing to the increasing confused state of mind. She puts it that, "I'm—I'm ashamed to. How can I mention it to him? Every day I go down and take away that little rubber pipe. But, when he comes home, I put it back where it was. How can I insult him that way? I don't know what to do. I live from day to day, boys. I tell you, I know every thought in his mind. It sounds so old—fashioned and silly, but I tell you he put his whole life into you and you've turned your backs on him" (Miller 64). She is responsible of reminding her sons that their father is the reason they have a roof over their heads. Linda acts as an anchor to her husband and plays the role of a perfect wife in attempt to maintain the life she has had with her husband through the years. She is also her sons' advisor in matters of the home and things relating to their father.

Biff is the play's catalyst, he seems to have role in both worlds that Willy is experiencing, the reality world and the imaginary world. Although the play starts with obvious tension between father and son, like in any normal home, the course of the play reveals that Biff is or had been Willy's prized son. Biff is almost present in all the mind trips that his father takes throughout the play. In the course of the play, the reader finally realizes why Willy has problems with his son. Biff used to idolize his father, it was not until he noticed that his father did not play by the rules that they fell out. Biff noticed that his father was not as upright as he had thought. Biff thinks

that his father has been playing the sales man even at home (Zhang, 6). On the other hand, in contribution to his disturbing thoughts, Willy reminisces about the way he has raised his son. He notes that he has spoiled his son with notions of getting ahead in life no matter the means. In this way, the son resents his father for being a hypocrite even in their home.

Happy is another character in the play that leads to the reader's appreciation on the theme of home and the lessons picked up from parents by their children. Essentially, he leads to the appreciation of Willy's conduct in his own home. Although not living an ideal life, Happy's life shows the refusal to live in reality. He lives a life that is exaggerated and tries to maintain an exterior that he thinks other people will appreciate. Contrary to Willy's creation of characters that do not exist, Happy creates a life and a home for himself that does not exist. He starts by lying about his job positions and the people he works with. In essence, the reader sees that Willy has taught his sons that external perceptions are important and has thus led to minor instances of emulating the things they have seen with their father at home. Happy is fond of manipulating reality in order to create situations that are more favorable to him. The same is observable in Willy who's extent of exaggeration has taken a turn into mental illness and he has lost grip of the difference between the life he is creating for other people in his mind and the reality he exists in at home with his wife and sons.

Certain similarities are noted between Willy's process of concealing this from his home and his son's lifestyle. Firstly, both seem to deny situations as they are. In an attempt to mask the reality of their lives, Willy and Happy have the ability to conceal the parts of their lives that they are not proud of from the world. In the first instance, Willy creates an illusion about his son's success that his wife promotes as well. On the other hand, just as Willy is haunted by past sexual

interludes, Happy is not proud of having seduced and ‘ruined’ the wives of some of the executives he claims to work for (Hagopian 119).

The following essay has attempted to give different perspectives of home following the life of Willy as well as other characters representation of home in relation to Willy. The examination has shown that the home is created both by external and internal pressures. Like Willy, most people are inclined to build their homes on the pressures of the environments they find themselves occupying. In addition, the home has also been seen to be a source of inspiration and success to a man. It gives a man the reason to wake up and work hard. However it is also clear that the home can be associated with pain. Most of the regrets that Willy experiences are closely tied to his home affairs—including his tension with the sons, his own suicide attempts at home and his regret of jeopardizing his home and his marriage through an affair. Indeed, home is a complicated theme because of the different meanings it holds in different instances of different people’s lives as shown in ‘Death of a Salesman’.

Work Cited

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