The Striking Contrast between the Characters Happy and Biff Loman and Bernard

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Assignment Description: A reading response on Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman.

By conducting a close character analysis in Arthur Miller’s tragic play Death of a Salesman, the reader can quite plainly see the differences in character traits, values, and ethics between Happy and Biff Loman, and Charley’s son Bernard, who are products of different parenting styles and philosophies. Happy and Biff Loman’s father, Willy Loman, is a complex character; he is ambitious and hard-working; he is constantly striving to obtain his edge in the sales market in order to obtain the American dream; he is also outgoing, funny, caring, manly, and a dedicated father and family man. Yet, he is cranky, crass, rude, pessimistic, womanizing, and is failing as a salesman, husband, and father since his values and philosophies are focused in the wrong direction. Willy is more concerned with popularity and financial success than with loftier virtues, such as integrity, compassion, cooperation, and community. In contrast, their neighbor Charley is an honest, ethical, humble, hard-working, and successful businessman. He is also a caring, compassionate, supportive, loyal and dedicated friend, husband, and father. Even further, Charley is not concerned with being physically fit and attractive, fun, and well-liked; he is more concerned about family, education, stability, loyalty, and integrity.

Throughout the play, Biff Loman portrays some of his father’s personal characteristics and values. He is hard-working, funny, outgoing, and manly. However, he is also cranky, irritable, and dishonest, which is quite apparent since he is a thief. Increasingly, Biff is very unhappy with his life since he has become disillusioned with the distorted ethics of the highly competitive business world and the American dream, much like his father Willy. This is evident when Biff states, “Well, I spent six or seven years after high school trying to work myself up. Shipping clerk, salesman, business of one kind or another. And it’s a measly manner of existence... To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when all you really desire is to be outdoors, with your shirt off. And always to get ahead of the next fella. And still – that’s how you build a future” (Miller 244). Biff’s statements reflect the distorted business practices and values of the American rat race that Willy upheld for quite a long time. Fortunately for Biff, he is young enough to see the error of his ways and has plenty of time to correct them by pursuing a more ethical career path for which he would be better suited, like running his own ranch out West or promoting a sporting goods store with Happy.

Throughout the play, Miller infuses many of Willy Loman’s personality traits and philosophies onto the character of Happy Loman as well. Although Happy appears to be quite jovial, popular, hard-working, law-abiding, manly, and womanizing, he is also lazy, unambitious, and unlike his name, is very dissatisfied with himself and the American dream. This is evident when Happy describes how even though his boss has obtained a higher
position and salary, he still is not happy. For example, Happy states, “And suppose I get to be a merchandise manager? He’s a good friend of mine, and he just built a terrific estate on Long Island. And he lived there about two months and sold it, and now he’s building another one. And I know that’s just what I would do. I don’t know what the hell I’m workin’ for” (245).

Despite the fact that Happy realizes the pitfalls of these widely held American ideals, he still cannot shake the superficial ideal that status and power are more important than other more worthy ideals. For instance, although Happy is aware that “everyone around me is so false that I’m constantly lowering my ideals,” he still cannot abandon Willy’s ideals and wants to “show some of those pompous, self-important executives over there that Hap Loman can make the grade. I want to walk into the store the way he walks in” (245-246). Fortunately for Happy, he too is young enough to be able to redeem his mistakes and pursue a more honest, ethical, and fulfilling life.

Conversely, throughout the play Miller imbues the character of Bernard with loftier ideals that reflect Charley’s principles and philosophies. Unlike Biff and Happy, Bernard knows and upholds the virtues of education, diligence, loyalty, and integrity. Bernard, therefore, is living a much more fulfilled life of which he can be proud. A good example of Bernard’s great sense of ethics is when he offers to help Biff study for his state Regents math exam since he knows the importance of a good education. However, Bernard refuses to take the test for Biff because, “That’s a state exam! They’re liable to arrest me!” (253). Here, Bernard is displaying his compassion for and loyalty to Biff, yet he will not compromise his ethics.

After the exposure of Biff’s failure to study and other dastardly deeds, like stealing a football from school and being too rough with the girls, Biff drives off in Willy’s car without having a license. He does this in order to avoid the punishment that Willy has been too lax in doling out. Bernard quickly alerts Willy to the problem by exclaiming, “He’s driving the car without a license!” (253). Because Bernard understands the potential liability of Biff’s actions, he once again steps in to help his friend’s family despite the fact that they make fun of him and treat him badly. Nonetheless, due to his father’s positive influence and guidance, Bernard has become a successful lawyer and is living more of the American dream than Biff, Happy, or Willy, and has not had to compromise his ethics to do it. Thus, he is rewarded by getting to argue a case in front of the Supreme Court and quite humbly accepts Charley and Willy’s praise when Charley brags about him to Willy (281).

Through the use of characterization, Miller has expertly demonstrated the positive and negative effects of different parenting styles and philosophies upon their children. Much to their misfortune, Biff and Happy have adopted many of Willy’s priorities and values, which have led to their aimless, unsettled, and unfulfilled lives. Biff is unable to choose a nobler career path, and is a liar and a thief. Happy is preoccupied with socioeconomic status, wealth, prestige, and with being a popular womanizer. On the other hand, Bernard reaped the benefits of adopting Charley’s principles and ethics and is leading a much more productive and fulfilling life. Bernard is a successful and hard-working lawyer who is deeply concerned about the welfare of his clients and his community at large. Thus, through these characters, Miller’s ultimate message is delivered; Fathers and parents need to be very careful that the sins of the father are not
passed down to the son. However, pardon the pun; wherever there is a will, there is a way.

Works Cited