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BIFF LOMAN, THE LOST SON

*"O Dear Father,
It is thy business that I go about . . .
My mourning and my important tears hath pitied
No blown ambition doth our arms incite,
But love, dear love, and our aged father's right,
Soon may I hear and see him!"*

Cordelia

RESUMEN

El propósito central de este ensayo es lograr un estudio analítico del conflicto familiar entre el padre (Willy Loman) y el hijo (Biff) en la obra dramática y literaria La Muerte de un Agente Viajero, escrita por el dramaturgo estadounidense Arthur Miller. Biff Loman, el hijo, es el eje central de este ensayo. A través del análisis de este personaje se intenta determinar las razones que lo llevaron a padecer una constante alienación y a sufrir una vida sin propósitos y sin sentido. El ensayo logra concluir que la obra La muerte de un Agente Viajero no solamente evidencia la historia y los fracasos de Willy Loman, el protagonista central, como padre y trabajador, sino que además presenta la cruel y patética realidad de un hijo de familia que ha sido influenciado por el equívoco código moral de su padre.

Por otra parte, este ensayo intenta reconocer el valor literario de La Muerte de un Agente Viajero al haber ganado el Premio Pulitzer exactamente hace 50 años (1949) y ser aclamada como una de las mejores producciones de teatro de la literatura norteamericana desde ese entonces.

ABSTRACT

The main intention of this essay is to approach an analytical view on the conflict between father (Willy Loman) and son (Biff) in Death of a Salesman, written by Arthur Miller. Biff Loman, the son, is the focal point in this essay. The main attempt is to determine how Biff Loman becomes an alienated character. A concrete study of the causes and consequences of his alienation is carefully explained. This leads us to conclude That Death of a Salesman does not only display the story of

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Willy Loman's failures as a workman and as a father, but shows the frightening and dreadful reality of a son who has been influenced by his father's moral code.

In addition, this essay intends to recognize the importance of Death of a Salesman for having won the Pulitzer Prize in 1949 and points out that this play has been widely acclaimed as one of the best drama productions of American literature over the last fifty years.

Fifty years ago, the Pulitzer Prize was awarded to Death of a Salesman for the best play of 1949. Therefore, it is important to point out this year, exactly fifty years later, the great literary value of this dramatic work which has continued being recognized over the last half of the century as Arthur Miller's most popular play.

In general terms Death of a Salesman is considered as a play that openly proclaims the grievous injustices of a capitalist society that makes a full use of the "common man" and finally drops him/her out when he/she is no longer needed. However the play also embodies a deeper thematic accomplishment of a conflictive family matter between father and son. This highly intimate parental relationship is the real concern in this essay in view of proving that Biff, the son, is also the central character of the play who becomes a pitiful man as well as his father.

The problem that first engages serious attention is the fact that at the beginning of the play Linda, the mother, comments to Willy Loman, her husband, that Biff Loman is lost. "I know he's still lost, Willy. I think he is very lost" (16). This is the first insight that determines 34 year-old Biff Loman as being unable to find his own way in life. The immediate question arising here is why he is lost, and consequently it is necessary to carry out the discovery of the disastrous events that caused Biff to be in such a pathetic state.

The initial input we visualize is suggested when Linda says to her husband "You shouldn't have criticized him, Willy, especially when he just got off the train. You mustn't lose your temper with him" (15). The obvious implication is that Biff has been away from home for a long time and now he has returned back with no goals achieved. Later in the play we find he had been seeking fortune in the West, but his attempt had been a complete failure. Linda's statement also brings to view that father and son do not have good communication since Willy usually reprehends, with sharp disapproval, all the actions made by Biff as regards his profession. "In the beginning, when he was young, I thought, well, a young man, it's good for him to tramp around, take a lot of different jobs. But it's more that ten years now and he has yet to make thirty-five dollars a week" (16). Willy Loman's anguish is that his already 34 year-old son has not made a respectable amount of money in his whole life and has been unable to settle down with a decent job. In addition to this, Linda makes it evident that Willy Loman lacks the control of his bad temper and when he attempts to advise Biff, he ends up in censuring and condemning him. "When the hell did I lose my temper? I simply asked him if he

was making any money. Is that a criticism?" (15). Obviously, Willy does not acknowledge his fault since we discover later in the play he is narrow-minded with his own stubborn ideas.

Therefore, we can easily see Biff is currently lost. He himself confesses his alienation when in a conversation with his brother Happy he expresses the strangeness he feels between himself and the outside world. "I tell ya, Hap, I don't know what the future is. I don't know what I am supposed to want . . . I'm thirty four years old, I oughta be making my future . . . I don't know what to do with myself. . . I know that all I've done is to waste my life" (22). The remark on his age is pathetically a pitiful misfortune which inspires a profound regret of the impossibility to reverse time. He didn't know what to do in the past since he was not prepared to take advantage of youth and now, what is even worse, he is overwhelmed because the future seems to be uncertain and threatening. So his words are a lamentation of himself for the passing of a misused life and missed opportunities which will never be recovered. But the most lamentable sorrow is that he completely ignores the cause of his problem.

In order to find the causes of Biff's present conflict, we necessarily have to mention a number of incidents that he assimilated and adhered to since a very early age of his childhood. The structure of the play gives a detailed account on the record of these meaningful events by means of using Willy Loman's mind. Willy Loman often remembers his past life due to the fact that he lives more in illusion than reality. That is to say, during the present time of the play (1942) Willy Loman lives a dreadful situation because he is already old and the company he works for has put him on straight commissions and has taken him off a salary. Besides, he does not function appropriately when Biff is at home and in addition to this, he has a constant concern of Biff being lost. All of these chaotic matters force Willy to remember his happy moments in 1928 when everything seemed to be successful and favorable for the Loman family. Willy Loman always made his wife and children believe that he was a famous, well-recognized salesman and that he earned an enormous amount of money. He was conceited of the high opinion that he was liked by people wherever he went and that he was always welcomed with warmth, respect and affection. But as we discover, everything he says is just a fantasy. Willy prefers to immerse himself in his dreams and in the joyful plans of the past rather than bear the agonies of the present, now in 1942.

In the first flashback of the past that Willy goes through, we can identify guiding information to understand circumstances of Biff's destructive life. It is the time before 1928 during the happy days when both Happy and Biff are highschool students. Biff is successful at football and hopes to go to University. As soon as Biff appears on scene he is carrying a football he has stolen. "Biff: 'Did you see the new football I got?'/ Willy: (examining the ball) 'Where'd you get a new ball?'/ Biff: 'The coach told me to practice my passing'/ Willy: 'That's so? And he gave you the ball, eh?'/ Biff: 'Well, I borrowed it from the locker room'" (29). Here Biff has taken the property of school without any permission and what is more surprising is that

he is proud of the mischief he has done and "laughs confidentially"(29) showing what great satisfaction he has over what he has done.

Extremely shocking is Willy's attitude towards Biff's theft when he says "Coach will probably congratulate you on your initiative" (30). Readers expect Willy to reprimand or punish Biff for having done an improper act, but on the contrary Willy motivates his son and easily approves his determination. Indeed, at the present time (1942) Biff also remembers another theft when he stole a carton of basketball when he worked for someone called Oliver several years ago. This demonstrates that Biff's thefts seem to be a very usual action with his father's consent. In the same past scene when Biff and Willy are talking about the stolen football, Biff says his coach keeps congratulating him for his initiative and Willy's response to this comment reveals why he approves of his son for stealing things. "That's because he likes you. If someone else took the ball there'd be an uproar" (50). Willy Loman's philosophy of life is based on the assumption that being "well-liked" excuses any wrong action. Even in the present time, when Willy Loman argues with his wife, he affirms "Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world a young man with such personal attractiveness, gets lost ..." (16). For Willy Loman, having a personal and physical attractiveness not only ensures the gaining of fame and success, but it is a strong attribute to justify wrong actions such as Biff's constant thefts. That is why at the present Willy is angry with his son because Biff has not gained any personal achievement in spite of his powerful attractiveness. On the other hand, concerning the son's view about his father's ideas, it is clear that Biff, as well as his brother, is highly influenced by the idea of being well-liked. At a moment when they are referring to Bernard, their friend and neighbor who is a good student, they say "Bernard is not well-liked, is he?". "He is liked, but not well-liked"(33). We can see the two sons accept, and are completely influenced, by their father's theories of life. They follow a code of values imposed by someone else, but they lack their own. That is another Biff's sad reality in that he has never developed his own moral philosophy of life, he only copies his father's, which at the end turns out to be false.

Another reason why Willy allows his children to steal things is to demonstrate how fearless and brave Happy and Biff are. In one occasion when Willy remembers a day dream of a time when his brother Ben came to visit him, Willy sends the boys to steal lumber from a new construction of a neighboring building and proudly says "I got a couple of fearless characters there" (50) The father's positive response to what the children do cause them to take the action of stealing as a means of encouraging danger with confidence and resolution, and what is even more, to boast with excessive rejoice of their powerful manhood.

Due to Willy's view based on these two basic principles, physical attractiveness and courage, or "initiative" as he calls it, as the necessary conditions not only for success in life but also to justify any immoral action, Biff's life becomes later a meaningless reality. Eventually, we discover that Biff has not been able to keep a good job because he has stolen from every person he has worked for and he has even been taken to jail.

A careful understanding of Biff's thefts throughout his life needs to be seriously studied. In the common sense of Biff's mind, stealing has always been a way to be gratified and recognized since he was always acknowledged by his father in his childhood for the achievement of taking things without their owner's consent. Now that Biff is an adult, he equally expects to be congratulated by his superiors by subconsciously demonstrating how fearless he is, and furthermore, to reassure himself how well-liked he is up to the point that he will be excused for his mischievous behaviour. For Biff, everything he does is morally correct. Stealing is a good action that gives him importance because according to his father, such an act perfectly conforms with a right conduct and with a sense of "initiative".

Obviously, Biff Loman completely ignores the fact that those two principles inflicted by his father are not real values. No one can expect to have fortune granted in life just for the simple materialistic conception of being physically well-liked. A human being needs a deeper system of values to adhere to in his/her life. Ironically, after many years, Willy and Biff realize how fortunate their "not well-liked" neighbour Bernard is now that he is a professional lawyer and has a nice family; in other words, he has settled down. On the contrary, Willy Loman is in a great panic because he is finally fired from the Wagner Company at an old age and his son Biff is sadly sanken in a nonsense existence due to his belief in a code of false values. So Biff and his father are in the same critical condition because after all, Willy Loman has never been a successful man. He still has debts of his household appliances and he even borrows money from his friend Charlie every week to maintain his family. He owns nothing and his economical situation is an absolute crisis. The ironical point in this fact is that although Willy Loman's entire life has been in agreement with his stubborn ideas of personal attractiveness, he has not obtained any personal progress. Such a fruitless result leads to the idea that he has depended on a false system of human principles and has mistakenly influenced his children with a wrong morality which has led them to undergo a dreadful fate.

The climatic event related to Biff's thefts is presented almost at the end of the play when, at the present time, he decides to visit Oliver, the owner of a company for whom Biff had worked long time ago, to request a loan so that Biff can finally settle down in business. There, Biff unexpectedly steals Oliver's fountain pen and runs away. At this point, Biff seems to have a pathological mania of stealing things when he feels uncomfortable. Biff explains to his father that when he was at Oliver's he took the fountain pen but he "never intended to do it", he "didn't exactly steal it" (111). His words give us insight of the serious disease he has for taking things. Biff did not actually have any deliberate intention to do such an immoral act. However, he dared to take the fountain pen as a result of being ignored by Oliver who did not remember him and kept him waiting almost all day. In other words, Biff cannot stand of being disregarded by others because he is over-filled with a sense of self-importance. He assumes he has such a great initiative and such a valuable personal attractiveness that everyone has to look upon him attentively with great recognition. Therefore, Biff is not prepared to accept that Oliver does not remember who he is, and consequently at the moment

of being ignored he unconsciously grabs the fountain pen as a pathological impulse in view of granting his wish of being well known and well-liked as when he was so popular in highschool.

But if Biff was so popular in his childhood, in spite of his constant thefts, then why and exactly when did he start to get lost? Biff had definitely had to undergo one overwhelming incident that easily marked an abrupt change in his whole life. The significant event that helps explain Biff's current alienation is described in his sudden trip to Boston. Before 1928, Biff was very popular at football in highschool, but he had academic problems with math. Since his life was determined by the theory of being always well-liked, he is shocked when he discovers he has flunked math. He himself cannot assimilate how such a well known boy could have such a failure in math if he was convinced he had all of the physical appealing and the charming personality to be passed by the teacher. Desperately he takes a trip to Boston where his father is working so that Willy can go and talk to the teacher. Biff says about the teacher "Birnbaum refused absolutely. I begged him pop, but he won't give me those points. You gotta talk to him . . . because if he saw the kind of person you are, and you just talk to him in your way, I'm sure he'd come through for me . . . He'd like you . . ." (118). Biff's words show how much Biff depends on his father's premise of being well-liked. So far, Biff maintains the firm conviction that his father is an extraordinarily important person who can go to his school and impress his teacher in order to make Biff pass math. Tragically, at that Boston hotel, Biff discovers that his own father has an affair with a secret lover. For Biff it has already been hard enough to flunk math. In addition, the fact of finding out his father's immoral activity intensifies his painful frustration because it is more than a young boy can tolerate in just one day.

It is reasonably implied that this scene in Boston provokes the initiation of Biff's alienation problem. Biff discovers that his father's values are untrue. This is the first time Biff sees his father in a very realistic way. Biff has idealized his father at a such outstanding level, that when he sees reality, he dares to accuse his father of being a liar. "Don't touch me, you- liar! . . . You, fake, you phony little fake! You fake" (121). Biff's reaction is of absolute anger and disillusion so that he finally burst into tears and runs away.

We as the audience wonder why Biff could never overcome this problem. In theory, Biff could have continued his own way and could have worked on his individual goals without the need of having his father, because after all, life has to go on. The logical bearing we can conclude of this particular case is that Biff is unable to recover because he simply do not have an independent system of values. He has always depended on his father's values as part of his own life so that he becomes a lost individual when he rejects his father's false principles of life and discovers he has none of his own to adhere to.

Now at the present time, 1942 just right after Biff has stolen Oliver's fountain pen and after so many years of having denied his father's philosophy of life, Biff finally reaches a state of self- realization. First, he intends to make his father aware

of his mistaken life in that Willy has always lived in illusion and does not want to accept that his values are false. "Biff: `You are going to hear the truth- What you are and what I am! . . . The man don't know who we are . . . We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house" (130). However, Willy is so close-minded that he refuses to listen to his son's words. Willy does not want to recognize he has always been wrong. Biff also says "I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them" (132). Willy simply replies "You vengeful, spiteful mutt" suggesting that Biff is the wrong one Willy has to defend himself from. Willy's offensive words also indicate that he cannot approve the fact that he has built his whole life in wrong dreams and that all he has wanted to be has just been a mere illusion.

The second step of Biff's self-awareness involves his whole understanding of the causes of his constant alienation. "I ran down eleven flights with a pen in my hand today . . . And suddenly I stopped . . . I saw – the sky. I saw the things that I love in this world. And I looked at the pen and said to myself, why the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? . . . When all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am" (132). Biff is finally completely aware that he is not a good person because he has stolen from every place he has worked, and that he is immoral due to the distortion of his father's values which intruded upon him for a significant period of his life. After the Boston incident Biff is no longer successful, he never intends to go to university, he is not well-liked and he has not a correct conduct, that is, he suddenly is forced to confront a cruel reality. He says to his father "I stole myself out of every job since high school! And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air. I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is" (131). The great relevance of the play is that Biff achieves a realistic understanding not only of his father, but most importantly of himself. It is implied that from now on Biff will be able to develop his own potencialities as a human being even though his affirmation of "I'm nothing! I'm nothing pop. Can't you understand that? There is no spite in it anymore. I'm just what I am, that's all" (132). By starting recognizing what his problem is, he can look for a solution to find himself. In fact, at the end of the play when Willy has committed suicide in order to leave Biff the insurance policy, and ironically, after sacrificing his life in defense of his obstinate philosophical ideas and his sons, Biff keeps accepting that Willy Loman had always had wrong dreams and that he had never known who he had been. This thought demonstrates that Biff holds the hope to be better and is eager to look for his own system of values. On the contrary, Happy who had been the neglected son since Willy had focused his attention exclusively on Biff, seems to be lost at the end of the play. Happy explains that he is going to show that Willy Loman did not die in vain because he had had good dreams. Obviously Happy's determination is a hard task to accomplish because Willy Loman was nothing of what he wanted to be.

Because of this family treatment between Willy and Biff, we can also see that Death of a Salesman is not only a social play. It also carries a permanent and

current matter that can be part of our own family and our own identity. It lets us think about our own system of values and teaches us to reach a realization in view of evaluating our actions and our way of assuming life. Death of a Salesman is the direct portrait of our daily existence, and of course, it makes us think what we have done wrong so far.

NOTE

The cites mentioned in the essay were taken from Death of A Salesman printed by Penguin Editions.

