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Diversity Within
Death of a Salesman: Behavior Characteristics

Death of a Salesman is a 1949 theatrical play depicting an American family's struggles. Since 1949 it has become one of the most famous, award-winning plays in history. The playwright, Arthur Miller wrote this incredible play in less than 2 months, and yet it remains a world-renowned play and a focus of many discussions. The diverse behavior and personality of each character proves the depth and importance of this play. The main character Willy Loman is a salesman that is in crisis, losing his job, and coming to the realization that his sons are losing his respect. His wife, Linda Loman, is doing her best to support her aging husband and her two sons, Biff and Happy. Biff is Willy's eldest son, he is constantly arguing and trying to earn his father's respect. Happy is the youngest son; being the younger of the two has kept him in his brother's shadow, leading to confusion in his own life. Each main character in this play represents many conflicting differences.

According to Diversity Consciousness, diversity is referred to as, "all of the ways in which people are different"(1). Arthur Miller's play has been analyzed for many different topics including, depicting the American dream, focusing on Willy's sanity, and the Jewish background. However, analyzing the main characters' behaviors and differences could prove to answer each one of these topics. Each of topics coincides with the behaviors that the characters depict in this play. Willy Loman's sanity, or lack there of might be caused because of his Jewish heritage and his struggle with achieving the

American dream. The conflict of diversity we see in this play affects each character's actions.

Death of a Salesman has two acts that switch between two background cities, New York, where the Loman's reside and Boston, where Willy Loman works at times. The two backgrounds set the mood for some of the scenes. For example the beginning act shows Willy returning home from a sales trip, lugging along his two large cases demonstrating his lack of success. He is tired, confused and rejected. These characteristic behaviors play a key role in Willy's relationship towards the people around him, especially his wife, Linda. In the first scene he displays his lack of awareness in reality. Willy's mind constantly moves from his past to the present. It is never clearly said if his age is affecting his lack of concentration or if it's his lifetime experience as a travelling salesman. Through the script I can interpret that Willy seems to be selling his personality just as much as the unknown product he sells (Pelister). A great example of this is when Willy's neighbor, Charley endorses him saying, " He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoe shine. And when they start not smiling back- that's an earthquake" (Pelister).

Biff is Willy's first son. Throughout the play we begin to notice Biff swaying between two thoughts. One thought is brought up with the conversation between him and Charley, their neighbor. As a loyal son, Biff is constantly trying to understand and impress his father. Charley's explanation of Biff's father sums it up perfectly. Willy's disappointment stems from his lack of success as a salesman that in turn invalidates him as a successful father. Biff sees this disappointment in his father and assumes it for his own fault rather than his father's. Biff's second thought is that his father does not approve

his lifestyle or the fact that Biff does not want to become a salesman. Biff has not come to the realization that success will not come to him but rather he has to seek it out. Throughout the two acts he appears to come up short, not knowing which career path to take and whether or not to grow up. This confusion looks to be stemming from his relationship with his father. The lack of communication Biff and his father experience throughout their relationship leads to the behavior characteristics that Biff displays during the play.

Happy, Willy's second son does not show as many distinct behaviors as Willy or Biff, he tends to display a lazy medium between his father and brother. According to the script in which Linda defines Happy, "Happy is a philandering bum" (Novick, Julius). Through the entire 2 acts, Happy seems to be living behind his brother's shadow and in the protection of his mother, Linda. He displays a "happy go lucky" personality. As well as Biff, he is constantly seeking for his father's approval but unlike Biff, he is seeking his father's acknowledgement also. Between the two brothers, Happy seems to be the one aware of his father's shortcomings as an aging man while Biff is struggling to understand the aging process of his father. I couldn't help but notice that Happy is living with his own struggles as well. He has yet to face reality as he is still living with his parents awaiting a career and success.

Linda Loman is introduced in the beginning of the play as a loving, jovial wife unaffected by her husband's shortcomings (Pelister). In fact, she expresses an admiration for her husband and the struggles he's had. While reading the script I found her to be the most successful and admirable character in the play. She was the most successful because of her continuously calm behavior. Linda never strayed from her husband, never showed

her disappointments or stopped supporting her children and husband even through their confusion of their own lives. It seemed to me that while the Loman family was bordering on insanity, she was the rock that kept them in reality, especially her husband. While reading the script I was confused when the affair that Willy had did not come up in a conversation between Willy and Linda. Linda clearly knew that another woman had been sleeping with her husband, so why did her behavior remain so calm? When Miller was writing this play he seemed to keep a focus on the confused relationship of Willy and his son Biff. However, I think the relationship between Willy and Linda was more confusing because of the lack of discussion. Linda was never the one distraught with each conversation that they had. She was always the one asking him questions about his day, his successes and troubles. At the beginning of Act I, the first conversation they have is when he is returning home, disoriented. Linda displays the worried, caring wife asking him, "What happened?", "Don't you feel well?" (Pelister). This type of behavior she presents is what keeps the audiences intrigued. She has the moral compass of preserving, protecting and defending her husband (Novick, Julius). I believe Miller intentionally created this behavior to remind the audiences that there was a sane person in the Loman family.

Through my research with behavior characteristics I noticed an underlying issue, conflict with communication. According to Communication in Our Lives textbook, communication is defined as, "a systematic process in which people interact with and through symbols to create and interpret meanings"(503) The word conflict, in Communication in Our Lives textbook, is outlined as, "among people who depend on each other, the expression of different views, interests, and goals and the perception of

these differences as incompatible or as opposed by the other” (504). Both these definitions help to explain certain behaviors and relationships between the characters in the play. Even though symbols of communication in the play are not shown the lack of communication is definitely demonstrated. Willy Loman does not use a systematic approach of communication with any conversation he has during the play. There are several factors contributing to that issue. He is aging and with that, he can be easily confused and disoriented. He has spent much of his life “confusing materialist success with a worthiness to be loved” (Cardullo, Bert). He measures success by how many people are at a salesman funeral (Pelister). Another link that Communication in Our Lives textbook wrote about was the link between communication and self worth. When others are more successful around us our own achievements are lost (37). This leads to communication with fundamental problems such as jealousy, and blame. A perfect example of this is Willy’s communication with his neighbor Charley. After Willy is fired at age 63, his neighbor offers him a job to help out with the financial burden. Willy refuses the job offer simply to avoid the honest communication that he is struggling. Rather, he tries to protect himself as a success and a salesman.

The definition of conflict emphasizes several great examples of behavior characteristics and relationships in *Death of a Salesman*. The first conflict relationship is that between Willy and his son Biff. Their emotional and intellectual behaviors clash together. Willy is struggling to prove himself on his own interests and goals as a salesman, while Biff is struggling to prove himself simply to his father. Their goals are conflicting and incompatible. The behavior of Biff is to win his father over, but his father has too many conflicts of his own to realize that his son needs that approval. Another

conflict Willy is dealing with is between his past and present. While talking to Charley in his home, he shifts to talking to his brother Ben, a hallucination from the past. Willy is still struggling with the conflict of the successes his brother had rather than him. One conversation seemed very relevant to Willy's present behavior. From the script, Ben says, "When I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich" (Novick, Julius). Willy continues by offering that Ben brings his successes to Willy too. This inner conflict that Willy continues to hold on to is just one of the behavior characteristics of *Death of a Salesman*.

In concluding, *Death of a Salesman* will always be a great play with a deep meaning of life, human behavior and diversity. Arthur Miller created a story of a family that did not have many successes. The Loman's show that the American dream is not always achievable. The behaviors of humans are immense, confusing, and irrational. With each character in this play the different behaviors define how diversity and the approaches to different behaviors are important to every relationship and society.

Work's Cited

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