
Plot Analysis of Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller

Death of a salesman

On the surface, the plot in Death of a salesman seems rather simple. This is in fact not the case, when you dig deeper into the themes and motives of the novel. It deals with the core value of modern American society, The American Dream. This is put in relation to the painful conflicts of a working class family in New York, who throughout their life has struggled to make a decent living and fulfil the American dream. The story revolves around the protagonist Willy Loman, a travelling salesman, and the rest of his family. It consists of his wife Linda and his two sons Happy and Biff. After a long life on the road, Willy is exhausted and has started to hallucinate about the past. This makes the novel quite difficult to read, as there are very few distinctions to when Willy is hallucinating, and when it is reality. The main theme in Death of a salesman is without a doubt the American dream. This dream has been the basis of Willy's life, and he has a fundamental belief in it, that almost reach religious proportions. He has passed this trust in the American dream on to his two sons, which has quite dramatic consequences for them both.

For Biff his father's belief in him has caused him to become a philandering bum, unable to keep a regular job and fulfil his father's and his own ambitions. Furthermore, he has also become a kleptomaniac because of Willy's poor fathering skills and his inability to set boundaries throughout his childhood. Happy, on the other hand shares his father's belief in the American dream, and this has led to him conceiving himself, just like Willy does. He doesn't want to face the miserable reality of his life, and instead lies and cheats his way through life. He has inherited all of the worst traits from Willy, and doesn't even share his noble dream of making something of himself and his family. Instead he just wants to become rich, so that he can prove to his superiors that he is in fact worth something. The tragedy in all of this is that Willy has misunderstood the basic concept of the American dream. He believes that if you are just well liked, and is served a certain helping of luck by fate, you will make it big in life. This is wrong, because the essential message in the American dream is that if you, and only you, work hard enough for your dreams, only then will they come through. This means that you can rely on anyone else's help if you want to make it. This misunderstanding is what leads to Willy's suicide, because he thinks he can give his boys a head start in life, by granting them his death, and the 20.000 \$ that tags along. This could be right of him, but it would demand that the boys in fact had the abilities and ambitions to push through, which neither of them has.

Even though Death of a salesman probably wasn't intended to be a commentary on social inheritance, it is obvious throughout the story that Willy, Biff and Happy has been very affected by their childhood: Willy was abandoned by his father and brother, and has therefore sought to be well liked throughout his life. Biff was over-encouraged by his father who believed too much in him, and is therefore unable to keep a job in the present. Happy wasn't given enough attention, and always stood in the shadow of his older brother and therefore seeks attention from the ladies and his superiors, even though this forces him to lie and cheat. Freedom from want, by Norman Rockwell is painted in the same period as Death of a salesman. It expresses, as Death of a salesman does too, the American dream.

The main difference in this case, is that Rockwell is far from critical, while Arthur Millers novel deals with the consequences of this dream. In the painting, the main focus is the giant turkey in the middle of the picture. This focus is further emphasised by the fact that light is shining on it from the window in the background. This forms a sort of halo around the turkey, and the grandparents serving it. The painting is an expression of the American Dream comes true: Nobody is suffering, and the whole family is gathered around a delicate and plentiful meal. A symbol of the fact that no one is starving or suffering is that it is only a few of the participants in the meal, who are actually looking at the turkey being served. The rest are looking at each other and conversing. Another remarkable thing in the painting is that all of the youngsters in the painting are looking towards the front. This can be interpreted as them looking forward into the future and furthering the American dream. Freedom from want exemplifies the dream that Willy has, and shares with many Americans, in its purest form. It also states the ideal of the core family, which is prosperous, generous and harmonic. These are three traits that the Loman family has a severe lack of. The West in Death of a salesman symbolises the potential that Biff possess, in spite of his failed education and career. He has realised what he is good at in life, and has gained at least some self-knowledge. That is why he journeys west, just like the 18th century pioneers did.