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Becoming Biff

Motivations

There are several motivations for what Biff does in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. He is completely arrogant in the beginning of the play. He has been praised by his father so much that he begins to steal and think it is fine. In the book, Biff tells Willy he stole a football, stating, "Well, I borrowed it from the locker room". Willy just replies, saying, "...he's gotta play with a regulation ball, doesn't he?" (Miller, Arthur). Willy justifies Biff's actions, even if they are inappropriate and clearly wrong. This makes Biff highly confident. Biff is driven by his father's approval, which never falters. He is not worried about failing math because his father brushes it off, saying, "Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand. But when he gets out in the business world, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him" (Miller, Arthur). Academics are obviously not priorities, which motivates Biff to continue acting arrogant. There is no doubt to him that he is great as long as his father believes in him. When he finds Willy cheating, Biff closes down and loses all hope and respect. He even exclaims, "Don't touch me, you-liar!" (Miller, Arthur). He loses his way in life because his father was his only guide. He is motivated to continue stealing, as his father taught him that it was appropriate. He is motivated to believe he can do whatever he wants in life and be successful, all because his father said he was attractive enough to succeed. He is swayed to make amends with his father because his mother begs and asks to give him hope. He is forced to take an interview at a business company to try and please his father. Biff finally drives himself to break down and talk to his father, at which his father only scolds him and accuses him. Willy even goes as far as to say, "...you cut down your life for spite!" (Miller, Arthur). He accuses his son

of being spiteful for following his own path instead of his. However, talking to Willy was the only thing Biff could do to try and fix things. He breaks down into his father's arms because he needs to show him that he still loves him, even if he had no respect for him. He loses hope in his father ever accepting him (Father-son Relationship). But with his death, Biff is motivated to start a new life the way he wants to, as his father is no longer preventing him from accomplishing what he wants.

Backstory

For *Death of a Salesman*, the backstory is partially explained throughout the book as Willy has flashbacks. Before the play begins, the audience initially has very little information on the Loman family, especially on Biff. Biff was the oldest child, and therefore Willy had a lot of expectations for what he would grow up to be. He pictured his son following in his footsteps, as he was very proud of his own path. Willy allows Biff to become arrogant, and lets Biff walk all over with minimal rules because he believes he is going to be great. Willy even states, "Be liked and you will never want" (Miller, Arthur). As a result, Biff gets cocky and ignorant, and he ceases to care about academics that could have gotten him much further in life. Warnings never faltered him, as he always felt his father could get him out of anything. In the stage directions, it even says that Willy "laughs at the theft" of the football with Biff. (Miller, Arthur). He doesn't mind his crimes. Biff believes that his father's values are the most important, and so when his father accepts him, he feels like he is succeeding. The reality is that Willy is holding Biff back from finding his own way in life, as well as not giving him basic lessons in character. Biff believes that his father is a role-model, but when he finds him cheating on his mother, that belief becomes a lie. Biff comes to realize his father has gone against his family. It is assumed that Biff dropped out of summer school and left all academics behind. He never went to college or got a higher education, and as a result has a problem finding jobs. He enters every job interview with high hopes that he will be hired and instantly liked, just because his father has raised him to believe that his success is based off of how much people like him. He tries to strive for the only jobs he has ever heard about, the office jobs and the

salesman jobs his father has always told him to pursue. When Biff starts to look for jobs, he realizes that he cannot stand a job that his unfaithful father has wanted him to have. He realizes he would rather use hard labor and be outside all day. Farming makes him feel free and away from the business life that he was raised in. Biff knows truly that this is where he belongs. However, he returns home for a visit and finds his father both not well and also very unhappy with how Biff abandoned the goals he had of being a salesman (Death of a Salesman).

After the play, it can be assumed that Biff goes out to farm to make a living in a way that is pursuing his own dreams. Biff has always believed that, "Men built like we are should be working out in the open" (Miller, Arthur). He will always feel in his heart that he may have been a cause for Willy to take his own life. He knows that his father just wanted to see someone follow his dream, and he will always feel a little bit of guilt for knowing that he let his father down. However, Biff realizes he must live his own destiny and develop his own skills, as shown at the end of the book when Biff says, "I know who I am, kid" (Miller, Arthur). He moves away to farm and makes enough of a living to survive in decent conditions. Whenever he has time, he visits his mother to make sure she is doing fine, and he makes sure that they stay in contact periodically. He eventually gets married, and the couple lives under a tight budget, but happily. Biff spends his days working very hard and following his own path.

Playing the Character

Biff is a particularly difficult character to play within *Death of a Salesman*. He is perhaps the only character who grows and changes. Linda and Happy both seem to stay relatively the same throughout the play, only with short changes in emotions. Willy seems to lose his mind throughout the play, but he doesn't completely change his personality permanently, but just through short periods where his mind wanders and he expresses different feelings. Biff is the only character who discovers that he is a complete failure in his life, and with this, his outlook on life changes. During the play, there are parts where Biff has to play a confused and lost character, especially in the beginning parts of the book and before he tries

to make Willy understand that he is a failure. He is not confused or lost in the way that Willy may be, but he walks around with unsureness about his place in life. He needs to plead at scenes where he begs to follow his own dreams. There needs to be confusion on his face when he finds out that Willy is suicidal. The inner conflict Biff has throughout the play needs to be shown.

When there are flashbacks on Biff's life, Biff needs to be happy. There always has to be a bounce in his step. His confidence never wavers, and his smile flashes every chance he gets. In the play, Miller uses stage directions such as "Biff is prancing around" and "He laughs confidently" to display that Biff needs to hold his head up high and be cocky (Miller, Arthur). He needs to realize that he is Biff, the arrogant son of a fantastic and successful father. He wants to grow up like Willy, and answers all Willy's comments enthusiastically. There is never a moment where his voice falters or stutters, and he speaks with clarity and good eye contact to every person. He always is clean-shaven, dressed in something that makes him look like more than he is worth, and his hair is always combed to perfection. He has a ball in his hand whenever he can get one, and he runs around trying to show off his football skills and trying to practice, as the stage directions also mentions that he is "practicing passing the ball" (Miller, Arthur).

When Biff finds Willy cheating, there needs to be a sudden realization. The hope and pride needs to drain out of Biff. His smile needs to fade and his hands have to drop by his side, and he must go "quickly and weeping fully" (Miller, Arthur). He avoids eye contact and can even almost trip as he tries to leave quickly.

When Biff confronts Willy at the end of the play, there must be a fierce look in his eye. He must follow Willy around the house and block him off from leaving the room. Miller expresses Biff in the stage directions, stating that he "looks into Willy's face, as if to find the answer there" (Miller, Arthur). He looks Willy in the eye and speaks aggressively, yelling at certain parts. He needs to try to drill Willy with the idea that he needs to be free to choose his future without guilt. At the end, he must slump into his arms

as though all of his energy and effort is gone. He has to sob as though his father is already physically dead.

At the funeral, Biff should have his shoulders back. He is free to live his life and follow his path. He helps his mother up and guides her. He must show determination to live his own life and deny becoming a salesman. He must be opposed to Happy's offer to stay.

Relationships

Biff and Willy have a long history, and it is one that has truly shaped both of the characters. Willy generally idealized and cherished his older son when he was growing up. Biff had a lot of respect for Willy and Willy appreciated how he wanted to grow up with his advice and with his approval. Willy almost tries to live his life through Biff, and starts to obsess over his experiences and successes. Biff was the perfect definition of Willy's idea of success; he was an attractive and well-liked young man, and one Willy thought would easily succeed based off of these characteristics alone. When Biff finds his father cheating, he loses all the respect that he had for his father. He even screams, "You fake! You phony little fake!" (Miller, Arthur). He realizes his father is not the honest man that he looked up to, but rather an unfaithful one that was betraying his family. He spends years of his life confused about who he is, and he realizes that he never had a chance to create his own path. However, Biff feels torn between pleasing his old father, who is in a mentally unstable state, and pursuing his own dreams. He wants to please his father, but eventually comes to terms with how much of a failure he is. At the end of the play, he tries to convince Willy that he is nothing and he tries to get his father to accept him and his ways. However, Willy is extremely angry and starts to yell, "Spite, spite, is the word of your undoing!" (Miller, Arthur). Eventually, they both embrace in a hug that reassures the fact that they still love each other. Even though they never agree on Biff's life decisions, this hug shows that both characters may have had their differences, but at the end they try to make amends, mostly for Willy's sake (Father-son Relationship).

Biff clearly cares for his mother. He always seemed to respect her, which may even be heightened by the fact that Biff feels bad that his father cheated. He seems to have a generally close relationship to his mother, but they also have their arguments. When Linda tells Biff of Willy's mental unstableness, Biff clearly takes his mother's concerns seriously. Biff promises to try to get an interview that will make his father happy. He wants to please his mother and is willing to put aside his differences with his father to try to give him a little hope. He promises to try and fix their relationship, and he listens to Linda about needing to help Willy. Although Linda yells at Biff towards the end of the book, Biff knew he couldn't listen and had to approach his father about the situation. At the end of the play, it is evident that they still care about each other. Biff takes time to pick Linda up at the funeral. He says things to her like, "Come along, Mom" and "Let's go, Mom" to let her know he is there for her (Miller, Arthur). The little actions that Biff displays towards Linda show that he clearly cares about her and at least tries to follow her directions.

Biff and Happy seem to be close brothers. They grew up close to one another, and even shared a room. They talk about past flings and about memories they had in the household, which shows that they grew up together. However, although he may not say it, Happy always seems jealous of Biff. Willy always appreciated Biff more because he was his first-born, attractive son. Willy saw an entire future in Biff, but never mentions his goals for Happy. Because of this, Happy feels he needs to gain the attention of his father. Even after his death, Happy claims that he needs to stay and work towards becoming a businessman. He claims, "I'm gonna show you and everybody else...He had a good dream" (Miller, Arthur). He didn't want his father's name to be in vain. He doesn't go with Biff to start anew in a different area, but still tries to achieve Willy's dream. Happy and Biff never really fight in a violent way, and although they still want to go different routes in terms of their career paths, they always seem in agreement and never in bad terms with each other.

Citations

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