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Essay 3

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Like Father Like Son

A son may be the spitting image of his father in many cases, but often times, the favorite child barely resembles his father at all. In Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Biff Loman is the firstborn to Linda and Willy Loman whose shadow continuously covers his younger brother, Happy. While Biff and Happy both held their father in high regard, they shared traits with him that would lead to decline in success. Biff is an animated character because his actions and thoughts change throughout the play, whereas Happy and Willy are static characters because they do not change their actions in order to become the success that they want to be. *Death of a Salesman* is set in the 1940s and the American dream of being "the man on top" plays an important role in motivating the characters. Children strived to achieve greatness through business and making a considerable amount of money. If success was not reached, however, it was common to lie to others in order to make one appear to be great. Throughout the play, Willy and his family lie about what they are to keep up the facade that everything is perfect in their home and work life. They lie to each other, their neighbors, and themselves. The way that Willy Loman played the father role led his boys to hold him in high regard, but lying to them about himself and themselves would hurt them later in life. Unreachable expectations were set for the boys who thought that they had reached them because they were led by their parents to believe so. One son was much like Willy but was ignored, and the other had a few of his attributes but

did not have the same dream that Willy did. Upon learning of his father being counterfeit, the eldest son's attitude changed, but the younger son still saw him as a golden apple.

Biff and Happy, Willy Loman's only two sons, loved and respected their father because of the fatherly image that he presented himself as to them. Willy thought that his sons were not capable of doing anything wrong and believed that they were so well-liked that people would accept whatever his sons chose to do. Irving Jacobson points out in "Family Dreams in *Death of a Salesman*" that Willy looks past the fact that his sons are being criminals and sees it as they are taking initiative (Jacobson 114). Upon hearing of Biff's football theft in order to practice, Willy laughs while telling him to return it, but then says that the coach will congratulate him for his initiative (Miller 2119). Willy should have reprimanded Biff for stealing the football, but instead he praised him for it, failing his job as a father to discipline his sons. Kayla R. Waters states in her scholarly journal, "The Hungry-for-Attention Metaphor: Integrating Narrative and Behavioral Therapy for Families With Attention Seeking Children," that "the most effective parenting style involves warm, positive attention plus corrective attention for problem behavior" (Waters 212). Biff received nothing other than positive attention from Willy, even when he deserved punishment. By not punishing Biff on several occasions, Willy led Biff to view him as more of a friend than a father. Lois Tyson's article, "CRITICAL READINGS: The Psychological Politics of The American Dream: *Death of a Salesman* and The Case for an Existential Dialectics," demonstrates the fact that one of the only things Willy wanted from life was love and respect from his sons and wife (Tyson 234). He also desperately wanted his family to be unified to each other and the past generations (Jacobson 116). Believing that their father was all that he said he was, Biff and Happy helped their father pull through several years of working solely on commission (Tyson 217). Although they saw their father in a golden light and loved

him, Biff and Happy Loman's opinion of their father would inevitably change as their life progressed. Being held in high regard by his boys, Willy was content with how they were transforming into young men during their high school years, but he neglected to teach them how to be a man. Terry Thompson declares in his article, "Miller's DEATH OF A SALESMAN," that "the two boys never learn how to act their own age; they never learn to offer anything but an attractive surface" (Thompson 247). No matter how hard Willy tried, he would not have been able to teach his boys about being a man because he had not learned how to be one himself. In a flashback, Willy recalls one of Ben's visits where he asked Ben to tell his sons about his own father to show them what a man he was (Miller 2129). Because his father left when he was a child and his older brother left shortly thereafter, Willy had no tangible example to go by when trying to teach his boys how to be men.

Although Biff and Happy both loved Willy and admired him, his constant lying to them about themselves and himself would bring harm to them later in life. Biff and Happy both learned to lie about themselves from their father. Jasmine Maki from the Grand Forks Herald says in her paper on lying that people are encouraged to lie during childhood; "Children see their parents lie and often times their lies go unpunished, so the act of lying becomes an acceptable way to interact with people" (Maki 1). Willy showed the boys that lying about their success was just something that everyone did. The boys saw the lies as truth when they were younger; and while Biff eventually came to the realization that his father was not as he said he was, Happy believed the lies presumably until his own death. Research shows that lying can be detected only fifty to fifty-four percent of the time (4). This is especially true when the lies come from a trusted loved one like Willy was to Biff and Happy. When they are grown men, Biff points out to Happy that buyers had been laughing at their father for years, contrary to what their father had

told them (Miller 2135). In nearly every conversation that Willy has, a lie spews out of his mouth. During conversations that last around ten minutes, the average person lies in twenty percent of that time (Maki 1). Willy, however, is not the average person since he lies to everyone that he meets about his whole persona. Willy's fabrications make him incapable of accepting his own failures or what he perceives to be a failure made by Biff (Jacobson 112). He breaks down mentally when Howard fires him and is too prideful to ask his boys for money; he even attempts to keep up the facade of success to Howard by saying that his sons are "working on a very big deal" (Miller 2146). The incapability of accepting failure hurts not only Willy's psyche, but also his family. Linda must pretend that she believes the fifty dollars that Willy brings home every week is not borrowed from their neighbor, Charley (2133). It caused her and her boys great pain to see her husband suffer like that. They had to go along with the lies that Willy told them to keep him happy while they could see that he was not mentally well. Studies show that lying can contribute to health problems, as seen in Willy's mental stability (Maki 2). He told lies so much that they became truth to him, resulting in pain and heartache to him and his family when forced to face the real truth.

The lies that became truth for Willy caused him to set unrealistic expectations for his boys that they inevitably will not reach. He believes that both of his sons will become great men in the business world and leads them to believe that they actually are great men. In agreement with Terry Neinhuis's critical analysis of *Death of a Salesman*, "Willy Loman has a defective sense of self...[and] passes these superficial values on to his two sons" (Neinhuis 4). Biff, Happy, and Willy go through their lives thinking that the world will accept them because of their looks and charm (Thompson 247). Willy constantly says that his boys are built like Greek gods and are "well-liked," giving them a false self-image of what they are and what they are capable

of being. Biff will never become the great salesman that his father wants him to be because that is not his dream, and Happy will not become the success he dreams of because he acts just as his father did. Regardless, all three men think that they have done great things and are on their way to great success. Biff eventually sees through this false image of greatness presented to him by his family when he says, “You’re practically full of it! We all are! And I’m through with it” (Miller 2171). Only Biff would see through the lies that covered up the realization that he never had, and never would, reach the expectations that his father had set for him.

Although Biff and Willy were different in many ways and similar in few, Willy gave most of his time to his eldest-born son; while Willy and Happy shared nearly all of each other’s attributes, Happy got no recognition or time from his father. It is shown scientifically in “Gender and Birth Order as Determinants of Parental Behavior” by Heidi Keller and Ulrike Zach that parents pay special attention to firstborn children when it comes to things such as, but not limited to, interaction time and consistency (Keller 177). Both Linda and Willy ignored Happy throughout the play by just brushing him off when he was trying to get their attention. Kayla Waters said that two-thirds of 500 parents were concerned with spoiling their babies (Waters 210). This was not the case with Happy and Biff though, as Linda and Willy clearly were not concerned with spoiling Biff and did not neglect Happy for fear of spoiling him too much. Happy has a need to be on top because of his father’s focus being only on Biff. Because of this, he attempts to compete with him but cannot do so on an appropriate level (Tyson 112). He uses sex with women as a form of tally system and boasts about the fiancées of co-workers that he has slept with to Biff. Even though Happy was ignored by his father, they both used women and financial success to heighten their self-image (Tyson 226-227). It was ironic how Willy ignored the son that wanted the same dream as he and acted in the same way that he did. Willy, Biff, and

Happy all lie to themselves at some point; telling themselves that they are greater than they actually are. Terry Thompson notes that neither of them are able to assume the role of being a responsible adult (Thompson 246). They cannot and will not take responsibility for their negative actions. While all three men lie to themselves and others, it is Biff and Willy that share the passion of working with their hands. In Willy, this trait is shown when he talks to Charley about putting up the ceiling in the living room for he had done it all by himself (Miller 2126). However, the ability of father and son to do carpentry work does not mean that they shared the same dream. While Willy wanted Biff to be a success in the business world like he thought he was, all that Biff wanted to do was sit on a ranch and herd horses.

Despite holding their father in high regard and sharing some of his attributes, Biff and Happy would learn of their father's superficiality. Biff learned of this counterfeit appearance when he walked in on his father with "the woman." Lois Tyson states that this hurt Biff deeply, so much so that he rejected the personal relationship that he and Willy had throughout his childhood (Tyson 230). He refused to follow his father's dream from that point on and would continuously fight with him over simple statements that ought to have been nothing. Biff would, however, come to realize that his father needed help with his mental state and would do his best to help it. He comes to tell one of the call-girls, Miss Foresythe, that his father is "A fine, troubled prince. A hardworking, unappreciated prince" (Miller 2162). Recalling all that his father had done for him and his family, Biff showed sympathy toward his father instead of the resentment that he had harbored since he found out about the woman. Happy, however, is not sympathetic of his father and deserts him in the restaurant. He also sends him to Florida when his mental state becomes embarrassing (2115). Resentment for his father has built up through the years of being cast aside like a dirty towel. Kayla Waters states in her research that the

security of an attachment in infancy transfers into the relationships one will build as an adult (Waters 211). Willy did not build as strong a relationship with Happy as he did with Biff because he spent all of his time with Biff and completely ignored Happy when they were children. This is why Biff was more capable of displaying sympathy to his father's condition than Happy was. Happy did not see the fake that his father was like Biff did, he only saw a salesman trying to make his way in the world. Even when Biff said that they were all fakes Happy denied it and continued to say that they were all more than what they actually were. After Willy's death, when Biff said that his father had the wrong dream, Happy protested and said that "Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have—to come out number-one-man" (Miller 2175). He would continue to follow his father's misguided dream, seeing his father as the hard-working, successful man that he had known as child.

By following his father's misguided dream, Happy demonstrated the old regard that he had for his father as a child. He also showed the static nature of his character by not changing the way that he thought or acted after discovering the truth about himself and his family. Even though Happy was ignored as a child, he became much like his father; and Biff, who was never left alone, did not have much in common with his father. Both boys loved their father and held him in high regard, most likely due to the way he parented and the facade that he put up to them. It was because of this facade and the lies that unreachable expectations were set for Biff and Happy. They thought that they had reached these expectations until introspection lead Biff to believe otherwise; Happy thought that he was where he needed to be and was doing what he needed to do in order to achieve success. Happy denied the fake nature of his father because he would have to reveal the fake nature of himself if he did so; whereas, Biff set himself free to do

as he pleased when he pulled down his father's facade. As shown in this play, the statement "like father, like son," can be true for one son but not the other.

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