
KÖNIGS ERLÄUTERUNGEN

Band 142

Arthur Miller, DEATH OF A SALESMAN

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PRÜFUNGSAUFGABEN MIT MUSTERLÖSUNGEN

In Ergänzung zu den Aufgaben im Buch (Kapitel 6) finden Sie hier zwei weitere Aufgaben mit Musterlösungen. Die Zahl der Sternchen bezeichnet das Anforderungsniveau der jeweiligen Aufgabe.

Task 5 **

Outline the father-son conflict between Willy and Biff. What impact does this conflict have on the play?

Model answer

Willy and Biff are inseparable

The two characters of Willy and Biff are inextricably linked to each other throughout the play, almost like two sides of the same person, in whom love and hate, revenge and forgiveness, ambition and despair are constantly in conflict with each other. Willy, who did not go to Alaska, feels guilty about not continuing his father's legacy. Biff's success in life is supposed to serve as a kind of compensation for this, his role is to carry on the family tradition in a new way.

For Biff, on the other hand, his father stands between himself and his own life. It is his father who is preventing him from realising his own dreams. Whilst for Willy, Biff is his great last hope, for Biff, Willy is no longer an ideal role model; his extramarital affair has rendered him useless in that respect.

Past and present

And yet, they are unable to break free from one another. Their affection for each other binds them together, as does Willy's big dream of success which Biff himself has internalised to such a degree that, even when he recognises the necessity to pursue a different life, he is unable to shake it off completely. However, the affection that father and son share is heavily burdened by feelings of guilt and reciprocal disappointments. Past events – in particular Willy's adultery and Biff's thefts – threaten to break into the present at any time and to unhinge everything. Biff's thefts can be seen as a form of rebellion against his father; not only do they destroy his chances of success in his job, but also Willy's hope of redemption from the feelings of guilt he bears towards his own father. The conflict begins with Biff's discovery of his father's affair, which pulls the rug from under his feet as it signifies complete disillusionment, an abrupt dismantling of his role model. From this moment on, Biff's thefts – at least subconsciously – turn into indirect acts of revenge.

Biff's conflict

Biff is torn between his compelling desire for self-fulfilment and the wish to help his father. In the hope of finding a solution for both himself and his father, he finally decides to open his father's eyes drastically to the reality. He would like to show his father a different way – and at the same time risks pushing him further towards suicide. Ironically, it is not Willy's recognition of reality that speeds up his suicide, but rather the realisation of Biff's love for him. This realisation does not mean that Willy can accept Biff's decision to follow a different path in life than that favoured by him. On the contrary, it strengthens Willy's resolve to commit suicide, as Biff would then receive the life insurance sum of \$20,000 with which he would finally be able to fulfil Willy's lifetime dream.

The father-son conflict is central to the play

Of all the different conflicts that *Death of a Salesman* addresses, i.e. pressure to succeed, alienation, technical advances and isolation etc., the father-son conflict between Willy and Biff plays a central role; without it, the play would not work. The tense relationship first becomes apparent at the beginning of the first act when Willy asks Linda if Biff apologised that morning (p. 11, l. 14–16) The conflict runs like a red thread through the entire play, gathering speed until it finally culminates in the big argument between Willy and Biff at the end of the second act which leads as a direct result to Willy's suicide.

Task 6 *

Explain the role of women in *Death of a Salesman*, in particular that of Linda Loman.

Model answer

Women as
'extras'

In *Death of a Salesman*, there are five female characters: Linda Loman, the wife of the main protagonist, Miss Forsythe and Letta, two young women who Biff and Happy meet at a restaurant, Charlie's secretary Jenny and finally the Woman, Willy's lover. With the exception of Linda Loman, they all take on the role of extras. Willy's lover even remains nameless despite the fact that it is his relationship with her that sparks the conflict between Willy and Biff at the centre of the play.

Linda is
supportive
of Willy

Although Linda has a primary role in the play, she still appears isolated among all the male protagonists who are all closely interlinked. Arthur Miller has created her as a simple, loving and loyal wife and mother, without any ambitions of her own. In all conflicts – especially those between Willy and Biff – she is the level-headed one who attempts to restore peace. Her love for Willy is so great that she stands by him whatever the situation, and is completely loyal to him. She pacifies and reassures him when he is full of self-doubt: She always sees others as being responsible for his difficulties. By this behaviour, she supports the culture in her family of sweeping any problems under the carpet and making them seem better than they are.

Nevertheless, Linda Loman is not simply a weak woman with no will of her own. She is the one who keeps track of the finances and somehow manages to get by on the small budget at their disposal. Twice in the play, she shows herself to be assertive. Her vehement objections prevent Willy from going to Alaska (p. 92, l. 13–33) and towards the end of the second act, she throws Biff and Happy out of the house calling them "louse" (p. 134, l. 3) because their own enjoyment was more important to them than helping their bewildered helpless father.

Linda is the first and last person to speak on stage. Although her final words of "We're free ..." at his grave are a reference to the final mortgage payment on the house, they also refer to being free from Willy's immovable and foolish expectations.

Antiquated
female
characters?

Arthur Miller has often been reproached for his portrayal of female characters in *Death of a Salesman* because he marginalises and devalues them in their ability to act. The fact that all the action is entirely male-focused suggests that women are virtually meaningless – as well as stupid: The appearance of the two young ladies who Biff and Happy meet at the restaurant serves one purpose: to show how the two fall for the Loman boys' crude bragging, Jenny is nothing more than a cheap copy of the obliging secretary, Willy's lover does not even have enough personality to be worthy of a name, and Linda is so blinded by love and loyalty that she is unable to grasp the cause of the problem. Even though Miller's play can be considered timeless in many ways, his portrayal of women is certainly completely antiquated.