Tragedy- Death Of A Salesman Essay, Research Paper

The optimistic outlook of tragedy

Many people who read tragedies believe that they offer a pessimistic outlook on life. Arthur Miller?s novel, Death of a Salesman, expresses the message that to achieve the American dream you have to follow your heart. Those who have read ?Tragedy and The Common Man?, an essay by Arthur Miller, realize that tragedy offers more to its readers then a sad ending; it offers optimism and encouragement for the future.

Willy Loman often pauses to reflect upon past conversations he had with his brother Ben, a man who fulfilled the American dream, to get rich quick. When Ben was seventeen he ?walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out and by God I was rich? (1891). The jungle represents man?s oppurtunity to achieve the American dream. Whenever Ben talks about the jungle he talks about the diamonds he has found. The diamonds symbolize success. Willy has many oppurtunities to go into the jungle and ?fetch a diamond out? (1937), but he never makes it. Tragedy, in this case, is ?the consequence of a man?s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly? (?Tragedy?, 1341). Willy believes in his mind that he will be successful on his own. Willy admires his brother?s success, but rather then follow in his footsteps, Willy feels he can make it as a salesman. His willpower is an encouragement to readers. Even though Willy was not successful, he never gave up.

As time passes though, Willy?s oppurtunities pass until finally ?the woods are burning! I can?t drive a car!? (1887). Willy?s chance ?to fetch a diamond out? has passed, not only is he unable to follow his uncle?s footsteps, he now is unable to fill his current job requirements. Willy is a salesman and is required to drive to Boston for work. His inability to drive renders him useless to his company. Willy believes that ?You can?t eat the orange and throw away the peel- a man is not a piece of fruit.? (1908). That is exactly what Willy?s boss does, throw?s Willy away once he has nothing left inside. In his article on tragedy, Miller illustrates characteristics of tragic characters and relates them to common man. He determines that the tragic flaw in Willy?s character is not ?necessarily a weakness. The flaw, or crack in the character, is really nothing ? and need be nothing ? but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status? (?Tragedy?, 1341). Willy?s pride prevents him from one final oppurtunity to succeed. Charlie offers him a job after hearing that Willy was fired. Though Willy borrows money from Charlie, he is offended when Charlie offers him a job for fifty-dollars a week. He sees it as a direct hit on his pride. Willy always assumed he would be more successful in life then Charlie because Charlie is ?liked, but he?s not well liked ? (1882). This belief sets Willy and his sons up for failure because they believe being well liked is the key to success, rather then working for it. When Willy realizes that his whole life is wasted the tragedy of the story unfolds. For the readers, ? The quality in [Tragedies] that does shake us, however, derives from the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world? (?Tragedy?, 1341). Willy?s tragedy is in realizing that he has wasted his life without ever achieving his dream. This is the unhappy ending every reader looks for in a tragedy. The reader is left to realize, however, that the story is not meant to sadden. Tragedy is meant to enlighten the reader. It illustrates for the reader what life will be like if the reader does not listen to the author?s message.

Willy strives to impress upon his sons the importance of success. Since their childhood he has boosted their egos by pumping their heads full of unrealistic expectations. They are raised to believe that they should start at the top and stay at the top. Biff is the only son to realize what a mistake it was to be raised with such high expectations. All his life he ? had to be big boss shot in two weeks? (1936). This made it impossible for him to settle in to a profession and work his way up. Willy would never believe Biff when he told him he was ?a dime a dozen, and so are you? (1936). Unfortunately, Willy insists that he is Willy Loman, and is ?ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing- his sense of personal dignity? (?Tragedy?, 1341). This generally brings about a feeling of tragedy. In the end Willy gives up life in attempt to ?gain his ?rightful? position in society? (?Tragedy?, 1341). Biff learns from his father?s mistakes, as the reader should as well. He decides to go out and follow his heart and try to achieve the American dream his way. Thus the optimism and encouragement in a tragedy peaks through again. At Willy?s funeral, Biff acknowledges that Willy ? had the wrong dreams. All, all wrong.? (1939). Biff realizes that Willy never knew what he was. He never saw that the real way to find success would be to work with his hands, something Willy frequently comments on enjoying. Unfortunately, Biff?s younger brother Happy never realizes that his father was wrong about the road to success. Happy goes on believing that any minute he?s going to get a big break and come out ahead. He vows to ?show you and everybody else 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.? Happy never realizes that his father?s life was unsuccessful and following it instead of following his own path will doom him to repeat the same fate.

Right before Willy?s final confrontation with Biff, he is out planting the seeds he has always talked about planting. The garden represents Willy?s final attempt to be remembered. Willy wants to leave something behind so that people will remember him as being a great man. He has decided that ? after all the highways, and the trains, and the years, you end up worth more dead then alive.? (1917). He anticipates that his family will value him more when he is gone. He strives for the death of a salesman, a death that attracts many people to mourn the loss. Charley tries to convince Willy that ?nobody?s worth nothin? dead?. His attempt to save Willy is futile, as Willy looks to the future with optimism of finding success for the seeds he has just planted, both in the garden and in his sons.

One of the greatest tragedies in literature is the misconception that tragic stories offer little more then a sad ending. After comparing Arthur Miller?s essay with his tragic work, one realizes that the Miller is trying to offer optimism and encouragement to his fellow man. To read of someone?s failures, and to apply that information to life in order to avoid failure, is to truly appreciate a tragedy and it?s meaning.