

Best Intentions Far Awry: The Family Dynamic in Miller's *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*

Pamela Loos

“Miller’s tragedies are about men who are not ‘at one’ with society,” according to William B. Dillingham, “because they have sinned against it or have refused to assume their rightful place in it” (339-40). Indeed, the fathers of *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* are both out of sync with society: Willy Loman fails to understand himself and esteems a career path that goes against who he truly is, and Joe Keller fails to recognize that, besides being responsible for his family, he must also be a moral person within the larger world. In both plays, the fathers’ conflicts ripple across their families and cause their deaths. Willy Loman’s inability to reconcile himself with society causes both his own and his son Biff’s wrenching unhappiness; Joe Keller’s own conflict with society causes the death of his son Larry as well as of scores of other men’s sons. Ultimately, the fathers’ conflicts push them both to suicide, allowing no opportunity for them to be restored to society and leaving their families in despair.

As important as the fathers are in these plays, however, neither of the fathers is his play’s key focus. Rather, the two plays emphasize the entire family dynamic as the fathers near the end of their working lives and look to their sons to take up their work and become successful businessmen. Wives and sons go to great lengths to protect their families, lies that have been perpetuated for years are exposed, family members fail to understand themselves and one another, and fathers and sons have conflicting views about what is important in life. At the end of each play, a son comes to some realizations about himself and his father, tries to explain them to his father, and becomes a catalyst in his father’s destruction.

When *Death of a Salesman* opens, Willy is in his early sixties, about the same age as Joe Keller, and, like Joe, he has two grown sons,

though both of his are still alive. Also like Joe, he insists that his son become a successful businessman. His conflict with society is primarily twofold. First, he is torn about his own self. As Miller explains, “In the deeper, psychological sense, he is Everyman who finds he must create another personality in order to make his way in the world, and therefore has sold himself” (Fuller 243). Trying to make a living as a salesman, Willy finds that he must develop a personality that is at odds with his true self—he must split himself in two between his job and who he actually is. This split has serious consequences, as it causes Willy to misunderstand himself and his family by defining success solely on business terms and, as we will see later, forcing this definition upon his sons. Gerald Weales points out that audiences have mixed reactions to Willy and his struggle: “Is Willy, for instance, a born loser, or is he a game little fighter who, having been sold a bill of goods about the American Dream, keeps slugging it out against unequal odds?” (xvi).

The second part of Willy’s conflict follows from this split as he insists on a vision for his older son, Biff, that is thoroughly at odds with who Biff is. Miller says, “Biff wants not to be an integer, a simple little factor, in this gigantic business and industrial operation that the United States is. . . . He is a precursor of the hippy movement in a way” (“Interview” 507). Willy, though, wants Biff to be a successful businessman, and this faulty vision creates a key conflict in the play. Willy’s vision goes against Biff’s nature and so pits him against his natural place in society. It creates a conflict between father and son, a conflict within Biff himself, extreme disruption in the family, and havoc in the world at large for those with whom Biff comes in contact.

As the play opens, we find that Willy has been plagued for years by Biff’s inability to hold a job (let alone become the successful businessman Willy would like him to be), and Biff, too, has been unhappily drifting and getting into trouble. Trying to figure out what went wrong, Willy replays earlier years, years he sees as greatly successful during which he filled his sons’ heads with advice about how to become suc-