

Summary and Analysis Act I: Scene 5

Summary

Scene 5 continues in the past where **Scene 4** ended. Linda enters the kitchen carrying a basket of laundry. Biff orders Happy and his friends, who are waiting down in the cellar, to help with the chores. Some hang laundry; others sweep out the furnace room. Linda and Willy are left alone and begin discussing his earnings from the trip to New England. Willy exaggerates his sales, telling Linda that he sold \$1,200, but when she calculates his commission, Willy is forced to admit that he only sold \$200. Linda recites an itemized list of bills that exceeds his \$70 commission by approximately \$50. Willy becomes agitated and refuses to pay for the carburetor for the Chevy because he considers the car worthless, even though he praised the car at the beginning of the scene.

Willy declares that he will be successful in Hartford because he is "well-liked," but he immediately follows that statement by saying that people do not respond well to him. Willy says that he talks and jokes too much, and that no one takes him seriously because of his appearance. Linda assures him that she finds him attractive and that his children love and respect him. Linda's comments encourage Willy, and he declares his affection for her. In the background, a woman's laughter can be heard, and a faint outline of a woman dressing becomes visible.

Analysis

Scene 5 is significant because it is the first time that Willy's manipulation of reality occurs in front of the audience. Although the scene continues in the past, picking up in the kitchen where Scene 4 left off, the audience is given the opportunity to observe Willy's tendency to exaggerate and deny reality. He is not satisfied with his earnings, or modicum of success, so he reinvents his success by exaggerating his sales to Linda. It is only when Linda confronts him with the numbers that he is forced to admit his true commission. Once Linda knows the truth, Willy can no longer pretend about his success, so he becomes argumentative and begins to contradict prior statements. For example, Willy's assertion that Chevrolet is "the greatest car ever built," is immediately revoked once his exaggeration is revealed. Criticism of the car is just one example of Willy's need to bring order to his life by passing judgment and thus appearing as an authority on something, or anything.

Willy's contradictions throughout the scene reveal his own inability to accept the truth about himself and the reality of the world he lives in. He knows that people criticize him because of his demeanor, and he realizes that people are no longer receptive to him. The fact that Willy acknowledges these things demonstrates that he knows the reality of the situation; however, his immediate contradictions prove his inability to accept the way things are. He denies his own failure as a salesman, along with his inability to be "well-liked," because they are too painful. It is much easier for him to invent a reality in which he is successful, thereby creating order in a disordered existence.

Glossary

crack to hit or strike with a sudden, sharp blow or impact.

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