

Act One: Scene Nine

Summary

Scene 9 shifts back to the past. Willy finally meets his brother Ben. Ben is on his way to catch a train, but he and Willy talk briefly about Ben's successful venture into African diamond mining. Willy begs Ben to tell the boys about his father. Willy only remembers vague images of a campfire, a large bearded man, and flute music. Ben describes the large profits their father made selling homemade flutes while traveling across the United States.

Biff and Ben begin boxing. Ben defeats Biff and warns him to use any resources available when fighting a stranger, even if that means being unfair. Linda is uncomfortable as a result of Ben's advice. As Ben prepares to leave, Willy boasts that Brooklyn has all of the qualities of the great outdoors, including animals, large trees, numerous opportunities to hunt, and so forth. He then sends the boys to steal some sand from the apartment construction site. Willy instructs them to remodel the porch in order to demonstrate their building skills.

Charley comes over and warns Willy that the building watchman will have the boys arrested if they are caught again. Willy criticizes Charley and his son Bernard in front of Ben. Bernard arrives, informing everyone that the watchman is pursuing Biff. Willy is momentarily upset, but dismisses his anxiety when Ben compliments Biff's courage.

Charley leaves after Willy insults him again. Willy entreats Ben to stay because he needs someone to talk to. Willy feels insecure and "kind of temporary" since he never had the opportunity to talk to his father. Willy asks Ben to show him how and what to teach the boys. Ben responds by reciting the facts of his African adventure: He was 17 years old when he went in the jungle, 21 years old when he came out, and he was rich.

Analysis

Scene 9 demonstrates Willy's dependence upon his memories and the insecurity that prompts him to rearrange events and facts in an attempt to create order or success.

Once Charley leaves at the end of Scene 8, Willy is free to immerse himself completely in his recollection of Ben's visit. Willy is thrilled by Ben's story of the diamond mines, not only because it proves that individual greatness is possible within the Loman family, but because Willy projects a portion of that success upon himself. Willy believes that he is connected to Ben's accomplishment because Ben offered him a job. It does not matter that Willy refused the position; just the fact that the position was offered links him to Ben and his fortune.

The greatest revelation of Scene 9 comes about with Willy's discussion of his father. Willy is insecure, and he traces his own insecurity to the absence of his father. Having been denied approval from his father, Willy is driven by a need to gain approval and recognition from everyone. This accounts for his "temporary" view of himself. Willy

cannot be content with his life, job, or his marriage because he is continually evaluating himself based upon the success of others. As a result, Willy has created a cycle of eager acceptance and rejection of himself. So long as Willy is received favorably, he is momentarily content; however, these moments occur rarely within the play.

More often than not, Willy feels compelled to prove to others that he is successful, as a salesman, as a father, and as an American living in the "great outdoors" of Brooklyn. Willy creates the illusion of success needed to gain approval by rearranging events and facts as he wishes them to be. This reinvention of reality allows him to appear successful to others and to himself, but Willy also realizes that it is only an illusion. Therefore, his satisfaction is fleeting. Whenever Willy acknowledges to himself that he is not successful, in fact is nothing but average, he denies the truth because it is too painful for him to believe that he is a failure. Once again, Willy begins to reconstruct his life in an attempt to create order.

The cycle of acceptance and rejection accounts for Willy's continual contradictions as well. He responds to others, depending on where he is in the cycle. Problems arise because Willy constantly moves back and forth within the cycle; as a result, his comments or behavior must change accordingly. For example, while trying to win approval from Ben, Willy tells Biff to steal building supplies and remodel the porch. Willy's attitude changes once Bernard announces that the watchman is pursuing Biff. Willy denies that Biff was stealing and denies that he is responsible for Biff's actions. It appears that Willy has failed again because Ben will surely disapprove; however, Ben's praise moves Willy back into eager acceptance of himself and his family.

Glossary

temporary for a time only; not permanent.

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