

Act Two: Scene Six

Summary

Charley comes in the office as Bernard leaves. Charley tells Willy that Bernard will present a case before the Supreme Court. Charley gives Willy \$50, but Willy asks for more because of his insurance payment. Charley offers Willy a job, but Willy refuses repeatedly. Charley is offended and becomes angry; however, he gives Willy the money. Willy reveals that Howard fired him. Once again Charley attempts to convince Willy to work for him, but Willy refuses and will not explain why. Willy remarks that an individual is "worth more dead than alive."

Analysis

Scene 6 represents Willy's last chance to put his life back together. Although Charley freely gives Willy the money that he needs, he offers Willy the opportunity to start his life over and end the charade he is living. In many ways, Charley's proposition can be paralleled to Ben's. Both men present Willy with a job that guarantees a measure of success, along with attractive benefits. Ben gave him the chance to work outdoors and possibly become rich, while Charley gives him the chance to earn a reasonable income without traveling.

Pride causes Willy to lose both of his chances. He turned down Ben's job because he wanted to prove to his brother that he could do just as well in Brooklyn. He turns Charley down because he has always been jealous of the fact that Charley owns his own business. In the past, Willy ridiculed Charley, just as he used to ridicule Bernard, so he feels that working for Charley now would be a humiliation. It is perfectly fine with Willy to borrow money from Charley secretly, but he does not want to be associated with Charley as an employer.

Charley confronts Willy with the truth about his job: Willy is a salesman, and a salesman is defined by what he can sell. Anything that cannot be sold is irrelevant and of no value. If the salesman cannot sell anything, then he is worthless. The fact that Charley can adequately describe Willy's job, as well as Willy's character, along with the fact that he genuinely wants to help him, forces Willy to acknowledge that Charley is his "only friend."

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Act Two: Scene Seven

Summary

Scene 7 takes place in a local restaurant. Happy chats with Stanley, the waiter, and Stanley is impressed because Happy can predict when beautiful women will enter the café. Happy flirts with Miss Forsythe, a young woman seated at the next table. Biff enters, and Happy informs him that the girl is on duty. Happy instructs her to cancel her appointment and find a friend. Biff is upset. He went to Oliver's office and waited six hours to see him, but Oliver did not remember him at all. Biff was just a shipping clerk when he worked for Oliver, not a salesman. Biff stole Oliver's fountain pen. Happy directs Biff not to reveal to Willy what happened.

Analysis

Scene 7 provides the audience with insight into Happy's character. Happy is defined by his sexuality and desire for power. He wants everyone to believe he is an assistant buyer when he is really the "assistant to the assistant." Happy uses his good looks and sexual prowess as a means of gaining power over others, both females and males. For example, he does not care anything for Miss Forsythe, and it is later revealed that she is a prostitute, but he tells her to cancel her date and find someone to bring along with her. Happy enjoys commanding women. Here he gives Miss Forsythe an order simply because he knows she will do it. This gives him satisfaction and pleasure. Later, he will gain sexual pleasure from her or her friend.

Happy also relishes the fact that "respectable" women cannot resist him. He has seduced the fiancées of three executives just to gain pleasure and power. He thrives on sexual gratification, but even more than that, Happy savors the knowledge that he has ruined women engaged to men he works for and also despises. He states, "I hate myself for it. Because I don't want the girl, and, still, I take it and — I love it!" Happy is similar to Willy in two ways. Both deny their positions and exaggerate details in order to aggrandize themselves, and sexual interludes are the defining moments of both of their lives. Willy's life revolves around his attempt to forget his affair with the Woman, while Happy's life revolves around an active pursuit of affairs with many women.

Glossary

strudel a kind of pastry; here the term refers to a prostitute.

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Act Two: Scene Eight

Summary

Willy joins Happy and Biff in the restaurant. Biff says he wants to have a discussion based on facts only. Biff does not know who originally said he was a salesman for Bill Oliver, when he was actually just a shipping clerk. Willy tells the boys that Howard fired him. Biff tries to explain what happened at Oliver's office, but Willy keeps interrupting him. Biff and Willy argue, and Willy accuses Biff of offending Oliver. Biff is exasperated.

Analysis

Scene 8 is significant because it begins to build the tension that erupts in Scene 9, ultimately leading to the final confrontation between Willy and Biff in Scene 13.

For the first time in his life, Biff attempts to address his life as it really is. Waiting for Oliver makes Biff realize he has been living a lie. All this time, Biff has directed his anger and resentment toward Willy because he considers him a "fake." However, Biff is his father's son, just like Happy. He too creates a favorable past for himself — or an unhappy childhood — in order to justify the course his life has taken. As a result, Scene 8 is a turning point for Biff. He consciously chooses reality over fantasy. He would rather deal with the facts, as strange and disturbing as they may be, than reinvent events to suit his purpose.

Scene 8 is important for Willy because he is also truthful about his situation. For once he does not attempt to sugarcoat his job or his success for the boys. However, Willy contradicts his own willingness to accept reality as he continues to force Biff into a lie. Willy cannot allow Biff to fail because that will only magnify his own breakdown. He constantly interrupts Biff while he is talking for two reasons: to prevent Biff from telling the truth and to interpret the events as he wants them to be. Happy contributes to Willy's fantasy by contradicting Biff each time Biff tries to be honest. So as Biff makes an effort to finally achieve order by admitting the truth, Willy and Happy likewise attempt to create order by concealing the truth.

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Act Two: Scene Nine

Summary

Scene 9 continues primarily in the restaurant, although the house is lit when Linda appears. Willy is still sitting at the table with Biff and Happy. Biff attempts to describe his visit to Oliver, but Willy does not hear him. Instead he hears young Bernard inform Linda that Biff failed math and will not graduate. Bernard also tells her that Biff took a train to Boston to talk with Willy. The exchange between Linda and Bernard ends as Biff finishes explaining why he took Oliver's pen; however, Willy did not hear Biff's explanation.

Willy overhears the operator at a hotel ring his room. Willy answers the operator, telling her he is not available. Biff is confused and upset because Willy is behaving irrationally. Willy tells Biff that he is "no good for anything," until Biff states that he is supposed to meet with Oliver and his partner about the Florida idea. This brings Willy back to the present. Willy becomes angry because Biff refuses to meet with Oliver and his partner since he stole the fountain pen. Biff then admits that he does not have an appointment with Oliver after all, that he only went to Oliver because of Willy.

Willy slips back into the past. The Woman from Act I, Scene 6 asks if he plans to open the door. Willy stumbles off in the restaurant, looking for a door. Biff begs Happy to help Willy, and he shows Happy the rubber hose he found. Happy refuses and blames Biff for Willy's condition. Happy tells the girls that Willy is not his father and then leaves with the girls without paying the tab.

Analysis

Willy is mentally collapsing at this point. He had difficulty distinguishing between the past and present earlier in the play, but the possibility of things getting better still existed. By Scene 9, Willy knows that all is lost — both his job and Biff's chance of success — so he resorts to the past to escape the present. Biff's failure with Oliver immediately moves Willy back to his son's failure in high school. As Biff tries to explain what happened with Oliver, Willy is caught in the past, still trying to understand what it is that caused Biff to "lay down" in high school and how that connects to his failure today. Willy is desperately trying to regain order in the present by making sense of the past.

Learning that Biff stole Oliver's pen temporarily brings Willy out of the past. Willy feels responsible for Biff's actions, and he immediately moves back into the past to find justification for the theft. Biff states, "I didn't exactly steal it [the pen]!" but it is impossible for Willy or the audience to believe this based on his previous record that includes stealing the football, as well as the building materials. Willy is partially to blame for Biff's actions simply because he sanctioned his behavior every time before by not making Biff face the consequences. Therefore, because Willy taught Biff that he did not have to follow rules in high school, his behavior in the present is a reflection of his previous conditioning. As a result, Willy bears the primary responsibility for Biff's present failure.

Willy loses his grip on reality as the the scene progresses and blends Young Bernard, the hotel operator, and the Woman into his conversation with Biff. Once Biff realizes his father is hallucinating, he is compelled to lie to Willy in order to restore him to his senses. The only way he can effectively regain order for Willy is to deny his own need to accept reality. As a result, Biff is forced to contradict his own principles rather than watch his father fall apart before his eyes.

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Act Two: Scene Ten

Summary

Scene 10 begins in a hotel room. The Woman tells Willy that he has "ruined" her and that she will send him in to the buyers immediately whenever he is in Boston. They are in the process of getting dressed when someone knocks on the door. Willy orders the Woman to remain in the bathroom. Biff comes in and tells Willy that he failed math and will not graduate. Willy decides to leave immediately so that he can talk with Biff's teacher before the school closes for the summer. The Woman comes out of the bathroom. Willy pretends that she is simply borrowing his bathroom, and he tells her to leave, but she refuses until he gives her the stockings he promised. Willy orders Biff to help him pack, but Biff resists. Biff calls Willy a liar and a "phony little fake." The scene shifts back to the restaurant. Stanley helps Willy to the door because he is disoriented. Stanley gives him directions to a feed store.

Analysis

Scene 10 is the key to the play. Willy is finally forced to confront the point of disorder in his life. It is true that Willy has always exaggerated events and details to become "well-liked"; however, up until the affair, Willy had not sacrificed his principles or betrayed his family. Willy blames his behavior on loneliness, but it is the result of his need for attention. The affair is a betrayal of Linda and the boys, who center their lives on him. Once he cheats on Linda, Willy denigrates himself, and this diminution of his character is unrecoverable.

A selective process governs Willy's habit of denying the present in favor of a more satisfactory past. Willy does not randomly choose memories, nor does he allow himself to remember everything. For example, during Scene 5, Willy becomes defensive when questioned by Bernard. He reacts in this manner because Bernard triggers memories of the affair. Willy knows he was unfaithful to Linda, but he has successfully pushed that memory to the back of his mind because of the guilt associated with it. Bernard's question brings the affair to the front of Willy's mind, and he can no longer selectively forget it.

During Scene 9, Willy desperately sorts through memories of Biff's childhood in order to explain to himself why Biff failed with Oliver. He cannot understand why Biff let his last opportunity for success pass him by. It is only when Biff reveals his reason for going to see Oliver that Willy finally understands: "Why did I go? Why did I go? Look at you! Look at what's become of you!" Biff went to see Oliver to please his father and to prevent Willy from suffering a complete mental breakdown. Biff fails with Oliver, just as he did in high school, and Willy is to blame for failures of both the past and present. Even though Biff still wants to satisfy Willy, he cannot because his esteem for his father has been irreparably damaged by knowledge of the affair.

During Scene 10, once Biff discovers that his father is not perfect, and even worse, that he is a traitor to his mother, Biff loses all respect for Willy. He realizes that everything Willy said to him means nothing. The affair negates all of Willy's tales of greatness that have motivated Biff up to this point. Why should he attend summer

school or hold a steady job? Need for his father's approval no longer guides his actions. As a result, Willy is responsible for Biff's downward spiral. Biff did not attend summer school or graduate because of Willy's perfidy. Now he is incapable of achieving success because he possesses no faith in his father or himself.

Glossary

self-centered occupied or concerned only with one's own affairs; egocentric; selfish.

ruin to deprive (a woman) of chastity.

chippie [Slang] a promiscuous young woman or a prostitute.

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