## Willy Loman's Brother Ben: Tragic Insight in *Death of* a Salesman

Critic: M. Bettina, Sister

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Nationality: American

[In the following essay, Sister Bettina examines the function of the character of Ben in *Death of a Salesman*, arguing that Ben is an extension of Willy's own consciousness, and that "through [Ben] Miller provides for the audience a considerable amount of the tragic insight which, though never quite reaching Willy, manifests itself to them in the dramatic presentation the workings of his mind."]

In the thirteen years since Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* had its spontaneous Broadway success, critics have often cited as a deficiency in it the lack of tragic insight in its hero, Willy Loman. "He never knew who he was," says his son Biff at Willy's grave; and by a like judgment critics can substantially discount the play's tragic claims.

But Biff's choric commentary on his father, like many other very quotable remarks in the scene of Willy's "requiem," is not quite true. Willy did struggle against self-knowledge—trying not to know "what" he was; but he had always a superb consciousness of his own individual strength as a "who." "I am not a dime a dozen!" he shouts in the play's crisis; "I am Willy Loman...!" And it is this very sense of his personal force and high regard for it which qualify him as a hero.

What turns this self-esteem into something tragic and self-destructive is his contrasting awareness that, in spite of his powers, he is not what he wants to be. Himself partially unaware that he actually desires simple fulfillment as a father, Willy dreams of being an important businessman, greatly admired by his two sons. He has misconstrued the ideal of fatherhood, confusing it with the ability to confer wealth and prestige. Because of this misplaced idealism—and his related commitment to the economic delusion known as "the American dream" —he seems not to have the stature of the traditional tragic hero.

That, as his son Biff says, Willy has "the wrong dreams" is certainly true. What criticism has to decide, in the light of the play's dramatic structure, is whether this common human defect does not increase rather than weaken his effectiveness as tragic hero.

Because playwright Miller has buttressed the basic realism of *Salesman* with strongly expressionistic elements, analysis of his play has to be made carefully. Willy's stage presence does not equal his characterization, as it would in a more conventional play. Instead of simply appearing in the events on stage, he himself—or rather, his confused mind— is the scene of much of the dramatic action.

Consideration of tragic insight in Willy, then, leads one to notice an expressionist device which reappears with the regularity of a motif in episodes taking place in Willy's consciousness. This is the stylized characterization of Willy's rich brother Ben who, when closely observed, takes shape less as a person external to Willy than as a projection of his personality. Ben personifies his brother's dream of easy wealth.

Ben is the only important character not physically present during Willy's last day. He is on stage only as he exists in Willy's mind. But he is the first person whom Willy asks in his present distress, "What's the answer?"; and in the end it is Ben's answer which Willy accepts. As one critic summarizes it:

Ben "walked into the jungle and three years later came out with a million"; Ben shot off to Alaska to "get in on the ground floor"; Ben was never afraid of new territories, new faces, no smiles. In the end, Ben's last territory—Death—earns Willy Loman's family \$ 20,000 insurance money, and a chance for them finally to accomplish his dream: a dream of which they have never been capable, *in* which they also can only be buried: the old "million" dream. [Kappo Phelan, "Death of a Salesman," *Commonweal* XLN, 1949, p. 520]

Although Ben is dead before the play begins, the force which he symbolizes draws Willy to suicide.

Ben also stands out as the play's only predominantly formalized characterization. That in him Miller combines realism with expressionism in a ratio inverse to that of the rest of the play seems another indication of his distinctive symbolic function.

The audience first sees him when memories of a visit paid by him some twenty years before push themselves into Willy's consciousness. "William," he boasts, "when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!" This is the first insinuation of what may be called Ben's theme—the going into a strange country and emerging with its wealth. Willy, who in this scene is a young father, triumphantly concurs: "...was rich! That's just the spirit I want to imbue them with! To walk into a jungle! I was right!" Ben, whom he has presented to his sons as "a great man," has confirmed his ambitions for them.

At his second appearance in Willy's memory, Ben again exults over his wealth, but this time he puts his brother on the defensive. He is now making money in Alaska and wants Willy to come into his business. Willy does find the offer attractive, and he hesitates before deciding that, after all, he is "building something" here in the States. "And that's the wonder, the wonder of this country," he goes on to exclaim, "that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked! "Ben repeats, "There's a new continent at your doorstep, William. You could walk out rich. Rich!" But Willy insists, "We'll do it here, Ben! You hear me? We're gonna do it here." He is still calling this when Ben, for the second time, abruptly disappears into darkness.

Willy next sees his brother after he has finally admitted to himself that he is a business failure. And from this point in the play Ben functions as a symbol of Willy's dream. He no longer is a memory; instead he has become a force working in the present.

Willy has lost his job, is thoroughly defeated, and wants to talk over with his brother a "proposition" of suicide. At first seeming to dissuade Willy, making reluctant appeals to his pride, Ben gradually comes to admit that Willy's insurance indemnity is worth suicide: "And twenty thousand—that *is* something one can feel with the hand, it is there." Willy becomes lyrical: "Oh, Ben, that's the whole beauty of it! I see it like a diamond, shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I can pick up and touch in my hand." Ben's motif, riches waiting in darkness, is working in Willy's mind. He no longer believes he can make money in another way.

The play's crisis ensues and Willy comes to see that his son Biff loves and forgives him. More than before he yearns to give his son something, and Ben immediately reappears to recall the suicide plan. The idyllic leitmotif which accompanies Ben starts up in accents of dread. "The jungle is dark but full of diamonds, Willy.... One must go in to fetch a diamond out." Slowly he moves into the offstage darkness. "Ben! Ben, where do I ...?" Willy pleads. "Ben, how do I ...? "Finally he rushes off after him; seconds later he is dead.

Ben's one-dimensional character becomes a facet of the intimate psychological portrayal of Willy just as expressionism fuses with realism in *Salesman* a whole. Miller uses Ben—along with the more conspicuous devices of skeletal setting, nonrealistic lighting, free movement in space and time, and musical leitmotifs—to provide a deeper realism than conventional dramatic form would have allowed.

Traditional drama implements audience-insight into the hero's problem by his own voluble awareness of it; tragic figures are more or less poetically articulate about their destinies, desires, and mistakes. *Death of a Salesman*, however, forces a question as to whether insight in the hero is a dramatic end in itself or only insofar as it heightens audience-consciousness. For, in spite of its hero's foolish commitment to something so hollow that he will not even admit it to himself, the play's structure permits its audience to follow in the very action on stage the inexorable working of his mind. Thus Willy emerges as more than a pathetic victim of American society. Miller employs expressionism precisely to show Willy's struggle against self-knowledge, thereby pointing up his personal responsibility for refusing to estimate himself sincerely.

What Miller believes to be the basic impetus of any tragic hero—the supreme importance of his self-respect, even when he must lie to himself to preserve it—is, structurally and otherwise, the main concern of his play. *Salesman* studies the break-up of an ideal rather than of a man. But Willy's collapse will follow inevitably that of his self-image His existence has come to depend upon belief in his ideal. Symbolically speaking, he has become his delusion.

Functioning in Willy's consciousness as a personification of this dream, Ben is a most important "minor" character, a projection of his brother's personality rather than an

individual human force. Through him Miller provides for the audience a considerable amount of the tragic insight which, though never quite reaching Willy, manifests itself to them in the dramatic presentation of the workings of his mind.

In one way Willy's commitment to his dream typifies a necessary breaking of the laws of reality by all men: their construction of the tenuous ideals of themselves which truth by its very nature has to destroy. Willy, who will give up his life rather than his chosen image of himself, represents the fool in each of us. By that very fact, he must go the way of the tragic hero.

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