

ENGL1102

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## Father Knows Best

Picture a typical businessman sauntering through the white picket fence of his pristine home following a long, yet thoroughly satisfying day at the office. The odors of an alluring dinner prepared by his devoted wife greet him while two all-American youngsters race to embrace their dear ol'dad. As this affectionate, fictitious family sits down for a pleasant meal, they uphold the hollow precedent that countless individuals fail to achieve. Despite the family portrait the Cleavers may faithfully promise from the television screen, a "perfect" family simply does not and cannot exist. However, the reality of the matter does not prevent many from diligently defending the concept. Such delusional perceptions generally result in a painful sense of shortcoming for family members drowning in the pressures of idealism, inevitably resulting in the family unit's gradual deterioration. The Lomans in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and the Hoover family in the movie *Little Miss Sunshine* serve as two pertinent examples of this ironically unfortunate phenomenon. Driven by the patriarchal figures' denial and general disdain for those "not-liked" or "losers," both families illustrate the image of dysfunction as the various family members desperately attempt to uncover some level of honesty within their households.

In the Loman home, anything short of perfection is absolutely intolerable . . . at least in theory. The head of the family, Willy Loman, centers all family activity around the maintenance of a flawless family image. Consequently, he utterly refuses to acknowledge the existence of any negative attributes that may counter his dream, thus sacrificing his relatives' actual needs. For a number of years, Willy's facade works quite well. He is a seemingly successful salesman with two strapping sons "built like Adonises" and a submissive wife who loyally supports her husband's warped visions (Miller 1081). After all, he is the head of the household; thus, his actions and beliefs greatly manipulate the thoughts and actions of his wife and children, providing him with a false sense of security. In psychological terms, such behavior is known as "the recursive nature of living systems . . . When one person in the system acts, every other person is influenced, which again affects the person who initially acted" (Conoley 2). All the same, the Loman lifestyle is far from ideal. Regardless of his owning appliances with "the biggest ads" and fathering a high school celebrity, Willy's obsession with an immaculate family image eventually becomes the destructive force responsible for his family troubles and overall mental instability (Miller 1082). In fact, even his sons' adolescent glory days reveal that Willy's insecurities are laying a foundation for future family trauma. As he ignores his eldest son completely, the father essentially worships Biff and encourages the lad's miscreant behaviors, such as cheating, stealing, and being "too rough with the girls" (Miller 1084).

Beyond instilling relatively immoral values into his children in his attempt to make certain they are "well liked," Willy incessantly disrespects the one person who faithfully nurtures him and views him as "the handsomest man in the world," his wife Linda (Miller 1080, 1083). At home Willy frequently releases frustration upon his wife, yelling at her for hardly notable offenses such as "interrupting," mending her stockings, or "contradict[ing]" his cheese preferences (Miller 1096, 1073). Of course, while traveling, the combination of being "so lonely" and fearing he "won't make a living for [Linda]" compels Willy to repetitively cheat on his "pal" of a wife (Miller 1083). Secretly tainting his marriage with deceit is but a single example of Willy's American dream family existing solely within the bounds of his mind, rather than in reality. Despite the escalating internal problems, Willy is determined to convince himself, along with the rest of his family and friends, that "there's nothing the

matter” with the Lomans (Miller 1084). Unfortunately, one cannot force a family into a frame of perfection through reputation alone, a fact that torments each member of the family from the moment Biff fails high school algebra.

Much like the Lomans, the Hoover family is wrought with conflict as a result of the attempt to fit within the father's perfect mold. Also a salesman, Richard Hoover relentlessly pushes his “Nine Steps to Success” plan upon his family, as well as anyone else who will listen. Like Willy, Richard fails in selling his product to customers, but severely traumatizes his family with his dogged ideals of success. However, the Hoovers as a whole, in contrast with the Loman family, are considerably less secretive about their personal dysfunction. The overly competitive Richard has fathered two children: a depressed son and a chunky, spunky, pageant-crazed daughter, Olive. Additionally, the family hosts a suicidal, homosexual uncle and a porn/drug-addicted grandfather. Paralleling Linda Loman, the desperate Hoover mother frantically tries to hold her family together, as far from picture perfect as they may be. Nonetheless, these openly eccentric characters provide a similar example of the emotional struggles the Lomans fight to keep beneath the surface. The movie's plot focuses on a family road trip, encouraged by Mr. Hoover's thirst for victory, to a beauty pageant so that young Olive can compete for the title of “Little Miss Sunshine.” The numerous trials which the Hoovers face along the way, such as the grandfather's death, constant transportation trouble, and numerous psychological “meltdown[s],” provide a “look at the ceaseless and futile battle to maintain one's footing on a social treadmill” (Laurier). This relentless combat against social expectations effectively proves the standard of a faultless family to be undeniably unattainable. As Richard refuses to accept his family and himself in their state of imperfection, the tensions between relatives grow through the “recklessly blind and egotistical quest” (Laurier).

As with any object withstanding immense pressure, a family, too, must ultimately fold under mounting weight; and in the case of the Lomans, the members walk away with a number of lasting psychological scars. Their denial, rather than the actual family discrepancies, ultimately disbands the family. The paramount dilemma in fostering a family living in pure denial is that at least one member will more than likely stumble upon some form of enlightenment, which predictably makes for chaos amongst the remaining family members. Such an epiphany strikes Biff as he discovers his father's infidelity. The boy's sense of perception is drastically shaken as he realizes that Willy is not the popular, business-savvy hero whom he spends his youth idolizing; rather, his father is nothing but a “fake” (Miller 1093). Biff's pompous ideology shatters the moment he recognizes that Willy's “I'm vital in New England” attitude is the source of his entire household's hollow pride (Miller 1072). Returning to a family's “recursive nature,” Biff's rift from Willy and his subsequent pursuit of “finding himself” take quite a toll on the Lomans' outwardly carefree lifestyle (Miller 1072).

The remainder of the play exposes the tragic results of aspiring to one man's standards of perfection, with each character demonstrating a personal response to Willy's impact. As an adult, Happy seeks compensation for affection denied to him in youth through keeping company with a wide variety of women, persistently ignorant of his and his family's state of crisis. Linda, who at least realizes that “attention must be paid” to Willy's increasing incompetency, remains blinded by her love for her husband and simply cannot bear to “insult” him (Miller 1092, 1094). Though Biff powerfully desires honest communication between his relatives, the tendencies towards irresponsibility and stealing that he develops in adolescence persistently haunt him. Rather than exhibiting any growth whatsoever, Miller's tragic hero, Willy Loman, falls deeper into delusion. Even in the midst of this confused salesman's suicide — Willy's final attempt to make success for the Lomans — the family cannot reach a peaceful consensus as to whether Willy's pristine dream is “the only dream [one] can have” (Miller 1131).

The Lomans spend years complying with Willy's expectations; contrastingly, most members of the Hoover household overtly ridicule Richard's thirst for perfection. The crucial exception is Olive who, in her youthful innocence, cannot yet form her own opinions and consequently looks to her guardians for total guidance. As her father serves as a "teacher, role modeler, and socializer who demonstrate[s] . . . reward[s], punish[es], and otherwise shape[s]" Olive, she develops an overwhelming fear of failing (Masten and Shaffer 12). Though the rest of the family is not so easily influenced, they lack any form of unity and coexist in a state of mass confusion "trying to make sense of the world and find a secure and rational place in it" (Laurier). Uncertainty goads family member to construct walls or "boundaries" between themselves and the other family members (Conoley 4). While to an extent boundaries may exist within any ordinary family, the borders marking each Hoover's territory are exceptionally "impermeable," preventing "information, affection, and supervision" from "flow[ing] easily between" them (Conoley 4). Though the family is not exactly enthusiastic about its impending expedition to a "prepubescent" beauty pageant, the Hoovers begin connecting as a family through adversity (Laurier). Diverging from the disastrous outcomes in *Death of a Salesman* and *Little Miss Sunshine*, honest communication between the Hoovers leads to actual unification. As family members observe Olive dance provocatively in the "Little Miss Sunshine" pageant, they realize that their family is far from perfect, but that accepting each member as he or she is is possible. Through their comedic journey of harmonious growth, the Hoovers demonstrate that, although a family may indeed experience a constant array of problems, each member must not only love, but accept the others in order to fully appreciate the joys of family. In the end, the Hoover family escapes the tragic fate of the Lomans to find their own happy ending by way of recognition and acceptance.

Despite their various divergences, both *Death of a Salesman* and *Little Miss Sunshine* attest that the dire consequences of living under false pretenses are far more harmful than being the odd family on the block. This is not to say that the father figures of either drama are wicked men by any means; they are simply befuddled about how to achieve happiness for themselves or within their families. While the "traditional" family still holds respect in modern culture, the problematic family, in turn, finds far greater acceptance than in the era of *Death of a Salesman*. Family dysfunction is actually a common source of amusement for much of today's America, as is prevalent in the hoards of reality television programs focusing on the subject (*Jerry Springer*, *Wife Swap*, etc.) and the comedic plot of *Little Miss Sunshine*. However, in an era of skyrocketing divorce rates and domestic violence, one begins to wonder at what point acceptance of family imperfection converges with approval of hollow relationships.

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