

Level III

First Place Winner

Sandy Shen

(Grade 10: Self-entered, Solon. Sponsor: Lai Mee Shen)

Letter to playwright Arthur Miller (1915-2005) concerning his play, *Death of a Salesman*, winner of the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and Tony Award for Best Play

Dear Arthur Miller,

Wedged between two pleather bus seats atop a blasting heater, I was both comfortable and confined. Having gotten up at 4:15 am, the day had dragged on with the weight of work and sleep-deprivation. All I wanted was to unwind for the rest of the three-hour-long bus ride with a light read. That was how I intended to relax, until you arrived and reduced me to a bundle of silent tears and sniffles. Until that moment, I had never truly realized the distances words could travel to relate fiction with reality.

When I first picked up *Death of a Salesman*, I already knew how it ended. I assumed it would be a quick play that would improve my understanding of what it was like being in a line of work that valued your efforts as much as you liked your job -- not much in this case. Instead, I received a story so compelling that it rewrote my prejudiced understanding of what a father and a job meant. You introduced me to the tragedy of helplessness, regret, and faded glory.

There is nothing sadder than witnessing the defeat of a man who used to hold up the world. Willy Loman, a failing salesman long past his prime, had been beaten, undermined, and eventually defeated, by the cold, apathetic nature of a materialistic and capitalistic society. Being as old as he was, he could no longer adapt to the fast-paced machinations of a modern salesman while supporting his family. Pushed to humiliating desperation, Willy pathetically relied on the help of people he envied for pity. Even more saddening, his own son, Biff, continued to lose the dwindling respect he had for his father. The passage of time, coupled with the failure to meet his beloved son's expectations, marks the strength Willy Loman must have possessed in order to continue plowing forward.

Willy continued to try redeeming himself for his family, his career, and his dreams. By appealing to the help of others multiple times, he sacrificed his dignity and self-esteem in the name of his family. Like an earnest fool, he simply wanted the best for his family and to fulfill his dream of a meaningful life. In too many dangerous ways, Willy is the man I have begun to fear my father might become.

When I think of my dad, my first thought is of him in a suit: pressed, professional, and punctual. I remember the days when, like Biff, I idolized my father. Whenever my father came home from a long day of work, I would race excitedly to the door and ambush him with a hug. My little brother would also try to latch onto him, but I remember fighting to be the one to play with our dad. Whether it was pretending I was Cinderella and ballroom dancing (even though I was always stepping on my dad's socks) or asking him to quiz us on an endless stream of topics, there was never an end to the amount of respect I had for him.

But in an event almost identical to Biff's, the seasons abruptly changed. We weren't as close as before. I distanced myself, placing cold distrust and frustration in place of respect and acceptance. Biff and I both experienced the monumental realization that parents, no matter how

amazing they can be, are still human. We both saw what had been done. Not only did our fathers turn away from their roots, but they denounced their nobility. All those years of unlimited compassion were gone the instant I discovered what he had done.

Yet what Biff and I had failed to realize was that the men in our lives were very good fathers. They were both talented dreamers but chose their children over their personal wishes. My father could have moved to multiple countries had he not loved and about our well-being. Willy, too, insisted on securing his sons a comfortable life through any means necessary, including a possible business venture. Had I not read the point of view you offered on fathers and devotion, I do not know how much longer I would have held my misplaced grudge. It had festered inside of me for years, refusing to be dealt with or forgiven. For Biff, it had remained stagnant for decades and faded too late for him to properly reconcile with his father.

For Biff and Willy, the precious opportunity for forgiveness and growth was lost to death and tragedy. Given the power of perspective you have installed throughout *Death of a Salesman*, I have learned to recognize and respect the role my father plays in my life as well as all that he has sacrificed for me and my siblings. While he is my father, he is first a human with shortcomings and weaknesses. I can only stress how glad I am for not having to wait until my father disappeared from my life to grasp all of this. Maybe one day I will be his little daughter again, riding atop his shoulders.

Thank you,
Sandy Shen, 10th Grade