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Inescapable Destiny: An Analysis of Character and Fate

Contrary to later Calvinist beliefs of predestination, Greek philosopher Heraclitus argues in his famed quote that, in fact, “a man’s character is his fate.” That is, that an individual’s character will ultimately determine his or her future. Character, unlike being, is an identity which is not strictly accorded from birth, but rather develops over time, consisting of that individual’s personal thoughts and beliefs, actions, and the response of others to that individual, as well as their physical being. To suggest this, Heraclitus determines that, truly, a man does have control over his destiny. Whether or not an individual takes advantage of this fact is often determinable by their fate. Just as Willy Loman’s lackluster lifestyle produces nothing but normality, Nora Helmer’s cravings for purpose ultimately give her the strength to pursue self-discovery.

As a work heavily reliant upon its historical context, *A Doll House* portrays the dissatisfaction of the traditional role of the woman. Main character Nora Helmer’s disconnect from her role as a mother and wife proves a crucial component of the story, as well as an innovative trait for a woman of the time to possess. Unlike more modern times, ideas of women’s suffrage and liberation were hardly acceptable desires, making more evident the true grasp that Nora was able to take on her life in order to redirect her fate. While a typical woman of the time would succumb to the role and future that society had established for her, Nora makes the very bold and uncommon decision to leave her husband and traditional life in order to explore new opportunities. “I’m not up to the job,” she confesses. “There’s another job I have to do first. I have to educate myself” (Ibsen 1630). The progression of her character, especially through her continued feelings of powerlessness and desires to hold true purpose were truly, in this case, able to determine her fate.

Just as Nora Helmer was became empowered through personal feelings of dissatisfaction, Willy Loman’s downfall can only be attributed to himself. Willy’s persistent hesitations and naïve hopes build in the same way Nora’s frustrations do, progressing to a climax of chaos and bleakness. As a man living in the past, Willy set himself up for a disastrous future, never gaining the motivation to be anything other than “well-liked.” Throughout *Death of a Salesman*, Willy passes up opportunity after opportunity for the comfort of stability. He justly instills this mental in both of his sons, never pushing them to reach anything higher than football quarterback. Each Loman family member presents himself in a way which suggests little progression, and duly, neither Willy nor Happy ever achieve anything more than the ordinary.

In *Oedipus Rex*, and in most Greek literature, the added aspect of all-knowing gods presents a problem for Heraclitus’ words. Because, ultimately, the players within the story have very little control over their destinies by means of pesky oracles, character appears to hold no significance in establishing each individual’s fate. The chorus frequently makes this state known, speaking “Zeus, yours is the power, Zeus, what man on earth can override it” (Sophocles 1359). For Oedipus and his family, the god Apollo, specifically, manipulates each person as a mere pawn in his prophecy. These gods play a crucial role in shaping not only the fate of each individual, but their character as well, driving them to try to outwit the oracles. Such a bold attempt, as Oedipus’ family has executed accordingly angers the gods. And, so, while they never truly possess much control, each character, had they responded differently would have produced a much different outcome. Certainly, the prophecy would have come true, but perhaps, Jocasta would not have committed suicide or Oedipus would not have blinded himself. It is only within their individual actions and thoughts that they would assume such futures.

Within the best works of literature, an author creates whimsical and undeniable character development, vital to creating a multi-dimensional story. With this, comes discovery and assumption of self, a true progression which Heraclitus spoke of in his quote. No end goes unexplained and no action goes unlooked. Each action, thought, and figure holds purpose in determining an end in accordance with its means.