

Dramatic Techniques in Death of a Salesman

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Abstract

Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman is a simple but imaginative play. For over fifty years, it has been stirring up controversy over its form and its structure. Basically, the form of the play is a modern tragedy, not a classic one, but its structure is quite complicated and interrelated. Just as the title of the play suggests, we know the protagonist, Willy, is going to die. However, the key point is why he chooses to end his life by committing suicide and when he will do it. Definitely, the answer lies in the structure of the play. In his Introduction to Collected Plays, Miller points out that the protagonist's death "came from structural image. The play's eye was to revolve from within Willy's head, sweeping endlessly in all directions. . . ." Therefore, in order to explore the inner mind of Willy's death, I would like to take three major dramatic techniques—the treatment of time, the use of the stream of consciousness, and the form of a confession—to explain how the play goes so smoothly and so powerfully.

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Arthur Miller's Death of A Salesman is a play about the last day of a salesman and about the interactions of love and hatred, of reality and fantasy, of sense of guilt and quarrel that inevitably drive him to commit suicide. For more than five decades, the play has "provoked a lengthy controversy over whether it was a true tragedy."¹ On one hand, the structure of the play is quite simple and loose; on the other, it impresses us as a theatrical triumph and provides us a new example of modern tragedy. Naturally, to be touched by the play and to realize it thoroughly are two different things. How is this possible in the case of a play so confined to the bottom of our heart? It stands to reason that the play needs several interpretations and discussions from the critics as well as readers. So, in the paper, I would like to take some major dramatic techniques as a approach to explore the play.

The "treatment of time"²: as in all tragedies, we first meet the protagonist, Willy Loman, a few moments before his final time. But Miller does not use the usual direct, plain, expository statements to acquaint us with the antecedent action necessary to an understanding of Willy's dilemma. Few critics have recognized the significance of the play's structure, of its use of scenes that gradually exposes the Willy's inner world. Just as Matthew C. Roudane comments on the structure of the play: "the form of Death of a Salesman was an attempt, as much as anything else, to convey the bending of time."³ So, we begin with what is most notable about the structure of the play: the treatment of time.

The aim for adapting this technique is multifunctional. By putting emphasis on the earlier scenes, we are shown to know why Willy has to choose his own way to end his life. At the same time, it serves to raise that suicide to the level of sacrifice by linking it with Willy's early dreams. If we study the play carefully, we may clearly find two sorts of time in the play. One is "psychic time, the way we remember things; the other is the sense of time created by the play"⁴ and shared by the readers as well as the audience.

Partly because the advance of modern psychology has made it easy for us to switch from the present to its memory in the past and back again. It offers "many profound clues toward solving a work's thematic and symbolic mysteries."⁵ In the play, we find Willy is doomed to repeating the same pattern of antagonism and failure along with a hopeful atmosphere. Gradually we are brought to confront a situation that we have already been wondering about: how will Willy end his life and when? For instance, Willy has a fatal flaw--he lives in a dream world and is always schizophrenic—that is, he talks to himself. So we return to the 'past' and come back to the 'present' with him and has no difficulty making transitions. This is a technique of time treatment, totally free from time-bounding.

Partly because an illusion of such movement lies within the structure of the play. Miller has actually chosen to show us the scenes which made up the Willy's life. These scenes, from false pride to despair and from a vestige of love to an orgy of hate, pity, and death, spread in front of us as if they exist in Willy's mind. Into his visualization of Willy's final hours, Miller introduces two theatrical skills: "the guidance from Ben and the nurture of Biff."⁶ The guidance

from Ben presents Willy's inner insecurity, for Willy bows down to the image of Ben's success. Ben "personifies ideal success, the realization of the wildest dreams a man might have. In his quest to make some sense of his failed life, Willy views Ben as a guide --- an older brother's role --- who appears to him every time Willy is most desperate."⁷ When Willy questions his way of teaching his sons and feels temporary about himself, he asks Ben for an advice : "Ben, how should I teach them?" Ben's answer is to pursue an American dream. "William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen, when I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I am rich!"⁸ From the lines by Ben, we readers come to know what had happened to him and get a clear picture of what Willy was and, at the same time, what had gone wrong with him.

However, the nurture of Biff brings us a knowledge that Willy is "not in the eyes of his sons just a man, but a god in decay."⁹ To his first son Biff, Willy bends his knees before the idol of success, teaching him the importance of a smiling face and making him believe the key to success is to be 'well liked.' Ironically, Willy's godhood is totally destroyed when Biff comes to Boston at seventeen and catches Willy with a lusty woman. Willy, on the contrary, bends his knees asking Biff for forgiveness and understanding. These two theatrical skills give dimension to the portrait of Willy---what happened to him and why he was necessarily and inevitably forced to take his own life by himself . Without them, the play would be a sentimental piece of work, and it would be very hard for us to feel the tragic sense that Willy made his final solution to himself.

The use of the stream-of-consciousness technique: the play begins and ends in one basic setting, the Loman home, and flash-backs in the stream-of-consciousness style present Willy's present dilemma that is closely connected with the past. Just as Harold Clurman points out, "the play dramatizes Willy's recollection of the past, and at times switches from a literal presentation of his memory to imaginary and semi-symbolic representation of his thought."¹⁰ That is, the contrast Miller chooses to express his idea is "between Willy as a salesman and Willy as a man."¹¹ Such a view of the contrast can justify the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique. For example, Willy does not actually go back to the past. It is the past, as in a hallucination, that comes back to him. Each time when he is frustrated, guilty, or accused by his sons, he will be in a dream and the past appears in his mind. The reason for this technique is to show Willy's unconscious desire to avoid pain and to repair the bitterness, frustrations and humiliation of daily life at the present. In this case, Biff seems to have a clear understanding of his father's hallucination:

Biff, *at the peak of his fury*: Pop, I'm nothing. Pop. Can't you understand that? There's no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all .

Biff's fury has spent itself, and he breaks down, sobbing, holding on to Willy, who dumbly fumbles for Biff's face.

Willy, *astonished*: What're you doing? What're you doing?

To Linda: Why is he crying?

Biff, *crying, broken*: Will you let me go, for Christ's sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?

Struggling to contain himself, he pulls away and moves to the stairs. I'll go in the morning. Put him---put him to bed. Exhausted, Biff moves up the stairs to his room. (Text 133)

In order to use the stream-of-consciousness technique more smoothly, Miller chooses two characters, Linda and Charley, to present the whole, complete Willy: what he was, what he is, and what he will be. For the whole play, Linda and Charley are the only ones who realize the seriousness of Willy's situation: the former knows the present Willy, a tired, frustrated old man in his sixties; the latter realizes the past Willy, a hopeful, would-be-rich young man. Linda is the model of a loving, gentle and loyal wife, she understands the pain and fear behind Willy's behavior. She senses that Willy is in trouble and something has gone wrong with him. To

protect him, she is even terrifyingly tough to Biff:

... I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. (Text 56)

After the boys abandon their father in a restaurant for dates with women they have picked up, she fiercely attacks both of them: "You're a pair of animals! Not one, not another living soul would have had the cruelty to walk out on that man in a restaurant!" (Text 124). Linda knows her Willy is a common man and as good as many other people. She thinks he deserves at least the respect of his own sons: "Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person!" (Text 56). Perhaps Linda expresses the idea that Miller suggests us to think about.

On the contrary, when Willy cannot stand the bitterness of the reality, he goes back to the past and Charley appears in his mind: "the technique of psychic projection, of hallucination, of the guilty expression of forbidden wishes dramatized."¹² On one hand, Charley stands in contradiction to everything Willy believes in. He knows what Willy was in the past. He even tries to make Willy a man of success and thereby restore Willy's dignity. His humanity and lack of illusion enable him to penetrate Willy's mind and points out Willy's weak points: "Why must everybody like you? Who liked J. P. Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he'd look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was well liked" (Text 97). He is stern about Willy's low standard of fair play, and impatient with his childlike dreams, urging Willy all through the years to be realistic: "The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that" (Text 97). On the other, Charley just like Linda understands what have happened to Willy and has a sympathetic feeling for Willy's suicide. In the requiem, he talks to Biff in defense of Willy:

Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the like. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back—that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished, Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. I comes with the territory. (Text 138)

Willy has to dream to "seek a kind of ecstasy in life"; however, by its very nature, "it is impossible to maintain."¹³

The use of the form of a confession: As we know, the play begins and ends in one basic frame house within the limitation of forty-eight hours, and we are suggested with only one firm piece of knowledge that Willy Loman is about to destroy himself. With the fixed setting, time and plot, how can this play be so powerful? As Miller wrote, "he wishes to create a form which, in itself as a form, would literally be process of Willy Loman's mind As I look at the play now its form seems the form of a confession."¹⁴ As we know, the development of the plot basically follows a very simple principle: now talking about what happened yesterday, then suddenly going back to a time thirty years ago, then switching back to the present and even pondering on the future. These 'confessions' are right and necessary. Without them, we can never get the vision of the play and its themes which Miller tries to suggest to us.

As the title suggests, Willy is going to die. He is experiencing a mental-and-physical crisis. The past and the present are co-existing in his mind. Each time he returns from an episode in the past, he brings us a discovered piece of information that strongly reflects his troubled present. Through a series of confessions, we get a clear picture of Willy: he is worn-out with travelling and hoping. His hopes have never been carried out. At the bottom of his heart, he is tortured by the strain of his own failure and antagonism of his beloved son. The

following confession can vividly reveal Willy's hopes and torture:

Oh, Ben, how do we get back to all the great times? Used to be so full of light, and comradeship, the sleigh-riding in winter, and the ruddiness on his cheeks. And always some kind of good news coming up, always something nice coming up ahead. And never even let me carry the valises in the house, and simonizing, simonizing that little red car! Why, why can't I give him something and not have him hate me? (Text 127)

According to Webster's New World Dictionary, the definition of 'confession' is the confessing of sins to a priest or an admission of guilt by a person charged with a crime. By using the form of a confession, we come to get the theme that Miller wants us to think about: who is to blame? Biff used to be the star of the school football team but he was excused all his faults. Why is Biff now at thirty a failure? And why did he stop loving and worshipping Willy somewhere around seventeen? Why does Biff and Happy still wonder? Willy used to have a chance to be rich, well-liked and well-known. Why does he have to end his life by committing suicide? To answer these questions is just like to explore the deep side of our heart. It needs some evidences and proofs that, sarcastically, can be excused reasonably.

If mankind cannot escape from the reality, his inescapable problem is himself: what he was, what happened to him, what he is, and what he has to choose to live and die with. These are the touching, impressive and universal subjects. Death of a Salesman, in this sense, is definitely a skillful piece of work in which we get all these subjects to think about. By using dramatic techniques, the treatment of time, the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique and the form of a confession, we come to share a tragic feeling with Willy: "a little man sentenced to discover his smallness rather than a big man undone by his greatness"¹⁵ and "a little man cannot admit to his failure to obtain the American dream."¹⁶ He finally has no choice but killing himself for the want of some positive, viable human value. This is an enduring play and no playwright can develop the play so movingly and so smoothly than Arthur Miller.

Notes

¹Oscar G. Brockett, The Essential Theatre, 6th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1996) 42.

²I borrow the 'treatment of time' from Judah Bierman, James Hart and Stanley Johnson, "Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman," Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman, Text and Criticism, ed. Gerald Weales (New York: The Viking Press, 1967) 266.

³Matthew C. Roudane, Conversations with Arthur Miller, ed. (Jackson: Mississippi UP, 1987) 363.

⁴I borrow these two ideas from Matthew C. Roudane 363.

⁵Wilfred L. Guerin, Earle Labor, Lee Morgan, John R. Willingham, A Handbook of Criticism to Literature, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 121

⁶Judah Bierman, James Hart and Stanley Johnson 266.

⁷Liza McAlister Williams & Kent Paul, Barron's Book Notes: Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman (New York: Barron's Educational Series, 1984) 21.

⁸The following quotations from Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman will be marked as Text, Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman, Text and Criticism, ed. Gerald Weales (New York: The Viking Press, 1967) 52.

⁹Daniel E. Schneider, "Play of Dreams," Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman, Text and Criticism, ed. Gerald Weales (New York: The Viking Press, 1967) 253.

¹⁰Harold Clurman, "The Success Dream on the American Stage," Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman, Text and Criticism, ed. Gerald Weales (New York: The Viking Press, 1967) 215.

¹¹Liza McAlister Williams and Kent Paul 268.

¹²Schneider 252

¹³Benjamin Nelson, Portrait of a Playwright (New York: David McKay Company, 1970) 134.

¹⁴Arthur Miller, "Introduction to Collected Plays," Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman, Text and Criticism, ed. Gerald Weales (New York: The Viking Press, 1967) 156.

¹⁵John Mason Brown, "Even As You and I," Arthur Miller: Death of a Salesman, Text and Criticism, ed. Gerald Weales (New York: The Viking Press, 1967) 207.

¹⁶Andrea Gronemeyer, Theater (New York: Barron's Educational Series, 1996) 160.

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