



ARTHUR MILLER'S DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE IN DEATH OF A SALESMAN

GURPREET KAUR

Research Scholar
Magadh University



GURPREET KAUR

ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), created its own genre: the American tragedy. In *Death of a Salesman* Miller demonstrated his perfect answer to critics of his earlier dramas who claimed he was incapable of producing other than a conventional play. Brooks Atkinson, calls it a generally accepted tragic masterpiece. Arthur Miller's American dreamer Willy Lowman is an illustration of much practiced philosophy of being well liked and exemplifies America's success myth. The tells the story of a man confronting failure in the success-driven society of America and shows the tragic path, which eventually leads to Willy Loman's suicide. The play has been welcomed as a great technical triumph, regardless of what one may think of this play as a tragedy of Willy Loman. In this paper, I intend, to frame Miller's dramatic output within the American dramatic tradition. Dramatic techniques are used in multiple ways by Miller to convey different angles of the story while lighting patterns follow the dialogue or music to exhibit the play's mood. The dramatic structure's various aspects such as events, time and plot have also been described. The play has been structured "expressionistically", in that, Miller broke down conventional constraints of time and place and moved the audience in and out of Willy's past and then into the present and then back in the past again, as Willy shuttles between the dreams and promises of his past and the harsh reality of the present.

Keywords : Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, American Dream, Expressionism.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

Arthur Miller's extensive use of dramatic elements in his plays, such as sound, particular attention to stage settings, and his dialogues gives a rare effectiveness. Critics have noted the impact of his relatively simple use of language for his dialogues, with no grandiose wordplay the beauty and effectiveness of dialogue lies in its simplicity. The dialogue in the play gives the impression of realism. Linda is the character who most often expresses the universal aspects of the Loman predicament :

LINDA: "One day you'll knock on this door and there'll be strange people here..." (Act 1,pg38)

The simplicity of sentence construction and vocabulary is the 'feature of her most memorable speech'

LINDA: "Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person." (Act 1,pg39)

The position by the word 'attention', in Linda's sentence gives it more emphasis, as does its repetition. The whole speech transcends the common place; this is not ordinary, everyday language."

Arthur Miller's play is an example of non-linear storytelling. Set in Brooklyn during the late 1940s, *Death of a Salesman* follows the last day of the old, unsuccessful salesman Willy Loman's life and his struggle to achieve success. It 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. The play moves between the past and present, between the real space of the Loman's home and the place of Willy Loman's mind.

The play opens with Willy returning from a failed business trip late at night who is mentally perplexed. He has reached the point of exhaustion where he not only is unable to continue his work :

WILLY: I'm tired to the death. I couldn't make it. I just couldn't make it, Linda.

LINDA : Where were you all day? You look terrible.

WILLY: I got as far as a little above Yonkers. I stopped for a cup of coffee. Maybe it was the coffee.

LINDA: What?

WILLY : I suddenly couldn't drive any more. The car kept going off onto the shoulder, y'know?

LINDA : Oh. Maybe it was the steering again. I don't think Angelo knows the Studebaker.

WILLY: No, it's me, it's me. Suddenly I realize I'm goin' sixty miles an hour and I don't remember the last five minutes. I'm — I can't seem to — keep my mind to it."(Act 1, pg 5)

Willy and his wife, Linda, talk about the visit of his oldest son Biff who has been working as a farm worker in the West. Biff and his younger brother Happy, who is also visiting, overhear their father talking to himself in the kitchen. Linda tells her two sons about Willy's deteriorating mental health and suicide attempts. Biff decides to help his father. Biff and Happy come up with a business plan and ask Biff's former employer for a loan to make it a reality. Inspired, Willy decides at the same time to ask his boss for local job. He receives his severest blows when he needs the greatest amount of love and care. He is unable to travel extensively. He makes a request to his young employer to relieve him of such a tiring burden and give him a comfortable job. But, for the capitalism businessman no moral or legal obligation can be binding. To him, Willy is commercially as useless as the peels of a fruit.

So, HOWARD (he says): "*I can't take blood from a stone.*"(Act 2, pg 58)

Willy's request was rejected and he was fired and Biff's former employer did not even recognize him. Willy asks his neighbour Charley to loan him money. Charley offers him a job instead but Willy rejects the offer.

CHARLEY: You want a job?

WILLY: I got a job, I told you that What the hell are you offering me a job for?

CHARLEY: Don't get insulted.

WILLY: Don't insult me." (Act 1, pg 28)

The climax comes when Biff reveals the truth about himself as a failure to his father. He begs him to give up his dream of him.

WILLY: 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? I'll go in the morning. Put him — put him to bed."(Act 2, pg 99)

In anguish, Willy decides to commit suicide so that Biff can collect his life insurance money. The whole situation sums up in Biff's remark who says on his father's death.

BIFF: "He had the wrong dream. All, all wrong."(Requiem, pg 103)

The tragedy of Willy Loman, says Arthur Miller, is:

"Willy gave his life, or sold it, in order to justify the waste of it..."

Willy represents every low-man in America. It is a tragedy of a man troubled by the society. Willy believes in American myth that

"Success is obtained by being well-liked".

His dream ends up in nightmare. So the play challenges to new American capitalistic concepts.

Arthur Miller uses several techniques to characterize Willy, Biff, and Happy's American capitalistic ideology. His techniques serve to explain the reasons behind his characters actions. Each of these characters taken a wrong turn down the road of life and are now trying to rectify the damage they have inflicted upon themselves and others in their life. Willy's goal throughout life was to climb out of his social class. As a salesman, Willy was a failure and he tried desperately to make his sons never end up like him. As a result, he loses his mind and his grasp on reality.

Death of a Salesman is a story of a man who has lost his mind and sacrifices himself to an idea, the false promise of a golden future. Willy Loman has absorbed the values of his society until they seem part of what he wishes to see as his own definition. He is a salesman; the epitome of a society built on social performance and wedded to the idea of a transforming future. Future for Willy is rosy and full of hope. Bigsby in *Critical Study* (2005), declares:

"Willy Loman is a man who wishes his reality to come into line with his hopes, a man desperate to leave his mark on the world through his own endeavors and through those of his children. Though he seems to seek death, what he fears above all is that he will go before he has justified himself in his own eyes and there are few, from New York to Beijing, who do not understand the urgency of that need". (Bigsby, *Critical Study*, pg 101)

Thus, *Death of a Salesman* is Miller's proclamation of the end of Enlightenment and Grand narratives. The entire play may be an account of Loman's struggle to attain success, to be one with the American society. He drags the entire family into the quagmire of his decisions, and attempts to influence their lives to attain satisfaction, as he seems resigned to his fate. Willy's sense of needing love and respect causes him to dedicate his life to the eternal American quest of a transformed tomorrow. Loman's death, his erasure, is probably one of the masterstrokes of such a protagonist- with his death comes insurance, his support to his family, and to achieve a plethora of other goals. To quote Jacobson-

"Leonard Moss has noted that he chooses death "not simply as an escape from shame but as a last attempt to re-establish his own self- confidence and his family's integrity." (Leonard Moss, Arthur Miller (New Haven, 1967), p. 45.)

Willy's idea of death to get the insurance money makes it seem possible to synthesize the values of Ben and Singleman. For by entering the dark, unknown "jungle" of death Loman might bring out tangible wealth, "like diamonds," thus becoming as much an adventurer as Ben but within the skyscraper world of New York.

Throughout the story, Willy often has flashbacks of the conversations that he and his brother Ben once had and the author intertwines them in past and present very nicely.

"BEN: Is mother living with you?

WILLY: No, she died a long time ago.

BEN: That's too bad. Fine specimen of a lady, Mother." (Act 1, pg 31)

These flashbacks illustrate Willy's loss of reality from the world. As Willy and Charley are playing a game of cards, Willy has a flashback of him and Ben and Charley becomes completely confused, believing that Willy is speaking to him.

"BEN: I'd hoped to see the old girl.

CHARLEY: Who died?

BEN: Heard anything from Father, have you?

WILLY : What do you mean, who died?

CHARLEY : What're you talkin' about?" (Act 1, pg 31)

As a character, Ben represents the opportunity that Willy did not take and all the fortune that he missed. 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. 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 expressionistic stage setting, use of light, sound and introducing Willy's imaginary talk with Ben all contribute to the Playwright's attempt to highlight Americanism.

Willy's false notion of ideals from the beginning by Miller's use of symbols and various expressions used in the play. The American west, Alaska, African jungle are uttered several times to illustrate the play's recurrent theme of American dream. Stocking scene is used to indicate Willy's alienation and infidelity. His two heavy suitcases symbolize the burden of two sons. These baggages illustrate pluck and luck theory. Willy planting seeds in the shadow which will not grow anything as there is no sunlight. It focuses the fact that without proper steps you will not be able to get the fruit. Willy cannot breathe in his house which is suffocating by being surrounded by large apartment buildings. Linda cannot grow carrots here. His walls are transparent denoting the idea of glasses and thereby fragile, like Willy's trivial city life. When Willy is considering killing himself, he hears Ben telling him that,

BEN : "the jungle is dark but full of diamonds." (Act 2, pg 91)

The jungle here is a risk (physically and, more interestingly, *morally*), which has the potential to yield wealth. In deciding to commit suicide, Willy perceives himself going into the dark jungle to get diamonds for his son.

Arthur Miller employs Expressionism to create a subjective truth and his plays appeared so real as if no one wrote them but they just happened. He combined expressionism with realism to create this form, he made an innovation in dramatic techniques. In his own belief, Salesman "*broke the bonds of a long tradition of realism.*" One of the most notable contradictions between Willy's idealized version of life and reality is displayed during a conversation between Willy and his wife Linda.

WILLY : "Oh I'll knock 'em dead next week. I'll go to Hartford. I'm very well liked in Hartford. You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me." (Act 1, pg 23)

This specific conflict between Willy's idealized life and reality, or between what kind of man he could have been and what he actually is, has rendered him unstable in this late stage of life, both mentally and emotionally. The realistic technique is also seen in the progress of much of the action – the dialogue between Willy and Linda when Willy -unexpectedly comes back from his business trip

"LINDA: Willy!

WILLY: It's all right. I came back.

LINDA: Why? What happened? Did something happen, Willy?

WILLY: No, nothing happened." (Act 1, pg 5).

The dialogues between Happy and Biff, Willy's whole interview with Howard, Willy's driving away to kill himself, the scene at Willy's grave, and so on.

Miller makes use of many other technical devices of music and light to attain the standard target of an expressionistic play. To reveal the true nature of Willy Loman Arthur Miller makes use of Music. The music is symbolic of Willy Loman's nostalgia for the lost paradise of rusticity of the New England. The dramatic devices, such as music and lighting effects, are used by Miller to supplement the expressionistic lapses into the past. Each Act, as well as the final Requiem, is introduced with music. At the beginning of Act II, the music heard in the early morning "*is gay and bright*" as the stage direction informs.

The music and light reminds the audience of the temporary reconciliation which has taken place in the Loman family and also diminishes the grim hint of Willy's suicide towards the end of the first Act. The play opens with a melody played on the flute. The music is a device for dissolving time and distance. The music suggests, in Miller's words, "*grass and trees and the horizon*". It is associated with the flutes which Willy's father made and sold across the whole country. The flute here is an expressionistic device to symbolize life in the open, a life full of hope and peace against a pastoral background. This music is heard as soon as Willy and Ben begin to speak of the father.

This technique also heightens the basic irony of the play by showing in related episodes of Willy's life the conflict between what Miller calls "the previously assumed and believed-in results of ordinary and accepted actions" and "their abrupt and unforeseen--but apparently logical-- effects."

Except the technique of expressionism and realism, there are other significant techniques at work in the play. Miller has deliberately blurred the past and the present of Willy Loman. By blurring the boundary of the past and the present, Miller has tried to throw dramatic spotlight upon the suicidal predicament of Willy Loman:

“WILLY : Where is Dad? Didn’t you follow him? How did you get started?

BEN: Well, I don’t know how much you remember.

WILLY: I remember you walking away down some open road.

BEN : I was going to find Father in Alaska.

WILLY: Where is he?

BEN: At that age I had a very faulty view of geography, William. I discovered after a few days that I was heading due south, so instead of Alaska, I ended up in Africa.” (Act 1, pg 33)

Willy's abandonment by his father and brother at a young age leaves him with many unanswered questions and concerns. This secret fear corrodes his character, making him kind of a desperate person. Ironically, this desperation eventually leads to both Biff abandoning him and Willy abandoning his family through suicide.

To demonstrate the psychic nature of a frustrated and suicidal man Arthur Miller has not divided Act into scenes. Moreover, Miller has divided the play into two Acts only. The unity of time and action contributed to the credibility and appropriateness of an expressionist reality. Miller himself admits that its treatment of time “*explodes the watch and the calendar*”. By not dividing acts into scenes the playwright succeeded in capturing the smooth continuity of uninterrupted action demanding perfect coherence.

Miller is subversive of the chronological unfolding of the plot. It has, on the contrary, lays emphasis upon the circular unfolding of the plot. In the expansion of plot of *Death of a Salesman* both the past and the present coincide rendering entire experiences confused and chaotic.

Centola writes, “*He convinces himself that only his death can restore his prominence in his family’s eyes and retrieve for him his lost sense of honor.*” (A Sartrean Reading of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. (1988) p. 297-302)

Willy fails to see that his illusion of success was a lie, even when Biff confronts him with the truth. When Willy felt that he had gained back a part of Biff that was lost, he wanted Biff to hold on to that and remember him under those terms. Willy felt that the only way that that could be accomplished was to take his life on his terms, gaining control, respect and the love that he felt he always deserved.

By portraying Willy’s struggle to accept the falsehood of the American dream and his failure to realize that Biff does not wish to pursue this dream, Miller does not only emphasize the flaws of material wealth, but also that each person measures success differently. While Willy interpreted success as being wealthy and well respected,

“WILLY: Bernard is not well liked, is he?

BIFF: He’s liked, but he’s not well liked, (referring to Bernard).”(Act 1, pg 21)

Willy's recipe for success is based entirely around a cult of personality. Most people are liked by their friends and acquaintances. But only great men, according to Willy, are truly well-liked - and that is what brings them success. In this quote, we see that Willy's belief in personal connections has been transferred to his sons as well, as they dismiss their friend Bernard for only garden-variety likability.

Thus, *Death of a Salesman* is a multilevel achievement which demonstrates the remarkable fusion of various dramatic techniques used by Miller and this assimilation helps Miller communicate with his readers and audiences quite effectively. Its a realistic evaluation of American values. To conclude, Miller can create effect out of commonplace constructions, and appeal to his audience like an artist. Miller is a dramatist who owes a debt to or has been influenced by Ibsen, Chekhov, and Dostoyevski and the German expressionism. He has broadened the horizons of realism. He wished to enrich the realistic style with an “evaluation of life” a constant articulation of ethical judgment on the other hand he also used the expressionistic style to capture the mental and emotional, not physical state of the character. *Death of a Salesman* represents the compromise mainly between realistic and expressionistic modes. Therefore, to Raymond Williams, “*Death of a Salesman is an expressionistic reconstruction of naturalist substance, and the result is no hybrid but a particular form*”. (Williams, Raymond. *Modern Tragedy*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1966.)

This particular form of the play shows Arthur Miller’s deep insight into the tragedy of Willy Lowman who is totally shattered by false values which are also a part of his American Society. This shows Miller’s deep

understanding of stagecraft and dramatic technique. His use of time sequence, dialogues, music and light greatly add significance to his dramatic technique through which he combines social awareness with a genuine concern for the psychology of common American. *Death of a Salesman* is therefore more than a moving portrait of one man's self-delusion and exhaustion. It is a complex presentation of American aspirations and universally felt dilemmas of existence.

REFERENCES

- [1]. www.en.wikipedia.org
 - [2]. www.shmoop.com
 - [3]. Miller, A. 1998. *Death of a Salesman*. New York: Penguin Book.
 - [4]. Szondi, Peter. 1987. *Theory of the Modern Drama*. Polity Press: Cambridge.
 - [5]. Christopher Bigsby .2009. *Arthur Miller*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
 - [6]. 4.Bradford, Wade. "Arthur Miller - Biography of an American Playwright." *About.com: Plays & Drama*. Web. 27 Nov. 2011. <<http://plays.about.com/od/playwrights/p/arthurmiller.htm>>.
 - [7]. Lal, R. 1980. *Death of a Salesman: A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Rama Brothers.
 - [8]. Kennedy, X.J., Dana Gioia. 1999. *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
 - [9]. Williams, Raymond. *Modern Tragedy*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1966.
-