EXPRESSIONISTIC DEVICES IN DEATH OF A SALESMAN

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ABSTRACT

Miller was interested not merely in the physical but also in the mental and emotional aspects of his characters. More important for an understanding of the form of *Death of a Salesman* is a familiarity with German expressionism. To deliver the complexity of what was going on in Willy's head, Miller departed from the realism of *All My Sons*; time is exploded, linear cause and effect rearranged, the sets minimized – a table and chairs become the kitchen, a window frame hangs in air. Miller wrote "There is no limit to the expansion of the audience's imagination so long as the play's internal logic is kept inviolate. It is not true that conventionalism is demanded. They will move with you anywhere; they will believe right into the moon so long as you believe right into the moon so long as you believe who tell them this tale. We are at the beginning of many explosions of form. They are waiting for wonders."

He later said about the experiments in form found in *Death of a Salesman*: "I was very moved by German expressionism when I was in school; yet there too something was perverse in it to me. It was the end of man, there are no people in it any more; that was especially true of the real German stuff. It's the bitter end of the world where man is the voice of his class function and that's it. Brecht has a lot of that in him, but he's too much of a poet to be enslaved by it. And yet at the same time I learned a great deal from it. I used elements of it that were fused into *Death of a Salesman.*"

In expressionistic plays, the playwright's subjective sense of reality finds expression. Expressionism seeks to depict the inner life of characters. It went further than realism or naturalism, which traced the lineal development of a story through external details of environment. Expressionism used symbols to evoke the unseen and the unconscious and so expressionist plays were "cool" in their approach: objective, stylized, impersonal. Miller took the form and made it "warm" and humane. About *Death of a Salesman*, Miller wrote: "From the theatrical viewpoint that play........... broke the bounds, I believe, of a long convention of realism...... I had willingly employed expressionism but always to create a subjective truth......... I had always been attracted and repelled by the brilliance of German expressionism after World War I, and one aim in salesman was to employ its quite marvellous shorthand for humane, 'felt' characterization rather than for purposes of demonstration for which the Germans had used it"
MOBILE CONCURRENCY OF PAST AND PRESENT

In Death of a Salesman we find a happy, blending of realism and expressionism. For the technique of realism Miller may be said to have been indebted to the celebrated Norwegian dramatist of the nineteenth century, Henrik Ibsen. But Miller goes one step further than the ordinary writer of the realist or naturalist school. Miller begins to dramatize the events of the past and present showing them as coexisting. Miller wrote "The salesman image was from the beginning absorbed with the concept that nothing in life comes 'next', but that everything exists together and at the same time within us."  

The incidents from the past that Willy recalls in the present are an "expression", or dramatization, of what's going on inside Willy's mind. An observer in the present would simply see Willy talking, mumbling to himself. Miller's aim in Death of a Salesman is to erase any gap between a remembered past – that would be evoked through words – and a present that would be performed on stage. In Death of a Salesman both past and present are given theatrical representation. There is no clear cut boundary between them. Miller wrote, "Thanks to the expressionistic technique of scrim and curtain, the characters may exist in both the present and the past. For example, Biff and Happy are seen as teenagers and adults successively."

There are no flashbacks in Death of a Salesman. Better than the erroneous term 'flashback', the phrase double exposure would be more appropriate. In Willy's mind, past and present exist on the same level, Willy perceives himself both in the present and in the past which is made up of various strata. In a way, Willy is schizophrenic: overwork, worry and repressed guilt have caused his mental collapse. In this state of nervous breakdown, past and present are inextricably mingled, time is, as it were, exploded.

In Death of a Salesman Willy is both the self-remembering I, looking back upon himself, and the remembered I itself, that is to say, the salesman as he used to be. Similarly the same actors play their present and past themselves, this is the case not only for Willy's sons but also for Bernard, who has become a successful lawyer.

In Miller's mind, Death of a Salesman was not an abstract concept but the concrete image of an enormous head that would be on stage, opening up the play, so that spectators would be able to see inside. It was a very ambitious idea and the original title was The Inside of His Head.

In Death of a Salesman, the spectator is plunged into the main character's head. There is no linear onward progression – it is a play with interruption and the striking characteristic of Death of a Salesman is its uninterrupted dramatic tension. There are two kinds of plots in Death of Salesman. The external plot represents the succession of events
perceived by Willy Loman (present – objective reality). The internal plot deals with Willy's stream of consciousness – his memories and obsessions (subjective reality). Miller says, "It was conceived half in laughter. For the inside of his head was a mass of contradictions. This image accounts for the treatment of time in the play; for the concept that nothing in life comes 'next', but that everything exists together and at the same time within us, that there is no past to be 'brought forward' in a human being, but that he is his past at every moment and that the present is merely that which is past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to."

In drama people presented themselves primarily in speech, as they do in life. Yet there was an eerie, dreamlike melding of past and present in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman's "present action", dialogue and his conversations with the ghosts of his past like his revered brother Ben; there was a melting of the barriers between inner and outer worlds that gave to the play its disturbing, poetic quality. Miller wrote: "Writing in that form was like moving through a corridor in a dream, knowing instinctively that one would find every wriggle of it and, best of all, where the exit lay. There is something like a dream's quality in my memory of the writing and the day or two that followed its completion.

**MUSICAL MOTIFS**

From the opening flute notes to their final reprise, Miller's musical themes express the competing influences in Willy Loman's mind. Once established, the themes need only be sounded to evoke certain time frames, emotions and values. The first sounds of the drama, the flute notes "small and fine," represent the grass, trees and horizon – objects of Willy's (and Biff's) longing that are tellingly absent from the overshadowed home on which the curtain rises. This melody plays on as Willy makes his first appearance, although, as Miller tells us, "[h]e hears but is not aware of it". Through this music we are thus given our first sense of Willy's estrangement not only from nature itself but from his own deepest nature.

As Act I unfolds, the flute is linked to Willy's father, who, we are told, made flutes and sold them during the family's early wanderings. The father's theme, "a high, rollicking tune," is differentiated from the small and fine melody of the natural landscape. This distinction is fitting, for the father is a salesman as well as an explorer; he embodies the conflicting values that are destroying his son's life.

The father's tune shares a family likeness with Ben's "idyllic" music. this false theme, like Ben himself, is associated finally with death. Ben's theme is first sounded, after all, only after Willy expresses his exhaustion. It is heard again after Willy is fired in Act II. This time the music precedes Ben's entrance. It is heard in the distance, then closer, just as Willy's thoughts of suicide, once repressed, now come closer at the loss of his job. And Willy's first words to Ben when he finally appears are the ambiguous "how did you do it?". When
Ben's idyllic melody plays for the third and final time it is in "accents of dread", for Ben reinforces Willy's wrongheaded thought of suicide to bankroll Biff.

The father's and Ben's themes, representing selling (out) and abandonment, are thus in opposition to the small and fine theme of nature that begins and ends the play. A whistling motif elaborates this essential conflict. Whistling is often done by those contentedly at work. It frequently also accompanies outdoor activities. A whistler in an office would be a distraction. Biff Loman likes to whistle, thus reinforcing his ties to nature rather than to the business environment. But Happy seeks to stifle Biff's true voice:

HAPPY.............. Bob Harrison said you were tops, and then you go and do some damn fool thing like whistling whole songs in the elevator like a comedian.

BIFF, against Happy, So what? I like to whistle sometimes.

HAPPY. You don't raise a guy to a responsible job who whistles in elevator!

(Act I - 60)

This conservation reverberates ironically when Howard Wagner plays Willy a recording of his daughter whistling "Roll out the Barrel" just before Willy asks for an advance and a New York job. Whistling, presumably, is all right if you are the boss or the boss's daughter, but not if you are an employee. The barrel will not be rolled out for Willy or Biff Loman.

Willy's conflicting desires to work in sales and to do outdoor, independent work are complicated by another longing, that of sexual desire, which is expressed through the "raw, sensuous music" that accompanies The Woman's appearances on stage. It is this music of sexual desire, I suggest, that "insinuates itself" as the first leaves cover the house in Act 1. It is heard just before Willy – reliving a past conversation – offers this ironic warning to Biff: "Just wanna be careful with those girls, Biff, that's all. Don't make any promises. No promises of any kind". (Act I - 27)

This raw theme of sexual desire contrasts with Linda Loman's theme: the maternal hum of a soft lullaby that becomes a "desperate but monotonous" hum at the end of Act I. Linda's monotonous drone, in turn, contrasts with the "gay and bright" music, the boy's theme, which opens Act II. This theme is associated with the "great times". Willy remembers with his sons – before his adultery is discovered. Like the high, rollicking theme of Willy's father and like Ben's idyllic melody, this gay and bright music is ultimately associated with the false dream of materialistic success. The boys theme is first heard when Willy tells Ben that he and the boys will get rich in Brooklyn. It sounds again when Willy implores Ben, "[H]ow do we get back to all the great times?"

In his final moments of life, Willy Loman is shown struggling with his furies: "sounds, faces, voices, seem to be swarming in upon him". Suddenly, however, the "faint and
high" music enters, representing the false dreams of all the "low" men. This false tune ends Willy's struggle with his competing voices. It drowns out the other voices, rising in intensity "almost to an unbearable scream" as Willy rushes off in pursuit.

And just as the travail of Moby Dick ends with the ongoing flow of the waves, nature, in the form of the flute's small and fine refrain, persists – despite the tragedy we have witnessed.

SETS

In the introduction to his *Collected Plays*, Miller acknowledges that the first image of Salesman that occurred to him was of an enormous face the height of the proscenium arch; the face would appear and then open up. "We would see the inside of a man's head," he explains. *In fact, The Inside of His Head was the first title. It was conceived half in laughter, for the inside of his head was a mass of contradictions*. By the time Miller had completed Salesman, however, he had found a more subtle plays correlative for the giant head; a transparent setting. The entire setting is wholly, or, in some places, partially transparent, Miller insists in his set description. By substituting a transparent setting for a bisected head, Miller invited the audience to examine the social context as well as the individual organism. Productions that eschew transparent scenery eschew the nuances of this invitation.

The transparent lines of the Loman home allow the audience physically to sense the city pressures that are destroying

We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind [Willy's house], surrounding it on all sides. The roofline of the house is one-dimensional; under and over it we see the apartment buildings

Willy's subjective vision is expressed also in the home's furnishings, which are deliberately partial. The furnishings indicated are only those of importance to Willy Loman. That Willy's kitchen has a table with three chairs instead of four reveals both Linda Loman's unequal status in the family and Willy's obsession with his boys. At the end of Act I, Willy goes to his small refrigerator for life-sustaining milk (cf. Brecht's parallel use of milk in *Galileo*). Later, however, we learn that this repository of nourishment, like Willy himself, has broken down. That Willy Loman's bedroom contains only a bed, a straight chair, and a shelf holding Biff's silver athletic trophy also telegraphs much about the man and his family. Linda Loman has no object of her own in her bedroom. Willy Loman also travels light. He has nothing of substance to sustain him. His vanity is devoted to adolescent competition.

Chairs ultimately become surrogates for people in *Death of a Salesman* as first a kitchen chair becomes Biff in Willy's conflicted mind and then an office chair becomes Willy's deceased boss, Frank Wagner. In, perhaps, a subtle bow to *Georg Kaiser's Gas I and Gas II*, Miller's gas heater glows when Willy thinks of death. The scrim that veils the
primping Woman and the screen hiding the restaurant where two women will be seduced suggested Willy Loman's repression of sexuality.

LIGHTING

Expressionism has done more than any other movement to develop the expressive powers of stage lighting. The German expressionists used light to create a strong sense of mood and to isolate characters in a void. By contrasting light and shadow and by employing extreme side, overhead, and rear lighting angles, they established the nightmarish atmosphere in which many of their plays took place.

The original Kazan Salesman made use of more lights than were used even in Broadway musicals (Timebends 190). At the end of act I, Biff comes downstage "into a golden pool of light" as Willy recalls the day of the city baseball championship when Biff was "[l]ike a young God. Hercules – something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him." The pool of light both establishes the moment as one of Willy's memories and suggests how he has inflated the past, given it mythic dimension. The lighting also functions to instill a sense of irony in the audience, for the golden light glows on undiminished as Willy exclaims, "A star like that, magnificent, can never really faded away!" We know that Biff's star faded, even before it had a chance to shine, and even as Willy speaks these words, the light on him begins to fade. That Willy's thoughts turn immediately from this golden vision of his son to his own suicide is indicated by the "blue flame" of the gas heater that begins immediately to glow through the wall – a foreshadowing of Willy's desire to gild his son through his own demise. Productions that omit either the golden pool of light or the glowing gas heater withhold this foreshadowing of Willy's final deed.

Similarly, productions that omit the lights on the empty chairs miss the chance to reveal the potency of Willy's fantasies. Perhaps even more important, the gas heater's flame at the end of Act I recalls the "angry glow of orange" surrounding Willy's house at the play's beginning. Both join with the "red glow" from the hotel room and the restaurant to give a felt sense of Willy's twice articulated cry: "The woods are burning!..... There's a big blaze going on all around" (Line no. 41,107). Without these sensory clues, audiences may fail to appreciate the desperation of Willy's state.

CHARACTERS & COSTUMES

Miller employs expressionistic technique when he allows his characters to split into younger versions of themselves to represent Willy's memories. Young Biffs' letter, sweater and football signal his age reversion, yet they also move in the direction of social type. The Woman also is an expressionistic type, the play's only generic character other than the marvelously individualized salesman.
Miller's greatest expressionistic creations, however, are Ben and Willy Loman. In his Paris interview, Miller acknowledged that he purposely refused to give Ben any character, "because for Willy he has no character – which is, psychologically, expressionist because so many memories come back with a simple tag on them: somebody represents a threat to you, or a promise" Clearly Ben represents a promise to Willy Loman. It is the promise of material success, but it is also the promise of death. We might consider Uncle Ben to be the ghost of Ben, for we learn that Ben has recently died in Africa. Since Miller never discloses the cause of Ben's death, he may be a suicide himself. His idyllic melody, as I have noted, becomes finally a death march. In Willy's last moments, the contrapuntal voices of Linda and Ben vie with each other, but Willy moves inexorably towards Ben. Alluding to Africa, and perhaps also to the River Styx, Ben looks at his watch and says, "The boat. We'll be late" as he moves slowly into the darkness.

Willy Loman, needless to say, is Miller's brilliant demonstration that expressionistic techniques can express inner as well as outer forces, that expressionism can be used to create "felt," humane character. The music, setting, and lighting of Salesman all function express the world inside.

Willy Loman's head, a world in which social and personal values meet and merge and struggle for integration. As Miller writes in the introduction to his Collected Plays:

"The play's expressionistic elements were consciously used as such, but since the approach to Willy Loman's characterization was consistently and rigorously subjective, the audience would not ever be aware – if I could help it – that they were witnessing the use of a technique which had until then created only coldness, objectivity and a highly styled sort of play."

In 1983, when Miller arrived in Beijing to direct the first Chinese production of Death of a Salesman, he was pleased to find that the Chinese had created a mirror image of the original transparent set. Seeing this set, and observing that the kitchen was furnished with only a refrigerator, table and two (not even three) chairs, Miller felt "a wonderful boost" to his morale (Salesman in Beijing 3-4). Teachers and directors might offer a similar boost by giving full weight to the expressionistic moments in Death of a Salesman. For directors, achieving such moments may be technically demanding, but they should not be abandoned simply because they are challenging. Similarly, the expressionistic devices should not be considered too obvious for postmodern taste. In truth, the expressionism in Salesman is not intrusive. Its very refinement of German expressionism lies in its subtlety, in its delicate balance with the realistic moments in the drama. This ever-shifting tension between realism and expressionism allows us to feel the interpenetration of outer and inner forces within the human psyche. The expressionistic devices also elevate Willy's suffering, for they place it in
the context of the natural order. To exercise the expressionism is to diminish the rich chord that is Miller’s drama.

**THE STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY BLEND OF NATURALISM & EXPRESSIONISM**

The structure of the play is a blend of naturalism and expressionism. Although rooted in realistic conventions, the play extends the border of realism to fantasy and dream-play and poetic drama.

The Play is not, then, merely a series of chronological events to show how it created the present. It is primarily a progress towards a deeper understanding of Willy's Predicament; this is achieved by separating what Willy says from the real truth, by distinguishing Willy's view of the other characters from what they really are. The form of the play reflects its subject, Willy human.

In the theatre the different places and times inside Willy's head are present on the stage together. The Flashback technique is adopted in the play, but the flashbacks are not scattered in the play at random. He selects them in a definite pattern that gives increasing depth and dimension to the protagonist. The flashbacks are not arranged in a chronological order. They are arranged in a manner to illuminate Willy's character and his psychological state.

Flashbacks are of two types. One group comprises the events involving Willy and his brother Ben. In this series of flashbacks, Ben appears to Willy's crumbling mind as a cold, righteous, self-assured deity an objectification by contract of Willy's uncertainty and insecurity. In every meeting with Ben, Willy is shown as the adoring, fearful and supplicating child seeking guidance and assurance from the archetypal authoritarian father. The second group of flashbacks centers on Willy and his sons. This series shows Willy the Father, trying to substantiate his ecstatic belief in the success ideal by superimposing it upon his children.

Both sets of flashbacks culminate in the one involving Willy's infidelity – the fact and symbol of his final degradation, the revelation of his insecurity and failure, and the verification of his bleak loneliness and alienation.

E.R. Wood Writes, "The climax of the action on the naturalistic plane, when Biff and his father really face each other in hate and love, is interspersed with glimpses of the fantasy world, so that Willy talks with Ben and reverts to the 'great times' when Biff was a football star, before he drives off to his death."

Miller wanted to reveal the inside of Willy's mind. Hence the use of expressionism as a dramatic device seemed inevitable to him. Expressionism is rooted in experience.
William Beyer observes: "Miller has produced a challenging drama in *Death of a Salesman*, and it is a provocative, moving and occasionally eloquent play which makes pertinent comment on the decadent values in our society. The play's structure drives its narrative home with emotional impact since Miller uses the familiar screen and radio technique. The play begins and ends in one basic setting, the Loman home, and flashbacks in the popular stream of consciousness style clarify the present dilemma in terms of past relevancies. Musical bridges between scenes dovetail them nearly together. For the music being used thematically, is mood provoking and blends perfectly with the structure, which is organically valid and an artistic triumph. Sound craftsmanship is a common place in our theatre, but artistic creation is indeed a rarity and Miller has achieved the latter here, which makes both the playwright and the play eventful."

*Death of a Salesman* is an expressionist reconstruction of naturalist substance, and the result is not only hybrid but a powerful particular form. The persuasiveness of the play is one of false consciousness. The conditioned attitudes in which Loman trains his sons are broken into by real consciousness, in actual life and relationship. The expressionist method embodies this false consciousness much more powerfully than naturalism could do.

Miller’s plots are not traditional. In his attempt to yoke past and present together in the stream of consciousness manner, he tells the story elements. Despite his wide ranging experiments with form, the narrative schemes of *All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, The Crucible, A View From The Bridge* and *After The Fall* are remarkably alike. In each work hidden guilt is first referred to covertly, then based in a climate revelation a scheme based on Ibsen's exhibition of the inescapable casual movement from past action to present reaction. Almost all his heroes have some sins and mistakes to confess. First they hesitate to do that: they try to maintain a distance between inward reality and outward appearance.

REFERENCES


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3. Miller : From his Introduction to his Collected Plays, P. 26


5. Introduction to collected plays, P.P. 25


7. Reference from Collected Plays. P.P. 39
8. Introduction to "Death of a Salesman" (Heinemann, 1958).