

Dramatic technique in death of a salesman

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Discuss the dramatic techniques in *Death of a Salesman*. From a technical point of view, Miller was welcomed by those involved in the practical craft of theatre. In his plays, we find challenge and convention, boldness and caution, daring technical experiment and poetic dialogues. In *Death of a Salesman*, his new dramatic techniques- unrealistic setting, music, lighting, etc. -all generated a sense of mutation of old forms and conventions. *Death of a Salesman* concentrates on Willy Loman, an exhausted middle aged salesman, who has failed to realize his dream of economic success and is presented as being on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Failure also engulfs his wife Linda and two sons-Biff and Happy. The play is divided into three main parts, act 1, act 2 and the requiem. Each section takes place in the present day (spring 1949). Act 1-night time Act 2-various times the next day Act 3-several days later The play is largely a representation of what takes place in his mind during the last two days of his life. In fact, Willy's reminiscences allow us to understand what happened in the past, and why things are how they are now in the present day.

Miller says: " The salesman image was from the beginning absorbed with the concept that nothing in life comes next but everything exists together and at the same time within us. " The story is told on two different levels. There is a public storyline (realistic) which begins late one night and ends twenty-four hours later. Parallel with this, there is the private storyline (non-realistic) inside Willy's mind, which like our own minds, does not always work logically and chronologically but mixes up memories and imaginings with what is actually taking place in the present.

Miller was interested in expressionism but didn't want to abandon the conventions of realism. He used, like O'Neill, a dramatic form that combined the subjectivity of expressionism with the illusion of objectivity afforded by realism. The firm reality of Ibsen's method remained, but it was banded with the dream sequences or flashbacks of past life existing in the present. In *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, Miller adopts Ibsen's 'retrospective structure' in which an explosive situation in the present is both explained and brought to a crisis by the gradual revelation of something which has happened in the past.

In theatre, expressionism has been defined as a mode of writing and production in which the aim is to depict inner meaning rather than outward appearance. For writers, this may imply the use of poetic or stylized language and symbolic characterization. For producers, it implies the use of non-realistic scenery and effects. In expressionistic plays like "Death of a Salesman", the following effects are likely to be used: 1) The action may flow without interruption from one time period to another. More than one time period may co-exist.

In "Death of a Salesman", the audience see present and past action at the same time when Willy talks to Linda and sees the woman(past) in the same room, when he talks to Charley and Ben(his dead brother) at the same time. 2) The action may be presented as a dream or vision by one of the characters. In *Death of a Salesman*, this style is most obvious in the use of flashbacks or dream sequences. Much of the family's history and past events

are revealed through Willy's flashbacks. This is done by narration, dream sequence and memories.

All these scenes, in which we have flashbacks, start in the present and then the character only visible to Willy appear. Most of the flashbacks take place during the summer after Biff's senior year at high school when all the problems began. Biff saw his father with another woman and lost faith in him. Before this, his father was a hero to him, now he is a fraud. These flashbacks explain the current conflict between father and son. We see the second flashback while Willy is playing card game with Charley.

Here we see how the flashback appear gradually, usurping the present bit by bit . He is actually talking to the remembered Ben and the real Charlie simultaneously. When Charlie finally realizes that Willy is absent-minded, he makes an exit. Here we see Willy's too much obsession of the past over present. Miller described Willy as literally at that terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present". He didn't see Willy's internal sequences as flashbacks.

Miller says, " There are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present because in his desperation to justify his life Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between now and then. "

3) The action may take place in more than one location simultaneously. In the kitchen when Willy starts talking to young Biff and Happy in the past, Linda enters the room and asks Willy about the car. 4) The Setting must be non-realistic or partly realistic. One part of the stage may be set with realistic scenery, such as the kitchen at

Brooklyn in *Death of a Salesman*, but this may have an empty open stage area in front of it into which a single piece of furniture or other item may be brought to suggest a location, or the area may be left empty and used for variety of purposes, such as: In the empty space, Howard Wheels on a table with his wire recorder and his office is rapidly set up. To create a restaurant, Happy and the waiter bring on the chair-table the garden at Brooklyn. The play's setting contributes to the understanding of the theme. In *Death of a Salesman*, the realistic set is the backyard of a middle class family.

We see Willy's 'small, fragile-seeming home' with one dimensional roof, dwarfed by apartment blocks. Miller says: "An air of dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality". The world outside Willy's home seems oppressive and menacing, threatening to swallow up an economic failure like Willy. Here we see the use of stream of consciousness technique. The play begins and end in one basic setting, the Loman home and the flashbacks in stream of consciousness style presents Willy's present dilemma that is closely connected to the past.

Harold Clurman says: "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." Miller shows the contrast between Willy as a salesman and Willy as a man. 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.

It shows Willy's unconscious desire to avoid pain and to repair the bitterness, frustrations and humiliations of daily life at the present. In order to use this technique more smoothly, Miller chooses Linda and Charley, to present the whole, complete Willy: what he was, what he is, and what he will be. Broken biff says, " Will you let me go for Christ's sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens? " The time shifts in the setting shows Willy's stream of consciousness. The set is designed to minimize the boundaries between past and present.

When we see Willy's present, the characters follow the rules of stage direction, entering only through the stage door to the left. When Willy visits his past, the characters openly move through walls. As Willy's mental state deteriorates, the boundaries between past and present are destroyed and the two start to exist in parallel. So the stage setting expresses Willy's divided consciousness as the reality of the house walls can be breached. The transparency of the setting represents the fragility of Willy's hold on reality.

Miller sees Willy as living " at the terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present. " Miller uses the lighting so that the scenes could change much faster and without the actors leaving the stage. The lighting reflects the basic mood of each act and shows the ' mobile concurrency of past and present'. It keeps moving from one scene to another scene-The light on Willy and Linda's bedroom fades down when the scene ends and the light comes up on the boys bedroom for another scene. ' A blue light of sky' falls upon the house.

The surrounding area shows ' an angry glow of orange', symbolizing the anger of the helpless middle class people in amoneyminded society. The light in past scenes is brighter than the present scene. It means that past was far better for Willy than present. In an expressionistic drama, music and light might be used to indicate a character's state of mind. Here music is a contrivance for the dissolution of time and distance limitations. Biff and Happy, dressed in high school football sweaters, are accompanied with the ' gay music of the boys'.

The melody of flute at the beginning evokes the spacious area of old west, where Willy's father, an inventor, sold flutes . It symbolizes a lost freedom and a lost ideal. When Willy claims to be ' tired to the death', the flute fades away, as if unable to cope with the pain of Willy. When Willy commits suicide, Miller says: " As the car speeds off, the music crashes down in a frenzy of sound, which becomes the soft pulsation of a single cello's string. " By using the form of confession, Miller makes us think about, who is to blame?

Why is biff at the age of thirty four a failure? Why biff and happy still wonder? Symbolism is another feature of expressionism. Linda's mending of stocking, flute song displaced by childish nonsense from a wire recorder, wife's praise erased by a whore's laughter etc, are some beautiful symbols. Willy, the symbol of average American citizen, is trapped by the money-grabbing American society. The planting of seeds symbolize Willy's meaningless attempt to leave something positive for his sons. One athletic trophy symbolizes the fragment of Loman family's dream.

Here we see that the real characters like Biff, Happy, and Charley can't fulfill Willy's expectations. On the other hand, the imaginary presences or the characters from the past are ideal, heroic figures who embody Willy's unfulfilled dream. Here we see subjective characterization. We find a strong imagery when Willy says, "the woods are burning." Willy's brother Ben compares the process of success-building to entering a jungle. Ben says: "When I was I was seventeen, I walked into the jungle and when I was twenty-one I walked out... And by God I was rich! The jungle was the locale of Ben's success, but for Willy, the forest is burning and there is little time left. The burning woods image is symbolic of Willy's feeling that he cannot bear the pressure of time, debts, human relationships. Even the apartment buildings in his neighborhood are closing in on him. He wants to commit suicide. When Willy's mind wanders back to the happy days of his sons' youth, the entire house and surroundings become covered with leaves. The present time is marked by the disappearance of these leaves. After Willy's death, "The leaves of day are appearing over everything".

We find dialogues of typical New Yorkers, realistic, full of repetition, hesitations and contradictions. The language of stage direction, dialogue of the characters are very poetic. Willy says: "Funny you know? After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive." The title, the use of the requiem and Willy's dialogue everything foreshadow Willy's death. We also find dramatic irony. Willy portrays himself as being at the top of his game in sales with countless admirers, after thirty years of experience.

The biggest irony lies in the fact that at his funeral, nobody except his family members and Charley were present. So the dramatic techniques in Death of a Salesman impresses us as a theatrical triumph and provides us a new example of modern tragedy Miller didn't use either the timeswitch or the mixture of realist and expressionist technique simply for their own sakes . Actually, this was the best way to tell the story with the minimum of delay and repetition. Naturally, to be touched by the play and to realize it thoroughly are two different things.