

Symbolism portrayed through common objects

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In *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller uses common objects as symbols of the evolving relationship between the main characters in his play. Women's stockings and their holes symbolize the failing relationship between Willy Loman and his wife, Linda. Seeds in a garden symbolize Willy's declining sense of self-worth and his need to leave something significant behind after his death. Finally, the fountain pen is a symbol of the burden Willy's son Biff carries as he tries to live up to his father's image despite never truly wishing to inhabit that role. First, Linda is always darning her old stockings to fix their holes. The holes resemble the things in her life that are broken. Willy gets frustrated with Linda when she tries to fix the old stockings; he feels she should throw them out. He says: "Will you stop mending stockings? At least while I am in the house. It gets me nervous. I can't tell you. Please" (75). Willy's reaction to the darning suggests the guilt he feels for having an affair - he gave a pair of Linda's stockings to his mistress. To Biff, who witnessed that transaction, stockings represent betrayal and deep hurt. With "You-you gave her mama's stockings" (121), Biff becomes aware that he and his mother have a relationship with Willy that is based on lies - full of holes. While Willy is out buying new stockings and giving them away to his materialistic mistress, Linda is home trying to fix the holes in her stockings and in their relationship. Second, Willy consistently mentions his interest in buying seeds for his garden. Because surrounding buildings block the sun, nothing has grown there for a long time. Willy laments about "the way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks. The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in this neighborhood. The grass don't grow any more you can't raise a carrot in the backyard" (17). The

dead, boxed-in garden represents Willy's state of mind as well - he feels he has no way out. After his fight with Biff in the restaurant, Willy has a deep desire to find a hardware store and purchases some seeds. He says to the waiter: " I have got to get some seeds, right away. Nothing is planted. I don't have a thing in the ground" (122). He wants to bring life into a place he feels is dead, to leave a legacy for his sons before he kills himself. Through planting, Willy would express his desire for his sons to grow big and strong and live the life Willy wanted but never had. Finally, Biff steals a fountain pen in an act that represents his feelings of frustration and entrapment. From an early age, he has felt compelled to steal to fill a void in his life; he even spent some time in jail for it. When he is rejected by someone he thought would give him a loan, Biff steals a fountain pen off the desk and runs down the stairwell. He has no need for this pen. It represents all the times he stole in the past and the lifelong entrapment he has felt from his father. The theft prompts Biff to realize that he is no longer going to follow his father's lead or follow someone else's standards, nor does he have any more interest in taking things from others. At the end of the play, Biff is able to tell his father that the life of a salesman is not for him. The pen is what gave Biff the wisdom to change. Arthur Miller uses symbolism throughout his play to help show the Loman family's dysfunction and the individual and shared problems its members face. His skillful use of common objects as important symbols demonstrates his talent as a playwright and contributes to the timelessness of this play. Work Cited Miller, A. (1949) *Death of a salesman*, Penguin Books, New York, USA.