

Musical motifs

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



Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is a deceptively simple play. The simplicity of the play, however, quickly dissolves into a respectful ambiguity through Miller's ingenious stage directions, nonverbal expressions and, most importantly, his musical design. From the opening notes to their final reprise, the audience is enormously attracted by what Tennessee Williams called the "plastic theatre" (Williams 213). The use of musical expression complements the textual version of the play creating a more lucid production. This willingness that Miller has to open up his theatre to more than merely a language-embedded performance allowed him to create a lyric drama, a more poetic theatre through the melodic themes. The musical motifs assume important roles in the production, roles accentuating the conflicts that the Lomans articulate to the audience through language. They foreground, through metaphor, many of the play's deeper ambiguities and discords. Miller's musical themes express the competing influences in Willy Loman's mind. Once established, the themes need only to 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. These are 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 initial appearance, although, as Miller tells us, "he hears but is not aware of it" (1165). Through this melodious music we are thus given our first sense of Willy's estrangement not only from the nature itself but also from his own deep nature that confuses happiness with success. The flute music also holds important past references for Willy. Ben informs Willy that their father made flutes and sold them during the family's

early wanderings (1185). As Ben enters into their father's biography a new music is heard, introducing an additional musical theme as the father is characterized by " a high, rollicking tune" (1184). The tune is differentiated from the small and fine melody of the natural landscape (1165). This distinction is fitting, for the father is a salesman as well as an explorer. The rollicking musical theme that is heard in reference to his name collides with the tender music that he is remembered for. This represents the conflicting values that he possessed and passed on to those around him, thus giving evidence to Willy's adverse correlation between happiness and success. The father's tune shares a familiar likeness to Ben's " idyllic" (1182) music. This theme presents itself falsely, as it is associated in depressing and discouraging contexts. Ben's theme is first sounded after Willy expresses his exhaustion from his pursuit to succeed (1182). Then it is perceived 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. When Ben's idyllic melody plays for the third and final time it is in " accents of dread" (1228), for Ben reinforces Willy's wrongheaded thought of suicide to help finance and support Biff and the family. This idea of selling out relates to the abandonment that Willy's father portrayed since Willy can not remember much about him. The father's and Ben's themes contribute greatly to Willy's disillusionment about life. They are thus in opposition to the small and fine theme of nature that begins and ends the play. The whistling motif elaborates this essential conflict. Most people envision whistling to be an outdoor activity that accompanies work. A whistler in an office would be a

distraction. Biff Loman is fond of whistling, thus reinforcing his ties to nature rather than the business environment. 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 sounds 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 elevators! (60) Happy holds many of the similar values that his father does, as he believes that success and acceptance are the roots to happiness. He attempts to explain to Biff that to succeed, and thus gain happiness, he must not forfeit his desires. This corresponds to Willy's estrangement from nature to gain successfulness. Later in Act 2 the whistling theme reverberates again as Howard Wagner plays Willy a recording of himself whistling "Roll out the Barrel" just before Willy asks for an advance and a New York job (1198). Willy's uneasiness with the recorder that plays the whistling reiterates the concept of Willy's estrangement and more importantly his blindness to the truth. Being that Howard is a very prosperous man and is the person whistling on the recorder, disproves Willy and Happy's idea that whistling is disapproved by business authorities. In a sense, Howard is showing Willy that happiness does not lie in one's success but rather with his connection with nature and finding himself. 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 (1179, 1215). It is this music of sexual desire that insinuates itself in Act 2. It is also 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" (1174). This raw theme of sexual desire contrasts with Linda Loman's musical motif. She is characterized by a maternal hum of a soft lullaby. This comforting music becomes a "desperate but monotonous hum" at the end of Act I (1195). Linda's monotonous drone, in turn, contrasts with the "gray and bright" music, the boys' theme, which opens Act II. This theme is associated with the "great times" (1195) that 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 (1185). It sounds again when Willy implores Ben, "How do we get back to all the great times?" (1218). In his final moments of life, Willy Loman is shown struggling with his furies, "sounds, faces, voices, seem to be swarming in upon him" (1229). 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 his car. As the car rushes off, the music crashes down in a frenzy of sound. The clamorous music softens as it becomes the soft pulsation of a single cello representing death and the end of Willy Loman's struggle for success. The play ends in the form of the flute's small and fine refrain. It persists despite the tragedy we have witnessed insinuating that nature and following one's true self is the foundation of happiness. From page to stage, Arthur Miller meticulously structures *Death of a Salesman* upon a cluster of

regressive musical images, images that correspond directly to Willy Loman's fall. Without paying much attention the music in the play help the audience experience the mood that each character adds. Upon further examination, the sounds contribute to the musical motifs that underlie and support the overall theme that Miller is addressing. From the conflicting nature of the flute to the controversy of whistling, Miller magically addresses the disillusionment of the American dream through Willy Loman. Barnet, Berman, Burto, and William E. Cain. "Death of a Salesman." An Introduction to Literature. New York: 1997. Williams, Tennessee. "Production Notes of Plays, The Theatre of Tennessee Williams, vol. I. New York: New Directions, 1971.