

# Arthur miller's 'death of a salesman' exemplifies how careful attention to the li...

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



A thorough analysis of the linguistic features of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) will illustrate how, for a conscientious reader, all we need to know about performance is supplied within the written text. Focusing on the dramatist's use of preference structure, silence and the turn-taking mechanism, will reveal that all the vital characteristics of live theatre are available in the written words. To facilitate an evaluation of the legitimacy of linguistic methodology and its outcomes, it is first necessary to consider what may be discerned from the text and performance of *Death of a Salesman* from a non-linguistic perspective. The play originated from the presumption that "the distinction we make between our past and our present is unreal: it all exists simultaneously in our minds." *Death of a Salesman* exhibits the mind of Willy Lowman as it deteriorates through repeated disappointments and unattained aspirations. Many factors contribute to this process: obstinate faith in the American Dream and a need to prove oneself as a hero of the American way of life breeds deception of family members and himself. The entire Lowman family are central characters - with perhaps the exception of Happy - and the audience/reader is afforded insight into the themes, plot and the protagonist through their interactions. Willy's wife Linda is a multifaceted character. She has the pretence of a stereotypical housewife in post-war America. The perpetual presence of a wash basket in her hands, stage directions such as 'Linda is filling his cup when she can.' ... Linda holds his jacket for him' (p. 55) all highlight her perceived roll in the family. Linda speaks gently and plainly, when speaking to her husband, simple lines like 'Just rest. Should I sing to

you?' (p. 54) emphasise her calming, protective nature in the delicate handling of his mental state. However, her willingness to ban Biff from the house if he does not comply with her wishes regarding Willy, in conjunction with her proficient handling of the family finances expose Linda as a strong woman whose depth of perception far exceeds what her demeanour implies. This is evident when she tells her son's that Willy ' has to go to Charley and borrow fifty dollars a week and pretend to me that it's his pay' (p. 45). Linda's extensive awareness of the reality of the family's situation is apparent when she tells her boys in Act One about ' the little rubber pipe' (p. 47) she discovered. This bare truth is juxtaposed with vast deception Every day I go down and take away that little rubber pipe. But, when he comes home, I put it back where it was. How can I insult him that way? (p. 47) This antithesis epitomises the conflict in Death of a Salesman. Those who allow themselves to see and confront the truth are in dispute with those who live in a cloud of delusions - be it by choice or consequence. While Linda conceals the truth to protect her loved ones, Happy chooses to deceive himself and others. He exaggerates like his father: when he meets Miss Forsythe in the restaurant scene he lies about he and his brother's occupations. Very much the marginalized member of the family, Happy's sporadic one-line contributions to discussions are incongruous and do little more than provide comic relief: ' I'm gonna get married, Mom. I wanted to tell you.' (p. 53) Echoes his adolescent mantra ' I'm losing weight, you notice, pop?' (P. 26) These self - centred ploys for attention illuminate his peacekeeping efforts. When Biff insists on telling Willy an unpleasant truth

about his moral character, Happy instructs him to 'tell him something nice' (p. 83) and follows this by suggesting a nice lie that would suffice. When the tension gets to the point of embarrassment, Happy disowns Willy publicly rather than take action: 'No, that's not my father. He's just a guy.' (P. 91)

Biff's character contrasts his brothers in its complexity. He shows sensitivity towards nature when describing the 'inspiring...sight of a mare and a new colt' (p. 16) in his first appearance on stage. Biff also admits in this scene that he is 'mixed up' and 'like a boy' (p. 16); this sets the tone for Biff's positive development towards self-awareness - the only character in the play that achieves this. Young Biff's confidence is based on a false, inflated self image and perception of the world supplied by his father. Miller collides the moment when Biff first loses all certainty of self with the moment he first glimpses the truth of who his father is. The years of disillusion that followed cease when Biff comes to a clear understanding of himself and the danger of lying to oneself: How the hell did I ever get the idea I was a sales man there? I even believed it myself...he gave me one look and - I realised what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been. We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk. (P. 82)

Miller's use of the word 'dream' in that speech of Biff's draws a parallel between the trivial daily lies and the "greatest lie of all, that the world is composed of individuals to whom society is answerable, if one works hard enough success is inevitable." Belief in this maxim contributes largely to Willy's disappointments in himself and in Biff. His journey towards suicide is punctuated with morsels of hope hinging on falsification. At the end of Act One optimism surrounds the impending trip

to Willy's boss Howard, of which he states ' Everything'll be alright.' (p. 54) The following morning is also the day of Biff's visit to Oliver for an unrealistic business proposal. Willy tells Linda that Biff is ' heading for a change...He could be a - anything in that suit!'(p. 55). When all ventures fail, Willy's difficulty distinguishing appearance from reality and past from present degenerate: Biff: so I'm washed up with Oliver, you understand? Are you listening to me? Willy: Yeah, sure. If you hadn't flunked- (p. 87)Guilt from past misconduct can be seen here interfering with present judgement. Willy's older brother Ben - who only appears in flashback sequences of Willy's memories- symbolises the glorious past and the accomplishments of his father (as is indicated by the flute music which accompanies him) and thus also the importance of family ties. Ben also embodies the American dream. It is significant then, that it is he who lures Willy to the final decision of suicide. Desmond Wilcox states " Miller has denied that the play is either an indictment of American Capitalism or an analysis of family relationships gone wrong, though any reader or spectator is bound to feel that these are elements in it" It is appropriate that Wilcox includes the reader and the spectator as equals in his statement on the understanding of Death of a Salesman. Linguistic analysis of Arthur Miller's manipulation of turn taking mechanisms - based on V. Herman's modification of Sacks et al.'s formulation as described by Levinson (1983) - in an excerpt from the end of Act One (see appendix), supports many of the before mentioned deductions of character and theme. The sequence entails Linda, Biff and Happy discussing Willy's condition. Of the 37 turns in total Linda owns 19, Biff 13

and Happy only 5. Immediately the reader understands that in the co-text of Linda's usual infrequent, short calming turns, this indicates an unexpected depth to her character. Linda is the dominant character in this sequence, she self selects 8 times maintaining the topic and orientation on Willy's misfortune despite Biff's attempts to close the conversation at turns 10 and 16, and his turn skips whenever Linda pry's him for a truthful answer; 10, 16 and 18. At turn 7 Linda takes a long turn of 16 lines without any pre-emptory bid for the floor. Her speech is full of challenging rhetorical questions which indicate to the reader much of the history of Willy's circumstances and deterioration, 'no one knows him any more, no one welcomes him. And what goes through a man's mind, driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent?' The repetition of 'no one' emphasises the atmosphere of isolation that plagues Willy and permeates the play: the same isolation that filled the Lyric Theatre during the performance I attended. The ambience was aided by Miller's set design notes calling for 'towering angular shapes...surrounding all sides' (p. 7), which imposed on the audience as well as the actors. The loneliness evoked that evening is equally present in the texture of Linda's speech at turn 7. Miller uses naturalistic language with poetic syntax to convey atmosphere and tone in the speech. Repetition of 'old', 'why' and 'how long' resonate with disillusionment and weariness. The description of his fruitless efforts epitomise how the American Dream is mythical and Willy's dedication to it detrimental to his well-being. Happy's superficial nature is evident in Linda's pointed remarks in turn 3 and her insult which prompts him to end turn 7 by

interrupting her with his characteristic brevity. She responds with a term of endearment in turn 9 to soften the dispreferred accusation, then she turns her attention to Biff, Miller indicates in the stage directions that he is selected as next speaker. She poses a direct question, but the adjacency pair is left open, Biff turn skips at turn 10 and simultaneously attempts a closing of the conversation. Linda who will clearly disprefer both aspects of her son's response, self selects and denies him the power to close the conversation whilst ensuring that the current topic is maintained. In turns 11 - 14, mother and son alternate turns equally and speak honestly. Turns 13 and 14 are a (QA) adjacency pair that expose a truth about the past and allude to the secret affair of Willy's that Biff dare not mention to his mother. The guilt, sensitivity and protective nature of Biff become apparent in Miller's turn management here. When Linda reproaches Biff with metalanguage to explain further in turn 15, he responds with a multi-clause turn skip with further attempts to close the conversation abruptly ' I'm going to bed.' And follows this with an attempt to leave the room. Linda again self selects at line 17 with a dramatic truthful comment that angers Biff, but does not prompt to question her - illustrating the avoidance of truth which characterises this family. He instead counter reproaches her with the question ' Now what do you want?' Linda resists his counter-reproach opting instead at turn 19 to force the truth about Willy out into the conversation. She selects Biff in the turn, which indicates the inequity among the three characters, Happy ' turns quickly to her, shocked' but does not turn grab despite Biff's attributable silence at turn 20. Biff's silence may be due to a gap between his ability to

consider the news and then formulate a respectful, relevant response. This would be supported by other indication of Biff's sensitive character in spite of all his spite. What follows in turns 21 and 22 is another (QA) adjacency pair, honest and direct on both parts. In turn 22 Biff asks his mother 'How' is his father trying to kill himself and because the topic has now orientated to a matter which involves Linda's secretive behaviour the dominance shifts slightly. Linda turn skips for the first time at turn 23 and this segues to a short side sequence . Biff reproaches her at turn 24 and prompts her at turn 26. At turn 27 Linda begins her full explanation, but it is punctuated with full stops and hesitations. Happy self selects at turn 28 with an exclamatory remark, one line long, denying the truth of the situation. The remark is not acknowledged by anyone (which occurs throughout the play) and Linda resumes her explanation at turn 29. The trailing dots and stage directions imply a pause at the end of Linda's first line, she is likely to be bracing herself for the divulgence of more unpleasant information but Biff misinterprets the TRP and begins to speak ' simultaneously' as Linda continues causing an overlap of turns 30 and 31. The reader may infer that Biff's contribution to the overlap was provoked by an over-attentiveness deriving from guilt of secrecy and his desire to shield his mother that manifests itself repeatedly in the play, e. g. Biff [furiously]: ' stop yelling at her!' (p. 51). Another side sequence results, initiated by Linda's ' what?' at turn 32. Biff chooses the preferred option and drops out politely. Linda however does not accept this and reproaches him to tell her what he said. Metalanguage dominates the clarification of this sequence as turns 35 and



36 form a final (QA) adjacency pair resulting in Biff repeating his words honestly. Happy self selects at turn 36 with a mild prompt to move the conversation away from conflict and Linda responds by at last elaborating to answer the question she was asked at turn 22, thus closing the Question/Answer pair. It is clear that Biff and Linda afford each other a full hearing (apart from one misunderstanding). Smooth turn change between them occurs with each responding when selected and no turn grabs occurring. This illustrates the mutual respect and affection they share. On the contrary, Linda only selects Happy once and that is the only time he is selected, his shallow duplicity is not only evident in the turn management of the sequence, it is also stated within Linda's 3rd and 7th turns. It is significant that the two boys facilitate Linda's dominance of this sequence, as they give her full hearing bar the occasional interruption and select her most. It is apparent in this sequence that the themes of the play involve the danger of deluding oneself and loved ones, in addition to the detrimental effect wholehearted belief in a national fallacy. Linguistic analysis also demonstrated all features of character that one needs to know to understand the play and experience its tension, pathos and tragedy. NOTES: Wilcox, Americans. P. 45 Ibid. p. 49 Banks. Drama and Theatre Arts. P. 257 Wilcox. Americans. P. 45 Herman. Dramatic Discourse. P. 81 Ibid. p. 118 Grant. Director of: Death of a Salesman. Oct. 1999. Herman. Dramatic Discourse. P. 131 Ibid. p. 84 Ibid. p. 87 Simpson. Odd Talk. P. 39 Herman. Dramatic Discourse. P. 83 Ibid. P. 85 Ibid. P. 111 Ibid. P. 113

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