



ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* AS AN EXPRESSIONIST PLAY

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ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is beyond doubt one of the most successful playwrights of the postwar era in America. Arthur Miller firmly established his reputation as an outstanding American dramatist with the production of his best play *Death of a Salesman*. *Death of a Salesman* is the play which won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1949. Since its production in 1949, *Death of a Salesman* has to this day remained a classic. It has universally been acknowledged as one of the best plays written in English. *Death of a Salesman* is an expressionist play. In this play Miller blurs the boundaries between past and present to dramatize mental state/memories of the Protagonist. The paper aims to analyze *Death of a Salesman* as a representative expressionist play by highlighting the expressionist devices used by Miller in the play.

Keywords: Expressionism, Past, Present, light, music, memory

Expressionism is one of the main currents of art in the later 19th and the 20th centuries characterized by qualities of highly subjective, personal, spontaneous self-expression. Expressionism refers to an artistic style in which the artist seeks to depict not objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse within a person. Expressionism in literature arose as a reaction against materialism, complacent bourgeois prosperity, rapid mechanization and urbanization, and the domination of the family within pre-World War I European society. In forging a drama of social protest, Expressionist writers aim to convey their ideas through a new style. They do not lay emphasis on the outer world, which is merely sketched in and barely defined in place or time, but on the internal, on an individual's mental state; hence, the imitation of life is replaced in Expressionist drama by the ecstatic evocation of states of mind. The leading character in an expressionist play often pours out his or her woes in long monologues couched in a concentrated, elliptical language.¹

"Death of a Salesman is an expressionistic reconstruction of naturalist substance, and the result is no hybrid but a particular form."² (Williams)

Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman*, is an expressionist play. Miller uses many expressionist devices in this play to look inside the mind of the protagonist, Willy. Miller has used expressionist devices like music, lights, symbolism, blending of the past with the present. Miller has blended them so artistically that he has blurred the boundaries between past and present. In this play, Miller has artistically used music to dissolve time and space. The use of music does not only enable him to set up a dream-like aura but also gives Miller an opportunity to express Willy's mental state in the play. The play opens with a melody played on a flute and ends in the same manner:



“A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is a small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon.” (Miller, 1)

In his Paris Review interview, Miller acknowledged his expressionist posture:

“Willy...is, psychologically, expressionist because so many memories come back with a simple tag on them: somebody represents a threat to you, or a promise.” (Theatre Essays, 272)³

Another expressionist device is the setting of the play. It is more or less transparent. Several rooms can be seen at once and scenes shift quickly from one room to the other. Miller continually blurs the boundaries between past and present, as a result time continually jumps according to Willy’s memories:

“The entire setting is wholly or, in some places, partially transparent...Whenever the action is in the present the actors observe the imaginary wall-lines, entering the house only through its doors at the left. But in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter and leave a room by stepping through a wall onto the forestage.” (Miller, 1) e.g. [“They move through the wall-line into the kitchen.” (Miller, 21)

Miller artistically uses lights as expressionist devices in the play. This can be understood from the following stage directions:

“Their light is out. Well before they have finished speaking, Willy’s form is dimly seen below in the darkened kitchen. He opens the refrigerator, searches in there, and takes out a bottle of milk. The apartment houses are fading out, and the entire house and surroundings become covered with leaves. Music insinuates itself as the leaves appear.” (Miller, 15)

Miller’s expressionist technique gets artistic manifestation in the kitchen scene. When Willy is in the kitchen he is reminiscent of the successful teenage years of his sons. Here Miller blurs the boundaries between past and present:

WILLY: “Just wanna be careful with those girls, Biff, that’s all. Don’t make any promises.”

Light rises on the kitchen. WILLY, talking, shuts the refrigerator door comes downstage to the kitchen table...He is totally immersed in himself, smiling faintly.

WILLY: Too young entirely, Biff. You want to watch your schooling first...”

[WILLY is gradually addressing- physically- of point offstage, speaking through the wall of the kitchen, and his voice has been rising in volume to that of a normal conversation.]

WILLY: I been wondering why you polish the car so careful.” (Miller, 15)

As Willy is nostalgic about his young sons, young Biff and young Happy appear on stage:

[YOUNG BIFF and YOUNG HAPPY appear from the direction WILLY was addressing.]

BIFF: [*pointing in the direction of the car offstage*]: How’s that Pop, professional?

WILLY: Terrific, terrific job, boys. Good work, Biff. (Miller, 16)

The expressionist technique is also manifested in the scene in which WILLY and LINDA talk to each other and when he hears the laughter of a woman:

LINDA: Willy, darling, you’re the handsomest man in the world-



WILLY: Oh, no, Linda.

LINDA: To me you are the handsomest.

[From the darkness is heard the laughter of a woman. WILLY doesn't turn to it, but it continues through LINDA's lines.]

LINDA: And the boys, Willy. Few men are idolized by their children the way you are.

[Music is heard as behind a scrim, to the left of the house, the WOMAN, dimly seen, is dressing]

WILLY [with great feeling]: You're the best there is, Linda, you're a pal, you know that? On the road- on the road I want to grab you sometimes and just kiss the life outa you.

[The laughter is loud now, and he moves into a brightening area at the left, where the WOMAN has come from behind the scrim and is standing, putting her hat, looking into a 'mirror', and laughing.]

WILLY: " 'cause I get so lonely – especially when business is bad and there's nobody to talk to..." [He talks through the WOMAN's subsiding laughter; the WOMAN primps at the

'mirror'] There's so much I want to make for-

THE WOMAN: Me? You didn't make me, Willy. I picked you.

WILLY [pleased]: You picked me? (Miller, 23-24)

[The WOMAN bursts out laughing, and LINDA's laughing blends in. The WOMAN disappears into the dark. Now the area at the kitchen table brightens. LINDA is sitting where she was at the kitchen tables, but now is mending a pair of her silk stockings.]

LINDA: You are, Willy. The handsomest. (Miller, 23-24)

This scene is a representative expressionist scene where Miller expresses the inner working of Willy's mind. By blending present with the past and using expressionist devices like lights and music artistically. The death of a Salesman is replete with this technique.

Praising Miller's artistic use of expressionist devices in the play, Peter Szondi in his critical essay "Memory: Miller" states:

"In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller tries to escape the contradiction (between past and present) by surrounding dramatic form. Fundamental here is the fact that he does not disguise the analysis as action. The past is no longer forced into open discussion by the dramatic conflict; the dramatic personae are no longer portrayed as masters of the past to satisfy a formal principle when in fact they are its helpless victims. Instead, past achieves representation in the same way that it emerges in life



itself- of its own accord, in the *memoire involontaire* (Proust). Therefore, the past remains a subjective experience and can create no illusory bridges between the individuals whom the analysis brings together – individuals whom it had left in lifelong separation. Thus, instead of an interpersonal action that would call for discussion of the past, the present generated by the thematic discloses the psychic state of the individual over-powered by memory. Willy Loman, an aged salesman, is presented in this manner. The family has recently begun to notice that he talks to himself. In fact, he is actually talking to them, not in the real present but in the past he remembers, which no longer leaves him alone. The present of the play is constituted by the forty-eight hours that follow Lowman's unexpected return from a business trip." (Bloom, 8)

He further goes on to say: "These memories in turn create a means9one already long familiar to the cinema under the flashback) of introducing the past into the space beyond dialogue. The scene shifts constantly in the play staged for Loman by his *memoire involontaire*. The protagonist regards himself in the past and, as self-remembering I, is absorbed into the formal subjectivity of the work. One can readily grasp the epic nature of this play of memory by comparing it to the 'play within a play' as it appears in the Drama." (Bloom, 9)

Another remarkable example of Miller's artistic blending of past and present can be seen in the scene in which Willy plays cards with Charley. Willy while playing is nostalgic about Ben, as a result Ben appears before him. Since it is Willy who is immersed into memory, Charley cannot see Ben. This results in confusion between them and they end up quitting the game:

WILLY: A man who can't handle tools is not a man. You're disgusting.

CHARLEY: Don't call me disgusting, Willy.

[UNCLE BEN...enters the forestage from around the right corner of the house...He enters exactly as WILLY speaks.]

WILLY: I'm getting awfully tired, Ben.

[BEN's music is heard. BEN looks around everything.]

CHARLEY: Good, keep playing; you'll sleep better. Did you call me Ben?

[BEN looks at his watch]

WILLY: That's funny. For a second there you reminded me of my brother Ben.

BEN: I only have a few minutes. [He strolls, inspecting the place. WILLY and CHARLEY continue playing.]

WILLY: There was the only man I ever met who knew the answers.

CHARLEY: Who?

BEN: How are you all?

WILLY: [taking a pot, smiling]: Fine, fine.

BEN: Is Mother living with you?



WILLY: No, she died a long time ago.

CHARLEY: Who?

BEN: That's too bad. Fine specimen of a lady, Mother. (Miller, 29)

Willy over-powered by his memories commits suicide in the end. The sound of a car starting and moving at full speed is heard. He drives away the car to smash it and kills himself. In this context Miller states: "The trouble with Willy Loman is that he has tremendously powerful ideals... [the play's aim is] to set forth what happens when a man does not have a grip on the forces of life and has no sense of values which will lead him to that kind of a grip." (Bloom, 14)³

Thus Miller uses many expressionist devices in this play. The use of music, lights, setting enables him to portray the 'Inside of His (Willy's) Mind'. Flashbacks help Miller to blur the boundaries between present and past and to give the readers of the audiences an insight into the mind of Willy Loman. Flashbacks or memories represent Willy's emotional state. When he thinks about the successful teen-age years of his son's, he tries to evade the present reality for they have not been successful in their life. Willy's memories also manifest his desire to be loved and admired by other characters in the play. I would conclude the paper with a quotation from Peter Szondi: "In *Death of a Salesman* the past is not played as a thematic episode; the present and its action constantly overflow into the play of the past. No troupe of actors enters; without saying a word, the characters can become actors enacting themselves because the alternation between immediate/personal and past/remembered events is anchored in the epic principle of the form operative here. The dramatic unities are likewise abolished – indeed, abolished in the most radical sense: memory signifies not only a multiplicity of times and places but also the absolute loss of their identity. The salesman's house remains on stage, but in the scenes remembered, its walls are of no concern- as is the case with memory, which has no temporal or spatial limits. In this play, present reality and the reality of the past achieve simultaneous representation. (Bloom, 9-10).

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1. <https://www.britannia.com/art/Expressionism>
2. "Death of a Salesman: A Symposium" Tulane Drama Review, May 1958, pp. 63-69) quoted from (Bloom, 140)
3. <https://studymoose.com/expressionism-in-death-of-salesman-essay>.