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Death of a Salesman and the poetics of Arthur Miller

Death of a Salesman is a deceptively simple play. Its plot revolves around the last twenty-four hours in the life of Willy Loman, the hard-working sixty-three-year-old traveling salesman whose ideas of professional, public success jar with the realities of his private desires and modest accomplishments. Subtitled "Certain private conversations in two acts and a requiem," the play has a narrative which unwinds largely through Willy Loman's daydreams, private conversations revealing past family hopes and betrayals, and how those past experiences, commingled with entropic present circumstances, culminate in Willy's death. Realizing that in death he may provide for his family in ways he never could during his lifetime, Willy commits suicide, hoping that his insurance will grant Biff a "twenty-thousand-dollar"[1] deliverance, an extended period of grace. He hopes the insurance money will somehow expiate, or at least minimize, the guilt which he feels for his affair at the Standish Arms Hotel a lifetime ago. The simplicity of the play, however, quickly dissolves into filial ambiguity, civic paradox, and philosophic complexity.

Mythologizing America

Death of a Salesman presents a rich matrix of enabling fables that define the myth of the American dream. Indeed, most theatregoers assume, on an a priori level, that the principles Willy Loman values – initiative, hard work, family, freedom, consumerism, economic salvation, competition, the frontier, self-sufficiency, public recognition, personal fulfillment, and so on – animate American cultural poetics. The Founding Fathers, after all, predicated the US Constitution on the belief that every citizen possesses an inalienable right to the unfettered pursuit of the American Dream. No wonder Benjamin Franklin's practical 1757 essay on how to achieve Salvation, *The Way to Wealth* (whose title would have prompted Willy Loman to buy a copy), attracted the common working person. Although

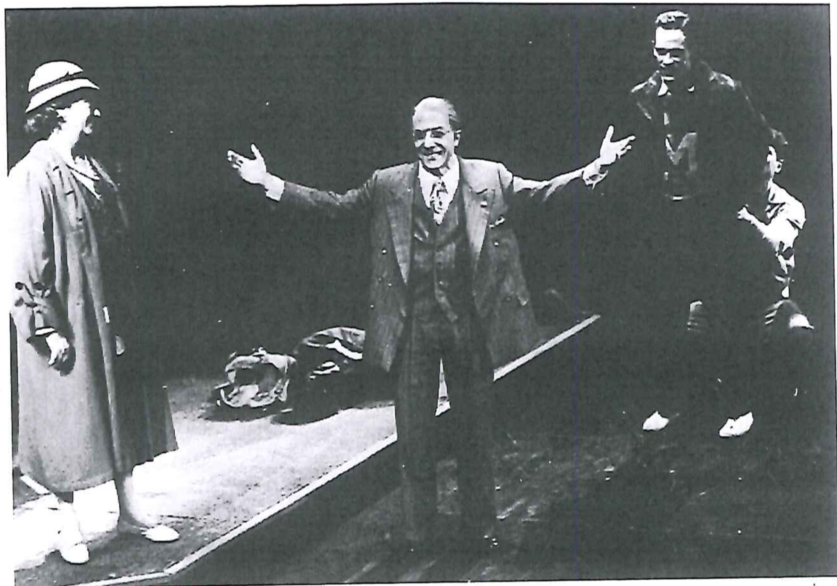

Figure 1 Kate Reid, Dustin Hoffman, John Malkovich, and Stephen Lang in the 1984 New York production of *Death of a Salesman*, directed by Michael Rudman.

Willy Loman, inspired by a mythologized Dave Singleman and a desire to build a future for his boys through hard work, endorses such values, it is an endorsement foisted upon him less by personal choice than by a malevolent universe whose hostility mocks his every pursuit. Well-meaning yet lacking, a fatherless father, a salesman no longer capable of selling, Willy Loman can only cling to idyllic fables that baffle as they elude him. In the past, the ever talkative Willy has lived by "contacts" and "who you know and the smile on your face!" (*Death of a Salesman*, p. 86); in the present, Willy's talk reaches a Beckettian *de*crescendo, "Shhh!" (p. 136) being his last utterance before he speeds off to his suicide.

In its text and subtext, then, *Death of a Salesman* replicates a model of community and of citizenship to which most theatregoers – regardless of gender, race, nationality, or ideology – respond. The nature of that popular and intellectual response varies greatly, to be sure. The play embodies, for many, the *peripeteia*, *hamartia*, and *hubris* that Aristotle found essential for all great tragedies. For many feminist critics, on the other hand, the play stages "a nostalgic view of the plot of the universalized masculine protagonist of the Poetics";[2] it presents a grammar of space that marginalizes Linda Loman and, by extension, all women, who seem Othered, banished to the periphery of a patriarchal world. *Death of a Salesman*, the universalists

counter, seems beyond philosophical limits or gendered subjectivity, and thus is a play to which all – social constructionists, Jungians, Marxists, poststructuralists, and so on – react. *Death of a Salesman* presents a constellation of conflicting views and warring narratives, and has become what Walter Benjamin would call a "cultural treasure." This explains its enduring appeal. Within a year of its premiere, *Death of a Salesman* was playing in every major city in the United States. As early as 1951 it was viewed by appreciative audiences in at least eleven countries abroad, including Great Britain, France, Israel, and Argentina. As Brenda Murphy observes, "since its premiere, there has never been a time when *Death of a Salesman* was not being performed somewhere in the world."[3]

This is not to imply that the play has received universal praise. For decades, artistic terrorists (to borrow Frank Zappa's term) masquerading as theatre reviewers, as well as serious scholars, have taken Miller to task. The charges are familiar. The play sentimentalizes experience. Its Hallmark Card flourish at the end dismantles the play's moral seriousness. The rhetoric of clichés diminishes its riposte. The play's protagonist is an unfit subject of tragedy, an unworthy man incapable of carrying the tragic burdens its author places on him. An implicit sexism somehow dates the play. And, among other charges, Miller in this play and in selected theatre essays presents a flawed essentialistic humanism. But the critical challenges, sometimes eloquently and convincingly argued, often seem much to do about little. The emotional impact of the play remains so strong that the response of most theatregoers, despite the occasional dissenting voice of some academics, has been overwhelmingly favourable for half a century.

Such praise comes from the notion that most in the audience relate to as they rebel against the Lomans. The adulterous father. The marginalized mother. Wayward children. A family's battles to pay bills. Unemployment. The child's quest. Spite. Loss. Felt but unexpressed love. Guilt and shame. Self-reliance. Theatregoers see themselves, their parents, or their children in the play. As David Mamet said to Miller after watching the play in 1984, "that is *my* story – not only did you write it about me, but *I could go up on stage right now and act it.*"[4] A play concerning the most public of American myths, *Death of a Salesman* lays bare the private individual's sensibility, a sensibility neutralized by those very myths. Dustin Hoffman revealed that after he read the play at the age of sixteen, he "had a kind of small breakdown for about two weeks." Hoffman, who read Bernard's lines in a 1966 record version of the play and then played Willy in the celebrated 1984 Broadhurst Theater revival in New York, says of Miller: "He's my artistic father."[5] In an era when many scholars question precisely what

constitutes American essentialism, most theatregoers still regard *Death of a Salesman* as the quintessential American play.

But the play also transcends its own American heritage and claims to American essentialism. As C. W. E. Bigsby suggests, the play has "had no difficulty finding an international audience, often being produced in countries whose own myths are radically different, where, indeed, the salesman is an alien and exotic breed . . . Certainly, no country seems to have been baffled by a play in which an individual creates his own fate while believing himself to be an agent of social process. No audience seems to have had difficulty in responding to the story of a man distracted from human necessities by public myths."[6] Many audience members watching the 1950 Vienna production wept, as did the Chinese audiences after seeing the 1983 Beijing run. The play "has been played before a native audience in a small Arctic village with the same villagers returning night after night to witness the performance in a language they did not understand."[7]

Death of a Salesman continues to engage audiences on an international level, not only because it traverses intercultural borders, but also because it brings audiences back to the edges of prehistory itself. Postmodern in texture, reifying a world in which experience is "always ready" for the Lomans, the play gains its theatrical power from ancient echoes, its Hellenic mixture of pity and fear stirring primal emotions. Miller himself believes that

> it's a well-told, paradoxical story. It seems to catch the paradoxes of being alive in a technological civilization. In one way or another, different kinds of people, different classes of people apparently feel that they're *in* the play . . . It seems to have more or less the same effect everywhere there is a dominating technology. Although it's also popular in places where life is far more pretechnological. Maybe it involves some of the most rudimentary elements in the civilizing process: family cohesion, death and dying, parricide, rebirth, and so on. The elements, I guess, are rather fundamental. People *feel* these themes no matter where they are.[8]

Audiences feel such themes because, despite the play's modernity, tribal undercurrents animate the narrative. Although critics have long questioned Miller's conception of tragedy, and understandably so, the playwright nonetheless places in useful perspective his views regarding the tragic textures of *Death of a Salesman*. In Willy Loman, Miller writes in "Tragedy and the Common Man" (1949), "we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity." Despite the deep irony of his life choices, Willy Loman represents, for many, the commonplace "individual attempting to gain his

rightful position in his society"; in "his willingness to throw all he has into the contest, the battle to secure his rightful place in his world," Willy's struggle defines his Sisypheian heroism.[9] Audiences experience, in other words, the afterwash of the tragic.

The set and the stage directions

Miller underpins the tragic power of the play through the wonderfully multivalent set and setting. When theatregoers settled into their seats at the packed Morosco Theatre on opening night in 1949 and waited for the play to begin, they heard the melody of a flute. The aural dissolves (like Willy's dreams) to the visual as the curtain rises and the salesman's skeletal house comes into focus. Elia Kazan and Miller worked meticulously with Jo Mielziner, who developed the set, and Eddie Kook, the lighting engineer. Miller provides one of the best-known opening stage directions in American drama, directions on which Kazan, Mielziner, and Kook based their collaborative efforts. Functioning as a kind of prose-poem, the initial stage directions prefigure many of the play's major dynamics.

The stage directions function in at least two important ways. First, they delineate the spatial and physical machinery of the play, including the basic layout of props, the importance of the forestage, the use of such kinesic devices as music and lighting, and, above all, the centrality of the salesman's house. Mielziner filled the stage with realistic props: a kitchen table with three chairs, a small refrigerator, telephone, wastebasket, stairs, three beds, an athletic trophy, and a chest of drawers. But these realistic props were placed within a highly expressionistic set. No solid walls separated Willy and Linda's bedroom, situated slightly elevated and stage right from the kitchen, or the boys' bedroom, located on the second floor, from the kitchen. Instead of a solid roof, only gabled rafters angling upwards, silhouetting a roof line, were used. The back of each room had walls of sorts, but they were translucent backdrops. Since no walls separated the rooms, characters were not necessarily confined spatially or, in the daydream sequences, temporally. When the action occurs in time present, for instance, the actors observe the imaginary wall-lines. But, Miller's stage directions indicate, "*in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping 'through' a wall onto the forestage*" (*Death of a Salesman*, p. 12).

Audiences gazed at another backdrop behind the house, which featured two trees and images of towering buildings. During Willy's daydreams about the past, Mielziner bathed the stage in a soft amber light, its golden hues suggesting the glory of a past in which the Lomans' neighborhood was

filled with grass, trees with green leaves, and a beautiful horizon. The past was a time of freshly painted cars, homes, and soaring hopes. Biff proudly donned his golden football uniform before adoring fans. It was a time when Linda smiled easily. The idealism and happiness of the past have been leeched from the Lomans' present, however. Now, Linda enamels herself with her "*iron repression*" (p. 12). Often during the present scenes, lights from the rear cover the stage with an ominous reddish orange glow. These lighting gradations permit the spatial, the temporal, and the thematic to inhabit the stage simultaneously, and in ways that perfectly suggest the interiority of the characters. The shifts in lighting, if subtly done, not only make for a spatial fluidity, but also register through direct sensory experience the cohering of social, psychic, and actual time.

A particularly foreboding scene illustrates Miller's dramaturgy. The menacing gas heater, located behind a translucent backdrop, visually seems to come alive at the end of Act One. The time is in the present as Biff enters that darkened kitchen, lights a cigarette, and walks downstage into "*a golden pool of light*" (p. 68). At the same time Willy and Linda are in their bedroom, reminiscing about the charisma Biff exuded in high school; Willy says that his son was

> Like a young god. Hercules – something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him. Remember how he waved to me? Right up from the field, with the representatives of three colleges standing by? And the buyers I brought, and the cheers when he came out – Loman, Loman, Loman! God Almighty, he'll be great yet. A star like that, magnificent, can never fade away! (p. 68)

When Willy utters the "never fade away" lines, however, Kook slowly dimmed the lights that were pointed at Willy, a haunting visual intimation that Linda is helping her husband to bed for the last time. Miller's stage direction accentuates the effect as the "*gas heater begins to glow through the kitchen wall, near the stairs, a blue flame beneath red coils*" (p. 68). Moments later a horrified Biff discovers the rubber tubing Willy hides behind the gas heater. Visually, such stage atmosphere makes for brilliant theatrics. With props, lighting, body movement, and language operating contrapuntally, Miller draws the audience into the Lomans' holy storm.

The initial stage directions function in a second important way. They foreground, through metaphor, many of the play's deeper ambiguities and conflicts. The flute music sounds "*small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon*" (p. 11). The music holds important past references for Willy: his father made and sold flutes as a traveling salesman; through a kind of free associative pattern, the music reveals something of Willy's past desires and dreams, when all things seemed possible to him. Once the

music fades, the stage directions concentrate on the house itself, a "*small, fragile-seeming home*," a home dwarfed by the "*solid vault of apartment houses*" (p. 11). The vault allusion, whether referring ironically to a site of banking, investing, and finance, or to a site of entombment, entrapment, a place of no exit, clearly draws attention to the fragility of the Loman home. Miller creates a trope for the decline of the natural world. Towering apartments, radiating "*an angry glow of orange*" (p. 11), surround the home, allowing only a minimal amount of blue light from the sky to fall upon their property. Later, Willy fondly reminisces about lilacs, wisteria, peonies, and daffodils. He tries to plant seeds, impossible though such an effort to reconnect himself with the organic rhythms of the universe proves to be. The plight of the Lomans, then, finds its parallels in the architecture and urban space of their home. In text and performances, Miller insists on maintaining the drama's essential contrariety: "*An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality*" (p. 11), though reality ensures that Willy never fulfills his dreams, and his dreams never fully square with reality. Miller juxtaposes an imploding urban landscape of time present – "Smell the stink from that apartment house!" (p. 18) – with Willy's longings for a pastoral landscape, one necessarily reconstructed only in time past.

Images of the fall, falling, and the fallen

Miller's stage directions provide insight into what Kazan (and Stanislavsky before him) calls the characters' spines, or their fundamental nature. When Willy enters carrying two large valises, symbolically filled with sixty-odd years of Willy's existence, he "*thankfully lets his burdens down*" (p. 12). His physical and spiritual exhaustion obvious, Willy "*hears but is not aware of*" the flute music. Joseph Hirsch's original poster used in advertizing the play in New York City in some ways visually prepared audiences for a troubling image of a troubled salesman: Willy's rear view is pictured, his slumping shoulders outlined through his business suit. Head bowed, dress hat on, he carries his sample cases, the image of an exhausted if not defeated man. Miller heightens our sense of Willy's physical and spiritual depletion by selectively fading the lights on him.

Miller presents no fewer than twenty-five scenes in which Willy's body language and dialogue create images of the fall, the falling, or the fallen. While Charley repeatedly asks his neighbor if he is ever going to grow *up*, Willy usually appears "*beaten down*" (p. 65). Willy often seeks relief by collapsing into a chair, where he "*lies back, exhausted*" (p. 67). He also sits down in a chair after Howard fires him. Indeed, Miller places special

emphasis on the chair in Howard's office: he felt that "the chair must become alive, quite as though his old boss were in it as he addresses him." Mielziner and Kook "once worked an entire afternoon lighting a chair," Miller reports, and, in performance, the result was a highly effective expressionistic moment, one in which, "rather than being lit, the chair subtly seemed to begin emanating light."[10] During the restaurant scene he "*tries to get to his feet*" several times as Biff, "*agonized, holds Willy down*" in his chair (*Death of a Salesman*, p. 112).

Miller fills the daydream scene in Boston with images of a fall, moving from the chair at Frank's Chop House to the bed in the Standish Arms. In the Volker Schlöndorff version (1985), Willy (played by Dustin Hoffman) and the Woman (played by Linda Kozlowski, resplendent with Marilyn Monroesque hair and body) embrace as they *fall* in a slow motion sequence into bed. After hearing Biff's knocking on the door, she pleads, "Willy, Willy, are you going to get up, get up, get up, get up?" (p. 114) while the audience watches a man in the process of falling down, down, down, down. After Biff discovers his father with the Woman, Willy, "*getting down beside Biff*" (p. 120), explains his loneliness. A shattered Biff exits while "*Willy is left on the floor on his knees*" (p. 121); as Willy's mind returns to the present, he remains huddled down against the toilet, abandoned by his sons. During his famous "Spite, spite is the word of your undoing!" speech, Willy is "*sinking into a chair at the table, with full accusation*" (p. 130). Willy's verbal scattershots, increasingly detached from deeds, reinforce his impotence: he snaps his fingers while giving Biff orders, but his directives are ignored. Biff blots out his father. Willy insists that Linda throw away her worn stockings, but, unknown to Willy, she keeps them.

Miller also reinforces the falling and fallen imagery through the dialogue. When Willy begs his boss for a salary, we hear that he once averaged, in 1928, a salary of a hundred and seventy dollars per week; now he begs for sixty-five, then fifty per week, the regressive monetary requests paralleling Willy's downward spiral. From Biff's running *down* eleven flights of stairs to his realization that he was not a salesman with Oliver but merely a shipping clerk; from Biff's idolizing his father to calling him a "phony little fake!" (p. 121); from Linda's announcement that she will cook a big family breakfast to her throwing the flowers to the floor, images which suggest fallen hopes and expectations dominate the text. Fittingly, at the funeral, Linda "*lays down the flowers, kneels, and sits back on her heels. All stare down at the grave*" (p. 136). The sound of loud, frenzied music lowers to the "*soft pulsation of a single cello string*" (p. 136). In a case of the watchers watching the watchers watch, the audience and the Loman family remember stories of Dave Singleman's massive funeral and cannot help but

compare it to Willy's sparsely attended burial ceremony. From page to stage, Miller meticulously structures *Death of a Salesman* upon a cluster of retrogressive images, images that correspond directly with the Lomans' fall.

Family backgrounds

Miller worked assiduously to create the Lomans' fall. Although written in about six weeks in 1948, *Death of a Salesman* had a long gestation period. Some years after the first production of the play, Miller discovered a college notebook he used as a student at the University of Michigan in the 1930s. Miller had "totally forgotten that ten years earlier I had begun a play in college about a salesman and his family but had abandoned it" (*Timebends*, p. 129). Further, Miller recalls his teenage encounters with his "two pioneer uncles," Manny Newman and Lee Balsam (*Timebends*, p. 121). From them he sought advice about carpentry, a trade that would become a life-long vocation for the playwright. Working with Uncle Balsam on a porch design as a teenager, Miller writes that this "was my first experience with the fevers of construction, and I could not fall asleep for anticipation of tomorrow; and it was exactly the same one cold April in 1948 when I built a ten-by-twelve studio near my first house in Connecticut where I intended to write a play about a salesman" (*Timebends*, p. 121). The relative dynamics of carpentry and the stagecrafting of *Death of a Salesman* would be strong. In each, planning, interconnections, and designs are crucial, while in the case of carpentry Arthur Miller has written that "the idea of creating a new shadow on the earth has never lost its fascination" (*Timebends*, p. 121). While Miller's studio would cast a private shadow, a work space for the individual artist, the end-product, *Death of a Salesman*, cast a very long public shadow.

The impact of his uncles ultimately had less to do with carpentry, however, and much more to do with *Death of a Salesman*. Both were salesmen. Tellingly enough, Miller regarded Uncle Manny and Uncle Lee, like Ben and Willy's father, as pioneering men. It was Manny Newman, especially, who entranced Miller for years, and whose contradictions shaped Miller's conception of Willy Loman and his family. Miller's recollection of the Newman home, for example, parallels the Lomans'. "There was a shadowy darkness in their [the Newmans'] house, a scent of sex and dream, of lies and invention, and above all of contradictions and surprise" (*Timebends*, p. 122). Admitting that his memories of the Newman household were the product of a teenage experience, Miller still remembers "the lure and mystery with which my mind unaccountably surrounded the Newmans. I could never approach their little house without

the expectation that something extraordinary was about to happen in there, some sexual lewdness, perhaps, or an amazing revelation of some other kind." Their house "was dank with sexuality" and "was secretly obsessed, as though they were obscenely involved with one another – a fantasy of mine, of course" (*Timebends*, p. 124). No wonder the Loman house is a home in whose structure linger secret obsessions.[11]

One of Manny Newman's sons, Abby, told Miller, "'He wanted a business for us. So we could all work together . . . A business for the boys'" (*Timebends*, p. 130).[12] For the playwright, who had now been thinking about writing *Death of a Salesman* for ten years, this revelation was a galvanizing moment. Miller would interfold the family business motif throughout *Death of a Salesman*. Early in the play, for instance, Willy hopes that "Someday I'll have my own business" (*Death of a Salesman*, p. 30), and after his young boys volunteer to help, Willy marvels, "Oh, won't that be something! Me comin' into the Boston stores with you boys carryin' my bags. What a sensation!" (p. 31) Late in the play, Stanley, the waiter at Frank's Chop House, learns that Happy and Biff might be "going into business together" (p. 100). In repartee encoded with layers of rich ironies, Stanley replies, "Great! That's the best for you. Because a family business, you know what I mean? – that's the best." He quickly adds, "'Cause what's the difference? Somebody steals? It's in the family. Know what I mean?" (p. 100). Stanley is wrong.

Although the Lomans never go into business together, they discover that there is a huge difference. From Happy's stealing other executives' fiancées to Biff's stealing the high school football, the box full of basketballs, the lumber and cement from the neighborhood, the suit in Kansas City, and Bill Oliver's fountain pen, the question of stealing deepens to encompass not only social crimes but fundamental private issues: the stealing of one's very identity, the loss of the self, the abrogation of responsibility. Inheritors of Willy's sins from the past, Happy and Biff find themselves fated to perpetuate the values instilled by their father in the present and future. Biff and Happy are flawed extensions of Willy and Linda, the genetic lineage carried on with devastating efficiency and symmetry. For throughout Miller presents characters who carry within them modern versions of an Aristotelian fatal flaw, the moral fissure, the *hubris*, that foretells their tragedy. Willy trains his sons well. Minor errors must be heaped upon larger sins, extending a terrible replicating process and ensuring that a tragic parental heritage will be passed on to all descendants. For each character, there is no escape from this family's tabooed ancestral history. Biff, especially, feels the tragic inevitability of his biological and spiritual fate. Problems of guilt and innocence haunt him, as do the relations between private life and social processes.

So one of the central problems Miller embeds in the script is that, though the Lomans know they have transgressed social law in their petty thievery and personal deceits, they seldom take the necessary first steps toward self-disclosure and, more significantly, self-knowledge. For the Lomans, Truth kills. Until the last twenty-four hours in Willy's life, neither Biff nor anyone else faces facts. The Real has long been devalued, deformed, defleshed. Illusion and its relation to familial bonds and the larger (in Rousseau's sense of the term) social contract have been conveniently twisted into the appearance of Truth. In brief, the Lomans remain co-conspirators, master builders of their illusory world.

Even Linda, who knows that "only the shallowness of the water" (p. 59) saved Willy from suicide the year before, and that Willy has "been trying to kill himself" (p. 58) recently, contributes to the truth–illusion matrix. If Linda casts herself as supportive wife, she is also a complex figure who plays a central role within the family dynamics. This became more apparent when Miller directed the play in Beijing, where he emphasized Linda's centrality. She was "'in action,'" Miller says. "She's not just sitting around. She's the one who knows from the beginning of the play that Willy's trying to kill himself. She's got the vital information." He pinpoints Linda's predicament, one underscoring the impossibility of her life: "Linda sustains the illusion because that's the only way Willy can be sustained. At the same time any cure or change is impossible in Willy. Ironically, she's helping to guarantee that Willy will never recover from his illusion. She has to support it; she has no alternative, given his nature and hers."[13] Hence Linda each morning takes the rubber pipe from the hot water heater – only to replace it each night when Willy returns home. "Ashamed," fearful that she might "insult him" (*Death of a Salesman*, p. 60), and not knowing how to deal with such a stubborn husband, Linda weds herself to an illusory world. To deny the crisis is to live, perhaps, another day. Illusions appear so suffused within the psychodynamics and vocabulary of the family that the Lomans, we realize, have slipped years ago into a psychotic denial, hoping all along that outer events will somehow right themselves – and their lives. Nothing could be further from the truth. Minutes before Willy kills himself, Biff screams to his father, "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!" – an insight immediately confirmed in Happy's lie: "We always told the truth!" (p. 131).

It would be misleading to claim that Manny Newman was the sole model for Willy Loman. Miller drew on multiple models and incidents, both fictional and historical. While "making preliminary sketches of scenes and ideas for a salesman play," Miller decided on the name Loman. "'Loman,'" Miller reports, "had the sound of reality, of someone who had actually lived, even if I had never known anyone by that name" (*Timebends*,

p. 177). But one cold winter afternoon, while walking to the subway in New York City, the playwright noticed a film that was currently showing, one that had influenced his own aesthetic imagination years earlier. The film was Fritz Lang's *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*. A key character's name in the film: Lohmann. Miller also provides a corrective to two generations of those scholars who reduced Willy's surname to a too obvious allusion. "In later years I found it discouraging to observe the confidence with which some commentators of *Death of a Salesman* smirked at the heavy-handed symbolism of 'Low-man.' What the name really meant to me was a terror-stricken man calling into the void for help that will never come" (*Timebends*, p. 179).

Surely there were many sources for Willy and the other characters. Miller drew upon his literary forebears as well as his own personal experiences during the Great Depression, which he has often called a moral catastrophe. Desperate American salesmen trying to fuel the Dynamo fascinated him. In Manny Newman's salesman friend, Miller saw the contours of hopeless heroism:

> Like any traveling salesman, he had to my mind a kind of intrepid valor that withstood the inevitable putdowns, the scoreless attempts to sell. In a sense, these men lived like artists, like actors whose product is first of all themselves, forever imagining triumphs in a world that either ignores them or denies their presence altogether. But just often enough to keep the game going one of them makes it and swings to the moon on a thread of dreams unwinding out of himself. (*Timebends*, p. 127)

In Manny Newman, Miller located similar patterns. After a chance meeting at the Colonial Theatre in Boston, Miller saw Manny, who had just watched *All My Sons*. He was weeping. "I could see his grim hotel room behind him, the long trip up from New York in his little car, the hopeless hope of the day's business" (*Timebends*, p. 131).

Toward a new poetics

The influence of Miller's encounters with family and cinema had yet a deeper influence on *Death of a Salesman*. More than merely providing a model of character development, Manny Newman inspired Miller to theatricalize plot and narrative in wholly new forms. When Miller called out to Manny in the lobby of the Colonial Theatre, a distracted Manny ignored Miller's greeting and simply replied, "'Buddy is doing very well'" (*Timebends*, pp. 130–31). The lack of transition between Miller's "'Manny!'" and Manny's reference to Buddy, his eldest son who Miller

... terms, triggered the possibility of a new dramatic method. The absence of conversational transition, Miller writes,

> stuck in my mind; it was a signal to me of the new form that until now I had only tentatively imagined could exist. I had not the slightest idea of writing about a salesman then, totally absorbed as I was in my present production. But how wonderful, I thought, to do a play without transitions at all, dialogue that would simply leap from bone to bone of a skeleton that would not for an instant cease being added to, an organism as strictly economic as a leaf, as trim as an ant.
> (*Timebends*, p. 131)

Animating the transitions would be Miller's daring use of time. *Death of a Salesman*, after all, ignores the linear, chronocentric unfolding of time. To be sure, the action takes place during the last twenty-four hours of Willy's life, but the drama privileges the time of Willy's inner awareness. Time filters through daydreams. Miller conflates time. And it is a time that measures the intensity of felt experience, not the monotony of nine-to-five routines. In *Timebends*, Miller describes his intention to write

> a play that would do to an audience what Manny had done to me in our surprising meeting – cut through time like a knife through a layer cake or a road through a mountain revealing its geologic layers, and instead of one incident in one time-frame succeeding another, display past and present concurrently, with neither one ever coming to a stop.
>
> The past, I saw, is a formality, merely a dimmer present, for everything we are is at every moment alive in us. How fantastic a play would be that did not still the mind's simultaneity, did not allow a man to "forget" and turned him to see present through past and past through present, a form that in itself, quite apart from its content and meaning, would be inescapable as a psychological process and as a collecting point for all that his life in society had poured into him. This little man walking into the street had all my youth inside him, it seemed. And I suppose because I was more conscious than he, I had in some sense already created him.
> (*Timebends*, p. 131)

Miller wanted, to borrow Tom Wolfe's metaphor from *The Right Stuff*, to push the envelope, to reinvent the nature of theatricality itself. He wanted a play whose very ontology would be even more inventive than that achieved by some of his American predecessors, such as O'Neill in the early sea plays, in *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones*, or Elmer Rice in *The Adding Machine*, works that challenged the prevailing American realistic theatre. Miller wanted to formulate a dramatic structure that would allow the play textually and theatrically to capture the simultaneity of the human mind as that mind registers outer experience through its own inner subjectivity.

Furthermore, Miller was not satisfied with merely drawing upon his uncles, other salesmen, and such notable portraits of American salesmen as seen in O'Neill's *Marco Millions* and *The Iceman Cometh*, or, in a more general sense, the plight of the American worker as reflected in Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing!* and *Waiting for Lefty*. This hardly implies that Miller strays from social commitment. Indeed, more than any American playwright, Miller embeds a moral optimism and social seriousness in every play. This was as true for the earlier plays, from *The Golden Years* and *All My Sons* through *The Price* and *The American Clock*, as it is for his work in the 1990s, *The Ride Down Mount Morgan*, *The Last Yankee*, and *Broken Glass*. Such key theatre essays as "Tragedy and the Common Man" (1949), Introduction to *Collected Plays* (1957), and "About Theatre Language" (1994) highlight the civic function of Miller's artistry. He is an ethicist. His entire theatre stands as a critique of the *republica*. But in *Death of a Salesman* he wanted to refurbish the presentation of his moral and social commitment in a new form.

Miller sought nothing less than a new poetics. The notion of creating a sense of simultaneity, a dramatic process by which he could bend time, became increasingly important. He had worked carefully to achieve the success of the realistic *All My Sons*, which in 1994 he identified as his "most Ibsen-influenced play."[14] Yet even as he was beginning to enjoy the economic freedoms and entitlements from royalties generated by his first Broadway success, Miller tested new possibilities. As he put it, "*All My Sons* had exhausted my lifelong interest in the Greco–Ibsen form" (*Timebends*, p. 144). This seems to be a curious remark for a thirty-two-year-old with only two Broadway productions to his credit, but it clearly indicates that his artistic instincts prompted dramaturgic revolution. He came of age as a young dramatist when "we thought it [the realism of Broadway] the perfect style for an unchallenging, simpleminded linear middle-class conformist view of life."[15] Even today some directors and audiences have difficulty when the playwright strays too far from mimesis. "They can't stand a metaphor," Miller told the editor of this volume:

> Metaphor is dangerous, ambiguous; it leaves people slightly mystified and the conscience of the American theatre is that of an intelligent business man. He is a realistic, intelligent, even sensitive person, but he ain't interested in metaphors. He wants to know who's on first and this has made for a very strong realistic tradition, not just in the theatre but in the novel, the movies, and so on. But as soon as you begin to stretch that into a metaphoric area, they get uneasy.[16]

And so, during his apprenticeship years, Miller grappled with the social

power and aesthetic limitations of realism. "My own first playwriting attempt was purely mimetic, a realistic play about my own family . . . I came out of the thirties unsure whether there could be a viable counterform to the realism around me."[17] Miller felt that "the problem with *All My Sons* was not that it was too realistic but that it left too little space and time for the wordless darkness that underlies all verbal truth" (*Timebends*, p. 144). For *Death of a Salesman*, photographic realism simply could not reflect the interior subjectivity he was seeking. He needed a play that exteriorized the "logic of the imagination."[18] One key to the greatness of *Death of a Salesman*, therefore, concerns its dramatic form as that form refracts the time of Willy Loman's experience.[19]

A poetic language

Just as Miller searched for a unique dramatic form and use of time, so he sought out a unique grammar of expression. He needed a language that would expose, in theatrical and psychological terms, the inside of Willy's head. Above all, he wanted a language that would present the simultaneity of Willy's thought processes and daydreams. A child of American dramatic realism, a playwright influenced by the social theories and dramatic practices of the eminently realistic Henrik Ibsen, Miller felt compelled to reformulate language in *Death of a Salesman*. Although Joseph A. Hynes claims the play's language seems highly sentimental,[20] and Harold Bloom that while "Miller is by no means a bad writer . . . he is scarcely an eloquent master of language,"[21] the playwright may be viewed as one of the most gifted and radical sculptors of language in American drama.

Interestingly, Tennessee Williams, not Ibsen or Shaw, liberated Miller. After Kazan took Miller to see *A Streetcar Named Desire* in New Haven, he was inspired to work even more precisely with his language. Seeing *Streetcar* "strengthened" Miller. It was a play that opened "one specific door," one that did not deal so much with "the story or characters or direction, but [with] words and their liberation, [with] the joy of the writer in writing them, the radiant eloquence of its composition, [that] moved me more than all its pathos. It formed a bridge . . . to the whole tradition of unashamed word-joy . . . we had . . . turned our backs on" (*Timebends*, p. 182). The beneficiary of this word-joy would be Willy Loman.

> With *Streetcar*, Tennessee has printed a license to speak at full throat, and it helped strengthen me as I turned to Willy Loman, a salesman always full of words, and better yet, a man who could never cease trying, like Adam, to name himself and the world's wonders. I had known all along that this play could not be encompassed by conventional realism, and for one integral reason: in Willy the past was as alive as what was happening at the moment, sometimes even crashing in to completely overwhelm his mind. I wanted precisely the same fluidity in the form, and now it was clear to me that this must be primarily verbal. The language would of course have to be recognizably his to begin with, but it seemed possible now to infiltrate it with a kind of superconsciousness. (*Timebends*, p. 182)

If Williams formed a bridge, whose foundation was the word, Miller suddenly crossed this creative bridge more confidently and entered fresh imaginative terrain. As in *After the Fall* and *The Ride Down Mount Morgan*, Miller sought in *Death of a Salesman* the verbal equivalents for his characters' troubled inner selves, a search that led him away from the realism of Ibsen, O'Casey, (the later) O'Neill, Odets, and Hellman and toward a new dramatic expression. He was also enormously attracted by what Williams called the "plastic theater."[22] The use of lights, music, sets, and other nonverbal expressions that would complement the textual version of the play became central kinesic forces in production. This willingness to open up his theatre to more than a merely language-grounded realism allowed Miller to create a lyric drama, a more poetic theatre, a more interiorized realism. Stage symbol, scenic image, body language were to assume important roles, roles accentuating the conflicts that the Lomans articulated to audiences through language.

Death of a Salesman works because of its linguistic simplicity. Miller had discovered his verbal *métier*. For, on one level, the play is exceedingly realistic, its language wrested from the American idiolect of clichés, its characters instantly recognizable to any theatregoer, its intertextual and extratheatrical references derived from the stuff of American popular culture of the day. References to Studebakers and Chevvys, Ebbets Field and Red Grange, B. F. Goodrich and Thomas Edison immediately established personal correspondences and cultural signifiers for each member of the audience. Surely the irony of Biff, captain and quarterback of the *All-Scholastic* (my emphasis) Championship Team of the City of New York, failing math and never graduating touched the nerve of parents whose sons were (whether they liked it or not) inculcated with athletics in the United States. World War II now over, it was time once again to release the furies on the gridiron. Adonises always beat Anemics.

Yet for all its linguistic simplicity, Miller interfolds a voracious repartee throughout *Death of a Salesman*. Miller's is a militant script. Nor is such voracity limited to Willy; all the characters have absorbed an assertive or even violent vocabulary. Willy hopes his boys can "lick the civilized world" (*Death of a Salesman*, p. 64), though Biff screams, "screw the business

world!" (p. 61). Willy threatens to "whip" Biff, though he brags to Ben that his boys would "go into the jaws of hell for me" (p. 52). Biff claims that Willy "always wiped the floor with" Linda (p. 55), and Howard says to Willy, "If I had a spot I'd slam you right in" (p. 80). The infantile Happy brags that he "can outbox, outrun, and outlift anybody in that store" and resents the fact that he has "to take orders from those common, petty sons-of-bitches" (p. 24); he also wonders if he has "an overdeveloped sense of competition" (p. 25) and, near the end of Act Two, orders from the restaurant giant lobsters "with the claws" (p. 99), a fitting dinner for a man who, leering at Miss Forsythe, blathers, "I got radar or something" (p. 100). Only Happy, staring at his father's grave, could utter such banalities as "I'm staying right in this city, and I'm gonna beat this racket! . . . [Willy] fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him" (pp. 138–39). In Boston, the Woman refers to herself as a football, one who has just been booted out of an illicit affair with Willy (pp. 119–20). Willy reflects in his last daydream, ". . . and when you hit, hit low, and hit hard" (p. 135), a reflection meant for Biff but which actually foreshadows his own suicide moments later. The ever-supportive Linda turns acerbic after her boys abandon Willy at the restaurant. She lambastes Happy and his "lousy rotten whores!" (p. 124) and orders Biff to clean up the scattered flowers she has just knocked to the floor: "Pick up this stuff, I'm not your maid any more. Pick it up, you bum, you!" (p. 124). Miller even anthropomorphizes some consumer objects through vigorous language: "That goddam Studebaker! [it's . . .] on its last legs." The refrigerator consumes belts "like a goddam maniac" (p. 73). And Howard's dictaphone, a symbolic reminder of how far Willy lags behind his own technological era, talks to Willy, who has no idea of how to turn off the newfangled invention. The taped voice of Howard's son spinning out of control foregrounds, of course, Willy's own life, which is spinning out of control. After all, Willy does not fit in with the industrialized world; he is more at home in a pastoral world, one in which he can use his hands to build a porch or plant seeds in a garden.

Miller's vigorous repartee – the rapidity and intensity with which actors deliver their lines – gains theatrical momentum through its imagistic referents. These are death-saturated dialogues. Willy launches the tragic trajectory of the play at the very start when admitting, "I'm tired to the death" (p. 13), which becomes a haunting monody throughout the play: "I'm so tired" (p. 68), he says to Linda at the end of Act One. Miller extends the death motif when a rested Willy opens Act Two by saying he slept "like a dead one" (p. 71), and Willy repeats the refrain minutes later when confiding to Howard, "I'm just a little tired" (p. 80). In a comment

prefiguring his own demise, Willy wishes Howard's father, Frank, the best in the grave – "may he rest in peace" (p. 80). Linda knows that Willy's old friends are "all dead, retired" (p. 57). Schoolchildren "nearly died laughing!" at Biff's Birnbaum imitation (p. 118). Miller describes the music that has "*died away*" (p. 88). As the play reaches its climax, Biff utters, "Forget I'm alive" (p. 129) and Willy tells his son, "Then hang yourself! For spite, hang yourself!" (p. 132).

Death allusions permeate the script. Willy complains that builders "massacred the neighborhod" (p. 17). He boasts he "knocked 'em cold in Providence, slaughtered 'em in Boston" (p. 33), and that he will "knock 'em dead next week" (p. 36). Charley says, "My New England man comes back and he's bleedin', they murdered him up there" (p. 51); Willy calls business "murderous" p. 51). Although Bernard's language, in its reasoned cadences, plays counterpoint to the Lomans' outbursts, his most revealing lines describe Biff's return from Boston, the half-hour fist-fight they had, and how they kept "punching each other down the cellar, and crying right through it. I've often thought of how strange it was that I knew he'd given up his life" (p. 94). Near the end of Act Two, Willy says to Biff, "You're trying to put a knife in me – don't think I don't know what you're doing!" (p. 130). Images of fire abound, too. Not surprisingly, Willy is right when he talks about the woods burning. From the angry glow of orange to the Woman thinking there is a fire in the hotel, from the fire-engine red Chevy to Willy's being fired, from Biff's burning his sneaker in the furnace to his pleas that his father burn his phony dream, Miller's language suggests conflagration.

Despite whatever (anti)heroic attributes we ascribe to Willy, he is a figure savagely divided against himself. He emerges as a competitive man whose vision of entrepreneurial spirit, which has devolved into a series of self-deceiving gestures, too often fuels pride. He is a man who contradicts himself. However, given Willy's *physis* (what the ancient Greeks by the time of Sophocles conceived of as one's authentic nature), it could not have been otherwise. At all costs, Willy must leave his thumbprint on the world.[23] He must constantly name and re-name himself. Forever doomed to linger in the margins, Willy locates his essential self within the epicenter of the business world: "Go to Filene's, go to the Hub, go to Slattery's, Boston. Call out the name Willy Loman and see what happens! Big shot!" (*Death of a Salesman*, p. 62). But his pride descends to arrogance, and from arrogance to ignorance, an ignorance fostered by a competitive American business work ethic. Hence *Death of a Salesman*, many critics suggest, is a critique of a capitalist society that brutalizes the unsuccessful. In Marxist terms, Willy completes the brutalization process by reducing

himself to a commodity, an object, a thing, which enables him to make the greatest and last sale of his entire professional life: the sale of his very existence for the insurance payment. The play exposes, for the ideologue, the inadequacies of a bourgeois America. This at least was the dominant view expressed by critics after the play's successful runs at the Pushkin Theatre in Leningrad and the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow during the summer of 1959. Since the Cold War was in full force, such a response seems predictable enough. However, while the sociopolitical textures of the play undeniably manifest themselves throughout, *Death of a Salesman* gains its power from other sources.

Death of a Salesman goes well beyond the level of oversimplified social protest (and a play to be used in the service of a particular ideology) because it concerns the fundamental practical and metaphysical question: what does it mean to be fulfilled in one's very existence? This question underpins the play's greatness, reinforces its philosophic largeness. For in Miller's cosmology, Willy Loman is much more than a neurotic malady, or, as Biff argues, "a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them!" (p. 132). Unquestionably the allure of wealth and fulfillment entice Willy Loman to dream, and to die. But a felt poignancy filled the Morosco Theatre on 10 February 1949 when Lee J. Cobb as Willy confides to Howard:

> We've got quite a little streak of self-reliance in our family. I thought I'd go out with my older brother and try to locate him, and maybe settle in the North with the old man. And I was almost decided to go, when I met a salesman in the Parker House. His name was Dave Singleman. And he was eighty-four years old, and he'd drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, he'd go up to his room, y'understand, put on his green velvet slippers – I'll never forget – and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want.
>
> (p. 81)

No matter that Howard will fire Willy momentarily, or that Willy, like Dave Singleman, will soon die "the death of a salesman" (p. 81). For many, Willy Loman's aspirations have a ring of truth to them, grounded though they may be in a romanticized vision of an American Dream, one that ultimately certifies death.

Willy invites the audience to enter "the inside of his head," the original working title of the play. In effect, the audience becomes privy to the crisis within Willy and to the philosophic complexity of *Death of a Salesman*. Thus when Willy continues, " 'Cause what could be more satisfying than to

be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people?" (p. 81), he confirms what Linda knows. "So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" (p. 56). Willy Loman's real condition lies in his insecurity in the universe, his profound sense of being unfulfilled, and in his inability to observe his own emotional speed limits. No question Willy exaggerates, cheats, and lies, charges which he is ill equipped to refute but well suited to deny. But when he screams to Biff, "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!" (p. 132), is he not laying claim, not only to his dignity and individual worth but also to every person's worthiness?

Undoubtedly Willy suffers from O'Neillean "pipe dreams," or Ibsenesque "vital lies." When convenient, or necessary, Willy confers upon illusions the status of objective reality. Yet he, in a sense, tragically knows at least part of himself. In telling rare occasions he locates his demythicized self without the rhetorical gallantries that mask his inadequacies. He admits that he is foolish to look at and that he babbles too much; he acknowledges that he feels temporary about himself. Strange thoughts bother him. He asks the grown Bernard for advice. Adding to Willy's paradoxical nature are those moments in which he mixes self-disclosure with external fact: "You'll [Happy] retire me for life on seventy goddam dollars a week? And your women and your car and your apartment, and you'll retire me for life! Christ's sake, I couldn't get past Yonkers today! Where are you guys, where are you? The woods are burning! I can't drive a car!" (p. 41). Miller occasionally bestows upon Willy a capacity for self-knowledge within the marketplace, as evident during the scene in Howard's office: "I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit!" (p. 82). Willy knows America is no isocracy in which all people have equal power. Adding to Willy's tragic stature are those singular moments when he honestly assesses his overall predicament, as seen, for instance, when he meets his sons in the restaurant: "I'm not interested in stories about the past or any crap of that kind because the woods are burning, boys, you understand? There's a big blaze going on all around. I was fired today" (p. 107). Such insights make Willy more than a misfit or an oversimplified Everyman. Rather, they enhance his tragic stature precisely because they reveal to the audience Willy's capacity to distinguish reality from chimera; that the majority of his other remarks make such distinctions less clear only adds to the sense of tragic loss. Thus audiences find in Willy traces of the past tragic figures who populated the stages of Shaw, Ibsen,

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and Shakespeare and, backtracking to the primal origins of Western dramatic heritage, of Sophocles and Euripides. This is why Arthur Miller, I believe, is to the second half of twentieth-century American drama what Eugene O'Neill was to the first half: our supreme tragedian.

Coda

Half a century later, the significance of *Death of a Salesman* has only increased. As Miller remarks, "People tell me that *Death of a Salesman* is more pertinent now than then. The suppression of the individual by placing him below the imperious needs of society or technology seems to have manufactured more Willys in the world. But again, it is far more primitive than that. Like many myths and classical dramas, it is a story about violence within a family."[24]

If we live in a world which, indeed, manufactures more Willys, it is easy to understand why theatregoers today continue to be moved the way 1949 audiences were. From an ecological point of view, Willy's ravings about overpopulation, builders massacring elms to construct apartment complexes, and "Bricks and windows, windows and bricks" (*Death of a Salesman*, p. 17) resonate for twenty-first century audiences in London, Beijing, and any major city in the United States. From an economic perspective, Willy's struggles to pay the mortgage and, above all, his insurance, resonate for theatregoers who themselves increasingly feel the financial pressures exacted upon them by an increasingly capitalist, or at least Westernized, world. On a domestic level, global audiences respond to the play's exploration of the primal family unit and the way in which Miller presents the dynamics of the relationship between husband and wife, and parents and children. In a country where social security is more a lie of the mind than political fact, Willy's being fired after working thirty-four years with the firm annihilates Emersonian notions of self-reliance. Willy exists in a world that increasingly detaches itself from him, reminding him daily of his own insignificance. Whether driving 700 miles only to be denied a sale or meeting his sons for dinner only to be abandoned by them, Willy knows that he will reap more profits in one masterstroke – his suicide – than in all the sales he closed in a lifetime. As he points out to Ben, "Does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up a zero?" (p. 126). Willy, exhausted after dealing with feelings of innocence and guilt, protection and betrayal, and celebration and loss, reasons "you end up worth more dead than alive" (p. 98). The Lomans, in sum, have become inextricably linked to various enabling American mythologies – and pathologies. This is precisely why *Death of a Salesman* outlines the collective and

essentially moral anxieties of a nation as those anxieties, occupying the interstice of the Real and the Illusion, affect the individual.[25]

The funeral scene confirms Willy's ultimate fall. If the Requiem provides a sense of closure for Willy and for the audience, the surviving Lomans continue voicing their competing narratives. Happy blathers on, pointlessly. Biff, despite heroic efforts to face facts, still carries on an Oedipal resistance to his father. Willy, he insists, bought into the wrong dreams and did not know himself. Were the play to end with Biff's lines, maybe "the secret we and Miller thereby deny is that we hate Willy because he represents everything we want to deny about ourselves."[26] But Miller doesn't end the play there, and I am not convinced he allows us to hate Willy. Charley's important "nobody dast blame this man" speech, perhaps, places Willy's fate in a broader social and philosophical context. Charley refers to the utter precariousness of human existence when that life comes face to face with emptiness. Questions of hate, spite, and so on continue to reverberate, but as distant echoes. Willy was, indeed, riding out there on a smile and a shoeshine, without a spiritual insurance policy that would have allowed his dreams to exist in equipoise with reality. Since he lived most of his life on the fault lines of the "earthquake" to which Charley refers (*Death of a Salesman*, p. 138), he could only survive with the hopeless hope of "a salesman" who's "got to dream, boy" (p. 138). If intellectually such a reading seems forced, it makes perfect sense theatrically. And, for Miller and most theatregoers, this is all that matters.

Despite the carnivalesque world of the Lomans, Miller provides a resolution of sorts. This resolution may be best understood in the context of the playwright's intellectual position, which reveals itself through his moral optimism. From *The Golden Years* through *Broken Glass*, Miller's poetics emphasize the primacy of the individual's social duty and the importance of familial love. Implicit in all the major plays is Miller's belief in the unifying force of love that creates the possibility for social revolt in the *polis* and personal insight within the family. These essentializing forces, which elude the Lomans, only increase the play's sense of tragic loss. The poetics of Arthur Miller are informed with a sense of charity and love which the Lomans can never adequately express. This is why Linda, sobbing quietly as the curtain falls, can only contemplate what could, or should, have been.

NOTES

1 Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), p. 17.
2 Linda Kintz, "The Sociosymbolic Work of Family in *Death of a Salesman*," in Matthew C. Roudané (ed.), *Approaches to Teaching Miller's Death of a*

Salesman (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1995), p. 106. See also in this same volume Susan Harris Smith, "Contextualizing *Death of a Salesman* as an American Play," pp. 27–32, and Janet N. Balakian, "Beyond the Male Locker Room: *Death of a Salesman* from a Feminist Perspective," pp. 115–24. For other useful essays debating feminist issues in the play, see Charlotte Canning, "Is This Play About Women?: A Feminist Reading of *Death of a Salesman*," in Steven R. Centola, *The Achievement of Arthur Miller* (Dallas: Contemporary Research Associates, 1995), pp. 69–76; Gayle Austin, "The Exchange of Women and Male Homosocial Desire in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Lillian Hellman's *Another Part of the Forest*," in June Schlueter (ed.), *Feminist Rereadings of Modern American Drama* (Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989), pp. 59–66; and Kay Stanton, "Women and the American Dream of *Death of a Salesman*," in *Feminist Rereadings*, pp. 67–102.

3 Brenda Murphy, *Miller: Death of a Salesman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 70.

4 "David Mamet," in Christopher Bigsby (ed.), *Arthur Miller and Company* (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 64.

5 "Dustin Hoffman," in Bigsby, *Arthur Miller and Company*, pp. 70–71.

6 Christopher Bigsby, *Modern American Drama, 1945–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 89.

7 Murphy, *Miller: Death of a Salesman*, p. 106.

8 Matthew C. Roudané, "An Interview with Arthur Miller," in Roudané (ed.), *Conversations with Arthur Miller* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), pp. 360–61.

9 Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," *New York Times*, 27 February 1949, section II, pp. 1, 3.

10 Arthur Miller, *Timebends* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), p. 190.

11 The physiological and psychological correspondences linking Manny Newman and Willy Loman seem equally compelling. "Manny Newman was cute and ugly, a Pan risen out of the earth, a bantam with a lisp, sunken brown eyes, a lumpy, pendulous nose, dark brown skin, and gnarled arms," Miller recalls (*Timebends*, p. 122). Physiologically, traces of Manny may be found in Willy, who confides to Linda that he is foolish-looking. F. H. Stewarts, a salesman, mockingly calls Willy a walrus. More importantly, Manny was also, like Willy, "a competitor, at all times, in all things, and at every moment" (*Timebends*, p. 122).

Although Miller only spent a few hours with Manny Newman during his lifetime, he nonetheless proved to be one of the pivotal figures upon whom Miller based Willy Loman. In describing Newman, Miller could very well be talking about Willy: "he was so absurd, so completely isolated from the ordinary laws of gravity, so elaborate in his fantastic inventions, and despite his ugliness so lyrically in love with fame and fortune and their inevitable descent on his family, that he possessed my imagination until I knew more or less precisely how he would react to any sign or word or idea" (*Timebends*, p. 123).

The coalescence of fiction and fact reaches its most poignant expression through the emotion of a profound sadness both Willy and Manny shared. During that fateful night in Boston, the Woman says to Willy, "You are the saddest, self-centredest soul I ever did see-saw" (*Death of a Salesman*, p. 116). Of Manny Newman Miller would write, "his unpredictable manipulations of fact freed my mind to lope and skip among fantasies of my own, but always underneath was the river of his sadness" (*Timebends*, p. 123). And director Elia Kazan, after reading a working draft of the script in 1948, telephoned Miller and in an "alarmingly somber" voice said, "My God, it's so sad" (*Timebends*, p. 185). Sadness, however, must be masked at all costs. Appearance counts. Hence there was a "competitiveness that drugged" Manny Newman's mind (*Timebends*, p. 124), the same competitive personality that would energize as it immobilized Willy Loman. Caught in a naturalistic world that reduces him to an insignificant speck in the universe, Willy and his soaring inner spirits are tempered by an outer deterministic environment: "There's more people! That's what's ruining this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening!" (*Death of a Salesman*, pp. 17–18). It was Manny Newman's and Willy Loman's "romance of hope" (*Timebends*, p. 126), then, that would partially define the trajectory of their lives.

12 Miller's conversation with Manny Newman's son was also a galvanizing, revelatory moment because it helped the playwright clarify the contradictory nature of Willy Loman. When he heard that Manny wanted "a business for the boys," Miller realized that this conventional, mundane wish was a shot of "electricity that switched all the random iron filings in my mind in one direction. A hopelessly distracted Manny was transformed into a man with purpose: he had been trying to make a gift that would crown all those striving years; all those lies he told, all his imaginings and crazy exaggerations, even the almost military discipline he had laid on his boys, were in this instant given form and point. To be sure, a business expressed his own egotism, but love, too" (*Timebends*, p. 130). Miller's reminiscence of Manny Newman found its theatrical corollary within Willy Loman; here Miller describes the Real, his uncle, but what follows even more accurately externalizes the fictional Willy Loman: "That homely, ridiculous little man had after all never ceased to struggle for a certain victory, the only kind open to him in this society – selling to achieve his lost self as a man with his name and his sons' names on a business of his own" (*Timebends*, p. 130).

Miller acknowledges that another salesman, a friend of his uncle, "was more vivid to me than even Manny." This salesman, unmarried and fitted with a wooden leg, differed in temperament from Manny Newman, his "reflective air" giving rise to an observation that arrested Miller. "'You've changed, haven't you?' he said. 'You've gotten serious.'" For a young man soon to turn craft into art, the salesman's observation gave Miller "the dignity of a history of my own," and, more importantly, the courage to follow artistic instincts within a meritocracy that valorizes a business as sacrament, ethic and ethos. "If ever I knew that salesman's name I forgot it long ago, but not his few interested words that helped crack the shell of suffocating subjectivity surrounding my existence" (*Timebends*, pp. 126–27).

13 Roudané, "Interview," p. 370.

14 Arthur Miller, "Ibsen and the Drama of Today," in James McFarland (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 232.

15 Arthur Miller, "About Theatre Language," in Miller, *The Last Yankee* (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 81.
16 Unpublished interview with Arthur Miller, conducted by Christopher Bigsby, 1994.
17 Miller, "About Theatre Language," pp. 81, 84.
18 Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, p. 90.
19 Miller elaborates on the use of form and time in the play:

> The form of *Death of a Salesman* was an attempt, as much as anything else, to convey the bending of time. There are two or three sorts of time in that play. One is social time; one is psychic time, the way we remember things; and the third is the sense of time created by the play and shared by the audience. When I directed *Salesman* in China, which was the first time I had attempted to direct it from scratch, I became aware all over again that the play is taking place in the Greek unity of twenty-four hours; and yet, it is dealing with material that goes back probably twenty-five years. And it almost goes forward through Ben, who is dead. So *time* was an obsession for me at the moment, and I wanted a way of presenting it so that it became the *fiber* of the play, rather than being something that somebody comments about. In fact, there is very little comment verbally in *Salesman* about time. I also wanted a form that could sustain in itself the way we deal with crises, which is not to deal with them. After all, there is a lot of comedy in *Salesman*; people forget it because it is so dark by the end of the play. But if you stand behind the audience you hear a lot of laughter. It's a deadly ironical laughter most of the time, but it *is* a species of laughter. The comedy is really a way for Willy and others to put off the evil day, which is the thing we all do. I wanted that to *happen* and not be something talked *about*. I wanted the feeling to come across rather than a set of speeches about how we delay dealing with issues. I wanted a play, that is, that had almost a biological life of its own. It would be as incontrovertible as the musculature of the human body. Everything connecting with everything else, all of it working according to plan. No excesses. Nothing explaining itself; all of it simply inevitable, as one structure, as one corpus. All of those feelings of a society falling to pieces which I had, still have, of being unable to deal with it, which we all know now. All of this, however, presented not with speeches in *Salesman*, but by putting together pieces of Willy's life, so that what we were deducing about it was the speech; what we were making of it was the moral of it; what it was doing to us rather than a romantic speech about facing death and living a fruitless life. All of these elements and many more went into the form of *Death of a Salesman*. All this could never have been contained in the form of *All My Sons*. (Roudané, "Interview," pp. 363–64)

20 Joseph A. Hynes, "'Attention, Attention Must Be Paid . . . ,'" *College English* 23 (1962): 576.
21 Harold Bloom, "Introduction," in Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Interpretations: Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), p. 1.
22 Tennessee Williams, "Production Notes," *The Glass Menagerie*, in *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, vol. I (New York: New Directions, 1971), pp. 131–34.

23 For an informative discussion linking Arthur Miller, Willy Loman, and the function of art, see Bigsby's interview with Miller in *Arthur Miller and Company*, p. 233.
24 Roudané, "Interview," p. 361.
25 For excellent discussions of the public/private dialectic in Miller, see C. W. E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 135–248; Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, pp. 72–125; Bigsby, "Introduction to the Revised Edition," *The Portable Arthur Miller* (New York: Penguin, 1995), pp. xxv–xli; Robert A. Martin, "Arthur Miller: Public Issues, Private Tensions," in Matthew C. Roudané (ed.), *Public Issues, Private Tensions: Contemporary American Drama* (New York: AMS Press, 1993), pp. 65–75; Martin, "The Nature of Tragedy in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*," *South Atlantic Review* 61 (1996): 97–106; Bernard F. Dukore, *Death of a Salesman and The Crucible: Text and Performance* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 16–20, 33–39, 45–56; Thomas P. Adler, *American Drama, 1940–1960: A Critical History* (New York: Twayne, 1994), pp. 62–83; June Schlueter and James K. Flanagan, *Arthur Miller* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1987), pp. 56–66; Janet N. Balakian, "*Salesman*: Private Tensions Raised to a Poetic Social Level," in Centola, *The Achievement of Arthur Miller*, pp. 59–68; *Platform Papers: 7. Arthur Miller* (London: Royal National Theatre, 1995), pp. 3–36; and Matthew C. Roudané, "Arthur Miller and His Influence on Contemporary American Drama," *American Drama* 6 (1996): 1–13.
26 Walter A. Davis, *Get the Guests: Psychoanalysis, Modern American Drama, and the Audience* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), p. 144.

Source Bigsby, C(ed)(1997) The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller. C.U.P.