

He struggles to comprehend the ordinary life that he found back in Ohio.

And then I came home and it was incredible. I—there was no meaning in it here; the whole thing to them was a kind of a—bus accident. I went to work with Dad, and that rat-race again. I felt—what you said—ashamed somehow. Because nobody was changed at all. It seemed to make suckers out of a lot of guys. I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank-book, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator. I mean you can take those things out of a war, but when you drive that car you've got to know that it came out of the love a man can have for a man, you've got to be a little better because of that. Otherwise what you have is really loot, and there's blood on it. (85)

He caught a glimpse of the larger scale while he was overseas, but here at home, he realizes how his friends and neighbors focus so carefully on what's very close to them that they cannot see (or choose to ignore) what lies beyond, even though it shapes immediate experience. Chris has learned that his neighborhood is involved with the larger community, but he understands his life only in terms of personal interaction and individual choice. Considering what he's become since his return to civilian, peacetime life, he takes a relentless view of compromise:

But I'm like everybody else now. I'm practical now. . . . The cats in that alley are practical, the bums who ran away when we were fighting were practical. Only the dead ones weren't practical. But now I'm practical, and I spit on myself. (123)

Jim Bayliss, that thoughtful neighbor, explains how each man learns to give up a little of himself in order to get by.

We all come back, Kate. These private little revolutions always die. The compromise is always made. In a peculiar way. Frank is right—every man does have a star. The star of one's honesty. And you spend your life groping for it, but once it's out it never lights again. (118)

He reveals that he gave up medical research to return to his wife. "And now I live in the usual darkness; I can't find myself; it's even hard sometime to remember the kind of man I wanted to be" (118). Like Chris, he has little sense of the larger structures in which individual action takes place, and he returns to questions of character and individual strength.

The point of the play, of course, is that all the brave young men were Joe Keller's sons, so the scope of his responsibility extends well beyond Chris and Larry, far beyond his plant and his arbor and his neighborhood, and out into a community that makes its own demands and sets its own standards. Yet this vision doesn't expand the range of the family as much as it brings all of humanity down to the family scale; Joe discovers not that his family is a subordinate component of a larger community but that the community is an extended family. Chris confronts his father to ask, "Don't you live in the world?" and so accuses him of defining his life in terms too private, but he and Joe comprehend their worldwide complicity only as a version of family relations (116). Even when the elements of the play suggest a wider angle, Miller brings the action back to the private sphere, and his model of human relationships simply offers a domestic hearth so capacious that multitudes may share in its warmth.

### *Death of a Salesman*

[. . .] what's driving Willy nuts is that he's trying to establish a connection  
[. . .] within the world of power [. . .]

—ARTHUR MILLER, 1966, CARLISLE

Although *Death of a Salesman* returns all issues to the personal level, the drama rests on a political substructure as it works out the ramifications of power dynamics in society. The play explores politics in the abstract, offering a hierarchical class structure, the consolidation of social power in the hands of a few, and the legitimation of an economic system whose competitive imperative shapes all social relations, yet it names none of these elements explicitly, instead masking all through the operations of liberal individualism. That is, Miller presents human interaction as a matter of character, each man dealing with others as unique individuals without reference to the political or social operations that enfold them. Willy Loman and his sons attempt to engage in the prevailing struggle, barely find opportunities to compete, and go down in defeat. In the end, men like Ben Loman and Bill Oliver scarcely notice Willy's agony and spare no sympathy for him, and only Biff and Happy care enough to debate the significance of their father's existence. Not only does the individual bear full responsibility for the outcome of his life, in the end, he is alone and forgotten.

Accordingly, Miller gives the action a private, domestic setting, beginning the text of the play with the house itself, not precisely the Loman family home, but “the Salesman’s house,” so designated for the social role that dominates Willy and his vision.<sup>2</sup>

Before us is the Salesman’s house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange. As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home. An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality. (130)

This passage tells us less about the house than about its surroundings and its effect; that is, rather than describe the appearance of the house—the color of the siding, the molding in the bedrooms, the architectural style of the whole, or the furnishings and interior decorations that the Lomans have selected over the years—Miller suggests its relationship to the world. The house, perhaps, has no fixed essence, but rather an interactive role to play. It constitutes a powerful, evocative setting, one that cradles the Lomans, provides a constant, looming metaphor for the sense of safety and belonging that they seek, and shelters them as a family, however embattled.<sup>3</sup>

This setting is suitable, even inevitable, because the Lomans, on Willy’s last day, the single day of the action of the play, have retreated to their home as the only space that’s available to them, the only point of safety, remote from the turmoil of the contest. The house looms large in our imaginations because Miller has swung his lens around to place it in the foreground, offering the impersonal apartment buildings as evidence of the faceless power that built them while leaving the rest of the world barely imaginable in the distance, that world that has conquered the Lomans, revealing and perhaps even determining who they are.

Yet the Salesman’s house is more than a reflection of Miller’s imagination and Jo Mielziner’s visual legacy.<sup>4</sup> The subtitle of the play begins with the phrase “certain private conversations,” a consciously casual description that suggests the playwright’s sense of irony, for no staged conversation is private, and Miller is employing selected conventions of realistic theater even while crafting a drama that freely calls attention to its own theatricality. The salesman’s house provides a suitable stage for Miller’s “private conversations,” but it also precludes other kinds of in-

teraction. It’s a certain space with certain boundaries and a certain character; what happens within its walls is what *can* happen within the privacy that it provides, and what *must* happen as Willy and his family turn in toward each other. The setting, the interiority, and the privacy all work together; the house serves an action that the house then shapes and limits.

### *The Drama of the Interior*

Consider what we might regard, for better or for worse, as the epitome of serious, traditional, twentieth-century American drama: a play composed of domestic, frequently intimate events enacted in the representational mode called psychological realism and set within the confines of a home. The foregrounded family marks out a personal territory, a preserve that protects them from the struggles of society. The home and family that form the substance of the play work interdependently with the staging possibilities and even the ways in which such matters as story and idea might be conceived. Thought, conception, text, design, performance, and reception are all integral parts of a whole, none of them inevitable or ordinary but all working to present a coherent vision.

Such work is what we might name the drama of the interior, a phrase that suggests simultaneously the emotional turmoil within each character, the domestic struggle that drives the family, and the setting for the action. Although we might subordinate that setting to those elements commonly privileged as forming the meat of the play—idea, story, and character—and position theatrical space in service of dramatic text, careful consideration of theatrical art suggests a disruption of this interactive hierarchy. Space, place, and setting operate in both real and fictive dimensions to establish boundaries for what we can imagine, write, create, and perceive. A theatrical setting is an actual place where people we call “actors” interact before the gaze of people we call “spectators” or “the audience,” all framed in a certain “neutral” but culturally charged structure called a “theater,” but it is also a figurative place where “characters” interact in a time/space that exists only in the minds of all present. Space and conception determine each other. We can trace the historical development of theatrical structures and the conventions of *mise-en-scène*, interpreting them as cultural responses to trends in performance, literary tastes, and theories of human psychology, yet those very performances, fashions, and constructs are what we are able to grasp and offer within those structures and conventions. The drama of the interior is

not, therefore, merely a matter of accepting certain approaches and limitations; it is, rather, a form that works synergistically with its content, each determining and determined by the other.

The drama of the interior plays upon the tension between private space and public surroundings, and upon the struggle over boundary and trespass. The more specific notion of "home" evokes a welter of customs, codes, rituals, obligations, roles, expectations, and histories, and to choose "home" as the setting is to conceive of the action as essentially private and to identify key moments as those that play out hidden from public view. The house is less a refuge than the space that confines and defines the family. Indeed, much of what we call "realism" rests on the paradigm of the individual as a private creature retreating into a sanctuary. Realistic domestic drama typically reaches climax and resolution in one of two ways: either the members of the family engage with each other as never before, confronting truths about their relationships that they had not understood or had refused to acknowledge, or their conflict propels them out into society, where they break apart. Either way, the denouement reveals the family as changed.

The Salesman's house defines three territories for the Lomans: (1) the world beyond, where they encounter others; (2) the world within, where they encounter each other; and (3) the self.

The world beyond the Salesman's house is a wilderness, both dangerous and seductive. When Willy sallies forth, he encounters buyers who don't remember him; Howard and Charley, who reveal his failures; the Woman, who enables his weakness; the road where he lets the car drift; and the restaurant where his sons abandon him. He is a traveling salesman to whom travel means risk, injury, and defeat. The very first lines of dialogue present the outside world as fearful but empty:

LINDA. Willy!

WILLY. It's all right. I came back.

LINDA. Why? What happened? Did something happen, Willy?

WILLY. No, nothing happened. (131)

Of course, a great deal has happened. Willy has returned from a sales trip he was unable to complete. He traveled only as far as "a little above Yonkers"—that is, through the city that lies on the northern boundary of the Bronx, so scarcely beyond New York itself—and, anxious over his inability to concentrate behind the wheel, took nearly four hours to drive

back to Brooklyn at only ten miles an hour. Since he left that morning and we see him returning late at night, we infer that when he stopped for a cup of coffee, he must have lingered for much of the day, lost and bewildered. This wilderness is dark and inhospitable, a strange land that Willy, even though he is a professional traveler, cannot negotiate.

He has proven himself completely unable to do his job, so in act 2, he mounts one last, desperate expedition to the outside world, where he finds a series of defeats. Howard Wagner won't even entertain the idea of giving him a job in the New York store, temporizing only to the extent that "there just is no spot here for you" but then firing him (179).

HOWARD. Willy, you can't go to Boston for us.

WILLY. Why can't I go?

HOWARD. I don't want you to represent us. I've been meaning to tell you for a long time now.

WILLY. Howard, are you firing me?

HOWARD. I think you need a good long rest, Willy. (182)

Howard has both freedom and authority, while Willy is powerless. The Salesman has nothing to offer his boss, nothing to sell to him, and no leverage that will enable him to deflect rejection. He protests, makes extravagant claims regarding his past performance, and begs for employment even at a reduced salary. He struggles from a position of debilitating weakness, and nothing he says or does can sway Howard's judgment.<sup>5</sup>

Willy then goes to Charley to collect his customary \$50, and he asks for an additional \$110 to pay his insurance.<sup>6</sup> Again, Willy is weak and the other is strong, for while Charley has a successful business (very like the one that Willy has served for thirty-six years), enough money to support Willy clandestinely, and a son who's become a successful attorney, Willy has only his strained jokes and his dogged, resentful determination to refuse Charley's offer of a job. Yet again, Willy has nothing that the other man needs or desires, so the other can either condescend and pity, or he can simply turn his back.

Willy's last stop in the city is Frank's Chop House, where he meets his sons for dinner. Biff tries to tell him that his own sortie has failed, that Oliver didn't remember him and scarcely stopped to acknowledge him, much less hear his proposal, but Willy's fantasies combine with Happy's unscrupulous manipulation to obfuscate the facts. This is a gathering of the incompetent and bewildered, three men who lack the skills even to

survive in the world they dream, ludicrously, of conquering; in the end, the sons save face only by sneaking off with the "chippies" and so claiming a cheap triumph at the pathetic expense of the father they desert. Willy had exhausted all other avenues and looked to his sons for deliverance from despair, but even they forsake him.

In *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge*, the world outside of the home offers a community to which the central characters belong and with which they must engage. Yet the relationship of the Lomans to that larger community is troubled. Linda, within the limits of the play, never leaves the house, and she knows the outside only in terms of the experiences that the men describe when they come home. Happy has eagerly run outside, but while he compulsively relates tales of his amusements and business involvements, he boasts of more success and reward than he can substantiate; his place in the community is largely illusory, and his claims are deceitful. Biff has seen much of the world, traveling afar (like Ben, like Willy's father) and tasting the open range as well as a jail cell, but his journey has left him bewildered and alienated, painfully aware of his individuality as a burden rather than a marker of kinship with those he meets. Willy has built his life on identifying with the values of the community and, he hopes, living and succeeding by them. In his fantasies, he is one of the men by whose achievements the community sets its standards, and his tragedy spirals from the obtruding realization that his perceptions are wrong.

Miller provides this key to his concerns.

How may a man make of the outside world a home? How and in what ways must he struggle, what must he strive to change and overcome within himself and outside himself if he is to find the safety, the surroundings of love, the ease of soul, the sense of identity and honor which, evidently, all men have connected in their memories with the idea of family? ("The Family" 73)

Willy's compulsion to sell himself constitutes this quest to "make of the outside world a home." He would be liked and familiar; he would see others greet him with smiles and pleasure. He imagines towns populated with buyers, businessmen, and officials who are as glad to welcome him as they would a brother. He ranges far afield to search for this sense of belonging, but his quest is a failure, so he keeps coming back to Brooklyn, where he cherishes the belief that he finds much of what Miller relates to "the idea of family."

Unable to find a home in that outside world, Willy pours himself into the house; even Biff recognizes that "there's more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made" (221). Hap's merchandise manager moves on, unsatisfied, to build again, but Willy strives to turn his house into a monument to his dreams, a work of art to serve as the ark for his spirit. He regards it as a kind of temple, a sanctified space where he forbids the boys to curse. Yet the house holds him in thrall; its equipment burdens him and he can't seem to earn enough to keep up with the bills. He complains, "I'm always in a race with the junkyard!" (174). Now, as he measures the march of days, he sighs, "Figure it out. Work a lifetime to pay off a house. You finally own it, and there's nobody to live in it" (133).

The Lomans return to the Salesman's house to find a closed system that is too small and confined to bear. Both John Proctor and Eddie Carbone move beyond the family and find external points of view as referents to measure and guide their decisions and behavior, and although circumstances bring each man to a moment of final, dire reckoning, his journey ranges through the scope and breadth of his community. In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller packs the Lomans' hopes and fears into the life of the house. They find themselves ever pressed against each other like rodents nesting in a burrow; the space compresses the family, cinching it down until the heat and pressure rise relentlessly. In this tiny, circumscribed territory, there is no room for any one of them to find a place; if one moves, he crowds the others. They are dependent on each other, but so much so that there is no leeway for negotiation and little slack left for choice. They struggle for a sense of responsibility within a moral framework, but their situation is too desperate to permit such refinement. They cannot live without each other, yet they are packed in so tight that their togetherness brings agony. Willy and Biff must resolve their differences, but they cannot do so.

Each of the Lomans may pay any price, make any sacrifice, or offer any confession, but nothing will suffice to confer a sense of individuality. None can achieve a distinct sense of self because the others are always there, always connected, bound to each other and compelled by enclosure. Each strives to define a distinct "self" in relation to "family," but none succeeds. Biff, in resigned desperation, finally offers to suspend all negotiations and resentments so he can stop striving for resolution. Linda sadly endorses his proposal, but Willy casts him out even while holding fast to him. Biff has struggled to define who he is—"I'm a dime

a dozen"—but Willy refuses to validate this agonized conclusion (217). Biff isn't strong enough to find himself without Willy's cooperation, so he remains lost.

The slow but relentless collision of father with son provides the most incendiary, searing encounter in the play. As with the entire story, Miller employs a late point of attack, relieved only by the echoes of the past that Willy's anxious, fretful memory provides. Willy remembers Biff as the teenage idol who threw touchdown passes in his honor, the boy who missed his absent father but admired the stories of his travels, the bright hope who could trust in charisma rather than his studies. Yet Biff was also the subject of warnings by Linda and Bernard, who identified him as a delinquent who disquieted mothers and stole lumber. Now, facing his end, Willy can't decide what to make of this son, this man of thirty-four years who still displays the qualities his father admires but who cannot connect with the success that should have come so easily. This adult Biff no longer offers adulation, so Willy must himself rehearse the speeches he longs to hear, assuring the family that he is a "big shot." At best, Biff is still the winner on the brink, the young champion of shining ideas and great expectations who will gratefully accept Willy's advice, no matter how contradictory or ill-founded. This paragon, this imaginary manifestation of eager, innocent ideals, blinds the Lomans to its actual counterpart.

Father and son are unable to communicate. Biff finishes act 1 smoking a lonely cigarette before reaching behind the gas heater to find the telltale rubber tubing and staring, "horrified," toward the father who babbles to the moon. When they meet again, in Frank's Chop House, Biff tries to tell the truth, but Willy deflects his earnest, anxious efforts with his desperation and yearning. Neither can articulate what he truly feels; neither actually listens to the other. Biff is approaching a point of agonizing self-recognition, but Willy has backed himself into a corner, warding off the assaults on his dignity from Howard and his wire recorder, Bernard and his tennis rackets, and Charley and his job offer. Peering out from his defensive position, Willy can only respond to Biff's apparent recalcitrance by retreating farther, back into his guilt and anger over his son flunking math. Panicking, Biff falls back on the lies that he hopes will appease Willy for the moment.

The two men are able to reach their final awakening only when they rendezvous in the Salesman's house. Even the "garden" won't suffice; Biff asks Willy, again and again, to "come inside," partly because "there are

people all around here" (214, 213). Biff tries to walk away, but Willy can't let him go without exacting a price, and in retaliation, Biff brings out the rubber tubing to expose his father and humiliate him before Linda and Happy. The little hose serves as the springboard, the catalyst that finally frees Biff to say what he must say: "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house" (216). *In this house*. What happens in this house—the transactions, the evasions, the covenants, and the failures—is what truly matters. Biff declares who he really is, or, at least, who he truly perceives himself to be, and after multiple assurances to the contrary, he finally lays the blame in Willy's lap: "I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody!" (216). Yet the moment doesn't take hold, doesn't last. Biff reaches his apotheosis with "I'm nothing," but as he sobs on his father's shoulder, Willy is merely baffled (217). Defeated and exhausted, Biff climbs the stairs, and the Salesman never sees him again.

The entire action of the play brings Willy and Biff to their disastrous confrontation. That it fails to reach a constructive or beneficial resolution is a matter of the weight of their lives pushing them inevitably to their ends; no present revelation can balance the torment of the past. Yet all that they are—as individuals, as dreamers, as hustlers, as father and son, as husband and brother—can thrive or wither only in this house. The house is where they became what they are and have been, and the house is where they must play out their story. Whatever they are out West, in Boston, or in Frank's Chop House is temporary, lasting only as long as they pass through. Willy's interaction with Howard and the boys' evening with "the chippies" form material that they bring back to feed the fires of the family. They bring experience home for contemplation and assessment, and only what endures in the house really matters.

Biff sees Linda, the wife and mother, as the virtuous woman who is synonymous with the family, and it is Willy's infidelity, the ultimate, unanswerable lie, the betrayal of family relationships and loyalty, that destroys Biff's faith in his father and ultimately leads to the Salesman's self-destruction. Willy could have withstood his own guilt, but he cannot brook Biff's rejection, giving up his life in order that his son—not, oddly, his wife—be able to collect on his life insurance policy. The son has struggled to investigate the family and reveal its truth, and the father must choose a way to cope with the discovery. Biff suffers in order to learn what he is, and the play drives toward the scene when he insists on articulating the truth even though Willy refuses to accept the revelation.

Each Loman man faces himself with difficulty. Willy meets adversity like one whose vision temporarily blurs: he rubs his eyes and looks again, squinting in hopes that the image before him will resolve into what he expects and desires. His convictions are so vivid that he simply cannot process any experience that contradicts them. Happy has not yet met a moment of reckoning, so he blithely lies, distorting experience to convince not only others but even himself that all's well. He is so inured to this way of life, this habit of deceit, that he achieves it effortlessly; only when Biff or Linda challenges him directly does he falter. Biff is the only one to struggle to see himself and his life with ruthless clarity. He has spent half his life wandering, both geographically and emotionally, but he returns to the Salesman's house for his truly pivotal moment. Miller never offers a reason for Biff happening to return at this particular moment, when his father is reaching a crisis; the cause is, we speculate, as visceral and primal as for an animal whose instincts compel a return to its nesting place to spawn or die. Biff returns to the house because it is his time for self-awakening, but he does not accomplish his epiphany easily. He struggles through confusion, disappointment, anger, hope, shame, and defeat. Like Willy, he travels outside of the Salesman's house to measure himself against the territory beyond, and he returns to assess and articulate what his experience has taught him: he is a former shipping clerk with no connections and little education who loves "the work and the food and the time to sit and smoke." He's "one dollar an hour," not "a leader of men," but he can choose not to be "a contemptuous, begging fool" (217). He returns to the Salesman's house because only there does he have a chance to find himself and explain who he is to the only people who could conceivably care, but his customary portion is delusion and frustration.

The Salesman's house provides the Loman men with a starting point that is also their finish line. They depart to reach for triumph—Willy to sell, Happy to seduce, and Biff to lead his team to victory—leaving Linda to inhale the fragrance of shaving lotion and pass out saccharine. Opportunity lies beyond, in the jungle, whether Alaska, Africa, South Dakota, or even the buyers' offices in Boston, but the point is to bring the prize home. No Loman finds a valid position in society; the men wish to participate, to belong, but they can't find the way. Barred and excluded, even ostracized, they are left with each other, and their family becomes the tiny community where each person must measure experience, dependence, and responsibility, where each must find a moral stan-

dard by which to deal with the others, and where each must find and establish his or her rightful place. The validity of any success, any heroic narrative, or any new aspiration is contingent upon the family gathering in the home to acknowledge it. The men return to the Salesman's house to grapple with the meaning of their attempts, to tell stories as strained surrogates for what they wish they had accomplished, and, finally, to deal with each other. Whatever battles they fought in the outside world are not quite finished until the domestic reckoning. The house is the venue for confrontation and recognition, whether evaded or attempted. It is the place whose painfully familiar and ordinary trappings induce them to admit that ultimately, they have only each other.

The Lomans turn inward to find themselves, but their fruitless search ends in alienation. They return from the jungle, the hostile wilderness where Ben prevails and Willy quails, but although they refer to each other in order to measure their worth, they fail to find an alternative to the cutthroat values of Ben's milieu. Even in the home that should be a haven, they live by principles that serve others' interests even as they cripple the cloistered family.

### *Competition*

To Willy and his sons, to succeed is to prove, through competition, supremacy over others. They study those they admire and conclude that success is both the consequence and the reward of winning, of climbing to the top by prevailing in a power struggle. Happy complains because "I have to take orders from those common, petty sons-of-bitches till I can't stand it any more," insists that he could physically dominate any other man in his store, and won't consider going West with Biff until he claims the glory that the merchandise manager now enjoys and shows "some of those pompous, self-important executives over there that Hap Loman can make the grade" (140). To Willy, to "sell" a client is to master the situation, to take charge, to impose his will on someone else, and to prove his own comparative strength. He once cherished hopes of elbowing others aside, of becoming a partner in Wagner's firm or having his own business. Now he delights in the prospect of his sons starting a company to sell sporting goods because "you guys together could absolutely lick the civilized world," and his greatest hope for Biff is that after the insurance money arrives in the mail, "he'll be ahead of Bernard again" (168, 219). He never lets go of the image of Biff playing in the championship football game, the young hero determined and even destined to break

through the line, score the touchdown and defeat the opposing team. Only if the Lomans rise above others will achieving their goals bring the satisfaction they desire; Happy clings to the idea of competing and winning as he stands over his father's grave, insisting, "I'm not licked that easily. I'm staying right in this city, and I'm gonna beat this racket!" (222). Their goal is predominance; Willy insists that "if old man Wagner was alive I'd a been in charge of New York now," he assures Linda that if Biff had "stayed with Oliver he'd be on top by now," and he reserves his greatest admiration for Ben, who scorns legal niceties and fair play in his ruthless determination to overpower others in the Darwinian environments of Alaskan timberlands and African diamond mines (133, 170). Peter Levine describes Ben as "the personification of the archetypal American capitalist—the swashbuckling, arrogant individual whose masculinity is defined by strength, power, aggression, competitiveness, toughness and a win at all costs mentality" (48). The Lomans will know they've succeeded when they are employers rather than employees, managers rather than subordinates, when others take orders from them and defer to them, and when they've "licked the world" and left the rest behind. They aspire to win and so take control of their lives. They hope to claim a dominant role in the scenario Chantal Mouffe describes as "social relations [. . .] constructed as relations of subordination" (91). In this regard, the play traces their contest and their defeat.

The Lomans express success in superlative terms; nothing short of mastery will do. Willy remembers Ben as "a genius [. . .] success incarnate," and introduces him as "a great man," while Ben describes their father as "a very great and wild-hearted man" (152, 157, 157). Happy declares that his father has "the finest eye for color in the business" (137). Willy acclaims Happy's Florida proposition as "a one-million-dollar idea" and tells Biff, "you got a greatness in you," remembering that he was the tallest boy on his football team, "like a young god, Hercules" (168, 171, 171). He explains to Howard how meeting Dave Singleman taught him that "selling was the greatest career a man could want" and he insists to Ben that "the sky's the limit" (180, 184). Willy knows that when Biff walks off of Ebbets Field, he'll be "captain of the All-Scholastic Championship Team of the City of New York" (185). When Happy wants to impress the girl in the restaurant, he tells her, "Biff is one of the greatest football players in the country," and even after Biff has scorned all of his dreams and aspirations, Willy tells Ben that "that boy is going to be magnificent!" (196, 218). Miller never reveals who actually won that key

football game at Ebbets Field; all that matters is that Willy believed, at his very core, that Biff would emerge victorious. In Willy's imagination, there is no such position as second place; a man is either the best or nothing at all.

When Willy and his sons map out their strategy, they focus on swaying others, for they hope to achieve their goals by convincing those in power to support them. Bill Oliver becomes the object of their hopeful imaginings, so Willy gives Biff detailed although contradictory advice regarding how to manage his meeting. Happy tells his brother that Oliver "thought highly of you" and Biff agrees that "he thought the world of me," while Willy assures Linda that "there's fifty men in the City of New York who'd stake him" (141, 142, 167). If they cannot persuade others to assist them, they consider more forceful means; Happy tells Biff that he'd like to "outbox that goddam merchandise manager" in order to prove that he's a better man and so worthy of more respect and authority (139). Ben lures Biff into a tussle by purporting to teach him a valuable lesson on getting ahead, but he overcomes him and warns, "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy" (139, 158).<sup>7</sup> Ben's easy victory might suggest that the Lomans are outmanned, but they take the incident as a demonstration of an approach they must and can learn. They see social relations as a form of battle, and one they intend to win.

By ordinary standards, Willy Loman is indeed a successful man. For thirty-five years, he supported his family, kept his marriage intact, worked loyally for the same company, raised two sons, and paid off a mortgage, all in spite of the disadvantages of having only modest skills, acquiring neither education nor training, and working in a competitive, unstable occupation. (If we take as historically specific the chronology of Willy's life, we could add that he weathered both the Great Depression and World War II, although Miller mentions neither explicitly.) He is reliable, hardworking, and dedicated to his responsibilities. Yet the play presents him as a failure, as Biff puts it, "a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them!" (217). The problem is not that he fell short in relation to the everyday demands of his life but that he did not rise above the rest, so the most crushing indictment Biff can offer his father is, "I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you" (217). Willy stayed in the game, gutsy and determined, but because he wasn't the star player, he deems his life a loss.

The Lomans measure success partly in terms of dollars. Biff is disappointed that at the age of thirty-four, he is "playing around with horses,

twenty-eight dollars a week," and he tells Willy that he's never been able to earn more than a dollar an hour (139).<sup>8</sup> Willy negotiates with Howard in hopes of securing a place in their New York store, first offering to work for \$65 a week but soon reducing his proposal to \$40, although he scorns Happy's weekly \$70 as inadequate. The Lomans set their sights high; on the day of the football championship, Willy dreams that Biff might earn as much as Red Grange's \$25,000 a year, and Happy envies the restless merchandise manager for his \$52,000 salary.<sup>9</sup> Even so, Biff tells Happy, "the trouble is we weren't brought up to grub for money. I don't know how to do it" (140). Money is the evidence of success, but the Loman boys don't want to struggle for it, feeling that it should simply flow in their direction. Yet money, by itself, isn't enough; what they desire most is the respect and unabated admiration of others.

Willy sees limitless advantage in making an impression on others because "personality always wins the day," and he tells the boys, "That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises."<sup>10</sup> Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want" (169, 146). He's observed "a thousand times" how doors open to successful men, but he has convinced himself that they enjoy such access not because of accomplishments but because of sheer magnetism and presence (184). As Thomas E. Porter has argued, Willy embraces Horatio Alger's belief that those in power will require good character; that is, a man who is earnest, enterprising, and industrious will receive his due reward.<sup>11</sup> Biff and Happy absorb Willy's model of the successful man, a hardworking, self-reliant fellow with spirit and initiative who takes advantage of opportunities, a leader, athletically impressive and good with both his hands and a set of tools, and above all, not only liked but well liked. Willy measures Biff's potential in terms of his charisma, not only that others liked him, but that he once exercised power over the teenagers who followed him around in school, whose faces lit up when he smiled at them, and who waited in the cellar for their hero's orders. The Salesman assures his son that Oliver would remember him because "you impressed him in those days," and he tells Ben that when Biff "walks into a business office his name will sound out like a bell and all the doors will open to him!" (199, 184). Willy absolutely believes that "it's not what you do, Ben. It's who you know and the smile on your face! It's contacts, Ben, contacts! [. . .] a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked" (184). Biff needs neither skill nor education; he requires only that

those who hold the keys will recognize his destiny and lift him up to his preordained position. Willy values not substance but relationships, and especially the dynamic of power that shapes personal interaction.

Willy mistakes a certain evidence of success for its cause. He remembers how Biff's young friends admired him, but he forgets that Biff had earned that regard through actual achievements on the high school football field. Even Happy realizes that he can't walk in the door in the manner of the merchandise manager until he's risen to his position in the company. Willy admires Ben's astonishing preeminence, and he begs him to explain how he did it, but all his brother will disclose, vaguely and cryptically, is "when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. [. . .] And by God I was rich" (157). He displays the result without revealing the process, further alienating his hapless younger brother from the select circles. He offers just one enigmatic fragment of advice regarding Alaska, recommending, "Screw on your fists and you can fight for a fortune up there"; that is, you can thrive through guts and determination (183).

In a moment of rare honesty and vulnerability, Willy asks Bernard, "what's the secret?" (188). Willy has always believed that there is a secret, a key to unlock the golden door, a smile, a look, a handshake, or a piece of sheer luck. Since Miller tells the story from Willy's point of view, we don't see Bernard's probable career path from college to the Supreme Court: dedicated studies toward good grades and high regard in law school, service as a clerk for an eminent judge, and an associate position in a prominent law firm, possibly leading to partnership. We suppose that Bernard worked his way up, enduring the mundane in order to set up his achievements, and demonstrated both his skill and his value to those who might trust and reward him, but Willy can imagine none of this, seeing only the tennis rackets and realizing that Bernard has somehow walked through the doorway that Biff can't, inexplicably, locate.

Willy has, in a sense, personalized the notion of American exceptionalism, the idea that Americans are chosen for a special destiny and that American culture is uniquely virtuous and even morally superior. He insists that he and his sons are special, so special benefit and opportunity will be theirs. He clings tenaciously to his conviction that "I am known!" and he assures his sons that "they know me up and down New England. [. . .] I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own" (213, 145). He deserves this treatment merely because, as he declares to Biff, "I am Willy Loman" (217). In



Willy's mind, there is no need for an American to earn his unique privilege; it is his birthright.

The men occasionally bring themselves to face the possibility that someone else might win the game and that they will, consequently, lose and fail, and Biff confronts the truths that Willy and Happy will not acknowledge. When he finds his father in the hotel room with The Woman, he loses faith in both the man—deciding that he is *not* one who could sway his mathematics teacher—and his credo. Everything Willy has taught him is wrong; none of the beliefs and strategies will actually help him win the game. Bernard advises Willy to walk away, but that is the one thing that Willy cannot ever do, to give up, to stop trying, to stop believing that he can win and come out ahead of the rest. Biff, who has faced the possibility that he is not the man his father imagined, remembers his years trying to work his way up beyond entry-level positions as “a measly manner of existence,” and he decries the imperative “always to have to get ahead of the next fella” (138). His growing awareness of the realities before him leads to what his father can't help regarding as heresy.

### *The Politics of Failure*

Willy spends his life fighting off the terrifying possibility that he has failed and that he alone is responsible; he bears the liberal burden. It never occurs to him that he has, instead, been defeated and beaten down, that his denial and disappointment are less his fault and more the consequence of how the stronger and their system have treated him. He believes, heart and soul, that his life is his own, that he is master of his destiny, and that his initiative and effort provide the means to his success. Yet he is involved in a power play, embroiled in a system he cannot see, and nothing he can do will alter his place in it.

*Death of a Salesman* is somewhat susceptible to a Marxist analysis.<sup>12</sup> The Lomans live in a society that defines both social and personal worth in terms of the individual's ability to sell a product or turn a profit. As Willy perceives it, the class structure consists of a hierarchy of owners, managers, buyers, assistants, and traveling salesmen, with each level exploiting the one below. The assistants are the gatekeepers, the buyers are the targets for the salesmen's pitches, the managers make the key decisions, and Ben is the paradigm of the owner, the visionary who scorns rules and moves in the world he dominates with more freedom than anyone else. The system assigns status and power according to financial suc-

cess, so wealth becomes both the evidence and the reward of achievement, and the lowest position in the structure goes to the common laborer like Biff, who wanders and works for cheap wages, more vulnerable than anyone else to easy replacement. Willy's position condemns him always to need something from someone with more power than he has, and since he is, by Happy's surprisingly frank description, “no hot-shot selling man,” he has spent his life working at the behest of the Wagners and finally losing his salary to travel on commission alone so that the company takes no financial risk while enjoying the full benefits of his labor (169). As a typical member of a subordinate class, he lives and works according to the ideology of the dominant class that exploits him. This set of beliefs and perceptions places value on reliably productive workers, entrepreneurial daring, high profits, and a consumerist economy, allocating American-style freedom, individuality, and autonomy not to all but in portions according to each man's success and place in the system. Leftist cultural critic Raymond Williams argues that “class conflict is inevitable within the capitalist social order: there is an absolute and impassable conflict of interests around which the whole social order is built and which it necessarily in one form or another reproduces” (*Politics* 135). Yet in Miller's play, the Lomans, as the exemplars of the subordinate class, show little awareness of the class struggle, for no one—until Biff's weary capitulation, late in the play—calls into question the prevailing values. The Lomans strive to understand “their real conditions of existence,” to borrow a key phrase from Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, but their vision is blurred by representations that they cannot fathom (162). As a Gramscian analysis might argue, the dominant class has supported its interests and ensured its survival by shaping the perceptions and values of the subordinate class—here, the Lomans—so that they sustain and protect the status quo. Willy lives according to a gospel that he perceives and promotes as received truth, and he labors to uphold a system that callously leads to his destruction with little more dignity than the discarded orange peel whose implications so disturb him. From a Marxist perspective, the play indicts the capitalist system that finally drives Willy to end his life.

Yet *Death of a Salesman* has inspired no significant outcry against free enterprise, the aggressive search for profits, entrepreneurial ambition, the use of salesmen to persuade the reluctant to buy products they may or may not need, the commission system, and the lack of a meaningful support structure for aging workers. On the contrary, the play affirms

the economics of the postwar United States and encourages sympathy without a consequent revolutionary urge. We feel sorry for Willy and we empathize with his suffering, but his defeat confirms the Darwinian principles of the American system of business and leaves the class structure intact. Miller's 1949 audience could mourn Willy's fall but walk out of the Morosco and continue to participate in the system that crushed him, perhaps taking advantage of postwar prosperity, just as Miller and producer Kermit Bloomgarden could continue to market their production and enjoy its profits.

The play takes no activist position in that it does not identify problems and present a program for remedy or change, and the struggle lacks the enemies that Miller acknowledges when he ruminates over "the sin of power." We meet Ben and Howard, and the specter of Bill Oliver haunts the Lomans' fantasies, but these are not villains but rather participants (albeit successful ones) in the very system that entangles Willy. We might as well condemn the memory of Dave Singleman as blame Howard. Miller sets up a political situation in personal terms, both for us and for Willy. It's no surprise that the Lomans can't see the social machinery that grinds them down, but in an activist play, we, out in the audience, would expect to enjoy a more informed vantage. The action encourages us to accept the Lomans' narrow view that in their desperation, they have nowhere to turn but to each other.

If there are no enemies, then there are, it would seem, no culprits. Willy's life destroys him, yet he meant no harm. He is an innocent man, a naïf who never understood the world around him. He betrays his sons and his wife, but so does he betray himself. To his last day, Willy is certain that he is showing his boys the path toward success and happiness, the way of the legendary Singleman and the phantasmic Ben, the yellow brick road to acres of diamonds. Like any true believer, he tries to live by what he thinks he knows, and he passes his vision to his sons. Could he have done otherwise? Charley warns Biff, "Nobody dast blame this man" (221). Then who is to blame? In *All My Sons*, *The Crucible*, and *A View from the Bridge*, Miller traces the sources of calamity, finding its headwaters in moments of conscious wrongdoing. Yet Willy is no sinner, unless bewilderment is a sin. He plays out his frustrations with Charley, Biff, and Howard, but the source of his desperation is the world that has made him what he is and then denied him the success he's been taught to desire. Much of Willy's pathos and calamity derives from his inability to see where he stands. He is punished, but he has committed no crime. He

tries his best to live by the code he embraces so fully, and his reward is exhaustion and crushing disappointment.

Miller further veils the play's political potential by choosing not to give the action reference to its historical period and so engage specific social issues. As June Schlueter has demonstrated, the playwright respects historical accuracy only with regard to matters of incidental color like Gene Tunney's boxing championship, the vintage of the family Chevy, and the nomination of Al Smith ("Re-membering" 152-53). The Lomans have resided in their Brooklyn home since the mid-1920s, but they seem to have lived in isolation from the major events of the 1930s and 1940s that shaped many American families. Biff's failure to kick off a career apparently has nothing to do with the Great Depression, even though he finished high school in 1932, just as unemployment was approaching its peak, and Willy never suggests that his sales record suffered during those hard times; only now, during the postwar boom, does he struggle. During the war years, both Biff and Happy were healthy, single men in their twenties whose peers surely enlisted in the army or the navy, but although Happy mentions in passing that he went overseas, the only evident residue of his military service is the lobster recipe that Stanley still keeps tacked up in the kitchen. The Lomans appear to live without connection to the operations of history.<sup>13</sup>

Miller's ahistorical approach might constitute a response to the jeopardies of the early Cold War, a suspicious, uneasy time when raising certain matters of concern too specifically could invite calumny. *Death of a Salesman* opened less than two years after the scandal of the Hollywood Ten, just a year before Joseph McCarthy accused the State Department of employing 205 known Communists, and only two months after Alger Hiss was indicted for perjury.<sup>14</sup> When Columbia Pictures was preparing to release Stanley Kramer and László Benedek's 1951 film of *Death of a Salesman*, they made a special request that the playwright later explained:

I was first asked by Columbia's publicity department to issue an anti-Communist statement to appease the American Legion, which warned that my failure to take an ad in *Variety* castigating the Reds, a ritual of the period, would bring on a picketing campaign against the film nationwide. (*Timebends* 315)

Columbia's position was that to remain silent was to support the dreaded Communists, and only speaking out, even if merely to parrot

the conventional rhetoric, would confirm one's patriotic credentials. From another angle, some were troubled by the implications of even the abstract, generic portrayal of Willy's plight. Miller has described his reaction to Columbia Pictures' plan to screen a twenty-five minute probusiness short before every showing of the feature film:

This small masterpiece [. . .] consisted mainly of interviews with professors who blithely explained that Willy Loman was entirely atypical, a throwback to the past when salesmen did indeed have some hard problems. But nowadays selling was a fine profession with limitless spiritual compensations as well as financial ones. In fact, they all sounded like Willy Loman with a diploma, fat with their success, to which had been added, of course, Columbia Pictures' no doubt generous pourboire for participating in this admirable essay of elucidation. [. . .]

Sitting there with these well-paid men, I was caught in a barrage of contradictory sensations, but over everything hung an inexpressible horror at the charade it all represented. The unseen presence in the room was the patriots' threat to kill the film commercially with a yahoo campaign against me. [. . .] I muttered something about suing the company for destroying the value of my property with this defamatory short. [. . .] at bottom I was being asked to concur that *Death of a Salesman* was morally meaningless, a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing. And to that it was easy to say no. (*Timebends* 315-16)

The episode is telling, for it reveals various perspectives on the impact of the play. Miller seeks to protect the commercial value of his creation and the benefit he anticipates it will bring him, while the film executives and their academic colleagues seem concerned that the portrayal of Willy will somehow threaten Americans' confidence in how the little man can participate in the free enterprise system and thrive, for those in control need a reliable supply of Willy Lomans who will keep the economy moving. All agreed that the film, as well as its source play, had the potential to connect in a meaningful way with the real world.

Perhaps *Death of a Salesman* did not tell the story that the owners expected or desired to hear. Consider an alternative angle on the larger action of the play, told as a newsreel of events in New York City. As the nation settles in after World War II, various citizens achieve success: Bill Oliver makes bigger and more lucrative deals, increasing his holdings, influence, and staff; Howard Wagner reorganizes the sales company he recently inherited from his father, expanding even while he increases his

company's efficiency; and a young attorney, the son of a small but solid businessman in Brooklyn, so impresses his firm's senior partners with his acumen and eloquence that they assign him to argue a case before the United States Supreme Court. In the meantime, an aging traveling salesman loses control of his car, and his sons, an itinerant petty thief and a promiscuous clerk, return home for the very private funeral. By contrast, Miller turns away from the conventional to follow not the prominent but the obscure on whom they stand. He stages not the rise to success or even the fall from victory, but rather the hopeless history of those who never really had a chance.

And so we return to the drama of the interior and the implications of the Salesman's house. It becomes a refuge from social realities, a retreat not only for the Lomans, but for the audience and possibly for Miller as well. In the Lomans' world, the personal does not seem political, where all issues are couched in private, individual terms. This drama of the interior, built on these "private conversations," fosters a politics of interiority and suggests that larger social operations simply do not exist. All power struggles, all hierarchies, alliances, and conflicts, return responsibility always to the individual, to specific relationships, and to the family. Nothing is systemic, all is personal, and the play affirms the centrality of the liberal humanist subject.

Yet that positioning brings no benefit; it guides a cultural vision but simultaneously deceives. The individual surely provides the structural spine and guiding rationale of the play, but he fares poorly. Willy drives to his pointless death. Biff returns to the shame of a dollar an hour. Hap insists on his father's failed vision. They learn little. Power resides in the world beyond, but the Lomans are spiritually trapped in the Salesman's house. As long as they see only self and family, they live on the margins and cannot partake of the potential they imagine. Their perceptions exclude them.

They search for the truth of their condition, but they are as fundamentally alienated from such an understanding as the house is from the surrounding, encroaching apartment buildings. Willy has lived by a list of worn aphorisms that he offers to his sons like a drummer's chapbook on how to win friends and influence people. Their faith in what they don't recognize as illusion blocks them from laying their hands on something substantial. Only Linda has found some measure of truth because only she remains within the Salesman's house and accepts it as her given territory. The men return with stories and hopes and failures; she deals with

the practical realities of what is, what is not, what can be done, and what cannot be done—what people say, and what they cannot say. She knows that there is a coil of rubber tubing just as she knows that she can't insult Willy by taking it away. She has accepted the boundaries of the Salesman's house, the same frontiers that the men deny and resist. Only she proceeds from a reliable foundation, but it leads her to a puzzled challenge to the men's fundamental aspiration: "Why must everyone conquer the world?" (183).

Jo Mielziner designed the Salesman's house with transparent walls. He understood that the home only seemed to offer a haven, that the lives of the Lomans were determined by the world beyond, no matter how often they turned their steps back to Brooklyn.<sup>15</sup> The family gathers in the Salesman's house because, ultimately, they have nowhere else to go, but their home becomes a crucible where their anguished confrontations sear them. Willy drives joyfully but blindly to his death, the boys continue unchanged, and Linda claims a freedom that we can only regard as obscure.

## *The Personal as Political*

Miller turns, again and again, to the conflict between the individual and authority. The lone citizen confronts those who present themselves as the masters of his community, and he finds that they have come not to support him but to impose injustice upon him. The question he must resolve, then, is how to respond. Should he speak out? Should he reveal this injustice to others? Should he take action against it? To what extent should he place himself at risk? And on what is his conception of himself founded? Through his exploration of the options and possibilities, Miller develops a political critique of the practice of government as a means of asserting power and of serving the people. In *The Crucible*, John Proctor denounces the oppressive regime that asks him to endorse hypocrisy and compromise, and he rejects submission in favor of self-sacrifice as the only available choice to preserve his integrity and sense of who he is. In *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, written more than two decades later, a small group of writers explores the alternative of negotiation and struggles to coexist with repression and threat.

### *The Crucible*

From its very first moments, *The Crucible* presents a war, a contest over who shall hold and wield social power. Miller stages neither the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692 nor the anti-Communist hearings of the early 1950s, but rather a simulation of the first to address the issues of the second, offering a dramatically sensational revision of the past as a metaphor for the inflammatory contention of his own present.<sup>1</sup> As a simulacrum, his Salem displaces both referents; by suggesting an accurate representation of seventeenth-century Massachusetts, the staging eclipses history and compromises its accurate understanding, and by subtly urging the correlations between the two proceedings as well as their social circumstances, Miller suggests that the hearings by the