

AN ANALYTICAL INTERPRETATION OF ARTHUR MILLER'S
DEATH OF A SALESMAN

by

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The analysis of "Death of A Salesman" is an attempt to describe the the linguistic features of the play written by Arthur Miller in 1949. In portraying characters and creating incidents the author formulates linguistic structures which constitute the units of his style. He presents ideas and feelings by the use of syntactic patterns. These formal units, as well as his choice of lexical items and their organization into lexical sets convey the dramatic theme. Hence, a stylistic description would provide an evaluation of the fusion of form and content. The author's choice of one construction as opposed to other available forms is based on many reasons. One of them is the dramatist's desire to affect the audience. Another is that, for setting specific relationships, he constructs carefully organized dialogues and focuses the emphasis on the main theme. Moreover, Miller's style in the play "Death of a Salesman" is characterized by a degree of concentration of relevant information which is proportional to that formal structure. Furthermore, the emotional situation of the speaker is conveyed by means of units of both syntactic patterns and semantic concepts. The elements of the dialogues and sentences are always

integrated in realistic environments for specific dramatic purposes. When a speaker tries to gain the participation of the audience in reaching a certain conclusion, he uses the syntactic technique of combining interrogatives, exclamations and declaratives in his speech. This formal structure is used by Miller in the speeches of the three main characters: Willy, Linda and Biff whenever they attempt to elicit understanding.

The linguistic units, which are used to convey the situation of the Loman family, have focus purposes. They imply emotional colouring and personal attitudes. The construction of the play constitutes a sort of network whose constituents belong to the structural levels of phonetics, syntax, lexis and semantics. The speech segments function on these levels simultaneously. The stylistic analysis concentrates on the specific-generic functions of the linguistic devices. A purposeful dialogue may be, at the same time, an identifiable structural entity presented by types of sentence patterns. The analytical devices depict the part-whole relations.

The dramatic form of the play conveys the pathetic situation by stressing the oppression of society on the

sensitive individual.

The semantic content is the impact of language units on the audience's perception. It refers to all that the listener understands from the dialogue. Form, which is the physical constituents of the context, denotes not only the words but also their sequential arrangement. Hence, the formal structure refers to the occurrence of the linguistic components. The suggestive features of the dramatic writing create opportunities for varying interpretations. This analysis is illustrated by excerpts from the play in an attempt to distinguish the denotations and the connotations of the structural units. It is based on the fact that the literal meaning is affected by the suggestive elements of the context. In "Death of a Salesman" the social and mental situations are created by sets of details. The logical processes which relate the main incidents constitute relevant factors of both form and content. The analysis and the dissection of the technique are concluded by an evaluation of the perceived intellectual structure.

Arthur Miller's style in "Death of a Salesman" is characterized by various features. His presentation of an external situation is used to suggest an inner

attitude. The introductory dialogue between Willy and Linda denotes the present inadequacy of Willy's abilities to deal with the particulars of his situation. When Linda asks him

Don't you feel well?¹ Willy's answer is I'm tired to death. (The flute has faded away. He sits on the bed side beside her, a little numb). I couldn't make it, Linda. 2

The word "death" is introduced in the first scene. It is carefully chosen to relate Willy to the idea of death. His tragic death constitutes the main part of the semantic structure. The flute is another formal item used to set a close relation between the lexical and the semantic structures. It accompanies the expression of Willy's agonies. It is heard as he returns home from his unsuccessful trip, during his mental struggle to comprehend his present situation and, finally, after his suicidal death. The flute relates Willy's late father and his dead brother Ben to his present desperate situation. A comparison is made by Ben as he describes their father's skill in making flutes

1. Miller, Arthur. 1949. Death of a Salesman. 1977 Reprint. England: Penguin Books . p. 13.

And we'd stop in towns and sell the flutes that he'd made on the way. Great inventor, Father. With one gadget he made more in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime. 3

The dialogues are mainly formed by simple sentences which are either declarative, interrogative or exclamatory. The compound sentences, composed of two or more than two clauses, are frequently related to the expression of an idea or a concept which is used to form images of mental activities. Thus they are used to convey the exploration of the inner feelings of the characters. Willy expresses his point of view concerning the present situation of his fatherhood by

In the beginning, when he was young, I thought, well, a young man, it's good for him to tramp around, take a lot of different jobs. But it's more than ten years now and he has yet to make thirty-five dollars a week! 4

Because the speaker's inner characteristics are discovered through his external behaviour, the continuation of the process of understanding him is given in a multiplicity of form. Syntactic structures which are composed of three different and successive types of sentences constitute a recurrent feature of the style. As Willy

2. Ibid., p. 13.

3. Ibid., p. 49.

4. Ibid., pp. 15-16

tries to portray and understand a disappointing situation. He makes use of the interrogative, exclamatory and declarative sentences.

Willy: Loaded with it. Loaded! What is he stealing? He's giving it back, isn't he? Why is he stealing? What did I tell him? I never in my life told him anything but decent things. 5

Willy's attempts to persuade himself and others constitute an important semantic element of the play. He expresses his troubled personal feelings with his point of view of the present family situations. His speeches describe his impressions concerning his deteriorating mental as well as social conditions. The code of sacrifice which he pursues requires the differentiation between Biff's unhappy present and his potentials for the future. The words Willy uses to display his son's attitudes are colloquial and conversational. To portray the world of success, he prefers the descriptive and metaphorical style. The lexical items which he chooses connect his concept of success with his struggle to prove himself as a useful and successful person. The tragedy begins with his efforts to reach the state where he is not merely the passive object of forces beyond his control. Willy exclaims

What's the mystery? The man knew that he wanted and went out and got it! Walked into a jungle, and comes out, the age of twenty-one, and he's rich! The world is an oyster, but you don't crack it open on a mattress! 6

The relationship between the grammatical patterns and the semantic content, in Willy's speech, reflects his consciousness. In the quotation above he describes past actions by two tenses. "Walked" is past but "comes" is present. To him Ben's coming as a rich man is still living even after so many years. The linguistic structure of the play denotes the concept that the problems of Willy's life are genuine. They are tragic and at the same time they can never be fully resolved. The semantic component exists in its verbal construction. In a dialogue between Willy and Charley he explains his painful situation "I got nothin' to give him, Charley, I'm clean, I'm clean."⁷ And when his friend Charley tells him "He won't starve. None a them starve. Forget about him", Willy asks eagerly "Then what have I got to remember?"⁹ The repetition of the syntactic structure of the clause "I'm clean" shows how deep his feelings are. The word "clean" may denote two concepts. It conveys Willy's intention to describe his poverty.

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5. Ibid., p. 41
 6. Ibid., p. 41
 7. Ibid., p. 43.
 8. Ibid., p. 43.
 9. Ibid., p. 43.

Meanwhile, the connotation of the word may be referring to his feelings that he is not responsible for the failure of Biff.

The Lexical and semantic components are carefully organized in the dramatic structure. The first scene contains the idea of death as it describes the situation of Willy's family life. He is introduced as he is entering his home with two sample bags. The verb phrases, which he uses to describe his actions, reveal his state and his personality. They are mainly verbs of motion and perception composed of the auxiliary and a negator: couldn't make, couldn't drive, don't remember and can't seem to keep.

The noun phrases which are used to introduce his world relate vital items of his world, such as the door, the two large sample cases sixty years old, the car, the doorway, the house, his exhaustion, the door to the kitchen and his burden.

Willy first appears worried and upset. When his wife asks him about his condition, he says "I am tired to death"¹⁰. This is given as a trivial conversation but it is a semantic lead to his eventual death. The metaphor is used to convey the first signal of Willy's

discontent.

The context presents Willy's feelings of exhaustion, oppression and discontent as they come to impress his consciousness. These emotions are filling his mind with a vague awareness of his responsibility towards his self. No defined cause is given although the dialogue creates a sense of despair. The human situations are created by successive units of the conversation. Repetitions of syntactic patterns and personal pronouns convey the vagueness of his inner feelings. Willy uses the negative form in the description of his mental state

No, it's me. Suddenly I realize I'm goin' sixty miles an hour and I don't remember the last two minutes. I'm - I can't seem to - keep my mind

As he tries to specify his present condition, his ideas are expressed in a form which is a verbal groping. The linguistic structure embodies his tentative perception of the events that are to fill his consciousness. His wife Linda tries to advise him, but her words are like a forecast to the structure

Well you'll just have to take a rest, Willy, you can't continue this way. 12

The words and the semantic structure of Linda's speeches give

the ideas which denote important reasons for what is wrong with Willy. She points to the fact that he is suffering from continuous worries about the family's situation. She stresses the fact that his "mind is overactive"¹³. Linda continues to point out that in human life it is always true that "the mind is what counts"¹⁴. The word, overactive, and the clause, what counts, illustrate Miller's choice of lexical items to convey relevant and abstract situations.

Willy tries hard to consider his deteriorated condition as temporary but his assertion is weakened as he speaks

I'll start out in the morning. Maybe I'll feel better in the evening. The golden-aron supports are killing me. 15

Choice of words prepares the way for the idea of his death as a result of a wilful action.

The context explores the domain of Willy's consciousness where the subjective feelings can be evident.

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10. Ibid., p.13
 11. Ibid., p.13
 12. Ibid., p.13
 13. Ibid., p.13
 14. Ibid., p.13
 15. Ibid., p.13

The short declarative sentences are used to set the mood of the characters with clarity and precision. At the semantic level explanations of a character's feelings, behaviour and actions are given gradually by carefully organized details. Willy is introduced in the uncomfortable mood of inability and frustration. When the causes for his mood are explained, his behaviour is understood as relatively normal. The illusory idea of his death becomes a reality at the end. His visions of his experiences are the protagonists behind his death. The dialogues' structure mark's the progress of his visionary ideas. The dialogues between Willy and his dead brother Ben, and at the same time, between Willy and his friend Charley are carefully constructed to reveal the interfection of the present and the past in Willy's consciousness.

Willy hears Ben who is asking about their late mother. When Willy answers his brother Charley hears him and begins to ask questions. Willy makes a movement to enforce his consciousness of the present situation. But this lasts for only a moment. Then he answers his late brother aloud again as he continues his argument with Charley.

Ben: Is Mother living with you?
Willy: NO, she died a long time ago
Charley: Who?
Ben: That's too bad. Fine specimen of a lady, Mother.
Willy to Charley: Hah?
Ben: I'd hoped to see the old girl.
Charley: Who died?
Ben: Heard anything from Father, have you?
Willy, unnerved: What do you mean, who died?
Charley taking a pot: What're you talkin' about?
Ben, looking at his watch: William, it's half-past eight!
Willy, as though to dispel his confusion he angrily stops
Charley's hand: That's my build!
Charley: I put the ace -
Willy: If you don't know how to play the game I'm not
gonna throw my money away on you!
Charley, rising: It was my ace, for God's sake!
Willy: I'm through, I'm through,
Ben: When did Mother die?
Willy: Long ago. Since the beginning you never knew how
to play cards. 16

The context portrays Willy as being gradually overcome by his emotional involvement in both his past experience and his expected future failure. The nature of presentation sets for Willy a clear mental presence as he defies the social oppression and personal despair. Linda's successive questions are used to invoke understanding for his situation

And what goes through a man's mind, driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent? Why shouldn't he talk to himself? Why? 17

Biff tries to describe his personal idea of his father to a friend. His concept is conveyed by formal units which are a mixture of complete and incomplete sentence structures

16. Ibid., p.46

17. Ibid., p.57

Miss Forsythe, you've just seen a prince walk by. A fine, troubled prince. A hard-working, unappreciated prince. A pal, you understand? A good companion. Always for his boys. 18

The quoted speech is composed of a sentence, noun phrases a question and fragments of a sentence.

The semantic structure of the play establishes the contradictions in Willy's life. He is repeatedly baffled by his own concepts and emotions. He moves between self-knowledge and self-deception. The syntactic structures of the sentences are characterized by the presence of negative forms, repetitions, interrogatives and exclamations.

Willy, with pity and resolve: I'll see him in the morning; I'll have a nice talk with him, I'll get him a job selling.
He could be big in no time. My God! Remember how they used to follow him around in high school? When he smiled at one of them their faces lit up. When he walked down the street ... (He loses himself in reminiscences). 19

The quoted passage illustrates one of the play's recurrent sentence structures. Willy's name or the personal pronoun referring to him constitutes the syntactic subject. At the same time he is the performer of the action and the semantic subject. The exposition of Willy's behaviour shows how he carries on a running dialogue with dead

18. Ibid., p.114

19. Ibid., p.16

persons concerning his personal experiences. His consciousness alternates between his self-assertion and self-forgetting instances. Sharing past memories with his brother, Willy remembers himself as a little boy deserted by his father in early childhood. As his recollection of the past is clarified he states the fact that his father has disillusioned him. His mind relates this past experience with his present disillusionment which is caused by both Biff's failure as well as his own. The memories of his childhood are revived. The linguistic structure of the sentences, referring to the present and the past simultaneously, show how his consciousness is unable to differentiate between them:

Willy: No, Ben! Please tell about Dad. I want my boys to hear. I want them to know the kind of stock they spring from. All I remember is a man with a big beard, and I was in Mamma's lap, sitting around a fire, and some kind of high music.

Ben: His flute. He played the flute.

Willy: Sure, the flute, that's right! 20

The syntactic patterns of the quoted sentences contain repetitions of the personal pronoun "I" four times, the clause structure "N + V + N + Inf" twice and the noun phrase "the flute" three times. Willy tries to recollect a past experience from a sort of suspense. His choice of lexical items, verbs and nouns, convey his

inner feelings. The author provides the source of an explanation of his behaviour. He has proceeded in a life which was in a way misguided. He is introduced in "Act one" as his awareness of the desperate situation of the whole family has reached the state which is causing dualities in his consciousness.

Willy's passionate response to the present situation in his home is reflected in his choice of words. He finds himself "boxed" 21 while his home is no more than "brick and windows, windows and bricks" 22. His speech contains verbs expressing hatred and violence

They should have arrested the builder for cutting down those! They massacred the neighborhood. 23

Immediately his consciousness moves to the past which has gentle images of delicate flowers. He visualizes the past by his choice of the beautiful colourful flowers and their sweet "fragrance" 24. The use of the exclamation denotes his passionate feelings for the past.

More and more I think of those days, Linda. This time of the year it was lilac and wisteria. And then the peonies would come out, and the daffodils. What fragrance in this room! 25

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21. Ibid., p.17
22. Ibid., p.17
23. Ibid., p.17
24. Ibid., p.17
25. Ibid., p.17

Willy is in a situation where he is moved by forces beyond his control. The present environment and past experiences become parallel to his feelings of present disillusionment and past happiness.

Another vague experience is introduced. He begins to realize the ungovernable mixing of times that he is doing and exclaims

How isn't that peculiar! Isn't that a remarkable - 'He breaks off in amazement and fright as the flute is heard distantly'. 26

The repetition of the negative syntactic pattern conveys his perplexity.

Here again his image of the past contains a praise of his son Biff. He states the precise date of an old car and the exact number of miles on it when he sold it. The semantic component shows how accurate his memory is. Past experiences are gradually becoming more visual to his mind. The linguistic structure of the dialogue denotes the fusion of time limits during Willy's mental lapses.

26 Ibid., p.18

Willy: I am thinking of the Chevy. (Slight pause.)
 Nineteen twenty-eight ... when I had that red Chevy
 (Pause.)
 That's all I could swear I was driving that Chevy
 and ... 27

As ... the past continuous tense, which denotes how
 certain past experience is to his mind. His usage of
 the infinitive, the and that, renders the image of the
 car concrete and visual.

The discussion between him and his wife, in "Act One",
 is mainly about Biff's failure in work. The entire scene
 is characterized by his deep concern and disillusionment
 in his son's career. Willy leaves the scene after he has
 actually set a verbal image of what the whole play is to
 accomplish. The organization of the formal structure adds
 a clarifying value to the content. Willy's loss of touch
 with the present and his frequent lapses into the past
 have psychological and social effects. The dialogue
 between his two sons describes some of his abnormal actions
 He stops at a green light and then it turns red and he goes. 28
 The threat of Willy's committing suicide is signalled twice
 by the context. The first is by stating that he smashed a
 car on purpose. An eye-witness said to Linda that

he came to that bridge, and then deliberately smashed
 into the railroad, and it was only the shallowness of
 the water that saved him. 29

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27. Ibid., p.19
 28. Ibid., p.20
 29. Ibid., p.59

The second time is in the description of the "thing" which Linda found in their cellar. She interpreted the desperate situation and tries to explain it to Biff:

he put his whole life into you and you've turned your backs to him³¹

Willy seems in "Act Two" to be reaching out of his desperate situation to a saving action. He is determined to save his son Biff,

The metaphorical description of his sleep reveals his state of thoughts "I slept like a dead man"³². The voice of the past is calling Willy's consciousness to focus in time and place. He is repeatedly dealing his cards with the present environment and surroundings in a conversation. He addresses his late son

Frank, don't you remember...
She's a girl like you...
and Frank... 2.

Willy moved his home from the countryside to the city long ago. But his job as a salesman still gives him the opportunity to move about, his driving is a part of his life alone has lasted for more than thirty years.

30. Ibid., p.59
31. Ibid., p.60
32. Ibid., p.71
33. Ibid., p.82

increased his tendencies of self-exploration and feelings of responsibility. His experience of mobility constitutes an evident feature of his work. At the present time, he has a poor job of a salesman without a fixed salary. When he loses it, his solitary lapses into the past are extended as he realizes the existence of economic problems for himself and his son Biff. The structure of his sentences contains abstract noun phrases and repetitions of syntactic patterns when he speaks of Biff in one of his visionary dialogues with Ben:

And Ben! When he walks into a business office his name will sound out like a bell and all the doors will open to him! I've seen it, Ben, I've seen it a thousand times! You can't feel it with your hand like timber, but it's there! 34

Successive exclamations convey his great confidence.

Becoming actively interested in promoting his son's career, Willy decides to get him a large sum of money to ensure his success. His life insurance money is the only amount he can think of. He tells his friend Charley

Funny, y'know after all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive. 35

34. Ibid., p.86

35. Ibid., p.98

The lexical items marking his life are nouns which are related to movement: highways, trains, appointments and years. The comparison, between the effects of his life and death, is semantically marking the movement towards the moment when Willy is to commit suicide. By this act of sacrifice he is enabling Biff to live the life of a man and to enjoy his life. The presentation of the specific concepts which have been Willy's life: the feelings of responsibility and his own self. Willy is convinced that he is put in a position to live

When Biff reads the letter his intention is to
... Biff relates himself to his father
... confusion. His call for help is

... help him ... help me, help
... be ...

The syntactic pattern 'V & N' is repeated four times. The pronouns in the first two refer to his father, while suddenly the pronouns in the last two refer to himself.

The linguistic structure of the play conveys the discovery of specific psychological effects of failing to form decisions in life situations. The dialogue visualizes the situations in which Willy chose the type of life which is leading him to commit suicide.

Finally Willy decides that his death is the only way to avoid the financial oppression which is threatening his family. Psychological and social forces make him discuss his plan of committing suicide with his dead brother only:

Now look, Ben, I want you to go through the ins and outs of this thing with me. I've got nobody to talk to, Ben, and the woman has suffered, you hear me?

Ben, standing still, considering: What's the proposition?

Willy: It's twenty thousand dollars on the barrelhead. Guaranteed, gilt-edged, you understand? 37

The noun phrase he uses to refer to his death is "this thing" and to his life is "the barrelhead". The choice of nouns reflect his feelings of misery and disappointment. He describes the insurance money as "guaranteed, and gilt-edged". The verbal elements show how he is convinced of the act of committing suicide. It has duplicated in value as he begins to add the concept that his wife will also benefit from it. Thus the abstract idea becomes his only aim. Willy addresses Ben more often than before; as he is associating himself with the dead brother in an intricate structure to assert his near death. Then Ben states that they are going together on an imaginative abstract boat and reminds Willy that it's time by "The boat. We'll be late". 38

37. Ibid., p.126

38. Ibid., p.136

The pronoun "we" refers to Ben and Willy as they are to leave the house together because Willy is to die soon and join Ben in death.

The context makes it clear that while Willy is by his mental disorder and will soon be dead, he is determined to make life better for his family before death. The sound of a car crash denotes the end of his life.

An evaluation of the style relates the technical methods of form to the potentialities of the semantic content. Death of a Salesman displays significant features of modern life situations. The logical procedure is a form of a call for understanding and search for possible alternatives.

Repetitions of the same personal pronouns and the same short syntactic patterns constitute features of style. Willy exclaims:

I was right! I was right! I was right! 39

The repetition denotes how he is emotionally affected. Riff expresses his agonies by

39. Ibid., p.52

I'm like a boy. I'm not married, I'm not in business. I just - I'm like a boy. Are you content, Hap? You're a success, aren't you? Are you content? 40

The dialogue is characterized by the presence of exclamatory, interrogative, and declarative sentences. The use of two or three types of sentences in a single utterance of a person is used to denote emotional involvement in the situation. For example, Will combines a question, two exclamations, and a statement.

What are you walking away for? Don't walk away! if you can't do it, something say it to my face! Don't you walk out at me behind my back. You're walking out of the other side of your goddam face - isn't this game? 39

Wanda uses four exclamations and a question as she reproaches her son Biff:

And you! What happened to the love you had for him? You were such pals! How you used to talk to him on the phone every night! How lonely he was till he could come home to you? 40

Biff uses different types of sentences when he explains to Happy their father's intention of committing suicide:

Yeah, but he doesn't mean anything to you. You could help him. I can't! Don't you understand what I'm talking about? He's going to kill himself, don't you know that? 41

40. Ibid., p.23
41. Ibid., p.90
42. Ibid., p.57
43. Ibid., p.115

The lexical items are carefully chosen to convey contemporary thought by themselves and their formation into sentences and dialogues. To Willy the past is characterized by abstract nouns which are formed by two or three syllables:

In those days there was personality in it, Hank. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear - or personality. You see what I mean? They don't know me any more. 44

The verbs he uses are short and suggest action. They convey a concept related to death. His choice of words establishes links between the two periods of time and the features of his career.

The lexical structure of Biff's speech conveys his personal characteristics and his awareness of his situation. To Biff, working in an office would make him a "contemptuous begging job!" 45. What he really likes is found outdoors. He states clearly that he loves to be "out there" where he can find

the work and the food and the time to sit and smoke. 46

The semantic component of Death of a Salesman is a study of a specific situation in modern social environment.

44. Ibid., p. 81

45. Ibid., p.132

46. Ibid., p.132

Willy Loman and his family are suffering from social and psychological realities. The social significance of the play gives it the validation of an intellectual stimulant. The context portrays the situation of an old salesman when he is rejected by his company and sons. His disturbed psychological condition causes his destruction.

Willy's mind moves involuntarily away from the external despairing present towards an internalized better past. His behaviour exhibits psychological oppression as he tries to solve his difficult emotional problems. Willy has deep feelings of responsibility which he explains by:

A man can't go out the way he came in, Ben, a man
ought to add up to something. 47

This situation makes it very difficult for him to be completely absorbed in the external surrounding society. He tries desperately to prove to his family that his life is not a failure. In his mental lapses he forms an inevitable connection between his own death and Biff's success. He plans and performs a final action, which is committing suicide, to provide his family with a large amount of money.

47. Ibid., p.125

In the stylistic analysis of the play, the attention given to the patterns of the syntactic structure is completed by reference to their distribution in the context. The lexical items are related to the larger units of meaning. The nouns "death" and "salesman" constitute the lexical items of the title and denote the main features of the semantic component. There is a sort of a drive towards Willy's death from the beginning of the play. He refuses to accept any other job and repeatedly refers to himself as a salesman.

The structural features of the conversation form unifying elements of the play. The dialogues relate series of events and serve, at the same time, as appropriate sub-events of the plot. Arthur Miller effectively explored Willy's tragic situation. The details of his mental disturbance lead to the discovery of his personal dilemma.

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