

JUDAH BIERNAN, JAMES HART,  
AND STANLEY JOHNSON

Judah Bierman and Stanley Johnson teach in the English Department at Portland State College. James Hart is Professor of American Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, and is the author of, among other books, *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*.

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ARTHUR MILLER:  
DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Unlike the dramas by Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Lorca, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is a tragedy set in our own times, played out on our own scene, by characters who, however we regard the quality of their thought, speak in our own language and with our own peculiar accents. In one sense, therefore, we cannot claim that the play is foreign to us. For what we lose of *Oedipus* because we are not Athenians, and of *Othello* because we are not Elizabethans, and of *Blood Wedding* by not being Spaniards, that much, at least, is ours because we are Miller's American contemporaries. Even were we to reject his assumptions and deny his conclusions, we would still know the world Miller creates, because the apartment houses that cut off Willy's horizon cut off our own as well, and the three thousand miles from Brooklyn to San Francisco involve more a change of name and site than of setting.

Centering on the quality of the protagonist, most of the comment about this play has argued the question of whether Willy

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Loman has sufficient stature to be a tragic hero. There is an irony in this debate over the admission of Willy to the company of Oedipus and Othello: few commentators have recognized the significance of the play's structure, of its use of scenes that embody and, at the same time, illustrate the insubstantiality of the salesman's world of the smile and backslap; for the chosen structure indicates that Willy, though no less heroic—no less committed, that is, to his own dreams—is cast in a different mold than that used for the traditional hero. We begin, therefore, with what is most notable about the structure of the play itself, its treatment of time.

As in all tragedies, we first meet the hero a few moments before his end. But Miller's drama does not rely on the usual compressed expository report to acquaint us with the antecedent action necessary to an understanding of the hero's motives. Partly because the advance of modern psychology has made it easy for us to shift from the present to its root-experience in the past and back again, and partly because an illusion of such movement lies within the technical capacity of the modern stage, Miller has chosen actually to show us the scenes which made up the life that now dissolves before us. These he shows us as they exist in Willy's mind, that is, without any clear distinction as to the particular times at which they happened. Thus we come to witness, and not simply to know by report, the younger life of Willy Loman, who, some thirty-five years before, started his pilgrimage to the grave we now stand beside with his wife Linda, and his boys, Biff and Happy. This treatment of time, by putting emphasis on the earlier scenes, reduces the impact of the final suicide. On the other hand, it serves to raise that suicide to the level of sacrifice by linking it with Willy's early dreams.

Into his visualization of the last forty-eight hours of the hero's life, Miller introduces two other kinds of scenes: those involving guidance from Ben, and those involving the nurture of Biff. The first kind are objectifications of Willy's own insecurity, for Willy bows down to the image of Ben's success, finding in Ben's words—as in those of a Delphic oracle—both a guide for action and a

reassurance that his own ideas are right. And the second kind of scene shows us Willy bending his son's knee before the idol of success, teaching him the liturgy of the smile, and making him to believe that over the door of heaven is inscribed: "Enter here only the well-liked." These scenes (and that other visualization of the past, the episode of the Woman in Boston), give dimension to the portrait of the protagonist. Without them, the play's theme-statements would be what they are sometimes unwittingly taken to be: sentimental idealizations of a failure. With them, it becomes clear that Willy's failure stems from the quality of his aspirations, and not of his spirit.

I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. 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.

The second is the epitaph that Charlie reads over his friend, Willy Loman—salesman, sixty-three, suspected suicide:

Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue.

Now, in the first statement, Linda argues that Willy Loman, because he is a man, must have what all men must have: if his name is not to be written in the permanent records of Man, he must at least be able to hear the voices of his children. This minimal certificate of immortality he must have to keep him from oblivion. But Charlie, on the other hand, speaks of Willie as a salesman, not as a human being. There are men, he says, whose lives are built of necessity on nothing more substantial than the smile and the shine, whose satisfactions are no more enduring than dreams of bigger and still bigger orders. A man such as these cannot be blamed for his action if he chooses to die "dramatically" in a last attempt to gain for himself a more

substantial place in the memory of men. Some commentators have in effect combined the two theme-statements, asserting that what Miller intended was an indictment of the American system for ruthlessly discarding its faithful servants. For them, Willy symbolizes the failure of the American capitalist ethos, its basic destruction of the humanity of man.

Each of these interpretations—the wife's, the friend's, and the critical view that combines them—points toward the meaning of the play, but each also raises questions that it leaves unanswered. Can we, for example, accept Linda's demand that "attention be paid," knowing as we do the shallowness of Willy's past? Does not this knowledge degrade him below the level of interest? Plain souls like this salesman are of interest to their families and to God; but we need greatness to inspire us. On the other hand, if Miller's concern lay with the tragedy of a salesman in a capitalist world, why did he not show us at least a successful salesman? Willy succeeds only with his batch of cement; he is a carpenter and a planter. But as a salesman he is a failure. Can he then be a valid symbol in an indictment of the capitalist world? Is he more than a symbol of failure?

These questions emphasize the danger, particularly acute in tragedy, of confusing the poetic statement with the whole meaning of the play; life as revealed in tragedy cannot be so easily summed up in a line or two of dialogue. The keys to meaning, on the contrary, are found in the plot, in the characters, and in the conflict that engages them. The conflict Miller chose to communicate his vision is that between Willy as a salesman and Willy as a man. Such a view of the conflict explains and justifies the author's uses of the past; each of the episodes can now be seen as making the same, insistent point: Willy suffers from his attempt to live by his business ethics. He is content to govern all his relationships, including those with his family, by the same standards that prevail when he is on the road. He cannot distinguish—as we do, and as the play insists we do—between the ethics of business (a little happy cheating now and then) and the sterner ethics of life.

Willy is blind to the fundamental contradiction between his

progress as a salesman and his self-realization as a man, and his blindness is almost allegorically reflected in his children. Like Willy, Happy lives the life of the business ethic. Like his father, he fails to understand that the smile is no safe-conduct pass through the jungle. Significantly, he is incapable of fruition; he is a philanderer, and wastes himself in a succession of casual, fruitless unions. He has the smell of women on him, in a play in which men cry out to assert their masculinity. Biff, on the other hand, reflects Willy's discontent. He does not understand what troubles him: who his father is. And the episode of the Woman in Boston sets him adrift because the episode is a combined revelation of Willy's key to successful selling and his recurrent attempts to blot out his feelings of inconsequentiality. Biff comes home and is symbolically set free only when he discovers himself as a nobody.

The whole question of Willy's hidden identity is curiously like that in *Oedipus*. The key words—he does not know who he is—point the parallel almost unmistakably. But before we rank the salesman with the king, we need to check one further structural element. From Aristotle to Maxwell Anderson the point of *recognition* has been fundamental in the structure of tragedy. Biff, as we have seen, finally recognizes his situation; he reports that in his flight with the pen, he has suddenly realized the falsity of his life. He discovers his own identity, even though he identifies himself as a nobody. But where is Willy's moment of recognition, and what does it amount to? How much does Willy really see, even after that climactic scene in which Biff, tendering his love, frees both himself and his father? The question we are really asking is whether Willy Loman recognizes anything equal in quality to that which drove Oedipus to his self-mutilation and Othello to his suicide. The answer is both yes and no.

The *impact* of his recognition is of equal quality: it drives him to decisive action. What is different and debased is the quality of the action taken, the solution envisioned. Unable to rise above the commercial values that have defined and limited his life, Willy comes to suicide only as a new answer to his old problem. He is giving Biff something in return for his tendered

love; he will trade himself for the money which he still sees as the key to his son's success in life. What is debased is Willy's immature evaluation, and the equally immature response founded on it. It is the response of a man who chooses death, not because life has been made intolerable by a terrible burden of guilt, but because he believes that his death is the purchase price of a security he himself could never find.

But perhaps the best approach to Willy's place among tragic heroes is to ask of his death the same class of question that we ask of the others. Concerning the fall of Oedipus, ruler of Thebes, solver of the Sphinx's riddle, we ask, "Does this fall mean that man is driven by an insatiable desire to know (above all to know himself), but, at the same time, that this desire for self-knowledge leads ultimately to blindness and destruction?" As we witness the fall of Othello, prince of Moors, General of Venice, Governor of Cyprus, we ask, "Does this fall mean that we have in us all that seed of jealousy which, given a dark moment of despair, will germinate and flower into a passion that destroys all reason?" And of the bereavement of the Mother and the slayings of Leonardo and the Bridegroom, I are we not forced to ask, "Does this mean that the primitive hunger of the blood must always be satisfied, though it destroy the man, the family, and even the society through which it flows?" But, finally, what are we moved to ask of the death of Willy Loman? To what critical human issue does it point? Or is it merely another depressing episode, and, like his life, without significance? Who is Willy Loman that attention should be paid to him?

To answer that he is three million American salesmen—at least the equal of one Theban king or one Moorish general—is to evade the question. It is also an evasion to say that Willy is a common or Loman and hence ineligible to be the hero of a tragedy. The tragic vision is not focussed on the station or status of man, but on the motives of his soul. The stature of Othello and Oedipus and Leonardo comes not from their place but from the intensity of their living. They have had knowledge that

life is good; in them a human potential has been reached and, in the face of destruction, their manhood affirmed. It would solve our problem if we could insist that attention be paid to Willy Loman because in his living, whatever his station or work, he had lived, because in his human relations he had soared to what men are capable of. But even where he seems most successful, in the adoration given him by Biff and Happy, we know the shallowness of Willy's achievement; we know the falseness of his aspirations, and how their falsity keeps him from laying any real foundations for their future or his own.

Like Oedipus, Willy does not know who his father is or who his children are. But unlike Oedipus, who has the strength to discover the truth, as well as the strength to destroy himself, Willy has only the weakness of his ignorance. His self-destruction is not, like Othello's, an atonement and redress of balance by a figure who emerges from his torture with dearly bought wisdom; it is the despairing, ill-considered act of immaturity. If we reject Willy, it is because he is only potentially a hero. He never grows to full size, since, though he has something of the heroic spirit, he only vaguely comprehends that his life is without meaning or substance. We reject him because his life, the *unexamined* life, is not worth living. And yet, we cannot wholly reject him: the terror of Miller's vision, and the point at which it joins those of Sophocles and Shakespeare, is that it finally forces us to ask, "Have we created a society fundamentally so inimical to man that, in cutting him off from the sun and the earth, it threatens his very survival?"

<sup>1</sup> In *Blood Wedding* by Federico Garcia Lorca.