

Death of a Salesman by A. MILLER (1949)

Introduction

I Post-war American drama

2 leading playwrights: Williams and Miller

→ Tennessee Williams, the Southerner.

. A Streetcar Named Desire (1948) Kazan/Brando/Leigh
film adaptation in 1951

. Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955) Kazan/Newman/Taylor
film adaptation in 1958 by Richard Brooks

. The Glass Menagerie (1944), several film adaptations

Main themes: physical/mental handicap, characters trapped in their past, escaping into a world of illusion, the decline of the Southern aristocracy...

→ Arthur Miller, the Northerner.

. Death of a Salesman (1949) directed by Kazan
adapted for the silver screen in 1951 by Stanley Roberts,
directed by László Benedek, denounced by Miller

Another adaptation was in 1985 by Volker Schlöndorff
with Dustin Hoffman, Kate Reid, John Malkovich, Stephen Lang
Canadian actress Colonel Quaritch
in Avatar

Several other film adaptations.

. The Crucible (1953) about the witch hunt of Salem in 1692
1957 film adaptation written by J.P. Sartre with Montand +
an allegory of McCarthyism. Signoret

- A View from the Bridge (1955), revised in 1956 with two acts, directed by Peter Brook in London. A man denounced an illegal immigrant out of jealousy.
- All my Sons (1947): a man sold faulty parts to the US Air Force, causing the planes to crash. He commits suicide in order to pay for his crime. Directed by Kazan

Main Themes: politics, honour, conscience, every aspect of the American Dream.

An eminent stage-director: Elia Kazan.
 Co-founder of The Actors Studio.
 Influence on American drama and films.
 Kazan collaborated with Williams and Miller.

II Social realism in the USA

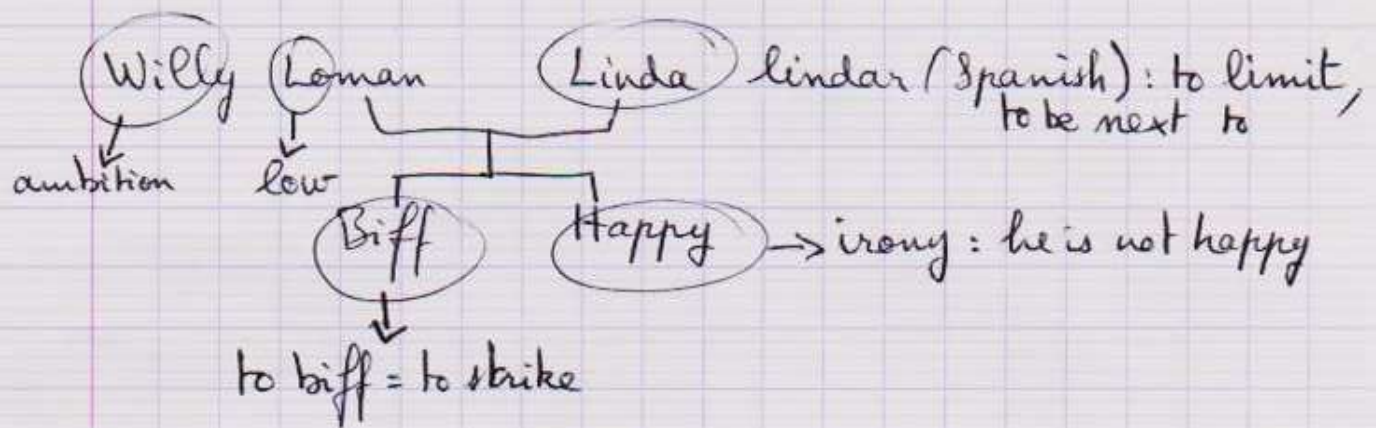
US artists in the 40s-50s divided between abstract art and realist art
 Rothko / Benton-Hopper
 (avant-garde)

Miller (and Williams) sided with realist art. They were in favour of social conscience and social transformation (radicalism)
 → Pbs with the House Un-American Activities Committee (1956)
 When Salesman was performed in 1949, European drama was into the avant-garde (Beckett, Ionesco, Camus...), the Theatre of the Absurd. Only in the 60ies was avant-garde drama introduced in the USA.

Salesman is a social realist play.

III Death of a Salesman, a modern American tragedy.

Modern Tragedy: the protagonist is not a hero,
but a man in the street, an anti-hero: W. Loman.
The tragedy is not based on the mistake of an
individual, but on a collective responsibility,
→ a political dimension.



W. Loman is a Salesman, but we don't know what he sells. He travels a lot but does not sell much. He has been downgraded by his employer, he is paid on commission only. He symbolizes the failure of the American dream.

Death of a Salesman

TEXT ONE

Willie and Linda Loman are average ordinary middle class people. They have a monotonous existence. But, after about 15 years of absence, their son Biff is back home, disrupting their routine.

① The time-frame of the story.

1910-1929: The golden age, symbolized by the Chevy. Biff and Happy were affectionate boys. The neighbourhood was green (the 2 elm trees): lilac, wisteria, daffodils ... like living in a garden.

1929-1944: The downfall, Paradise Lost.

The Chevy was Simonized and sold away.

The area was overbuilt with houses and apartments. The children went away, Biff failed his degree and disappeared. Old Wagner was replaced by Howard.

The morning of scene one: Biff came back by train and had an argument with his father. He went out with his brother in the evening.

② Willie Loman's complex mind.

WL refuses to see reality. "I'm vital in New England" but in fact he is a loser.

He is full of contradictions: "Biff is a lazy bum" "He is not lazy".

His notion of time is defective: peonies ... daffodils.

He does not like changes (PS), prefers routine.

As if routine had taken control of his life. His car accident, the day of Biff's return, was probably an unconsciously deliberate mistake.

③ The feeling of confinement, closed door effect.
"Why don't you open a window?" "They boxed us in here."
(90) → feeling of claustrophobia.

Willie is trapped in his illusions ("I'm vital in New England") and in the past (79).

He lives in an artificial jail, kept by Linda. She never contradicts him (see 86), she is always trying to soothe him by saying yes and being positive. Her protective attitude is a sort of conservatism. She never rebels, even when insulted (41).

The setting is intentionally artificial, unreal. The house looks like a doll house, a mental house. Walls are missing: confinement is a mental process.

TEXT TWO

While Willie is downstairs, speaking to himself, Biff and Happy are talking in their old bedroom.

1 Revisiting the past with irony
The 2 brothers crack jokes about their memories of women (25-33). The recollection is not idealised, there is no nostalgia.

Biff is making a crude assessment of his life after college (64-75). It is a total failure, Biff has wasted his life (78).

Happy's answer is ironical: "You're an idealist"
→ it is idealist to have the ambition to have a happy life, (everybody knows that it's impossible).

Irony is a way to survive, not to become desperate or crazy.

2 Revisiting the father-son relationship.

Happy tries to bridge the gap between Biff and Willie. Biff does not understand his father → 43

Something secret took place between them → 59-61 and resulted into a rift. Biff refuses to say it to Happy. But the father-son relationship is damaged → 13-14
"He's alright, I guess" → euphemism suggesting that Biff is still "sour" on Willie.

Happy tries to open Biff's eyes on Willie → 47-49
Willie's mind is obsessed by Biff: "most of the time he's talking to you" (52-53). Willie never stopped talking to Biff, even when Biff was away. Why? → Willie's guilt?
Is it possible to reestablish the contact, or is it too late?

3 Revisiting the American Dream

Success and happiness = making money (84-87)

But the consumer society is a sort of alienation

→ 90-94 → life is meaningless, "crazy" (96)

The 2 brothers took opposite ways:

- Biff went away, his father's life was a negative model (67-75)

- Happy stayed at home, trying to follow his father's example (88-98)

Either of them are now in a dead-end.

The American Dream has become a nightmare.

Conclusion: The scene is a talk between two mature brothers. Their visions of life, family and happiness converge in so far as they are full of bitterness and disillusion.

TEXT THREE

Willie is remembering the day when Biff and Happy polished the Chevy. His reminiscence is actually performed on stage. The spectators can see what is on his mind.

① Willie's daydreaming parenthesis.
The story-line is suspended with a sort of flash-back, or analepsis, a few years earlier. We gradually enter Willie's mind: we hear what he "hears" (line 10), and we see what he sees (17). We shift from external focalisation to internal focalisation.

Logically, the scenery is transformed. The two elm trees (re)-appear, we are in a landscape environment, with happy music. The scenery looks very artificial: it is a mental reconstruction. Even the two actors playing the boys look younger. The stage becomes a place where memory is re-enacted.

Some theatrical conventions are "twisted": the characters from the past can go through gaps in the scenery, whereas ordinary characters cannot do so. Young Biff and Happy are like ghosts, they can go through walls.

② A beautification of the past "reality".
Memory is selective, only good images filtered through. Everything looks or sounds positive:
- The car is wonderfully polished (20-22)

- Willie has a surprise for the boys, and they can't wait to see it (the punching ball).
- The boys love their father (52-55)
- The future promises to be glorious (58-62)
- Biff will go for a touchdown for his father(?).
- Willy, Biff and Happy refuse to mar the day with Bernard.

③ The tragic flaw.

In Greek tragedies or in Shakespearean tragedies, the hero suffers from excessive self confidence (hubris), like King Lear or Richard III, and consequently makes a mistake. That mistake will have a series of irresistible catastrophes, like a snow-ball which nothing can stop.

Here, Willie's flaw is to be too indulgent with Biff. First, with the football, then with Bernard, Willie never manages to set the good example to his son (return the ball and revise the exam). On the contrary, he abdicates as a father (45-47). Bernard symbolizes the voice of reason, responsibility and reality: he is discarded by Willie, who prefers his illusions.

Why is Willie so self-confident? He is a man who stayed stuck in the period before 1929, when life was easy. He believes that "to be well-liked" is enough to have success. What matters is appearances (106). He is caught in the trap of the American Dream, a dream which went bankrupt in 1929. The tragic flaw thus has a collective dimension in Miller's play.

TEXT FOUR: Ben's return

Willie is playing cards with his neighbour, but little by little he drifts into his day-dreaming again, about his brother Ben, who actually comes on stage as the neighbour withdraws.

① A Russian doll structure of story-lines -

The play gets tangled into several embedded plots.

(a) We are in 1944, Willie is in his lounge playing cards with his neighbour.

(b) Ben intrupts into the play from the past, probably before 1929: the backyard turns into a beautiful garden again. It's like a story within the story.

(c) Ben tells about his past life, their father, Alaska, Africa, etc. It's a story within the story within the story.

The play moves backward into Willie's memories and imagination.

② The alternative story-line

Ben offers an alternative story to Willie.

Instead of becoming a Salesman, he could have followed him to Alaska (line 28) and he could have had a great life (line 36). Those are things that might have happened. But the outcome of this alternative story is very unlikely.

Ben ended up in Africa, instead of Alaska, which is quite impossible. We realize that Ben's story is but a crazy assumption. There is in fact no alternative story for Willie.

③ Ben: myth or legend?

Ben symbolize the American Dream. Going into the "jungle", and getting out of it with success and wealth, that is the myth of the self-made man. He's an object of admiration and regret (line 105). But spectators realize that such a character does not exist outside Willie's mind. He emerges from the dark like a ghost, all dressed in white, shot from behind with a high angle. Film directions contribute to create a fairy-tale atmosphere in the scene (echoing voice, for example). So we finally do not know if what we see is Willie's memory, in which case Ben actually came back one day, or Willie's imagination, in which case Ben is a pure myth invented by Willie as his doppelganger.

The passage with Ben underlines Willie's failure by contrast. Ben symbolizes everything that Willie failed to achieve.

TEXT FIVE : LINDA LETS IT ALL OUT

I WL, a victim of the exploitation of man by man ^{Linda's version of the story.}

"The man is exhausted" = exploited to exhaustion

After too much travelling, he is worn out and downgraded like an underdog (15-17; 18-20).

Marxist undertones : Willie is broken down by the capitalist system. A. Miller was accused of marxism.

Willie's attempts of suicide with his car shows the connection with his job. His car is his office, his working place. He wants to die at his work-place, as a worker.

Linda ^{pities} Willie and accuses her two sons.
_{defends}

II Who is to blame?

Linda puts the blame on her two sons. ^{18... rhetorical questions.} She blames Happy for being selfish (10) and superficial (28). She accuses Biff of having abandoned his father. ⁽³²⁾ But Biff refuses to be the only one to be guilty (42). He knows something secret about his father which caused the rift between them.

Linda sides with Willie, against her sons (36). She asks Biff to choose between making the peace with Willie or going away (36): "his life is in your hands." (33)

Linda lays all the responsibility on Biff. Can one be responsible for one's father's life?

The road to
III Hell is paved with (Linda's) good intentions.

Linda's confession is like a chorus lamenting on the action, and expressing a moral point of view: Willie can be pitied but cannot be blamed (25-6). She is the moral conscience in the play. Her intention is to defend and protect Willie, the man she has chosen. But to what result?

She refuses to upset Willie, so she does not speak to him about the car accidents and the rubber pipe. Instead, she gives this responsibility to her sons: "His life is in your hands" (94). In her inability to act against Willie's truth-illusion matrix, she contributes to building that matrix. "How can I insult him that way?" Despite her good intention, she is building a jail, or a fortress around Willie, and fails as a wife and as a mother.