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Teaching Arthur Miller's

Death of a Salesman

from

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by

Rebecca Grudzina



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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Death of A Salesman*

DEATH OF A SALESMAN was written in 1949 and is often regarded as an attack on the materialistic aspect of the American Dream—the achievement of wealth and success at the expense of personal integrity. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1949, the 1949 Tony Award for Best Play, and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play—the first play ever to win these three major awards.

The original production opened on February 10, 1949 at the Morosco Theatre and ran for 742 performances. The play has been revived on Broadway three times:

- June 26, 1975 at the Circle in the Square Theatre, running for 71 performances.
- March 29, 1984 at the Broadhurst Theatre, running for 97 performances. Dustin Hoffman played Willy. In a return engagement, this production reopened on September 14, 1984 and ran for 88 performances. The production won the Tony Award for Best Reproduction.
- February 10, 1999 (fiftieth anniversary of the play's original opening) at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre, running for 274 performances. This production won Tony Awards for: Best Revival of a Play; Best Actor in Play; Best Featured Actress in a Play; Best Direction of a Play. This production was filmed.

Structure of the Play

- The play is divided into three main parts, Act One, Act Two, and the Requiem.
- Each section takes place on a different day in the “present-day” (Spring 1949).
 - Act I: night-time
 - Act II: various times the next day
 - Requiem: several days later
- Much of the family's history, and the events that have led to the current situation and family relationships are revealed through flashbacks. These flashbacks also provide a somewhat objective glimpse of the past to contrast with the family members' memories of those same events.

Marxist Approach Applied to *Death of A Salesman*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Examining Willy as the Hero of the Proletariat

1. Divide the class into small groups.
2. Have each group review the scenes below and discuss the questions that follow:
 - Act One, first flashback, beginning, “Willy: I been wondering why you polish the car...” and ending, “...what a sensation!”
 - Act One, Willy’s card game with Charley, beginning, “Charley: What’re you doin’ home?” and ending, “Charley: You ought to be ashamed of yourself!”
 - Act One, Linda’s confrontation with her sons, beginning, “Biff: He’s got no character,” and ending, “Linda: He’s dying, Biff.”
 - Requiem: Especially Biff’s speeches
 - Is Willy a failure?
 - What is his true failure?
 - What do the stories of Willy’s father, brother, and son suggest about Willy’s intended destiny?
 - Why would Miller create a character who possesses such carpentry skills?
 - When Linda says, “Attention must be paid to such a man,” what does she mean by “such a man”?
 - Later in this same scene, Willy yells at Biff, “Even your grandfather was better than a carpenter.” What does he mean by “better”?
 - What does Linda mean in the Requiem, when she says, “He only needed a little salary”? What does Charley mean when he counters, “No man only needs a little salary”?

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *Death of A Salesman*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” OR “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social moré.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Examining the Play for Clues to Miller's Values

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Arthur Miller Timeline*.
2. Have students individually, in pairs, or in small groups, study the timeline, review the following scenes, and then answer the questions below:
 - Act One, first flashback, beginning, “Willy: What do we owe?” and ending with, “Linda: ...a hundred twenty dollars by the fifteenth.”
 - Act One, closing scene, beginning with the stage direction, “Willy walks in from the entrance of the house...” and ending with the end of the scene.
 - Act Two, opening scene, beginning, “Willy: Why are we short?” and ending with, “Linda: It’s an accomplishment.”
 - Act Two, Willy’s conversation with Howard, beginning, “Howard: I’ve got to see some people, kid,” and ending, “Howard: You’ll have to excuse me, Willy.”
 - The Requiem, Linda’s final speech.
 - Reread all scenes in which Willy talks about his father and his brother.
 - What might we infer from the play about Arthur Miller’s relationships with his parents?
 - What can we infer from the play that Miller felt about his father’s business failure?
 - What might we assume is Arthur Miller’s equivalent to Biff’s longing for the Great Outdoors?
 - What can we assume was Arthur Miller’s personal opinion of the American Dream?
3. Reconvene the class and discuss the psychoanalytic implications of the play.

Formalist Approach Applied to *Death of A Salesman*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Evaluating the Use of Flashbacks as A Narrative Technique

1. Copy and distribute the handouts, *Death of a Salesman: Formalism Activity One Time Sequences* and *Death of a Salesman: Formalism Activity One Plot Event Timesheet*.
2. Divide the class into small groups and have each group examine the flashbacks that occur in Acts One and Two and complete the Time Sequences handout.
3. Next, have the students consider the action of the play with the flashbacks removed and have them complete the Plot Event handout.
4. Reconvene the class and discuss the following:
 - What is the time span of the main action of the play?
 - How much do the flashbacks add to the time span of the play?
 - In what order do the events of the main action of the play occur?
 - In what order do the events of the flashbacks occur?
 - Do the flashbacks advance the plot or merely provide exposition?
 - What correlation, if any, is there between the action and exposition of the flashbacks and the action of the main story immediately prior to the flashback?
 - In reality, how dramatically do the flashbacks disrupt or alter the chronological order of the events of the play?
 - How effective is the flashback as a technique for providing the audience with essential exposition?
 - How effective is the flashback as a technique for advancing the plot?