6 Dramatic Structure

As characters reflect each other, so do scenes and sequences, seamlessly interweaving. After Howard fires Willy from his job, the imaginary Ben offers him one, then the real Charley does. Following Willy's visit to his boss, Biff narrates his visit to a former boss – which like his father's ends disastrously. The sons' sexual encounter in the restaurant interconnects with their father's in a hotel room.

Whereas Act I begins with worry about death, dejection about a job and estrangement between Willy and Biff, it ends with hope and encouragement in all aspects. Act II starts with an exhilarated Willy holding great expectations for himself and his sons; it ends with his embrace of death. At the opening of Act I, Willy's desperation is reflected by the backyard, about which he is disconsolate since not even grass grows any more. His new optimism at the opening of Act II is reflected by his cheerful suggestion of buying a place in the country where he will raise vegetables. Early in Act I, when Willy hopes Biff will find himself, he optimistically says, 'I'll put my money on Biff' – which he does at the end of the play. Early in Act II, confident that Howard will transfer him to the New York office, Willy exclaims, 'I will never get behind a wheel the rest of my life!' – but he will, one last time.

Like Ibsen's compact prose dramas – indeed, like the well-made play against which Ibsen reacted – *Death of a Salesman* has as structural focus, a climax that revolves around a hidden secret. Although the scene in Howard's office is just as crucial to the play as the scene in Boston, the latter is its structural pivot, placed in the climactic spot, after the office scene and near the play's end, and artfully foreshadowed. Some reviewers castigate the scene as trite and simplistic; others defend it as psychologically valid. A serious criticism is Ruby Cohn's (in Martin): 'A phoney dream of success should be exploded by a scene about the phoniness of success, and not about illicit sex'. Perhaps a more fruitful line of inquiry would be to ask that since the hotel scene is clearly climactic, of what is it the climax? Because it reveals Willy's guilt and the effects of its discovery on Biff, the answer revolves around the nature of

B. F. Dukore, *Death of a Salesman and The Crucible*
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the relationship between father and son, which is the central theme. Far from being reductive, it implicates the others. Not only does Biff witness Willy's gift of the stockings promised to his mother (betrayal of the ideal of family), it makes him see the hollowness of his father's business values (the ideal of society), of which Willy held himself up as exemplar. In Willy's first memory of the past, he announces that if his sons become well liked, they will succeed – as he has, since he never needs to wait to see a buyer. In Boston, the Woman tells Willy that henceforth, thanks to her, he will not have to wait to see buyers. While Biff does not hear her, the entire experience connects to him; furthermore, Willy tells Biff three times that she is a buyer. Rejecting success in business, since it betrays his mother, he rejects his lying father and business itself. Particularly notable, the discovery of the secret is private, not public. As Brian Parker states, the play progresses towards 'the gradual admission by Willy *to himself* of his own guilt'; unlike discoveries in Ibsenite drama, Willy's guilt 'is never openly discussed between him and Biff, and Linda and Hap never learn of it at all: the sole importance is that Willy himself should recognise it' (in Corrigan, *Miller*).

A compact work, *Death of a Salesman* confines itself to the last 24 hours in its protagonist's life. Although the past continually intrudes upon the dramatic present, as in Ibsenite drama, Miller does not treat the past in terms of conventional exposition. Instead, as Willy remembers past events, his memories take place on stage. The play's time framework is complex. As Edward Murray perceives, Miller dramatises three types of time: objective time present (we see what occurs, as if in real life), subjective time past (enacted as Willy presently imagines the past) and a mixture of both. Take, for example, the four scenic units in the first part of Act I. The play begins with objective time present (Willy and Linda, Biff and Happy, Willy and Linda), continues with subjective time past (Willy imagines himself with his family in 1932), follows with objective time present (Willy, Happy, Charley), then a mixture of objective and subjective (Willy talks to Charley and his dead brother), and so forth. In the restaurant scene of Act II, Miller dazzlingly employs combinations of time in rapid sequence.

Often, critics call the scenes involving the past *flashbacks*; but flashbacks are precisely what they are not. A cinematic term, a flashback is a break in chronological sequence which dramatises an event or exchange that occurred in the past. Although one might embroider this definition to note that the break may be subjective rather than objective, the former is rarely the case (Alfred Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* and Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* are virtually unique in this respect: in flashbacks, characters lie about or distort what happened). The usual flashback convention is that the dramatisation of the past is reality.

Events in time present trigger not events in time past but Willy's present view of such events. When Howard sacks him his mind conjures Ben, who offers him a job. The first dramatised scene of the past, not a flashback but a hallucination, depicts a time when Willy apparently enjoyed what he now misses. Now, he complains of apartment houses crowding his home; then, they had not been constructed and there were trees whose branches might hit his roof. Now, he cannot get past Yonkers and he is estranged from his older son; then, he returns from New England a seeming success to boys who adore him and emulate him (after Willy calls Charley liked but not well liked, Biff says the same of Bernard). But the supposedly safe retreat is filled with hidden perils. Biff might fail math, therefore not be graduated; Biff steals; Willy's earnings are lower than he initially boasts. In a dramatically daring hallucination within the first hallucination, his infidelity haunts him as the vision and laughter of the Woman in Boston interrupt him. The hallucination farther from reality comments not only on reality but also on the hallucination closer to reality, and its dramatic technique is nonrealistic: 'Willy, Willy, are you going to get up, get up, get up, get up?'

Even Willy's most idealised view of the past, Ben, is a criticism of himself. Salesmanship, says Ben, provides nothing upon which to lay one's hands. With a single gadget, their father could earn more money in a week than a person like Willy could earn in a lifetime.

The merger of hallucination and objective reality is integral to Miller's dramatic method. As Benjamin Nelson explains, hallucination 'indicates the agonising intensity of the sales-

man's search for the meaning of his life' and 'by insolubly linking the final day of Willy's life with the years that have shaped this day, it gives his life and death a dramatic cohesiveness'.

The play ends not with the titular death but with a funeral – an ironic contrast to that of Dave Singleman. Each speaking for himself, no mourner explains what the play is about. Happy reaffirms Willy's dream. Charley talks of Willy's cheerful and confident appearance. Biff offers an alternative to his father's values. Linda speaks of her love and the irony that with the mortgage paid off, 'We're free'. The play makes us disinclined to accept either Happy's valuation or Charley's refusal to blame Willy, but it also makes us wary of accepting Biff's recognition that he and his father are ten cents per dozen as the final word for anyone but Biff himself (Willy's zest for life and full commitment may make him seem more valuable than that). While we understand more of Willy than Linda does, it is appropriate that the play's last words speak affectionately of the salesman. Despite its ambiguities, the Requiem offers an alternative to a bleak note struck amid utter incomprehension.

7 Tragedy?

From the outset, *Death of a Salesman* raised the question: Is it a tragedy? For the most part, reviewers answered affirmatively. The play has 'exaltation as well as tragic meaning' (Howard Barnes, *New York Herald Tribune*, 11 Feb. 1949). In Biff 'lies the catharsis of the play, the journey through "pity and fear" to a heightened sense of what the individual must mean to himself and to others. . . . This is not the whole answer. But it is more than Willy perceived' (John Beaufort, *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 Feb. 1949). Eric Bentley disagreed: the tragedy destroys the social drama, its catharsis reconciling or persuading us to disregard the material conditions against which the social drama protests, and the social drama destroys the tragedy, in that the subject of the little man as victim