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LANGUAGE, VERBALISM AND SYMBOLISM IN ARTHUR MILLER'S 'DEATH OF A SALESMAN'

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ABSTRACT

Miller has been one of the most outspoken American writers of the last four decades. He has held generally progressive and radical views and has variously written against racism, capitalism and Vietnam war. All these ideas are amply reflected in his plays. Death of a Salesman was Miller's play and an instant success. It was hailed as a modern classic and has put Miller among the foremost playwrights of this century. Death of a Salesman Miller is still concerned with the exploitations of the individual and the evils of a commercial society. The protagonist Willy Loman ,was a traveling salesman, and his family were the main characters in this play. The usage of Language, verbalism, Symbolism were extraordinary and unique from other styles of Drama.

VERBALISM AND SYMBOLISM IN 'DEATH OF A SALESMAN'

Metaphors and Language suitable to the Subject

Verbalism and symbolism are remarkable features of the play, *Death of a Salesman*. The style of the speech of the characters of the play reflect their style of conduct. Through their particular usage of commonplace words and idioms, the dramatis personae delineate personal qualities. Linda's little words Loman:

I don't say he's 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 human being and a

Terrible thing is happening to him..... A small man can be

Just as exhausted as a great man.

Or

He's only a little boat looking for a harbor.

Or Charley's generalization:

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 man way out

there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine.

may form a good example to show how metaphors match the subject in Miller's plays.

Speech Reflective of Characters' Class, Time and Status

The speech forms in the play mirrors a class, a generation and a way of life according to the speakers. Each character uses a different register or even a different dialect of American English. Willy's most sorrowful laments are made out of clichés: "where are you guys?", "the woods are burning". The Loman use the lower-middle class Crooklyn dialect with high-class diction. Some words specifically stand for specific character. For example, 'vengeful,' 'solidified', 'consumes', 'reconstruct' and 'prohibit' for Willy; 'feasible' and 'characteristic' for Happy; 'remiss' and 'abrupt' for Biff; 'crestfallen' and 'conquer' for Linda.

Use of Symbol

The Loman's favourite adjective is "well-liked" and their commonest and most revealing verb is "make". Both these are symbolic of the materialistic business ethic. The verb "make" occurs more than forty times in the play in its various collocations. Some of such usages are: "make mountains out of mole hills", "makin' a hit", "makin' my future", "make me laugh" and "make a train".

Similar "make money" occurs about nine times besides such idiomatic expressions as "make the grade", "make a mark" and "make it", besides some more specific usages of make like "the man who makes an appearance", "make a nice impression" and "you didn't make me, Willy I picked you." The various denotations are reducible to four general categories namely 'fabrication', 'causation', 'execution' and 'acquisition'. This has a relevance to Willy's definition of man. According to Willy, a man must acquire status and wealth, must produce tangible goods, and to fulfil the goal of a well-liked man must earn love through personal attractiveness. He says, "A man who can't handle tools is not a man" and "The man who makes an appearance is the man who gets ahead". Both these statements are contradictory. But Willy fails to realize the inherent contradiction of his own statements and feelings.

A little Loman calls life by large names. He has ambition and expectations beyond his reach. This aspect is revealed by a contradiction in his name 'low man' and his dream of 'high man'. In his own vision and dreams, his sons to him are only boys', 'kids', little children with nollypops needing his advice and care. He fails to regard them as grown up adults. Death of a Salesman, on a close examination, will be found a play with logical and linguistic contradictions. But such contradictions are deliberate and are used to sharpen the effect. Willy Loman suggests his moral immaturity through logical as well as linguistic contradictions, especially when offering advice to Biff. He warns his sons: "gee is a boy's word", and he uses this term frequently. He complains: "not finding

yourself at the age of thirth-four is a disgrace!", and "greatest thing in the world for him was to bum around," and that "Biff is a lazy bum." And after some he grumbles: "And such a hard worker. There's one thing about Biff-he's not lazy."

One time Willy advises Biff: "Walk in very serious. You are not applying for a boy's job. Money is to pass. Be quiet, fine and serious. Everybody likes a kidder, but nobody lends him money." But soon after on the occasion he tells him: "walk in with a big laugh. Don't look worried, Start off with a couple of your good stories to lighten things up. It's not what you say, it's how you say it-because personality always wins the day." Such contradiction is symbolic of Willy's inner essence which is full of contradictions and failures. Willy himself wonders: "why am I always being contradicted?"

Verbal Idiosyncrasies Reflective of Characters' Mind

Verbal idiosyncrasies of their peculiar cast of mind. For example, Willy projects his confusion symbolically he admires two individuals who epitomize values that are equally important to him but incompatible with each other. At one extreme stands Dave Singleman, recipient of a salesman's highest reward; at the other pole is Willy's elder brother Ben. Whereas Dave Singleman stands for love and affection (for it is through love what he acquires material gain from his customers), Ben stands for acquisition by force (for Ben acquired goods through force). Willy is a man being torn between the two poles of love and force, of man's own drive and initiative, cool and calculated effort on one hand, and his environment on the other hand.

Fusion of Expressionistic, Realistic and Rhetoric styles

Willy's father loved carpentry; Willy loves gardening and sports; Biff loves sporting and Nature. These are symbolic of man's basic and fundamental need as well as his self-reliance. Love of gardening, as suggested by some critics, supplies the terminology for an unconscious admission of moral impotence- "nothing is planted. I don't have a thing in the ground." Ben is symbolic of Willy's other self. The shorthand of German expressionism with Miller employs in the play reproduces the psychological immediacy of past events; the Salesman image was from the beginning absorbed with the concept that nothing in life comes next but that everything exists together and that the same time within us" (Miller).

Miller's experimentation with expressionistic, realistic and rhetorical styles has been conditioned by his over-riding desire to declare objective truths about man in society. According to Miller a playwright's goal should be to merge surface of experience with the cogent emotional life and philosophically or socially meaningful themes. That is

why Death of a salesman is a fusion of the objective, subjective and analytic truth.

Nevertheless, most of Miller's symbolic and verbal images are drawn along simple lines—a carousel that conceals hatred (Focus), a fruitful tree destroyed in its prime (All My Sons): “greenleaves” blotted out by the hard outlines of apartment buildings, a flute song displaced by childish nonsense from a wire recorder, a wife's praise crased by a whore's laughter (Death of a Salesman) a dingy warehouse harbouring hopeless inmates (A Memory of Two Mondays); a herd of mustangs moving towards extinction (The Misfits); a ruined tower that memorializes horrors committed by ‘ordinary’ men (After the Fall); feature and a broken pot guarded as if they were life itself (Incident at Vichy).

LANGUAGE OF ‘DEATH OF A SALESMAN’

Every day (conversational)

Language:

One criticism of “Salesman” is that it does not have a rich gift of language. Its hero does not use rich language but a cliché-ridden American conversational language. *Mary Mc carthy* says:

"Lear, however, has the gift of language, which is not just a

Class-endowment, for the fool has it too. This gift of language

Is what makes him human and not just, human being"

Another critic remarks:

We have had more than one extraordinary dramatist who

was a cripple as a writer, and this is lamentable but not

ruinour.

These object icons are not wholly fair. Language of man exalted or poetical tone would be inappropriate to characters like the Lomans. The dialogue is not so commonplace nor so artless as may at first appear. *Dennis Welland* observes,

“Miller could probably write the American equivalent of a Harold Pinter play—could, but would not want to because, rightly or wrongly, he could not accept the implication that this is as far as most people can go in their use of language. At the same time his standards in this play, dictated by the theme, the situations and the characters themselves, are realistic. If in All My Sons, the characteristic idiom is the unanswered question, in Death of a Salesman it is the cliché worn so smooth as to limit communication to the superficial and the

unimportant. Upto this point in his development as a dramatist Miller has become progressively less hopeful about the possibilities of communication at a deeper level, but this makes the bottom of the curve on the graph and in the succeeding plays it climbs steadily upward, until eventually he formulates his practice into a theory. In the interim, the most that Death of a Salesman justifies our asking for is a suspension of judgment, couple I with the recognition of the dialogue's general fidelity to daily usage and of the fact that the more elevated language of tragedy would not be appropriate to a play that is not a tragedy anyway.”

Realistic Dialogues:

The dialogue in Death of a Salesman gives the impression of realism; Miller has an ear for the banalities and inadequacies of every day speech. It should be noted that within effect of flat and cliché-ridden American conversation, many variations are called for, Willy himself is fairly inarticulate; indeed, his inability to put his frustrations into words is a part of his general inadequacy in dealing with his life, he lets stock phrases do his thinking for him. Such reassures himself by means of commercial maxims such as ‘personality always wins the day’, ‘Start big and you'll end big’ or assertions of conventional attitudes such as ‘A Bman walking in for fifteen thousand dollars does not say’ “Gee!” But Willy does chieve movements of evaluation, for instance when he tells of the death of Dave Singleton, the eighty four year old salesman, and in his angry demonstration with Howard. When he says, “*you can't eat the orange and through the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit!*”

Colourful Imagery:

Willy reveals at times a taste for colourful imagery, as in ‘The Woods are burning’ and Uncle Ben's words echoing in his mind, ‘*The jungle is dark but full of diamonds*’.

“Biff, after he has discovered his identity, is able to speak forcibly and in simple language which round like everyday speech, though it is of course, full of the devices of rhetoric. It is interesting moving speech, his emotion is dumb, and so is Willy's response.

“Happy and Howard need only a superficial language because they are using speech as a sort of provocative shell. Charley also is keeping emotion at arm's length, but he expresses himself with a crisp, wise-

cracking force. 'Can't we do something about the walls?' he asks. 'You sneeze in here and in my house has blow off!' He is given some lines of craggy wisdom, such as 'The jails are full off territory' and 'No man only needs a salary'.

Simplicity of Language:

"Linda is the character who most often expresses the universal aspects of the Loman predicament: 'One day you'll knock on the door and there'll be a strange people here' 'when he brought them business, when was young, there were glad to see him. But now his old friends, the old buyers that loved him so and always found some order to hand him-they're all dead retired.' All this is within the scope of naturalistic vocabulary and rhythm, and any exaltation much some from the emotion with which she speaks for the million as like herself the simplicity of sentence construction and vocabulary is a 'feature of her most memorable speech' already quoted. It is worth considering in some detail a sentence in it, 'Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.' To see how it differs from such a naraphrase as 'yo't got to pay attention finally to a guy like that,' which might be expected to mean roughly the same thing. The position by the word 'attention' in Linda's sentence gives it more emphasis, as does its repletion; the phrase 'such a person' raises the subject above the casual are the personal; the passive form of the verb makes the statement universal rather than particular; above all, the rhythm is essential. The paraphrase robs the sentence of its dignity and emotional depth. The whole speech transcends the commonplace; this is not ordinary, everyday language,"

Then we have comments from a well-known man like Harold Clurman who says:

Other playwrights may be more colourful, lyrical and rich with the fleshed nerves and substance of life, Miller holds us with a sense of his soundness. His play has an ascetic, slate-like hue, as if he were eschewing all exaggeration and extravagance. And with a sobriety that is not without humour, yet entirely free of frivolity, he issues the forth-right commandment, "thou shalt not be a damn fool!"

Language suitable to the role and rank of character

The language of every character in the play is a reflection of a class, a generation and a way of life, "The boss is goin' crazy what Linda leak he's got in the cash register" a waiter relates, "you put it in but in it don't come out." Cliches are abundant. Hap, Loman is "gonna beat this racket" and come out "number one man" in order to prove that his father "did not vain" Willy excels in his command of tasteless cant popular in the 1930's. "Well, bottoms up! And keep your pores open!" Willy says, saluting her girlfriend. His sorrowful laments are stock phrases "where are you guys, where are you?" he shouts to his sons; "the woods are burning!" when he gropes for metaphoric expression, he uses stale expressions: "because you got a greatness in you, Biff, remember that....Like young God. Hercules-something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him." All the Loman try to be eloquent by leaving their lower middle class Broklyn dialect with high class diction; they find words like 'vengeful', 'solidified', 'reconstruct' and 'prohibit' (Willy), 'feasible' and 'characteristic' (Happy), 'remiss' and 'abrupt' (Biff) 'crestfallen' and 'conquer' (Linda). In content, unhappily for the speaker, search terms after sound incongruous and somewhat vulgar judged by these mannerisms which Miller undoubtedly heard in his own social milieu, Willy Loman can be seen simply as a mediocrity native to American society. But Miller's objective, as in *All My Sons*, goes beyond linguistic realism. The author customarily underscores his character's banality with hackneyed phrases and platitudes, here he practiced that form of irony so deftly that even the vaquest generalization becomes an instrument for self-expositions.

A general criticism (which is got wholly fair) is that "Salesman does not have rich gift of language but a cliché-ridden American conversation language."

Since his theme, situations and characters are realistic, Miller makes use of a realistic, everyday language. His language is free from superficialities verbosity. Miller does not prefer elevated language of tragedies; his is a different kind of tragedy. Yet Willy has a taste for colourful imagery. Each character is made to use a language according to his status and role and class.

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