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Allegorical Representation in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore Arthur Miller's words and symbols are more and more alive with life like characters and situations. Flesh and blood characters scale the world in the play *Death of a Salesman* and the characters are caught up in completely human situations. Situations are such that can be visualized and characters win our sympathy. This play received numerous awards for its literary merit, including the Pulitzer Prize for drama and it is considered by various critics as the perfect embodiment of the contemporary American drama. The play opens with references to cars. Cars are American symbol of individual mobility, freedom, and social status. But Miller uses the positive American suggestions of this symbol in a negative and ironic manner. This past association of the car with family happiness and eager activity contrasts with the symbol of the car in the present, when its implications include mental and physical exhaustion, a means of committing suicide, and death. *Death of a Salesman* is a serious satire, brought Miller artistic success as well as international recognition. This play has been viewed by many as a caustic attack on the Americans ideas of achieving wealth and success. Miller's criticism of the American dream comes as part of his larger commentary on societal changes.

Key words: individual mobility, sympathy, American dream, human situations, exhaustion.

Allegory is a phrase which was used by Ibsen with great skill. Allegory means an object was described or a metaphor introduced which had meanings and implication beyond its apparently “realistic” functions in the action. Miller’s earlier play, *All My Sons*, also used symbols, though these are, for the most part, much cruder and narrower in their implications than the symbols employed by Ibsen.

Miller’s plays are alive with life like characters and situations. Flesh and blood characters scale the world of the play *Death of a Salesman* and the characters are caught up in completely human situations. Situations are such that can be visualized and characters win our sympathy. In an idiom used by the common man, these characters put across to us very vividly their plight and predicament. We share their joys and are stung with sorrow, in their misery and misfortune. Miller’s realism is seeped with the reality of his own observations of life. Making the study of their environment his base, Miller penetrates the layers of consciousness of his characters. In the preface to his *collected plays* Miller says:

“A writer of any worth creates out of his total perception, the vaster proportion of which is subjective and not within his intellectual control ... if it is art (that the playwright has created), it must by definition bend itself to his observation rather than to his opinions or even his hopes” (138)

However, in *Death of a Salesman*, Miller uses symbols with great subtlety and effect. They are recurrent and thus help to structure the play. In other words, by their repetition they give form to a play which has abandoned conventional formal arrangement.

Two of the symbols used in *Death of a Salesman* have specifically American connotations. The play opens with references to cars. Cars are American symbol of individual mobility, freedom, and social status. But Miller uses the positive American suggestions of this symbol in a negative and ironic manner. For Willy Loman a car offers geographical mobility but little freedom. At the beginning of the play he has come home, exhausted with driving the car. This is on the surface, a realistic statement of fact. But the implications of driving are quickly conveyed to the audience. Willy says:

Willy. “I’m tired to the death. I could not make it. I just couldn’t make it, Linda”. And again: “suddenly I realised I’m goin’ sixty miles an hour and i don’t remember the last five minutes. I’m I can’t seem to keep my mind to it”.

Linda. Adds 'But you didn't rest your mind. Your mind is over active, And the mind is what counts dear.'" (8)

Beneath the statement of fact is an implication about Will's state of mind. He has been driving himself off the road; his life has been a long competitive progression of futility and now, in his desperate tiredness, the car is going out of control and, like his life, is about to be wrecked.

Linda reveals later that this is not only an unconscious process but also a deliberate gesture toward suicide by Willy. In a repeated reference to driving, when she speaks of Biff, she gives the opinion of a woman observer about Willy's driving: "She says that he wasn't driving fast at all, and that he didn't skid. She says he came to that little bridge, and then deliberately smashed into the railing, and it was only the shallowness of the water that saved him." (46)

This repetition of the symbol prepares for the revelation to Biff that his father has been considering suicide by another method-by gassing himself. The symbol achieves its final intensity in the climax of the play when Willy drives his car out of the house into darkness and death.

In the past, the car had been a status symbol and a centre of interest absorbing the activities of the male members of the family. Biff and Happy, under their father's boyish eagerness, had cleaned and polished the car in a manner which took on the proportions of a Sunday ritual. This past association of the car with family happiness and eager activity contrasts with the symbol of the car in the present, when its implications include mental and physical exhaustion, a means of committing suicide, and death.

The second symbol, which is specifically American in its connotations, is that of the west. We may recall that Willy's father used to start journeying from Boston in the east, travel and sell his flutes through the Midwest-Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois-and then journey on onwards through all the western states. Biff has inherited this urge to wander but lacks the capacity to make money in the process. Further, the condition of western society has changed since his grand-father's day. Traditionally the American western territories suggested a freedom to explore, settle, and make money in a manner impossible in the eastern states or in Europe. But now, with the frontiers of the western states having been decided, opportunities are fewer. Miller inverts this particular dream-value in American experience.

One of the final remarks made by Biff to his father is that the west has offered him total constriction, and not expansive freedom. In Kansas City he had stolen a suit and spends three months in Jail. In this symbol a second aspect of the American Dream is shown to be deceptive and destructive.

Two other symbols are used to suggest certain processes in Willy's consciousness. The temporary optimism at the beginning of Act II is conveyed partly by references to seeds and tools. Willy imagines that he can make seeds grow in his gardens Linda, with her womanly practicality, says: "That'd be wonderful. But not enough sun gets back there. Nothing 'll grow any more" (55). But Willy later in the day purchases seeds and at night rather absurdly tries to plant them. He has stated: "I have got to get some seeds right away. Nothings planted. I don't have a thing in the ground"(58). The implication is that his life is a barren thing. Nothing has grown out of his endeavours. As he says: "A man cannot go out the way he came in, Ben, a man has got to add up to something" (67). But it is already too late and his gestures of planting in the hope of future growth are desperate and futile. Instead of growth, the slow adding up to something, there is only sterility and the subtraction of dream from reality. Instead of meaning, there is only the disconnectedness of a half comprehended despair.

Some words and phrases recur off and on when different characters speak. These words have some symbolic value. 'Liked', 'well-liked' etc. are the words Willy uses. Dave Single man, a salesman of outstanding success who even in his old age well past eighty could canvass sales orders over the phone, was Willy's ideal. He is liked, well liked, by everyone and Willy makes this type of reference in regard to his own son during his student days. He refers to his own brother Ben similarly. Negatively, when referring to Charley of whom he is slightly jealous,, Willy says that he is liked but not well-liked. In the speech of other characters also similar phrases of symbolic value can be detected.

Thus the symbol of stockings operates on the narrative plane by providing an area of mystery, the solution to which is withheld as a dramatic technique: the symbol operates also on the psychological level implying not only an adulterous relationship but also disillusionment in Biffs' mind. Willy harbours a double guilt – towards his wife and towards his son.

Finally, it is possible to treat Willy as a symbolic character Willy may be regarded as an American Everyman. Willy is much more emphatically a representative figure, then any of

Miller's other characters. This means that Willy's problems are much less personal dilemmas that they are public issues. The use of symbols in *Death of a Salesman* contributes to building up the atmosphere necessary to focus on Willy's tragedy. Together they bring out the texture of the materialistic American society, the dreams born out of that society and their destruction, the conflicts aroused by being a part of that society.

Reference

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