

AN ANALYSIS OF DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE IN DEATH OF A SALESMAN BY ARTHUR MILLER

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Abstract

Arthur Miller's Death of Salesman remains a seminal text in modern American drama, not merely for its narrative content but for its innovative use of dramatic style technique that mirror the protagonist's psychological breakdown. While the play has been widely analyzed for its themes, less attention has been given to how its structure and style cause those themes to resonate with the audience. This study hypothesizes that Miller's deliberate use of non-linear narrative (Flashback), expressionistic stage directions, and symbolic language serve as mechanisms to externalize Wily Loman's mental deterioration and critique the American Dream. This research employs a qualitative, descriptive analytical design focused on close reading. The data source is the original 1949 script of Death of a Salesman. Key technique flashback. Stage direction, tone shifts are identified and analyzed using dramatology theory (Innes, 2000; Elam, 1980) and semiotic analysis (Barthes, 1967). Finding show that 70,6% of scene transitions employ non-linear shifts, especially flashbacks, correlating directly with moments of psychological tension. Dialogue analysis reveals 137 over symbolic references of failure and illusion. Stage direction demonstrate 276 unique-mood setting. Cues that enhance emotional atmosphere were identified 82,3%.

Keywords: Dramatic style, Arthur Miller, Dramatic Technique

Abstrak

Drama Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman, tetap menjadi teks penting dalam drama Amerika modern, bukan hanya karena isi naratifnya tetapi juga karena penggunaan teknik gaya dramatis yang inovatif yang mencerminkan kehancuran psikologis protagonis. Meskipun drama ini telah banyak dianalisis karena tema-temanya, perhatian yang diberikan pada bagaimana struktur dan gayanya menyebabkan tema-tema tersebut beresonansi dengan penonton masih kurang. Studi ini berhipotesis bahwa penggunaan narasi non-linear (kilas balik), arahan panggung ekspressionis, dan bahasa simbolis yang disengaja oleh Miller berfungsi sebagai mekanisme untuk mengeksternalisasi kemerosotan mental Wily Loman dan mengkritik Impian Amerika. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain analitis deskriptif kualitatif yang berfokus pada pembacaan cermat. Sumber data adalah naskah asli Death of a Salesman tahun 1949. Teknik kunci adalah kilas balik. Arahan panggung dan pergeseran nada diidentifikasi dan dianalisis menggunakan teori dramatologi (Innes, 2000; Elam, 1980) dan analisis semiotik (Barthes, 1967). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa 70,6% transisi adegan menggunakan pergeseran non-linier, terutama kilas balik, yang berkorelasi langsung dengan momen ketegangan psikologis. Analisis dialog mengungkapkan 137 referensi simbolis tentang kegagalan dan ilusi. Pengarahan panggung menunjukkan 276 pengaturan suasana hati yang unik. Isyarat yang meningkatkan atmosfer emosional diidentifikasi sebesar 82,3%.

Kata kunci: Gaya drama, Arthur Miller, Teknik Drama

1. INTRODUCTION

In the evolution of 20th century was a renowned American playwright born in Harlem, New York City. He was known for his works critiquing the American Dream and societal values. His famous play, *Death of a Salesman* (1949), won the Pulitzer Prize and is considered one of the greatest works in American theater. Other notable works include *The Crucible* (1953), which portrays the Salem with trials as an allegory for McCarthyism, and *A View from the Bridge* (1955). In this research, author choose drama in title *Death of Salesman*. Drama is a form of literary work that presents a story through dialogue and action, intended to be performed on stage or screen. It portrays conflicts, emotions, and human experiences, often structured in acts and scenes. Drama can be categorized into various genres, such as tragedy, comedy, and historical drama, each serving to reflect societal and psychological themes. Worthen, W. B. (2003) Drama is a literary and performative genre that merges text with theatrical representation, engaging audiences through dialogue, action, and staging. In this research, author be analyzed of dramatic style technique. Dramatic style technique refers to the methods and artistic choices used in drama to enhance storytelling, character development, and audience engagement. These techniques include dialogue, symbolism, stage directions, lighting, and narrative structure, shaping the way a play is presented and interpreted. (Keir Elam, 2001) Elam explains that drama is a semiotic system in which verbal and non-verbal elements work together to create meaning. Dramatic style techniques such as symbolism, body expressions, and lighting are used to convey messages to the audience. In this theory, drama is not only seen as a written text but also as a visual and auditory experience filled with various signs that can be interpreted by viewers.

Many literary scholars have analyzed *Death of a Salesman* from the perspectives of theme, character, and sociopolitical context. However, there is still a need for a deeper exploration of the dramatic style techniques that Miller employs to shape the play's meaning and structure. Understanding these techniques is crucial to appreciating how the play conveys its emotional and psychological depth. Despite numerous studies on *Death of a Salesman*, existing research often focuses on its thematic elements rather than its stylistic construction. How Miller's dramatic techniques such as shifts in time, stage directions, and lighting enhance character development and audience engagement remains an area that requires further scholarly attention. This study aims to analyze how Miller's dramatic style techniques contribute to the overall impact of the play. By examining elements such as expressionist structure, symbolism, and flashbacks, this research will provide insights into the artistic choices that make *Death of a Salesman* a

timeless and influential theatrical masterpiece. This study hypothesizes that the dramatic style techniques used by Arthur Miller in Death of a Salesman play a crucial role in enhancing the play's emotions and themes. Expressionist techniques, symbolism, non-linear narrative, and the use of lighting and stage directions help reflect Willy Loman's mental state, highlight the contrast between reality and illusion, and reinforce the message of failure and the American Dream.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical design rooted in textual analysis. The primary object of study is Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman (1949 edition), examined during the research period from January to March 2025. Each act and scenes reviewed systematically, with particular attention given to stylistic elements that serve dramatic function. The subject of this research is a single, complete literary work: Death of a Salesman. Inclusion criteria include: 1) Original English version of the script, 2) Complete stage directions by the author, and 3) Recognized as canonical by major dramatic literature references. Ethically, this research adheres to standard practices in literary analysis, with proper citation and acknowledgment of all primary and secondary sources. No human subjects are involved, hence ethical clearance is not required. The study identifies and codes the following dramatic techniques:

- a. Non-linear narrative instances (flashbacks); counted per scene (unit: instance per scene)
- b. Symbolic phrases in dialogue; coded and quantified (unit: phrase count)
- c. Stage direction density; calculated as number of stage directions per page (unit: ratio)
- d. Shifts in tone or mood via dialogue cues; qualitative categorization (unit: presence/absence; interpreted thematically)

To ensure validity, a dual-coding process was applied. Two independent coders analyzed the text, and results were cross-validated with Miller's interviews and scholarly interpretations (Bigsby, 2005; Esslin, 2009). Quantitative coding results were tabulated and displayed in percentages to highlight dominant stylistic patterns. While no inferential statistics were applied (due to the nature of the subject), data visualization was used to reinforce claims (e.g., pie chart of technique frequency, bar graph of motif repetition). The interpretive layer uses semiotic theory (Barthes, 1967) and dramaturgical frameworks (Innes, 2000; Elam, 1980) to analyze the function of stylistic devices within the dramatic structure.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings indicate that Death of a Salesman extensively employs dramatic technique to construct meaning and emotional depth.

Tabel 1. Frequency of Dramatic Techniques in Death of a Salesman

Technique	Total Instances	% of Total Scenes
Flashback	12	70,6%
Symbolic Dialogue	137	27,4%
Stage Directions	276	-(2,4/ page)
Tone Shifts(scenes)	14	82,3%

Flashbacks appear in 12 scenes (70.6%), demonstrating the dominance of a non-linear narrative structure that reflects the protagonist's fragmented psychological state. Symbolic dialogue, identified in 137 instances (27.4%), shows that much of the dialogue functions metaphorically to express themes of failure, illusion, and the American Dream. Stage directions occur most frequently, with 276 instances. Highlighting the importance of visual and auditory cues in shaping atmosphere and character psychology. Additionally, tone shifts are present in 14 scenes (82.3%), indicating frequent emotional transitions that reinforce dramatic tension and instability. Overall, the table confirms that Miller's dramatic style relies on the integration of structural, linguistics, and performative techniques to convey psychological conflict and thematic complexity.

Analysis revealed that 12 out of 17 scenes (70.6%) utilize flashbacks or memory fragments. These non-linear elements primarily occur in Act I and II, functioning as psychological windows into Willy Loman's fragmented mind. For example, in Act I:

- a. *"Suddenly music, faint and high, stops him. It rises in intensity, almost to an unbearable scream. The light on Willy is fading. The leaves are gone. It is night, and the apartment houses look like a dream. Willy is talking to himself."* (Miller, 1949, p. 24)
- b. *"Biff: Coach'll probably congratulate you on your initiative!*
Happy: oh, he keeps congratulating my initiative all the time, Pop" (Miller, 1949, p 27-29)
- c. *"BERNARD: Just because he printed University of Virginia on his sneakers doesn't mean they've got to graduate him, Uncle Willy!"* (Miller, 1949, p.32)
- d. *"BEN: When I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And by God I was rich!"* (Miller, 1949, p. 44-47)

- e. “*LINDA: Willy, darling, you’re the handsomest man in the world—WILLY [laughing]: Oh, no, Linda.*” (Miller, 1949, p. 35–36)
- f. “*WILLY: Like when he smiled at one of his classmates? Your teacher flunked him for spite!*” (Miller, 1949, p. 54)
- g. “*BIFF: You you gave her Mama’s stockings! [His tears break through and he rises to go.]*” (Miller, 1949, p. 95–96)
- h. “*WILLY [to Charley, unseen by Ben]: What’s the secret? How did you do it?*” (Miller, 1949, p. 66–68)
- i. “*BEN: I walked into the jungle and when I was twenty-one I walked out. [He laughs.] And by God I was rich.*” (Miller, 1949, p. 49)
- j. “*WILLY: That’s why I thank Almighty God you’re both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world...*” (Miller, 1949, p. 31)
- k. “*WILLY [angrily, taking them from her]: I won’t have you mending stockings in this house! Now throw them out!*” (Miller, 1949, p. 38)
- l. “*BEN: The jungle is dark but full of diamonds, Willy... WILLY [turning to Ben]: That’s the spirit, Ben!*” (Miller, 1949, p. 106–108)

Out of 500 dialogue units coded, approx. 137 (27.4%) contained symbolic or metaphorical language most notably references to failure, illusion, entrapment, and the American Dream. For instance:

Table 2. Symbolic Language in Dialogue

CHARACTER	QUOTATION	SYMBOL MEANING	PAGE
Willy	“You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away a man is not a piece of fruit!”	Symbol of dehumanization under capitalism	82
Linda	“He’s not the finest character that ever lived. But he’s a human being”	Symbol of compassion in a cold, tilitarian world	56
Biff	“Pop, I’m nothing! I’m nothing, Pop. Can’t you understand that?”	Symbol of shattered illusion and identity crisis	133
Ben	“The jungle is dark but full of diamonds, Willy”	Symbol of risk, materialism, and death as reward motif	134

Willy	I am not a dime a dozen! I am willy loman, and you are Biff Loman!"	Symbol of fragile self worth and clinging to identity	132
Willy	"The woods are burning!"	Symbol of pressure , crisis, and a collapsing world	67
Biff	I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been!"	Symbol of personal awakening and rejection of the American Dream myth	106
Linda	"Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person	Symbol of moral appeal to recognize the forgotten common man	56
Willy	"The man who makes a appearance in the business world is the man who gets a head?"	Symbol of superficiality and image obsession in capitalist success	33
Happy	"it's the only dream you can have to come out number one man"	Symbol of inherited delusion and blind ambition	137

Across 115 pages, the script includes 276 unique stage directions, giving us a density of 2.4 directions per page. These directions often describe lighting, sound, and gesture that directly signal shifts in emotion or psychological states.

Table 3. Stage Direction Density

STAGE DIRECTION	DRAMATIC SECTION	SYMBOLIC MEANING
"A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon"	Opening (Act 1)	The flute represents Willy's father, nature, and lost simplicity his longing past

“An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality”	Opening (Act 1))	Shows how Willy’s house is saturated with dreams that distort real life
“From the darkness is heard the laughter of a woman”	Act 1 (Memory scene)	The woman’s laugh symbolizes Willy’s with over infidelity haunting him
“The light on Linda’s face seems to go down”	Act 2 (Funeral prep)	Dimmed light marks grief, foreshadowing Willy’s death
“ Raw, bright light”	Act 2 (Biff’s outburst)	Represents harsh reality confronting Biff and Willy
“The light on his face suddenly goes on”	Act 2 (Biff’s truth)	Suggests Biff’s realization and clarity about his life’s lie
“Suddenly music, faint and high, stops him. It rises in intensity, almost to an unbearable scream”	Act 2 (Final decision)	Echoes mental collapse music reflect inner torment before suicide
“ The woman comes into the spotlight, laughing, the light on Willy is fading	Act 2 (Climax)	Light fading represents Willy’s loss of dignity guilt overtakes his identity
“ Only the music of the flute is left on the darkening stage”	Requiem (Final scene)	Symbolizes death and the fading American Dream only memory remains
“ He breaks off in amazement and fight as the flute is heard distantly”	Act 1 (Flashback hit)	Flute triggers trauma memory and reality blur, showing Willy’s unstable mind.

Mood and tone shifts were identified in 14 of the 17 scenes (82.3%), usually signaled through emotional outbursts, pauses, or fragmented sentence structure. These tonal ruptures mirror the collapse of logical continuity in Willy's world.

Table 4. Tone Shift and Emotional Cues

QUOTATION / CUE	DRAMATIC SECTION	TONE SHIFT/ EMOTION	SYMBOLIC/ NARRATIVE MEANING
“Biff, I’m nothing Pop! Can’t you understand that?”	Act 2 (Climax)	Desperation / Catharsis	Breakdown of illusion biff’s search of authenticity
Music rises almost to an unbearable scream	Act 2 (Before suicide)	Tension / Collapse	Willy’s psyche unravels emotional chaos before death
Linda, “ Why shouldn’t he talk to himself?”	Act 2	Calm / Anguish	Protective frustration toward society’s neglect of Willy
Happy, we always told the truth: /Biff: “ you big blow”	Act 1	Denial / Exposure	Family delusion exposed emotional disintegration
Willy (smiling) : “ I’ll knock em dead next week”	Act 2	Hopeful / Delusional	False optimism denial of decline
Suddenly the laughter is heard willy freezes	Act 1	Stability / Guilt instrusion	Symbol of past sin disrupting present
Ben:” time, William, time! “ Willy: “ we’re gonna make it, Ben”	Act 2	Urgency / Desperation	Dream slipping away frantic attempt to regain control
Linda (sobbing): “ why did you do it?”	Requiem	Grief / Betrayal	Final sorrow tinged with unanswered pain
The woman (laughs), light on	Act 2	Seduction / Shame	Emotional collapse triggered by memory

Willy fading			of affair
Biff's voice breaks from anger into tears	Act 2	Rage / Vulnerability	True emotion beneath blame healing attempt
Willy (suddenly fearful) " the woods are burning"	Act 2	Confidence / Panic	Sign of pressure and looming doom
Linda: " he's not the finest character but he's human being"	Act 1	Realistic / Pleading	Honest defense of Willy's flawed humanity
Willy (breakig down): " nothing's planted I don't have a thing in the ground	Act 2	Frustration / Emptiness	Symbol of failure, no legacy: emotional barrenness
Biff (quietly): " he had the wrong dreams all, all wrong	Requiem	Sorrow / Clarity	Final reflection tragic recognition of misdirected life

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis reinforces that Arthur Miller's dramatic techniques in *Death of a Salesman* serve not as mere aesthetic choices but as mechanisms for exploring psychological trauma and critiquing societal norms. Through flashbacks, symbolic dialogue, and tonal shifts, Miller constructs a non-linear narrative that mirrors Willy's fractured sense of time and memory. Language becomes both expressive and combative, confronting the myth of capitalist success. Visual elements such as the recurring flute motif and emotionally charged lighting create a silent vocabulary for repressed emotions. These stylistic choices embody the modern dramatic tendency to expose the conflict between inner consciousness and external reality, emphasizing that meaning arises through structural fragmentation and emotional layering.

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