

## INTERPRETATION OF DRAMA-2

*The aim of this article is to introduce you to the study of drama. Unit 1 of this article present some basic issues involved in the interpretation of drama. It tries to show you how to read a play, how to get the most out of this experience. It introduces to you the theatrical modes prevalent today and also gives an overview of Shakespeare's drama. Units 2 and 3 help you to make a practical application of the methodology outlined in Unit 1. Unit 2 deals with a full-length play. The activities in these units will help you to get into the habit of reading a text closely and attentively. This, in turn, will help you to arrive at interpretations on your own. After you finish studying this block, you should be able to read and interpret drama on your own.*

In this unit, we will read a play together. We will apply all that we talked about in Unit 1 and see how to interpret a play. When you finish going through this unit, you should feel confident of interpreting plays on your own.

### Reading the play

We have for you one of the most popular plays of our century- Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller- which was first published in 1949, the year in which Miller was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Miller was born in 1915, in New York, in a middle class Jewish family, and lived through the Great Depression of the 1930s. This economic crisis shattered the faith that America was the land of opportunities. Millers family too, had to face hardships- Miller had to find a job ( he worked as a shop assistant for two years) to earn enough money to go to college. His plays reflect all this –the struggles of individuals in society and the failure of the American Dream.

Do you remember what we said on how to read a play? Remember to turn on all the taps (see Unit 1) that are required to get the most out of reading a play.

Now read Death of a Salesman- it is provided for you along with your course material. Please do not read the introduction provided in the book just now. You can read it after you finish working on this unit. Just read the play. It should take you about two and half hours to read. Can you ensure that you will not be disturbed for such a long spell? If not, read it in two spells, may be an act at a time?

Let your imagination soar-- try and visualize and hear what the dramatist writes about. Even though the setting is New York and Boston, I'm sure you will have no problems empathizing with the protagonist. The play is about the life and – as the title of the play tells you--the death of a salesman, Willy Loman. I hope reading the play will be as it was for me. Now enough of may musings -- read the play. Then describe, in few sentences, the emotions you felt after you finished reading the play.

Did you realize that this play is basically about Willy Loman and the conversations he has with himself when he reflects on his past? In fact, the first title of this play was The Inside of His Head. This is what Miller himself has to say about this play:

The *Salesman* image was from the beginning absorbed with the concept that nothing in life comes next but that everything exists together and at the same time within us; that there is no past to be *brought forward* in a human being, but that he is his past at every moment and that the present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and reacting to.

Now, what kind of feeling did you get when you read the play? Did you feel sorry for the salesman? Did you feel that his death was a tragedy which could have been averted? Were you able to feel empathy with the family? Did you identify yourself with any one of the characters in the play? Or did you experience the sense of joy which Willy Loman feels as he approaches his end?

Miller describes his own feelings, at the end of the play, as exultation- exultation over the

fact that Willy finally knows that he is loved by his son: Willy has achieved his fatherhood, something that he had striven for all his life: and with one final insurance policy.

If you were to direct this play what kind of stage would you set up? You can write your answer in about 500 words. You can take about an hour to do this. A careful look at stage directions will help you in this activity.

What did you come up with? This is what I would have done.

We must remember that this play is not totally realistic in its mode. When Willy is imagining his past, the characters he talks to move around the stage without observing the boundaries of walls or rooms. Therefore, we can't have a set with walls demarcating the different locales.

At the back of the stage, I would have put up a large backdrop with skyscrapers- something like the New York skyline. At the centre of the stage, I'd have put a dining table, three chairs and refrigeration signifying that this is the kitchen. To the right of this *kitchen*, I would construct two steps with a doorway leading to a bed and a chair which would represent Willy's and Linda's bedroom. A window would look out into *the other apartments*. A silver athletic trophy would also be visible.

Behind the table and chairs symbolizing the kitchen, I'd have thick curtains, behind which would be the *unseen* living room. Above this room, I'd construct a floor on which I'd place two beds, because this would then be the boys' bedroom. I'd also put a dormer window at the back. A staircase from the left of the *kitchen* would lead to this bedroom, which would also have a doorway.

The entrance to the house would be on the left of the stage, with a doorway to show the exact location of the entrance.

The forestage and the apron stage would be empty -- it would have to give enough space for Willy and the other characters to move around when they are enacting scenes from the past or the city scenes.

I'd put no walls, but I'd have thin transparent curtains where the walls should have been. This would help the audience know that when characters walk through these screens, Willy is imagining events from his past; and when characters use the doorways, the action is in the present. These thin transparent curtains would also emphasize the dreamlike appearance of the stage.

Comment on the *melos* of the play. You can write your answer in about 750 words. You can take about two hours to do this.

In this drama, music plays an important role. Did you get the significance of the flute? The play opens with a melody, played upon a flute, "telling of grass and trees and the horizon" (47). (The numbers within parentheses, from now on, refer to the pages of the book that you have- *Death of a Salesman*). The flute plays on as the curtain rises, as Willy Loman comes on to the stage, and throughout the opening conversation with Linda, his wife. Willy talks of feeling tired and this is when we realize that the music has faded away. We also hear the flute when Willy converses about the past (53). In the course of the play, when Willy *converses with* his dead brother Ben, we learn that their father not only played the flute, but also made flutes and sold them. We then hear the flute after Biff and Happy come home after having deserted their father at the restaurant. The requiem in the play ends with the flute. It plays behind Linda's monologue at Willy's grave. And then "Only the music of the flute is left on the darkening stage" (154) the flute, to me, seems to be a link, a unifying factor throughout the play. It links Willy Loman with his brother and their father. It also links Willy with his sons Biff and Happy. The flute seems to say that these bonds between generations will endure, in spite of problems that may occur.

Different characters are also given different kinds of music. We have "Ben's music" (75) when Ben is introduced to the audience for the first time, then again when Willy *talks* to him in

Howard's office (107), and then again when Ben seems to entice Willy into the darkness, into the ultimate act of suicide. Here the dramatist specifies that Ben's music is "idyllic" (149). I think the importance of Ben's music, to Willy, is that Ben has achieved, has made a success out of his life, something which Willy wanted to do, but never could. Ben achieved this in the jungles of Africa in diamond mines. Hence Ben's music has to remind the audience of a simple and happy country life.

"The day music of the boys"(109) is heard when *young* Bernard is seen with *young* Biff and Happy before they go to the football match Biff is to play. This gay music is also heard when Willy *talks* to Ben about all the good times that Willy had with Biff (143). The music is obviously symbolic of youth, of the energy, the joy of life that young people have.

"Willy's theme" (138) is heard only once, at the restaurant, after Willy has been left alone by his sons. Significantly, it is heard when Stanley, the waiter, asks Willy "Can you make it?" and Willy replies "I'll--sure, I can make it."

The music associated with Linda is when she, herself, "hums a soft lullaby"(95), which is later described as "desperate but monotonous". She does this at the end of Act I when she tries to help Willy rest. It is symbolic that for all the other characters music is provided in the background. But for Linda, she has to sing it herself. Linda is the one person in the play who is always doing things especially for her family, guiding them and helping them with their work.

Willy and his boys Biff and Happy are fond of women and their encounters with women are accompanied by music and loud laughter (70), or by "raucous" music (119) or by laughter and "raw, sensuous music" (133) symbolizing the shallowness of these relationships.

Music is also used to demarcate the past from the present--"music insinuates itself" (61) when Willy is "talking" to himself about *young* Biff: or when "a single trumpet note jars the ear "(128) when *young* Bernard comes in to tell Linda that Biff had failed his math.

The "whistling" which Willy listens to when he wants to ask Howard for a desk job-- first by Howard's seven-year-old daughter and then by Howard himself-- is of the song Roll out the Barrel. This may signify the situation that Willy is in an *over-a-barrel* king of situation-- that is, a difficult position.

The music that accompanies Willy's suicide is, indeed, striking. In the moments before Willy kills himself, we listen to music which is "faint and high", rising "in intensity, almost to an unbearable scream". And then, as he rushes off in his car at full speed, "the music reaches down in a frenzy of sound, which becomes the soft pulsation of a single' cello string" (151). This is all that is required to tell us that Willy is dead.

### **Arthur Miller's introduction**

#### **Beginning of extract**

The play grew from simple images. From a little frame house on a street of little frame houses, which had once been loud with the noise of growing boys, and then was empty and silent and finally occupied by strangers. Strangers who could not know with what conquistadorial joy Willy and his boys had once re-shingled the roof. Now it was quiet in the house, and the wrong people in the beds.

It grew from images of futility--the cavernous Sunday afternoons polishing the car. Where is that car now? And the chamois cloths carefully washed and put up to dry, where are the chamois cloths?

And the endless, convoluted discussions, wonderments, arguments, belittlements, encouragements, fiery resolutions, abdications, returns, partings, voyages out and voyages back, tremendous opportunities and small, squeaking denouements-- and all the kitchen now occupied by strangers who cannot hear what the walls are saying.

The image of aging and many of your friends already gone and strangers in the seats of the mighty who do not know you or your triumphs or your incredible value.

The image of the son's hard, public eye upon you, no longer swept by your myth, no longer reusable from his separateness, no longer knowing you have lived for him and have wept for him.

The image of ferocity when love has turned to something else and yet is there, is somewhere in the room if one could only find it.

The image of people turning into strangers who only evaluate one another.

Above all, perhaps, the image of a need greater than hunger or sex or thirst, a need to leave a thumbprint somewhere on the world. A need for immortality, and by admitting it, the knowing that one has carefully inscribed one's name on a cake of ice on a hot July day.

I sought the relatedness of all things by isolating their unrelatedness, a man superbly alone with his sense of not having touched, and finally knowing in his last extremity that the love which had always been in the room unallocated was now found.

The image of a suicide so mixed in motive as to be unfathomable and yet demanding statement. Revenge was in it and a power of love, a victory in that it would bequeath a fortune to the living and a flight from emptiness. With it an image of peace at the final curtain, the peace that is between wars, the peace leaving the issues above ground and viable yet.

And always, throughout, the image of private man in a world full of strangers, a world that is not home nor even an open battleground but only galaxies of high promise over a fear of falling.

And the image of a man making something with his hands being a rock to touch and return to. "He was always so wonderful with his hands", says his wife over his grave, and I laughed when the line came, laughed with the artist- devil's laugh, for it had all come together in this line, she having been made by him though he did not know it or believe in it or receive it into himself. Only rank, height of power, the sense of having won he believed was real-- the galaxy thrust up into the sky by projectors on the rooftops of the city he believed were real starts.

In this unit, we have demonstrated to you how to apply Aristotle's six focal points to the interpretation of a play. We have also tried to show you how to spot what kind of theatrical mode is being used to present the play.