Death Of A Salesman Symbols Essay, Research Paper

Arthur Miller is recognized as an important and influential playwright, not to mention essayist and novelist. Although he has had plenty of luck in his writing career, his fame is the product of his ingenious ability to control what he wants his readers to picture or feel. As one of his critics states, Miller writes ingeniously, conveying the message that if the proper study of mankind is man, man s inescapable problem is himself (Brown, 306). Miller accurately puts into words what every person thinks, feels, or worries about, but often has trouble expressing. By the use of symbolism, Arthur Miller portrays Willy s (along with the other Lowmans ) problems with family life, the society, and himself in Death of a Salesman.

Arthur Miller is an interesting author in the sense that many of his plays reflect or are a product of events in his life. He was born in 1915 in New York City and was the son of a successful businessman, up until the Great Depression when his father lost most of his wealth. This greatly impacts Miller s life, and influences the themes for many of his future writings. To make ends meet at home, Miller worked as a truck driver, a warehouse clerk, and a cargo-mover; consequently, these odd jobs bring him close to the working-class type people that will later be the basis of many characters in his plays. It is while he is involving himself in these jobs that Miller forms his love for literature; he is greatly impressed by Fyodor Dostoevski s The Brothers Karamazov because it questions the unspoken rules of society, a concept he often wondered about, especially after the Great Depression. He believes that American society needed to be made over; for this reason, many of his earlier plays show sympathetic portrayals and compassionate characterizations of his characters. In 1956, Miller marries the eminent Marilyn Monroe. This event significantly affects his writing in that he focuses on female characters more than he had formerly. He also looked back at his prefigured themes in past stories and expanded or reconsidered them (Rollyson, 1336-7). Clearly, the roots of his works are the result of important events from his past experiences.

Death of a Salesman is a play relating to the events leading to the downfall of Willy Loman, an aging salesman who is at one time prosperous, but is now approaching the end of his usefulness (Atkinson, 305). Miller uses symbolism to expand on the conflicts within the Loman family. Happy and Biff, Willy s two sons, represent two sides of Willy s ever-conflicting personality. Happy, who often receives his consolation of unsuccessfulness through women, represents Willy s more materialistic side. Biff, who is more capable of genuine humanity, represents the kinder and more realistic Willy; he favors Biff over Happy (CLC Vol. 10, 343). Although this may seem more of a good thing, it also plays a big part in fueling the conflict between the two. Because Willy favors Biff, he wants more than anything for Biff to succeed in life, and pushes him to do so. In the beginning, Biff agrees with Willy that successfulness is everything. The University of Virginia emblem on his shoes symbolizes his high ambitions; that is, his ambitions before he and Willy drifted apart. One of the most significant scenes in the play is when Willy has a flashback of the hotel scene where Biff catches his faithful dad with another woman this is what causes their father-son relationship to falter. After this point in the play, Biff no longer tries to be successful like his father. A symbol that also relates to Willy s infidelity is the stockings. Because he gives the stocking that are meant for Linda to his mistress, they become a symbol of his infidelity. Every time Willy sees Linda humbly mending her old, torn stockings, he feels guilty for what he s done; therefore, the stockings are also a sign of his guilt and her humbleness. One of the largest symbols relating to family worries is the mortgage on their house. In the requiem, Linda says, I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there ll be nobody home (Miller, 139). The house symbolizes Willy and Linda s 35-year struggle to own their own home and how ironic it is because as soon as the mortgage Willy worked so hard for is finally paid off, no one is left to live in their beloved house. Miller skillfully uses these symbols to help the reader understand in depth the conflicts within the Loman family.

Another way in which Miller uses symbolism is to show conflicts or problems with the society. To begin with, the setting of Death of a Salesman is a symbol that is society-related. Willy feels that the apartment buildings that surround their house are blocking out the sunlight and country atmosphere that the Lomans used to enjoy; this symbolizes Willy s feeling of being choked by the society in which they live (Downer, 35). He denies the idea that his life is processed for him, that he is the product of society; in contradiction, critics of the novel state, Willy Loman is [only] as solid as the society in which he tries to sell himself (Rollyson, 1339). A similar symbol is the hammock. The hammock that once swings in their back yard represents the earlier carefree society of when Willy and Linda first bought their house. Another symbol reflecting society is the fountain pen that Biff attempts to steal. That pen comes to represent everything Biff rejects about their society not only stealing, but also the business world in general because of all of its corruptness. The emphasis placed on these social forces is what leads to the downfall of Willy, and the tragedy of the play (Steinberg, 295). As the reader sees, numerous symbols in the play enhance the meaning of the work in relation to the society surrounding the Lomans.

In addition to symbolism relating to family life and the society, Miller uses symbolism to expand on issues concerning each of the characters. Not only do numerous symbols exist in the play that relate to each of the characters, but the characters themselves often represent something as well. To start off, Linda Loman stood for many things, but mostly as Willy s supporter and security symbol. While the reader sees Willy slowly losing control of his life, Linda stands as his loving housewife who is always there to clean and cook for him, and to love him unconditionally; in other words, some sort of stability. Although she is the strongest supporter of Willy s dreams, one of the critics claims that she is the one who prods Willy to his doom by loving him, but not knowing him well enough to help him (Bliquez, 321-2). Though he may seem insignificant, Howard Wagner also plays a somewhat important role: he provides the technical means of the deterioration of Willy when he lays Willy off from his job (Dusenbury, 317). The scene in Howard s office where Willy asks for a different job, and Howard refuses, finalizes Willy s uselessness in the society. As mentioned before, Happy and Biff represent two sides of Willy s personality. Another significant character is Ben, Willy s dead brother who he often talks to in his illusions. Ben is Willy s hero in that Ben is his ideal of economic and personal success; Willy always regrets not taking up Ben s offer to come with him to Alaska and become rich. On the other hand, Ben also represents false standards of conduct. His character leads Willy away from realistic ideals (Dusenbury, 317). Another significant scene in the play is the garden scene where Willy is talking with Ben. Here, they are contemplating whether Willy should commit suicide or not. Willy believes that the insurance money his family will receive from his death will provide for Biff s magnificent future. This scene with Ben obviously signifies Willy s unstable mentality (Rollyson, 1341.) Critics say that Willy s need for Ben sometimes conflict with his need for Linda because Linda symbolizes something stable and certain, while Ben represents something unrealistic (Bliquez, 322). Lastly, Willy stands as the most significant character in Death of a Salesman. Miller uses various symbols in the play to expand on Willy s role. One of the first symbols readers encounter is the flute music. The music shows the transitions from past to present (and vice versa) in Willy s mind. Furthermore, the music also represents an unknown musical father; Willy can t quite remember him, but he wants and is in need of his guidance (Dusenbury, 317). Next, the car stands as a symbol. At first, it is Willy s transportation for work as a traveling salesman; however, it comes to be Willy s mode of killing himself later on in the story. A similar symbol is the tubing that Linda and Biff find in the basement. Early on in the story,

Willy uses the tube as a way to try to kill himself, though he never completes the job with it. Willy s mistress, Miss Frances, directly represents his infidelity. He loves Linda, but is overcome by loneliness and feels the need to be loved. There are also many significant ideas in the book. One of these is Willy s obsession with being well-liked. Everything he does in his life is centered on his idea that success comes from being well-liked (Clurman, 308); in reality, few Americans follow Willy s theory of success (CLC Vol. 6, 327). Another idea Willy has is that of Biff s spitefulness. His guilty feelings cause him to believe that Biff purposely fails in life just to spite Willy for what he s done (Dusenbury, 317). One of the most prominent lines in the play is Willy s isn t that remarkable, for various reasons. First, it is related to one of the most important scenes, where Biff confronts Willy. This scene is substantial in that Biff aids Willy in finally realizing that he is just another common man when he says, Pop! I m a dime a dozen, and so are you (Miller, 132)! Willy also realizes in this scene that Biff loves him, and when he realizes this, he utters, Isn t that isn t that remarkable (Miller, 133)? Another time when the line comes into play is when Willy sadly realizes that Charlie, who previously seemed detestable, is his only real friend. Although these symbols relating to Willy are of great significance, Willy himself probably stands as the most significant symbol in Death of a Salesman. One of the first comments critics have is on Willy Loman as a simple character versus a complex character. To begin with, Willy is a walking contradiction. On one hand, he is described as fat and unattractive, while on the other hand, he is persuasive and pleases people. At times, he calls Biff a bum, while at others, he describes Biff as having greatness. Moreover, Willy calls his car the finest of its kind then later refers to it as a piece of junk (Rollyson, 1340). Willy Loman also has all of the modern conveniences that make him a product of society, but he does not want to be just another social component. Thus, no one is really sure whether he is simple or complex. Another argument critics make is whether or not Willy is a tragic hero. Most people agree that Willy is not a tragic hero, although his story is a tragedy. Arthur Miller once stated that Willy is (just) a man who dies for want of some positive, viable human value (Drama Criticism, 313). He is a common man who becomes the victim of a tragically harsh society (Steinberg, 296). And last but not least, Willy is more of a little man sentenced to discover his smallness rather than a big man undone by greatness. In other words, he is too passive of a character to play a tragic hero.

As the reader can see, Arthur Miller brilliantly uses symbolism in Death of a Salesman to enhance the story of the Lomans in relation to their family life, the society in which they live, and to themselves as

separate characters. Without a doubt, Willy Loman exists as the most significant character and symbol, not by playing the tragic hero, but by being nothing more than a common man with a tragic story now isn t that remarkable?