Tragc Negro Essay, Research Paper

Death of a Salesman’s Symbols & Imagery

Symbolism runs throughout Death of a Salesman. There are examples in almost every scene. One example that Miller uses often is the stockings which Linda darns and which Willy presents as a gift to Miss Francis. They can be seen as a symbol of Willy’s career, his self-worth, and his ‘product.’ At home, his life is in crisis and the stockings are full of holes. Linda, the loving wife, attempts to mend their life in the same way that she mends holes in the stockings. Willy is enraged at this action and orders her to throw the stockings in the garbage. This action is symbolic of his desire to be free of problems at home and enjoy a life of success and harmony. When Biff discovers his father with Miss Francis, he is most angered by the fact that Willy has given her “Mama’s stockings.” Again, the garments represent a bond of integrity and happiness that has been violated.

Willy’s car plays a symbolic role as well. In this car, Willy, quite literally, is driving himself to death. We learn from Linda that Willy has staged several previous car accidents. These “accidents” were perhaps early attempts to commit suicide, but they were definitely attempts to draw attention to his condition. The car represents power, movement forward, acceleration and mobility – all of which are symbols in Willy’s life of hopelessness, decay, and despair. It should therefore come as no surprise that Willy consider this vehicle as an instrument with which to kill himself.

The fountain pen that Biff steals is symbolic of Biff’s inadequacies. He has no need for the pen, nor is it meaningful in any conscious manner. Rather, it serves to highlight the absurdity of theft, the demeaning quality of taking from someone something which you do not need. Biff has lived a life based on Willy’s values, but when he discovers that these values are not good for him, he abandons them in search of his own. Biff discards it in favor of integrity and belief in himself. He wishes to get rid of his life-long habit of taking from others (such as the football back in high school). He has spent time in prison, and this symbolically represents how he has spent much of his life imprisoned by his father’s mentality.

At the end of the play, Willy purchases some seeds for his garden and begins to plant them late at night. He is close to suicide but realizes that he must leave something “real” behind for his sons. The planting of the seeds is symbolic of Willy’s desire to grow big and tall; ironically, Biff is the one who will secure growth in life. Happy, in his determination to continue Willy’s action can be seen as the weed in the Loman’s garden.

In terms of imagery, one of the most important is that of “the woods are burning.” Willy’s brother Ben made a success of himself early in life and compared the process of success-building to entering a jungle. Willy constantly remembers Ben saying “When I was I was seventeen, I walked into the jungle and when I was twenty-one I walked out…And by God I was rich!” The jungle was the locale of Ben’s success, but for Willy, the forest is burning and there is little time left. The burning woods image is symbolic of Willy’s feeling that everything is closing in on him: time, debts, human relationships. Even the apartment buildings in his neighborhood are closing in on him and he cannot bear the pressures. That is why he considers throwing himself into the fire and committing suicide.