

Analysis of Death of a Salesman from the Perspective of Expressionism

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Abstract

Renowned as a genius of realism, Arthur Miller full of audacious ambitions skillfully integrates the traditional realism with avant-garde artistic tactics of expressionism in *Death of a Salesman* to arouse a barrage of criticism at the American dream. This essay intends to probe into the quintessence of expressionist elements from the interior to the exterior of the protagonist Willy Loman, an epitome of the American dream in *Death of a Salesman*, so as to generate a better command of Miller's extraordinary aesthetic techniques and thus grasp the essence of the American dream.

Keywords

Arthur Miller; *Death of a Salesman*; American Dream; Expressionism.

1. Introduction

Among contemporary dramatists, Arthur Miller (1915-2005) undoubtedly ranks as the master. As David Thacker (2005), famous British theater director, once put it, We English were of the opinion that in terms of his artistic achievements, he was only slightly inferior to Shakespeare, but superior to God. With reference to *Death of a Salesman* (1949), it is acclaimed as one of the most prestigious tragedies in the history of American drama with *Long Day's Journey into Night* of Eugene O'Neill and *A Streetcar Named Desire* of Tennessee Williams. It made its debut successfully on Broadway, stirring an incredible sensation across the United States and earning Arthur Miller numerous awards including the 1949 Pulitzer Prize. Focusing on the protagonist named Willy Loman, Arthur Miller delicately displays an ordinary American's tragic life and reveals thought-provoking themes by virtue of his extraordinary writing techniques in *Death of a Salesman*.

It is worth mentioning that renowned for his realist style as he is, Arthur Miller also possesses the expressionist consciousness. Consequently, in addition to the realist components, most of his works are imbued with the elements of expressionism as well. In terms of expressionism, it initially emerges in the field of paintings and subsequently spreads its influences over literature. It is the German that pioneer in the expressionist movement and have made great success, especially in the circle of drama. Since then, the school of expressionism has come into beings and blossoms in the arena of drama. Throughout the development of expressionism, writing techniques adopted by various dramatists vary from one to another, but the depiction of the mind is the spotlight that distinguishes the expressionist drama from the traditional one. Specifically speaking, expressionist dramatists place great emphasis on the penetration into the innermost world of characters. Therefore, infused with expressionist writing techniques, expressionist productions are inclined to focus on the portrait of characters' psychological conditions and mindsets. Representative of Miller's creation, *Death of a Salesman* is characteristic of expressionism, which touches on the protagonist Willy Loman's volatile and complicated feelings throughout two acts and a requiem. Therefore, this essay intends to dig into the expressionist elements in *Death of a Salesman* from the interior to the exterior and thus

contributes to getting the whole picture of Arthur Miller's unique writing prowess in the following.

2. Hallucination--Expressionist Presentation of the Interior

Above all, the direct expressionist presentation of the mind of the main character Willy Loman deserves to be pinpointed, by virtue of which Miller has succeeded in vividly portraying the ebb and flow of Willy's psychological process. To be more specific, the appearance of hallucination mixed up with the recurrence of memories is the major approach to vivifying the image of Willy in *Death of a Salesman*, which indicates his doomed failure.

When it comes to the hallucination, it is a kind of irrational activities that the expressionists believe to be an internal projection and thus they take full advantage of to reveal the innermost feelings held by the characters. The appearance of hallucination in *Death of a Salesman* blurs the boundary between the past and the present, which is not only conducive to displaying the past experiences in close connections with the present, but also beneficial to clarifying the underlying reasons for Willy's dilemma. His elderly brother Ben plays an indispensable role in Willy's hallucination. More specifically, the image of Ben, as a matter of fact, always emerges in coincidence with the very occasion when Willy is overwhelmed with frustrations. For example, in the Act One, on hearing the offer suggested by his neighbor and friend Charley who makes a great coup with wits and willingly reaches out to Willy to support his family, Willy feels humiliated and generates hallucination that "UNCLE BEN, carrying a valise and an umbrella, enters the forestage ..." (Miller, 2015: 34). Judging from the reaction of Charley and square brackets hinted by Miller, it is apparent that the image of Ben is only visible to Willy and the audience offstage but is invisible to Charley. That is to say, an imaginary space is mingled with the real space in the scene at this moment, indicating that Willy is stuck in a state of mental disorder. According to the description of Ben who is "a stolid man, in his sixties, with a moustache and an authoritative air ... utterly certain of his destiny ..." (Miller, 2015: 34), in Willy's eyes, his courageous brother is an embodiment of success and sets a good example for him. Actually, Ben once invited Willy to be engaged in groundbreaking endeavor with him in Alaska full of opportunities and later made huge fortunes on his own. Nevertheless, Willy believes that he could make it as an assiduous salesman and hence declines Ben. Supposing that Willy had taken his brother's advice and taken adventure with him, he would have been likely to be as wealthy as Ben and enjoyed fame and fortune. Therefore, the setting of this hallucination delicately designed by Miller represents poor Willy's remorse. Furthermore, it is clear to see that adventurous Ben is an incarnation of bravery that Willy lacks, which is a necessity essential for success.

Then, after Charley withdraws from the stage, Willy's illusory dialogue with Ben still goes on. Their topic is mainly focused on how to nurture their offspring. Willy introduces his two sons Biff and Happy to Ben, hoping to receive recognition and suggestions from Ben. Ben gives his response and affirmation, saying that "William, you're being first-rate with your boys. Outstanding, manly chaps! (Miller, 2015: 40)". Hanging on to Ben's words, Willy feels extremely happy, but still wonders how he should teach his sons. In reply to Willy, Ben gives great weight to each word with a certain vicious audacity: "William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich! (Miller, 2015: 40-41)". With such words, Ben vanishes into the air. It is noteworthy that such words repeat several times in this act with profound meanings. Willy's hallucination is indeed a revelation of his innermost world. On the one hand, as an independent individual in the society, poor Willy feels frustrated and even suffers from depression about his status quo, regretting not having seized the opportunity to take adventures into the jungle. On the other hand, as a father of two sons who idle about in their thirties, incompetent Willy tries to reflect on his education methods, but

ultimately refuses to face up to his failure in view of the fact that his two mediocre sons lag far behind so-called bookworm Bernard, his friend Charley's son, who grows up as an educated elite. Stubborn and blind, Willy is still pinning his expectations on his elderly son who was born with charm and was once more popular than Bernard among people, urging Biff to initiate his own business from scratch to make fortunes. In the end, inspired by the hallucination of Ben, Willy makes up his mind to commit suicide in order to leave the insurance indemnity for Biff as the start-up capital. Obviously, underdog as he is, Willy sticks to his ludicrous American dream until his death.

3. Stage--Expressionist Presentation of the Exterior

In addition to the explicit expressionist presentation of the mind of Willy Loman, Miller also applies the stage effects to complement the characterization through the expressionist presentation of the surroundings around main figures.

Generally speaking, lighting and music on the stage serve as major supplementary tools. In terms of lighting, it was originally used just for illumination on the stage. Until the end of the 18th century, did Adolphe Appia (1862-1928), Swiss dramatist, unearth its artistic and aesthetic expression potentials. From his perspective, the dynamic change of light and shade is empowered to shape the whole stage atmosphere and segment different spaces ranging from the virtual to the real in the meanwhile, which contributes to visualizing the intangible psychological world of performers and hence caters to dramatists of expressionism who tend to have a predilection for the penetration into the inner feelings. In *Death of a Salesman*, lighting is fully utilized to efficiently separate performance areas. The lighting switches with the alternate recurrence of such figures in Willy's memories as his brother Ben, his two sons in their youth and the woman in a hotel of Boston whom Willy has affairs with. The sense and sensibility of Willy lie in the core conflict of this play and push forward the development of the plot. It is by virtue of lighting that the spiritual world of Willy is visualized and stage effects are spontaneously displayed.

With stage effects taken into account, apart from lighting, background music can also make a great difference. Actually, music always plays a crucial role in dramas, which renders the atmosphere and insinuates the plot. What's more, effective employment of music contributes to the depiction of personality and recognition of psychological activities as well. The flute that frequents most sets the keynote in *Death of a Salesman*. At the very beginning of the play, a melody played upon a flute, "small and fine", precedes the presence of characters and associates with lyrical and idyllic scenery, "telling of grass and trees and the horizon" (Miller, 2015:7). The flute is bestowed with symbolic meanings, especially an embodiment of nature in stark contrast to the cruel business world in reality. Its melody here indicates Willy's longing for nature which is the purest pursuit from his bottom of heart. Despite the surrounding of towering skyscrapers on all sides of his accommodation, Willy still leaves room for planting, which suffices to demonstrate his innate propensity for nature. However, unfortunately, Willy gradually goes astray and forgets his original aspiration in pursuit of fortunes. Eventually, with the accompaniment of the flute in his funeral that just a few people attend, his wife Linda is summoning herself. "Only the music of the flute is left on the darkening stage ... (Miller, 2015: 112)." The flute sound is an elegy and requiem dedicated to Willy, betokening lamentably his tragic life.

Based on the above analysis, with regard to lighting and music as the exterior, both of them add up to the stage effects and serve as auxiliary means to demonstrate the inner feelings of characters indirectly and implicitly.

4. Conclusion

To put it into a nutshell, regardless of the interior and the exterior, Arthur Miller is adept at capitalizing on the expressionist writing techniques to reveal the innermost world of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Hallucination, a kind of expressionist presentation method in particular, directly and explicitly brings the spiritual world of Willy into the spotlight, while lighting and music indirectly and implicitly illustrate his psychological activities. With the juxtaposition of cruel reality and melancholic memories, the underlying reasons for Willy's burst of bubbled American dream are unveiled. What's more, Ben, embodiment of brawn, and Charley, incarnation of brain, are two distinct representatives of success, which shows the key to success that Willy fails to figure out.

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