

Twentieth Century American Drama
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Lecture - 06
Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman Part 1

Hello, and welcome to this course titled Twentieth-Century American Drama. So, today we will be looking at one of the most representative texts, which is considered a signature text in American drama - The Death of a Salesman. It is a 1949 stage play, written by Arthur Miller, and it has also been widely enacted into different forms, including film adaptations.

Death of a Salesman was written at a time when America as a nation was trying to negotiate with the disillusionment they were facing as a nation about the notion of the American dream. So, in that sense, it has been considered as a representative, not just in the literary scheme of things but also in terms of understanding the cultural ethos of the nation.

So, Arthur Miller was one of the most important American playwrights of the period and he has composed a number of very significant plays such as *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* - the text that we shall be looking at, *The Crucible*, *A View from the Bridge*, and *A Memory of Two Mondays*, etcetera. There are a couple of novels that he produced namely, *Focus* and *Misfits*, which were also filmed in the 1960s.

So, *Death of a Salesman* has an interesting subtitle - Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem. Fundamentally, this is structured as a play in two acts including a requiem; a requiem refers to a church mass which is held for the repose of dead souls. So, metaphorically it also refers to a token act of remembrance.

So, this play is largely about a number of recollections, a number of conversations which reflect the individual lives of the characters described in the play, and the cultural ethos of the nation. It talks about a certain section of the society which still has a lot to look forward to; which is invested in the future in significant ways, but also getting disillusioned because of the many ways in which their dreams are being led down and betrayed.

So, this play has been seen historically as a critique, a severe critique of the American dream, but of late, there have also been other ways of looking at it to see if Arthur Miller was precisely critiquing the American dream or if he was offering an alternate model to look at the American society and the cultural ethos of those times.

When the play begins, there is a conversation - The play begins in a family setting within a household, and there are series of conversations through which we get insight into the character.

We get an insight into the prevalent family setting and, more importantly, into the many ways their private lives get increasingly influenced by the public and political decisions. We also learn about how individual and family lives are intricately connected to the decisions taken at a larger political level, and how they are influenced by the many changes which are happening in the society at large.

When this play was staged for the first time, in the late 1940s and the 1950s, it was also seen as an eye-opener, which in multiple ways showcased the possibility of the American dream being a failure as well. So, the American dream is a very cardinal concept in this entire play, in the entire discussion that we will be having, where the play engages with the many social realities from the 1930s onwards where it seems as if America as a nation was beginning to fall short of the promises that it had made to its citizens.

So, in that sense, it is about the nation and how individual lives that are connected intricately with the nation. There is a very severe critique of how the happiness of the individual is also tied to the kind of progress and prosperity of the characters, in alignment with the progress of the nation.

The play is set in the decade after the Great Depression of the 1930s. The 1930s was a severe, public, political, and economic challenge that America and many other nations were facing. But America, in particular, felt the brunt of it to such an extent that it led to severe depression among its citizens and a severe breaking down of a lot of settings in the public as well as private realms.

The stock market crash of 1929, followed by the great depression in the 1930s, signaled the end of the very optimistic and confident version of history that America was

projecting, which was responsible for opening up the immense possibility even for ordinary citizens to achieve success irrespective of their backgrounds.

So, in a sense, the American dream was also about the immense possibilities that America as a nation offered a person to become successful, prosperous, and to stay happy irrespective of their backgrounds or limitations of one's domestic or familial settings.

There was a wider dimension to this notion of the American dream. It was a dream; it was providing opportunities, not just for the citizens of the country but also for the immigrants. In that sense, there was a wide-ranging and overarching significance for the projection of the American dream as well as its failure to live up to its promises.

In the 1940s and early 50s – the time when this play is set, we do not entirely see a failure of the American dream, but we find that there is a sense of betrayal which is replicated in the actions and decisions that the characters undertake.

We find this a play trying to negotiate with the idea of the American dream, trying to expose some of its loopholes, and trying to be critical, not in an entirely destructive way but trying to be critical about the false hopes that this notion may also degenerate.

The play does not end on a happy note, and there are various dark elements from the beginning of the play, which also expose the shallowness behind the immense possibilities which are being projected or offered.

The central protagonist of this play is Willy Loman, a salesman. The beauty of this work is that, it enables the salesman to dream, but at the same time there are certain kinds of restrictions the salesman as well as his family members encounter. Initially, when they were in the pursuit of the American dream they were not aware of its many limitations.

So, one of the important statements made by the play is that the salesman has a dream. That also talks about the various ways in which the dream of the nation and the potential of the individual comes in alignment with the American society of the 1950s, where the private, public, and political realms seemed to have an intricate connection.

Though the play is not set during the time of the Great Depression, it certainly bears its mark. The play is set against the backdrop of the aftermath of the Depression. The

challenges and the many consequences of the Depression in the following decade can be seen reflected in the characters' responses and decisions.

Willy Loman is a 63-year-old salesman who painfully recognizes his failure as a professional, as a man, as a father, and he is unable to cope with this realization. He is entirely baffled by his failure and that sense of disappointment disillusion, and this is something that we can see from the beginning of the play.

What strikes us as pertinent and very tragic is that Willy Loman never thought that he or his sons would experience failure in any way. He believed in the American dream completely, and thus he is unable to accept the sense of failure. This sense of failure is coupled with his inability to acknowledge that he has failed himself and his family. He is unable to accept reality. Whether he is a total failure, or whether there is a certain kind of perception based on the many markers and standards set by society is a question that we would reserve to answer as we further discuss this play in the next couple of sessions.

At some level, we find him constantly going back to his comfortable memories, to the 1930s when he begins to internalize the feeling that America is the greatest country in the world. When the play begins, we find that this disillusionment that has struck him as an individual, as a family man and by extension his entire family is also an aftermath of the disappointment in his nation, which he believed was the greatest country in the world. This belief is shared by not just Willy Loman but by most of the characters in the play and the milieu of the play. There are multiple instances in the play here Willy Loman tries to recall the decisions he took, and he tries to engage with the entire trajectory of his life to find out where exactly he went wrong.

Since nothing was supposed to go wrong in the way the nation was shaping itself, the way the American dream was sold to its citizens and even to the others who came to the country, wishing to be a part of this dream. Hence, Willy Loman struggles to find out where exactly he went wrong.

Interestingly, Willy Loman has somehow internalized this belief that nothing could go wrong with the American dream. He believes that he failed due to some error of judgment that he had made. So, for the same reason, he rightfully looks forward to the next generation to give him back what he failed to achieve.

In his mind, Willy Loman believes that there was some error in the way he had planned his life or that he had taken the wrong route which he is unable to articulate or even figure out. But he hopes that his sons will be able to achieve what he could not.

Rooted in strong and individualistic middle-class ambitions, the play comes across as dealing with twin feelings simultaneously. The feelings of hope and promise that the characters are forced to believe regarding their future investment, along with the growing disappointment and sense of failure with oneself that cannot be redeemed in the next generation either. He is forever in the pursuit to achieve something and the moment he realizes that there may be a distant possibility, he wants to achieve it through his sons, which also causes several unpleasant and discomforting instances in the play.

Interestingly, this play was initially conceived from a short story that Arthur Miller had written when he was 17. The short story was about an ageing salesman who sells nothing, and he is a character who is continually abused and bullied by his buyers, and he borrows his subway fare from the narrator of the short story. This is an extensive adaptation of the short story that Arthur Miller had written when he was 17. From the notes that he had written on the early manuscript of the short story that was never published, it was revealed that the salesman on whose life the story was modelled after had thrown himself under a subway train.

Arthur Miller's engagement with society, the stories and the lives that he was familiar with while growing up also becomes a significant inspiration for *Death of a Salesman* as a play. Hence the basis of this play could be traced to the ordinary American life which Arthur Miller had also experienced.

Miller has talked about this play using very interesting vocabulary. In one of his responses, he had compared the structure of the play to that of geological strata. Thus, in this play, different time periods are referred to at the same time. He has also compared the play to a CT scan report, which simultaneously reveals the inside and the outside.

So, in that sense, it is possible to notice that how time and space are being engaged with in the scheme of this play is very complex; it is interesting as it simultaneously deals with the inside as well as the outside.

Even in the opening scene, we find that the tension within the family has seeped into the living room and into the family from outside. Because the moment Willy returns home from a presumably long and tiring work trip, his sense of disillusionment and discomfort can be related to something which happened outside.

This continual scanning or continuously incisive critique of what happens outside as well as inside simultaneously has been seen as a part of the complex arrangement of the play. So, the events staged in the play take place within 24 hours; the play begins with a timid, discouraged, and dispirited protagonist entering his house, and though there is an expression of hope for the future, but also an undeniable disillusionment of the present.

The unhappiness which prevails in the family and the irritation which is part of the family's daily interactions are very evident from the opening scene itself. Right from the beginning of the play, we can see that Willy Loman's life is a series of many unpleasant things which have been happening either on the road or at the workplace, which extend into his domestic space as well.

The simmering feeling of unhappiness and disillusionment sets the tone for the rest of the play in the opening scene itself. So, before we get into the discussion of the play per se, I will draw attention to how Arthur Miller himself has talked about time in the context of his play. He talks about two kinds of time: social time and psychic time. The duration of the play is 24 hours; this is the time within which the actions of the play take place.

At the same time, we find a different kind of time operating in the minds of the different characters, which Arthur Miller refers to as psychic time. Both social, as well as psychic time is in alignment with the national consciousness. It is in alignment with how time has been perceived from the point of view of the nation as well and how things have been happening in America, particularly in the context of the aftermath of the Great Depression and the many different ways the American dream has been pursued.

As per Miller's reference, when we talk about social time, it is about what happens in the public world, the tangible events and the real historical time, which provides a context for Willy's life, family, and his personal as well as public engagements. But in terms of psychic time, it is evident in the way in which Willy's memory scheme works; it is about the flooding memories.

, In terms of narrative and dramatic techniques, it gives the audience a context to understand what Willy and his family are undergoing. The time frame during which the memories happen also functions as a key to understanding what happens in the life of Willy and the entire milieu of the play.

It would not be wrong to assume that the past is also a vital character in this play, because as we progress through the play, we understand that the past and its relationship to the present is essential to understanding the play, and particularly the character of the protagonist, Willy Loman.

The elaborate description of the stage settings reveals that the play begins with the sound of a flute. In the original production, it is said that music was played in the background for 22 minutes before the play commenced. The play begins with the sound of a flute, which takes Willy, the protagonist, back to his childhood.

The flute sounds remind him of the time when he had travelled with his father and brother in a wagon. We come to know that his father had made and sold flutes. In his mind there is a contrast between his and his father's life, since his father could make as well as sell what he made. This also accentuates the kind of tragedy that he has perceived in his mind - that he cannot sell.

The past is a tainted memory in his mind, which affects how he deals with the present. The continual moving of back and forth in time and how the play traverses social and psychic time is relevant to understand the play and learn how the critique of the American dream operates.

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The action takes place in Willy Loman's house and yard and in various places he visits in the New York and Boston of today.

Throughout the play, in the stage directions, left and right mean stage left and stage right.



When the play begins, this is how the setting is introduced - The action takes place in Willy Loman's house and yard and in various places he visits in New York and the Boston of today. Thus the representation of place and time is very realistic in this play.

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ACT ONE

A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon. The curtain rises.

Before us is the SALESMAN's house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange. As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home. An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality. The kitchen at center seems actual enough, for there is a kitchen table with three chairs, and a refrigerator. But no other fixtures are seen. At the back of the kitchen there is a draped entrance, which leads to the living-room. To the right of the kitchen on a level raised



The description of the flute sound in Act 1 sets the tone in many ways, and we also find that the sound of the flute could be related to the life of Willy Loman's father. The way Willy Loman's father made and sold flutes and the success that Willy Loman identified with his father is contrasted with his failure as a salesman.

The sound of the flute which is played in the background is very significant in setting the tone of this play in terms of connecting the two notions of time: social time and psychic time. So, we will quickly read through this description which gives us a sense of the setting.

“Before us is the Salesman’s house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange”. We find that there is a play with colors and lights here, which also describes the city and how the city towers over physical space as well as the lives of the individuals.

“As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home. An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality”. The liminal space between dream and reality is explored extensively, and we will begin to realize it as we read through the play.

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kitchen table with three chairs, and a refrigerator. But no other fixtures are seen. At the back of the kitchen there is a draped entrance, which leads to the living-room. To the right of the kitchen, on a level raised two feet, is a bedroom furnished only with a brass bedstead and a straight chair. On a shelf over the bed a silver athletic trophy stands. A window opens on to the apartment house at the side.

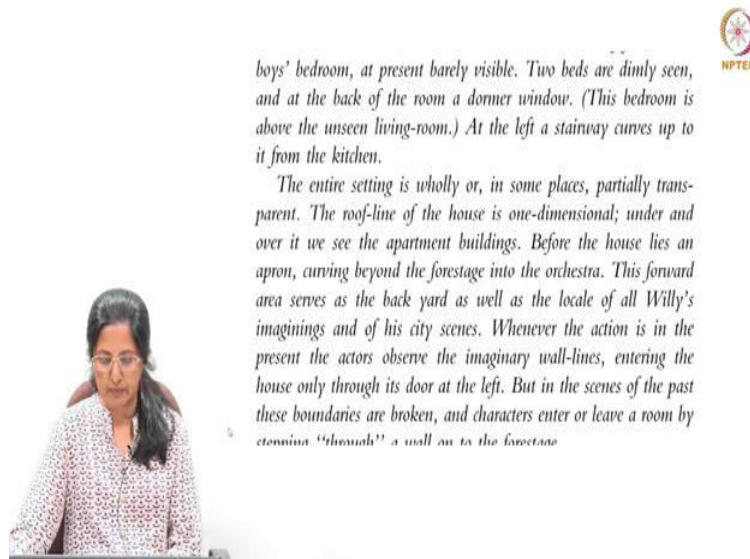
Behind the kitchen, on a level raised six and a half feet, is the boys' bedroom, at present barely visible. Two beds are dimly seen, and at the back of the room a dormer window. (This bedroom is above the unseen living-room.) At the left a stairway curves up to it from the kitchen.

The entire setting is wholly or, in some places, partially transparent. The roof-line of the house is one-dimensional; under and over it we see the apartment buildings. Before the house lies an



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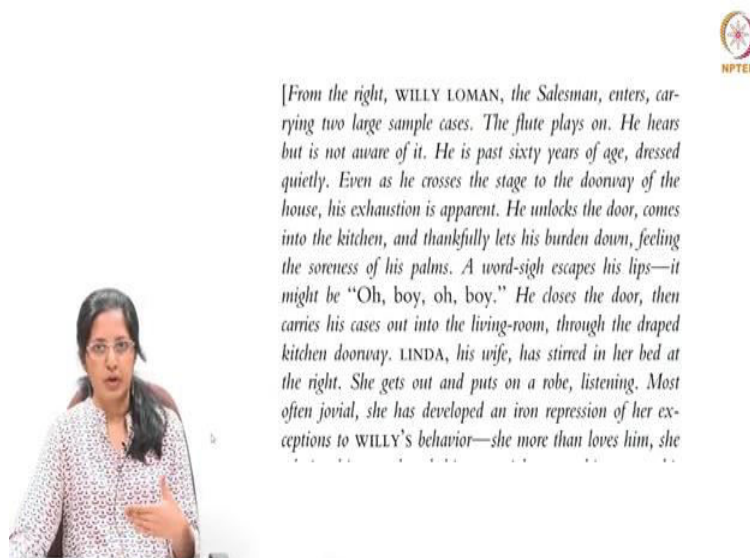


boys' bedroom, at present barely visible. Two beds are dimly seen, and at the back of the room a dormer window. (This bedroom is above the unseen living-room.) At the left a stairway curves up to it from the kitchen.

The entire setting is wholly or, in some places, partially transparent. The roof-line of the house is one-dimensional; under and over it we see the apartment buildings. Before the house lies an apron, curving beyond the forestage into the orchestra. This forward area serves as the back yard as well as the locale of all Willy's imaginings and of his city scenes. Whenever the action is in the present the actors observe the imaginary wall-lines, entering the house only through its door at the left. But in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stemming "through" a wall on to the forestage

So, this description gives us a sense of the physical setting. In the description, the contrast between the towering life of the city and the smallness of the apartments, which are part of it, is accentuated.

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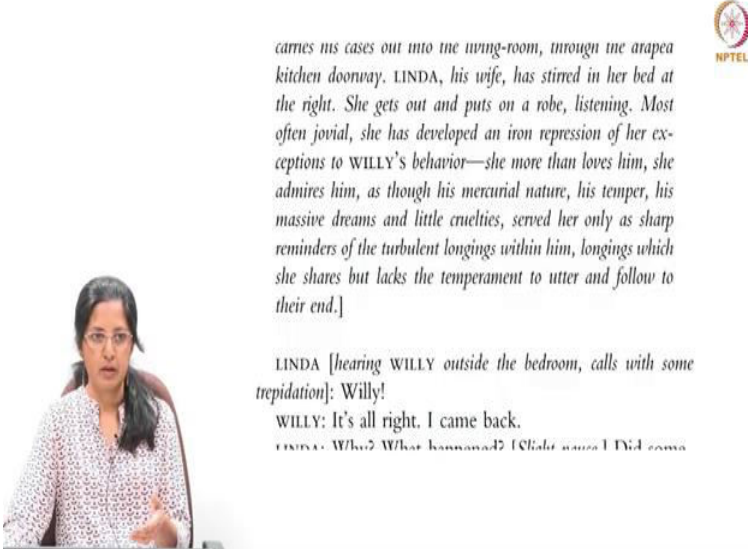


[From the right, WILLY LOMAN, the Salesman, enters, carrying two large sample cases. The flute plays on. He hears but is not aware of it. He is past sixty years of age, dressed quietly. Even as he crosses the stage to the doorway of the house, his exhaustion is apparent. He unlocks the door, comes into the kitchen, and thankfully lets his burden down, feeling the soreness of his palms. A word-sigh escapes his lips—it might be "Oh, boy, oh, boy." He closes the door, then carries his cases out into the living-room, through the draped kitchen doorway. LINDA, his wife, has stirred in her bed at the right. She gets out and puts on a robe, listening. Most often jovial, she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to WILLY'S behavior—she more than loves him, she

As the play begins, we find the protagonist entering, "Willy Loman, the salesman, enters, carrying two large sample cases. The flute plays on. He hears, but is not aware of it. He is past sixty years of age, dressed quietly. Even as he crosses the stage to the doorway of the house, his exhaustion is apparent. He unlocks the door, comes into the

kitchen, and thankfully let us his burden down, feeling the soreness of his palms. A word-sigh escapes his lips, it might be “Oh, boy, oh, boy.” He closes the door, then carries his cases into the living-room, through the draped kitchen doorway, Linda, his wife, has stirred in her bed at the right”.

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carries his cases out into the living-room, through the arched kitchen doorway. LINDA, his wife, has stirred in her bed at the right. She gets out and puts on a robe, listening. Most often jovial, she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to WILLY'S behavior—she more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties, served her only as sharp reminders of the turbulent longings within him, longings which she shares but lacks the temperament to utter and follow to their end.]

LINDA [hearing WILLY outside the bedroom, calls with some trepidation]: Willy!

WILLY: It's all right. I came back.

CURTIS: Willy? Willy? kanna?2 [Slide ends] Did come



She gets out and puts on a robe, listening. Most often jovial, she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to Willy's behavior, she more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties, served only as sharp reminders of the turbulent longings within him, longings which she shares, but lacks the temperament to utter and follow to their end”.

Here we find that what comes as a wedge or a sore point in this family is how they engage with the American dream and how they pursue it. More than the differences in their temperaments, it is the pursuit of this dream that brings happiness or causes unpleasantness in this entire play.

Having set the tone for the milieu of the play, and we will also bring this discussion to an end today. I strongly encourage you to read through the first act before we proceed with the discussion so that you know the play and the discussions will also make more sense to you.

I thank you for listening. Thank you for your time. I look forward to seeing you in the next session.