

**Twentieth Century American Drama**  
**Prof. Merin Simi Raj**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**

**Lecture - 09**  
**Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman Part 4**

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## Death of a Salesman



Hello, and welcome to yet another session of this course. We looked at some of the significant parts of the play, *Death of a Salesman* from the first scene of the first act. Now, we proceed to take a look at some general aspects of the work, something which will give you an overall understanding a general understanding to situate the larger context of the play.

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- Written in a realistic style
- Set in the American of 1940s – but universally relatable
- An added dimension of poetic theatre – letting the audience into the private thoughts of the central character
- The first title was 'Inside his head'



From our discussion so far, it is very evident that this is a play which was written in realistic style, in terms of the presentation of the dialogue, the background presented, the props made available on screen. All the elements in the play are very realistic.

The realist technique is used to invoke a sense of nostalgia, to critique the contemporary and the reality, and also to give an insight into the characters' minds. It is very evident from the milieu of the play that it is set in the America of the 1940s. But there is also a certain universal relatability about the context and the situations that the characters are placed within.

Despite the particularity of the location, we find a universal element in that as well; a universal element in terms of relationships, human psychology, the diverse effects of the society and certain kinds of pressure that operate from within families.

There is a universal relatability about it despite the specific location within which the play is set. Despite the realistic style in which the entire play is presented, there is an added dimension of poetic theatre. So, this is something we find that Arthur Miller, continually experiments with, not just in this play but in a number of his other plays as well.

Miller follows the realist tradition, but without losing the poetic element. The heightened effect of dramatization is achieved in this fine blend. He has a way of letting the audience into the private thoughts of the central character by adding a poetic dimension.

Even when the central protagonist, Willy Loman, is rooted in his realist settings, there are multiple allowances that we shall shortly discuss. These multiple allowances are made within the dramatic technique to give us an insight into the characters past as well as what happens psychologically inside the characters' minds.

All the props, dialogues, the other characters and various events are brought together to heighten the dramatic effect, which is realist as well as poetic at the same time. Incidentally, the first title that Arthur Miller chose for this play was "The Inside of His Head," which also heightens the other the kind of psychological aspect this play is pursuing.

Death of a Salesman is largely about the psychological dwellings of the central character trapped within certain realities from which he seeks to escape through different techniques of nostalgia and by dwelling on the past in certain ways, which also becomes fatal to the character.

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### Time switches

- Time switches frequently occur in Willy's mind
  - To show his confused state of mind
- Willy constantly 'slips back' in time
  - Mood changes
- Sometimes double time switch
  - A time switch occurring inside a time switch
- Vivid memories – almost like living an experience, not just remembering
- Triggers
- Reality too hard – retreats into a happier past
- Miller applying modern stage techniques to the socialist realist drama (Ibsen)



Arthur Miller employs a certain technique throughout this play - time switches. Time switches are not essentially flashbacks; it occurs when the character living in the present

suddenly slips into another frame of time from the past. Time switches give us an insight into the character, which also infuses the scene with a sense of loss, and also gives us a comparative context of what Willy Loman is at the moment with what he has lost or what he could have become .

So, these time switches frequently occur in Willy's mind, and the beauty of this play is that the audience are also privy to this switch and can engage with the different events, which happen in different periods in Willy Loman's life, without affecting the quality of the play.

The time switches are seamlessly woven into the narrative of the play without affecting the flow of events, the dialogues or the plot. The time switches are deliberately used in this play to primarily showcase the confused state of mind of Willy Loman.

Willy Loman's confusion is built into this play in multiple ways: in the props shown on stage, in the response of the other characters, and most importantly, these time switches have an interruptive and schizophrenic quality. It keeps telling us about the current state of mind of Willy Loman.

The important element to be kept in mind is that it is not the events and the episodes from the path that is important. Willy Loman's mind keeps wandering to these different time frames as and when he has this lapse into a different time slot from the past.

We find that the images are still very vivid. At some level, it seems like he is reliving the past in a more intensive and immersive way than he is living in the present. His remembering of the past has a more intensive and immersive quality than his contemporary lived experience in the 1940s of America, on which he has hope but, at the same time, detests as well.

This is the complexity that the play seeks to capture through the characters, the various dialogues and the settings. Willy keeps slipping back in time, quiet constantly. This is very evident, right from the first scene when we realize that he thinks he is driving a Chevrolet, but he is not, and also when he lowers the windshield while driving and thinks that he is in the countryside. The different kinds of images from the past will keep coming back to invade his present.

And that also has a fatal quality to it, because he has been involved in several car crashes as his wife Linda and later on his sons also expressed the same concern. The time switches are important not just in revealing the state of mind that Willy Loman is in but also in showcasing how these events could affect his as well as his immediate family's life, their future and how that also puts a lot of pressure on them at so many levels.

The mood changes that Willy Loman experiences are because of the constant time switches that keep happening in his mind. A close reading of the play reveals that more often than not, it is not something that happens in the present that affects Willy Loman.

But it is a comparison with what had happened in the 1930s, about what had happened when Happy and Biff were growing up. It is this compare and contrast mode that gets triggered when the time switch happens. That is what primarily confuses him and affects his mood in very significant ways.

Sometimes we find the play employing a double time switch where a time switch occurs inside a time switch. So, Willy Loman is placed in the 1940s, particularly in 1948. We will quickly take a look at the timeline of the play. When he is thinking about a certain episode from the 1930s, he also remembers how he had a memory of something from a past before the 1930s.

The double time switch happens within this play to accentuate the quality of confusion in Willy Loman's mind. As indicated in the first scene, his vivid memories of the past and the time slots into which he lapses are almost like a lived experience. They do not feature in black and white or grey images.

But, they are very vivid, colourful images, which also keep him in a happy mood for at least a temporary time frame. There are certain kinds of triggers that act as a catalyst for the time switches. It could be just about anything; sometimes it could be a sight outside on the road, or a word, or a memory triggered by something that his sons said.

Anything could act as a trigger and take Willy Loman back into a particular time frame; the time switch can happen with any kind of trigger. As mentioned, the fatality of this time switch is what also makes this play more interesting and compelling because he even forgets what kind of car he was driving and even forgets that he is driving when the

time switch happens. It is that immersive in its quality that he forgets himself and the settings around him. He also bounces back to reality with a different mood altogether.

So, perhaps that could be the reason behind the frequent time switches. The reality that Willy Loman is dealing with is a bit too hard for him in terms of it his material success and seeing his sons successful. We find that it is too hard for him to comprehend because life had taken a very different turn altogether than what he had expected a decade ago when Biff and Happy were kids in high school.

There was a different kind of promise that life seemed to hold out to him, and he finds that most things have been shattered and they do not have even a semblance to the kind of expectations that he had. That is perhaps why he chooses to retreat into a happier past, which he knows at some level that he cannot access anymore.

That makes this retreat a very pleasurable event for him, but the time switch also becomes very painful when he comes back to the present. It is painful not just for him, but also for his family members and everyone associated with him. Here we find Miller applying modern stage techniques to the socialist realist drama. There is a way in which modern stage techniques are infused into the realism that Ibsen had brought to the stage.

When the play is read or staged, there is no interruption in terms of the performance. We find that the dialogue and the settings are all seamlessly woven in, despite the frequent time switches that happen in Willy Loman's mind.

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### Chronology of the play

- Play tells the story of 24 hours in the life of Willy Loman
- Year 1948 - present
- Action ranges over a longer period



1870-90	During the 'Wild West' period in the history of the United States Willy's father is making and selling his flutes as he travels from east to west.
1871	Ben Loman born.
1885	Willy Loman born.
1903	Alaskan gold strike. Willy could have gone to Alaska but meets Dave Singleman.
1912	Willy joins the Wagner company.
1914	Biff Loman born. Bernard born.
1916	Happy born.
1923	The Loman family move to Brooklyn, taking out a 25-year mortgage.
1928	Willy's best year for business as he remembers it. This was the year in which he drove the red Chevrolet.
1931	Biff fails to graduate, leaves high school and goes out to the West.

It might be useful to take a quick look at the chronology of the play to understand the context and the nature of the time switches. So, the play essentially tells the story of Willy Loman and what happens in his life in 24 hours, with the help of different dramatic techniques, frequent time switches, and the thoughts of Willy Loman and the characters.

We get a bird's eye view of his entire life. We may not get a glimpse into some minor details, such as what exactly Willy Loman had been selling as a salesperson. We do not get to know the nitty-gritty of his job, except for his discomfort and lack of success.

There are so many gaps in this telling because it is Willy Loman who is remembering the past, and there are several details that do not come to his mind because the way he sees it they are not very relevant in his scheme of things. In the 24 hours, there are numerous dialogues in the present, which will also help us understand the rising action.

Within these 24 hours, we get an insight into Willy Loman and his immediate family members' lives; how they have changed as an after effect of the changing society; how the political changes had been affecting them, and how this sheer domesticity had evolved across societal and political changes.

We get a sense of the time frame which goes back to the 1870s and 90s. This is the Wild West period where Willy remembers his father making and selling his flutes while he is

travelling from the East to the West. There is a sense of achievement and movement that he associates with his father's selling business.

There is a tradition on which he is basing a number of his hopes and his optimistic view of the future. It was in 1871 that Willy Loman's father was born. So, from the scattered dialogues and frequent time switches, we can cull out the dates and give a chronology to the various events which have impacted Willy Loman's situation in the present.

Willy Loman was born in 1885, and based on that, we can find out how old he was when the play's events happened in 1948. There is a reference to the Alaskan gold strike of 1903, which we will discuss in detail when we look at that aspect in the play.

It is in 1912 that Willy joins the Wagner company. He is disappointed in the company because he thinks that his boss was kinder to him than his son, who had recently taken over. These are some of the aspects built into the narrative of the play seamlessly.

This also tells us a lot about the excellent craftsmanship of Arthur Miller as a playwright. The first son Biff Loman was born in 1914, and after two years, Happy was born. We get these details from the various minor details scattered across the play. It was only in 1923 that the Loman family moved to Brooklyn.

The opening of the play is set in Brooklyn, in their living room. The location has a significant dimension to contribute to this play because the play opens in a domestic setting, right in the heart of the city, in Brooklyn, and it also accentuates the kind of boxed lives that Willy Loman describes.

When he is thinking about the Wild West period of which he has only a received memory through his father, or when he is thinking about the glorious roads he had driven through in the past, he is rooted in boxed lived experiences, within the car or the living room.

This location that he is at the beginning, Brooklyn, is very important, but it was only from 1923 onwards the Loman family had to move to Brooklyn. They are also paying a 25-year mortgage which adds to the pressures of the family.



In Willy's memory, 1928 was the best year of his career, and it is important to remember that we never get to know what kind of goods he used to sell; that becomes immaterial here. In this pursuit for material success, the goods that he sells cease to be important.

It is his persona that becomes more important. The fact that he has been unable to do well in business has nothing to do with the product he tries to sell, but it is about himself. So, that is perhaps, one of the most stringent critiques of this work. 1928 was also the year when he was driving his red Chevrolet.

That was a fulfilling notion in his mind, not just in terms of material success but also emotional fulfilment. He used to feel very masculine in the things that he was doing in and around 1928. But by 1931, his world begins to fall apart when Biff fails to graduate, drops out of high school and goes to the West. Biff's movement towards the West when he goes to Texas to be a farmhand to experiments on different things is seen as a setback.

There was nothing glorious about this movement back to the West, which was described as the Wild West period from the 1870s to the 1890s. There was nothing glorious about this return to the past. This was not the kind of return that Willy Loman was longing for.

The time switches in this play are very episodic. The times switch is only about going back to certain episodes which had given him happiness, at least momentarily or had shown him the prospect of success in the contemporary setting; it is not a physical return to the past.

While Willy Loman is constantly slipping back and forth into certain time slots, he is extremely unhappy and physically affected to the extent that when he returns to reality, he chooses to go back to the past in certain ways, to Texas with his son and experiment with different kinds of manual labour, moving away from the capitalist setting in which they are misfits.

This longing for the past, which is just good enough to fantasize and lapse into momentarily is ironic, but there is no way he can return to that point physically and live there

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- Two Acts – a number of short sequences
- Act 1 – 9 sequences
- Act 2 – 10 sequences
- No lowering of the curtain between sequences
- Public action in year 1948 (the present) & private action in remembered time



If we look at the structure of the play, there are two acts and many short sequences built into these two acts. Act one has about nine short sequences, and Act two has ten sequences. There is no lowering of the curtain between these sequences, which is another dramatic feature that we can notice here.

There is no lowering of the curtain to signify this transition from one sequence to the other, but it happens seamlessly because that seamlessness is very important to show the nature of Willy Loman's mind, that how even in his mind, the time switches and transitions are seamless.

This confusion and the movements from one scene to the other are captured deliberately in the stage settings. So, there are two kinds of actions that happen here. There is a public action happening in the present, in 1948, which is the lived experience of Willy Loman and all the other characters. There is also a private action that happens in remember time.

Sometimes we understand where the actions in the play are happening and when those actions are happening, but sometimes, we do not. It would suffice if we broadly divide the time slots of this play into two: the public action, which happens as and when the play progresses and live before the audience and the private action, which happens in remember time. Mostly from the remember time of Willy Loman and certain conversations between Biff and Happy, we get access to the remember time from different time slots of the past.

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## Characters

- Fourteen characters
- Loman family – the principal characters
- Charley and Bernard – supporting characters
- The Woman
- Howard Wagner
- Minor characters
  - Jenny – Charley's secretary
  - A young waiter
  - Miss Forsythe



There are fourteen characters in the play, including the major and the minor ones: the Loman family - Willy Loman, his wife Linda and their sons Happy and Biff constitute the principal characters of this play. The events that happen in their life, the memories they cherish, or the events that trigger certain memories take the plot ahead.

The supporting characters are Charley and Bernard, whom we shall be meeting as and when we go ahead with the discussion of the play. There is also a woman who remains unnamed, who is very important for revealing certain aspects of the other characters. Howard Wagner and the minor characters such as Jenny, who is Charley's secretary, a young waiter and the two girls, one of whom is Miss Forsythe, who is important to understand the characters of one of Willy sons.

We do not find any of these characters unnecessary. They all contribute directly or indirectly to the play. Even the minor characters contribute directly to shaping our understanding of the principal characters and about what is happening in their lives and minds.

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### Major themes

- A critique of capitalism, American way of life
- Family relationships
- About dreams, self-deception, dishonesty
- Human psychology
- Materialistic success and what it means



There are many themes that this play takes us through. Some of the important ones being the critique of capitalism, which is the most evident, and a critique of the American way of life. We also find an urban-rural divide built into its biases, and how material success is associated with certain modes of existence.

Family relationships are at the heart of this play. This is something we will continue to explore as and when we are going through different sequences. There are dreams and notions of self-deception about honesty and dishonesty.

We find that the play very thoroughly engages with human psychology, whether it is while dealing with Willy Loman's character or with his sons or when the minor characters are introduced. This play is a study of human psychology as well as the elements, which we will be examining in detail in one of the forthcoming lessons.

One of the pressing questions and one of the cardinal themes that this play continues to explore is regarding materialistic success and how that determine how one can lead their life. So, with this, we wrap up our discussion for today.

From the next session, we will quickly take a look at the second act and a few selected sequences from the second act as well, which will help us understand how the play deals with different themes and how the time switch has become very important in shaping our understanding of the characters and the movement of the plot.

So, we shall be focusing on these aspects in greater detail when we get back to a close reading of the text.

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