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"It's All About the Language": Arthur Miller's Poetic Dialogue

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In a 2003 interview with his biographer, Christopher Bigsby, about the inherent structure of his plays, Arthur Miller explained, "It's all about the language" (Bigsby, "Miller"). Miller's declaration about the centrality of language in the creation of drama came at the end of his almost seventy-year career. He had completed his final play, *Finishing the Picture*, and a little more than a year later, he became ill and subsequently died in February 2005. Thus Miller's statement can be seen as a final avowal about how language operates in dramatic dialogue, a concern that had obsessed him since the start of his career when he wrote his first play, *No Villain*, at the University of Michigan in 1935.

Despite Miller's proclamation, not enough critical attention has been paid to the sophisticated use of language that pervades his dialogue. Throughout his career, Miller often was subject to reviews in which critics mostly excoriated him for what they judged as a failed use of language in his plays. For example, in the *Nation* review of the original production of *Death of a Salesman* in 1949, Joseph Wood Krutch criticized the play for "its failure to go beyond literal meaning and its undistinguished dialogue. Unlike Tennessee Williams, Miller does not have a unique sensibility, new insight, fresh imagination or a gift for language" (283-84). In 1964, Richard Gilman judged that *After the Fall* lacks structural focus and contains vague rhetoric. He concluded that Miller's "verbal inadequacy [has] never been more flagrantly exhibited" (6). John Simon's *New York* review of the 1994 Broadway production of *Broken Glass* opined that "Miller's ultimate failure is his language: Tone-deafness in a playwright is only a shade less bad than in a composer." In a June 2009 review of Christopher Bigsby's authorized biography of Miller, Terry Teachout judged that Miller "too often made the mistake of using florid, pseudo-poetic language" (72).

These reviews illustrate how, as a language stylist, Arthur Miller was underappreciated, too often overshadowed by his contemporary Tennessee Williams, whose major strength as a dramatist for many critics lies in the “lyricism” of his plays. As Arthur K. Oberg pointed out, “In the established image, Miller’s art is masculine and craggy; Williams’, poetic and delicate” (303). Because Miller has so often been pigeonholed as a “social” dramatist, most of the criticism of his work focuses on the cultural relevance of his plays and ignores detailed discussions of his language—especially of its poetic elements. Most critics are content to regard his dialogue as “colloquial,” judging that Miller best used what Leonard Moss described as “the common man’s language” (52) to reflect the social concerns of his characters. The assumption is often made that the manufacturers, salesmen, Puritan farmers, dockworkers, housewives, policemen, doctors, lawyers, executives, and bankers who compose the bulk of Miller’s characters speak a realistic prose dialogue—a style that is implicitly antithetical to poetic language.

This prevailing opinion of Miller as a dramatist who merely uses the common man’s language has been reinforced largely by a lack of in-depth critical analyses of how figurative language works in his canon. In his November 1998 review of the Chicago run of the fiftieth anniversary production of *Death of a Salesman*, Ben Brantley noted that, “as recent Miller scholarship has suggested again and again, the play’s images and rhythms have the patterns of poetry” (E3). In reality, though, relatively few critics have thoroughly examined this aspect not only of *Salesman* but also of Miller’s entire dramatic canon.¹ Thomas M. Tammamo judges “that critical attention to Miller’s drama has been lured from textual analysis to such non-textual concerns as biography and Miller as a social dramatist” (10).² Moreover, classroom discussions of Miller’s masterpieces *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* (1953) mostly focus on these biographical and social concerns in addition to characterization and thematic issues but rarely discuss language and dialogue. Five years after his passing, it is time to recognize that

Arthur Miller created a unique dramatic idiom that undoubtedly marks him as significant language stylist within twentieth- and twenty-first-century American and world drama. More readers and critics should see his dialogue not exclusively as prose but also as poetry, what Gordon W. Couchman has called Miller’s “rare gift for the poetic in the colloquial” (206).

Although Miller seems to work mostly in a form of colloquial prose, there are many moments in his plays when the dialogue clearly elevates to poetry. Miller often takes what appear to be the colloquialisms, clichés, and idioms of the common man’s language and reveals them as poetic language, especially by shifting words from their denotative to connotative meanings. Moreover, he significantly employs the figurative devices of metaphor, symbol, and imagery to give poetic significance to prose dialect. In addition, in many texts Miller embeds series of metaphors—many are extended—that possess particular connotations within the societies of the individual plays. Most important, these figurative devices significantly support the tragic conflicts and social themes that are the focus of every Miller play. By deftly mixing these figurative devices of symbolism, imagery, and metaphor with colloquial prose dialogue, Miller combines prose and poetry to create a unique dramatic idiom. Most critics, readers, and audiences seem to overlook this aspect of Miller’s work: the poetry is in the prose and the prose is in the poetry.

Indeed, poetic elements pervade most of Miller’s plays. For example, in *All My Sons*, religious allusions, symbols, and images place the themes of sacrifice and redemption in a Christian context. In *Death of a Salesman*, the extended metaphors of sports and trees convey Willy Loman’s struggle to achieve the American Dream. In *The Crucible*, the poetic language illustrates the conflicts that polarize the Salem community as a series of opposing images—heat and cold, white and black, light and dark, soft and hard—signify the Salemities’ dualistic view of the world. In *A View from the Bridge*, metaphors of purity and innocence give mythic importance to Eddie Carbone’s sexual, psychological,

cal, and moral struggles. *After the Fall* uses extended metaphors of childhood and religion to support Quentin's psychological quest for redemption. *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* connects metaphors of transportation and travel to Lyman Felt's literal and figurative fall, and *Broken Glass* uses images of mirrors and glass to relate the world of the European Jew at the beginning of the Holocaust to Sylvia and Phillip Gellburg's shattered sexual world.

That most critics continue to fail to recognize Miller's sophisticated use of poetic elements is striking, for it is this very facility for which many other playwrights are praised, and the history of drama is intimately intertwined with the history of poetry. For most of Western dramatic history, plays were written in verse: the ancient Greek playwrights of the fifth century B.C.E. composed their tragedies in a verse frequently accompanied by music; the rhyming couplets of the *Everyman* dramatist were the de rigueur medieval form; and English Renaissance plays were poetic masterpieces. Shakespeare's supremacy as a dramatist lies in his adaptation of the early modern English language into a dramatic dialogue that combines prose and poetry. For example, Hamlet's "quintessence of dust" speech is lyrical prose. In the twentieth century, critics praised the verse plays of T. S. Eliot, Maxwell Anderson, Christopher Isherwood, and W. H. Auden.

Even more baffling about this critical neglect is that Miller readily acknowledged his attraction to poetry and dramatic verse. His views on language, particularly poetic language, are evident in the prodigious number of essays he produced throughout his career. Criticism has mostly ignored this large body of nonfiction writing in which Miller frequently expounds on the nature of language and dialogue, the tension between realistic prose and poetic language in twentieth-century drama, and the complex evolution of poetic language throughout his plays.³ For example, in his 1993 essay "About Theatre Language" he writes:

It was inevitable that I had to confront the problem of dramatic language. . . . I gradually came to wonder if the essential pressure toward poetic dramatic language—if not of stylization itself—came from the inclusion of society as a major element in the play's story or vision. Manifestly, prose realism was the language of the individual and private life, poetry the language of man in crowds, in society. Put another way, prose is the language of family relations; it is the inclusion of the larger world beyond that naturally opens a play to the poetic.

... How to find a style that would at one and the same time deeply engage an American audience, which insisted on a recognizable reality of characters, locales, and themes, while opening the stage to considerations of public morality and the mythic social fates—in short, the invisible? (82)

* * *

Miller's attraction to poetic dramatic dialogue can be traced back to his development as a playwright, particularly his time as a student at the University of Michigan in the mid-1930s and the early years of his great successes in the 1940s and 1950s, when his views on dramatic form, structure, aesthetics, and language were evolving. Miller knew little about the theater when he arrived in Ann Arbor from his home in Brooklyn, but during these formative college years, he became aware of German expressionism, and he read August Strindberg and Henrik Ibsen, whom he often acknowledged as major influences on him. Christopher Bigsby has pointed out that Miller always remembered the effect that reading Greek and Elizabethan playwrights at college had on him (*Critical Study* 419). However, Miller was markedly affected by the social-protest work of Clifford Odets. In his autobiography, *Timebends* (1987), Miller describes how Odets's 1930s plays *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), *Awake and Sing* (1935), and *Golden Boy* (1937) had "sprung forth a new phenomenon, a leftist challenge to the system, the poet suddenly leaping onto the stage and disposing of middle-class gentility, screaming and yelling and cursing like somebody off the

Manhattan streets” (229). Most important for Miller, Odets brought to American drama a concern for language: “For the very first time in America, language itself had marked a playwright as unique” (229). To Miller, Odets was “The only poet, I thought, not only in the social protest theater, but in all of New York” (212).

After Miller won his first Avery Hopwood Award at Michigan, he was sent to Professor Kenneth Rowe, whose chief contribution to Miller’s development was cultivating his interest in the dynamics of play construction. Odets and Rowe clearly were considerably strong influences on Miller as he developed his concern with language and his form broke out of what he termed the “dusty naturalistic habit” (*Timebends* 228) of Broadway, but other influences would also compel him to write dramatic verse. The work of Thornton Wilder, particularly *Our Town* (1938), spoke to him, and in *Timebends* Miller acknowledges that *Our Town* was the nearest of the 1930s plays in “reaching for lyricism” (229). Tennessee Williams is another playwright whom Miller frequently credited with influencing his art and the craft of his language. He credited the newness of *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) to the play’s “poetic lift” (*Timebends* 244) and was particularly struck by *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), proclaiming that Williams had given him license to speak in dramatic language “at full throat” (*Timebends* 182).

Moreover, Miller practiced what he had learned and espoused. In fact, he reported that when he was first beginning his career he was “up to [his] neck” in writing many of his full-length and radio plays in verse (“Interview” 98). When he graduated from Michigan and started his work with the Federal Theatre Project in 1938, he wrote *The Golden Years*, a verse play about Montezuma. In a letter to Professor Rowe, he reported that he found writing verse much easier than writing prose: “I made the discovery that in verse you are forced to be brief and to the point. Verse squeezes out fat and you’re left with the real meaning of the language” (Bigsby, *Arthur Miller* 155). Also, he explained that much of *Death of a Salesman* and all of *The Crucible* were origi-

nally written in verse; the one-act version of *A View from the Bridge* (1955) was written in an intriguing mixture of verse and prose, and Miller regretted his failure to do the same in *The American Clock* (1980) (Bigsby, *Critical Introduction* 136).

However, Miller found an American theater hostile to the poetic form. Miller himself pointed out that the United States had no tradition of dramatic verse (“Interview” 98) as compared to Europe. In the 1930s, Maxwell Anderson was one of the few American playwrights incorporating blank verse into his plays, and the English theater witnessed some interest in poetic drama in the 1940s and 1950s, most notably with Christopher Fry and T. S. Eliot. In reality, dramatic verse had been in sharp decline since the late nineteenth century, when the realistic prose dialogue used by Henrik Ibsen in Norway was adopted by George Bernard Shaw in England and then later employed by Eugene O’Neill in the United States. Miller also judged that American actors had difficulty speaking the verse line (“Interview” 98). Further, Miller came of age at a time when American audiences were demanding realism, the musical comedy was gaining in dominance, and commercial Broadway producers were disinterested in verse drama.

Christopher Bigsby has pointed out that Miller was “in his own mind, an essentially poetic, deeply metaphoric writer who had found himself in a theater resistant to such, particularly on Broadway, which he continued to think of as his natural home, despite its many deficiencies” (*Critical Study* 358). Struggling with how to accept this reality, Miller accommodated his natural inclination to verse by developing a dramatic idiom that reconciled his poetic urge with the realism demanded by the aesthetics of the American stage. Thus he infused poetic language into his prose dialogue.

* * *

Let’s examine how some of these poetic devices—symbolism, imagery, and metaphor—operate in Miller’s masterpiece, *Death of a*

Salesman. From the outset of the play, Miller makes trees and sports into metaphors signifying Willy Loman's struggle to achieve the American Dream within the competitive American business world. Trees symbolize Willy's dreams, sports the competition for economic success.⁴ Miller sustains these metaphors throughout the entire text with images of boxing, burning, wood, nature, and fighting to make them into crucial unifying structures. In addition, Miller's predilection for juxtaposing the literal and figurative meanings of words is particularly evident in *Salesman* as the abstract concepts of competition and dreaming are vivified by concrete objects and actions such as boxing, fists, lumber, and ashes.

Trees are an excellent illustration of how Miller uses literal and figurative meanings. Two references in act 1, scene 1, immediately establish their importance in the play. When Willy unexpectedly arrives home, he explains that he was unable to drive to Portland for his sales call because he kept becoming absorbed in the countryside scenery, where "the trees are so thick, and the sun is warm" (14). Although these trees merely seem to distract Willy from driving, he also indicates their connection to dreaming. He tells Linda: "I absolutely forgot I was driving. If I'd've gone the other way over the white line I might've killed somebody. So I went on again—and five minutes later I'm dreamin' again" (14). Willy's inability to concentrate on driving indicates an emotional conflict larger than mere daydreaming. The play reveals how Willy often exists in dreams rather than reality—dreams of being well liked, of success for his son Biff, of his "imaginings." All of these dreams intimately connect to Willy's confrontation with his failure to achieve the tangible aspects of the American Dream. He is a traveling salesman, and his inability to drive symbolizes his inability to sell, which guarantees that he will fail in the competition to be a "hot-shot salesman." The action of the play depicts the last day of Willy's life and how Willy is increasingly escaping the reality of his failure in reveries of the past, to the point where he often cannot differentiate between reality and illusion.

The repetition of the mention of trees in Willy's second speech in scene 1 cements the importance of trees in the play as a metaphor for these dreams. He complains to Linda about the apartment houses surrounding the Loman home: "They should've had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When Biff and I hung the swing between them?" (17). However, these trees are not the trees of the real time of the play; rather, they exist in Willy's past and, more important, in the "imaginings" of his mind, the place where the more important dramatic action of the play takes place.

Miller's working title for *Death of a Salesman* was "The Inside of His Head," and certainly Willy's longing for the trees of the past illustrates how dreaming works in his mind. Throughout the entire play, trees—and all the other images connected to them—are complicated symbols of an idyllic past for which Willy longs in his dreams, a world where Biff and Hap are young, where Willy can believe himself a hot-shot salesman, where Brooklyn seems an unspoiled wilderness. The irony is that, in reality, the past was not as idyllic as Willy recalls, and the play gradually unfolds the reality of Willy's failures. The metaphor of trees also supports Willy's unresolved struggle with his son Biff. Willy's memory of Biff and himself hanging a hammock between the elms is ironic as the two beautiful trees' absence in the present symbolizes Willy's failed dreams for Biff.

Throughout the play, Miller significantly expands upon the figurative meaning of trees. For example, in act 1, scene 4, Willy responds to Hap's claims that he will retire Willy for life by remarking:

You'll retire me for life on seventy goddam dollars a week? And your women and your car and your apartment, and you'll retire me for life! Christ's sake I couldn't get past Yonkers today! Where are you guys, where are you? The woods are burning! I can't drive a car! (41)

Willy's warning that "the woods are burning" extends the tree metaphor by introducing an important sense of destruction to the trees of

Willy's idyllic world of the past. Since the trees are so identified with Willy's dreams, the image implies that his dreams are burning too—his dreams for himself as a successful salesman and his dreams for Biff and Hap. The images of burning and destruction are crucial in the play, especially when Linda reveals Willy's suicide attempts—his own form of destruction, which he enacts at play's end. We realize that since Willy is so associated with his dreams, he will die when they burn. In fact, Willy repeats this same exact line in act 2 when he arrives at Frank's Chop House and announces his firing to Hap and Biff. He says: "I'm not interested in stories about the past or any crap of that kind because the woods are burning, boys, you understand? There's a big blaze going on all around. I was fired today" (107). This line not only repeats Willy's warning cry from act 1 but also foreshadows Biff's climactic plea to Willy to "take that phony dream and burn it" (133). The burning metaphor—now ironic—also appears in Willy's imagining in the Boston hotel room. As Willy continues to ignore Biff's knock on the door, the woman says, "Maybe the hotel's on fire." Willy replies, "It's a mistake, there's no fire" (116). Of course, nothing is threatened by a literal fire—only by the figurative blaze inside Willy's head.

Once aware of how tree images operate in the play, a reader (or keen theatergoer) can note the cacophony of other references that sustain the metaphor in other scenes. For example, Willy wants Biff to help trim the tree branch that threatens to fall on the Loman house; Biff and Hap steal lumber; Willy plaintively remembers his father carving flutes; Willy tells Ben that Biff can "fell trees"; Willy mocks Biff for wanting to be a carpenter and similarly mocks Charley and his son Bernard because they "can't hammer a nail"; Ben buys timberland in Alaska; Biff burns his sneakers in the furnace; Willy speculates about his need for a "little lumber" (72) to build a guest house for the boys when they get married; Willy is proud of weathering a twenty-five-year mortgage with "all the cement, the lumber" (74) he has put into the house; Willy explains to Ben that "I am building something with this firm," something "You can't feel . . . with your hand like timber" (86). Finally, there

are "the leaves of day appearing over everything" in the graveyard in "Requiem" (136).

Miller similarly uses boxing in literal and figurative ways throughout the play. In act 1, scene 2, Biff suggests to Hap that they buy a ranch to "use our muscles. Men built like we are should be working out in the open" (24). Hap responds to Biff with the first sports reference in the text: "That's what I dream about, Biff. Sometimes I want to just rip my clothes off in the middle of the store and outbox that goddam merchandise manager. I mean I can outbox, outrun, and outlift anybody in that store" (24). As an athlete, Biff, it seems, should introduce the sports metaphor, but, ironically, the sport with which he is identified—football—is not used in any extensive metaphorical way in the play.⁵ Instead, boxing becomes the extended sports metaphor of the text, and it is not introduced by Biff but rather by Hap, who reinforces it throughout the play to show how Willy has prepared him and Biff only for physical competition, not business or economic competition. Thus Hap expresses his frustration at being a second-rate worker by stressing his physical superiority over his managers. Unable to win in economic competition, he longs to beat his coworkers in a physical match, and it is this contrast between economic and physical competition that intensifies the dramatic interplay between the literal and the figurative language of the play.

In fact, the very competitiveness of the American economic system in which Willy and Hap work, and that Biff hates, is consistently put on physical terms in the play. A failure in the competitive workplace, Hap uses the metaphor of physical competition—boxing man to man—yet the play details how Hap was considered less physically impressive than Biff when the two were boys. As an adult, Hap competes in the only physical competition he can win—sex. He even uses the imagery of rivalry when talking about his sexual conquests of the store managers' girlfriends: "Maybe I just have an overdeveloped sense of competition or something" (25). Perhaps knowing that they cannot win, the Lomans resort to a significant amount of cheating in competition:

Willy condones Biff's theft of a football, Biff cheats on his exams, Hap takes bribes, and Willy cheats on Linda. All of this cheating signifies the Lomans' moral failings as well.

The boxing metaphor also illustrates the contrast between Biff and Hap. Boxing as a sports metaphor is quite different from the expected football metaphor: a boxer relies completely on personal physical strength while fighting a single opponent, whereas in football, a team sport, the players rely on group effort and group tactics. Thus the difference between Biff and Hap—Hap as evoker of the boxing metaphor and Biff as a player of a team sport—is emphasized throughout the text. Moreover, the action of the play relies on the clash of dreams between Biff and Willy. Biff is Willy's favorite son, and Willy's own dreams and disappointments are tied to him. Yet Hap, the second-rate son, the second-rate physical specimen, the second-rate worker, is the son who is most like Willy in profession, braggadocio, and sexual swagger. Ultimately, at the play's end, in "Requiem," the boxing metaphor ironically points out Hap's significance as the actual competitor for Willy's dream, for he decides to stay in the city because Willy "fought it out here and this is where I'm gonna win it for him" (139).

Biff's boxing contrasts sharply with Hap's. For example, Biff ironically performs a literal boxing competition with Ben, which juxtaposes with the figurative competition of the play. The boxing reinforces the emphasis that has been placed on Biff as the most physically prepared "specimen" of the boys. Yet Biff is defeated by Ben; in reality he is ill prepared to fight a boxing match because it is a man-to-man competition, unlike football, the team sport at which he excelled. He is especially ill prepared for Uncle Ben's kind of boxing match because it is not a fair match conducted on a level playing field. As Ben says: "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way" (49). Thus the literal act of boxing possesses figurative significance. Willy has not conditioned Biff (or, by extension, Hap) for any fight—fair or unfair—in the larger figurative "jungle" of the play: the workplace of the American economic system.

Willy, too, uses a significant amount of boxing imagery, much of it quite violent. In the first imagining in act 1, Biff asks Willy about his recent sales trip, "Did you knock them dead, Pop?" and Willy responds, "Knocked 'em cold in Providence, slaughtered 'em in Boston" (33); when he relates to Linda how another salesman at F. H. Stevens insulted him, Willy claims he "cracked him right across the face" (37), the same physical threat that he will later make against Charley in act 2 on the day of the Ebbets Field game. Willy wants to box Charley, challenging him, "Put up your hands. Goddam you, put up your hands" (68). Willy also says, "I'm gonna knock Howard for a loop" (74). Willy uses these violent physical terms against men he perceives as challengers and competitors.

As with the tree metaphor, this one is sustained throughout the scenes with a plethora of boxing references: a punching bag is inscribed with Gene Tunney's name; Hap challenges Bernard to box; Willy explains to Linda that the boys gathered in the cellar obey Biff because, "Well, that's the training, the training"; Biff feebly attempts to box with Uncle Ben; Bernard remarks to Willy that Biff "never trained himself for anything" (92); Charley cheers on his son with a "Knock 'em dead, Bernard" (95) as Bernard leaves to argue a case in front of the Supreme Court; Willy, expressing to Bernard his frustration that Biff has done nothing with his life, says, "Why did he lay down?" (93). This last boxing reference, associated with taking a dive, is a remarkably imagistic way of describing how Biff initially cut down his life out of spite after discovering Willy's infidelity.

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Miller also uses images, symbols, and metaphors as central or unifying devices by employing repetition and recurrence—one of the central tenets of so-called cluster criticism, which was pioneered in the 1930s and 1940s.⁶ In short, cluster criticism argues that the deliberate repetition of words, images, symbols, and metaphors contributes to the

unity of the work just as significantly as do plot, character, and theme. These clusters of words can operate both literally and figuratively in a text—as I. A. Richards notes in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*—and, therefore, contribute significantly to the overall aesthetic and thematic impact. For example, in *Arthur Miller, Dramatist*, Edward Murray traces word repetition in *The Crucible*, examining how Miller, “in a very subtle manner, uses key words to knit together the texture of action and theme.” He notes, for example, the recurrent use of the word “soft” in the text (64). My own previous work on *The Crucible* has examined how the tenfold repetition of the word “weight” supports one of the play’s crucial themes: how an individual’s struggle for truth often conflicts with society.

Let’s examine an intriguing example of word repetition from *Death of a Salesman*.⁷ The words “paint” and “painting” appear five significant times in the play. The first is a literal use: at the end of act 1, Willy tells Biff during their argument, “If you get tired of hanging around tomorrow, paint the ceiling I put up in the living room” (45). This line echoes Willy’s previous mockery of Charley for not knowing how to put up a ceiling: “A man who can’t handle tools is not a man” (30). In both instances, Willy is asserting his superiority on the basis of his physical prowess, a point that is consistently emphasized in the play.

The second time “paint” appears is in act 2, when Biff and Hap abandon Willy in Frank’s Chop House to leave with Letta and Miss Forsythe. Hap says to Letta: “No, that’s not my father. He’s just a guy. Come on, we’ll catch Biff, and honey we’re going to paint this town!” (91). Of course in this line Miller uses the cliché “Paint the town red” for its well-known meaning of having a wild night of partying and dissolution—although it is notable that Miller uses a truncated form of the phrase. Nevertheless, here the cliché takes on new significance in the context of the play. Willy defines masculinity by painting a ceiling, but Hap defines it by painting the town with sexual debauchery and revelry, lordling his physical superiority and his sexual conquests over other men.

The third, fourth, and fifth repetitions occur in act 2 during the imagining in the hotel room when Biff discovers Willy with the woman. When the woman comes out of the bathroom, Willy says: “Ah—you better go back to your room. They must be finished painting by now. They’re painting her room so I let her take a shower here” (119). When she leaves, Willy attempts to convince Biff that “she lives down the hall—they’re painting. You don’t imagine—” (120). Here, painting is simultaneously literal and metaphorical because of its previous usage in the play—but with a high degree of irony. Willy’s feeble explanation that Miss Francis’s room is literally being painted is a cover-up for the reality that Willy himself has painted the town in Boston. Biff discovers that Willy’s manhood is defined by sexual infidelity—ultimately defining him as a “phony little fake.”

* * *

Another relatively unexplored aspect of Miller’s language is the names of his characters. Miller chooses his characters’ names for their metaphorical associations in most of his dramatic canon. Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays’s 1997 text *The Language of Names* revived some interest in this technique, which is known as literary onomastics and is considered a somewhat minor part of contemporary literary criticism. Kaplan and Bernays examine the connotative value of names that function in texts as “symbolic, metaphorical, or allegorical discourse” (175). Although some scholars have discussed the use of this technique in individual Miller plays, most readers familiar with the body of Miller’s work notice how consistently he chooses the names of his characters to create symbols, irony, and points of contrast.

For example, readers and critics who are familiar only with *Death of a Salesman* among Miller’s works have long noted that Willy’s last name literally marks him as a “low man,” although Miller himself chuckled at the overemphasis placed on this pun. He actually derived the name from a movie he had seen, *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, in

which a completely mad character at the end of the film screams, "Lohman, Lohman, get me Lohman" (*Timebends* 177-79). To Miller, the man's cry signified the hysteria he wanted to create in his salesman, Willy Loman. Many critics also have noted the significance of the name of Dave "Singleman," the eighty-year-old salesman who stands alone as Willy's ideal.

Despite Miller's consistent downplaying in interviews of the significance of his characters' names, an examination of his technique reveals how extensively he connects his characters' names to the larger social issues at the core of every play. For example, the last name of *All My Sons'* Joe Keller, who manufactures faulty airplane parts and is indirectly responsible for the deaths of twenty-one pilots, resembles "killer." In previous work on the play, I have noted the comparison of the Kellers to the Holy Family, and how, therefore, the names of Joe and his son, Chris, take on religious significance. Susan C. W. Abbotson has noted how the first name of *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan's* Lyman Felt suggests the lying he has lived out. She also has analyzed the similarities between Loman and Lyman, and has argued that Lyman is a kind of alter ego to Willy some forty years later. Frank Ardolino has also examined how Miller employs Egyptian mythology in naming and depicting Hap ("Mythological").

An intriguing feature of Miller's use of names is his repetition of the same name, or form of the same name, in his plays. It is striking how in *Salesman* Miller uses the name "Frank," or variations of it, five times for five different characters, a highly unusual occurrence.⁸ In act 1, during Willy's first imagining, when Linda complains to Biff that there is a cellar full of boys in the Loman house who do not know what to do with themselves, Frank is one of the boys whom Biff gets to clean up the furnace room. Not long after, at the end of the imagining, Frank is the name of the mechanic who fixes the carburetor of Willy's Chevrolet. In act 2, in the moving scene in which Howard effectively fires Willy and Willy is left alone in the office, Willy cries out three times for "Frank," apparently Howard's father and the original owner of the

company, who, Willy claims, asked Willy to "name" Howard. Willy also meets the boys in Frank's Chop House and, in the crucial discovery scene in the Boston hotel room, Willy introduces the woman to Biff as Miss Francis, "Frank" often being a nickname for Francis.

There are significant figurative uses of "Frank" too, for, although the word means "honest" or "candid," all of the Franks in *Salesman* are clearly associated with work that is not completely honest. Biff uses the boy Frank and his companions to clean the furnace room and hang up the wash—chores that he should be doing himself. Willy somewhat questions the repair job that the mechanic Frank does on "that goddam Chevrolet." Despite Willy's idolizing of his boss, Frank Wagner, Linda indicates that Frank, perhaps, promised Willy a partnership as a member of the firm, a promise that kept Willy from joining Ben in Alaska and that was never made good on by either Frank or his son, Howard. Miss Francis promises to put Willy through to the buyers in exchange for stockings and her sexual favors, but it is uncertain whether she holds up her end of the deal, since Willy certainly has never been a "hot-shot" salesman. And, of course, Frank's Chop House is the place where Stanley tells Hap that the boss, presumably Frank, is going crazy over the "leak in the cash register." Thus Miller clearly uses the name Frank with a high degree of irony, an important aspect of his use of figurative language in his canon. Of course, all this business dishonesty emphasizes how *Salesman* challenges the integrity of the American work ethic.

Miller's careful selection of names shows that he perhaps considered the names of his characters as part of each play's network of figurative language. As Kaplan and Bernays note, "Names of characters . . . convey what their creators may already know and feel about them and how they want their readers to respond" (174). Thus, in his choice of names, Arthur Miller may very well be manipulating his audience before the curtain rises, as they sit and read the cast of characters in their playbills.

Finally, being aware of Miller's use of poetic language is crucial for

however we encounter his plays—as readers who analyze drama as text or as audience members in tune with the sound of the dialogue. It is, indeed, “all about the language”—the language we read in the text and the language we hear on the stage.

Notes

1. Although some critics have examined Miller's colloquial prose, only a few have conducted studies of how poetic devices work in his dialogue. Leonard Moss, in his book-length study *Arthur Miller*, analyzes Miller's language in a chapter on *Death of a Salesman*, a section of which is titled “Verbal and Symbolic Technique.” In an article titled “*Death of a Salesman* and Arthur Miller's Search for Style,” Arthur K. Oberg considers Miller's struggle with establishing a dramatic idiom. Oberg judges that Miller ultimately “arrives at something that approaches an American idiom to the extent that it exposes a colloquialism characterized by unusual image, spurious lyricism, and closed-ended cliché” (305). He concludes that “the play's text, although far from ‘bad poetry,’ ‘teilingly moves toward the status of poetry without ever getting there” (310-11). My 2002 work *A Language Study of Arthur Miller's Plays: The Poetic in the Colloquial* traces Miller's consistent use of figurative language from *All My Sons* to *Broken Glass*.

In other studies discussing individual plays, some critics have noted poetic nuances in Miller's language. In “Setting, Language, and the Force of Evil in *The Crucible*,” Penelope Curtis maintains that the language of the play is marked by what she calls “half-metaphor” (69), which Miller employs to suggest the play's themes. In an article published in *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, John D. Engle explains the metaphor of law used by the lawyer Quentin in *After the Fall*. Lawrence Rosinger, in a brief *Explicator* article, traces the metaphors of royalty that appear in *Death of a Salesman*.

2. Thomas M. Tannaro also points out that the diminished prestige of language studies since the height of New Criticism may account for the lack of a sustained examination of imagery and symbolism in Miller's work. Moreover, Tannaro notes that Miller's plays were not subjected to New Critical theory even when language studies were prominent (10). In his new authorized biography *Arthur Miller: 1915-1992*, Christopher Bigsby clearly recognizes Miller's attempts to write verse drama, but this work is largely a critical biography and cultural study, not a close textual analysis.

3. Most notable among these works are the following: “The Family in Modern Drama,” which first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1956; “On Social Plays,” which appeared as the original introduction to the one-act edition of *A View from the Bridge* and *A Memory of Two Mondays*; the introduction to his 1957 *Collected Plays*; “The American Writer: The American Theater,” first published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review* in 1982; “On Screenwriting and Language: Introduction to *Everybody Wins*,” first published in 1990; his 1993 essay “About Theatre Language,” which first appeared as an afterword to the published edition of *The Last Yankee*; and his March 1999 *Harper's* article “On Broadway: Notes on the Past and Future of American Theater.”

4. For a more detailed discussion of these metaphors, see “*Death of a Salesman*: Unlocking the Rhetoric of Poetic Power” in my 2002 volume *A Language Study of Arthur Miller's Plays*. Also, in “Figuring Our Past and Present in Wood: Wood Imagery in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*,” Will Smith traces what he describes as a “wood trope” in the plays.

5. When Biff discovers Willy with the woman in the hotel room in act 2, she refers to herself as a football (119-20) to indicate her humiliating treatment by Willy and, perhaps, all men.

6. Frederick Charles Kolbe, Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, and Kenneth Burke pioneered much of this criticism. For example, Spurgeon did groundbreaking work in discovering the clothes imagery and the image of the babe in *Macbeth*. Kenneth Burke, in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, examines Clifford Odets's *Golden Boy* as a play that uses language clusters, particularly the images of the “prizefight” and the “violin,” that operate both literally and symbolically in the text (33-35).

7. In his work *Arthur Miller*, Leonard Moss details the frequent repetitions of words in the text, such as “man,” “boy,” and “kid.” He notes that forms of the verb “make” occur forty-five times in thirty-three different usages, ranging from Standard English to slang expressions, among them “make mountains out of molehills,” “makin a hit,” “makin my future,” “make me laugh,” and “make a train.” He also notes the nine-time repetition of “make money” (48). Moss connects these expressions to Miller's thematic intention: illustrating how the American work ethic dominates Willy's life.

8. In “I'm Not a Dime a Dozen I Am Willy Loman!": The Significance of Names and Numbers in *Death of a Salesman*,” Frank Ardolino takes a mainly psychological approach to the language of the play. He maintains that “Miller's system of onomastic and numerical images and echoes forms a complex network which delineates Willy's insanity and its effects on his family and job” (174). Ardolino explains that the name imagery reveals Biff's and Willy's failures. He sees the repetition of “Frank” as part of Miller's use of geographical, personal, and business names that often begin with *B*, *F*, or *S*. Thus the names beginning with *F* “convey a conflict between benevolence and protection on the one hand and dismissal and degradation on the other” (177). Benevolent Franks are Willy's boss, the boy Frank who cleans up, and the repairman Frank. Degrading Franks are Miss Francis and Frank's Chop House, which contains the literal and psychological toilet where Willy has his climactic imagining of the hotel room in Boston.

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