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ECCENTRIC USE OF TIME& FLASHBACKS AS THEATRICAL DEVICE IN MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

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ABSTRACT

Along with soliloquy, monologue, dialogue, aside, direct address, and voice over, the use of flashbacks has constantly been exercised as a significant theatrical device. But Arthur Miller's rather unorthodox use of it has rendered the drama *Death of a Salesman* a special dimension in terms of economic exploitation of language and space replacing them with flashbacks. The purpose of this study is to investigate into the flashback techniques used in this social drama to unlock the theme(s) of this piece, minimizing the effusive use of language, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of unorthodox flashbacks used to depict individual's crises. The qualitative approach is used to find and analyze data in this study exploring the *Death of a Salesman* as the primary and other related research articles and books as secondary sources.

Key words: theatrical device, flashback, time, language in theatre, Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

1. Introduction

The use of the time theories as theatrical devices by British author J. B. Priestley in the dramas of 1930s and 1940s can be discerned as an innovative stage in experiments with theatrical dramas. In the linear concept of time, the flashbacks and foreshadows conventionally triumphed as two important mechanisms in drama as well as in prose fictions. But, Arthur Miller has experimented with several concepts of time with his special use of flashbacks in *Death of a Salesman*. In *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller* (2nd Edition), Matthew C. Roudané quoted Miller saying "there are two or three sorts of time in that play. One is social time, one is psychic time, the way we remember things, and the third is the sense of time created by the play and shared by the audience." (interview, 1985) In *Death of a Salesman* flashbacks are used in an unorthodox way, that is, past and remote past mingle with present; hence flashbacks occur inside other flashbacks giving a complex web-like structure to the linearity of the time-frame of the drama.

The flashbacks are subjective in *Death of a Salesman*, not indifferent like in any other drama. The characters reveal themselves through the flashbacks, not in present. The present identity and the personality of the characters are shaped by the past giving a more comprehensive portrayal of the characters. With a view to understanding the subjective reality of the characters, use of flashbacks appears to be an important theatrical device since flashbacks involve retrospection to inner-self of a character in a play. For example, the

past is seen with only Willy's eyes, not imperatively. So, there is no scope of fabrication or alteration of the reality about the characters.

Moreover, this unorthodox use of flashbacks has rendered a special dimension in the use of language in theatre. The dramatist could exploit the economic use of language to describe a character's psychological state in the past and its influence in the formation of present personality of that character, namely Willy Loman.

2. Research Questions

The broader research question for this study reads *Is the unorthodox use of Flashbacks an effective Theatrical Device in Death of A Salesman?* This broader research question will be addressed through the following three specific smaller research questions:

1. Do the flashback techniques help unlock the theme(s) of *Death of a Salesman*?
2. Do the flashbacks minimize the effusive use of language in this drama?
3. Is the unorthodox use of flashbacks effective to depict individual's crises in this drama?

3. Literature Review

A good theatrical experience entails proper utilization of some theatrical devices which connects itself with the mission of unfolding the coded theme of any fiction or drama. Soliloquy, monologue, dialogue, aside, direct address, voice over, foreshadows and flashbacks are few among many theatrical apparatuses which are conventionally used to unfold the experiences of life through theatrical experiences. Foreshadows (*prolepsis*) and flashbacks (*analepsis*) which are used for special effect basically deal with the temporal disparity in the chronological sequence of events in a narrative or dramatic piece. *Analepsis* is basically connected with telling or showing something happened in the past with respect to the present. (Genette, 1980)

A Glossary of Literary Terms defines flashback as "interpolated narratives or scenes often justified, or naturalized as a memory, a reverie, or a confession by one of the characters" (Abrams 1993) in a drama or a novel or in any other fiction. Flashback serves as a theatrical device for an interruption in the chronological progress of the plot in a drama with a purpose of reflecting back on any event of serious importance in the life of the protagonist or of any other important character of the piece who shares the experience of reliving in the past. It relates with the psychic understanding of the character through whom the flashback is demonstrated. In psychiatry this experience is also called flashback hallucinosis which refers to an abnormally vivid, often recurrent recollection of a disturbing past event, sometimes accompanied by hallucinations. (flashback 2011)

Using flashback in a theatre drama seems to demand more craftsmanship in language use in the dialogue since theatre is much a living art where manipulation of event sequence for specific purpose is a crucial enterprise for the dramatist. This is crucial because the changing of a scene for the change of timeline requires a very delicate shift and transgression in temporal plane.

"In its classic form, the flashback is introduced when the image in the present dissolves to an image in the past, understood either as a story-being-told or a subjective memory. Dialogue, voice-over, or intertitles that mark anteriority through language often reinforce the visual cues representing a return to the past" (Turim 1989: 1) So, language is extremely vital element in any flashbacks since memories can be interlinked by language as a binder of time planes. Some (flashbacks) are subjective, interiorized; others represent a telling-in-language whose degree of subjectivity might be considerably less (Turim 1989:2)

Flashbacks are basically used for (a) character development, (b) textual hints and (c) pace of events in a theatre. Since a drama more fits to be staged than to be read, minimization of language use is important. What makes a play theatrically rich is a question of a wide range of issues. In his famous literary criticism series "critical reviews", Harold Bloom offered the analysis that Miller looks an ordinary writer when his plays are read and reread. But when they go to the stage, they become "very effective dramas". (2006) That is the feature for which *Death of a Salesman* earned Pulitzer Prize in 1949:

The form of *Death of a Salesman* was an attempt, as much as anything else, to convey the bending of time... The play is taking place in the Greek unity of 24 hours; and yet it is dealing with material that goes back probably 25 years. And it almost goes forward through Ben, who is dead. So, time was an obsession for me at the moment, and I wanted a way of presenting it so that it became the fiber of the play, rather than being something that somebody comments about. In fact, there is very little comment really in *Salesman* about time. I also wanted a form that could sustain itself the way we deal with crises, which is not to deal with them. After all, there is a lot of comedy in *Salesman*; people forget it because it is so dark by the end of the play. But if you stand behind the audience you hear a lot of laughter. It's a deadly ironical laughter most of the time, but it is a species of comedy. The comedy is really a way for Willy and others to put off the evil day, which is the thing we all do. I wanted that to happen and not be something talked about. (Miller, 1985)

"Time" works as a filler to the stagecraft. The stage setting is trying hard to indicate and unfold the plot of the drama, and subsequently the time-switches contribute in the process. The flashbacks are equipped with audio-visual spectacles – laughter of the women, music of the flute. The flashbacks are subjective. They show things which Willy is seeing or intends to see, and the present time is objective, as they merely narrate things neutrally. Flashback inside flashback: Willy-Woman flashback takes place from Willy-Linda flashback; and they return from their time-switch to another past event. The flashbacks take up a psychological notion; they tend to indicate the suppressed feelings and that of shame and guilt. Time merges: past and present mix together with Ben's appearance that is visible only to Willy; definitely, he comes from past. *Death of a Salesman* followed the three unities of classical Greek drama, hence the unity of time also. But Miller wanted to unfold the total story which was impossible to make in a 24-hour time span unless it was subsidized by the flashbacks which helped to minimize the effusive use of language to present the situation to the audience.

The flashbacks mostly belong to the happy memories; while the present is bitter. This indicates the lamentation of the nostalgic past. Here again the use of flashbacks minimizes the time gap and help juxtapose the happy against bitter as the two sides of a coin which is one of the themes of this drama.

4. Methodology

A qualitative data analysis methodology is used in this research. The procedure included close reading and re-reading of the drama *Death of a Salesman*, taking notes, reflecting on the data and writing down interpretations. Also taking a closer look at scholarly articles as secondary sources of information was also considered. Conclusions are reached through discursive validation of qualitative data gathered.

5. Findings

The use of time and flashback is so pressing an element in *Death of a Salesman* that the dramatist himself once commented in "Michigan Quarterly Review" about the type of time and its importance in the progression of the dramatic actions:

The form of *Death of a Salesman* was an attempt, as much as anything else, to convey the bending of time. There are two or three sorts of time in that play. One is social time; one is psychic time, the way we remember things; and the third one is the sense of time created by the play and shared by the audience. ... The play is taking place in the Greek unity of 24 hours; and yet it is dealing with material that goes back probably 25 years. And it almost goes forward through Ben, who is dead. So, time was an obsession for me at the moment, and I wanted a way of presenting it so that it became the fiber of the play, rather than being something that somebody comments about. In fact, here is very little comment really in *Salesman* about time. I also wanted a form that could sustain itself the way we deal with crises, which is not to deal with them. (Miller, 1985)

Despite the fact that *Death of a Salesman* doesn't have the customary scene divisions; it can be put into separate scenes as per the incidents and situations. In that case, it gives us a very mathematical view of how the entire play has been interlaced with time-switches:

The time-switches have been used to narrate the story. It is the flashbacks and memories that unfolds the plot of the play. This time switches help reduce the narrative space replacing it by action and dialogue. As can be found in the following tables:

Table 1: Catalogue of Flashbacks from *Death of a Salesman*

Flashbacks	When	What happens	Analysis
01	After the boys go to bed, Willy at downstairs; young Biff and Happy appear (Act 1 Scene 1 p 17)	Willy is in the kitchen; but observes the scenes from the past; favors Biff much; expectation high	Charley and Bernard are not well-liked, refusing the reality; Willy's blind confidence over his sons, ridicules Bernard
02	Willy in the kitchen at the same night (Act 1)	Willy and Linda converse; Willy's unsuccessful sales commission	
03	the same night Ends with Ben's exit (Act 1 pp 25-36)	Flashback inside flashback; Willy and the woman flashback takes place from Willy –Linda conversation; they come back to another past event	It's a prolonged memory scene which includes several incidents to build up the plot
04	At Howard's office (Act 2)	Ben enters Willy's mind again, invites him to join him in Alaska	Howard's rejection of Willy's service might make Willy seek refuge in fantasy
05	At Frank's chop house (Act 2)	A young Bernard meets Willy (and Linda, too) and gives them the news of Biff's failing in math exam	It is seemingly associated with Willy's realization that Biff has failed as a salesman in his meeting with Oliver

Table 2: Record of time switches in first two acts of *Death of a Salesman*

Act 01	Scene 01	Present	Willy-Linda Biff-Happy
Act 01	Scene 02	Past	Willy-Bernard-Biff-Happy Willy-Linda
Act 01	Scene 03	Overlap (present and past)	Willy-Charley Willy-Ben
Act 01	Scene 04	Past	Willy-Ben-Linda-Biff-Happy
Act 01	Scene 05	Present	
Act 02	Scene 01	Present	
Act 02	Scene 02	Past	
Act 02	Scene 03	Overlap (present and past)	
Act 02	Scene 04	Past	
Act 02	Scene 05	Present	

6. Discussion

Unconventional flashback techniques used in *Death of a Salesman* help to present the themes as well as minimize the effusive use of language replaced by demonstration of the past actions through time switches in this drama. Unorthodox use of flashbacks also appears as a very effective device in depicting individual's crises in this drama.

Flashback techniques to unlock the themes of *Death of a Salesman*

The flashbacks or the time-switches in *Death of a Salesman* are not meant to be only the connectors between the present and the past narratives of the drama, but also to serve as an effective, technical, theatrical device to pace the story and add to the structure of the drama. The play unfolds its story around the past events, and the flashbacks or the time-switches serve as the back-linking connections between the on-stage plot and the core twists of the story. They are no less in their theatrical appeal than the light, sound or the stagecraft. Though the main plot of this drama is very simple, "it contains a number of sub-plots, each with its own chain of causation, in which one action leads to another though sometimes after the passage of time" (Spalding, 66: 1987) If we have a close look at the progression of events and the connection of sub-plots, it can easily be discerned that with the help of time switches the themes are connected with a chain of reconnections after a time gap. If we scrutinize the Table 1 above, it can be distinguished that "one such chain begins in Act I, Sequence 2, when Biff first has the idea of approaching Bill Oliver and ends in Act II, Sequence 7 when he realizes that he can never again approach him with a business proposition. (Spalding, 1987)

Seen with a view of the traditional literary terms, the flashbacks in this play are mostly unusual. They are not the mere reminiscences of a character. Though they are all seen from the perspective of the protagonist, they never are the simple memory of the past. Rather the time-switches act more in a mechanical way to disclose the layers of the story. This is how they are characteristically different from the traditional flashbacks.

For example, the first time-switch tells us that Willy has always been more inclined to his elder son, Biff, than to Happy. The present stream of actions never reveals that, but the scenes from the past do. And it also precisely indicates Willy's illusive and fanciful idea of "being liked". Both these notions are working as the key motives of the story. As the play starts with an aged Willy returning from an unfinished sales trip, we never have any clue what is wrong with him. The flashbacks expose his attributes.

What is noteworthy in the use of the flashbacks here is the fact that the past scenes dominate the drama in such a fashion as if the whole drama takes place in the past, and the present scenes are merely the links between the audience and the plot. The entire theme of the drama and almost all the major climaxes find their refuge in the past scenes. Looking from a classical and conventional perspective, this technique of Miller in *Death of a Salesman* is highly distinctive. The time-switches are associated with the integration of the story in such a way that they serve almost as the structural devices among the different layers of the play.

Flashback minimizes the effusive use of language in this drama

For giving account of the past incidents in the characters' lives and as well as to demonstrate the psychological impacts of past incidents on the characters' personality the reference to the past incidents through flashbacks are obvious. But, a drama is based more on *mimesis*, performance, which is "showing" through direct representation instead of "telling." and less on *diegesis*, characterized as the narrator's commentary on the thoughts and actions of characters. Therefore, a dramatist is expected to be frugal in using words to tell the story. To cater these needs the flashbacks help fulfill the necessity of narration.

The pace of events in this play is accelerated also because of the use of flashbacks. Table 2 above specifically delineates the act and scene wise time shifts to connect the events in single web of plot.

Unorthodox use of flashbacks effective to depict individual's crises in this drama.

The flashbacks are unorthodox because sometimes it so happens that the characters from the past (Ben) come back to present and join the scene (Howard's office). Whenever Willy is experiencing a flashback, Miller represents his father's memory through a flute playing offstage.

The flashbacks tend to carry the story forward not only from the viewpoints in the past, but as if it is pushing the story ahead in the present. So, we find that there are more characters in the past than in the present. Flashback 01 runs back into past again with the appearances of the Women and Ben. The pattern of the time switch appears somewhat: present > past > past to present. In this constant movement of time Willy

doesn't only remember the past events, he rather visualizes what "would have happened". Here we encounter a reinvention of the past or more precisely it can be called a retrospective reconstruction of time. Miller once said "Every man has an image of himself which fails in one way or another to correspond with reality. It's the size of the discrepancy between illusion and reality that matters. The closer a man gets to knowing himself, the less likely he is to trip up on his own illusions." Therefore, to understand himself Willy had to constantly time travel which ultimately helps reveal his inner crisis.

When Miller plotted his most famous play, *Death of A Salesman*, he had a title for this play as "The Inside of His Head". The title was, without any doubt, meant for the protagonist, Willy. This, as well as an inquisitive perspective towards the play, can show us some indications about how this overwhelmingly appreciated play can be looked into in terms of the use of the theatrical devices. The feedback *Death of A Salesman* received ever since it was brought out is gigantic. The main focus of the wholesome admiration has been Miller's attack on Capitalism in an economically degrading America. In his autobiography *Timebend*, Miller remembers the initial reaction to the play:

'On the play's opening night, a woman who shall not be named was outraged, calling it "a time-bomb under American capitalism." I hoped it was, or at least under the bullshit of capitalism; this pseudo life that thought to touch the clouds by standing on top of a refrigerator waving a paid-up mortgage at the Moon.' (1987)

The existence of very life posited in the real time is questioned here. Life seems to be virtual and abstract as life at present gets mixed with the imagination and memories of past. This influx of past life in the present is catalyzed under the strain of Capitalism which renders real life a secondary status prioritizing on the outcome and product of this real life as a worker.

Though Miller himself said *Death of A Salesman* doesn't have flashbacks, time can be treated in *Death of A Salesman* in three ways: as the customary flashbacks or time switches which take the audience back to past; as an effective device which not only works as traditional flashbacks but as a linear coherence between the characters and the multiple dimensions of even the same character; as a symbol like when Ben repeatedly looks at his watch and says that his time is running out.

This help portray the delusion and dilemma as one of the themes of the play; the discrepancy between illusion and reality creates dilemma in the characters of this play as Miller said:

"Every man has an image of himself which fails in one way or another to correspond with reality. It's the size of the discrepancy between illusion and reality that matters. The closer a man gets to knowing himself, the less likely he is to trip up on his own illusions." (Schumacher, 1949. The New York Times)

Here flashback as the most appropriate and effective technique is used to be exploited to portray this delusion and dilemma in the protagonist Willy. Without flashback theatrical presentation

Conclusion

Eccentric use of *Time* and *Flashbacks* in *Death of A Salesman* minimizes the length of this drama by reducing the effusive and gushing use of language as well as rendering the drama with special capacity to uphold the psycho-critical stage of an elderly American everyman who surrenders to the disappointing pursuit of dilutional American Dream. Time and flashback as theatrical device also catalyze the easy portrayal of the themes of this play such as the presentation of delusion and dilemma which was difficult to present through any other suitable alternative technique.

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