

Miller's Manipulation of Time and Space

Miller often experiments with narrative style and technique. For example, Miller includes lengthy exposition pieces that read as stage directions within *The Crucible*. At first glance, it seems that an audience must either read the information in the program or listen to a long-winded narrator. Upon further inspection however, it becomes apparent that Miller's inclusion of background material allows actors and directors to study character motivation and internalize the information, thereby portraying it in the performance.

Miller provides audiences with a unique experience when it comes to *Death of a Salesman*. In many ways, the play appears traditional. In other words, there are actors who interact with one another, there is a basic plot line, and the play contains standard dramatic elements such as exposition, rising action, conflict, climax, and so forth. However, Miller's manipulation of time and space creates a very non-traditional atmosphere that is unsettling but effective because it mirrors Willy's mental state, thereby allowing the audience to witness his mental instability and take part in it.

Stage directions call for a complete house for the Lomans. An audience will not simply watch the action take place in the kitchen but can observe several rooms within the home. This sounds as if it would be distracting since an audience can view several things at once. After all, what should the audience look at? If more than one character is on stage, whom should the audience pay attention to? Miller solves this problem through lighting. Only characters that are talking or involved in direct action are lit on stage, all other rooms, characters, and props remain in shadow.

The result is a vast number of rooms and props that can be utilized immediately. The audience does not have to wait while a new set is erected or an old one torn down, but instead moves directly and instantaneously into the next scene. Such movement without the benefit of time delays or dialogue transitions produces a disjointed and fragmented sequence of events, much like a dream. In fact, the stage directions in Act I describe the house as follows: "An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream arising out of reality."

Miller does not stop there. Even though the action of the play can shift from one part of the house to another without delay, the action is still limited to the present. Willy's dreams, memories, or recollections of past events must be revealed in a manner that is distinct from actions taking place in the present. This is important for two reasons: First, the audience must be able to differentiate between the present and the past in order to follow the action of the play; second, Willy's increased agitation must be apparent to the audience, and there is no better way to reveal it than to have the audience observe his inability to separate the past from the reality of the present.

Miller achieves this effect by manipulating the space and boundaries of the rooms. When action takes place in the present, characters observe wall boundaries and enter and exit through the doors. During Willy's recollections of the past, characters do not observe wall boundaries, and the action generally takes place in the area at the front of the stage, rather than inside the house. As a result, the audience can distinguish present events from Willy's memories. For example, in Act I, Scene 3, Willy pours a

glass of milk in the kitchen, sits down, and begins to mumble to himself. He is in the present. He then remembers a past conversation with the teenage Biff and resumes the conversation. Since this is a past event, Willy directs his speech through the wall to a point offstage. This cues the audience that Willy is digressing in the past.

Sound is also used to create a dreamlike state for both Willy and the audience. A flute melody is associated with Willy, Ben has his own music, laughter cues the Woman, and so forth. Once the sound is introduced with the appropriate character, the audience automatically associates the sound with that same character. As a result, Miller is able to prompt reactions and expectations from the audience, whether they are aware or not. For example, in Act II, Scene 14, it appears that things have finally been settled between Willy and Biff. Even though Biff is leaving in the morning, he and Willy have reconciled. This puts the audience at ease, but once Ben's music is heard, it is evident that the play has not reached its final conclusion. In fact, Ben's appearance may create anxiety for the audience because it suggests an alternate, more disturbing, end to the play.

As the play progresses, the action shifts to the front of the stage. In other words, the audience becomes increasingly aware that the majority of the action is taking place inside Willy's head. It is difficult enough to watch an individual lose his or her identity. It is extremely unsettling and disturbing to be forced to experience the individual's memories, illusions, or perhaps delusions resulting in mental instability. Miller takes that into consideration and then pushes his audiences to the extreme. As Willy's mental state declines, the audience is forced to watch and to react. As a result, the play may be called *Death of a Salesman*, but it is a death observed and experienced by every member of the audience.

<https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/d/death-of-a-salesman/critical-essays/millers-manipulation-of-time-and-space>