



All is not Gold: Fatherhood and Identity in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract

The essay tries to shed some light on Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. It starts with an analysis of a seemingly irrelevant detail: the difference between gold and diamonds. Gold must be seen as a symptom pointing to Willy Loman's obsession for imitation, which can be accounted for by a specific form of pathological narcissism, itself caused by a faulty representation of the structure of fatherhood in his unconscious. From there, it will prove necessary to question the protagonist's peculiar relation to naming, especially his use of the Name of the Father. The approach chosen will be interpretative systematically progressing from symptoms to structures that are both ever more abstract and specific. In other words, the problem raised is to determine how far one can go from a theoretical point of view in order to reconstruct the logic governing Willy's unconscious.

To cite as

Thomières, D., 2016, 'All is not Gold: Fatherhood and Identity in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*', *PsyArt* 20, pp. 1–23.

Why diamonds? They constitute a *Leit-motiv* in Arthur's Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. They are what Ben discovers at age 17. At the end of the play, they represent what Willy at age 63 hopes to "pick up and touch in [his] hand" (126). Diamonds are first and foremost a problem for readers and spectators, or, more specifically, an object — obviously not realistic — to be constructed in their minds with its various implications. We all know that the first title Miller chose for his play was *The Inside of his Head* and that literally is where the theoretical stage is set for us: what does Willy's identity consist in, how does his unconscious work, and, above all, why are identity (and diamonds) a problem for him? Most of the time, the other characters (apart from the real present-day Biff and Happy) are projections which take the protagonist back to his past, to

possibilities, roads taken and roads not taken. They embody social polarities, that is to say distant poles or goals that could be/should have been reached. Accordingly, this essay will be a practical as well as a theoretical interrogation that will address the notion of identity in Arthur Miler's *Death of a Salesman*. How far can one go, starting from a number of symptoms, in order to reconstruct from a theoretical point of view the logic working towards Willy Loman's death?

In this respect, not surprisingly, Miller continues the great tradition of classic 19th century American writers, such as Hawthorne, Melville or Faulkner, who systematically expressed the aporias of their culture by means of symbolic oppositions and who knew perfectly well that it is impossible to separate the individual from the society in which he or she lives.¹ For them, as well as for Miller, all individuals are different physically and mentally, if only because everyone has had a specific personal history due to the chance meetings and accidents they have experienced ever since they were born. Society, on the other hand, is made up of a limited number of virtualities which people actualize or not owing to unconscious motives in which the abstract structure of fatherhood usually plays a crucial role. In this respect, *Death of A Salesman* is not fundamentally different from, say, "Young Goodman Brown," *Pierre* or *The Sound and the Fury*.

In Miller's play, American society confronts Willy Loman with three dreams which are represented by three different characters in his mind: i) Ben and financial success at all costs (or J.P. Morgan "with his pockets on"); ii) Dave Singleman, the man who was "well-liked"; iii) Bernard (and possibly Charley, though we don't know by what means foul or fair he became rich), that is to say meritocracy and hard work linked to a series of ethical values such as respect for those who did not make it. Willy clearly does not like the last option. His specific problem is that he cannot reconcile the first two possibilities (being "rugged" and being "well-liked"). In his mind, it should be both at the same time, whereas, in his life, things always turn out to be either/or (he gives up his plans to follow Ben when he meets Singleman), or, rather, in the end, it is always neither/nor. In point of fact, *Death of a Salesman* shows us how it took Willy 36 years to slowly die poor and not "liked". When the

¹ For instance, the lawyer in Melville's "Bartleby" cannot choose between sacking his copyist or making him the recipient of his "charity," a word he likes to repeat. A binary opposition between the values of capitalism and those of Christianity structures the "inside of his head," which in itself is the legacy left by the founding Fathers who refused to separate religion from business. (The first puritans who wanted to find a new country in which they could practise their creed as they saw fit joined the Massachusetts Bay Company if they could afford it. It originally was a business enterprise in which they had purchased shares in the modern economic sense of the term). Melville's lawyer is the prisoner of the implications of the word charity, etymologically *caritas* in Latin, that is *dear* (*dear* as someone we love or *dear* as in expensive?) The lawyer is unable to decide what decision he will take. At bottom, he never acts. As far as he is concerned, Willy Loman's own mental binary opposition is between (to quote him) *rugged* and *well-liked*.

play closes, it is true, he finally unites the two dreams and lays his “hand” upon the diamonds, except that that synthesis lies only in his imagination and that it is the hand of a dead man, and also except that, as Charley said at one point, “nobody’s worth nothin’ dead” (98).²

Plays are meant to be seen and/or read. Willy Loman’s problem has become the readers’ and the spectators’ problem. They have to try to understand what went wrong with the “interior of his head.” In other words, they need to reconstruct the network of implications which eventually explain why he cannot choose, which fundamentally is the same problem as determining why he fails. In this respect, Miller is very much like a physician who comes up with a diagnosis and who also, in his own way, intuits a number of theoretical discoveries from the fields of anthropology and psychoanalysis. One could maintain in this respect that his role as a dramatist is to isolate symptoms and show how they fit together.³ Readers and spectators then can provide their own conclusions: given the options provided by his society, why are the social virtualities the character unconsciously chooses possibilities of death, not of life?

It will thus be argued that the play can be interpreted as a series of symptoms which point to a final diagnosis having to do with fatherhood. Willy’s obsession for diamond will constitute the starting point on which the essay will build. The diamonds will lead us to the importance of models which will have to be explained in terms of the protagonist’s pathological narcissism. That narcissism will then be shown to be closely bound up with an breakdown of the structure of fatherhood that has to be explained in terms of a failure when it comes to names and their unconscious implications, especially as regards the name of the father. In other words, Miller’s play will be studied in a cumulative manner by means of a series of ever more complex theoretical perspectives.

Being and desire

The diamonds appear in the first scene with Ben (44-52). The passage is crucial in that it very economically articulates the logic at work inside Willy’s mind. At a symbolic level, it is structured along an opposition between possibilities of life and possibilities of death. It should of course be clear that the problems raised in the exchange between the two brothers have nothing to do with the

² Reference is to the Vintage or Penguin editions of *Death of Salesman*. Their pagination has been the same since 1949.

³ One is reminded of Gilles Deleuze’s pronouncement when he explains that writers are (like) physicians. See his *Essays Critical and Clinical*, especially the first chapter, “Literature and Life” (11-17). Deleuze briefly gives some examples: Herman Melville, Thomas Wolfe, Franz Kafka, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, etc. Arthur Miller could certainly constitute a valuable addition to that list. The term ‘diagnosis’ means collecting symptoms and establishing distinctions between them (*dia*), and then producing a body of knowledge (*gnosis*) that can later be used critically in order to enhance life. Following Deleuze, this essay will consider that, among other functions, literature helps us discover for ourselves new possibilities to relate to myself, others and, if one chooses to believe in them, to transcendent entities.

real Ben. They are about choice. In the present (that is to say the day preceding his death), Willy suddenly finds himself urged to reconsider the vital decisions he made about his life. The occasion is given by Linda who mentions that they just heard of Ben's death two weeks before.⁴

When the fictitious Ben enters (or, shall we say, when what he represents enters Willy's mind?), he does not call his brother Willy the way people normally address him in real life. "So you're William" (47). Ben will always use that same formal name. His role is, as it were, to raise ontological questions: *William*: will + I am. What is the relation between identity and desire (or choice which is the etymological signification of *will*)?⁵ I am not if I am without a will, I am not if I don't make choices. The passage shows at the most abstract level why Willy will always find himself unable to define who he is.

The conversation revolves around Ben's (probably instinctive and unconscious) choices when he tells his brother about his life. He said that he decided to follow their father who had gone to Alaska. He immediately adds, "At that age I had a very faulty view of geography, William. I discovered after a few days that I was heading due south, so instead of Alaska, I ended up in Africa" (48). Obviously, Ben's travels are not to be taken in a factual manner. They are about "open road[s]" (*ibid.*), taken or not taken. In other words, they embody problems. The problem is symbolically made explicit when Willy naïvely exclaims: "The Gold Coast!" (*ibid.*) His reaction makes it possible for us to understand that the road(s) Willy never took in his life are twofold: i) unlike Ben, he never left (his first mistake, as Bernard points out, "sometimes, [...] it's better for a man just to walk away," 95); and ii) if he had left, he would have followed. We know that the father took his family across America starting in New England and ending up in the west in 1890, the year the Frontier was officially over. Against this historical background, at that time, the next step was to look for a new Frontier. Alaska was one of them, especially with the beginning of the Gold Rush. Ben does not make the mistake Willy would have made. He has an identity of his own because he makes choices. He accordingly does not imitate his father and he heads for an unknown continent, Africa, where he finds something that has necessarily to be different — diamonds — and he becomes rich.

Africa presumably refers to the diamond mines in South Africa, if one wishes to understand events in a factual way, but it is clearly more general and

⁴ Any essay on Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is deeply indebted to a number of critical studies who made it possible for us to find our way among the many complexities of the play. Concerning family matters, practically, all the most valuable of these all go back to the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Later contributions did not really add any substantial insight. In this regard, this essay is particularly grateful for what Centola, Hadomi, Jacobson, Schlueter and Tyson had to say about the play.

⁵ The word derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wyllan*, to wish or to choose. See the Skeat's indispensable *Dictionary*.

symbolic and it must be understood as a vaguely Darwinian cliché. It is the jungle, a possibility of life synonymous with chance and change, risks and dangers. It is above all what is not yet written, something Willy cannot represent to himself as he always needs models to repeat: his father if he had left or Dave Singleman since he did not leave. When you follow a model, Miller's play says, you are bound to fail,⁶ a principle which needs, however, to be somewhat qualified. You can follow if, and only if, you are already rich and powerful. Consequently, after his African apotheosis, Ben goes to Alaska and invests in the lumber business (initiating the destruction of nature Willy laments in Brooklyn.) Ben and Willy's father embodied the first age of capitalism. Ben represents the second, the Robber Barons, colonialism and imperialism, as well as a belief that nothing is sacred and that there is nothing wrong if "the woods are burning."

Willy cannot choose. He will always remain the prisoner of two antithetic models, that is to say two incompatible American dreams: the ideals fundamentally embodied by Ben and by Dave Singleman. His life will have consisted in imitating his father in a degraded way. Whereas the latter had been a complete man from an economic point of view (he invented a "gadget," manufactured it and sold it), Willy will be non creative, passive at it were, which is curiously the way he is represented by his brother, alone under a waggon in South Dakota, and he will only be a salesman, in fact regressing to New England in the east where his father's adventure began. It is as if he could never adapt to the changes in American history. The father made use of the waggon for his own profit, Ben and Dave Singleman travelled by train. Symbolically, Willy belongs to a third generation, that of the automobile,

⁶ It should be noted that, with his symbolic use of geography, Miller is here again fully part of the great tradition of classic American literature, and that undeniably is the way his play should be interpreted. To limit ourselves to a single example, on the face of it, *The Scarlet Letter* seems entirely unrelated to *Death of a Salesman*. Yet, at a deeper level, the two works exhibit the same underlying logic. They are about choosing, not at an abstract and empty manner, but at the level of the possibilities actually offered to you by your society as it is. In Hawthorne's romance, conformists live in the city which is binarily opposed to the forest, literally a jungle with its wolves, Indians and witches. It is a wilderness where human beings cannot survive without going mad. Yet, it is in that jungle that characters like Hester Prynne — or Ben in Miller's play — suddenly experience the crucial turning point in their lives. In Hawthorne's novel, after a unrepresented and unrepresentable meeting with Dimmesdale in the wilderness, the young woman's life begins with the choices she now has to make. Not wishing to be a conformist, she will try to be herself, whatever that term means. She elects to live in a small house half way between the city and the forest and then she starts embroidering (the personal component of identity) the letter imposed upon her (the social component). In his Brooklyn house, Charley would appear to be in a similar geographical position as Hester's. There is no doubt that he entered the jungle at some point in the past and committed some unspecified transgression, as no-one can become rich without breaking the laws of society. However, he now conciliates money and human(e) values. Like Hester, all members of society have a symbolic letter to carry. Willy also has one branded upon his unconscious, even though he never left the city. DS: Dave Singleman? Death of Salesman? Unlike Hawthorne's heroine, however, Miller's travelling salesman has selected values inextricably linked to the death towards which he slowly progresses.

except that he constantly turns out to be the victim of cars that keep breaking down. Waggon, trains and cars are social possibilities to which some people are able to adapt, whereas others are not.

Two Brothers

The central problem of the play is about the relation between choice and identity, in other words it is about inventing, writing something new, like, for instance, Hester Prynne embroidering her letter in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Arthur Miller knows that is here a logic at work which he expresses in a structural way. Fundamentally, there are two characters and only two characters in *Death of a Salesman*: on the one hand, a composite entity made up of the three Bs, and, on the other hand, a second composite ending in -y. The three Bs are all elder sons. They don't imitate but conquer new continents: Ben, Bernard (an only son is by definition an elder son as he does not have to define himself in relation to an elder brother), and presumably Biff at the end of the play, if one supposes that he will move to the West and an open-air life, which seems to be borne out by his declaration in the 'Requiem' that Willy had "the wrong dreams" (138). On the other hand, there are the younger sons with names ending in -y who do not go away (physically and/or symbolically). Willy is a follower, as is Happy who does not question his father's emptiness and explains in the "Requiem" that "[h]e [Willy] had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have—to come out number-one-man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him" (139).⁷

It should be noted that, at first viewing or reading of the play, this structure may appear gratuitous. Why link the ultimate meaning of life to the fact that one is born first or second? However, when one starts looking at the play in terms of problems, it is that particular question which is basically superficial. It is simply not the right question.⁸ The mistake readers often commit is to take the contents of the play in a realistic manner whereas all the details in it are to be construed as so many problems to be interpreted symbolically. In this respect, the play tells us that the (after all, chance) order of our birth is the puzzle our minds are meant to crack. What matters is that one does not imitate because one is an elder son. On the contrary, in the universe of *Death of a Salesman*, paradoxically, one is an "elder" son because one imitates. The problem is mental and symbolic, not physical. All told, it would appear to be the sign of a choice: following or not, not in the order of one's birth, but in the

⁷ Are we going to say that Charley is the odd man out of the second group? It is true that, like Willy and Happy, he never left New York, or possibly he has returned to it. What matters, however, are the values which he exhibits. He quietly insists on his difference. Clearly, he does not use violence or he no longer does so in order to conquer new continents. After all, -ey is not exactly -y. Should we conclude that Charley represents Miller's ideal, the man who does not choose regression and defeat, which does not mean that he is not prepared to help others less lucky than him?

⁸ Readers interested in anecdotal and biographical interpretation probably do not need to be reminded that Arthur Miller was his parents' second child and that he had an elder brother...

essential decisions of life. Of course, it should be added, a younger son can become the elder son, that is to say adopt a creative behavior and not follow a repetitive pattern ultimately leading to a kind of death of life. In that respect, what the play hides and reveals at the same time is that Ben is the... younger of the two Loman brothers. Not in reality, of course, but symbolically. He is the one who dared... In other words, a name is not a fate and someone called Ben(jamin) can give the lie to his name. Nothing ever is written. Life is something that always has to be invented anew, which is what Benjamin literally discovered.⁹

What Miller's play reveals is that what is important is not the given, but our attitudes towards that given, the creative choices that we make or that we do not make. *Death of a Salesman* shows the lethal logic inherent in our attempts at following models. In this regard, the dramatist is not only a physician, but also a sort of anthropologist.¹⁰ The pattern elder/younger son, or rather creator/follower is not static, which is what the plot of the play very clearly bears out. There are fundamentally two kinds of models. The first can be called exterior. Just like Don Quixote who tried to imitate Amadis de Gaula, Willy imagines that he can become like Dave Singleman, who, for him, was a picture of perfection, a sort of god, in his mind. Of course, the distance between the model and the subject will never be breached and the latter can only fail and become ever more paralysed. The second type of model is internal. These models are at first real and part of our daily world, but, very quickly, they become rivals, or, at least, enemies. The subject's attitude towards his model is thus bipolar and made up of a mixture of love and hate. (Love being of course the same thing as hate in reverse).

Two examples of this evolution are especially noteworthy in the play. At first, when he is still a teenager, Bernard looks up to Biff as if he were a god.

⁹ Just like Willy Loman, the critical literature concerning psychology in *Death of a Salesman* tends to be... repetitive. This remark should not be taken as an absence of humility behind this essay, but as an earnest desire to pay tribute to one of the earliest studies devoted to the play. In his 1950 "A Modern Playwright—Study of Two Plays by Arthur Miller," Daniel Schneider unquestionably broke new ground, if only because he did not try to read the play in a factual way. Today, it is true that his development inspired by traditional psychoanalysis (especially his references to Freud's theory of Oedipus) sounds somewhat unconvincing. What he says about the two kinds of brothers, elder or younger, nonetheless, is extremely perceptive and forceful. As he reminds us, "[e]very first son 'strikes it rich' in a younger son's eyes." Let us just think of Happy's repeated attempts at emulating his sibling: "I'm losing weight, Pop." This essay, after having recognized Schneider's authority, will, accordingly, not follow his Freudian orthodoxy, but, rather, try to be even less realistic and more abstract than he was.

¹⁰ It is difficult not to think of René Girard's first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, which originally appeared in 1961. Independently of the French anthropologist, Miller developed the same basic intuition about the logic at the heart of everyday social interactions. It is of course fair to say, in return, that Girard chose his examples in literary works (Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Proust, later Shakespeare), which permitted him to demonstrate clearly that literature is a privileged medium in which the illusions created by the power of models upon us can be deconstructed so that we can devise new ways of approaching life in a non-lethal manner.

On the day of the Ebbets Field game, he quarrels with Happy in order to be allowed to carry Biff's helmet before settling for his shoulder guards. The situation is reversed when he witnesses Biff burning his University of Virginia sneakers. He is so disappointed that he literally fights with his former god. His dream has been shattered. As he confesses in his last interview with Willy: "I loved him, Willy, y'know?" (94). He then moves on to a different logic and stops looking for a model. In the end, he is himself seen with a racket actually going to play tennis in Washington, D.C., when Biff has completely given up sport.

There is something almost frightening in the second example as it implies a psychotic situation in which two models have become the prisoners of one another. Willy ignores Happy. The only thing which counts is the image of Biff which he has created in his own mind. In his fantasy, Biff is Willy's god, at the same time as Willy is Biff's god. For his father, Biff is an Adonis and a Hercules, and he will represent the success Willy could never be, both on the sports field and later in the world of business. Up to the moment of his death, Willy will never get over that fixation or escape that specular structure and virtually his last words are addressed to Biff whom he imagines at the height of his glory as an athlete. Conversely, for Biff, his father is the only justification for going to university: "And remember, pal, when I take off my helmet, that touchdown is for you." (32), and, later, "Ah, when Pop comes home they [the other boys] can wait!" (34). The pattern evolves in a similar manner as with Bernard. Biff goes to Boston because he is sure that Willy's magic touch will solve his problems with his math teacher. Suddenly, however, the mirror is cracked and love becomes hate when Biff discovers that his ideal is not in love with him. His father is not a god, just a man in a hotel room with a naked woman, and Biff's illusions are dramatically shattered. He calls his father a "fake" and Willy believes that his son's attitude towards him is motivated by "spite." Models have become enemies.¹¹ What has happened is that, rather than despising himself, Willy now hates his son, because unconsciously he knows that Biff's prestige is purely an illusion. Biff was a god only because Willy made a god of him.

Being and time

A second problem will take us one step further. Individuals actualize or do not actualize the virtualities their societies place at their disposal. Choices are

¹¹ Curiously (or perhaps not curiously), Willy's heyday was in 1928. "I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in the year of 1928!" (82). The confrontation in Boston took place four years later. In-between, of course, the economic crisis hit America, destroying all of a sudden the illusions of financial success the country had been entertaining. It will probably then not come as a surprise when we read that, after all, Willy was in fact a very poor salesman, claiming loudly that he had been making "five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston" (35), when in fact he had barely earned "seventy dollars and some pennies" (*ibid.*) that particular week. Already, even before 1929, like millions of Americans, Willy had been forgotten by prosperity. Illusions...

limited and everyone answers in a personal manner. How then can we now account for the difference between the two Brooklyn neighbors, Charley and Willy? Biff and Bernard? Why does one (try to) follow when the other does not? It certainly has to do with their personal history and with what fatherhood has come to represent for them. Here again, the dramatist assembles and analyses symptoms, making it then possible for readers to come up with diagnoses which, it will be noted, by and large closely resemble those offered by Sigmund Freud or his French follower Jacques Lacan. It is as if, as was the case with anthropology, Miller had on his own and with his own material intuited the same concepts as those developed by psychoanalysis, except that he does not express them in a theoretical way but with his specific dramatic technique. It could practically be maintained that, if, for modern readers, say, Lacan helps us read *Death of Salesman*, the play also helps us better understand the particularly abstruse Lacan.

It seems clear that Willy has become the victim of some form of extreme narcissism. In itself, narcissism is not a perversion. It only becomes one, or, at least, it takes on a pathological aspect, when it is too extreme. Willy, for instance, becomes angry, when a fellow tradesman calls him a “walrus.” Objectively, the other man is right. Willy needs saccharine tablets, which means that he probably suffers from diabetes due to over-weight. However, from a subjective point of view, that is not the image he has of himself. This example, however, is only a minor instance of narcissism. On the other hand, Willy’s deadly fascination for Biff constitute an extreme form of it, and literally deadly it is, as Willy dies hallucinating his son scoring a touch-down at Ebbets Field.

The theory of narcissism has to do with cathexes of which there are two sorts: those placed on outside “objects” (other people, objects like a football ball, etc.) and the inner ones concentrating libido on the ego. Narcissism becomes dangerous when a 50 % / 50 % equilibrium is destroyed. A narcissistic subject can direct up to 100 % of his libido upon an image of himself, cutting himself off in the process from the outside world. It must, however, be pointed out that narcissism in *Death of a Salesman* is highly complex and, in a certain way, particularly perverse. Willy invests upon an image of Biff which he has imposed upon his son, and, as a consequence, Biff, conversely, invests upon an illusory image of his father. To a large extent, Willy’s obsession is for that strange object that he himself tellingly calls “I and Biff” (16) and that has spawn a lethal delirium *à deux*, as if the two of them were in love with each other, or, rather, worse, as if their love had turned into a kind of passion. Technically, it could be said that passion corresponds to a cathexis in which all the subject’s libido is entirely projected upon the object, except that, in Willy’s case, if outwardly the object is the other person (Biff for Willy and Willy for Biff), in fact the object is a projection of my ego, which means that, at bottom, the ego places a 100 % cathexis upon itself. In other words, the subject has no self apart from the image of the other person to which

he has become a slave. The other is like a mirror in which — and only in which — I am able to see myself. Willy exists as long as Biff is both an Adonis and a Hercules, and Biff feels that his existence is endowed with reality as long as his father is a god.

The perverse logic of this extreme form of narcissism is apparent when one considers the sex lives of the two characters. Paradoxically, its main characteristic is that it is strictly non sexual. Admittedly, both have — or, rather, had — sexual partners. Willy has a wife in New York and had a mistress in Boston. Biff, as for him, used at first to be more active with girls than Happy, as probably befits an elder son and a high school football champion. What is important to understand, however, is that sex has to do with the mind, not with the body. It is linked to our representations of identity and what, for instance, is fairly obvious in the play is that Willy is not in love with or even sexually desires The Woman. She mainly offers him a form of peace, they enjoy having a laugh together. Miss Francis (a man's first name?) thus seems to provide him with some sort of camaraderie when she is not seen as a surrogate mother. Revealingly, she calls him her Drummer-Boy. To a large extent, both The Woman and Linda have perfectly understood that Willy is a little child who mentally has not reached puberty. Symbolically, when he returns home, Linda has a glass of milk ready for him and, when he appears worried, she sings him a lullaby. In addition, it would appear that their sex life has become inexistent or mechanical, at least for him, in spite of the apparent efforts of Linda who never stops withdrawing and putting back Willy's hose. (*Honni soit qui mal y pense...* As Lawrence Sterne would put it, a hose is only a hose.)¹² As for Biff, virility is an image which constantly keeps eluding him. There is little doubt that, in his case, stealing is magically synonymous with a desire for being a man. In point of fact, he only steals objects associated with the ideal images Willy has projected upon him: a suit (in Texas where he works with animals on ranch!) and a pen (a second object expressing the essence of a businessman) and a carton of basketballs (as if he was still an athlete). In both cases, Biff unsuccessfully attempts to indirectly achieve his sexual identity. It is of course unnecessary to elaborate on the connotations of (fountain) pen and balls.

The crisis arises when, for a number of reasons, the other person stops identifying to the image which the subject has forced him to play.¹³ The mirror

¹² Readers keen on innuendos are strongly advised to turn to *Tristram Shandy*: “by that word I mean a nose, and nothing more, or less.” (Volume III, Chapter XXXI). It is unquestionable that, in the tradition of Sterne, Miller liked plays on words. See Gilleman for a most challenging analysis of the sexual puns in *Death of Salesman*.

¹³ It is fascinating to read *Death of Salesman* in parallel with a number of classic texts of psychoanalysis. It is almost like reading the same “story” twice, but told in two starkly different manners. Miller did not need to read Sigmund Freud's famous article on narcissism or Jacques Lacan's essay on the mirror stage. He intuitively knew what these theoretical studies would say. He had already discovered the same mechanisms on his own. In this respect, it is important to distinguish i) the subject; ii) the I; and iii) the ego or self (in spite of the fact that Lacan, who carefully separates the three entities, uses the term I in the title of his essay to refer to what we

cracks.¹⁴ The illusion is shattered. In Boston, Biff has a brutal realization: his father is not a “sexless god.”¹⁵ It is not just that he sees an (almost) naked woman in Willy’s bedroom. He sees the naked truth, something utterly obscene.¹⁶ He is then perfectly right when he calls his father “a fake.” The work implies that there is at the same time reality and an image or an illusion, and that, whereas both should correspond, in reality, they do not. What Biff has discovered is that identity is bound up with faith. In other words, the subject is sure of his identity in so far as he believes in an image of himself. This is corroborated by Biff’s second narcissistic collapse. It takes place after the visit he pays Bill (short for William) Oliver, a sort of secondary father figure who will provide him with the money necessary to start his own business, something the primary father figure, Willy (short for William) Loman cannot do. “I ran down eleven flights with a pen in my hand today. And suddenly I stopped, you hear me? [...] I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw—the sky. I saw the things that I love in this world. [...] And I looked at the pen and said to myself, what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don’t want to be?” (132). Biff has understood that ultimately the problem is what you want to be. It is about identity. The surrogate father has not recognized him. Biff has always been used to receiving his identity from the outside by means of an image projected by an exalted father figure upon him. In the middle of that flight of stairs, Biff literally sees (“I saw [...], I saw”) that he has no self.

now call the *self*). The subject is the overall structure of which both the I and the self are parts. The I is always empty. It only means that I am a human being and that, unlike animals, I can speak and use the deictic marker *I* to point to myself. The self is an object which I construct: *I am myself / my self*. It is a composite image made up of all my identifications with which I *identify*. In other words, it is my (always unstable and temporary) *identity*.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan’s 1936 concept of the mirror stage is an extremely economical theory. Miller, who never read Lacan, would immediately have understood what is at stake in it. It accounts for the genesis of two very important realities. The first is identity which starts when the infant suddenly realizes that it is himself that it sees in the mirror. Identity, however, consists in a false image of myself (a reverse left-right reflection of my face, or possibly another baby at school, then later a prestigious figure like a surgeon or an airline pilot) with which I temporarily identify. An adult’s self is thus a heterogeneous mixture of these first identifications followed by all the others which grown-ups never cease to produce. Secondly, Lacan’s theory explains the birth of aggressivity which takes place when, in some cases, my image in the mirror becomes frightening. It is now perceived by the infant as a double who becomes a rival or an enemy, unless a third person, — mother, father or some other adult — is present and comforts the baby: don’t be afraid, it is not another baby, it is only you. That is exactly what all of a sudden happens in Boston. The image in the mirror stops being myself / my self, and immediately the situation becomes mentally unbearable.

¹⁵ The phrase is borrowed from Daniel Schneider’s 1950 essay.

¹⁶ The word *obscene* has no sexual content. Perhaps, we should recall the convenient distinctions traditionally supposed to have been put forward by Jean-Paul Sartre: a young woman in a bathing suit is *erotic*, the same young woman without her bathing suit is *pornographic*, a piece of dead meat on a butcher’s stall is *obscene*. (Whereas the etymologies of *erotic* and *pornographic* are easy to figure out, that of *obscene* is uncertain, being possibly derived from *scaevus*, sinister, coming from the left, or from *caenum*, filth. One thing is clear though, it is not sexual. In Latin, *obscenus* referred to an event of bad omen, implying that something is going to destroy me).

The three generations

It is time to return to Willy, who, for (largely unconscious) reasons of his own, has developed a form of pathological narcissism. What are those reasons? Is there something like a cause? It would seem that, in Willy's past, some sort of traumatic event prevented in him a normal development of his sense of self. Very often, in psychoanalytic case studies, the problem has to do with the baby's separation from its mother. In Miller's play, it is the father who unexpectedly left when the boy was 4. Of course, the problem is not that Willy's father went to Alaska and probably stopped providing for his family. It is far more abstract and general, if only because nothing in the play is to be taken at a purely factual level. (In other words, readers are moved by the play not because they are salesmen or something happened to them in South Dakota, but because they have a father, or perhaps they lost him, or something terrible befell them in relation to their father). Why do I need a father (or an adult playing a father's role) and how do I relate to him in order to become an adult? Such undeniably is the crucial problem posed by Willy's tragedy.

As a result, in Willy's imagination, the absent father became a sort of absolute, that is a figure of perfection and completeness. He has a big beard (the way God is traditionally represented?), he is a success from an economic point of view, inventing, manufacturing and selling, being indeed he is the complete embodiment of the essence of business before the advent of the division of labor. More generally, he belongs to the pastoral age of the Frontier, and, by definition, a pastoral age is a world to which one will never have access. There is a before and an after. Willy lives in the after, and, if his father had not abandoned him, some other trauma would presumably have taken place with similar psychic results. A second factor has also to be taken into consideration. Men are not born equal, physically or mentally. Biff could have been an athlete. Willy could not. In his case, there is apparently an element of weakness, bodily but also psychological. In conjunction with his father's memory, he has of himself the image of a little boy protected by a wagon and to whom Ben offers a bunch of flowers, almost as if Willy was a woman. It is indisputable that manhood will be a crucial question at the heart of Willy's identity. Put differently, in this non-realistic play about symptoms, nothing guarantees us that the memory of that day in South Dakota is true to life. Maybe, it is a projection into the past of the character's present sense of insecurity.

From then on, Willy has become the victim of an either/or structure. Some people are nothing (me), whereas others are everything (my brother). Ben is not to be construed as a surrogate father for Willy as some academic studies have suggested. What would be the point? Ben's image is part of Willy's identity. He is everything I am not and everything I could not be. As I am nothing, and because I have never been but nothing, he is the absolute I crave. He above all has the solution to my failure: "What's / What is the answer?" (47 and 84), Willy keeps asking. Apart from the fact that he is a living image

of virility with his supposed seven sons (only boys! and a magical figure to boot!), he is the “subject supposed to know,” the fictitious figure upon whom I project my anxiety and my sense of deprivation.¹⁷ He knows all the details, including my age when he left (not four years old, but very precisely “three years and eleven months,” 47). Above all, he has the key to the diamonds, in other words, the secret of success, the answers to both how to *be* (identity) and how to *have* (money). He entered the jungle, a kind of black box never described, and he came out of it a man. In addition, as he said, “I have never kept books” (*ibid.*), meaning presumably that he wasn’t afraid of a tax inspection because he symbolically was above or outside the Law and more generally society.

The humour of this passage sufficiently indicates that we should not look for any sort of verisimilitude in it. Its significance within the play is abstract and theoretical. It has to do with one essential question: what should your father represent for you? Willy has come to think in terms of absolutes: his father, just like his brother, are gods, and that precisely is the reason why he never grew up (and, to continue with the humour, that is also the reason why he still drinks milk when he sees his wife...) What Miller’s play seems to suggest is that a healthy development of our identity requires a balanced relation to our father (or to an adult playing his role). It is all a question of equilibrium, of the “good distance:” on the one hand, the father must not be out of reach, as was Willy’s father, and, on the other hand, he must not be too close, as Willy will constantly be for Biff. A father has to be someone to whom you can relate. In this respect, Charley appears to be a perfect example of what a non pathological father can be. As he declares (with, also in his case, what is clearly a pinch of humour): “My salvation is that I never took any interest in anything” (96). The word *interest* actually comes from Willy’s mouth (and mind) as he cannot understand why Charley never took what he calls “any interest in” his son. Unlike his neighbour, however, Charley does not think in terms of interest or influence, which, it stands to reason, does not mean that Charley never showed any interest in Bernard. On the contrary, the whole play shows that he deeply cared for him. However, he did not make any important decisions in Bernard’s stead. In other words, Charley was (physically and morally) present and Bernard was (psychologically) free, which can be seen as an example of a “good distance.”¹⁸ We may suppose, for instance, that Charley

¹⁷ That celebrated phrase is Jacques Lacan’s. It refers to the image of the analyst in the eyes of the analysand, as the latter imagines that the former’s authority enables him to have all the “answers,” to speak like Willy when he thinks of Ben. It is of course a projection which is part of the process known as transference. In the end, the analysand will hopefully break free from these imaginary illusions and construct for him or herself a better understanding of his or her identity and of the origin of his or her desire. See in particular Seminar XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: “He is supposed to know that from which no one can escape, as soon as he formulates it — quite simply, signification” (253).

¹⁸ Humans need walls, in the same way as countries need frontiers whose main function is to prevent war. In fact, what makes us human is “mending wall” (in the singular, it is a general

would have said “no” if Bernard had broken the moral law and started stealing things. Willy, who identifies to Biff, does not. He should have. Willy is thus the victim of his absolutist image of Ben. On the contrary, one of the lessons of *Death of a Salesman* is that no-one is outside the law, as it is the law which turns children into adults, telling them what can be and what cannot be an object of desire for them. Ultimately, *William’s* naïve disregard of the law can only have one consequence: he does not know who he is (*I am*) and he does not know what he wants (*will*).¹⁹

At the heart of the logic behind *Death of a Salesman*, there are always three generations. That is what the law is ultimately about. First and foremost, the law represents the point of view of society, which is something which Willy seems unable to understand, enslaved as he is to his narcissism and his limited vision. Society only desires one thing: it wants to continue and, as a consequence, its members’ only mission concerns procreation. (Only mission from the point of view of society, it goes without saying). As a consequence, humans have to unconsciously accept two differences: i) the difference between generations, or the principle of the three generations: I have a father, then there is myself, then I am a father (if I am a man); ii) the difference between a man and a woman which is obviously necessary in order to produce new children. Failure to do so results in perversion (by definition) or (in extreme cases) in madness. Some families are successful because they obey the law. The Wagners are a good example. Howard, Frank’s son, has two

pronouncement), and, as Robert Frost famously showed, it always takes two to mend a wall. It is an on-going process, as expressed by the *-ing* suffix. It is only because there is a wall that I am able to relate to the others, my neighbour included. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who is most unlikely to have read our famous New England poet, develop the same point with his concept of the “good distance.” In *The Origin of Table Manners*, the third volume of his *Mythologies*, he relates the fable of the celestial pirogue. The pirogue is in fact a problem. Where are its two passengers going to sit? There are three possibilities: i) at the extreme ends; ii) in the middle; iii) one on each side between the middle and the end. The answers are: i) indifference, no communication; ii) fusion and madness; iii) the “good distance.” Lévi-Strauss connects the pirogue with a number of key Latin American myths like those of the sun and the moon, or of day and night. If night stops being different from day, it quickly means war and chaos. Of course, the main application of the pattern concerns human societies: one cannot marry too close (ie, incest) or too far (to an enemy or an animal). To return to our everyday preoccupations, what should the relationships inside a couple consist in? The relationships between father and son? Readers interested in the importance of these questions for American literature are referred to Daniel Thomières’s essay “Sons but not Lovers: Fatherhood and Identity in Three Classic American Novels” which analyses examples of “bad distances” between father and son in works by Hawthorne (“Young Goodman Brown”), Melville (*Pierre*) and Faulkner (*Quentin in The Sound and the Fury*).

¹⁹ This point is only an example of a type of ancient wisdom that is only forgotten at our own risks. For instance, both Sigmund Freud (psychoanalysis) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (anthropology) reminded us that the key to psychological growth is the Oedipus theory and that humanity’s first law is the prohibition of incest. One marries outside one’s family or one’s clan. It is in fact the same law. It is thus impossible to separate desire from the law. The Oedipus principle, which is about the fact that there are always three generations, similarly tells us whom we are allowed to desire and whom we are not. If we ignore that fundamental law, the outcome is always perversion and/or madness.

children. What his daughter says on the tape recorder is revealing: “It’s nine o’clock, Bulova watch time. So I have to go to sleep” (78). A recognition of the succession of the generations fundamentally means a acceptance of time which cannot be stopped, something Willy is unable to do. In *The Sound and the Fury*, the arch narcissist Quentin Compson breaks his watch. Symbolically Willy pawned his.²⁰ In addition, accepting time is bound up with being part of the law. “So I have to go to sleep,” because, if I don’t go to bed at 9, I will be sick to-morrow, and to-morrow and to-morrow, which may in the end herald the beginning of serious psychological difficulties. On the other hand, if I understand what is necessary, that will be the sign of my freedom, and America will then be open to me. As regards her brother, it is clear that the day he will go into business, unlike Willy, he will prove a ruthless success. He has shown that he already knows the names of all the American states (with their capitals!) Acceptance of the law of the three generations is of course also true of Charley who similarly has two grandchildren (two boys in his case).

The opposition with Willy’s family could not be clearer. Willy knows that he has always felt “kind of temporary about [him]self” (51) ever since his father abandoned him. He cannot be part of the continuity of time in which generations follow one another. As a matter of fact, *Death of a Salesman* could very well have been entitled *The Fall of the House of Loman*, a play in which the protagonist’s double is not his twin sister, but one of his sons. This is undoubtedly the way we are meant to understand the significance of the ending of the play which hinges on a contrast between the two brothers. Happy will continue to try to imitate his father. He cannot of course but fail because there is nothing to imitate in Willy who has no identity and no desire of his own. Besides, as we saw, successfully building one’s identity has nothing to do with following someone else’s image. Happy now keeps saying “I’m gonna get married, Mom / I’m getting married, Pop” (68 and 133), but, even though he has had quite a few women friends, they always marry someone else and, one supposes, bear their children. On the other hand, possibly Biff will opt out of his deadly confrontation with Willy when he speaks of Texas in spring, a most symbolic season with the return of life and fertility at long last: “There’s nothing more inspiring or—beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt” (22). Even horses are conscious of the importance of time and generations.

His name on ice

There probably was a cause in Willy’s childhood — it most likely was the gap he was faced with after his father’s disappearance — which blocked his mental evolution. In the play, however, the cause is mostly perceptible in its effects,

²⁰ In his own way, Willy is just as narcissistic as Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*. He pawns the watch in order to pay for a series of correspondence courses for Biff. Symbolically, in Willy’s eyes, the watch is exchanged for success, his success, it goes without saying, as Biff has no free will, being only a puppet in which Willy hopes to discover a glorified image of himself.

that is in the fact that he cannot be a father. It is true that he has two sons, but fatherhood here is to be seen not as a physical reality, but as a mental image, a deep-seated part of one's identity. In this regard, Willy Loman is very much like Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown after the latter left the forest and returned to his wife's bed. Their symptoms are broadly similar. Both men are the prisoners of an ambivalent image of their fathers, which is, in Brown's case, what he suddenly discovers in the heart of the forest. The models (Brown's ancestors, Willy's mythical father, as well as Willy for Biff in Willy's mind) turn out to be disappointing. Even though he produced an unspecified number of children and grandchildren, Hawthorne's character remains "[a] stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not desperate man." (123-124). He has lost his faith, that is not only his trust in his wife Faith, but also the capacity to believe in marriage, fatherhood and the trappings of society. For different reasons, of course, Willy Loman is similarly incapable of playing the role society expects from him, that is to say be a father and unite the law and desire for his sons, say no when necessary, and allow them to become independent and self-sufficient.

In the last analysis, Willy's problem with fatherhood is linguistic. "If I could say mother," exclaims Quentin twice in *The Sound and the Fury* (95 / 172), showing a remarkable awareness of what prevents him both from (symbolically) having a father and from being a father, a process that slowly and inexorably also takes him to his death by suicide. We should probably say that Quentin's declaration reflects Faulkner's prescience. The novelist does not write that Quentin does not have a mother. He has a mother (a bad one), as well as a father (who does not play his role and does not say no when his son tells him — in imagination — that he has committed incest). The problem is not factual. It has nothing to do with words either. (Quentin of course knows the word *mother* and he actually uses it). The problem has to do with the repercussions of the word in his unconscious. For him, *mother* should correspond to some sort of structure or framework that would sustain him and enable him to be part of his community. In addition, the sentence is unfinished. Those readers who have read the whole novel are able to complete it: If I could say mother, I would not have to jump into the Charles river. As far as Willy is concerned, his difficulty lies with what his father represents: "Dad left when I was such a baby and I never had a chance to talk to him and I still feel—kind of temporary about myself" (51), which appears to be a contagious situation, as Biff, Willy's double, also says about his father: "I can't talk to him!" (109). The problem is admittedly different from that implied by the quotation from *The Sound and the Fury*, but, nonetheless, the two characters have one thing in common. Just like Quentin, who, in his delirium, tries to create an image of his father with which he believes he could establish a dialogue, find a *you* which would make an *I* possible, before the two voices finally become indistinguishable at the end of his monologue, Willy would like to address his absent father. Deep down, what he needs is an opposition, i.e., in his case,

between *I* and *you*. If he could say *you*, he would be able to say *I*, which would then guarantee his subjectivity.²¹

Quentin Compson could not say mother. Willy Loman cannot use the *I / you* opposition in a conversation with his father. Quentin has a mother and a father. He also has the words *mother* and *father*. His problem is that he cannot “say mother.” Mother? What’s in a word? Totally independently from the findings of the modern science of linguistics, both Faulkner and Miller perfectly understood two key principles. First, “In a language, there are only differences, and no positive terms,”²² which means that a word is a system of oppositions. In this case, *mother* is inseparable from the system *mother / father / grandfather / son / brother / sister*, etc. (The list is always unfinished). If his unconscious is unable to rely on the smooth working of this system of permutations, the subject will collapse, especially if, at one point, he has to show that he is a father (saying *no* to one of his sons, for instance). Secondly, linguistics and more generally psychoanalysis have shown that words do not directly relate to reality. Words are always metaphors, something most of us have long forgotten. (*Grasp, seize, understand*, for instance, are obviously metaphorical terms). As far as father is concerned, it replaces something, which is of course the most elementary function of metaphor. (In, say, *She is an angel*, *angel* replaces my fiancée, as this particular word provides the best description one will ever come up with to talk of her. Of course, angels do not exist. They are part of a paradigmatic structure used in this example to talk about a woman, including *somebody with substance, pig or strudel*, etc. to speak like Happy Loman). In Quentin’s case, *mother* is a metaphor of dungeon, the dark chaos from which he tries to break free and to which he is fatally

²¹ In less linguistic terms and in a more psychological way, Willy’s problem could alternatively be described as a refusal or failure to mourn. His father has been physically absent ever since he was 4, but he is far too present from a mental point of view, completely alienating Willy’s mind who has turned him into a god. One does not relate to gods. They are perfect and out of reach. The linguistic approach chosen for the last layer of analysis of this essay has, however, seemed more promising in its implications. Readers who are, however, interested in the problems raised by the impossibility of mourning, can, for instance, re-read “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath (in *Ariel*, 49), a poem that will enable us to corroborate this essay’s theoretical approach. When she was young (11, if we accept that her confessional poem is autobiographical), the poem’s persona lost her father who had originally come from Germany. What the poem shows is that “Daddy” completely blocks the subject’s mind, forcing her to repeat words containing the alliteration oo. The subject can say Du (*you* in German), but nowhere in the poem will we find *Ich (I)*... In the end, the speaker explains that she has finally healed as she has found another man to replace her father (a husband who looks like the father!), and she finally says “I’m through.” Clearly, she is still the prisoner of the oo sound, that is of the father. I’m through? I have escaped? Or is it, I am dead? The poem ends in ambiguity. In this regard, Plath’s text offers a very cogent linguistic interpretation of Freud’s opposition between mourning and melancholy in his article on mourning. Mourning means accepting loss and coming to terms with present-day reality. Melancholy, on the other hand, is the refusal to mourn that commonly ends in suicide. Willy Loman’s is a good case in point.

²² Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in Modern Linguistics*, 118.

attracted.²³ Put succinctly, Faulkner's diagnosis is: for the character, it is either the dungeon or having and being a father. Similarly, one could say that, in Willy's case, it is either suicide like Quentin or saying *I* and *you*.²⁴

The problem is Willy's and, by contagion, Biff's. It should be noted that we do not know Bernard's last name. He does not need it. In his case, the system functions correctly and he adapts effortlessly to the roles and the possibilities offered to him by his society. He does not have any difficulty saying *I* or expressing his desires either. On the other hand, the male members of the Loman family cannot designate either themselves or each other in a stable manner that would permit them to acquire a minimum of autonomy instead of remaining enslaved to a series of lethal confrontations. They cannot make words resonate in their unconscious so that they are able to achieve a secure sense of self. As we saw, words are always part of a system of oppositions and the subject can only define himself inside that system. Ben, who represents what Willy would like to be but cannot, has apparently understood that very simple but necessary logic. Benjamin is not (the) Benjamin! He intuitively knows that he belongs to a system opposing younger son (follower and failure) / elder son (success and self-sufficiency). Ben chooses one side of this alternative: the younger son becomes the elder son, or,

²³ To some extent, Willy appears as a latter-day Hamlet who jumps into Ophelia's grave and remains there. In fact, the abyss into which Willy will eventually fall is empty. It is the final darkness of the highway. On the contrary, Hamlet will rise another man from the tomb. He has recognized Ophelia's love, albeit too late. He then emerges from his narcissism and from his fantasy of fusion with his mother in order to assume his social responsibilities. It is at that precise moment that he proclaims his name (also the name of his father), as well as his rank: "This is I, Hamlet the Dane." (*Hamlet*, Act 5, scene 1, 53-54). Unlike "I am Willy Loman," Hamlet's statement is fully meaningful in so far as he is able to identify with it in order to carry out his mission successfully. Not surprisingly, Lacan makes use of Dr. Schreber's *Memoirs*, but also of Shakespeare's hero, in order to substantiate his theory of the Name of the Father, to which he adds a number of associated considerations about mourning and narcissism which are also perfectly relevant for an analysis of Miller's *Death of Salesman*.

²⁴ References to linguistics are to Ferdinand de Saussure. References to psychoanalysis are to the Schreber case by Freud, and especially to its revision by Lacan who used it to illustrate his concept of the Name of the Father (or what he called the signifier *father*). Lacan, who liked puns, never refrained from pointing out that the phrase can in French be spelt both as le Non du Père (*the No of the Father*) and le Nom du Père (*the Name of the Father*). A father's role is to say *no* to his child but also to the mother: no, you are no longer part of your mother's body, no, he/she is no longer part of your body. That *no* is a metaphor which replaces the abyss in which the infant and its mother could collapse. More generally, in our paternalistic western cultures, a baby is symbolically given its father's last name to show that it will have to break free from the dual chaos in which it has been living with its mother in order to eventually become part of culture, that is to say discover the law and desire. Lacan of course points out that it is something not to be taken in a realistic manner. It is the No/Name of the Father in the mother's mouth which introduces the child to the linguistic systems of oppositions that will structure his or her adult unconscious. In some cases, however, accidents happen. The consequence is what Lacan calls a forclusion of the signifier *father*. That is what must have happened in Dr. Schreber's case. When he found himself in situations in which he was supposed to think of himself as a father, he collapsed into a mental abyss and became delirious. (See Lacan's Seminar III, *Psychoses*).

rather, what is implied in the arithmetics of the play by being an elder son. On the contrary, Biff and Willy cannot escape the alternative. For them, meaning and identity endlessly keep passing from one side of the opposition to the other as they never choose to occupy a stable place in the system.

Willy never escapes the emptiness of his first name: William. He keeps telling himself: “He’ll [Biff] see what I am, Ben!” (126), “he [Biff] thinks I’m nothing” (*ibid.*), “Don’t you [Biff] want to be anything?” (112), just like Biff (Willy’s double here) repeats “Pop, I’m nothing! I’m nothing, Pop. Can’t you understand that? [...] I’m just what I am, that’s all” (132-133). There will never be an answer. Grammatically, I am is an empty utterance as it does not have a complement that is part of a meaningful opposition. (*Something / nothing / anything* are only indefinite pronouns and therefore not sufficient to produce signification and a sense of identity). Willy cannot escape the implications of his last name either. *Loman*? While allowing that Miller insisted on the fact that he was simply thinking of police commissioner Lohmann, a character in Fritz Lang’s movie *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, it is extremely difficult for readers and spectators to ignore the basic question: what is a *man*? The word is largely an empty cliché in that context, as it is not taken as part of an opposition (man vs. woman, man vs. animal, etc). *Low man* as opposed to his boss *Howard* (etymologically, toward the heights) whom he claimed to have “named”? In this instance, Willy seems to have chosen one of the two sides of the opposition (that of the victim) and presented the other side (success) to his future employer. Name as fate? It would appear that Willy willingly submits to it. It could also be said that he identifies to *Singleman*, his model. With that name, that mythical character is a contradiction in terms: the man who for Willy represents the possibility of being “well-liked,” that is a possibility of life he will try to impart to his own family, ironically was single and died alone in a train. Name as fate again with its untenable opposition? Only Ben, as Willy suspects, knows (he knows everything!) the meaning of *man*, that is what must be attached to it: “it does take a great kind of man to crack the jungle” (138). Such will be Willy’s ultimate identification. Whether he succeeded or not, the answer lies beyond the pale, in death.

Incapable as he is of finding support and direction in a first name which is not part of an opposition or in a last name that is the degraded part of an opposition, Willy will try again to assert his identity by means of names or appellations that are all metaphors. He will, however, systematically fail because his mind never stops switching back and forth from one side of the opposition to the other without being able to permanently cling to either of these sides. Of course, one needs to bear in mind that readers and spectators are inside the character’s mind and that he plays all the roles. When his sons talk about their father or about themselves, it is as a reflection of the way Willy sees himself at that moment. His self image, both when he is directly thinking of himself or when he is thinking of himself through his sons, is always bipolar. He cannot choose whether he is a prince (which, said in passing is the way he

called Frank Wagner, the admired boss), a Hercules, an Adonis, or, on the other hand, “kid,” “Drummer-Boy,” a bum, yellow, phony, a fake, a dime a dozen, or the terrible “just a guy,” etc.²⁵

Names and metaphors are Willy Loman’s tragedy. Miller sensed it. He declared that his character should be seen as someone “who could never cease, like Adam, trying to name himself” (*Timebends*, 182), and even more tellingly that Willy was “a man trying to write his name on ice on a hot July day” (Miller’s words as reported by Alvin Klein in a *New York Times* review, December 2, 1990). Willy will never stop trying. A ray of hope, however, appears near the end of the play when Biff seems to have given up being his father’s double. He has just stolen Bill Oliver’s pen, the ultimate symbol of the businessman who signs big contracts. Biff suddenly understands. The pen is useless. He will never sign his name. He has no name.

Diamonds forever

Willy’s death is one last attempt at an impossible synthesis. In his case, we understand that that means being completely cut off from reality and reaching the extremity of narcissism. He will be for Biff the father his father never was for him. He feels as if he finally had the answer. He believes that he knows now what fatherhood means. It means twenty thousand dollars, the money Bill Oliver did not give Biff. (It is of course highly unlikely that the latter still wants to start his sporting goods business, if he ever really wanted to do so). Willy once again makes all the decisions at Biff’s place. There is no going back as he now approaches death. In that last scene, he literally is Ben. It had long been a dream of his to identify to the subject he supposed knew all the answers, who could, who had, who was. At present, Willy is no longer a split personality.²⁶ Even though he briefly discussed with Ben if his plan was sound and whether the insurance company will pay up the money as they have already proved suspicious of his previous accidents, he at present does not have any hesitations, and, in his delirium, the voices of the two brothers eventually merge, just like Quentin’s and Mr. Compson’s voices merge in *The Sound and the Fury* before Quentin plunges into the water. In addition, being Ben means that he is no longer submitted to desire, that is to say to lack, to hoping that one day he will be able to possess what he does not have now. As Ben stresses, “that is something one can feel with the hand, it is there” (126). Not surprisingly, practically Willy’s last words symbolically refer to a glorified

²⁵ In the play, *Pop*, a term frequently used by Biff and Happy, is the only way mode of address that is not part of an system of oppositions. Can one identify to *Pop*? Admittedly, it is traditionally used to American children and it is a valuable synonym for *dad* or *father*, but one has to recognize that it is almost not a name, but rather something like an onomatopoeia, or, worse, a palindrome, that is to say that the word possesses a mirror structure, as if Willy’s relationship to his sons could never escape a (deadly) specular logic.

²⁶ Before committing suicide, Quentin Compson has the same desire of union with what he imagines is his double: “Niggers say a drowned man’s shadow was watching for him in the water all the time.” (*The Sound and the Fury*, 90).

image of Biff's long promised "touchdown." Willy is sure. He now has the diamonds, "hard to the touch" (134). The diamonds represent that magic and that impossible synthesis: i) financial success; and ii) being well-liked, a synthesis that had been embodied in his idyllic image of Dave Singleman, the salesman with the symbolic green slippers. Willy then enters the garden, trying to turn it into a paradise regained with his seeds which, he is sure, should not fail to prove fertile, and then he moves on to his car and the Garden becomes the Jungle.

Death of a Salesman is undeniably part of the great tradition of classic American literature and it can be argued that it is best interpreted when it is seen as an attempt at making sense of the interplay between society and the individual. Society is represented by a limited number of virtualities that concrete individuals actualize or not. Some people like Willy Loman even try to actualize two of these virtualities at the same time, "rugged" and "well-liked," without understanding that they are incompatible. B & B: they are doubles at first. Biff could have been a success like Bernard, except that he remains caught in the contradictory fantasies his father has imposed upon him, whereas Bernard, for whom Biff had first been a model, chooses hard work and seizing chances. Biff & Will(y): one may imagine that, at the end of the play, Biff will stop being Willy and break free from his impossible ideals.

Against the possibilities made available by that social background, exactly as in the classic tradition to which Miller's play belongs, it seems possible to distinguish two kinds of individuals: those of who commit suicide and those who do not. To the first category belongs Hester Prynne, even though she is also a victim and, like Willy, is treated like an "orange," the "peel" of which the magistrates symbolically "throw away" (82). Yet, she survives her ordeal. The second group is made up of characters who are enslaved to the image of a double they have created and who eventually die of it, even if some of them do not actually take their own lives: Roderick Usher and his sister, Melville's Pierre and his sister, Quentin Compson's and his sister... "Did you ever have a sister?" Willy Loman does not. He has a son (only one...) That is the sole difference. Biff is Willy's double in the mirror. Whereas Willy's slow progress towards death begins at age four when his father abandoned him and left him "kind of temporary about [him]self" (51), Hester seems to have been born constitutionally stronger (her parents were present and, one supposes, supportive) and she is thus able to choose social and mental survival. Like Willy, however, her starting point was traumatic, but her true life — and Hawthorne's novel — symbolically begin when she is portrayed leaving Boston prison. Unlike Miller's salesman, the seamstress will not become the prisoner of a 100 % identification of an absolute object like Ben's diamonds. She understands perfectly that, if she does not remain 50 % part of society, the outcome will be death or madness, a temptation she at one point briefly entertains. When she is very old and returns to New England, she even spontaneously returns to the small house half way between the city and the

forest and she places the letter back upon her chest. She has the real answer. Identity is half social and half individual. In her case, the other half, the creative and personal dimension, consists, not in imitating a model, but in embroidering and bestowing value upon the mark society has placed upon her body and her soul. She uses needle and thread, the limited materials she has at her disposal in her sewing equipment. There are no diamonds. Diamonds do not exist. They belong to the realm of fantasy. Hester's thread is gold.

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