

## A DISCOURSE STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) through a discourse-stylistic lens, integrating Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how language constructs ideology, identity, power relations, and psychological instability in the Loman family. The approach highlights that the play's tragedy is not merely thematic but enacted through discourse patterns. Key linguistic features analyzed include fragmented discourse and temporal shifts (blurring past and present to reflect denial and instability), repetition (e.g., "well liked," "be liked and you will never want"), turn-taking and silence (revealing power struggles and gendered silencing), high-certainty modality (asserting capitalist certainties as universal truths), and lexical metaphors (mapping human worth onto economic terms like "worth," "stock," "sales"). SFL meta-functions (ideational, interpersonal, textual) provide micro-level tools for clause analysis, while CDA situates these in broader socio-ideological contexts, critiquing the American Dream, capitalist values, and patriarchal norms. Findings reveal how conversational structures, interruptions, and silences encode Willy Loman's ideological entrapment, mental fragmentation, and family power dynamics. The study demonstrates that Miller's conversational tone, colloquialisms, irony, flashbacks, and expressionistic elements reinforce these discourse strategies. Implications suggest discourse analysis enriches literary discourse by linking language to social critique, adding a linguistic-ideological dimension to existing scholarship on the play.

**Key Words:** *Stylistics, discourse, critical discourse analysis, systematic functional linguistics, meta-functions.*

### Introduction

Language is an important tool in human communication. It is the system of rules and principles of human communication. Perhaps, it is the most distinctive defining characteristics of language as a method of communicating ideas, emotions and feelings. In fact, MC Neill (2000) argues that language is not just a matter of words but also other features other than words. Also, Mbuba (1998) describes language as not only a social phenomenon but also has linguistic dimensions which aid linguistic analysis. It is to be noted that the use of language changes over time to reflect certain realities. Again, Mbuba (1998) opines that change often occurs in the ethno linguistic environment in connection with the content and context of what is to be communicated through language and time.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* although written in 1949 seems to answer to the dynamic nature of language use. Akpan (2013) maintains that the scope and diversity of the human thoughts and experiences place great demand on language and its application. Akpan and Effiong, (2021), argues that communication is not restricted to a fixed set of topics, but rather, language must do something more than provide a package of ready-made messages. This means that language must enable us to produce and understand new words, phrases and sentences as the need arises.

The *Death of a Salesman* occupies a dominant position in modern American literary space especially as it questions the American supposedly "utopian" state and its tragic representation of the ordinary American citizen. This text written over 77years ago has enjoyed several literary and linguistic criticisms

and viewed in different lenses, such as socioeconomic consideration, psychological analysis, sociolinguistic commentary and its tragic perspective. However, this present endeavor, which is to view it in the lens of discourse - stylistic shifts critical attention to the language patterns through which the various themes revolve and are constructed.

Discourse-stylistics, according to Enang, Uruzian, Udoka, (2013), combines stylistics and discourse analysis to investigate how meaning is generated through interactional structures, linguistic choices, and contextual positioning. In other words, it is discourse centered stylistics. Olowe (1998) opines that discourse stylistics is an eclectic term that combines discourse and stylistics and that it has a lot to do with the ethnographic approach to the study of discourse. While Opara (2005) says that discourse analysis analyses what is communicated in discourse, and stylistics analyses how it is communicated.

Miller (1998) argues that rather than focusing solely on what the play represents, this approach interrogates how meaning emerges from dialogue organization, turn-taking, repetition, deixis, modality, metaphor, and silence. In the text, the author presents the breakdown of narrative linearity, and blends of memory and present actions which depicts the fragmented conversational exchanges that are not merely structural devices; but are discourse strategies that encode psychological instability; ideological fixation, and shifting power relations within the Loman's family.

Examining the play at the level of discourse-stylistics, it becomes evident that the tragedy in Miller's work is embedded in language itself. Willy Loman's repeated assertion about being "well like", his high-certainty modal expressions, and his interruptions during confrontation with Biff are stylistic markers of denial, insecurity, and ideological entrapment. Thus, discourse stylistic examination reveals that the collapse of American Dream is not only dramatized through the plot but enacted through patterns of speech, silence, and conversational conflict.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This Study Adopts An Integrated Framework Drawing From Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) And Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) To Examine How Discourse Constructs Ideology, Identity And Power Relations In *Death Of A Salesman*. The Justification Of This Choice Is That These Theories Will Enable Us To Tease Out The Meaning Potential That Is Encoded In Miller's Language. According To SFL, Language Simultaneously performs three meta-functions: Ideational meta-function which is concern with how language represents experience and reality. In this study, ideational analysis will examine transitivity patterns, processes, and representation. Secondly, interpersonal meta-function which centers on interaction power, and attitude, accordingly, we will look at mood structures, modality, and evaluative language. Thirdly, textual meta-function, this concerns how discourse is organized, thus, this study will analyse theme-rheme structure, cohesion, and information flow.

According to Dijk (1995) CDA is an interdisciplinary approach to textual analysis and is interested in the role of language in defining social relations along asymmetrical lines. However, drawing from Fairclough's model of CDA, discourse is analysed at three levels: textual level, discursive practice, and social practice. Therefore, SFL provides the micro-linguistic tools for analysing clause structure, modality, and transitivity, while CDA situates those linguistic choices within broader ideological and socioeconomic contexts.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, text-based approach, analysing selected excerpt from *Death of a Salesman* through an integrated SFL and CDA framework. Linguistic features such as transitivity, mood,

modality, repetition, deixis, and turn-taking are examined to uncover how meaning is constructed as the clause and discourse level, while CDA situates these patterns within broader socio-cultural ideological contexts, including capitalist values, the American Dream and constructions of masculinity. By combining micro-linguistic analysis with socio- ideological interpretation, the study explores how psychological instability, power relations and ideological entrenchment are enacted through language rather than simply represented thematically.

**Table 1: Discourse Stylistic Analysis of *Death of a Salesman***

Discourse Feature	Examples from Text	SFL Function	CDA Interpretation/Ideological Significance
Fragmented discourse/temporal shifts	Willy switches between present and past: " I was going to do this... but now..."	Ideational meta-function: unstable temporal deixis, blurring processes and participants.	Reflects psychological instability, enacts denial of reality, reproduces internalized American Dream Ideology.
Repetition	"Well like", "personality ", "success " (p.23), (p.33)	Textual meta-function: cohesion and emphasis; interpersonal meta-function: reinforces belief.	Obsessive thought patterns, discursive enactment of capitalist values; ideological entrenchment.
Turn-taking and silence	Interruptions between Willy and Biff, Linda's pauses. (p.104).	Interpersonal meta-function: power negotiation; ellipsis indicates unexpected meaning.	Power struggles between family; gendered silencing; control over narrative and ideological discourse.
Modality	"He'll be great ", "the man " who makes an appearance..." (p 33)	Interpersonal meta-function: high-certainty modality: declarations.	Encodes ideological certainty, present personal belief an universal truth; reinforces patriarchal and capitalist norms
Lexical metaphor	"Worth","stock","contacts","sales" ( Act1-2, multiple pages).	Ideational meta-function: human experience mapped onto economic processes.	Naturalises capitalist ideology: constructs identity and relationships in economic terms; links value and personality

**How to use the Table**

1. Column 1 - Discourse feature: The linguistic or interactional pattern being analysed.
2. Column 2 - Examples from the text: Direct and paraphrased excerpt illustrating the feature.
3. Column 3 - SFL function: Explains the clause-level meta-function(s) in Halliday's terms (ideational, interpersonal and textual).
4. Column 4 - CDA interpretation: Shows the broader socio- ideological meaning and how language constructs power, identity or ideology.

**Discussion of the Table**

**1. Fragmented discourse / temporal shift**

Willy's shift between past and present, e.g, "I'm very well liked... people don't seem to take to me" (Act1, p.23), this reflects the ideational instability (SFL) and enact denial of reality, reinforcing internalized American Dream Ideology (CDA).

## 2. Repetition

For examples phrases like "well liked", " be liked and you will never want" ( Act 1, p.33) create textual cohesion (SFL) and encode capitalist ideas, showing how language reproduces societal measures of success (CDA).

## 3. Turn-taking and silence

In the text, interruptions and silences, e.g, Biff: " we never told the truth...(Act1, p.104) and Linda: " Attention must finally be paid..." (Act1, p.44), mark interpersonal power struggles (SFL) and reveal family hierarchies and gendered constraints (CDA).

## 4. Modality

In the text, we found high-certainty statements like "the man who makes an appearance...gets ahead" (Act 1, p.33) function interpersonally (SFL) and assert ideology as truth, enforcing capitalist and patriarchal norms (CDA).

## 5. Lexical metaphor/economic language

Such as examples from the text include, "Worth", "Stock" and "sales" ( Act 1- 2) map human identity to economic value (SFL) and normalize capitalist ideology, linking personal worth to productivity (CDA).

### Analysis of Language and Style in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

Arthur Miller's language use and unique style in *Death of a Salesman* can be analysed thus:

#### Language use:

- a) **Conversational tone:** Miller's uses a conversational tone to create a sense of intimacy and familiarity between the characters and the audience. For instance:

"I'm telling you, Biff, it's the talk of the town. The greatest salesman in the world."(Act 1.Scene 1).

- b) **Colloquialisms:** Miller incorporates colloquialism and slang to give the dialogue a sense of authenticity and realism. For instance:

"You're a phony, Willy! You're a fake!" (Act 2, Scene 1).

- c) **Repetition:** Repetition is also being used by Miller to emphasize key themes and ideas such as:

"I am Willy Loman"  
I am Willy Loman" (Act 1, Scene 1).

- d) **Imagery:** Miller uses imagery to create a sense of atmosphere and mood. For instance:

"The sky is falling!  
The sky is falling!" (Act 1, Scene 1).

- e) **Irony:** Miller uses a lot of irony in *Death of a Salesman*, and they are of various types, for instance:

#### (1) Verbal Irony:

"I am well-liked". (Act 1, Scene 1, p.15)

Here Willy's claim to be well-liked is an example of verbal irony, as he is actually struggling to make sales and is not well-liked by his boss. Also, this statement:

"I'm a salesman.  
I'm a salesman" (Act 1, Scene 1, p.20)

Willy's repetition of the phrase is an example of verbal irony, as he is not a successful salesman.

### **(ii) Situational Irony**

"I'm going to make a fortune.  
I'm going to be a big shot"

(Act 1, Scene 2, p. 35)

Willy's statement about making a fortune and being a big shot is an example of situational irony, as he ultimately fails to achieve his dreams.

Also, the utterance:

"I'm tired to death"  
(Act 2, Scene 1, p. 81)

This statement about being tired to death is an example of situational irony, as he ultimately dies at the end of the play.

### **(iii) Irony of Fate**

"I'm going to make a fortune  
I'm, going to be a big shot"  
(Act 1, Scene 2, p. 35).

Willy's statement about making a fortune and being a big shot is an example of irony of fate, as he ultimately fails to achieve his dreams and dies a tragic death.

Also, the statement:

"I'm tired to death"  
(Act 2, Scene 1, p. 81)

Willy's statement about being tired to death is an example of the irony of fate, as he eventually dies at the end of the play.

### **(iv) Dramatic Irony**

"Biff is a lazy bum!"  
(Act 1, Scene 1, p. 25)

Willy's statement about Biff being a lazy bum is an example of dramatic irony, as the audience knows that Biff is actually struggling to find his place in the world.

## (2) Miller's Unique Style

**(a) Expressionistic realism:** Miller's style blends elements of expressionism and realism to create a unique and powerful dramatic voice. For instance:

"The sky is falling  
The sky is falling".  
(Act 1, Scene 1, p.13)

This line illustrates Miller's use of expressionistic realism to convey Willy's emotional state.

**(b) Stream-of-consciousness narration:** Miller uses stream-of-consciousness narration to convey Willy's inner thoughts and feelings, creating a sense of immediacy and intimacy. For instance:

"Oh, boy, oh, boy!  
I am going to make it big".  
(Act 1, Scene 1, p. 17)

**(c) Symbolic language:** Miller uses symbolic language to convey deeper meanings and themes such as the use of the rubber hose to symbolize Willy's desperation and despair. For instance:

"The rubber hose...  
It's a very good hose".  
(Act 2, Scene 2, p. 33)

**(d) Emotional Language:** Miller is sometimes economical with words, thus using few words to convey complex emotions and ideas, in this case the exhaustion and desperations that Willy feels. For instance:

"I'm tired to death"  
(Act 1, Scene 1, p. 11)

**(c) Distinctive Dialogue:** Another unique style of Miller is his use of distinctive dialogue in *Death of a Salesman*. For instance:

"You're a phony, Willy!  
You're a fake"  
(Act 2, Scene 1, p. 50)

This line spoken by Biff illustrates Miller's use of distinctive dialogue to reveal character and create tension.

**(f) Flashbacks:** Miller uses a lot of flashback in *Death of a Salesman*. These are some instances:

Willy's memories of Dave Singleman, a successful salesman who died the death of a salesman, serve as a flashback to Willy's past and highlight his own aspirations and illusions. (Act 1, Scene 1, p. 17). "Dave Singleman... he died the death of a salesman".

Also, Willy's memories of Biff's high school days serve as a flashback to Biff's past and highlight his own disappointments and disillusionments. (Act 1, Scene 1, p. 22) "Biff was a star athlete... he was star".

**(g) Foreshadowing:** Miller uses foreshadowing to hint at the tragic events that will unfold. For example:

"I'm going to get a job, and  
I'm going to stick with it"  
(Act 1, Scene 2)

This line spoken by Biff foreshadows his eventual failure to find a stable job

Also this line:

"You can't fool me, Willy.  
I know who you are"  
(Act 1, Scene 2).

This utterance spoken by Linda foreshadows Willy's eventual downfall and exposure.

### **Implications of the Findings**

- i. Fragmented discourse, temporal shifts, and interruptions reveal Willy's mental instability.
- ii. Turn-taking, silences and interruptions in family dialogue expose negotiation of power and authority.
- iii. The analysis shows that the play's tragedy is not only thematic but constructed through discourse.
- iv. These findings suggest that teaching literature with a focus on discourse analysis allows students to connect language, ideology and social critique.
- v. By applying SFL and CDA, this study adds a micro-linguistic and ideological dimension to the scholarship on *Death of a Salesman*.

### **Conclusion**

The study demonstrates that *Death of a Salesman* constructs meaning not only through plot and themes but through linguistic and interactional strategies through fragmented discourse, repetition, modality, turn-taking, and economic metaphors, Willy Loman's language enacts psychological instability, family power struggles and the internalization of capitalist and patriarchal ideology. Applying SFL clarifies how these patterns function ideationally, interpersonally and textually, which CDA situates them within broader social and ideological contexts. The findings highlight that tragedy in Miller's work is discursively produced: language itself performs the collapse of America Dream and the tensions within familial and societal hierarchies. This discourse focused perspective enriches Miller scholarship and underscores the value of examining literary texts at the micro-linguistic level to reveal the interplay between language, ideology and human experience.

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