

Symbolism & Motifs in Miller's 'Death of a Salesman'

The rubber hose

The rubber hose is the tangible evidence that Willy is contemplating suicide as he has put a 'new little nipple on the gas pipe' (p. 47). Linda removes the hose but she returns it before Willy comes home, because she cannot insult him by letting him know that she is aware of his intentions. Biff does not have the same concern for Willy's dignity as his mother has.

Miller said in an interview in 1987 that, 'Like many myths and classical dramas, it is a story about violence within a family.' The rubber hose is the metaphorical dagger with which Biff fatally stabs his father. With this graphic image he destroys Willy's dignity and leaves him no way of escape. Miller says that, as Willy refuses to look at it, he is '*caged, wanting to escape*' (p. 103). After this confrontation, Willy's death is inevitable.

Stockings

Willy gives stockings to the woman in Boston, so, whenever he sees Linda mending her stockings, he is reminded of his betrayal, and his guilt makes him angry. Linda is the one who looks after the family's finances, trying to make ends meet, so she mends stockings rather than throw them away. When Willy sees her mending them, it is like an accusation that he is failing to provide for his family, so stockings become a symbol of his guilt and his shame.

Make an A3 revision spread illustrating and explaining the symbols and motifs in DoaS. Feel free to use images from the internet if you don't want to draw your own. Be sure to use bullet points - add any other symbols, or motifs you think are necessary.

Cars

A car is vital to a travelling salesman as well as being symbolic of a man's material success and his freedom. In Willy's mind, the car is a proud symbol of his status, his independence and his sons' love for him. However, Willy's loss of control over his car symbolises his loss of control over his life. Ironically, the car gives him geographical mobility but it traps him and becomes the means of his destruction.

The wire-recording machine

As well as being a neat way of bringing Howard's family on stage, the wire-recording machine is a symbol of 'progress'. It is the latest gadget invented by this consumer society and Howard's latest fad, which prevents him from giving proper attention to Willy. When Willy accidentally switches the recorder on, it triggers the hysterical breakdown that demonstrates to Howard his fragile mental state and prompts Howard to fire him. Ironically, as Willy keeps trying to relive the past in an effort to understand what went wrong, this machine captures the past for eternity. It symbolises Willy's inability to cope with the modern world, and the continuous recitation draws attention to the mechanisation of the modern world and the lack of human empathy, demonstrated so poignantly when Howard urges Willy to buy one.

Through the medium of the recorder, we learn of Howard's pride in his children and his brusqueness with his wife, which creates a parallel with Willy. His pride in his children blinds Howard to Willy's plight and supersedes the loyalty he should have felt to his father's employee, just as Willy's pride in his sons blinded him to Bernard's worth and Charley's genuine friendship.

A jungle

Ben boasts, 'when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich' (p. 37). Willy's response is, 'That's just the spirit I want to imbue them (Biff and Happy) with! To walk into a jungle!' For Willy, a jungle is a symbol of a hostile environment that offers riches to those who are prepared to take risks. When he has his imaginary conversation with Ben at the end of Act Two, Ben seems to be encouraging him to commit suicide. Death may be frightening but, 'One must go in to fetch a diamond out.' Willy missed his chance to go to Alaska but now there is another daunting jungle offering the rich prize of the insurance money: 'The jungle is dark but full of diamonds' (p. 106).

Diamonds

Diamonds become symbols of financial success. Ben gives Willy a diamond fob watch as evidence of his wealth and Willy pawns it to pay for a correspondence course for Biff, as though Ben's success will be passed on to Biff. The appointment with Oliver was illusory but Willy sees the insurance money as 'like a diamond, shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I can pick up and touch in my hand' (p. 100). A diamond represents an opportunity for a man to make a success of his life. In Willy's mind, even in New York, 'a man can end up with diamonds here on the basis of being liked' (p. 68).

Seeds

On p. 12, Willy remembers the plants that used to grow in the garden and bemoans the fact that 'you can't raise a carrot in the backyard'. Nevertheless, at the beginning of Act Two, optimistic because Biff is going to see Bill Oliver, Willy comments, 'Gee, on the way home tonight I'd like to buy some seeds', and he dreams of getting a little place in the country where he can grow vegetables. Seeds represent his yearning for the outdoor life and his hopes for the future. After he is fired from his job and his sons abandon him in the restaurant, Willy actually buys seeds and plants them, as if admitting that all his other hopes have come to nothing. He seems to be trying, too late, to re-establish the contact with nature that he used to have but which has been stifled by the city.

Seeds represent Willy's need to leave a legacy behind him. They seem to represent a realisation that his own seed, his children, will never grow into the successful men he has dreamed of. The seeds he has sown during his working life have led only to his being fired. He judges success on how 'well-liked' a man is and dreams of hundreds of people at his funeral. However not even Howard Wagner comes to his funeral, after Willy has served the firm loyally for 35 years, opening up new territories for them.

Ironically, it is inevitable that the real seeds he plants will come to nothing because the garden is so overshadowed by the apartment buildings, just as the insurance company will probably refuse to pay out because he has a history of suicide attempts. Willy's hopes for his boys have not grown because they are overshadowed by the materialistic values in New York. Like the seeds trapped in a sterile garden, Willy Loman is trapped in a society and a mindset that prevent him from developing into anything that will last and, just as he has blighted his own life, he has blighted the lives of his sons as well.