

WOMAN AND SUBVERSION IN *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

Courtisane ou ménagère... je n'y vois pas de milieu (1)

When the prostitute invaded literature in the 19th century, a writer like Guy de Maupassant explained that this was due to literature's tendency towards precise observation, and to women's two functions in life: love and motherhood. Indeed, the two dominant *rôles* in literature (in the sense given it by A.J. Greimas, ie rôle as a programme, a narrative or social stereotype that makes the unfolding story easy to foresee (2), have been the rôle of wife and mother, and that of the whore. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Saleman* is no exception. There are two camps.

Courtisane:

On the one hand, we have several representatives of the whore: in anticipation of the loose women that Happy and Biff pick up in the restaurant, that Linda calls "lousy, rotten whores", and the Other Woman that Willy gives Linda's stockings to in payment for services rendered, we have first of all, "that big Betsy something", Happy's first sexual experience. The demonstrative adjective, the lack of a surname ("what the hell was her name"), the adjectival use of "something", all contribute to making the woman into an indeterminate thing. This category of woman is dehumanized, by equating her first with animals (Happy says of Betsy, "Boy, there was a pig!", and associates her with her collie dog), then with objects of consumption. Women figure last in Happy's lists of objects of desire; his prized possessions are his "own apartment, a car, and plenty of women". They are "those two" he and Biff "*had* tonight" (3). Not only objects of desire, these women are also somebody else's property. (Happy systematically seduces other executives' fiancées.) The ownership and the illicit possession make them stolen goods. Things you have, things you own, things you steal. Things you buy: the girls in the restaurant are "on call" - in other words, for sale. Things you consume: Happy's terminology for them is "strudel".

Ménagère:

On the other hand, we have the supportive wife and mother, "a fine specimen of a lady", her sons' feminine ideal (4).. Contrasted to Willy's infidelity, that we can call a form of disloyalty, Linda remains ever loyal to her husband, even when this entails casting off her own sons (5). But is the role of wife really given priority to that of mother? If we look closely, we see that in fact Linda is her husband's mother. Not through the text, but through a series of stage directions, we learn that she feeds him, dresses him, soothes him like a child:

She is taking off his shoes

Linda hums a soft lullaby

Linda is filling his cup

She is straightening the bed for him

Linda holds his jacket for him

Linda, getting him into the jacket/ buttoning up his jacket/ giving him the handkerchief...

This mother-child relationship is significant in that it excludes other roles, such as that of sexual love. The description of Linda through textual allusions (grey hair, looking old) and through stage directions (dressed in a robe, carrying a basket of wash, or mending stockings) brings home the message that maternal instinct and sexual love are mutually exclusive. Arthur Miller clearly classifies his female characters into two categories: Good Woman vs Woman of Easy Virtue (6). Can the classification be satisfactorily covered by Maupassant's explanation of a tendency towards precise observation? Was Proudhon a prophet? Was American society in 1949 made up only of housewives or of whores? Were there no independent women exercising a profession?

Verisimilitude:

The point is elsewhere. As Gérard Genette has pointed out (7), a text that does not fulfill expectations, that does not correspond to preconceived notions, troubles the receptivity of the reader. Such a text is perceived as unrealistic, unlikely, unintelligible. Thus a realistic text tries to stay close, not to Reality, but to what the majority of people think is reality. In other words, to persuade the reader that everything is "true", the writer must present a filtered reality. To achieve verisimilitude, he must conform to conventions, to public opinion, to a body of implicit maxims and prejudices that make up a system of values and a vision of the world (ie ideology). So, although women have made up a large part of the work force ever since the 19th century, writers have kept painting portraits of Women of Easy Virtue vs Wives and Mothers. They are actually types, and are not meant to be understood, only recognized. They stem from public opinion that links woman's function, not to production, but to reproduction. This reproduction is not merely of a biological nature. If the Family has such a highly-charged ideological significance, even today with the advent of a new millenium, it is because it perpetuates a certain social order.

Just as women reproduce the human race, and the established order of things, so too do female characters reproduce the social order. This is why it is so interesting to study the female characters in *Death of a Salesman*, one of the first plays to question the American Dream, to attack America's materialism, its obsession with success, power, and money, written by a liberal social thinker who claims that drama has a fated mission: that of raising the truth-consciousness of mankind to a level of such intensity as to transform those who observe it. (8)

So let us rapidly examine the female characters in *Death of a Salesman* : their description (already tackled above), their distribution, their functions, and see if they contribute to challenging the social order. Do they have a subversive value? Do they cause narrative complications and/or confusion? Do they cross lines, blur borders?

Functions:

With respect to function, we have seen that the female characters' function is either love-making or home-making. The men are the ones who achieve. The women are the spectators and the fans. Linda repeatedly tells Willy he is "doing wonderfully", that he is "the handsomest man in the world", and in the flashback immediately

following, the loose woman says to Willy, "I think you're a wonderful man". The only working woman in the play, she is but a spectator. When alluded to in the text, her job is reduced to "sitting at that desk watching all the salesmen go by" (9).

In *Death of a Salesman*, the male characters move within the spheres of power, of acts. Some succeed (Charley, Howard, Bernard- who acts upon the highest body of authority in the land, the Supreme Court), others fail but at least have strived. Willy, who embodies failure in the play, definitely succeeds in carrying out his final project, that of killing himself. The female characters, on the other hand, have no specific competence, carry out no plan of action. When Linda realizes her husband is planning suicide, she takes no steps. This character is unable to make a decision, to act, to shape the future:

Every day I go down and take away that little rubber pipe. But, when he comes home, I put it back where it was...I don't know what to do. I live from day to day.

Distribution:

With respect to distribution, we can notice that female characters never appear in the absence of males. Although A. Miller presents his male characters in various combinations (familial, neighbourly, professional), and although the males often appear without females, the women appear only in the presence of husband, son, or (would-be) lover. The focalisation is always masculine. Women are not the subject but the object of the point of view: object of desire, object of a gaze (10).

As for the space they occupy, we have already noted that the wife and mother lives in an enclosed space: her home. Even the loose women who are allowed to move about in public places are confined to places of pleasure (the hotel, the restaurant), and rarely gravitate to places of business (11). Furthermore, we notice another dichotomy: whereas the men are extremely mobile, moving from inside to outside, from home to car to office, from town to town and state to state, from one continent to another, from town to country, from small town to federal capital, the women are rooted to one spot only.

Enough has been written about the treatment of Time in *Death of a Salesman*. Suffice it here to say that, just as the male and female characters are differentiated by the space they occupy, so too are they opposed through their relationship with Time. The men remember; they also anticipate. They project back into the past, and ahead into the future. Key words that frequently crop up in Willy's discourse are "remember", "in those days", and "someday". He seeks to "get back to all the good times", but also foresees future glory, when time will bring him recognition.

Ben, that funeral will be massive! They'll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire! All the old-timers with the strange licence-plates- that boy will be thunder-struck, Ben, because he never realized- I am known! Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey- I am known, Ben, and he'll see it with his eyes once and for all. He'll see what I am, Ben!

The fact that the future "will come" is eventually belied by the preterite "didn't come" (Linda asks at the funeral, "Why didn't anybody come?"), in no way takes away from Willy's ability to project himself in time, to link past, present, and future

into an extraordinary fusion. Willy's sons, too, are constantly reminiscing, or making plans for a golden future. Their discourse constantly juxtaposes "Remember" with "I'm gonna". But the woman is riveted to the present, confined to it just as she is confined to her enclosed space. We have seen that Linda admits to her sons: "I live from day to day", ie in an eternal present. She cannot penetrate or understand the past ("Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it", she says to Willy at his graveside). She cannot even project herself into a future whose advent was triggered by her husband's suicide ("It seems to me that you're just on another trip. I keep expecting you.").

A timebomb:

Now that we have examined the women in *Death of a Salesman* from different angles, we must keep in mind that they are characters in a play that critics at that period called a timebomb set by Communists to destroy the country. In one of his interviews (12), A. Miller admitted that some Broadway producers and investors shied away from his plays because they were too liberal (13). Directors who did put on his plays tended to stress the psychological side and play down the "message", which was a challenge to the capitalist system (14). Now what we have been trying to elucidate in this paper is the function of the female characters in what is considered to be a subversive play. Do they contribute to challenging American institutions, hierarchies, mentalities, or do they rather serve to tone down the "message" and make it more palatable?

Turning subversion into authorization:

We have seen that where A. Miller's female characters are concerned, there is no inversion of expectation. He stays close to his public's preconceived notions about the role of women, so as not to trouble their receptivity. He faithfully conforms to the dominant world view of his period, which is essentially 19th century, middle-class, and male. In fact, Arthur Miller's vision, his division of women into two categories, is a reflection not merely of one society and one era, but of patriarchal societies through-out history. Engels pointed out already in 1884, that ancient Greek civilisation was founded on the division between wife and mother, and courtesan, with respective social functions. The social organisation corresponded to a spatial organisation identical to that of our play: the women destined to bear children and bring them up were enclosed in their homes, while those whose business was pleasure could go out. Engels declared that monogamy and prostitution were opposites, but inseparable opposites, the two poles of one social state (15). In this he was inspired by the founder of anthropology, American ethnologist Lewis H. Morgan, who established a structural correspondance between modes of production, family structures, and social consciousness (16). The rock and foundation of Western society is not capitalism, nor any other economic system, but rather patriarchy, which is also ultimately about power- but not the power of one class over another, or one man over another, but rather the supremacy of man over woman.

Actually, all the while *Death of a Salesman* is challenging America's economic order (capitalist), it is consolidating its social order (patriarchal). It questions society's view of the working-class as the Other, priding solidarity among

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men. But it reinforces the view that Woman is the Other. Man is the creator, the producer, the law-maker.

There is a two-way relationship between the text and the social code from which it emerges. The text is both codified and codifier: codified by the conventions and system of values of the society which produces it; codifier in that it defines and produces a structured social whole. Shelley was right in declaring that *poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world* (17). The artist is a legislator, along with the statesman and the philosopher. As Edgard Pich points out, the text is a vehicle bearing laws that insinuate themselves into the minds of the receiver:

en dépit de la bonne volonté de leurs auteurs et de leurs déclarations même de bonne foi, il est impossible que (les oeuvres d'art) ne soient pas d'une façon ou d'une autre porteurs d'une loi qui s'insinue avec plus ou moins de bonheur dans l'esprit du lecteur: écrire ne peut être que légiférer, c'est-à-dire, réitérer, restaurer ou instaurer une norme, une cohérence (18).

Far from having a subversive value, A. Miller's use of women undermines subversion. It relativizes, distances, reassures. Through his female characters, he turns subversion into authorization. His treatment of women allows him to address a dominant culture from within its own structures and set of values, within its own modes of understanding, while still contesting aspects of that culture. As the perceived dominant is patriarchal rather than capitalist, the public will allow attacks on its economic system so long as its social order is not threatened.

In conclusion we can see that the role of woman in *Death of a Salesman* is not that of raising consciousness. Woman's function is to counteract subversive elements, to soothe and reassure. *Death of a Salesman* is no timebomb set to destroy the country. It promises that woman will always be there to keep the hearth-fires burning.

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NOTES

- (1) P.J. Proudhon, *Systèmes des contradictions économiques, ou Philosophie de la misère*, 1846.
- (2) A.J. Greimas, *Sémiotique*, Hachette, Paris, 1979.
- (3) Note once more the use of the demonstrative adjective anticipating the noun "creatures", and the numeral categorizing the women not as individuals, but as a collective.
- (4) How significant that a good woman should be so hard to find:

COUP DE THEATRE n° 11
"Arthur Miller"

*I'd like to find a girl- steady, somebody with substance...Like Mom
They broke the mould when they made her
There's not a good woman in a thousand.*

- (5) Although A. Miller makes it clear that she dotes on her sons, she warns them: *He's the dearest man in the world to me, and I won't have anyone making him feel unwanted... Either he's your father and you pay him that respect, or else you're not to come here.*
- (6) The categories are further differentiated by the *space* the characters occupy: the good woman exists only in the enclosed space of her own home; the loose women appear in public places.
- (7) G. Genette, *Vraisemblable et Motivation*, *Communications* n° 11, éd. du Seuil, Paris, 1968. In the same issue, also see Roland Barthes, *L'effet de réel*.
- (8) Arthur Miller, *the Family in Modern Drama*, *the Atlantic Monthly* n° 197, April 1956 (underlined by me).
- (9) All underlined words are done so by me, unless stated otherwise.
- (10) One thinks of Luce Irigaray, who declared in *Pouvoir du discours/ Subordination du féminin*, *Dialectique* N° 8, 1975:
le féminin ne se déterminerait jamais que par et pour le masculin, la réciproque n'étant pas vraie.
- (11) One of the two working women in the play, Miss Francis is never seen in the office working. She appears only in Willy's hotel bedroom, half-undressed. Moreover, Willy's raunchy comments suggest that the only other working woman in the play, Jenny, treats the office as the hooker does the brothel, as a headquarters for sexual services : *Jenny, Jenny, good to see you. How're ya ? Workin' ? Or still honest ?*
- (12) *Morality and Modern Drama*, interview by Phillip Gelb, in *the Educational Theatre Journal* n° 10, Oct. 1958.
- (13) One example is his difficulty raising funds in 1951 for his new version of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, because Senator McCarthy was still too powerful a figure.
- (14) When after 34 years of service, Willy is first taken off salary and put on commission, then callously dismissed, his anguished cry, *You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away - a man is not a piece of fruit!* resounded throughout the country.
- (15) Cf Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 1884.
- (16) Cf Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Line of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization*, 1877.
- (17) Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 1821.
- (18) Edgard Pich, *Littératures et Codes sociaux: l'anti-féminisme sous le Second Empire*, *Romantisme* N° 13-14, 1976.