

DEATH OF A SALESMAN/ THE STRUCTURE

Miller likened the structure of *Salesman* to geological strata, in which different times are present in the same instant. He has also compared it to a CAT scan, which simultaneously reveals inside and outside, and the time scale in *Death of a Salesman* is, indeed, complex. The events onstage take place over twenty-four hours, a period which begins with a timid, dispirited, and bewildered man entering a house once an expression of his hopes for the future. It is where he and his wife raised a family, that icon of the American way, and reached for the golden glitter of the dream. He is back from a journey he once saw as a version of those other journeys embedded in the national consciousness, in which the individual went forth to improve his lot and define himself in the face of a world ready to embrace him. But the world has changed. His idyllic house, set like a homestead against the natural world, is now hemmed in by others, and his epic journey is no more than a drummer's daily grind, traveling from store to store, ingratiating himself with buyers or, still more, with the secretaries who guard the buyers from him. The play ends, after a succession of further humiliations, frustrated hopes, and demeaning memories, when Willy Loman climbs back into the car, which itself is showing signs of debilitation, and attempts one last ride to glory, one last journey into the empyrean, finally, in his own eyes, rivaling his successful brother, Ben, by trading his life directly for the dream which lured him on. But this twenty-four-hour period is only one form of time. There is also what Miller has called "social time" and "psychic time." By social time he seems to mean the unfolding truth of the public world which provides the context for Willy's life, while psychic time is evident in memories which crash into his present, creating ironies, sounding echoes, taunting him with a past which can offer him nothing but

reproach. All these different notions of time blend and interact, that interaction being a key to the play's effect. But, of course, all these differing time schemes are themselves contained within and defined by the audience's experience of the play, a shared moment in which the social reality of the occasion (its performance, say, in Communist China in the 1980s) and the psychological reality of individual audience members themselves affect the meaning generated by the stage action. The past, and its relationship to the present, has always been vital to Miller. As a character in another Miller play (*After the Fall*) remarks, the past is holy. Why? Not merely because the present contains the past, but because a moral world depends on an acceptance of the notion of causality, on an acknowledgment that we are responsible for, and a product of, our actions. This is a truth that Willy resists but which his subconscious acknowledges, presenting to him the evidence of his fallibility. For the very structure of the play reflects his anxious search for the moment his life took a wrong turn, for the moment of betrayal that undermined his relationship to his wife and destroyed his relationship with a son who was to have embodied his own faith in the American dream.