
**POETIC APPROACH IN DRAMA SCRIPT STUDY: ANALYSING WILLY LOMAN'S
DISAPPOINTMENTS IN ARTHUR MILLER'S DEATH OF A SALESMAN IN TEACHING
ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CONTEXT**

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Abstract

This article describes and explains how Culler's (1997) poetics in the study of literature can be used to gain literary competency for the teaching of literature in an English as a foreign language (EFL) environment. The use of this strategy is discussed using one of the most famous play scripts in American literature: Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. Following Culler's poetics technique, the study focuses on one of the themes present in the play script: Willy Loman's (the main character) disappointments, which make up the majority of the story with a dramatic ending: Willy's decision to commit suicide. This article seeks to persuade EFL teachers who study literature to take Culler's side and use poetics as the beginning point for a literature study in order to increase their students' literary ability.

Keywords: Literary Competence, Poetic Approach, Teaching Literature in EFL Context, The Study of a Drama Script, Death of a Salesman

INTRODUCTION

A literate culture produces literature because it is a written work that depicts what people do and how people live in a society. According to Guerin (2005), even if literature has a basic stance as art, it must be noted that "art does not exist in a vacuum" (p. 17), and it is intended to communicate some ideas that are relevant to the real human experience throughout history. As a result, studying literature broadens our understanding of human existence. As a result, the use of literature in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context is critical because literary works allow students to learn about different world views, enrich their perspectives, and indirectly teach them how to appreciate differences in real society (Hapsari, 2011). Furthermore, in an EFL context where students rarely use English in their daily conversations, literature is an important teaching source because it provides examples of language use in context, such as reading a drama script, which teaches students how certain expressions are used in a conversation (Hapsari, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culler (2000, 2002) defines literary competence as the ability to understand the meaning beyond what is written in the text, requiring the reader of a literary work to comprehend the operations of literary discourse, its implicit semiotic signs, and culture. Culler (2000) also emphasizes the distinction between poetics and hermeneutics in the study of literature. Poetics begins with the meaning of a literary work, whereas hermeneutics begins with the form. He goes on to say that "the modern tradition of criticism" has become buried in

hermeneutics or has blended poetics and hermeneutics (Culler, 2000, p. 61). Furthermore, he contends that poetics should be considered “the first track” in the linguistic paradigm of literary study (Culler, 2000, p.61). He goes on to explain that it is poetics, which focuses on the rules that allow literary structure and meaning to exist. As a result, literary competence entails the ability of readers to recognize “literary genres, recognize plots, create characters out of the scattered details provided in the text, identify themes in literary works, and pursue the kind of symbolic interpretation that allows us to gauge the significance of poems and stories”.

Following Culler’s poetic approach to literary analysis, this essay will detail and explain how this approach was used to analyze one of the themes present in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*: the disappointments of Willy Loman (the main character in the theatre script).

RESEARCH METHOD

Willy Loman’s Disappointments Lead Him to Suicide: One of The Major Themes in Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*

Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman* focuses on a family as the most significant feature. This two-act play covers private talks that take place over two days and lead to Willy Loman’s suicide choice. With such a decision, there must be certain failures in Willy’s life that make him feel disappointed. Thus, Willy Loman’s disappointments are one of the primary topics in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, and the following paragraphs will examine the disappointments that

caused Willy Loman to commit suicide.

Willy Loman is a retired salesman in his sixties. Act I reveals that Willy has a plethora of grievances. He is dissatisfied with his employment (pp. 9-10), his thirty-four-year-old son named Biff, who does not have a stable career and usually constantly argues with him (pp. 10), his surroundings (pp. 11), and even himself (pp. 21). This complaint implies that Willy is mentally sick.

There are also various flashback narratives that reveal Willy's thoughts on the past and how he imagines life should be. Willy's flashback reveals that in the past, he had an excellent relationship with both Biff and Happy (pp. 17-21). This flashback storyline also reveals that Willy taught his sons that a person's popularity and success are determined by his appearance rather than his education.

"Willy: Exactly what I mean. Bernard may have the finest grades in school..., but when it comes to business, you will be five times ahead of him. That is why I thank God that you are both built like Adonises. Because the one who makes an appearance in business... is the man who succeeds..." (p.20)

This statement reveals that Willy is unconcerned about his son's schooling. He believes that being attractive is sufficient for success.

But, in Act II, Willy begins to see that everything he has taught his kid is incorrect when he meets Bernard, the son of his neighbor, Charley, and his sons' friend, who grows up to be a mature adult and accomplished lawyer (pp. 51- 52).

Willy: How did you do it? Why didn't he see the light? Bernard: I have no idea, Willy.

Willy: You were a childhood buddy of his. Something bothers me about it...nothing good ever happened to him.

Bernard: He never prepared for anything (p. 51).

Bernard's statement implies that Biff has never had stable employment because of his lack of an educational background. Biff did not graduate from high school since he failed a math exam and did not enroll in summer school after visiting his father in New England.

Furthermore, the flashback thought shows that Willy had an affair with a woman in the past (pp. 222-23), but Linda was completely unaware of it. Biff was disappointed when he discovered Willy had an affair (pp. 65-67). Linda, Biff's mother, is an obedient and devoted wife who deserves complete respect from his father. Furthermore, Biff could not believe the fact that his father, whom he really admires, could commit such a heinous thing. That is why, when he discovered that his father was a liar who had destroyed his marriage, he became so furious and irritated that he began neglecting his own life. Biff becomes a loser after failing to graduate from high school, stealing items, spending time in prison, never having a steady job, and continuously arguing with Willy. Willy feels bad when he discovers that Biff's failure in life is part of his error. (p. 74).

Bernard: He wasn't completely beaten by it all. But then, Willy, vanished from the neighborhood for over a month. And I assumed he'd traveled to New England to visit you. Did he ever talk to you about it?

Willy remains silent. Bernard: Willy?

Willy (with a strong resentful tone in his voice): He did come to Boston.

What do you think?

Bernard: Well, only that when he returned, I'll never forget it, it constantly perplexes me... Willy, you know what I mean? And he returned a month later with his sneakers--remember ones with "University of Virginia" printed on them?...And he burned them in the furnace after taking them down in the cellar...Willy, what happened in Boston?

Willy regards him as an intruder...

Bernard: Don't become sore.

Willy (angrily): What are you trying to do, point the finger at me? Is it my fault if a boy falls asleep?

Willy begins to feel he has failed as a father as a result of this interaction. He eventually learns that his affair has turned his son into a loser.

Willy Loman is also disappointed that he cannot provide financial security for his wife, Linda. Willy adores Linda because she is a devoted, faithful, and patient wife. He doesn't want his wife to be concerned about him (pp. 11, 22). Willy feels so bad about his affair (pp. 23, 41) that he wants to keep working to provide financial security for Linda. But times have changed. Willy gets retired by his boss's son, Howard (p. 46). Willy declines a job offer from his neighbor Charley because he feels a sense of competition and resentment toward Charley. Willy, on the other hand, continues to borrow money from Charley (pp.53-54).

Willy is also disappointed since he believes he has lost his competition with Charley. Bernard, Charley's son, is a wealthy businessman, whilst Biff is unemployed. While he must continue to borrow money from Charley, his financial

situation is steady. Willy believes that all of his years of hard effort have been in vain.

Willy (going to the right): You know what's funny? After all the highways, trains, appointments, and years, you're worth more dead than living (p. 54).

Willy's words imply that he begins to feel pitiful about his situation and considers suicide. This sentence implies that Willy intends to commit suicide.

Willy Loman is also disappointed since his sons ignore him at the restaurant and opt to pursue a date. At the restaurant, Happy is more concerned with the possibility of dating Miss Forsythe than with his father's feelings. Willy has a flashback thinking of the day Biff went to see him in Boston and discovered he was having an affair with a woman. Willy compares his current situation of being neglected by his sons (pp. 60-65) to his previous one in Boston (pp. 65-66), in which he thought he had disregarded his family for his own pleasure. It is also implied that Happy inherits Willy's proclivity for having affairs with women. Happy is never satisfied with a single lady (as stated in Happy's comment on page 15) and neglects his family (his father, while at work).

Willy, for example, is dissatisfied with his faithful and dutiful wife, Linda, and neglects his sons (Biff and Happy).

Finally, Willy Loman faces a number of setbacks. First, he believes he has failed as a husband by failing to be a faithful partner and provide financial security for his wife. Second, he believes he has failed as a father in his responsibility to provide a good example for his boys (Biff and Happy) and guide them to be successful men. Third, he believes he has failed in his rivalry with his friend

Charley. Willy Loman becomes depressed as a result of his setbacks and decides to commit suicide.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the preceding consideration of one of Miller's primary themes in *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman's disappointments that lead to suicide, it is obvious that discussing a theme can lead to a more profound understanding of the literary work. The analysis of Willy Loman's disappointments can help students become more aware of the message provided in the theatre script's exchanges between the characters. For instance, consider the following script citation (p.74):

Bernard: He wasn't crushed by it all. But then, Willy, vanished from the neighborhood for over a month. And I assumed he'd traveled to New England to visit you. Did he ever talk to you about it?

Willy remains motionless. Willy? Bernard asks.

Willy (with a bitter tone in his voice): Yeah, he came to Boston. What do you think?

Bernard: Well, only that when he returned, I'll never forget it, it constantly perplexes me... Willy, you know what I mean? And he returned a month later with his sneakers--remember those with "University of Virginia" printed on them?... And he burned them in the furnace after taking them down in the cellar...Willy, what happened in Boston?

Willy regards him as an intruder... Bernard: Don't become sore.

Willy (angrily): What are you trying to do, point the finger at me? Is it my

fault if a boy falls asleep?

Students must study the plot, story sequence, and cumulative flashback events that motivate Willy's utterance to Bernard, Willy (angrily): "What are you trying to do, blame it on me?" Is it my fault if a boy falls asleep?

These responsible actions stem from the discussion of Willy Loman's disappointments. The pupils will be unable to uncover the significance of the dialogue unless they carefully analyze the events that led up to the talk between Bernard and Willy. To acquire this level of literary skill, a detailed structural examination of speech is required. Culler's literary competency is referred to by Misson et al. (1994) as a "structuralist framework" that the readers acquire since it involves a detailed investigation of the inherent aspects in the literary work. According to Culler (2000,2002), the poetic approach is a better way to begin a study of literature than the hermeneutics approach. However, this does not rule out the use of hermeneutics, which involves extrinsic parts of the literary work, to aid the study of literature. The point is that a poetic approach with a detailed investigation of the intrinsic aspects should be the starting point in order to increase students' concentration on and appreciation for the literary work as the topic of study. Although literature has a fundamental stance as art, it must be acknowledged that "art does not exist in a vacuum" (Guerin, 2005). Extrinsic elements should be used to scaffold learning only if the students have already had enough time to study the structure of the literary work as the object of study.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, following Culler's (2000, 2002) and Misson et al. (1994) arguments on the importance of studying intrinsic aspects in the study of literature, I would argue that the poetic method should come before the hermeneutics approach in the study of literature. While I do not subscribe to the conventional formalist view that the literary text is self-sufficient, I believe that teaching literature in an EFL context should encourage students to appreciate the literary work before developing their critical analysis from the extrinsic elements involved in its creation.

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