

Name

Professor

Class

Date

Cinematic Storytelling: The Restaurant Scene in *Death of a Salesman*

The restaurant scene in *Death of a Salesman* demonstrates a successful adaptation of Arthur Miller's original stage play into film. In the play, the restaurant scene contains a break in the form of a flashback where a Young Bernard explains to Mrs. Loman that Biff flunked math (Miller 110). This flashback scene is a brief moment of "truth" that Willy remembers, puncturing the fantasy about his son as a success and also sets up Biff's disillusionment of his father. The film omits this flashback scene because it detracts from the intense emotional buildup between Biff and his father. Instead, the camera, directing, and cinematography uses other means to show Willy's inability to confront the truth.

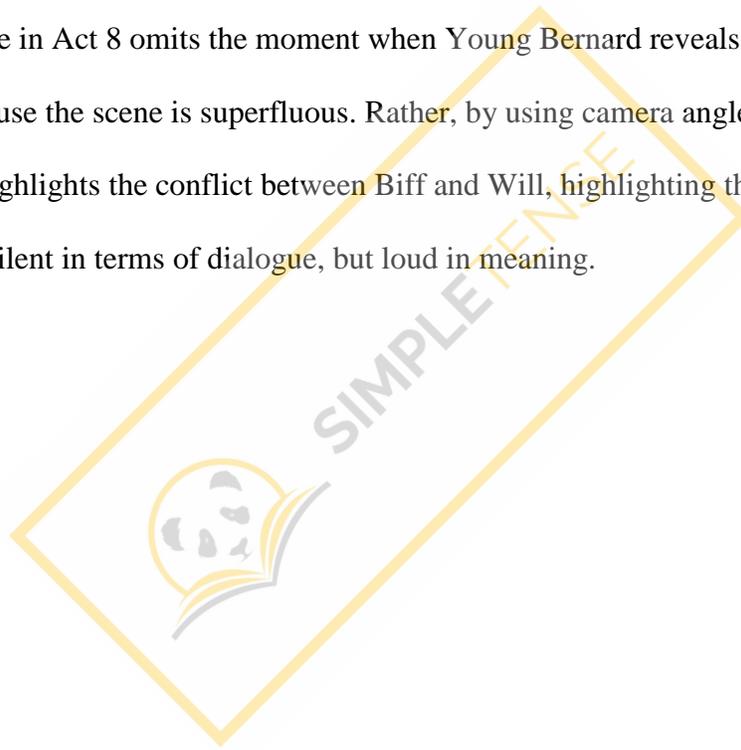
The camera's positioning is a metaphor for the power relationship between Biff and Willy. Biff starts in a subservient position, kneeling before his seated father, explaining how his visit to Oliver was an eye-opener about how small and unimportant he is in real life. The camera angle captures this humbling, as the camera looks downward on Biff, as he looks up to his father. Biff's stammering and flustered hand gestures reinforce his limited agency as Willy continually interrupts him with assertions based on the lie he built up around his son's superiority. Happy stands behind Willy, urging his father on and supporting him. Biff partially accedes to Willy, lying that he has an appointment to see Oliver. But when Biff still persists in puncturing Willy's illusion, Willy pushes Biff to the ground, chastising his son for disobeying his father, but also for continuing to challenge the narrative he established.

However, in pushing a man when he is already “down” to the floor, Biff regains an inner strength. He stands up to his full height and bends over the seated Willy, thereby demonstrating a superior position. His stuttering ends and his hand gestures become more forceful as he tells his father he has no appointment. Willy tries to reassert his authority by wrapping his fist around Biff’s necktie and pulling his son’s face closer, but Biff retains a higher position; as Willy looks up into his son’s face, it seems his holding Biff’s tie is akin to grasping at straws. Biff refuses to lower himself to his father’s level. He raises his head, forcing his father to give up his hold as he tells Willy that he is no good.

The remainder of the scene supports this reversal of the power relationship between father and son. Willy hears echoes of the past, namely the woman whom he had an affair, laughing on the soundtrack. Her voice echoes across the film, demonstrating the presence of a flashback without the use of scene shifts and stage lighting, as in Miller’s play. The cinematographer reinforces this flashback scene through the violent red color scheme. Everything in the film that triggers Willy’s fantasy and flashback is bathed in red, usually reserved as a symbol of conflict (Bellantoni 28). The restaurant’s walls are red, Happy’s dates wear red clothing, and the hose that Biff has in his pocket—which Willy uses to try to commit suicide because of his realization of his unglamorous life—is also reddish. Fittingly, the only non-red items in the scene are his sons, Biff, who wears a dark blue and clashes with the color scheme as jarring as he clashes with his father, and Happy, who wears a neutral white as he supports Willy and also looks up to Biff. When Willy enters the washroom, he momentarily looks downward, as if realizing the truth of Biff’s words. The washroom, with its natural, dark wood panels, creates an atmosphere of brief reflection as Willy considers the truth of Biff’s words. Willy even cleans his glasses and stares at his reflection. But when he re-enters his

flashback, the restaurant's washroom transitions into the bathroom of his past, as he enters his mistress's bedroom, which has the same red background as the restaurant. Her red lipstick and bare, pink skin re-asserts the passionate red color scheme. This time, however, the red highlights Willy's adulterous passion and foreshadows Biff's initial disillusionment with his father when he catches him with his mistress.

While the film *Death of a Salesman* alters Arthur Miller's work by removing some scenes, it strengthens the play by reinforcing the theme in what remains. The film adaptation of the restaurant scene in Act 8 omits the moment when Young Bernard reveals Biff flunked math, but it does so because the scene is superfluous. Rather, by using camera angles and color, the cinematography highlights the conflict between Biff and Will, highlighting the conflict through the setting that is silent in terms of dialogue, but loud in meaning.



Works Cited

Bellantoni, Patti. *If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die: The Power of Color in Visual*

Storytelling. New York: Focus Press, 2005. Print.

Death of a Salesman. Dir. Volker Schlöndorff. Perf. Dustin Hoffman, Kate Reid, and John

Malkovich. Roxbury Productions, 1985. Film.

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem*.

New York: Penguin Books, 1997. Print.

