

“The Jungle Is Dark and Full of Diamonds”: Natural Value and the Logic of Naturalism in *Death of a Salesman*

Jon Dietrick

When Willy Loman’s brother Ben, in the second act of *Death of a Salesman*, contrasts the present and substantial value of a diamond with the continually deferred value of Willy’s sales “appointments,” the attentive reader or audience member perhaps will notice that this advice comes from a character who is himself not quite present or substantial. As a phantom or a delusion or a memory that holds out the promise of a “natural” money as well as an essential, natural self (for Ben is Willy’s only source of knowledge about his father, about “the kind of stock” the Lomans “spring from”), Ben manifests precisely the characteristics of money that both tantalize and terrify the Lomans (34). Historically, the increasingly arbitrary relationship between money’s physical material and its “face value”—the move, in Marc Shell’s phrase, from “the electrum money of ancient Lydia” to “the electronic money of contemporary America”—has made money function as a symbol of a more general disjunction between appearance and reality, seeming and being, “material” and “intellectual currency” (1). One “solution” to this problem has been the fantasy of a *natural* value. This notion informed the debates surrounding gold or silver and its relation to money that raged throughout the nineteenth century in America, and resurfaced during the Depression.¹ As Ben’s diamonds do for Willy, so does gold (or silver) money promise to eliminate the troubling gulf between substance and sign, or between the often-unreliable signs we must use to navigate the world and what we perceive to be the “reality” of that world.

In *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, Walter Benn Michaels locates in American literary naturalism this anxiety over issues of material reality and representation. The “logic” of naturalism Benn Michaels elaborates is based on the repression of money as free-

floating signifier, which expresses itself in various (and always unsuccessful) strategies of “escape” from the money economy. An aesthetic expression of both the desire for and the impossibility of this escape, naturalism obsesses over the ontological and epistemological questions raised by money, becoming “the working out of a set of conflicts between pretty things and curious ones, material and representation, hard money and soft, beast and soul” (173).

Of course it would be a mistake to view *Death of a Salesman* as an unproblematically naturalist play. Influenced both by the highly naturalistic theatre of the 1930s and by the Depression milieu that gave birth to those plays, Miller’s watershed play is naturalistic in its portrayal of humans subject to economic and ideological forces; at the same time, the naturalism of the play is complicated by its almost post-modern treatment of distinctions such as present and past, action and “talk,” hard value and soft currency, a treatment that resists naturalism’s “hard” distinction between signs and the real. In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller elaborates his own vision of the relation of economic to psychic life by dramatizing the attempted “escape” from the money economy Benn Michaels locates as the obsession of naturalism—the doomed attempt to, in the critic’s words, “stage the disappearance of money” (144). The distinctions that obsess the characters of the play—between saying and doing, seeming and being, technology and nature—are themselves rooted in money and the commodification of life in America. Ultimately, however, the play demonstrates how the increasing commodification of American life complicates those very distinctions.

One of the most salient aspects of *Death of a Salesman* is the play’s exploration of the tricky distinction between saying and doing, talk and action. Often taken as evidence of what Richard Hofstadter famously delineated as the business world’s general hostility toward intellectuals and almost religious dedication to “practicality,” the American businessman, at least in the twentieth century, appears on the literary and cultural scene as a self-described “man of action” with no time for “idle