Re-membering Willy’s Past: 
Introducing Postmodern Concerns through \textit{Death of a Salesman} 

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\textit{Death of a Salesman} has become so familiar a play to high school and college students that finding new ways to approach this watershed of American drama is a continuing challenge. As years of critical commentary have shown, the play lends itself readily to a generic approach, cued by Miller’s own essay “Tragedy and the Common Man,” or to a social, softly Marxist approach (how responsible is capitalist society for Willy’s failure?). In a postmodern literary climate, however, the challenge is to extend critical commentary to see whether this forty-year-old canonical play can be recontextualized.

In particular, my interest in approaching \textit{Death of a Salesman} from a postmodern perspective resides in the recurring monologue that Willy conducts with himself. By focusing on Willy’s several memory scenes, I have been able to encourage students to destabilize the orthodoxies of the play and have also introduced them, in accessible terms, to the concerns of postmodernism. Those concerns entail a questioning of historicity—can we, asks Linda Hutcheon in \textit{A Poetics of Postmodernism}, “ever know [the] past other than through its textualized remains?” (20)—and a challenging of essentialist assumptions about identity.

I begin by assigning students the task not only of reading the play but also of reconstructing the personal history of Willy Loman. Because Miller is generous with temporal references, both fictional and historical, students who pay close attention to the text can assemble a calendar that records events from 1873 (when Ben was born) through the present (1949, “the New York and Boston of today” [\textit{Salesman} 10]). Moreover, they seem to enjoy doing so and, in class, are eager to compare their chronologies. Typically, they list 1890 as the year when Willy, nearly four years old, watched his father head for Alaska and his seventeen-year-old brother Ben, attempting to follow, head for Africa. They identify 1913 as the year that Willy, age twenty-seven, began working for Wagner & Co. and the year that Howard Wagner was born. Biff, who was nine when his parents bought the house in Brooklyn, left home in 1939, before the war. The students record several pieces of information about the present: Biff is thirty-four and Willy sixty-three; Ben, age seventy-six, reportedly died a few weeks earlier; and Linda, on the day of Willy’s funeral, makes the final payment on their twenty-five-year home mortgage. Those who are most thoughtful will succeed in dating Willy’s reveries as well: it was 1932 when Biff played football at Ebbets Field, flunked his math exam, and discovered Willy and The Woman in a Boston hotel room, 1928 when Ben reappears.
We spend the first class reviewing the chronology; students explain to one another how they arrived at particular datings. (One can date Ben’s appearance to 1928, for example, by connecting Linda’s comment to Ben within Willy’s third reverie—“Why, old man Wagner told him just the other day that if he keeps it up he’ll be a member of the firm . . .” [85]—with the scene between Willy and Howard in which Willy speaks of promises made in 1928 [82].) At this point, students see Willy as a character with a carefully constructed, recoverable past. Miller’s attention to temporal detail permits them the security that accompanies the chronologically intact realistic play.

But *Death of a Salesman*, despite the dismissive tendencies of critics, is not a realistic play. Its partially transparent set of imaginary wall-lines, its shifts between the present world and the past, and its reliance on a dramatized interior monologue challenge, in both form and spirit, the conventions of realism. I speak with students about expository techniques characteristic of the realistic mode, encouraging the realization that much of the recuperation of the past that takes place in Miller’s play relies on the memory scenes. How reliable, I then ask, is Willy as “narrator”? Though basic to the study of narrative, such a question invites a recontextualized reading of the play and a distinctly postmodern query: To what extent has Willy assumed authorial control of his own history, consciously or unconsciously rewriting and restaging it to suit his emotional needs?

To answer the question, we turn to the present space of the play. Here students catalog the action and dialogue of characters outside Willy’s reveries. Happy, they note, who has otherwise hardly been generous with his family, recently sent Willy to Florida for a rest. Charley is quick to investigate when he hears noises next door and unusually tolerant of Willy’s unjust abuse. By Jenny’s account, Charley gets upset whenever Willy turns up at the office, and when she hears a voice from the elevator (Willy, recalling the Ebbets Field game), she solicits the assistance of Bernard because she “can’t deal with him any more” (90). Both sons worry when they hear their father talking to himself or see him going for walks in his nightclothes, and all the characters are aware of Willy’s repeated road accidents, which the insurance company claims were not accidents at all. Even the faithful Linda, who moderates Biff’s assessment—“You called him crazy,” she says—by characterizing her husband’s condition as exhaustion, makes a desperate plea that “attention . . . be paid,” for “a terrible thing is happening to him” (56).

If other characters’ comments suggest that Willy is suffering mental fatigue, so does Willy’s own behavior; take, for instance, two incidents occurring on the fatal Tuesday. In the first, Willy asks, then begs, Howard Wagner for a transfer to the home office. Following the unproductive interview, Willy recoils in astonishment at his own irrational behavior: “Pull myself together! What the hell did I say to him? My God, I was yelling at him! How could I!” (82). When Willy accidentally switches on the
wire-recording machine, the voice of Harold's five-year-old son reciting state capitals becomes a cruel, cacophonous assault on the frightened man and a prelude to his firing. Later that day, at the Forty-eighth Street restaurant, The Woman's voice, calling for Willy to open the hotel room door in response to the knocking, mentally punctuates his dialogue with the present-day Biff, who is trying to tell his father of his failure not in math, as he did seventeen years earlier, but in his encounter with Bill Oliver. Unable to suffer either moment of truth, Willy dashes off to the washroom, where, as Biff later describes it, his sons leave him "babbling in a toilet" (124).

Even when Willy is not on the extremities of experience, however, students see that his language and behavior establish certain tendencies of mind. In the opening scene, the salesman, having just scuttled a trip to New England because he was unable to keep the car on the road, speaks of opening the windshield, confusing the Studebaker he drives in 1949 with the 1928 Chevy he once owned. Students witness the chronic strain between Willy and his elder son ("Why are you so hateful to each other?" [54]) and listen as the father speaks with disdain of Biff's indolence ("Biff is a lazy bum!" [16]), then, moments later, boasts of Biff's industry ("There's one thing about Biff—he's not lazy" [16]). They hear Willy confess that he's "tired to the death" yet refuse to consider a New York transfer: "I'm the New England man. I'm vital in New England" (13-14). And they hear Linda tell her sons that their father concealed a suicide hose behind the basement fuse box. Contradictions characterize the sixty-three-year-old Willy, who habitually collapses present and past, love and loathing, confidence and despair.

Balancing the security afforded them by the earlier discussion of chronology with the present results of character scrutiny, students are ready to look more closely at Willy's reveries. Both 1928 and 1932 were, I suggest, critical years. In 1928, Willy passed up an opportunity to work for his brother in Alaska, ensuring the subsequent financial scrimping that has characterized his declining years in sales. Four years later, his son, about to graduate from high school and enter the University of Virginia on an athletic scholarship, presented Willy with his greatest moment of pride (Biff is a football hero in a championship game) and his greatest moment of shame (Biff discovers Willy and The Woman in a Boston hotel).

When students examine the four memory trips, they learn much about Willy's insecurities and habits of mind. In the first reverie, the sixty-three-year-old, imagining himself and his family in their Brooklyn backyard seventeen years earlier, glows with paternal pride at his handsome, athletic sons. Willy's red 1928 Chevy, which had made frequent trips to New England, had eighty-two thousand miles on the odometer, but it was still in pristine condition, for Biff, under his father's supervision, had regularly simonized the car. In this idyllic domestic setting, Willy rewards his sons with a Gene Tunney punching bag, speaks of hanging a hammock between the elms,
gives fatherly advice about girls and school, fantasizes about starting his own business, boasts of meeting the mayor of Providence, and warms to the thought of walking through a hotel lobby in Boston with his boys carrying his bags. In this first reverie, Willy and his sons anticipate Saturday's Ebbets Field game, in which Biff promises to break out and score a touchdown for his dad.

When Bernard intrudes to remind Biff to study for the Regents exam the following week, Willy dismisses him with “Don't be a pest, Bernard!” (33), then schools his boys on the relation between success and personality. Painting a portrait of the traveling salesman for his sons, Willy boasts of his successes: “Knocked 'em cold in Providence, slaughtered 'em in Boston” (33). The Willy of the first part of this reverie is full of himself and his boys; all is well—his sons are well liked and, like himself, will succeed on a smile.

Only when husband and wife discuss Willy’s commissions and the bills does Willy admit his habit of inflation. Beginning with the boast of having done “five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston” (35), Willy, coached by Linda, adjusts his commission from $212 to $70. The recital of debts brings expressions of concern from Willy about the quality of the washing machine, the roof, and the car, a doubt that settles, finally, on his own inability: “Linda, people don’t seem to take to me. . . . They seem to laugh at me. . . . I don’t know the reason for it, but they just pass me by. I’m not noticed” (36). This portion of the reverie establishes Linda as Willy’s lifelong supporter. Candid and self-reflective, if not perspicacious, Willy catalogs his failings, only to be told by Linda, “[Y]ou’re the handsomest man in the world” and then, in a pronouncement that legitimizes the earlier memory, “Few men are idolized by their children the way you are” (37).

Also crowded into this first reverie, prompted by Linda’s comment about their sons and by Willy’s confession of loneliness and fear, is The Woman, who is filled as well with words of support: “I picked you. . . . I think you’re a wonderful man. . . . you’re so sweet. And such a kidder” (38–39). Though Willy’s first memory sequence is of an encounter with The Woman before Biff discovers them, Willy’s guilt over the affair is already apparent: Linda’s mending of stockings incenses him, for he presents The Woman with a gift of stockings each time they meet. Yet, given the need for a woman’s approval (students may notice that, from the age of four, Willy was brought up, alone, by his mother), we understand why Willy, during his absences from home, has an affair.

The reverie ends with Bernard’s reappearance, haunting Willy with the truth about his irresponsible elder son, who cheats, steals, is “rough with the girls” (“All the mothers are afraid of him!”), and drives without a license. “If he doesn't buckle down,” Bernard warns, “he’ll flunk math!” Despite the claim that this portrait of the youthful Biff makes on Willy’s memory, the man defends and denies: “There’s nothing the matter with him! You want him to be a worm like Bernard? He’s got spirit, personality. . . .”
Alone, "wilting and staring," Willy justifies his paternal role: "I never in my life told him anything but decent things" (40–41).

Willy's first reverie, which covers three events in 1932, reveals the extent to which he is devoted to an ideal: success in business, friendship, and love comes from being well liked. He himself "can park [his] car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own" (31). Willy's sons, "built like Adonises" (33) and eager to please, are sure candidates for success. But the reverie reveals as well a man assailed by the missiles of truth that threaten to shatter the veneer. As uninvited recollections enter Willy's memory, the salesman, tellingly, attempts to edit them out of the drama of his mind.

Prompted to notice Willy's revisionary impulse, students begin to question the accuracy of Willy's recuperation of the past. Was Linda really so tolerant of his low commissions, so hyperbolically supportive of her husband? Was she responsible for the buttressing of self-confidence that reactivates yet paralyzes the salesman, invidiously assuring his return to the road job and preventing his making a change? Or did Willy rewrite the extent of Linda's support to transfer blame for his self-delusion to his wife? Did Linda observe that his sons idolized him, or did Willy create a fictionalized Linda to confirm that he was loved? A look at the rhetoric of the present reveals that Willy, not Linda, is given to hyperbole. Though Linda's words are filled with affection and support, she is not in the habit of idealizing a man whose failings are all too evident. We agree that Linda's language in Willy's memory trips sounds more like a refashioning of Willy's rhetoric than an expression of her own.

Having encouraged an interrogative mode, I direct students to Willy's third reverie, which slips from Ben's 1928 visit into the Ebbets Field game that the first memory trip anticipated. I point out that Ben, who is, after all, momentarily in a time space he cannot legitimately inhabit, keeps trying to leave—and finally does. As the memory shifts to 1932, Willy is adamant in his support for Biff: "Without a penny to his name, three great universities are begging for him, and from there the sky's the limit, because it's not what you do, Ben. It's who you know and the smile on your face!" (86). Preparing to depart for the game, the family and Bernard are excited. When Charley, possibly filling in for Ben, playfully mocks Biff's achievement, Willy turns into the angry armed bodyguard, indignantly protecting not only his son's honor but the set of creaky values that have shaped the Lomans' lives.

In Willy's second memory trip, chronologically the earliest, Ben stops by on his way to Alaska, promising to reappear on his return trip. Cued by his conversation with Charley, who responded to the commotion in the Loman household attending Willy's first mental excursion, the reverie first moves uncontrollably between the past and the present, as Willy tries to juggle Charley's comments with those of his remembered brother. Indeed, both Charley and Ben speak of job opportunities, which Willy refuses. Eventually,
the mental trip settles into a sustained drama in which the brothers, who have not seen one another in thirty-eight years, catch up on family affairs. Willy introduces his brother to Linda and the boys: "This is your Uncle Ben," he announces proudly, "a great man!" (48). Willy tells Ben that their mother died long ago, and Ben describes their father:

Father was a very great and a very wild-hearted man. We would start in Boston, and he'd toss the whole family into the wagon, and then he'd drive the team right across the country. . . . And we'd stop in the towns and sell the flutes that he'd made on the way. . . . Great inventor, Father. (49)

Ben confirms the values that Willy promotes in his sons ("rugged, well liked, all-around" [49]): "William, you're being first-rate with your boys. Outstanding, manly chaps!" (52). Elated, Willy ends the reverie: "That's just the spirit I want to imbue them with! To walk into a jungle! I was right! I was right! I was right!" (52).

Knowing Willy's needs and tendencies, students are primed to question this first of two memory sessions with Ben. They think it curious that Ben's description of the father who deserted the family confirms Willy's idealized perceptions of his father and—even more curious—celebrates him as a salesman and a pioneer. They also notice that the comparison concluding Ben's description—"With one gadget he made more in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime" [49]—is much like Willy's self-characterizations, promoting, then deprecating his own worth. As when we looked at Linda, we question whether Ben actually made such pronouncements or whether the sixty-three-year-old Willy only imagines he did. Nagged by the doubts about Biff that surfaced in his first reverie, Willy needs Ben's reassurance. Moreover, he needs to understand why he himself feels and behaves as he does. When Ben arrives, Willy, shaking his hand, exclaims, "Ben! I've been waiting for you so long!" (47). When Ben motions to leave, Willy pleads with him to stay:

Can't you stay a few days? You're just what I need, Ben, because I—I have a fine position here, but I—well, Dad left when I was such a baby and I never had a chance to talk to him and I still feel—kind of temporary about myself. (51)

Given Willy's psychological needs, we may reasonably speculate that Ben's comments are Willy's personal wish fulfillment, a private psychoanalysis in which the misremembered Ben provides the explanations and the answers Willy desires.

Ben's reappearance en route to Africa after his "short business trip" to Alaska meets with Willy's confession that "nothing's working out. I don't
know what to do" (84). Yet when he met with Howard, he spoke of 1928 as a lucrative year ("I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commissions"), claiming that Frank Wagner had come to him, "or rather, I was in the office here—it was right over this desk—and he put his hand on my shoulder." In imaginary conversation with Frank moments later, Willy again recalled the event: "Frank, Frank, don't you remember what you told me that time? How you put your hand on my shoulder, and Frank..." (82). Although he does not complete the narration, Linda offers an account to Ben within the reverie. Again, we wonder how much of Linda's part has been rewritten by Willy, who himself may have stubbornly refused Ben's offer of a job in the Alaskan timberland even as he refuses other, more recent offers. The remembered "promise," which may have been nothing more than an encouraging boss's careless remark, provides Willy with the occasion to defend his job as salesman: "I am building something with this firm, Ben, and if a man is building something he must be on the right track, mustn't he?" (85).

Students need take only a small step now to ask whether Ben actually appeared in 1928—or whether Willy invented the story. A look at the dialogue of the present reveals that Willy's third reverie is not the first occasion on which he has recalled the visit and the job offer. As the voice of Ben intrudes on Willy's conversation with Charley, Willy tells Charley, "For a second there you reminded me of my brother Ben." Charley clearly knows about brother Ben, for he replies, "You never heard from him again, heh? Since that time?" (45). Willy also talks with Happy about Ben's visit:

  **WILLY.** ... Why didn't I go to Alaska with my brother Ben that time! Ben! That man was a genius, that man was success incarnate! What a mistake! He begged me to go.
  **HAPPY.** Well, there's no use in—
  **WILLY.** You guys! There was a man started with the clothes on his back and ended up with diamond mines!
  **HAPPY.** Boy, someday I'd like to know how he did it. (41)

Has Happy met the family hero, as Willy's conversation implies, or has he merely become accustomed to the story of a missed opportunity that might never have been an opportunity at all? (Students will remember that Ben hardly begged Willy to go to Alaska.)

Increasingly comfortable with the questions, students may even ask whether Ben existed at all. He does not, for one thing, ever appear in the present. A few weeks earlier, the Lomans presumably received a letter announcing Ben's death. But might Linda have contrived the announcement, in a gesture not unlike that of Edward Albee's George, who, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, kills off the couple's imaginary son in a car crash? Might Linda, aware of Willy's suicidal intent, have tried to deflate the dream that
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has proved sustaining but toxic to her husband? Might she have felt that the invented death of the hero brother, who never existed in the first place, was a necessary step in reclaiming her husband from the obsessions that threaten his life? Only once in the present does Linda speak of Willy’s brother in verifying terms, and that is when Willy cannot recall what he has done with the diamond watch fob from Ben. She reminds him that he pawned it twelve or thirteen years earlier to pay for Biff’s radio correspondence course. Yet this event, too, might be part of the fiction that her compassion has allowed. If the watch fob is the only material evidence of Ben’s existence, why must its absence be explained?

The possibility that Ben is part of the mental arsenal Willy has built up in his own defense becomes particularly provocative in the play’s final moments. Here Ben, a prominent presence in Willy’s final mental excursion, can only be a fictive construct. For Willy’s conversation with his brother about the insurance money is not a recuperative moment but a present fantasy. Though Ben is dead, Willy engages him in a dialogue on the subject of suicide, responding to Ben’s endorsement of the plan by going ahead with the deed. Seeing the force of Willy’s imagination, students ask whether Willy’s reconstructions of the past are, in fact, no more verifiable historically than this last encounter with Ben. Were they, in short, not memories at all but constructs, designed, consciously or unconsciously, to re-present one man’s meaningless life as meaningful? (At this point I like to point out that Miller calls the memory trips “imaginings” [12].)

That question asked, I then invite students to consider the imagining set in the Boston hotel room. Reserved for a position near the end of the second act, that memory trip, which culminates in Biff’s impassioned accusation—“You fake! You phony little fake! You fake!” (121)—is the mental companion of the restaurant scene, in which son disillusions father; not only did Biff fail to get a loan from Oliver, but he stole his former boss’s pen. When, in the recollection, Biff appears in Boston pounding on Willy’s hotel room door, the salesman, concealing The Woman in the bathroom, reluctantly admits him. The father-son talk that ensues appeals to the paternal ego students have seen in the simonizing and Ebbets Field sequences; Willy is ready to intervene on Biff’s behalf to salvage the failed math course. Willy’s recollection of The Woman’s entrance seems painfully candid and precise, as though Willy, even after seventeen years, cannot rewrite this scene.

Not only does the recollection seem uncharacteristically free of Willy’s habitual attempts to reshape the past, but, as students discover, it is verifiable. Here present and past interact as Willy recalls Bernard’s news that Biff has flunked math and gone off to Boston. A confirming prelude, Bernard’s visit must have been related to Willy by Linda, who received the news. Moreover, this event, unlike the others, is confirmed in the present. Bernard asks Willy what happened in Boston, what caused Biff to burn his University of Virginia sneakers, to have a fistfight with his friend, and to cry. “I’ve often
thought of how strange it was that I knew he'd given up his life," Bernard
remarks (94).

Yet despite the indelibility of the Boston affair, Willy has not been success­ful in "reading" the event. Speaking "confidentially, desperately," he tells
Bernard, "There's something I don't understand about it. His life ended
after that Ebbets Field game. From the age of seventeen nothing good ever
happened to him" (92). Unable to reshape the memory of the Boston affair
or to acknowledge its devastating effects, Willy instead blames Biff for his
testy behavior and, in their final argument, repeatedly accuses his son of
being spiteful. Nonetheless, with its confirmations in the present, this mem­
ory is psychologically and historically intact. Students understand that the
questions they asked of the other reveries yield different but productive
answers here.

I also count on this final memory trip to dispel any tendencies that students
might have to dismiss Willy as a psychotic. I refer them to Miller's objection
to the Stanley Kramer film:

Fredric March was directed to play Willy as a psycho, all but com­
pletely out of control, with next to no grip on reality. . . . [A]s a
psychotic, he was predictable in the extreme; more than that, the
misconception melted the tension between a man and his society. . . .
If he was nuts, he could hardly stand as a comment on anything.
(Timebends 315)

I refer them as well to Molly Kazan's advice, also related in Timebends: she
felt that Miller could strip the play of "all the scenes in the past" because
they were "unnecessary in the strictest sense." The playwright defended
those scenes as offering a coloration and a tonality that were necessary to
the characterization of Willy and to the justification of the action of the play
(334). I want students to understand that a psychotic Willy would be a
reductive reading, and I want them to understand that our approach to Death
of a Salesman has moved through the psychological to the epistemological. I
point out that Willy's self-assessment ("I still feel—kind of temporary about
myself" [51]), with its pun on time, contains Willy's unintended validation
of our approach, which explores his memories as an inquiry into the nature
and the authorization of experience and the self.

The complexities of Willy's memory trips model the epistemological ques­
tions involved in any one person's relation to the past. Whether Willy's
motivation at any moment is to repudiate or to reclaim, it is clear that the
impulse of his recollections is transformative. Willy's (or anyone else's) rela­
tion to the past involves a series of rereadings and misreadings; the bound­
aries between the discourses of history and fiction are neither manifest nor
firm.

With some discussion of this insistently postmodern premise, students
understand that meaning rests not in the events but, as Hutcheon puts it, "in the systems which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts.' " "This is not," Hutcheon continues, in a comment germane to the Miller play, "a 'dishonest refuge from truth' but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs" (89).

With its structural interplay between past and present, the former represented and re-presented through the consciousness of a man with particular interpretive strategies, Death of a Salesman can prove an effective introduction to the concerns of postmodern literary criticism. In constructing the chronology, students see the determining nature of history; in deconstructing Willy's memories, they face questions about the historicity of knowledge, the nature of identity, the epistemological status of fictional discourse. At any stage of their literary experience, but particularly when they are freshmen, an awareness of how authors of texts—themselves included—construct meaning should serve them well.

APPENDIX I

The Chronology of Death of a Salesman

1873  Ben born.
1886  Willy born.
1890  Father leaves for Alaska (Ben is 17, Willy 4); Ben follows but ends up in Africa.
1894  Ben is rich.
1913  Willy (age 27) starts working for Wagner & Co.; Howard Wagner is born.
1915  Biff is born (Willy is 29).
1917  Happy is born (Willy is 31).
1924  Willy and Linda buy house in Brooklyn (Willy is 38).
1928  Ben, in his sixties [sic], stops by on his way to Alaska, meets Linda and the boys; reappears on his way back to Africa, offering Willy a job in Alaska. Willy claims to be averaging $170 per week; Frank Wagner reportedly speaks of making Willy a member of the firm.
1932  January: Biff plays on the All-Scholastic Championship Team of the City of New York at Ebbets Field, takes Regents exams. 
June: Biff fails math, discovers Willy with The Woman in a Boston hotel room.
1932–39  Biff tries various jobs, takes radio correspondence course (1936 or 1937).
1939  Biff leaves home.
1949  Ben dies (age 76); Willy kills self (age 63); 25-year mortgage on Loman house is paid. Biff is 34, Happy 32, Howard Wagner 36.
Notes on Reconstructing the Chronology

1. Miller sets the play in "the New York and Boston of today" (10). Since Death of a Salesman was published in 1949, I have taken that year as the present. I considered 1948, when Miller began writing the play, finding that the dates could be adjusted by one year without violating internal consistency or historical coincidence. But, with Bernard Dukore, I settled on 1949 because Biff's year of birth would then be 1915, the same as Miller's, and his high school graduation date, like Miller's, would be 1932. (In All My Sons [1947], Miller made Chris Keller the same age as himself.)

The time of year is probably May. Early in the play, Willy speaks of spring flowers: "This time of year it was lilac and wisteria. And then the peonies would come out, and the daffodils" (17). Although Willy's horticultural knowledge is imperfect (daffodils are the first to bloom), he establishes the time of year as May, when lilacs and wisteria are in flower in Brooklyn. Linda confirms the likelihood that the month is May when she speaks to Biff about having written to him in February about Willy's smashing up the car (164) but having been unable to write since then because "[f]or over three months [he] had no address" (54).

2. Miller obliquely but certainly establishes 1928 as the year Ben appears. In the present world, he has Willy place the conversation with Frank Wagner concerning Willy's partnership in the firm in 1928, "the year Al Smith was nominated" (82). In Willy's reverie, Linda recalls that conversation to Ben as having taken place "just the other day": "why, old man Wagner told him just the other day that if he keeps it up he'll be a member of the firm, didn't he, Willy?" (85). The year 1928 is also the year of Willy's Chevy, which, when it appears in the simonizing scene in 1932, has accumulated eighty-two thousand miles (20). Production has proved that although the text locates Ben's visit in 1928, there is no need to preserve the distinction between these reveries and the 1932 reveries. In the 1985 Volker Schlondorff television production starring Dustin Hoffman, for example, Biff and Happy wear the same clothes when they simonize the car as they do when they meet Uncle Ben.

3. The reveries involving the Ebbets Field game, the math exam, and Biff's trip to Boston return Willy to 1932, the year of Biff's planned high school graduation. In Willy's first reverie, Biff is simonizing the car a few days before the Saturday Ebbets Field game, the week before the Regents exam (32). A 1931 New York Times article reveals that the high school Regents exams were administered each year in January and June, making either, initially, a plausible dating ("City Pupils"). It is unlikely, however, that Miller, who elsewhere respects historical accuracy, would have placed the championship football game in June, when Ebbets Field would have been occupied by the Brooklyn Dodgers. The New York Times index, disappointingly spotty in the 1930s, does not include the All-Scholastic Championship Team of the City of New York. Scanning back issues of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, however, I found that such a team was acknowledged at an awards luncheon in January 1932, as it had been for six years. The article refers to Abraham and Straus's sponsorship of the luncheon, noting that it had become "an integral part of the scholastic football season." Moreover, Frank Glick, personnel director, commented, "I've seen a lot of football, and I've never seen schoolboys play it any better than they do at Ebbets
Field or Boys High Field or any of the local fields” (Parrot). While it is clear from Glick’s comment that high school teams played at Ebbets Field during the football season, neither the New York Times nor the Brooklyn Daily Eagle speaks of a championship game played between the selection of the team members (c. 20 December, according to the Brooklyn Daily Eagle) and the awards banquet (c. 9 January). It would appear, then, that Miller elaborated on the selection of these twenty-two high school players (eleven on the first team, eleven on the second) by creating a fictional championship game. Because the team was, historically, selected in late December and honored in early January, as the culmination of the fall football season, it is reasonable to assume that Biff’s game took place a week before the January, not the June, Regents exams.

Two textual references also help locate the season. Willy refers to Christmas, suggesting that the holiday is still fresh in his mind: “I didn’t tell you, but Christmas time I happened to be calling on F. H. Stewarts . . .” (37). As Willy and his family head for the game, Charley jokingly asks, “Baseball in this weather?” (89), a comment that implies this event is just prior not to the June Regents exam (during baseball season) but to the January exam.

The failed math course and Biff’s trip to Boston take place at the end of term, in June. (Bernard, recalling the event, is explicit about the date: “Willy, I remember, it was June, and our grades came out. And, he’d flunked math” [93].) Biff, unqualified to graduate because he has failed not the Regents exam but the math course (“Birnbaum flunked him! They won’t graduate him!” [110]), begs his father to talk to his math teacher “before they close the school” (118). Bernard’s story of Biff’s burning his sneakers on his return from Boston (“What happened in Boston, Willy?” [94]) and Willy’s plaintive comment to Bernard (“His life ended after that Ebbets Field game. From the age of seventeen nothing good ever happened to him” [92]) suggest the impact of this sequence of events: Ebbets Field, the Regents exam, Biff’s final grade in the math course, the Boston hotel.

Willy’s comment also confirms that Biff is seventeen at the time. If he was born in 1915, as the chronology suggests, then this memory year is 1932. (It should also be noted that at the time of the reverie Biff is too young to have a driver’s license: Bernard notes, “He’s driving the car without a license!” [40]. In 1932, though one could obtain a junior operator’s license at age sixteen, it did not permit driving in New York City; the legal driving age in Brooklyn was eighteen.)

4. Several historical references help place events. Biff, for example, left home “before the war” (22). Miller may mean before 1939, when Germany invaded Poland, or before December 1941, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States entered the war. When Biff returns home, he has been gone for ten years (16). Since it is unlikely that Miller would have set the play later than 1949, particularly given his opening description of the setting, I conclude that Biff left in 1939. (Of course, if the present is 1948, Biff would have left in 1938, also “before the war.” Any earlier date would probably not have prompted the location of the day in relation to the war.)

Other historical references include the 1928 Chevy with eighty-two thousand miles (19); a Gene Tunney punching bag (29; Tunney was world heavyweight boxing champion from September 1926 to July 1928); Howard’s purchase of a mass-marketed wire recorder (76); Jack Benny’s radio show (78; Benny was on radio from 1932 to 1955); Al Smith’s presidential nomination (82); Red Grange (89; Harold “Red”
Grange, a University of Illinois football star, signed with the Chicago Bears in 1925 and retired after the 1934 season; and the All-Scholastic Championship Team of the City of New York (88).

5. Several fictional references also help place events. Willy, for example, who is now sixty-three (57), was “[t]hree years and eleven months” (47) when his father left home; his brother Ben was seventeen. Ben walked into the jungle at seventeen and walked out at twenty-one, having made his fortune (48, 52). Biff was nine years old when Linda and Willy bought the house in Brooklyn; the twenty-five-year mortgage on the house is about to be paid off (73). Howard Wagner is thirty-six years old (stage direction, 76); he was born the same year Willy started working for the firm, thirty-six years earlier (56). Biff, who is thirty-four (16), “spent six or seven years after high school trying to work [himself] up” (22) before leaving home; he’s been tramping around for more than (almost?) ten years now (16); it’s been “almost [more than?] ten years” since he worked for Oliver (26), a year since he’s visited home (55). “Biff is two years older than his brother Happy” (stage direction, 19).

6. The one chronological clue that I was unable to reconcile comes in the stage direction for Uncle Ben’s entrance: “He is a stolid man, in his sixties” (44). Ben, in fact, is in his fifties in 1928. I have reluctantly concluded that, although Miller is careful in constructing the chronology, he fell prey to a mathematical error here (perhaps in deference to Biff). Willy also gets his numbers wrong when he tells Howard he’s “put thirty-four years into this firm” (82). Linda is more certainly accurate in observing, “He works for a company thirty-six years this March” (56). Had Willy been at Wagner & Co. for only thirty-four years, he would not have been around to “name” Howard, who is now thirty-six (“Your father came to me the day you were born and asked me what I thought of the name of Howard” [80]). Dukore, seeking a psychological rationale for these discrepancies, suggests that Willy confuses “his time with the firm with his older son’s age” (14) and “imagines seeing [Ben] . . . in his sixties—Willy’s age in 1949” (15).