

ENG347 Take-home Final Exam

C. Scott Ananian

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1 Question 3

“In reading, the eye is an anesthetized organ, little more than a window to the waiting consciousness on which a world of signification imprints itself with only the barest trace of the signifiers that carry it. In the theatre, however, the eye awakens and confiscates the image.” Discuss how four playwrights you have read use visual imagery to convey the meaning of their work.

The word “theatre” is derived from words originally meaning, “seeing-place.” Its uniqueness as an artistic form lies in its ability to crystalize meaning through visual imagery, and the work of playwrights such as O’Neill, Miller, Shepard, and Hwang illustrates the effectiveness of such concrete staged visions. However, often effects impossible to realistically re-create can instead be suggested verbally by the actors, as is done in *A Long Day’s Journey Into Night* and *Broken Glass*.

At the end of O’Neill’s lengthy play *The Iceman Cometh*, Harry Hope calls out to Larry, “Come over and get paralyzed!” This feeling of stasis grips the entire play, which treats the unsuccessful attempts of the occupants of Harry Hope’s Saloon to escape their “pipe dreams” and re-enter reality. The strong visual image of immobility is first established by the setting: a back room so crammed with furniture that “it is a difficult squeeze to pass between.” The set in which it is impossible to move is populated with characters who seem to possess no desire to move. At the top of the show, all except for Larry Slade are asleep in their chairs.

O’Neill uses the static image to ultimately portray his sense of the immutability of man’s destiny: just as we can not change position in this room, we can not change our role in life or fulfill our dreams. What’s more, it is

inferred that we would become profoundly unhappy if our dreams ever did come true, because through them we deny the unpleasant truth. The visual image thus summarizes the play's life philosophy.

In *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*, however, O'Neill calls for a number of impossible images. He begins the play with a meticulous description of each of the characters; a description too precise by far to use for casting. He follows this with several impossible stage-directions: dark-brown eyes that "appear black" (are they black?), hands which "one avoids looking at," but which are featured prominently throughout the play. These visual cues are obviously not meant to be observed during performance—it would be impossible to stage them—so O'Neill's motivations must rise above mere theatre-craft. I read these stage-directions as true and necessary marks of auto-biography.

The truly visual element of *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* is the fog. Despite the fact that the fog, in all probability, will not be an actual part of the physical scene due to production constraints, it is made an integral part of our mental realization of the play by the actors' frequent references. The fog tracks Mary's retreat into the fog of her morphine-induced stupors, and the fog of non-meaning causing Edmund's despair. The visual metaphor used by O'Neill resonates to make his tale of lost persons particularly memorable.

Arthur Miller similarly uses spoken images to fix *Broken Glass* in our memories. Sylvia's haunting image of "those two old men on their knees in the street" scrubbing the sidewalk with toothbrushes is never explicitly seen; nevertheless it is one of the most memorable images of the play. Sylvia's helpless immobility on stage—her obvious inability to get down on her knees

to scrub—further hints at the root cause of her disability, in the same way as Gellburg is reminded of his “other-ness” by the Jewish semblance of his own face. The dynamic image of Sylvia rising at the death of Phillip is the mirror to *Iceman*’s stupor, and summarizes Miller’s rejection of O’Neill’s immutable present.

Miller’s most famous play is *Death of A Salesman*, and its dramatic use of transparent scenery and stylized setting is notable in its encapsulation of the theatrical metaphor. Miller uses *Salesman*’s staging to allow a fluid motion between past, present, and imagination in the telling of Willy’s story. The set described in the script communicates **meaning** less, perhaps, than the original set Miller had created: when the title of the play was still “The Inside of His Head,” the set likewise depicted a huge human head. Arguably, however, this set too explained the style of the work, and not its meaning.

Sam Shepard avoids comments on style in favor of concrete (if abstract) visual symbols. The stage direction for *The Tooth Of Crime* reads, “A bare stage except for an evil-looking black chair with silver studs and a very high back, something like an Egyptian Pharaoh’s throne.” This mention of royal trappings is a visual clue to *The Tooth Of Crime*’s struggle of two Kings; once the play is understood as a modern sci-fi Richard II, the throne serves to symbolize the whole meaning.

The symbology is not so clear in Shepard’s *Buried Child*. The play is filled with visual images which may or may not correspond to a deeper truth. The arrival of Tilden bearing the bones of the eponymous buried child in his arms is clearly the visual summary of this tale of hidden secrets revealed, and the magical harvest in the backyard can be easily interpreted as a portent of

rebirth and regeneration incipient with the arrival of Vince as a new head of household. The symbols which most capture our attention—Tilden’s piles of carrots and corn—are left unexplained. The answer to Halie’s question on the meaning of the corn is Tilden’s simple response, “It’s a mystery to me.” Although we can impose an arbitrary reading on the vegetables as agrarian rite, we cannot impute a definite author’s intent. Shepard seems to have placed the vegetables in the living room as a cryptic iconic token, rather than as a symbolic crystallization of meaning.

In *M. Butterfly*, the focus of the theatrical experience is the unambiguous revelation of meaning for image. David Henry Hwang succeeds in creating a surprising and memorable effect on the audience by re-interpreting the gender of Song Liling between Acts II and III. The transformation of the Asian Madame Butterfly of Puccini’s opera into the dominant and threatening Asian male of Act III embodies Hwang’s message on cultural stereotypes. Hwang would like to enact this same transformation in the minds of his audience: destroying our stereotypes of the “passive Oriental” by transforming the image into that of a man, of ourselves. It is for this reason that gender in *M. Butterfly* is so strongly dualistic: homosexuality is not couched as an option because Hwang wishes to avoid replacing our Oriental stereotype with a homosexual stereotype or a female stereotype. He wants us to associate Asians with “normal people,” and for most of his audience, that translates into heterosexual male.

These four playwrights approach the use of theatrical imagery in different manners. O’Neill’s plays use strong images to capture mood: static, lost, or hopeless. Miller primarily uses image to capture a style: *Death of A Salesman*

breaks down realism to introduce a Willy-centered world-view with the set's transparent walls and visual effect, and *Broken Glass* imputes deep meaning to Sylvia's handicap through association with the newspaper photo and the dramatic anti-paralysis at the conclusion. Shepard prefers icons, instead—single objects or occurrences that register symbolically to his audience, even when they are uncertain as to the symbol's referent, as for the carrots of *Buried Child*. Most inclusively, Hwang hangs his entire play on the visual transformation of the M. Butterfly of the play's title; all other dialog is intended only to prick our minds into a fuller understanding of this central change. The four approaches are equally effective in utilizing the theatrical form to transcend written literature in order that the eye may “awaken and confiscate the image.”

2 Question 5

Playwrights often structure their plays around the idea of “insiders” versus “outsiders”—two groups, often from different worlds, in antagonistic relationship to one another. Discuss how and why four of the playwrights you have read use this structuring principle.

Philip Gellburg gasps out in Arthur Miller’s play *Broken Glass*, “Why must we be different? Why is it? What is it for?” The works of Eugene O’Neill, Edward Albee, August Wilson and Tennessee Williams all take stabs at answering that question as they spin around artificial divisions of “insiders” and “outsiders.”

O’Neill’s vision is of an inside tragically separated from the outside; people trapped in, unable or unwilling to break out. The story-tellers of *The Iceman Cometh* all yearn for their pipe dreams, their visions of a bright future outside Harry Hope’s Saloon, but the outside they imagine does not exist. Each character is pitted against the outside world, reality. Chuck and Cora’s “outside” is New Jersey, where they hope to get married, but “every ginmill we come to she’d drag me in to blow her.” Their struggle against being “dragged in” fails. Hickey’s struggle as a Salesman is against the temptations of “outside,” when he was not safely inside with Evelyn, and his refuge in Harry Hope’s saloon gives way to the more permanent inside of a jail.

Likewise *A Long Day’s Journey Into Night*’s Mary is trapped, both by her way of life and by her addiction. She complains that she has no friends, but also “couldn’t stand to have friends” because of her situation. Mary is set apart as the “insider,” who refuses to come out; Tyrone, Edmund and Jamie consort with their barmates or the brothel, but are unable to come

into Mary's world. The fog isolates them all, though, and confuses their desires for out- or inside. Edmund speaks of being happiest out in the fog—"That's what I wanted—to be alone with myself in another world"—while Jamie wishes Mary could emerge from her self-imposed "inside-ness" so that he could, too. It is a fitting structure for O'Neill's play of lost souls: each feels trapped in a netherworld, content neither inside alone or outside with others.

The inside/outside ambiguity exists also in Tennessee William's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Blanche in this case occupies the double role: she is an insider in the Blanche/Stella familial relation, but an outsider in the Stella/St Stanley marriage. Her desires are typical of an outsider: she wants to be loved by a successful insider and thus be accepted inside herself. Hence her letters to her phantom lover Shep Huntleigh and her aborted affair with Mitch.

The duality is more clear in *Orpheus Descending*. The outcast, Carol, is an outsider to the people of Two River County, ostracized to all but Val and Lady. Val is an outsider as well, a wild thing in a "civilized" place, marked by his snakeskin jacket. Lady is an outsider because of her ethnicity: as an Italian, she will never be considered part of the town. Her marriage to an insider is forced upon her, and her revenge is the creation of a little bit of outside—her father's wine garden—inside the "civilized" confines of her store. The Sheriff's wife Vee is also an outsider, because she has been granted visions outside the realistic experience of "common-sense" folk. The "Conjure Man" is the last outsider of the play, excluded from society because of his ethnicity and symbolizing an occult natural spirituality that only the

outsiders can appreciate. His Choctaw cry encapsulates the wild longing which makes the outsiders out of place in Two River County. The natural relation of outside to outsider has no place inside the town, which results in the play's tragic end.

Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolfe* is also sharply divided into insiders and outsiders. Martha and George are clearly on the inside: they know the rules of the game and how it's played. Honey and Nick are relegated to the often confused outside, played against each other by the inside pair. The physical placement of the play emphasizes this dichotomy: we are in George and Martha's house; Honey and Nick are on foreign turf. Likewise, the play begins and ends with the insiders, alone. As in the dichotomy of *Orpheus Descending*, there is at times outright hostility between the two groups, but in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolfe* private moments as well as public happen before outsiders.

The outsiders are an implicit force in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*: Sutter's ghost is the closest any outsider gets to the stage. Nonetheless, they are powerfully present. The Sutters and the piano purchaser are the most visible, but everyone outside the family can be considered an outsider to the piano, which records the family souls. Boy Willie's quest to move the piano outside, and the manifestation of Sutter's ghost inside can be seen as parts of the inside/outside duality. Similarly, Boy Willie and Lymon's watermelon sale and Berniece's cleaning job are inside/outside interactions that are merely tolerated, not condoned. Ultimately, the family is at odds with the outside, which includes the segregation of the south which the family has fled.

These four playwrights have all utilized an inside/outside duality to structure their plays, but the results are as different as the plays themselves. O'Neill portrays characters desiring but unable to move from inside to outside, or vice-versa, while Williams paints a more hostile interaction of forces, culminating in rape or death. Albee uses the division most as a structuring convention, as he pairs off groups of insiders and outsiders for their vicious word games and reconciliations. Finally, the outside/inside dichotomy reflects the segregation of the American life Wilson portrays, and the play dwells on the morality of the various types of business transactions between the groups, transferring money for service or souls.