**Littérature L1S2-TD de B. Goursaud**

**Proposition de corrigé pour le DST1**

**Question #1-** Pay attention to Linda’s rhetorical strategies to defend Willy. What image of Willy does it give the audience? How does Linda herself come across? (to come across=(here) to appear)

This passage is an exception in the play as Linda breaks from her usual quiet character to mount a rhetorically **deft** defense of her absent husband. But **in doing so** she both proves her loyalty and love for Willy and simultaneously humiliates him in his absence. For instance, her first argument is a concession to her sons that Willy isn’t a great man (“I don’t say he’s a great man.” l.7). A concession is a classic rhetorical **trope** but while it **provides** Linda **with** an argument in the debate, the result is that the portrait painted by Willy’s own wife is **blatantly unflattering** to the audience.

Linda clearly **has the upper-hand** in this dialogue. She has the longest cue (l.32-51), she interrupts Biff (l.15) and manages to impose her ideas to Happy (“Sure!”, l.18). She makes comments such as “You never asked, my dear!” (l.24), where the **term of endearment** can obviously be read as sarcasm, and she even calls Happy a “philandering bum” (l.51), a clever way of insulting him since she doesn’t directly address him. Happy’s own indignant response (“Mom!”, l.52) thus tends to confirm her accusation and humiliate him even more.

The succession of rhetorical questions that **makes up** most of the longest cue in the passage is also interesting because it affirms her angry dominance over the conversation and **simultaneously** depicts Willy as a tragic figure: “Why shouldn’t he talk to himself?” (l.43-44) is **significant** in that respect as the modal “should” can be understood to contain nuances of recommendation as well as logical deduction. The first sense suggests an ironic but tender piece of advice while the second makes Linda sound much more desperate. The choice of interpretation **is** of course **up to** the actor and director but what matters here is that Linda’s speech makes her seem powerful and loving which emphasizes the desperate situation her husband finds himself in.

**Question #2-** What role does the unsaid have in this scene? Pay attention to the distribution of cues and the characters’ attitudes to each other. (the unsaid=le non dit)

**On the face of it**, this is a scene of revelation where Linda is telling everything to her sons, in particular when she reveals the change in Willy’s professional situation (l.20-23; l.28-30). But the apparent **straightforwardness** of the passage is only a façade since Linda’s description of Willy’s recent **predicament** **is characterized by** a clear **understatement[[1]](#footnote-1)**—or a lie?—when she **blames it on** mere exhaustion (“The man is exhausted.”, l.17). The audience has already heard the story of Willy’s accident and this creates a form of dramatic irony[[2]](#footnote-2).

This unsaid element of the conversation **may seem like** a way of keeping control on the situation on Linda’s, an interpretation reinforced by Linda’s confident and sarcastic **comment on** the situation: “You don’t’ have to be very smart to know what his trouble is” (l.16). In fact, Linda is clearly controlling the image her sons have of Willy—in the next passage, she will reveal Willy’s suicidal tendencies but in this text she only alludes to it: while the sentence “He won’t be alright.” (l.69) sounds **ominous**, the absence of explanation is a way ensuring her sons’ attention. Similarly, the regular use of rhetorical questions, a trope that leaves answers unsaid, was a way of silencing her sons’ critique of their father.

However, the unsaid has another function in this scene, particularly at the end, when Biff alludes to his father’s adultery. **Interestingly,** when Biff hits back at his mum with the fact that he was kicked out of the house, she answers with her first genuine question (“Why did he do that?”, l.61) as opposed to her rhetorical ones. Biff’s answer to her question (“Because I know he’s a fake…knows.”, l.62-63) is interesting because of its **evasiveness**. Without clearer context for Linda, the insult could refer to a lot of things: is Willy faking love? exhaustion? Is he lying about something? The unsaid is thus **used** again here as a tool to reaffirm power, but this time by Biff. In his next cue, the use of short, uncoordinated sentences and his exit from stage have the same effect—they reaffirm Biff’s control of the conversation, just like his final cue does: “I hate this city and I’ll stay here.” (L70-71) is a surprising contradiction where it is easy to read the reference to the city as a **synecdoche[[3]](#footnote-3)** for the family or the father. Biff’s use of the unsaid can thus be read as **a response to** Linda’s own use of it to keep control over the family.

1. **Understatement:** a statement that makes something seem less important, severe etc than it actually is. It can be used as figure of speech to emphasize a point, in which case it is a form of verbal irony called “litotes” (e.g. : “Not bad” to mean “very good”). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **Dramatic irony:** the situation in which the audience of a play knows something that one or all the characters do not know. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. **Synecdoche:** a figure of speech where the whole of something is used to refer to the part. It is connected to **metonymy,** where the part of something is used to refer to the whole (e.g.: a sail for a boat, a cradle for a birthplace, the blade for the sword..). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)