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**A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF SWEARING IN ARTHUR MILLER'S  
DEATH OF A SALESMAN**

**Key words: Swearing, the model of Vingerhoets' et(2000) , Death of a Salesman**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present study tries to examine the swear words uttered by the characters in Arthur Miller's *Death of a salesman* using psycholinguistic approach. The aim of the study is to show the types of swearwords. It also aims to make clear the kinds of swear words that point to causal language. Three sources of taboo are found in this literary text: religion, body or intellectually helpless and perversity. Besides, it aims at showing the usability of the adapted model.

One of the purposes of the study is to prove that swearwords can be used to interpret literary texts. The model of the study is adapted from Vingerhoets' et. (2000) Model of Crying as the notions of the model are more relevant to the aims of study. The findings of analysis showed the usability of the adapted model .

The study shows a detailed explanation of the notion of swearing . Moreover, after conducting the analysis of literary texts, the conclusions of the study are presented.

**1. Introduction**

Swearwords are interesting and fascinating .Society denounces them, few confess to using them and still, everybody swears, at least from time to time. And why not? Swearwords are a natural part of our language ,and they are obviously one of the most effective and active ways to away extra disappointment or outrage in difficult situations. It has even been suggested that swearwords may be a factor in reducing fatigue, overwork, pressure, tension and stress.

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## 2. History of Swearing

We have a long history of swearing. In old ages, the majority of people didn't put swearing in writing. It was never used in old ages. Nevertheless, it gradually went higher. During the middle ages, swearing became common among different social ranks. It wasn't limited to a particular age or gender. In the dark ages swearing was shown as a form of art. Swearing in the middle age was regarded as destructor of social and religious organizations especially when names of gods were concerned. There was a frustration in society when swearwords started being used (Montag, 2001:36).

The first usage of swear words was related to Egypt. The usage of swearwords is done by using the names of gods in Ancient Greek and Latin. It wasn't related to the usage of dirty language. The punishment of uttering swearwords in public in ancient Rome was death. Nevertheless, swear words are used for years before being registered in the written form(Ljung,2010:23)

Swearing has reached its highest point in Britain during the eighteenth century. There was a real activity in Britain during the eighteenth century to cease the usage of swearwords. The upper class ceased the use of swearwords as a form of speech. The usage of the swearwords became familiar and the majority of people started using word 'fuck'(Ibid).

Although swearing is familiar in contemporary society, it is undesirable socially. Montagu shows that some individuals who want to reduce the use of swearwords publically have different opinion of it privately. For example, someone might prevent uttering the swearwords 'shit' publically to show themselves as being good people, but they use it at homes. Swearing is denounced socially since it is regarded vulgar, improper and takeover of the name of God or gods for nothing(Ibid).

## 3. Defining Swearing

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In his book, Ljung (1990:23) states that the first important point in defining a swearword is that it should be used in a non-technical sense i.e. the word *bitch* will be non-swearing when it means a female dog, but it will be swearing when used to disparage a woman. In line with the requirement of non-technicality, the word *Jesus* in the sentence '*the life and teaching of Jesus*' is not a swearword. However, it becomes a swearword when it is used in an exclamation like '*Jesus fucking Christ*' (Ljung,1990;23).

An item or an expression should be used in an emotional manner to be classified as a swearword. That is why a swearword cannot be translated literally because it will lessen the real meaning of the items. Furthermore, Bees Fagersten states "the intention of uttering swearword can be explained by paying closer attention to the contexts in which swearing takes place". Therefore, in order to know the intention and reasons of swearing, we have to know the different contexts since swearing is context-dependent (Locher& Graham,2010:291).

Wajnryb (2005:15) states that there are two points of perplexity dealt with the survey of bad language .One deals with the exact words that actually constitutes swearing, and the other with how we refer to swearing .The first case of perplexity emerges from the fact that there are more contexts in which we can swear than there are exact swearwords (i.e. similar swearwords can be applied in a different situation for the sake of obtaining a different meanings. The second case has to deal with the exact meta-language of swearing .It means various word labels for the similar notion. It indicates that we are not referring to a universal set of labels. Swearing is synonymous with cursing, bad language, or profanity.

The term 'swearing' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989:367) is clarified as follows:" to utter a form of oath lightly, as a mere intensive, or an expression of anger, vexation or other strong feeling [...] to utter a profane oath, or use profane language habitually; more widely, to use bad language". It is

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clear that this definition needs accuracy: Oath, profane, language or bad language are all concepts that may be compared or equalized with swearing and that is why it doesn't inform the audience or readers much they don't already know. In the same way, scientists trying to clarify the notion of swearing seldom do this in a firm manner, indicating various concepts with different features.

Anderson and Trudgill (1990: 61) point out that swearing can be clarified as: a form of language use in which the term:

- a. points to something that is taboo and /or denounced in the culture
- b. should not be understood word by word,
- c. can be used to show powerful affections and behaviours.

This definition does not restrict swearing to a speech act that is used to show affections. Actually, Anderson and Trudgill differentiate between expletives, abusive swearing, humorous swearing, and auxiliary swearing. The latter two are not meant to be insulting humorous swearing often carries the form of naughty swearing, but is cheerful rather than naughty and auxiliary swearing is only a manner of talking. In contrast, naughty swearing is disdainful and contains name – calling, whereas splanchnic would be used to show affections and are not addressed to others (Anderson and Trudgill,1990:61).

Wajnryb comes to the same inference in her dictionary of the meta-language of swearing where she differentiates between the concepts of foul language, abusive swearing and expletives. Foul language is qualified as a general concept for swearing and all its functions containing language that is not abusive. (Wajnryb, 2005:18-22) the following hierarchy of concepts with their definitions:

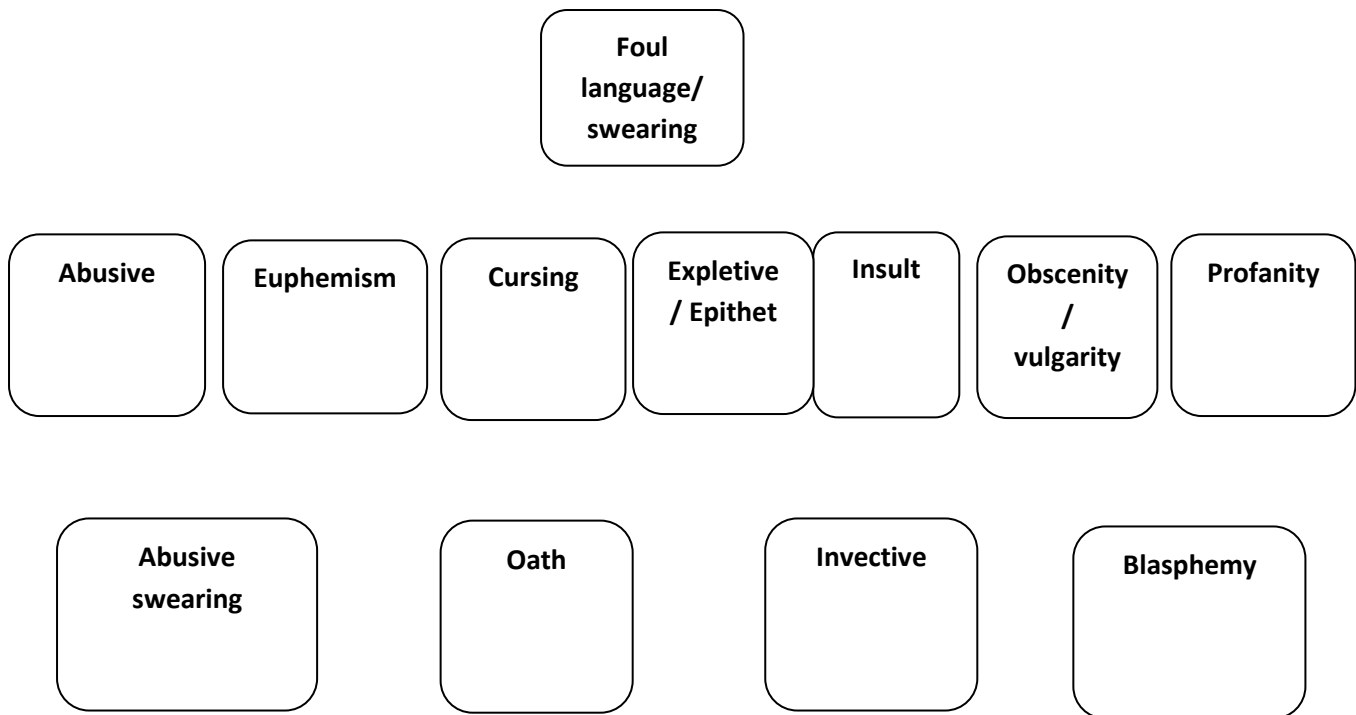


Figure 3: Based on Wajnryb's Hierarchy of swearing Terms

*Foul language:* It is connected with naughty or offensive, but it can be used without oppressing anyone.

*Abusive swearing:* Swearwords that are addressed to others 'you fucker', metaphoric curses 'go to hell'.

*Dysphemism:* The substitution of a disagreeable, offensive or disparaging expression for an agreeable or inoffensive one.

*Euphemistic swearing:* The substitution of an inoffensive term 'goodness gracious' for one that is considered taboo 'good God almighty'.

*Cursing:* The curser often recalls a higher being and scolds some evil upon a particularly specified target 'may you be damned for all eternity!' A number of aspects differentiate cursing from swearing. Placing a curse on someone is

enormous threatening attitude. In the past, a specific supernatural being was often recalled but nowadays, we can only shout.

*Oath*: A metaphoric curse, e.g. ‘may your blood cease to flow’

*Expletives /epithet*: An exclamatory swearword spoken in sentimental environment. What is being marked is the relief of sentiments .The swearwords are not directed to anyone.

*Insults*: A naughty expression that is meant literally ‘you ugly, fat idiot’.

*Invective*: A purified or refined narration of an insult used in formal contexts.

*Obscenity /vulgarity*: It means swearing through plain use of taboo words ‘shit, fuck’

*Profanity*: Swearing through using anything oppress holy or sacred things. It is more general than blasphemy since there might be no intention to dispraise. For, example God or Jesus used in a secular manner.

*Blasphemy*: It derogates religion. The item would not be considered blasphemous unless its use was meant to give specific fault.

Thus, it becomes clear that the meta-language of swearing contains a number of notions that, due to Wajnrybe(ibid), should not be mingled together. Swearwords clearly serve a number of various speech acts: to swear, to curse, to insult, to intensify, to be vulgar, to be obscene, and to blaspheme, and so on.

Speech acts that are used to show the psychological case, i.e. sentiment of the interlocutor, are known ‘*expressives*’ by Searle (1979:15).

Mateo and Yus (2000:98) distinguish between swearing or cursing and insults. The latter idioms or gestural motions with the basic but not the only intent to injure an addressee sentimentally .They are law breaking and etiquette violators swearing and cursing are with no intention, but used to show

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revolutionary self-centredness around affections such as failure, vengeance, force, suffering, or stress.

#### **4.Data Analysis**

##### **4.1 Towards a Model of Swearing**

Montagu (1942) regards swearing in adult to have the same function as crying by younger kids in outrage cases. Montagu also shows that laughing, crying, and swearing are mutually connected, since all these unsophisticated explosions of passion may cause a purgation effect and can benefit inter-personal aims.

The visible agreement with crying are wonderful and unusual .Crying and swearing are related to a variety of strong (specifically negative, but also positive) passions, and both are hypothesized to attend to inter-personal functions .And for both attitudes ,biological and cultural causes seem to be related(Montagu,1942:189-201).

Vingerhoets, et al. have shown a model explaining the pragmatic function of biological, psychological and contextual factors found in crying. So the present study can adopt Vingerhoets' (2000) model since swearing and crying are mutually related to each other. (vingerhoet etc al.,2000:345-377).

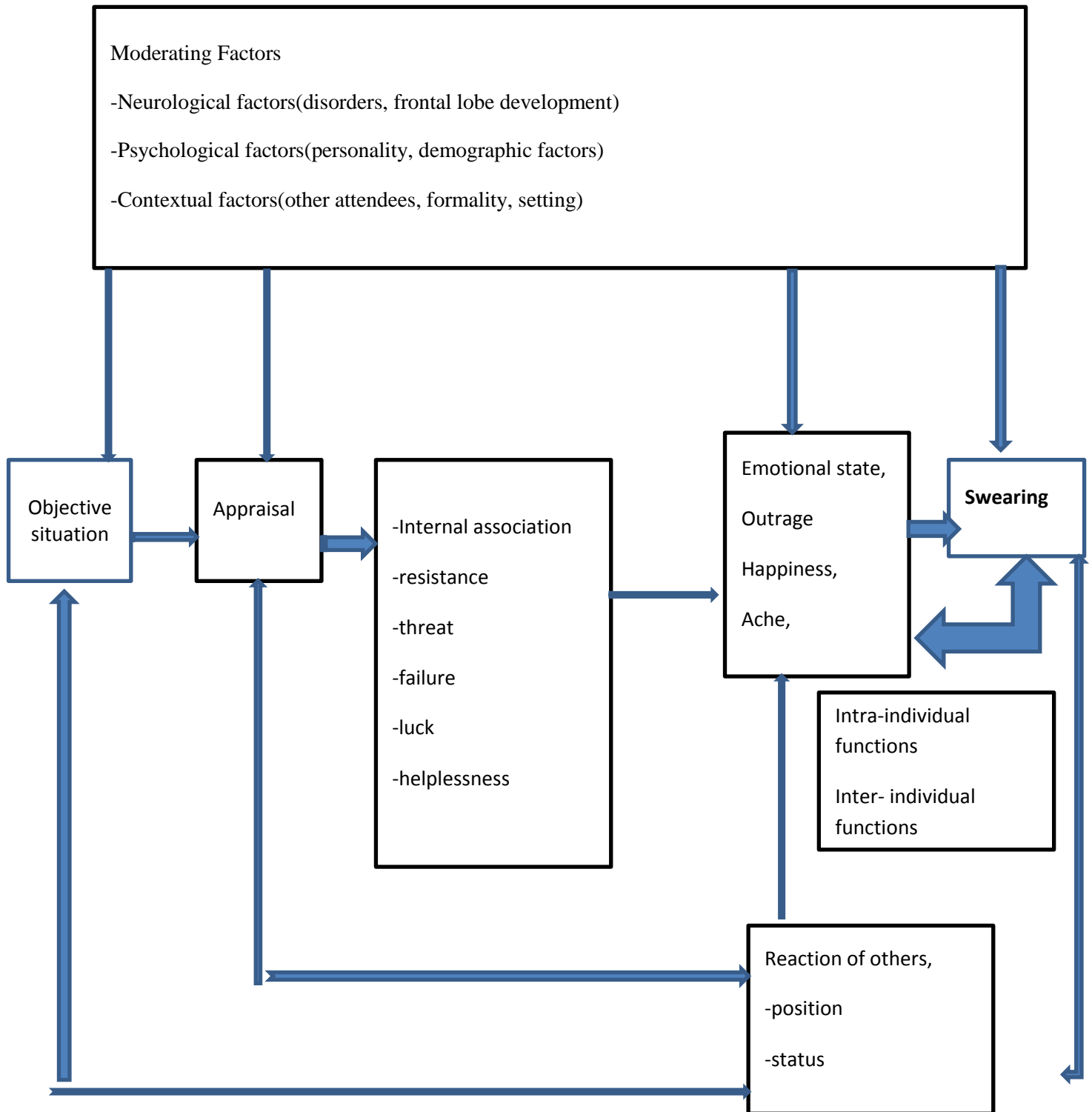


Figure 3: A proposed Model of Swearing

Adapted from Vingerhoets' et al .(2000),Model of crying



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Presenting these noticeable resemblance, we suggest a model of swearing established on Vinger et al .(2000)crying model. The heart of the model is a cognitive emotion model, with its key characteristic being appraisal or evaluation of the objective situation. Appraisal relates to the individuals decision or judgement concerning whether the situation is or not personally relevant. When the situation is considered personally relevant, the appraisal or assessment goes on with the estimation of the situation in terms of positive or negative, danger, defiance (challenge), deprivation, who is in charge of ,etc. This appraisal or assessment process is affected by biological, psychological ,and contextual factors. Specific appraisal styles or sentiments like outrage, depression, frustration or anxiety. When somebody lives through a certain intense sentiments, this emotion or sentiment may or may not be explicated by swearing subordinate on certain factors. The model presents that swearing can serve intra-personal and inter-personal functions. Swearing can therefore affect the emotional case of the Swearing person him or herself ,in addition to the emotional case of others .Responses of the other people in line can affect the sentimental condition of the swearing person, in addition his appraisal or assessment of the objective situation.

As presented earlier, swearing may give rise to favourable reflexions or responses in others . When swearing because of displeasure or dissatisfaction it will direct to further group binding. This group binding can give rise to assistance or help from others, which can convert the appraisal or evaluation by the swearing person in addition to the objective situation .Furthermore, swearing can call up positive or negative responses or reactions in others. For instance, an offensive response by another person may give rise to danger or fear in place of the formerly felt frustration, which may lead to endangering or threatening situation.

However, in the following section, the study will analyse Arthur Miller's play *Death of A Salesman*. The study limit itself to the theme of the play, while the life of the writer will be out of the scope of study.

#### 4.2 Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

The play is about four main characters. Willy Loman is a very depressed salesman. He is considered to be a dreamer because of the failure. The play concentrates on Willy who cannot focus or recall things probably. He cannot drive well. The connections between the family members are not good. Biff, the older son, has turned in to a thief. He does not know what he wants in his life. Happy, the incurious man, always feels perplexed for having such a father.

Linda, the mother, always gives care and attention to Willy. She believes that he is in need of these things. She sacrifices a lot for the sake of her family. She always talks kindly to Willy believing that his mind is fatigued and overactive. Linda asks the two boys to appreciate Willy and never neglect him. She says that '*He is the dearest man in the world for me*'. Act two present the quarrel between Biff and Willy. It is ended with Willy's suicide. At the end of the play, Biff understands he had dreamt wrongly and Linda is very sad because of her husband's suicide. She says it is a rough world because nobody except the family members has come to the funeral. Willy has committed suicide for the sake of the American dream thinking that through that he will become famous and Biff will be successful.

#### 4.3 The Analysis of Swearwords in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

##### Text 1, Act 1, Page 3:

Willy: I'll start out in the morning. May be I'll feel better in the morning. These *goddam* arch supports are killing me.

\.The word *goddam* occurs 12 times in the whole play. It is a strong swearword used to show annoyance.

2. Willy is psychologically and neurologically tired. The word is a taboo word since it is related to religion category.

3. The motives behind using the word are psychologically and neurologically based. Willy is discomforted.

4. The function of the word '*goddam*' is intensifier since it precedes a noun. It is used in a negative way. Willy in the context above lacks energy and enthusiasm in life.

5. The reaction of his wife Linda in this situation is just to give him care and attention. She believes that he is mentally fatigued. Linda tells him that '*your mind is overactive*'. Willy in this context is tired and exhausted despite his recent vacation in Florida.

6. Neurologically, Willy is mentally ill. He is suffering from aged dementia (craziness) since he swears a lot. Mainly, Willy is expressing his helplessness and ache which has led him to use the swearword. His sentimental case affects the sentimental case of Linda. The latter has behaved positively.

7. Profanity occurs when someone is using religious terminology in a profane, secular, uncaring manner, such as Jesus Christ, hell damn, and Goddamn. The word occurs outside the religious context. It is the most dominant in the whole play.

**Text 2, Act 1, Page 5:**

Willy: The trouble is he's lazy, *goddammitt!*

1. The word *goddammitt* which means '*God damn it*' occurs 6 times in the play. It is a strong taboo word that points to religion. It points to the exclamation of discomfort.

2. Psychologically, Willy is frustrated thinking that his son is lazy. Biff is at the age of 35 and still he is finding himself. According to Willy this is a disgrace. It

depresses Willy to see Biff, a man of immense ‘personal attractiveness’ lost in the process of finding himself. Willy sees himself in Biff and wishes to relive his life through Biff’s success. Biff has not yet amounted to anything, and this is doubly discouraging for Willy, for not only is his son a disappointment after having shown such early promise, he is also depriving Willy of fulfilment through his offspring.

3.The word is used to show psychological and neurological case of dissatisfaction since he is a dreamer.

4.For the second time, Linda’s reaction is just to soothe the situation by telling him to get something to eat because she has brought a new American cheese.

**Text 3, Act 1, page 11:**

Biff: And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my *God*, I’m getting’ anywhere !what the *hell* am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I’m thirty –four years old, I oughta be making my future.

1.The swearword hell is repeated twenty-two times in the whole play ,while the swearword *God* is mentioned sixteen times. Both of them are strong taboo words since they point to religious category. The expression ‘*my God*’ is a formal item should not be used informally.

2.The situation points to the psychological case of Biff. The motive for uttering these words is psychologically and pragmatically based. Spring, the season of regeneration, of hope, of new life reminds Biff of his failure in life. He feels he is accomplishing nothing. He doesn’t know what to do with himself .He feels that he is better than any other job that has been afford to him. He moves from one job to another .Both of the swearwords point to the exclamation of discomfort. Biff thinks of the time that is passing without achieving anything.

Happy's reaction to Biff is by telling him that he is a poet, or an idealist. Happy thinks that Biff should not feel discomforted.

4. Pragmatically, Biff feels free to swear since he is talking to the same gender, and in the same conversational theme. They belong to the same family.

**Text 4, Act 1, Page 12:**

Happy :And I know that's just what I would do .I don't what the *hell* I'm working for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment –all alone. And I think of the rent I'm paying .And it's crazy .But then, it's what I always wanted .My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, *goddammit* , I'm lonely.

1.The two swearwords that are uttered by Happy are strong taboo since they belong to religious category.

2.Psychologically, Happy is sad and lonely despite his achievements. He possess every things like his own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. He is not experiencing a real happiness. He is waiting for his manager to die to take his position.

3.The motives behind using these swearwords are psychologically and pragmatically based. The psychological case of Happy is bad since he feels restless, bored, unmotivated and confused. It is an indication of emptiness since he does not know what comforts him in life. We expect to hear more swearwords since he is talking to the same gender, in the same setting and the same theme. He feels himself comfortable while swearing. Biff suggests buying a ranch and to raise cattle since they are physically not mentally strong.

**Text 5, Act 1, Page 26:**

Willy: I got an awful scare. Nearly hit a kid in Yonkers. *God!* why didn't I go to Alaska with my brother ben that time! ben! That was a genius, that man was success incarnate! what a mistake! He begged me to go.

1.The strong swearword ‘*God*’ is forbidden to be uttered since it is used informally.

2. It points to the exclamation of regret. Willy regrets not having gone to Alaska with his brother Ben when he had the opportunity several years earlier. The matter was an enormous success and could have helped Willy. Ben had begged Willy to go, but it was in vain. Happy reacts to that saying that he will help Willy in his retirement. Happy thinks that Willy should not think about anything. Willy doesn’t that saying’ You’ll retire me for life on seventy goddam dollars a week? and your women and your apartment, and you’ll retire me for life!’. Willy in the context above is very sad and sorry for losing the chance to travel to Alsaka. He regards himself to be unsuccessful.

3.The motives behind the using the formal item ‘*God*’ in informal ones are psychologically and neurologically based. Psychologically, Willy is feeling bad. Neurologically, he is unable to control the usage of swearwords since he is suffering from aged dementia(craziness).

## 5. Conclusions

The study can sum up the following :

1. From the analysis, the swearwords belong to profanity are *hell, damn, God, damnable, goddam, goddammitt, and for God’s sake*. Meanwhile, *by hell* and *by God* are considered as an oath. We also have abuses when addressing others directly using swearwords, for example, *damnable jade*.

2. Characters in the selected literary text swear to show annoyance, discomfort and intolerance .They also swear because they are surprised ,astonished, restless and angry.

3.The characters who are desperate, violent, unsuccessful, idle ,empty, preternatural and reckless are expected to swear more than the ordinary ones. Characters from low social and antisocial personality seem to swear a lot. Also

characters who are conservative religiously appear to swear less in comparison to the normal ones. Neurologically, we have certain diseases like Alzheimer (Craziness) seem unable to control the usage of swearwords.

دراسه نفسيه لاستخدام كلمات السب في مسرحيه موت بائع متجول لارثر ميلر  
الكلمات المفتاحيه: السب، نموذج فنغرهويت (٢٠٠٠)، موت بائع متجول.  
البحث مستل من رساله ماجستير

أ. م. د سراب قادر مغير

فاطمة محمد احمد

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### الملخص

تناولت الدراسة بحثا في كلمات السب المستخدمة لدى شخصيات مسرحية (موت بائع متجول) مستخدمة طرق تداولية. ان الهدف من البحث هو بيان انواع الفاظ السب او الشتيمة. يوجد هنالك ثلاثة مصادر من الكلمات المحضورة في النصوص الادبية المنتقاة: منها ما يتعلق بالدين والمعاقين جسديا او فكريا والمنحرفين. كذلك يهدف البحث الى بيان تطبيق الطريقة المتبناة. أضف الى ذلك، ان الدوافع وراء استخدام الفاظ السب في النصوص الادبية المنتقاة قائمة على نصوص ضمنية تماما مثل الدوافع النفسية والعصبية. أن احد اهداف الدراسة هو اثبات امكانية استخدام الفاظ السب لفهم النصوص الادبية أن الطريقة المستخدمة في التحليل مأخوذة من نظريه فنغرهويت في البكاء (٢٠٠٠) يتضمن البحث دراسة نظرية لألفاظ السب. كما يعرض البحث العلاقة بين ألفاظ السب وسوء الادب. ويظهر البحث شرحا "مفصلا" عن كلمات السب والشتيم ووظائفها الرئيسية. أضف الى ذلك، بعد إجراء تحليل النصوص الادبية ثم عرض استنتاجات الدراسة، وتوصياتها .

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