Compensatory Symbolism in Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*

“We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!” (131), Biff erupts in the emotional climax of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Deception plays a pivotal role in Miller’s drama—the Lomans lie not only to the outside world but to themselves as well. Willy Loman, despite his whole-hearted efforts, fails to function in the stereotypical role of a male-provider that his American society demands of him and, therefore, feebly attempts to cover up or compensate for his declining masculinity. “He is driven by feelings of inadequacy and failure to seek himself outside himself, in the eyes of others” (Ribkoff 51)—in other words, he looks for himself in “things.” Willy’s prevalent focus on superficial aspects, such as equating a tennis court with people of merit, the size of an advertisement with the efficiency of a refrigerator, and the physical appearance of his own two sons with their ability to function productively in the business world shows that he associates quality solely in terms of appearance. This applies to himself as well—as long as others perceive him as a man, Willy believes he is a man. Therefore, “[u]sing the only resources they can summon, Willy and Linda create a kind of false consciousness about the turmoil at the center of their lives” (Bloom 27). Willy feels that it suffices merely to cover up his negative or inadequate qualities, rather than actively ameliorating the internal problem. This, claims Benjamin Nelson, causes Willy to be “caught in an irresolvable dichotomy between fact and fancy” (84). By ignoring the pervading problems in his life, Willy merely foments his inadequacy, which festers under the surface like molten lava until it ultimately erupts, causing the breakdown of his family. Miller creates a cohesive drama by employing physical props and symbols to represent either the blatantly declining masculinity of the Loman men or their feeble attempts to mask their deficiencies, thereby paralleling the overriding theme of both physical and emotional impotence.
In her article “Miller and Things,” Marianne Boruch notes that

In speaking of drama, one could . . . venture that a playwright is not a good playwright unless he can take the hard, physical extension of our ideas—things, objects—and use them dramatically, as pivots of human action and revelation. But more than that, one could say a playwright is not a great playwright unless he can use things—in themselves—thematically, not simply as properties to be touched then discarded on the way to discovery, but somehow as the discovery itself. At this point, drama extends itself into poetry, and metaphor swells with movement to a broader, historical reality. Arthur Miller operates in this vision with reserve and intelligence and surprise. (103–104)

Miller creates a sense of fusion in Death of a Salesman by surrounding Willy with various symbols that denote his physical and emotional decomposition. For instance, Willy’s automobile—a symbol of his vitality and his masculinity because he functions as a “road man” (80)—has changed from a virile red Chevrolet to a decrepit Studebaker, paralleling Willy’s own transformation from a young salesman into an old man. The Lomans’s refrigerator—the family’s source of nourishment—continuously breaks down, draining the family for whom it is meant to provide. However, as Willy himself notes, neither the Chevrolet nor the refrigerator has ever performed well; he simply idealizes the superficial aspects of his machinery—the Chevvy [sic] for its impressive physical appearance and the refrigerator for its striking and ubiquitous advertisements. By using these symbols, Miller both manifests Willy’s own declining masculinity and emphasizes the salesman’s compulsive need to maintain his appearance of functionality.

Furthermore, Willy’s house itself, a traditional symbolic representation of the owner, lays transparent and infirm before the towering, intimidatingly phallic apartments that dwarf the house’s diminishing form. To “keep up appearances,” Willy constantly repairs his house to meet social standards. Just as he lies to Charley about having a job when he has, in fact, been fired, Willy maintains the façade of domestic harmony by updating the exterior appearance of his house. When viewing a house from the street, passersby initially see the front stoop. By installing this addition, Willy reveals his focus on the superficial—curb appeal. Instead of maintaining the interior of the house—or even the relationships of the inhabitants therein—Willy merely adds to the outward beauty of his house, showing his obsession with exterior splendor. By repairing the ceiling, Willy reveals his profound need to “cover” himself: he backtracks with Linda about the true amount of his commission after his initial gross