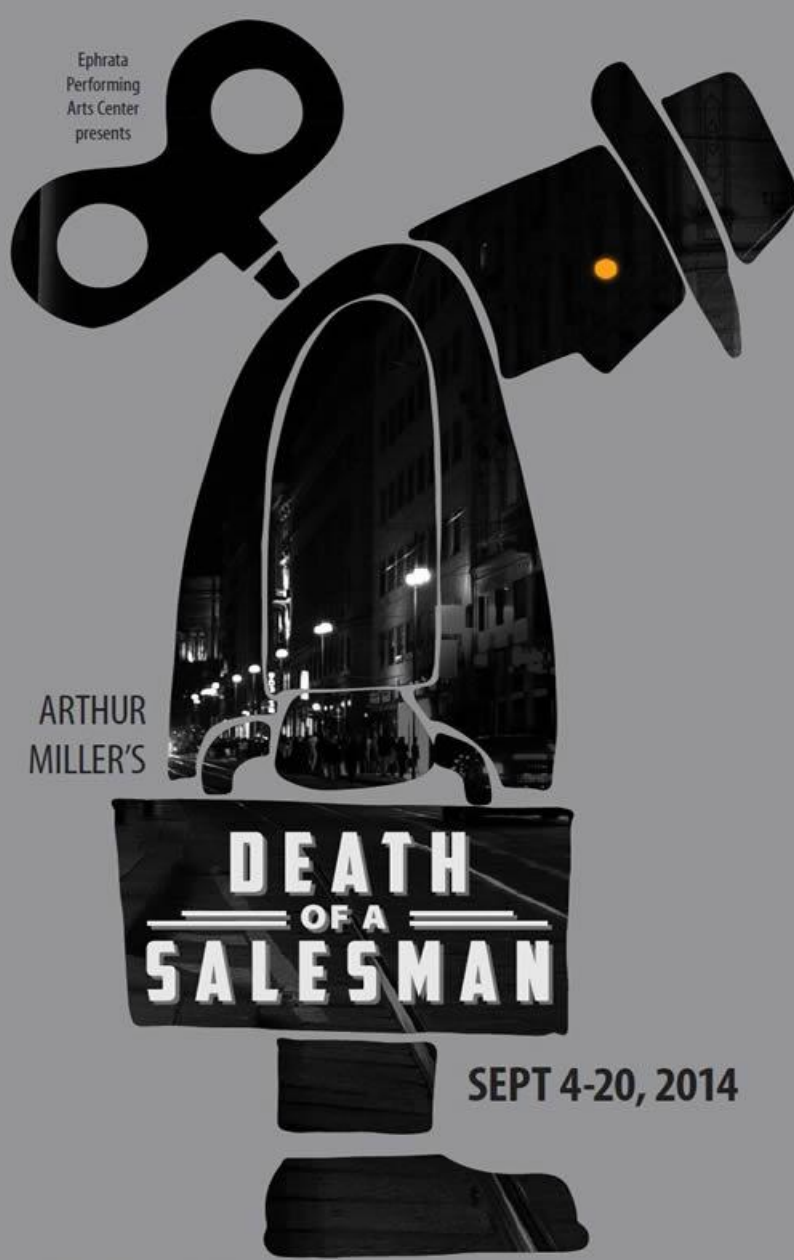


'Death of a Salesman' by Arthur Miller - A2 Revision Booklet



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ARTHUR
MILLER'S

**DEATH
OF A
SALESMAN**

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Plot Summary

Death of a Salesman takes place in and around the Brooklyn house of Willy Loman, a salesman who has traveled for more than 30 years up and down the New England coast. The action is confined within a 24- hour period, from Monday night to late Tuesday evening, much of it reflecting the tragic turmoil of Willy's mind. A requiem concludes the play, an epilogue at the funeral of the salesman.

The story is told through a complex montage of scenes interlocking the present with past events - memories, imagined moments, and flashbacks from the life of Willy Loman.

At 63, Willy Loman, a traveling salesman all his life, is becoming increasingly worried about his ability to make ends meet. Although his house is nearly paid for, and his sons are on their own, lately each sales trip is more exhausting and less satisfying. He feels drained and is losing his grip on his own existence: "I'm tired to the death" he tells his wife, Linda.

Their older son, Biff, estranged from his father for years, has moved away and has been drifting across the country: "I've had twenty or thirty different jobs since I left home before the war." Happy, his younger brother, stayed in New York and has his own place. He works in a warehouse and pursues his dream: "My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women." For the moment the two brothers are back home, visiting their parents. From the bedroom they used to share as boys, they overhear their parents and also talk about their own lives.

Willy has returned home from an aborted sales trip and Linda, worried about her husband's difficulties, urges him to ask his firm for a position that would not require traveling. He agrees to speak to his boss. Once she has gone to bed, however, Willy begins to talk to himself, troubled by a restless mind spinning out of control: "I have such thoughts, such strange thoughts," he had actually told Linda earlier.

In this tormented state Willy recalls his past, the young father he once was - an energetic and boasting man, determined to properly raise his boys by sharing with them his strong business outlook and dreams of success. This whirlpool of memories replays snippets of the history of the Loman family leading up to the present. Through the play a recurring image haunts Willy's imagination - it's his older brother Ben, a model of entrepreneurial success. Other scenes reveal discrepancies between Willy's apparent optimism and the actual situation in which the Loman family finds itself.

When Happy and Biff wonder about Willy's behavior, Linda Loman sadly acknowledges the deterioration of their father's spirit, and reveals to them that he has lost his salary and is now working on commission only. She then insists to the boys not to turn their backs on Willy, but to show him respect and give him support: "Attention must be finally paid to such a person," she emphatically reminds them. When she also tells them that their father has even tried to kill himself, Biff agrees to move back home, find a decent job

and help out his parents.

Next morning, encouraged by his sons' renewed support, Willy goes to see his boss. The young man, Howard, heir to the Wagner company, not only refuses Willy's request, but he eventually lets know the failing salesman that he is no longer needed as an employee. Willy turns to his neighbor Charley who offers him a job, but Willy's pride prevents him from accepting this reasonable proposition. Instead, as he has done before, he borrows more money from Charley to pay the latest round of bills and his insurance premium.

In a restaurant, as planned, Willy meets his sons for dinner. He finds out that Biff failed to have the intended interview with Oliver, his former employer, and was left waiting for hours with no other result than his helpless frustration. This circumstance lead him to steal the man's fountain pen, an irrational, impulsive, reprehensible act. Willy, anguished by his own predicament, refuses to hear any such facts because, as he shouts at his sons: "The woods are burning, boys, you understand? There's a big blaze going on all around. I was fired today." They are quite shocked by the news. Meanwhile Willy is unable to acknowledge Biff's disappointment and refuses to listen to the uncomfortable truth why his son's plan didn't succeed. Together, Biff and Happy end up leaving Willy behind, as they walk out of the restaurant with two young women they had met there. Alone, and again tormented by his contradictions and confusing thoughts, Willy recalls figments of the past. Particularly disturbing is his guilty memory of an extra-marital encounter with a woman in a Boston hotel room, where Biff had once surprised him.

At night, later, when Biff and Happy return home, Linda chastises her sons for having abandoned their father in the restaurant. And she continues to fiercely defend Willy. But Biff can no longer live with lies and false hopes. He tells his father to "take that phony dream and burn it" and explodes with rage and bitter recriminations. Willy sees Biff's outburst as a sign of love. "That boy is going to be magnificent!" he exclaims as he clings to his resolve to make his dream of success possible for his sons. Counting on the money from his life insurance policy that will ensure the family's future prosperity and his sons success, he drives off into the night and is killed in an automobile crash.

After the funeral, when Biff concludes that his father had "the wrong dreams," Charley counters and defends Willy: "Nobody dast blame this man. [...] For a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. [...] He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back - that's an earthquake. [...] A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."

Finally, Linda left by herself in her devastating grief, addresses Willy and wonders why did he do it, why did he kill himself just when the last payment on the house was made. Shaken by pain, she mutters, "We're free and clear. We're free..."

The Structure of the Play

The structure of the play is such that we are not so much interested in asking, 'what is going to happen to this family?' as 'what has happened to this family to make them like they are?' The play is pervaded by different kinds of dreams: the American dream, hopes and ambitions and daydreams and fantasies. These dreams motivate the characters, (temporarily) shield them from the disappointing 'reality' of their lives and give them false hopes. Arguably, it is the characters' dreams which ultimately lead to the play's tragedy.

Arthur Miller said of *Death of a Salesman* that it 'explodes the watch and the calendar'. The past lives of Willy and his family are mixed in with what is happening to them in the present and this can be quite confusing when you read the play for the first time. It is less confusing if you see the play performed.

PAST AND PRESENT

When the action shifts into the past it is not just as flashbacks to past events, to let the audience know what happened in the past. All of the characters, and especially Willy, are deeply affected now by what happened in the past.

What we see of the past is a mixture of the events and conversations that happened and the characters' view of the past as it affects them now.

Arthur Miller wrote about the play that he wanted to show that 'nothing in life comes 'next' but that everything exists together and at the same time within us; that there is no past to be 'brought forward' in a human being, but that he is his past at every moment and that the present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to. I wished to create a form which, in itself as a form, would literally be the process of Willy Loman's way of mind.'

Miller helps the audience to be aware of scenes from the past in three ways:

1. When the action is in the present, the actors stay inside the imaginary walls of the house on the stage. When they enter into the past, they step through the imaginary walls onto the front of the stage and scenes from the past are shown at the front of the stage.
2. The lighting changes to allow the house to look as if it is covered in the shadows of leaves.
3. A flute plays to suggest happier times in the past. Miller says it suggests 'grass and trees and the horizon'.

FLASHBACKS / DAYDREAMS

In *Death of a Salesman*, this style (blending of Expressionism and Realism) is most obvious in the use of 'flashbacks' or 'dream sequences'. At the beginning of the play, Miller first of all provides an anchor in reality. He presents a series of events that are accepted by the audience as the objective reality of the play i.e. those sections of the play that take place in the present. We understand them as objective reality because we see various different characters' perceptions of the events – for example, Willy's breakdown is discussed by the boys and Linda; Jenny the secretary talks to Bernard before Willy enters.

However, the play also shows the internal turmoil and psychological breakdown that Willy is experiencing by presenting what is going on in Willy's head. Sometimes this takes the form of the acting out of Willy's past experiences, sometimes in the appearance of Ben or The Woman in Willy's 'present'. This style means that while the audience can share the nightmare experience of Willy's breakdown with him, we never lose touch with the real events even though Willy perceives reality in a distorted way. Miller described Willy as 'literally at that terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present'. He did not see Willy's internal sequences as 'flashbacks'.

“There are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present... because in his desperation to justify his life Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between now and then.” Arthur Miller

LANGUAGE

The use of language in *Death of a Salesman* is entirely Realistic. Miller's dialogue is carefully constructed to follow the exact speech patterns of ordinary New Yorkers. It is very dense and fast, with repetitions, hesitations, and contradictions. The characters often use slang and clichés such as: “Biff is a lazy bum”, “You make mountains out of molehills”, “I'm a dime a dozen”, “You're a pal”, “He's gonna flunk you”, “I'm takin' one play for Pop”.

The form of *Death of a Salesman* was an attempt, as much as anything else, to convey the bending of time. There are two or three sorts of time in that play. One is social time; one is psychic time, the way we remember things; and the third one is the sense of time created by the play and shared by the audience. ... The play is taking place in the Greek unity of 24 hours; and yet it is dealing with material that goes back probably 25 years. And it almost goes forward through Ben, who is dead. So *time* was an obsession for me at the moment, and I wanted a way of presenting it so that it became the *fiber* of the play, rather than being something that somebody comments about. In fact, there is very little comment really in *Salesman* about time. I also wanted a form that could sustain itself the way we deal with crises, which is not to deal with them. After all, there is a lot of comedy in *Salesman*; people forget it because it is so dark by the end of the play. But if you stand behind the audience you hear a lot of laughter. It's a deadly ironical laughter most of the time, but it *is* a species of comedy. The comedy is really a way for Willy and others to put off the evil day, which is the thing we all do. I wanted that to *happen* and not be something talked *about*.

Arthur Miller, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 1985

Inspiration

"...To me the tragedy of Willy Loman is that he gave his life, or sold it, in order to justify the waste of it. It is the tragedy of a man who did believe that he alone was not meeting the qualifications laid down for mankind by those clean-shaven frontiersmen who inhabit the peaks of broadcasting and advertising offices. From those forests of canned goods high up near the sky, he heard the thundering command to succeed as it ricocheted down the newspaper-lined canyons of his city, heard not a human voice, but a wind of a voice to which no human can reply in kind, except to stare into the mirror at a failure."
Arthur Miller, "The 'Salesman' Has a Birthday," *The New York Times*, February 5, 1950

*"The first image that occurred to me which was to result in *Death of a Salesman* was of an enormous face, the height of the proscenium arch, which would appear and then open up, and we would see the inside of a man's head. In fact, *The Inside of His Head* was the first title. It was conceived half in laughter, for the inside of his head was a mass of contradictions. ... The *Salesman* image was from being absorbed with the concept in life that nothing in life comes "next" but that everything exists together and at the same time within us; that there is no past to be "brought forward" in a human being, but that he is his past at every moment and that the present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to.*

I wished to create a form which, in itself as a form, would literally be the process of Willy Loman's way of mind. But to say "wished" is not accurate. Any dramatic form is an artifice, a way of transforming a subjective feeling into something that can be comprehended through public symbols. Its efficiency as a form is to be judged – at least by the writer – by how much of the original vision and feeling is lost or distorted by this transformation. I wished to speak of the salesman most precisely as I felt about him, to give no part of that feeling away for the sake of any effect or any dramatic necessity. What was wanted now was not a mounting line of tension, nor a gradually narrowing cone of intensifying suspense, but

a bloc, a single chord presented as such at the outset, within which all the strains and melodies would already be contained. The strategy ... was to appear entirely unstrategic. ... If I could, I would have told the story and set forth all the characters in one unbroken speech or even one sentence or a single flash of light. As I look at the play now its form seems the form of a confession, for that is how it is told, now speaking of what happened yesterday, then suddenly following some connection to a time 20 years ago, then leaping even further back and then returning to the present and even speculating about the future."
Arthur Miller, Introduction to *Collected Plays*, 1957

"Willy is foolish and even ridiculous sometimes. He tells the most transparent lies, exaggerates mercilessly, and so on. But I really want you to see that his impulses are not foolish at all. He cannot bear reality, and since he can't do much to change it, he keeps changing his ideas of it." **Arthur Miller, *Salesman in Beijing*, 1984**

Arthur Miller once said that everything he had written was based on somebody he had seen or known...

Death of a Salesman began as a short story that Miller wrote at the age of seventeen while he was working for his father's company. The story told of an aging salesman who cannot sell anything, who is tormented by the company's buyers, and who borrows change for the subway from the story's young narrator. After finishing the story, Miller wrote a postscript on the manuscript saying that the real salesman on whom the story is based had thrown himself under a subway train. Many years later, on the eve of the play's Broadway opening, Miller's mother found the story abandoned in a drawer.

In his autobiography *Timebends*, Miller related that he found inspiration for that short story and the play in his own life. Miller based Willy Loman largely on his own uncle, Manny Newman. In fact, Miller stated that the writing of the play began in the winter of 1947 after a chance meeting he had with his uncle outside the Colonial Theatre in Boston, where his *All My Sons* was having its pre-Broadway preview. Miller described that meeting in this way: *I could see his grim hotel room behind him, the long trip up from New York in his little car, the hopeless hope of the day's business. Without so much as acknowledging my greeting he said, "Buddy is doing very well."*

Miller described Newman as a man who was *a competitor at all times, in all things, and at every, moment!* Miller said that his uncle saw *my brother and I running neck and neck with his two sons [Buddy and Abby] in some horse race [for success] that never stopped in his mind!* He also said that the Newman household was one in which you *dared not lose hope, and I would later think of it as a perfection of America for that reason...It was a house trembling with resolution and shouts of victories that had not yet taken place but surely would tomorrow.* The Loman home was built on the foundation of this household.

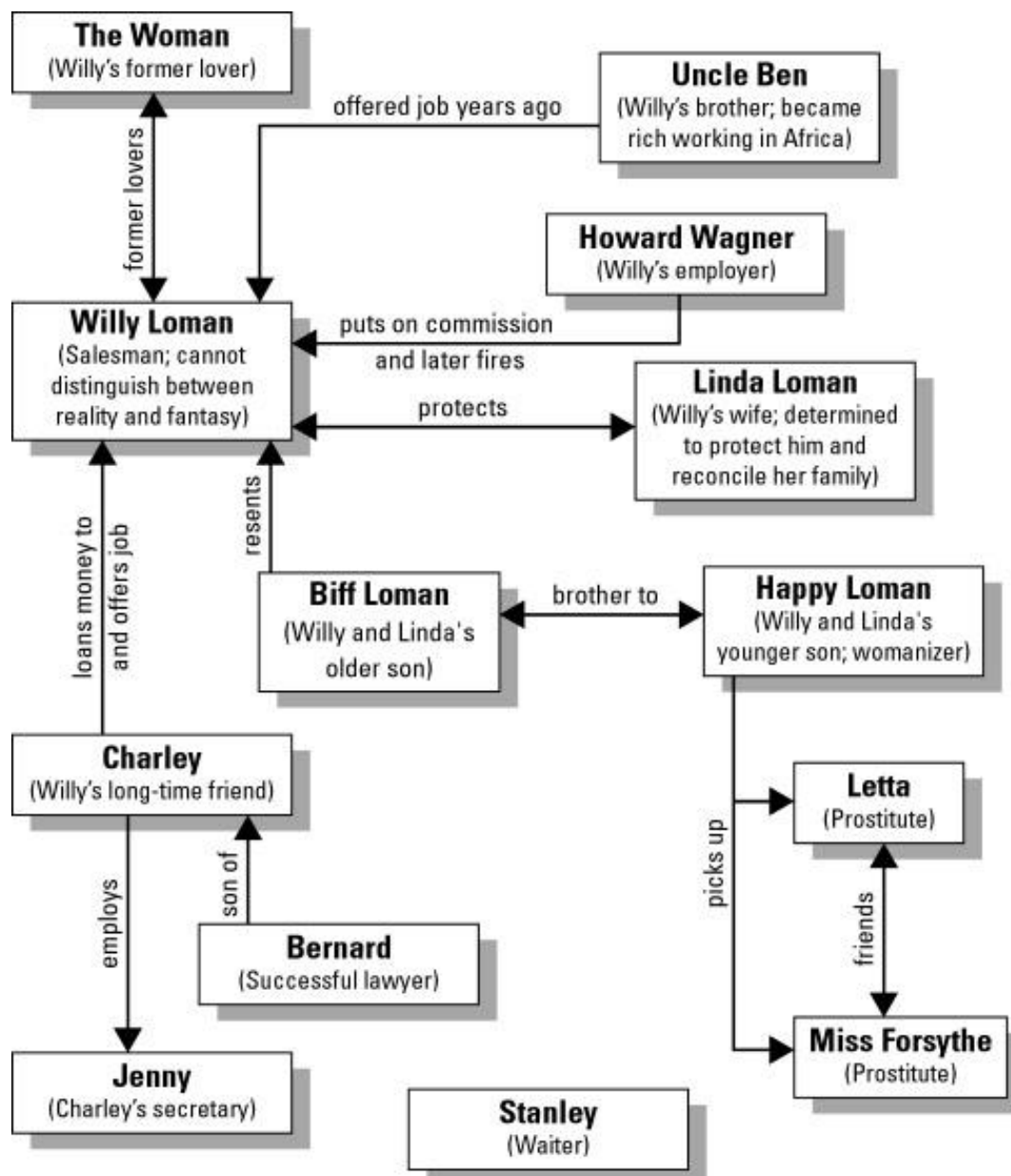
Manny's son Buddy, like Biff in Miller's play, was a sports hero, and like Happy Loman, popular with the girls. And like Biff, Buddy never made it to college because he failed to study in high school. In addition, Miller's relationship with his cousins was similar to Bernard's relationship with Biff and Happy in *Salesman*. As Miller stated: *As fanatic as I*

*was about sports, my ability was not to be compared to [Manny's] sons. Since I was gangling and unhandsome, I lacked their promise. When I stopped by I always had to expect some kind of insinuation of my entire life's probable failure, even before I was sixteen. In *Timebends* Miller described Manny's wife as the one who bore the cross for them all! supporting her husband, "keeping up her calm enthusiastic smile lest he feel he was not being appreciated. One can easily see this woman honored in the character of Linda Loman, Willy's loyal but sometimes bewildered wife, who is no less a victim than the husband she supports in his struggle for meaning and forgiveness.*

Miller met many other salesmen through his Uncle, and they influenced his perception of all salesmen. One man in particular struck Miller because of his sense of personal dignity. As Miller stated in *Timebends*, *this man like any traveling man...had, to my mind, a kind of intrepid valor that withstood the inevitable putdowns, the scoreless attempts to sell. In a sense [all salesmen are] like actors whose product is first of all themselves, forever imagining triumphs in a world that either ignores them or denies their presence altogether. But just often enough to keep them going, one of them makes it and swings to the moon on a thread of dreams unwinding out of himself!* Surely, Willy Loman is such an actor, getting by on a smile and a shoeshine, staging his life in an attempt to understand its plot.

Because he was so deeply involved in the production of *All My Sons*, Miller did not give the meeting with his uncle more than a passing thought, but its memory hung in his mind. In fact, Miller described the event as the spark that brought him back to an idea for a play about a salesman that he had had ten years previously - the idea that he had written as a short story. In April 1948 he drove up to his Connecticut farm and began to write the play that would become *Death of a Salesman*. As he sat down before his typewriter in his ten-by-twelve-foot studio, he remembered *all I had was the first two lines and a death*. From those humble beginnings, one of American theatre's most famous plays took shape.

Character Map



Context – The American Dream

The idea of the American Dream is that, through a combination of hard work, courage and determination, prosperity can be achieved. These values came to America with the early settlers and were passed on to later generations. The Irish Potato Famine and other problems in Europe encouraged mass immigration to America. People fled the problems at home in order to prosper from the freedom and financial security that they had heard existed in America.

In the later half of the 19th Century, there was a distinct possibility of coming across a fortune through relatively little effort, as long as you were able to invest in land. Many

early prospectors bought cheap land west of the Rockies in the hope of finding deposits of gold. The American Dream was a driving force in the Gold Rush of the mid to late 1800s, as well as encouraging the immigration that followed.

As the 20th Century drew closer, the Dream became that of industry and capitalism, with men such as John D Rockefeller beginning life in humble conditions, but going on to control vast corporations and the fortunes that resulted. Successes such as these suggested that talent, intelligence and a willingness to work hard were all that was needed to achieve the dream. America has always been perceived as a place where the streets are paved with gold; consequently, there are more legal immigrants to the US per annum than any other country in the world. They were (and are) drawn to work in the major cities such as New York, Chicago and Detroit.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Depression was a cause of major hardship and seemed to be a reverse of the Dream which people had held dear for so long.

Yet the end of WWII drew young American families to live in comfort and stability in the suburbs, living the life of a 'perfect family'. The rise of the hippy values of the 1960s rejected this ideal – but did not kill it off entirely.

Many people today say that that the American Dream is misleading. It is impossible for everyone to gain prosperity simply through hard work and determination. The consequence of this is that those who do not achieve success believe that it is entirely their fault. In addition, the poor are penalized as their poverty is seen as proof of their laziness. The American Dream does not take account of the fact that the family and wealth that one is born into, as well as traits such as natural intelligence, have a bearing on potential success in life.

Things to consider:

1. The word 'Dream' is important – what does it suggest?
2. What do you think that Miller is trying to say about the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*?

Context – What was happening then?

In 1880s and 1890s when Willy was growing up:

- the first machine, the graphophone, was invented to record and play back your own voice in 1885;
- Geronimo, the Apache Indian Chief surrendered in 1886;
- there was a Goldrush in Alaska in 1896;

- the Battle of Wounded Knee was fought in 1890 - the last major battle between the American Indians and the white soldiers.

In 1913, when Willy joined the Wagner firm:

- it was just before the First World War;
- the first Ford Motor Company moving assembly line was opened, to begin mass production of the Model T car. Henry Ford talked of 'democratizing the automobile';
- American society was small, stable and relatively secure economically - it was the period before the great Depression of the twenties;
- Arthur Miller was born in 1915.

In 1932, when Biff would have been at high school, captain of the football team and about to take his State Board of Regents examinations to qualify for the University of Virginia:

- America was in the middle of the Depression;
- about 15 million people were unemployed;
- factories were closing and shops were empty of customers and going out of business, or partly closed for inventory, having overstocked products - being a salesman was not an easy job in this climate;
- few people could afford to drive a car, except for business.

Context – The Theatrical Context

In 1947, Miller saw Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* on stage and was impressed at how Williams had used a mixture of **realism** and **expressionism** to create a unique feeling for his play. It is this influence that we see in *Death of a Salesman*.

REALISM

- An artistic movement which began in France in the 19th Century.
- It sought to accurately portray everyday characters, situations and problems.
- The language used was as close as possible to natural conversation.
- Costumes were contemporary and sets were three-dimensional and lifelike.
- The plays were usually about social problems.

EXPRESSIONISM

- Was a reaction to realism and began in the 1900s.
- It sought to portray the inner psychological life of a character, concentrating on a subjective view of the world rather than an objective one.
- Plot, structure and characterisation were less important than poetic dialogue.
- Lighting was used to create atmosphere.

Miller was fascinated by Expressionism but didn't want to give up the conventions of Realism. In *Death of a Salesman*, he incorporates the two so that we see the reality of the events as well as the turmoil that Willy is undergoing.

Sometimes, this takes the form of Willy's past experiences being acted out; at other times, it is in the appearance of characters from the past in Willy's present.

Some people call these events 'flashbacks'. Miller did not. He said that it is 'literally that terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present'. ... 'There are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present ... because in his desperation to justify his life Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between now and then.'

Themes

Reality and Illusion

The gap between reality and illusion is blurred in the play -- in the structure, in Willy's mind and in the minds of the other characters. Willy is a dreamer and dreams of a success that it is not possible for him to achieve. He constantly exaggerates his success: ('I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in the year of 1928') and is totally unrealistic about what Biff will be able to achieve too. Willy's inability to face the truth of his situation, that he is merely 'a dime a dozen', rubs off on his sons. Happy exaggerates how successful he is and Biff only realizes in Oliver's office that he has been lying to himself for years about his position in the company: **"I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been. We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk."** Biff is the only one who realizes how this blurring of reality has destroyed them all. His aim becomes to make Willy and the family face the truth which they have been avoiding, the truth of who they are: **"The man don't know who we are!... We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house."** This blurring of reality and illusion is carried through into the structure.

Memory and the past.

The American Dream (and dreaming more generally – hopes and ambitions, daydreams and fantasies)

The American Dream is the capitalist belief that if you work hard enough you can be a success in America. However, the success that the dream aspires to is based on money and power. In Willy's mind it is also linked with being "well-liked". Biff realizes that being true to yourself is a more important success. Howard's treatment of Willy shows how destructive the pursuit of this dream can be. He lays Willy off when he can no longer generate money for the company which enrages Willy: **"You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit."** Willy's adherence to the dream means that he buys status symbols on credit that he cannot afford to keep the payments up on. It is ironic then that Willy's funeral is on the day that the last mortgage payment is made.

Family and relationships (particularly between fathers and sons)

In the play, each generation has a responsibility to the other that they cannot fulfill. Biff and Happy are shaped by Willy's sins. In Happy's case, he is destined to perpetuate Willy's values and strive for material success, where Biff has been destroyed totally by Willy's betrayal of the family through the affair and the fact that Willy never discouraged him from stealing. On the other hand, Biff and Happy have the opportunity to save Willy by becoming "successful" in his eyes and supporting him and Linda in their old age. However they are not able to do this because of the way they have been raised. Biff is attempting

to break this cycle of destruction in the family.

Nature and Physical Pursuits

In the play, the alternative to the corruption of urban capitalism is physical or natural pursuits. Biff talks about working with horses or cattle on ranches as his calling. Happy knows he can 'outbox, outrun and out-lift anybody in that store' and Willy 'was a happy man with a batch of cement'. The 'Loman Brothers' would sell sporting goods and Willy should have gone to the wilds of Alaska. The suggestion is that the true nature of all three of these men would be in physical pursuits and in a rural setting. However, Willy's dependence on 'the dream', means they cannot follow their true calling.

Masculinity and Heroism

Willy is very much caught up in the masculine dream of America and it does not succeed as he wishes. He tries to live up to expectations and prove his popularity and success, yet he is unable to achieve these things in the way he envisages. In many ways, Miller is questioning and shattering the construction of manhood in a similar manner as he does with the American Dream.

Whilst Willy fulfils the 'masculine' stereotype within the household – he pays for the fridge and is the sole provider etc. – he never really earns himself a respectable place in the community. He believes people laugh at him and that he is 'not noticed'. Whilst Linda does her best to console and reassure him, her position as female in the text does not lend her the authority she needs to be able to change his perceptions.

Indeed, women are objectified and seen as consumable objects in the play. All the male characters display this attitude to some extent. 'The Woman' is not even granted a name, and Happy regularly refers to women as food and games; they are sexual objects that can be used and thus display their masculinity.

Motifs

The jungle/woods

The woods or the jungle are a symbol of life, especially the risks of life. Uncle Ben is not afraid to take risks in life. He literally walked into the jungle to achieve his dreams – he took control of his life. Willy is more fearful and is losing control of his life. He tells the boys that “the woods are burning” when he loses his job. But Ben tells Willy that “the jungle is dark” but that he must walk in to it – he is telling him he should take control by committing suicide.

Diamonds

Diamonds are a symbol of success. Ben find diamonds in the jungle and gives Willy a diamond watch fob. Willy has to pawn the watch fob to pay for a course for Biff – he is trying to pass the “success” on to Biff. He tries to do this again by committing suicide and leaving money to Biff; he must “fetch a diamond”. Willy has a vision of the success Biff can achieve with the insurance money – “I see it like a diamond, shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I can pick up and touch in my hand”.

The garden

The garden is a repeated motif that works as a symbol of Willy’s desire to create a good life for his family. Willy’s garden used to grow well before the apartment blocks were built. But now ‘The grass don’t grow anymore, you can’t raise a carrot in the backyard.’ Willy is trying to ‘grow’ something for his family i.e. he wants to become a success and support them. He used to be on his way to achieving that but he has ultimately failed. At the end of the play, one of his last acts in life is his futile attempt at planting seeds. Willy never achieves success in life, and he also never plants his garden.

Stockings

Stockings, for Willy, represent his affair with The Woman. Linda is seen several times mending stockings, while The Woman is given new stockings by Willy. In the same way, Willy gives love to The Woman which he should be giving to his wife. Willy always feels guilty when he sees Linda mending stockings and orders her not to do it. Stockings are also a symbol of material wealth and Willy feels like he cannot provide Linda with new stockings. She is more pragmatic however, and hides them instead of throwing them away – she understands that they cannot afford to be wasteful.

Falling / Down The words **fall**, **falling** and **down** and the movements they suggest re-appear again and again and emphasize the fall of Willy and his family. Willy is described as ‘beaten down’ and he ‘lies back, exhausted’. Willy also ‘falls’ into bed with the woman and she shouts at him to ‘get up, get up’. When Biff leaves him in the hotel, Willy is on his knees. Biff is also going down – when he steals the pen from Oliver’s office he runs down 11 flights of stairs. Finally, when Willy has fallen down to his death, Linda lays flowers down at his grave.

Stealing

Biff and Happy both steal. Happy steals fiancées and Biff steals a football, basketballs, lumber and cement, a suit, a fountain pen and many other things not mentioned. Their stealing can be seen to represent the way their true identities have been stolen by lying and the pursuit of an unachievable dream.

Brand Names

The use of brand names helps to heighten the realism of the play – Chevrolet, Simonize, Hastings, Studebaker. However, these “status symbols” also represent the material success that Willy strives for and how it is ultimately empty. He is so proud of the Chevy as “the greatest car ever built” but when it goes wrong he says “they ought to prohibit the manufacturer of that car”. He is duped by advertising into thinking that owning these things equates with success.

Theatrical Context - Tragedy

A tragedy, in the theatrical sense, is a serious play which represents the disastrous downfall of a central character (the protagonist). In some Ancient Greek tragedies, a happy ending was possible, but the more usual ending is that the protagonist dies.

Aristotle (4th Century) defined a tragedy as an action which is serious and complete, with the protagonist achieving **catharsis** (purification) through incidents which arouse pity and terror. The protagonist is led to this point through **hamartia** (an error) which often takes the form of **hubris** (excessive pride).

Traditionally, the protagonist would be of high status. The protagonist in a tragedy has a character defect or **tragic flaw** which brings about their downfall.

'Death of a Salesman', with its concerns for a socially inferior protagonist, may be considered a domestic tragedy (consider carefully the use of setting and the key characters). It can also be considered a modern tragedy; one where ordinary people are placed in tragic situations – made popular after the First World War.

Key Terms

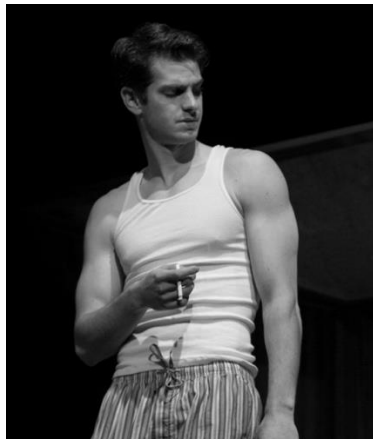
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|---------------------------|--|
| Consumerism | Contemporary society's obsession with spending on new products |
| Irony | Saying something in a way which conveys a different or opposite meaning |
| Materialism | An excessive regard for material possessions |
| The American Dream | First coined in 1931 by James Truslow Adams, The American Dream is the 'dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement'. |
| Requiem | A religious ceremony and mass for the dead. |
| Protagonist | The main character in a plot or story. |
| Objectification | The action of degrading someone to the status of a mere object. |
| Tragedy (play) | A serious play which represents the disastrous downfall of a central character. |
| Hubris | Excessive pride – usually a flaw which leads to the downfall of the protagonist. |
| Capitalism | An economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state. |

Key Character Maps

Willy



Biff



Happy



Linda



Questions by Act to make you think

ACT ONE

1. Why is Willy home? Why is Linda alarmed that he's home?
2. Why is Willy annoyed at Biff? How does he describe Biff? What does this tell us about Willy?
3. How has the neighborhood changed? Why does it matter to the story that his surroundings are no longer the way they used to be?
4. How does Linda treat Willy? How do the boys feel about him? Is Biff trying to spite Willy? Why does Biff come home in the spring?
5. Why won't Happy go out West with Biff, and why won't Biff stay? Why doesn't either son get married and settle down?
6. How does Willy act toward the boys when they are young? How do they act toward him? How does Willy feel about Charley and Bernard?
7. What does Willy's reaction to Biff's theft of the football tell us about Willy? He says the boys look like Adonises. What other clues show that Willy believes in appearances?
8. Willy praises and then curses the Chevrolet; he tells Linda that he's very well liked, and then says that people don't seem to take to him. What do these inconsistencies tell us about Willy?
9. "Five hundred gross in Providence" becomes "roughly two hundred gross on the whole trip." How does Linda take Willy's stories? What does this reveal about her? Why does Willy make a fuss about Linda's mending stockings? How is this important to the play?
10. Why does Charley visit? How does he feel about Willy? How and why do they insult each other?
11. Who is Ben? Why does Ben appear? What does Willy think about the future? About the past? What does Ben teach Biff? Why does Willy feel "kind of temporary" about himself and want Ben to stay?
12. What does Linda think is the trouble with Willy's life? Why is she angry at her sons? Why does she put the rubber hose back after she had taken it? What does this tell about her?
13. Why is Willy interested when Biff mentions Bill Oliver? Why do they argue? How does Happy try to capture attention?

ACT TWO

1. Why is Willy's mood upbeat at the start of Act Two? What does he expect to happen?
2. Why does Willy tell Howard about Dave Singleman? Describe the dramatic effect when Howard listens to the voices of his family while Willy tries to talk business. Why does Howard tell Willy to drop off his samples and forbid him to go to Boston? Why is this such a blow to Willy?
3. What is Willy's philosophy? How does Biff as a football hero embody his father's dreams? Why does Charley say Willy hasn't grown up?
4. What is Willy's impression of Bernard when he sees him in his father's office? Why does Willy exaggerate Biff's importance? Why does Bernard ask what happened after the game at Ebbets Field?
5. Why won't Willy work for Charley? Why is Willy able to ask Charley for money? How is Charley's view of what a salesman needs different from Willy's view?
6. In the restaurant, how does Happy reflect Willy's values? Why does Miller have the girls come in?
7. How does Biff's realization that his life is a lie underline the theme of the play? Why does Biff take Bill Oliver's fountain pen? Why can't he tell his father what happened with Bill Oliver? Why do Biff and Happy leave Willy at the restaurant?
8. Why did Biff go to Boston? What does he discover when he sees the Woman? Why is it that Biff never went to summer school? Why can't he believe in his father?
9. Why does Linda tell the boys, "Get out of here, both of you, and don't come back!"?
10. Why does Willy keep planting seeds where they've never grown before? Why does Willy think Biff will be impressed with his funeral? Why does Ben say that Biff will call Willy a fool?
11. Why doesn't Willy want to see Linda? Why does he think Biff is spiting him? Why does Biff show him the rubber hose? Why does Biff confront Willy and Happy?
12. What does Biff do that elates Willy? How does Happy try to attract Willy's attention? How does Ben influence Willy at this point?

REQUIEM

1. What is a requiem? What is the purpose of this final act? To what extent is it successful?
2. Charley says: "No man only needs a little salary." To what is he referring? What else does a man need?
3. Explain the irony of Linda's last speech.

Example Essay Questions

Past Questions

1. Discuss Miller's dramatic presentation of success and ideas about success in *Death of a Salesman*.
2. Discuss the dramatic presentation and significance of competition and sport in *Death of a Salesman* (question taken from our exam zone).
3. By what means and with what effects does Miller present Willy's varying states of mind in the play?

Potential Questions

1. How helpful is the manipulation of the time sequence in *Death of a Salesman* in understanding some of the conflicts of the play?
2. Discuss the significance of Willy's brother, Ben, in '*Death of a Salesman*'.
3. In what ways does '*Death of a Salesman*' point out the hopelessness of chasing the American Dream? Are there any rewards?
4. 'Willy is the victim of a phoney dream'. To what extent do you agree with this statement?
5. To what extent do the characters of Willy and Biff Loman reveal the emptiness of some of the ideals of American life?
6. Discuss the importance of dreams in '*Death of a Salesman*'.
7. 'Willy Loman is too naïve and superficial a character to be the hero of a tragedy.' To what extent do you agree with his statement?
8. 'He had all the wrong dreams. All, all wrong.' Discuss in relation to Willy in '*Death of a Salesman*'.
9. To what extent is '*Death of a Salesman*' about 'the inside of a man's head'?
10. What is the importance of the relationships between fathers and sons in '*Death of a Salesman*'?
11. Miller has said that '*Death of a Salesman*' is 'really a love story between a man and his son, and in a crazy way between both of them and America.' Do you agree with this statement?
12. Discuss the presentation and significance of women in the play.

13. Discuss the significance of the title 'Death of a Salesman'. What is the importance of selling in the play?
14. What is interesting about Miller's handling of time and memory in the play? What does this add to your understanding of the characters?
15. 'Biff's rejection of Willy's ideas is the climax of his self-discovery.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?
16. 'Willy's image of America is a mistaken one: it is no longer the land of opportunity but a concrete jungle.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?
17. Discuss the presentation and significance of Happy in the play.
18. Discuss the dramatic presentation of family and relationships in 'Death of a Salesman'.
19. By what means and with what effects does Miller present concepts of reality and illusion in the the play?
20. What role does the fear of abandonment play in the characters' lives.
21. 'Linda is the moral center of the play.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?