

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

by Arthur Miller

ISBN 0-14-118097-8

U.S. \$11.00

Genre: Fiction, Classic, Drama



INTRODUCTION

Note to Teacher

The questions, exercises, and assignments on these pages are designed to guide students' reading of the literary work and to provide suggestions for exploring the implications of the story through discussions, research, and writing. Most of the items can be handled individually, but small group and whole class discussions will enhance comprehension. The Response Journal should provide students with a means, first, for recording their ideas, feelings, and concerns, and then for reflecting these thoughts in their writing assignments and class discussions. These sheets may be duplicated, but teachers should select and modify items according to the needs and abilities of their students.

America has long been known as a land of opportunity. Out of that thinking comes the "American Dream," the idea that anyone can ultimately achieve success, even if he or she began with nothing. In Arthur Miller's **Death of a Salesman**, we follow Willy Loman as he reviews a life of desperate pursuit of a dream of success. In this classic drama, the playwright suggests to his audience both what is truthful and what is illusory in the American Dream and, hence, in the lives of millions of Americans. Unusual in its presentation of a common man as a tragic figure, the play received the Pulitzer Prize as well as the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award when it was produced and published in 1949. About the writing of the play, Miller says, "I wished to create a form which, in itself as a form, would literally be the process of Willy Loman's way of mind." To accomplish this, Miller uses the sense of time on stage in an unconventional way to illustrate that, for Willy Loman, ". . . the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present." Although he denies any direct intent to make a political statement about the capitalist way of life in the United States, Miller brings the American Dream onto the stage for evaluation.

ABOUT ARTHUR MILLER

Arthur Miller was born in New York City in 1915 and studied at the University of Michigan. His plays include **All My Sons** (1947), **Death of a Salesman** (1949), **The Crucible** (1953), **A View from the Bridge** and **A Memory of Two Mondays** (1955), **After the Fall** (1963), **Incident at Vichy** (1964), **The Price** (1968), **The Creation of the World and Other Business** (1972) and **The American Clock**. He has also written two novels, **Focus** (1945), and **The Misfits**, which was filmed in 1960, and the text for **In Russia** (1969), **Chinese Encounters** (1979), and **In the Country** (1977), three books of photographs by his wife, Inge Morath. More recent works include a memoir, **Timebends** (1987), and the plays **The Ride Down Mt. Morgan** (1991), **The Last Yankee** (1993), **Broken Glass** (1993), which won the Olivier Award for Best Play of the London Season, and **Mr. Peter's Connections** (1998). His latest book is **On Politics and the Art of Acting**. Miller was granted with the 2001 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. He has twice won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and in 1949 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Preparing to Read

1. How is the American Dream characteristic of American ideals and philosophy? What are the differences between the materialistic and the idealistic values associated with the American Dream?
2. What was happening economically and socially in the United States in 1949? Was it fairly easy or difficult to get a job? What was America's standing in the world?
3. What is your definition of salesman? How is a salesman different from someone in another occupation? What attitudes do you think a salesman should have to be successful? What attitudes would hinder him?
4. What effect do the expectations of parents have on the behavior of their children? In what ways might parental expectations be beneficial? In what ways might they be

detrimental?

5. As you read through the play, stop occasionally to record your thoughts, reactions, and concerns in a Response Journal. Your journal may be a notebook or individual sheets which you clip together and keep in a folder. Include statements about the characters - what you learn about them, how they affect you - and about the key issues and events in the play. Also, jot down questions you have about events and statements in the play that you do not understand. Your Response Journal will come in handy when you discuss the play in class, write a paper, or explore a related topic that interests you.

Understanding the Story

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 when 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.

Digging Deeper

1. In what ways does Willy not fit into the definition of an average working man building a secure home for his family? In what ways does he represent Everyman? How does Willy represent more?
2. How does Miller use tension in the family to underscore Willy's character? How does he use the stage set to influence the audience's perception of the tension?
3. What is the turning point in Willy's life? Is Willy the main character in this play or is Biff?

Why? What does Biff discover about himself? How does this discovery affect his relationship with Willy? How is Biff's self-realization dramatic? What is the climax of the play?

4. Who suffers most from Willy's delusions? Why?
5. Does Linda help or hinder Willy in overlooking his small sales and his dishonest attempts to make them seem bigger? How else does she influence Willy? Discuss Linda's remark, "Attention - attention must finally be paid to such a man!" What is the effect of the switch in Linda's speech to this very formal statement? Why does Miller use it?
6. How is Willy's killing himself for the insurance money symptomatic of the way he has lived? What legacy does Willy leave his family?
7. What is Willy's dream? What is he searching for throughout the play? Why doesn't he find it? Did he have a chance of fulfilling it? Did he have the wrong dream? Inappropriate attitudes? Is he a born loser, or does he stand in his own way to success? Explain.
8. Does Biff's antagonism cause Willy's failure or merely intensify the failure he already experiences?
9. How does what Biff learns in Boston influence his life? Why can't Biff be what his father wants him to be? Why does Biff steal things? Does Biff use Willy's behavior as an excuse for his own waywardness? What does he say to Willy about the way he wants to live and what Willy expects of him?
10. Discuss the significance of Willy's being a younger son with an absent father. How does that influence his behavior with his own sons? In what ways does Happy's situation reflect Willy's? How has Willy treated Biff? How is it different from the way he has treated Happy? Why is the athletic trophy in Willy's room instead of in Biff's?
11. Compare the way Biff treats his father with the way Happy does. Why is it hard for Biff to tell Willy the truth? Why doesn't Happy want him to?
12. From the author's description at the start of the play, what do we know about Linda? What can we guess? Does she know about the Woman in Boston? What makes you

think she does or doesn't? Why does she repeatedly enter with a load of wash?

13. How does Ben affect Willy? How does he influence the events in the play?
14. Willy is proud of putting up the living room ceiling and making a cement porch. How is the image of working with his hands carried through the play?
15. Why does Miller let us know in the title that Willy's death is coming? Why doesn't he make it a surprise? Is Willy's death in a car more or less appropriate than a suicide using the rubber hose on the water heater would be? Why? What harm does Willy's death do? What good?
16. Discuss the symbolism of the two heavy sample cases and the stockings. How does Miller use the characters' names as symbols? What do they mean? What is the significance of Loman? Why Willy instead of Bill? What other symbols does Miller use and to what purpose?
17. How are the angular shapes and the lighting described in the opening scene important to the meaning of the play? Why does Miller have the buildings closed in by other buildings? How does he use the stage setting as a statement about time? What do the leaves stand for? How is music used?
18. What is the effect of having scenes from the past staged in addition to the current action of the play?
19. What would you say are the false values which the play reveals? What are the true values which the play upholds?
20. Daniel E. Schneider, in **Play of Dreams**,* states that the play is really about a man and his sons. Do you agree that the primary theme of **Death of a Salesman** is the conflict between father and son and between firstborn and second-born sons? Support your opinion.
21. Some reviewers believe that the play is a criticism of capitalism and the American way of life. Discuss your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with them. What are the social implications of the play?

* included in the Viking Critical Library edition.

Writing Responses

1. Do you agree with Willy, who believes that contacts and personality are what make a salesman a success, or with Charley, who believes that a salesman must have confidence in his product and the ability to sell it? Select an opinion to agree with, and give evidence to support your belief.
2. Biff says, "He had the wrong dreams." What was wrong about Willy's dreams? Was there a right dream for Willy? Is Willy ever a success? Explain. What dream could Willy have followed successfully?
3. Who is Willy's foil in the play? Explain how that person serves as a foil for Willy, noting specific differences between them.
4. How do you define tragedy? According to your definition, is *Death of a Salesman* a tragedy? Is it a tragedy according to the classic definition? Explain how it is or isn't.
5. List Willy's slogans in life. Describe how his slogans match his character.
6. In a five-paragraph essay, identify three instances of irony in the play and explain what is ironic about each.
7. Define your idea of success - what it is, how it can be achieved, of what value it is to the person achieving it. Write it as an editorial for your school newspaper.
8. Write an obituary for Willy Loman that could appear in his town's newspaper.

Exploring Further

1. The recent film version starring Dustin Hoffman differs from the staged version in having numerous sets. Compare the filmed version to the staged version described in your book. Does the film resemble a stage play in any way? Miller says the media of film in itself changes the play. How is this true?
2. Read Eudora Welty's **Death of a Traveling Salesman**.^{*} How is the isolation and loneliness of Welty's salesman similar to Miller's? How is it different?
3. Read Irwin Shaw's **The Eighty-Yard Run**^{*} Darling's golden moment on the practice field is the turning point in his life. How is that success similar to Biff's? How is Biff's life

different from Darling's?

4. Read Walter D. Moody's **The Know-It-All Salesman**.** To what extent does Willy Loman fit Moody's description? How have Willy's flaws gotten in the way of his sales?
5. Interview four or five salespeople for different companies. Find out what they think is necessary for success in sales. Give an oral report on your findings.
6. Read some biographical information about Arthur Miller. What are the subjects of his other writings? What have critics said about his importance in modern drama? In what ways are his experiences reflected in his writings?
7. Research the signals which suicide victims usually give. What typical signals did Willy give? Could Willy have been prevented from killing himself? What resources are available in your community to help potential suicide victims?
8. Improvise some dialogue that could have been exchanged between Biff and Bernard, or another character, which reveals something about their personality differences.
9. Make a sketch of the stage set as you envision it from Miller's description at the start of the play.

* included in the Viking Critical Library edition

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