Death of a Salesman Study Guide

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller

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Introduction

Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman is considered by many to be both the playwright's masterpiece and a cornerstone of contemporary American drama. Subtitled *Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem,* the play was first produced in 1949 and struck an immediate, emotional chord with audiences. The work garnered numerous honors and awards, including the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and enjoyed a lengthy run (742 performances) on Broadway. In the decades following its premiere, *Death of Salesman* has become one of the most performed and adapted plays in American theatrical history. Much of this success is attributed to Miller's facility in portraying the universal hopes and fears of middle-class America. Through his main character, Willy Loman, Miller examines the myth of the American Dream and the shallow promise of happiness through material wealth. He uses Willy as an example of how undivided faith in such a dream can often yield tragic results, especially when it goes largely unfulfilled. Audiences have continued to respond to this theme because, in some incarnation, the American Dream has persisted; a viewer can watch *Death of a Salesman and relate* Willy's situation to their own compromised ideals and missed opportunities. More than a cautionary tale, however, Miller's work is also revered for its bold realism and riveting theatricality, a play that deals in weighty emotional issues without descending to melodrama.

Author Biography

Miller was born in Manhattan, New York, on October 17, 1915. His parents were Jewish immigrants who had come to America in search of prosperity. His father, Isadore, ran a successful garment business for a number of years, while his mother, Augusta, was a schoolteacher. Following the failure of his father's business in 1928, Miller's family moved to Brooklyn, which would serve as the setting for a number of his plays, including *Death of a Salesman.* His father's failure and subsequent withdrawal from the world of business had a profound effect on the young Miller, one that has direct roots in the character of Willy Loman. By the time Miller reached young adulthood, America was in the midst of the Great Depression. He saw firsthand how once-wealthy neighbors were reduced to poverty and the humiliation of menial labor or outright panhandling. Much of the playwright's cynicism regarding wealth and conspicuous consumption can be attributed to his experiences during these years.

Miller followed his high school graduation with two years of work in the hopes of earning enough money to attend college. In 1934 he was admitted to the University of Michigan. His time in college nurtured both his writing skills and his interest in liberal social causes. He studied play writing under Kenneth Ro we and was twice awarded the Avery Hopwood Award for playwnting. In 1938, the year of his graduation, he won the Theater Guild National Award for his play They Too Arise; like many of his early plays, the work features youthful idealogues fighting against social inequity. Following his graduation, Miller returned to New York and began a series of jobs involving play writing. Near the onset of World War II, he began writing radio scripts for such anthology programs as *The Calvalcade of America and The Columbia Workshop.*

During the war, Miller worked on a screenplay for the film *The Story of GI Joe, a* work he envisioned as a realistic portrayal of the average combat soldier. His efforts were overruled by film studio executives, however, who wanted a more palatable, romanticized story to sell the American public. Miller's hunger for realism in drama was not dimmed, however, and he sought out a forum for his art. Unfortunately, the Broadway stage of 1944 would not offer such a forum: Miller's debut with *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, a tale of a man unhappily trapped in his world of wealth, was a failure. Three years later, however, he achieved success on Broadway with *All My Sons*. In 1949 he presented *Death of a Salesman,* the work that established him as a major force in American theatre.

Miller's work in subsequent years continued his interest in current events and social injustice, with works such as *The Crucible* (1953) furthering his reputation. By the mid-1950s, however, Miller's personal life began to overshadow his professional. His marriage to film star Marilyn Monroe swept him into a life of celebrity that all but eclipsed his work as a playwright. After his divorce from Monroe, and a lengthy hiatus, he returned to his craft. Not content to rest on the laurels of his past, Miller continued to experiment with forms of drama, crafting a variety of works throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1996, at the age of eighty-one, he adapted *The Crucible* for a filmed adaptation starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Winona Ryder.

Plot Summary

Act I

Death of a Salesman opens with Willy Loman returning to his New York home during the night. Hearing him enter, Linda, his wife, is concerned and gets out of bed to greet him. Although Willy had been on his way to Boston, he reveals that he had made it only to Yonkers before he had decided to return home. During this conversation, the audience discovers that Willy has had several automobile accidents recently and that he seems to be emotionally unstable. Willy and Linda begin arguing about one of their sons, Biff, who has recently returned to New York from the West. Throughout this conversation (as throughout many others), Willy contradicts himself, especially regarding Biff's character

Upstairs, Biff and his brother, Happy, who are spending the night at their parents' house, wake up and strain to hear the conversation. They reminisce about their childhood and discuss the tensions that have developed between Biff and Willy. Although Biff and Happy are in their thirties, they frequently act much younger and are treated by their parents as if they are younger. Happy is clearly a womanizer, while Biff is frustrated at his lack of professional success and the conflicts he feels between his own desires and the desires his father has for him. Both men discuss their dissatisfactions with their lives and speculate about their options, though they can't seem to commit to any change. Happy attempts to persuade Biff to move back to New York permanently, especially after they overhear Willy talking loudly to himself. He suggests that Biff visit a man he once worked for, Bill Oliver, and ask for another job.

Much of the action in the play occurs as flashbacks, with Willy responding to the past as if it were the present. Now, Willy remembers buying a much younger Biff and Happy a punching bag; Biff is playing with a football he had stolen from his school, Willy begins bragging aboul how well-known and well-liked he is in the East coast towns he travels through as a salesman. He makes similar statements frequently throughout the play, though his financial situation belies the success he claims. Within this flashback, Bernard, a cousin of Biff and Happy, enters and urges Biff to come study his math. Biff, a senior in high school at this point, is in danger of failing the course, hence failing to graduate, which would prevent him from accepting an athletic scholarship at the University of Virginia. According to Willy, however, Bernard is the one who will fail at life because he is not popular a prophecy which will be clearly disproved by the end of the play.

Willy and Linda begin to discuss their financial problems, which have increased because the firm that has employed Willy for decades has taken him off salary and put him entirely on commission. At this point, Willy remembers a woman, apparently a clerk in one of the companies he visits but whose significance will become clear only much later in the play. Willy refers to his Uncle Ben, who "knew what he wanted and went out and got it," who, in other words, became rich.

Linda reveals their financial difficulties to her sons, but when they criticize Willy's firm, Linda claims Biff and Happy are equally neglectful. Linda also reveals that Willy has been trying to kill himself, that his frequent automobile accidents seem to have been intentional, and that she has found a rubber lube near their gas water heater. She suspects that Willy will use the lube to asphyxiate himself with gas.

When Biff tells Willy that he is going to visit his former employer. Bill Oliver, Willy encourages him to ask to borrow $15,000. Simultaneously, he criticizes Biff for lacking a professional or manly demeanor. Happy encourages Biff to get his "old confidence" back, though he seems to have lost it years ago, if he ever had it. The Act ends with Lind apleading with Willy to ask for a position that would not require him to travel.

Act II

This Act occurs the following day. At breakfast, Linda assures Willy that Biff had left in a good mood, confident that Bill Oliver will respond to him favorably. She also says that their sons want Willy to meet them for dinner.

Willy talks to his boss, Howard, asking him for a position in New York rather than on the road. Howard declines, claiming to have no position available. Willy begins shouting, citing his early success which exasperates Howard, probably because Willy exaggerates his earlier abilities. By the end of the conversation, Howard has fired Willy entirely. At this point, another flashback occurs, the day of Biffs big high school football game in Ebbets Field. When time shifts back to the present. Willy enters his brother Charley's office. He speaks with Bernard, who has grown into a successful and responsible man. Bernard asks what actually happened to Biff after high school, when he failed math and refused to make the course up over the summer. Willy becomes defensive and loud, As he frequently has, Charley offers Willy a job, but Willy is tooproud to accept. Although he is disgusted, Charley continues to lend Willy money.

The scene shifts to the restaurant, where Happy is waiting for Biff and his father. Happy attempts to pick up a woman he assumes is a prostitute. When Biff arrives, he reveals that he had failed with Bill Oliver, who kept him waiting all day and didn't even remember him. Although Biff attempts to have a frank conversation with Willy, both Happy and Willy subvert this effort, cooperating instead with the family's desire to ignore the truth in favor of a mythologizedpast. Within this conversation, another crucial flashback occurs. When Biff had failed math, he had gone to Boston to persuade Willy to intervene with the teacher. Instead, he discovered Willy in a hotel with another woman and became profoundly disillusioned with both Willy and his own life's possibilities. It was after this discovery, apparently, that Biff refused to attend summer school and hence relinquished his opportunity for an athletic scholarship and a college education.

Biff and Happy leave Willy in the restaurant in order to accompany the prostitute Happy had met earlier. The next morning, Linda asks them both to leave. Willy has clearly

become more unstable and thinks more overtly of suicide. The Act ends with Willy speeding off in his car.

Requiem

The last moments of the play occur after Willy's funeral, which has not been well-attended. Biff indicates that he will return to the West, while Happy will remain in business in New York. The play concludes with Linda at Willy's grave, uttering the ironic remark that because their house is finally paid for (with Willy's insurance money), they are now "free."

Act 1, Pages 130-149

Act 1, Pages 130-149 Summary

The play opens with a lengthy description of the Loman house. Miller writes detailed stage directions, with lighting, sound, and prop placement, signifying the movement of every item and every character in his play. The home is a simple house, sitting before a surplus of apartment complexes in Brooklyn, New York. The tall, angular silhouette of Manhattan lies in the backdrop. Light slowly appears on the stage, while a flute plays in the background. The home is simple and realistic, with only a few items representing the respective rooms: kitchen, living room, bedroom, and boys' bedroom, steeped with trophies.

Willy Loman enters his home carrying two large sample cases. Willy is exhausted and walks to the kitchen to unwind. Willy's wife, Linda, has awakened in the middle of the night and hears her husband stir outside the bedroom door. Linda goes to him, taking off his shoes, while he tells her about his night. When she worries about his car crashing again, he tells her that his vision became impaired while he was driving back from New England, where he is one of the top sellers for Brown and Morrison. Willy was driving sixty miles per hour and suddenly ran off the road. Willy is still shaken up when he tells Linda the story. Linda tries to calm him down, to convince him to stop selling in New England. Linda thinks he should be a salesman in New York, because he is sixty years old. Willy quickly agrees, but reminds her he has always been the New England seller.

The conversation quickly turns to the subject of their two sons, Biff and Harold, who is called Happy. Willy is furious that Biff is thirty-four years old and working on a farm, still trying to find himself. Willy thinks of his attractive son as having so much to offer as a salesman. Still, he remembers the yesteryears, in which he and his sons first drove a car. He constantly thinks back to the past, wishing life was simple and happy again.

Biff and Happy, upstairs in their old bedrooms during this visit home, overhear their parents discussing them. Linda tells Willy that now Biff is back at home, the boys have come home from a double date. They are thrilled the two brothers are going out together. Nonetheless, Willy is still angry about Biff's destructive waste of a life and cries out to him that he can go back to Texas if he wants. Willy does not seem to admit to caring about his own children. Willy spent so much time with them in their youth and cannot believe how little they care about him now. Still, they do care about him, whether or not Willy accepts and understands this.

The Loman brothers are introduced Biff and Happy worry about their father. They realize his eyesight is not bad, despite the fact that he stops at green lights and drives through red ones. They see him losing his mind and speaking to himself and start to worry about his mental capacities. However, they are also slightly embarrassed by his odd behavior. Happy tells Biff that Willy is constantly expressing concerns about him, wanting him to

settle down, get a real job, and make something of himself. Yet, Biff recounts all of his jobs after the war, and knows that life is not being lived while inside a horrible job. This job, in his mind, is just to pay for a home that will never be his. Happy explains that, while he has everything he thought he always wanted, such as his own car, apartment in the City, many women, he is lonely, and moreover unhappy. Biff suggests that Happy come out west with him or to Texas. Biff would be happy if the two of them were together. However, Happy quickly returns to his obsession with money and women. Happy does not think he can live in Texas or Nebraska and work on a ranch, because he would not be making enough money. Happy reminds Biff, all the time, how everyone always loves and looks up to him. If he were to just move to the city with Happy, they would have any girl they wanted, like the girls they had this very night. Happy informs Biff that the girl he was with this night is engaged to be married.

Biff explains he does not like that type of lifestyle and wants to open up his own ranch. Biff thinks of Bill Oliver, a powerful man who liked him in the past, and thinks of asking for money to start his own ranch. Happy thinks Bill will back him.

Willy walks into the kitchen and gathers milk from the refrigerator while he reminisces of earlier, happier years with his sons. These memories are reenacted in the front of the stage. Willy recalls his sons playing with the new car, and watches them toss the football around. Willy is drawn to Biff, as though all of his hopes rest on this boy, who is healthy, attractive, strong, and ambitious. Suddenly, a younger boy named Bernard walks into the house, wanting to study with Biff. Willy informs his impressionable and eager sons that Bernard, although he is smart, will never succeed in the business world, because he is not that well-liked. Willy's sons are so proud of their father for traveling to so many great cities and are proud of his great success. They want to grow up, at this point, to be just like him. Willy reminds them that his two sons are built like Adonises and are so well-liked, and, as a result, will succeed in the business world.

Willy continues to reminisce, this time with Linda. Willy moves to the edge of the stage and tells her how much money he has made in one week. Linda is so thrilled to hear of his success. However, it is quickly forgotten when they count their bills and expenses. Willy worries he will not make enough money at the rate he is going. Willy tells Linda that he is well-liked, and a moment later contradicts his words by saying that he works so hard. Unfortunately, he is not doing well, because he is not well liked. Willy thinks he talks too much and is fat. Still, Linda tells him he is the most handsome man in the world. Willy pulls her over and tells her he wishes she could be on the road with him, so he can kiss the life out of her.

Act 1, Pages 130-149 Analysis

The verbose description Miller writes in the opening of *Death of a Salesman* sets the mood and tone of the play for its length. Miller's specific stage directions do not allow for much leeway and interpretation. As a result, the play is performed with the same fervor and emotion as was intended. The house, set in the backdrop of New York, allows the audience to feel with the Lomans. They are close to New York City, but not inside. Flute

music plays when the curtain rises, and returns when Willy has flashbacks of his brother, Ben. Because the set is so simple, we are forced to pay special attention to the dialogue, because it is truly the attraction in this work of art. With flashbacks and age gaps, the set is seemingly insignificant. It is the space that the characters occupy inside and around the house that is important.

Linda's first appearance onstage is important, because it represents her role with regard to Willy and her role in the play. The first thing Linda does is drop to her feet and tend to her husband by removing his shoes. Linda fills this role throughout the play and throughout her life, happily, willingly. When they speak, they constantly speak of Willy's career and their children. Willy cannot keep his story straight. From the onset of the play, he says that he is fine, just to contradict himself a few lines later and say that he is unwell. This pattern will continue throughout the play. Linda does pick up on his odd behavior, yet she does nothing about it. Linda simply loves Willy and wants him to live in a happy, albeit often a fantasy, world. While the play progresses, her attitude towards his predicament does grow.

When the story moves upstairs to Biff and Happy, their relationship is presented upfront. Nobody can dispute Happy's success by his physical presence. Happy carries humility loosely and spills confidence everywhere. Biff, the image of a high school football star gone bad, first meets the audience in a relaxed, welcome mood. The audience sympathizes with this once desirable man. Linda and Willy introduce the two sons before the audience meets them, setting the impression from the beginning. The play is primarily concerned with Biff and Willy's relationship, and, as a result, we are more interested in Biff from the beginning. Furthermore, the two brothers hold stereotypical roles from the opening of the play and do not change their roles through the course of it. Though they grow and develop, they remain "the forgotten son" and the "ideal son." When the two sons discuss their father, they express different emotions for him. Happy states his embarrassment by Willy, which gives his personality an air of distance, while Biff is more shocked and saddened by the change. Biff is more concerned with Willy's disregard for his life, and again, we, as the audience, connect more with him.

When Happy elaborates on his lifestyle of debauchery, Biff is disgusted. Happy's playboy world and economically motivated workweek put the two brothers at a large distance, because they desire different things out of life. Happy is constantly trying to recruit Biff to his world, just like Willy seems to recruit Biff to his world. What nobody sees is that Happy has followed in Willy's footsteps, despite Willy's indifference. Biff, on the other hand, wants to find himself on his own. Tempting Biff with women, nice cars, and an apartment in the city does nothing to Biff, because he enjoys life in the open range.

When Willy walks into the kitchen, he discusses one of his beliefs. Willy has led his life based on the principle that men who are attractive and well liked are bound to succeed. Because of this mantra, Willy finds himself in many complex situations that deny such a mantra. Willy's faith in the well-liked philosophy backfires when his beloved son is unsuccessful. Furthermore, when young Bernard ultimately succeeds as a poorly liked

man, Willy is lost. His world turns upside down as the play proceeds. However, this first glimpse into such a philosophy sets his character rolling.

It is important to remember that at the end of this opening scene, Willy contradicts himself with regard to his career. Whether or not he knows if Linda sees this inner conflict is open to interpretation. Linda simply plays the faithful, loving wife, constantly supporting and complimenting him. However, note that Willy speaks of his great success and quickly changes to his utter failure in the course of one page of dialogue.

Act 1, Pages 150-172

Act 1, Pages 150-172 Summary

Willy reminisces, once again, about his long weeks on the road. This time, he envisions a very posh and proper woman his age. Willy is flirting with her. The woman tells him to look her up the next time he is in Boston and that she will help with his business. They joke and as Willy leaves, the woman begins to laugh. That laugh transforms into Linda's laugh, and suddenly Willy is looking into the kitchen again, while Linda sits inside it, mending a pair of her silk stockings. Willy leaves the dim light where the woman is standing to come to Linda. Willy reprimands her for mending her stockings, which she claims to do only because they are so expensive to buy. Suddenly, Bernard comes into the kitchen wondering where Biff is. Bernard reminds Willy that unless Biff studies, he will fail. Willy does not want Biff to be a worm as is Bernard, yet he also wants him to cheat off of Bernard. Bernard hears the woman's voice from Boston laughing inside the Loman house. Linda worries that all of the mothers are scared of Biff because he is too rough with the girls and drives without a license and steals footballs.

Willy's focus returns to the present day while Happy comes down the stairs, asking why his father has come home so early in the week. Willy is frustrated with Happy for asking him so many questions and even more unhappy because he looks at his sons as not providing for him. Moments later, he is irate that he cannot provide enough for his sons.

Uncle Charley walks into the kitchen, discussing house renovations, moving, and fixing the roof of his house. Charley offers Willy a job, and Willy is quickly insulted, because he already has a job. Willy wonders aloud why Biff is moving back to Texas. When the two men discuss putting up a roof over their heads, he accuses Charley of not being a real man because he does not know how to work with tools. In the midst of their argument, Uncle Ben enters the kitchen.

Willy sometimes sees Ben as a stranger and sometimes as his brother who invited him to go to Alaska in the past to develop land. Willy never went, and Ben quickly became extremely successful. Charley, Ben, and Willy inconsistently speak about their investments, their risks, and their opportunities. Ben died years ago, but Willy still sees him standing in his kitchen. They speak of their mother, who also passed away. Charley wonders if Willy will get any of Ben's money, but Willy claims that Ben has seven sons who will inherit the fortune.

Still, Willy's mind wanders to the imaginary. Linda suddenly appears in the kitchen, while Willy's imagined brothers continue to argue. Willy wants to know how Ben did it, how he made all his money. Linda is so pleased to meet her brother-in-law Ben for the first time, because she only knows of him through legend. Ben informs them that he left for Alaska to find their father when Willy was young, but went south and wound up in Africa. There, as his story goes, he walked into the jungle at seventeen, found diamond minds, and walked out at twenty-one rich. Willy wants to know more about their father, because he

remembers nothing. Then, in the middle of his mirage, Biff and Happy come into the kitchen as young boys. Happy continues to ask Willy if he notices all the weight he's lost. Willy is only concerned with Biff and his good looks and rowdy nature and ambition to make money. Much to Linda's dismay, Biff and Ben play-fight in the kitchen until Ben leaves.

When he leaves the kitchen and Willy's memories, Willy asks him one more time for advice for his children. Willy is trying to raise them to be like him. Willy also reminds Ben and Charley that business is extremely tough these days, but he continues, that, of course, business is nevertheless still great for him. On his exit, he repeats his mantra: "William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out, I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!" (Miller 160). Willy is in awe of his older brother, still.

Suddenly, Willy looks to Linda sitting in the kitchen and is brought back to present day in the middle of the night. Willy quickly leaves the kitchen and walks out to the front of the house, muttering to himself. Biff and Happy walk into the kitchen to speak with Linda, who, they are shocked to see, has grown older and visibly shows signs of age. Linda reprimands Biff for fighting with Willy and calling him crazy. They are both shocked to see their father deteriorating, both mentally and financially, and as a result physically. Happy constantly defends him, trying to play the good son who was never in his grace. However, Biff puts Willy down, berating him to his mother's face. Linda immediately threatens her beloved son by telling him that if he cannot respect his father, whom she loves so dearly, then he is disrespecting her and is therefore not allowed in her home. Linda informs her sons that Willy's salary has been taken away from him and he is forced to work on commission now, like a beginner. They are disgusted at the company for treating their father so poorly. Linda claims that his sons are no different.

Happy and Biff are shocked to hear these words come out of their mother's mouth. Yet, they still persist. Biff claims he does not like business, that he does not fit into the business world. Biff adds that Willy does not either, which is why people make fun of him. In the middle of such banter, Willy walks in and hears his son making fun of him. In order to appease his family, Biff tells Willy that he will stay in Brooklyn, at home, and get a job in sales. Willy doubts he can make it, but listens nonetheless. Biff plans to go to Bill Oliver the next day to ask for ten thousand dollars to start a new business with the two brothers. Willy is excited about this prospect and begins to lecture Biff on what to wear, how to act, and the way to speak. Willy leaves the room while Biff and Happy continue daydreaming about their future business. Yet, when their father leaves, Biff is again shocked at the fact that Linda looks so old and that Willy has lost all his salary. This news distresses him and he does not know how to fix such grave problems.

The lights fade on the two Loman brothers while they come up on Linda and Willy in their bedroom. Willy is in the bathroom complaining about the leaky plumbing. Biff and Happy enter the bedroom, anxious about the meeting tomorrow. While Willy is preoccupied prepping Biff, Happy announces he is getting married. Nobody listens or acknowledges his announcement. When the scene closes, Biff reaches behind the heater to find a rubber tube covering the opening. He is terrified, because Linda just

informed him that Willy has been trying to kill himself. Biff takes away the tubing and leaves the room. It is something Linda has never been able to bring herself to do, because she understands that if Willy were to discover someone knew about his attempted suicides, he would be morbidly ashamed and embarrassed.

Act 1, Pages 150-172 Analysis

The two women in Willy's life mesh into one through their voices. In another memory, Willy sees a woman he spent time with on the road in Boston. However, because this voice recurs several times throughout the play, we know it is important. Furthermore, when her voice transforms into Linda's, we see Willy's confused mind running in too many directions. Perhaps the women in his memory have collided. Perhaps the transformation of the voice to Linda's is forced. Either way, the laugh should foreshadow future laughter that could cause problems for all characters.

It is important to note the conversation at this point between Bernard, Biff, and Willy. When Willy advises his son to cheat off of Bernard, he is contradicting his belief in hard work. It seems as though hard work is only important if it is fun and if it is what is in his heart. However, this philosophy brings the Loman men heartache in the future. Because Biff does not learn how to work hard, he does not pass math, and furthermore, does not know how to work hard in the rest of his life. Willy ignores Bernard's warnings, thinking of only his own work mentality. This overt distancing from other people also puts both men in an awkward place later in life.

Charley's discussions with the Loman men set up another dichotomy of male characters in the play. Willy sometimes feels the need to put other people down in order to feel like a true man himself. Despite Charley's obvious success, Willy continuously berates him, because he cannot work with his hands like a real man. However, Willy never does work with his hands in his work life. Willy is a salesman. It is this discussion that illustrates Willy's true calling. Unfortunately, Willy is too blind to notice.

At this point, Uncle Ben walks into Willy's daydreams. Willy is surrounded by brothers and family members who, in his opinion, have become a success. By constantly imagining them, he is forcing self-doubt on himself. If he were to let go of other people's lives, then he might have been able to find happiness in his own. However, he is constantly following the flute, Ben and Charley, into the jungle. Willy does not even know what the jungle is, he only knows that it brought success to the others.

Linda's character truly comes alive in these scenes. When she sees her sons speak poorly of their father, she turns on them. Linda's alliance is, and always has been to her, Willy, despite all his fallbacks and tribulations. Linda emerges as a strong, powerful woman who can do nothing but watch her husband deteriorate. Linda's voice will gradually increase throughout the remainder of the play. However, at this point, when Linda explodes with empathy for her husband, we see not only a great woman, but also a great man. It is through Linda that we care even more for Willy. Willy is human, as is Linda, and they both suffer from one of the greatest human foibles: pride.

Biff's removal of the rubber tube in the heater demonstrates a great strength of character. While Linda protests her love for Willy, she does nothing to truly help him or change him. Linda simply continues to live her life with him as though everything is satisfactory. It is possible that this disobedience to the truth, in fact, harms their relationship. Perhaps it represents a lifelong disconnection, camouflaged by an amorous union. Nonetheless, Biff is the first and only person who is willing to help his father at the risk of losing him.

Act 2, Pages 173-193

Act 2, Pages 173-193 Summary

Willy and Linda Loman sit at the kitchen table drinking coffee on a Tuesday morning. Linda remarks that Willy seems more rejuvenated and energized than he has in a long time. Willy is thrilled his sons have left so early in the morning to meet with Bill Oliver. While they discuss Biff's prospects, Willy knows that it sometimes just takes some men a longer time to stabilize. Linda reminds Willy they have only one more payment until the mortgage is paid off and they own their house. Willy hopes Biff will one day get the house and raise his family in it. However, he is frustrated, because he looks at all the payments in his life: his car, his refrigerator, his house, and cannot believe that he barely owns anything after his long life of servitude. Linda prepares him to leave for the day in New York, where he plans to land a New York job, and never have to work behind the wheel of a car again. Furthermore, his two sons plan on taking him to a nice, big meal in the City at Frank's Chop House. Willy is excited and energized when he leaves the house for the day. On his way out, he sees Linda's stockings in his hand and is once again angry with her for still mending them.

After Willy leaves the house, the phone rings and Linda picks it up to hear Biff's voice. Linda tells Biff how happy Willy seemed to be this morning for the first time in years. Linda instructs him on how to act and how to welcome Willy at the restaurant.

The light fades on Linda after the phone conversation and comes up over Howard Wagner, a thirty-six year old businessman working at a small typewriter. Howard is playing with a new voice-recording device that he claims nobody can be without. Howard plays his young daughter, son, and wife's voice for Willy, and barely seems to notice that Willy is even in the room. Finally, Willy lowers himself enough to ask Howard for the favor he has been holding onto, to find a space for him to sell in the city. Howard claims that he cannot do so. Willy reminds Howard that he helped his father build the business and that he even helped name Howard. Howard hopes Willy has not had another breakdown. Willy continues to beg Howard, lowering his requested weekly salary from sixty to forty dollars per week. Willy even begs to go to Boston and work as a traveling salesman once again. However, Howard, who has been meaning to fire him for a long time, tells Willy that he no longer wants him representing the company. After a brief emotional struggle, Willy envisions his brother Ben again, inside the office when he leaves. Willy and Ben continue to speak of Alaska and becoming rich.

Willy walks away, now daydreaming about the time when Biff played football in Ebbett's Field. Willy is so proud of his son and cannot believe Biff's life is now beginning with such promise. Charley comes in, teasing everyone about the game. Willy takes all of his comments so seriously that they fire little words at one another.

Willy quickly transforms his vision to Charley's office. Willy is walking into the office, despite the fact that he is still talking to himself, screaming "touchdown." Jenny,

Charley's secretary is afraid of Willy and annoyed that she still has to deal with him so much. Bernard, Charley's son, is relaxing in the office, casually dressed with an overnight bag and tennis rackets to his side. Charley is humming when Willy walks in. Bernard asks Willy about Biff, wondering what happened to him. Willy tries to tell Bernard about Biff's new big deal, but Bernard shrugs it off. He asks Willy why Biff decided not to go to summer school after he flunked math in high school. Bernard realizes that Biff's life ended after the fame in Ebbett's Field. Instead of going to summer school, he went to visit Willy up in Boston on a trip. Willy seems lost when Bernard tells him this news. Still, they continue discussing Biff and business, and suddenly Bernard must leave. Charley brags that he is arguing a case in front of the Supreme Court. Willy wonders how Charley's son is so important, when he never encouraged him to do anything, nor did he take any interest in Bernard's life.

Charley offers Willy a job, once again; however, Willy quickly turns it down. Willy is so thrilled Bernard has turned out so well and still thinks that they will all play tennis together when they are grown. Charley is frustrated with Willy when he will not accept his job offer. Willy cannot accept Charley's comments. Willy tells Charley he is the only friend he has, and leaves the office.

Act 2, Pages 173-193 Analysis

While Willy and Linda discuss their life in a somewhat content manner, the tone quickly changes to depression. Willy is saddened and frustrated by the American system. People live to pay off their bills. All they want to do is own something and they do not get to do that until they practically die. Willy's words and actions are constantly contradicting each other. Willy's philosophy as a salesman means he should be thrilled with the idea of a mortgage and bills, and slowly owning property. However, while Willy is better suited for other work, more independent work, he has trouble dealing with the American concept of stability, despite his constant self-reassuring.

Linda's mending of the stockings represents their current status in society. Because she is trying to fix such seemingly inexpensive items, Willy thinks of himself as unsuccessful and poor. Willy cannot possibly conceive of himself in a financial hotspot, especially after years of hard work and devotion. As a result, he jumps on Linda for trying to help. It is not until later in the play that we see an even greater significance of the silk stockings.

When Willy visits Howard in the office, he has officially lowered himself to a point to which he never thought he would slump. While he begs Howard for a job, he changes his plea every few moments. This behavior only propels Willy into an even deeper depression, which he finally admits to his boys later at the bar. However, when Howard, a man half his age, lets Willy go, he sees a changing of the guard. The voices on Howard's new machine are strong, young children who could represent both Biff and Happy in their youth. When they were that age, they looked up to Willy and admired him. Perhaps it is simply changing times. In thirty years, perhaps Howard will be Willy.

Bernard and Charley's entrance into the scene reinforce the fact that Willy lacks the life he wanted. The people who never seemed to care, in his mind, about success, have found it, and he cannot admit his jealousy. It is interesting to count how many times Willy contradicts himself. Willy is constantly saying he is successful and loves the hard work. Then just a few lines later, he complains that work is too hard and he is unsuccessful. Every time Willy dreams of greatness for himself, his children, and his future, he envisions Ben. Ben returns with his mantra of going into the jungle, like a threat throughout the play. When Willy speaks with Charley, he also thinks of Ben. Here are two men who have made it. They remind Willy that he has not.

The ultimate contradiction in which Willy finds himself falls in his final conversation with Charley in this scene. Charley attempts to show Willy how his old ideas of success hold no water. Willy has always believed that, if you are attractive, strong, and well-liked, then you will be successful. When Charley disembodies his entire belief system, Willy is left helpless once again. Without his pride, without his faith, he feels naked and pathetic. Yet still, when Willy is at his lowest, he can sink even lower by telling Charley he is the only friend he has. This man who Willy despises, refuses to work for, and constantly berates to his family, this man with whom he is in constant competition, is his only true friend in the world.

Act 2, Pages 193-212

Act 2, Pages 193-212 Summary

The lights come up on Happy while he is talking to a waiter at the restaurant in the city where he is waiting for Willy. Happy and Biff begin speaking to a girl. Happy tells her that Biff plays football for the New York Giants and that he went to West Point. The girl becomes excited and agrees to cancel her plans that night so that she can spend it with them. Biff is increasingly frustrated with Happy's attitude towards life and women, and ultimately tells him about his horrible day with Bill Oliver. Biff apparently waited in the office for six hours, until 5pm when Oliver finally saw him for one minute. Bill neither recognized nor remembered him. Biff was, after all, only a shipping clerk for him decades ago, not a salesman. Nonetheless, when Biff left the office, he stole one of Oliver's fountain pens and ran away quickly so that nobody would see. Biff is terrified and shocked with his own behavior and wants to plan a story to tell Willy so that he no longer remains depressed and suicidal. According to Happy, they should pretend that business with Oliver is okay and let it slowly faze out. After all, "Dad is never so happy as when he's looking forward to something" (Miller 197).

Willy arrives, expecting and happy to see his sons with good news. Willy eagerly asks Biff about the meeting with Oliver. Biff wants to tell the truth, yet Happy continuously interrupts with white lies of how everything went well. Willy tells his sons that he was fired. This news startles Biff, who still wants to tell the truth, and whose heart bleeds for his father. Happy essentially ignores this information, still trying to let his father believe that everything is okay.

Suddenly, Willy flashes back to the past, where a young Bernard is furiously knocking on his door. Linda answers to hear Bernard crying out about Biff flunking math. Bernard, Linda, and Willy are all arguing about Biff's math course and visit to Boston. Everyone and no one is to blame for Biff's demise at the end of high school. These thoughts are mixing in with the present day, while Biff tells Willy the story of the fountain pen and the meeting with Oliver. Willy is furious when he discovers what happened with Biff and the fountain pen, yet is still lost somewhere in time, with voices from the past and present mixing in his mind. Suddenly, Biff begins to lie to his father to help him feel better, and he explains how much he hates Oliver and could not go back to him, after stealing his balls years ago and now his fountain pen. Then, he cries, "Why did I go? Why did I go! Look at you! Look at what's become of you!" to Willy. (Miller 203).

Willy's mind floats in and out of consciousness, hearing a woman's voice calling him to leave. Meanwhile, two women named Letta and Miss Forsythe walk into the restaurant to drink with Biff and Happy. They approach Willy and think it is cute how the boys have brought their father on the date. Willy quickly leaves and Biff tells them how he is a great and unappreciated prince. Biff yells at Happy for not caring and not helping Willy. Happy rebuts with his claim that Biff simply leaves and is never around to help. Biff is so

angry that he leaves the table. Happy continues on with the date with the girls, claiming that Willy is not his father.

The lights fade on a hotel room where Willy and a woman are dressing under sensual lighting. It is several years in the past. They hear a knocking on the door and quickly fix the scene. The woman disappears and young Biff is waiting at the door with a suitcase. Biff comes in, frantically telling Willy about flunking math. Biff says he wants Willy to convince the teacher to pass him, because he knows Willy is good at convincing people to do things. Willy is a great salesman, Biff thinks. Willy quickly agrees to do so and they plan to leave that very night to fix Biff's grade. However, when Biff tells him why he flunked, that it was because he made fun of the teacher's lisp, the woman in the bathroom laughs. This woman comes out in her towel and Biff sees her. Willy throws her out of the room while she screams for the stockings he owes her. Tears are streaming down Biff's face when he confronts his father about the woman and for giving her Linda's stockings. Willy tries to calm Biff down by ordering his acquiescence and by commanding him to relax and go back to Brooklyn to fix the math grade. Biff claims he wants nothing to do with such a liar as Willy and that he will not go to the University of Virginia as planned.

The lights return to the bar in present day, while Willy continues commanding an absent Biff. Willy speaks, instead, to Stanley, the waiter, who informs Willy that his sons have gone off with the two women. Willy asks Stanley where a seed store is located and tries to tip him with extra money he claims he no longer needs. While Willy is leaving, Stanley drops the money back into Willy's pockets.

When the two boys arrive home, they find Linda outraged and furious. Happy hands her flowers and she throws them on the floor, cursing at her sons for deserting their beloved father at the restaurant. Biff fights back, desperately wanting one small conversation with his father. Linda calls both boys bums, scum of the earth, and tells Happy to go to his whores. Linda cannot be around people, even her own children, who, in her mind, treat a man such a Willy Loman with such disrespect.

Act 2, Pages 193-212 Analysis

Happy's laissez-faire attitude toward life angers Biff. Biff is frustrated with his relationship with Willy and Linda, with his lack of career, and mainly with his horrible meeting with Oliver. The fact that Oliver does not remember Biff reinforces the lack of respect he gets from his father. Biff cannot believe he wasted an entire day on something he cares nothing about. The waiting mirrors his impression of the business world, and forces his hatred of it deeper. Furthermore, Happy's lackadaisical small talk with the women in the bar reminds Biff of how different he is from his brother. Biff barely respects his own brother and sees how poorly Happy treats people. Happy's success in business, once again, confirms Biff's hatred of the world. Happy's persistence to lie to Willy angers Biff even more. The white lies parallel the lies in the Loman family, digging into Biff's heart.

Additionally, Biff's story of stealing the pen reflects his life's accomplishments. On the surface, Biff has been stealing since he was a kid, and has gotten into serious trouble because of it. However, the kleptomania has a deeper source. The fountain pen might represent the office world, the place he hates and never wants to join, but feels he must try, just to appease his father, who also does not fit in with the office world. By stealing, he may think he can easily flow in and out of the business world, the farm world, and his family world. However, stealing can only go so far. Sooner or later it catches up with people, and, in this case, Biff realizes his misfortune and wants to change.

Willy's flashback to Bernard warning about the math grade knives its way into Willy's consciousness while he listens to Biff's story about the fountain pen. These recurring stories are the magnets that bring together Willy's misfortune and downfall. Willy continues to hear and see these stories while he hears his son tell of another problem and mistake. By not separating the past from the present, Willy is already slipping into death. Willy is simply trapped inside his skin; he does not even notice when the boys leave. However, they realize their folly later, when Linda confronts them, wanting to disown them and throw them out of the house. Linda, the faithful wife, seems to be the one character who lives in blissful ignorance. However, she is the one who will ultimately suffer the most.

Willy's betrayal of Linda is the turning point in this play. Biff is still a wide-eyed boy who respects and treasures his father, until he discovers him with another woman. Whether Willy blames himself for destroying Biff's life or whether Biff blames himself for destroying his own life, both men are to blame. Both men, proud, strong, and rugged, destroy the family together, as though they are one person. The problem lies in the complexity of the situation, however. If Biff were to tell Linda about the woman, then she would no longer blame him for hurting Willy. However, she would be destroyed. The truth in this situation can only bring pain. As a result, feelings, emotions, thoughts, and comments are bottled up for years to come. Biff willingly abandons his ideal of a hardworking, enviable, admirable man such as his father, and chooses a life so opposite, that it can not only hurt himself, but hurt his father, too.

Act 2, Pages 212-220

Act 2, Pages 212-220 Summary

Willy walks into his garden with a hoe and the packets of seeds he just purchased. Willy envisions his brother, Ben, and proposes a lucrative idea to him. Willy has life insurance of $20,000 and wants to die. Ben thinks he will be making a fool of himself and that the company may not honor the policy. When Ben vanishes from Willy's mind, Biff enters the garden. Biff has come to say goodbye to his father. Willy cannot understand why Biff plans to leave town forever when he has an appointment tomorrow with Oliver. Biff tries to convince his father that he has no such appointment and that Oliver never put his arm around Biff. Willy cannot understand and picks a fight with his son, refusing to go inside to see Linda. Eventually, he goes inside alone, where Linda willfully accepts Biff's departure. However, Willy refuses to shake his son's hand, thinking his son is spiteful. After fighting between the three Lomans, Biff turns around and walks up the stairs. Before he leaves, Willy screams.

Biff tries to explain that he has no spite, because he is leaving to prove he blames nobody. Yet, in his rage, he finally blurts out to the family that Willy is crazy. Biff removes the rubber tube from his pocket and places it on the table. Willy pretends to not know what the tube is, while Linda and Happy are shocked. Biff erupts at Willy, screaming, telling him that he, Biff, is a nobody, because Willy always tried to push everything on him, that he tried to make him feel like he was living all of Willy's dreams, that whatever he did was never right. As a result, Biff ended up living and breathing hot air, never able to take orders from other people. Biff stole things across the country at every job and even went to jail. All the while, Linda is crying, Happy is sometimes getting a word in edgewise, and Willy curses Biff with his own spite. Willy claims that all Biff is doing is trying to spite him.

At the end of the argument, Willy dons a smile in catharsis. Willy realizes that his son really does love him. After all, Biff was tearing, and that means that he loves his father. Happy tells his mother, again, that he is going to be married and will run the company. However, all Willy can think of is Biff's future success. Willy knows Biff will be magnificent. Willy hears Ben's voice in his head, telling him that the jungle is dark but full of diamonds. Willy translates this to mean that he can still get $20,000 and give it to Biff to start something grand. Willy knows Biff will do better than Bernard, better than anyone. Willy convinces Linda to go to bed and walks to his car. We hear a loud screech of a motor and an enormous crash.

The lights come up on the house while Charley and Bernard are dressed in mourning clothes. Happy, Biff, and Linda walk through the line of the house, toward the audience, and lay flowers on the grave of a salesman, Willy Loman.

Act 2, Pages 212-220 Analysis

In this climactic scene of the play, Biff and Willy finally confront one another with their true feelings. These identical men, neither living up to his potential, have spent the majority of their lives living in spite of the other. Still, neither can admit this until now. When Willy curses his eldest son a final time, he elicits tears from him. Biff has given away all spite, anger, and heartache with his father, after seeing him so distraught and lonely. It is the mutual solitary life, the understanding between two lost souls that ultimately joins these two men. Biff sees Willy - himself in thirty years - and realizes that he will not become like that. Biff will live his life for himself, he will discover himself. Biff no longer holds grudges against his father, because he realizes his father has paid for any and all vices he has had in the past. With Biff's tears comes the emotion that lies beneath. Biff is the one who cares about Willy for Willy, not necessarily for what he can do for him. Willy finally sees that quality in him, and it is just that realization which propels him to make the final decision of his life. While Biff has learned an ultimate lesson from his father, Willy has found peace. Willy may not have learned the most valuable lesson, nor has he changed, but still, Willy Loman may have found peace in the only world he understands. If he can die thinking good thoughts for his son, then he is dying happy.

The reincarnation of Ben as the final image in Willy's life is an embodiment of the American Dream. Ben lived that dream, in Willy's eyes. Ben became wealthy at a young age and traveled the world. Yet, he remains a vibrant, healthy man throughout the play. While Willy has aged, his older brother Ben remains the same as he looked when he left home so many decades earlier. This final, imagined conversation with Ben propels Willy to crash his car. Ben does not try to talk him out of such a crazy decision. Ben, who we come to realize is Willy's ego, does question the decision, but ultimately backs him. When he does so, he leaves the world with the hope of Ben's American Dream for his son.

It is interesting to note how few lines Happy is given in this final scene. Happy repeatedly tells his parents he is getting married, yet nobody acknowledges this statement. Happy is the son who is trying to emulate his father, yet is truly nothing like him. Willy can see this difference and gives him no credit. This lack of interest could represent the growing change in American families.

Another point of interest in analyzing Willy's death is that he drives into it. Willy is on an forward motion toward something else. Perhaps Willy did not believe his life was ending. If he wanted to stop it altogether, he would and could have chosen another method of suicide. Furthermore, the vehicle of a car is a symbol of modern technology and the changing face of America. Willy can use the tools and pieces of the 'American Dream' to end it for himself.

Requiem

Requiem Summary

Linda, Biff, Happy, Charley, and Bernard stare at Willy's grave in shock and mourning. Linda cannot understand why nobody showed up to the funeral. While Biff persistently claims that Willy never knew who he was, Happy interrupts by saying that he knew exactly who he was and that he, Happy, will complete the dream for him. Happy even tries to recruit Biff, once again, to the business world. However, this time Biff says no. Biff now knows who he is, and he knows he does not belong in the business world. Everyone leaves the grave, except for Linda, who wants to say her final goodbyes to her husband.

Requiem Analysis

In this final scene of the play, the Loman family must accept Willy's passing. However, despite Willy's so-called sacrifice, nobody except for Biff has learned anything new. While Charley convinces everyone that Willy was a salesman at heart, that he always had a dream, and lived up to it, Happy insists on completing that dream for him. Happy even tries to urge his brother to join in Willy's dream. However, Biff is the only person who realizes that Willy's dream was not even Willy's dream. In order for any man to find true happiness, he must discover his own passion. Biff understands that being a salesman is not his passion. While he may not know what fits him, he knows what does not fit him. Perhaps it took such a grave loss in order for Biff to be able to separate himself from his father's goals and live his own life.

Linda, the faithful, loving wife, cannot come to terms with goodbye. Linda has lived most of her life alone, because Willy was always on the road. Linda has trouble understanding that her partner in life is permanently gone. Linda cannot understand that, after living for so long just to own a few things, Willy now owns a house, but is lying underground. More than anything, Linda feels lost now, like Willy did his entire life. What Willy did not realize in his life, perhaps Linda will realize in his death.

Miller, Arthur. *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays*. Viking Press, New York: 1957.

Characters

Bernard

Bernard is the son of Charley, Willy's only friend and supporter outside of his family. As a young man he is quiet, dependable, pensive, and a top student; as an adult Bernard remains sensitive and genuine, and displays the intelligence, self-confidence, and perception that have helped him become a successful attorney. Bernard contrastssharply with Biff and Happy, in a sense serving as the embodiment of the success to which they always aspired but never achieved. When Charley informs Willy that Bernard is going to argue a case before the Supreme Court, Willy communicates that he is impressed, and says "The Supreme Court! And he didn't even mention it." In a line which sharply indicts Willy's habit of chattering endlessly about his own false accomplishments and his dreams, Charley replies, "He don't have to he's gonna do it."

Charley

Charley is Willy's only friend, and eventually he becomes Willy's sole financial support, "loaning" him fifty dollars a week knowing all the while that his money will never be repaid. Charley is a successful businessman, and is exasperated by Willy's lack of respect for him and his ideals, and by Willy's inability to separate reality and fantasy. Charley tries in vain to dispel Willy's delusions and attempts to save him from financial rum by offering him a job, and when Willy refuses his offer, Charley exclaims, "You been jealous of me all your life, you damned fool!" When Willy conveys to Charley his disbelief that Howard Wagner has failed to display the gratitude that Willy feels he deserves and has fired him, Charley asks: "Willy, when're you gonna realize that them things don't mean anything? You named him Howard, but you can't sell that. The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that." Despite his continued arguments with Willy, and despite the feelings of frustration and exasperation Willy arouses in him, Charley cares about his friend and offers him compassion and support.

Mm Forsythe

Miss Forsythe is approached by Happy in the restaurant, and calls her friend, Letta, to come and be a companion for Biff. She is an attractive and sexy woman who conveys the impression that she is highly available

Miss Francis

See The Woman

Jenny

Jenny is Howard's secretary, and is presented as an efficient, business-like, capable woman who is annoyed by Willy and considers him a nuisance. Her attitude toward Willy stands in sharp contrast to Linda's admiration of Willy.

Letta

Letta is a friend of Miss Forsythe, and comes to the restaurant to meet Biff after Miss Forsythe calls her, She is a sugary, bubbly young woman, who gives the impression that she has limited intelligence and is extremely available.

Ben Loman

Ben is Willy's older brother, and is, to Willy, the embodiment of true success. He appears in scenes which take place in Willy's imagination, and appears larger-than-life, all-knowing, powerful, a great adventurer; he is everything Willy dreams of becoming. In the play, Ben's primary role is to serve as a sounding board for Willy; Willy conducts imaginary conversations with his brother, who owns timberlands in Alaska and diamond mines in Africa, and it is through these conversations that the audience gains a better understanding of what drives Willy and of his inner thoughts. Ben also represents for Willy the kind of life he dreams of for his sons. Ben remarks: "William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!" Willy, excited by his brother's stories of adventure, responds enthusiastically: "That's just the spirit [want to imbue them [Biff and Happy] with! To walk into a jungle!"

Biff Loman

Biff is Willy's eldest son; once a high school football idol, he has grown into a man who, in his mid-thirties, displays only a small measure of his youthful confidence, enthusiasm, and affection, and more often appears as a troubled, frustrated, deeply sad man with a tendency to escape into dreams at times. Biff was betrayed by his father at a very young age when he discovered that Willy was having an affair. Biff, who steals things as an adult, blames his father for not giving him the proper guidance when he was caught stealing as a child. Biff also blames his father for instilling in him the belief that success lies in the accumulation of wealth; it is because his father programmed him to think this way, Biff believes, that he is so unhappy and cannot enjoy doing the outdoor labor for which he has a talent. Biff is tortured by his disillusionment with Willy, by his failure to live up to his own standards, by his failure to achieve the greatness that Willy dreamed he would, by his desire to get back at his father for what he believes has been done to him, and by his great love for Willy, which creates in him tremendous confusion and emotional turmoil. Biff ultimately decides to try to show Willy that his dreams and fantasies are false, telling his father: "You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! ... I'm nothing, Pop. Can't

you understand that? There's no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all." In the Requiem scene at the play's end, Biff illustrates that he has truly come to an understanding of his father's failure to achieve success, observing that Willy "never knew who he was" and that he "had the wrong dreams."

Happy Loman

Happy is the younger of Willy's two sons; he has grown up in the shadow of his older brother, and consequently has a hard edge to his personality that the other characters lack. He is a handsome man in his early thirties, who while seemingly even-tempered and amiable, retains an air of hostility that is most apparent in his distinct sexual energy and his womanizing ways. He appears more content than Biff, but at the play's end he is drawn into his father's illusion; he pledges to take up his father's cause and succeed where his father had failed. While after Willy's death Biff recognizes his father's failings, Happy wildly proclaims: "I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him."

Linda Loman

Linda is Willy's long-suffering, devoted wife, who desperately loves her husband and resents the fact that his sons don't love and appreciate their father as much as she believes they should. She speaks carefully, and has a quiet manner that belies her inner strength. She treads cautiously around Willy, taking care not to raise his temper, and continuously presents a cheerful, hopeful appearance. Linda has tremendous patience, and serves as the family peacemaker. Linda sees through her husbands and sons; she knows that they are deluded, but she continues to bolster their fantasies, believing that she is doing the best, most loving thing for her family. In her essay in the 1991 compilation *Willy Loman,* critic Kay Stanton asserted, "the Loman men are all less than they hold themselves to be, but Linda is more than she is credited to be.... She is the foundation that has allowed the Loman men to build themselves up, if only in dreams, and she is the support that enables them to continue despite their failures.... She represents human dignity and values: cooperative, moral, human behavior as opposed to lawless assertion of self over all others through assumed superiority."

Willy Loman

Willy is the salesman around whom the play is constructed. He is sixty-three years old, desperate to achieve even a small measure of the success to which he has always aspired, and cannot face the reality that he has misdirected his energies and talents chasing a dream that never had any chance of materializing. Willy's flashbacks and fantasies comprise a large part of the play and inform the audience about his past, the histories of the other characters, how he has become what he is in the present, and perhaps most importantly, his ideal self In the scenes which take place in present time,

Willy is highly emotional, unstable, uncertain at times, highly contradictory, and seems worn down by life. In his flashbacks and fantasies, however, Willy is a more loving father and husband, a more capable provider; he is cheerful, light-hearted, and self-assured. Ultimately, because he cannot live with the realization that he has failed to live up to his unrealistic expectations, and because he believes he will finally be able, with his death, to leave his family with a sizable amount of cash, namely a $20,000 life insurance payoff, Willy commits suicide. In an imagined conversation, Willy responds to his brother Ben's admonition that suicide is a "cowardly thing," by asking: "Why? Does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up a zero? ... And twenty thousand that is something one can feel with the hand, it is there." Many critics have asserted that Willy is a modern tragic hero, and that his tragedy lies in his belief in an illusory American Dream. In a 1979 interview with Harry Rafsky on the Canadian Broadcasting Company, Miller asserted that after seeing *Death of a Salesman,* the audience members "were weeping because the central matrix of this play is ... what most people are up against in their lives.... they were seeing themselves, not because Willy is a salesman, but the situation in which he stood and to which he was reacting, and which was reacting against him, was probably the central situation of contemporary civilization. It is that we are struggling with forces that are far greater than we can handle, with no equipment to make anything mean anything."

Stanley

Stanley is the waiter who serves Willy, Biff, and Happy during their meeting at the restaurant. He is highly agreeable, helpful, and enthusiastic

Howard Wagner

Howard is Willy's boss, who rejects Willy and ultimately fires him. Howard, like Charley, is a successful businessman. However, Howard displays none of Charley's kindness or compassion, offering Willy such hollow trade cliches as "It's a business, kid, and everybody's gotta pull his own weight."

The Woman

The Woman is the person with whom Willy has an affair. She appears in flashbacks as a good-natured, fun-loving woman in her forties who appears proper on the surface but displays evidence of a boisterous spirit. Willy gives her an extravagant gift of nylon stockings, which were a rare luxury for women during World War II, and it is the memory of this gift that causes Willy's pangs of guilt and anger when he sees Linda mending her stockings. Her laughter during the flashback scenes serves as a piercing, shrill, painful reminder to Willy and Biff of Willy's infidelity. Willy's affair with the Woman is further evidence of his shortcomings, and illustrates how he has failed to live up to his own image of himself as the ideal husband and father.

Themes

Appearances vs. Reality

What appears to be true to the characters in *Death of a Salesman* is often a far cry from reality, and this is communicated numerous times throughout the play. Willy's frequent flashbacks to past events many of which are completely or partly fabricated demonstrate that he is having difficulty distinguishing between what is real and what he wishes were real. Willy's imagined conversations with his dead brother, Ben, also demonstrate his fragile grip on reality. Willy's mind is full of delusions about his own abilities and accomplishments and the abilities and accomplishments of his sons. Biff and Happy share their father's tendencyto concoct grand schemes for themselves and think of themselves as superior to others without any real evidence that the schemes will work or that they are, indeed, superior. At the end of the play, each son responds differently to the reality of his father's suicide. Biff, it appears, comes to the sad realization thathis father "didn'tknow who he was," and how his father's unrealistic dreams led him away from the satisfaction he could have found if he had pursued a goal that reflected his talents, such as a career in carpentry. Happy, who had previously given the appearance of being more well-grounded in reality but still hoping for something better, completely falls into his father's thought pattern, pledging to achieve the dream that his father failed to achieve.

Individual vs. Society

Willy is constantly striving to find the gimmick or the key to winning over clients and becoming a true success. He worries incessantly about how he is perceived by others, and blames his lack of success on a variety of superficial personal traits, such as his weight, the fact that people "don't take him seriously," his clothing, and the fact that he tends to talk too much. While all of these concerns are shared by many people, for Willy they represent the reasons for his failure. In reality, Willy's failure is a result of his inability to see himself and the world as they really are: Willy's talents lie in areas other than sales, and the business world no longer rewards smooth-talking, charismatic salesmen, but instead looks for specially trained, knowledgeable men to promote its products. Willy fails because he cannot stop living in a reality that does not exist, and which dooms him to fail in the reality that does exist.

Individual vs. Self

Willy's perception of what he should be is continually at odds with what he is: A mediocre salesman with delusions of grandeur and an outdated perception of the world around him. He truly believes that he can achieve greatness, and cannot understand why he has not realized what he feels is his true destiny. He completely denies his actual talent for carpentry, believing that pursuing such a career would be beneath him

somehow. Willy struggles with the image of his ideal self his entire life, until he can no longer deny the fact that he will never become this ideal self and he commits suicide.

American Dream

Willy's quest to realize what he views as the American Dream the "self-made man" who rises out of poverty and becomes rich and famous is a dominant theme in *Death of a Salesman.* Willy believed wholeheartedly in this treasured national myth, which began during colonial times, and which was further developed during the 19th century by such industry tycoons as Andrew Carnegie and J.D. Rockefeller. In the 1920s, the American Dream was represented by Henry Ford, whose great success in the automotive industry was achieved when he developed the assembly line.

Also in the 1920s, a career in sales was being hailed as a way for a man without training or education to achieve financial success. Pamphlets, lectures, and correspondence courses promoting strategies for improving the skills of salesmen were widely distributed during this decade. These strategies focused on teaching salesmen how to effectively manipulate their clients. Willy would have begun his career as a salesman in the 1920s, when belief that salesmen adept at manipulation and "people skills" were destined for wealth and fame was widespread. However, by the late 1940s, when *Death of a Salesman* takes place, the job market and prevailing belief has changed, and salesmen (and other workers) required specialized knowledge and training in order to succeed. Because he lacks such knowledge or training, Willy is destined to fail in a business world that demands the ability to play a specific part in a large establishment. Willy, of course, does not realize how things have changed, and he continues to try to strike it rich using his powers of persuasion. Willy's personal representations of the American Dream are his brother Ben and the salesman Dave Singleman, and he views the success of these two men as proof that he can indeed attain the success he is so desperate to achieve According to Willy's version of the American Dream, he is a complete failure.

Style

Willy reminisces about past events and imagines situations, and the audience is able to see his thoughts played out on the stage. The reminiscences and imaginary sequences allow the audience to understand the characters' inner thoughts and provide insight into their behavior during the present-day scenes. For example, the audience learns, during one such reminiscence, that Biff has been tormented for since he was a young child by the discovery that his father had an extramarital affair. This insight helps the audience to better understand both Willy and Biff, explains some of Biff's anger toward his father, and indicates why he is so disillusioned. The instructions for setting in the play provide insight into how Arthur Miller wanted the play to be perceived by the audience. Miller includes instructions that the only substantial part of the set
should be the Loman home, and all other locales should be merely hinted at by using changes in lighting or setting up a few chairs or a table. In this way, the audience can clearly see which events on stage are taking place in reality, and which are taking place inside of Willy's mind. Miller originally titled the play The Inside of His Head, which illustrates that he intended to show the audience what happens in a man's mind when his dreams are never realized, and when he lives in a world based on illusion. Miller's method of flashing back and forth between the past and the present, and between the imaginary and the realistic, allows the audience to witness how a lifetime of disappointment, delusion, and failure have led to the current situation, and shows facets of each character that would not have been revealed if only the present-day occurrences had been portrayed. Because of the way the play is constructed, the audience can see what the characters have become and what experiences, thoughts, and emotions led them to their present state. Death of a Salesman is a drama set in 1949, in New York City and Boston. The action of the play takes place largely inside the Loman home in Brooklyn, but other places in New York and Boston are used as well, including hotel rooms, Willy's office, a restaurant, and Willy's gravesite. The play is grounded in realism, which means that it depicts realistically what happens in the lives of its characters, but it also contains elements of expressionism, specifically when it depicts imaginary sequences and portrays for the audience the inner workings of the characters' minds and their emotions. The play is largely a representation of what takes place in the mind of Willy Loman during the last two days of his life.

Historical Context

When World War II ended in 1945, the United States embarked upon an unprecedented period of economic prosperity, driven by the increase in industrial production markets brought about by the war. Unlike the Great Depression and the war years, Americans had a surplus of goods and services from which to choose, and the money with which to purchase them. Nonfarming businesses grew by one-third, and housing construction became a booming industry. However, the economic situation was not improved for the poorest Americans during this time. The economic boom brought high inflation, which kept poorer citizens from saving any money, and small farmers faced hard times because of government policies that benefitted larger, corporate farmers. The lowest-paid workers in the country were the migrant farm workers, with sales clerks and unskilled laborers (such as gas station attendants) not far above them. Happy, a sales clerk, and Biff, a farm worker, represent this segment of the American workforce in *Death of a Salesman*, and each of them struggles to retain his dignity in the face of his lowly position in a largely affluent society.

Because Americans felt so secure in their newfound prosperity, they began using credit to purchase the'products and services they desired. Although the prices of these goods and services were driven higher and higher by increased demand, Americans continued to purchase them, using credit to buy what they could not otherwise afford. For the first time in history, automobiles were more often purchased on credit than with cash, and the use of long-term credit, such as home mortgages, also rose dramatically. Willy Loman suffers from the effects of relying too much on credit, struggling to keep up his payments while trying to provide the necessities for his family.

The United States emerged from World War II as a "superpower" among the world's nations, but this role led to insecurities on the part of the American government and the American people, who suddenly bore the responsibility of retaining their position in the world, "keeping the world safe for democracy" by protecting it from the influences of the other world "superpower," the communist Soviet Union. Because of the national pride and feeling of superiority instilled in them by thek victories during the war, Americans felt a deep-seated need to prove that capitalism was better than communism during the period that followed World War II, which is known as the Cold War era. Americans felt obligated to achieve financial success, both as a way of defeating the Soviets and as a way to show their gratitude for the freedom they were privileged to possess by virtue of living in a democratic society. Willy's preoccupation with his financial status and his position in society reflect this Cold War attitude.

The Great Depression and World War H led to major changes in the nature of the American government. Beginning with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal (an economic program that began in response to the Great Depression), government became larger and more influential in the daily lives of American citizens. Furthermore, the growth of large corporations and the spread of such mass communication media as radio and television made Americans feel more like a large, connected society. With this new-found sense of belonging came a new-found desire to conform to the accepted

norms and values of the majority. Instead of being a nation of rugged individualists, the United States became a nation of people who wished desperately for acceptance by their peers, which meant that they needed to appear successful in the eyes of society. Willy displays this wish for acceptance in his preoccupation with being "well liked," which he views as the ultimate measure of success. In *The Lonely Crowd*, a book published in 1950, author David Reisman argues that prior to the Cold War era, Americans were motivated by strict morals and rules of conduct, but following World War n they became more motivated by others' perceptions of them, and altered their behavior according to acceptable societal standards. Reisman classified the pre-Cold War behavior pattern as "inner-directed," and the postwar pattern as "other-directed," maintaining that "other-directed" people, like Willy Loman, have no established sense of identity because they look to other people to determine their self-image. This idea is reflected in Biffs comment at the end of the play when he says that Willy "didn't know who he was."

Critical Overview

Since its debut performance in 1949, Death of a Salesman has brought audiences to tears. Critical debate rages, however, over Willy Loman's stature as a tragic hero. In the classic definition of tragedy, the hero is a person of high stature brought low by an insurmountable flaw in his or her character, known as the "tragic flaw." Some scholars argue that Willy is pathetic rather than tragic, because he is not a great man who loses his stature because of something he does, but a common man who is largely a victim of a society in which the odds are stacked against him. For instance, Eric Mottram contended *in Arthur Miller: A Collection of Critical Essays* that Willy represents "what happens to an ordinarily uneducated man in an unjust competitive society in which men are victimized by false gods. His fate is not tragic. There is nothing of the superhuman or providential or destined in this play. Everyone fails in a waste of misplaced energy." Others have suggested that Willy cannot be considered a tragic hero because he never confronts his faulty values. *In his Arthur Miller: Portrait of a Playwright,* Benjamin Nelson asserted. "Although the play's power lies in its stunning ability to elicit ... sympathy, the intensely idiosyncratic portrait of Willy Loman is a constant reminder that the meaning of his drama depends upon our clear awareness of the limitations of Willy's life and vision." Conversely, *College English* contributor Paul Siegel compared Willy Loman to William Shakespeare's great tragic hero King Lear, asserting: "The cause of the catastrophe of the king of ancient Briton and that of the salesman of today is the same: each does not know himself and the world in which he is living " In his introduction to *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays,* Miller commented on his character's inherent tragedy: "Willy Loman has broken a law without whose protection life is insupportable if not incomprehensible to him and to many others, it is the law which says that a failure in society and in business has no right to live.... The law of success is not administered by statute or church, but it is very nearly as powerful in its grip upon men."

Because Willy struggles for money and recognition and then fails to gain either, some critics see *Death of a Salesman* as a condemnation of the American system. In *Newsweek,* Jack Kroll suggested that the drama is "a great public ritualizing of some of our deepest and deadliest contradictions. It is a play about the misplaced energy of the basic human material in American society." However, many critics have offered differing opinions on the message Miller sends in the play. For example, Stephen A. Lawrence in an essay *in College English,* suggested: "Perhaps what is wrong with the society is not that it has implanted the wrong values in [Willy],. . but that it has lost touch with values which should never be relegated only to the personal sphere or the family unit-----Willy's problem is that he is human enough to think that the same things that matter in the family—especially his love for his son—matter everywhere, including the world of social success." *Catholic World* contributor Sieghle Kennedy offered another view, maintaining: "With Charley living next door, economics can hardly be termed the nemesis of Willy's life. His failure as a man is the cause, rather than the effect, of his economic failure." Willy's decline is made more pathetic by the suggestion that he might have become an expert carpenter if he had not pursued the fantasy of wealth and popularity.

On one point most critics agree: *Death of a Salesman* is one of the significant accomplishments of modern American literature. In The Forties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Lois Gordon called it "the major American drama of the 1940s" and added that it "remains unequalled in its brilliant and original fusion of realistic and poetic techniques, its richness of visual and verbal texture, and its wide range of emotional impact." New York Times columnist Frank Rich concluded that *Death of a Salesman* "is one of a handful of American plays that appear destined to outlast the 20th century. In Willy Loman, that insignificant salesman who has lost the magic touch along with the shine on his shoes after a lifetime on the road, Miller created an enduring image of our unslaked thirst for popularity and success." According to John Gassner in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Miller "has accomplished the feat of writing a drama critical of wrong values that virtually every member of our middle-class can accept as valid. It stabs itself into a playgoer's consciousness to a degree that may well lead him to review his own life and the lives of those who are closest to him. The conviction of the writing is, besides, strengthened by a quality of compassion rarely experienced in our theatre."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

An educator and author, Domina discusses the themes of failure and delusion that pervade Miller's landmark work.

Arthur Miller's classic American play, *Death of a Salesman*, exposes the relationship between gender relationships and dysfunctional family behaviors. In this play, the themes of guilt and innocence and of truth and falsehood are considered through the lens of family roles. Willy Loman, the salesman whose death culminates the play, is an anti-hero, indeed the most classic of anti-heroes. According to an article on the play in *Modern World Drama*, Willy is "a rounded and psychologically motivated individual" who "embodies the stupidity, immorality, self-delusion, and failure of middle-class values." While his self-delusion is his primary flaw, this characteristic is not necessarily tragic since Willy neither fights against it nor attempts to turn it toward good. Dennis Welland in his book, *Miller: The Playwright* summarized this view, critiquing critics who believe that "Willy Loman's sense of personal dignity was too precariously based to give him heroic stature." Although he is ordinary and his life in some ways tragic, he also chooses his fate. The article *in Modem World Drama* confirmed that "considerable disputation has centered on the play's qualification as genuine tragedy, as opposed to social drama."

Although Willy is dead by the end of the play, that is, not all deaths are truly tragic. The other characters respond to Willy's situation in the ways they do because they have different levels of access to knowledge about Willy and hence about themselves. An analysis of the relationships among these characters' insights and their responses will reveal the nature of their flawed family structure.

According to conventional standards, Biff, the older son of Willy and Linda, is the clearest failure. Despite the fact that he had been viewed as a gifted athlete and a boy with a potentially great future, Biff has been unable as an adult to succeed or even persevere at any professional challenge. Before the play opens, he had been living out west, drifting from one low-paying cowboy job to another, experiencing neither financial nor social stability. Back in New York, he is staying with his parents but seems particularly aimless, although he does gesture toward re-establishing some business contacts. Although one could speculate that the Loman family dynamics in general have influenced Biff toward ineffectually, as the play progresses readers understand that one specific biographical moment (and his willingness to keep this moment secret) provides the key to his puzzling failure.

Near the end of the play, Bernard, Willy's nephew, asks Willy about this crucial incident. Although Biff had already accepted an athletic scholarship to the University of Virginia, he failed math his last semester in high school; his best option was to make the course up during summer school. Before he makes this decision, Biff visits Willy, who is in Boston on business. According to Bernard, Biff "came back after that month and took his sneakers remember those sneakers with 'University of Virginia' printed on them? He was so proud of those, wore them every day. And he took them down in the cellar, and

burned them up in the furnace. We had a fist fight. It lasted at least half an hour. Just the two of us, punching each other down the cellar, and crying right through it. I've often thought of how strange it was that I knew he'd given up his life. What happened in Boston, Willy?" Willy responds defensively: "What are you trying to do, blame it on me?"

What had happened, of course, as Willy subsequently remembers and as he has probably remembered frequently during the intervening years, was that Biff had discovered Willy in the midst of an extramarital affair. In contrast to Linda, who frequently appears with stockings that need mending, this other woman receives gifts of expensive stockings from Willy. The existence of this woman (and perhaps others like her) is one factor contributing to the financial strain of the Loman family. Biff understands this instantly, and he also understands the depth of Willy's betrayal of Linda and the family as a whole. The trust Biff had given Willy now seems misplaced. Indeed, according to the flashbacks within the play, the young Biff and Happy had nearly idolized Willy, so this betrayal while Biff is yet an adolescent is particularly poignant. As Biff is about to make a momentous life decision, in other words, he is confronted with duplicity from the man he had looked to as a role model. Yet Biff shares this knowledge with no one; instead this secret becomes the controlling element of his own life.

When Biff does attempt to tell the truth, not about Willy's affair but about his own life, Willy and Happy both resist him. "Let's hold on to the facts tonight, Pop," Biff says, indicating that "the facts" are slippery in their hands. The outright lies members of the Loman family tell, that is, come more easily because they also exaggerate some facts and minimize others. Although many of their stones may be eventually founded in truth, that truth is so covered with their euphemistic interpretations that it is barely recognizable. The stories the family has told have become nearly indistinguishable from the real circumstances of their lives. Trying to separate reality from fantasy, Biff says, "facts about my life came back to me. Who was it, Pop? Who ever said I was a salesman with Oliver?" But Willy refuses to acknowledge the substance of the question: "Well,you were." Biff contradicts him, as determined to acknowledge the truth as Willy is to deny it: "No, Dad, I was a shipping clerk." Willy still declines to accept this fact without the gloss of embellishment: "you were practically" a salesman.

Later, the conversation among the three men reveals that similar embellishments continue to characterize their lives. "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!" Biff proclaims. When Happy protests that they "always told the truth," Biff cites a current family lie: "You big blow, are you the assistant buyer? You're one of the two assistants to the assistant, aren't you?" But Happy continues the family habit: "Well, I'm practical-ly..."

This inability to acknowledge the truth affects the family on many levels but most particularly in terms of their intimacy with one another and their intimate relationships with others. Biff hasn't dated anyone seriously, and Happy is most comfortable with prostitutes. While waiting for Willy at a restaurant, Happy assures Biff that a woman at another table is "on call" and urges her to join them, especially if she "can get a friend." Although Happy is clearly a participant in this encounter, he says, "Isn't that a shame now? A beautiful girl like that? That's why I can't get married. There's not agood woman

in a thousand." Although Happy and Biff would probably classify their mother as a "good woman," they follow their father's example in seeking out women they won't marry to gratify their egos and then in treating those women as disposable.

Linda eventually responds to her sons with scathing disrespect in part because of the way they respond to other women, but primarily because she assumes they chose to accompany prostitutes rather than to fulfill their dinner plans with their father. "You and your lousy rotten whores!" she says. "Pick up this stuff, I'm not your maid any more," she continues, and then asserts, "You're a pair of animals!" Linda, of course, doesn't realize that Willy, too, whom she accuses her sons of deserting, is guilty of infidelity. Willy's emotional stability is threatened, she believes, in part because of the way his sons respond to him. She fails to consider the possibility that Biffs instability and the immaturity of both Biff and Happy has been affected by Willy's model.

The most profound secret of the play, however, is of course Willy's apparent obsession with suicide. He has been involved in several inexplicable automobile accidents, and he has perhaps planned to asphyxiate himself by attaching a rubber tube to their gas water heater. Linda has discovered this tube and has revealed her discovery to her sons, but she forbids them from addressing the subject directly with Willy, for she believes such a confrontation will make him feel ashamed. This secret is hence ironically acknowledged by everyone except the one whose secret it is Willy. When he does finally succeed in killing himself, his act can be interpreted as a culmination of secrets, secrets which are compounded through lies because they have been created through lies. Welland suggested that Willy's suicide results from his affair "To argue that in these days of relaxed social morals one minor marital infidelity hardly constitutes grounds for suicide is, paradoxically, to add weight to the theme in the context of this play: for Willy Loman it is enough." His affair is certainly one factor in his decision, but it is a factor because he had been found out by his son, and because others are now starting to question him. So although these secrets include his affair(s) and Biffs knowledge of this aspect of his life, they also include his failure as a salesman and the subsequent failures of his sons.

Source: L M Domina, in an *essay for Drama for Students, Gale, 1997*

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Sister Bettina examines the function of the character of Ben in Death of a Salesman, arguing that Ben is an extension of Willy's own consciousness, and that "through [Ben] Miller provides for the audience a considerable amount of the tragic insight which, though never quite reaching Willy, manifests itself to them in the dramatic presentation of the workings of his mind."

In the thirteen years since Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* had its spontaneous Broadway success, critics have often cited as a deficiency in it the lack of tragic insight in its hero, Willy Loman, "He never knew who he was," says his son Biff at Willy's grave; and by a like judgment critics can substantially discount the play's tragic claims.

But Biff's choric commentary on his father, like many other very quotable remarks in the scene of Willy's "requiem," is not quite true. Willy did struggle against self-knowledge trying not to know "what" he was; but he had always a superb consciousness of his own individual strength as a "who." "I am not a dime a dozen!" he shouts in the play's crisis; "I am Willy Loman...!" And it is this very sense of his personal force and high regard for it which qualify him as a hero.

What turns this self-esteem into something tragic and self-destructive is his contrasting awareness that, in spite of his powers, he is not what he wants to be. Himself partially unaware that he actually desires simple fulfillment as a father, Willy dreams of being an important businessman, greatly admired by his two sons. He has misconstrued the ideal of fatherhood, confusing it with the ability to confer wealth and prestige. Because of this misplaced idealism and his related commitment to the economic delusion known as "the American dream" he seems not to have the stature of the traditional tragic hero.

That, as his son Biff says, Willy has "the wrong dreams" is certainly true. What criticism has to decide, in the light of the play's dramatic structure, is whether this common human defect does not increase rather than weaken his effectiveness as tragic hero.

Because playwright Miller has buttressed the basic realism *of Salesman* with strongly expression-istic elements, analysis of his play has to be made carefully. Willy's stage presence does not equal his characterization, as it would in a more conventional play. Instead of simply appearing in the events on stage, he himself or rather, his confused mind is the scene of much of the dramatic action.

Consideration of tragic insight in Willy, then, leads one to notice an expressionist device which reappears with the regularity of a motif in episodes taking place in Willy's consciousness. This is the stylized characterization of Willy' s rich brother Ben who, when closely observed, takes shape less as a person external to Willy than as a projection of his personality. Ben personifies his brother's dream of easy wealth.

Ben is the only important character not physically present during Willy's last day. He is on stage only as he exists in Willy's mind. But he is the first person whom Willy asks in

his present distress, "What's the answer?"; and in the end it is Ben's answer which Willy accepts. As one critic summarizes it:

Ben "walked into the jungle and three years later came out with a million"; Ben shot off to Alaska to "get in on the ground floor"; Ben was never afraid of new territories, new faces, no smiles. In the end, Ben's last territory Death earns Willy Loman's family $20,000 insurance money, and a chance for them finally to accomplish his dream: a dream of which they have never been capable, in which they also can only be buried' the old "million" dream [KappoPhelan, "Death of a Salesman," Commonweal XLN, 1949, p 520]

Although Ben is dead before the play begins, the force which he symbolizes draws Willy to suicide. Ben also stands out as the play's only predominantly formalized characterization. That in him Miller combines realism with expressionism in a ratio inverse to that of the rest of the play seems another indication of his distinctive symbolic function.

The audience first sees him when memories of a visit paid by him some twenty years before push themselves into Willy's consciousness. "William," he boasts, "when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!" This is the first insinuation of what may be called Ben's theme the going into a strange country and emerging with its wealth. Willy, who in this scene is a young father, triumphantly concurs: ".. .was rich! That's just the spirit I want to imbue them with! To walk into a jungle! I was right!" Ben, whom he has presented to his sons as "a great man," has confirmed his ambitions for them.

At his second appearance in Willy's memory, Ben again exults over his wealth, but this time he puts his brother on the defensive. He is now making money in Alaska and wants Willy to come into his business. Willy does find the offer attractive, and he hesitates before deciding that, after all, he is "building something" here in the States. "And that's the wonder, the wonder of this country," he goes on to exclaim, "that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked!" Ben repeats, "There's a new continent at your doorstep, William. You could walk out rich. Rich!" But Willy insists, "We'll do it here, Ben! You hear me?

We're gonna do it here." He is still calling this when Ben, for the second time, abruptly disappears into darkness.
Willy next sees his brother after he has finally admitted to himself that he is a business failure. And from this point in the play Ben functions as a symbol of Willy's dream. He no longer is a memory; instead he has become a force working in the present.

Willy has lost his job, is thoroughly defeated, and wants to talk over with his brother a "proposition" of suicide. At first seeming to dissuade Willy, making reluctant appeals to his pride, Ben gradually comes to admit that Willy's insurance indemnity is worth suicide: "And twenty thousand that is something one can feel with the hand, it is there." Willy becomes lyrical: "Oh, Ben, that's the whole beauty of it! I see it like a diamond, shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I can pick up and touch in my hand." Ben's

motif, riches waiting in darkness, is working in Willy's mind. He no longer believes he can make money in another way.

The play's crisis ensues and Willy comes to see that his son Biff loves and forgives him. More than before he yearns to give his son something, and Ben immediately reappears to recall the suicide plan. The idyllic leitmotif which accompanies Ben starts up in accents of dread. "The jungle is dark but full of diamonds, Willy.,,. One must go in to fetch a diamond out." Slowly he moves into the offstage darkness. "Ben! Ben, where do I...?" Willy pleads. "Ben, how do I...?" Finally he rushes off after him; seconds later he is dead.

Ben's one-dimensional character becomes a facet of the intimate psychological portrayal of Willy just as expressionism fuses with realism in Salesman a whole. Miller uses Ben along with the more conspicuous devices of skeletal setting, non-realistic lighting, free movement in space and time, and musical leitmotifs to provide a deeper realism than conventional dramatic form would have allowed.

Traditional drama implements audience-insight into the hero's problem by his own voluble awareness of it; tragic figures are more or less poetically articulate about their destinies, desires, and mistakes. *Death of a Salesman,* however, forces a question as to whether insight in the hero is a dramatic end in itself or only insofar as it heightens audience-consciousness. For, in spite of its hero's foolish commitment to something so hollow that he will not even admit it to himself, the play's structure permits its audience to follow in the very action on stage the inexorable working of his mind. Thus Willy emerges as more than a pathetic victim of American society. Miller employs expressionism precisely to show Willy's struggle against self-knowledge, thereby pointing up his personal responsibility for refusing to estimate himself sincerely.

What Miller believes to be the basic impetus of any tragic hero the supreme importance of his self-respect, even when he must lie to himself to preserve it is, structurally and otherwise, the main concern of his play. Salesman studies the break-up of an ideal rather than of a man. But Willy's collapse will follow inevitably that of his self-image. His existence has come to depend upon belief in his ideal. Symbolically speaking, he has become his delusion.

Functioning in Willy's consciousness as a personification of this dream, Ben is a most important "minor" character, a projection of his brother's personality rather than an individual human force. Through him Miller provides for the audience a considerable, amount of the tragic insight which, though never quite reaching Willy, manifests itself to them in the dramatic presentation of the workings of his mind.

In one way Willy's commitment to his dream typifies a necessary breaking of the laws of reality by all men: their construction of the tenuous ideals of themselves which truth by its very nature has to destroy. Willy, who will give up his life rather than his chosen image of himself, represents the fool in each of us. By that very fact, he must go the way of the tragic hero.

Source: *Sister M Bettina, "Willy Loman's Brother Ben: Tragic Insight m Death of a Salesman" in Modern Drama, Vol. 4, no, 4, February, 1962, pp. 409-12.*

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt from his review of Death of a Salesman, which originally appeared in the New York Times on February 11,1949, Atkinson declares that the play, which he calls "a superb drama," "has the flow and spontaneity of a suburban epic that may not be intended as poetry but becomes poetry in spite of itself because Mr. Miller has drawn it out of so many intangible sources."

As drama critic for the New York Times from 1925 to 1960, Atkinson was one of the most influential reviewers in America.

Arthur Miller has written a superb drama. From every point of view *Death of a Salesman*, which was acted at the Morosco last evening, is rich and memorable drama. It is so simple in style and so inevitable in theme that it scarcely seems like a thing that has been written and acted. For Mr. Miller has looked with compassion into the hearts of some ordinary Americans and quietly transferred their hope and anguish to the theatre. Under Elia Kazan's masterly direction, Lee J. Cobb gives a heroic performance, and every member of the cast plays like a person inspired.

Two seasons ago Mr. Miller's All My Sons looked like the work of an honest and able playwright. In comparison with the new drama, that seems like a contrived play now. For *Death of a Salesman* has the flow and spontaneity of a suburban epic that may not be intended as poetry but becomes poetry in spite of itself because Mr. Miller has drawn it out of so many intangible sources.

It is the story of an aging salesman who has reached the end of his usefulness on the road. There has always been something unsubstantial about his work. But suddenly the unsubstantial aspects of it overwhelm him completely. When he was young, he looked dashing; he enjoyed the comradeship of other people the humor, the kidding, the business.

In his early sixties he knows his business as well as he ever did. But the unsubstantial things have become decisive; the spring has gone from his step, the smile from his face and the heartiness from his personality. He is through. The phantom of his life has caught up with him. As literally as Mr. Miller can say it, dust returns to dust. Suddenly there is nothing.

This is only a little of what Mr. Miller is saying. For he conveys this elusive tragedy in terms of simple things the loyalty and understanding of his wife, the careless selfishness of his two sons, the sympathetic devotion of a neighbor, the coldness of his former boss' son the bills, the car, the tinkering around the house. And most of all: the illusions by which he has lived opportunities missed, wrong formulas for success, fatal misconceptions about his place in the scheme of things.

Writing like a man who understands people, Mr. Miller has no moral precepts to offer and no solutions of the salesman's problems He is full of pity, but he brings no piety to it.

Chronicler of one frowsy corner of the American scene, he evokes a wraithlike tragedy out of it that spins through the many scenes of his play and gradually envelops the audience....

Source: *Brooks Atkinson, in a review of Death of a Salesman (1949) in On Stage: Selected Theater Reviews from The New York Times, 1920-1970, edited by Bernard Beckerman and Howard Siegman, Arno Press, 1973, pp. 298-99.*

Adaptations

Death of a Salesman was adapted as a film in 1952. This version was produced by Stanley Kramer and directed by Laslo Benedek. It starred Frednc March as Willy, Mildred Dunnock as Linda, Kevin McCarthy as Biff, and Cameron Mitchell as Happy.

A made-for-television version was filmed in 1966. Lee J. Cobb plays Willy; David Susskind was the producer.

A made-for-television version was also filmed in 1986. It stars Dustin Hoffman as Willy and John Malkovich as Biff. It is available through Video Learning Library, Facets Multimedia, and Warner Home Video.

A documentary, *Private Conversations on the Set of Death of a Salesman,* was also produced based on the 1986 version with Hoffman. Arthur Miller is featured as well as the actors. It is available from Karl-Lonmar Home Video.

A sound recording of the play was also produced by Decca in 1950.

Another sound recording is available from Caedmon, which was produced from the 1966 television version with Lee J. Cobb.

Topics for Further Study

Research the economic growth America experienced during the post-World War II years. What do you feel led people like Willy Loman to expectations regarding success and the "American Dream."

In what ways could the Loman family have avoided their sad situation by the play's end? Consider such elements as communication and compromise.

Compare and contrast the characters of Willy Loman and Amanda Wingfield (from Tennessee Williams's The *Glass Menagerie)*; both of these characters spend much of their time recalling their past, often incorrectly. In what ways does this selective perception of their pasts affect their current situations?

Miller's play criticizes the false promises of the American Dream. Discuss facets of late twentieth century life that lead people to similar misconceptions of attainable success. Consider the role that advertising, music, television, and films have on this issue.

Compare and Contrast

1949: Post-World War n economic growth combined with advertisements promising the American Dream created widespread optimism among Americans with hopes of attaining material wealth.

Today: An unpredictable economic climate coupled with a more media-savvy public has created an environment of cynicism and doubt regarding the validity of the American Dream.

1949: The German Federal Republic (West Germany) is established and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) is established under Soviet control, effectively splitting the country following its defeat during World War II.

Today: Germany was reunified in 1990, and has shown a steady increase in economic and cultural stature in the world.

1949: The era of smooth-talking sales, when powers of persuasion often overshadowed knowledge and ability, was ending, giving way to careers requiring training and specialized knowledge.

Today: The advent of "infomercials" and multi-media accessibility has sparked a resurgence in slick showmanship and sales techniques reliant on gimmickry.

1949: National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences presents its first Emmy Award ceremony; nine percent of American households own a television set.

Today: The annual Emmy Awards are a major television event and, like hundreds of other programs, are part of millions of Americans' everyday life; over ninety percent of American households own at least one television set.

What Do I Read Next?

King Lear, a play by William Shakespeare written in approximately 1605 is a classic tragedy which also concerns generational discord, this time between a father and his daughters. The play confronts the difficulty of interpreting events and the actions of others with accuracy.

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath, published in 1963, concerns a young woman's psychological instability and her eventual suicide.

The Crucible, a play Arthur Miller wrote in 1953, has a multi-layered plot. On the surface, it concerns the Salem witch trials, while the subtext concerns the U.S. Senate's investigation into alleged communist activity in Hollywood.

Necessary Losses by Judith Viorst, published in 1986, is a psychological study which concerns how people negotiate loss in order to reach greater maturity. She argues that people must give up some expectations as well as suffer loss through death and physical separation.

Making a Living While Making a Difference, published by Melissa Everett in 1995, is a career guide for people who desire a profession which is socially meaningful. This book is designed for people who want to be financially successful without undermining their own ethics.

Further Study

Carson, Neil. *Arthur Miller,* Grove, 1982

This book offers an overview of Miller's major works, with an emphasis on their status as theater.

Comgan, Robert W. *Arthur Miller; A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, 1969.

An excellent resource for critical information on Miller and his work *Death of a Salesman* is discussed at length.

Matlaw, Myron, editor*. Modern World Drama,* Dutton, 1972, pp 194-96.

This is primarily a plot summary with introductory comments situating the play within dramatic literary tradition.

Murray, *Edward Arthur Miller, Dramatist,* Ungar, 1967.

Provides analysis of Miller's major works with respect to structure, dialogue, and theme While not overtly negative, Murray shows distaste for Miller's use of language, calling it unpoetic.

Welland, Dennis. "Death of a Salesman" in his Miller *The Playwright,* Methuen, 1979.

This book considers much of Miller's work Welland considers the views of several other critics while coming to a positive evaluation of the play.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535