

"ATTENTION MUST BE PAID..."

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY

Throughout history, tragedies have focused on the fall of great men, such as Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* or Shakespeare's *King Lear*. As the title of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* suggest, this play is the tragedy of a common man. The playwright wanted to show how the fate of a common citizen is just as important, just as meaningful, as that of a powerful ruler. As Linda Loman says of her troubled husband, "Attention must be paid to such a person."

When Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman* in 1949, he created a new and unique structure to tell Willy's story. As the play shows us the last 24 hours of Willy's life, it drifts back and forth from the real world in which Willy lives to the interior world of his mind. We see Willy in conversation with his wife, his sons, his boss, in the present day; but we also see Willy "re-living" certain significant moments from earlier in his life, especially conversations with his brother Ben, who has recently died. These scenes are not typical flashbacks. They do not necessarily show us these events as they occurred, but rather as Willy remembers them. As the play continues, and as Willy's mental state unravels, his memories collide with his reality. We see not only how past events have shaped Willy's present life, but also how his current troubles warp his memories.

Willy is not a door-to-door or retail salesman. His job is to show his company's products to buyers at stores throughout the New England region, and to persuade them to offer those products to their customers. Willy has given many years to his company; but recently his sales have gone down, and his boss has stopped his base salary. Now Willy must depend solely on his sales commission, just like a beginner. Lately, sales have been so poor that every week, Willy is forced to ask his next-door neighbor Charley for a "loan."

Willy Loman is the central figure of the play, but Willy's life is centered on his family. Willy's wife, Linda, runs the family home and is ever at the ready to comfort and encour-

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EXPLORING...

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DEATH OF A SALESMAN

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age Willy. She knows her husband is near the end of his rope, and she is desperate to help him, but she doesn't know how. The Lomans have two grown sons. Biff, a popular and talented athlete in high school, now drifts through life aimlessly. Willy cannot understand why Biff has changed, and the two constantly argue. Happy seems to have the trappings of success, but he confesses to Biff that he feels empty inside. Tensions are high in the Loman home, and the line between love and anger can be very thin. The play gives us a clear-eyed view of not

only the careful negotiations but also the casual cruelties of family relationships.

Death of a Salesman is not only Arthur Miller's masterpiece, it is also considered by many to be the greatest American play of the twentieth century. The conflict between personal needs and business economics, the challenge of maintaining family relationships in the face of clashing individual values, the innate desire to find personal meaning in an indifferent world—these are issues we can all relate to. Almost sixty years later, *Death of a Salesman* still demands our attention.

TRAGEDY, FAMILY, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

EXPLORING THE PLAY'S THEMES

Arthur Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman* in the late 1940s. The Great Depression of the 1930s had been a time of poverty and hardship, and World War II had brought many sorrows and sacrifices. Now the United States was poised at the edge of the 1950s, a decade which promised expansion, innovation, and a rising economy. Business was booming, and America was caught up in a frenzy of growth and success.

Rather than celebrating the spirit of the time, Miller's play was a sober warning about the limits of capitalism. Willy's work as a salesman exemplified the slick surface sheen of marketing that some saw as a dangerous replacement for old-fashioned hard work and craftsmanship. The Age of Television would bring about the Age of Advertising, as an entire industry of Madison Avenue marketers would develop to sell products, not on the basis of their merits, but on the basis of their sales pitches.

Willy Loman firmly believes in this new way of thinking. In Act I, he says to his sons, "... the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want." But Willy's values have not brought him the financial success he craves. As Charley says of salesmen in Act II, "He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back—that's an earthquake." Miller's play focuses on the plight of those who fall through the cracks in the American Dream.

Willy's sons have swallowed their father's values whole, no questions asked. Happy has followed his father into the world of big business, and while deep down he feels empty, he is still eager to find himself on top. Biff has given up the business world to work as a ranch hand. He loves the freedom and the physicality of this life, but at the same time he fears he is wasting his time.

Biff's inner conflict expresses itself in his volatile relationship with Willy. Although in his youth Biff worshiped his father, something happened along the way that led Biff to

despise the man who raised him. This secret eats at Biff. The play's central story is a father's decline, but that story is complemented by his son's personal crisis. As Biff wrestles with the choice between following his father's dream or being true to his own values, he comes to a realization about himself, and he is able to forgive his father. This expression of love brings peace to their relationship, but Willy's distorted thinking leads him to make a terrible choice.

Prior to that resolution, the calming influence in the Loman family is Linda. In the America of the mid-twentieth century, a woman's place was in the home. Linda Loman represents the typical American housewife of that era, keeping the house clean and dinner on the table as she raises her sons and, most importantly, stands by her man. Nowadays we may see such a role as limiting, but Linda is proud and happy to be a supporting figure for the men of her family. But Miller is never content to show us a mere façade.

Although Linda seems to defer to Willy in all things, we see in several scenes that it is in fact she who monitors the family budget. Willy develops a number of schemes to "protect" his wife from the harsh realities of his situation, but Linda sees through them all. Her strength is all the more remarkable for being hidden behind her unconditional love, and that love makes her final survival heartbreakingly.

One of the chief elements of classical tragedy is the hero's fall from grace. As we watch a rich and mighty king succumb to the forces of fate and lose his position, his wealth, his power, and his authority, we feel pity and fear. This catharsis, or purging of emotions, is the purpose of tragedy.

But where is the tragedy in the death of a mere salesman? He loses no throne, no wealth, no power. Even the name Loman suggests Willy's low status in the world.

From what grace can he fall? The tragedy of Willy Loman may be found in the difference between his aspirations and his reality. Willy believes in the American Dream, even when

it has failed him utterly. Willy's own shortcomings contribute to his failure, but Miller suggests that Willy's all-American values themselves may be misguided. *Death of a Salesman* is a harsh critique of an economic system that indulges the wealth of a few and ignores the poverty of others.

Perhaps even more importantly, Willy's tragedy is a family tragedy. Willy's dream of business success is not about fame or power or even wealth. It is a dream of a better life for his family. Willy wants to be a good salesman so he can be a good husband to his



Playwright Arthur Miller

wife and a good father to his sons, so he can provide a decent home and a comfortable life for them. Willy's conflict with Biff wounds the very core of Willy's reason for living. The resolution of that conflict frees Willy to make the ultimate sacrifice for what he sees as the good of his family. That this belief is merely another illusion is perhaps the saddest factor in the tragedy of Willy Loman.

ARTHUR MILLER • AN AMERICAN ORIGINAL

Arthur Miller was born in 1915 and grew up in the historically Jewish neighborhood of Harlem in New York City. Arthur's father taught his children about the importance of ethical behavior and the duty of all people to become politically involved in the world.

After graduating from high school, Miller attended the University of Michigan. He felt drawn there not only because of the democratic attitudes of the student body, but also because the unconventional faculty were willing to discuss social issues and ideas such as Marxism in their classrooms. Miller believed that art should help to change society. His early plays twice won the University Theatre's prestigious Hopwood Award. Commenting on society and the human condition in powerful ways would be a personal goal for all his future works.

When Miller graduated in 1938, he got a job with the Federal Theater Project in New York for \$23 a week. In accepting this position, he refused a \$250-a-week job as a writer for Twentieth Century-Fox. He feared that Hollywood would destroy his will to write about important subjects and perhaps his ability to write at all.

In 1940 he married his college girlfriend, Mary Grace Slattery, despite their families' objections: she was Catholic and he was Jewish. In 1941 when the United States was pulled into World War II, Miller was rejected from service because of an old football injury; to compensate, he wrote patriotic radio plays.

In 1944 Miller made his Broadway debut with *The Man Who Had All the Luck*. Unfortunately the play opened and closed after four performances. His next play, *All My Sons*, illustrates the tragedy of a man who compromises his morals in order to keep intact his livelihood and his respectable place in society. The play was a hit, winning the Drama Critics Circle Award and establishing Miller as an important writer.

In 1949's *Death of a Salesman*, Miller wanted people to question our society's view of success by showing the impact on the common man of false ideas of success. The production was a huge success, winning the Critics Circle Award, the Tony Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

In 1950 Miller went to Hollywood to discuss a film about longshoremen, only to find that Hollywood was not interested in them. This was the time of the "Red Scare": certain actors, directors, producers, and writers were blacklisted from the entertainment industry because of what were perceived as "leftist" or "communist" tendencies. Miller was in that group.

In 1951, Senator Joseph McCarthy started Senate hearings, sponsored by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and the blacklist of artists and intellectuals increased. Miller wanted to speak out on this subject and found a metaphor in the Salem witch trials of 1692. *The Crucible* tells of the hysteria of the witch-hunt, the truths it rejected, and the lies it spawned. While the play was not successful when it first appeared on Broadway in 1953, today it is considered a great American classic.

Miller's next play was *A View from the Bridge*, the story of an Italian longshoreman's struggle to keep his family and pride together even as he turns over two family members to the Department of Immigration; the play was not as well received as Miller had hoped, but it has been staged many times since.

In 1955 Miller was subpoenaed by the HUAC to testify about his political affiliations and those of his friends. Refusing to disclose names of friends or colleagues who belonged to leftist organizations, Miller was charged with contempt. Ironically Miller was not a member or supporter of the Communist Party. He had been drawn to the ideals of socialism; however, he had never committed himself to the political movement. He was a believer in the rights of the individual to free thought, rights our Constitution provided and which the HUAC was denying.

Because of his time away from home and his commitment to work, Miller and his wife, Mary, had grown apart, so they divorced and went their own ways. While he was in Hollywood, Miller had taken a great interest in the actress Marilyn Monroe, and they were soon married. The marriage between the prize-winning dramatist and the sexy movie star caused quite a sensation.

Miller gave up his career in New York to be with Marilyn. His desire to help her over-

come her insecurities and addictions required that he be with her all the time. He did write a short story, "The Misfits," which he then adapted into a screenplay for Marilyn. During the filming, however, Marilyn had a breakdown, and once the ordeal of the filming was over, the couple divorced.

In 1964 Miller returned to the stage after an eight-year absence with *After the Fall*, a highly personal play based on his life with Monroe, who had committed suicide in 1962. A trip to Germany, visiting the concentration camps and attending a trial of Nazi criminals, inspired *Incident at Vichy*. Audiences had trouble grasping the theme and were confused by the unusual mix of characters.

The Price, a heart-wrenching confrontation between two brothers produced in 1968, was Miller's most successful play since *Death of a Salesman*. After that he began to write more experimental works such as *The American Clock* (1980) and *Danger: Memory!* (1987).

In 1983 *Death of a Salesman* was produced in China, the first American play to be produced under Communist rule. A highly acclaimed 1984 Broadway production of *Death of a Salesman* starring Dustin Hoffman was filmed for television, where it was seen by 25 million people. The play returned to Broadway in 2000, this time starring Brian Dennehy.

Broken Glass, focusing on society's reaction to the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s, briefly returned Miller to Broadway in 1994. *The Crucible* was finally filmed in 1996, with the playwright's participation in the process. Miller's final play, *Finishing the Picture*, based on the filming of *The Misfits*, premiered at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in 2004.

Arthur Miller died in 2005 at the age of 89. His writing was molded by his life experiences, his curiosity about the nature of human behavior, and his desire to enlighten audiences on issues of social value. These values came from his parents who were both brought up in hard-working immigrant families who were driven to succeed in America. Miller wrote plays that still challenge audiences to participate in the process of rethinking old attitudes and approaches.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

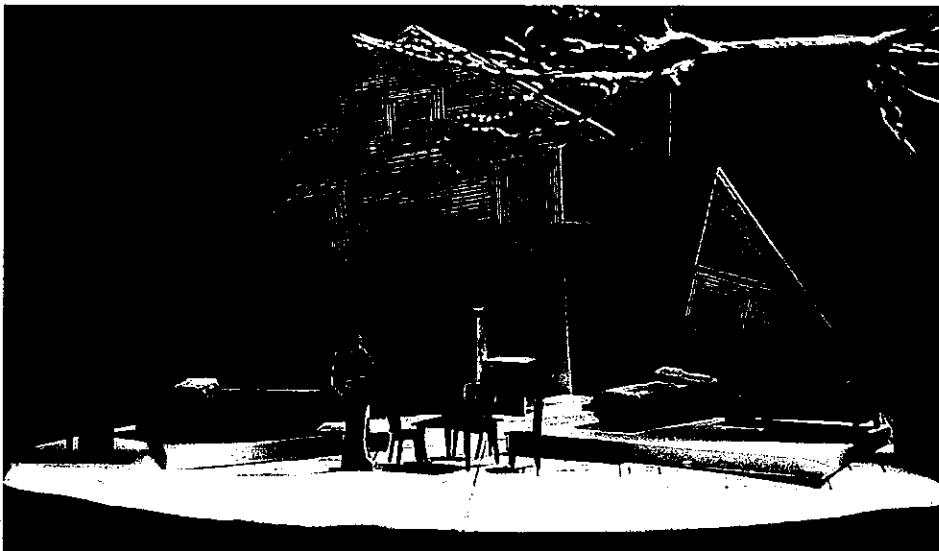
Twice in the play Willy says "The woods are burning." What does he mean?

What is the significance of Willy's interest in gardening, and his carpentry work? What do these talents suggest about alternatives for Willy?

Why does it bother Willy to see Linda mending her stockings?

How accurate are Willy's memories? What clues does the play give us about which memories are true and which memories are false or distorted?

A recurring motif in the play is Biff's petty thievery – a football, some lumber, a carton of basketballs, a fountain pen. How does Willy's response to these incidents affect Biff? How does this behavior relate to Biff's failure in his math class, and/or to his lack of job stability?



The set for *Death of a Salesman* at the IRT (scenic model, above, by designer Erhard Rom) depicts the Loman home. What does this design suggest to you about the play, about the Loman family, about Willy himself?

WRITING ACTIVITIES

Write a review of the IRT production. How do the scenery, the lighting, and the costumes help to tell the story? How effective are the actors at conveying the emotional range of the characters?

Write a letter from Biff to his parents about his life out west. Then write a similar letter from Biff to his brother, Happy. How would the letters be different?

What do Willy's memories of the boys' high school days suggest about the relative value of sports and academics? Consider where Biff, Happy, and Bernard each end up in life; what does this suggest about those two realms? Write a paper which justifies or challenges the importance of sports in America today.

What is represented by the character of Ben? What lures, both good and bad, does he offer Willy?

Throughout the play, Linda and Willy discuss household bills and repairs. Willy's constant complaint is that by the time something is paid for, it is worn out. How do these discussions relate to the play as a whole? What do they suggest about American society?

What do you think Biff will do with his life after the end of the play? What about Happy? Linda?



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UPCOMING STUDENT MATINEES

Bad Dates

March 21, 28, 29; April 3, 4, 18

The Unexpected Guest

April 17, 18, 19, 20, 24, 25, 26; May 1

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