

Death of a Salesman

Arthur Miller

Modernism in America (the 20th century)

1. **Social background: booming industry and material prosperity in contrast with a sense** of unease and restlessness underneath a decline in moral standard described as a spiritual poverty
 - ▶ the impact of warfeelings
 - ▶ of fear, loss, disorientation and
 - ▶ disillusionment
2. **Literature:**
 - ❖ Imagist Movement; modernism in poetry;
 - ❖ The Lost Generation; depression
 - ❖ The Beat Movement; American fiction after WWII; new fiction ;
 - ❖ Imagist Movement

Twentieth century: a period of the American Drama

- ▶ Pound and Flint laid down three main principles:
 - Direct treatment of poetic subjects, elimination of merely ornamental or superfluous words,
 - Rhythmical composition in the sequence of the musical phrase rather than in thesequence of a metronome.
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20th Century a period of...

- ▶ the Lost Generation
 - ▶ spiritual crisis; the second American Renaissance;
 - ▶ the expatriate movement; young people volunteered to “take part in the war to end wars”, only to find that modern warfare was not glorious or heroic;
 - ▶ the feeling of gloom and despair and cutoff;
 - ▶ the sense of doom, dislocation and fragmentation
 - ▶ the Great Depression(1929|1933)
 - ▶ novels of social protest
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Twentieth century American Drama

- ▶ Twentieth century American Drama has gained itself an indispensable position in the world literature and also established its international reputation for its achievements in the realistic theatre, expressionist theatre, metatheatre and feminist theater that are rooted in American social reality.
- ▶ It produces a band of important playwrights, two Nobel Prize laureates among them.
- ▶ American realistic theatre features a genre of modern tragedy in the strand that starts with Eugene O'Neill, continues with Tennessee Williams and consummates with Arthur Miller, whose *The*
- ▶ *Death of a Salesman* depicts the social reality of ordinary American people. The legacy is preserved in the later generations of American playwright like Marsha Norman.
- ▶ Expressionist theatre gained a firm foothold in U.S. since Eugene O'Neill thematically uses expressionistic devices in his *Hairy Ape* and other plays. Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller also use their expressionist dramaturgy effectively in *Glass Menagerie* and *The Death of a Salesman*, respectively.
- ▶ Metatheatrical arts are intensively and effectively invented by American playwright Thornton Wilder in his *Our Town*, an American classic that still holds the stage for nearly eighty years.



Awards won by Miller

- ▶ Pulitzer Prize in 1949
 - ▶ Theatre Guild National Prize, 1944
 - ▶ Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award (given for achievement in the theater), 1947 and 1953
 - ▶ Emmy Award (given for achievement in television broadcasting), 1967
 - ▶ George Foster Peabody Award, 1981
 - ▶ John F. Kennedy Award for Lifetime Achievement 1984; Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, 1999
 - ▶ National Book Foundation lifetime achievement award 2001; New York City College Alumni Association medal for artistic devotion to New York, 2001
 - ▶ Japan Art Association lifetime achievement award, 2001.
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Major Works of Miller

- ▶ *All My Sons* on Broadway in 1947.
- ▶ *Death of a Salesman* (1949) (won the Pulitzer Prize for drama, international fame, and an estimated income of two million dollars)
- ▶ *The Crucible* (1953)

Audiences were ready to accept his belief that "a poetic drama rooted in American speech and manners" was the only way to produce a tragedy out of the common man's life.




Brief summary of Death of a Salesman

- ▶ Willy believes wholeheartedly in what he considers the promise of the American Dream—that a “well liked” and “personally attractive” man in business will indubitably and deservedly acquire the material comforts offered by modern American life. Oddly, his fixation with the superficial qualities of attractiveness and likeability is at odds with a more gritty, more rewarding understanding of the American Dream that identifies hard work without complaint as the key to success. Willy’s interpretation of likeability is superficial—he childishly dislikes Bernard because he considers Bernard a nerd. Willy’s blind faith in his stunted version of the American Dream leads to his rapid psychological decline when he is unable to accept the disparity between the Dream and his own life.
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The Protagonist-Willy Loman

- ▶ **Willy Loman** - An insecure, self-deluded traveling salesman. Willy believes wholeheartedly in the American Dream of easy success and wealth, but he never achieves it. Nor do his sons fulfill his hope that they will succeed where he has failed. When Willy's illusions begin to fail under the pressing realities of his life, his mental health begins to unravel. The overwhelming tensions caused by this disparity, as well as those caused by the societal imperatives that drive Willy, form the essential conflict of *Death of a Salesman*.
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Willy's son- Biff Loman

- ▶ Willy's thirty-four-year-old elder son. Biff led a charmed life in high school as a football star with scholarship prospects, good male friends, and fawning female admirers. He failed math, however, and did not have enough credits to graduate. Since then, his kleptomania has gotten him fired from every job that he has held. Biff represents Willy's vulnerable, poetic, tragic side. He cannot ignore his instincts, which tell him to abandon Willy's paralyzing dreams and move out West to work with his hands. He ultimately fails to reconcile his life with Willy's expectations of him.
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Linda Loman- a strong woman

- ▶ Willy's loyal, loving wife, Linda suffers through Willy's grandiose dreams and self-delusions. Occasionally, she seems to be taken in by Willy's self-deluded hopes for future glory and success, but at other times, she seems far more realistic and less fragile than her husband. She has nurtured the family through all of Willy's misguided attempts at success, and her emotional strength and perseverance support Willy until his collapse.



Happy Loman- Willy's Younger son

- ▶ Willy's thirty-two-year-old younger son. Happy has lived in Biff's shadow all of his life, but he compensates by nurturing his relentless sex drive and professional ambition. Happy represents Willy's sense of self-importance, ambition, and blind servitude to societal expectations. Although he works as an assistant to an assistant buyer in a department store, Happy presents himself as supremely important. Additionally, he practices bad business ethics and sleeps with the girlfriends of his superiors.
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Minor Character of the Play-(1)

- ▶ **Charley** - Willy's next-door neighbor. Charley owns a successful business and his son, Bernard, is a wealthy, important lawyer. Willy is jealous of Charley's success. Charley gives Willy money to pay his bills, and Willy reveals at one point, choking back tears, that Charley is his only friend.
 - ▶ **Bernard** - Bernard is Charley's son and an important, successful lawyer. Although Willy used to mock Bernard for studying hard, Bernard always loved Willy's sons dearly and regarded Biff as a hero. Bernard's success is difficult for Willy to accept because his own sons' lives do not measure up.
 - ▶ **Ben** - Willy's wealthy older brother. Ben has recently died and appears only in Willy's "daydreams" Willy regards Ben as a symbol of the success that he so desperately craves for himself and his sons.
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Minor Characters-(2)

- ▶ **Howard Wagner** - Willy's boss. Howard inherited the company from his father, whom Willy regarded as "a masterful man" and "a prince." Though much younger than Willy, Howard treats Willy with condescension and eventually fires him, despite Willy's wounded assertions that he named Howard at his birth.
 - ▶ **Stanley** - A waiter at Frank's Chop House. Stanley and Happy seem to be friends, or at least acquaintances, and they banter about and ogle Miss Forsythe together before Biff and Willy arrive at the restaurant.
 - ▶ **Miss Forsythe And Letta** - Two young women whom Happy and Biff meet at Frank's Chop House. It seems likely that Miss Forsythe and Letta are prostitutes, judging from Happy's repeated comments about their moral character and the fact that they are "on call."
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Themes of the Play

- ▶ **The American Dream** is one of the underlying themes in *Death of a Salesman*. Willy's desire to be financially and socially secure stem directly from his belief in the American Dream. In the end, the play suggests that the American Dream is unattainable.
- ▶ Willy believes wholeheartedly in what he considers the promise of the American Dream—that a “well liked” and “personally attractive” man in business will indubitably and deservedly acquire the material comforts offered by modern American life.



▶ Theme of aging.

Willy Loman is a middle-aged salesman with outdated ideas about himself and the world around him. He still believes that he can succeed in life, even though it's abundantly clear that his time has passed.

▶ *Theme of escape:*

Death of a Salesman takes place at Willy Loman's home in New York City. Development has boxed the small house in, making it feel cramped and confining. Willy often thinks of his brother's adventures in distant lands. This suggests that Willy wants to escape his life.



Theme of Abandonment

- ▶ Willy's childhood emotional trauma of his abandonment by his father.
- ▶ Willy's abandonment by his elder brother Ben. Even as an adult, Willy's relationship to Ben is fraught with this fear of abandonment.
- ▶ Howard abandons Willy by firing him
- ▶ Happy and Biff abandon him in the restaurant, Willy returns home like a dejected child.
- ▶ Willy's fear of abandonment is probably also responsible for his obsession with being well liked.
- ▶ After these blows, the power of Willy's fantasies to deny unpleasant facts about his reality abandons him as well.



Symbols Used in the Play

SEEDS

- ▶ Seeds represent for Willy the opportunity to prove the worth of his labor, both as a salesman and a father. His desperate, nocturnal attempt to grow vegetables signifies his shame about barely being able to put food on the table and having nothing to leave his children when he passes. Willy feels that he has worked hard but fears that he will not be able to help his offspring any more than his own abandoning father helped him.
 - ▶ The seeds also symbolize Willy's sense of failure with Biff. Despite the American Dream's formula for success, which Willy considers infallible, Willy's efforts to cultivate and nurture Biff went awry. Realizing that his all-American football star has turned into a lazy bum, Willy takes Biff's failure and lack of ambition as a reflection of his abilities as a father.
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DIAMONDS

- ▶ To Willy, diamonds represent tangible wealth and, hence, both validation of one's labor (and life) and the ability to pass material goods on to one's offspring, two things that Willy desperately craves.
- ▶ Ben encourages Willy to enter the “jungle” finally and retrieve this elusive diamond—that is, to kill himself for insurance money in order to make his life meaningful.



Jungle: THE AMERICAN WEST, ALASKA, AND THE AFRICAN JUNGLE

- ▶ These regions represent the potential of instinct to Biff and Willy.
 - ▶ Willy's father found success in Alaska and his brother, Ben, became rich in Africa; these exotic locales, especially when compared to Willy's banal Brooklyn neighborhood, crystallize how Willy's obsession with the commercial world of the city has trapped him in an unpleasant reality. Whereas Alaska and the African jungle symbolize Willy's failure, the American West, on the other hand, symbolizes Biff's potential.
 - ▶ Biff realizes that he has been content only when working on farms, out in the open. His westward escape from both Willy's delusions and the commercial world of the eastern United States suggests a nineteenth-century pioneer mentality—Biff, unlike Willy, recognizes the importance of the individual.
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STOCKINGS

- ▶ Willy's strange obsession with the condition of Linda's stockings foreshadows his later flashback to Biff's discovery of him and The Woman in their Boston hotel room. The teenage Biff accuses Willy of giving away Linda's stockings to The Woman.
 - ▶ Stockings assume a metaphorical weight as the symbol of betrayal and sexual infidelity. New stockings are important for both Willy's pride in being financially successful and thus able to provide for his family and for Willy's ability to ease his guilt about, and suppress the memory of, his betrayal of Linda and Biff.
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THE RUBBER HOSE

- ▶ The rubber hose is a stage prop that reminds the audience of Willy's desperate attempts at suicide. He has apparently attempted to kill himself by inhaling gas, which is, ironically, the very substance essential to one of the most basic elements with which he must equip his home for his family's health and comfort—heat.
 - ▶ Literal death by inhaling gas parallels the metaphorical death that Willy feels in his struggle to afford such a basic necessity.
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Willy's home: a metaphor for his ambitions

- ▶ When purchased, the neighborhood the home was quieter than they now find it.
 - ▶ The house was surrounded by space and sunlight.
 - ▶ Willy was a young man with ambitious hopes for the future, and his house represented a space in which he could expand his dreams.
 - ▶ In the present, the house is hemmed in on all sides by apartment units.
 - ▶ Willy is a much older man, and his chances of achieving his dreams are much slimmer.
 - ▶ His home now represents the reduction of his hopes. There is less room to expand, and the sunlight does not even reach into his yard.
 - ▶ In the past, the house was the site of hopeful departure and triumphant return. Willy would set out each week to make a load of money. When he returned, his worshipful sons greeted him, and he whispered into their eager ears his hopes to open his own business.
 - ▶ Now, the house is the site of Willy's frustrated ambitions. When the play opens, Willy returns to his home a defeated man, unable to complete his latest business trip, and with his argument with Biff left unresolved.
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Role of Music

The music changes with the background

- ▶ It is pleasant with a soft flute playing when Willy thinks about the nature.
- ▶ It turns jarring when the scene of his being caught with his mistress in a hotel room by Biff is played in his mind.
- ▶ Music is gay and bright when Willy is filled with a hope that Biff will meet Oliver and everything will be all right.
- ▶ There is a 'Ben's music' to announce his presence in the imagination of Willy.
- ▶ A raucous music is heard during the meeting of the boys with their father in the restaurant.
- ▶ A boys music is heard whenever Biff and Happy appear in the mind of Willy.
- ▶ Music crashes down in a frenzy of sound when Willy races his car to commit suicide



Tendency to Mythologize

- ▶ Willy's tendency to mythologize people contributes to his deluded understanding of the world. He speaks of Dave Singleman as a legend and imagines that his death must have been beautifully noble.
 - ▶ Willy compares Biff and Happy to the mythic Greek figures Adonis and Hercules because he believes that his sons are pinnacles of “personal attractiveness” and power through “well liked”-ness; to him, they seem the very incarnation of the American Dream.
 - ▶ Willy's mythologizing proves quite nearsighted, however. Willy fails to realize the hopelessness of Singleman's lonely, on-the-job, on-the-road death.
 - ▶ Trying to achieve what he considers to be Singleman's heroic status, Willy commits himself to a pathetic death and meaningless legacy (even if Willy's life insurance policy ends up paying off, Biff wants nothing to do with Willy's ambition for him).
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A Tragedy of the Modern Man

▶ The Dangers of Modernity

- ▶ Death of a Salesman premiered in 1949 on the brink of the 1950s, a decade of unprecedented consumerism and technical advances in America. Many innovations applied specifically to the home: it was in the 50s that the TV and the washing machine became common household objects. Miller expresses an ambivalence toward modern objects and the modern mindset. Although Willy Loman is a deeply flawed character, there is something compelling about his nostalgia. Modernity accounts for the obsolescence of Willy Loman's career - traveling salesmen are rapidly becoming out-of-date. Significantly, Willy reaches for modern objects, the car and the gas heater, to assist him in his suicide attempts.
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Father Son Relationship

- ▶ Willy and Biff seems to have a love hate relationship. Willy loves his son but the guilt he carries of ruining his son's life by shaking Biff's trust in his father makes him lash at his son for his failures and thereby deepening the rift in both.
- ▶ Biff has spent his life trying to live up to - or react against - an impossible falsehood and a vision of himself that never existed. Willy's illusions about success impacted every part of his sons' lives. He seems to hate his father for all this but in the end we see his care and his pain for his father.



Willy as a Salesman

- ▶ Willy's most common line is that businessmen must be well-liked, rather than merely liked, and his business strategy is based entirely on the idea of a cult of personality.
- ▶ He believes that it is not what a person is able to accomplish, but who he knows and how he treats them that will get a man ahead in the world.
- ▶ As a salesman Willy is stuck up on the first impression on others just like a salesman does. This viewpoint is tragically undermined not only by Willy's failure, but also by that of his sons, who assumed that they could make their way in life using only their charms and good looks, rather than any more solid talents.



The dominant emotion in play: Nostalgia, tinged with regret.

- ▶ All of the Lomans feel that they have made mistakes or wrong choices.
- ▶ The technical aspects of the play feed this emotion by making seamless transitions back and forth from happier, earlier times in the play.
- ▶ Youth is more suited to the American dream, and Willy's business ideas do not seem as sad or as bankrupt when he has an entire lifetime ahead of him to prove their merit.
- ▶ Biff looks back nostalgic for a time that he was a high school athletic hero, and, more importantly, for a time when he did not know that his father was a fake and a cheat, and still idolized him.



America as a land of Opportunity

- ▶ Tied up intimately with the idea of the American dream is the concept of opportunity. America claims to be the land of opportunity, of social mobility.
- ▶ Even the poorest man should be able to move upward in life through his own hard work like Ben.
- ▶ Willy has full faith in America as a great nation of opportunities
- ▶ Miller complicates this idea of opportunity by linking it to time, and illustrating that new opportunity does not occur over and over again.
- ▶ Bernard has made the most of his opportunities; by studying hard in school, he has risen through the ranks of his profession and is now preparing to argue a case in front of the Supreme Court.
- ▶ Biff, on the other hand, while technically given the same opportunities as Bernard, has ruined his prospects by a decision that he made at the age of eighteen. He is the one who realises that he is lazy, given to stealing and therefore the success is elusive for him.

The Play as a Tragedy of a common man : a lo-man

- ▶ It is a tragic rendering of a man's shattered beliefs of a lifetime
- ▶ The common man struggles through life with his dreams and ends up with nothing in the end
- ▶ The worth of a man is recognized only by the business/ money he brings in and not by the length of the job
- ▶ The realisation in the fag end of a man's life that he is worth nothing alive
- ▶ The hopes and dreams cherished from children are quashed by their selfishness.



Quotes from the text

I'm the New England man. I'm vital in New England.

Willy Loman, Act I

- ▶ Willy's self-definition is centered around his career. He isn't the man who does sales for New England - he's the New England man. He believes himself to be vital to the company, but in reality it's the company that's vital to him and his feelings of self worth. When he discovers that he isn't vital anywhere, his worldview crumbles.



He's liked, but not well-liked.

Biff, referring to Bernard. Act I

- ▶ Willy's recipe for success is based entirely around a cult of personality. Most people are liked by their friends and acquaintances. But only great men, according to Willy, are truly well-liked - and that is what brings them success. In this quote, we see that Willy's belief in personal connections has been transferred to his sons as well, as they dismiss their friend Bernard for only garden-variety likability.



The man knew what he wanted and went out and got it! Walked into a jungle and comes out, the age of twenty-one, and he's rich!

Willy, regarding Ben. Act I

- ▶ This is a principal refrain for Ben. Although Willy is the first one to use this line, Ben repeats it many times throughout the play, making it clear that Ben is only a figment of Willy's imagination. He does not speak normal words, but is the personification of a symbol - Willy has attached all his ideas of success and worth to the abstract concept of his brother Ben, whether Ben merited it or not.



I don't say he's a great man. Willie Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall in his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person.

Linda, regarding Willy. Act I

- ▶ This is the play's direct cry to human dignity. The thesis of Linda's speech - and of Salesman as a whole - is that all men deserve respect and attention. No human being is disposable. No man should die without feeling he mattered.



You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away - a man is not a piece of fruit.

Willy, act II

- ▶ This is Willy's articulation of Linda's "attention must be paid" speech. But Willy's appeal is not for some abstraction of attention or dignity. He is arguing directly to his employer that there must be responsibility taken for employees. Willy gave his youth to the company, and now the company must take care of him.



After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive.

Willy, Act II

- ▶ Willy is bemoaning the worthlessness of all his years of work. He never earned enough to save anything, and he didn't build, and he didn't grow, and now that his job is done he has nothing left. He was a subsistence worker. It is this realization - along with the realization that he has a life insurance policy with a large premium - that drives him to suicide.



I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been.

Biff, act II

- ▶ This is Biff coming to terms with the fact that his father's illusions of success for him were truly just illusions and nothing more. Biff has spent his life trying to live up to - or react against - an impossible falsehood and a vision of himself that never existed. Willy's illusions about success impacted every part of his sons' lives.



*I've got to get some seeds. I've got to get some seeds, right away.
Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground.*

Willy, act II

- ▶ Willy realizes that his whole career has built up to nothing. He worked for 40 years and has nothing to show for it. This leads to his obsession with seeds late in the play - it is too late to grow anything for his sons, but at least he can plant some vegetables, something that will outlast him and provide some use.



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.

Happy, Requiem

- ▶ This shows that Happy has become the idealist, while Biff is leaving town to start over as a man who accepts his mediocrity. But now Happy has the urge to try, to become something. Perhaps he will succeed - but more likely, he too will fail. Willy did die in vain, and Happy cannot change that.



I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!

Willy, Act II

- ▶ Biff has just cried that he is a dime a dozen, and so is his father. Willy refuses to believe this, cannot believe this. He and his sons must be special. The Lomans must stand out from the pack. All of Willy's feelings of self-worth and identity come from doing better than the next guy, and to realize that he is no different than anyone else would be to realize that his life was false.



BEN: Father was a very great and a very wild-hearted man. We would start in Boston, and he'd toss the whole family into the wagon, and then he'd drive the team right across the country; through Ohio, and Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and all the Western states. And we'd stop in the towns and sell the flutes that he'd made on the way. Great inventor, Father. With one gadget he made more in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime.

WILLY: That's just the way I'm bringing them up, Ben—rugged, well liked, all-around.

Act I

- ▶ This conversation takes place in the imagination of Willy giving him motivation to stick to his beliefs of Success and a reassurance that his beliefs are right.
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- ▶