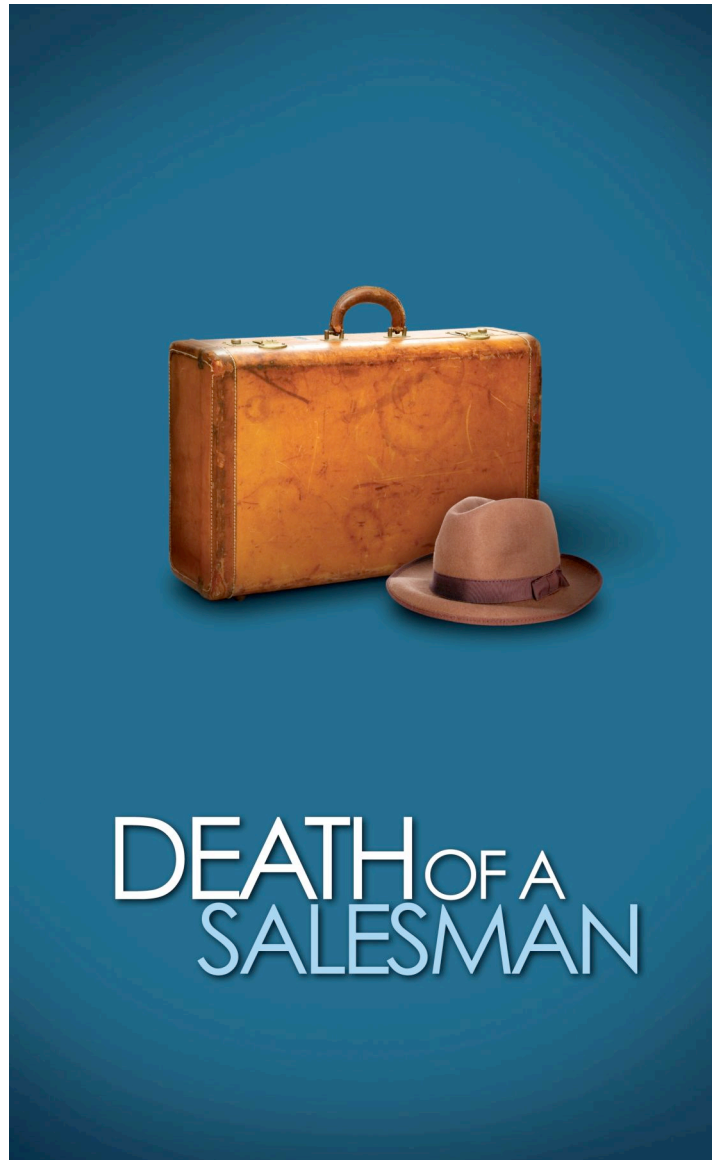


DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Study Guide for Teachers



The Weston Playhouse Theatre Company
World-Class Theatre in the Heart of Vermont

703 Main Street, Weston, VT 05161

www.westonplayhouse.org

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INTRODUCTION

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller was first performed in 1949 on Broadway and was an immediate success. This deceptively simple story of the tragic road to suicide of a traveling salesman struck an emotional chord with American audiences. It was critically acclaimed and won the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the production ran for 742 performances before it closed. Since then *Death of a Salesman* has become one of the most performed and adapted plays in American theatrical history.

While Miller tackles the social question of the effect the capitalistic American Dream myth has on an ordinary family, its enduring appeal seems to lie in the fact that Miller tapped into the hopes and fears of not only an American but a global public. Universal human questions about the nature of happiness and success, of aging and of family responsibility are tackled. Willy Loman has the quality of an everyman, whose struggle to attain his dreams of success resonates within us all.

But it is not just the themes of the play that ensured its success. Miller was so innovative with form and skilled with language that he created a style that was accessible to any audience yet produced a multi-layered piece of theatre.

These qualities have confirmed the play's place in the canon of 'classic literature' and ensured that since its premiere, there has never been a time when *Death of a Salesman* was not being performed somewhere in the world.

AROUND THE WORLD

The appeal of *Death of a Salesman* is not solely an American phenomenon; the play has found its way onto stages across the world including productions in Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, South Korea, Russia and England – among others. Miller, himself, directed the play in the People's Republic of China in 1983, confirming that the tragedy of Willy Loman affects audiences regardless of cultural background. The Chinese actor playing Happy wrote, **“One thing about the play that is very Chinese is the way Willy tries to make his sons successful. The Chinese father always wants his sons to be ‘dragons.’”**

2010 *Salesman* hits close to home

When *Death of a Salesman* premiered in February of 1949, the United States was in the midst of a recession. Some feared that another depression was at hand. Miller makes no direct references to the 1948-1949 recession in *Death of a Salesman*, just as he omits or glances over more momentous historical events such as the Great Depression and the Second World War. Nonetheless, a palpable sense of economic anxiety hangs over the play—anxiety that likely feels all too familiar to today's audiences -- the family struggling to make mortgage payments, a long-time employee laid off without warning, and an ill and aging parent afraid of becoming a financial burden to his grown children.

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR STEVE STETTLER

What are some of the factors that led to your choice of *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* for this season's school matinee production?

Death of A Salesman is perhaps the greatest American play, and as such it has been on our short list for years. It was groundbreaking and heartrending six decades ago when it debuted, and it still stands the test of time. A standard in most curricula, it speaks equally well to an adult and to a school age audience. Add to that Christopher Lloyd's interest in returning to Weston to play Willy Loman, and it became the opportunity of a lifetime.



This follows last year's selection of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Much has been written about the concept of the American Dream in both of these plays. Do you see that as being the driving theme of *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*?

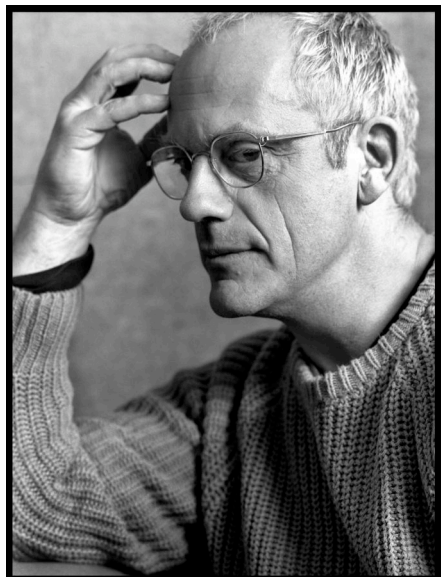
Miller was the son of an immigrant businessman who lost everything in the Depression, and *Death of A Salesman*, like many of his plays, takes a hard look at the shortcomings of the American Dream. At the same time, *Salesman* was inspired by Miller's memories of his uncle, a traveling salesman who favored pride over truth, and it has been called "the American *King Lear*" because it grippingly charts the last moments in the life of an aging patriarch. Much of the play's greatness lies in its ability to work on both a personal and a thematic level.

Could you briefly talk about what it is that you do as the Director of the play?

I hope that I serve the author's text by bringing it to unique life with a carefully chosen group of artists. I try to provide guidance to the designers and actors, working to fashion a complete and consistent world onstage. I work to lead and focus my collaborators so that we can do our best work and bring the play in a fresh and rich way to our audiences.

I know that you've been involved in theatre for a long time and first appeared as an actor on the Weston stage. How did you become a director?

I have been directing plays since my early teens when I staged a mercifully edited production of *My Fair Lady* in my back yard with neighborhood children lip synching to the LP. As I continued to direct in high school and college and eventually at Weston and beyond, I became aware that my interest in the big picture and my critical "third eye" were more suited to directing than acting.



Christopher Lloyd
Photo by Michael Romanos

I know you have selected Christopher Lloyd (of *Back to the Future*, and brother of Weston's Sam Lloyd) to play Willy Loman. Does his build and physicality impact your choices for the other roles?

First I honestly have to say that Chris chose us. I asked him what play would get him back to Weston and he suggested *Death of A Salesman*. And it is Chris' artistry (his film and television work is complemented by an extensive theatrical resume), rather than his physicality, that inspires me to find the perfect actor for each of the other roles.

Once the cast is assembled for rehearsals (in early August 2010), what's your approach to working with the actors to bring the words to the stage?

We will spend some days just reading the script around the table, working on meaning, intention, relationships, and skills such as the New York dialects. Then gradually we will put the play on its feet, encouraging the actors' own choices. I provide the framework and springboard for exploration and then I work to make the story clear to an audience, fine tuning it all the way to the opening night.

Arthur Miller begins DEATH OF A SALESMAN with stage directions regarding the playing of music on a flute and there are other very specific notations throughout the play. How do you interpret these instructions? (Is there a score for this music? Are you legally bound to follow the playwright's stage directions?)

A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon. The curtain rises.

While most all directors seek to support the intent of the playwright, many ignore stage directions and prefer to find their own solutions. The description of the flute music in the acting edition of the play stems from what was done in the original production, and it does not have to be taken literally now. We will be working with a sound designer and possibly a composer to create our own score.

As you have studied and re-read this play, is there anything that has particularly surprised you or caught your imagination?

I have been struck by the fact that, among many other things, *Death of A Salesman* could now be seen as an Alzheimer's play. It movingly depicts a man whose mind is progressively wandering back to the past, and its very form is dictated by that journey. I am intrigued by the possibility of handling the scenes from the past not as flashbacks with wigs and costumes that fully suggest another time but as voices and images in Willy's head that temporarily take him – and us – somewhere else.

What do you hope young people will take from experiencing this play?

I hope that *Death of A Salesman* will reach them on a personal level. Their teachers can convince them of its historical and literary importance, but I want our production to make them care about the characters, to allow them to get caught up in the story, to see something of themselves, their families and their own dreams and conflicts in it.

Watching a play is not like lying on a psychiatrist's couch or sitting alone in front of the television. In the theater you can sense the reaction of your fellow citizens along with your own reactions. You may learn something about yourself, but sharing it with others brings a certain relief – the feeling that you are not alone, you're part of the human race. I think that's what theater is about and why it will never be finished.

Arthur Miller, quoted in Peter Lewis, "Change of Scene for a Mellow Miller,"
The Sunday Times, November 3, 1991



Jo Mielziner's sketch of the set for the original Broadway production of *Death of a Salesman*, 1949.

THE PLAYWRIGHT – Arthur Miller (1915 – 2005)

Arthur Miller was born in Manhattan, New York City, near the lower edge of Harlem in 1915. His father was a comfortably middle-class manufacturer of women's coats, and his mother was a schoolteacher. The Miller family moved to Brooklyn in the early 1930s because the Great Depression had plunged them into great financial difficulty. These years of poverty and struggle influenced many of his plays.

After he graduated from Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn, Arthur Miller spent the next two and a half years working as a stock clerk in an automobile parts warehouse until he had saved enough money to attend college at the University of Michigan. He finished college with financial aid from the National Youth Administration and from the money he earned as night editor of the Michigan Daily newspaper. While there, Miller began to write plays, several of which were rewarded with prizes. Upon graduating from college in 1938, Miller returned home to New York where he married Mary Grace Slatter and had two children, Jane and Robert. While back home, Miller also joined the Federal Theatre Project, an arts program sponsored by the US government. However, before his first play could be produced, the project ended. A college football injury kept him from active service in the Second World War. He worked as a fitter at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and wrote radio scripts, he also wrote two novels during this time - *Situation Normal* (1944), a volume of material about army life, and *Focus* (1945) a novel about anti-Semitism.

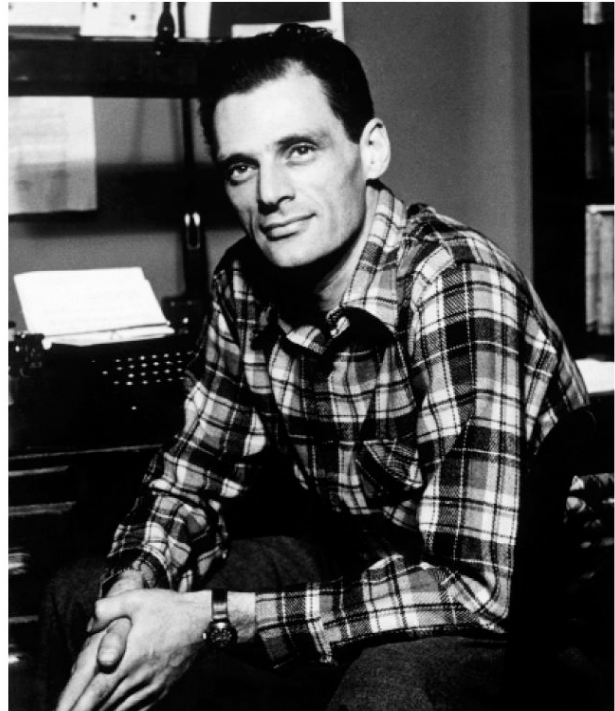
Miller had not, however, given up on playwriting. In 1944, his play *The Man Who Had All the Luck* won a prize offered by New York City's Theatre Guild and received a Broadway production. The show, though, was not very lucky - it closed after only four performances.

It was not until three years later that Miller was able to find success on the stage. His play *All My Sons* debuted to positive critical reviews in 1947, and it was a big hit with audiences as well. This play established him as a significant voice in American theatre. In his review of Miller's play, Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* wrote, "The theatre has acquired a genuine new talent." The play also won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Donaldson Award, voted upon by subscribers to Billboard Magazine.

Arthur Miller later described the impact of *All My Sons* on his life:

"The success of a play, especially one's first success, is somewhat like pushing against a door which is suddenly opened that was always securely shut until then. For myself, the experience was invigorating. It suddenly seemed that the audience was a mass of blood relations, and I sensed a warmth in the world that had not been there before. It made it possible to dream of daring more and risking more."

Two years later, with *Death of a Salesman*, Miller did indeed dare and risk more. Likewise, he gained more as well. With this play, Arthur Miller soared to new artistic heights and critics began to regard him as one of the greatest twentieth-century American playwrights. The play was a huge popular success, and ran for 742 performances at the Morosco Theatre, New York. The play also won a Pulitzer Prize.



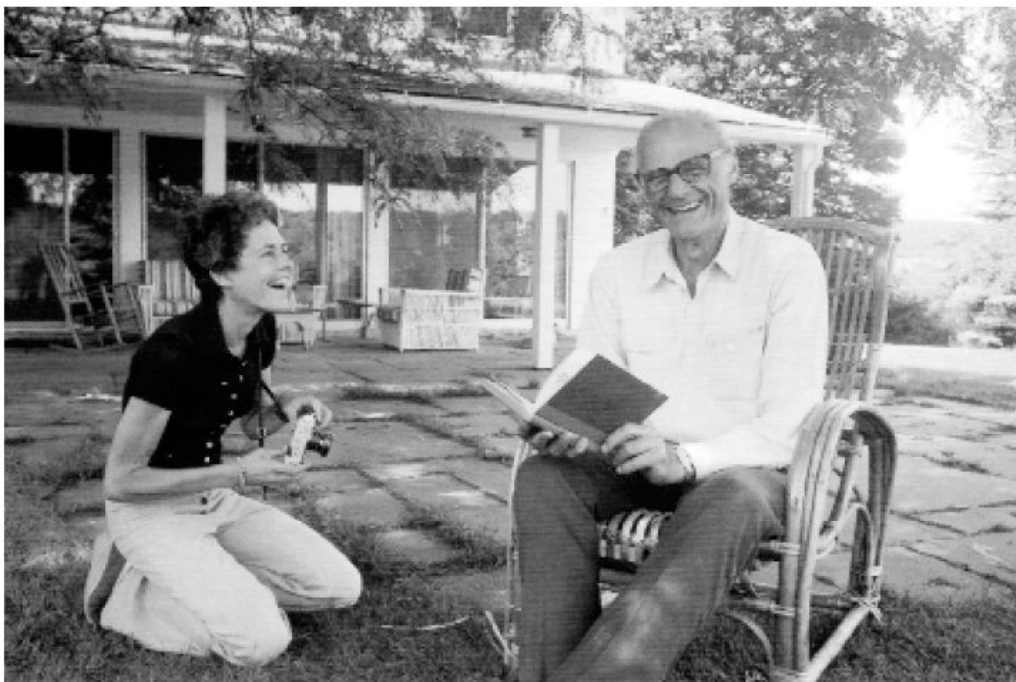
Arthur Miller, 1949. The year he won the Pulitzer for *Death of a Salesman*.

The next several years were very good for Miller, during which time he had several hit plays, culminating with *The Crucible*, which debuted on Broadway in 1953, during the height of Senator Joe McCarthy's congressional investigations into "un-American" activities of US citizens (which mostly meant involvement with the Communist Party). The early 1950s were a very tense time in American history; the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union made many Americans extremely worried about the safety and future of their nation, and Miller reflected the paranoia and hysteria of the time in *The Crucible*. As a result, Miller was denied a passport to Belgium to attend the opening of *The Crucible* there. Later, he was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and was asked to tell the committee members the names of US citizens who were involved in Communist activities. Miller refused, and was thus cited with contempt of Congress, a serious crime. This conviction, however, was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1958.



The mid-50s were also very turbulent times in Miller's personal life. In 1956 he divorced his wife and married actress and sex symbol Marilyn Monroe, whom he had first met in Hollywood in the early 1950s. This event brought him great notoriety and caused a media sensation, but in 1961 it also ended in divorce. Miller married photographer Inge Morath in 1962. They had two children, Rebecca and Daniel, although Daniel had Down Syndrome and was placed in an institution soon after his birth. Miller still wrote up until his death in 2005, although from the mid-eighties his work was more highly valued in London, where critical and popular success was much warmer than in the United States. He is revered as one of America's greatest playwrights who helped to define American drama.

Miller was also the author of *The Misfits* (1961), a screenplay for his second wife, Marilyn Monroe; and *Timebends: A Life* (1987), an autobiography. His books of reportage with photographs by Inge Morath, his third wife, include *In Russia* (1969) and *Chinese Encounters* (1979). Among Miller's other plays are *A View from the Bridge* (1955), *After the Fall* (1964), *The Price* (1968), *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* (1991), *Broken Glass* (1994), and *Resurrection Blues* (2002). Miller won seven Tony Awards, an Olivier Award, an Obie Award, the John F. Kennedy Lifetime Achievement Award, the National Book Award 2001 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, and the Jerusalem Award.



Miller with his third wife, Inge Morath, at their Roxbury home, 1975 .
(Alfred Eisenstaedt/LIFE Image Archive)

ARTHUR MILLER IN HIS OWN WORDS

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

Arthur Miller, "The 'Salesman' Has a Birthday," *The New York Times*, February 5, 1950

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

I wished to create a form which, in itself as a form, would literally be the process of Willy Loman's way of mind. But to say "wished" is not accurate. Any dramatic form is an artifice, a way of transforming a subjective feeling into something that can be comprehended through public symbols. Its efficiency as a form is to be judged – at least by the writer – by how much of the original vision and feeling is lost or distorted by this transformation. I wished to speak of the salesman most precisely as I felt about him, to give no part of that feeling away for the sake of any effect or any dramatic necessity. What was wanted now was not a mounting line of tension, nor a gradually narrowing cone of intensifying suspense, but a bloc, a single chord presented as such at the outset, within which all the strains and melodies would already be contained. The strategy ... was to appear entirely unstrategic. ... If I could, I would have told the story and set forth all the characters in one unbroken speech or even one sentence or a single flash of light. As I look at the play now its form seems the form of a confession, for that is how it is told, now speaking of what happened yesterday, then suddenly following some connection to a time 20 years ago, then leaping even further back and then returning to the present and even speculating about the future.

Arthur Miller, Introduction to *Collected Plays*, 1957

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

Arthur Miller, *Salesman in Beijing*, 1984

INSPIRATION for *Death of a Salesman*

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

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

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

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

Manny's son Buddy, like Biff in Miller's play, was a sports hero, and like Happy Loman, popular with the girls. And like Biff, Buddy never made it to college because he failed to study in high school. In addition, Miller's relationship with his cousins was similar to Bernard's relationship with Biff and Happy in *Salesman*. As Miller stated: *"As fanatic as I was about sports, my ability was not to be compared to [Manny's] sons. Since I was gangling and unhandsome, I lacked their promise. When I stopped by I always had to expect some kind of insinuation of my entire life's probable failure, even before I was sixteen."* In *Timebends* Miller described Manny's wife as the one who *"bore the cross for them all"* supporting her husband, *"keeping up her calm enthusiastic smile lest he feel he was not being appreciated."* One can easily see this woman honored in the character of Linda Loman, Willy's loyal but sometimes bewildered wife, who is no less a victim than the husband she supports in his struggle for meaning and forgiveness.

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

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

WRITING *Death of a Salesman*

(Arthur Miller wrote the selection on this page for his autobiography, *Timebends*.)

With [the play] *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams had printed a license to speak at full throat, and it helped strengthen me as I turned to Willy Loman...I had known all along that this play could not be encompassed by conventional realism, and for one integral reason: in Willy, the past was as alive as what was happening at the moment, sometimes even crashing in to completely overwhelm his mind. I wanted precisely the same fluidity in the form [of *Death of a Salesman*].

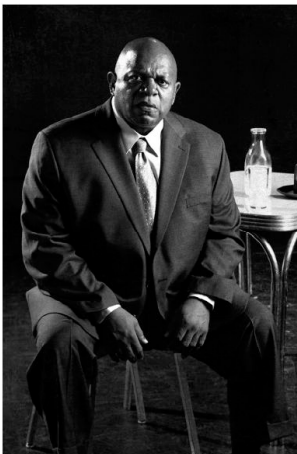
By April 1947 I felt I could find such a form, but it would have to be done in a single setting, in a night or a day. I did not know why. I stopped making my notes in our Grace Court house in Brooklyn Heights and drove up alone one morning to the country house we had bought the previous year.

I started writing one morning...[and] wrote all day until dark, and then I had dinner and went back and wrote until some hour in the darkness between midnight and four. I had skipped a few areas that I knew would give me no trouble in the writing and gone for the parts that had to be muscled into position. By the next morning I had done the first half, the first act of two. When I lay down to sleep I realized I had been weeping - my eyes still burned and my throat was sore from talking it all out and shouting and laughing. I would be stiff when I woke, aching as if I had played four hours of football or tennis and now had to face the start of another game. It would take some six more weeks to complete Act II...

"In reality all I had was the first two lines and a death—
'Willy!' and
'It's all right. I came back.'"

I did not move far from the phone for two days after sending the script to [director Elia Kazan]. By the end of the second silent day, I would have accepted his calling to tell me that it was a scrambled egg, an impenetrable, unstageable piece of wreckage. And his tone when he finally did call was alarmingly sombre. "*I've read your play.*" He sounded at a loss as to how to give me the bad news. "*My God, it's so sad.*" "*It's supposed to be.*" "*I just put it down. I don't know what to say. My father...*" He broke off, the first of a great many men - and women - who would tell me that Willy was their father. I still thought he was letting me down easy. "*It's a great play, Artie. I want to do it in the fall or winter. I'll start thinking about casting.*" He was talking as though someone we both knew had just died, and it filled me with happiness.

On the play's opening night, a woman who shall not be named was outraged, calling it "*a time-bomb under American capitalism.*" I hoped it was, or at least under the bullshit of capitalism; this pseudo life that thought to touch the clouds by standing on top of a refrigerator waving a paid-up mortgage at the Moon, victorious at last...



Charles S.
Dutton as
Willy
Loman.

2009 Yale
Repertory
Theatre
Production
of *Death of
a
Salesman*.

"What an author thinks he did in a work or what he tried to do may be illuminating to the reader, but once a work is finished, the author, looking back at it, is not much more trustworthy than any other reader...."

...remember(ing) that Willy Loman is not a concept but a character who has to be given flesh by an actor."

Critic & author Gerald Weales,
in his introduction to the Viking Critical Library
Edition of *Death of a Salesman*.

The Characters: Who's who?

(In *Death of a Salesman*, the characters talk about themselves and each other. Can we always accept what they say at face value? What might be their motivation to embellish or distort the truth?)

WILLY LOMAN

a salesman, age 63

"And they know me boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring you fellas up, there'll be open sesame for all of us, 'cause one thing boys: I have friends."

--WILLY

"I get the feeling that I'll never sell anything again, that I won't make a living for you, or a business for the boys."

--WILLY

"I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. 'Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to...pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people."

--WILLY

"...I still feel—kind of temporary about myself."

--WILLY



Rick Foucheux as Willy Loman and Nancy Robinette as Linda Loman in the 2008 production at Arena Stage.

LINDA LOMAN

Willy's wife

"You're my foundation and my support, Linda."

--WILLY

"[It's] enough to be happy right here, right now. Why must everybody conquer the world?"

--LINDA

BIFF

Willy and Linda's older son, age 34

"I've always made a point of not wasting my life, and every time I've come back here I know that all I've done is to waste my life."

--BIFF

"Like a young god. Hercules—something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him... God Almighty, he'll be great yet. A star like that, magnificent, can never really fade away!"

--WILLY

HAPPY

Willy and Linda's younger son (age 32)

"I don't know what the hell I'm working for.
Sometimes I sit in my apartment – all alone.
And I think of the rent I'm paying. And it's
crazy. But then, it's always what I wanted.
An apartment, a car, and plenty of women.
And still, goddammit, I'm lonely."
--HAPPY

"I gotta show some of those pompous, self-
important executives over there that Hap
Loman can make the grade."
-- HAPPY



Arthur Kennedy as Biff, Lee J. Cobb as Willy &
Cameron Mitchell as Happy in the 1949 production.



Thomas Chalmers as Uncle Ben, Lee J. Cobb as
Willy, & Howard Smith as Charley in the original
1949 production.

UNCLE BEN

Willy's older brother

"Ben. That man was a genius, that man was
success incarnate!
The man knew what he wanted and went out
and got it! Walked into the jungle, and
comes out, the age of 21, and he's rich!"
--WILLY

CHARLEY

Willy's neighbor and friend

"A man oughta come in with a few words.
One thing about Charley. He's a man of few
words, and they respect him."
--WILLY

BERNARD

Charley's son and friend to Biff and Happy

"Bernard can get the best marks in school,
y'understand, but when he gets out in the
business world, y'understand, you are going
to be five times ahead of him."
--WILLY, to BIFF

OTHERS

THE WOMAN

HOWARD WAGNER, *Willy's Boss*

JENNY, *Charley's Secretary*

STANLEY, *a waiter*

MISS FORSYTHE, *a call girl*

LETTA, *a call girl*

SYNOPSIS -- (Royal Lyceum Theatre Company, Edinburgh)

Act 1

Willy Loman is a traveling salesman at the end of his career. The beginning of the play sees him returning home to his wife Linda after nearly crashing his car. Biff and Happy, their adult sons, are on a rare trip home. The relationship between Biff and his father is strained. Willy thinks Biff is a “lazy bum”: he has not found himself a career at the age of 34. Upstairs in their bedroom, Biff talks to his brother Happy about his inability to settle and his anger at his father’s criticism of him.

Alone in the kitchen, Willy retreats into his memory, remembering the boys as teenagers, Biff being a top class footballer and his successful brother Ben. Within these memories are also hints of where things started to go wrong for Willy as he exaggerates his success, dismisses Biff’s stealing and lies to his wife. Another woman is seen in Willy’s past.



The past and present mingle in Willy’s mind throughout a visit by his friend Charley who offers him a job which Willy proudly rejects. The brothers and Linda discuss Willy – Linda defends him and attacks her sons for their treatment of him. She tells them that Willy is trying to kill himself.

Biff tries to placate Willy’s anger when he overhears them discussing him by telling Willy that he will go and see an old employer, Oliver, and ask for a job. This escalates into a plan for the brothers to set up in business together. Willy is delighted and the whole family is sucked into this daydream. At the end of the Act, however, Biff discovers the length of tubing that Willy has hidden so he can use it to commit suicide.

Act 2

The Act opens happily with Willy making plans to ask his boss for a desk job and then meet his sons for dinner. However, when Willy sees his boss he will not give him a different job and finally tells Willy he is fired. This triggers memories of his brother Ben offering him a job, which he turned down. Willy then goes to Charley’s office to borrow money and meets Charley’s son Bernard, whom Willy had ridiculed as a boy but who is now a successful lawyer. Charley again offers him a job and Willy is again furious at the ‘insult’.

In the restaurant that evening, Biff tells Happy that Oliver did not remember him – he realized he had been lying to himself about his importance in the company. As he was leaving the office he stole a fountain pen.

Willy joins them and Biff tries to tell him what has happened but Willy won’t listen. Biff and Happy leave Willy alone in the restroom. Willy remembers an incident in Boston where Biff discovers him with a woman.

On the boys’ return to the house, Linda is furious. Willy is talking to his brother Ben (in his mind) about his plan to commit suicide so his family can have the insurance money. Biff and Willy argue again and Biff tells his family that he has lost every job he ever had through stealing and that he has been in jail. However, Willy sees Biff’s admission as a sign that Biff likes him and decides that if he leaves him the money he will be ‘magnificent’. As the others go to bed, Willy leaves the house and crashes his car.

Requiem

The graveside. The family react in different ways – Happy is angry; Charley believes that the job has destroyed Willy. Biff knows that he has had the ‘wrong dreams’. The scene ends with Linda who cannot understand why he has done it when they have just made the final payment on the house and are ‘free and clear.’

THE SETTING

THIS IS AMERICA —Michael Walkup, Production Dramaturg, Yale Repertory Theatre

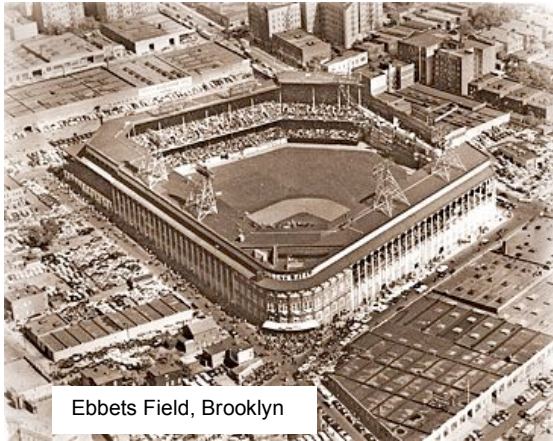
http://www.yalerep.org/on_stage/currentseason/salesman/articles_america.html

Arthur Miller sets *Death of a Salesman*, his exploration of the elusiveness of the American Dream, in the quintessentially American city of Brooklyn. (Actually, the term “city” only properly applies to Brooklyn until 1898 when it officially became incorporated as one of New York City’s five boroughs.) Brooklyn occupies Kings County on eighty-one square miles at Long Island’s western tip and is connected to neighboring Manhattan by three bridges, one tunnel, fourteen subway lines, one ferry service, and a pugnacious wariness of being consumed by the cosmopolitan bully across the East River. We recognize Brooklyn from images of its high-stooped brownstones and eponymous bridge, as the setting for numerous sitcoms from *The Honeymooners* to *The Cosby Show*, and as the home of Brooklynese, a much-imitated accent popularized by Hollywood through surly WWII soldiers and down-on-their-luck street toughs.

Brooklyn’s many distinct neighborhoods offer snapshots of the American melting pot. The ethnic communities of Brooklyn were for decades synonymous with their neighborhoods’ names—some still are. There have long been Jewish residents in Brighton Beach and Flatbush; African Americans moved into Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville after WWI; Italians still congregate in Bensonhurst; and Vinegar Hill near the Manhattan Bridge used to be known as Irish Town. Though the quiet of these Brooklyn neighborhoods is sometimes disturbed by intense parochialism, the borough is united in its resistance to being ranked second after the more genteel Manhattan. Such pride and doggedness have earned Brooklyn its reputation as the hardscrabble borough of striving families. There’s more space here, and it’s cheaper by the square foot. There are more family-friendly businesses, and fewer skyscrapers blotting out the blue.

The first half of the twentieth century saw Brooklyn in ascendance: the Brooklyn Navy Yard brought thousands of workers to the borough during the two World Wars, and new subway lines built in the 1930s made for an easy commute between Brooklyn and Manhattan. A spike in housing construction after WWI expanded the borough’s residences so that by the mid-1920s it surpassed Manhattan as the most populous borough of NYC, a predominance it maintains to this day. Kenneth T. Jackson, a NYC historian, claims that as many as one-quarter of all Americans can trace their heritage to one-time Brooklyn residents.





Because of its role as a way station for such a large portion of the population, Brooklyn boasts a number of iconic American landmarks. Ebbets Field—home to the Brooklyn Dodgers from 1913 to 1957—bordered diverse neighborhoods in central Brooklyn until it was demolished to make way for high-rise apartments. Prospect Park, a 19th-century city-beautification project designed by the same architects as Manhattan’s Central Park, spans 585 pacific acres just blocks away (the architects considered Prospect Park the more successful project). Coney Island, at the south tip of the borough, was home to such classic amusements as the Cyclone roller coaster and the Steeplechase, and every summer visitors elbowed each other on the boardwalk waiting in line for a Nathan’s hot dog.

Death of a Salesman opens in the Loman’s home in Brooklyn in 1949. The small, single-family unit is described by Miller in a stage direction as crowded on all sides by the “towering, angular shapes” of new apartment buildings. Miller never specifies in which neighborhood the Lomans live, rather his play evokes an almost mythic Brooklyn.

The past Willy recalls is another important setting of Miller’s play – the early 1930s, when Willy’s two sons were in high school, Brooklyn was still green, and the neighboring structures did not impede the view from the yard. Through leaps in memory spurred by grief and confusion, Willy seems to live simultaneously in these two disparate Brooklyns.



Dustin Hoffman as Willy and John Malkovich as Biff in the 1985 movie.

THEMES (http://www.lyceum.org.uk/lyceum_images/Death%20of%20a%20Salesman%20Teachers%20Pack.pdf)

Reality and Illusion

The gap between reality and illusion is blurred in the play -- in the structure, in Willy's mind and in the minds of the other characters. Willy is a dreamer and dreams of a success that it is not possible for him to achieve. He constantly exaggerates his success: ('I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in the year of 1928') and is totally unrealistic about what Biff will be able to achieve too. Willy's inability to face the truth of his situation, that he is merely 'a dime a dozen', rubs off on his sons. Happy exaggerates how successful he is and Biff only realizes in Oliver's office that he has been lying to himself for years about his position in the company: **"I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been. We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk."**

Biff is the only one who realizes how this blurring of reality has destroyed them all. His aim becomes to make Willy and the family face the truth which they have been avoiding, the truth of who they are: **"The man don't know who we are!... We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house."** This blurring of reality and illusion is carried through into the structure.

The American Dream

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

Willy's adherence to the dream means that he buys status symbols on credit that he cannot afford to keep the payments up on. It is ironic then that Willy's funeral is on the day that the last mortgage payment is made.



1928 Chevy

Family

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

Nature and Physical Pursuits

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

MOTIFS (Source: Royal Lyceum Theatre)

Motifs are elements (dialogue, symbols, situations, etc.) that keep reappearing throughout.

The jungle/woods

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

Diamonds

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

The garden

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

Stockings

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

Falling / Down

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

Stealing

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

Brand Names

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



STYLE, STRUCTURE AND FORM (Source: Royal Lyceum Theatre)

In 1947 Miller saw *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, directed by Elia Kazan and designed by Joe Mielziner (the team that was to produce *Death of a Salesman* in 1949). He was impressed at how the non-realistic elements blended with the realistic ones. This production helped him to create a style for *Death of a Salesman* that encompassed both *REALISM* and *EXPRESSIONISM* in such a way as to truly represent Willy, his dilemma, and also his state of mind.

REALISM

Realism was an artistic movement that began in 19th century France. The realists sought to accurately portray everyday characters, situations, and dilemmas. Realist drama was a careful observation of human characteristics and the language attempted to be as close as possible to natural conversation. Contemporary costuming and three-dimensional sets were used so as to create a 'lifelike' stage picture. The plays were usually critiques of social problems. Famous realist dramatists are: Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov and George Bernard Shaw.

EXPRESSIONISM

A reaction to Realism, the Expressionist movement began in the early 1900s. Expressionist dramatists were concerned with presenting the inner psychological reality of a character, a subjective vision of the world as opposed to an objective representation as Realism wanted to do. They were, as American Expressionist playwright Elmer Rice claimed, "... getting beneath reality, displaying more than reality, replacing reality with something more expressive."

They threw out dramatic convention – plot, structure and characterization were abandoned, dialogue became poetic and lighting was used to create atmosphere.

Expressionism was successful mainly in Germany and Scandinavia, but American dramatists like Eugene O'Neill and Thornton Wilder were also influenced by Expressionism.

Miller was interested in Expressionism but didn't want to abandon the conventions of realism. He used, like O'Neill, a dramatic form that combined *THE SUBJECTIVITY OF EXPRESSIONISM* with the *ILLUSION OF OBJECTIVITY AFFORDED BY REALISM*.

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

Arthur Miller, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 1985

FLASHBACKS / DAYDREAMS

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

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

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

TRAGEDY

There is much discussion of whether *Death of a Salesman* can be considered a tragedy. 'Tragedy' as a form was defined by the Greek playwright Aristotle in 330 BCE. He defined a tragic character as being: *A person of noble stature who has a fatal flaw (often arrogance or over-confidence) that leads to his or her downfall. The suffering is not wholly deserved and through that suffering, the character gains some self-awareness that turns his or her defeat into a sort of triumph. The play should not leave the audience feeling depressed but rather with a sense of compassion and awe.*

If we go by this definition, Willy fulfils most of the qualifications – except that he is not a man of high status.

Miller answered this criticism by saying that:

"I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were... If rank or nobility of character was indispensable, then it would follow that the problems of those with rank were the particular problems of tragedy".

Arthur Miller, *Tragedy and the Common Man*, New York Times 27 Feb 1949

Certainly, the play follows much of the structure of a tragedy as Willy is inexorably drawn to his destruction by his inability to see the truth (his 'fatal flaw').



Mildred Dummock as Linda Loman in the original Broadway production of *Death of a Salesman*, 1949.

LANGUAGE

The use of language in *Death of a Salesman* is entirely Realistic. Miller's dialogue is carefully constructed to follow the exact speech patterns of ordinary New Yorkers. It is very dense and fast, with repetitions, hesitations, and contradictions. The characters often use slang and clichés such as:

"Biff is a lazy bum" "You make mountains out of molehills" "I'm a dime a dozen" "You're a pal" "He's gonna flunk you" "I'm takin' one play for Pop"

But this impression of realism is created through careful construction.

"It is necessary to employ the artificial in order to arrive at the real. More than one actor has told me that it is surprisingly difficult to memorize their dialogue. The speeches sound like real, almost reported talk when in fact they are intensely composed, compressed into a sequential inevitability that seems natural but isn't." Arthur Miller, *Notes on Realism, Echoes Down the Corridor* (Methuen, 2000)

LITERARY CONNECTIONS (Guthrie Theatre Study Guide)

In the Introduction to the anthology *Closers*, the editor, Mike Tronnes, points out that "selling may be the defining activity of American society." Indeed, as any reader of literature can confirm, the figure of the salesman looms large in plenty of stories, novels, and plays. Over the years it has established itself as an archetypal character, depicted in a diversity of circumstances and fictional accounts by major American writers from Herman Melville to David Mamet, Sinclair Lewis to John Updike, Flannery O'Connor to Harry Crews, Erskine Caldwell to Raymond Carver, Philip K. Dick to Thomas Wolfe, Edna Ferber to John Cheever, and so on.

As an example and illustration, below is the opening of the first story published by the outstanding Southern writer Eudora Welty (1901-2001). It is titled "Death of a Traveling Salesman" and it appeared in the magazine *Manuscript* in 1936. The focus of this very short narrative is on the last moments in the life of a salesman who, lost on the road, wrecks his car near the shack of an unknown couple. It offers fascinating possibilities of parallel interpretations and links with Arthur Miller's play.

Here is the excerpt:

R. J. Bowman, who for fourteen years had traveled for a shoe company through Mississippi, drove his Ford along a rutted dirt path. It was a long day! The time did not seem to clear the noon hurdle and settle into soft afternoon. The sun, keeping its strength here even in winter, stayed at the top of the sky, and every time Bowman stuck his head out of the dusty car to stare up the road, it seemed to reach a long arm down and push against the top of his head, right through his hat - like the practical joke of an old drummer, long on the road. It made him feel all the more angry and helpless. He was feverish, and he was not quite sure of the way.

This was his first day back on the road after a long siege of influenza. He had had very high fever, and dreams, and had become weakened and pale, enough to tell the difference in the mirror, and he could not think clearly. ... All afternoon, in the midst of his anger, and for no reason, he had thought of his dead grandmother. Then he forgot her again.

This desolate hill country! And he seemed to be going the wrong way - it was as if he were going back, far back. ... But now - what if in fourteen years on the road he had never been ill before and never had an accident? His record was broken, and he had even begun to question it. ...

Eudora Welty, from *Death of a Traveling Salesman*.

Published by Harcourt Brace & World in *A Curtain of Green & Other Stories*, 1941.

The complete text may be found online at: <http://writing2.richmond.edu/jessid/eng423/restricted/2welty.pdf>

CURRICULUM MATERIALS

We recommend that you first read the background material found in the preceding sections. Follow that by reading through and choosing those activities and questions that fit your needs and focus.

BEFORE THE PLAY

Student understanding and appreciation of the play will be enhanced by exploring the following topics prior to attending a performance.

1. Audience etiquette
2. Glossary of names/references
3. Life and times of Arthur Miller

1. AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

Please plan some class time to talk to your students about the experience of live theatre and appropriate audience etiquette. Audience reaction and response are an integral part of live theatre and (unlike movies) make each performance a unique experience. The actors can sense when an audience is attentive and involved.

- Please ask students to refrain from conversation during the performance and remind them to use restroom facilities before the show or during intermission.
- Cameras, cell-phones, beepers, flashlights, laser pointers, and any electronic devices are not permitted in the theatre. Please have students leave these restricted items on the bus.
- Showing respect for the actors on stage and fellow audience members will make everyone's experience a positive one. Learning appropriate and constructive audience response is part of the Vermont Framework of Standards (5.7).

2. GLOSSARY OF NAMES/REFERENCES

Review with students the references listed below. You might assign each student a name to research and report on orally to the class.

Thomas Edison
B.F. Goodrich
J.P. Morgan
Jack Benny
Al Smith
Red Grange
Gene Tunney

1928 Chevy
1940s Studebaker
Wire Recorder
Simonize
Adonis
Hercules

Ebbets Field
Brooklyn
Yonkers
Hackensack
Waterbury Clock

3. THE PLAYWRIGHT

In small groups have students research the following topics and share their findings with the class. Have them use maps and visual images to enhance their presentations.

- A timeline of Miller's lifespan -- 1915-2005 -- reflecting historical, technological and artistic milestones
- Life and works of Arthur Miller
- Critical response to the play *Death of a Salesman*
- Obituaries on the death of Arthur Miller

QUESTIONS FOR THE PLAY READER: AN ACT BY ACT GUIDE

(From "A Teacher's Guide to the Penguin edition of *Death of a Salesman*")

ACT ONE

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

ACT TWO

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

REQUIEM

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

QUESTIONS FOR AFTER ATTENDING A PERFORMANCE

1. Describe the design elements (set, lights, props, costumes, sound, etc.) that you noticed in *Death of a Salesman*. What was most intriguing about the design? How did you feel the design elements helped to tell the story? Did you notice any links between the elements of design and the themes addressed in the play?
2. What clues did the costumes of this production of *Death of a Salesman* give you about the characters before they said or did anything?
3. How did the actors' physicalization of their characters enhance the interpretation of each character? Give specific examples, such as the way the actors walked, sat, gestured, handled props, etc.
4. Discuss the actors' uses of their voices. Did each character have a distinct voice? How did the use of voice help reveal character?
5. Who was your favorite character? What was it that the actor playing this role did to make you feel that way?
6. How did the music and sound effects impact this interpretation of the play?
7. What was the effect of having scenes from the past or Willy's dreams staged within the current action of the play?
8. What was your favorite moment/scene in the play?
9. What impressed you most about this production?
10. If you read the play first, how did the live production compare with your own visualization of the play? Did you like the choices the Director made? What might you have done differently? Why?

DELVING DEEPER

1. Is *Death of a Salesman* a tragedy and Willy Loman a tragic hero, or is his death merely the pathetic demise of a small man?
2. Who is to blame for Willy's destruction?
3. What is the turning point in Willy's life? Is Willy the main character in this play or is Biff? Why? What does Biff discover about himself? How does this discovery affect his relationship with Willy? How is Biff's self-realization dramatic? What is the climax of the play?
4. Does Linda help or hinder Willy in overlooking his small sales and his dishonest attempts to make them seem bigger? How else does she influence Willy? Discuss Linda's remark, "Attention—attention must finally be paid to such a man!" What is the effect of the switch in Linda's speech to this very formal statement? Why does Miller use it?
5. What is Willy's dream? What is he searching for throughout the play? Why doesn't he find it? Did he have a chance of fulfilling it? Did he have the wrong dream? Inappropriate attitudes? Is he a born loser, or does he stand in his own way to success? Explain.
6. Why is Biff so angry about the incident in Boston? Why does Biff steal? Does Biff use Willy's behavior as an excuse for his own waywardness?
7. Discuss the significance of Willy's being a younger son with an absent father. How does that influence his behavior with his own sons? In what ways does Happy's situation reflect Willy's? How has Willy

treated Biff? How is it different from the way he has treated Happy? Why is the athletic trophy in Willy's room instead of in Biff's?

8. What do we know about Linda? What can we guess? Does she know about the Woman in Boston? What makes you think she does or doesn't? Describe her relationship with Willy and with her sons. Is her character the same in reality and in Willy's memories of her?

9. How does Ben affect Willy? How does he influence the events in the play? What do you think of the way he has achieved his wealth?

10. Willy is proud of putting up the living-room ceiling and making a cement porch. How is the image of working with his hands carried through the play? Why, then, doesn't Willy think highly of being a carpenter?

11. Why does Miller let us know in the title that Willy's death is coming? Why doesn't he make it a surprise? Is Willy's death in a car more or less appropriate than a suicide using the rubber hose on the water heater would be? Why? What harm does Willy's death do? What good?

12. Trace one of the symbols (stockings, diamonds, etc.) throughout the play and explain why and how Miller has used it. What other symbols does Miller use and to what purpose?

13. How does the structure of the play mirror Willy's blurring of illusion and reality?

15. How is Willy's killing himself for the insurance money symptomatic of the way he has lived? What legacy does Willy leave his family?

ESSAY TOPICS

1. Daniel E. Schneider, in "Play of Dreams,"* states that the play is really about a man and his sons. Do you agree that the primary theme of *Death of a Salesman* is the conflict between father and son and between first-born and second-born sons? Support your opinion.

2. Some reviewers believe that the play is a criticism of capitalism and the American way of life. Discuss your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with them. What are the social implications of the play?

3. Who is Willy's foil in the play? Explain how that person serves as a foil for Willy, noting specific differences between them.

4. The play, *Death of a Salesman* was first produced in 1949. Write an essay evaluating the play in terms of how it is relevant to families today. Support your judgment with experiences taken from the lives of yourself and your friends as well as with specific examples from the play.

5. Biff Loman has a problem communicating with his father, Willy Loman. Their differences of opinion about success lead to arguments and misunderstandings. Write an essay of a time when a difference of opinion created a communications problem with your parents. State specifically what the problem was and tell what happened as a result of the differences. What did you learn from this experience?

6. Willy Loman refuses to take the job that his friend, Charley offers him, and commits suicide at the end of the play. Write an essay explaining why you think Willy behaves in this manner. What effect does his suicide have on the rest of the Loman family? Develop these ideas with evidence. Convince your readers that you have read the play carefully and thought deeply about the possible reasons for Willy's actions.

7. When Willy Loman asks his boss, Howard to give him a job at the office so he won't have to travel, Howard refuses. In this scene, Howard tells Willy to ask his sons to help him out, and suggests that "This is no time for false pride." Willy brushes off that suggestion, saying that his sons are working on "a very important deal," and that he can't impose on them. Should children be responsible for their aging parents? Or should society care for them? Write an essay on this problem. State your position and use arguments to defend it. Your goal is to persuade your readers to accept your viewpoint.

ACTIVITIES

1. **TEN YEARS LATER:** Have your students write or improvise a scene between Linda, Biff, and Happy that takes place ten years after Willy's death. To help them get started, you might want to ask them to consider the following questions:

- What event might bring the three of them together?
- How do they feel about seeing each other?
- What has happened to each of them in the past ten years?

Instruct them to use everything they learned about the characters over the course of the play as a guide, but to feel free to make up their own story, as long as it is consistent with the play. Then have the student groups perform their scenes to the class.

2. **SUCCESS:** The notion of success is very important to Willy. He believes to be successful one must be well-liked and defines success by popularity. In Willy's mind, his brother Ben is the embodiment of success, yet he has achieved it in the perilous 'jungle' of competition. It is Charley and his son Bernard who achieve honorable success in the play. Charley is the antithesis of Willy in that he possesses everything Willy dreams of: a successful career and a successful son. In small groups have students discuss the following questions:

- Do you agree with Willy that being "well liked" is an important element of success? (What if you are the President of the US? Competing on American Idol? A high school teacher?)
- Can you be successful without being well liked? Can one be well-liked and not successful?
- What other attributes are important to success?

On a personal level:

- What does being a success mean to you?
- Near the end of your life, how will you judge whether you were a success or not?
- Do you define success in terms of material possessions (such as cars, homes, and jewelry), in terms of more intangible possessions (such as love, friendship, and respect), or a combination of both?
- What are the risks and benefits of pursuing only material possessions?

4. **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: CHANGING TIMES and SOCIAL VALUES**

At age 63 in 1949, Willy Loman would have been born in 1886, his son Biff in 1915.

- Have students explore the technological, historical and social changes that would have impacted the Loman family.
- What major changes and events have occurred since 1949?
- If the play were written and set in 2010, how might the characters be different?
- Which character might have changed the most? And why?

5. **MOCK TRIAL**

- As a class, set up an inquest into Willy's death. Set up the room as a court room.
- Cast members of the class as: lawyers, a judge, witnesses (i.e., characters from the play), journalists, a representative of the insurance company, a psychologist.
- The lawyers should interrogate the witnesses about what happened to Willy.
- Remember, if it is proven that Willy committed suicide, the insurance company won't pay out...

PLAY QUOTES

Read the passages and answer the following questions: 1. Who said it? 2. To whom was it said?
3. What was happening in the play? 4. What does it mean?

1. *"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 into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person."*

2. *"Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eight-four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved by so many different people?"*

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

4. *"Why boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich."*

5. *"He walked away. I saw him for one minute. I got so mad I could've torn the walls down! How the hell did I ever get the idea I was a salesman there? I even believed myself that I'd been a salesman for him! And then he gave one look and--I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been! We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk."*

6. *"Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way."*

7. *"I'm getting married, Pop, don't forget it. I'm changing everything. I'm gonna run that department before the year is up. You'll see, Mom."*

8. *"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. Not like-like an appointment! This would not be another damned-fool appointment, Ben, and it changes all the aspects. Because he thinks I'm nothing, see, and so he spites me. But the funeral-- Ben, that funeral will be massive! They'll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire! All the old-timers with the strange license plates--that boy will be thunder-struck, Ben, because he never realized--I am known! Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey--I am known, Ben, and he'll see it with his eyes once and for all. He'll see what I am, Ben! He's in for a shock, that boy!"*

9. *"He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong."*

10. *"Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. 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. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."*

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

Study Guides

Guthrie Theatre Company (in depth guide):

<http://www.guthrietheater.org/sites/default/files/salesman.pdf>

Kennedy Center (one page/student questions):

http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/content/2389/2389_memplay2_salesmanstudy.pdf

Lyric Theatre (study guide plus links to many articles, interviews, etc.):

<http://www.deathofasalesmanlondon.com/study.asp>

Penguin Teacher's Study Guide for reading Death of a Salesman

<http://us.penguingroup.com/static/pdf/teachersguides/deathsalesman.pdf>

Royal Lyceum Theatre Company (excellent, concise guide):

http://www.lyceum.org.uk/lyceum_images/Death%20of%20a%20Salesman%20Teachers%20Pack.pdf

Yale Repertory Theatre (excellent compendium of information):

http://www.yalerep.org/about_rep/willpower/Salesman_Study_Guide.pdf

Other Resources

National Endowment for the Humanities (Miller biography, interviews, articles):

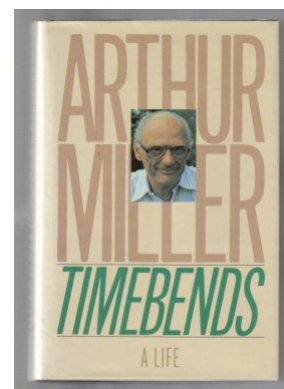
<http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/miller/biography.html>

Arthur Miller on NPR (two appreciation stories on Miller's death):

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4496712&ps=rs>

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4495177&ps=rs>

Arthur Miller's autobiography: TIMEBENDS: A Life



The American Dream on Stage and Screen

THEATRE

A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry

The American Dream by Edward Albee

The Iceman Cometh by Eugene O'Neill

Glengarry Glen Ross by David Mamet

National Anthems by Dennis McIntyre

The Adding Machine by Elmer Rice

FILM

Erin Brokovich (2000)

Rocky (1976)

The Karate Kid (1984)

American Beauty (1999)

Wall Street (1987)

American Psycho (2000)

Up in the Air (2009)