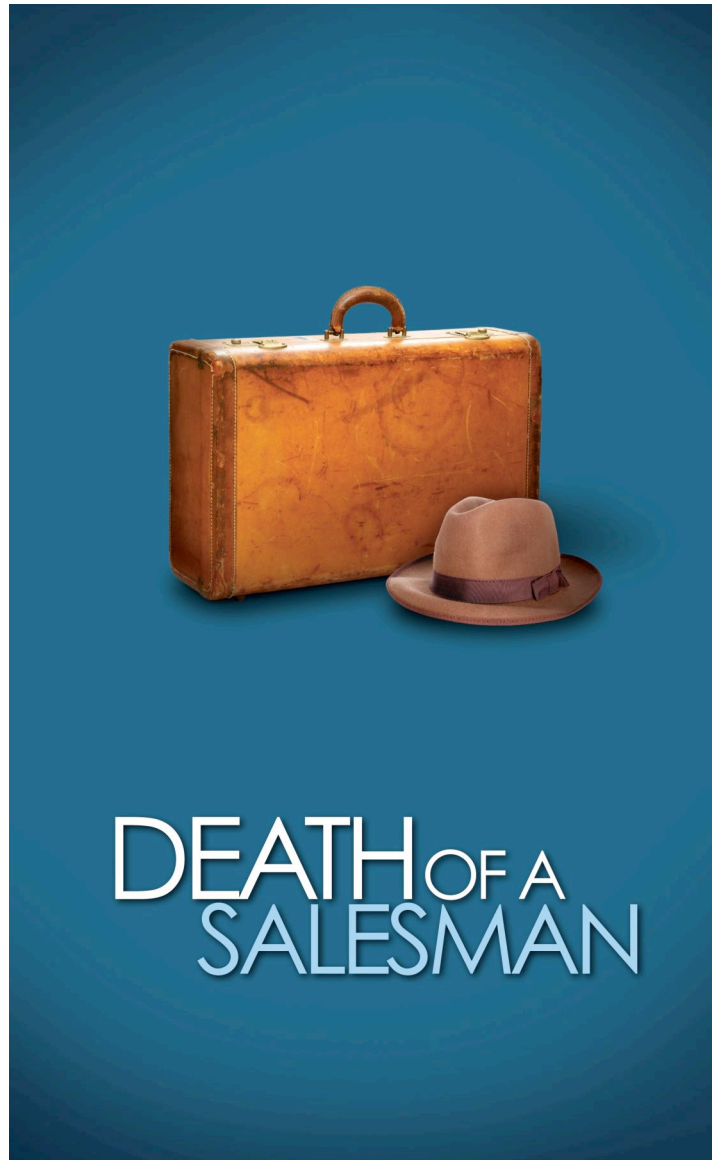


DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Study Guide for Teachers



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

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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.

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.

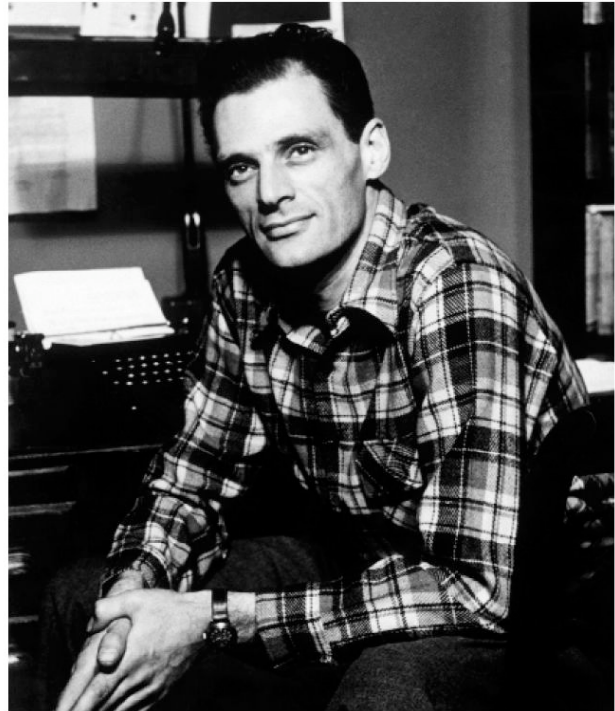
Miller had not, however, given up on playwriting. In 1944, his play *The Man Who Had All the Luck* won a prize offered by New York City's Theatre Guild and received a Broadway production. The show, though, was not very lucky - it closed after only four performances.

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 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.

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

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

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

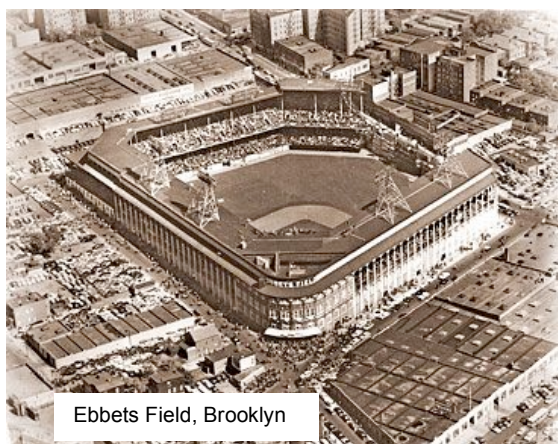
THIS IS AMERICA —Michael Walkup, Production Dramaturg, Yale Repertory Theatre
http://www.yalerep.org/on_stage/currentseason/salesman/articles_america.html

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-stopped 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 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 find 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.



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.