



# Death of a Salesman

Arthur Miller

The American Dream:  
At what cost?

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# About the Playwright: Arthur Miller



- Born in New York City on October 17, 1915
- Began as playwright at University of Michigan
- [Pulitzer Prize](#) winner for *Death of A Salesman*
- Double winner of New York Drama Critics Circle Award

# Miller's Legal Troubles

- Suspected of being a Communist sympathizer
- *Death* seen as un-American
- Miller has troubles with the HUAC/McCarthy
- 1953 - Miller denied a passport
- 1955 - HUAC pressures NYC not to allow Miller to make a film for them on juvenile delinquency

# The Saga Continues...

- 1957 - Miller convicted of contempt of Congress for refusing to name names    And then...
- 1958 - US Court of Appeals overturns his contempt conviction

# Miller's Assertions

- *Death* is **not** a “document of pessimism.”
- *Death* is not un-American; it celebrates the life of Willy Loman.
- Miller believes that tragedy is “inherently optimistic.”

# From Classical Tragedy

- Unity of time -- the final 24 hours in Willy's life
- Unity of action - the play is complete unto itself
- the tragic hero...with a twist



# Also from Classical Tragedy

- the hero's traits, esp. being a mixture of good and bad and being of higher moral worth than others in society
- the concept of the hero's flaw
- the hero's capacity to willingly endure suffering
- the catharsis of the audience

# Initial Themes

- Addresses family conflict in post World War II America
- Takes a close look at the price paid for the “American Dream”
- Charges America with creating a capitalist materialism centered around a postwar economy
- This materialism skewed the original view of the “American Dream” as envisioned by the founding fathers





# Themes in *Death*

- Willy Loman as a modern tragic hero
- An individual's search for meaning and purpose in life (not Willy, but Biff)
- failure in pursuit of success
- Man's need to "leave a thumbprint somewhere in the world."
- An examination of the materialistic values of society

## More themes in *Death*

- The love of a father for a son and a son (Biff) for a father
- The conflict between father and son
- The question of who shall wield the power?
- the problem of communication

# More Themes

- **Abandonment:** The not-so-positive transient nature of mankind
- **Betrayal:** Willy's primary obsession (Biff)

# Symbols

- **Seeds:** opportunity for growth, but will not always germinate.
- **Diamonds:** Material & tangible wealth
- **The Woman's Stockings:** betrayal and infidelity.
- **The Rubber Hose:** Suicide
- **Alaska, Africa...The American West:** success and failure

# Characteristics of the Tragic Hero

"A man doesn't become a hero until he can see the root of his own downfall."

~Aristotle

Six Characteristics of the Tragic Hero:

- Nobility or wisdom (by birth)
- A flaw or error of judgment (Hamartia)
- A reversal of fortune (peripetia)
- The discovery or recognition that the reversal was brought about by the hero's own actions (anagnorisis)
- The audience must feel dramatic irony for the character.
- The character's fate must be greater than deserved.

## A few key traits of the T.H.

- Usually evokes empathy...
- Has a weakness, usually pride
- Something has gone awry in his/her life
- Usually faced with a very serious decision he must make
- Noble in nature
- Must understand his mistakes...
- Likely doomed from the start...
- Begins his “journey” as no better or worse than the rest of us...

# The Common Man as Hero

Miller's thoughts:

- “Everyone knows Willy Loman.” (allusion to the morality play, *Everyman*.)
- “The common man is suitable for a tragic hero.”
- Willy is meant to be seen as greater and better (at least in potential) than his society.

# Miller's Modern Tragedy

- The hero is a common man.
- The hero struggles against society.
- The hero meets his downfall.
- The downfall is a result of an incongruity between his own perception of the world and reality.
- The hero achieves a kind of redemption in his downfall.



# Act 1

An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream  
rising out of reality.

- How does this serve to foreshadow Willy Loman's life?

# Major Characters

- Willy Loman
- Biff Loman
- Linda Loman
- Happy Loman
- Charley
- Bernard
- Ben
- The Woman
- Howard Wagner
- Stanley
- Jenny
- Miss Forsythe and Letta

# Willy Loman

- Father, traveling salesman
- Believes in chasing the American Dream although he never achieves it
- Pins his failed hopes on his sons, Biff and Happy
- Becomes mentally ill when pressure of reality crushes his illusions

# Biff Loman

- Elder son, 34 years old
- High school standout-football star, many male friends, and female admirers
- Academic failures lead to a life of kleptomania
- Represents Willy's vulnerable, tragic side
- Fails to reconcile his father's expectations

# Linda Loman

- Loving, devoted wife
- Naïve and realistic of Willy's hopes
- Emotionally supportive of Willy
- Willy's strength until his tragic perishing

# Happy Loman

- Younger son, 32 years old
- In Biff's shadow all his life
- Relentless sex and professional drive
- Represents Willy's sense of self importance and ambition
- Often engages in bad business ethics

# Charley

- The Lomans' next door neighbor
- Successful businessman
- Often gives Willy financial support
- Described sadly as Willy's only friend although Willy is jealous of Charley's success

# Bernard

- Charley's son
- Successful lawyer
- Often mocked by Willy for being studious
- Compared to Loman sons by Willy; they do not measure up to his success



# Ben

- Willy's deceased older brother
- Independently wealthy
- Appears to Willy in daydreams
- Willy's symbol of success that he desperately wants for his sons

# The Woman

- Willy's mistress
- Her admiration for Willy is an ego boost
- Biff catches Willy with her in a hotel room
- Biff loses faith in his father due to infidelity