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Prestwick House  
**Literature**  
Teaching Unit  
*Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide*



## Death of a Salesman

by Arthur Miller

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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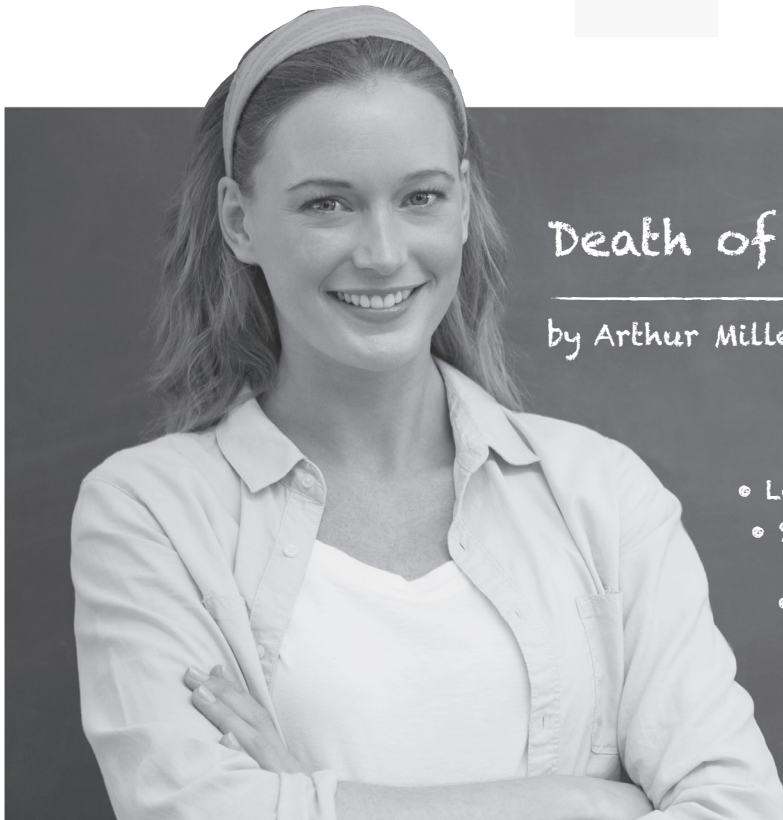
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# Literature Teaching Unit

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# Death of a Salesman

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. identify and discuss the following themes in this play:
  - The city as a place of confinement and restriction versus nature, the country, as a place of openness and growth. Note the following motifs:
    - Recurring use of the flute, a musical instrument associated with the woods;
    - Repeated references to being boxed in by apartments, etc.;
    - Repeated references to wilderness, open spaces, etc.;
    - Repeated references to seeds and planting.
  - Who we are in terms of our real talents and ambitions. Note this conflict within Biff and repeated references to “who we are,” “who you are,” etc.
  - The American Dream. What is it for Willy, and how does he hope to achieve it? What goes wrong?
  - The corrosive effect of lying and dishonesty. Note:
    - The role of theft and stealing
    - The many times the Lomans, particularly Willy and Happy, exaggerate or distort the past.
  - The tragic hero as a man obsessed by his dream. Consider Miller’s comment in the 1966 Paris Review. “I’ve always been aware of that kind of agony, of someone who has some driving, implacable wish in him which never goes away, which he can never block out. And it broods over him, it makes him happy sometimes or it makes him suicidal, but it never leaves him. Any hero whom we even begin to think of as tragic is obsessed, whether it’s Lear or Hamlet or the women in the Greek plays.”
  - Relationships between fathers and sons. Consider the relationships between Willy and his father; between Willy and his sons; between Charley and Bernard.
2. identify and discuss those techniques of staging that lead critics to label this play as “expressionistic.” (Note the stage directions for the set, lighting, use of music, appearance of the characters at different ages, and the appearance of some characters who are dead.)

# Death of a Salesman

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Cite actions or patterns of behavior by Happy, first as a teenager and later as an adult, that would prove the thesis: “Happy is the neglected son, who is not taken seriously by his parents.” He repeatedly tries to gain his parents’ attention, but usually fails in doing so.
2. How do Willy’s repeated references about being “boxed in” serve as a metaphor for his own life?
3. Identify the instances and cite the circumstances in which theft appears in this play; then state your opinion as to why Miller makes it so prominent.
4. Prove the thesis, by citing supporting comments or instances from the play, that the Lomans distort the past and then base their high expectations on this misinterpretation.
5. What is there about this play’s set design, music, lighting, and staging that makes it expressionistic?
6. What elements of plot, dialogue, characterization, and theme make this a realistic play?
7. In what sense is Willy Loman a tragic hero?
8. Why do some critics say that *Death of a Salesman* is a portrait of the American Dream gone sour?
9. For each of the following, write a character study of at least one-half page per character in which you identify the important comments or actions of each. State why they spoke or acted the way they did: Willy, Biff, Happy, Linda, Charley, and Ben.
10. Discuss Willy’s relationship with his father, and then the subsequent relationship with Willy’s own sons. Contrast this latter relationship with Charley and Bernard’s relationship.
11. By citing references to the play, prove that the following are themes in this play:
  - The confinement of the city versus the freedom of the country.
  - To be what you are brings happiness; to be what you think you should be, but may not have the temperament or talent for, brings unhappiness.
  - Willy Loman is the personification of the American Dream gone awry.

# Death of a Salesman

## Act I (pages 1 – 29)

Since the essence of drama is characters in conflict with themselves or others, what do we learn of the four major characters in *Death of a Salesman* early in the play?

### Willy

1. What is most noticeable about him?

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2. Why does his mind keep slipping back to the past?

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3. What upsets him about his job?

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4. What is it about Biff that upsets him?

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**Act I (pages 20 – 41)**

1. What is the implication of the following exchange between the two sons?

**Happy:** You're not still sour on Dad, are you, Biff?

**Biff:** He's all right, I guess.

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2. Why does Biff believe that his Dad is mocking him?

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3. What is the conflict within Biff? What do you suppose might be the cause of this conflict?

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4. What are Happy's problems?

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5. Who is Bill Oliver and why does Happy say Oliver will help Biff? What is Biff's reservation about Oliver?

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6. Willy's mind is wandering. How does Happy react to this? How does Biff react? What is noticeably missing in both reactions?

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5. What is the picture we get of Howard? What is ironic about the way he addresses Willy?

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6. When Willy compares himself to an orange, how might his comments be interpreted as a criticism of the capitalistic system?

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7. How does Howard resolve his problem with Willy?

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8. Ben appears again. Willy is torn between Ben and Linda. What might each represent?

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