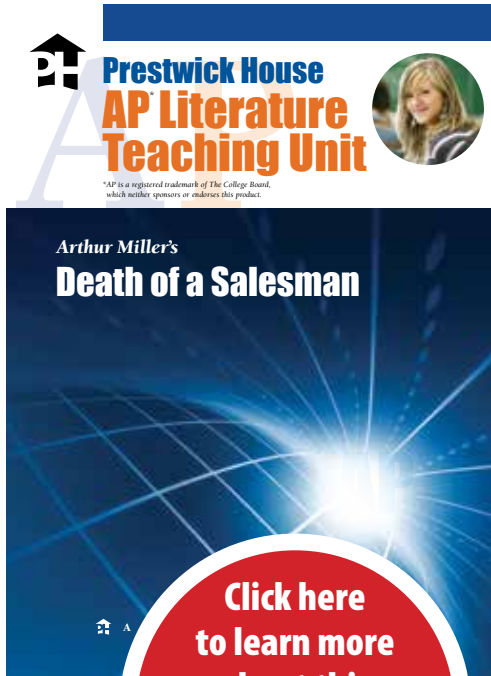




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Teaching Unit

# Death of a Salesman

by Arthur Miller

Written by Rebecca Grudzina



# Prestwick House

Item No. 302791

# 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 (human civilization) versus nature
  - Self-awareness / the role of self-awareness in achieving the American Dream
  - The corruption of the American Dream
  - *Death of a Salesman* as a modern tragedy
2. examine the realistic and expressionistic aspects of the play.
3. analyze Willy Loman as a tragic hero.
4. identify and comment on the “literary merit” of the play.
5. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.
6. respond to writing prompts similar to those that appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.
7. offer a close reading of *Death of a Salesman* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text.

## Lecture Notes

### BACKGROUND

*Death of a Salesman* was written in 1949 and is often regarded as an attack on the materialistic aspect of the American Dream—the achievement of wealth and success without integrity. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1949, the 1949 Tony Award for Best Play, and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play—the first play ever to win these three major awards.

The original production opened on February 10, 1949 at the Morosco Theatre in New York, and ran for 742 performances.

The play has been revived on Broadway three times:

- June 26, 1975 at the Circle in the Square Theatre, running for 71 performances.
- March 29, 1984 at the Broadhurst Theatre, running for 97 performances. Dustin Hoffman played Willy. In a return engagement, this production re-opened on September 14, 1984 and ran for 88 performances. The production won the Tony Award for Best Reproduction.
- February 10, 1999 (fiftieth anniversary of the play's original opening) at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre, running for 274 performances. This production won Tony Awards for: Best Revival of a Play; Best Actor in Play; Best Featured Actress in a Play; Best Direction of a Play. This production was filmed.

### STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY

The play is divided into three main parts, Act I, Act II, and the Requiem. Each section takes place on a different day in the “present-day” (spring 1949).

- Act I: nighttime
- Act II: various times the next day
- Requiem: several days later

Much of the family's history and the events that have led to the current situation and family dynamic are revealed through flashbacks. These flashbacks also provide a somewhat objective glimpse of the past in contrast to the family members' memories of those same events.

The plots of most plays begin with one or more *inciting incidents* that establish the conflict and set the rising action in motion. In *Death of a Salesman*, the two inciting incidents—both of which actually occurred before the beginning of the play—are Biff's return home after an absence of nearly ten years, and the arrival of the news of Ben's death.

# Death of a Salesman

## Act I

1. What is the first sensory image Miller creates for the reader?

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2. How does Miller visually introduce the motif of enclosed versus open spaces?

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3. What tone is set by the description of the opening of the play? How is this tone established?

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4. At the beginning of the action, from where is Willy returning? What is unusual about this homecoming?

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5. What is it about Biff that upsets Willy?

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**Act II**

1. What is the source of the optimism at the beginning of this act?

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2. The scene with Howard, Willy, and the tape recorder goes on for nearly two pages. What is the purpose of this scene?

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3. What purpose does Howard serve for the audience?

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4. What does Dave Singleman represent for Willy?

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5. How accurately do you suppose Willy is remembering Dave Singleman? What is significant about Singleman's name?

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6. How might Willy's comparing himself to an orange be interpreted as a criticism of the capitalistic system?

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**Requiem**

1. What is a requiem? Why is this section called a Requiem?

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2. Are we surprised that no one has come to the funeral? Why or why not?

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3. What does Biff mean when he says of his father, “He had all the wrong dreams. All, all wrong”?

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4. What is ironic about Linda’s wondering why no one came to the funeral?

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5. What does the ending of the play suggest is in store for Happy?

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