# A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE PENGUIN CLASSICS EDITION OF

# **DEATH OF A SALESMAN** BY ARTHUR MILLER



ARTHUR MILLER Death of a Salesman

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#### INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is arguably the most powerful American tragedy of the twentieth century. While part of the drama's strength draws on its confrontation with the conformist and self-congratulatory mood of postwar America, its real power springs from its deft character development, its sensitivity to domestic and internal conflicts alike, and its innovative plot and set design. For its time, the play is a delicate balance of traditional and experimental elements, bound by Modernism's own everyman themes: personal meaning and purpose in the face of alienation and anonymity. As Miller himself reminds us, the story itself is absurdly simple: it is the story of an average man's last day alive.

The play's classroom challenge lies in the subject itself: how do forward-thinking young people engage a drama about a man obsessed with an illusory past and, as they will observe from the title, no real future. The answer lies in the choice of themes that the teacher knows will engage individual classes. While it is difficult to downplay deeper themes without losing the meaning of the play, a number of accompanying themes can be emphasized: one's responsibilities to family, one's self, and one's benefactors. Self-awareness and self-deception are essential to Willy Loman's trials and tribulations. And there are few young adults who can't sympathize with Biff Loman's situation, trying as he is to liberate himself from his father's false view of him. "Who am I?" is the powerful, recurring question that drives each character's search for personal meaning.

To harness the young adult knack for forward thinking, this guide's Pre-Reading Activities emphasize reflection on personal values, ideas and ideals of the American Dream and realworld consideration of career-life and personal goals. Historical context takes a back seat to cultural context, meaning that the domestic, suburban, middle-class world of the play is emphasized above and beyond Cold War hysterics or the anti-conformist subcultures and the emerging Civil Rights revolution.

The During Reading Activities emphasize discussion questions as well as written responses which help connect the drama's themes with students' personal lives. After Reading Activities again emphasize reflection. Students can explore alternative paths in the story as well as the overlooked "successes" of minor characters. It also includes discussion topics ranging from conventions (Miller's expressionist plotline) to gender and feminist considerations.

The play's prevailing themes are deep: personal and professional failure, familial disaffection and estrangement, infidelity, and suicide. Although many young adults' lives have been touched by at least one of these realities, there are few invitations to talk about them. This very theme—the willingness to prefer cozy imaginary realities to actual human circumstances—is the drama's foundation stone. In this regard, *Death of a Salesman* is an invitation to the maturity and realism toward which young adults naturally endeavor. If Miller's domestic drama reminds us of nothing else, it is that needful conversations do not create great literature—they begin with it. *Death of a Salesman* opens up conversations on fundamental values—personal, familial, and social—while giving its audiences the final word on none. Ultimately, the lessons it bestows lie in the very classroom discussions it generates.

#### LIST OF MAIN CHARACTERS

Willy Loman, an aging salesman facing hard questions about his success and legacy Linda, the patient and devoted wife of Willy and mother of brothers Biff and Happy Biff, the older son of Willy and Linda, recently returned home Happy, the younger brother of Biff Charley, a generous neighbor and tactful friend Bernard, the childhood neighbor and friend of the Loman brothers Uncle Ben, Willy's older brother, ideal man, and embodiment of the American Dream The Woman, Willy's mistress and secret shame Howard Wagner, Willy's employer and son of Willy's original boss

#### **PRE-READING ACTIVITIES**

These activities activate students' prior experience and background knowledge. Teachers can choose the activities that best meet the background, needs, and interests of a particular group of students.

#### I. EXPLORING THE HISTORICAL PERIOD

#### The Ad Man: An Introduction to the 1950s Mainstream

The rise of the business class—and of middle class purchasing power—was a distinctly postwar American phenomenon. In the wake of unprecedented economic growth and a fresh credit market, the advertising industry revolutionized itself, promising to reach consumers where the salesman could not. The postwar explosion of advertising in print, radio, and television became a mirror for middle class ideals (if not realities). On the other hand, advertising industries also *created* those ideals by shaping American spending habits and views on consumption.

In the following activities, students examine the implications and fictions of 1950s ad culture.

- Ad Gallery: Have students visit http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/household-ads-1950s to browse hundreds of household ads from the decade. (Students can also search "1950s" within the search bar or choose a specific topic.) Using either a class site or free site (like http://s5.photobucket.com/) have students individually upload three images from the site to the class "gallery." For each ad, students should respond in writing to the following questions:
  - What product, service, or image is the ad for? How does the ad attempt to sell the product, service, or image? What are some of the selling points?
  - Which Americans does it target? What gender? Age?
  - Compared to the other images you find, what is either most surprising or most typical of this ad?
  - Do we still see ads for this product today? Have the selling points changed? How?

As a class, browse through the gallery and have students introduce and discuss one of their ads. Afterward, have students regroup or pair up to discuss the following questions before written reflection:

Assume you know nothing about this decade. Looking at the ads, what values or habits can you infer about family life in the 1950s?

- What would people do in their spare time?
- In which part of the house did they spend the most time?

- What did they eat and drink?
- What did women do with their time? What did men do with their time?
- Which Americans are not shown in these ads? Why do you suppose this is?
- Taken together, how would you define the nuclear family as 1950s ad culture portrays it?
- Do you think the ads are a realistic portrayal of family life in the 1950s? Why or why not?

For whole class discussion, students can post their reflections to the class site or share aloud.

- 2. Ad History: In this activity, individuals or pairs research and annotate a common article. Steps:
  - Create a Google site and paste the text of the following article, which provides a brief snapshot of the "mainstream" in the 1950s: http://adage.com/article/75-years-ofideas/1950s-tv-turns-america/102703/.
  - Have each individual or pair choose a term that is completely unfamiliar from the article (person, business, product, ad strategy, etc.) to research. Students will write a short definition for the term, including a list of sites used in their research. Each entry should include at least one example or detail about the term.
  - Have students upload their written entry to the Google site, signing their entry. Students will read all other entries. First, discuss with the students which entries were helpful in understanding the essay. Then ask: What do you understand about the impact of advertising on American society now that you have done this additional research? How is advertising currently affecting American society? Can you give specific examples of the ways in which ads shape Americans?

## The Salesman: Icon of the Business Class

"The Salesman" was an icon of the postwar American business class, a predominately white male segment of the middle class. For Miller, this icon is at once a lens through which we can witness middle class challenges and naiveté, and a key to the increasingly mythic nature of the American Dream. The play itself presumes a basic familiarity with this figure and its attendant values. In these exercise options, students explore the Salesman by looking at old and new perceptions of this quintessentially American icon.

- 1. As a class, watch the video at https://archive.org/details/Hired1940. This is an actual General Motors / Chevrolet training video from 1940, and it presents a good example of the sales culture emerging during and after WWII. During the film, have students respond in writing to the following questions, then discuss afterward:
  - How would you describe the people in this video? How do they talk? Dress?
  - Is this a culture in which you would be comfortable? Explain.
  - Why was this film made? Who made it? For whom do you think it was made? How do you know?
  - Give three examples of types of people who are *not* depicted in this film. Why do you suppose they are not shown?
  - Is this an effective film by today's standards? Give examples to support your judgment.
- 2. The idea of the Salesman begins with basic concepts. Have students compile a list of definitions for the following sales concepts: prospecting, cold calling, upselling, cross-selling, salary, commission, bonus. Simple internet searches will suffice. Afterward, have students visit http://monster.com. Have students, on their own, read through the summary of sales careers at http://www.monster.com/sales-careers. Then, as a group or class, explore the short article http://www.monster.com/blog/b/salesperson-sell-entertaining. Test for understanding with the following prompts:

- What are three to five responsibilities for a salesperson?
- What kind of education is required for most sales positions?
- What kinds of skills do salespeople need?
- How do salespeople get paid? In what ways is this desirable? In what ways is it not?
- · Based on this snapshot, would you want a career in sales? Why or why not?
- In groups or as a class, read the following article: http://www.monster.com/career-advice/ article/sales-not-for-you-dont-be-so-sure. Discuss as a whole class:
  - What are three misconceptions the article tries to dismiss?
  - Of what is this article trying to persuade the reader? How does it try to persuade?
  - Are you persuaded by it? Does the article sell you on sales? Why or why not?

## **II. INITIAL EXPLORATION OF THEMES**

#### The American Dream

1. In the play, Miller suggests various conceptions of the "American Dream." This activity asks students to define this term for themselves. Divide students into small groups and tell them: One definition of the American Dream is that a U.S. citizen can achieve success and prosperity through hard work and initiative (Google definition). As a group, brainstorm ideas, creating a mind map that lists life goals the average American seeks and the means they apply to achieve these goals. Title the center of the map "American Dream," and give specific examples for each idea connected to "Goals" and "Means for Reaching Goals."

Students can compose their maps on paper or post them to free sites such as http://prezi. com or www.cacoo.com. Have students share their maps with the class. As students review specific instances, ask if the example is (1) common within the school or community, (2) common among Americans, or (3) almost universal or globally common. Discuss which values are perhaps more universal, which are more local or idiosyncratic, and which are at the heart of the American Dream.

2. Ask students to ask at least three people outside of the class for their definitions of the American Dream. They should select people from diverse backgrounds—different genders, ages, races, and cultural groups should be represented. Tell students to make a chart with the following information about the respondents and their ideas: Gender, Age, Race/Cultural Group, Main Ideas.

Once students have their data, ask them to draw insights from their small sample of responses. What are the commonalities? What differences do they see between responses?

In small groups in class, ask students to compare their findings to see what is common and what is different across groups. As a whole class, discuss if the American Dream is "alive and well" in American society.

- 3. Have students explore the poll at https://www.newdream.org/resources/poll-2014. Discuss and define components of the American Dream in the bar chart on page two; then have students order categories according to their own priorities. Have students organize into groups based on their first choice in their personal re-ordering. In these groups, have each student write a one- or two-sentence rationale for why their priority takes precedence other components of the American Dream. Have each group generate concrete examples supporting their collective rationales. Invite different groups to use their rationales and examples to discuss why their idea of the American Dream is valid.
- 4. Given the popularity of the television series, Mad Men, many students will be familiar with

the pursuit of the American Dream by the main characters in the drama. Brainstorm with the class the ideas of the American Dream that they have seen in the series. Then ask students to read "*Mad Men's* Characters Know the American Dream Is a Lie—But That Hasn't Saved Them from Buying into It" an article by Tom Hawking from May 13, 2015, available at http://flavorwire.com/518739/mad-mens-characters-know-the-american-dream-is-a-lie-but-that-hasnt-saved-them-from-buying-in-to-it. Discuss as a class:

- According to Hawking, what are the characters in *Mad Men* pursuing. Why are they so unhappy?
- Do you agree with Hawking's assessment that Don Draper embodies the American Dream and that he understands why it eludes him?

## Self-Deception

One of the prevailing themes of Miller's play is self-deception, and each member of the Loman family takes part in self-deception. Like the characters in the play, everyone has strengths and weaknesses, but being honest with one's self often means distinguishing between the two. Sometimes, though, people convince themselves that they are good (or bad) at something when the opposite is true. This Problem Situation exercise asks students to consider how people engage in self-deception and the ramifications of this behavior.

Have students individually read the scenario and respond to the questions in writing. Then have them pair up and discuss their responses. Afterward ask a few students to read their responses to the class, and discuss the following questions with the whole class: Were John and Emily deceiving themselves? Is self-deception a common trait among students? If so, in what ways? Why might students deceive themselves about their abilities or their progress in achieving their goals?

Scenario: John and Emily are high school students who want to get good grades, maintain active social lives, and participate in sports. John is a linebacker on the football team, and Emily is a defender on the soccer team. Their busy lives prevent them from spending much time on their homework, and they both have been averaging Cs with an occasional D on their work in English class. The end of the semester is drawing near, and a major final project and test are looming. They both think they will pull off at least a B in the course by doing well on these final activities. However, both the football and soccer teams have qualified for post-season games, and both John and Emily are on the decorating committee for a major end-of-year dance which they will attend. Secretly they both want to be selected as royalty for the dance, so they have been spending extra time socializing with other students after practice in the evenings.

Questions for response:

- Do you think that John and Emily are deceiving themselves about being able to do well in their English class?
- What do you think might be the result of the schedule they are following?
- If they don't do well on their English work, will they blame others or themselves?
- What, if anything, might you do differently if you were in their place?

## Disillusionment

Another important theme of the play is disillusionment, specifically regarding one's own deeply held values. This exercise has students map their own values and judgments prior to reading the play.

Distribute a hard copy of the questionnaire to each student. For each pair of statements, have students choose the one they agree with more; then have them provide a one-sentence rationale for why they agree with that statement. Afterward, if possible, have students text their choice

from each pair via **http://polleverywhere.com**. Have students use their written rationales for group discussion of the poll results.

- a. Personal happiness depends mostly on one's relationships with family and friends.
- b. Personal happiness depends mostly on one's material and financial success.
- c. It's okay to lie to people you love if the lie protects their feelings or security.
- d. It's never okay to lie to people you love, no matter the reason.
- e. It's okay to lie about yourself if it earns you the respect of other people.
- f. To lie about yourself is to have no self-respect.
- g. Self-respect depends on other peoples' perceptions of us, whether we like it or not.
- h. Other people's perceptions of us neither hurt nor help our self-respect.
- i. It's more respectable to strive toward a goal and fail than it is to quit striving.
- j. It's wiser to know when to quit than to strive toward a seemingly unreachable goal.

As a (paired) After Reading Activity, have students answer the questions above from the character's perspectives; one partner should answer from Willy's perspective and the other from Biff's perspective. Students should identify a moment in the play that captures that character's belief. Ask students to discuss how Biff and Willy's perspectives (answers) compare.

Have students return to their answers from the Pre-Reading Activity. Discuss: Which of the characters might have answers similar to the students' own answers? Have students describe in writing a scene in the play where the character demonstrates a value highlighted by one of the statements.

# **DURING READING ACTIVITIES**

# I. TRACKING THE NARRATIVE

On a technical level, the most challenging aspect of the play is the plot or narrative flow. Willy Loman's character slips in and out of recollection—often while on stage with "present" characters. The effect is akin to stream-of-consciousness, but the logic of it is fairly simple: Willy disappears into recollection, especially when confronted with contradictions to his own version of things. On occasion, he disappears even further into the past, entering what we might call the "deep past." The chart included here can help students track the flow of the narrative, and they can use it as a reference tool for During and After Reading activities. Alternatively, provide students with the structure of the chart and ask them to fill it in as they read the play.

#### The Plot Structure of Death of a Salesman Pages **Exterior Events** [Willy's] Interior Events Past **Deep Past** 1-8 Late at night, aging salesman Willy Loman returns to his Brooklyn home from an abortive business trip to Maine 8-14 While staying in their parent's house, brothers Happy and Biff Loman reflect on past exploits and present anxieties. Willy begins to daydream. 15-24 Teenage Happy and Biff are polishing the Chevy as Willy returns from a successful sales trip. Willy and Linda reflect on their household's success and security. Willy dismisses Biff's guestionable behavior. 24-26 Willy has a brief affair while on his business trip. The "Woman" is introduced 26-27 Willy is enraged when confronted with Biff's teenage exploits. Bernard and Ben are introduced. 27-30 Happy attempts to talk with Willy, but they argue. Overhearing them, neighbor Charley visits Willy and offers him, yet again, a new job. Willv observes the apparition of Ben while playing cards with Charley. 30-37 Ben offers Willy "tremendous opportunity" in Alaska. Young Happy and Biff are introduced to their legendary uncle. 37-44 Willy goes for a walk alone while Linda, Biff, and Happy share concerns about him. Linda vehemently defends Willy from criticism. 45-51 Willy returns. Happy shares a promising new business idea,

in which he and Biff are partners. A fresh optimism fills the household. In order to procure a loan, Biff plans a meeting with a useful contact (and former employer) the following day. Willy is elated.

[End of Act 1]

Pages	Exterior Events	[Willy's] Interior Events	
		Past	Conscience
52-56	Biff and Happy have already left to pitch their business plan. Over breakfast, Linda encourages Willy to ask his employer for a sales position in the city so he doesn't have to travel. Linda reminds Biff, over the phone, that he and Happy have dinner plans with their father that night.		
56-69	Willy asks his boss, Howard, for a position in the city. In an offhand, dismissive manner, Howard fires him.	The Loman house is abuzz, getting ready for Biff's big game at Ebbet's Field. Charley's aloof humor infuriates Willy, who takes the game very seriously.	Willy confesses to Ben that "nothing's working out." Ben and Willy compare their ideas of success. Willy seeks Ben's validation.
69-76	Bernard arrives at his father's office, where Willy has apparently been talking to himself during his reminiscences. Willy has a candid conversation with Bernard, then with Charley. He accepts Charley's money but not his job offer.		
76-96	Happy and Biff arrive at the restaurant for dinner. While waiting for Willy, they meet two young women. Biff tells Happy that the meeting with Oliver was a failure. Willy arrives and tells his sons he's been fired. Biff confesses that his own meeting was a failure, but then attempts to back- pedal on his story.	Linda, Bernard, and Happy react to the news that Biff has flunked math (and therefore can't graduate). Young Biff panics about his future. Willy relives the night when Biff discovered the affair with the Woman. Bernard's earlier question about Biff's refusal to take summer school is answered, in part.	
96-109	Late that night, Happy and Biff return to the house to find Linda furious that they had apparently deserted Willy at the restaurant. Willy is attempting to plant his garden in the dark. Willy and Biff have a final confrontation in which Biff attempts to dispel Willy's delusions about both of them. Willy realizes that Biff loves him, but his delusions persist. Late that night, Happy and Biff return to the house to find Linda furious that they had apparently deserted Willy at		Willy confesses to Ben his plan to commit suicide so that his life insurance will provide for the family. Ben is alternately the voice of affirmation and doubt.

96-109	the restaurant. Willy is attempting to plant his garden in the dark. Willy and Biff have a final confrontation in which Biff attempts to dispel Willy's delusions about both of them. Willy realizes that Biff loves him, but his delusions persist. Biff announces he will leave the family forever on the following day. Willy drives off; the car crashes. As morning rises, the remaining family members appear on the stage's apron in mourning dress. [End of Act II]	Willy confesses to Ben his plan to commit suicide so that his life insurance will provide for the family. Ben is alternately the voice of affirmation and doubt.
110-113	[Requiem]	
	Linda, her sons, and Charley are the only ones at Willy's grave. Each reflects differently on Willy's life, and each character's perception of Willy Loman is reiterated. Linda's soliloquy ends with the paradoxical notion of freedom.	

# **II. ANALYZING THROUGH INDIVIDUAL RESPONSE**

These questions can be used to guide students' reading, to provide journal prompts, or to stimulate group discussion.

# Act I

- 1. What are Willy's criticisms of Biff? What are his expectations for him? Why might these be important to Willy? (pp. 5-6)
- 2. Based on Miller's description of the two brothers in his stage directions, which son do you anticipate might better resemble his father? What quality do they share? How have you already seen that quality in Willy? (p. 8)
- 3. Why does Biff feel like he's wasted his life? How does he measure success? (p. 11)
- 4. How does Happy measure success? How does this differ from his brother's idea of success?
- 5. Biff gets angry at the idea that Linda can hear Willy when he talks to himself. Why? (p. 15)
- 6. From where and how did Biff get the football? Why does Willy react the way he does? (p. 18)
- 7. Willy reveals his secret dream to his sons. What is it? Does his dream shape his description of his travels? Or do you think his travels shape his dream? Explain. (pp. 18-19)
- 8. How does Biff react when Bernard warns him that he might flunk math? How does Willy react? Why does Willy react this way? Why does Willy take out his anger on Bernard? (p. 20)
- 9. In Willy's eyes, Bernard (p. 20) and his father Charley (p. 18) share the same flaw. What is

it? How does Willy contrast his sons to Charley's son?

- 10. According to Willy, what is the single greatest quality of "the man who gets ahead"? (p. 21) Do you agree or disagree with him? What does it mean to "get ahead"? Explain using examples from life.
- 11. Willy tells Linda that "people don't seem to take to [him]." How does this compare to how Willy describes his reputation to his sons on page 19? Why is there a difference between how he talks about his feelings to his sons and to his spouse?
- 12. Based on the short flashback of the "Woman," how would you describe Willy's relationship with her? Why do you think Miller inserted this brief scene in the middle of Willy's conversation with Linda? (p. 25)
- 13. Willy implicitly sums up his feelings as a father about Biff. What are they? (p. 27) How does this help explain his present feelings about his son? How does he feel Biff's behavior and lifestyle reflect on him?
- How would you describe Willy and Charley's relationship? Why does Willy treat him the way he does? (p. 30)
- How does Ben make Willy feel about himself? What qualities in Ben does Willy want for himself? For his sons? (p. 35)
- 16. Biff tells Linda to "stop making excuses" for Willy. How does she defend Willy? Is she really making excuses for him? Explain. (p. 41)
- 17. Why is Willy so confident that Happy and Biff's business plan will work? (p. 48) Why does Willy himself need their plan to work?

#### Act II

- 1. What kind of mood does the music immediately suggest? Why does the scene open with this mood?
- Willy notes that he would like to buy some seeds after work this evening. What does the gardening motif suggest about Willy's attitude at this point in time? (p. 52)
- 3. Linda and Willy are about to make their last mortage payment on the house. Linda points out that the house has "served its purpose." What does she mean? Why doesn't Willy grasp her meaning? (p. 54)
- 4. Over the phone, Biff tells Linda that he was the one who took the rubber pipe off of the gas heater. What is Linda's reaction? Why would she have felt more relieved if Willy had removed it himself? (p. 56)
- How would you describe Howard? What do he and Willy have in common? What is Howard's reaction to Willy as he describes his wishes? Why does he react this way? (pp. 59-60)
- 6. Compared to his words, how do Howard's actions tell us more about his attitude toward Willy? (p. 62)
- While Ben is building his business empire, Willy is building "something with [his] firm." According to Willy, what is he building? How is it different from what Ben is building? (p. 65)
- 8. "Ben, am I right? Don't you think I'm right? I value your advice." Why do you think Willy needs Ben's validation? Is there evidence that Ben has ever validated Willy's life choices? How has this affected how Willy thinks about himself, his life, and his past choices?

- 9. Why does Willy feel like Charley laughs at him behind his back? (p. 69) Why does Willy take the importance of the game so seriously? What about Charley's behavior enrages him?
- When Willy first tells Bernard about Biff's plans, is he lying or just exaggerating? Explain. Why does he do this? (p. 70)
- 11. Complete Willy's sentence for him: "I always felt that if a man was impressive, and well liked, that nothing—" (p. 75)
- 12. "We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years..." Why do you think Biff would ever believe he was a salesman for Oliver? (p. 81)
- 13. Happy tries to convince Biff to lie to Willy. What's the lie? What is Happy's motive in trying to persuade his brother to lie to their father? (p. 82)
- 14. Biff calls Willy a liar and a fake. What is the lie? How does it change Biff's perception of his father?
- 15. The scene in the hotel with the Woman reveals the meaning of the symbol of the stockings. What does Willy associate with stockings, and how does this flashback explain Willy's reaction to stockings when he's with Linda? (p. 95)
- 16. Do you think Linda knew about the Woman? Why or why not? If she were to find out, would it change her opinion of Willy? How do you know?
- 17. "I've got to get some seeds right away. Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground." What is the denotative meaning of this line? What's the connotative meaning? How do we explain Willy's sense of urgency in finding seeds for planting? (p. 96)
- What feelings motivate Linda's reaction to Biff and Happy when they return to the house? Do you think her reaction is justified or not? Explain. (p. 99)
- 19. What is the proposition that Willy describes to Ben? How does Ben validate Willy's idea? How does he cast doubt on it? (pp. 100-101)
- 20. Willy continues to blame Biff's failures on spite. What does he mean by this? Why does he continue to believe that Biff is spiting him? (p. 103)
- 21. "You blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody!" Who does Biff blame for this? What does he mean? What are some examples of how Willy has done this throughout Biff's life? Is Willy to blame? Explain. (p. 105)
- 22. Biff tries to make his father realize that he has created an illusion for both of them. What is this illusion? What is Willy's reaction? (p. 105)

## Requiem

- Of his father, Biff says, "There's more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made." What does Biff mean by this? How does this reflect on Biff's definition of happiness early in Act 1? (p. 110)
- 2. What does Charley mean when he observes that "for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life"? (p. 111)
- 3. Happy resolves to "show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain." (p. 111) How might Happy do this? Do you think Happy is capable of doing this? Why or why not?
- 4. "We're free... We're free..." (p. 112) What freedoms does Linda imply in her last lines at Willy's grave? Who has which freedoms?

#### **III. READER RESPONSE AND JOURNAL PROMPTS**

As students read the play, they can collect and comment on significant quotes in a reader response journal or as a focus activity for a discussion of different sections of the play. The teacher can also provide quotes and ask for students' verbal or written responses. Some key quotes for reflection include:

- 1. "See, Biff, everybody around me is so false that I'm constantly lowering my ideals..." (p. 12).
- "That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want" (p. 21).
- "...Dad left when I was such a baby and I never had a chance to talk to him and I still feel—kind of temporary about myself" (p. 36).
- 4. "He's the dearest man in the world to me, and I won't have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue" (p. 39).
- 5. "Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. 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 allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" (p. 40).
- 6. "It's not what you say, it's how you say it—because personality always wins the day" (p. 48).
- 7. "...I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. 'Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people?" (p. 61).
- 8. "...because it's not what you do, Ben. It's who you know and the smile on your face! It's contacts, Ben, contacts! The whole wealth of Alaska passes over the lunch table at the Commodore Hotel, and that's the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked!" (pp. 65-66).
- 9. "The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that" (p. 75).
- 10. "Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am!" (p. 105).
- 11. "...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" (p. 111).
- 12. "I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have—to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him" (p. 111).

#### **IV. DEEPENING ANALYSIS: GROUP AND INDEPENDENT ACTIVITIES**

#### **STORYBOARDING CONFLICT: ACT 1**

Storyboarding is a quick and easy way to summarize key conflicts in the drama. It can also reveal subtle nuances in those conflicts. Students can create their own three-panel storyboards by hand or at http://www.storyboardthat.com. For Act 1, assign or have students choose a character pairing from the following list:

- Willy & Biff
- Linda & Biff/Happy
- Biff & Happy
- Willy & Charlie
- Linda & Ben/Willy
- Willy & Ben
- Willy (in reality) & Willy (in illusion)

Have students identify a key scene in the play that exemplifies the conflict between their two characters. (Other characters may be included or referenced.) Based on the scene have students use or create dialogue to summarize (1) the emotion, issue, or disagreement of the first character, (2) the response or position of the second character, and (3) the resolution or lack thereof reached by the characters. Once the storyboards are complete, have students print them for a gallery walk or post them on a message board. In either case, storyboards with the same character pair should be grouped together.

Have students respond to the following questions in writing (during the gallery walk) or on the message board:

- Which conflict did you storyboard? How did other interpretations of the conflict agree with or differ from your own?
- Consider all the conflicts across the storyboards. Which interpretation surprised you most? Why?
- Of all the conflicts, which seem to be at the heart of the play? Explain.

# **STORYBOARDING CONFLICT: ACT 2**

Willy Loman's confession that "nothing's working out. I don't know what to do..." has no easy solution. In this storyboarding exercise, have students piece together a history of Willy's life choices. In pairs, have students identify separate instances of a choice that Willy made, either in his past or the drama's present. In a triptych, three-panel storyboard, ask students to illustrate (1) the initial circumstances (what was happening), (2) Willy's action (choice), and (3) an effect or outcome of that choice.

Now have students trade their storyboards with another pair. For each storyboard, have students discuss and respond in writing to the following questions:

- What is the choice that Willy faces? What circumstance led him to make that choice?
- What is his motive? Are there any other considerations guiding his decision?
- Who else did that choice affect? Was it for better or worse? Explain.
- Given the choice Willy made, what might have been an alternative outcome? How would this outcome have been better or worse than what happened in the play?

As a whole class, review the choices illustrated across the storyboards. Discuss: What conclusions can you draw about Willy's decision-making process? What motivates Willy? Does he take others into consideration? To what degree is he responsible for the effects of his choices?

# **DIRECTOR'S NOTES**

Engage students in the action and emotions of the characters by choosing key scenes for them to analyze and perform. This exercise works best with scenes that are most emotional or tense (i.e. pp. 15-24, 37-44, or 96-109). Divide the class into groups with enough actors for the scene.

Before the performance: In their groups, have students read through and analyze their assigned scene by asking them to describe, using bullet points, how characters in the scene will look and act. Each member of the group can choose a different character to analyze. Questions to consider:

- How do the characters feel?
- Why do they feel that way?
- How should their voice reflect the feeling? What degree of volume, tone, strength, or weakness might they use?
- How would they move about during the scene?
- What physical actions might they use to show what they are feeling?
- How do other characters respond? How do you know by their facial or physical actions?

Performance: Have each group perform their scene with appropriate actions as they read their lines.

After the performance: Ask each group to critique its performance by jotting down their sense of how well they were able to express the intended emotional impact of the scene. Questions to consider:

- Did the actors behave in the ways imagined in the read-through? If not, how were they different?
- Did acting out the scene change the way you think about the character?
- Were you able to effectively convey your ideas about the character? What might you need to add or change?

# THE LOMAN MAP OF THE UNIVERSE

The settings alluded to in the dialogue have both symbolic and imaginary value for Willy. In this activity, students use found or created images to represent Willy's world. Begin by having students list places Willy goes to in his imagination: Brooklyn "yesterday," Brooklyn "tomorrow," New England, Alaska, the "Jungle." Have students draw these places on a map and provide images for the location. Remind students that borders and relative position also have significance.

Next, for each of these places have students fill in their maps with the following responses:

- Who inhabits each of these places in Willy's imagination? For each place, indicate the character Willy primarily associates with that place.
- Of which of these places does Willy have a negative opinion? Why? Of which of these places does Willy have a positive opinion? Why?
- For each place, name an image or symbol that Willy associates with the place.

## **GENDER SWAP**

While the roles of female characters in the play have been criticized since the play's debut, the portrayal of both genders is rigidly structured and, by contemporary standards, quite conservative. In this exercise, students explore the implications of the play's portrayal of both genders by reversing the characters' roles in two key pieces of dialogue.

# Act I:

Working in pairs, have students reread pp. 8-14, Biff and Happy's bedroom conversation. As a class, do an initial read-through of the scene. Have students read along, highlighting any lines that stand out as meaningful or emotional. Discuss:

- What struggles do the brothers have in common? What do they struggle with separately?
- How do they view women? What are their expectations of women? How do they treat women?

Next, have students work in pairs. While reading, students should identify words and phrases that are clearly "gendered" and replace them with a word or phrase equally applied to the opposite gender (i.e. replace "him" for "her," "mister" for "missus," "brother" for "sister," "dad" for "mom," and vice versa, etc.) Students might even rename characters as they translate them into the opposite gender. Have a group perform the rewritten script, preferably with female students playing male roles and vice-versa. During the performance, have students follow along in the text and highlight any lines that stand out as especially meaningful or emotional. Afterward, encourage students to reflect on the following questions in writing or aloud:

- Which lines change when the gender of the actor/actress delivering them changes? How do they change?
- How does the gender swap change the conversation as a whole? Is this a conversation you would expect two sisters to have? Why or why not?

## Act II:

Working in groups of 3-4, have students reread pp. 76-86, the opening restaurant scene, before Willy arrives. As in Act 1, students should identify words and phrases that are clearly "gendered," then replace them with a word or phrase equally applied to the opposite gender. Again, students might even rename characters as they translate them into the opposite gender. Have a different group perform the rewritten script, preferably with female students playing male roles and vice-versa. Afterward, have students reflect on the following questions in writing or aloud:

- What line or moment in the scene was most surprising or unexpected? Why do you think it had that effect?
- How would you describe the overall effect of the gender swap (i.e. comic, awkward, uncomfortable, etc.)? How would you describe the female roles? The male roles?
- How would you explain the difference between this reenactment and the scene as it was originally written? Does the dialogue have a different effect when the opposite gender delivers the lines? Why or why not?
- Are gender roles different today compared to the time of the setting of the play? In what ways?

## **AFTER READING ACTIVITIES**

## I. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITTEN RESPONSE

- 1. Consider Willy's idea of success. Is his definition of success realistic or unrealistic? Does Willy Loman achieve the American Dream, or does the American Dream fail him? Explain.
- 2. In her argument with Biff, Linda exclaims of Willy, "His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him....Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" (p. 40). First, what is Linda actually demanding? Why does she argue that "attention must be paid"? Lastly, do you accept her argument, knowing what you know about Willy's questionable choices? Explain.
- 3. Why does Willy commit suicide? Is this a positive or negative act? Explain, using details from the play.
- 4. "The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that" (p. 75). Despite Charley's mockery, Willy does in fact spend much of his life trying to sell something: the idea of his own success. Using evidence from the play, explain how Willy tries to portray himself as successful to each of

the following characters: Ben, Charley, Linda, his sons, and himself. Who does he successfully persuade of his success, and why do these characters believe him? Who does he fail to persuade, and what arguments do these characters give him?

- 5. The play is often described as a tragedy. Is Willy a tragic hero? If so, what might his tragic flaw be? Argue your position using examples from the play.
- 6. "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house" (p. 104). Throughout the play, Willy, Biff, and Happy all tell lies. Not all the lies are self-serving. For each of the Loman men, find two lies they tell. For each lie, what is the motive? Are some more acceptable lies than others? If so, why? If not, why? Finally, what are the consequences of each man's lies?
- 7. In the restaurant scene with Biff, Happy, and Willy, two things happen: Biff explains how Oliver wouldn't listen to his business idea, and Bernard and Linda react to Biff flunking math in high school. Biff's two major "failures" mirror each other on the stage at the same time. This is the first time in the drama that there is a flashback that does not include Willy. Discuss: What does this flashback reveal about Miller's use of time in the play?
- 8. The character of Ben serves a complex role in the play. At first, he is Willy's older brother who appears in Willy's recollection. What is Willy's relationship with his brother during Act I? In what ways does Willy consider Ben his "ideal"? How does Ben regard Willy? Now consider how the character of Ben changes in Act II. How does Miller use Ben in a fundamentally different way in Act II? At what moments does Ben become Willy's voice of self-doubt? Of self-affirmation?
- 9. Arthur Miller has long been criticized for his portrayal of women. For example, read Rhoda Koenig's criticism of Miller's treatment of female characters in Christopher Bigsby's "Introduction" to the play (p. xix). Using examples from the play, respond to Koenig's critique and Miller's response (suggested by Bigsby) to the question of how women are treated in the drama. Do you agree with Koenig, Miller, or both? Explain.

## **II. GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS**

These activities engage students in making connections and furthering their thinking about themes and ideas they have encountered in reading the play. They also provide an outlet for creative responses to the play.

#### 1. Unwritten Scenes: Forks in the Road

"If I'd gone with him to Alaska that time, everything would've been totally different." There are a number of "forks in the road" where Willy's choices might have yielded different results for him and his family. Have students work with partners and choose one or more of the following alternative paths that Willy might have taken. Students begin by rereading the scene. Have each partner choose one character, then write an 18 to 20-line dialogue in which each attempts to persuade the other of his or her perspective. If students elect to perform their scenes, have the audience declare, justify, and discuss a winner in the argument. Then, as a class, discuss the different persuasive arguments used and their effectiveness.

- Going to Alaska: What if Willy followed Ben to Alaska? Willy's perspective: I need to go to Alaska because... Linda's perspective: You should stay in Brooklyn because...
- Biff graduates: How did Willy attempt to persuade Biff to graduate? *Biff's perspective:* It doesn't matter if I go to summer school and pass math because... *Willy's perspective:* It's absolutely important that you go to summer school, pass your math class, and graduate because...

• Willy accepts Charley's offer: How might Linda try to persuade Willy to take the job? *Linda's Perspective:* You should accept Charley's offer to give you a job because... *Willy's Perspective:* I can't accept Charley's offer because...

#### 2. Success Stories

Not everyone in the play feels a sense of failure in their lives. In fact, almost half of the play's minor characters are successful. Uncle Ben, neighbor Charley, Charley's son Bernard, and Howard Wagner are all successful in different ways.

Have students create a table with a column for each character. For each line, list the following: the character's occupation; a citation from the text that shows in what ways that character is successful; and two or three of the character's qualities or circumstances.

As a follow-up, discuss with students:

- How do each character's personal qualities or circumstances lead to his or her success? Which of these qualities, if any, does Willy share?
- Throughout the play, Willy criticizes each of these successful characters *except* his brother, Ben. How do Ben's successes differ from the achievements of Charley, Bernard, and Howard Wagner? What qualities does Ben have that, in Willy's eyes, the others do not?
- Willy criticizes Charley, Bernard, and Howard Wagner for different reasons. Add another column to the chart. For each character, identify a line in the text that shows Willy's criticism. Are his points valid or superficial?
- Willy and Ben have fundamentally different ideas of success. While Ben believes in what is material and tangible, Willy insists that the key to success is contacts and the support, admiration, and love of people around you (p. 65-66). With whom do you agree more? Why? Which version of success does Willy ultimately choose? What are the consequences of this choice?

#### 3. Competing Lomans

By the end of the drama, brothers Biff and Happy understand differently. While Happy's understanding of his father resembles Linda's, Biff has a different idea about his father. Ask students to choose Biff or Happy to write a bio-poem for Willy Loman from that character's perspective. Remind students to begin by reviewing the brothers' final words about Willy in the "Requiem."

Have students share their poems in groups or with the class, discussing the following:

- How do the two brothers' perceptions of Willy differ? What do they have in common?
- Whose perception of Willy is more accurate?
- What moments in the drama support this interpretation of Willy?

This activity can be opened to include bio-poems from the points of view of Linda and Charley.

#### 4. The Loman Bequest

As a foil for his conscience, Willy tells Ben a justification for his suicide: the life insurance payout will provide for his family far better than he himself can. Yet Willy never articulates what he hopes the family will do with this bequest. In this exercise, students consider Willy's attitudes toward the people in his life and select a bequest of symbolic items.

Have students choose one of the main characters from the play. From Willy's perspective, have students write a brief first-person paragraph addressed to the character from Willy using one of the following expressions:

• A wish for the future

- A shared memory
- A regret
- An apology
- A shared value or personal quality

In small groups, have students share Willy's bequests and what they reveal about his character. Then discuss as a whole class Willy's intentions at the end of the play. What does Willy truly wish for his family? Is he thinking about them or himself at the end?

#### 5. The Music of the Play

Miller uses music for various purposes throughout the play. Ask students to review the play identifying where and when music is used and describing the kinds of music Miller has chosen. Once students have this list, ask them to analyze Miller's intended effect for specific instances when music is used. Discuss in writing or as a class: How does music in convey the mood and message of a particular scene?

Students can listen to the music as they review the play by tracking the musical cues in the complete soundtrack of the original Broadway production at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8nSKs5c5-CqECV6gm\_pM2CoLN2fRUtiU. Also students can review various productions of the play with the music.

For a creative exercise, ask students to create or find their own music for a key scene in the play. Then students can share their music and scene and explain their choices to the class.

## **FILM AND VIDEO RESOURCES**

 A short history of the play's many revivals can be found here: https://theatrelitwiki. wikispaces.com/Death+of+a+Salesman+Broadway+Productions. This site includes two links to YouTube with scenes from two revivals. Although these are different scenes in the play, they both include the main characters, Willy and Linda. Ask students to watch these scenes, paying attention to the representation of the main characters by the actors.

Discuss: Which of the representations are more successful and why? Ask students to identify specific actions, speech patterns, physical movements that reveal the character's inner nature. Ask them why they think this representation is most effective.

- 2. One of the most notable recent revivals was the 2009 production at the Yale Repertory Theater: http://www.yalerep.org/on\_stage/currentseason/salesman.html. Director James Bundy's choice to cast the play exclusively with African American actors and actresses received mixed reviews, namely because the Loman family experience was, during its inception and original production, a specifically white, suburban experience. For students, a short but challenging review of Bundy's production can be found at http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/05/ theater/reviews/05deat.html?\_r=1. Questions for discussion might include:
  - How would you describe the reviewer's attitude toward the play? What are some examples of his support for this production? What are some of his criticisms?
  - What was playwright August Wilson's main objection to the all-African American casting of this play? Rephrase his objection in your own words.
  - How does this objection affect the reviewer's opinion of this particular production? Do you agree or disagree with Wilson's observation? Why?
- 3. Choose key scenes from the two outstanding film versions of the play for class viewing. Given the two adaptations' clear-cut differences, they will readily lend themselves to

compare-contrast exercises analyzing literary devices such as mood, character development, tone, foreshadowing, and elements of tragedy such as hamartia and hubris.

- The 1966 version of *Death of a Salesman* follows the play's dialogue verbatim. It casts Willy's descent into instability in a stark critique of the values of middle class culture. Death of a Salesman. 1966. Dir. Alex Segal. Actors: Lee J. Cobb. Mildred Dunnock. George Segal. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0187806/?ref\_=tt\_rec\_tti
- The complete 1966 film is available on YouTube. Act I: https://www.youtube.com/watch? v=aVjSJ6yblbo and Act II: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLRSSBXVDMQ
- The 1985 film offers a volatile interpretation of Willy's struggle through the acting of Dustin Hoffman. Death of a Salesman. 1985. Dir. Volker Schlöndorff. Actors: Dustin Hoffman, Kate Reid, John Malkovich. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089006/: YouTube has several short scenes from this film. The confrontation between Biff and Willy appears here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1lazBK1Pec

Use the following questions to generate class discussion:

- Compare and contrast the two portrayals of Willy. Which seems more effective and why?
- Compare and contrast the two portrayals of Linda. Which seems more effective and why?

Miller's play can be viewed as a critique of the American Dream. Comparing the 1985 version to the 1966 film, ask students to describe the mood or the atmosphere created by the director, including details from the films that create the overall mood. Remind students of the definition of mood. A useful definition can be found at <a href="http://literarydevices.net/mood/">http://literarydevices.net/mood/</a>. Then discuss:

- Is one of the films lighter or darker than the other? Why? What is the difference in mood between the two films?
- What might account for the differences in mood generated by the production of the film?
- Is there a connection between the mood and the period (1960s vs. 1980s) in which the film was produced?
- Based on the mood of the film, could a viewer conclude that the American Dream was more viable in one period than in the other?

## **EXTENDED READING**

The following texts can be paired with *Death of a Salesman* to introduce or extend discussion of key themes.

• A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry

This 1959 play follows an African American family as they strive to define their own American Dream. Incidentally, the story begins with the circumstances that conclude *Death of a Salesman*. The father has died, leaving an insurance policy to help improve his family's circumstances.

Babbitt by Sinclair Lewis

Arguably a precedent for Miller's play, this 1928 novel by Nobel Prize winner Sinclair Lewis examines the dreams, challenges, and double standards of Willy Loman's icon: the middle-class American businessman.

#### • Fences by August Wilson

Often drawn into comparison with Miller's play, this 1983 drama explores a parallel African American middle-class experience of the 1950s. As with Miller's protagonist, Wilson's blue collar patriarch must resolve his own broken dreams or lose his family in the process. *Glengarry Glen Ross* by David Mamet Winner of the Tony Award and the 1984 Pulitzer Prize, this story navigates the highs and lows of four real estate salesmen turned against each other. Due to its language, clips of the film may be advisable.

White Noise by Don DeLillo This 1985 winner of the National Book Award follows the middle-class, Midwestern Gladney family as it explores—often more subtly—many of the themes in *Death of a Salesman:* the pitfalls of materialism, the schism and reunion of family, and the confrontation of the failings of loved ones.

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