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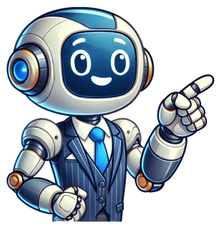

Death of a salesman pdf

ARTHUR MILLER 1949AUTHOR BIOGRAPHYPLOT SUMMARYCHARACTERSTHEMESSTYLEHISTORICAL CONTEXTCRITICAL OVERVIEWCRITICISMFURTHER READINGArthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman is considered by many to be both the playwright’s masterpiece and a cornerstone of contemporary American drama. Subtitled Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem, the play was first produced in 1949 and struck an immediate, emotional chord with audiences. The work garnered numerous honors and awards, including the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and enjoyed a lengthy run (742 performances) on Broadway. In the decades following its premiere, Death of Salesman has become one of the most performed and adapted plays in American theatrical history. Much of this success is attributed to Miller’s facility in portraying the universal hopes and fears of middle-class America. Through his main character, Willy Loman, Miller examines the myth of the American Dream and the shallow promise of happiness through material wealth. He uses Willy as an example of how undivided faith in such a dream can often yield tragic results, especially when it goes largely unfulfilled. Audiences have continued to respond to this theme because, in some incarnation, the American Dream has persisted; a viewer can watch Death of a Salesman and relate Willy’s situation to their own compromised ideals and missed opportunities. More than a cautionary tale, however, Miller’s work is also revered for its bold realism and riveting theatricality, a play that deals in weighty emotional issues without descending to melodrama.AUTHOR BIOGRAPHYMiller was born in Manhattan, New York, on October 17, 1915. His parents were Jewish immigrants who had come to America in search of prosperity. His father, Isadore, ran a successful garment business for a number of years, while his mother, Augusta, was a schoolteacher. Following the failure of his father’s business in 1928, Miller’s family moved to Brooklyn, which would serve as the setting for a number of his plays, including Death of a Salesman. His father’s failure and subsequent withdrawal from the world of business had a profound effect on the young Miller, one that has direct roots in the character of Willy Loman. By the time Miller reached young adulthood, America was in the midst of the Great Depression. He saw firsthand how once-wealthy neighbors were reduced to poverty and the humiliation of menial labor or outright panhandling. Much of the playwright’s cynicism regarding wealth and conspicuous consumption can be attributed to his experiences during these years.Miller followed his high school graduation with two years of work in the hopes of earning enough money to attend college. In 1934 he was admitted to the University of Michigan. His time in college nurtured both his writing skills and his interest in liberal social causes. He studied play writing under Kenneth Rowe and was twice awarded the Avery Hopwood Award for playwriting. In 1938, the year of his graduation, he won the Theater Guild National Award for his play They Too Arise; like many of his early plays, the work features youthful idealogues fighting against social inequity. Following his graduation, Miller returned to New York and began a series of jobs involving playwriting. Near the onset of World War II, he began writing radio scripts for such anthology programs as The Calvalcade of America and The Columbia Workshop.During the war, Miller worked on a screenplay for the film The Story of GI Joe, a work he envisioned as a realistic portrayal of the average combat soldier. His efforts were overruled by film studio executives, however, who wanted a more palatable, romanticized story to sell the American public. Miller’s hunger for realism in drama was not dimmed, however, and he sought out a forum for his art. Unfortunately, the Broadway stage of 1944 would not offer such a forum: Miller’s debut with The Man Who Had All the Luck, a tale of a man unhappily trapped in his world of wealth, was a failure. Three years later, however, he achieved success on Broadway with All My Sons. In 1949 he presented Death of a Salesman, the work that established him as a major force in American theatre.Miller’s work in subsequent years continued his interest in current events and social injustice, with works such as The Crucible (1953) furthering his reputation. By the mid-1950s, however, Miller’s personal life began to overshadow his professional. His marriage to film star Marilyn Monroe swept him into a life of celebrity that all but eclipsed his work as a playwright. After his divorce from Monroe, and a lengthy hiatus, he returned to his craft. Not content to rest on the laurels of his past, Miller continued to experiment with forms of drama, crafting a variety of works throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1996, at the age of eighty-one, he adapted The Crucible for a filmed adaptation starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Winona Ryder.PLOT SUMMARYAct IDeath of a Salesman opens with Willy Loman returning to his New York home during the night. Hearing him enter, Linda, his wife, is concerned and gets out of bed to greet him. Although Willy had been on his way to Boston, he reveals that he had made it only to Yonkers before he had decided to return home. During this conversation, the audience discovers that Willy has had several automobile accidents recently and that he seems to be emotionally unstable. Willy and Linda begin arguing about one of their sons, Biff, who has recently returned to New York from the West. Throughout this conversation (as throughout many others), Willy contradicts himself, especially regarding Biff’s character.Upstairs, Biff and his brother, Happy, who are spending the night at their parents’ house, wake up and strain to hear the conversation. They reminisce about their childhood and discuss the tensions that have developed between Biff and Willy. Although Biff and Happy are in their thirties, they frequently act much younger—and are treated by their parents as if they are younger. Happy is clearly a womanizer, while Biff is frustrated at his lack of professional success and the conflicts he feels between his own desires and the desires his father has for him. Both men discuss their dissatisfactions witii their lives and speculate about their options, though they can’t seem to commit to any change. Happy attempts to persuade Biff to move back to New York permanently, especially after they overhear Willy talking loudly to himself. He suggests that Biff visit a man he once worked for, Bill Oliver, and ask for another job.Much of the action in the play occurs as flashbacks, with Willy responding to the past as if it were the present. Now, Willy remembers buying a much younger Biff and Happy a punching bag; Biff is playing with a football he had stolen from his school. Willy begins bragging about how well-known and well-liked he is in the East coast towns he travels through as a salesman. He makes similar statements frequently throughout the play, though his financial situation belies the success he claims. Within this flashback, Bernard, a cousin of Biff and Happy, enters and urges Biff to come study his math. Biff, a senior in high school at this point, is in danger of failing the course, hence failing to graduate, which would prevent him from accepting an athletic scholarship at the University of Virginia. According to Willy, however, Bernard is the one who will fail at life because he is not popular—a prophecy which will be clearly disproved by the end of the play.Willy and Linda begin to discuss their financial problems, which have increased because the firm that has employed Willy for decades has taken him off salary and put him entirely on commission. At this point, Willy remembers a woman, apparently a clerk in one of the companies he visits but whose significance will become clear only much later in the play. Willy refers to his Uncle Ben, who “knew what he wanted and went out and got it,” who, in other words, became rich.Linda reveals their financial difficulties to her sons, but when they criticize Willy’s firm, Linda claims Biff and Happy are equally neglectful. Linda also reveals that Willy has been trying to kill himself, that his frequent automobile accidents seem to have been intentional, and that she has found a rubber tube near their gas water heater. She suspects that Willy will use the tube to asphyxiate himself with gas.When Biff tells Willy that he is going to visit his former employer, Bill Oliver, Willy encourages him to ask to borrow $15,000. Simultaneously, he criticizes Biff for lacking a professional or manly demeanor. Happy encourages Biff to get his “old confidence” back, though he seems to have lost it years ago, if he ever had it. The Act ends with Lindapleading with Willy to ask for a position that would not require him to travel.Act IIThis Act occurs the following day. At breakfast, Linda assures Willy that Biff had left in a good mood, confident that Bill Oliver will respond to him favorably. She also says that their sons want Willy to meet them for dinner.Willy talks to his boss, Howard, asking him for a position in New York rather than on the road. Howard declines, claiming to have no position available. Willy begins shouting, citing his early success which exasperates Howard, probably because Willy exaggerates his earlier abilities. By the end of the conversation, Howard has fired Willy entirely. At this point, another flashback occurs, the day of Biff’s big high school football game in Ebbets Field. When time shifts back to the present, Willy enters his brother Charley’s office. He speaks with Bernard, who has grown into a successful and responsible man. Bernard asks what actually happened to Biff after high school, when he failed math and refused to make the course up over the summer. Willy becomes defensive and loud. As he frequently has, Charley offers Willy a job, but Willy is too proud to accept. Although he is disgusted, Charley continues to lend Willy money.The scene shifts to the restaurant, where Happy is waiting for Biff and his father. Happy attempts to pick up a woman he assumes is a prostitute. When Biff arrives, he reveals that he had failed with Bill Oliver, who kept him waiting all day and didn’t even remember him. Although Biff attempts to have a frank conversation with Willy, both Happy and Willy subvert this effort, cooperating instead with the family’s desire to ignore the truth in favor of a mythologized past. Within this conversation, another crucial flashback occurs. When Biff had failed math, he had gone to Boston to persuade Willy to intervene with the teacher. Instead, he discovered Willy in a hotel with another woman and became profoundly disillusioned with both Willy and his own life’s possibilities. It was after this discovery, apparently, that Biff refused to attend summer school and hence relinquished his opportunity for an athletic scholarship and a college education.Biff and Happy leave Willy in the restaurant in order to accompany the prostitute Happy had met earlier. The next morning, Linda asks them both to leave. Willy has clearly become more unstable and thinks more overtly of suicide. The Act ends with Willy speeding off in his car.RequiemThe last moments of the play occur after Willy’s funeral, which has not been well-attended. Biff indicates that he will return to the West, while Happy will remain in business in New York. The play concludes with Linda at Willy’s grave, uttering the ironic remark that because their house is finally paid for (with Willy’s insurance money), they are now “free.”CHARACTERSBernardBernard is the son of Charley, Willy’s only friend and supporter outside of his family. As a young man he is quiet, dependable, pensive, and a top student; as an adult Bernard remains sensitive and genuine, and displays the intelligence, self-confidence, and perception that have helped him become a successful attorney. Bernard contrasts sharply with Biff and Happy, in a sense serving as the embodiment of the success to which they always aspired but never achieved. When Charley informs Willy that Bernard is going to argue a case before the Supreme Court, Willy communicates that he is impressed, and says “The Supreme Court! And he didn’t even mention it.” In a line which sharply indicts Willy’s habit of chattering endlessly about his own false accomplishments and his dreams, Charley replies, “He don’t have to—he’s gonna do it.”CharleyCharley is Willy’s only friend, and eventually he becomes Willy’s sole financial support,“loaning” him fifty dollars a week knowing all the while that his money will never be repaid. Charley is a successful businessman, and is exasperated by Willy’s lack of respect for him and his ideals, and by Willy’s inability to separate reality and fantasy. Charley tries in vain to dispel Willy’s delusions and attempts to save him from financial ruin by offering him a job, and when Willy refuses his offer, Charley exclaims,“You been jealous of me all your life, you damned fool!” When Willy conveys to Charley his disbelief that Howard Wagner has failed to display the gratitude that Willy feels he deserves and has fired him, Charley asks: “Willy, when’re you gonna realize that them things don’t mean anything? You named him Howard, but you can’t sell that. 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.” Despite his continued arguments with Willy, and despite the feelings of frustration and exasperation Willy arouses in him, Charley cares about his friend and offers him compassion and support.Miss ForsytheMiss Forsythe is approached by Happy in the restaurant, and calls her friend, Letta, to come and be a companion for Biff. She is an attractive and sexy woman who conveys the impression that she is highly available.Miss FrancisSee The WomanJennyJenny is Howard’s secretary, and is presented as an efficient, business-like, capable woman whois annoyed by Willy and considers him a nuisance. Her attitude toward Willy stands in sharp contrast to Linda’s admiration of Willy.LettaLetta is a friend of Miss Forsythe, and comes to the restaurant to meet Biff after Miss Forsythe calls her. She is a sugary, bubbly young woman, who gives the impression that she has limited intelligence and is extremely available.Ben LomanBen is Willy’s older brother, and is, to Willy, the embodiment of true success. He appears in scenes which take place in Willy’s imagination, and appears larger-than-life, all-knowing, powerful, a great adventurer; he is everything Willy dreams of becoming. In the play, Ben’s primary role is to serve as a sounding board for Willy; Willy conducts imaginary conversations with his brother, who owns timberlands in Alaska and diamond mines in Africa, and it is through these conversations that the audience gains a better understanding of what drives Willy and of his inner thoughts. Ben also represents for Willy the kind of life he dreams of for his sons. Ben remarks: “William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!” Willy, excited by his brother’s stories of adventure, responds enthusiastically: “That’s just the spirit I want to imbue them [Biff and Happy] with! To walk into a jungle!”Biff LomanBiff is Willy’s eldest son; once a high school football idol, he has grown into a man who, in his mid-thirties, displays only a small measure of his youthful confidence, enthusiasm, and affection, and more often appears as a troubled, frustrated, deeply sad man with a tendency to escape into dreams at times. Biff was betrayed by his father at a very young age when he discovered that Willy was having an affair. Biff, who steals things as an adult, blames his father for not giving him the proper guidance when he was caught stealing as a child. Biff also blames his father for instilling in him the belief that success lies in the accumulation of wealth; it is because his father programmed him to think this way, Biff believes, that he is so unhappy and cannot enjoy doing the outdoor labor for which he has a talent. Biff is tortured by his disillusionment withMEDIA ADAPTATIONSDeath of a Salesman was adapted as a film in 1952. This version was produced by Stanley Kramer and directed by Laslo Benedek. It starred Fredric March as Willy, Mildred Dunnock as Linda, Kevin McCarthy as Biff, and Cameron Mitchell as Happy.A made-for-television version was filmed in 1966. Lee J. Cobb plays Willy; David Susskind was the producer.A made-for-television version was also filmed in 1986. It stars Dustin Hoffman as Willy and John Malkovich as Biff. It is available through Video Learning Library, Facets Multimedia, and Warner Home Video.A documentary, Private Conversations on the Set of Death of a Salesman, was also produced based on the 1986 version with Hoffman. Arthur Miller is featured as well as the actors. It is available from Karl-Lorimar Home Video.A sound recording of the play was also produced by Decca in 1950.Another sound recording is available from Caedmon, which was produced from the 1966 television version with Lee J. Cobb.Willy, by his failure to live up to his own standards, by his failure to achieve the greatness that Willy dreamed he would, by his desire to get back at his father for what he believes has been done to him, and by his great love for Willy, which creates in him tremendous confusion and emotional turmoil. Biff ultimately decides to try to show Willy that his dreams and fantasies are false, telling his father: “You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! . . . I’m nothing, Pop. Can’t you understand that? There’s no spite in it any more. I’m just what I am, that’s all.” In the Requiem scene at the play’s end, Biff illustrates that he has truly come to an understanding of his father’s failure to achieve success, observing that Willy “never knew who he was” and that he “had the wrong dreams.”Happy LomanHappy is the younger of Willy’s two sons; he has grown up in the shadow of his older brother, and consequently has a hard edge to his personality that the other characters lack. He is a handsome man in his early thirties, who while seemingly even-tempered and amiable, retains an air of hostility that is most apparent in his distinct sexual energy and his womanizing ways. He appears more content than Biff, but at the play’s end he is drawn into his father’s illusion; he pledges to take up his father’s cause and succeed where his father had failed. While after Willy’s death Biff recognizes his father’s failings, Happy wildly proclaims: “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.”Linda LomanLinda is Willy’s long-suffering, devoted wife, who desperately loves her husband and resents the fact that his sons don’t love and appreciate their father as much as she believes they should. She speaks carefully, and has a quiet manner that belies her inner strength. She treads cautiously around Willy, taking care not to raise his temper, and continuously presents a cheerful, hopeful appearance. Linda has tremendous patience, and serves as the family peacemaker. Linda sees through her husbands and sons; she knows that they are deluded, but she continues to bolster their fantasies, believing that she is doing the best, most loving thing for her family. In her essay in the 1991 compilation Willy Loman, critic Kay Stanton asserted that “the Loman men are all less than they hold themselves to be, but Linda is more than she is credited to be. . . . She is the foundation that has allowed the Loman men to build themselves up, if only in dreams, and she is the support that enables them to continue despite their failures. . . . She represents human dignity and values: cooperative, moral, human behavior as opposed to lawless assertion of self over all others through assumed superiority.”Witty LomanWilly is the salesman around whom the play is constructed. He is sixty-three years old, desperate to achieve even a small measure of the success to which he has always aspired, and cannot face the reality that he has misdirected his energies and talents chasing a dream that never had any chance of materializing. Willy’s flashbacks and fantasies comprise a large part of the play and inform the audience about his past, the histories of the other characters, how he has become what he is in the present, and perhaps most importantly, his ideal self. In the scenes which take place in present time, Willy is highly emotional, unstable, uncertain at times, highly contradictory, and seems worn down by life. In his flashbacks and fantasies, however, Willy is a more loving father and husband, a more capable provider; he is cheerful, light-hearted, and self-assured. Ultimately, because he cannot live with the realization that he has failed to live up to his unrealistic expectations, and because he believes he will finally be able, with his death, to leave his family with a sizable amount of cash, namely a $20,000 life insurance payoff, Willy commits suicide. In an imagined conversation, Willy responds to his brother Ben’s admonition that suicide is a “cowardly thing,” by asking: “Why? Does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up a zero? . . . And twenty thousand—that is something one can feel with the hand, it is there.” Many critics have asserted that Willy is a modern tragic hero, and that his tragedy lies in his belief in an illusory American Dream. In a 1979 interview with Harry Rafsky on the Canadian Broadcasting Company, Miller asserted that after seeing Death of a Salesman, the audience members “were weeping because the central matrix of this play is . . . what most people are up against in their lives. . . . they were seeing themselves, not because Willy is a salesman, but the situation in which he stood and to which he was reacting, and which was reacting against him, was probably the central situation of contemporary civilization. It is that we are struggling with forces that are far greater than we can handle, with no equipment to make anything mean anything.”StanleyStanley is the waiter who serves Willy, Biff, and Happy during their meeting at the restaurant. He is highly agreeable, helpful, and enthusiastic.Howard WagnerHoward is Willy’s boss, who rejects Willy and ultimately fires him. Howard, like Charley, is a successful businessman. However, Howard displays none of Charley’s kindness or compassion, offering Willy such hollow trade cliches as “It’s a business, kid, and everybody’s gotta pull his own weight.”The WomanThe Woman is the person with whom Willy has an affair. She appears in flashbacks as a good-natured, fun-loving woman in her forties who appears proper on the surface but displays evidence of a boisterous spirit. Willy gives her an extravagant gift of nylon stockings, which were a rare luxury for women during World War II, and it is the memory of this gift that causes Willy’s pangs of guilt and anger when he sees Linda mending her stockings. Her laughter during the flashback scenes serves as a piercing, shrill, painful reminder to Willy and Biff of Willy’s infidelity. Willy’s affair with the Woman is further evidence of his shortcomings, and illustrates how he has failed to live up to his own image of himself as the ideal husband and father.THEMESAppearances vs. RealityWhat appears to be true to the characters in Death of a Salesman is often a far cry from reality, and this is communicated numerous times throughout the play. Willy’s frequent flashbacks to past events—many of which are completely or partly fabricated—demonstrate that he is having difficulty distinguishing between what is real and what he wishes were real. Willy’s imagined conversations with his dead brother, Ben, also demonstrate his fragile grip on reality. Willy’s mind is full of delusions about his own abilities and accomplishments and the abilities and accomplishments of his sons. Biff and Happy share their father’s tendencyTOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDYResearch the economic growth America experienced during the post-World War II years. What do you feel led people like Willy Loman to expectations regarding success and the “American Dream.”In what ways could the Loman family have avoided their sad situation by the play’s end? Consider such elements as communication and compromise.Compare and contrast the characters of Willy Loman and Amanda Wingfield (from Tennessee Williams’s The Glass Menagerie); both of these characters spend much of their time recalling their past, often incorrectly. In what ways does this selective perception of their pasts affect their current situations?Miller’s play criticizes the false promises of the American Dream. Discuss facets of late twentieth century life that lead people to similar misconceptions of attainable success. Consider the role that advertising, music, television, and films have on this issue.to concoct grand schemes for themselves and think of themselves as superior to others without any real evidence that the schemes will work or that they are, indeed, superior. At the end of the play, each son responds differently to the reality of his father’s suicide. Biff, it appears, comes to the sad realization that his father “didn’t know who he was,” and how his father’s unrealistic dreams led him away from the satisfaction he could have found if he had pursued a goal that reflected his talents, such as a career in carpentry. Happy, who had previously given the appearance of being more well-grounded in reality but still hoping for something better, completely falls into his father’s thought pattern, pledging to achieve the dream that his father failed to achieve.Individual vs. SocietyWilly is constantly striving to find the gimmick or the key to winning over clients and becoming a true success. He worries incessantly about how he is perceived by others, and blames his lack of success on a variety of superficial personal traits, such as his weight, the fact that people “don’t take him seriously,” his clothing, and the fact that he tends to talk too much. While all of these concerns are shared by many people, for Willy they represent the reasons for his failure. In reality, Willy’s failure is a result of his inability to see himself and the world as they really are: Willy’s talents lie in areas other than sales, and the business world no longer rewards smooth-talking, charismatic salesmen, but instead looks for specially trained, knowledgeable men to promote its products. Willy fails because he cannot stop living in a reality that does not exist, and which dooms him to fail in the reality that does exist.Individual vs. SelfWilly’s perception of what he should be is continually at odds with what he is: A mediocre salesman with delusions of grandeur and an outdated perception of the world around him. He truly believes that he can achieve greatness, and cannot understand why he has not realized what he feels is his true destiny. He completely denies his actual talent for carpentry, believing that pursuing such a career would be beneath him somehow. Willy struggles with the image of his ideal self his entire life, until he can no longer deny the fact that he will never become this ideal self and he commits suicide.American DreamWilly’s quest to realize what he views as the American Dream—the “self-made man” who rises out of poverty and becomes rich and famous—is a dominant theme in Death of a Salesman. Willy believed wholeheartedly in this treasured national myth, which began during colonial times, and which was further developed during the 19th century by such industry tycoons as Andrew Carnegie and J.D. Rockefeller. In the 1920s, the American Dream was represented by Henry Ford, whose great success in the automotive industry was achieved when he developed the assembly line.Also in the 1920s, a career in sales was being hailed as a way for a man without training or education to achieve financial success. Pamphlets, lectures, and correspondence courses promoting strategies for improving the skills of salesmen were widely distributed during this decade. These strategies focused on teaching salesmen how to effectively manipulate their clients. Willy would have begun his career as a salesman in the 1920s, when belief that salesmen adept at manipulation and “people skills” were destined for wealth and fame was widespread. However, by the late 1940s, when Death of a Salesman takes place, the job market and prevailing belief has changed, and salesmen (and other workers) required specialized knowledge and training in order to succeed. Because he lacks such knowledge or training, Willy is destined to fail in a business world that demands the ability to play a specific part in a large establishment. Willy, of course, does not realize how things have changed, and he continues to try to strike it rich using his powers of persuasion. Willy’s personal representations of the American Dream are his brother Ben and the salesman Dave Singleman, and he views the success of these two men as proof that he can indeed attain the success he is so desperate to achieve. According to Willy’s version of the American Dream, he is a complete failure.STYLEDeath of a Salesman is a drama set in 1949, in New York City and Boston. The action of the play takes place largely inside the Loman home in Brooklyn, but other places in New York and Boston are used as well, including hotel rooms, Willy’s office, a restaurant, and Willy’s gravesite. The play is grounded in realism, which means that it depicts realistically what happens in the lives of its characters, but it also contains elements of expressionism, specifically when it depicts imaginary sequences and portrays for the audience the inner workings of the characters’ minds and their emotions. The play is largely a representation of what takes place in the mind of Willy Loman during the last two days of his life. Willy reminisces about past events and imagines situations, and the audience is able to see his thoughts played out on the stage. The reminiscences and imaginary sequences allow the audience to understand the characters’ inner thoughts and provide insight into their behavior during the present-day scenes. For example, the audience learns, during one such reminiscence, that Biff has been tormented for since he was a young child by the discovery that his father had an extramarital affair. This insight helps the audience to better understand both Willy and Biff, explains some of Biff’s anger toward his father, and indicates why he is so disillusioned. The instructions for setting in the play provide insight into how Arthur Miller wanted the play to be perceived by the audience. Miller includes instructions that the only substantial part of the set should be the Loman home, and all other locales should be merely hinted at by using changes in lighting or setting up a few chairs or a table. In this way, the audience can clearly see which events on stage are taking place in reality, and which are taking place inside of Willy’s mind. Miller originally titled the play The Inside of His Head, which illustrates that he intended to show the audience what happens in a man’s mind when his dreams are never realized, and when he lives in a world based on illusion. Miller’s method of flashing back and forth between the past and the present, and between the imaginary and the realistic, allows the audience to witness how a lifetime of disappointment, delusion, and failure have led to the current situation, and shows facets of each character that would not have been revealed if only the present-day occurrences had been portrayed. Because of the way the play is constructed, the audience can see what the characters have become and what experiences, thoughts, and emotions led them to their present state.HISTORICAL CONTEXTWhen World War II ended in 1945, the United States embarked upon an unprecedented period of economic prosperity, driven by the increase in industrial production markets brought about by the war. Unlike the Great Depression and the war years, Americans had a surplus of goods and services from which to choose, and the money with which to purchase them. Nonfarming businesses grew by one-third, and housing construction became a booming industry. However, the economic situation was not improved for the poorest Americans during thisCOMPARE & CONTRAST1949: Post-World War II economic growth combined with advertisements promising the American Dream created widespread optimism among Americans with hopes of attaining material wealth.Today: An unpredictable economic climate coupled with a more media-savvy public has created an environment of cynicism and doubt regarding the validity of the American Dream.1949: The German Federal Republic (West Germany) is established and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) is established under Soviet control, effectively splitting the country following its defeat during World War II.Today: Germany was reunified in 1990, and has shown a steady increase in economic and cultural stature in the world.1949: The era of smooth-talking sales, when powers of persuasion often overshadowed knowledge and ability, was ending, giving way to careers requiring training and specialized knowledge.Today: The advent of “infomercials” and multi-media accessibility has sparked a resurgence in slick showmanship and sales techniques reliant on gimmickry.1949: National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences presents its first Emmy Award ceremony; nine percent of American households own a television set.Today: The annual Emmy Awards are a major television event and, like hundreds of other programs, are part of millions of Americans’ everyday life; over ninety percent of American households own at least one television set.time. The economic boom brought high inflation, which kept poorer citizens from saving any money, and small farmers faced hard times because of government policies that benefitted larger, corporate farmers. The lowest-paid workers in the country were the migrant farm workers, with sales clerks and unskilled laborers (such as gas station attendants) not far above them. Happy, a sales clerk, and Biff, a farm worker, represent this segment of the American workforce in Death of a Salesman, and each of them struggles to retain his dignity in the face of his lowly position in a largely affluent society.Because Americans felt so secure in their newfound prosperity, they began using credit to purchase the products and services they desired. Although the prices of these goods and services were driven higher and higher by increased demand, Americans continued to purchase them, using credit to buy what they could not otherwise afford. For the first time in history, automobiles were more often purchased on credit than with cash, and the use of long-term credit, such as home mortgages, also rose dramatically. Willy Loman suffers from the effects of relying too much on credit, struggling to keep up his payments while trying to provide the necessities for his family.The United States emerged from World War II as a “superpower” among the world’s nations, but this role led to insecurities on the part of the American government and the American people, who suddenly bore the responsibility of retaining their position in the world,“keeping the world safe for democracy” by protecting it from the influences of the other world “superpower,” the communist Soviet Union. Because of the national pride and feeling of superiority instilled in them by their victories during the war, Americans felt a deep-seated need to prove that capitalism was better than communism during the period that followed World War II, which is known as the Cold War era. Americans felt obligated to achieve financial success, both as a way of defeating the Soviets and as a way to show their gratitude for the freedom they were privileged to possess by virtue of living in a democratic society. Willy’s preoccupation with his financial status and his position in society reflect this Cold War attitude.The Great Depression and World War II led to major changes in the nature of the American government. Beginning with President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal (an economic program that began in response to the Great Depression), government became larger and more influential in the daily lives of American citizens. Furthermore, the growth of large corporations and the spread of such mass communication media as radio and television made Americans feel more like a large, connected society. With this new-found sense of belonging came a new-found desire to conform to the accepted norms and values of the majority. Instead of being a nation of rugged individualists, the United States became a nation of people who wished desperately for acceptance by their peers, which meant that they needed to appear successful in the eyes of society. Willy displays this wish for acceptance in his preoccupation with being “well liked,” which he views as the ultimate measure of success. In The Lonely Crowd, a book published in 1950, author David Reisman argues that prior to the Cold War era, Americans were motivated by strict morals and rules of conduct, but following World War II they became more motivated by others’ perceptions of them, and altered their behavior according to acceptable societal standards. Reisman classified the pre-Cold War behavior pattern as “inner-directed,” and the postwar pattern as “other-directed,” maintaining that “other-directed” people, like Willy Loman, have no established sense of identity because they look to other people to determine their self-image. This idea is reflected in Biff’s comment at the end of the play when he says that Willy “didn’t know who he was.”CRITICAL OVERVIEWSince its debut performance in 1949, Death of a Salesman has brought audiences to tears. Critical debate rages, however, over Willy Loman’s stature as a tragic hero. In the classic definition of tragedy, the hero is a person of high stature brought low by an insurmountable flaw in his or her character, known as the “tragic flaw.” Some scholars argue that Willy is pathetic rather than tragic, because he is not a great man who loses his stature because of something he does, but a common man who is largely a victim of a society in which the odds are stacked against him. For instance, Eric Mottram contended in Arthur Miller: A Collection of Critical Essays that Willy represents “what happens to an ordinarily uneducated man in an unjust competitive society in which men are victimized by false gods. His fate is not tragic. There is nothing of the superhuman or providential or destined in this play. Everyone fails in a waste of misplaced energy.” Others have suggested that Willy cannot be considered a tragic hero because he never confronts his faulty values. In his Arthur Miller: Portrait of a Playwright, Benjamin Nelson asserted: “Although the play’s power lies in its stunning ability to elicit . . . sympathy, the intensely idiosyncratic portrait of Willy Loman is a constant reminder that the meaning of his drama depends upon our clear awareness of the limitations of Willy’s life and vision.” Conversely, College English contributor Paul Siegel compared Willy Loman to William Shakespeare’s great tragic hero King Lear, asserting: “The cause of the catastrophe of the king of ancient Briton and that of the salesman of today is the same: each does not know himself and the world in which he is living.” In his introduction to Arthur Miller’s Collected Plays, Miller commented on his character’s inherent tragedy: “Willy Loman has broken a law without whose protection life is insupportable if not incomprehensible to him and to many others; it is the law which says that a failure in society and in business has no right to live. . . . The law of success is not administered by statute or church, but it is very nearly as powerful in its grip upon men.”Because Willy struggles for money and recognition and then fails to gain either, some critics see Death of a Salesman as a condemnation of the American system. In Newsweek, Jack Kroll suggested that the drama is “a great public ritualizing of some of our deepest and deadliest contradictions. It is a play about the misplaced energy of the basic human material in American society.” However, many critics have offered differing opinions on the message Miller sends in the play. For example, Stephen A. Lawrence in an essay in College English, suggested: “Perhaps what is wrong with the society is not that it has implanted the wrong values in [Willy],. . . but that it has lost touch with values which should never be relegated only to the personal sphere or the family unit. . . . Willy’s problem is that he is human enough to think that the same things that matter in the family—especially his love for his son—matter everywhere, including the world of social success.” Catholic World contributor Sieghle Kennedy offered another view, maintaining: “With Charley living next door, economics can hardly be termed the nemesis of Willy’s life. His failure as a man is the cause, rather than the effect, of his economic failure.” Willy’s decline is made more pathetic by the suggestion that he might have become an expert carpenter if he had not pursued the fantasy of wealth and popularity.On one point most critics agree: Death of a Salesman is one of the significant accomplishments of modern American literature. In The Forties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Lois Gordon called it “the major American drama of the 1940s” and added that it “remains unequalled in its brilliant and original fusion of realistic and poetic techniques, its richness of visual and verbal texture, and its wide range of emotional impact.” New York Times columnist Frank Rich concluded that Death of a Salesman“is one of a handful of American plays that appear destined to outlast the 20th century. In Willy Loman, that insignificant salesman who has lost the magic touch along with the shine on his shoes after a lifetime on the road, Miller created an enduring image of our unslaked thirst for popularity and success.” According to John Gassner in the Quarterly Journal of Speech, Miller “has accomplished the feat of writing a drama critical of wrong values that virtually every member of our middle-class can accept as valid. It stabs itself into a playgoer’s consciousness to a degree that may well lead him to review his own life and the lives of those who are closest to him. The conviction of the writing is, besides, strengthened by a quality of compassion rarely experienced in our theatre.”CRITICISML. M. DominaAn educator and author, Domina discusses the themes of failure and delusion that pervade Miller’s landmark work.Arthur Miller’s classic American play, Death of a Salesman, exposes the relationship between gender relationships and dysfunctional family behaviors. In this play, the themes of guilt and innocence and of truth and falsehood are considered through the lens of family roles. Willy Loman, the salesman whose death culminates the play, is an anti-hero, indeed the most classic of anti-heroes. According to an article on the play in Modern World Drama, Willy is “a rounded and psychologically motivated individual” who “embodies the stupidity, immorality, self-delusion, and failure of middle-class values.” While his self-delusion is his primary flaw, this characteristic is not necessarily tragic since Willy neither fights against it nor attempts to turn it toward good. Dennis Welland in his book, Miller: The Playwright summarized this view, critiquing critics who believe that “Willy Loman’s sense of personal dignity was too precariously based to give him heroic stature.” Although he is ordinary and his life in some ways tragic, he also chooses his fate. The article in Modern World Drama confirmed that “considerable disputation has centered on the play’s qualification as genuine tragedy, as opposed to social drama.”Although Willy is dead by the end of the play, that is, not all deaths are truly tragic. The other characters respond to Willy’s situation in the ways they do because they have different levels of access to knowledge about Willy and hence about themselves. An analysis of the relationships among these characters’ insights and their responses will reveal the nature of their flawed family structure.According to conventional standards, Biff, the older son of Willy and Linda, is the clearest failure. Despite the fact that he had been viewed as a gifted athlete and a boy with a potentially great future, Biff has been unable as an adult to succeed or even persevere at any professional challenge. Before the play opens, he had been living out west, drifting from one low-paying cowboy job to another, experiencing neither financial nor social stability. Back in New York, he is staying with his parents but seems particularly aimless, although he does gesture toward re-establishing some business contacts. Although one could speculate that the Loman family dynamics in general have influenced Biff toward ineffectuality, as the play progresses readers understand that one specific biographical moment (and his willingness to keep this moment secret) provides the key to his puzzling failure.Near the end of the play, Bernard, Willy’s nephew, asks Willy about this crucial incident. Although Biff had already accepted an athletic scholarship to the University of Virginia, he failed math his last semester in high school; his best option was to make the course up during summer school. Before he makes this decision, Biff visits Willy,WHAT DO I READ NEXT?King Lear, a play by William Shakespeare written in approximately 1605 is a classic tragedy which also concerns generational discord, this time between a father and his daughters. The play confronts the difficulty of interpreting events and the actions of others with accuracy.The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath, published in 1963, concerns a young woman’s psychological instability and her eventual suicide.The Crucible, a play Arthur Miller wrote in 1953, has a multi-layered plot. On the surface, it concerns the Salem witch trials, while the subtext concerns the U.S. Senate’s investigation into alleged communist activity in Hollywood.Necessary Losses by Judith Viorst, published in 1986, is a psychological study which concerns how people negotiate loss in order to reach greater maturity. She argues that people must give up some expectations as well as suffer loss through death and physical separation.Making a Living While Making a Difference, published by Melissa Everett in 1995, is a career guide for people who desire a profession which is socially meaningful. This book is designed for people who want to be financially successful without undermining their own ethics.who is in Boston on business. According to Bernard, Biff “came back after that month and took his sneakers—remember those sneakers with ‘University of Virginia’ printed on them? He was so proud of those, wore them every day. And he took them down in the cellar, and burned them up in the furnace. We had a fist fight. It lasted at least half an hour. Just the two of us, punching each other down the cellar, and crying right through it. I’ve often thought of how strange it was that I knew he’d given up his life. What happened in Boston, Willy?” Willy responds defensively: “What are you trying to do, blame it on me?”What had happened, of course, as Willy subsequently remembers and as he has probably remembered frequently during the intervening years, was that Biff had discovered Willy in the midst of an extramarital affair. In contrast to Linda, who frequently appears with stockings that need mending, this other woman receives gifts of expensive stockings from Willy. The existence of this woman (and perhaps others like her) is one factor contributing to the financial strain of the Loman family. Biff understands this instantly, and he also understands the depth of Willy’s betrayal of Linda—and the family as a whole. The trust Biff had given Willy now seems misplaced. Indeed, according to the flashbacks within the play, the young Biff and Happy had nearly idolized Willy, so this betrayal while Biff is yet an adolescent is particularly poignant. As Biff is about to make a momentous life decision, in other words, he is confronted with duplicity from the man he had looked to as a role model. Yet Biff shares this knowledge with no one; instead this secret becomes the controlling element of his own life.When Biff does attempt to tell the truth, not about Willy’s affair but about his own life, Willy and Happy both resist him. “Let’s hold on to the facts tonight, Pop,” Biff says, indicating that “the facts” are slippery in their hands. The outright lies members of the Loman family tell, that is, come more easily because they also exaggerate some facts and minimize others. Although many of their stories may be eventually founded in truth, that truth is so covered with their euphemistic interpretations that it is barely recognizable. The stories the family has told have become nearly indistinguishable from the real circumstances of their lives. Trying to separate reality from fantasy, Biff says, “facts about my life came back to me. Who was it, Pop? Who ever said I was a salesman with Oliver?” But Willy refuses to acknowledge the substance of the question: “Well,you were.” Biff contradicts him, as determined to acknowledge the truth as Willy is to deny it: “No, Dad, I was a shipping clerk.” Willy still declines to accept this fact without the gloss of embellishment: “you were practically” a salesman.Later, the conversation among the three men reveals that similar embellishments continue to characterize their lives.“We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!” Biff proclaims. When Happy protests that they “always told the truth,” Biff

Miller provides for the audience a considerable amount of the tragic insight which, though never quite reaching Willy, manifests itself to them in the dramatic presentation of the workings of his mind.In one way Willy’s commitment to his dream typifies a necessary breaking of the laws of reality by all men: their construction of the tenuous ideals of themselves which truth by its very nature has to destroy. Willy, who will give up his life rather than his chosen image of himself, represents the fool in each of us. By that very fact, he must go the way of the tragic hero.Source: Sister M. Bettina, “Willy Loman’s Brother Ben: Tragic Insight in Death of a Salesman” in Modern Drama, Vol. 4, no. 4, February, 1962, pp. 409-12.Brooks AtkinsonIn the following excerpt from his review of Death of a Salesman, which originally appeared in the New York Times on February 11, 1949, Atkinson declares that the play, which he calls “a superb drama,’” ‘has the flow and spontaneity of a suburban epic that may not be intended as poetry but becomes poetry in spite of itself because Mr. Miller has drawn it out of so many intangible sources.“As drama critic for the New York Times from 1925 to 1960, Atkinson was one of the most influential reviewers in America.Arthur Miller has written a superb drama. From every point of view Death of a Salesman, which was acted at the Morosco last evening, is rich and memorable drama. It is so simple in style and so“MR. MILLER HAS NO MORAL PRECEPTS TO OFFER AND NO SOLUTIONS OF THE SALESMAN’S PROBLEMS. HE IS FULL OF PITY, BUT HE BRINGS NO PIETY TO IT”inevitable in theme that it scarcely seems like a thing that has been written and acted. For Mr. Miller has looked with compassion into the hearts of some ordinary Americans and quietly transferred their hope and anguish to the theatre. Under Elia Kazan’s masterly direction, Lee J. Cobb gives a heroic performance, and every member of the cast plays like a person inspired.Two seasons ago Mr. Miller’s All My Sons looked like the work of an honest and able playwright. In comparison with the new drama, that seems like a contrived play now. For Death of a Salesman has the flow and spontaneity of a suburban epic that may not be intended as poetry but becomes poetry in spite of itself because Mr. Miller has drawn it out of so many intangible sources.It is the story of an aging salesman who has reached the end of his usefulness on the road. There has always been something unsubstantial about his work. But suddenly the unsubstantial aspects of it overwhelm him completely. When he was young, he looked dashing; he enjoyed the comradeship of other people—the humor, the kidding, the business.In his early sixties he knows his business as well as he ever did. But the unsubstantial things have become decisive; the spring has gone from his step, the smile from his face and the heartiness from his personality. He is through. The phantom of his life has caught up with him. As literally as Mr. Miller can say it, dust returns to dust. Suddenly there is nothing.This is only a little of what Mr. Miller is saying. For he conveys this elusive tragedy in terms of simple things—the loyalty and understanding of his wife, the careless selfishness of his two sons, the sympathetic devotion of a neighbor, the coldness of his former boss’ son—the bills, the car, the tinkering around the house. And most of all: the illusions by which he has lived—opportunities missed, wrong formulas for success, fatal misconceptions about his place in the scheme of things.Writing like a man who understands people, Mr. Miller has no moral precepts to offer and no solutions of the salesman’s problems. He is full of pity, but he brings no piety to it. Chronicler of one frowsy corner of the American scene, he evokes a wraithlike tragedy out of it that spins through the many scenes of his play and gradually envelops the audience. . . .Source: Brooks Atkinson, in a review of Death of a Salesman (1949) in On Stage: Selected Theater Reviews from The New York Times, 1920-1970, edited by Bernard Beckerman and Howard Siegman, Arno Press, 1973, pp. 298-99.FURTHER READINGCarson, Neil. Arthur Miller, Grove, 1982.This book offers an overview of Miller’s major works, with an emphasis on their status as theater.Corrigan, Robert W. Arthur Miller: A Collection of Critical Essays, Prentice-Hall, 1969.An excellent resource for critical information on Miller and his work. Death of a Salesman is discussed at length.Matlaw, Myron, editor. Modern World Drama, Dutton, 1972, pp. 194-96.This is primarily a plot summary with introductory comments situating the play within dramatic literary tradition.Murray, Edward. Arthur Miller, Dramatist, Ungar, 1967.Provides analysis of Miller’s major works with respect to structure, dialogue, and theme. While not overtly negative, Murray shows distaste for Miller’s use of language, calling it unpoetic.Welland, Dennis. “Death of a Salesman” in his Miller: The Playwright, Methuen, 1979.This book considers much of Miller’s work. Welland considers the views of several other critics while coming to a positive evaluation of the play. The American dream is a big part of Willy's life but leads him to unhappiness.Willy's ideas about success confuse his sons and hurt their family relationships.Symbols like stockings and the jungle show Willy's struggles with success and adventure. The main themes and symbols of Death of a Salesman include family relationships and, at large, the shortcomings of the American dream and all of its consequences, namely the financial well-being that can afford people certain luxuries. The American dream, which assumes that anyone can achieve financial success and material comfort, lies at the heart of Death of a Salesman. We learn that various secondary characters attain this ideal: Ben goes off into the wilderness of Alaska and Africa and, as luck has it, discovers a diamond mine; Howard Wagner inherits his dream through his father's company; the nerdier Bernard, mocked by Willy for his attitude, becomes a successful lawyer through hard work. Willy Loman has a simplistic view of the American dream. He thinks that any man who is manly, good looking, charismatic, and well-liked is both deserving of success and will naturally achieve it. The life trajectory of his brother Ben influenced him in that regard. Those standards, however, are impossible, and, over the course of his lifetime, Willy and his sons fall short of it. Willy buys into his distorted philosophy so thoroughly that he neglects what is actually good in his life, such as the love of his family, in order to pursue an ideal of success that—he hopes—will bring his family security. Willy's arc demonstrates how the American dream and its aspirational nature, which might be quite commendable per se, turns individuals into commodities that are only measured by their financial worth. In fact, even his demise at the end of the play is tied to the American dream: he ends his life so that he can, at least, give his family the money of his life insurance policy. Family relationships are what makes Death of a Salesman a universal play. In fact, when the play was produced in China in 1983, the actors had no trouble understanding the themes of the play—the relationship between a father and his sons or between husband and wife, or two brothers of different dispositions, were very intelligible to Chinese audiences and performers. The central conflict of the play concerns Willy and his elder son Biff, who showed great promise as a young athlete and ladies' man while in high school. His adulthood, however was marked by thievery and lack of direction. Willy's younger son, Happy, has a more defined and secure career path, but he is a shallow character. The twisted beliefs Willy instilled in his sons, namely luck over hard work and likability over expertise, led them to disappoint both him and themselves as adults. By presenting them with the dream of grand, easy success, he overwhelmed his sons, and this is true both of Biff and Happy, who produce nothing substantial. Willy, at 63, is still working, trying to plant seeds in the middle of the night, in order to give his family sustenance. Biff realizes, at the play's climax, that only by escaping from the dream that Willy has instilled in him will father and son be free to pursue fulfilling lives. Happy never realizes this, and at the end of the play he vows to continue in his father's footsteps, pursuing an American dream that will leave him empty and alone. Willy's role as a provider in regards to Linda is equally fraught. While he is enthralled by the Woman in Boston because she “liked” him, which stoked his twisted ideal of successful business man, when he gives stockings to her instead of Linda, he is overcome with shame. Still, he fails to realize that what his wife wants is love and not financial security In Death of a Salesman, stockings represent the covering-up of imperfection, and Willy’s (failed) attempt to be a successful businessman and thus, a provider. Both Linda Loman and the Woman in Boston are seen holding them. In the play, Willy reprimands Linda for mending her stockings, implicitly suggesting that he intends to buy her new ones. This reprimand takes on new significance when we learn that Willy, in the past, bought new stockings as a gift to The Woman when they meet for secret trysts in Boston. On the one hand, the silk stockings that Linda Loman mends are an indicator of the strained financial circumstances of the Loman family, on the other, they serve Willy as a reminder of his affair. In Death of a Salesman, the jungle represents the antithesis of the middle-class life that Willy Loman had strived to achieve. While Willy’s life is predictable and risk-averse, the jungle, which is praised mainly by the character of Ben, Willy’s brother, is full of darkness and dangers, but, if conquered, it leads to higher rewards than any average salesman-life could.