

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Death of a Salesman

by Arthur Miller

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Death of a Salesman

Lecture: The American Dream

Throughout the history of this country, America has been viewed as the “Land of Opportunity.” It is for this reason that millions of immigrants have come to this country seeking a better life for themselves and their children.

This dream of improving one’s station in life is as old as the country itself. To see this, we need look no further than Ben Franklin. Perhaps better than any other American, Franklin successfully typified the American Dream. Born into a working class family, he strove to improve his character, his mind and his talents. Through careful planning and hard work, he amassed wealth and rose economically, socially, and politically in his world.

As our Western frontier expanded, the dream grew. With the words, which are usually attributed to Horace Greeley, “Go west, young man,” in their minds, young Americans seeking their fortunes sought to expand the boundaries of their lives. It was not only in the West that fortunes were made, however, for ambitious young men like Carnegie and Mellon knew no geographical boundaries.

In literature, “the rags to riches” story of the successful young man who is honest, thrifty, and hard working became immortalized in the works of Horatio Alger. Thus for many, to some extent, the dream did come true. Not everyone became as successful as a Carnegie or Mellon, but in a more modest, but very real way, people and families did move up the socio-economic ladder. The capitalistic system, with all its faults, does allow anyone to rise from the poorest slums to become a success.

For some people though, like the Youngers in *A Raisin in the Sun*, the dream is long deferred; for some, like Gatsby, the dream turns to ashes; and for others, like the Lomans, the dream turns bitter and sour.

Note: All page references come from the Penguin Books edition of *Death of a Salesman*, copyright 1949.

Death of a Salesman

Cast of Characters

Willy Loman – (economically, socially, and when we meet him, emotionally a “low man”)A hard working salesman who, at the end of his career, is physically exhausted.

Linda – The loving wife and mother who, wisely or not, has always deferred to her husband.

Biff – The older son who was an all state football hero in high school. As a teenager, he was handsome and popular, but he is now having trouble getting his life in order.

Happy – The younger son who is a materialistic, pleasure seeker. He is generally happy-go-lucky, but every once in a great while he questions the direction of his life.

Charley – He is a brash, down-to-earth, honest businessman who successfully runs his own business.

Bernard – Charley’s son, and a friend of Biff and Happy. Because Bernard is bright, studious, and not too athletic, the Lomans tease him.

Ben – Willy’s dead brother. He occurs as an apparition from Willy’s past.

Howard – Willy’s boss. He is somewhat selfish and callous with his employees.

Death of a Salesman

Objectives

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

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

Death of a Salesman

Questions for Essay and Discussion

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

Death of a Salesman

Act I (pages 1 – 29)

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

Willy

1. What is most noticeable about him?

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

3. What upsets him about his job?

4. What is it about Biff that upsets him?

Act II (pages 122 – 136)

1. As this scene opens, why is Linda so angry?

2. Happy says, “But, Mom, he had a great time with us.” Is this a bold-faced lie, or does Happy believe it?

3. In this scene what signals Willy’s complete breakdown?

4. What is the guaranteed, “gilt-edged” proposition to which Willy refers?
