

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Death of a Salesman

by Arthur Miller

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Death of a Salesman

ACT I

1. What are your impressions of Willy's travel? Draw a sketch of how you visualize the house and the apartment buildings.
2. Who or what sort of people do Willy and Linda remind you of?
3. Imagine what it would be like to be married to Willy or to Linda. Describe how you would react to being married to each.
4. Willy seems to have contradictory ideas about his son Biff. Speculate about what Biff's situation really is.
5. This play was written during the late 1940's, which was the time of the urbanization of America. Consider Willy's reactions to the apartment buildings. Do you consider them justified or understandable?
6. At the start of the play, it is apparent that Willy has worked as a travelling salesman for the Wagner Company for most of his life. Willy's original boss, "old man Wagner," has died; and according to Willy, "that boy of his, that Howard, he don't appreciate" Willy's years of service and contributions to the company. Write a statement explaining what you believe an employer's obligations to a long-term employee are. Include any restrictions or limits that should be included on these obligations.

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7. Arthur Miller considered titling this play, Private Conversations in Two Acts. How did you feel as you listened to this private conversation between the brothers?
8. Think of a person, friend, or relative that you have known most of your life and have shared many experiences with. Write a private conversation you might have with this person when you are both adults, in your thirties.
9. With whom do you personally relate more to, Willy or Biff? Why is that?
10. With whom would you prefer to spend time, Happy or Biff?
11. In your opinion, are Biff and Happy good men in terms of their morality?
12. What advice would you give Biff and Happy? Would it be the same for both?
13. Do you think Biff and Happy have realistic plans, goals, and dreams? Do you think the dreams are possible? How are your ideas of your future similar to or different from Happy's and Biff's? Happy calls Biff "an idealist." Do you agree? How do you define an idealist?
14. Both Happy and Biff express concern about the American competitive system and about what is required for success, to get ahead, to build a future, and to be something. What is your personal definition of success?

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15. List the comments that Happy makes about women. Are you offended by his attitude toward women, or do you think that his attitude reflects the typical male attitude in American society?

16. In this scene, Willy's mind returns to the past; he remembers conversations and events when Biff was a senior in high school.

List the advice Willy gives Biff and beside each point Willy makes, indicate your agreement or disagreement and if you would attempt to follow the advice or ignore it.

17. Consider the information you have about what Biff was like in high school. Describe what you imagine Biff would be like in high school today.

18. In this scene, Willy is told that Biff may fail a major subject, has "borrowed" school equipment, is driving without a license, and is "too wild with the girls." How would your parents react if they heard any of this about you? How do you think parents should react to this type of behavior in their children?

19. As Willy is confronted with this information about Biff in his memories, he yells, "There's nothing the matter with him" and "I never in my life told him anything but decent things." It may be that Willy is in denial, which is a defense mechanism people use to protect themselves from a reality that is too painful for them to face.

What is your viewpoint on people being in denial and not facing reality?

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20. Willy's memory shifts to a conversation he had with Linda about money, bills, and his struggles as a salesman. Consider how this contradicts what he had just told his sons. What do you think the truth is?
21. It seems that Willy wants to project a successful image of himself to his boys; however, in doing so, he may be lying about what he actually accomplishes. Tell about a person that you have encountered who lies like this. In your account, include details of how this person affects others, and how others react.
22. Imagine that Willy is so tormented by his guilt over "the woman" in Boston that he goes to a psychologist. How do you think Willy would explain her to the psychologist? Write what you think a psychologist would say to him?
23. This scene is in the present. At the end of the previous scene, Willy had been yelling as he agonized over memories of Linda and Bernard confronting him about Biff's wild behavior. Happy has come to calm Willy down. However, Willy only becomes more agitated by Happy's comments. What, in your opinion, should Happy have said? What would you have said?
24. It may be that the "burning woods" is Willy's desperation. When he says to Happy, "Where are you guys, where are you? The woods are burning! I can't drive a car!" Willy seems to be expecting his sons to help him and has become angry that they do not. What is your viewpoint on a child's obligation to his or her parents?

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25. Charley seems to express a realistic attitude toward life. As Willy agonizes over not being able to help Biff, Charley tells him, “You take it too hard. To hell with it. When a deposit bottle is broken you don’t get your nickel back.” In other words, when we make mistakes, and things do not go the way we hoped they would, there is nothing we can do but to accept the reality, harsh as it may be.

How do you respond when things and relationships go wrong? To what degree are you a realist?

26. Willy, with his intensity and inability to let go of his dreams, seems to be a contrast to Charley, who is matter-of-fact and in control. Tell about two people that you know who are direct opposites in their emotional makeup and attitude toward life.
27. As this scene progresses, the dialogue becomes increasingly confusing because Willy is having a memory of his brother Ben as he plays cards with Charley. Tell about a conversation that you had with someone when that person seemed preoccupied with his or her thoughts or was distracted, and there were inattentive lapses or misunderstandings.
28. Imagine that Willy shared the memory in the question above with a psychiatrist. Write the psychiatrist’s report about Willy’s problems being a father.
29. Willy admits, “sometimes I’m afraid that I’m not teaching them the right kind of—” Make two lists based on your opinions of what parents should and should not do to be effective. First, list Willy’s mistakes. Second, list what Willy should have done with his boys in these circumstances.