

## Study/Discussion Questions for *Death of a Salesman*

1. What role do two very minor characters serve in the play? Provide the character name, a brief commentary, and at least one specific example from the text to support your ideas about each character. Suggestions: Bernard, Miss Forsythe and Letta, The Woman, Howard)

I)

II)

2. What is the function of the Requiem in the play? (What does it accomplish?)
3. Miller says that tragedy shows man's struggle to secure "his sense of personal dignity" and that "his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment." Do you think this makes sense when applied to some earlier tragedies (such as *Oedipus the King*), and does it apply convincingly to *Death of a Salesman*? Is this the tragedy of an individual's own making? Or is society at fault for corrupting and exploiting Willy? Or both?
4. We don't know what Willy sells, and we don't know whether or not the insurance will be paid after his death. What is the significance of these (and possibly other) omissions?
5. "Its theme comes across with blinding clarity – failure is the only sin Americans will not forgive" (Kallen circa 1975). Do you agree or disagree with the critic. Use specific examples to prove your point (though staying to some degree rooted in the text).

6. Another American dreamer is Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby. Compare Willy to Gatsby in terms of at least three of the following: their dreams; what they were, how they sought to achieve them, their self-delusions, the results of their achievements (or the causes for their tragic downfall), their ethics, the degree to which they evoke sympathy or pity in the reader/audience.
  
7. Willy is a man of contradictions, from his statements to his actions. List at least three clear contradictions voiced by Willy and discuss what these contradictions show about Willy's character.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. Miller's opening stage directions call for actors to observe imaginary walls when the action is in the present, and to step freely through walls when the scene is in the past. Do you find this technique of staging effective? Why or why not?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. Contrast the father-son relationships between Charley-Bernard and Willy-Biff.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
10. What do you make of the character of Ben? Do you see him as a realistic character? As a figment of Willy's imagination? What does he represent, when does he appear, and how is he the opposite of Willy? Why does he say what he says in their last conversation?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
11. When the play first appeared in 1949, some reviewers thought it a bitter attack upon the capitalist system. Others found in it social criticism by a writer committed to a faith in democracy and free enterprise. What do you think? Does the play make any specific criticism of society?

12. Compare the view (a), “Woman in Miller’s plays is usually the prop of the male principle without whom man falters, loses his way” to (b) “Miller’s women are usually shadowy characters, rarely as fully realized as even some of the secondary men.” to (c) the critic Rhoda Koenig objection to Miller’s treatment of women, “of whom he knows two types. One is the wicked slut, the other is a combination of good waitress and slipper-bearing retriever. Linda, in particular, is a dumb and useful doormat.” Which one most fully embodies your perception of Miller’s use and treatment of women in *Death of a Salesman*. Defend your response.
13. Miller said, Willy Loman “can’t bear reality, and since he can’t do much to change it, he keeps changing his ideas of it.” Discuss the form and structure of the play as a reflection of Willy’s state of mind. To what extent do you find the above quotation true?
14. Miller once said of Willy, “Something in him knows that if he stands still he will be overwhelmed. These lies and evasions of his are his little swords with which he wards off the devils around him ... There is a nobility, in fact, in Willy’s struggle. Maybe it comes from his refusal ever to relent, to give up...” Is Willy Loman’s story pathetic or tragic? If you find Willy pathetic, does this weaken the force of the play? Can we say that Willy has come to any self-knowledge at the end of the play?
15. Miller offered a number of interpretations on his play. (a) It is about “the paradoxes of being alive in a technological civilization.” (b) It is “a story about violence within the family.” (c) It is about “the suppression of the individual by placing him below the imperious needs of society.” (d) It is about “a man who kills himself because he isn’t liked.” (e) It is a play which expresses “all those feelings of a society falling to pieces which I had.” (f) And, “*Death of a Salesman* is a love story between a man and his son, and in a crazy way between both of them and America.” Defend your selection of which statement holds the greatest truth in your reading of the play.

## ***Death of a Salesman* – Additional First Reading Assignment**

**Directions:** Plays must always be read in a way that considers how the play would look and feel on the actual stage. Playwrights have a definite rationale for how they use the stage space, props, etc.. As you read the play, be aware of what information is given in the stage directions and dialogue to indicate what Arthur Miller wanted to be occurring on the stage with his play. Consider how he is using the dramatic space (to enhance the dramatic effect) and use your knowledge from the first reading to complete a visual representation of the stage (from the audience view and from overhead) in the space provided. In the audience view, use the text to be specific in where you locate stage objects and overall stage appearance. In the overhead view, provide specific information about the stage actions (use arrows to indicate spaces on the stage labeling those spaces for what scenes have occurred there – for example, use an arrow to the correct location for what you might call the “Willy planting seeds” scene). Draw to the best of your ability.

### **Audience View:**

**Overhead View of the Stage** (leave enough room so you can write out enough scene descriptions):