ARTHUR MILLER'S
Death of a Salesman
Teacher's Resource Pack

also starring
DOUGLAS HENSHALL  MARK BAZELEY

Directed by
ROBERT FALLS

LYRIC THEATRE
Shaftesbury Ave,
London, W1
Introduction

This education pack aims to enhance your visit to the play *Death of a Salesman*. It is written for students in Year Nine and above, for those studying English Literature, Drama, Theatre Studies or Citizenship. In addition to exploring the context, characters, structure, dramatic effects and themes of the play, there are classroom activities and discussion questions.

We hope that these resources will enable your students to enjoy the play and support your work in the classroom. We would welcome any feedback you may wish to give.

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Arthur Miller

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Arthur Miller was born in Manhattan, New York City, near the lower edge of Harlem in 1915. His father was a comfortably middle-class manufacturer of women’s coats, and his mother was a schoolteacher. The Miller family moved to Brooklyn in the early 1930s because the Great Depression had plunged them into great financial difficulty. These years of poverty and struggle influenced many of his plays.

After he graduated from Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn, Arthur Miller spent the next two and a half years working as a stock clerk in an automobile parts warehouse until he had saved enough money to attend college at the University of Michigan. He finished college with financial aid from the National Youth Administration and from the money he earned as night editor of the Michigan Daily newspaper. While there, Miller began to write plays, several of which were rewarded with prizes. Upon graduating from college in 1938, Miller returned home to New York where he married Mary Grace Slatter and had two children, Jane and Robert. While back home, Miller also joined the Federal Theatre Project, an arts programme sponsored by the US government. However, before his first play could be produced, the project ended. A college football injury kept him from active service in the Second World War. He worked as a fitter at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and wrote radio scripts, he also wrote two novels during this time - Situation Normal (1944), a volume of material about army life, and Focus (1945) a novel about anti-Semitism.

Miller had not, however, given up on playwriting. In 1944, his play The Man Who Had All the Luck won a prize offered by New York City’s Theatre Guild and received a Broadway production. The show, though, was not very lucky - it closed after only four performances.
It was not until three years later that Miller was able to find success on the stage. His play *All My Sons* debuted to positive critical reviews in 1947, and it was a big hit with audiences as well. This play established him as a significant voice in American theatre. In his review of Miller's play, Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* wrote, "The theatre has acquired a genuine new talent." The play also won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Donaldson Award, voted upon by subscribers to Billboard magazine. Arthur Miller later described the impact of *All My Sons* on his life:

"The success of a play, especially one’s first success, is somewhat like pushing against a door which is suddenly opened that was always securely shut until then. For myself, the experience was invigorating. It suddenly seemed that the audience was a mass of blood relations, and I sensed a warmth in the world that had not been there before. It made it possible to dream of daring more and risking more."

Two years later, with *Death of a Salesman*, Miller did indeed dare and risk more. Likewise, he gained more as well. With this play, Arthur Miller soared to new artistic heights and critics began to regard him as one of the greatest twentieth-century American playwrights. The play was a huge popular success, and ran for 742 performances at the Morosco Theatre, New York. The play also won a Pulitzer Prize.

The next several years were very good for Miller, during which time he had several hit plays, culminating with *The Crucible*, which debuted on Broadway in 1953, during the height of Senator Joe McCarthy’s congressional investigations into "un-American" activities of US citizens (which mostly meant involvement with the Communist Party). The early 1950s were a very tense time in American history; the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union made many Americans extremely worried about the safety and future of their nation, and Miller reflected the paranoia and hysteria of the time in *The Crucible*. As a result, Miller was denied a passport to Belgium to attend the opening of *The Crucible* there. Later, he was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and was asked to tell the committee members the names of US citizens who were involved in Communist activities. Miller refused, and was thus cited with contempt of Congress, a serious crime. This conviction, however, was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1958.

The mid-50s were also very turbulent times in Miller's personal life. In 1956 he divorced his wife and married actress and sex symbol Marilyn Monroe, whom he had first met in Hollywood in the early 1950s. This event brought him great notoriety and caused a media sensation, but in 1961 it also ended in divorce.

Miller married photographer Inge Morath in 1962. They had two children, Rebecca and Daniel. He still wrote up until his death in 2005, although from the mid-eighties his work was more highly valued in London, where critical and popular success was much warmer than in the United States. He is revered as one of America's greatest playwrights who helped to define American drama.
Arthur Miller's Plays

Miller's first two triumphs were *All My Sons* (1947; film, 1948), winner of the Drama Critics Circle Award, and *Death of a Salesman* (1949; film, 1952), winner of both the Drama Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. These two plays condemned the American ideal of prosperity because, Miller argued, few can pursue it without making dangerous moral compromises. *Death of a Salesman* remains Miller's most widely admired work. The keen social conscience evident in these plays has continued to surface in Miller's writing. In the Tony Award-winning *The Crucible* (1953; film, 1996) he wrote of the witch-hunts in colonial Salem, Massachusetts, and compared them to the congressional investigations into "un-American" activity that Senator Joe McCarthy was leading in the early 1950s. The probing psychological tragedy *A View from the Bridge* (1955) questions the reasonableness of US immigration laws. *After the Fall* (1964), which includes a thinly disguised portrayal of Miller's unhappy marriage to film actress Marilyn Monroe, offers a second, candid consideration of the congressional investigations in which Miller had been personally involved. Two one-act plays, *Incident at Vichy* (1964) and *The Price* (1968), deal with the universality of human responsibility and the guilt that often accompanies survival and success. Miller's later dramatic works include *The Creation of the World and Other Business* (1972), which seemed too didactic for both critics and audiences, and *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* (1991), which opened in London to mixed reviews. Although less successful than his earlier works, these two plays possess a passionate morality and show the absolute need for responsible, loving connections between people, as do most of Miller's work. However, Miller did achieve critical acclaim for his play *Broken Glass* (1995), a psychological mystery, which won the 1995 Olivier Award. The play deals with the consequences of denial and the toll of social injustice on the individual.
A Brief History

1920’s

The Twenties saw a massive rise in capitalism in America prompted by the growth of mass production. The automobile industry was particularly strong; owning a car became affordable for many. It was a time of high racial tension and new quotas were set for immigrants entering America. As technology grew, the country shrank and the popularity of automobiles, radios and movies exploded. In the autumn of 1929, the New York stock exchange was more active than it had ever been and economists were predicting a permanently high level of financial stability for the years ahead. However, on 24 October 1929, now known as Black Thursday, the stock market crashed causing widespread panic and economic decline of vast proportions. Banks closed and the nation was plummeted into a depression from which they did not emerge until well into the 1930’s.

1930’s

The Wall Street Crash shattered the confidence of a nation. America, once a land of opportunity and hope had become a land of desperation and fear. The Great Depression tore at the heart of America prompting people to question the principles of democracy, capitalism and individualism on which they had based their lives. The ideal of the American Dream was soon forgotten. Throughout the decade economics dominated politics and in 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt initiated a set of programs, known as the ‘New Deal’, to provide relief, create jobs, and stimulate the economic recovery of the country.

1940’s

America was finally pulled out of the Great Depression by manufacturing for the war effort during World War II, an event which went on to dominate the decade and restore the confidence of the American people. Meanwhile, the threat of communism came to be treated as a contagious disease and resulted in the House Un-American Activities Committee instigating its infamous hearings against communist activity in the US.
Synopsis

As the play opens, Willy Loman, who has been a travelling salesman for 36 years, returns home after having just left for a sales trip to New England. He tells his wife Linda that he can no longer go on the road because he cannot keep his mind on driving.

At the same time, his elder son Biff is visiting their Brooklyn home after being away for many years. Willy reminisces about Biff’s potential, 14 years earlier, when he was playing high school football and being offered athletic scholarships by numerous university teams.

When we meet Biff, he is discussing future job prospects with his younger brother Happy. Biff considers going to see Bill Oliver, a man for whom he had worked many years earlier, and asking him for a loan to get started in a sporting goods business. Biff and Happy tell Willy of this plan, and he gets very excited with the idea. He emphasizes that Oliver really liked Biff and we begin to see Willy’s fixation with the idea that one only needs personal attractiveness to be successful in the business world.

In fact, Willy decides that he too will see his boss the following day and ask for a New York position rather than a travelling job. The first day ends with the hope that Willy, Biff and Happy will achieve their goals for the following day. The three of them plan to meet for dinner after they have been to their respective meetings.

Unfortunately, Willy is not successful in his meeting with Howard Wagner, his current boss and son of the deceased owner. In fact, Howard fires Willy because he believes the elder salesman is doing the firm harm. Willy is crestfallen and goes to see his old friend and neighbour, Charley. Charley loans Willy enough money to pay his life insurance premium. Charley offers Willy a job, but Willy cannot bring himself to accept it. While at Charley’s office, Willy meets Bernard, Charley’s son, who has become a very successful lawyer. Bernard wonders why Biff lost his initiative. This angers Willy and causes him to reflect on the past.

Biff and Happy meet in the restaurant for dinner. Biff explains that he has had some important realisations about himself. Apparently, Oliver kept him waiting all day and then could not remember who Biff was. Biff was so upset by this turn of events that he stole Oliver’s fountain pen. This leads him to reconsider all of his previous jobs, most of which he lost because he stole from his employers. Willy arrives at the restaurant and tells Biff that he has been fired. Angered by Willy’s unrelenting misconceptions of him, Biff tries to relieve Willy of his illusions and begins to tell Willy that he stole Oliver’s pen and has been a failure all his life. Willy refuses to listen and retreats to the safety of the wash room. Biff leaves the restaurant and asks Happy to make sure Willy is all right, but Happy rejects Willy and departs with two call girls he has picked up.

When Biff arrives home later in that evening, Linda is furious with him for abandoning his father. Willy is in the backyard planting seeds and holding an imaginary conversation with his dead brother, Ben, who had been a very successful man. Willy once again becomes angry about Biff’s failure and a huge argument occurs. Biff starts to sob, and
goes to his room promising to leave in the morning. Everyone goes to bed except Willy, whose car is heard speeding away.

The final ‘requiem’ takes place over Willy’s grave after his funeral. Only Biff, Happy, Linda, Charlie and Bernard are present. Biff says that Willy had the wrong dreams; Charley defends him as a victim of his profession. Linda is left alone to talk to her dead husband.

Activity: Compare and Contrast with Miller’s other plays

Have your students studied or seen any other plays written by Arthur Miller? Below are a number of written exercises to expand their understanding of the plays.

*Death of a Salesman* and *A View from the Bridge*
Compare and contrast the characters Willy Loman and Eddie Carbone.

Consider their attitudes to work, their wives, their children (include Eddie’s niece Catherine), America.

At the end of the play, do these characters have the honour and respect they crave?

If these characters had met, would they have been friends? Write or improvise a scene in which they meet.

In what ways do the settings differ? How does the different settings and context of the plays affect the action?

How similar are Linda Loman and Beatrice Carbone? How does Miller portray the other female characters in the plays?

What are the dreams of the younger generation? What are their attitudes to the American Dream, which suggests anyone in America can be a success? Do these differ between Biff, Happy and Catherine, who were born in the US, and Marco and Rodolfo, who weren’t? Who has the brightest future ahead of them?
Inspiration for
Death of a Salesman

Arthur Miller once said that everything he had written was based on somebody he had seen or known...

Death of a Salesman began as a short story that Miller wrote at the age of seventeen while he was working for his father’s company. The story told of an aging salesman who cannot sell anything, who is tormented by the company's buyers, and who borrows change for the subway from the story’s young narrator. After finishing the story, Miller wrote a postscript on the manuscript saying that the real salesman on whom the story is based had thrown himself under a subway train. Many years later, on the eve of the play’s Broadway opening, Miller’s mother found the story abandoned in a drawer.

In his autobiography Timebends, Miller related that he found inspiration for that short story and the play in his own life. Miller based Willy Loman largely on his own uncle, Manny Newman. In fact, Miller stated that the writing of the play began in the winter of 1947 after a chance meeting he had with his uncle outside the Colonial Theatre in Boston, where his All My Sons was having its pre-Broadway preview. Miller described that meeting in this way: “I could see his grim hotel room behind him, the long trip up from New York in his little car, the hopeless hope of the day’s business. Without so much as acknowledging my greeting he said, ‘Buddy is doing very well.’”

Miller described Newman as a man who was "a competitor at all times, in all things, and at every, moment." Miller said that his uncle saw "my brother and I running neck and neck with his two sons [Buddy and Abby] in some horse race [for success] that never stopped in his mind.” He also said that the Newman household was one in which you “dared not lose hope, and I would later think of it as a perfection of America for that reason...It was a house trembling with resolution and shouts of victories that had not yet taken place but surely would tomorrow.” The Loman home was built on the foundation of this household.

Manny’s son Buddy, like Biff in Miller’s play, was a sports hero, and like Happy Loman, popular with the girls. And like Biff, Buddy never made it to college because he failed to study in high school. In addition, Miller’s relationship with his cousins was similar to Bernard’s relationship with Biff and Happy in Salesman. As Miller stated: “As fanatic as I was about sports, my ability was not to be compared to [Manny’s] sons. Since I was gangling and unhandsome, I lacked their promise. When I stopped by I always had to expect some kind of insinuation of my entire life’s probable failure, even before I was sixteen.”

In Timebends Miller described Manny’s wife as the one who “bore the cross for them all” supporting her husband, “keeping up her calm enthusiastic smile lest he feel he was not being appreciated.” One can easily see this woman honoured in the character of Linda Loman, Willy’s loyal but sometimes bewildered wife, who is no less a victim than the husband she supports in his struggle for meaning and forgiveness.
Miller met many other salesmen through his Uncle, and they influenced his perception of all salesmen. One man in particular struck Miller because of his sense of personal dignity. As Miller stated in *Timebends*, this man “like any travelling man...had, to my mind, a kind of intrepid valour that withstood the inevitable putdowns, the scoreless attempts to sell. In a sense [all salesmen are] like actors whose product is first of all themselves, forever imagining triumphs in a world that either ignores them or denies their presence altogether. But just often enough to keep them going, one of them makes it and swings to the moon on a thread of dreams unwinding out of himself.” Surely, Willy Loman is such an actor, getting by “on a smile and a shoeshine,” staging his life in an attempt to understand its plot.

Because he was so deeply involved in the production of *All My Sons*, Miller did not give the meeting with his uncle more than a passing thought, but its memory hung in his mind. In fact, Miller described the event as the spark that brought him back to an idea for a play about a salesman that he had had ten years previously - the idea that he had written as a short story. In April 1948 he drove up to his Connecticut farm and began to write the play that would become *Death of a Salesman*. As he sat down before his typewriter in his ten- by twelve-foot studio, he remembered “all I had was the first two lines and a death.” From those humble beginnings, one of American theatre's most famous plays took shape.
Writing *Death of a Salesman*

(Arthur Miller wrote the selection on this page for his autobiography, *Timebends.*

With [the play] *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams had printed a license to speak at full throat, and it helped strengthen me as I turned to Willy Loman...I had known all along that this play could not be encompassed by conventional realism, and for one integral reason: in Willy, the past was as alive as what was happening at the moment, sometimes even crashing in to completely overwhelm his mind. I wanted precisely the same fluidity in the form [of *Death of a Salesman*].

By April 1947 I felt I could find such a form, but it would have to be done in a single setting, in a night or a day. I did not know why. I stopped making my notes in our Grace Court house in Brooklyn Heights and drove up alone one morning to the country house we had bought the previous year.

I started writing one morning...[and] wrote all day until dark, and then I had dinner and went back and wrote until some hour in the darkness between midnight and four. I had skipped a few areas that I knew would give me no trouble in the writing and gone for the parts that had to be muscled into position. By the next morning I had done the first half, the first act of two. When I lay down to sleep I realized I had been weeping - my eyes still burned and my throat was sore from talking it all out and shouting and laughing. I would be stiff when I woke, aching as if I had played four hours of football or tennis and now had to face the start of another game. It would take some six more weeks to complete Act II...

I did not move far from the phone for two days after sending the script to [director Elia Kazan]. By the end of the second silent day, I would have accepted his calling to tell me that it was a scrambled egg, an impenetrable, unstageable piece of wreckage. And his tone when he finally did call was alarmingly sombre.

"I’ve read your play." He sounded at a loss as to how to give me the bad news. "My God, it’s so sad."

"It’s supposed to be."

"I just put it down. I don’t know what to say. My father...” He broke off, the first of a great many men - and women - who would tell me that Willy was their father. I still thought he was letting me down easy. "It’s a great play, Artie. I want to do it in the fall or winter. I’ll start thinking about casting.” He was talking as though someone we both knew had just died, and it filled me with happiness.

On the play’s opening night, a woman who shall not be named was outraged, calling it "a time-bomb under American capitalism." I hoped it was, or at least under the bullshit of capitalism; this pseudo life that thought to touch the clouds by standing on top of a refrigerator waving a paid-up mortgage at the Moon, victorious at last...
Structure

*Death of a Salesman’s* structure is central to its reputation as a brilliantly conceived and executed work of drama. Miller structures the play in such a way that it plays with our concept of time through flashbacks and intricate staging. Miller has stated that the “ultimate matter with which the play will close is announced at the outset and is the matter of its every moment from the first.” The plot is not laid in chronological order, but rather in a bit-by-bit piecing together of events.

The play begins in the present as Willy is shown in the grips of a crisis. The source of this conflict is not totally shown to the audience, but Miller tells us what we need to understand through a series of flashbacks and daydreaming sequences. We soon discover that Willy’s lack of self-worth derives from experiences related to his son Biff, to his waning career as a salesman and to his inability to make life wonderful for his wife Linda. It is the story of an aging man who considers himself a failure but is incapable of consciously admitting it. His debts prey heavily on his mind, and he reaches the point where everything seems to break down before it is “paid for.”

Through a process of zigzagging that spans the past, present and future, Miller presents his central character in the midst of a crisis which he resolves at the play’s end. The reality of his problems is too much to bear, and he is constantly searching for a way out. The setting varies from Willy’s house to Charley’s office, from Ebbets Football Field to a hotel in Boston, and several other locations as well. The most important location, however, is the inner mind of Willy Loman – it is there we see much of the action unravel since the drama lies not so much in certain events but in Willy’s perception and recollection of those events.

*I’ve never been able to make time real for myself. I can’t remember whether something happened two weeks ago or three years ago, or when I was in England the last time. The calendar doesn’t seem to exist in my head. It all melts together. It always has. It’s probably a form of insanity. I thought I would try to write that way – simply melt the days, the months, and the years, because I really do believe that we move through the world carrying the past and that it’s always alive in the back of our head. We are making constant references between what we see now and what we saw then. Between what we hear now and what we heard then. This face reminds us of a face long gone.* Arthur Miller, October 15, 1995
Activity: Writing exercise

How does Arthur Miller show that the past is as alive as the present in *Death of a Salesman*? You may like to answer this by finding specific quotes in which Willy, or any of the other characters, refer to the past. What does it say about a person if they often refer to things that have passed?

Miller’s decision to have *Death of a Salesman* take place “in a single setting, in a night or day” has a dramatic impact on the play. The past and the present are represented on stage simultaneously, making one day/night span many years in the life of Willy Loman. There are no scene breaks in either act of the play so the action runs fluidly. What effect would expanding the timescale of *Death of a Salesman* have on its impact? Write an outline of the play arranging all the events as they happen in chronological order, starting with Biff and Happy when they were teenagers and ending with Willy’s suicide. In small groups, share your thoughts on the exercise and answer the following questions:

- How would this new structure affect the flow of the play?
- Do the audience learn too much too soon?
- Would you need to incorporate scene changes so that the audience could recognise the passing of time?
- Is the play as dramatic?

You may also wish to present the amended scenes as a series of frozen images.

Activity: Class Discussion

Is *Death of a Salesman* a naturalistic play? How would you define it? What do you understand by the term ‘abstract realism’? Do you think it’s a term that applies to the play?

Can you think of any other plays that incorporate memory flashbacks? How do they compare to *Death of a Salesman*? You may wish to consider *A Streetcar Named Desire*, by Tennessee Williams, in which the principal character Blanche DuBois is haunted by memories of her husband’s suicide. Blanche’s flashbacks are not acted out on stage like Willy’s, instead the music of the Varsouviana Polka is used to evoke her recollections.
Characters

Willy Loman
The salesman of the play. He has been employed for 36 years by the Wagner firm as a travelling salesman. Now, at the age of 63, he has been removed from salary and placed on straight commission, a sign that he is no longer as valuable to the company as he once was. As a result, he struggles to bring enough money home to pay the bills. Willy is unable to distinguish between illusion and reality. Throughout the course of the play his dreams of success are defeated as he is overwhelmed by a system in which he seems destined for failure. He has absolute confidence in the American Dream to the point of self-delusion and shares the same false hope for his sons.

Linda Loman
Willy’s wife. She is devoted to the welfare of her husband and has made many sacrifices in order to sustain him. She tries to support and encourage Willy and keep the peace between him and their sons. Despite her efforts, he grows increasingly depressed. Linda knows Willy has been trying to commit suicide but she does not talk to him about it as she does not want to embarrass him.

Biff Loman
Willy’s 34 year-old son, the elder of the two children. As a high school student, he was the all-American boy; a star football player who showed great promise. However, following his discovery of his father’s affair, he has spent the past fourteen years as a drifter, doing various odd jobs around the company attempting to find meaning in life. Biff is able to recognise the fallibility of Willy’s dreams.

Happy Loman
Willy’s 32 year-old son, the younger of the two brothers. Happy lives in his own apartment and works for a department store. He feels rejected by his father, who always preferred Biff. Happy seems destined to echo the fate of his father. By pursuing the same dream as Willy, Happy is fated to an equally hopeless future battling the same system and entertaining the same illusions.

Charley
A next-door neighbour and lifetime friend of the Lomans. When Willy is put on commission, Charley lends him money each month. He is more down-to-earth than Willy and more successful. Charley is the antithesis of Willy and possesses everything Willy’s dreams aspire to; a successful career and a successful son.

Bernard
Charley’s son. As a child, he was Biff’s friend and has gone on to become a successful attorney.
Ben
Willy’s dead brother. As a young man he left home and became very wealthy. He is the man Willy was never able to be. He appears in Willy's daydreams as the only man Willy ever met "who knew the answers."

Jenny
Charley’s secretary.

Howard Wagner
Willy’s boss at the Wagner company and the son of the original owner.

Miss Francis
A woman from Willy’s past with whom he had an affair and was caught by Biff.

Letta & Miss Forsythe
Two young women Happy picks up.

Stanley
A young waiter at Frank's Chop House.

Activity: Class Discussion
How did Biff’s and Bernard’s positions of power change from Act One to Act Two? Why did that change occur?

Do you think Willy was a good father? A good husband? Why or why not?

How did Biff respond to Willy’s suicide? How did Happy? And Linda? How did you respond to Willy’s suicide?

Do you think the characters in Death of a Salesman are realistic? Do you have a relative or family friend who is similar to Willy? Or a classmate that is like Happy?

What do you think will happen to Biff over the course of the rest of his life? To Happy? Or to Linda? If Willy had lived, would they be a ‘success’ in his eyes?

How much does Miller hold Willy Loman responsible for his ultimate collapse and how much does he blame forces beyond Willy’s control? How much sympathy do you have for Willy by the end of the play?

Activity: Drama exercises
1. Motivations
In small groups, have your students list each of the characters in the play and write a single sentence for each character that begins “What I most want is…” Then have them write a sentence for each character that begins “What I’m most afraid of is…” Have each group share their answers and then discuss them as a class. Do your students share similar desires and fears to the characters? Or are these not relevant to young people? To people living in Britain? Or to people in the 21st century?

2. **Tableaux**
Ask your students to get into small groups. Once they are in their groups, ask them to sit and consider what the four most important moments in the play were. Once they have all agreed, have your students create a series of frozen images of each moment. Get them to rehearse these images, making image one flow smoothly into image two and so on. However, don’t let them forget to hold each image for at least ten seconds. Have each group perform their sequence of images to the entire class. After each group has finished their performance, you may want to ask the rest of the class what they think the moments in the play were.

3. **Casting**
Have your students cast the play with famous actors. Have them describe the qualities of each of their choices that would make them good for the role. Hold an “audition” in your classroom, during which each student explains why their actor and why s/he should get the role. Then have the class vote for who should play each role.

4. **Hot-seating**
Have your students assume the role of a character from the play. Allow them to absorb the characteristics of their chosen character in silence for a couple of minutes. Students should consider the feelings and thoughts of their character in response to what happens to them in the play. Make sure they know at what point in the play they are basing the character. Is this at the end of the play, after Willy’s suicide? Or after Act One? Place a chair in the centre of the room and ask your students to form an audience in front it. Ask for a volunteer to take the ‘hot-seat’ as their chosen character, for example Linda. Then ask your other students to pose questions to Linda. You may want to set the tone for the questioning first. Questions to Linda might include: How did you feel when you found the rubber pipe behind the fuse box? Were you angry with Biff and Happy for not supporting their father more?

Why not incorporate ICT into the exercise by filming the responses and playing them back. How did the students feel being questioned? From here you can work on further character development.
5. Twenty Years Earlier
Have your students get into groups of three and improvise a short scene with Willy and Biff and Happy when they were students at high school. How do Happy and Biff feel about their father at this point in their lives? Do they want to impress him? How does Willy relate to his sons? Does he have a favourite? How does this show? The scenes should revolve around the characters hopes for the future. The scenes could begin with Willy asking his sons what they want to be when they grow up. Does he approve of their choices? Remember, both Happy and Biff should be unaware of the events that are yet to come in their lives. After your students have had time to rehearse individually, have them perform their scenes to the rest of the class.

6. Ten Years Later
Have your students write or improvise a scene between Linda, Biff, and Happy that takes place ten years after Willy’s death. To help them get started, you might want to ask them to consider the following questions: What event might bring the three of them together? How do they feel about seeing each other? What has happened to each of them in the past ten years? Instruct them to use everything they learned about the characters over the course of the play as a guide, but to feel free to make up their own story, as long as it is consistent with the play. Then have the student groups perform their scenes to the class.

7. Character Study
Explore the character’s ‘backstory’. This is a way of looking at how actors work with a text and develop ideas about their characters to make them more ‘real.’ Death of a Salesman contains many fascinating characters, each with different layers that make them three-dimensional, believable and therefore more interesting to the audience. Working in pairs, ask the students to flesh-out the characters by choosing one or two of the following: improvising scenes involving this character as a person their age; writing the subtext of a scene (what the characters really meant by what they said); improvising a scene that is referred to in the play but not seen.
Symbols and Imagery

Symbolism runs throughout *Death of a Salesman*. There are examples in almost every scene.

One example that Miller uses often is the stockings which Linda darns and which Willy presents as a gift to Miss Francis. They can be seen as a symbol of Willy’s career, his self-worth, and his ‘product.’ At home, his life is in crisis and the stockings are full of holes. Linda, the loving wife, attempts to mend their life in the same way that she mends holes in the stockings. Willy is enraged at this action and orders her to throw the stockings in the garbage. This action is symbolic of his desire to be free of problems at home and enjoy a life of success and harmony. When Biff discovers his father with Miss Francis, he is most angered by the fact that Willy has given her "Mama's stockings." Again, the garments represent a bond of integrity and happiness that has been violated.

Willy’s car plays a symbolic role as well. In this car, Willy, quite literally, is driving himself to death. We learn from Linda that Willy has staged several previous car accidents. These “accidents” were perhaps early attempts to commit suicide, but they were definitely attempts to draw attention to his condition. The car represents power, movement forward, acceleration and mobility - all of which are symbols in Willy’s life of hopelessness, decay, and despair. It should therefore come as no surprise that Willy considers this vehicle as an instrument with which to kill himself.

The refrigerator in the Loman’s kitchen assumes symbolic significance as it was the quintessential image of the 1950’s American Dream in physical form. The popularity of radios, refrigerators and automobiles in particular began in the pre-Crash capitalist boom of the 1920’s and soon became potent images of consumer America. However, just as in a reflection of his dreams, Willy’s refrigerator is broken.

The fountain pen that Biff steals is symbolic of Biff’s inadequacies. He has no need for the pen, nor is it meaningful in any conscious manner. Rather, it serves to highlight the absurdity of theft, the demeaning quality of taking from someone something which you do not need. Biff has lived a life based on Willy’s values, but when he discovers that these values are not good for him, he abandons them in search of his own. The pen can therefore also be seen as the symbol of someone else’s values, of someone else’s possessions. Biff discards it in favour of integrity and belief in himself. He wishes to get rid of his life-long habit of taking from others (such as the football back in high school). He has spent time in prison, and this symbolically represents how he has spent much of his life imprisoned by his father’s mentality.

At the end of the play, Willy purchases some seeds for his garden and begins to plant them late at night. He is close to suicide but realises that he must leave something "real" behind for his sons. The planting of the seeds is symbolic of Willy’s desire to grow big and tall; ironically, Biff is the one who will secure growth in life. Happy, in his determination to continue Willy’s action can be seen as the weed in the Loman’s garden.
In terms of imagery, one of the most important is that of "the woods are burning." Willy’s brother Ben made a success of himself early in life and compared the process of success-building to entering a jungle. Willy constantly remembers Ben saying: "When I was seventeen, I walked into the jungle and when I was twenty-one I walked out...And by God I was rich!" The jungle was the locale of Ben’s success, but for Willy, the forest is burning and there is little time left. The burning woods image is symbolic of Willy’s feeling that everything is closing in on him: time, debts, human relationships. Even the apartment buildings in his neighbourhood are closing in on him and he cannot bear the pressures. That is why he considers throwing himself into the fire and committing suicide.

**Activity: Class Discussion**

Did you notice any other symbols and/or images in *Death of a Salesman*? What do you think they represented?

Can you think of other moments in plays and/or films that use symbols and images? How did they compare to the ones in *Death of a Salesman*?

**Activity: Small Group Discussion**

The Image of a Salesman

Arthur Miller uses the image of Willy Loman as salesman to create a sort of American Everyman – a character that represents everyone or that everyone can see themselves in.

In small groups, ask your students to consider

- What do you think Willy sells?
- Why might someone want to be a travelling salesman?
- What kind of person do you think a travelling salesman is? What kind of personality might they have?
- What are some of the positive aspects of being a travelling salesman? What are some of the drawbacks?
- Do you think being a travelling salesman is a profession that you would enjoy?
- It has been over fifty years since Arthur Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman*. How do you think the travelling salesman profession has changed since then (i.e., effect of television, the internet etc.)?
Themes

The American Dream

_Death of a Salesman_ examines the realities of the American Dream.

On the Fourth of July 1776 America signed the Declaration of Independence which declared ‘that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.’ The declaration brought to America a new sense of democratic freedom and established a notion of a society in which anything was possible. An American dream was born; a dream that boasted democracy, equality, prosperity and freedom. America became a land of opportunity where every man had power over his own destiny. Yet following the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the ideal of the Dream began to be undermined.

Willy Loman is a man trying to realise the American Dream. However, his failure to achieve it lies in his inability to waver from his belief in its promises.

Ultimately, the American Dream is the belief that every American has the same opportunity to achieve success, whether young or old, rich or poor. In modern society this success is often determined by material possessions and financial wealth.

Activity: Class Discussion

The American Dream

Much of _Death of a Salesman_ centres on Willy Loman’s life-long struggle to achieve the American Dream. Have a class discussion with your students about the American Dream. Some questions you might want to ask them are:

- Describe in your own words the American Dream
- Is this a dream that many people in the West share?
- Do you have this dream?
- Is this dream attainable for most people?
- Do you think you will achieve this dream?
- What are the drawbacks of having such a dream?
Activity: Writing exercise

Dreams for the Future

Have your students write personal essays in which they describe their dreams for their future. What do they want out of life? What do they hope to achieve? What do they think they need in order to be happy? Also, as Willy Loman has very specific dreams for his sons, have students include in their essays what they dream for their children. If any students do not plan to have children, have them describe why they do not plan to do so in their essay.

The American Dream on Stage and Screen

The American Dream has long been portrayed in film, TV and theatre. Rags to riches stories are part and parcel of this dream. Often this Dream is seen as a positive part of being an American citizen. It suggests everyone can be successful if they work hard enough. This ‘success’ is often financial and is recognised through material wealth. But sometimes, as in Death of a Salesman, it is portrayed as unattainable for many and therefore a pressure on people’s lives. This view recognises outside influences on the success (or otherwise) of people’s lives.

Theatre

*A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry
*The American Dream* by Edward Albee
*The Iceman Cometh* by Eugene O’Neill
*Glengarry Glen Ross* by David Mamet
*National Anthems* by Dennis McIntyre

Film

*Erin Brockovich* (2000)
*Rocky* (1976)
*The Karate Kid* (1984)
*Wall Street* (1987)

Activity: Internet Search

Using the internet, have your students find out more about these productions and films, and how they depict the American Dream. You may want to split the class up in to small groups and give each group a specific area of study. At the end of the session bring the class together and have each group report back their findings.
Success

The notion of success is very important to Willy. He believes to be successful one must be well liked and defines success by popularity. In Willy’s mind, his brother Ben is the embodiment of success, yet he has achieved it in the perilous ‘jungle’ of competition (see symbols and imagery for further reference to the jungle). It is Charley and his son Bernard who stand for honourable success in the play. Charley is the antithesis of Willy in that he possesses everything Willy’s dreams aspire to; a successful career and a successful son.

Activity: Class Discussion

Do you agree with Willy that being “well liked” is an important element of success? Can you be successful without being well liked? Can one be well liked and not successful? Does being well liked help one be a success? Or does the desire to be liked become a barrier to being successful?

Has Death of a Salesman changed your idea of what makes a successful salesman and/or successful person in general?

One of the important themes in Death of a Salesman is the nature of success. Willy Loman is constantly searching for the “answer” that will make him a success in his - and his sons’ - eyes. Have a discussion with your students on what they think it means to be a success in life. Some questions you might want to ask them are:

- What does being a success mean to you?
- Near the end of your life, how will you judge whether you were a success or not?
- Do you define success in terms of material possessions (such as cars, homes, and jewellery), in terms of more intangible possessions (such as love, friendship, and respect), or a combination or both?
- What are the risks and benefits of pursuing only material possessions?
Activity: Class Comparison

"What Success Means to Me"

Because so much of Death of a Salesman deals with the nature of success, it might be helpful to have your students explore their own personal definitions of "success" and compare those definitions to those of others in the class and those of society as a whole. To do this, first have your students make lists of things that they feel they need to have/be in order to be a "success." This can be completed for homework or during class. Then have students share their lists with the rest of the class. Write a sample of their responses on the board in two columns - one for material possessions, the other for intangible possessions. Next, have students return to their lists and circle all the items on their lists that are material possessions. After that, have them tally the number of items on their lists that are material possessions and those that are intangible possessions. Then have the class tally the number of students who have a greater number of tangible possessions and those who have a greater number of intangible possessions. Once completed, discuss the following questions:

- Why do you think we generated these results?
- What generalisations can we make about the results?
- Do you think our results would be similar or different to the rest of Western society?
Reality and Illusion

A major theme and source of conflict in the play is Willy’s inability to distinguish between illusion and reality. Much of the action unravels in flashbacks from Willy’s mind, and as a result the drama lies not so much in reality but in Willy’s own perceptions and recollections of events. Willy is under the illusion that a man can be successful as long as he is popular, this is his own delusion and at the end of the play we are able to see the reality as the only people to attend his funeral are Linda, Biff, Happy and Charley. Willy is also under the illusion that he and his sons will make something of themselves despite their setbacks, yet the truth seems to be, in the new capitalistic and technological world, they are all destined for failure.

Activity: Drama Exercise

Reality or Illusion?

Ask your students to sit in a circle. Explain that the object of this exercise is to determine what is ‘illusion’ and what is ‘reality’. Ask each student to think of a memory. Give them a couple of minutes to do this. If some students find it difficult, try and provide a stimulus for them. Tell them to keep their memories to themselves for the time being. Then ask each student to fabricate a memory. Tell them it can be completely made up but it must not be too over the top otherwise the exercise won’t work. Again give them a couple of minutes to do this. You may wish to start in order to get the ball rolling. Present both memories – the real one and the fictional one in any order – to the class, trying to make them both sound as realistic as possible. Then ask your students to try and guess which memory is made-up and which one is true. You can either continue this exercise by going round the circle, or asking for a volunteer to go next. Try and designate enough time to the exercise so everyone in the class can participate.
Section Two:

*Death of a Salesman*

At the Lyric Theatre

Spring 2005
This interview, a transcription of an on-line chat, took place on February 21, 1999 when the production of Death of a Salesman was showing on Broadway.

Were you able to attend the first opening of Death of a Salesman, 50 years ago?

Of course. I was there, and I was at all the rehearsals. I am usually very much involved in rehearsing the play. The first production was -- how should I put it -- more romantic. The set was a single house with an imaginary feeling to it... it looked like it could be blown away with a slight wind. The current set is much tougher -- more black and white as opposed to colour. And the new set revolves and changes -- on the first set nothing moved. It’s a matter of taste -- I think there are advantages to both.

Who is Willy Loman based on?

I knew a lot of salesmen in my life... he's sort of pieces of several people -- one of whom is an uncle of mine... but eventually you create something that has no root in anything... a creation that comes from your mind. He did in this case.

Who was your favourite Willy Loman?

My favourite Willy Loman probably would be Lee Cobb, who was the originator of the part. The reason most likely is the original production is when you discover the play... I've had many wonderful actors play the part -- George Scott, Dustin Hoffman -- but the heat of the discovery is the first time.

Why do you think Death of a Salesman has endured for 50 years? What makes it a classic?
That is a difficult question for me to answer because I'm so damned close to the play. I imagine people are attracted to the story as a very compelling one and the characters are people they understand and are moved by. Nowadays, most plays are fragmented... they are not the continuous unveiling of a story like this one, so people get more involved in the story. Also, Willy lives in our time... in a system of values that tend to de-value the individual... so that at a certain age he can be tossed away. The answer to it all is economic and political... but the situation of the play is something that many people are worried about... So maybe a combination of all these things is what has made the play so popular here and all over the world.

Do you relate differently to Willy Loman today than you did when you wrote the character as a young man?

That's an interesting question. I'm an old man now, and I tend to side with him more than I used to. I wrote him when I was 33, and Willy is in his sixties. I think I side with him more now, when he's fighting with his sons. Objectively I am the same as I was when I was 33, but subjectively I side with him more now -- it has changed.

What character in your plays do you most relate to in this stage of your life?

You know I'm distributed... a writer distributes himself among the people he's writing. I'm not sure there's any one person I identify with more than anyone else. I would like to identify with a John Proctor in The Crucible... I'd think that's a good person to be... but I don't know if I'm up to that. That's a hard question to answer.

What do you see as the biggest differences between the performance strategy of Brian Dennehy and other memorable 'salesmen'?

Well let's see... he has got a terrific drive in his performance... it's a powerhouse. In it he expresses the surge for some kind of victory over his circumstances in a very powerful way. Some of the others were more strategic -- less powerful. Brian is really "throwing himself on his sword" physically. Willy is really trying to survive - that's one of the most interesting things about the play - searching for spiritual validity through the love of his sons. Brian does that with great force, physically.

I consider Death of a Salesman, A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams and A Long Day's Journey into Night by Eugene O'Neal all as pleas for sensitivity to society's cast-offs. Do you feel that art can sensitisise society to this problem more effectively than news reports and such?

I think art can do anything more effectively than news reports. The mythology we live under is not really derived from the newspaper -- it comes from the Bible, from literature, from the mythology from the country. The building blocks of what we believe come from art. The news reports and such skip out of our mind too quickly... it is the things we get from art... and I speak of the Bible as literature as well as a holy book... that stick with us.

Tell me about your creating process...Do you have an epiphany or does an idea stew and you mull it over before you put pen to paper?
Both. I keep mulling until an epiphany happens... if it doesn't, I go on to something else. It is a process of making a deep connection with something, and if it doesn't happen there is no way I know of to make it happen... consequently there is long gaps in the creative process while you wait for this to take place.

**Are there any guidelines or tips you can offer to aspiring writers on touching up dialogue or writing in general?**

You know, I could talk for weeks and end up simply telling you that the way to write is to write, and to read, and to observe. There is no easy solution to the problems you face as a writer, except to believe in yourself, believe in your vision, and follow it where it leads. I don't know what else to say.
# Theatre Review Sheet

## About the Production

What was your overall reaction?

How did you find the pace of the production? Did it move too slowly, too quickly or at just the right speed?

What aspects of the production (such as set, costume, lights, sound, or acting) did you appreciate the most?

What scenes in the play did you find most/least interesting, entertaining, and enjoyable? What was it about these scenes that made you like/dislike them?

Would you recommend this production to anyone? If so, to whom? If not, why not?

## About the Characters

Did any of the characters touch you personally? Who was your favourite? Why?

Were the motivations of the characters clear? In other words, could you always see what the characters wanted?
### About the Performances
Which actor do you think gave the best performance? What did the actor portraying this role do which made her/him your favourite actor?

How did the actors use their bodies onstage to enhance their performances?

### About the Set
Did the set provide an appropriate environment and atmosphere?

Did you find any interesting details in the set? If so, what were they?

### About Lighting and Sound
Did the lighting establish mood and atmosphere? If so, how?

Were there any moments when the lighting was particularly effective? If so, when?

Were the music and sound effects appropriately conceived?

Did the music provide an appropriate mood for the play?
### About costumes/make-up/hairstyles

Do you think these elements reflected the characters? What clues did these elements give about the characters before the actors said or did anything?
Creating theatre education and access opportunities for young people...

The Mousetrap Foundation creates theatre education and access programmes to ensure that young people, with limited resources or support, have equal opportunities to experience the magic and power of live theatre in London's West End.

As an independent charity, not attached to a particular theatre or company, our objective is to represent young people by selecting the appropriate theatre production to meet the specific requirements of the teacher, student, theatre artist or family member.

“An experience that has dramatically changed my students’ perception of theatre” teacher

- **C145** - See one show for £5, open to 15 - 18 year olds.
- **Crossing Curricula** - Encourages inter-disciplinary teaching through the stimulus of a theatre production.
- **Envision** - Brings blind and partially sighted pupils into London theatre to see an audio-described performance enhanced by an education programme.
- **Family First Nights** - Brings families with limited resources to a West End theatre production of their choice.
- **Play the Critic** - Develops students' critical thinking and writing skills using professional theatre critics as tutors.
- **Playback** - A collaborative programme with the RSC on devising theatre.
- **PowerPlay** - Uses a theatre production as a centrepiece of a series of in-depth workshops in Pupil Referral Units.
- **Taking Your Part** - Uses a play as a stimulus to explore citizenship issues.
- **Teachers Preview Club** - A membership club that offers teachers discounted theatre tickets, a quarterly newsletter, special events and last-minute email offers.
- **TechTaster** - Assists teachers and their pupils to learn the basics of theatre design and technology delivered by professional theatre designers.
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- **TheatreMakers on Stage** - Offers school groups an opportunity to attend a matinee enhanced by a pre-show masterclass with the artists involved in the production.
- **TheatreWorks** - Brings theatre practitioners into the classroom to collaborate with teachers to deliver a series of individualised workshops stimulated by a theatre visit.
- **WriteNow** - A playwriting programme for A’ level students with an opportunity to see a professionally staged reading of their short plays.
- **StageSeen** - Brings deaf and hearing impaired pupils into London theatre supported by an education programme.

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