



## Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

Comprehensive Guide for A Level English Literature

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# Teacher's Introduction

This resource has been designed to support the teaching and study of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* AS and A Level English Literature, and to provide historical and biographical background set text on the AS and A Level AQA English Literature B specification for 'Aspects of Drama' and for OCR A Level non-exam assessment for the suggested theme 'Disillusion in America'.

The resource provides you with section-by-section summaries and analyses of the play, including studies on characterisation, relationships, genre, themes, use of language, form and structure, analysis, and literary approaches to the text.

The Section Analyses are intended to stimulate interaction between the play and the world. Each section are a variety of Debate Prompts, which can be used by students to discuss the play and to consider the broader social and ethical implications of their reading. You can also use them to stimulate discussion or as a basis for written work. You will also find practice Essays, a Revision section, and several Active Learning Tasks that can be used to help students think critically about the play.

At the back of the pack are a series of suggested answers to the Debate Prompts, Learning Tasks. These are simply intended to give an outline of the kind of ideas suggested by the text. They are by no means prescriptive, and can be used according to your own needs.

Using quotations from the text as examples, this guide will help candidates to understand the play and give them the ability to utilise it in order to give them the evidence they need to succeed in examinations and essays.

NB Also included is an Appendix containing a series of Recreative Tasks aimed at AS and A Level students. These tasks are designed to encourage the student to respond imaginatively to the play and to raise issues.

Sensitivity in teaching this resource is important as it deals with very sensitive content which may be difficult for some students. It is vital that the teacher checks any content carefully for suitability for their class. **In particular there is a suicide in the play.**

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# Specification Information

## Assessment Objectives

AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using appropriate terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.

AO2: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.

AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.

AO4: Explore connections across literary texts.

AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

## In This Guide

Below is a breakdown of which Assessment Objectives each section of the pack will cover. The AOOs are covered in this resource.

	AO1	AO2	AO3
Background			✓
Critical reception			
Plot summary			
Section-by-section analysis	✓	✓	
Whole-text analysis	✓	✓	✓
Key term glossary	✓		
Further reading			✓
Answers / indicative content	✓	✓	

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# Background on the T

The son of a virtually illiterate Polish-Jewish immigrant, Arthur Miller was born on the Upper East Side of New York district of Harlem. At the time, Harlem was an elegant and prosperous neighborhood with a diverse environment, enlivened by a mix of Italian, German, Jewish and black residents. Miller, who had travelled to America alone at the age of seven, had developed a thriving business by the time he had, at one time, employed nearly a thousand workers.

The Wall Street Crash, which economic historians cite as the catalyst for the so-called 'Contextual Analysis' section), led to the collapse of the family business. For the first time, Miller was faced with the consequences of financial distress. One of the most immediate consequences was that he had to move to a smaller house in the much shabbier environment of Brooklyn. The loss of his father could not afford to send him to university. He tried a series of different jobs, working alongside the men who made their living in the pressurised, hard-pressed world of the sort of men he would come to represent again and again in his literary career and who were embodied in *Death of a Salesman* in Willy Loman, Charley and Howard Wagner. Miller experienced, first-hand, the impact of the depression on the everyday lives of working-class people.

Two years after leaving high school, Miller applied to and was accepted in the University of Michigan, tuition and supporting himself by working part-time at the local newspaper, *The Michigan Daily*. While at college he began writing plays; his first play, *Honors at Dawn*, presented a searing indictment of the social tensions produced by the American depression. After graduating from Michigan, Miller entered the advertising industry while continuing to write plays. In 1940, he married his first wife, Mary Slattery, while he attempted to make a career for himself in literature. This period of his life was marked by the success of *All My Sons*. This play was to propel Miller to the forefront of the literary world and a successful career as playwright, short story writer and essayist. Miller also produced radio plays.

Miller was 34 when *Death of a Salesman* was published in 1949, and it was to win him a reputation that ran for a remarkable 742 performances on Broadway and won Miller several important awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for drama and the Tony award for best play. He went on to be thought of as one of the most important American playwrights of his age. Arthur Miller's most famous plays include *The Bridge* (1955), *After the Fall* (1964), *The Price* (1968) and *Broken Glass* (1994). He produced the film *Timebends*, in 1987.

On his death a *Times* columnist wrote of him, 'Right into his seventies, Miller was a good-humoured man, a tireless crusader for human rights as well as an active playwright' (Miller, 2005). He was married three times, to Mary Slattery, Marilyn Monroe (the American actress who starred in the film *The Misfits*) and the Austrian-born photographer, Inge Morath.

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# Critical Reception

Critics have typically received the play in a relatively positive light, focusing on the message and what this might suggest about American society. However, there is a great deal of moral points we can draw from the conclusion of the play. Below are three extracts from *Death of a Salesman*:

*To the other causes of Willy's catastrophe, then, to Willy's weakness, his incompetence to deal with a society too cruel to pay him the attention that he cannot wrest from it with his own strength, to his isolation from nature, to his incapacity to explain his own situation to himself, to his feelings of a loss of identity, of spiritual dryness, of lack of love, to his erroneous worship at the altar of personality, I suggest we may add to all these his crime: he has made moral **eunuchs** of his own sons. His is a criminality, a **hamartia**, for which the punishment, that miserable life, that miserable death, and that miserable funeral too, are appropriate and decorous consequences.*

**Eunuch:** A male (i.e. has had his sexual organs removed) sexually impotent

**Hamartia:** A character flaw that leads to a tragic hero's death

B S Fields, 'Hamartia'

Fields seems to suggest that Willy's death is actually a form of punishment for his beliefs. The factors that contribute to his downfall seem to be secondary, and the critic goes so far as to say that Willy is not a tragic hero but sinful. This view is worth bearing in mind, as Miller certainly does not present Willy as an admirable character.

*Clearly, Willy is a tragic, if occasionally self-contradictory, figure. That he acts unwisely in confronting Biff and in relating to his family is obvious. But his motives are well-intentioned as he struggles to achieve a victory over those forces that seem to conspire to keep his sons from achieving his own goals; his tragedy is that he dies blindly and alone. To argue that he does not gain size or the courage required for his sacrifice. But Willy's death serves to underscore the point that the noble and heroic than one's limited capacity to live in harmony with a mechanistic society that*

**Entropy:** A description of a system's disorder

Robert A Martin, 'The Nature of Tragedy in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*'

Martin argues the opposite, interpreting Willy's suicide as a form of redemption. He sees Willy as a tragic hero, if not a tragic hero. If Willy passively conforms to the expectations and ideals of the American dream, Martin suggests, he at least takes an active step in ending his own life.

*When Miller undertook in *Death of a Salesman* to present the plight of Willy Loman, he offered a critique of the American dream. The Lomans, never a family of adults, gradually and painfully attest to the failure of the success myth, discrepancies that their lives from time to time can no longer hide. What Willy and Bernard indicate in their respective failures and successes is the presence of arbitrary gods. Willy's death, and Miller's "requiem" confirms them as a part of the territory.*

Arthur K Oberg, 'Death of a Salesman and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*'

Oberg holds that Willy's death comes when he moves away from reality and toward idolatry. He argues that idolatry holds him back from understanding the smaller details in life. Oberg also sees Willy and Bernard, in a sense, act as gods themselves, in that they successfully follow the key aspects of the American dream. Overall, the implication is that Miller presents an American society given over to illusion.

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# Plot Summary

Willy Loman, a travelling salesman, comes home to his wife Linda, stressed out and at the beginning of the play, he reminisces about the past and compares this with his present and Biff, who have returned home to see their parents. They too reflect on the past, and how they failed to find success or happiness in life. In a bout of optimism, they decide to start a new business.

Willy experiences a series of visions of the past. One of these involves the build-up to his father's game, which is evidently a huge event for his father. For a younger Willy, Biff's sports career is a source of future achievements in business. A more painful memory is that of a mystery woman who appears repeatedly.

Back in the present day, Willy, who is evidently struggling financially, is offered a job. He turns this down, offended by the prospect of a job that he considers below his station. This is overlapped by a vision of his brother Ben, who apparently struck upon great wealth. Ben is viewing him as an embodiment of individual success in business.

At the end of the first act, Linda reveals to Happy and Biff that their father has been fired. However, a more positive note is struck with the prospect of the boys' new business. They meet their former boss Bill Oliver, and the brothers book a table for dinner with Willy to celebrate and anticipate.

Meanwhile, Willy visits his current boss Howard Wagner to ask for a non-travelling job. He is completely disinterested in his pleas, and argues that he has no openings for him. This is overlapped by visions; this time it is the day of Biff's game, and Willy is becoming increasingly nervous.

Willy encounters Biff's childhood friend and Charley's son Bernard, who has now made it. Bernard tells Willy about the secrets to success, evidently put out that Charley's son is achieving what Charley once again offers Willy a job, which, again, he refuses.

At dinner, Biff reveals to Happy that his meeting with Oliver has been a disaster, and that he is in the office in his distress. Willy joins the boys, and informs them that he has been fired. As the visions begin, Biff and Happy exit the restaurant. This time, the vision reveals Biff's affair with 'The Woman'.

When Biff and Happy return home, Linda reveals how disordered Willy's mind now is. She tells him, but this is not enough to prevent him taking his own life. The play ends with Linda standing over Willy's grave, remembering his life and pondering where it all went wrong.

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# Section Analyses

## Note for using the section analyses

*Death of a Salesman* consists of two acts which are not divided into scenes. The action takes place in the Lomans' house, in their yard, in a restaurant and in the offices of Brown and Morin. In the following, for ease of comprehension, we have divided the acts into sections with different locations in which the drama unfolds. However, it is worth remembering that when the main focus of our attention is on one particular room or one area of the stage, other parts of the stage are still visible. Sometimes action will be taking place in more than one part of the Lomans' house. Dialogue from different parts of the stage will be heard simultaneously. This is an important part of the aural experience of the play as Miller conceived it. As you read through the play, try to keep this in mind. At the beginning of the text, Miller provides a detailed description of the setting. He tells us that 'The entire setting is wholly, or in some places, partially transparent' through the spaces where, in a conventional house, walls would be. This happens regularly when Willy is recalling his past, where, according to the stage directions, 'boundaries disappear or enter or leave a room by stepping "through" a wall onto the forestage'. The effect is to create a dream-like, or **surreal**, atmosphere.

This is crucial to understanding Willy's experience of the interaction of past and present. One of the main points of the play is that Willy is unable to consistently differentiate between the inner world of his memories and the reality of his everyday environment. Miller considered that the play did not work effectively because of this. For this reason, the following analyses are instructive. He writes, 'The basic failure of the picture was a formal one: the attempt to find, a resolution for the problem of keeping the past constantly alive, and the tension between past and present was the heart of the play's particular construction' (*Plays*, p. 27). By keeping the different stage areas visible to the theatre audience, the play creates an uncertainty of spatial and temporal dimensions of experience that is fundamental to the play's consciousness functions.

Willy's consciousness is further signalled by the stage directions that run throughout the play, particularly to lighting and sound. When he becomes immersed in a certain memory, for instance, the area where this memory takes place will become increasingly lit up. Throughout the play there is a mysterious flute music; we are unsure whether or not Willy can physically hear this music, but it nonetheless serves to reflect his state of mind, changing tone and intensity according to his thoughts. Look out particularly for the mentions of lighting and sound in Willy's interactions with his younger version of Biff.

Think about how these special features of stage design and direction contribute to the overall effect of the play. Of course, the best way to achieve a clear understanding of the effects of the stage design is to watch the play at the theatre. Watching the play on stage gives us an invaluable opportunity to see how these special aspects of a play form an essential element of theatrical art.

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# Act I

## Willy and Linda's Conversation (pp. 7-14)

### Summary

Willy Loman returns home from work to his wife, Linda, who asks him a series of questions. This discussion introduces some of the play's key concerns, including Willy's weariness, his perpetual conflict with his son, Biff. Throughout the conversation, Willy continues to

### Analysis

The first voice we hear in the play strikes a note of anxiety, as Linda calls her husband's state of 'trepidation'. Straight away we are plunged into the anxieties of the Lomans' marriage and uncertainties that trouble Linda's mind and prevent her from sleeping. Willy is concerned about his health and responds impatiently. We do not know at this stage just how justified Linda's

The answers that Willy provides to Linda's anxious questions are imbued with the feeling of exhaustion. He describes himself as 'tired to the death', which various characters will attest to during the play. Excessive tiredness can, as we know, create profound psychological problems and difficulties. This is to be the case for Willy Loman.

Willy is reluctant to admit that his health is starting to affect his performance, and perhaps at the same time, we clearly get the impression that he is ageing; he complains of aching feet and says he needs new glasses. Linda is perhaps more practical about the infirmities of Willy's condition and tries to persuade him that, at 60 years old, it is unreasonable for him to expect to continue to work. However, Willy, however, seems too proud of his role with the company to consider staying in New England. He says, 'I'm vital in New England'. However, Willy's reflection that his health is 'like somebody's' provides another deathly omen.

Willy's reference to the beautiful countryside environment he had been driving through that day, where 'the trees are so thick', introduces the recurring **motif** of trees and vegetation.

**Motif:** An image or symbol that is repeated – to create a sense of unity or to emphasize a theme.

Throughout the play, this imagery represents the salesman's hopes and ambitions. His love of life, nature is also indicative of failure and frustration; trees that he had formerly admired and tried to grow vegetables in his back yard end in failure.

During this conversation Linda's careful concern for her husband becomes very apparent. She persuades him, removes his shoes and offers to feed him. Her tone is thoroughly sympathetic and considerate of her husband's welfare. Willy, however, seems to take her for granted and does not appreciate her attentiveness.

Having her sons Biff and Happy at home seems to be a rare source of pleasure for Linda. However, when talking about his sons, however, his first thought is a depressing one: that they do not want to work. This is more philosophical and tells Willy that, 'life is a casting off. It's always that way'. The inevitability of ageing and loss is met by her husband's vague notion that 'Some people are born to lead'. Clearly, denial forms a central part of Willy's experience.

When talking about Biff, Linda seems to play the role of peacekeeper. Willy, however, is perceived under-achievement and way of life. The salesman aggressively dismisses his wife's concerns. He later contradicts himself by asserting, 'There's one thing about Biff – he's not lazy'. It is not a surprise that this eccentricity is not new. We thus receive the impression of an unsettled mind that does not proceed logically and is readily distracted.

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For Willy, almost every line of conversation seems capable of starting a chain of remembrance that seem to involve Biff and the happiness of Biff's boyhood. He recalls, also, the neighborhood flowers, and speaks of the 'fragrance' that once permeated the house. We recall that the house was replaced by the smell of Happy and Biff's shaving lotion, the sign of their present-day life.

When Linda intervenes in Willy's remembered world and attempts to persuade him to focus on present practicalities he becomes unreasonably angry. His anger seems childlike and inconsistent, abruptly shifting its focus from the issue of population growth to a pedantic concern about the price of cheese. This somewhat undermines the pity readers feel for the protagonist. However, his spontaneous and unexpected affection, as when he tells Linda that she is his 'foundation', and his mood swings and abrupt changes of topic make him a very difficult character to interpret.

**Protagonist:** The main character in a drama or story.

The red Chevrolet ('Chevy') Willy once owned, introduced at the close of this section, is a symbol of the past course of the play, as he slips further and further into the past. It seems that he cannot distinguish between the present, or the world he inhabits in his memory from the reality of his present-day existence. One of the sharpest ironies involves Willy's inability to distinguish the different dimensions of past and present, a stage design providing one of the mechanisms by which this confusion is embodied (see the 'Stage Design' section). Willy's immersion in memory and illusion provides a great source of happiness, which is one of the symptoms of his mental illness.

### Essay Questions

- 1) Analyse the ways in which nature provides a context for Willy's world, and how the natural environment affects his happiness and his mental health.

### Debate Prompts

- 1) Does the play display a sexist attitude on the part of its **protagonist** toward women? Is this intended to reflect an overly masculine society at the time of writing?
- 2) Are Willy's problems simply the result of being overworked/overtired, or are they due to character flaws?
- 3) Why does Linda describe life as a 'casting off'? And what do you think is the meaning of what she believes 'some people accomplish'?
- 4) Does the tenderness that Linda obviously feels for her husband make Willy seem like a more likeable character?

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## Biff and Happy's Conversation (pp. 14–21)

### Summary

In their room, the brothers discuss their past, including their former relations with Willy about their current lives, particularly Biff's inability to forge a successful career and the close of the section, Biff resolves to see family acquaintance Bill Oliver about a potential job. Willy talking to himself.

### Analysis

Biff and Happy, like Linda, worry about Willy's driving, but Happy demonstrates a supposedly excellent eyesight: 'Why he's got the finest eye for colour in the business' yet exaggerated claims for his sons' abilities, so Happy makes a boast of this apparent

Like their father, Happy and Biff also seem to recall earlier days with pleasure. With regard to their former sexual conquests, they appear smugly **chauvinistic**; Happy's casual remark that his first sexual partner was a 'pig' might be seen as crude and offensive. His sexual prowess seems a rather lame conclusion to reminiscences about grand 'dreams' and wonder if their aspirations had ever been particularly grand.

**Chauvinistic:** Biff is superior to the other

As he talks about himself, Linda's assessment of Biff as 'lost' increasingly strikes us as recognised this too, suggesting that his brother has lost the confidence he displayed and an inclination is clearly for physical, outdoor activities, as we see in the passionate talk of herding cattle and working with horses. Yet this passion is a source of conflict for Biff; if he cannot achieve happiness in the business world, he clearly feels a pressure to earn a living in short, to be the kind of man that Willy would like him to be.

Although Happy's life is very different from his brother's – and perhaps much more than we have expected his sons to lead – he too is dissatisfied. He describes himself as 'lonely' and the women he has affairs with. When Biff speaks of buying a ranch Happy is immediately drawn to it, as if they seem to share the same ideals and aspirations and, for a moment, there is a glimpse of a world in which the stress and discomfort of the business world might be exchanged for the agricultural existence. Like his father, however, Happy seems capable of contradicting himself; more concerned with the pursuit of financial wealth than he worries about how much money he is likely to make.

Although, in some ways, Happy's role in the play seems less significant than his brother's, he is a conflicted character who is seemingly aware of the causes of his own failings and discontent. For example, he articulates the disgust he feels at himself for seducing the women with what seems to be genuine insight, that he may 'have an overdeveloped sense of himself'. Some aspects of his personality seem to be overwhelmed by his sexual arrogance, his empty materialistic ambitions. It may be argued that Happy has allowed himself to become consumed by his obsessions that preoccupy and torment his father.

The brothers respond differently to their father's eccentric murmurings. Biff becomes disillusioned by Willy's lack of consideration for Linda, and her anxiety about his health. We leave Biff with a criticism of his father: 'That selfish, stupid...'. In this section of the play, we begin to see how Willy's former idealisation of his son colours and problematises their present

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## Debate Prompts

- 1) Already similarities between Willy and Biff are apparent. For example, Biff's physical activity seems to chime with Willy's pleasant memories of trees, shrubs. What resemblances can you find between Willy and Biff or between Willy and Happy? Do they tend to bring the family closer together or keep them apart?
- 2) Both Happy and Biff, as well as Willy, seem to look back on the past with affection. Is their perception of the past similar to Willy's? In what ways do the brothers continue the promises of the past and the expectations of their youth?

## Essay Questions

- 1) To what extent is Willy to blame for Biff's inability to trust to his own instincts? What work does he truly desire?
- 2) Analyse the representation of Biff and Happy as characters. Why does Miller represent the two brothers?

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## Willy's Illusory Past World (pp. 21–31)

### Summary

At this point we enter fully into the past world that still exists in Willy's consciousness with Biff and Happy in the yard. They collectively look forward to Biff's upcoming A promise of success. Just as Willy begins talking to Linda about some of their financial appears and begins to taunt him.

### Analysis

The stage directions provide important indications of how this world takes shape: 'The out, and the entire house and surroundings become covered with leaves'. During the play, characters will arrive on stage by crossing parts of the set where we might expect make this world seem mysterious, intangible, and elusive.

Biff's respect and admiration for his father is obvious and wholehearted, a situation that his recent infuriation at Willy's ramblings. This section of the play provides us with a up his sons, and the disparity between his past expectations of them and present-day confident, authoritative, and holds the focus of Biff and Happy's attentions.

The lost elm trees that Willy mourns in the play's opening conversation with Linda a of hope and expectation. Beneath this idyllic scenario, however, are the seeds of Biff in Biff's exploitation of girls, and even laughingly approves when his son reveals that remember that in the previous section Biff worried about a theft which he committed the theft of 'a carton of basketballs'. We are becoming gradually aware of the connection misdemeanours and minor moral transgressions that Biff committed in his youth and failings of his adult life.

The value that Willy places on being 'well liked' is established during this section of the play. He suggests that in the business world, being liked is more important than academic qualifications. Being liked is also linked to physical appearance – he contrasts his sons ('built like **Adonises**') to the undermined by the knowledge that Biff has been encouraged by his father to play sports studying for an important maths examination.

**Adonises**  
beauty

Despite his initial assertions, even within his dream world Willy is unsure of the extent 'I'm well liked in Hartford. You see the trouble is, Linda, people don't take to me'. his dream spreading to include elements of self-doubt. Shortly after this, we become value of the sales he has made, both to Linda and, we suspect, to himself. It seems that his success as a salesman was not sufficient to ensure the smooth financial running of

The scope of Willy's dream world widens to include a scene beyond the household, the left of the stage. His expression of love for his understanding wife merges into his another woman. This character's mystery and volatility is suggested by her lack of a instead as 'The Woman'. When The Woman first appears, she is 'dimly seen', as if in realm of Willy's mind. Her presence is signalled with music and laughter and she is in sensuality of these associations contrasts dramatically with the domestic aura of the family household. At first, Willy seems reluctant to acknowledge her presence and continues Linda. However, his attraction towards The Woman seems irresistible and, instantaneous attention – shifts and we are confronted with a quite different aspect of Willy's exist

The stockings Linda is repairing function as a **symbol** of Willy's guilt. The image seems to underline the disparity between the confident, successful man of the world he pretends to be when with The Woman, and the inescapable financial realities of the life he shares with Linda. From this moment increasingly troubled. There is a rising sense of panic as Willy is confronted with the his lagging schoolwork – introduced by Bernard – to his perverse behaviour, which is incapable of finding a solution to his son's problems, first determining to punish Biff. Here, as elsewhere, Willy's recollection of the past is deeply disturbing, almost night

**Symbol**  
to represent

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### Active Learning Task

Willy's tendency to contradict himself unsettles us and seems to underline how unsteady he is. The 'Five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston' he supports dwindles to 'a hundred and eighty gross in Providence' and then, with barely a hesitation, to 'a hundred gross on the whole trip'.

Draw a mind map of potential reasons for this exaggeration/dishonesty.

### Debate Prompts

- 1) Why do you think Willy is unfaithful to his wife with The Woman? Do his perceptions of infidelity at all forgivable, or at least understandable?
- 2) How do we account for this tendency for Willy's memories to shift from an ideal to a state of distress at the difficulties and the anguish that this world comprised? Are his perceptions or is he subconsciously attempting to understand his past failings?
- 3) Willy's gift of stockings to his lover is symbolic: she comments 'I love a lot of things' Is her attraction to Willy purely a materialistic one? In what ways can her influence be seen in his behaviour towards his wife and family?

### Essay Questions

- 1) To what extent does Willy's infidelity reflect the chauvinism and irresponsibility of business, competition and materialism?

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## Willy and Charley / Uncle Ben (pp.31–41)

### Summary

At this point, Happy appears in pyjamas and we return to the present moment. After father, Happy returns to bed and Willy plays cards with family friend Charley. Their Willy's imaginary conversation with his Uncle Ben, who speaks of his financial success down Charley's offer of a job, his guest becomes frustrated and exits. Willy becomes imaginings, with the past versions of Linda, Happy and Biff joining Ben.

### Analysis

According to Willy, Ben 'walked into a jungle', and came out rich. But today, Willy This powerful image communicates his sense of impending disaster. The woods may opportunities that Ben found there, while functioning as a subtle reminder of Willy's gentle, less troubled, side of Willy's character that is in danger of being utterly laid t

Charley seems relatively content and empathetic towards Willy. Willy is instinctively unreasonably offended by his attempts at conversation. He tells Charley, for instance is not a man. You're disgusting'. We soon see that, although Charley is less boastful and never idealises the life of an American businessman, he is, in fact, considerably n hostility towards his neighbour is motivated by envy – as Charley will himself suggest personal pride.

We are told in the stage directions that Ben is 'utterly certain of his destiny', a point most of the other characters. However, it is also implied that he abandoned his family his fortune. There is no evidence that any of Ben's success benefited the family, and mother, it seems, passed almost unnoticed by him; in fact, his attitude to her seems she has died, he only remarks 'That's too bad. Fine specimen of a lady, Mother'.

Miller uses Ben to **symbolise** the American Dream of bountiful wealth being made available to bold-spirited pioneers who are prepared to take opportunities and discover new territories. Ben describes the discovery of his fortune to Biff and Happy: 'When I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God, I was rich'. Weighed down, perhaps, by his own inadequacy, Willy's self-doubt becomes even more apparent when he asks Ben to teach his sons. However, no brotherly advice is forthcoming, other than a retelling of does have to say is either evasive or ambiguous. He seems to speak for a capitalist ideal of fabulous wealth and hard-earned success, but never explains the material processes behind it. For example, when Ben tells Willy of how he 'ended up in Africa', having started 'due to no clue as to how he travelled the intervening thousands of miles. Nonetheless, Willy brother's tales of success, which appears to seem to him an embodiment of all the ideals most dear.

Willy's attempts to impress his brother with Biff's athleticism and fearlessness are countered by Bernard and Charley – who, here as elsewhere, provide the voice of reason. Biff, it is watchman for theft, and again, Willy's happy memories seem to teeter on the verge of tries to defend or conceal his son's misdemeanours. Ben's attitude towards his brother even cold. Yet Willy virtually begs him to stay and becomes increasingly pathetic in the some kind of insight, either into the secrets of business success or into the past that the fragility of Willy's confidence when speaking to his brother becomes more and more open admission of his own inadequacy as a father.

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### Debate Prompts

- 1) Remember that a great deal of the action takes place in Willy's mind: could it have no realistic substance at all, even as a representation of Willy and his family?
- 2) Remember that the subtitle of the play is *Certain Private Conversations*: might we refer to conversations that Willy has with himself, and to imply that what we see is really only Willy's subjective or **solipsistic** view of the world?
- 3) Why does Ben encourage Biff to punch him and why, when Biff seems reluctant, does he continue the encouragement?
- 4) Think about how Charley's view of business and of personal relations differs from Willy's. What principles and ambitions that set Willy apart from Charley? What, if anything, do they have in common?

### Essay Questions

- 1) 'When I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was thirty. I was rich!' To what extent does this quote reflect the main themes of *Death of a Salesman*?
- 2) Perhaps the only piece of solid advice Ben ever gives in the play is after he has been thrown over him, pointing the tip of his umbrella at Biff's eye: 'Never fight fair with a man. You get out of the jungle that way'. Analyse Miller's presentation of business principles in the play.

**Solipsistic:** Believing that one can only be certain in the knowledge of one's own existence

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# Willy's Suicide Attempts and the Business Plan

## Summary

As Willy steps outside for a walk, Linda and Biff argue about him – Linda defends her criticisms, and condemns both him and Happy for not doing enough to look out for himself, that Willy is trying to kill himself, mentioning the suspicious nature of his recent car tubing that he keeps in the cellar. Happy comes up with a plan to start a sports merchandise store. At this note the family all retire to bed. At the close of the scene, Biff returns downstairs from his hiding place.

## Analysis

When we return to the present time Willy seems more distracted than ever. The memories of past events continue to preoccupy him and make it difficult for him to respond to the immediate life; he is, for example, unable to answer when Linda asks him whether or not he has

Biff's support and affection for his mother seem to be the predominant impulse in his life. He is clearly impatient with his father, and seems angry over some incident or suspicion with his mother. Meanwhile, Linda is fiercely defensive of Willy, even to the extent of disrespect his father he should not come to the family home any more. As Linda points out to her boys, who has to contend with Willy's growing instability on a day-to-day basis. She is eccentricities, but nonetheless determinedly loyal and supportive of her husband. Perhaps the most successful feature in persuading us to sympathise with Willy, presenting him as a human being, although Willy is not 'a great man' he deserves consideration because 'he's a human being, something happening to him'. She communicates her sense of the undeniable importance of human life, the afflictions and sorrows that beset the life of the ordinary individual.

Linda's understanding of her husband's pride is demonstrated when she admits to taking it down and then restore it to its place. By contrast, when Biff resolves to make good in business, his selfless decision is immediately compromised by Happy's insensitive remarks about him. He insists, 'The trouble with you in business was you never tried to please people', a preoccupation with being personally liked. Happy's insensitive intervention seems to lack empathy. Predictably, Biff's newly made commitment to pursue business success is shattered when he is angered into repeating what he told Happy previously about his preference for

For the first time in the play, Willy and the present-day Biff are onstage simultaneously. Willy's son's outdoor lifestyle is evident when he says, 'even your grandfather was better than me'. The dismissive of Biff's aspirations and even compares him critically to Bernard who, we may feel a good deal of sympathy for Biff, knowing that he has just agreed to try to become successful solely to please his parents.

Happy, like his father, is capable of supreme and misplaced optimism, and conjures up a picture of his brothers working together in their new business venture. He exaggerates wildly, and is over-optimistic of the brothers' success. His plan, he says, will generate 'a million dollars' worth of business. He is more excited as he discusses the plan. He seizes the opportunity to advise Biff on business practice, but as usual, while dominating the conversation, clearly contradicts himself. 'Walk in very serious', and then, 'Walk in with a big laugh'. At the same time, he seizes the opportunity to advise Biff on business practice, but as usual, while dominating the conversation and angers Biff by shouting whenever Linda contributes anything to the conversation and angers Biff by shouting

Biff is evidently optimistic about the plans he has discussed with Happy, exclaiming 'ten thousand bucks, boy!' Despite his upbeat tone, we feel how false his expectation is. He is unable to compromise on what he truly wants in order to appease his parents. Biff, perhaps, is able to convince himself that he has great potential for success in business. When Willy says 'I want greatness in you Biff, remember that', Biff is disgusted at his exaggeration and his ingratitude. He is constantly to change between dismissing Biff as an utter failure and rhapsodising about his potential character.

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Willy's talk of Biff's past sporting prowess is **juxtaposed** by Biff finding the rubber tubing, bringing optimism and horror into startling opposition. As Willy looks through the bedroom window, he seems enchanted by the moonlight, and his remark communicates an almost boyish delight: 'Gee, look at the moon moving between the buildings!' Simultaneously, Biff is in the process with which Willy has intended to kill himself, with Linda's 'desperate but monotone'. These different elements intersect to create a strange and ominous atmosphere. At the helpless victim of forces that he cannot understand or change. He resembles a figure brought down by the workings both of his own flawed character and a destiny that he is unable to escape.

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### Debate Prompts

- 1) Why is Willy so unreasonably determined to exclude Linda from this conversation?
- 2) When Biff criticises him for his intolerance, he says, 'What're you, takin' over the significance of this remark? Does Willy somehow feel that his position as head of the household is secure, or is this simply crude sarcasm?
- 3) When Willy leaves the room we are told, in the stage directions, that he is 'battered'. Linda is upset that Biff has made his father unhappy by defending her. Is she right to be intolerant and to criticise Biff for objecting?
- 4) Does the strain that Willy is under explain or justify his unpleasant attitude?

### Essay Questions

- 1) Linda seems to have a powerful understanding of her husband's needs. Compare her relationship with her sons.
- 2) To what extent is Biff the victim of emotional blackmail? You should draw upon evidence from the text in your answer.

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## Act 2

### **Linda and Willy in the Kitchen (pp. 55–59)**

#### **Summary**

Willy and Linda talk positively about the future, and what it holds for Willy in a business. They go on to discuss Biff and Happy's proposed business venture, and Linda informs Willy of a table with their father at a restaurant for the evening.

#### **Analysis**

As Act Two begins, the music we hear is 'gay and bright'. Linda is happy that her husband seems rested, hungry and optimistic. We remember that in the previous act Linda has spent her time unsuccessfully trying to persuade her husband to eat something. Food and eating, the Willy's state of mind and the state of Loman family relations at a given time. There is a contrast in this breakfast scene. In fact, contrasted with what has gone before, there is something about the pleasures that Willy and Linda share. Linda seems content in performing the domestic duties of her house to function. She is clearly the more practical partner in this marriage and, in Willy's eyes, she makes sure that Willy does not leave without the trivial but essential objects he will need for his working day. Willy enjoys his meal and is confident that Biff has changed, with a suc-

**Idyllic:** Of a peaceful, happy, even idealised life.

Miller's nuanced use of language may, however, suggest some dark undertones to the Loman household. For example, Willy casually remarks that he 'slept like a dead one' in his comment, it strikes us forcefully as another dark omen, and creates a moment of disjunctive and joyless atmosphere. However, perhaps we may also wonder whether Willy has passed through a resurrection, and whether the strange incidents of the previous night might prove to be a sign that he is supported by Willy's reference to buying seeds, a symbol of new life and new beginnings. Willy is enthusiastically of finding a home in the country and of Biff and Happy getting married. In the previous scene, Willy accused Biff of 'counting his chickens', of being too ready to give up before having achieved it. Here Willy visualises a series of developments that would complete his dream but realise how unrealistic the prospects of success are. Willy is able to clearly see the value of success and domestic happiness, but is much less clear or consistent on how his hope

Willy is arguably influenced here by the story Ben tells of becoming rich. In Ben's account, wealth and happiness are achieved and remain obscure. Perhaps Willy's dreams of accomplishment are an **ideology** of capitalism and the American Dream, which was influential throughout the 20th century. Stories and myths about achieving wonderful material wealth are a familiar part of American culture. Perhaps Miller is suggesting that such stories are often illusory but at the same time they are powerful. This may suggest an added significance to the play's title; crucially, the title is not 'Death of a Salesman'. The indefinite article 'a' may imply that what happens to Willy could be a common experience.

Linda also seems ready to believe in the future that Willy dreams of. In fact, when she talks about Willy's sentiments about the tremendous importance and potential of appearances. She is proud of Biff's blue suit: 'He's so handsome in that suit. He could be a – anything in that suit!' She wants to keep the family together, despite the conflicts that make their lives difficult. It seems to be a desire to stay in the same home. Linda remarks: 'I can't get over the shaving lotion in this house!', which is operating as a symbol of Happy and Biff's adulthood. Willy is constantly thinking back to his childhood but perhaps Linda also has a tendency to perceive her children in an overly juvenile light.

Willy's anticipation of future happiness is set against the mundane reality of struggling with the machinery that are continually wearing out. He becomes infuriated when Linda reminds him of the cost of repairs to the material goods that he has worked to buy. He

he purchases are designed to last just long enough for the consumer to finish paying for them and be replaced. Willy says, 'I'm always in a race with the junkyard'; this depicts a continuous cycle of the purchaser acting as one element in a chain of production and consumption that ends with the manufacturers. It is ironic, perhaps, that Willy bewails the practices of consumption and depends upon society's willingness to continue paying for things.

Willy's good mood is re-established when Linda tells him that the mortgage on the house is not to Biff. The blight on Willy's happiness is the realistic thought that when he and Linda are dead it will be to a stranger' and not to Biff. Willy seems to want to express his love for his family through material things, as though his emotional life can only be made real with the help of material objects. He remembers the significance of the stockings he gave to The Woman.

Willy is impressed when Linda mentions the restaurant booking. This seems to infuse him with confidence; he feels certain that his business meeting will have a successful outcome. There are a number of domestic items and material goods and appliances in this short section. Linda has also given Willy his jacket. These damaged items have an emotional impact; for example, we see Willy's stockings when he has given his lover new stockings. However, they also speak of his aspirations.

### Active Learning Task

As you read through the play, make a note of examples of references to commodities represented with reference to their commercial value. For each of these items, draw up a list indicating what they represent, both to the reader and the characters. Remember that the 'Great Depression' was a formative influence in Miller's life. How do you think Miller's father experienced in the writer's youth inform the play's representation of material goods?

### Essay Questions

- 1) To what extent are Biff's and Happy's problems an effect of their parents' failures as adults?
- 2) 'Linda Loman is a weak character whose role is unimportant to the main issue of the play, which concerns itself solely with the lives of its men and their work.' Form an argument for or against this statement, using a range of evidence from throughout the text.

### Debate Prompts

- 1) Think about the importance of material success in today's society. Think about the role of material goods in happiness in the media and in advertising. Make a note of some of these images and discuss their impact.
- 2) Do such images motivate us to work hard to make the most of our abilities and talents? Or do these images may create a false representation of social realities?
- 3) Is it good to want to own lots of material items? Is it potentially damaging?

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## Howard Wagner's Office (pp. 59–66)

### Summary

Willy goes to visit his boss Howard Wagner in his office. Wagner shows off his new early type of audio recorder), while Willy builds up to asking him for a job that does New York. Howard informs Willy that he cannot offer him a job, as there are simply Willy attempts to win over Howard with a story about an elderly salesman he had known, Singleman, who worked all his life in sales and was able to make a good living, even phoning buyers. When Howard resolutely refuses to offer a job, however, Willy is

### Analysis

While Willy has always attached a great deal of importance to being 'well liked' and arriving to do a business deal, here we find a quite different reality. When Willy enters the office, he receives very little attention. In fact, he is preoccupied with his recording machine, which he – who does his best to feign interest. Wagner's enthusiasm for the machine seems partly due to his parental pride; the machine allows him to show off his five-year-old geography, a source of satisfaction that may seem endlessly fascinating to him, but more enthralling to anyone unrelated to the child. At the same time, the recording machine is valued for its ability to replace human beings. Willy observes that the recordings are when machines can imitate human individuals, the value of human life and human labour.

When Willy asks Howard for a non-travelling sales position, it soon becomes clear that Howard's reputation in the sales profession and has not understood of how little importance he is becoming increasingly desperate or pathetic as he reduces the weekly wages he is prepared to accept. Howard becomes more immovable in his refusal. Instead of supplying rational, businesslike reasons, Willy relies on emotional pressure and personal relations, telling Howard of how Frank's opinion when considering what to name his newly born son. However, Howard's refusal is based on realities. Whatever his personal feelings for Willy, and whatever connections between them, the harsh conditions of the economic situation or have any influence on the principle of business practice. We begin to realise how profoundly Willy has misunderstood the values by which Howard operates. While he tries to persuade Wagner to help him because of the obligations Howard is bound to be defeated by the banal truism that 'business is business'.

According to Willy, Singleman's success came due to his being 'remembered and loved by a different people'. It seems that meeting Singleman was the reason why he decided to work in sales. What attracted Willy to sales was not the potential to earn a great deal of money, but a conviction that a salesman can win great personal respect and friendship. The most vivid memory Willy recalls is of Singleman's funeral, which was attended by 'hundreds of salesmen and business men'. This is the ultimate symbol of the success that Singleman had achieved in business.

Howard's boredom at Willy's impassioned tale underlines how irrelevant his memories are to the realities of the business world. As Howard remains impassive, Willy becomes increasingly desperate and seems less and less likely to change Wagner's mind – for example, he admits, 'They say you can't take blood from a stone'. Howard tells Willy, 'I can't take blood from a stone'. This proverb, which is typical of the business world, may work on more than one level. While on the most obvious level, it simply expresses an unwillingness to find Willy a job because of the difficult economic situation of the time, it also seems to suggest suffering humanity, and the stone the coldness and hardness of business. It is clear that there is no room for compassion or human feeling in sales.

Willy's ensuing vision of Frank is presumably brought on by his failure to influence Howard. In an earlier section of the play that Willy believes Frank, or 'old man Wagner', was much more successful than Howard. As he accidentally turns on the recording machine, the voice of Howard's cold and ominous and mindless chant. Willy panics at this strange intrusion and calls out to his boss to 'shut it off!', underlining how alienated he is from the modern world. It may also demonstrate how unstable his mental health is. Finally, Willy's insistence that he does not turn to Happy and Biff for help ('I can't throw myself on my sons. I'm not a cripple!') demonstrates his inherently stubborn nature.

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## Essay Questions

- 1) Willy uses a striking metaphor to illustrate his sense of injustice, telling Howard and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit!’ Analyse the significance of this reference to the rest of the play. Focus particularly on what it means to Willy and the wider message about the business world.

## Debate Prompts

- 1) In what ways might the ‘wire-recording machine’ seem an appropriate device in the play? Are there any other indicators in the play that mechanical power is becoming more important than human intelligence?
- 2) Do you think Willy has always been deluded about the importance of personal relationships? Do you believe him when he says that things have changed since Dave Singleman died? Has the world become more impersonal, more indifferent to the ties of friendship and respect?
- 3) Is Howard correct in telling Willy that he is guilty of ‘false pride’? Is there anything about Willy that justifies this?
- 4) Do you think Willy accepts his failings at all at this point? Or is he still in a process of denial?

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## Ben's Reappearance (pp. 66–70)

### Summary

Willy has another vision of Ben and, in his now desperate situation, asks him for further business. They are joined by the past version of Linda, who tries to temper Willy's actions on the morning of Biff's big football game. Biff, Happy, Bernard, Linda and Charley are becoming increasingly nervous and agitated.

### Analysis

As Howard exits, we hear the music that is associated with Ben's entrance. Willy has no answers. He seems confused and lost, as though he has no ideas how to succeed in business so much, and is uncertain about the values and principles that govern his world. He is usually in a hurry, suggesting that success in the business world means sacrificing time with his relatives. Ben's offer of a job in Alaska clearly marks the return of a **repressed** man (a section), representing a missed opportunity that Willy cannot forget.

Ben seems to offer Willy one version of the American Dream. This is the idea that a man's willingness to fight for what one wants are the keys to becoming great. In addition, Ben's success in utilising natural resources, by venturing into new territories and taming the forces of nature, is achieved only by the type of work that Ben offers Willy, but also by Linda's question, 'Why not the world?' The 'world' may be thought of as those distant and wild regions that may only be reached by courageous men. This image connects with long-standing myths about the determined men of the American West, of the pioneering days when men confronted vast, unmapped territories with the potential for adventure and wealth.

Linda, however, encourages Willy to pursue a different kind of dream. She reminds Willy of his promise to one day be 'a member of the firm'. Her confidence and cheerfulness seem to remind us of how her hopes, and Willy's, have been so thoroughly disappointed. Willy's offer of a job seems to be influenced by Linda, whose ideals involve the happiness of a family and the security of domestic security. Perhaps her influence over Willy is stronger than we might imagine, as he seems to defer to her in most other matters. In this section, Willy seems, for a while, quite influenced first by Ben and then by Linda, and hesitates between the two without seeing his own mind. At the same time, Linda's argument that Willy does not need to go to Alaska is based on the kind of beliefs that he himself articulates throughout the play. Linda, like Dave Singleton, implying that she has listened to her husband's dreams and ideas and seems to believe more fiercely in Willy's rhetoric than he does himself.

As the past Biff enters the scene, Willy seems inspired by the vast possibilities that life offers and speaks at length about the great wealth that can be attained. The potential for a young man to believe, enormous, simply because Biff is popular and has an impressive appearance. Biff's football helmet seems to signify the presence of a young hero or mythical warrior; in the previous act to a Greek god – 'Hercules or something'. Willy's idealisation of his son and his American identity seem to intersect. He imagines a wonderful country that provides a path to admirable individuals and, at the same time, sees his son as the exemplary type of success that cannot fail to achieve great things simply by virtue of his personality. Perhaps the reference to Biff before Biff arrives on the scene is significant, depicting Biff as the inheritor of long-standing American values.

Suddenly, there is a mood of great excitement and expectation as the family prepares for the game, signalled by the 'gay music' in the background. Willy remembers Bernard pleading with him in order to get into the locker room and Biff's gracious, condescending acquiescence to his powers and Willy seems ecstatic as he admires Biff's physique, talking of how Biff is the 'captain of the All-Scholastic Championship Team of the City of New York'.

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Charley is his usual **phlegmatic** self, and his apparent disinterest in sport infuriates Willy, who declares, ‘this is the greatest day of his life’. Although Willy is referring to Biff, we wonder if, in reality, this is the greatest day of his own life. He has already alluded to this sporting event at the time that this was not only the high point of Biff’s accomplishments as a young man, but the time when their relationship was happiest. Willy becomes so upset by Charley’s amused attitude that he is underlined when Charley asks him, ‘when you go to grow up, it’s not simply getting caught up in the mood of the sporting event, and wants to set a proud passage, then, represents various displays of strong and competitive masculinity. When Willy is so assertive about his sporting skills, his father is equally determined to show off his physical prowess. Willy’s sense of inferiority emerges when he says, ‘I know you laugh at me behind my back’.

**Phlegmatic**  
sometimes

### Active Learning Task

Try writing a short (200–300 word) passage from an imaginary story in which Willy’s story should be set at the same time as the action of *Death of a Salesman*, focusing on how different if he had taken the job. This can be written in either dramatic form or prose.

### Essay Questions

- 1) Analyse the relationship between sport and the business world in the play. How compatible, or incompatible, are the two?

### Debate Prompts

- 1) Think about the relationship between Linda, Ben and Willy in this section. What do they represent? How do these ideas contradict or merge with each other?
- 2) Is Linda wrong to dissuade Willy from joining his brother Ben? In what ways has the relationship affected Linda and Willy’s life together?
- 3) What qualities do you think Willy would need to achieve success in Alaska with his new business?
- 4) Willy seems to overreact wildly to Charley’s jokes. What do you think is the cause of his aggression?
- 5) We are told that the music in this scene builds to a ‘mocking frenzy’. What does this suggest about the characters?

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## Charley's Office (pp. 70–78)

### Summary

Willy's past world merges into the present day, as he stands outside Charley's office and appeals to Bernard to go and speak to Loman, in order to stop his ramblings. Bernard, the successful career he is now forging in the legal profession, before talk turns to Biff, Charley himself enters, he lends Willy more money, before offering him a job. Once

### Analysis

The voices that fill Willy's imagination overlap with the sound of traffic and then of the car, emphasising the blurred boundary between illusion and reality. Bernard is now a grown man, much changed from the boy who was so desperate to carry Biff's sporting equipment. The fact that Charley are often distressed by Willy's condition may indicate that Willy is truly like Bernard, whom he does not really appreciate.

As the scene develops, it becomes clear that, unlike Biff, Bernard has become a successful man with a regular job, and the fact that he is carrying tennis rackets forms an ironic nod to his involvement in business and sport. He seems to have become the kind of man that Willy once dreamed of, but it is difficult for Willy to accept, considering how he demeaned Bernard as a child and how he treated Biff. Despite this, Willy appears to be genuinely pleased by Bernard's success, and emphasises the generosity of character that he is capable of.

Willy is unable to maintain his pretence of Biff's success, and is overcome with emotion when he asks 'what's the secret?' This replicates his earlier appeals to Ben for guidance, and seems to suggest that Willy is not cut out to be a success in the life he has chosen. After 34 years of sales, he still lacks a true understanding about the conditions and requirements of this life.

Willy's responses to Bernard's questions about Biff soon become defensive, and we sense that there is something important – perhaps not only from Bernard but also from himself. Willy's insistence on 'that Ebbets Field game'; even in admitting his son's failings, his memory centres on Biff's athletic prowess, rather than the upsetting details. As Bernard recounts fighting and crying with Willy at the exam, we see the extent of his friendship and respect.

Clearly Bernard is troubled by his friend's failure and mystified that Biff, who had always been so admirable, was prepared to suddenly relinquish his ambitions. At the same time, Bernard gains insight into the origins of Biff's troubles. He seems to realise that something happened in Boston that was to have a lasting effect on Biff's happiness. This is underlined by Willy's insistence on the matter. He becomes angry at what he sees as an accusation of guilt, and his response suggests he is unable to face up to his part in his son's underachievement. His reply of, 'What do you mean?' reaffirms Bernard's suspicion that Boston is at the very heart of the drama.

When Charley enters, it becomes clear how proud he is of Bernard's achievements. Bernard had previously inform Willy of Bernard presenting a case at the Supreme Court emphasising the need to boast and Bernard and Charley's modesty. We feel that if Biff had accomplished what Bernard clearly has in his profession, Willy would be loath to stop talking about it. Willy insists that he will pay back every penny of Charley's money, while his refusal to take a job reignites the tensions between the two men. The argument from the day of Biff's football game is replicated, as Bernard asks 'you going to grow up?' and Willy threatens to hit him. Evidently, the frictions that are evident in Willy and Charley's relationship for a long time.

Despite their differences, Charley clearly has a lot of sympathy for Willy. At the same time, he is knowing and more cynical. Willy repeats his belief that if a man is well liked and 'impressive' nothing would stand in his way, but Charley demonstrates the misguidedness of this conviction. He fittingly has the final word with the remark, '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'.

**Further Reading**  
Ambiguity in  
Tragedy vs. So  
*Death of a Salesman*

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## Essay Questions

- 1) Compare and contrast Willy and Charley's attitudes to life and business. To what fortunes the result of their principles?

## Debate Prompts

- 1) In what ways do you think Bernard's confrontation with Biff altered Bernard's self-perception? How did this affect his admiration for Biff?
- 2) How can we explain Bernard's success in the business world? Despite seeming more confident and physically less impressive than Biff in earlier life, Bernard has advanced his professional life by a considerable distance. What characteristics does Bernard possess that led to his success?
- 3) What 'secret' is Willy referring to? Is the question merely about financial success, or does it encompass something more than this? On the basis of what you have learnt in the text, how would you answer Willy's question?
- 4) Is Bernard's success simply the result of greater parenting?

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## The Restaurant (pp. 78–91)

### Summary

Happy flirts with a female client in the restaurant, Miss Forsythe, and attempts to please Biff. The brothers' conversation soon reveals Biff's failed meeting with Bill Oliver, a pen pal. When Willy joins them, he admits that he has been fired. As Willy enters into conversation with 'The Woman', Biff and Happy exit with Miss Forsythe and her friend.

### Analysis

The scene of the restaurant is set by 'raucous music', invoking an atmosphere of indulgence and **depravity**. The waiter, Stanley, has a small role to play but emerges as a sympathetic character. He is a working man, who is unpretentious. He also displays a sort of resigned, ironical pessimism, reminiscent of a comic, as we see when he tells Happy, 'I only wish during the war they'd a took me by now'.

Happy is clearly in a good mood, and wants to celebrate with an expensive meal and Biff's business meeting has been successful may suggest that he tends to share his father's breezy optimism that everything will work out for the best, while often overlooking his and his family's situation.

Happy's predatory attitude to women is underlined when Miss Forsythe enters the restaurant that he has an instinct for when an attractive female is approaching. Falsehoods come to light as they realise that the tendency of the Loman men to conceal unfortunate truths is dangerous. When Miss Forsythe tells Happy that she has appeared on a lot of magazine covers while lying; perhaps boasting is a common feature in a society in which personal value is judged by professional status and material wealth.

Happy speaks of Forsythe as though she is an object, asking Biff, 'You want her?' He asks Biff what a woman might feel about the proposition he makes to Biff. In any case, Biff is, as we see from his conversation about Willy, and becomes irritated by Happy's inattentiveness to the more pressing matter of Bill Oliver. His failure leads him to poignantly comment, 'We've been living in a dream world'. He begins to see that the Loman brothers, as well as Willy, have made lies the basis of their lives. The lies they tell themselves and each other have helped to sustain the myth that they are successful. In this scene and the one that follows, these lies begin to unravel and Willy and the Loman family are brought face to face with the harsh realities of their lives.

The strange act of stealing a pen emphasises Biff's emotional instability, and the childlike behaviour of a fully grown man. We remember that as a younger man he received surreptitious praise from Bill Oliver for a football – it may be that the trauma of his rejection by Oliver prompted a momentary state of mind. Perhaps this was the unthinking act of an unhappy man who unconsciously wanted to relive a part of his youth.

Simultaneously, Biff's experience in Oliver's office seems to have worked as a kind of catharsis. He has undergone a sudden revelation of the facts and influences that have shaped his life. He has seen how many lies have been told in the Loman household, and feels that the time has come to face reality. He is in a resultant confusion. Happy, characteristically, wants Biff to put a positive spin on his situation. He invents a story in which Oliver is giving careful consideration to Biff's proposition. He says to Biff, 'Dad is never so happy as when he's looking forward to something'. We may remember something from a previous scene, raising something of a moral dilemma over their collective future.

When Willy arrives, Biff seems determined to tell the truth for once. However, when he is fired, Biff is stunned. His remark, 'How could you be?' shows that he has not yet fully accepted the version of reality that has been revealed. The idea of his importance to the firm is a

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it is shocking for Biff when it is suddenly exposed as a myth. Willy is desperate for success and when he tells Biff that he is not interested in 'facts and aspects' we realise how strong his dependence on illusion is. Although this is Biff's story, Willy dominates the conversation and Biff is often in his father's mouth. In fact, as the conversation develops, Biff is browbeaten into going along with Willy's lies. Biff struggles to tell Willy what really happened but his father repeatedly interrupts, supplying his own version of events for Biff to hear.

The conversation gets increasingly tense. Eventually Willy demands, 'Tell me what you really want to do'. Biff tries to be doing his best to frustrate Biff's attempts to do just this. At the point that Biff explains his dream to Willy, he hears a 'single trumpet note' which 'jars the ear'. This disturbing note heralds another scene in which Biff imagines an event from Biff's youth. The scene – in which Bernard reveals that Biff had a crush on a girl in a sequence from the past in which Willy is not actually present. Therefore, this cannot be a real event. Biff imagines what he imagines to have happened. In Willy's disturbed mind, Biff's failure in the past is a failure to secure money for his business plan.

Despite his determination to tell the truth, Biff is forced to lie because of his anxiety about his future. When he tells Willy that he had made a good impression on Bill Oliver, Willy immediately dismisses the story, confirming our suspicion that he will only hear what he wants to hear. Biff's attempt to tell Willy the truth about stealing Oliver's pen, the result is only more frustration as Willy dismisses the story. Biff is fiercely Willy clings to his delusions and how desperate he is to believe in the idealistic dream.

Willy seems to be in a dangerously confused state by this time and we suspect that a part of the reason for this is Biff is, perhaps for the first time, conscious of his father's frailty and expresses his affection for him. Biff describes Willy as a 'fine, troubled prince'. Biff's short speech confirms his sincere affection for his father. Biff has outlasted all the conflicts and disappointments that have made their relationship so difficult. Biff has finally attained a genuine understanding of Willy and what he holds most dear. Biff is deeply moved by his father's love for him, yet feels powerless to save him.

Happy's feigned ignorance of the 'guy' that is his father seems particularly cruel at a moment when Biff is in need of help. This moment recalls the biblical scene in which, after Christ's arrest, his fatherly friends deny him times that he knows him. Happy's repudiation of his father seems to symbolise Willy's ultimate rejection of his father as a terrible betrayal of his love for his boys.

### Essay Questions

- 1) Biff says that when he met Bill Oliver he 'realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life was'. Discuss some of the reasons for his illusions about Bill Oliver.

### Debate Prompts

- 1) Do you think Happy is justified in wanting to keep the truth from Willy? If not, why not? Think of all the times that the members of the Loman household conceal the truth from Willy, or are there times when it is better for the family to hide painful truths?
- 2) Biff, who is on the verge of tears, tells Happy, 'You could help him – I can't'. What is Biff unable to do that would help Willy? Is he right to think that Happy would help Willy if he wanted to?
- 3) Do you think Miller intends to present Willy as a Christ-like character in this play? Discuss this possibility given his pride and sinful actions?

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## Willy's Secret (pp. 91–96)

### Summary

When Biff and Happy leave the restaurant Willy is alone with his dreams of the past, The Woman. In this remembered sequence, young Biff comes to talk to his father about The Woman's laughter from the bathroom where she is hiding. Willy's affair is the reason for Biff's failures, and the reason behind Biff's failures.

### Analysis

The 'raw, sensuous music' in the background stresses the sexual nature of Willy and The Woman's relationship. The Woman's laughter is heard here and at various tense moments throughout the play, as an ominous **motif** to **foreshadow** troubling or traumatic memories. It seems to be a sensually provocative symbol of Willy's guilt. The words Willy says to The Woman are, 'Will you stop laughing?' This indicates the anxiety that her laughter

**Foreshadow**  
language subtle  
happen later in

As they are elsewhere in the play, romantic or sexual relations are associated with Willy's adulterous relationship with The Woman as a consequence of his need to belong in the world. However, The Woman's affection for Willy is at least partly motivated by her love for him. Their relationship, therefore, has a materialistic, non-romantic aspect. Willy is playfully tells him, 'You ruined me', reflecting the way Happy conducts his own relationship with her.

According to the stage directions, Willy feels terror at the prospect of answering the door and doing so become increasingly unreasonable. Perhaps in his distorted, nightmarish recollection, Willy already knows who is there. His attempts to hide The Woman may work dramatically on the realistic level, Willy is clearly anxious that he should not be discovered with her. On another symbolic and psychological level, we can say that by hiding The Woman, Willy's sexual impulse that is responsible for his feelings of guilt.

Ironically, it is Willy's pleasure at his son's popularity that leads to the discovery of Biff's affair. Biff's approval comes before everything else, and here, this attitude is indirectly the cause of Willy's downfall. The Woman's indignant demand that she be given the stockings that Willy hid is the effect of sealing Biff's conviction that he has been unfaithful to Linda.

The effect of this discovery is to utterly destroy Biff's trust and respect for his father. When Biff's teacher he now tells him, 'He wouldn't listen to you'. He even calls Willy a 'fake hero'. Biff has idolised his father, and the disintegration of his respect for him throws his world into chaos. The ultimate symbol of Willy's dishonesty is his gift of a box of stockings to the woman, which she does with repairs. We realise the painful significance of Linda mending her stockings; by doing this, he must be reminded of Willy's disloyalty, and how wrong he had been to her.

Although it is late, planting seeds seems to Willy a particularly pressing need. His anxiety about anything reflects his desire to leave behind him a legacy, something that will be appreciated by his son. We remember that Willy has always had a love of nature and of working with his hands, and that he wants to satisfy this part of his identity. His failure to raise crops in the past may be read as a failure to which he seeks to compensate for symbolically.

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## Active Learning Task

Throughout the play, Biff seems to alternate between loving / caring for his father and hating him. Create a line graph – with time along the x-axis and ‘love’ along the y-axis, for instance – to show how Biff’s feelings for Willy change throughout the play.

## Essay Questions

- 1) The play cannot be characterised as a ‘tragedy’ because the main character is too young and his ambitions too shallow. Analysing this statement, form an argument either in favour of or against this claim.

## Debate Prompts

- 1) When Biff discovers The Woman in Willy’s hotel room his illusions about his father are shattered. Is young Biff’s idolisation of his father equivalent to Willy’s subsequent exaggeration of his own abilities? Do you think that Biff’s boyish expectations of his father were over-ambitious?
- 2) Alternatively, do you consider that Biff’s admiration for his father is no more than a natural part of a healthy father-son relationship? Should we understand the revelation in the hotel room as an example of a family myth being exploded?
- 3) In what ways might this incident be responsible for Willy’s subsequent need for success?

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## The Loman House (pp. 97–109)

### Summary

Linda chastises her sons for abandoning Willy, and refuses to let either of them speak, planting seeds in the ground, and talking to Ben one last time. Biff joins his father in the car as he has decided to leave for good. Provoked by his father's ignorance, he brings up the memory of another vision of the day of the day of Biff's football game, before getting into his car.

### Analysis

The opening stage directions indicate that Linda is not, at first, visible to Happy, and is startled and even frightened by her as she 'rises ominously'. Despite subsequently clarifying her time with us', Happy may be troubled by a guilty conscience about having left his father, enraged by the boys' apparent unkindness towards their father, as we see when she looks at the floor. However, she seems particularly disgusted with Biff, perhaps because she had to try to restore Willy's health and happiness. Happy once again demonstrates his insensitivity and failing to understand the consequences of his actions.

Linda's accusations provoke Biff into an outburst of self-contempt in which he exclaims 'I'm not worth a damn on this earth'; nonetheless, he is equally determined to see his father and have 'an abrupt conversation'. Biff has been driven to extreme anger and anxiety by her worries about her husband and her own future. She makes her an impressive, imposing figure, who has become strong in her desperate need to protect him.

Willy, meanwhile, seems to believe that he has nothing to show for his life and insists on 'something'. When Ben suggests that the insurance policy might not be honoured, Willy insists that the insurance company will pay out is based on the fact that he has worked for many years and paid premiums. We feel that Willy's experiences have not given him any critical insight into the forces that govern the business world. There is an invincible naivety about him in his attitude that he has only recently been fired by Howard Wagner after working for 34 years for him. Willy felt no personal obligation to help him. Our sense that Willy is wrong to convince himself that he is strengthened by the futile **symbol** of the seeds – they are being sowed, remember that they have never ever grown.

Willy becomes excited and expansive when he imagines his funeral, believing that it will be attended by all the people that people will come from all the places he has worked in. This, Willy imagines, will restore Biff's respect for him. We can only reflect how, sadly, Willy continues to misjudge the situation as we know that Biff has no regard for the business world but, more importantly, we see how much he cares for Willy. His grief at his father's death would make it impossible for him to feel any consolation from the crowds that Willy believes will attend his funeral.

However, Willy's enthusiasm is immediately deflated when Ben suggests that Biff will not attend and that he is a fool. His distress at this suggestion can be quite painful to watch when the play shows that Willy is, by now, in an extreme state of mental agitation and swings erratically from anger to confusion and fear. He speaks sadly of the past and his closeness to the young Biff, as if he were 'back to all the great times?' This seems a particularly poignant remark when we consider that the illusions that fill Loman's consciousness have been just such an attempt to find a way out of his situation.

Biff seems to have realised the futility of trying to explain himself to Willy, and concludes that he must go away. He has finally reconciled himself to the fact that he will never be the person his father wanted. His openness of his admission that, 'I'm a bum' instils a certain respect for Biff, as we admit that we have grand illusions once and for all. However, Willy remains agitated and unresponsive, his anger a failure out of 'spite', and refusing to shake his hand. Perhaps it is hard for him to accept that he is determined to make his own way in life. We may wonder whether Willy would rather die than admit that he can no longer be the predominant influence in his son's life. Willy says 'you leave this house,' which seems a terrible thing for a father to say to his son, but it is a sign of desperation to cling on to the relationship at all costs.

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When Biff places the rubber tubing on the table, Willy seems cornered and desperate, obviously unable to admit the reality of the situation. Perhaps it is now too late for him to be meaningful without his illusions. Biff insists that, 'The man don't know who we are!' His subsequent series of admissions lays bare his character to the audience. He speaks of denying the love he has for simple things, for nature and for freedom from the pressure of the business environment. In a way, he appears to have attained respect for his own individuality. Arguably it is this which makes his relationship with his father so difficult, for we feel the significance of what is truly most important to him.

Father and son are now, it seems, utterly opposed. Biff is almost ready to physically assault Willy. In a moment of desperate honesty, he tells Willy, 'Pop, I'm nothing! I'm nothing, Pop. Can't do no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all', clinging to his father and weeping. In a moment of his efforts to make Willy see the truth. It is a powerful and terrible renewal of the futility of his attempts to fulfil his father's expectations. At the same time, his assertion that 'I'm more', seems to show that he has forgiven Willy for his disloyalty to Linda and is not motivated by anger or resentment. Perhaps there is a moment of genuine togetherness here. Biff has been through words, but perhaps their embrace provides a physical manifestation of the dream they still share.

When Biff leaves, there is a long silence and we wonder if Willy has accomplished anything as a son and if he is capable of rethinking the terms of their relationship. He seems profoundly affected by what Biff has said to him and utters, in astonishment, his sudden perception that his son 'likes' him. Willy, for whom popularity has been the principal criterion of personal worth, should be unsurprisingly pleased by any genuine affection for him. However, it becomes clear that he has remained impervious to Biff's entreaty, when he says earnestly, 'that boy is going to be magnificent'. Willy is 'astounded' that he has recovered the illusion of Biff's future greatness and having regained a belief in his son's potential, he considers that there is something grand or even perversely admirable about Willy's suicidal act. He is torn between deciding that Willy's suicide is both foolish and futile, and admiring the price he has paid to motivate this act.

The 'accents of dread' in the background music **foreshadow** Willy's imminent death. While Happy makes promises about his future – **Frisson:** 'I'll be a success, I'll be a big success' – Willy promises that we suspect nobody believes in – Linda seems to sense the dangerous implications of Willy's mind. He is preoccupied with Ben, and his responses become part of a conversation. Biff tells him, 'It takes a great man to crack the jungle', and talks of the 'diamonds' that he has found there. The diamond is a powerful **symbol** of the elusive, resplendent promise of wealth that Biff has taken to refer to the acquisition of incalculable riches, but also, perhaps, to Biff himself, who has a unique and priceless value. The reference to the jungle provides a final instance of the symbolism of the important points in the play. Trees have been associated with Willy's love of nature, and here there is also a suggestion of the darkness and secrecy of death and suicide. When Biff says, 'Go in, to fetch a diamond out', the audience may experience a **frisson** of terror. Perhaps the only way for Biff to be successful, he must 'go in' to the uncharted territory of his own death.

Willy reflects joyfully on the realisation that Biff loves him and Ben, for the first time since he was a child, telling him that his plan is 'A perfect proposition all round'. As Willy contemplates his future, he is certain that he is on the point of achieving his most deeply held ambitions. He seems to have what he has always longed for. However, Ben, as is characteristic of this energetic man of business, is impatient, exiting with the final words, 'The boat. We'll be late'. Throughout the play, Biff has been departing on business trips, but on this occasion it seems that Willy is to go with him to the mysterious places, the lands that Ben has visited in his pursuit of wealth, and also symbolising opportunity and self-fulfilment. It is, perhaps, another image of the irresistible pull of the dream. In the end, of course, the dream and the journey will end in Willy's death.

Willy seems lost in a final memory of the game at Ebbets Field, imagining giving Biff a ride. We know that this was the last truly happy time that Biff and his father shared together. The memory is **juxtaposed** by Willy's car crash; it seems a fitting note for his life to end on, taking away from the mess his life has become. Simultaneously, however, it is a final reminder that the dream has led to his tragic death in the first place.

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## Essay Questions

- 1) Miller writes, 'In a great variety of ways even death, the ultimate negative, can be an assertion of bravery, and can serve to separate the death of man from the death of a machine; this distinction which underlies any conception of a victory in death' (Introduction). Analyse the relevance of this quote to Willy's suicide. To what extent is it an assertion of bravery? To what extent is it the result of cowardice? You should use examples from throughout the play.

## Debate Prompts

- 1) It is important to bear in mind that, in this scene, Ben is a completely illusory figure. He has never appeared before, it has been as part of Willy's recollections of past meetings and conversations. These recollections may have been distorted. Here, however, Ben is simply a figment of Willy's imagination. How does this affect the way we interpret what Ben has to say? What does this conversation tell us about the estrangement Willy feels from his family?
- 2) Biff begs his father to 'take that phony dream and burn it before something happens to you'. What does Biff mean by this? Willy seems to have lots of what Biff may have come to think of as 'phony' dreams. How do Willy's other inescapable, unrealisable dreams relate to his illusions about his future?

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# Requiem (pp. 110–112)

## Summary

The final short scene takes place at Willy's graveside. The characters ponder the reasons for his death, express anger, mystification and sympathy at his course of action.

## Analysis

It is evident that very few people have attended Willy's funeral, forming a sad contrast to the scene he imagined. Perhaps Willy had always been wrong in claiming that he was well liked or perhaps, simply, there is no lasting affection in the world of sales. Linda is unable to understand Willy's suicide, and seems especially distressed by the thought that the final payment on their house. Owing their house, Linda and Willy would have been free from the most pressing of financial concerns. There is great **pathos** in the mundane detail that 'he was even finished with the dentist'.

**Pathos:** An appeal to the emotions.

Biff recalls the times when Willy was happy working on the house: 'There's more of all the sales he ever made.' This suggests his belief that Willy was inherently more passionate about sales. He also argues that his father 'never knew who he was', recalling his own struggles. It seems that Biff is now secure in the understanding of his own needs, telling Happy, 'I'm not going to be a salesman.'

Charley's understanding of Willy is quite different from Biff's. He articulates the pressures of being a salesman. As Charley points out, a salesman's job is especially precarious. Unlike a workman, there is nothing tangible that he can rely on in his work; he depends on his charm and is not well liked. Charley seems to suggest that, in a sense, a salesman must always see his own death coming. That it is his personality that he really has to sell. The argument that 'a salesman is got to dream, boy' implies that Willy is not alone in depending on his dreams and illusions.

Happy is angry at his father, but, like Charley, we are sceptical when he asserts, 'We're free, we're free, we're free.' He perhaps more than anyone, failed in his duty to help Willy before it was too late, but he is not alone. He refuses to consider Biff's proposition that he join him, and exclaims that he is not going to be a salesman and the world of business, continuing to pursue the false ideals that killed his father.

The recurring flute music signals the end of the play, creating the sense that Willy is finally at rest. As Linda begins to weep she repeats, three times, 'We're free'; while the most immediate significance of this concern freedom from the financial drain of a mortgage, there may be a secondary meaning in Linda's freedom from the burden of dreams that can never be realised.

## Essay Questions

- 1) Examine the other characters' understanding of Willy Loman. What do their reactions to his death indicate about their own character?
- 2) 'A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.' To what extent does Willy depend on his dreams? To what extent does he depend on them to survive in the business world?

## Debate Prompts

- 1) Willy's suicide seems tragic, a dreadful loss that was the result of his failure to achieve his dreams, the frustration of his ambitions and of his growing mental instability. The consequences of his death, devoted to him, are grief and loneliness. His death has not, as he had misguided, been a success. He has lost materially and there is no sign that his sons feel gratitude or love for Willy on his death. Do you think any positives emerge at the end of the play or is the view it offers of the American Dream entirely bleak?

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# Characterisation

## Willy Loman

One of the critical aspects of Willy's characterisation is the contradiction between the man he is and the identity that the characters around him recognise. We learn early on that he has to say about himself and particularly about his professional life and accomplishments. He tells Linda that he plays an indispensable role as salesman in his company's trade in New England, but later we learn that this company is no longer even providing him with a salary.

Willy's inflated self-image is, however, fragile. It is characteristic of Willy to contradict himself within the space of a two or three sentences. He tells Linda:



WILLY: Oh, I'll knock 'em dead next week. I'll go to Hartford. I'm very successful. I know, the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me.

Perhaps the most apparent symptom of Willy's progressive psychological disintegration is his inconsistencies. We have the impression that he is not always fully conscious of what he is saying. At times, he seems to speak out of an unthinking desire to sustain the illusion of himself as a fundamental part of his personality for so long. At other times, his words seem motivated by his unconscious anxieties and feelings of guilt. He has the distracted appearance of never being fully present in his immediate surroundings. There is an ever-present sense of a mind divided between the past and the present, guilt and memory. He can be, by turns, petulant, affectionate, thoughtless and cruel. We have sympathy for a man who can spontaneously turn on his concerned wife for buying the car. His moods are, however, passing ones, and we may be touched by his heart-felt utterance: 'I need your support, Linda'.

If Willy is, at times, inattentive and distracted when speaking to others, he can also be inattentive to what others say to him. The most obvious example of this comes in the restaurant scene. When, after his failure to secure a loan from Bill Oliver, Willy refuses to listen and pushes his sorrowful expectations he has of him:



WILLY: The gist of it is that I haven't got a story left in my head, Biff. I'm not interested in facts and aspects. I am not interested. Now what have you got to say to me?

Willy then proceeds to manipulate Biff into telling him what he wants to hear. Again, Willy is not fully aware of having distorted the truth. Although it should be quite apparent that it has not been a success, Willy subsequently clearly believes that Oliver had treated his sorrowful expectations as fiction that he, himself, has invented. In this sense, Willy is not consciously a liar; he is deluding himself so readily.

In another respect, however, Willy is guilty of an extremely large lie. His affair with the girl, and its impact on all his family relationships, and seems particularly shameful when we consider the fact that his wife is. Willy is clearly haunted by guilt over this relationship, although we cannot attach more to the fact of his being discovered by Biff, rather than to the fact of his being discovered. He explains his adulterous relationship, at several points in the play, by claiming to be lonely. When Linda first appears on stage, during a conversation between Willy and Linda, Willy tells her (and Linda): 'Cause I get so lonely – especially when business is bad and there's no money. Commentators often dismiss this claim as an obviously feeble excuse. However, despite his love for his wife and, at least up until the point when his adultery is discovered, of the two boys, Willy is isolated by a sense of his failing aspirations and his need to sustain a façade. He has a strong impression of success and to exude optimism even when things are going badly wrong.

At the same time, we begin to realise that he has consistently played down the importance of the things that might provide a source of real happiness, for example, his love of working with his hands. His compulsion to hide his true feelings and his real identity from his family that makes him

We are convinced that his loneliness feels genuine. For example, he is sincere when you're the only friend I've got.' Yet their relationship has been characterised by poor communication. We sense how lonely Willy feels before his death when he tells the Ben, with whom, we remember, he has never had a close relationship, 'I've got nobody.' The lack of honest dialogue between Willy and his wife is, of course, Willy's past adult life. The Woman has an all-pervasive influence on Willy's family relations and impinges painfully on his life. Naturally, he can never discuss this with the person who knows and cares for him best.

An essential aspect of Willy's character is his exhaustion. This is the first thing we learn about it has dogged him for some time. When he tells Linda that he has just returned from Boston, 'you didn't rest your mind. Your mind is overactive, and the mind is what counts, dear.' This exhaustion then, not merely a tiredness of the body, but an unshakeable, all-consuming weariness that wears away at his mental health. It is a fundamental part of what makes Willy the character he is. His fatigue is not merely an effect of the physical demands of the work he does, although that is an important contribution. The tiredness that drains his mental faculties derives also, in part, from the burden of dreams and illusions that he carries with him through his everyday existence. Willy is a man who has long been tormented by the expectations he has of himself and by the contradictions of the American and economic system which seems to promise vast opportunities and yet is productive only of a grinding toil. In this respect, as in others, it is Linda who seems to understand the situation best.



LINDA: He used to make six, seven calls a day in Boston. Now he takes them out and puts them back and takes them out again and he's exhausted. He drives seven hundred miles, and when he gets there no one really welcomes him. And what goes through a man's mind, driving without having earned a cent?

The loneliness and the dreams that the play presents as the routine characteristics of life in this world prove to be insupportable for Willy. Willy does not have the phlegmatic nature of Ben in this world. Nor does he have the ruthlessness and aggression that Ben displays. He is an ordinary man with ordinary talents, desperate that he and his sons should live an extraordinary life. He was never really cut out to be a salesman. Charley seems to recognise as much:



CHARLEY: The only thing you've got in this world is what you can sell. You're a salesman, and you don't know that.

One of Willy's most damaging illusions concerns his conception of the sales profession. The persona and amicable relations provide the essential mechanisms of success in professional life. The harshness of the business environment. Willy over-estimates the importance of human relations. His image of professional relations is, perhaps, considerably more appealing than the reality. Our intuition that, while Willy's dreams are misguided and damaging, it is the grandeur of his dream that makes him an outsider and that frustrate all his efforts. Willy's dreams and aspirations come from a place we can recognise. In the end, it may be the tenacity of Willy's commitment to illusions that makes him so and impressive, which wins Willy our sympathy and even our respect.

### Active Learning Task

When Arthur Miller first conceived of this play, his plan was to design the stage in a way which would open up to show the inside of a man's head. Perhaps the action would take place inside the head to emphasise that what we are watching is, in part, merely Willy's world around him.

Plan and design a diagram (in the form of a spider chart or mind-map) in which the characters and their experience are clearly shown in their relation to one another. For example, you could place Willy's name to that of The Woman, another to that of his son Biff, and a third line to Biff.

Be prepared to show how these different characters influence Willy's understanding of himself and how the different characters interact to create the conflicts, dreams and anxieties of the play.

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## Biff

Biff is perhaps the one character who, through the course of the play, shows definite emotional development, of gaining in maturity and personal insight. The first we hear about her son, that Biff is 'very lost' and the stage directions that accompany his first 'bears a worn air and seems less self-assured'. He has become disillusioned by a society that dreams that are most dear to him. However, we also find that Biff is both conscious of those circumstances of his personal life that form the source of his discontent. He is able to find genuine happiness in the everyday business environment in a way that no other character can.



**BIFF:** And it's a measly manner of existence. To get on that subway, you have to suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation. You have to be outdoors with your shirt off. And always to have to get along with your father.

Biff's ability to perceive the limitations of the kind of professional life that Willy so ardently pursues, and the disparity between Biff's ideals and motivations and those of his father. At the same time, the influence of his father has been a very powerful one in forming Biff's character. This influence appears as a willingness to believe in the power of positive personal relations to facilitate success. Biff recalls the fondness that his former employer, Bill Oliver had for him and pins his hopes on the recollection that Oliver 'put his arm on my shoulder'. We realise that, in the hard-pressed world of the play, this counts for very little.

Biff suffers from an internal conflict. He is unable to reconcile his need for the kind of life that nature and provide the simple pleasures of stress-free labour and relaxation with the material goals and social status that his father so ardently desires him to have. The boy proposes, that would enable Biff to indulge his love of sporting activity while generating the sporting goods, seems an ideal solution to Biff's problems. His enthusiasm for this plan to please his parents and yet not utterly compromise his own chances of happiness.

Biff is, of course, in a very difficult situation. In order to ensure his mother's happiness, he must give up his father's dreams although he has long ago seen through these dreams and fallen away from them. Linda upbraids Biff for his ingratitude to his father and cries to him, saying that 'his father's mother's distress proves to be the determining factor:



**BIFF, kissing her:** All right, pal, all right. It's all settled now. I've been remiss. I'll stay, and I swear to you, I'll apply myself. *Kneeling in front of her.* It's just – you see, Mom, I don't fit in business. Not that I won't do it if it's good.

Biff's anguish is considerable. Made desperate by his mother's unhappiness, he feels that he does not believe he can keep. He can only try to convince himself of the logic of his situation, where, in truth, he knows he is bound to fail. A point that is often overlooked is that his father has pushed his son into situations where he cannot be true to himself. The expectations of both parents rest heavily on his hands. Attaining maturity entails distancing himself, at least in part, from his father, insisting on his own right to determine his destiny. One of the significant contrasts between the first act and at the end of the play is that when, in the latter scene, Linda cries, Biff's father says 'I'm through with it'. By now, Biff has found a new determination and an unflinching hardness towards his parents which he has never been able, previously, to sustain.

One important question about Biff is the extent to which his discovery of Willy's discreditable cause of his lack of direction in subsequent life. The profound distress that this experience has caused the fact that his father's adultery utterly destroyed his illusions about the father he had idolized in the young Biff's world. It was Willy who Biff constantly strived to please and Willy

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of distinctive self-worth. All of this was undermined when Biff realised that his father was not the principled champion of his family's interests that Biff had taken him to be. It is with a sense of disillusionment that Biff, then, decides his father is a 'fake' and a 'phony'. The discovery of the urges which were not or could not be satisfied within the family, may, of course, have hindered the young man's emotional development and sense of personal identity.

On the other hand, while it is implied that his knowledge of this aspect of his father's life has caused considerable feelings of antipathy between father and son, Biff does not claim, as Willy does, that his personal failings are somehow inextricably connected with this early discovery. Rather, it is giving him an exaggerated sense of his own importance:



**BIFF:** And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air that I can't hear no orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is!

Perhaps, somewhat ironically, it is the emotional distance that has grown up between Biff and Willy since Biff's discovery of Willy's disloyalty, that enables Biff to perceive the damaging effect of Willy's lies on Willy's life. Biff, who has been away from the family home for some time, has acquired a perspective that is available to Linda or Happy, on the disastrous pervasiveness of the Loman family's lies. Biff develops the clearest insight into the pretences and obsessions that are destroying the family, and he is the only one who has the courage to face up to the fact of his own ordinariness and to reject the materialistic motivations that his father and his society so fervently espouse. Biff commands a good deal of respect, shaken off both the expectations of his parents and the conventions of a competitive society. He emerges as a stronger, more self-aware individual, more secure in the acceptance of his own desires.

### Debate Prompts

- 1) To what extent do you feel Biff's story ends happily? Although he may end free from the expectations of his parents have placed upon him, this freedom is achieved at a cost.
- 2) Do you feel Biff's determination to be his own man contributes to Willy's death? Will his subsequent life will be a more satisfying one or will his future happiness be compromised?

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## Linda

Some critics, and particularly those who are censorious of what they see as Miller's women, have seen Linda as excessively submissive. On this reading she is too ready to surrender her own independence to the whims and illusions of an unpredictable and wayward husband. This might stress her passivity in the face of Willy's groundless irritability. In the first scene she does her best to alleviate her husband's worries and to provide for his needs. She is also sensitive to his eccentricities and is careful to protect his fragile self-esteem. For example, she is quiet when, in the play's first few lines, he tells her of how he has been unable to concentrate on work. In her solicitude, Willy peevishly attacks her, complaining pettily about her choice of dress. She does not interrupt Linda or to utterly ignore her. He seems, at times, to want to deny that she does anything whatsoever:



LINDA: Well after all, the people had to move somewhere.  
 WILLY: No, there's more people now.  
 LINDA: I don't think there's more people, I think –  
 WILLY: There's more people! That's what's ruining this country.

Linda never reacts to her husband's irritability, but whether this indicates the lack of a more generous interpretation, patient humility and compassion, is a moot point.

Perhaps one of the most difficult things to fathom about Linda's behaviour is her inability to see that she believes Willy intends to use to kill himself. Perhaps, by now, she is so accustomed to her husband in a world of convenient half-truths that she cannot find the power to dispel the illusions to maintain for so long. Should her failure to take decisive action at this critical point be a sign of cowardice? Is there insufficient motive in the thought of her husband's potential suicide to confront him? When Linda appeals to Biff to save his father we may find her guilty of accepting an intolerable burden of expectation while unresistingly accepting her own inability to affect the situation. These reflections raise difficult questions, for while we may find Linda sympathetic to her own powerlessness to affect the situation, we may also feel bound to sympathise with her. Perhaps, after all, that Linda is right to believe that it is only Biff whose intervention can help. In his intermittent expressions of deep affection for his wife, it is clear that this household is not as cold as it seems and that he is ready to pay her very little heed in matters that he takes to be of significance. It is an intuitive understanding that Willy is utterly dependent on the lies and illusions that he tells himself. The illusions constitute the structure of Willy's reality and Linda may be right to fear the foundations upon which this reality rests.

Those who see Linda as ineffectual and faint-hearted should account for her willingness to sacrifice her loves out of her sense of ultimate duty to her husband. In this respect, she is neither



LINDA: *With a threat, but only a threat, of tears.* He's the dearest man in the world. You can't have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue. You can't. You can't. You can't. Now, darling, there's no leeway any more. Either he's your father or else you're not to come here.

Her self-control at this point shows considerable strength of character and her determination makes her both moving and eloquent. We may feel that her fierce loyalty is misplaced. Willy has been unfaithful to her and that he frequently fails to show her the consideration she deserves. Her only service only serves to heighten the respect we instinctively feel for such characteristic expressions of unqualified affection.

The method of reasoning that sees Linda's character as insufficiently self-reliant or sees her on the account of the play's unsympathetic representation of masculine bullishness and profanity are the characteristics that are shown to dominate the male-dominated world of business.

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society. Against this background, Linda's humility may seem to have the effect of a counterbalance, a solitary example of compassion and tolerance in a world in which the next man impedes the expression of genuine human sympathy. Linda, and the domesticity which she offers, may seem to stand for the possibility of a world in which one's faith in which affection is not conditional upon wealth or status.

### Debate Prompts

- 1) Is there a sense in which Willy's aspirations provide a meaning for Linda's life?

### Essay Questions

- 1) 'Linda is the victim of Willy's dreams.' Form an argument either in favour of or against this statement, using examples from throughout the text.

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## Happy

Unlike his older brother, Biff, Happy has retained a considerable measure of the self he could command in his youth. In fact, he tells Biff, ‘I think I got less bashful and you told in the stage directions, *‘has never allowed himself to turn his face to defeat’* and, when his best to coax Biff into explaining why he no longer exudes the same confidence as his brother is discontented and clearly longs for him to regain something of the carefree happier times. This description seems to be of a sympathetic character that we can see the face of life’s misfortunes and appreciate him for his brotherly concern.

Yet our first impressions of a likeable, considerate character are gradually and inexorably sometimes, seem an appropriate name, but his is a facile happiness that comes, ultimately or an inability to truly relate to, the feelings of others. There seems to be a certain character, an emotional immaturity that betrays the superficiality of his expressions of emotion. When, for example, he defends his father to Biff, it is clear that he does not do so out of a state of affairs in the Loman household. For example, he responds indignantly to Biff’s respected Linda, but it is apparent that Biff has a far greater awareness of his parents’ likely to have. Another such hollow denial comes when he claims on behalf of the Loman truth!’ Such short-sighted and unconsidered statements consistently exasperate Biff, Happy’s inability or unwillingness to comprehend the complexities of the emotional

A good example of this comes in his attitude to women. He is attractive to women and we may suspect that he has never really connected to them on an emotional level. He typically uses terms that are derogatory or dehumanising: his first girlfriend is referred to as Miss Forsythe in the restaurant scene is heralded by ‘Strudel’s comin’’. It may be that he prizes him to prize personal independence and competitiveness, but this seems to have led to private relations and the inability to form genuine bonds of love or respect. He attaches more appearance than to reality and this is another character trait that seems to be part of his preoccupied with the material and trivial pleasures of life even though, on one level, the life he leads are ultimately unsatisfying:



HAPPY: [...] I don’t know what the hell I’m workin’ for. Sometimes I get a little drunk. And I think of the rent I’m paying. And it’s crazy. But then, I got my own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddamnit,

Despite this contradiction, it is clear that Happy is unable to truly consider any alternative he has embarked upon. For him, success can only be measured by the aura of affluence one can command. Although his line of work affords him no great happiness, it seems to be to out-compete his peers in the business environment. Furthermore, the failure of his father’s failure and suicide. He tells Biff that the dream of commercial success is ‘

In the play’s ‘Requiem’ scene, Happy’s defence of Willy’s aspirations and lifestyle has a certain eloquence. This is Happy’s most earnest moment in the play. He tells Biff:



HAPPY: All right, boy. I’m gonna show you and everybody that Willy

He seems a more serious, more determined individual than we have encountered previously. We give much credence to Happy’s assertions, given his propensity for deluding himself. The lessons he has learned are the wrong ones. He is ready to take over the mantle of his father, but we feel that this will only lead to further unhappiness and frustration. His identification with his father is symbolised in his use of the pejorative ‘boy’ which indicates that he sees himself as a male in the Loman household. It is striking that, at the funeral, Happy is, according to the stage directions, *‘ready to fight Biff’*. The threat of physical aggression is one of the last images that we see of Biff and Willy. It seems that Happy is prepared to follow his father, not only in his pursuit of success but in his determination to defend his father’s dreams even at the cost of his family relationships.

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One point that is rarely touched upon with regard to Happy may yet seem an obvious one in a family that seems to function according to a strict patri-lineal hierarchy. In quite outmoded family convention, Happy is treated as very much the subordinate to Willy. For example, Willy reflects sadly on the prospect of a stranger moving into the family home as the only alternative that occurs to him, and the only outcome that would provide some comfort. He thinks: 'If only Biff would take this house, and raise a family...'. In fact, it would be Happy to consider moving in, for it is Happy that has remained in the same city as his father, and is more inclined to pursue the sort of social respectability that his father values. Happy is also the favourite shown his older brother for whom he clearly retains some fondness. This is a way to explaining the lack of genuine feeling between Happy and his father.

### Debate Prompts

- 1) Is Happy inherently selfish and dishonest, or do you think there are factors in his environment that lead to the man he becomes?

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## Ben

Ben plays a hugely influential though ambiguous part in Willy's dreams and recollects an emblem of the dreams Willy has of achieving spectacular success. He also symbolises an ideal available for men of courage and personality that characterises Willy's perception of opportunity and adventure. At the same time, we should remember that Ben is Willy's only contact he seems to have in his imaginative and emotional life with his parental family. The regard that he has for Ben may derive, in part, from the deference that Willy may feel for an older member. Perhaps it is because Willy has never had the chance to spend much time with his father that respect has been magnified into humble adulation and a desperate desire to please. In the only Loman we are aware of who actually has made a success of his professional life, Ben, we are guaranteed that a strain of greatness does, indeed, run through the Loman family.

Perhaps it is by virtue of Ben's being absent for most of Willy's young life that, in Willy's imagination, Ben acquired the status of a sort of mythological higher being whose place is always some distance away from the imagination Ben seems to belong to a mysterious realm of opulence and manly adventure. Ben represents an exotic environment to which he is constantly on the point of returning. Ben represents a possibility that is always about to be removed. Willy is convinced that Ben was the 'secret' of 'all the answers'. Willy begs him to reveal the 'secret' of his success, appeals to him to help him by bringing up his sons, and asks him to tell him about the details of the family business that he can't remember. Yet Ben never supplies any answers. In fact, it is Ben's reticence that allows Willy to maintain the illusions Willy has about him. After all, Willy knows so little about his brother that he is reluctant to harsh reality to interfere with his reverential vision of his brother's grandeur and success.

While Willy venerates the image of his brother, we may think of Ben as a personification of the American Dream. His fantastically remunerative exploits in mysterious overseas territories embody the mythical image of the pioneering adventurer, winning great wealth and reputation through his unflinching trust in his own abilities. Those attributes that Willy prizes, such as independence, determination, are fully embodied in Ben. He shows that in reality, however, these qualities are accompanied by detachment, ruthlessness and narrow-mindedness. Ben is coolly unconcerned by the moral implications of his only moral principle is, 'Never fight fair with a stranger'. He is casually dismissive of the value placed upon the valorisation of material possessions. When Willy claims to be 'building something', Ben's response is uncompromising:



**BEN:** What are you building? Lay your hand on it. Where is it?

Ben's hard-headed, pragmatic character is reflected in his manner of expressing himself. He is the epitome of the point of rudeness and may be shown to enjoy the disturbing effect his words have on others, particularly Linda. His sentences are usually short and straight to the point. He may attempt to soften the blow when he tells Willy that Biff will 'hate' him and call him a 'coward', but he still gives the impression of having a coolly rational demeanour which is, at the same time, insensitive to the feelings of others.

Perhaps the image that we most readily recall in association with Ben is that of the dingo in the jungle. He speaks so knowingly. The jungle is cruel and untamed nature; it is, in a sense, the antithesis of the beautiful American countryside that is so attractive to Biff and Willy. We may also associate Ben with the business world, for this is also an environment in which one requires cold-blooded calculation and generosity of spirit is unlikely to prove fruitful. An exchange between Ben and Charley that Ben perceives between the sphere of business and the wildness of the jungle. Ben is, in a sense, and, we may suppose, unscrupulousness:

**CHARLEY:** Willy, the jails are full of fearless characters.

**BEN,** clapping Willy on the back with a laugh at Charley: And the stock exchange is full of 'em.



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Charley's fears are, of course, realised, for Biff, we later learn, has spent time in jail. His remark conveys a telling reality: 'the stock exchange' and 'the jails' are united in promoting criminal tendencies.

Finally, Ben's 'jungle' signifies the death that Willy must suffer in order to acquire riches. Ben may seem frightening and malevolent, an almost demonic figure who tempts Willy with the promise of diamonds. In his last moments, Willy seems to re-experience the urge to embark on a far-away business adventure in search of opportunity. It may be that he is harking back to the time Ben invited him to join him in Alaska. This incident is a source of great regret in Willy's mind. 'It would've been totally different' if he had accepted Ben's proposal. The conversation with Ben before he kills himself restores the chance to gain great wealth on one great business venture.

## Charley

Charley is a kind, honourable character whose long experience in the profession he has chosen is reflected with considerable insight into the demands and pressures that are wearing down his mind. He is careful of Willy's dignity and indulgent of his eccentricities. During the 'Requiem' scene, Charley provides what we feel is the most understanding justification of Willy's actions. In fact, Charley's words in this scene are rather maudlin; they argue that his speech romanticises Willy's actions in a disappointingly unrealistic tenor that is out of keeping with the character that we know. However, his insistence that, 'Nobody dast blame this man', is not inconsistent with the sympathy Charley has expressed for his friend in previous scenes. It is true that, in the aftermath of Willy's death, Charley shows himself with a tenderness that has not previously been evident; however, we can feel that he no longer needs to maintain the sceptical pragmatism that has informed his conduct.

Charley may well be affected by his seeming inability to help Willy more effectively. He offers advice and cannot bring himself to accept Charley's offer of a job. Willy cannot bear to see Charley, whom he insists on seeing as a lesser man. Charley's offer of employment is an act of generosity in the context of business. In fact, there is an irony involved here; Willy's personal relations do or should provide the fundamental means to business success. Charley offers Willy the chance of a job he does so out of personal motives, even if the precise nature of the job is not decided. Yet Willy, of course, cannot accept this act of friendship; it seems that, when determined by personal feelings, it may not issue from anything as uncomplicated as Charley's offer. Willy's elevated and unnecessarily complicated sense of the ethics of business practice prevents him from earning any money.

Charley tells Willy, 'I know you don't like me, and nobody can say I'm in love with you in any case. Their relationship seems to suffer from an impasse: if Charley was less concerned with Willy's terms, then, more manly – Willy might find it easier to take his advice and bring himself to consent to what he sees as a charitable gesture; even though he takes Charley's point of insisting that he is keeping strict accounts, as if this is in the nature of a business deal rather than the product of a purely altruistic motivation. However, Willy does see that Charley's offer is sincere; there is a moment of genuine fellow feeling when Willy tearfully tells him; 'Charley's offer is a striking indicator of the contradictions of Willy's character that the only people who consistently care for him are those for whom he can find little real respect.

Towards the end of the play, Willy is impressed to learn about Bernard's successful career. How can we understand how Bernard has achieved so much given Charley's apparent lack of interest in his son? Is there in the play to show Charley's approach to parenthood? Are there any indications of how Charley, as devoted a parent to Bernard, as Willy has been to Biff?

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## Bernard

There are similarities between Charley's relationship with Willy and the connection between Bernard and Biff. Bernard is the more level-headed of the two. He is more thought, by the Lomans, to lack the personal drive and manliness to make a real impact. Charley, rather than Willy, who proves to be endowed with those characteristics that make a career, so Bernard ultimately far outshines Biff in terms of personal and professional success. Bernard shows no interest in competing only makes this disparity more galling for Willy – the stage directions inform us that he is 'happy' as well as 'pained' when he learns that Biff is not at the Supreme Court.

As a young man, Biff's friendship is extremely important to Bernard. He helps Biff at the point of trying to provide him with answers in the all-important maths exam. Biff is popular and begs to carry his sports equipment and says that, unlike himself, Bernard is 'liked', but Biff's popularity and Bernard's supposed lack of personal impressiveness as a conclusion to win all the accolades in the business world. Meanwhile, Bernard, like his father, suppresses his reason, exhorting Biff to study in order to pass the state exam. When we meet Bernard, he emphasises the frustration of Willy's dreams for Biff. We learn that Bernard has wealth and has two sons. Charley later tells Willy proudly that he has scaled important heights and is the mirror image of Biff's failures. He also displays a modesty, seriousness and pride of a confident and self-reliant individual. He recalls with sadness the fight that he and Biff had which Biff failed his maths exam and learnt of Willy's adultery. Even then, he seems to have the wisdom and maturity of a kind that neither Biff nor his father ever seem to have learnt:



**BERNARD:** [...] I've often thought how strange it was that I knew he'd

Like Charley, Bernard has a quiet emotional honesty and a moral integrity that seem to be highly valued in the social and domestic contexts of this play. Unfortunately, these are qualities that are not highly valued in the business world.

### Debate Prompts

- 1) As Bernard leaves he tells Willy that sometimes, 'it's better for a man just to go on and on' suggests that he cannot take this advice. What do you think Bernard is referring to? Is it impossible to walk away from?

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## Minor Characters

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### Howard Wagner

His impersonal treatment of Willy when his employee begs for a new job is indicative of his business. The fact that he pays more attention to the wire-recorder than to Willy symbolizes the role of technology in a capitalist society. While Howard is not one of the central characters, his role is in demonstrating Willy's hopelessness and isolation in the world of sales.

### Dave Singleman

Although Singleman doesn't hold a speaking role in the play, he adds to the overall image of success. He plays a very similar role to Ben, as a representation of success and prosperity. Unlike Ben, however, he has the idea of being 'well liked' above all else, as we see in the image of his very well-attended parties.

### Stanley

The waiter in the restaurant. Stanley shows great care towards Willy when Biff and Willy come to his feet and looking after him. Miller indicates Stanley's working-class background with the phrase 'it's a dog's life.' His sympathy for Willy Loman most likely comes from his own knowledge of the struggle for money.

### The Woman

The Woman's presence is a continual reminder of Willy's infidelity. He remembers her mending her stockings, due to the stockings he once bought for The Woman herself. Her presence is an indictment of capitalism; Willy uses her presumably for sexual satisfaction alone, and not for the more than the items of material worth he buys her. The Woman undermines the love Willy has for himself, and is the source of his conflicts with Biff.

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# Relationships

## Willy and Linda

Linda strives to sustain Willy in the image he has of himself as a successful businessman. In doubt, she does her best to bolster his confidence and does so in a way that is often a hindrance to himself at more positive moments. For example, when Willy worries about talking too much, she says 'don't talk too much, you're just lively'. Linda, who should have realised that Willy's practice is inconsistent, is, nevertheless, prepared to abide by his line of reasoning, so that we can consider that her unqualified support of her husband is the appropriate attitude of a caring mother. However, we may also regret her unbending refusal to examine truthfully the consequences of his inconsistencies.

## Willy and Biff

Willy's belief in his own proficiency in the business world leads him to anticipate greatness. When these do not materialise he transfers his expectations to Biff. This prompts him to over-encourage Biff. Biff commits in his youth and inadvertently contribute to the problems that will plague Willy. Willy's habit to boast to his sons has disastrous consequences for his son, leading him to grow up without a sense of his own worth. As Biff tells his father, 'I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could take orders from anybody!'

## Willy and Happy

Happy has internalised some of his father's ambitions and principles without ever really finding it in his heart to care deeply for him. It is Happy who, in the restaurant scene, denies that Willy is his father, though he will subsequently tell Linda, 'when I [...] desert him I hope I don't outlive the day'. All the while, we feel, empty ones though he may, when he produces them, believe them him. Happy's impression that Happy is blithely unconcerned that there is an important distinction between truth and lies easily, almost, it seems, by instinct, as if he has been thoroughly infected by the atmosphere of falsehood that pervades the family home. Unlike Biff, he does not have the complex of inferiority. He has developed his own aspirations or to have sufficiently analysed those he has inherited.

## Willy and Ben

We sense Willy's regret at having not left with Ben to seek his fortune. Ben, to Willy, is the embodiment of success, a man who set out with nothing and came back with everything. Ben, like Howard Wagner, seems more concerned with business than he is with Willy, reiterating the depersonalisation of the American dream. Nevertheless, Willy remains his brother's **disciple** to the very end, imagining that he will eventually commit suicide.

## Biff and Happy

Happy fails to understand Biff's emotions, and does not recognise how much his brother shares Biff's ideal of a life out in the open air, but this is contradicted by his shallow view of life. While Biff wants to 'settle down', Happy is more concerned with his pay packet and his job. Throughout the text, Biff's irritation at his brother's selfishness is palpable.

## Linda and Biff/Happy

Both sons are very affectionate towards their mother, whom they address as 'pal'. Biff is protective of her. His enmity towards his father is expressed in terms of his anxiety about his relationship to Willy's dysfunctional behaviour. Aside from the empathy we feel for her at the end of the play, we feel that she has some degree of responsibility. After all, she seemingly fails to understand Biff's actions, and contributes to the illusions they hold growing up.

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## Willy and Charley

Charley is, to some degree, a **foil** to Willy. His level-headed, phlegmatic character contrasts with Willy's anxious unpredictability; he is consistently reasonable and his words seem to have a measured and shrewd quality, even when he is joking, and this lends him, at times, a considerable dignity.

Willy is usually at odds with Charley. Willy is consistently argumentative and, on their first meeting, finds several, equally tenuous pretexts for being unpleasant. The shortcomings that Willy harps on seem to relate to attributes that in indignation is usually out of proportion to the failing he identifies: 'A man who can't You're disgusting.' His readiness to abuse Charley for his lack of manly qualities makes inadequacy, however. For Willy, the ultimate test of a man's personal worth is the professional life. In this, he appears to have fallen far behind Charley. His lack of success, whom he has always tended to look down on, represents a real injury to Willy's pride.

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### Essay Questions

- 1) Compare any two of the characters in the play, showing how their relationship illustrates the play's themes.

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# Genre

## Tragedy

Miller writes that ‘The play was always heroic to me, and in later years the academy’s ‘stature’ for the tragic hero seemed incredible to me.’ (Introduction to *The Collected*

Much has been written on the question of whether *Death of a Salesman* qualifies as a play in itself, has written and spoken of this at some length and clearly believes that one can find a definition of ‘tragic drama’ to which his play belongs. The debate refers back to the definition given by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, the fundamental quality of tragedy is that The intention should be to produce **catharsis**, a process by which emotions are, depending on one accepts, purged or moderated.

This leads to a further crucial aspect of the Aristotelian theory of tragedy which concerns the dignity of the protagonist. On this point hinges the question of whether Miller’s play fits Aristotle’s definition. Aristotle writes that ‘Tragedy is an imitation of persons who are above the common level of life.’ From an Aristotelian perspective, it is only by witnessing the downfall of a man of nobility that the emotional impact can be achieved; a catastrophe visited upon a king, a general or a nobleman will have a far greater distance to travel than the sufferings of an ordinary individual, for the man of stature has a far greater distance to travel. Such a development is fundamental to Aristotle’s conception of tragedy. Those who cannot be seen as an example of the tragic genre may assert that Willy Loman is too ‘low’ to achieve this essential moral insight; because he does not embody sufficient personal dignity, these sufferings and death cannot achieve the emotional impact appropriate to tragedy in its highest form.

Miller clearly felt that Loman could be considered a tragic character. He argued that the status and rank of the tragic hero was outdated and properly belonged to a society with different lines to that of twentieth century America. For example, in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, a slave was ‘owned’, the scope of his potential destiny was strictly delimited and pre-ordained. A ‘low’ character such as a slave, therefore, could not truly be shown succumbing to a tragic fate, because he would not be thought to have sufficient independence for such challenges to arise. Part of the point of Willy Loman’s conception of his place in society is that it is not possible. Despite being a ‘low man’, he participates spontaneously in the dream of individual destiny. Miller writes, ‘So long as the hero may be said to have had alternative paths that materially changed the course of his life, it seems to me that in this respect at least, he has played a heroic role’. (Introduction to *The Collected Plays*, p. 32).

Many spectators and critics have spoken of experiencing a powerful, emotional identification with the ‘pity and fear’ that Aristotle makes so central to the concept of tragedy. *Death of a Salesman* invests Willy Loman, an exemplar of the ordinary, working-class American, with a dignity that clearly many of those who are drawn to the play respond to it on this level. This emotional connection may be seen as both a moving and controversial gesture. It speaks of Miller’s great sympathy for the everyday basis, and invests the pressures and aspirations that drive a good deal of American life with the force that might more normally be reserved for more conventionally heroic spheres.

Miller’s text contains certain allusions to the sphere of Greek tragedy and suggests that the experiences do comprise a tragic dimension, even if they are only dimly aware of this. He compares Loman to Hercules, a Greek hero, and this remark, though made only in passing, serves as a general reference to Attic tragedy. A more conspicuous example is Biff’s insistence, in the restaurant scene, that he is a prince. He says, ‘Miss Forsythe, you’ve just seen a prince walk by. A fine, troubled prince. A ha-

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prince'. Some literary critics have seen an allusion to English literature's most famous prince, Hamlet, from Denmark. However, it may be that the particular impact of this passage is that it makes Willy Loman's ideas. Princes, by tradition, are not known for their hard work. The appeal for sympathy that Willy makes on behalf of his father is effective precisely because we see the vast difference between him and fictional princes. If Willy is princely, it is despite his failures, his delusions and his self-delusion. In the only sense that the hard-headed world of the American businessman can afford to understand, in the love he bears for his sons, Willy attains a heroic grandeur in the context of an American dream where effort and constancy have no material reward.

### Debate Prompts

- 1) Miller writes, 'we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down everything – his sense of personal dignity'. ('Tragedy and the Common Man', Christopher, *Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*, p. 63.). Do you think that Willy Loman has 'personal dignity'?
- 2) According to Aristotle, one important element of tragedy is that the tragic hero has a fatal flaw. This term refers to a fundamental flaw in the protagonist's personality and which leads to his downfall. In *Hamlet*, for example, the final catastrophe may be said to be due to his indecisiveness; at the same time, it may be that his lack of resolution is an effect of his love for his mother and, therefore, part of what makes him an interesting and sympathetic character. What might his **hamartia** be? How could it be used in reference to Willy Loman? What might his **hamartia** consist of?

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## Expressionism

Expressionism is a movement in literature and the visual arts which had a particular influence in the middle years of the twentieth century. It denotes a broad range of approaches to expressing internal, psychological or emotional experiences. In this sense it may be seen as a conventional 'realism' which is concerned with representing the external aspect of a subject available to the visual and aural senses. *Death of a Salesman* employs specifically expressionist techniques at the same time retaining a focus on the external aspects of the Lomans' environment and the life of Willy's personal obsessions and private experiences.

One way in which Miller's play can be identified with the expressionist movement is its non-linear structure of progressive, linear narrative. The action does not develop in chronological order, but rather shaping the context of the incident which is to follow. Rather, we move through the play experiencing past and present as equally pressing and apparent, as having equally important consequences for the fate and the fate of his family. The expressionist element of the play is that which enables Willy to experience impressions formed in Willy's consciousness, to experience them as powerful and coherent, as was, in this respect, innovative.

While Willy's dream world seems at times like a happy refuge from the realities of his life, it is often impinged upon by feelings of guilt and anxiety. His dream world becomes, at times, a source of self-loathing as the realities of the everyday world in which evidence of his failure and most painful sequences in the play takes place in the form of a recollection of Biff's dream. Note that when Willy and The Woman hear knocking at the door of their hotel room, it is Willy's rising terror. 'Terror' seems a disproportionate emotional response when Willy cannot know that it is his son at the door. Willy's present-day awareness of his failure seems to be projected back into his recollections of the past. In similar ways through the play, memories and illusions are subtly infused with an awareness of present day realities. His memories, in their emotional dimension, can never be said to be strictly accurate, for they contain signs of a failure that would not have been present at the time.

One might take the view that, ultimately, Willy's dream world is forced into conflict with his present day situation. The illusions that pervade Willy's consciousness must ultimately give way to the force of the inescapable and unforgiving facts of his social environment. For example, when Willy is in Wagner's office he does so in the full assurance of his ability to make a good impression on Linda, that he will 'knock Howard for a loop'. This conviction seems to rest on the Loman's popularity and, more generally, of the overwhelming importance of personality. In the face of the unsentimental imperatives of business practice, Willy's self-belief soon dissolves and ultimately utterly undermines the intelligibility of Willy's illusions. The final confirmation of the reality of the world comes in the funeral scene at the end of the play, in the section entitled 'The Burial'. In this scene, of course, die with him and there is no return for his family on the illusions that have sustained him through hard-work and frustration. Meanwhile, Linda must face the mundane but heart-breaking reality of the loneliness of an empty house. Although Willy's internal experiences, his subjective world, have been constantly available to us and have been a powerful force in deciding his fate, he is ultimately subject to the pressures of the external environment and the concrete demands of the world. Miller's expressionism works in the service of an overriding social realism.

### Essay Questions

- 1) Rather than emphasising the tragic or expressionistic elements of the play, *Death of a Salesman* can be seen as an example of 'social realism'. From this perspective, the main focus is not on the illusions and the ultimate demise of a single individual, but rather on the social conditions of the environment in which he lives and works and to which all members of society are subject. Analyse this statement, considering how far Willy's death is a personal tragedy and how far it is a result of the wider forces at work in twentieth-century American society.

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# Themes

## American Dream

Many critics have held that the values that are so important to Willy Loman, the primary aspirations and lend definition to his sense of personal identity, are to be understood in the appeal of the American Dream. American culture, and the myths and stories that shape society, are steeped in a system of beliefs that makes the love of freedom, individualism, the guiding force of progress, government and public morality. These are the ideals engrained in the Fathers' original statement of the individual American's inalienable rights and obligations. They provide the characteristic thematic content of the myths and narratives that have developed since the period of the original frontiersmen, the self-sufficient conquerors of the American West to this day, and sanction the inviolable law of capitalist competition. The American Dream is a society in which each individual, irrespective of his origins, or his religious or political beliefs, can advance his professional and social life by virtue of his own talents and application. The achievement of the entrepreneurs who worked out their own individual paths to success, issue a promise that is sufficiently ambitious to take advantage. This dream of success forms the rationale for the young Biff's popularity will enable him to realise a wonderful future. He tells Biff that the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being

It may be that unless we see the appeal and even the grandness of Willy's dreams we will miss the predicament and much of the play's **pathos** will be lost. It is in the recognition that the American forms – have a powerful and ubiquitous attraction that the play can take effect within the importance and influence of Miller's play derives from the fact that it speaks not only of a single flawed individual, but also of the influences that inspire and frustrate whole generations defined by the economic and social values of modern capitalist existence. Willy may be a way that many spectators have found it easy to relate to. His delusions are often thought of as his thoughts and ideals are derived from an aspirational logic that is based on the notion of the precedence of man's distinctive ingenuity in the face of unfavourable odds.

In the funeral scene, Charley tells Biff 'A salesman is got to dream, boy'. He recognizes that the life of every salesman to nurture and pursue a personal dream, that without his dream purpose or justification. In the end, it is Willy's absolute need to preserve his illusion that he conceives of his own death as a business trip, a final entrepreneurial venture that is guaranteed that is owed him by virtue of a life's commitment to the principles of hard work. The American Dream is to be accomplished through a final act of self-sacrifice; having nothing left to anticipate of a financial return in the form of a 20,000 dollar insurance payout. He dies at the end.

### Debate Prompts

- 1) To what extent is Willy responsible for his own fate? To what extent is his delusionary processes put into operation by the irresistible workings of American social ideology?

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## Family: Myths and Secrets

The American Dream provides a motif which is, in Willy's mind, closely entwined with his family relations and the support he believes he can offer his sons. One major impediment to a full understanding of Biff's character is that he is unable to ascribe value to personality traits that are not his son's success in the business world. We may see Biff as potentially a much more rounded character than we are able to recognise. Biff's love of nature, his desire for manual work that is not financially rewarded, and his respect for what is acceptable, even admirable, attributes for them testify to a sensitivity that it is not limited to material wealth and the glorifying of social status. In addition – and this is part of the tragedy – Willy cannot see that the desires and impulses that prompt Biff to turn his back on the business world are an integral part of his own identity. His happiest memories are of working and playing outdoors, and perhaps the one plausible claim he makes for his own accomplishments concerns his contribution to the family home: 'All the cement, the lumber, the reconstruction I put in this house was found in it any more'. Willy's version of personal success blinds him to the aspects of his life that are important to his favourite son.

Willy's illusions come to utterly dominate the way he relates to his family and the world around him as a patriarchal provider. However, if Willy is unable to see beyond the empty promises of the American Dream and capitalist social conventions, then we may wonder at the rest of the Loman family's involvement in a world of illusion and half-truths that permeates the family home. Rather than providing a path to reality, the delusions, the Loman family seem instinctively to collude to preserve the fantasies that they live by. It is only minutes before Willy's death that Biff is motivated to insist that 'We never touched this house!', a charge that can, with justification, be levelled at Linda and Happy as well as Willy.

### Debate Prompts

- 1) It is not until the end of the play that the characters begin to confront the truth. Can you find any earlier moments in the play when you feel that Linda, Happy or Biff are being truthful? What consequences would this have had?

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# The Writer's Use of Language

Miller's construction of dialogue both adds to and detracts from the overall realism of the play. It focuses on recognisable everyday issues, from Willy's complaint about Linda buying 'Swiss mending old stockings. However, the writer endows everyday language with great significance. The 'Swiss mending old stockings', for instance, a **symbol** of Willy's infidelity, American consumerism and the American Dream. While the language of the play may not be as complex or diverse as that of a typical Shakespearean play, it is used in a way that brings tragic traditions into a recognisable twentieth-century context.

The expressionistic force of the play is engineered through a range of striking and imaginative techniques. Miller utilises a kind of fragmented dialogue, in which Willy seems to speak simultaneously to his past worlds and present. The card game in the first act between Willy and Charley provides a perfect example of this technique. While the two men talk and lay down cards, Willy is confronted with the presence of Ben. His concentration is divided between Charley's talk about the game and Ben's probing questions about their parents. The following exchange marks the culmination of Willy's internal conflict.



CHARLEY: I put the ace  
WILLY: If you don't know how to play the game I'm not gonna play.  
CHARLEY, *rising*: It was my ace, for God's sake.  
WILLY: I'm through, I'm through.  
BEN: When did mother die?  
WILLY: Long ago. Since the beginning you didn't know how to play.

Here, the action is balanced between two worlds. One embodies the subjective world of Willy's imagination while in the other, Charley struggles to make sense of Willy's erratic behaviour. The two worlds are conflated to the degree that Willy's responses can be understood to be directed to either world. Of course Charley has no awareness of Ben's presence. Willy's desperation to contain the chaotic world he is in, a desperation that is fully realised in the last line in this passage. 'Long ago' is overtly a reference to the death of their mother. However, the argument over the card game suggests that Willy is changing the meanings of his words into a comment on Charley's failings as a card player. This reflects the ever-changing, uncertain nature of Willy's perceptions of his environment. Expressionism is making the imaginary real. Here, we are made aware of the profound isolation of a character who exists in the fictions of a distracted imagination. Willy's hallucinations, by virtue of appearing to be real, define the world inhabited by his friends and family.

Another aspect of Miller's language is the recurring use of broad comments on life and death. One of the most important is on the importance of being 'well liked' to his advice to Biff, 'Start big and you'll end big'. One of the ironies of the play is that Willy completely fails to live out the principles he shares with Biff. The two most successful characters physically present in the play – Charley and Bernard – succeed where Willy fails. By littering the play with such statements, Miller demonstrates just how pervasive the American Dream has invaded everyday life, becoming an obsession with frequently negative consequences.

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# Form and Structure

Miller's ingenious manipulation of the set and his use of music and lighting, elements of the stage directions, add to the ambiguous relationship between appearance and reality. Miller overemphasises the importance of giving full and careful attention to the stage directions. The various techniques that Miller employs allow him to collapse the two worlds together. The man who has been driven by the frustrations and the never-ending drudgery of his work. The partitions between past and present, between illusion and reality, are no longer meaningful. Loman, 'he is literally at that terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer the voice of the present. In dramatic terms the form, therefore, *is* this process' (Introduction).

Miller's stage design is indebted to a focus on subjective, cognitive processes. The abstract Loman house, where, conventionally, one might expect walls to be, heightens the sense of the real-world environment. The stage design upsets the audience's conventional expectations and sustain a distinct and stable separation between the categories of subjective or psychological experience. These categories constantly converge, facilitating a complex form of representation. The imaginary seems as coherent as the demands of material circumstance. When the present day, the actors respect the imaginary partitions of the stage, and make entrances and exits as indicated. However, the stage directions inform us that, 'in the scenes of the past and characters enter or leave a room by stepping "through" a wall onto the forestage'.

We also note that Miller does not use designated scenes in the play, simply dividing the play into acts. While in this guide we have divided the play into relevant sequences, these sequences are an intentional ploy by the writer, who in doing so further blurs the distinction between the real and the imaginary. Dreams/memories of the past blend into the overall narrative. The manner in which Miller tells the story. In the first act, we are introduced to the issues underlining the lives of Willy Loman and his understanding of their relationships and some of the key factors that will play into his death. Act Two focuses on the escalation to Willy's death, bringing the action to a climax. Act Three is a flashback from the argument of the night before and instilling an overall air of positivity. Given the nature of the play, this cannot last long; however, the optimism of the characters makes the final outcome more poignant.

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# Contextual Analysis

## Arthur Miller

The picture we get of Miller's early boyhood is of a life led in an environment of comfort and stability. The stability and affluence of his family background encouraged the young Miller to believe that his life would last indefinitely. He once remarked: 'Until 1929 I thought things were pretty much as they were, and I was a young man, probably a businessman and a realistic, no-nonsense fellow' (Quoted in *Big Sister Study*, p. 61). The Wall Street Crash utterly changed Miller's conception of the world and he began to develop an interest in literature and in Marxism. Both these interests, in their different ways, envisage the possibility of a better existence, both for himself and for society as a whole. The literature and Marxism would come to have profoundly important consequences for Miller's life and work. It is worth noting that, in *Death of a Salesman*, when Willy Loman remembers his first sales, the year he recalls is 1928 – the year preceding that of the onset of the Great Depression.

## The Wall Street Crash and The Great Depression

Wall Street was the world's foremost financial market, dealing with the exchange of a vast volume of stocks and shares in companies from every sector of American business. Over four days, from 24<sup>th</sup> October, the value of those stocks fell dramatically. The initial causes of this sudden decline are much debated. Economic historians suggest that the Crash was a consequence of various deep-lying problems in the American economy that had not been attended to in the years leading up to this event. The Crash prompted a 'run on the banks' in which investors lost faith in financial institutions and sought to withdraw their assets. This led to the devaluation of the dollar and the failure of numerous American banks. Meanwhile, many investors were bankrupted by the sudden drop in the value of their shares. These factors meant that spending decreased and many workers were made unemployed. By 1932, 25–30 per cent of the workforce were without jobs and manufacturing output had fallen by almost half. As America was the leading industrial nation of the time, the economic crisis had widespread repercussions, affecting many countries in Europe, especially those who were most indebted to the United States.

More subtly, the depression affected the values and beliefs that were then an inherent part of American culture. The twenties had been a time of great optimism; there had been a conviction that economic progress was inevitable and we were living in a climate in which Miller grew up and the unanticipated economic crisis not only impacted on the quality of his everyday life, but also produced a great change in his world view and in his expectations.

## Death of a Salesman in Context

*Death of a Salesman* shows us a world in which economic anxiety has replaced optimism and hope. It is a world in which people must struggle to get by, while holding on to the illusion of the great success that is always on the point of being achieved. The fears and illusions of Willy Loman, a struggling salesman, seemed to tap into the condition of the American psyche. The play has a stark realism. It is an emblem of the upheavals, social, economic and psychological, that were experienced in America and beyond by the experience of the Great Depression.

During the course of a prolific and tempestuous career, Miller garnered lasting critical acclaim for the rigour and authority with which he treated the most pressing political and moral issues. The intellectual integrity with which Miller is commonly credited are demonstrated also in his active political involvement – for example, his outspoken opposition to the McCarthy era and his willingness to defend unorthodox political beliefs. In 1956, at the height of the McCarthy era,

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intolerance, people suspected of having socialist or communist sympathies were being prevented from working and travelling. Miller, who was known to have worked with the left and who had published work expressing his opposition to the intolerance of right-wing politics, was summoned to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), the body which was responsible for interrogating those accused of engaging in prohibited political activity. Here, Miller's political beliefs and those of his friends and associates whom he knew to have attended political meetings or to be connected with radical movements which the government deemed to be unacceptable. When he refused to testify, he was sentenced to 30 days imprisonment for contempt of Congress. This sentence was subsequently overturned by the Court of Appeal the following year. The incident testifies to Miller's determination to stand by his beliefs and principles which were fundamental to his moral world view, even at the cost of his career.

*Death of a Salesman* was first produced in 1949. As mentioned earlier, it had great critical success and won a total of six theatrical awards. Its major themes have been seen as specifically American, but it is also to be universal and enduring. Matthew C Roudane writes that: 'Within a year of its production it was being played in every major city in the United States. As early as 1951 it was viewed by audiences in eleven countries abroad, including Great Britain, France, Israel and Argentina' ('Death of a Salesman' in *Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*, Cambridge 1998). It took Miller's work to the world. The themes were not new to the playwright. The influences that shaped the play had their roots in the experience of the Great Depression and the personal upheavals of his early life.

Miller's original intention was for this play to be entitled *The Inside of His Head*. He was inspired by an event which occurred to me which was to result in the *Death of a Salesman* was of an enormous facade which would appear and then open up, and we would see the inside of the man's mind. (Miller, *Plays* (London, 1958), p. 23). The play's original conception can be characterised, though, as a move away from Expressionism in the theatre typically uses a variety of techniques to foreground the subjective experiences of the **characters**. This conception of the play's spatial or visual structure moves away from this unusual and innovative notion towards a relatively more familiar form of realism. The action unfolds in the Loman family home. Nevertheless, the play, as it came to be staged, is a departure from Miller's original idea. Although the action takes place within a conventional domestic environment, the perspective Miller provides involves us very intimately in the psychological world of the characters.

The world we see is, at crucial points, a world that takes its form and content from the subjective world that exists in Willy Loman's consciousness. To this extent, the play takes place inside of the mind of the characters. This has implications for our reading of the play. This is not (or not only) a conventional, 'realistic' play which gives a factual account of everyday experience. It shows us, also, a highly subjective world that exists in Willy Loman's mind, which might not correspond in all respects to the view of the world that we see. We may want to decide that the play takes place in a kind of ambiguous zone, not entirely separate from reality.

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# Film Adaptations

*Death of a Salesman* has been adapted for film and television on numerous occasions. The most recent production was that of 1985 starring Dustin Hoffman as Willy Loman and John Malkovich as Happy. The film version, of 1951, was the subject of some controversy. The play had been seen as an even unpatriotic, portrayal of capitalist business ethics. For example, it was felt that it was in an unflattering light and that this reflected badly on key American values, on materialism and free market competition. This period in American history was marked by great anxiety over the influence of communism. Right-wing commentators associated Miller's play with left-wing ideology and a threat to social stability. For example, Miller recalls that one journal called it a 'time-consuming edifice of Americanism' (Introduction to *Collected Plays*, p. 27). The company responsible for the Columbia Studios, seemed, at the last moment, to become nervous about the project. To promote the film, the company produced a short documentary, *Career of a Salesman*, which set the play in reality, the sales profession was an essential part of the economy and that the life of the salesman was a hard and rewarding one. In other words, Willy Loman was merely a fictional character and not intended to represent the usual experience of sales professionals. Miller was understandably incensed by the cowardly attempt to undermine his work.

Miller was not, in any case, in the least satisfied with the film. His main criticism was that it failed to reproduce the psychological complexity of the stage play. The play was able to represent the gap between the psychological, subjective experiences that only Willy is conscious of, and the objective world that the other characters see. It achieved this by keeping these two aspects of existence separate. The film production, by contrast, represented these two worlds separately; the scenes that took place in the dream world involved in dreams and memories were recreated as if they were taking place in a separate, non-material reality. Thus the sense of a man losing touch with his own surroundings was not a metaphorical representation of psychological disturbance seriously compromised. Miller's reasons for the film version are well worth bearing in mind, for they indicate the way in which Miller intended the play to be read and understood.

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# Literary Approach

## Marxist

Marxism derives the basic tenets of its theoretical approach from the work of Karl Marx and cultural thinkers of whom Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser have been among its basis in Marx's economic theory and its philosophical aspects retain the materialist origins. That is, it attempts to explain social and cultural phenomena in terms of the relations. The principle forces are those of economic production, the processes that material goods. In capitalist society, material goods are termed (not only by Marxist relations of people in capitalist society are, in Marxist thought, largely dictated by the processes of production. That is, one's position in society depends on whether one is a capitalist (the owners of the processes of production). Capitalist society is understood whilst securing ever increasing benefits for those who exploit them.

Economic relations are clearly of relevance to *Death of a Salesman*. Willy dreams of owning his own business so that he will not have to work away from home. From a Marxist perspective, one might want to argue that even if Willy achieved this ambition, the hardships and frustrations he suffers as a consequence of his relatively underprivileged position in life would only be passed on to those he employs. That is, he would employ workers who would then be in the position that Willy, himself, has endured. From this perspective, it is the organisation of society that is at fault and which is inevitably characterised by inequality and exploitation. Meanwhile, Howard Wagner, by virtue of owning the company that Willy works for, benefits from his labour but can dismiss him when he no longer earns sufficient profits for the company. Marxists argue that under the capitalist system, the processes of production utilise workers in the same way as they use technology: tools, machinery and production plants have a value that is comparable to that of the people who work with them. This can create what Marxists call 'alienation'; individual human identity is devalued and people are equated to things. Willy communicates a sense of this when he tells Howard, 'You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit'. In fact, capitalist business practices may ensure that workers are treated as disposable elements of production in just the way that Willy identifies. The economic downturn which America experienced during the 1930s must have made the position of workers seem even more vulnerable.

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## Feminist

Feminist critics seek to lay emphasis on the representation of women in literary texts and what literature shows us about the structure of relations between the sexes. Miller's play shows us is one in which traditional patriarchal values hold sway. In terms of one's status and achievements in the business world, a world from which women, secretaries and lovers – are excluded. Attitudes to women are generally condescending. Willy initiates sexual relations out of a competitive impulse, as if to compensate for his lack of success in sleeping with the wives or girlfriends of high-ranking businessmen. The language reflects competitive rivalry. When the Loman men discuss business, they use characteristic masculine language. Willy says he is 'gonna knock Howard for a loop'. When Happy speaks of asserting himself in which he will, 'outbox that goddam merchandise manager'. In both cases the image of himself has a kind of coarseness; the idiomatic form, 'knock Howard for a loop', and the use of 'outbox' are seen as examples of typically masculine, linguistic posturing, a way of establishing one's identity by the words that one chooses. One might also want to look at the way in which Willy speaks when the conversation turns to Biff and Happy's business proposition.

Feminist critics have criticised the play on the grounds that it does not fully engage with the female experience. The play, on this reading, is dominated by the emotional struggles of its male protagonist. Willy's aims and anxieties, supposedly remains subsidiary to those of the male characters in the business world and the females can only look on, sympathetically, from the side-lines. Whether this is a legitimate criticism may depend on how you measure the importance of Linda's role in the play. One might oneself whether the play is merely unconcerned with female experience or whether it presents a picture of a society in which females are consigned to roles that society implicitly assigns.

## Psycho-analytical

Psycho-analytical theorists typically try to explicate the action of the play in terms of Freudian interpretations of psychological experience. The play's concern with the mental life of its characters, especially through elements of expressionist representation, make *Death of a Salesman* a good candidate for this sort of approach. Psycho-analytical theory provides certain key concepts that structure the play. For example, a central tenet in Freudian readings is the importance of the unconscious to our everyday behaviour. The unconscious consists of our most innate impulses and drives that our conscious, rational minds can be the source of conflict or anxiety. It may be argued that the sexual impulse; Willy's need to gratify his sexual desires conflicts with his need to be a conscientious husband and father. The Woman, then, considered as a personification of the unconscious, generates the feelings of profound guilt that are such a powerful feature of Willy's unconscious. It is less Biff's discovery of his father's adultery that haunts Willy's imagination than the fact that he has succumbed to a desire that contradicts the image that Willy seeks to project of himself.

A related concept is that of **sublimation**. Sublimation provides an outlet for unconscious drives and transforms them into forms of accepted social behaviour which are quite distinct from the original drives. In this sense, are a product of these deep-lying motivations. For example, the competitive part of the business environment, and which Willy sees as the proper characteristic of the American dream, as a product of the sublimation of the sexual urge into the desire to outdo one's fellow competitors for success. Further relevant terms include **repression** and **the return of the repressed**. Repression involves concealing from ourselves the emotional traumas and psychological conflicts that shape our imaginative lives. It involves excising such trauma from our conscious minds and forcing it into the unconscious. However, psycho-analysts believe that such repressed material will inevitably return to consciousness. This may be in the form of a neurosis or mental disturbance which will manifest itself as a symptom or sign of the original trauma. Willy's present day behaviour is frequently influenced by memories that are only partially repressed.

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# Glossary of Terms

Character	A fictional human being who appears in the plot of a literary text
Chauvinism	The belief that one's own sex is superior to the opposite sex
Dehumanisation	The effect of treating someone as though they did not have human qualities. Language that is repetitive and very dull may be dehumanising because it does not provide intellectual stimulation and variety.
Depravity	Evil or immoral behaviour
Disciple	Follower – originating from the context of Christ's disciples
Eunuch	A male who has either been castrated (i.e. has had his sexual organs removed) or is naturally impotent
Filial	From a son or daughter towards their father
Foreshadowing	When a writer's use of language subtly indicates something that will happen later in the text
Foil	A character designed by the author to be very different to the protagonist, drawing attention to the key character features of the protagonist.
Frisson	French for 'thrill' or 'terror'
Genre	A literary 'kind' or 'type', e.g. Tragedy, Comedy, History, etc.
Hamartia	A character flaw that results in a tragic hero's death or some kind of downfall
Hubris	Overt pride or confidence, which often leads to a protagonist's downfall
Ideology	A system of ideas, beliefs and values which, together, form the worldview of a society. For example, in capitalist societies, ownership of property is an important criterion of how society is organised. In societies where a particular ideology is dominant, any challenge to its key concepts may be interpreted as a threat to that society.
Idyllic	Of an extremely happy, peaceful, even idealised, nature
Imagery	The pattern of related comparative aspects of language, particularly metaphors and similes
Juxtaposition	When two different images or ideas are placed close together in order to support each other
Metaphor	The non-literal naming of one object/idea as another object/idea <i>Loman household is Willy's kingdom'</i>
Motif	An image or sign which is used – often repeatedly – to convey a particular meaning
Solipsism	A philosophical concept which states that one can only be certain of one's own existence
Pathos	An element in drama that appeals to the audience's pity or empathy
Phlegmatic	Of a cool, calm – sometimes disinterested – disposition
Protagonist	The leading or most important character in a drama or narrative
Surrealism	An artistic movement which uses unusual language and images (for example, telephones in the desert) in order to represent dream-like or unconscious thoughts
Symbol	An image used by a writer to represent a larger topic or concept

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# Appendix: Re-creative writing for OCR

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## Creative Task

Imagine that Happy takes Biff up on his idea of moving to the country to buy a ranch. Write a short scene (200–250 words) in which the two sons inform Willy and Linda in New York and to begin the life they have always wanted. Bear in mind the aspirations of the boys but also that they share with their father a love of nature and of physical work.

How will Biff and Happy persuade their father that they are making the right decision? How will Willy raise? Remember Biff's dislike of non-manual professions and the disappointments they have all endured and continue to endure in pursuit of conventional ambitions.

## Creative Task

We see Ben exclusively through Willy's eyes. Willy's profound admiration of his brother's ideas about Ben's achievements in the business world, even though Ben provides a description of how these achievements came about. At the same time, Willy sees Ben by Ben's less appealing characteristics, for example, his lack of concern about their tactics he employs when sparring with Biff, his obvious complacency about his own life.

As an audience we seem to see Ben in a quite different light from that in which Willy sees his brother. What of the other members of Willy's family?

Write a short dialogue in which Linda talks to Ben. What sort of questions might Linda have to say about Ben's attitude to his brother and to his family? What might Ben say? What insights might he provide into the origin of Willy's hopes, illusions and idealism?

## Re-creative Task

Although Willy's affair with The Woman took place many years previously, it continues to affect family life profoundly. Clearly, Linda has never suspected Willy of being unfaithful. She knows her husband very well and tells her sons, 'I know every thought in his mind.'

Imagine a scene in which Linda has discovered the truth and confronts Willy with it. How do Linda and Willy respond to learning that Willy has slept with The Woman?

How do you think their relationship would change? Would their marriage be destroyed by the truth about what has troubled Willy for so long enable Linda to live more easily with the truth?

Write the scene.

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**Re-creative Task**

The story that Willy tells to Howard about meeting Dave Singleman is obviously a major factor in his decision to commit himself to the sales profession. Willy tells the story of why he started his career in sales just before Howard tells him about the possibility of ending Willy's career.

Imagine Willy's meeting with Singleman. Remember that Willy is a young man trying to do with his future – Willy claims that he had been considering going to Alaska to meet Singleman.

How might Singleman's conversation with Willy have influenced Willy to make his decision? What was it about Singleman that was so persuasive?

Write a scene in which Willy and Singleman first meet. Describe the background and give descriptions of Willy and Singleman in the form of stage directions, and write the dialogue.

**Re-creative Task**

The game at Ebbets Field is clearly an important event in the Lomans' life and a reflection of their personal worth in Willy's imagination. There are a number of references to the game throughout the play. We can assume that the game was successful for Biff. However, we do not know what Biff's reaction was. Imagine that, after the game, the Loman family have returned home together, celebrating. Imagine that they are discussing the game and talking happily about plans for the future.

Write the scene. Try to write as many characters as possible into the scene, including Biff, perhaps even Ben. What will they have to say about the game and about Biff? Try to use contrasting personalities and contrasting ideas.

**Re-creative Task**

The Woman plays a vital part in the plot but is barely seen at all in the play itself. She is being in some way responsible for what happens.

What story would she tell about her relationship with Willy Loman? Think about the things she had with Willy, the things they might have talked about and her reasons for conducting an affair with him.

Write a story (200–250 words) describing the thoughts and experiences she had during her affair with Willy.

**Re-creative Task**

Just before the end of this act, Willy realises that he is alone. The stage directions describe a 'gasp of fear' and that 'sounds, faces, voices, seem to be swarming in upon him and he flicks his eyes about'. What might these sounds and images consist of?

Imagine the vision that Willy is experiencing. Which characters does he see and what are they saying to him?

Write a re-creative piece describing what Willy sees and hears, suggesting what he is thinking.

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## Further Reading

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# Answers / Indicative C

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## Section Analyses:

Act One

*Willy and Linda's Conversation (pp. 7–14)*

	Debate Prompts	Ess
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Linda prepares Willy's work/food, gives him reminders, etc.</li> <li>Willy shows little recognition or gratitude</li> <li>Willy never questions Linda about her day or her concerns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seeds represent an empire and a</li> <li>The action takes house, shut awa</li> <li>Willy's apprecia juxtaposes his ca belongs out in th confines of the b</li> <li>Willy's stateme in the backyard' helplessness in l</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willy admits he is 'tired to the death'</li> <li>His conversation seems increasingly dislocated and incoherent</li> <li>We also see signs of his flawed nature in his obsession with the idea of commercial success</li> </ul>	
3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Linda is implying that people have to eventually go their own way, and follow their own dreams – whatever they may be</li> <li>For Willy, that 'something' appears to be the respect and admiration of others</li> </ul>	
4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The way Linda treats Willy suggests he is inherently childlike, and needs close care and attention</li> <li>However, we also see how much effort she puts into caring for him, and how little he appreciates it</li> </ul>	

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*Biff and Happy's Conversation (pp. 14–21)*

	Debate Prompts	Ess
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Like Willy, Biff speaks at length about the past</li> <li>Biff aims for a long-term relationship such as the one Willy shares with Linda</li> <li>Happy shares Willy's idealism and denial about the truth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willy has applied</li> <li>succeed, which h</li> <li>At the same time</li> <li>nature and the op</li> <li>Willy seems to t</li> <li>ideas, refusing to</li> <li>– arguably this is</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both seem to exaggerate how good things were</li> <li>They seem to think that they can just walk into a new business venture, based on their good looks and confidence</li> <li>Their confidence at succeeding in business seems inseparable from their former successes with women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Happy seems, if</li> <li>the two</li> <li>Biff is more mat</li> <li>settle down</li> <li>Happy is quick to</li> <li>raises</li> <li>Biff seems to be</li> <li>Willy, despite th</li> <li>The contrast bet</li> <li>indicates what a</li> <li>has promoted as</li> </ul>

*Willy's Illusory Past World (pp. 21–31)*

	Debate Prompts	Ess
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willy has an extremely stressful job, which involves spending a lot of time on the road – perhaps he feels lonely</li> <li>Equally, it could come from a desire to be 'liked' by someone other than his wife or children</li> <li>Willy is constantly concerned about how others perceive him as weak or pathetic, so we can to some extent understand his desire to be seen as a bad boy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The stockings re</li> <li>world of consum</li> <li>As in business, th</li> <li>seeking power</li> <li>However, this is</li> <li>Woman seems to</li> <li>all the power res</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willy's mind is in a disordered state. He may be trying to come to terms with the past, only to resort to the happier memories for comfort</li> <li>He wants to either find the reason for his failings, or else escape from them altogether</li> </ul>	
3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Woman seems to be the one in power, telling Willy, 'I picked you'</li> <li>This is juxtaposed by Linda telling her husband how sweet he is</li> <li>The stockings serve as a painful reminder to Willy of his betrayal</li> </ul>	

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### Active Learning Task

Reasons might include:

- His love for Linda; he doesn't want to disappoint her.
- His pride, preventing him from admitting his failings.
- Equally, he may not want to incur her anger about the bills.
- As a father, he may feel that it would set a bad example if his sons were to do the same.
- His guilt about The Woman may be another reason he wants to improve himself.
- Perhaps, by saying the words out loud, he is able to convince himself that he is doing the right thing.

*Willy and Charley / Uncle Ben (pp. 31–41)*

Debate Prompts	
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The blurring of past and present in the play reflects Willy's disordered state of mind, undermining the reliability of his 'memories'.</li> <li>• Ben's description of his success comes in very idealised language – perhaps we shouldn't entirely trust its accuracy.</li> <li>• Whether the dreams/memories are accurate reflections of the past does not entirely matter; their significance comes in what they represent.</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most of the conversations take place between two or three characters in enclosed spaces, so they are private in this sense.</li> <li>• The word 'certain' is doubly important, implying that Willy is selective about the scenes he chooses, but also forming an ironic reflection on the uncertainty of their reality.</li> </ul>
3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This act demonstrates masculine authority and power, which, as Miller implies, are required to succeed in a flawed corporate world.</li> <li>• Willy encourages Biff as he is desperate for him to impress Ben, and wants to confirm that he will be successful in life.</li> </ul>
4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both men are concerned with success, but in different ways.</li> <li>• While Willy seeks the glory of success in business, Charley seems to view this purely from the perspective of financial gain.</li> </ul>

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	Debate Prompts	Ess
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willy is talking about business, which he presumably regards as a male domain.</li> <li>(Students who have read ahead may want to mention that she reminds him of his betrayal.)</li> <li>Willy lives in a semi-illusory world, with his own ideas and principles. He does not want anyone to disturb this.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Linda ignores Ha to get married.</li> <li>She suggests that for Willy, failing problems run far</li> <li>She seems to aut matter what the wonder if she is</li> <li>Arguably, howev Willy too – she needs to control</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willy may well feel his position threatened, particularly as he is so infantilised by Linda.</li> <li>If we are to read the house as a projection of the inside of Willy's head, we could argue that Biff is invading the sanctity of this space by presenting the truth.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When the boys g pressured into by Oliver.</li> <li>He is not allowed anything to do w</li> <li>However, he is t who displays any illusions.</li> </ul>
3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Linda, in many ways, encourages Willy's falsehood by reinforcing his ideas of himself.</li> <li>One could argue that she wants him to gain a form of control in his household, which he lack so badly in the business world.</li> <li>However, perhaps Linda should be more firm, in order to be more fair. By not challenging him, she allows his thoughts to spiral out of control.</li> </ul>	
4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is hard to justify Willy's attitude, but the reasons behind it are evident.</li> <li>After the stress of his working day, he does not want to be challenged on any single facet of his life.</li> </ul>	

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	Debate Prompts	Ess
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ideas might include:</li> <li>Celebrity weddings</li> <li>Professional sport</li> <li>High-level business tycoons, e.g. Richard Branson</li> <li>Talent shows, e.g. X Factor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Neither of the br his opinion in far</li> <li>Happy seems to towards women. the way he is tre could refer here the smell of shav</li> <li>Linda’s descripti of a mother’s pri school; it is also unrealistic aims.</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This point is open to discussion, and subject to personal opinion/experience.</li> </ul>	<p>For:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Linda is very sub and rarely challe</li> <li>All the scenes wi Loman household her realm.</li> <li>The fact that Wi associate once ag the world of bus</li> </ul> <p>Against:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>She is the only cl care of Willy.</li> <li>Her managemen takes some press</li> <li>Whether or not important role to weakness.</li> </ul>
3)	<p>For material items:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many of the items shown in the play are key household items</li> <li>They give people something to aspire to</li> </ul> <p>Against:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willy’s suggestion of a ‘race to the junkyard’ highlights the stress of maintaining a certain standard of material wealth</li> <li>The Lomans come to depend too much on material objects as a source of pride</li> </ul>	

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### Active Learning Task

1. The stockings:
  - Remind Willy of his disloyalty to his wife
  - Symbolise his false pride; he may consider it beneath him for his
2. Willy's car(s):
  - Represents Willy's wearying life on the road
  - The old Chevy presents an image of success and glory to Willy
3. The wire-recorder:
  - Reflects Willy's isolation and his diminutive influence
  - Also offers a wider message about the depersonalisation of busin

Note: Miller's father, a once-thriving businessman, was left unable to send Street Crash. By working in the cut-throat world of sales, the playwright could be.

*Howard Wagner's Office (pp. 59–66)*

Debate Prompts	
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The device suggests that the humanity may be fading from interpersonal relationships in business.</li> <li>• Another example could be Willy's car, which perhaps symbolises technology taking over his life, too.</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Once again, Willy talks with a kind of airy idealism that makes it hard to trust his words entirely.</li> <li>• However, the pathos of the scene suggests that Miller is attempting to make a point about technology and consumerism taking over human relationships.</li> </ul>
3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although Howard treats Willy harshly, Willy's inability to influence him may suggest that he has a point – it seems that Willy has indeed overstated his reputation.</li> <li>• This is something that Charley also accuses Willy of when he rejects his job offer.</li> </ul>
4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• His dreamy recollections of Singleman suggest denial.</li> <li>• His assertion that Biff and Happy are working on a 'very big deal' suggests that he is still clinging desperately to the hope of success, in any form.</li> <li>• It is not until the following sequence that he appears to engage with his failings.</li> </ul>

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	Debate Prompts	Ess
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Linda is far less concerned with ambition or success than Willy and Ben.</li> <li>Ben seems to value individual merit and pursuing success alone.</li> <li>Willy, however, views success as the result of being 'well liked'.</li> <li>Ben and Willy's views are the most similar, but Ben appears to represent a new wave of business practices, where every man is out for himself.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clearly, both rec authority, even a</li> <li>As in big busines heroes or idols.</li> <li>Both can take a r wealth.</li> <li>However, the pl between the two</li> <li>Bernard is a rem required to succ</li> <li>Whether or not to debate, but M least be a balanc</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perhaps the decision causes some lingering resentment between Willy and Linda, and may be one of the factors in him pursuing an affair.</li> <li>It is hard to judge whether Willy would have been happy, or whether he would have been too weak to make the most of the opportunities Ben did.</li> <li>Equally, we don't know how close the illusion of Ben's success is to the truth.</li> </ul>	
3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suggestions might include:</li> <li>Being thick-skinned</li> <li>Ambition</li> <li>Selfishness</li> <li>Creativity</li> <li>Eye for opportunity</li> </ul>	
4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willy clearly does not want a special moment of Biff's success to be ruined.</li> <li>Perhaps he wants to demonstrate masculine authority for his son.</li> <li>(Anyone who has read on may argue that he is agitated about his infidelity.)</li> </ul>	
5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The word 'mocking' implies that Willy is being pathetic.</li> <li>It also reflects his rising agitation and insecurity.</li> <li>As it often does throughout the play, the music reflects the conflicting emotions in Willy's head.</li> </ul>	

Note: The Active Learning Task for this section is an independent creative exercise, not be provided here. However, students should be rewarded for insightful interpretation and contrast in their own work.

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	Debate Prompts	Ess
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bernard goes on to be a success after this; perhaps he realises Biff is not as strong a character as he thought.</li> <li>• This in turn may inspire him, making him realise that there is no reason he can't achieve great things.</li> <li>• It also makes him aware of Biff's sensitivity, showing him that there is more to him than the confident, powerful sportsman.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Charley does not emphasize on the fact that Willy could be baffling.</li> <li>• Willy holds on to his values, which constitutes, when he is adaptable – studies old-school values: 'work with his hands'.</li> <li>• Willy could well be a success, but he wasn't always confident.</li> <li>• However, we do not see him working lives; perhaps he is working / more</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bernard is a humble character.</li> <li>• He always puts great emphasis on his studies, which allow him to pursue his goals in the legal profession.</li> <li>• His attention to the less-fun aspects of life show that he is grounded, and perhaps less idealistic than the young Biff.</li> </ul>	
3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 'secret' could also refer to the secret to great parenting; what has Charley given Bernard that Willy couldn't give to Biff?</li> <li>• The answer to Willy's question could well be that study is as important as interpersonal relationships, and that one must pay attention to the details of life rather than the big picture sometimes.</li> </ul>	
4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This is open to debate, but Charley certainly teaches his son to be more humble than Biff or Happy.</li> <li>• It is evident in this section of the play that there is some big secret between Willy and Biff, so we shouldn't necessarily jump to broad conclusions about the nature of parenting. Maybe Bernard is inherently harder working in an academic sense; he is always encouraging Biff to study more, too.</li> <li>• The way in which Bernard is mocked as a youth could also be a contributing factor, giving him the drive to prove others wrong.</li> </ul>	

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	Debate Prompts	Ess
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>By concealing the truth, Happy is, to some extent, sparing Willy.</li> <li>However, his reasons are ambiguous; is he simply doing so to make his own life easier?</li> <li>Loman conceals his infidelity from Linda. If she had known, it's very unlikely she would have the same caring attitude towards him.</li> <li>While concealing the truth can spare characters in the short term, the overall habit of delusion in the Loman household is the root cause of the tragedy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Biff may inherit</li> <li>deluding himself</li> <li>His robbery of b</li> <li>be compared to</li> <li>not following Be</li> <li>Arguably, the re</li> <li>subliminal copin</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Happy does not share Willy and Biff's terrible secret – a secret that means Biff will always bear resentment towards his father.</li> <li>Biff has always been the child Willy had the highest hopes for, and this makes us wonder how much influence Happy could truly have.</li> <li>Throughout the play, Willy and Happy scarcely converse.</li> </ul>	
3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perhaps the focus should not be on Willy here, but on the Judas-like actions of Happy.</li> <li>The comparison is a significant one, however, particularly given how the boys revered him in days gone by.</li> </ul>	

	Debate Prompts	Ess
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Biff doesn't question the self-image Willy projects, until he discovers his betrayal.</li> <li>Willy certainly overemphasises Biff's qualities, at times almost ignoring Happy entirely.</li> <li>Willy is never entirely honest about how well he is doing in his job, so we wouldn't expect Biff to doubt him.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willy exhibits tr</li> <li>particularly his n</li> <li>He is far from pe</li> <li>and subsequent t</li> <li>While his ambiti</li> <li>shallow, this cou</li> <li>been conditione</li> <li>The main thing h</li> <li>recognition, rath</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It has traditionally been typical for sons to idolise their fathers, and want to replicate their successes.</li> <li>However, Willy's behaviour around his sons is also a reflection of the self-promotion common in sales.</li> </ul>	
3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willy feels the need to convince himself that he can be an example to his sons.</li> <li>He also struggles to admit that he is the reason for Biff's failings, calling his son a 'lazy bum' instead.</li> <li>His infidelity is arguably an act of weakness, so he needs to reassure himself that he is strong.</li> </ul>	

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### Active Learning Task

- Our first impression of Biff is that he is very aggressive to his father, s axis.
- This value should increase as he starts to talk about the business plan.
- When he argues with Willy before bed, the graph should dip again.
- Throughout the ‘Restaurant scene’, the graph should waver up and d and agitation.
- From this point onward, the graph should continue to rise.

*The Loman House (pp. 97–109)*

Debate Prompts	
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The fact that this conversation is completely illusory once again brings into doubt how accurate Willy’s ‘memories’ of Ben are.</li> <li>• We suspect that Ben’s speech is merely an extension of Willy’s own inner thoughts.</li> <li>• Willy may now be so painfully aware of his lies that he cannot face his family at all, fully immersing himself in illusion.</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biff wants his father to stop thinking about an idealised, perfect idea of success and focus on present realities.</li> <li>• Willy’s own dreams about a well-attended funeral tie in closely with the idea of Biff as a sporting hero. He thinks of Biff carrying this admiration into the business world.</li> </ul>

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	Debate Prompts	Ess
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willy is thinking of his son, Biff, when he dies.</li> <li>The family have paid off many of their debts at this point.</li> <li>Arguably, his death will bring an end to the Lomans' habit of self-delusion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Charley and Biff understanding – Biff in a personal</li> <li>Charley's realism assessment of W</li> <li>Biff is psychological recognising that world of business the open.</li> <li>Happy demonstrates moment to talk a</li> <li>Linda is, as always affairs. She also s recognition that financial record –</li> </ul>
2)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The uncertain ba reality shows just illusion to get by</li> <li>Charley could ha his job offer beca</li> <li>We could also ar overworked, 'tir</li> <li>We shouldn't ov mistakes, particu unbalanced treat Happy would be hadn't been igno</li> </ul>

Whole-text Analysis:

**Characterisation**

Willy

The Active Learning Task for this section is an independent creative exercise, so suggestions should be provided here. However, students should be rewarded for insightful interpretations and contrast in their own work.

Biff

	Debate Prompts
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At this point, Biff no longer has to impress anyone.</li> <li>He also no longer has to experience the tension between him and his father's relationship.</li> <li>However, this can be of little consolation – he will always feel somewhat inferior.</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At the end of the play, all Willy seems to be thinking about is the welcome that Biff loves and respects him after all.</li> <li>Happy seems willing to move on and look towards the future; however, Willy is stuck in the past and Willy's 'wrong dreams'. It seems doubtful that he will be able to move on.</li> </ul>

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Linda

	Debate Prompts	Ess
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Linda has little to look forward to in her own life, since she is mostly confined to the household.</li> <li>Willy's dreams to some extent allow her to believe in prosperity for the whole family.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Linda seems to p husband's succes</li> <li>Her deteriorating also be attributed them growing up</li> <li>At the end of the household bills h consolation to be</li> <li>Linda's only succ when he reports days. With him c forward to.</li> </ul>

Happy

	Debate Prompts
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We may attribute some of the blame to Willy, who largely ignores Ha clearly the favourite.</li> <li>Happy's attitude to women may also come from his father, a point im</li> </ul>

Bernard

	Debate Prompts
1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bernard is most likely referring to the unrealistic ideal Willy strives towa and just try to get by in life.</li> <li>This could also refer to the ideal he holds for Biff; if so, Bernard could be instead on maintaining a healthy relationship with his son.</li> <li>Willy's refusal to walk away could be related to his affair, which he alwa for.</li> <li>If he does walk away from his dreams, in his eyes he would be a failure to</li> </ul>

**Relationships**

	Essay Questions
1)	<p>For instance: Biff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High emotional sensitivity</li> <li>Tendency to honesty</li> <li>Wants to find forms of happiness other than the material</li> </ul> <p>Happy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Content with the superficial forms of success and happiness</li> <li>Highly selfish attitude, particularly towards his father</li> <li>Has no qualms about lying</li> </ul> <p>This relationship shows both the embracing and rejection of the ideals of the characters, however, ultimately suffer despite their differing standpoints.</p>

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**Genre**

Tragedy

**Debate Prompts**

1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willy dies thinking about his son, rather than his own ambitions – this re honour he loses at other times in the text.</li> <li>Some readers may suggest he loses dignity, as his suicide is to some exte</li> <li>He also never reveals his affair to Linda.</li> </ul>
2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If Willy possesses hamartia, it is his illusory approach to life and his trait</li> </ul>

Expressionism

**Essay Questions**

1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The material conditions of the Lomans' existence are highly recognisable portrayal of an American family.</li> <li>Willy consistently burdens himself with the expectations of the America</li> <li>However, the illusory nature of the stage design makes us question how reflect reality.</li> <li>We get a huge amount of insight into Willy's thoughts and feelings, sugg something more than just social realism in his play.</li> <li>For all the social commentary of the play, we cannot ignore the personal</li> </ul>
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**Themes**

American Dream

**Debate Prompts**

1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The ideals proposed by the American Dream are something that he cling</li> <li>We could argue that Willy is an inevitable product of his society.</li> <li>However, we also shouldn't forget that his infidelity plays a large part in</li> </ul>
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Family: Myths and Secrets

**Debate Prompts**

1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willy should have come clean to Linda about his infidelity. Their relation harmonious as that we see in the play, had he done so.</li> <li>Biff should have been more truthful with himself about his relationship w have lessened the disappointment surrounding the meeting.</li> </ul>
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