

# CONTENTS

---

## PART ONE

### INTRODUCTION

How to study a play .....	5
Reading <i>Death of a Salesman</i> .....	6

## PART TWO

### THE TEXT

Synopsis .....	8
Act I .....	10
Act II.....	24
Requiem .....	41
Extended commentaries	
Text 1 – Telling Willy the news (Act II, pages 84–5).....	43
Text 2 – Playing your hand (Act I, pages 34–9) .....	46
Text 3 – Asking the boss a favour (Act II, pages 59–64) .....	54

## PART THREE

### CRITICAL APPROACHES

Characterisation	
Willy .....	62
Biff and Happy.....	67
Linda .....	71
Ben .....	74
Bernard .....	75
Charley .....	76
Howard Wagner .....	78
The woman .....	78
The two girls .....	79
Theatrical techniques	
Realism .....	80
Expressionism .....	81
Staging .....	82
Montage .....	83
Structure .....	84

### Themes

Capitalism and the value of life .....	84
An ordinary man .....	86
Language and style .....	88
Signs and symbols .....	88

## PART FOUR

### CRITICAL HISTORY

Tragedy? .....	90
Heroic status .....	92
Social drama .....	94
Man in society .....	96
Politics .....	97
Psychoanalysis .....	98
The family .....	98
Gender .....	99

## PART FIVE

### BACKGROUND

Arthur Miller .....	101
His other works .....	102
Historical background .....	102
Capitalism .....	103
The American Dream .....	104
McCarthyism .....	105
Literary background .....	105
Chronology.....	108

FURTHER READING.....	110
----------------------	-----

LITERARY TERMS .....	114
----------------------	-----

AUTHOR OF THESE NOTES.....	115
----------------------------	-----

## CRITICAL APPROACHES

## CHARACTERISATION

## WILLY

Willy is meant to be played as someone who, to use the playwright's words, has *'massive dreams'*, but also indulges in *'little cruelties'* (p. 8). Arthur Miller has defended Willy's character by arguing that he does have values. Despite his age and the hardship he has endured in the selling business, he dreams that he would be in charge of the New York sales area if the former boss were still alive. Willy would especially like to have his own business so that he could spend more time with his family. On the other hand, he berates his highly sympathetic wife for getting the wrong cheese. He seems unable to comprehend the fact that she was trying to please him. Both his dreaming and his cruelty suggest that Willy lives in a world of his own. He has unrealistic dreams of his own and his family's importance and he is unable to understand why other people do the things they do. In Biff's case, he is still puzzled as to why Biff is working on a farm, and this leads to a great deal of friction.

Willy's views are also liable to sudden change. In the space of a few lines, he says that Biff is *'a lazy bum'* and then that he is *'not lazy'* (p. 11). He is able to idealise Biff one moment and attack him viciously the next. One of the things that Willy treasures most in Biff is his former skill at polishing the car! This shows a failure to grasp Biff's true nature. At the age of thirty-four, Biff seems unlikely to discover talents which have lain hidden all this time.

Willy might also be considered a hypocrite. In his remarks to Biff about not getting too involved with women because they are gullible (p. 21), he is trying to lecture Biff on a moral fault of which he is guilty. As we later see, he has a mistress. Immediately after his advice to Biff about involvement with women, he then rejoices in the fact that the women pay for his son. This might be an indication that Biff deceives and exploits women, yet Willy is happy at the thought. When as a young sportsman, Biff 'borrows' a football from school, Willy tells him that he wants the ball to be returned,

yet he also argues that Biff's theft of the ball is somehow acceptable (p. 23). He both condones the theft and rejects it; this is not perhaps a sign of insincerity, but rather of his willingness to reinterpret events to fit his dreams.

One question about Willy is whether he is intent on pleasing himself or whether he is really concerned about the needs of others. At one point he says: *'when business is bad and there's nobody to talk to ... I get the feeling that I'll never sell anything again, that I won't make a living for you [Linda], or a business, a business for the boys. There's so much I want to make for'* (p. 29). His love for Biff is heartfelt, but his ambitions for his son seem to have little relation to his son's needs and desires. His neglect springs directly from his dreams.

A salesman lives by his ability to engage other people and make them believe in him, and this carries over into Willy's private life. He even tells lies to his wife about the sales he has made to appear to be earning a great deal of money. The news of the family's debts comes as a surprise to Willy, who refuses to face this reality.

Willy appears egotistical, claiming that he is supremely popular with his clients (p. 24) and telling his young sons that he can park his car in any street in New England and the police will protect it. These boasts turn out to be ill-founded. Willy's pride in his son Biff's ability to play sport and be admired is rooted in his belief that *'the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead'* (p. 25).

Yet despite his apparent self-confidence, Willy tells his wife frankly about his fears and weaknesses. He has become aware of colleagues mocking him. Despite his belief in popularity and fighting talk, Willy can see that other men who say less are better salesmen: *'A man oughta come in with a few words. One thing about Charley. He's a man of few words, and they respect him'* (p. 28). It may be that Willy needs to exaggerate to boost his self-confidence – a necessary part of a salesman's psychological equipment. Linda's reassurance shows how fragile Willy's self-respect is. He appears to depend on her support to survive, and when she says that he is *'idolized'* by his sons (p. 29), we the audience know this not to be



## CHECK THE BOOK

For Miller's views on Willy, see his introduction to his *Collected Plays* (1958), reprinted in *Plays: One* (Methuen, 1988).



## QUESTION

Biff says of Willy: 'He had the wrong dreams' (p. 110). Is this true?

## CONTEXT

Willy's self-doubt, which breaks through his confidence on occasion and cannot be assuaged, is a classic symptom of depression.

World events

**1945** Franklin D. Roosevelt dies; he is succeeded as US president by Harry S. Truman  
The Second World War ends  
**1946** Winston Churchill coins the term 'Iron Curtain'

**1947** US foreign policy aims to restrict the expansion of Communism

**1948** Communist coup in Czechoslovakia

**1949** North Atlantic Treaty is signed by Western states

**1950** Senator McCarthy claims the US State Department is full of Communists, and heads an enquiry into 'un-American activities' that lasts until 1954

Arthur Miller

**1944** *The Story of GI Joe*, a screenplay, is written  
*The Man Who Had All the Luck* is staged

**1945** *Focus*, a novel, is published

**1947** *All My Sons* is staged

**1949** *Death of a Salesman* is staged, and wins the Pulitzer Prize

**1950** Arthur Miller's adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's play, *An Enemy of the People*, is staged

Literary context

**1944** *Antigone* by French playwright Jean Anouilh is staged  
*Huis clos (In Camera)* by French playwright Jean-Paul Sartre is staged  
Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* is staged

**1946** J. B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* is staged  
Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* is staged  
Terence Rattigan's *The Winslow Boy* is staged

**1947** Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* is staged  
J. B. Priestley's *The Linden Tree* is staged

**1948** Terence Rattigan's *The Browning Version* is staged

**1949** T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* is staged  
Bertolt Brecht's *Mutter Courage (Mother Courage)* is staged

**1950** Terence Rattigan's *Who is Sylvia?* is staged  
*La Cantatrice chauve (The Bald Prima Donna)* by playwright Eugène Ionesco is staged

World events

**1951** British diplomats Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean defect to the USSR  
**1952** George VI of England dies

**1953** Joseph Stalin dies; he is succeeded as Communist Party secretary by Nikita Khrushchev  
Coronation of Elizabeth II in England

**1954** US hydrogen bomb is tested at Bikini atoll

**1955** The Warsaw Pact, an Eastern European defence treaty, is signed by Communist nations

Arthur Miller

**1953** *The Crucible* is staged

**1954** Miller is denied a passport to visit Brussels for the European première of *The Crucible* on the grounds of it not being in the best interest of the country

**1955** *A View from the Bridge* is staged  
*A Memory of Two Mondays* is staged

Miller divorces his first wife, Mary Slattery  
**1956** Miller marries Marilyn Monroe

Literary context

**1951** Christopher Fry's *A Sleep of Prisoners* is staged

**1952** Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* is staged  
Terence Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea* is staged  
*En attendant Godot*, the French version of *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, is staged

**1953** Tennessee Williams's *Camino Real* is staged

**1954** *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas is broadcast on British radio  
Terence Rattigan's *Separate Tables* is staged

**1955** Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is staged in English  
Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is staged