

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Death of a Salesman

by

Arthur Miller

Book Information

Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman

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Book Level: 6.2

Interest Level: UG

A not-too-successful traveling salesman rears his sons on platitudes to his and their undoing.

Award: Pulitzer Prize

Topics: Careers, Marketing; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Sons; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound

Main Characters

Ben Willy's dead brother, who was successful in life and appears to him in moments of stress

Bernard Charley's son, who has become a successful lawyer

Biff Loman the oldest, physically attractive son of Willy, on whom Willy has pinned all his hopes and dreams

Charley the complete antithesis of Willy as well as his only true friend

Happy Loman the youngest son of Willy, who lives in Biff's shadow

Linda Loman the devoted and misinformed wife of Willy, who encourages the belief in his fantasies

Willy Loman a down and out salesman who lives and dies by the philosophy that being well-liked will gain a man everything

Vocabulary

crestfallen sad or low in spirits

imbue fill, as with color or a feeling

indignantly anger aroused by something unjust or unworthy

laconic presented with or given to a brevity of words

trepidation nervousness or dismay in the presence of danger

Synopsis

Willy Loman has been a traveling salesman for many years. He likes to think that he is vital to the New England area. Many years ago, he heard of a salesman named Dave Singleman who was so well-liked that he only had to pick up a phone to place many orders. After Singleman's death, people from all over the country attended his funeral.

In the beginning of the play, Willy has just returned from a road trip to New England. He explains to his wife that he can no longer continue the driving. He asks his wife when his son, Biff, is coming home. He remembers a time when Biff was in high school in 1928, when Biff was the star football player. He cannot understand why Biff never amounted to anything because he had so much personal attractiveness. Later, it is revealed that, after flunking a math course, he discovered his father's relationship with another woman. This incident completely shattered Biff and Willy's relationship.

Many years later, Biff has returned home and he tries to find a job that would be well-suited to him. He thinks he will ask a Mr. Bill Oliver for a loan of ten thousand dollars so he can open a business. Willy encourages him to ask for more because he is so well-liked.

Meanwhile, Willy has deluded himself into thinking he is a very well-liked and successful salesman. He asks his boss for a local position so he can stop driving. He is fired by his boss and his world crumbles. He goes to Charley for the money to pay for his insurance premium, but refuses to take a job when it is offered to him. Now, his only hope rests on Biff getting a loan from Mr. Oliver.

Biff has been so deluded by his father's values that he actually thinks he will get the loan. Mr. Oliver makes him wait all day and does not even remember him. Biff resorts to stealing, which has been a long-standing problem with him and has even landed him in jail when he takes Mr. Oliver's expensive fountain pen.

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Later, Biff and Happy await their father's arrival in a restaurant. Biff explains to Happy that he has been living a lie, or an illusion just like his father. He admits that he has stolen himself out of every job he has ever had. He tries to explain this to his father when he arrives, but Willy will not listen. He keeps asking Biff if he has an appointment for the next day. Biff leaves the restaurant in frustration, and Willy is left alone in the restaurant. On his way home, he stops to buy some seeds.

Later in the evening, Biff comes home and finds his father planting seeds in the backyard, talking to his dead brother, Ben. Biff tells his father that it would be best if they never see each other again. He tries again to tell his father that he is nothing but a failure, but Willy refuses to believe it and tells him how much potential he used to have. Out of frustration, Biff breaks down and cries on his father's shoulder. Willy, completely delusional, takes this as a sign of devotion and love and decides at that moment to sacrifice himself through suicide for his well-liked and personally attractive son. He reasons that with the twenty thousand in insurance money, Biff could really be something. He kills himself, and no one attends his funeral except his wife, and two sons, Charley, and Bernard.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Give some examples from the play that show how Willy encouraged Biff's behavior.

When Biff stole some basketballs, Willy approved, saying the coach would "probably congratulate him on his initiative." Also, Willy encouraged Biff to cheat and take answers from Bernard. Then, he sent both boys to steal some lumber in order to impress Ben. He told Biff not to mention the pen to Mr. Oliver.

Literary Analysis

How was Linda portrayed as the eternally suffering wife?

She was often berated or ignored by her husband, yet she was completely devoted to him. She was willing to believe Willy's fantasies, and she was even willing to reject her sons for him.

Inferential Comprehension

Willy is quickly spiraling downward toward an inevitable end. What are some examples in the story that show he was on the brink of insanity?

He talked with his dead brother. He had a hard time concentrating while driving. He talked to himself. He tried to plant a garden at night in his back yard. He took money from Charley but wouldn't take a job from him.

Constructing Meaning

Biff knew that his only chance for success was to get away from his father. How were the two alike?

Both started out with a clear vision of success that deteriorated over time. Both saw only what they wanted to see. They told each other what they thought the other wanted to hear. They felt sorry for one another.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features Part of Willy's deterioration stems from the fact that the world is becoming more modernized, and he is not keeping up with it. He has been using the same techniques for many years, and they are becoming outdated. Research the 1940s to discover what inventions and technological advances were made during this time period.

Understanding Characterization Willy's funeral was not as he had expected it to be. It was a sad lonely affair with only a few people in attendance. Write two obituaries for Willy, one that is realistic and one that was written by Willy.

Understanding the Author's Craft Reading a

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play can pose special problems. Without narrative, most information must be presented to the audience through dialogue and action, when the play is seen performed. It is said a play cannot be truly appreciated until it is seen live. Have students watch a film version of the play or see it live if possible. Afterward, have the students take a scene in the play and re-write it in narrative prose. How does this change the play?

Comparing and Contrasting In the middle of the play, Biff commented that Willy was going to kill himself. He thought things would be better if he left and never returned. He must have felt tremendous guilt over Willy's suicide. Write a letter to Willy from Biff's point of view telling him how he felt about his father. Have Biff suggest how things could have been handled differently.