

Death of a Salesman

Before Reading

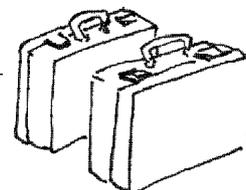
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1. Tensions in a Family

Look at these extracts from the play, in which two characters talk to each other. The characters have had their names removed. They are labelled A and B. Read the dialogues and talk about what is revealed about the characters and their relationship with each other.

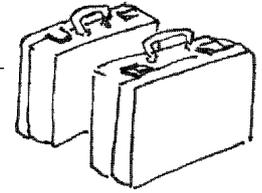
Work through this list of oppositions and decide whether any of them are helpful in describing A and B. Which define A? Which define B?

- male female
- secure insecure
- aggressive gentle
- vulnerable tough
- domineering dominated
- patient impatient
- confused clear thinking

Make some suggestions about who A and B are and what their relationship is to Biff Loman.

1 B: Not finding yourself at the age of thirty-four is a disgrace!
A: Shh!
B: The trouble is he's lazy, goddammit!
A: B, please!
B: Biff is a lazy bum!
A: They're sleeping. Get something to eat. Go on down.
B: Why did he come home? I would like to know what brought him home.
A: I don't know. I think he's still lost, B. I think he's very lost.
B: Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world a young man with such- personal attractiveness, gets lost. And such a hard worker. There's one thing about Biff- he's not lazy.
A: Never.

2 A: [*trying to bring B out of it*]: B, dear, I got a new kind of American-type cheese today. It's whipped.
B: Why do you get American when I like Swiss?
A: I just thought you'd like a change -
B: I don't want a change! I want Swiss cheese. Why am I always being contradicted?
A: [*with a covering laugh*]: I thought it would be a surprise.



2. The American Dream

America has often been presented as ‘the land of opportunity’, a country where anyone who is prepared to work can succeed. Americans have been proud of this view of their country and have valued hard work, determination and the ability to be successful and make money. This view of America has been called ‘the American Dream’. ‘Dream’ is a good name for it, because it suggests something wonderful that people can dream of and hope for but it also suggests something that may only be a dream, something unreal and impossible to achieve.

In *Death of a Salesman*, some of the characters, at different times in the play, seem to believe strongly in the American Dream. At other times, characters say things which suggest that they are disillusioned with it and no longer believe that ‘success’ is either possible or a good thing.

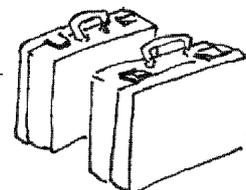
Willy, the main character in *Death of a Salesman*, spends his whole life striving for his own idea of ‘success’ for himself and his boys. Do you feel a similar pressure to succeed in your life?

What does success mean for a teenager in our society? Look at the list below. Which of them do you think would be a sign of ‘success’ for you? Put them in order of priority.

- owning a fast car;
- being happily married with children;
- having a lot of money;
- doing a job that you enjoy;
- passing your exams and doing well at school;
- being independent and free to do what you want;
- being admired by other people;
- becoming famous;
- your parents being proud of you;
- your friends being jealous of you;
- having good friends whom you can rely on;
- doing ‘better’ than your brothers or sisters.

Compare your priorities with other people in your class. Discuss whether there is any pressure on you to succeed and, if so, where it comes from - family? friends? the media? yourself?

Put your ideas on display paper, so that they can be put up on the wall. While you are reading the play, look back at your displays and compare your ideas of what it would mean to be successful with those of the characters in the play.



3. Selling Yourself

The main character in *Death of a Salesman* makes his living by persuading other people to buy his products. We do not know what he sells, but it appears to be a vitally important part of his self identity that he is seen by others as a successful salesman. A salesman can only count himself successful if he constantly increases his turnover. The routine of selling is very repetitious and draining, so the salesman has to cultivate personal qualities that will help to generate enthusiasm and optimism in himself even though the person to whom he is selling might appear uninterested.

At the time this play was written, many Americans were reading a best selling book called '*How to Win Friends and Influence People*' by Dale Carnegie. Basically the thrust of this book was to demonstrate how human relations could be exploited for practical gain. This is why Willie believes it is so important to be not just 'liked' but 'well liked'. Because if you are 'well liked' people will be prepared to trust you and therefore buy what you have to sell.

'Selling is the only job in the world in which a man is paid exactly what he is worth, and not what someone else thinks he is worth. He should love selling for this reason, and this reason only. He has accepted a man's job, and it will be entirely due to his own efforts. If he fails, it will be entirely due to his own weaknesses.'

Alfred Tack, *Sell Better - Live Better* (1958)

What might it be like to sell yourself over and over again?

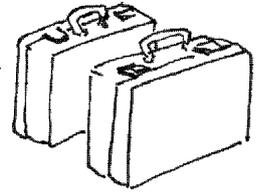
Get into groups of four and each select an object, say a watch or a piece of jewellery or a book. List three main points of interest in the object that you are going to try and sell and think of a price. Now try to sell your object to one of the four people in your group; the other two should observe the process and be prepared to comment afterwards.

Work out the kind of person that your prospective customer would trust.

Think about:

- your initial approach/introductions;
- what you would say about your would-be customer;
- what you would say about your product;
- how you would answer any questions.

When everyone has had a turn, discuss what you think might be the effect of constantly trying to sell your personality.



4. What was Happening Then?

In 1880s and 1890s when Willy was growing up:

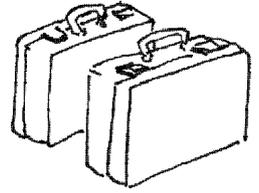
- the first machine, the graphophone, was invented to record and play back your own voice in 1885;
- Geronimo, the Apache Indian Chief surrendered in 1886;
- there was a Goldrush in Alaska in 1896;
- the Battle of Wounded Knee was fought in 1890 - the last major battle between the American Indians and the white soldiers.

In 1913, when Willy joined the Wagner firm:

- it was just before the First World War;
- the first Ford Motor Company moving assembly line was opened, to begin mass production of the Model T car. Henry Ford talked of ‘democratizing the automobile’;
- American society was small, stable and relatively secure economically - it was the period before the great Depression of the twenties;
- Arthur Miller was born in 1915.

In 1932, when Biff would have been at high school, captain of the football team and about to take his State Board of Regents examinations to qualify for the University of Virginia:

- America was in the middle of the Depression;
- about 15 million people were unemployed;
- factories were closing and shops were empty of customers and going out of business, or partly closed for inventory, having overstocked products - being a salesman was not an easy job in this climate;
- few people could afford to drive a car, except for business.

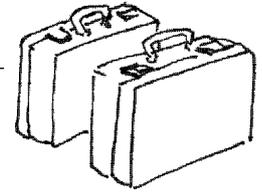


1. The Set

When the play was first staged in 1949, Miller had not included in the text a detailed description of the set. When Jo Mielziner designed the set for the first performance, Miller thought it was so well thought out and imaginative that he included a description of it in the published text. Most productions use a set based on this description.

Look closely at the set description at the beginning of the play. Try to draw a diagram of the set described by Miller. Make sure that you include all of the features he mentions. Compare your diagram with that of someone else in your group. Go back to the text to check any areas of difference and to see whether you have followed Miller's instructions accurately.

Try plotting the movements of Willy and Linda on your diagram, in the first few minutes of the play. You can do this using arrows, to show where Willy enters, where he pauses and so on.



2. Miller's Stage Directions

Miller is a playwright who makes particularly full use of stage directions to set out his intentions for the production of his plays.

His stage directions serve many purposes:

- to suggest movements and actions by characters;
- to indicate set and staging requirements;
- to make use of sound devices to suggest changing moods or changes between past and present;
- to express what a character is thinking or feeling at that moment;
- to express what he feels is the essence of a particular character, as explanatory material for actors and producer.

1. In pairs, read closely the stage directions at the top of Page 8. Continue annotating the stage directions to explore Miller's different purposes, as shown below.

Movement onto the stage

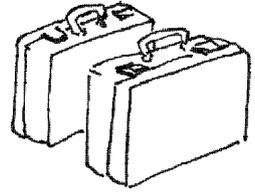
What's happening in Willie's head at this moment?

[From the right, WILLY LOMAN, the Salesman, enters, carrying two large sample cases. The flute plays on. He hears but is not aware of it. He is past sixty years of age, dressed quietly. Even as he crosses the stage to the doorway of the house, his exhaustion is apparent. He unlocks the door, comes into the kitchen, and thankfully lets his burden down, feeling the soreness of his palms. A word-sigh escapes his lips- it might be 'Oh, boy, oh, boy.' He closes the door, then carries his cases out into the living-room, through the draped kitchen doorway. LINDA, his wife, has stirred in her bed at the right. She gets out and puts on a robe, listening. Most often jovial, she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to WILLY'S behaviour- she more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties, served her only as sharp reminders of the turbulent longings within him, longings which she shares but lacks the temperament to utter and follow to their end.]

Flute acting as a sound device to suggest a happier past. NB Willie's father played the flute

2. Use Miller's stage directions on Page 8 to act out the first few moments of the play, before the actors begin following the script. Try to incorporate all the ideas and instructions given by Miller.

3. During your reading of the play, use your analysis of this early stage direction as a reminder to look closely at the additional information provided by the stage directions.



3. The Structure of the Play

Past and Present

Arthur Miller said of *Death of a Salesman* that it ‘explodes the watch and the calendar’. The past lives of Willy and his family are mixed in with what is happening to them in the present and this can be quite confusing when you read the play for the first time. It is less confusing if you see the play performed.

When the action shifts into the past it is not just as flashbacks to past events, to let the audience know what happened in the past. All of the characters, and especially Willy, are deeply affected now by what happened in the past.

What we see of the past is a mixture of the events and conversations that happened and the characters’ view of the past as it affects them now.

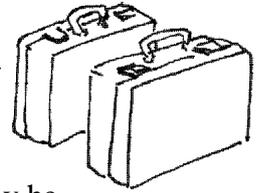
Arthur Miller wrote about the play that he wanted to show that ‘nothing in life comes ‘next’ but that everything exists together and at the same time within us; that there is no past to be ‘brought forward’ in a human being, but that he is his past at every moment and that the present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to. I wished to create a form which, in itself as a form, would literally be the process of Willy Loman’s way of mind.’

Miller helps the audience to be aware of scenes from the past in three ways:

- When the action is in the present, the actors stay inside the imaginary walls of the house on the stage. When they enter into the past, they step through the imaginary walls onto the front of the stage and scenes from the past are shown at the front of the stage.
- The lighting changes to allow the house to look as if it is covered in the shadows of leaves.
- A flute plays to suggest happier times in the past. Miller says it suggests ‘grass and trees and the horizon’.

1. Look closely at this extract from Act One, which shows shifts between past and present in the minds of the characters. Annotate the extract, underlining the moments when there is a shift from present to past and back again. What devices does Miller use to highlight that the characters are moving into the past in their heads?

During Reading



Earlier in the scene, Willy has told Linda that whilst driving the car that day he opened the windshield to let the warm air in.

LINDA: And Willy - if it's warm Sunday we'll drive in the country. And we'll open the windshield, and take lunch.

WILLY: No, the windshields don't open on the new cars.

LINDA: But you opened it today.

WILLY: Me? I didn't. [*He stops.*] Now isn't that peculiar! Isn't that a remarkable - [*He breaks off in amazement and fright as the flute is heard distantly.*]

LINDA: What, darling?

WILLY: That is the most remarkable thing.

LINDA: What, dear?

WILLY: I was thinking of the Chevy. [*Slight pause.*] Nineteen twenty-eightwhen I had that red Chevy - [*Breaks off.*] That funny? I coulda sworn I was driving that Chevy today.

LINDA: Well, that's nothing. Something must've reminded you.

WILLY: Remarkable. Ts. Remember those days? The way Biff used to simonize that car? The dealer refused to believe there was eighty thousand miles on it. [*He shakes his head.*] Heh! [*To LINDA*] Close your eyes, I'll be right up. [*He walks out of the bedroom.*]

HAPPY [*to BIFF*]: Jesus, maybe he smashed up the car again!

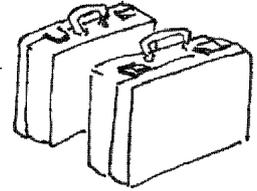
LINDA [*calling after WILLY*]: Be careful on the stairs, dear! The cheese is on the middle shelf! [*She turns, goes over to the bed, takes his jacket, and goes out of the bedroom.*]

2. Flick through the play to find more examples of each of these devices being used to indicate a shift from the present into the past.

The Title of the Play

Miller said that his first title for *Death of a Salesman* was *The Inside of His Head*.

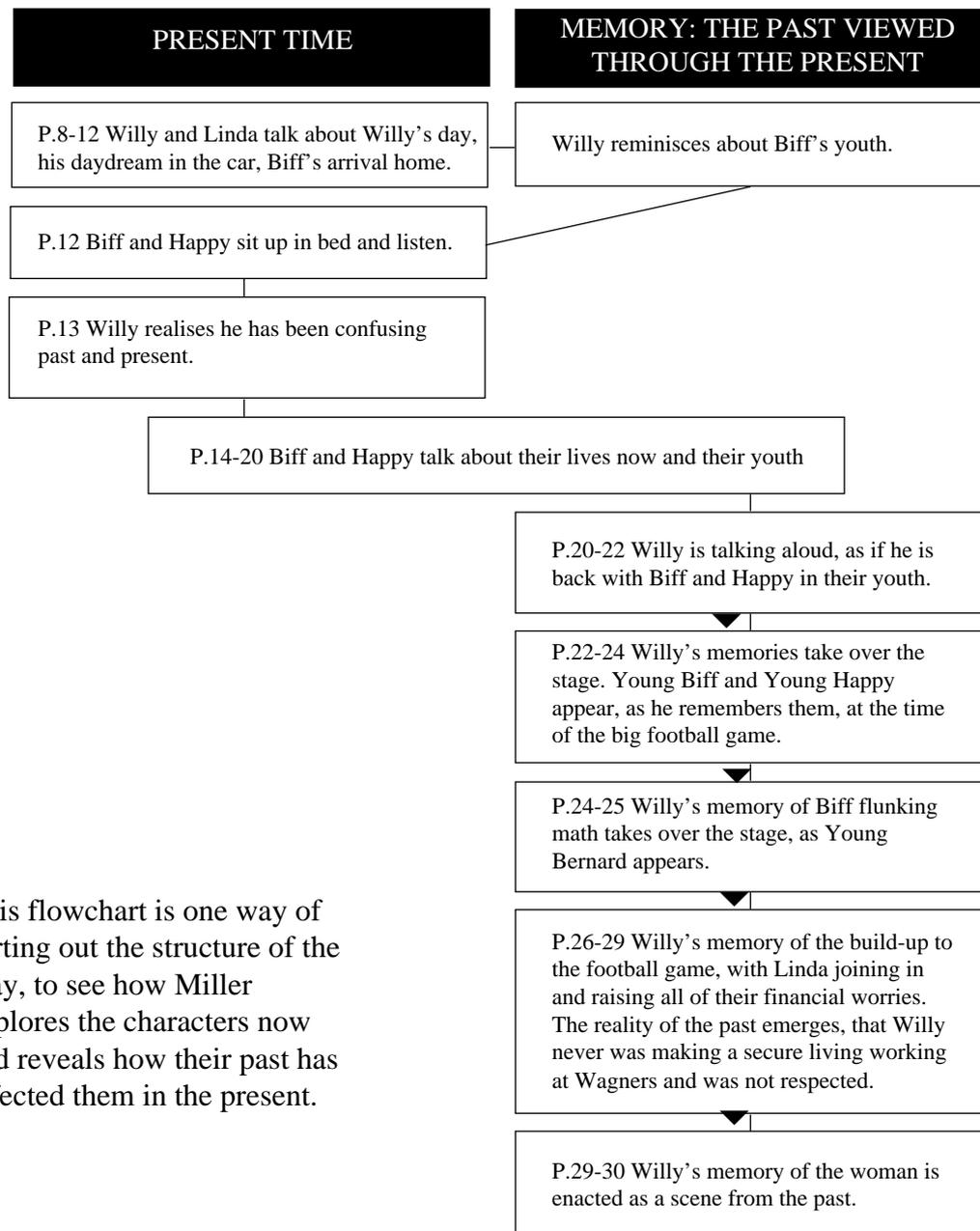
- Why did Miller consider using it?
- What aspects of the play does it emphasise?
- How does it relate to the structure of the play?
- Find three quotes from what you have read so far that would justify the idea that the play is about 'the inside' of Willy Loman's head.



Plotting the Structure of the Play

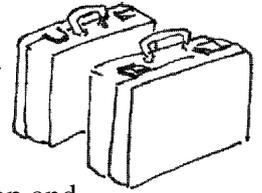
Most plays can be divided up fairly neatly into 'scenic units'. The plot unfolds by characters meeting in different groups, saying and doing things that create new events which change the story. Each new episode, or development of the story forms a scene. In *Death of a Salesman* most of the important events took place in the past and so the question in the audience's mind isn't so much, 'What's going to happen next?' as 'What happened to make this family like it is?' The mixing of past and present means that you can't really break down the play into clear scenes. Explaining the plot of the play is a complicated business.

A Flowchart for Act One



This flowchart is one way of sorting out the structure of the play, to see how Miller explores the characters now and reveals how their past has affected them in the present.

During Reading



1. Work in pairs. Continue the flowchart for Act One. You may need to stop and talk as a whole group about moments when it is hard to be sure whether the action is in the past or the present.

2. When you have finished reading the play, work in pairs to make a similar flowchart for Act Two.

A Flowchart for Act Two

This summary of the events of Act Two might be useful for you to work on as an alternative to going back over the text and listing the events for yourself. Find a way of highlighting the time shifts and noting any patterns you observe. One or two have been marked in for you, as examples of the kinds of things to look for.

The Loman House

Linda and Willy together for morning coffee. Hope in the air. Biff will ask Bill Oliver for a loan. Willy will ask to come off the road. Willy and Linda talk about their finances, their consumer goods and how close they are to paying everything off. The arrangement for the boys to take Willy to a restaurant is discussed. Biff phones Linda.

Howard's Office

Willy goes to see Howard to ask to come off the road. Howard is playing with his tape recorder, listening to his family's voices. Willy tells the story of Dave Singleman. He accidentally starts the recorder. Howard and Willy talk about Willy's performance as a salesman. Willy is fired.

Ben appears. He offers Willy a job, working on his timberland in Alaska. Linda objects, drawing on the Singleman story. Biff is preparing to go to the Ebbets Field game.^{*2} Bernard and Happy both want to carry his gear. Charley teases Willy about not being interested in the game. Willy insults Charley.^{*1}

Charley's Office

Willy banter with Charley's secretary. Talks to Bernard, who is a successful lawyer, about to go to Washington, carrying tennis rackets.^{*2} Willy is puzzled by his success, Biff's failure. Bernard talks about the day Biff flunked math. Questions Willy about what happened in Boston. Bernard leaves for Washington. Charley and Willy talk about salesmen. Charley offers Willy a job. Willy is insulted.^{*1}

*1 Willy's relationship with Charley always seems to end in offence - perhaps because of Willy's competitiveness

Frank's Chop House

Happy boasts to the waiter about work, family, flirts with girl. Biff tells Happy the truth about the meeting with Bill Oliver. Willy enters in good spirits. Biff desperate to tell him the truth.

Young Bernard tells Mrs. Loman the news about Biff flunking math.

Biff tells Willy he stole the pen of the operator in the hotel in Boston. Biff, frightened by Willy's reaction, tries to backtrack.

The voices of the operator and the woman in the Hotel room intrude. Willy is introduced to Letta and Miss Forsyth. The woman's voice keeps returning. Willy goes to the cloakroom. Biff shows Happy the hose from the cellar. Biff and Happy leave with the girls.

The Hotel Bedroom

The scene in the Hotel Bedroom is enacted, with Willy and the woman being interrupted by the young Biff.

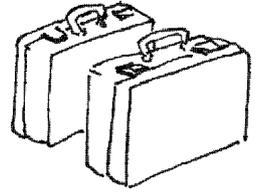
The waiter finds Willy in the cloakroom.

The Loman House

Biff and Happy return home. Linda attacks them for their treatment of Willy. Willy is planting seeds.

Willy talks to Ben about his insurance policy.

Biff's last effort to tell the truth. Willy goes off in the car.^{*2} *Irony that Biff used to excel at sport, not Bernard. Now the tennis racket is sign of Bernard's success*
The Requiem



Symbols and Motifs

In *Death of a Salesman* consumer objects keep cropping up in the play, as symbols of what is wrong in the society and in the characters' lives.

Working in small groups, trace the references to consumer goods, using the page numbers listed below. Decide whether the characters' attitudes to them were different in the past compared to the present and what that suggests about their changing views. Why do you think that they are included in the play?

Remember that in the late 1940s when the play was written, far fewer people would have owned cars. A refrigerator would also have been a very big purchase and many families would not have had one. Buying a fridge then might have been like buying a satellite disc now.

Cars: pages 13, 20-21, 26-28, 56-57.

Refrigerator: pages 27, 56.

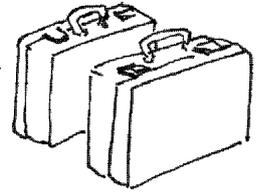
Stockings: pages 31, 58, 95.

The Shower: pages 52.

Tape-recorder: pages 59 -61.

Tennis Rackets: pages 71, 72, 74.

Fountain Pen: pages 82, 87.



Other Symbols and Motifs

Alongside consumer goods there are other symbols and motifs running through the play.

Working in pairs, divide up the list of symbols and motifs listed below between the pairs in the class. Each pair should take responsibility for collecting the references to that symbol or motif during the reading of the play. You should note down page references and any thoughts about the meaning of the symbol and the way it is being used.

When you have finished reading the play, look back at all the references and notes you have collected. See if you can trace a pattern or development in the use of the symbol or motif. Talk about what the symbol or motif contributes to the development of the themes of the play or to other aspects of the drama. Consider what would be lost without it.

Prepare a ten minute presentation to the rest of the group, about the importance of the symbol or motif you have focused on and tracing its development through the play. You could use an overhead projector, a photocopied handout summarising your main points or a diagram or chart on sugar paper, to help you explain your ideas.

Trees and Leaves

Seeds, Flowers & Vegetables

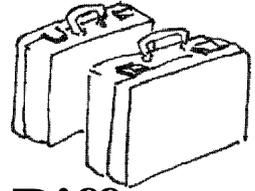
Tools

The Flute

Diamonds

The House

The Great Outdoors



5. First Impressions of Happy and Biff

Read the scene in which you meet Happy and Biff for the first time. The scene starts on page 14 [*Light has risen on the boys' room....*] and ends with the stage directions at the top of page 21 [*Their light is out....*]

1. In pairs, talk about your first impressions of Happy and Biff and their relationship with each other.

These are some issues to discuss:

- What kind of person does Biff seem?
- What kind of person does Happy seem?
- What do they feel about their lives now?
- What do they feel about their lives in the past?
- What are their feelings about their father, Willy?
- What kind of relationship do they have with each other?
- What tensions and conflicts are raised at this point in the play?
- What themes does Miller seem to be introducing through this dialogue between Biff and Happy ?

As you are talking, go back through the scene to look for evidence in support of your views. Pull out short quotes and note them down.

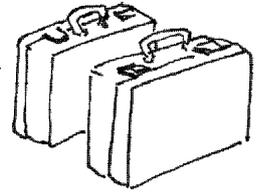
Writing

a. Write an account of your first impressions of Happy and Biff in this scene, using evidence and ideas collected in your paired discussion.

b. Keep this account. When you have finished reading the whole play, go back to the scene in Biff and Happy's bedroom. Re-read it and re-read your account of your first impressions of the characters. Think about how differently you read this scene in the light of having read the whole play. For example:

- Does anything seem important that you previously hardly noticed?
- Are there any clues about characters and relationships that seem particularly interesting in the light of the additional knowledge shed by Act Two?
- What themes are raised in the scene that become important in the rest of the play?
- Now that you have read the whole play, what do you think of the way Miller has introduced Biff and Happy in the bedroom scene?
- What would be lost if this scene were omitted from the play?

Write an account of your view of the scene having read the play, to put alongside your first impressions, showing how your reading of it has changed and developed.



6. The Card Game Scene

There are some scenes in the play which are particularly important moments of dramatic tension, or turning points in the action, or moments when something new is revealed either to the characters or to the audience.

It is worth looking closely at what Miller is doing with one of these scenes, the Card Game Scene, and how it contributes to the play as a whole.

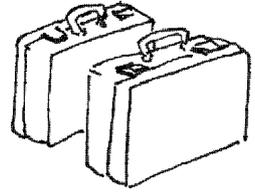
Work in groups of 6. (If there are less than 6 in the group, you will need to double up on character roles, with one person acting Charley **and** either Linda, Biff or Happy. If there are more than 6, one person should act as observer/ helper.)

1. Re-read the scene, from page 32 [*CHARLEY has appeared in the doorway...*] to page 41 [*LINDA:Come to bed, heh?*], sharing out the parts between you.

2. In your group, prepare a performance of the scene. You should make notes of your production ideas on a copy of the scene. Your production ideas should include:

- Decisions on the positions characters will take up and their movements/ the spatial relationships between the characters, such as distance between them, height/ where the audience's attention will be focused and how.
- Decisions on how the characters are feeling at different stages in the scene and how this can be revealed by tone of voice/ facial gestures/ body language/ movements. After a first reading, you could read the scene again, stopping three or four times to note down the thoughts in each character's head at different points in the scene.
- Decisions on how you are going to help the audience grasp the difficulties of the scene, such as shifts from present to past in Willy's mind, the confusions arising from Willy's growing instability and the appearance on stage of characters from the past, who are not really there but can be seen by the audience (e.g. Ben, the young Biff and Happy).
- A decision on one moment in the scene that you are going to **freeze-frame**, so that other groups can walk round you, look closely at the composition of the scene and question the characters in role by touching each character on the shoulder and asking their thoughts and feelings.

During Reading



3. Act out the scene in front of the other groups. Stop the action at the moment you have decided to freeze-frame. Pause to allow the other groups to wander round you, take notes on your positioning and question you about your feelings. When they have finished doing so, continue your performance to the end of the scene.

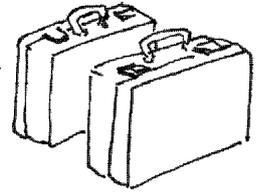
4. When each of the groups has performed the scene, with a freeze-framed moment, de-brief the activity by talking about how differently each group approached the scene and what you learned about the situation and the characters from looking at different performances of it.

Writing

1. Write a detailed commentary to go with your annotated copy of the scene, explaining the decisions you took, discussing the difficulties of producing the scene and evaluating your production and performance of the scene.

2. Write about why you think this is an important scene in the play. You might want to write about:

- what is happening to Willy in this scene;
- what the scene reveals to the audience about the characters;
- why Charley's involvement in the scene is important;
- why Miller includes the on-stage presence of Ben, young Biff, young Happy and Linda as a younger woman;
- how the scene relates to what comes before and after it in the play.



1. Using Your Flowcharts

1. Work with the person you worked with on the flowcharts.

Look back at the flowcharts you produced for each Act.

2. Make a copy of the two charts and paste them each onto A3 paper, to leave space around the edges for annotations.

3. Annotate the charts in this way:

- Draw lines and arrows to show patterns and relationships between parts of the play e.g. a line linking Willy's glorified account of Dave Singleman (page 63) with Ben's scorn for the idea of Singleman (page 67). Comment on the links you have made.
- Highlight any moments that you think are turning-points or climaxes in the drama. Look at where they appear, in which Act? At what moment? Prepared for in what ways? Paralleled by any other similar or contrasting scenes?
- Mark on the text any points at which a symbol or motif seems to take on a particular importance e.g. the planting of seeds at the end of Act Two.

Writing

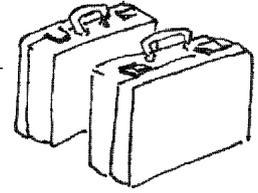
Look back at all the work you have done on the use of past and present in the play, the significance of the title, *The Inside of His Head*, plotting and analysing the structure of the play.

1. Write about what you think of *The Inside of his Head* as a way of describing the way *Death of a Salesman* is structured and what it is about.

2. Pick one scene from Act One that seems to you to show particularly well Miller's way of structuring the drama of Willy Loman.

You might want to write about:

- the way he uses past and present;
- the way he uses symbols and motifs in the scene;
- the way he uses parallels and contrasts;
- the way he builds up tension;
- the way he creates dramatic climaxes.



2. Willy, Biff and Happy

In *Death of a Salesman* the characters change, not only because of the events that occur in the the present, but also because of events that have taken place in the past. Charting their development is complicated further because the characters are not always honest with themselves or each other about what their lives are really like. Some of Willy's talk about the past is shown to be unrealistic and false, just as his dreams for the future are unreal fantasies. Biff and Happy also slip into fantasies about the past and future, as well as sometimes trying to be more honest with themselves.

Work in pairs or small groups. Each group should work on one character. Prepare a presentation of your ideas to the rest of your class, going back to the text to find evidence and quotes.

Look at this list of statements about these characters. Decide which you agree with.

Biff in the Present

Biff hates Willy and has no respect for him.

Biff is a drifter who has become a failure because of the way Willy brought him up. He should try to settle down and lead a decent life.

Biff's rootless life is a sign that he is searching for something important: his own identity.

Biff's love for Willy is stronger than that of Happy, even though he is bitter and angry with him.

Biff looks back on his past as a wonderful time, when he had a happy family and led the life of a hero.

Biff understands the past and realises that Willy's view of it is a fantasy.

Biff in the Past

Biff was a football hero and had a glorious youth, full of promise.

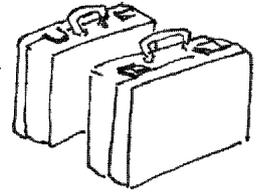
Biff was full of hot air. He stole and cheated but got away with it because he was 'well liked'.

Biff's discovery of Willy's affair with the buyer is the cause of all his later problems.

Biff's discovery of the affair forces him to face reality for the first time in his life. It is really the beginning of him 'finding himself.'

Biff's values as a boy were instilled in him by Willy.

After Reading



Willy in the Present

Willy is no longer successful as a salesman and is not earning enough to pay all his debts.

Willy is disappointed in Biff and feels that he should be more successful.

For Willy, success is being happy and doing what you want to do.

Willy relies very heavily on Linda but he shows no respect for her.

Willy looks back on the past as a golden time, full of promise.

Willy is not always honest with himself. He fantasises about the past and the future.

Willy is jealous of Charlie and Bernard.

Willy in the Past

Willy brought up his sons in a good and honest way.

Willy is to blame for Biff's failure and Happy's lifestyle.

Willy's affair was just another example of the lies beneath the surface of his life.

The fact that Willy lost his father so early in his own life accounts for some of his insecurity and difficulties in bringing up his own sons.

Willy was not influenced by his brother Ben.

Willy was scornful of Charlie and Bernard, because of their approach to life and their personal qualities.

Happy in the Present

Happy is happy.

Happy has totally accepted Willy's values and ideas about what it means to be successful.

Happy has a realistic view of the past.

Happy's love for his father is rather shallow.

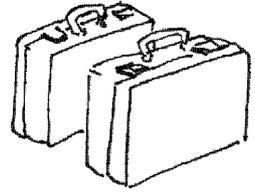
Happy has turned out to be a 'good' person.

Happy in the Past

Happy was in the shadow of Biff.

Happy worshipped Willy.

While Biff had a growing awareness that they were living in a fantasy world, Happy was completely taken in by the myth.



3. Willy, Biff and Happy - Real Life Models

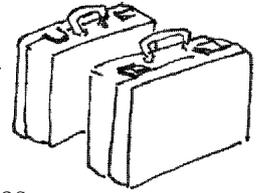
In his autobiography, *Timebends* Arthur Miller describes some of the background to his creation of the characters of Willy, Biff and Happy. His uncle Manny and cousins Buddy and Abby bear some similarities to the fictional characters of the play.

Manny

Manny Newman was cute and ugly, a Pan risen out of the earth, a bantam with a lisp, sunken brown eyes, a lumpy, pendulous nose, darkbrown skin, and gnarled arms. When I walked into the house, he would look at me - usually standing there in his one-piece BVD's, carrying a hammer or a screwdriver or perhaps a shoe box filled with his collection of pornographic postcards - as though he had never seen me before or, if he had, would just as soon not see me again. He was a competitor, at all times, in all things, and at every moment. My brother and I he saw running neck and neck with his two sons in some race that never stopped in his mind.....

It was a house without irony, trembling with resolutions and shouts of victories that had not yet taken place but surely would tomorrow. Both boys could be Eagle Scouts and win all the badges and make their beds and clean up after themselves and speak often and gravely of the family's honor and then, with Bernie Crystal and Louis Fleishman, go into Rubin's candy store and distract him long enough to make off with his three-foot-high globular glass display vase filled with penny candy. Or spend weeks preparing a camping trip to the South Pole, and once up there, having followed every honourable rule of scouting, find an old whore in a local tavern and spend the night taking turns with her in the pup tent and in the morning cut her reward by half, figuring that as brothers they should only be charged one fee. Everybody envied them, especially Buddy, the eldest, who played baseball and basketball and football and got mentioned in the Brooklyn *Eagle* two or three times and took two hours to get himself dressed for a date, oiling his black hair and talcing his face and punching himself in the stomach and snarling into the mirror to peruse his teeth.....

(Page 122-3)



It was the unpredictability of his life that wove romance around it. He was not in some dull salaried job where you could never hope to make a killing. Hope was his food and drink, and the need to project hopeful culminations for a selling trip helped, I suppose, to make life unreal. Fifty years later, in my Chinese production of *Death of a Salesman*, Ying Ruocheng, the actor playing Willy, was trying to imagine an equivalent to this romance of hope in some Chinese occupation, selling having always been a disreputable pursuit for Chinese, and certainly not something to be romanticized. He finally seized on the outriders who in the old times had accompanied caravans across China, protecting them from bandits. These hired guns had all kinds of adventures and formed a kind of bragging brotherhood, meeting in faraway places from time to time to trade tales of victories and defeats. With the coming of the railroads the need for their services vanished, and they ended up in local fairs firing at targets, swallowing swords, and drinking to forget (rather like our Buffalo Bill).

Much more than a single model would ultimately go into Willy Loman. Indeed, since I saw so little of Manny he was already, in my youth, as much myth as fact. But there are images of such defined power and density that without offering concrete information to the writer they are nevertheless the sources of his art.

(Page 126)

Buddy and Abby

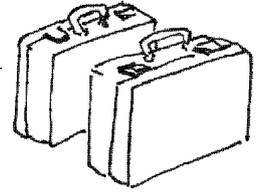
Manny had managed to make his boys into a pair of strong, self-assured young men, musketeers bound to one another's honor and proud of their family. Neither was patient enough or perhaps capable enough to sit alone and study, and they both missed going to college.

(Page 127)

Abby

The last I saw of Abby was a number of years before he died, in his early forties, like his mother of hypertension. He had invited me to his bachelor apartment in Manhattan after I phoned him. I had not seen him since before the war. Wearing blue silk pajamas and slippers, he ushered me into his small living room overlooking lower Lexington Avenue. It was a late Saturday afternoon. *All My Sons* was running on Broadway. *Focus* had been published a year or two earlier, and I had a wife and two children. What he had come out of his bedroom on two pairs of spike heels, two startlingly beautiful young women who dashed over to him where he sat and kissed him on each cheek, pausing only long enough to nod to me as he introduced me with a display of pasha-like satisfaction. Buttoning up blouses and straightening stockings, they hurried out of the apartment. They were late, they said, for work. 'I love it with two,' he chuckled as the door slammed shut.

(Page 128)



Manny and Abby

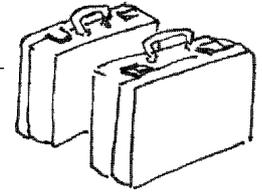
‘What did your pop want?’ I asked him. This was what I had come for. I was obsessed these days by vague but exciting images of what can only be called a trajectory, an arched flow of storytelling with neither transitional dialogue nor a single fixed locale, a mode that would open a man’s head for a play to take place inside it, evolving through concurrent rather than consecutive actions. By this time I had known three suicides, two of them salesmen. I knew only that Manny had died with none of the ordinary reasons given. I had also totally forgotten that ten years earlier I had begun a play in college about a salesman and his family but had abandoned it. I would only discover the notebook in which I had written it some nine years hence - long after the first production of *Death of a Salesman* - when my marriage broke up and I had to move my papers out of my Brooklyn house.

‘I mean if you had to say the one thing he wanted most, the one thing that occurred to him most often, what would it be?’

My cousin Abby, big, dark, filled with the roiling paradoxes of love for me and competitive resentment, of contempt for his late failed father and at the same time a pitying love and even amused admiration for the man’s outrageousness - my cousin sitting there had also entered my dreams not long before, and possibly it was the dream that had caused me to ring him up after so many years.

A vast purple plain blends on the horizon into an orange sunset sky. My bare white foot is lowering into a shallow hole at the bottom of which is a little pool of crystal clear water beneath whose surface are stretched five silvery strings, thick as harp strings. My foot descends and touches them, and the air fills with a bloom of music that even ripples the water. Now in the near distance appears a white concrete wall on the purple plain, and as I approach I see two goat-like fawns walking on their hind legs. They are playing handball against the wall. They are my cousins, Abby and Buddy. The smack of the hard black ball against their forehooves is tremendous, thrilling.

(Page 129)



4. Fathers and Sons

Arthur Miller said of *Death of a Salesman* that it is ‘really a love story between a man and his son, and in a crazy way between both of them and America’.

The relationships between fathers and sons are at the heart of the play. For Miller, people are created by their past and in particular by their early family relationships. Willy’s insecurities, his relationship with his sons and his final breakdown had their seeds in his relationship with his own family and the insecurity of his early childhood.

Look at this list of all the father/son and brother relationships that are found in the play.

Willy and Biff;
 Willy and Happy;
 Biff and Happy
 Willy and his own father;
 Willy and Ben;
 Charley and Bernard.

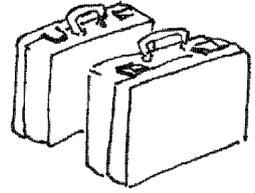
Try presenting each of the relationships in diagrammatic form. For each relationship, look at this list of words and decide which ones are true of the relationship. It may be that different words are more or less true at different times in the play. Your chart should try to show changes across the play.

loving	resentful	rejecting
angry	scornful	forgiving
admiring	confused	like-minded
honest	hostile	friendly
dishonest	disappointed	argumentative
respectful	distant	

Different stages in the play:

1. **Act One** • Biff’s return home
2. **Act One** • the past, when Biff was a football hero
3. **Act One** • Willy’s memories of his own father and brother
4. **Act Two** • in the chop house after Willy is sacked and Biff goes to see Bill Oliver
5. **Act Two** • the past, after Biff went to Boston to see Willy
6. **Act Two** • after the show-down between Willy and Biff.

After Reading



Writing

1. A psychoanalytic view of the play might focus on the relationships between fathers and sons and explain the characters in terms of their childhood experiences. Write about the way in which Willy was formed by his own childhood experience of his father and about the way in which this influenced his approach to his own sons. Try to include something about his relationship with his brother Ben and how that compares with Biff and Happy's relationship as brothers.

2. Charley and Bernard have a very different father/son relationship to that of Willy and his sons. Try writing a scene from the past, when Bernard was a boy, with Charley and Bernard talking about the events of the play. They could be talking about:

- Biff and Happy;
- school work;
- the future and what Bernard should be aiming for in life;
- Bernard's feelings about himself, as compared with Biff.

Try to show the differences between Charley's relationship with Bernard and Willy's relationship with his sons. You could look back at pages 22-26 to remind yourself of the way Willy talked to his 'boys'.

For example:

BERNARD: Did you hear about Biff becoming captain of the football team? Isn't that great?

CHARLEY: Sure, but I hope it leaves him time to study.

BERNARD: I'm worried about Biff, Dad. He's a big football hero but he don't seem happy.

3. Look closely at Miller's statement that *Death of a Salesman* is:

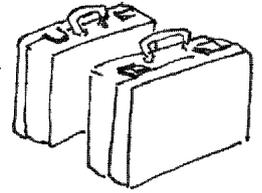
'really a love story between a man and his son, and in a crazy way between both of them and America.'

Look at both parts of the statement.

What do you think he means?

Do you agree with this reading of the play or are there other views of what is going on in the play that you would foreground?

Write about whether you agree with Miller, going back to the text to give evidence and examples to justify your view of the play.



5. Linda

Sub-texting Linda's thoughts

Linda is shown in two contexts: in dialogue with Willy and her sons, and in scenes where Willy is absent.

The end of Act One is one example of Linda in dialogue with her family.

Work in small groups and look back at the end of Act One, starting at the bottom of page 50, where Biff says, 'I'll see Oliver tomorrow....'

Re-read the scene, out loud, sharing out the parts but with an extra Linda (5 parts in all). Each time Linda speaks, the extra Linda should express what is going on at that moment in her head, as if she is Linda's inner voice.

Part of the way through the scene, change parts, so that more than one person has the chance to be Linda's inner voice.

For example:

LINDA: Maybe things are beginning to -

[Inner Voice: Thank God for something hopeful. Willy has to have something to dream about ...]

Linda without Willy

There are three key scenes in which Linda appears without Willy:

- Act One, bottom of page 41, where she talks to Biff and Happy.
- Act Two, page 97, when Biff and Happy return home from their night out.
- Requiem, page 110, at Willy's graveside.

Re-read these scenes in turn.

For each scene, talk about what the scene adds to your awareness and understanding of Linda. What would be lost if the scene had been omitted?

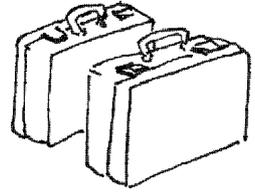
One critic, Bernard F. Dukore, describes these three scenes by saying that:

- in one scene Linda pleads Willy's case as a father;
- in one scene Linda pleads Willy's case as a man;
- in one scene Linda pleads Willy's case as a husband.

Try to match Dukore's statements to the scenes.

Talk about whether you agree with Dukore's view of what Linda is doing in these scenes.

After Reading



Talking about Linda

Drawing on what you have done so far on Linda's character, talk about the statements below, deciding whether you agree or disagree with them and why.

- Linda is a victim of Willy's bullying and emotional blackmail.
- It is Linda who holds the family together.
- Linda understands what is going on in the family very well but doesn't have the power to make use of that knowledge to change the course of events.
- The whole of Linda's life is devoted to supporting Willy.
- Linda is taken in by Willy's dreams and believes them herself.
- 'She is neither stupid nor overly passive, as some assert. Were she to nag Willy to face reality, he might emulate his father and abandon the family.' (Bernard Dukore)
- Linda behaves as she does, not because of her personal inadequacies but because of the way she is positioned within the nuclear family and the kind of society she lives in.

Add any statements of your own.

Linda's Role in the Play

Christopher Bigsby, in an interview with Arthur Miller asked him whether he in any way regretted 'not giving Linda more resources to make the battle a bit more equal'.

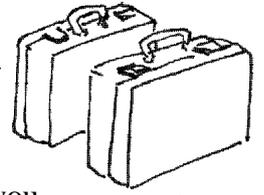
Miller replied:

'I regretted it at the time but I couldn't honestly give her what I didn't think she would ever have. You see, if that woman were more articulate in terms of her ability to handle it, probably they would have broken apart earlier on; she couldn't have stood it. You know, he's a cruel son of a bitch that guy; everybody is charmed by him but if you objectively face some of those scenes in the bedroom, he just wipes the floor with her from time to time. You see a woman who was thinking of herself more would simply not have been there one morning, or else she would have put up such a fight as to crush him because he would never be able to accept any independence around him. This is part of the disease.'

Writing

1. Re-write the scene that you sub-texted at the end of Act One, following your own ideas for how Linda might behave differently in the scene. Use this as a chance to explore how different the play might be if Miller had given Linda a different role. Write a commentary to go with the scene, explaining what you felt was going on in the original scene and how and why you have adapted it.

After Reading

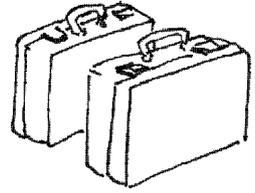


2. Write about Linda's role in the play, using these suggestions for issues you might consider:

- What role has Miller given to Linda in the play?
- Why is she represented as she is?
- Does the play encourage us to think about her in her own right, or does she just exist in the play to demonstrate Willy to us?
- What difference would it make if Linda were not there: to our view of Willy, to our view of Biff, to our view of Happy, to the messages we take away with us from the play?



Biff, Linda and Happy, Schlondorff, 1985.



6. A Question of Values

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

(Timebends)

Look at these quotations from the play. What do they suggest about each of the characters’ views of success and the American Dream at the stage in the play when they say it?

BIFF: And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my God, I’m not gettin’ anywhere. What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I’m thirty-four years old, I oughta be makin’ my future. That’s when I come running home. And now, I get here, and I don’t know what to do with myself. (Page 16.)

HAPPY: But then it’s what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I’m lonely. (Page 17.)

HAPPY: I gotta show some of those pompous, self-important executives over there that Hap Loman can make the grade. (Page 18.)

WILLY: America is full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people. And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring you fellas up, there’ll be open sesame for all of us, cause one thing, boys: I have friends. (Page 24.)

WILLY: ... the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. (Page 25.)

BEN: Why boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. (*He laughs*). And by God I was rich. (Page 37.)

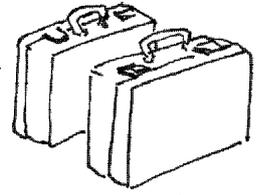
WILLY: You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away- a man is not a piece of fruit! (Page 64.)

LINDA: Why must everybody conquer the world? (Page 67.)

WILLY: And that’s the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can endwith diamonds here on the basis of being liked! (Page 68.)

BIFF: Pop! I’m a dime a dozen, and so are you! (Page 105.)

HAPPY: He had a good dream. It’s the only dream you can have - to come out number-one man. (Page 111.)



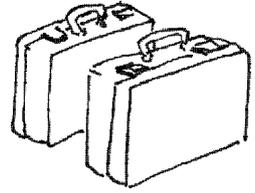
Writing

1. What do you think Arthur Miller is trying to say about ‘success’ and the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*? Is he using the story of Willy to put across a message?

Use some of the quotations you looked at earlier to describe what Miller is trying to say. You may be helped by the quote from *Timebends*.



Biff and Willy, Schlöndorff’s film adaptation, 1985.



7. Buying and Selling

Willy's job is not just any job. He is a salesman and selling is an important idea that runs through the play.

Business success is part of the American Dream. The play also shows the growth of a consumer society, in which it suddenly became possible to buy lots of consumer goods - fridges, cars, tape-recorders - and people measured their success by what they could afford to buy. It became possible to buy on credit and pay back in instalments, so that expensive objects were within people's grasp. But, as the play shows, these objects that people desired and dreamed of possessing did not necessarily bring happiness.

In small groups talk about these issues:

Do you think we live in a consumer society? Have you felt pressure to buy the right things - clothes, music or other desirable things? Does this ever cause problems for you and your friends? Are you ever tempted to buy things you can't afford?

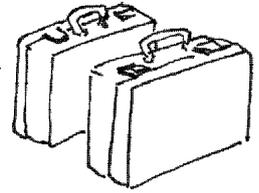
Nowadays, one of the biggest problems associated with the consumer society is debt, particularly amongst young people. Credit cards, so-called 'plastic money', make it very easy for people to buy more than they can afford and run up huge debts.

A critic called Raymond Williams said of Willy Loman that he was 'a man who from selling things has passed to selling himself, and has become, in effect, a commodity which like other commodities will at a certain point be economically discarded.' In the play we never find out what Willy actually sells but Miller responded to this question by saying, 'Himself'.

Look at the quotations from the play that follow. Decide which of these messages they are trying to get across:

1. The society of the play is a society which discards people when they are no longer financially useful.
2. A consumer society produces products which are junk.
3. Consumerism changes people and makes them behave in less 'human' ways.
4. The salesman's life is based on false hopes: he makes his living by encouraging other people's false hopes about the products they buy and he has to be optimistic himself in order to have the confidence to sell, sell, sell.

After Reading



LINDA: Well, the fan belt broke, so it was a dollar eighty.

WILLY: But it's brand new.

LINDA: Well, the man said that's the way it is. Till they work themselves in y'know. (Page 27.)

WILLY: That goddam Chevrolet, they ought to prohibit the manufacture of that car! (Page 28.)

CHARLEY (*talking of Biff*): When a deposit bottle is broken you don't get your nickel back. (Page 34.)

LINDA: He works for a company thirty-six years this March, opens up unheard-of territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his salary away. (Page 44.)

WILLY: Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it's broken: I'm always in a race with the junkyard! (Page 57.)

WILLY: You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away - a man is not a piece of fruit! (Page 65.)

CHARLEY: ... man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back - that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory. (Page 111.)

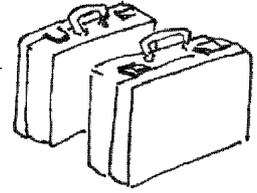
Writing

1. Write about whether you agree with Raymond Williams' view that the play shows Willy trying to sell himself like a commodity and finally being discarded.

Think about the messages the play offers about consumerism and the way consumer symbols and motifs are used to re-inforce this theme.

To what extent do you feel that Willy is a man with personality problems, or is someone whose problems are caused by the kind of society he lives in?

2. Write about the title, 'Death of a Salesman' exploring what it means to you and whether it is a good title for the play. Is it important that the word 'Salesman' should be in the title? What themes and ideas does it suggest that you find represented in the play?



8. What's in a Name?

Sometimes playwrights choose the names of their characters to highlight something important about them.

In pairs look at each of these names in turn. Discuss what they make you think of and how well they suit the character for whom they have been chosen.

Loman

Biff

Dave Singleman

Bernard

Happy

One critic explained Arthur Miller's choice of Willy Loman's name. He said that Loman stood for 'low man on the totem pole', in other words, bottom of the heap. Miller wanted to write a play about an ordinary person, who would be recognised by ordinary people watching the play. He wanted his hero to be a 'common man'. He said of Willy that he is 'a character so complex, so contradictory, so vulnerable, so insensitive, so trusting, so distrustful, so blind, so aware - in short, so human - that he forces man on us by being one.'

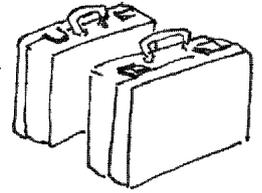
Miller himself said that he was not thinking of these things in choosing the name Loman but that subconsciously he had remembered the name Lohmann from a favourite film of his by Fritz Lang, a thriller called *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, in which a terrified young detective tries to call his boss for help. His boss is called Lohmann.

Miller said, 'In later years I found it discouraging to observe the confidence with which some commentators on *Death of a Salesman* smirked at the heavy-handed symbolism of 'Low-man'. What the name really meant to me was a terror-stricken man calling into the void for help that will never come.'

Names are important because they define one's identity as an individual and *Death of a Salesman* is all about the struggle of Willy (and Biff) to find and assert their identity. In the last scenes of the play Biff says to Willy, 'Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!' Willy replies, 'I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman.'

Find one quotation from the play to back up each of these statements.

1. It doesn't matter how unimportant a person you are in society, you still need to be seen as important and treated with respect.
2. Biff is trying to find out who he is.
3. Biff believes that Willy has never really known himself.
4. Willy feels insecure about his own identity.
5. Happy has adopted an identity that he believes Willy would be proud of.
6. Willy finds himself by the end of the play.



9. The Ending

The Climax of the Play

In pairs re-read the climax of the play, from page 97, where Happy and Biff return home, to page 109.

In pairs or small groups go through the text, picking out five short key quotes, which seem to you to express any of these things:

- a change of attitude in a character by the end of the play;
- a realisation of an important truth by a character;
- a summing up of a key theme in the play;
- a moment of tragedy.

Write down each quote, talk about why it seems to you to be important or interesting and note down key points raised in your discussion.

Join up with another pair or small group. Present to each other the quotes you chose. Using the ideas raised in this activity, try to make a list of agreed statements that you would like to make about the climax of *Death of a Salesman*.

For example:

The ending makes us feel...

By the end of the play...

It is tragic because...

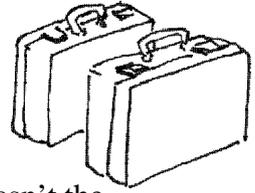
The Requiem

Paste a copy of the Requiem onto a sheet of A3 paper or sugar paper.

Work on the text and make notes on it, using underlining, arrows and comments and other such devices. Use these prompts to help you:

- Brainstorm the title. What is a Requiem? In what sense is this section a Requiem?
- Ask questions of the text, such as why characters say what they do/ behave in the ways that they do in the Requiem? e.g. why can't Linda cry? Why does Charley say, 'Nobody dast blame this man'?
- Trace back through the play the reverberations of what people say in the Requiem e.g. look back through the play to see why it is important that Linda says 'Why didn't anybody come?'
- For each character, think about what is added to our understanding of them by the inclusion of the Requiem.

After Reading



- Talk about why Miller felt that the Requiem was necessary. Why wasn't the climax on pages 108-9 enough of an ending? How does it work as a conclusion to the drama?
- In what ways, if any, are Miller's own comments on the Requiem useful? Discuss and annotate them to see what light they throw on the Requiem.

'But the key is in the requiem at the end, which everybody wanted me to cut out. They said that the audience were never going to stay there because Willy Loman is dead; there's nothing more to say. Of course, they did want to stay there, just as you do want to go to a funeral. And what is the point of a funeral? You want to think over the life of the departed and it's in there, really, that it's nailed down: he won't accept this life.'

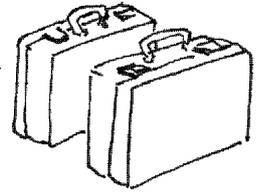
Arthur Miller and Company

'I must confess here to a miscalculation, however. I did not realize while writing the play that so many people in the world do not see as clearly, or would not admit, as I thought they must, how futile most lives are; so there could be no hope of consoling the audience for the death of this man. I did not realize either how few would be impressed by the fact that his man is actually a very brave spirit who cannot settle for half but must pursue his dream of himself to the end. Finally, I thought it must be clear, even obvious, that this was no dumb brute heading mindlessly to his catastrophe.'

Introduction, *Collected Plays*

Writing

1. Write a commentary on the Requiem, showing what it adds to the play and discussing what you feel about it as an ending.
2. Choose one character in the Requiem. Write a monologue which explores more fully their attitudes, state of mind and feelings about the events of the play, using what they say in the Requiem as a starting-point. You could incorporate their words from the Requiem in your monologue.
For example:
Linda: Why didn't anybody come? He was popular, I know he was. He was a man who was respected for his work as a salesman ...



10. The Restaurant Scene on Stage and Screen

In this section you are going to concentrate on directing and performing one scene from the play, the scene where Willy meets his sons in the restaurant on page 57.

A Stage Production

Preparing for the Rehearsal

In groups of four you are going to rehearse this scene with a view to performing it for the rest of the class. Before you begin to annotate your texts, refresh your memory of what has taken place before this key scene by examining the time plan for Act Two so that you can get a sense of how the previous scenes are linked together. For example, in Act Two Scene One we hear Willy talking about his consumer goods which are falling apart. Then in the following scene, Howard shows him the wire-recorder, (a machine shortly to become obsolete), Willy himself gets the sack and becomes obsolete.

Try to focus on the following things as you pool your ideas on performing the scene:

- What expectations does each character bring to the meeting?
- How do images of selling pervade the relationships?
- What words and actions trigger off certain reactions?
- How does the playwright orchestrate Willy's gradual disintegration?
- In what ways are we being prepared for the next scene?
- Why is the hotel bedroom scene coming next?

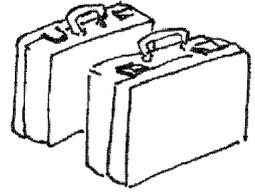
Planning the rehearsal

Now in your groups of four do a read-through of the restaurant scene without actually performing it. Discuss the following points:

- what's going on in the characters' heads and how they are feeling about, and responding to each other;
- the pacing and intonation of the reading;
- facial expression and body stance;
- how the director might organise the physical relationships and the way characters move.

Now that you have had a chance to discuss the scene, make notes on the text to help you give support to the actors in the task of interpreting their parts as if for the very first New York production.

To give you some ideas for this, examine the following rehearsal notes on the tennis rackets scene made by Elia Kazan, the director of the very first American production of *Death of a Salesman*.



The Script

[Noticing the rackets]

WILLY: You going to play tennis there? ¹⁴

BERNARD: I'm staying with a friend who's got a court.

WILLY [*Wondrously*]: Don't say. ¹⁵ His own tennis court. Must be fine ¹⁵ people, I bet.

BERNARD: They are, very nice. ¹⁶ Dad tells me Biff's in town. ¹⁷

WILLY ¹⁸[*Big smile*]: Yeah, Biff's in. Working on a very big deal, Bernard.

BERNARD: ¹⁹ What's Biff doing? ^{20, 21}

WILLY: Well, he's been doing very big things in the West. But he decided to establish himself here. Very big. We're having dinner. ²² Did I hear your wife had a boy? ²³

BERNARD: That's right. Our second. ²⁴

WILLY: Two boys! What do you know?

BERNARD: What kind of a deal has Biff got?

WILLY: Well, Bill Oliver - a very big sporting-goods man - he wants Biff very badly. Called him in from the West. Long-distance, carte blanche, special deliveries. ²⁵ Your friends have their own private tennis court?

²⁶ BERNARD: ²⁷ You still with the old firm, Willy?

WILLY: ²⁸ I'm ... overjoyed to see how you made the grade, Bernard - overjoyed. It's an encouraging thing to see a young man really ... really ... looks very good for Biff ... very ... ²⁸

²⁹ [*He breaks off. Then ...*]

Bernard ... ³⁰

[*He is so full of emotion, he breaks off again.*]

BERNARD: ³¹ What is it, Willy?

[*Pause*]

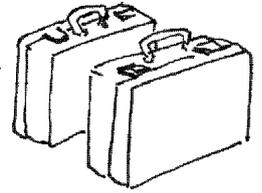
WILLY [*Small and alone*]: ³² What... what's the secret?

BERNARD: ³³ What secret?

WILLY [*With an embarrassed smile*]: ³⁴ How ... how did you ...? Why didn't he ever catch on?

BERNARD: ³⁵ I wouldn't know that, Willy.

After Reading



Elia Kazan's Rehearsal Notes

¹⁴ How did the little schmuck do it?

¹⁵ *Willy* invests all these things [a private court] with great drama, mystery, and wonder.

¹⁶ *Bernard*: changes subject. Bernard always feels a little uncomfortable squirming under *Willy*'s amazed admiration.

¹⁷ *Both* are now figuring out what happened.

Bernard keeps playing with his Beta Kappa key, his glasses, his watch. They smoke, cigarette case, etc.

¹⁸ *Willy*: redemption, make it up.

¹⁹ *Bernard*: find facts. Bernard knows *Willy* is lying. Now he begins to ponder the source of it.

²⁰ They are *not talking to each other*. They are *examining each other*. Not particular cues - as if speeches are entirely unrelated.

²¹ What is he *really* doing?

²² Change subject.

²³ *Willy* is *not* a grandfather. He wants it desperately.

²⁴ Offers cigarette here.

²⁵ Change subject.

²⁶ Bernard takes cue - goes behind *Willy* to get matches, etc.

²⁷ Change subject.

²⁸ *Willy* is bleeding inside. Suddenly can't stand it. Bernard conceals that he thinks *Willy* is a pathetic fake. Bernard bows his head and shields his eyes as if he is embarrassed for *Willy*.

²⁹ *Willy* tries to speak of it. *Can't*. About to cry. *Can't* speak! *Can't* speak!

³⁰ *Willy* tenses in his chair and turns out.

³¹ *Bernard*: to help - he's full of pity.

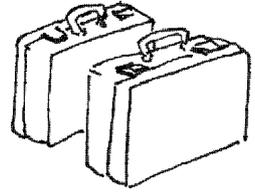
³² *Willy*: forcing it out.

N.B. He thinks it's some secret. Some magic formula of success! 'Sentences that sell,' some advice he has failed to give.

³³ *Bernard*: help. Gently. Bernard really knows. He *can't look at Willy*, sits on desk with head bowed.

³⁴ *Willy*: just stands there with head bowed ... he can't look at Bernard and ask what he's asking.

³⁵ *Bernard*: avoid. You can't tell a man like *Willy* the truth ... it would be too cruel.



A Screen Production

This activity uses a film adaptation of *Death of a Salesman*, directed by Volker Schlöndorff with Dustin Hoffman playing Willy Loman.

On the following two pages are two sequences of shots taken from the restaurant scene:

- the sequence of shots on page 145 occur at the beginning of the restaurant scene just after Willy has arrived. They show Willy's pleasure at being with his sons evaporate as Biff tries to tell him the truth about his failed meeting with Bill Oliver
- the sequence of shots on page 146 show moments in which Willy begins to 'timeswitch' and let scenes from his past merge with the present.

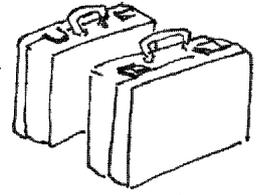
Working on the Sequences of Shots

See if can you match each shot from the two sequences to a particular exchange in the text. Write the dialogue alongside the shot in the column on the left.

Next, annotate each shot in the column on the right as though you were the film director, explaining your decision to shoot the moment in a particular way. Pay particular attention to:

- the body language of the characters;
- facial expression;
- camera angle;
- framing - i.e. relationship of characters and objects within the frame;
- the mise-en-scene i.e. people, objects, background decor also seen within the shot.





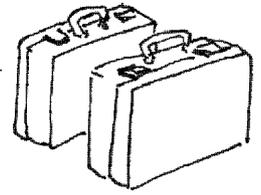
Sequence of shots as Willy enters the restaurant

Dialogue



Director's Notes

After Reading



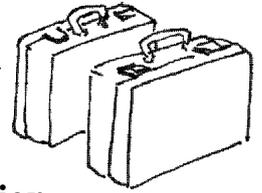
Sequence of shots where Willy begins to 'timeswitch'

Dialogue

Director's Notes



Death of a Salesman



Analysing the Restaurant and Hotel Scenes in the Film Version

This section of the film is extremely complex both in narrative and in filmic terms. The director has had to make important creative decisions about how to deal visually with problems of time and previous incidents in the play. To do this he has used a number of visual motifs or recurrent signs. Some of them are listed below - you may be able to find more. For each one, try and describe where and how it is used, and its function for the narrative of the scene:

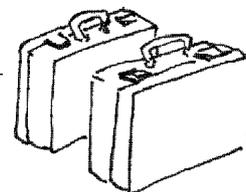
- glasses;
- doorways;
- mirrors;
- red wallpaper;
- the use of slow motion.

In filming this sequence, the director had to make some changes to the original script, and create a series of new audio-visual directions. The following will help you explore what is involved in an adaptation from stage to screen.

1. Make a list of all the moments where he has changed the original script or stage directions. Comment on the reasons for and effects of each change.
2. Make a second list of all the audio-visual ideas not featured in the original script. Try and explain why each one was necessary, and what it adds to the original script.
3. How does the director convey the increasingly disturbed state of Willy's mind?
4. What particular visual details does the director use to capture the intensity of the relationship between Willy and Biff: think particularly of eye contact and physical contact.
5. Consider generally how a performance of this kind adds to your understanding of the characters.

Writing

Write up your analysis of the Restaurant and Hotel scenes, exploring how the text has been adapted for the screen and how effective you found the adaptation.



11. Writing a Film Review

Watch the film of *Death of a Salesman*, directed by Volker Schlöndorff in 1985. Write a review of the whole film and assess whether this version manages to avoid the failure of a previous film adaptation which Arthur Miller describes below:

It may be in place to remark, in this connection, that while the play was sometimes called cinematographic in its structure, it failed as a motion picture. I believe that the basic reason - aside from the gross insensitivity permeating its film production - was that the dramatic tension of Willy's memories was destroyed by transferring him, literally, to the locales he had only imagined in the play. There is an inevitable horror in the spectacle of a man losing consciousness of his immediate surroundings to the point where he engages in conversations with unseen persons. The horror is lost - and drama becomes narrative - when the context actually becomes his imagined world. And the drama evaporates because psychological truth has been amended, a truth which depends not only on what images we recall but in what connections and contexts we recall them. The setting on the stage was never shifted, despite the many changes in locale, for the precise reason that, quite simply, the mere fact that a man forgets where he is does not mean that he has really moved. Indeed, his terror springs from his never-lost awareness of time and place. It did not need this play to teach me that the screen is time-bound and earth-bound compared to the stage, if only because its preponderant emphasis is on the visual image, which, however rapidly it may be changed before our eyes, still displaces its predecessor, while scene-changing with words is instantaneous; and because of the flexibility of language, especially of English, a preceding image can be kept alive through the image that succeeds it. The movie's tendency is always to wipe out what has gone before, and it is thus in constant danger of transforming the dramatic into narrative. There is no swifter method of telling a 'story' but neither is there a more difficult medium in which to keep a pattern of relationships constantly in being. Even in those sequences which retained the real back-grounds for Willy's imaginary confrontations the tension between now and then was lost. I suspect this loss was due to the necessity of shooting the actors close-up - effectively eliminating awareness of their surroundings. The basic failure of the picture was a formal one. It did not solve, nor really attempt to find, a resolution for the problem of keeping the past constantly alive, and that friction, collision, and tension between past and present was the heart of the play's particular construction.

(Introduction to *Collected Plays*)

Work on More than One Play

This section offers some suggestions for ways of thinking about and writing about more than one play, for a long essay or open study, or simply because you have chosen to read more plays by Miller.

1. Miller's Presentation of Women

Read the review letter to Arthur Miller on Page 40 of the material on *The Crucible*.

Think about how the arguments in the letter apply to the plays by Miller that you have read.

Write your own letter to Miller, expressing your view of his plays' stance towards women, drawing evidence from the plays you have read.

You may want to:

- examine the women characters and how they are presented;
- draw parallels and contrasts between the women characters across the plays;
- think about the role of the women in the plays;
- think about what is left out about women's experience that you would want to see;
- consider how the presentation of the male characters contributes to the view of women that the plays encourage us to take away with us.

2. Miller in School

The Head of English at your school is asking for views about which books should be taught on your course for next year's students. S/he wants to include one Miller play but is canvassing opinion on which one s/he should choose.

Of the plays that you have read, which one would you recommend?

You could think about:

- the themes of the plays and how appropriate they are for your age group;
- the dramatic qualities of the plays;
- how interesting you find the characters and the way they are presented;
- what pleasures you had in reading and working on the plays.

3. Miller on TV

You are working as a researcher for *The South Bank Show*, a TV arts programme. The programme team have decided to do a special feature on Arthur Miller, to coincide with the opening of his new play in the West End. The programme will be a compilation of items, including interview material from the archives, a new interview by the programme's presenter, Melvyn Bragg, autobiographical information from his book *Timebends*, sequences from film versions of his plays and short dramatisations of extracts from his plays.

You have been asked to select and prepare the extracts from his plays, to illustrate his main themes, concerns and distinctive qualities as a playwright. Your brief is to do the following:

- select five varied and representative extracts (each one no more than four minutes long);
- write a note to the producer explaining in detail the choice of extracts, so that s/he can make decisions about how to include them in the programme;
- suggest some questions that Miller could be asked in the interview, based on the extracts and other broader questions;
- write a script for the introductory comments which will preface each dramatisation;

4. A New Play by Miller?

Having read more than one play by Miller you should have begun to see patterns across his work, in his themes, the kinds of characters he presents or the kind of drama he creates.

Make a list of all of the patterns you have noticed in the plays you have read. One way of thinking about it is to ask yourself, 'What would I expect from another play by Miller?'

Use this list of your knowledge and expectations of Miller's drama to map out an imaginary new play by Miller.

- Write a brief synopsis of the plot.
- Write an account of the planned characters and their inter-relationships.
- Write about the themes that will be raised by the plot and characters.
- Write the opening scene of the play, drawing on what you know of Miller's dramatic technique.

5. Miller's Themes

Take one that particularly interests you and trace how it is developed differently in two or more of Miller's plays.

Possible themes are:

- the individual and society
- the family
- Miller's ideas about heroism
- fathers and sons.

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